

ALEXIS CALDER



SHIFTER CLAIMED

ROYAL MATES

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ROYAL MATES BOOK ONE

ALEXIS CALDER

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Also by Alexis Calder

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Thanks for Reading!

About the Author

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CHAPTER ONE

SKYLAR

Loud music blared from the room I was standing outside. Something with a thumping bass and a repetitive beat. It was so loud, it was impossible to hear if anyone was moving around inside, which, I'm sure was the point.

Still, I leaned my ear against the door. I had excellent hearing, freakish by human standards, but I wasn't human.

And neither was the man in that hotel room.

Vincent Romana had managed to evade me for weeks. Every time I thought I had pinned him down, he'd already moved on. For a vampire, he sure liked to move. Most vampires picked a central base so they could be indoors when the sun came up. If Vincent had a home base, I had yet to find it. Instead, he preferred to move from one dump to the next every day, making him difficult to hunt. Which meant I was dangerously close to not having enough to pay my rent. I needed this pay day and this scumbag needed to be off the streets.

Of all the shitholes I'd been to while chasing this vamp, this one had to be the worst of the bunch. The Essex House Motel was the kind of building that probably should be condemned. The pool was a full-on swamp, complete with vines and shrubs growing in the green water along with a smell that made you wonder how many bodies were hidden under the algae.

The building itself was a bizarre teal color with peeling yellow trim. It wasn't even trying to look respectable. Not that the marquee advertising rooms by the hour wasn't a dead giveaway.

For once, I was grateful for my shifter blood that helped me heal quickly and avoid most human maladies. I had to admit, even my skin crawled at the thought of touching anything at this place. I hoped my wolf side could protect me from tetanus. And STDs. Cause ew. Just the thought of what was on the carpet once I opened that door made my stomach flip.

I hunted and killed supernatural baddies for a living. But this place freaked me the fuck out. It was like something out of a horror movie.

With a deep breath, I took hold of the door handle and turned. I had to swallow my glee when it didn't catch. He didn't even bother to lock the door behind him.

Dude might be good at staying one step ahead of me for his nightly crash pads, but he sure wasn't a bright one. Vampires seemed to fall into two categories. The first was brilliant, devilishly handsome, and all too proper.

Then there was the second kind. The vampires that probably shouldn't have been turned. They enjoyed the power while never taking responsibility. They burned through money, made enemies fast, and often ended up in trouble. They didn't think before they acted and gave the good vamps a bad name.

Guess which kind Vincent was.

Slowly, I opened the door a crack and peeked into the dark room. The music made the floor vibrate but it didn't hide the movement on the bed.

I opened the door wide enough to slide in and closed it behind me. A male was sprawled out on the bed while a woman's head bobbed up and down on his cock. She moved like a robot, mechanical and purposeful.

A second woman had her tits in the man's face and his hands were all over her. He was rough and grabby and there

was absolutely nothing sensual about his movements. I swallowed back the vomit rising in my throat. There was nothing sexy about any of this. These women were both clearly compelled into these acts.

Anger surged, sending a rush of heat through my chest. There was nothing worse than a supernatural who used their powers to reduce or remove someone else's free will. I wasn't going to hold anything back tonight.

While the ability to see well in the dark, and smell better than I should, suited my job, it was times like this that I hated it. It was almost too much to see this kind of abuse. But I was the reckoning. Vincent was going down. Time to start the show and get this over with.

I grabbed my stake from the custom pocket sewn into the back of the waistband on my black leather pants. Vincent was on the dead or alive list, and if he gave me any trouble I wouldn't hesitate to end him. In fact, it would make my job easier if I did. Less paperwork and no being called in as a witness in a trial that might end up fixed anyway.

Plus, after reading about the way he'd been abusing, kidnapping and selling women, I'm not sure he's worth the time it would take for him to get a trial. The women in his bed right now were pretty damning evidence about his transgressions. Don't get me wrong, I know my role in this. I know I'm not the judge. But sometimes I'm the executioner.

Technically, I'm a hunter and my primary job is to bring the bad guys in for the enforcers to deal with. But if something went wrong and I had to protect myself, then assholes like Vincent sometimes ended up dead.

Okay, they often ended up dead. It was easier that way and then I knew they wouldn't get off after friends in high places bribed the powers that be. Nobody was going to cry for a low-level henchman like Vincent.

Besides, I got paid either way.

I flipped on the light switch.

“I’m sorry, did I interrupt something?” I leaned against the doorway.

A woman squealed and gathered the blanket off the bed, wrapping it around her as she fled. I stepped aside so she could go right out the door. Her compulsion was clearly broken and she’d end up with a raging headache in the morning.

The second woman sat on the bed, staring at me with glassy, unfocused eyes. My heart broke for her but I couldn’t do anything about her right now. I made a mental note to call the enforcers to get rid of her compulsion when I was done here.

I turned my attention to the male. He was balding, and his large, hairy chest heaved as he sucked in oxygen out of habit. Most vampires I knew rarely bothered with breathing. This guy was so new, his body was reacting as if he needed the air. He had yet to kick his old human habits.

What the fuck had he done to get turned? He wasn’t turned for his looks that was for damn sure.

“You want to do this now?” he asked.

“Oh, honey, I’ve been waiting for weeks to dance with you.” I smiled sweetly as I twirled the stake in my palm.

He growled, showing his fangs. “You’re not going to be smiling when I’m done with you, girlie.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Girlie?”

He growled again as he lunged toward me, his arms outstretched. I was already across the room when he closed his arms around nothing but air.

With a hiss, Vincent turned toward me, his eyes flashing in anger. I tightened my grip around the stake in my hand.

He lunged for me again, knocking over a chair in the process and landing on his side with a thud. With a grunt, he threw the chair across the room and the remaining human woman started screaming. I glanced at her and the glassy look was gone.

“Get out of here!” I yelled.

She grabbed a dress off the ground and pulled it over her head while she beelined it for the door. At least I didn't have to worry about the humans anymore. We weren't really supposed to let them see our business, but I was guessing she wasn't going to register that I was holding a stake or that the man growling at me had fangs. Most humans ignored what they couldn't explain.

"Shall we?" I returned my attention to Vincent.

He had something in his hands now and was baring his teeth at me. He was also still naked.

I rolled my eyes and sidestepped an overturned chair, giving him an easier path to get to me. If he charged me again, I could stake him without guilt. Not that I was even sure I was capable of guilt after ten years of doing this job.

"You bitch, you're not going to get me," he screamed and threw something at me. A bong, maybe? I didn't really see what it was as it flew past my head. It slammed against the wall and shattered in a satisfying kind of way.

"Are you going to charge me again or do you want to do this like civilized people?" I asked. "Last warning for me to bring you in alive."

His eyes moved toward the open door. The one I'd walked right through because he couldn't be bothered to lock it.

"Don't even think about it," I said. "You give me a reason to chase you and you're finished."

He was such a young vamp and he moved like a human. He was slow, clumsy, and careless. If he made a run for it, he wouldn't stand a chance. We both knew it.

I could see the muscles in his body tensing, his eyes darted between me and the door. The dumbass was considering it. Well, he wasn't turned for his intelligence, either.

"Don't, please, don't make me do it," I deadpanned. It was nonsense. He knew it, I knew it. Once a hunter was sent after you, there wasn't much chance for escape.

I might look innocent enough, but my trademark pale blue and silver hair had to have given me away. I had a reputation after all and I was damn proud of that. I had a feeling even someone as low on the ladder as Vincent had heard about the lone wolf who rarely let her marks live. I could sense the fear behind his bravado.

“Try me, blood bag,” I shifted so I was standing between him and the door. “I dare you.”

“Freeze!” someone shouted from behind me.

I tensed and while keeping my eyes on the vampire in front of me, I stepped to the side enough that I could catch a glimpse of whoever had joined the party.

He was tall, dark, and handsome in an uptight, conforming kind of way. I knew right away that I was dealing with someone in law enforcement. *Shit*. I’d gone three years without a run in with a cop and go figure it happens on what should be an easy, quick, in and out case.

“Put down the stake and step aside. I’m taking over,” he said as he walked into the room.

Oh hell no. If this asshole thought he could come in and take my bounty, he was out of his fucking mind. “I don’t think so. I don’t share credit or share my fee.”

It was clear now that he wasn’t a human cop. Maybe he just dressed like one. Whatever he was, he was trying to worm his way in on someone else’s bounty. “You’re not a member of the guild, are you?”

He pulled something out of his pocket and I lifted my stake higher. Like I’m dropping my weapon. What was this guy thinking? There’s still a vampire standing awkwardly, and nakedly - is that even a word? - a few feet from me. And let me tell you, the cold air in here was not doing him any favors.

Newcomer lifted up what looked like a wallet and the flap fell to reveal a shiny metal badge. I lifted my eyebrows in surprise. He was a cop, but not the human kind.

“Enforcer, step aside,” he said.

“I’m Guild,” I said. “This is my bounty and there was no order for me to call in backup.”

“You’re the half wolf, aren’t you?” the enforcer said.

I narrowed my eyes. I hated the looks I got and the false sympathy for being a hybrid. I might not have the ability to shift or half the magical shit these other supernaturals had but I could stand on my own.

“I don’t see how my heritage is any of your fucking business,” I said.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the enforcer said. “This is a dangerous job for a half human.”

“I knew you smelled delicious,” the vampire said.

I glared at him as I gripped my stake tighter. The new guy probably wasn’t as much of a threat as this vampire I was sent to kill. “What I am has nothing to do with my confirmed kills.”

“You can go, miss...”

“Miss?” I asked. “I’m sorry, no. I’m not going anywhere. I have a job to finish and you’re in the way.”

“I can’t let you kill him,” he said.

Vincent started laughing. “Alright, officer, you see that she’s trying to kill me. Not even giving me a chance to go quietly. Shouldn’t you be locking her up?”

“If she’s active within the Guild, she’s not doing anything illegal.” He glanced at me. “You are active?”

“Of course, I am,” I said. “But I have no idea why you’re here.”

“That’s classified. Royal enforcer business on special assignment for Queen Marcella.”

A shiver ran down my spine. I’d never heard of a *royal* enforcer but I’d sure as shit heard of Queen Marcella. Just because I hunted these creatures for a living didn’t mean I knew everything about their world. I was only half supernatural and didn’t belong to any pack. I picked up

hunting from my dad. It was a family tradition. What can I say? Some of us had fucked up families. But that was another story for another time.

“Look, bro, I don’t know what kind of hustle you’re trying to pull, but this man is scum who was sentenced fair and square. The bounty is mine,” I said.

The enforcer shook his head and reached inside his black jacket. I grabbed for the knife strapped to my thigh and pulled it out quickly.

“Gear down.” He moved slowly, pulling out an envelope and holding it up. “I’m not your enemy.”

“You’re coming between me and my rent so yeah, I’m pretty sure we’re not on the same side,” I said.

“Can I go put on some pants?” naked vampire asked.

“No,” both the enforcer and I said at the same time.

“I think I might rather let her have a shot at me,” he said.

“You say that like you think you’d have come out of it alive,” I said.

I was half watching the vampire and half watching as enforcer guy dug a whole bunch of bills out of the envelope. My eyes widened at the sight of all that cash. He had to have thousands of dollars just stashed in an envelope.

How the hell did an enforcer have so much cash? That wasn’t exactly a profession you went into for the money. A good hunter typically far out-earned the enforcers. Shit, I’d make more from this job than he’d make all month.

“Are you trying to bribe me?” I asked.

“I’m covering your fee,” he said. “What was it? Standard rate, I’m guessing.”

“Yeah,” I said, wishing I wasn’t so damn honest. I should have told him it was more.

“I was only standard rate?” Vincent asked. “That hurts.”

“Like I said, you’d be dead right now if it weren’t for our uninvited guest,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” enforcer said. “I’m sure he won’t last long after I question him.”

Huh. Imagine that. Looked like the enforcer had a little bit of a dark streak. Maybe we weren’t so different after all.

“Go on, it’s all there.” The enforcer was holding out a small pile of cash.

I considered taking it, but before I could, something slammed into me. I landed hard on the ground, Vincent’s heaving, naked form on top of me. My stake went flying and my hands were pinned to the ground.

The vampire growled as he lowered his face toward my neck with a hungry growl.

“Oh, fuck no!” There was no way I was going to be a snack today. Especially not for a mark I was supposed to be taking out. This was all that stupid enforcer’s fault. I was never distracted and I’d never been pinned down by a mark. Dammit. This was so not my night.

I pulled my knees up, then used my feet to push Vincent. He was heavy and didn’t budge despite my pressing. *So you want to play it like that?*

Using my boot heel, I dug down to where I hoped the family jewels were. Based on the sudden release of my wrists and the yelp of pain, I hit my target.

I rolled away just as the creature unleashed his full vampire side. Fangs fully extended, eyes black upon black, he lunged for me. I grabbed my stake and lifted it, ready to strike.

Just as Vincent was about to leap on me, he exploded in a mess of blood and guts and goo. I closed my eyes and mouth and tried to cover my face with my arm. It hardly helped. I could still taste the dead vampire.

I rolled on to stomach and spat on the ground before jumping to my feet and using my sleeves to wipe my face.

The enforcer was staring at me, his hands lifted in front of him. Gold sparks crackled on his fingertips.

“What the fuck?” I was staring at him, wide eyed. I’d killed my share of vampires. I’d never made one explode like that. Especially not with my bare hands. Nobody could. You had to stake them in the heart. And sure it was messy, but not bits of flesh and vampire entrails sticking to your favorite leather pants kind of messy. This was something else entirely. “What are you?”

CHAPTER TWO

ELIAS

I shouldn't have used my powers in front of her but when I saw the vampire charge her, I lost it. I was hit with an overwhelming sense to protect her, to keep her safe.

That wasn't my style at all. I don't play nice with others and I sure as shit don't care if a random hunter goes down. I was here for one reason only. Vengeance. And now my only lead in my sister's murder was dead.

I needed this vampire alive. He wasn't worth the blood he drank, but I needed the information he had. And now he was dead because I decided some stranger's life was more important. That was a costly mistake I shouldn't have made.

"What are you?" The hunter took a step closer to me.

"I told you, I'm a royal enforcer," I said.

She shook her head. "Not that. What the fuck are you? I've never seen anyone take out another creature like this."

I could sense her fear. She was terrified of me even though she didn't show it. Girl had guts, that was for damn sure. The few others who had seen my powers didn't react this calmly. Not that I let any of them keep their memories after. Which was what I should be doing with her. I should be erasing her memory of even meeting me and sending her on her way, but I was hesitating.

“You owe me two thousand dollars.” She put her hand on her hip and glared at me. “If you hadn’t shown up, I would have had him locked down.”

Even covered in blood and gore, she was hot as hell. With silver hair, full lips, and bright blue eyes, she was captivating. Add in the curves of her athletic build and she was literally everyone’s type.

In a different life, I might have pursued her. But that’s not possible here. I’m on a mission and she would be nothing but a distraction.

I reached inside my jacket pocket and re-pulled out the envelope of cash. The enforcer gig might be my cover, but my real boss kept me well supplied in bribe money. “Two grand.”

“You might as well keep your money. I’m telling the Guild this was my kill,” she says. “I’m not losing my perfect record on your account.”

I froze. This was when I needed to erase her memory and send her packing. She could easily tell them she took care of Vincent or I could alter it so she didn’t even remember chasing him in the first place.

My chest tightened. The thought of wiping our encounter from her mind completely sent an uncomfortable pain through me. I liked this woman. I didn’t want her to pass me in the street with a blank expression if we ran into each other again. And despite my training, and as much as I knew it was wrong, I wanted to see her again. Even if it was just in passing.

“You can’t tell the Guild about me,” I said.

She lifted an eyebrow. “And why is that?”

“I told you, this whole thing was classified,” I said.

“So? I’ll tell them I made the kill, and I’ll get paid,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, then I passed the stack of bills toward her.

“I told you, I’ll get my fee,” she looked at the money in my hand with disgust. “I don’t need your bribe or whatever that is.”

“They gave it to me for this case, you might as well take it,” I said with what I hoped was a casual shrug.

“Why?”

“The royals are loaded, just take it,” I said. “I’m sure there’s something you could use it for.”

She looked down at her clothes and wrinkled her nose before looking back up at me. “I don’t think you can dry clean vampire entrails out of leather.”

“Get yourself some new pants.” I extended my hand again.

Slowly, she reached out and I moved faster, grabbing her hands in mine.

“What the hell are you doing?” She tried to pull away, but I was stronger and held her fast. While my memory magic was powerful, I couldn’t do it without touching my victim.

I knew this was when I should be altering her memory. And that was my plan when I grabbed her, but I just couldn’t do it.

“Let go of me, you freak,” she said.

I could feel her hands trembling despite her tough words. Usually, the fear fed me, gave my magic more power. This time, it was sending me into a mild panic. I hated that she was afraid of me.

“Look at me,” I said, my voice calm and steady.

Her eyes snapped to mine and her breathing quickened. She was trying to fight me, but failing.

“What are you?” she asked again.

“You will leave this place and you’ll go home. You will not ever speak of this case again or tell anyone where you were or what you did tonight. You will not tell anyone that we’ve met or that you ever saw me.”

Her lower lip quivered but her eyes didn’t release from mine while my magic seeped into her.

“Tell me you understand. Not a word about any of it. Give me your word.”

She nodded. “I understand. I give you my word.”

With her answer, the magic snapped into place, binding her to my commands. I released my grip on her and for the first time in my life, guilt swam through me. I’d commanded hundreds of people. Taking away free will, memories, identities, livelihoods... I’d done more terrible things than I could count. But I’d never felt guilty until now.

This woman was dangerous. She was making me weak. I didn’t know why or how, but she was.

“What did you do to me?” she asked.

“What I had to,” I said as I pressed the money into her hands.

“I hope I never see you again.” She took the money and threw it at me. “Keep your money, asshole.” She walked away from me, her whole body tense. She probably wanted to scream at me more, but I’d commanded her to leave and go home. There was nothing she could do.

It was the right choice to send her away, but a pang of regret flickered through my gut. There was something about her. I continued to watch her until she turned around the building and I lost sight.

Then it hit me just how badly I fucked up. I let her walk away without making her forget my face or my powers. It was a moment of weakness. A mistake. I hadn’t fucked up like that since I was in training. And that was a very, very, long time ago.

It was too late to change it now. Besides, soon enough, it would be like a bad dream to her. It wasn’t common for me to run into hunters in my work.

I turned back to the destroyed room and shook my head. I should be questioning this piece of shit right now. Instead, I was staring at his pieces. What a waste. After years of dead ends, trying to find the leader of this crime ring, this was

supposed to be my break in the case. Now it was nothing. I'd have to start over. Again.

Quickly, I picked up my phone and texted my clean up guy. Then I left the room, closing the door behind me.

There was nothing left to do but find a new lead and keep going.

CHAPTER THREE

SKYLAR

One of the perks of living in a city like Harbor Crossing was that nobody batted an eye at a woman walking down the sidewalk covered in gore.

Supernaturals weren't out, but there were so many of them here that most humans adapted to the weird without realizing. They keep their eyes forward, didn't ask questions, and certainly didn't stop for small talk.

The city was a pulsing heart with a million moving pieces. Crowded, dirty, and loud, this was my city. My home. I grew up here, cutting my teeth on hunting supernaturals in the alleyways and seedy underground bars. I was only thirteen when my dad started dragging me along on hunts with him.

As an outcast, there wasn't a whole lot I could do. My dad married for love instead of pack, and he was punished for it. When my mom died giving birth to me, I think he died a little too. He did the best he could, but nobody would accuse him of being warm. Maybe that was the shifter in him. Though, I wouldn't know since the only other shifters I knew were the ones I hunted and my roommate, Lola. But she was like me, an outcast, not part of any pack.

I turned toward my building and could already hear her disapproval. She was a full shifter, able to transform into a wolf on command. I'd never seen her do it; though, I

suspected her occasional weekends away were so she could run in the nearby mountains as a wolf.

We had one rule in our house: no supernatural talk.

Which meant, she'd judge my ruined clothes silently. When she left the shifter community she really left. She even got a human day job and a human boyfriend and did not discuss her past. I never pressed. I'd seen enough evil from the list of misdeeds of my marks to know she had to have her reasons.

Our building was ancient. We had drafty windows and an elevator that only worked half the time. But it was a refuge in the middle of the chaos. A building almost entirely inhabited by misfit supernaturals. Most of us in this building were here so we couldn't be found.

It was far too expensive for what it was, but they didn't run credit histories. Or background checks. Which was useful since I didn't technically exist. I was never registered in the supernatural community or the human community. So in an odd way, I have a foot in both but also in neither.

I took the crumbling stairwell to the third floor and emerged into the hazy hallway. From the smell of things, our neighbor was having a party tonight and the theme was whatever the newest product he was offering. It wasn't pot, not in this building. It was probably something supernatural. And while it didn't have an unappealing scent, there was no way I was going to linger and find out if the secondhand smoke was enough to make someone high.

Quickly, I made my way to my door at the end of the hall. Through the fog, it looked like it was open. But that was impossible. Lola and I were strict about keeping our door closed and locked even while we were home. Between my job and whatever she was hiding from in her past, there was also the steady stream of our neighbor's customers knocking on our door mistakenly from time to time.

Whatever was in this smoke must already be getting to me.

My brow furrowed as I moved closer, it really looked like the door was open. I picked up my pace, and before I thought it through, I was sprinting to the end of the hall. My heart was already racing when I reached my open door, but full-on panic struck as soon as I stepped inside.

My apartment was trashed.

No, that's not the right word. Trashed was how it looked when we had a few busy weeks and didn't have time to clean. This wasn't trashed. It was destroyed.

Our dining room table was in two pieces, every couch cushion had the stuffing ripped out, springs dangled from the torn base. Papers and clothes and shattered objects littered the floor. Photos and pictures were thrown from the wall, the contents removed from the frames.

I pulled my knife from the pocket on my thigh and tiptoed around the shattered glass and broken objects. Forcing myself to keep my breathing steady and my eyes focused, I looked for any signs that the perpetrator was still here.

"Lola? You home?" I paused, waiting for any sign of movement.

It was silent. Lola wasn't home and if there were any uninvited visitors still here, they were being careful to keep quiet.

I moved forward slowly, my eyes darting around the destruction for any signs of who might have done this.

None of this made sense. Sure, I had enemies, and I had a feeling Lola did too. But this didn't look like revenge or an attempt on our lives. It was pretty clear that whoever had been in our apartment was looking for something.

I wanted to say it was one of our neighbor's customers looking for a fix, but my instincts told me that wasn't the case. This was too extreme. Whoever did this tore open our couch cushions. They were looking for something they thought was hidden with purpose.

My eyes darted to the overturned couch. It was presently on the one place where we did hide things. There was a loose

floorboard we kept our cash in for rent or emergencies. Since I had a dangerous job and nobody else around, I put all my cash in there. Lola knew if I didn't come home, the money was hers. Not that there was much there at a time... rent here was criminal and I'd desperately needed tonight's pay. I cringed as I remembered that I'd thrown that money back at the enforcer. Damn my stubborn pride.

I wanted to open the floorboard and check, but not yet. I needed to make sure I was alone first.

I checked the kitchen and bathroom. I checked the hallways and the closets. I checked my room, which looked like someone had set a bomb off. Wonderful. I was going to have to start over. Looked like I'd be sleeping on the floor for a while.

With a deep breath, I left my room and walked to the second bedroom. I pushed open the door and dropped my knife to the ground. I felt like I'd been punched in the gut and I reached for my throat as I struggled to take in a breath.

Lola was sprawled out on the floor, a pool of blood under her.

Movement caught my eye in the corner of the room and I regained my senses, grabbing for my fallen knife.

Anger surged through me and I charged the pile of fabric, hoping to take out some of my aggression on a hidden assailant.

When I pulled the sheets aside, a tiny black head popped out. Ears back, yellow eyes trained on me, Lola's cat, Miles, meowed.

Hot tears burned in the back of my eyes and I let out a labored sigh. I was relieved that it was just her cat but I was also disappointed the killer hadn't waited around so I could serve up some justice.

I squeezed the knife handle and quickly checked the rest of the room. Aside from the closet, there weren't many places anyone could hide. The bed was in pieces and everything else

was so scattered and broken it mostly covered the floor without the ability to cover a person.

“Enforcers! We’re coming in. If you’re in here, show yourself,” a male voice echoed through the apartment. It was amplified with magic and it sent a chill down my spine.

Another one of my shitty half shifter gifts: I could sense magic. Whole lot of good it did me now. Sensing it kept me alive on occasion but rarely gave me much of an advantage. It pretty much just helped me to know when a supernatural was pretending to be human or when an object was spelled. But I had to be pretty damn close to the thing in this city. There was so much magic everywhere that it was hanging in the air most places.

Usually I kept that skill turned off, not worrying about it unless I was hunting. But now that my senses were fired up, I could feel the magic residue hanging like fog in my apartment. It was never like this. Either the enforcers were using insane amounts of magic, or whoever had broken in had. Both thoughts sent my stomach in knots.

“Last warning, I can feel you. If we come to you, we will shoot first,” an enforcer called.

Fuck me. Can’t they give a girl a minute to get her senses? I glanced at Lola and my chest tightened. Who would do this to her?

I heard footsteps moving toward the room.

“I’m coming out,” I called. “I live here and I’m unarmed.” I slid my knife back into the pocket on my filthy pants.

Hands up, I walked slowly toward the front door where a group of enforcers was looking around what used to be my living room.

“My roommate is back there in her room.” I swallowed hard. “She’s dead.”

A female enforcer stepped forward, a pad of paper in her hands. “And you killed her for what purpose? Was it to send a message to her father?”

My brow furrowed. “What? I didn’t kill my roommate. I just got home and found this mess.”

“You seem real shaken up about it,” she said.

“You’re kidding me, right? Because I’m not bawling, I killed her?” Hot tears stung my eyes. “I got here five minutes before you. I’m pretty sure I’m still in shock.”

“Murder will do that to someone,” she said.

“What the fuck are you even talking about?”

“We got a call about a disturbance and a woman screaming,” another enforcer said. His eyes dropped down my body, then slowly traveled back up to my face.

That’s when I remembered that I was covered in blood from my hunt earlier. “I can explain.”

“You better,” the male enforcer said.

“I’m a hunter. Guild official, certification up to date,” I said.

“You were on a hunt tonight?” The female enforcer lowered her pad of paper. “Who was the target?”

I opened my mouth to explain about Vincent and no sound came out. My brow furrowed. I tried again. All I could do was sputter and grunt. No words.

The female enforcer lifted her brow. “Cat got your tongue?”

“I really was on a case tonight,” I said.

“Sure.” She picked up her pad of paper. “Who paid you to snuff out the princess?”

“I didn’t kill my roommate,” I said. “And her name was Lola, not princess.” *Condescending bitch.*

“Yes, Lola Vega, daughter of the High Moon Pack’s late alpha. Princess.” The female gave me a thin-lipped smile.

My eyes widened. I knew Lola was a wolf shifter, but I had no idea she was so high ranking in the family structure. And I had no idea she came from the High Moon Pack. They

were the most well-known and strongest pack around. You didn't fuck with them and survive. Why had Lola run? Had someone from her pack found her and taken her out? She told me she was hiding from them, that she was never going back.

"I didn't kill my roommate. I don't know who did, but it wasn't me."

"Enforcer Cain," a younger enforcer with long blonde hair and violet eyes walked up to the female I was talking to.

"She's dead and it looks like she was tortured before they finished her off." He swallowed and took a breath. "They used silver pins all over her arms and legs."

"What?" Tears slipped down my cheeks and my pulse raced. "Why would someone do that to her?"

"Why *did* you do that to her?" Cain, the female enforcer, glared at me.

"Will you get off? I'm half wolf. Why the hell would I stab silver into my friend? I know how bad silver hurts and I wouldn't be able to touch it with bare hands. Do your damn job. I'm not the killer here." I inch closer to her, my anger winning out over common sense.

"Back down or I will take you down." Her tone is cool and calm. She's not even slightly rattled by my aggression.

If it weren't for the fact that she was accusing me of murder, she and I might get along.

"She didn't do it," another voice joined the party. A voice I recognized.

My whole body tensed and I took a step away from Cain. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Considering I'm the only one in this room who thinks you didn't kill your roommate, maybe you should try being nicer to me," he said.

I glared at the enforcer I'd met earlier this evening. The creature who prevented me from giving an alibi. "You going to tell them the truth about where I was tonight?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “But I do believe you didn’t kill your friend.”

“You asshole.” My anger moved from Cain to the newcomer. If I hadn’t reached for that money, if I had just left right away, I’d have my alibi. I wouldn’t be in this mess.

“According to Hunter Guild rules, if a Hunter is accused of murder, they have forty-eight hours to prove their innocence,” he said, keeping his eyes on Cain.

I glared at him. He could end this. He could tell them what happened and where I was. I opened my mouth to try to say that I was with him, but even those words wouldn’t form. Whatever he did to me, the magic was strong. *Fucking asshole.*

“That’s an ancient rule meant to be used if they have crossfire or an accident or an enemy finds them,” she says. “This is an open close case. See for yourself.” Cain gestures around the room, then gestures to me.

“You owe me new pants,” I managed.

He ignored me. “I don’t think she would have destroyed her own apartment or been so obvious about leaving the body.”

“She was trying to make it look like an invader,” Cain said.

“Bullshit,” I said. “If I wanted someone dead, I’ve got much less messy ways to do it. And I would get rid of the body.”

“That’s not helping you,” he said.

I pressed my lips closed. *Yeah, probably not.*

“It’s the law,” my new enemy who was somehow trying to get me two lousy days said.

“Fine, but she’s your responsibility. I want her attached to you until her forty-eight are up. Then, you personally deliver her to the Hall of Justice.” Cain whistled.

The other enforcers all gathered in a little circle around her. “Get as much evidence as you can and get the princess out of here. If we don’t get her body back to her pack before sunrise we’re going to have a war on our hands.”

“You already have a war on your hands,” I said.

Cain’s forehead creased.

“Whoever really killed her started it. Lucky you, I’m going to find that fucker and end it,” I said.

Cain smiled. “Well, good luck with that.”

CHAPTER FOUR

SKYLAR

Inside, I felt like I was breaking apart. Outside, I kept my expression impassive and watched as the enforcers dug through the remains of my apartment. I wanted to cry over losing Lola. I also wanted to find the killer and gouge both of his eyes out before finding a very painful way to kill him. Or her. Or them.

The thought of vengeance was the only thing keeping me from losing my shit in front of the enforcers. I glanced over at the male I'd met earlier. I still didn't know his name or what the fuck he was. He wasn't in charge, which surprised me. Based on his actions at the motel, I thought for sure he was someone high up.

In the better light inside my ruined home, I could make him out better. He was tall and broad and probably very muscular under his jacket. His square jaw and sharp cheekbones were covered in black stubble that was darker than his chocolate brown wavy hair. He was handsome, that was for sure. But it didn't excuse his behavior.

I looked him up and down, letting down my guard enough to feel his magic. It pulsed and crackled in an unstable way, making my heart race. There was something dark and dangerous about him, though that shouldn't come as a surprise from earlier.

The thing that did surprise me was the shiver of tingles that raced right down to my core when I opened myself up to his magic. I gasped, startled, and I had to turn away from him. In a strange way, it felt intimate, as if by opening up and sensing his magic, I had somehow exposed part of myself.

I locked down my senses, not wanting to risk that experience again. This man wasn't my friend and he sure as hell could not be trusted. I had to guard myself around him. I looked back at him, this time without extending my senses.

There were codes we followed in the supernatural world. One that superseded all the different races was that you didn't fuck with free will. He stole my ability to talk about what I had done tonight, which was bad form no matter where you grew up.

He might have prevented them from locking me up but he was also the reason I wasn't going free. With a simple statement, he could get me off the hook and out of this. Instead, he stood there, watching his coworkers dig through my belongings. Or what was left of them.

Deep brown eyes flecked with gold, locked on mine and I quickly looked away. My face heated. I was totally busted staring at him and I was sure he thought I was checking him out. I had to admit, he was attractive. Okay, fine, if not for the uptight clothes and scary as shit magic, I might actually be interested in him.

He's tall, dark, and handsome in a broody, mysterious asshole kind of way and I know that under different circumstances, he's exactly the kind of bad news I'd run right into. There is no way that's happening now, though. Had we met in a bar, maybe I could have overlooked the whole enforcer thing for a tumble in the sheets. But taking my voice and eliminating my alibi was unforgivable.

"I'm Elias." He had one of those unforgettable voices. Smooth, steady, and commanding. I hated that the sound of it sent a ripple of pleasure through me. *Stupid sexy voice.*

"Enforcer Elias?" I asked.

“Just Elias is fine,” he said.

I stared at him, waiting for him to break my gaze. He didn't. He held it, looking back into my eyes as if challenging me. Then he smiled. “This is where you introduce yourself.”

“You already know my name,” I said. “You're in my apartment and have apparently decided to play some kind of twisted game with my life.”

“I'm sorry about tonight, I am,” he said.

“Not sorry enough to fix it?” I demanded. “You have the power here to make it all go away.” I glanced at his hands, recalling the gold sparks. “And probably a lot more power than anyone else in this room.”

“Skylar, right?”

I narrowed my eyes. “You're avoiding all the important stuff.”

“Yeah, I do that,” he said.

“Unbelievable. Why not just let me go to jail now? Why go through the charade?” I asked.

“Because you and I both know you didn't kill Lola Vega,” he said.

My throat tightened and the tears threatened again but I didn't want to cry in front of this asshole. “Again, you could fix that right now.”

He shook his head. “I won't. But I will help you clear your name.”

“Wouldn't it be easier to explain...” I can't finish the sentence, my voice stolen from me once again. I stamped my foot on the ground like a frustrated child. “You have no idea how maddening it is not being able to say something.”

“You don't know anything about maddening,” he said.

Clacking and banging sounds came from the hall and I turned to look out the door. Elias grabbed me, gripping my upper arms with his large hands, he pulled me away from the door.

The touch was brief, but both of my arms felt like they had gotten too close to a fire. He dropped his hands, but the heat from his touch remained after the men with the gurney walked past us.

What was this guy? He wasn't a shifter, I could sense shifters. He didn't have the same magic signature as most mages, and he wasn't pale enough to be a vampire. He was something else. I just didn't know what and I wasn't sure if I wanted to know.

He was someone I was stuck with for two days while I figured this shit out. Even I'll admit, two days wasn't a lot, but I'd never been this motivated. Sure, money was nice motivation in a hunt but this was personal.

The sound of wheels returned, the noise even more uncomfortable than usual as the enforcers rolled the gurney over shattered glass and other debris. I clenched my hands into fists and bit down on the inside of my cheek to keep from full on screaming. Silent tears fell as they rolled my friend out of our shared apartment.

I don't know who would have wanted to hurt Lola. Nobody from our tiny social circle, that I know. We'd befriended a few humans and a couple of rogue mages. Okay, Lola had befriended them and they let me join in when I felt the need for other people. Mostly, I stayed to myself. It was better that way. At least that's what my dad had always said. In the business I was in, you made enemies and it was too easy for them to get to you through your friends.

I was pretty sure whoever killed Lola wasn't after me, but I didn't know why I felt that way. I knew I had good instincts, though, so I was going to have to bet on myself and follow those if I wanted to find her killer.

Cain walked over to us and stopped in front of me. The other enforcers stood silently behind her, two of them still wearing blue gloves and holding a few baggies. I wasn't sure what evidence they found but I sure as shit wasn't going to ask them. I knew how that would make me look. They wouldn't be able to see a hunter looking for her mark; they'd see someone

they already decided was guilty looking to see if her trail was clear.

“Forty-eight hours then you bring her in.” Cain’s words were meant for Elias, but she kept her eyes locked on me.

Keeping my jaw tight and my lips pressed together, I glared at her. There were a hundred things I wanted to shout at her but none of them were going to help my situation.

“We’ll return with the killer by then,” Elias said.

“Or the killer’s head,” I added.

Cain scoffed. “You always were a sucker for a pretty face, Elias.”

“This has nothing to do with that,” Elias said.

“Whatever.” Cain waved her hand toward the door and the enforcers behind her walked out, baggies in hand.

“Look, I don’t know why you’re taking this side,” Cain said as she leaned closer to Elias, “but this girl is going to take you down with her.”

“It’s her right to try,” Elias said.

“Such a waste,” Cain said, shaking her head.

Rage welled up inside me as I watched the exchange. There was history between these two, but despite my dislike of Elias, I found myself on his side. Cain wasn’t a good guy. I knew it in my gut.

“Try not to get her killed. I’d like the grand court to be able to question her before they decapitate her.” Cain turned her attention back to me and smiled, showing her fangs.

My brow furrowed. *Vampire*. I didn’t catch it at first. How did I miss that? She didn’t have the same magic signature that most of them did.

Without another word, Cain left the two of us standing in my destroyed apartment.

“Where should we start?” Elias asked.

“How about with you explaining what the fuck happened tonight,” I said.

CHAPTER FIVE

SKYLAR

“That’s not going to happen,” Elias said.

“You fucking owe me,” I snapped.

“I saved your ass just now,” he replied.

“My best friend is dead and I can’t even mourn her, thanks to you,” I said through gritted teeth. It didn’t feel right crying again. I needed a real cry. The full on screaming, heaving kind of cry that Lola deserved. This asshole stripped me of being able to even let myself go there.

“I’m sorry about your friend,” he said.

“No, you’re not.” I glared at him, not taking my eyes off his. He did look a little sorry. Or maybe that was in my head. Tastes of his magic seeped out, my senses firing again.

Despite my efforts, I could feel his magic sputtering and flaring like an out of control fire. It was like an explosion waiting to happen. I could sense how unstable and powerful it was. What I couldn’t sense was any sign of remorse. Not that I had the ability to know for sure but like I said, my instincts were usually spot on.

It didn’t matter right now, though. Feeling his magic was just making me more stressed. I took a deep breath in and closed that part of me, eliminating the feel of his magic and the residue that was floating around me. It wasn’t going to help bring my friend back.

“I meant what I said. I will help you find the true killer,” he said. “It’s the least I can do.”

“That’s for damn sure,” I spat. “This whole thing would be so much easier if you just came clean and told the truth.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Your magic is illegal, isn’t it? Is that what this is about? Your abuse of power?”

“You need to stop asking me questions before I wipe your memory completely,” he said.

I took a step back, fear prickling the back of my neck. “You can’t really do that. Can you?”

He shrugged. “Want to find out?”

I’d heard of dangerous magic that existed in the darkest corners of the world. It was said to be stronger than anything else but it was considered too unstable to wield. It was the kind of magic that bordered on myth. The stuff that made up children’s stories and horror movies. The kind of magic we all hoped didn’t actually exist.

The problem was that I saw it with my own eyes. And I could feel it pulsing through him, filling the room with an energy unlike anything I’d ever felt. Even if he prevented me from talking about it, I knew he was far more dangerous than any of the creatures I’d hunted.

I’d faced vampires, mages, and shifters and brought them all down. Usually with only minor injuries. None of the monsters I’d hunted scared me the way this male did.

“Why would you even help me at all?” I asked, ignoring the million other questions circling in my head.

“Would you rather I not?”

“Maybe,” I replied.

“You’re smarter than I thought you were,” he said. “But I’m a man of my word and I’m going to help you.”

I swallowed hard. He’s not a man. That’s for damn sure.

“You’re the hunter. Where should we start?” He glanced around the mess. “What do you think they were after?”

I shook my head. "I have no idea. I didn't even know Lola was from the High Moon pack, let alone that she was a princess."

"Well, now you know," he said.

I walked past him toward the door and then closed it, locking it before turning back to my living room.

"You think that'll keep out the bad guys?" he asked.

"No, I think you'll keep out the bad guys. That lock will keep the druggies next door from walking in. Besides, I don't think they're coming back. Who returns to the scene of the crime?"

"You'd be surprised." He was standing next to me now but I never even heard him move. Being around him for two days was going to force me to keep my guard up more. I was used to dealing with low level scum who often let their power get to their heads. It made them sloppy. When they made a mistake, I could sweep in and collect.

This dude wasn't going to make any mistakes.

I walked over to the flipped couch and started pushing it. It didn't budge. The odd pieces sticking out made it difficult to slide. "Want to give me a hand?"

Elias walked over and set his hand on what used to be an arm rest. The couch seemed to leap off the ground and flew over to the wall, slamming into it with a crunch.

I stared at him. "Subtle."

He shrugged. "It's not like you're getting your security deposit back."

Rolling my eyes, I got to my hands and knees and started feeling the floor to find the loose floorboard.

My fingers finally caught the edge and I lifted it, revealing the undisturbed contents. There was probably about five-hundred dollars of mine in an old Crown Royal bag. Lola's stash was in a beautiful carved wooden box.

I lifted both items out and set them on the ground before re-covering our hiding place.

“How did they miss that?” Elias asked as he crouched down next to me.

“I’m not sure the trashing of the place was about looking for things,” I said. “Otherwise they would have been more precise and less destructive.” I traced my fingers over the carved wood, sadness making my heart hurt. “They were counting on Lola cracking under torture to tell them what they wanted. They probably trashed it cause they were mad or to make it look like they searched the place.”

“How come you’re a hunter and not an enforcer?” Elias asked.

I laughed. “I’m not really the enforcer type.”

“Yeah, probably not,” he said.

I looked up at him. “I get the feeling you’re not, either.”

His lips twitched and I got the sense I struck a nerve. *Interesting.*

“What’s in the box?” He lifted his chin.

I shrugged. “Cash, I’m guessing. That’s what I kept in here.”

I opened my Crown Royal bag and dumped the bills on the floor. Then I took a deep breath and looked down at Lola’s box. I felt guilty just opening it but she was gone. I wondered if the box held any value or if it was important. She’d never once told me about her family but now that I knew who they were, I wondered if they’d want to collect what remained of her belongings. Then again, she left them. She was hiding here from something. That I knew, but I never realized it was from a famous family. I thought it was from an ex-boyfriend or something. My intuition really let me down there.

Elias sat down cross legged on the floor. I glanced over at him, surprised by how comfortably he appeared to settle in. It wasn’t an aggressive position or even a position that he could strike from easily. In a weird way, I could sense it was the

closest thing I was going to get to him trying to show me he meant no harm. Not that I believed it or trusted him for a second.

But right now, I was stuck with him. Part of me wanted to take the box somewhere more private. It felt weird to open her little stash in front of a stranger. Though, I figured if I walked away, the enforcer on my floor would follow.

With that unpleasant thought, I let out a breath and opened the box.

There was a pile of money and a little red velvet bag. I lifted the money and peeked under it. That was it. All I had left of my closest friend was this little box. I didn't care about the money. It wasn't like I'd stay in this place now that she was gone. But whatever was in the little bag had to be important.

I pulled on the drawstring and opened the pouch before tipping out the contents. I expected jewelry. Instead, a small white stone fell into my hand. It was about the size of a quarter and smooth and shiny. It reminded me of one of those stones you could get from the box at the museum gift store. It didn't look like anything special. My guess was that it was sentimental somehow. At least I wouldn't feel guilty hanging on to it. I doubted anyone in her family was looking for this or expecting it back.

"You have got to be kidding me," Elias said, reaching for the stone.

I pulled it away from him. "Hey, find your own pretty rock. This is staying with me."

"You muted your senses, didn't you?" he asked.

I blinked at him in surprise. I never told him what my abilities were. Most shifters couldn't sense magic. My dad told me it was a rare result of my body taking in half of the supernatural abilities. How did Elias pick that up?

"Go ahead," he said.

I closed my fingers around the stone and allowed my senses to grow. The rock in my hand pulsed like it had a

heartbeat. An unusual vibration hummed through it, as if it was made of music. I'd never felt anything like it before.

"What the hell?" I opened my hand and looked at the small object. Before, I simply saw a stone. Now that I was looking for magic, it wasn't what it seemed. It didn't even appear to be solid. A glowing white sphere floated just above my palm. The closest thing I could compare it to was a miniature moon. Complete with its own glow.

"I guess we know what they were after," Elias said.

"What is it and why did Lola have it?" I asked.

"That's a moon stone." He reached out with his index finger and touched the glowing sphere. The stone fell back to my palm, the glow doused.

"What did you do?" I pulled my hand away and held it up against my chest, trying to protect the thing my friend had died for.

"I deactivated it for now," he said.

"Explain," I said. "And no more lies, no more bullshit. What the fuck is going on? How are you connected to all of this?"

"I can assure you, I had nothing to do with your friend's death. I didn't even know there was a moon stone in your world, let alone that it was here," he said.

I lifted my eyebrow at the mention of *your world* but I didn't stop him. This was the most I'd gotten out of my temporary partner since we met.

"This changes things." He stood and extended his hand, offering it to me.

I hesitated.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

"I'm not sure I want you touching me. I've seen what your hands can do."

He dropped his hand. "Look, this isn't ideal for either of us. But you need my help right now. And I swear I will get

you out of this.”

I looked down, back to the little box that was so important to Lola. It suddenly struck me how true it was that you can't take it with you. “She deserves vengeance. I'm not going to play nice when we find the killer.”

“Finally, something we can agree on,” he said.

CHAPTER SIX

ELIAS

All of this would be so much less complicated if I had just wiped her memory. I had my orders, I knew what I should have done. It wasn't too late. I could and probably should eliminate everything from last night, but I didn't want to. There was some part of me that couldn't stand the idea of doing anything that might harm Skylar.

I'd never felt guilt for anything I'd done in the name of my mission. And I knew that helping her find her friend's killer was taking me away from my goal for two days, but I couldn't stop myself. Every piece of me was driven to help her. To protect her.

I told myself it was because she reminded me of my sister, Clara, but that wasn't entirely true. Clara had been fragile and elegant. Skylar was tough as nails and still covered in vampire blood.

The thought made me smile.

"What?" she demanded.

"You're a mess," I said.

"Thanks to you." She pushed herself to standing, still clutching the stone in her grip. "Now, are you going to finish explaining why this stone is a big deal or am I going to have to head to the pawn shop and ask some questions?"

"You do that, you're going to start a war," I said.

“Aren’t you dramatic,” she deadpanned.

“The moon stone, when combined with the proper ingredients, can control shifting. It might even work on you.” I knew the stories of the stone’s bloody past, but I wasn’t sure what it would do to a half shifter. Especially one who I was beginning to suspect wasn’t half human, after all.

“What do you mean *controls shifting*?” She was staring at the stone again as if it was about to bite her.

“In the before days, vampires used these stones to force shifters to serve them. They could make them change at their command. Control them, even.” I nodded to the stone. “They remove a shifter’s free will. It’s how the vampires enslaved the wolves so long ago.”

“Why have I never heard of this before?” She looked skeptical.

“Because they shouldn’t exist anymore. Most of them were made into jewelry and spelled to activate the magic. What you have is a dormant stone. It needs a few other things to pull it all together, but those are easy to find. The stone is what’s rare. They were all destroyed during the shifter emancipation wars.”

“Apparently not,” she said. “Unless this is a replica?”

“You felt the magic yourself,” I said.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “How do you know so much about what I can and can’t do?”

“I’m observant,” I said.

“Liar,” she said.

“Does it matter? What I can and can’t do isn’t going to help us find your friend’s killer or clear your name.”

“You have the power to clear my name by being honest,” she said.

“We’re going in circles and wasting time. I’m not giving you that information and I’m not going to talk about it again.”

This woman was annoyingly persistent. Which I supposed was part of what made her good at her job.

“We start with Lola’s pack,” she said. “We need to find out why Lola has this and who else knew it was in her possession.”

“Agree,” I said.

“Give me five minutes,” she said, turning away from me.

“You do realize that if you run off on me I’ll have to hunt you down instead of looking for Lola’s killer.”

She turned around and glared at me. Her full lips were pressed together and for a moment, I wondered if they were as soft as they looked.

That was a dangerous thought. I was already getting more emotionally attached to this half-shifter than I should.

“Thanks to you, I look like I murdered someone. Nobody is going to talk to me like this. I need to change my clothes. Am I going to need to ask permission to pee too?”

My cheeks heated. “I’ll wait here.”

“Feel free to wander off if you like. I promise I won’t waste my time looking for you if you get lost or fall behind.” She turned and walked away from me, her silver and blue hair catching the light as she moved.

My eyes went right to her ass. She really did wear those leather pants well. I told myself it didn’t hurt to look. It had been years since I’d been with anyone. I’d been so focused on my mission and so determined to get back to the palace and away from this place. But every time I thought I had a break in the case, it turned out to be a dead end.

This time, it was my fault. I killed the vampire I needed to question. I could have let him have Skylar. Or I could have pulled him off. Instead, I went right into protection mode and put Skylar’s life above my mission.

I’d never done that before. I’d always sacrificed everything for the cause.

Spending time with Skylar was dangerous. She distracted me and caused me to lose focus. I'd give her this forty-eight hours because I didn't want her going to jail when she wasn't guilty. But as soon as we caught the killer, I needed to get as far away from her as possible.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SKYLAR

Ten minutes into our drive, I was struggling to turn off my abilities. Most shifters couldn't do what I did. As far as I knew, my gift of sensing magic was a strange result of my mixed blood. Usually, I had great control of myself and could turn it off. For some reason, being around Elias was like keeping that part of me plugged in and powered up to full blast.

I wasn't a fan.

Especially not when the silent, broody male in the driver's seat was emitting a pulse of magic darker than anything I'd ever experienced. And I've taken down a lot of dark magic users.

Most of the time I encountered anything resembling what I was feeling from Elias it was self-inflicted. Mages using forbidden magic or vampires who dabbled in things they shouldn't. There was always an artificial flavor to their magic. That didn't exist with Elias. Whatever his magic was (I hadn't forgotten that he exploded a vampire) it was all him and it was intense. And not likely in a good way.

He was commanding and cocky and sexy as hell, but I knew he was bad news. Once this thing was locked down and we had Lola's killer, I needed to make sure I didn't cross paths with him again.

Elias turned down a side street and headed toward the docks. I winced involuntarily. Why does all the creepy shit have to go down in cliché places like docks anyway?

“You might want to go solo on this,” he said.

I turned and looked at him, surprised that this was what he broke his silence with. “You afraid?” It was a joke, of course. I doubted he was afraid of anything.

“I think you might have better results than an enforcer showing up. You’re Lola’s friend. You have emotional ties to this. Shifters respond to emotions.”

I was sure there was an insult in there somewhere given that I was half-shifter but I let it go. He was right, out of the two of us, I had a better shot at getting the pack to talk.

The High Moon Pack is notorious for a lot of reasons; very few of them good ones.

They’re by far the biggest, most well-known pack in Harbor Crossing and I’m pretty sure their influence covers most of the east coast. I’ve had my share of run ins with members of the pack over the years, but most of the time it was when I’d find someone hunting the same mark I was.

They weren’t guilty, though, and their hunts were personal vendettas rather than legal bounties. Twice, I’d had shifters back down and go home after finding out I was on the case. That was a hell of a compliment. It gave me hope that my reputation was going to work in my favor while trying to find Lola’s family.

The car came to a stop in front of a bar. *The Wet Dog* wasn’t a place I’d ever been, but it was famous. The private club was the home base for the pack and since it was private, it wasn’t frequently visited by outsiders.

I grew up hearing rumors of what went on in here, but I never thought I’d ever see the inside. Being half wolf, I wasn’t exactly welcome in any pack. Stepping foot in here was asking for trouble for no reason.

Unfortunately for me, I now had a reason and it came with bad news. I hoped they weren’t the *kill the messenger* type of

pack.

“You need an invitation?” Elias asked. “I thought this was what you did for a living.”

I bared my teeth at him. “Don’t push me. I can handle myself just fine but forgive me if I take a moment to gather my thoughts before going into the lion’s den to tell them one of their own was killed.”

“Lion’s den?” He chuckled. “More like dog park.”

“You want to go in there instead?” I asked. “Be my guest.”

“You just said you can handle it,” he said. “What is it? Do you need back up or can you do this?”

I opened the car door. I’d rather take my chances with the wolves than sit there for another minute. My instincts were telling me that Elias was dangerous, but he was also infuriating. “Feel free to go for a walk while I’m away. Maybe a long one.”

“Maybe I will,” he said.

I slammed the door and crossed the parking lot toward the bar. I was surprised Elias wasn’t following me after all the warnings from Cain, but I was grateful for the ability to do this solo. I didn’t work well with others. Besides, this was my business. While Elias could have cleared my name with a single sentence, I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t be on this path anyway.

Lola was my only real friend if I’m being honest. We met in a yoga class when I was eighteen. My dad had just died and I was stuck living in a shit hole and taking bounties myself for the first time. And let me tell you, when you’re new to the guild, you get the shit marks with the graduated pay scale, less than base. It’s tough to pay the bills like that. Lola noticed that I started missing classes and covered a new punch card for me without asking.

I felt awful that she had to do that for me, but she taught me that friends help each other. Eventually, we got a place together. That was six years ago.

My throat was tight again and I blew out a shaky breath. I had to get my head clear before I stepped into this place. I needed to be strong, focused. I couldn't let the grief cloud my judgement or dull my senses. It was possible I was making the biggest mistake of my life by walking through that door. But I owed it to Lola.

Shoulders back, chin high, I walked into the bar like I fucking belonged there.

It was dark and smoky and classic rock played on the ancient juke box. People filled every space, gathered around tables, lined up at the bar, shooting pool. It was like every stereotypical dive bar I've ever been to. The only difference was that the whole place hummed with a kind of pent-up energy that could only come from so many shifters gathered in the same place.

Once again, I couldn't shut off my senses. There was so much magic here. It wasn't anything like the magic that I felt from Elias. This was different. Primal, tangled, less focused. Shifter magic wasn't the same energy as mages or vampires, but I could feel it.

Walking through this bar was like wading hip deep in a shifter magic bog.

Thankfully, my ability to sense magic in other supernaturals wasn't a typical shifter gift. Not a single head turned to me as I made my way to the bar. The music continued, occasionally interrupted by the clacking of pool balls or the grunts or cheers of patrons. It was all relatively normal. A human dropping by probably wouldn't know there was anything different about this place. They might feel like something's off, but they wouldn't know why.

I found an empty bar stool between a pair of males who were so shamelessly flirting with the people next to them that I had no risk of being the focus of their attention.

The bartender walked over to me while polishing a glass. I'm serious. He was legit polishing a glass as if I was in the middle of some cheesy western. I half expected him to ask me

how I was feeling or greet me by name. Which of course, is ridiculous.

“What can I get you?” he asked.

“Seltzer and lime,” I said.

He lifted a judgmental eyebrow but didn't comment on my lack of alcohol. I know I seem like a party pooper every time I order a drink at a bar, but I don't trust myself with booze. My powers are too sensitive when I'm drunk and I can't shut them down. It's overwhelming to sense the magic everywhere and it often extends beyond that.

When I drink, I let my guard down and I can feel more than just magic. And trust me, you don't want to know the feelings and emotions of the people around you. It ruined a lot of friendships for me when I was younger. Imagine knowing that your friend isn't actually into their significant other or that that same friend wants to jump into your pants. It's awkward. Trust me on that.

The bartender returned with my boring ass drink and set it in front of me. I took it and slid a five-dollar bill toward him. “Thanks. Two years sober and I can finally come into these places without temptation.”

His judgmental expression changed and he smiled. “Good for you, doll.”

I resisted wincing. *Doll?* Who uses that term?

“Can I get you a burger or something?” he asked.

“I'm not hungry, but I am looking for something else,” I said, using the seductive voice that made me feel a little guilty.

“You're not quite my type, darling, but I can point you in the direction of some lonely males if you're in the mood,” he said.

Gotta love a helpful bartender, am I right? “That's sweet, but this isn't a social call.”

“Oh?” He leaned over the top of the shiny wood bar. “What is it then?”

“I’m looking for someone, and I heard this was the place to find him,” I said.

He backed away, then looked me up and down before returning his eyes to mine. “You’re a hunter.”

“I am, but I’m not on duty, this is personal. A family matter,” I added.

“Lay it on me and I’ll see what I can do,” he said.

“I’m looking for Xander Vega,” I said.

The bartender’s whole body stiffened and the friendly expression dissolved in an instant. “I think you need to leave.”

“It’s important,” I said. “I have to speak with him.”

He shook his head. “You should go now. Before something happens.”

The air in the bar shifted and I could feel the presence of shifters closing in around me.

“I mean no harm. I need to speak with him regarding his sister,” I said.

Someone grabbed my arm and tugged, dragging me around so I was now facing away from the bartop. Six huge male shifters were glaring at me.

“He told you to leave, hunter,” a male with massive bushy black eyebrows and a nose that looked like it’d been broken multiple times said.

“We don’t want hunters in here,” another said. He was shorter but built like a tank. He cracked his knuckles as he moved closer to me. “This is no place for traitors.”

I’d heard that before. Lots of supernaturals viewed hunters as traitors, because we hunted our own kind. But we weren’t the ones who broke supernatural law. Sure, I’d taken down my share of supernaturals, but they were all bad. At least that was what I told myself so I could sleep at night. Not that it always worked, but honestly, I didn’t accept a case if it felt morally wrong.

“Look, I have to see him. You can tell me where to find him or I’ll go elsewhere. Either way, I’m going to talk to him.”

“Last warning, little one,” a third male said. He was a mouth breather with a shiny bald head and a red face. His nostrils flared as he bared his teeth at me. “Or we’ll have to teach you a lesson about poking around where you don’t belong.”

It was clear I was in the right place. All of these assholes had to be High Moon Pack. They thought they were protecting their Alpha. But how good could he be if he needed protection from a five-foot-six half shifter hunter?

“Seriously?” I shook my head. “You all need to back the fuck off. Let your boss make the choice. Unless you don’t think he can take me? Is that it? He’s afraid to have a conversation with a hunter?”

Mouth breather pulled back his fist and I ducked, sliding off the stool just in time to prevent getting knuckles in my teeth.

Someone grabbed me from behind, pinning my arms against my side. I kicked and twisted. “Let me go.”

“Who sent you?” he asked.

“I sent myself, dickwad. Now let me go. This is important.” I elbowed him in the ribs, causing him to loosen his grip enough for me to twist around. Facing him, I pulled an arm free and punched him in the chin.

He grunted and let go of me as his hand moved to hold his jaw. “You bitch.”

I ran forward but only got a few steps before someone grabbed my arm and yanked me down. My feet slipped and I went down hard, landing on my knees. Before I could scramble back to my feet, someone grabbed my ankle and pulled me, sending me flat to my stomach.

I managed to roll to my back and kick my foot right up between the legs of the male who had my ankle. He let go but the other male kicked me in the stomach. I groaned as my

vision blurred. He kicked me again, knocking the wind from me.

Forcing myself to breathe, I scrambled away from the foot and pushed myself up. Four males were closing in on me and we had an audience. Cheers erupted and a few people whistled. I could hear the hum of the music in the background but my ears were ringing, making the lyrics impossible to pinpoint.

“Seriously? Four against one?”

“We warned you,” one of them said.

I reached down and grabbed my knife then held it out in front of me. “Fine. We’ll do this your way.”

Mouth breather charged me, his hands reaching for me like claws. I dodged and swiped with my blade, catching his cheek. As I shifted away from my attacker, one of the others stepped in and a fist made contact with my cheek.

The pain radiated through the whole side of my face, making my eyes water. I could taste the copper scent of blood in my mouth.

With a growl, I charged forward, managing to plunge the knife into his shoulder. He let out a howl of pain as I pulled the knife out from him.

Arms went around my waist and I was on the floor again, barely breaking my fall with my hands. My knife flew across the floor and a black boot stepped on it, stopping its slide.

Those boots had a familiar quality to them. I looked up to see Elias. A little of the tension I was feeling eased and a rush of gratitude filled me. I’d never admit it, but these shifters were kicking my ass.

“Let her go and back away, only warning,” Elias said. His tone was chilling and steady. The entire bar went silent.

No music, no talking, no cheering. Silent as a grave.

“This ain’t your business.” The shifter with the huge eyebrows took a step toward Elias.

I felt the pressure release from my back and I knew they'd found a new toy. I wasn't being held down anymore. Quickly, I got to my feet and bypassed the shifters who were moving closer to Elias. I moved in front of him.

"Back the fuck off, all of you," I said. "We have business with Xander Vega and we're not leaving until we see him."

Elias moved next to me. "Stay back, I'll handle this."

"I've got this," I hissed.

"Yeah, the blood on your face makes that clear," he said.

Suddenly, Elias pushed me so hard I slammed into the wall, knocking a framed photo to the ground. He was in front of me now, and things were moving way too fast.

In a blur of black fabric and gold sparks, bodies flew into the air. Grunts, screams, and the sound of bones snapping reverberated through the silence of the bar.

I took a step forward, trying to navigate my way into the fray, but there was so much motion and so many moving bodies that I couldn't find an opening.

Finally, sound returned, hitting me like a sonic boom. The bar erupted in screams as all the patrons scrambled toward the door. I moved away from the entry so I didn't get trampled, which caused me to take my eyes off the fight.

Though, I suppose it wasn't much of a fight.

When I looked back, there was a pile of shifters and Elias stood in the center of them. His shoulders rose and fell with heavy breaths. The gold sparks I'd come to associate with whatever the fuck his magic was sizzled on his fingertips.

"What just happened?" I asked.

"You're welcome," he said.

"I told you I had it under control," I insisted, which I didn't. We both knew that.

He laughed. "Yeah. I can see that."

The door opened and we turned to see who was stupid enough to walk back in.

Tan skin, jet black hair, and amber eyes, the newcomer instantly sent a shiver right through me. He was huge and imposing and holy fuck he was every fantasy I've ever had about a perfect man.

But this wasn't a man. This was a shifter.

"Xander Vega?" I asked.

"What the fuck did you do to my bar?" he asked.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SKYLAR

“She came in looking for you, boss,” a voice called.

I turned to see the bartender emerging from behind the bar.

“Seriously? You hid back there the whole time while four dudes beat the shit out of me?” I shook my head. “You belong in this pile with the rest of them.”

Xander walked over to me and stopped inches from me. My whole body reacted to his presence as if he was the sun and I was feeling his heat. I knew shifters put off more heat but this was ridiculous. Maybe it was an alpha thing? I wasn’t sure I’d ever been around an alpha before.

“They did this to you?” He gently touched my cheek before scowling at the passed out shifters. He shook his head. “Four shifters against one isn’t what we’re about.”

I should have batted his hand away. I should have punched him. I’d have done that if any other stranger touched me without permission. Instead, I stood there breathless and staring at him as if he were a prized work of art. Because let me tell you, up close he was even better.

“Skylar,” Elias’s voice broke me from the trance.

I shook my head and took a step back, reclaiming some of my personal bubble. “Look, I came here looking for you and they attacked me.”

“She’s a hunter,” bartender said.

“So?” I snapped. “What of it? I didn’t come here for anyone in this bar. Though, now I wish I would have.”

“They dead?” Xander asked, lifting his chin toward the pile of broken shifters.

“They’ll live but they won’t be able to work for a while,” Elias said.

“Who the fuck are you?” Xander asked. He moved closer to me again but was focused on Elias.

“Enforcer,” he said. “On a case that directly involves you.”

“I don’t want anything to do with the enforcers.” He glanced at me. “Or the hunters.”

“I need five minutes,” I said. “Then we’re gone.”

“Fine. Clock’s ticking.”

“You want me to air family business in the open like this?” I asked.

“They’re out for the count.” Xander looked at the pile of shifters.

I looked over at the bartender. “Him?”

“My office,” Xander said as he walked away from me. He stepped over several of the unconscious shifters and then stopped. “Only you. Enforcer stays out here.”

“No way, I’m not leaving her alone with you,” Elias said.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I got this.”

“That’s what you said before,” Elias said.

“And who’s fault is it that I’m hurt at all?” I asked.

“If he touches you, I won’t hold back,” he said.

“That was you holding back?” I gestured to the destruction around us.

“You’ve seen what I can do,” he said.

That was true. None of these shifters had been exploded.

“You coming? You’re down to four minutes,” Xander said.

“Yeah, but you might want to be nicer to me, I’m not the most dangerous person in this bar and you aren’t either,” I said.

“I know that’s not a threat,” he said.

“It’s definitely a threat,” Elias said.

I moved forward, going around the bodies as best I could. “Let’s just get this over with. Elias, if he kills me, at least you won’t have to baby sit me anymore.”

Xander looked curious but continued to the little door at the back of the bar. He unlocked it and stepped inside. I followed behind him.

The office was simple and served its purpose. There was a small couch, a desk with a chair on either side, and a little table covered in framed photos. It wasn’t something I expected but as soon as I glanced at them, one stood out.

I bypassed the chair and walked to the photo of a younger Xander and the unmistakable smiling face of Lola.

I picked it up and grief made my stomach twist into knots. The photo reminded me of why I was here. The aching pain in my gut, the likely black eye, and swollen lip were worth it. Whoever killed Lola deserved punishment.

“Three minutes,” Xander said.

I turned to face him. Xander was sitting on top of the desk, his hands gripping the edge of the table so tightly I could see the bulge of his muscled arms through his tee shirt.

“My name is Skylar Aven. Do you know who I am?” I asked.

“Should I?” he asked.

“When was the last time you spoke to her?”

“Who?” he asked.

“Lola,” I said.

He was off the desk and in my face in a heartbeat. His large hand went around my neck, his other hand was on my chest, pinning me to the wall.

“Choose your next words carefully,” he said.

Fear coursed through my veins. This was not going the way I anticipated. Still clutching the framed photo in my hand, I locked my eyes on his. There was an intensity in his gaze that pulled me in. A unique energy swirled around him. It was heady and sensual and made me want to fall into him and never leave. The fear eased and I was left feeling a strange sense of comfort from his presence.

“What about Lola?” He growled.

“She was my best friend,” I said. “But you deserve to hear this from me.”

He dropped the hand on my throat. “I haven’t spoken to her in years and you’re using the past tense.”

“She was killed,” I said. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Where?” he asked.

“In our apartment,” I said. “We lived downtown.”

“That’s why the enforcer is here?” He asked. “To see if I know anything?”

I shook my head. “The enforcer is a complication. I’m here to find out what you know so I can find her killer and make him pay.”

“I don’t talk to cops,” he said, releasing his hand from my chest.

He was so close to me I could feel his body brush against mine. He might not be holding me against the wall anymore, but it was pretty damn clear I wasn’t yet free to leave.

“I’m not a cop,” I said. “I’m a hunter, that’s true. But I didn’t kill Lola. Now, are you going to ease up and let me talk or are you going to continue to threaten the only lead you have on finding your sister’s killer?”

He growled, a low guttural sound that sent my heart fluttering. *Fuck*. How was that sound so sexy coming from him? There were so many reasons Xander Vega was off limits but holy hell he was a fine specimen of a male. I didn't date shifters. They were too possessive and clingy, but in another time, I might have made an exception for him.

Xander took a step back and swept his arm toward the couch. Silently, I walked to it, taking a seat on the end as close to an armrest as I could get.

He sat on the other end, his knees turned to me, his eyes locked on mine. His expression was less intense than it had been. Less murderous, I suppose. But he was still giving me a warning in his look.

"Listen, we both want the same thing here," I said, trying to ease the tension hanging between us. "Unless you're the one who wanted your sister dead. In which case, I will not hesitate to take you down."

His lips turned upward in the slightest smile. "I appreciate that. And I can see why Lola liked you."

"She was my best friend." I had to clear my throat to keep it from getting too tight again. My tears were private and I'd cry them when I was alone. And after I shoved my knife through the heart of Lola's killer.

"Tell me what you know," he said.

"I came home from a hunt and found our place trashed and Lola dead." I swallowed, taking a moment to consider how much I should tell him.

He hadn't seen his sister in years and she had never once told me about him. I had no idea if they were close or why they weren't in contact. He wasn't showing visible emotion, but I could sense the shift in how he was feeling. As if he was hiding his anger and grief. It was possible he was holding back tears, just as I was.

My intuition was usually spot on, but I wasn't sure if I trusted myself around him. I had no reason to trust him and no reason to feel safe with him. For the first time in my life, I

worried that I was being blinded by attraction. Was this how men felt around attractive women? It was like I was half thinking with my hormones which wasn't like me.

“Do you want the details or is that too much?” I asked.

“Tell me.” A vein in his forehead appeared as he tightened his jaw. He was bracing himself.

I nodded once. “They tortured her with silver. There were tiny silver pins inserted in her arms. As if they were trying to get her to talk before they took her out.”

Xander stood and walked over to the desk before turning and walking back. He paced back and forth a few times, occasionally running his hand through his jet black hair.

Finally, he stopped and looked at me. “You know more. Don't hold back.”

“Yes, there's more.” I hesitated, unsure of where to begin and what to include. What if someone from the pack was responsible for this? What if Xander was involved?

Xander sat back down on the couch. “Tell me everything. Don't leave anything out.”

“Why did she leave?” I had to know who she was running from. I wasn't about to give up the information she'd died for if she'd fled from her own brother.

“She had to,” he said. “To protect the pack.”

“Why?” I needed to know if I should proceed. Elias had said the stone was capable of starting a war. I wasn't about to get in the middle of supernatural politics. As far as I was concerned, I was neutral. I didn't take sides. I hunted shifters and vampires equally. No favorites.

“She had a job to do and she did it. She knew the risks. We all did. It had to be done,” he said, but it was as if he was talking to himself.

“You knew where she was this whole time?” I asked.

“No, that's part of it, she couldn't tell us where she went.”

“She was protecting something, wasn't she?” I asked.

Xander's expression changed just enough that I knew I was right. She wasn't fleeing from her pack, she'd left to hide the stone.

I needed the information Xander had to help me figure this out. Making a decision, I pulled the shiny rock out of my pocket and presented it to Xander. "Is this why they killed her?"

Xander recoiled, physically moving away from the stone.

I closed my hand around it and slid it back in my pocket. "I'm sorry. Does it effect you?"

"No," he said. "It's just what it represents."

"Tell me about it," I said. "Who knows about this and why would they come for her?"

"You really want to find who killed her, don't you?" he asked.

"I have no choice," I admitted. "They think I did."

He narrowed his eyes at me and stared at me as if studying my face for a long minute. "You'd do this either way, wouldn't you? Go after them even if it wasn't your ass on the line."

"Absolutely. She was my best friend and I want to make them hurt the way they hurt her." I was surprised by the rage that boiled within me. I'd never been driven by vengeance before this. I'd managed to make peace with my kills because I was doing them on someone else's authority. I was given a name and I tracked and caught or killed my target legally. It was never personal.

This time, I wanted whoever killed my friend gone. I was choosing their sentence. It was personal. Even if the killer's name isn't on a list, I was talking them down.

"So that explains the enforcer," he said. "You've got guild time."

"Yes," I said. "So, as you can tell, I'm in a hurry. Any info you can give me will help my case."

“First, we have to talk about that stone,” he said. “I can’t keep it with me. It’s too much of a risk to the pack.”

“Why not destroy it?” I asked. “Why all the secrecy and sending Lola away from her family?”

“It can’t be destroyed. Trust me, we’ve tried. Six generations of my family have protected it, passing it to the second born child when they came of age. For the good of the pack, they’d leave and live alone until it was time to pass it on to the next generation.” Xander shook his head. “If I could’ve taken her place, I would have but she was proud of her task. We were raised to take our places when the time came. Me as pack leader, her as the keeper.”

“Well, that sounds mighty noble and all that, but there has to be a way to end this cycle. From what I’ve heard, this thing is too dangerous to exist. Nothing can break it?” It didn’t seem likely. All magic had a source and a counter source. For all magic, there was something that could defeat it. It wasn’t always pleasant or easy, but it was possible.

“Unless you have a tool that breaks Demon magic, I’m afraid this is our only option,” he said.

The stone suddenly felt like it weighed a hundred pounds in my pocket. Demon magic was the exception to every rule, of course. But there hadn’t been any sighting of demons in our realm in a century. They stayed in their place, and we stayed in ours.

“Well, fuck,” I said.

He laughed. “Yeah, fuck.”

“Alright, so who’s next in line in your pack? Don’t you have an alternate? This can’t be the first time this has happened.” I hated minimizing Lola’s life this way. It felt disrespectful and dirty, but I knew it wasn’t safe in my pocket. Especially not while going after the very people who had tried to find it in the first place.

Add in where it came from, and I wanted it as far away from me as possible. I sure as hell didn’t want to carry demon magic around with me.

“Traditionally, it would be my second born who would take over,” he said. “But I don’t even have a mate, let alone a kid.”

“What’s the alternative?” I asked.

He stood and walked over to the desk, ducking behind it. I heard the telltale sound of a safe being opened.

“Please tell me you have a place to store this thing,” I said.

He rose, an envelope in hand. “Each keeper leaves a name of who they trust to take over their duty if the worst should happen. An intermediary who can act as keeper until the next heir is ready.”

Xander looked down at the envelope, staring at it as if it was something sacred. I supposed in a way it was, his last little bit of Lola. I knew that feeling well. I felt the same weight, the same reverence when I’d opened the box she kept her valuables in.

With a long exhale, he tore open the envelope. Then he looked up at me.

“It’s you,” he said. “Lola chose you.”

“Um, no. That’s impossible. I’m not even a shifter,” I said.

He turned the letter so it was facing me. In Lola’s clear, neat handwriting I saw my name on the paper. Only my name. No other information.

When had she put my name on there? We must have met a few years after she left the pack. Why would she think I was the best one to care for this?

“She must have trusted you.” He leaned against his desk as he looked at me. “Like it or not, the stone is your responsibility now.”

“No,” I said. “Why trust me with this? You should give it to someone else. I don’t want it.”

“I can sense your wolf. This is just as dangerous to you as it is to any of us. If it got out there, you’re just as vulnerable. Maybe more since you’ve likely got a list of enemies that

rivals my own. You've got a lot of reasons to keep it safe," he said.

"Half wolf," I said, feeling the familiar pang of inadequacy that always accompanied that confession. "I'm only half. I don't even have a pack. I don't belong in your world."

"You do," he said. "You're pack now."

I blinked at him, not sure I'd heard him correctly. I was a half shifter, shunned from birth. My father had been cast out of his pack and I'd never looked for them. I never even tried to belong.

"Welcome to the High Moon Pack," he said. "As the new keeper, you're one of us now."

I tensed as a million thoughts raced through my mind. "I can't shift."

"Lola claimed you as pack when she wrote your name on this paper. In the High Moon Pack, we take care of our own. Even if they can't shift."

"That's insane, you don't even know me. Why trust me with this responsibility?" I asked.

"Lola trusted you, so I trust you," he said.

A knock sounded on the door. "Skylar, we gotta get moving."

"Your babysitter calls," Xander said. "I know the law prevents me from joining you, but I'm here if you need me. Any time. Pack protects pack."

A shiver ran through me. I wasn't sure I believed him and it was too much to process all at once. Had I really been taken in by a pack? Did I want to be part of a pack?

"Skylar," Elias called through the closed door.

There wasn't time to figure this out now. I would keep the stone safe for Lola's sake and figure out the rest later. "I don't have any leads. Who would be after this stone? Who else might know about it?"

“Last time there was an attempt to take it, the Clover Coven was directly involved,” he said.

“You have got to be shitting me,” I said.

“You asked,” he said. “If they are involved, it’s going to mean war. I have to alert the rest of the pack.”

“No, not yet,” I begged. “Give me one more night. This will be easier to solve if word doesn’t get out that a bunch of wolves are on the trail. I don’t want the killer to leave town if they haven’t already.”

“That’s asking a lot, you know that,” he said. “Lola deserves justice and you deserve the protection from you pack.”

There it was again, the insistence that I was part of his pack. Flutters filled my insides at the thought of spending more time with the alpha. I tightened my jaw, sending the distractions from my mind. I was letting him throw off my focus. Which was another reason I didn’t need him interfering right now.

“I need to do this for Lola. And myself,” I admitted. “Just one more night. If I don’t find the killer, I’ll be locked up and out of your hair.”

“Alright. I’ll wait on sharing about Lola if you swear you’ll let me know if you need help,” he said.

“I will.” I stood.

He closed the distance between us in one large stride. “Be careful with that stone. Don’t let it fall into the wrong hands. We’re counting on you.”

I was standing so close to him, I could feel his warm breath on my face. He smelled like leather and pine, as if he spent hours outdoors. It was intoxicating. I wanted to breathe him in for days.

The door opened. “Skylar, those shifters are going to be pissed when they wake and I don’t think we should be here when that happens.”

I was still standing right next to Xander and I jumped at Elias's words, quickly moving away from the shifter.

"Did I interrupt? Is this some kind of wolf thing? Do you two need to sniff each other some more?" He grinned as he leaned against the door jamb.

Xander's nose brushed against my neck and I heard him inhale.

"What the fuck?" I moved away. My cheeks heated. Hadn't I done the same thing to him? Not that I'd admit it. "Just because he's being a dick doesn't mean you need to play along."

"It sounded like a good idea," Xander said.

"Shifters," I said, rolling my eyes. When I'd caught his scent I hadn't been creepy about it.

"Careful, sweetheart, you're one of us, even if it's only half," he said. "Take care of that stone. And take care of yourself."

I closed my fingers around the rock in my pocket, feeling the emotional burden of the prize. It was a lot of responsibility. The problem was, whoever had killed Lola wasn't just aware of Lola's connection to her brother, they'd also be looking for me. I couldn't keep the stone on me, either. And it would be safer if Xander didn't know where it was in case they came for him.

There was only one thing I could think of to keep the stone safe. And it involved placing it under the care of a human.

CHAPTER NINE

XANDER

From the moment I saw the half wolf, I felt the connection. I was hoping it was a fluke, a false signal, something I could ignore.

By the time she was in my office, there was no denying the attraction. Her scent called to me like a siren, trying to drag me under.

If not for the nature of her visit, I might have claimed her right then. Each moment that passed made it more clear.

Skylar Aven was my mate.

My true mate.

It took all my willpower to talk my wolf down so I could listen to her. Once the gravity of her visit was revealed, the desire to bed her was gone, but it didn't stop the call of our bond.

I watched her leave the bar with the enforcer, my inner wolf clawing at my insides, begging me to follow. Jealousy tangled inside me, threatening to undermine my promise to give her time.

But I had assured her, I would wait one more night. She deserved the time to clear her name and if I interfered, she could lose her chance at freedom.

If anyone else had come into my bar with the news of Lola's death and asked me to do nothing, I would have killed them on the spot.

Lola's killer needed to pay. But the request had come from my mate. Even if she didn't know it yet, I would do anything to keep Skylar from meeting Lola's fate. Even if it meant doing nothing. For now.

I walked out into the bar just as the pile of injured shifters were starting to stir.

"What you want me to do with them, boss?" Luke, my bartender asked.

"Who started it?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Luke said. "The girl was asking for you."

I growled. "That girl is my mate. If you ever disrespect her again, I'll rip your throat out."

Luke tensed. "I didn't know."

"I didn't either," I said. "But when these assholes wake up, you tell them if they so much as harm a hair on her head, I will make it so their families can't even identify their body."

I didn't wait for a response before storming toward the door. I pushed it open then turned back to Luke. "And clean this place up. I want it ready to open tomorrow."

"You got it, boss," Luke said.

My Harley was parked on the side of the bar, near the dumpsters. I climbed on and took off, leaving the waterfront district, and heading for the outskirts.

I needed open roads, fresh air, and a place I could shift and let my wolf run until I was numb.

Lola was gone. Taken from me too soon. We'd said our goodbyes when she was seventeen. Our aunt Juanita had just passed so Lola inherited the stone. She was brave, taking the responsibility with maturity and grace. I was twenty and would take on my role as pack leader the spring after she left.

When our dad died, I couldn't even write to her to tell her. We had no contact other than the letter delivered by courier five years ago.

I knew the letter meant she was worried that someone was hunting her. Despite the rules, I sent members of the pack out looking for her to ensure her safety.

She was well hidden and none of them ever found her. Turned out, she'd never even left the city.

My lips curved in a smile, impressed by her ability to blend in so close to home. I wondered if she was staying nearby so she could keep tabs on me. In a way, that made me feel a little better. She'd been closer to me than I realized.

It was a strange feeling, missing someone you mostly let go of already. I always thought we'd see each other again, when we were both old. When I had children, Lola could have passed the stone off to my second born when he or she was eighteen. Then, Lola could have come home.

I always thought she'd return.

Now, I had to make peace with never seeing her again. I accelerated along the highway, pushing my bike faster, feeling the pull of the woods. I wanted to scream, I wanted to howl, I wanted to break every bone in Lola's killer's body.

But I'd given the chance to Skylar. My mate.

Who was now protecting the stone.

My heart felt like it was shattering into a million pieces. I'd lost my sister and I couldn't be with my mate.

The stone had to stay away from the pack. If I claimed Skylar while she was the keeper, it would be too dangerous. As long as she held the stone, we couldn't be together. It would have to pass to another.

But I couldn't stay away from her. Now that I knew who she was, I could already feel the connection between us. The bond was there, even if she didn't yet know.

Even if I wanted to stay away from her, I knew my wolf would eventually win and I would give in. I'd have to find a

way to eliminate that stone.

I took the exit toward the National Park. Thousands of acres untouched by industry. Easy access to this park was part of why my pack had built up such a strong hold in Harbor Crossing. We were the only pack who could hold our own against the vampire royals who also claimed the city.

But the vampires didn't give a shit about the open spaces or woods. They wanted the factories and shops and clubs. Our pack was simple. We valued family and freedom. Space to run, time to follow our traditions, peace.

Whoever was after the stone was threatening all of that. The fragile balance between my pack and the vampires was hanging in the balance.

Aside from that, whoever started this already killed my sister. If my mate followed, I wasn't going to turn the other cheek. I'd slay every member of the killer's family, every member of their pack or coven. Nobody would be safe.

With Lola's death, we're already on the brink of war. If Skylar dies, these monsters will beg me for death.

CHAPTER TEN

SKYLAR

Elias was tapping away on his phone as we walked back through the bar. Thankfully, the shifters he took out were still passed out but several of them had rolled over or changed positions from when I'd last been in the room.

“Checking in with your boss?” I asked.

“No, my informant,” he said.

“You have an informant in the Clovers?” I was impressed. The Clover Coven was a vampire coven of dubious intent. They often took in the outcasts from the other groups. I'd hunted my share of members of their coven. Enough so that the thought of walking into one of their safe houses or territories made me nervous.

I wasn't exactly the blending in type and word traveled fast about hunters. I was known in most circles and I was mostly okay with it. Now, I wondered if I should have been more discrete.

We stepped outside into the parking lot into the gray of way too fucking early. It wasn't like I didn't see dawn often. In my line of work, I often worked all night. But I hadn't intended that tonight so I was going on a long stretch without sleep. I handled lack of sleep better than most humans I knew, but I still needed it to be at my sharpest.

“We won't be able to see them till nightfall,” Elias said.

“While we wait, there’s something I need to do. Alone,” I said.

“You need to get some sleep,” Elias said.

I knew I needed some rest but it would have to wait. I had to find safe storage for the stone. “Soon. But I we have a couple of stops to make.”

“What kind of stops?” he asked.

“First, I need something from my apartment, then I need to drop something off with a friend.”

I stared at him, waiting for him to question me. I didn’t want to give him the details. It was bad enough that he’d know the location we were visiting but I knew better than to ask to go off on my own. Plus, I could use the ride.

The stone had to be stored somewhere away from me. Away from magic detection. There was only one place I could think to hide it, but I was putting a friend in danger.

A human friend.

If anyone found out I involved her and went after her, she wouldn’t be able to defend herself. I felt awful for even considering it, but I couldn’t think of any other options.

“Alright,” he said. “Then sleep.”

I was surprised he didn’t question me but I wasn’t going to push my luck. “Thank you.”

“You going to tell me what happened at the bar?”

He started the engine. “You going to tell me what happened in your one on one with the shifter?”

If I didn’t know better, I’d say there was a touch of jealousy in his tone. Maybe even in the emotional signal he was throwing. Weird. “We got our lead. What else do you want to know?”

“You two looked pretty cozy in there,” he said.

“Maybe that’s how I get information from people,” I said. “Feminine wiles and all that.”

He laughed. “When do I get to see these *wiles*?”

“I don’t need anything from you,” I said. “I do want to know how you took out that group of shifters like that.”

“Maybe I have my own tricks,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s clear,” I said. “You know, we’re supposed to be working together on this. Maybe we need to be on the same page.”

“That’s not how this works. You get the time to prove your innocence, I’m your escort.”

“I can tell you want to help me,” I said. “If you didn’t, I’d have focused my energy on breaking whatever spell you put me under instead of finding the killer. Then I could just out you and move on with my life.”

“No, you wouldn’t. You want this more than you want the alibi.”

That was true. This was personal. But it still didn’t excuse Elias’s evasion of my questions. I still couldn’t figure out what the hell he was. I was leaning toward mage with powers he probably shouldn’t have, but I wasn’t sure.

When he pulled into the parking lot of my apartment, a weight had settled into my stomach. I didn’t want to go back there, into that place of death.

“You okay?” Elias asked.

“No,” I admitted.

“Want me to go with you?” he asked.

“No.” I removed my seatbelt. “I’ll be right back.”

I didn’t wait for him to respond before I opened the door and darted out of the car. Aside from my knife, there was one other possession I owned that was magical. I was kicking myself for not grabbing it when I first left.

With any luck, it was still there. If it wasn’t this whole plan was about to backfire before I even started it.

I raced up the steps, two at a time. Winded, I emerged onto my floor. The door to my apartment was closed and there wasn't any haze from my neighbor yet. It was probably too early for him to have started his parties.

My hands were shaking and my chest felt tight as I approached my apartment. I didn't want to open that door and see the destruction, but I had no choice. Lola had died for the stone. The least I could do was try to protect it on her behalf. It made me feel like I could honor her memory, just a little bit. Especially since she chose me for the job. It wasn't something I'd planned for, but I'd follow through.

I turned the handle, the door opened. I hadn't bothered locking up when I left. Everything was just as it was. Destruction and the lingering tingle of magic.

Taking a quick breath in, I closed off my senses, and kept my eyes forward. In and out. I was here for one thing.

I jumped over debris and sped to my room as fast as I could. All my drawers were removed from my dresser, their contents strewn around the floor. I started digging through the mess, searching for the tiny blue jewelry box.

Minutes ticked by, feeling like eternity as I continued to toss things aside, desperate to find the item.

Finally, I spotted it. But the box was open, the contents missing. *Fuck me*. Nothing could go the easy way, could it? I tossed clothes and set aside my broken guitar.

Please be here.

Finally, a glint of gold caught my eye. My pulse raced in anticipation and I used my foot to move a hoodie that was partially covering the item.

My shoulders relaxed as relief spread. I'd found it. Quickly, I picked up the gold locket. The chain was still in one piece, the clasp unbroken. Finally, something went right.

Carefully, I opened the magical locket, then dug the stone out of my pocket. As soon as I set the stone on top of the open locket, it was as if the heart shaped metal swallowed the rock

hole, the moon stone shrinking to the size of a bead. I shut the locket then closed my fingers around it.

It was a valuable, amazing piece of magic. But it was also the only gift I had from my mom.

On my sixteenth birthday, my dad gave me the locket. He'd explained that it belonged to my mother and told me about its magic. He said she always planned to pass it on if she'd had a daughter.

I'd never used it once. I'd never even worn it. It seemed too special to touch. In my fear to have anything happen to it, I'd mostly forgotten about it to the point where I almost left it here.

What did that say about me? The only item that I had connecting me to my mom, nearly forgotten.

My throat tightened. When this was over, I wasn't going to keep the necklace locked up anymore. I'd wear it with pride.

If I survived this thing, that was.

I clasped it around my neck. It was the first time I'd ever worn it. Tears prickled at the back of my eyes. I'd lost so much during my life. But I was still alive and I had to keep moving. That's what my dad always said when I asked about my mom. She wanted me to live.

I took one last breath and swallowed hard, clearing the emotions from my mind. There was no way I was going to explain any of this to Elias. I tucked the charm under my shirt then left the apartment.

"Got what you needed?" he asked as I slid into the passenger seat.

"Yes."

"Where to?" he asked.

I was surprised he didn't press about why we'd stopped here, but I was grateful for the privacy.

"Old Town," I said.

He nodded then started the car.

Elias looped around the bustling central downtown to the edge of the city. It was older and the buildings had been here since the founding of Harbor Crossing. Eventually, modern skyscrapers and infrastructure shifted east, moving the heart of the city away from its history.

This original part of Harbor Crossing was affectionally known as Old Town. Sprawling mansions stood behind formidable stone walls. Most of them backed to a wide grassy area called City Park. It was one of the few open spaces that wasn't paved within city limits. On most days, you could find humans playing volleyball or having barbecues there. At night, humans stayed far away. Too many grisly and disturbing things happened there after dark.

Aside from the park, a mall that had been a major hotspot in the nineties, was the crown jewel of the retail area. But to find the really great shops, follow the side streets for the converted Victorian homes. There were soap shops, and doctor's offices, lawyers, and tarot card readers crammed into little offices in beautiful painted ladies. Some were still private residences, but most were now businesses.

That's where we were headed. "You're going to Mulligan and Smith's," I said. "Do you know where that is?"

Elias lifted his brows. "The mortuary?"

I nodded.

"Of all the places you could put it, a mortuary?"

"Hey, you know that the human dead are the closest thing to the veil we have." There was a pseudo supernatural aura around places of death. When someone died, their soul was temporarily between the realms and that ethereal quality often lingered for hours, sometimes days, depending on how easily the human soul transitioned. It gave off a signature similar to how magic felt. For those of us who could sense magic, we could feel the vibrations coming from them. I was hoping it would be enough to mask the magic of the stone.

"That's actually really smart," he said. "I take it back."

“Thank you.” The stone emitted its own magical signature and if I were hunting for it, that’s what I would track. I knew there were ways of tracing specific magic and I wasn’t sure how they’d found it at our apartment in the first place. I needed it hidden and away from any other supernaturals.

Heidi was as human as they came, but she had a sixth sense about the other parts of the world. While she’d never flat out confessed her belief in the things that go bump in the night, she brushed off supernatural encounters and seemed to roll with things better than most humans.

Then there was the time we were having dinner and a ghost passed through. The spectral form had stopped right in front of us, staring longingly at our pizza and wings. Heidi had tensed and looked at exactly the spot the spirit was lingering. Then, she smiled and nodded once at the ghost.

I’d never had the courage to ask her about it. Opening that can of worms wasn’t easy with humans. They were often not as prepared for the whole truth as they thought, even if they were more open than some humans.

Heidi’s family has owned Mulligan and Smith’s Mortuary since the 1800’s. The building was a gorgeous Victorian front with a few wacky additions in the large back yard. They’d built up an outdoor ceremony location sometime at the turn of the century and had a basement full of bodies. It was by far my favorite old human building.

I knew it sounded morbid, but there was history in the walls and on every surface. During Halloween season, they opened their doors to walking tours for ghost stories and to show off the antiques they’d accumulated.

Okay, now the ghost thing was starting to make more sense. They’d essentially welcomed them in the mortuary since as long as I’ve known Heidi.

Elias pulled his car into the gravel parking lot. “If you’re not back here in ten minutes, I’m coming in.”

I glared at him.

“Aside from the fact that I’m responsible for you, there’s people after us. Ten minutes is me being nice.”

If I didn’t agree with him, I’d have argued. To be honest, I wanted to be in and out in five, but I wasn’t going to tell him that. The less time I spent here, the less chances anyone would find where we’d gone.

Without a word, I left the car and walked to the front door. During the day, Heidi usually ran the show here. In addition to her managing the facility, she employed a few others but I’d never seen them in my visits.

It wasn’t like I was here often, but Heidi was one of the few people I occasionally spent time with aside from Lola. Since Heidi’s boyfriend didn’t live in town and I was pretty much permanently single, we’d done quite a few girls’ nights with just the two of us.

I wasn’t looking forward to dropping the bad news, though. Most of the time I spent with her was in group events with Lola as the facilitator. Lola loved to host trivia nights or drag us to Karaoke when I wasn’t working. While I missed out on a lot of her crazy plans, I was there enough.

My chest tightened. There weren’t going to be any more of those events. I never thought I’d miss them, but I suppose they were more fun than I realized at the time.

I stepped through the door, a little bell chiming as I entered. As luck would have it, Heidi was sitting on one of the antique couches in the sitting room. She jumped up from her seat when she saw me, her blonde curls bouncing as she ran to greet me.

Heidi was taller than me with blue eyes and naturally curly hair. She looked like she was made of sunshine and sugar, but she was nothing of the sort. Sure, she was kind and compassionate. But she also collected poison rings from the Middle Ages and had a passion for classic horror films.

She was exactly the right kind of weird. I loved that about her.

“What are you doing here?” She pulled me into an embrace and then stepped back, her smile fading quickly. “Something is wrong.”

She was also excellent at reading people. Sometimes I wondered if she had magical blood somewhere in her family tree.

“I wish I had more time,” I said.

“What is it?” Her brow furrowed.

“Something terrible happened,” I said. “I can’t explain everything right now but I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Spill,” she demanded.

“Lola’s dead,” I said.

She covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes instantly welling up with tears. “No.”

“It’s bad, Heidi, I’m not gonna sugar coat it,” I said. “She was murdered.”

Heidi dropped her hand from her mouth. “Who would do that?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” I said. “Well, I’m working with the police so they can find her.”

Heidi didn’t know what I did or what my heritage was. I was hoping to keep it that way. At least for now. There were times I’d almost told her. She was so easy to talk to and didn’t feel the same as other humans. But that would have to wait. Maybe I’d tell her the truth later.

“I need a favor,” I said.

“Anything.”

I unclasped the necklace. “Please, keep this safe for me. If anyone comes by...”

“I never saw you,” she said as if she knew just how big this really was.

“Thank you,” I said.

She pulled me in for another hug. “I don’t know what you’re up to but promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I will,” I said.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SKYLAR

Elias was sitting in the front seat as if he'd been there the whole time. I was a little surprised he looked so cozy. I thought for sure he'd follow me, despite saying he'd wait. Maybe he could be trusted. Just a little.

It was still early, the sun had only been up for about an hour, and I was feeling the exhaustion hard.

With the clock ticking, I hated the idea of wasting time to sleep, but I knew even a few hours would benefit me. I opened the passenger door and sat down on the seat.

“Hidden away?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “After we find the killer, we can retrieve it and figure out the next steps.”

“We?” He arched a brow.

“I will figure out the next steps,” I said.

He looked amused and I rolled my eyes. I was too tired to deal with him right now but at least he hadn't pressed for details. “You want to take shifts and get a few hours each in your car?”

“You can't be serious.” He wrinkled his nose in an almost adorable display of disgust.

“You have a better idea? Cause I'm pretty sure my apartment is compromised. Not that there's anything left to

actually sleep on there anyway.”

“I’ve got a place,” he said.

“Cop safe house?” I asked, intrigued.

“Sort of.” He started the car and drove away from Old Town toward the outskirts of the city. The same run-down part of town we’d first met in.

The car turned off the main road and I looked up to see a familiar sign. My shoulders slumped. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

“There’s a reason the scum of the earth pick this place.” Elias pulled the car in front of the office of the *Essex House Motel*.

“I barely survived this shit hole last night. Why on earth would you think I want to come back here?” I asked.

“Because they have a warded room,” he said.

“This place?” I didn’t even try to hide my skepticism. This was the last place I’d expect to have the very expensive spells to create a ward. Wards had to be applied by highly skilled mages. They wore off quickly and had to be constantly reapplied. Most wards lasted only a week but a highly skilled mage could apply a ward for a month.

Either way, the cost was astronomical. There were not a lot of mages who specialized in that kind of magic and they could demand quite the premium for their service.

“Wait here.” Elias was already out the door before I could argue. He’d left the keys in the ignition and the car running. Bold for an enforcer whose job was tied to bringing me in with or without evidence.

Before I could consider where I’d go if I took the car, he was back. He passed me an old fashioned looking skeleton key. “Hold this.”

I took the key from him and instantly felt the jolt of magic. It sent tingles right through my fingertips and up my arm. Even the key was warded. Whoever they had on the payroll for this was good.

“Is this an enforcer safe house?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

I looked at the key again and wondered how he had knowledge or access to something like this. Even at a crap hotel like this, a warded room would run the renter a lot more than an enforcer was paid.

Elias parked the car in front of building number three. At least it wasn't the same building I'd been in last night. That would have been too weird.

That's when it hit me.

When we met last night, he'd said he was on official business for Queen Marcella. “You're not working for the enforcers, are you?”

He turned off the engine. “You met my boss. You saw my badge.”

“That's not why you were there, though,” I knew it in my gut. The vampire queen was outside the law. Her court had its own rules. The few times I picked up some bounties for the queen rather than the enforcers, my instructions were different. And the enforcers didn't pay. The queen's guard did.

“You can't work for the queen and the enforcers,” I said.

“I'm an enforcer,” he said.

“Did the queen bribe you?” I asked.

“My work with the queen isn't related to what I do for the enforcers,” he said. “Can we drop it now?”

“No,” I said. “Your work for the queen is why we're in this mess. You were doing something for her last night. And whatever it was, it wasn't sanctioned by the enforcers.”

I laughed as I realized I was able to say all of this. “I can tell them you're not loyal. Tell them to investigate your connection to her. You silenced me but you didn't take everything.”

A gold light caught my eye and I noticed the sparks were back on his fingertips.

Oh shit.

Every time I've seen those, bad things happened. I opened the car door and I ran.

I cut through the parking lot, my arms pumping, willing my legs to go faster. My mind screamed at me, telling me to turn and fight. I knew either way was probably futile based on the power he had. He would kick my ass in a fight and if he had that kind of magic, what else was up his sleeve? I was fast, but most supernaturals were faster.

Still, I ran. Through the parking lot, between the buildings, into a business park lined with impersonal brown buildings. There weren't any cars in the parking lot yet. It was too early for the humans to be at work. Breathing heavy, I moved forward, too afraid to look back.

All at once, the feeling of intense magic seemed to swallow me and I was lifted off my feet. A gust of wind sent me barreling forward and I slammed into the glass windows of one of the buildings, my feet dangling in the air. The glass vibrated and shook, but thankfully it held.

Face against the window, I could make out the slight reflection of a figure moving toward me. I tried to pry myself off the glass, but I was stuck in place. "Leave me alone."

"I'm going to release you but I need you not to run, do you understand?" Elias asked.

"Just kill me and get it over with," I said, wincing at my own words. I always suspected I'd meet a grizzly end. My dad had in this line of work, why would I be spared the same fate that met most hunters? I just didn't see it coming like this. At the hands of a corrupt enforcer.

"If I wanted you dead I would have killed you last night," he said.

I felt the grip of the magic loosen and I slid the few inches back to the ground. My hands were shaking from fear and I forced myself to steady them. I'd killed vampires and wrangled shifters solo. None of them scared me the way Elias did.

Slowly, I turned around and faced him, my chin high. I glared at him, meeting his dark eyes. They had that same look from the other night, his pupils and iris the same dark color. It was mesmerizing and terrifying at the same time.

He let out a long breath and closed his eyes.

I considered running again but I knew I didn't stand a chance and I'd piss him off more. I slid my hand down my thigh and felt for the top of my knife, making sure it was still there.

His eyes snapped open and I lifted my hand, not wanting him to know that I was already considering my weapon. "What do you want from me?"

"I don't know," he said.

That wasn't the answer I expected. My brow furrowed and I waited for him to say more.

"It's true, I'm on a mission for Queen Marcella. I'm working as an enforcer as my cover. But I will do my job as an enforcer and help you with this case," he said.

"Why bother?" I asked. "This can't be part of your job for the queen."

"Honestly?" He let the question hang there.

"Are you even capable of the truth?" I asked.

He smirked. "With you, it seems I am."

"What does that even mean?" I asked.

"I should have wiped your memory last night. You'd have gone home with no knowledge of where you'd been or what you'd done."

My knees felt weak. Nobody should have that kind of power. I'd heard of spells that could disrupt memory or potions, but they were stories. I'd never seen them in action. "If you did that, I'd be in jail right now."

"I know, but that wasn't my intention," he said. "I swear I had nothing to do with Lola. I didn't know that's what you

were walking into. But I don't know why I didn't wipe your memory. I've never let anyone remember seeing my magic."

"Why didn't you do it, then?" I asked. "Wipe my memory, I mean. I wouldn't even know who you were if you'd done it."

"I don't know," he said. "I couldn't bring myself to do it."

Flutters filled my insides. If he wasn't such a monster, him letting me keep my memory might be considered kind of sweet. In a fucked up, really damaged kind of way. Aside from the strange magic and all the secrets, there was something endearing about him. It made me uncomfortable.

I was usually an impeccable judge of character. With Elias, I was conflicted. My instincts were pulling me to him, but logically that made no sense. I had no clear idea of his intentions or motives. "Are you going to hurt me?"

"No, I'd never hurt you," he said.

His words sounded so genuine, intimate even. My heart was racing but it wasn't from running. None of this made sense. I shouldn't trust him at all. His actions pointed to someone I should be keeping my distance from, but I couldn't get my heart and my head to align.

"Please, you have to trust me on this." He stepped back. "Come back to the hotel. You need some rest."

I hesitated, unsure of where to go from here. "How do I know you're not just going to erase my memory and leave me with the other enforcers? Cain was ready to lock me up and throw away the key."

"You're innocent. We both know that and I'm not going to stop until I prove that."

"That's a nice sentiment," I said. "But we have forty-eight hours and you ignored the other part of my question."

"I won't erase your memory," he said. "I promise."

"What's your promise worth?" I asked. "You're nothing that you say you are. You're an agent of the Vampire Queen and you have magic you shouldn't."

His expression hardened. “My word is good. You’re going to have to believe me.”

The worst part? I did believe him. The reasoning behind it was missing, but I did.

“We are going to find Lola’s killer,” he said. “I swear it.”

While I wasn’t sure *what* Elias was, I had yet to meet a supernatural of any race who didn’t follow the same code. We were good for our word. Sure there were exceptions, but the liars never lasted long. Once you proved you couldn’t be trusted, you ended up exiled. That wasn’t something any supernatural could afford in a world where we hid from humans.

“What happens after we find the killer?” I asked.

“We go back to our lives,” he said. “You go back to hunting, I go back to work.”

Why did I hate the idea of us going separate ways? It should have been a comfort to think of life without the fear of the magic I didn’t understand. I told myself it was the stress of losing my best friend and the lump in my throat that came every time I had to consider living without her. When this was over, I’d probably never give Elias a second thought. “Okay.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

ELIAS

It had been a while since I'd had to use one of the Queen's safe rooms. Not only was the room warded weekly, it was totally light proof for vampire protection. Not that I needed that, but it did make the room nice and dark during the day.

While the room did appear clean enough, nothing else was impressive. Two double beds took up most of the room. A door on the end led to a bathroom that was probably rarely used since most visitors were vampires. A desk, chair, and a small dresser completed the space. There wasn't even a TV here because it was rarely used for more than a night.

The one thing that made this room unique from the others in the hotel was the small fridge in one corner. I knew that fridge was stocked with blood bags for emergency use. While most vampires still preferred to get their blood the old-fashioned way, there was a movement toward bagged blood from donors. And bagged blood stood in when an official donor wasn't present.

Under vampire law, all donors had to give consent and agree to the terms. There were always humans who stumbled into our world and gladly joined the ranks. I didn't understand it but I suppose there's always been a fascination with our world by those who don't belong.

Of course, there were enough vampires who skirted the rules. That's how I found myself in the service of the Queen.

The vampires who dealt in illicit blood trades didn't care who they bought or sold. They captured and enslaved humans and supernaturals alike. When they took my sister, they sealed their fate. I'd been hunting them one by one for the last decade, working my way through their ranks to avenge my sister's killers. When I crossed paths with the Queen, rather than punishing me for the extreme and illegal lengths I went to for revenge, she recruited me.

"Well, this is cozy," Skylar said.

"It's safe, that's what matters," I said.

"I can feel the wards. Good quality work. Likely not enforcers footing the bill on this, I'm guessing," she said.

Before I could say anything she set her hand on my upper arm. "Thank you."

Her words took me off guard but her hand on me was the real distraction. What was it about her that made me lose focus? It was bad enough that I'd let her go last night. After she ran from me, I should have corrected it, but I couldn't.

I'd resigned myself to stop fighting and just go along with this. We were one night down on our time so tomorrow night we had to find the killer or at least enough evidence to submit to the enforcers. Then, I'd be back on my case and move on with my usual work.

Skylar walked over to one of the beds and turned on the lamp before sitting down. She started to unlace her boots. "You want to take shifts?"

"You'll be safe here," I said.

"That might be the case, but I still don't fully trust the wards," she said. "Between the usual target on my back, there's the added target of being Lola's roommate. There's no way whoever killed her doesn't know I'm looking for them. And add in whatever enemies you've made in the service of *both* of your jobs." She laughed. "Aren't we the pair? Between us, we've probably got a dozen people hunting us."

"I'll stay up." I flipped off the light switch by the door.

“You need to rest too.” She dropped her boots to the floor then turned to me, eyes narrowed. “Unless you don’t need to sleep.”

“I sleep, occasionally,” I admitted. “But I don’t really need to.”

“Well, there goes my theory,” she said.

“What theory?” I asked.

“That you’re a mage dabbling in dark magic.” She said the words without the slightest judgement. I’d never heard anyone discuss dark magic so nonchalantly.

I grabbed a chair from the desk and pulled it out, taking a seat, angling it so I faced the door. “Get some sleep.”

“Wake me at noon,” she said.

“Okay.” I didn’t plan on waking her so early but I’d deal with her being upset later. She was going to need all the rest she could get before we walked into the Clover Coven tonight.

I half expected her to argue with me again. Instead, she pulled back the blankets and crawled into the bed. She turned off the lamp. “Good night.”

“Night.”

For a long while, I sat in the dark, listening to her breathe. Finally, her breathing slowed and I could sense that she’d fallen asleep. Relief rushed through me and I relaxed, knowing she was safe and getting the rest she needed. Ignoring the strangeness of that, I stared ahead and ran through the events of the last few hours. Nothing about my evening had gone according to plan.

I’d been on the trail of Vincent Romana for a few weeks before I thought I had him cornered. I was sure he worked for the same group responsible for my sister’s death. He wasn’t high up in the ranks, but he was high enough that I thought I could get some information from him. Instead, I’d killed him, losing a chance at following one of the few leads in my case.

An organization known as the Knights were linked to more cases of missing humans and supernaturals than any other

group. I wasn't the only one trying to take them down, yet they'd evaded capture for a decade.

After I helped Skylar, I'd have to find a new lead to follow. There wasn't anything I could do about losing Vincent's information now. I would have killed him after he talked anyway. Even if the Queen hadn't given me the authority to execute these monsters, I'd probably take them out either way. I suspected that's why she agreed to work with me.

While I didn't need the Queen's permission, it made my work easier and provided resources like this room. I was in her territory and in her realm. I could get by on my own just fine, but I avoided political tension by playing the game mostly by her rules.

Time passed quickly in the dark as I went over my case in my head. There was another lead I could follow as soon as I finished helping Skylar.

Skylar whined in her sleep, a scared little moan that made me think she was having a bad dream. I peeked at my watch. We'd been here about three hours. I was hoping she'd get a few more hours before she woke.

I wondered if she'd sleep through whatever her nightmares were. I could see well enough in the dark to make out her silver hair fanned out on the pillow. Her eyes were closed and her soft, full lips were parted.

She cried again, the sound enough to make my heart ache. She was still asleep, but I didn't like the idea of her being afraid, even in her sleep. That overwhelming urge to protect her still roared to life inside me, even though I knew I couldn't do anything to keep her safe in her dreams.

I walked over to the other bed and pulled the top blanket from it. Maybe she was cold. I threw the blanket over Skylar and then sat back down.

It was quiet for a while, then Skylar's noises returned. Soft at first, little muted cries. But as they grew increasingly louder, I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand on edge.

Something wasn't right.

Quickly, I moved to Skylar's side and gently shook her awake. "Skylar, wake up."

She sat up with a gasp, her eyes bursting open. She looked wild and terrified.

"What is it?" I asked.

She looked around for a moment, as if she was trying to figure out where she was or what had happened. Then she turned to me. "Someone's here."

"That's impossible, nobody should be able to find us here," I said.

"Unless they're tracking your car," she said. "We didn't exactly try to cover our tracks."

I had been so caught up with following the breadcrumbs of Lola's case, that I didn't stop to think about the details and I'd made a rookie mistake. "We should go."

"They're outside," Skylar said.

"How could you know that?" I asked.

"I can feel magic," she said. "Even through these wards."

I didn't have time to question her. I knew she had talents beyond what she should. "What else can you feel?"

She tossed the blankets aside and tiptoed in her socks over to the door. Reaching out her hands, she stood in silence for a moment before padding back over to me. "There's at least three of them out there. I can feel two shifters and a third that has a strange signature." She stopped in front of her boots and stepped into them one at a time. Then she froze.

"What is it?" I could sense the fear rising in her. I couldn't feel magic the way she could, but I could feel her emotional shifts. I hadn't felt a spike of fear like this from her since she ran from me. "You're not going to run again, are you?"

She looked up at me and I could make out the serious expression on her face even in the dark. "That third person feels a lot like how you feel. I don't know what that means

because I don't know what you are but I sure as hell don't want to come across another one of you."

I tensed. There was only one other being with magic like mine who'd be anywhere near me. And he was supposed to be dead. *Fuck*. This wasn't about Lola. The creatures waiting for us on the other side of that ward were here for me.

"We don't have much time," I said. "They're not here for you. These guys are here for me and we can't beat them."

"Well, that sounds promising," she hissed.

"I have a plan and if we're lucky, it just might get us out of this alive," I said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SKYLAR

“What did I get mixed up in when you ruined my bounty?” I asked.

“Not now, Skylar,” Elias said. “Keep quiet.”

I clenched my fists and glared at him. This whole thing was his fault. All of it. Why didn't I keep running?

Light caught my eye and I looked down to see his hands were lit up and I remembered exactly why I stopped running.

“You hide in the bathroom, I'll take them out and then we'll go,” he said.

Elias could likely handle whoever was outside that door unless that magic signature that felt like his was unleashed. “No way. I'm not a bad fighter myself. You might need me. And I sure as hell don't want to be cornered in a little room if they get past you.”

“You want to help me?” He seemed surprised.

“Just to be clear, all of this is your fault,” I said. “But you did help me in the bar. And you were right, I'd have followed the lead even without the threat on me.”

“Alright. We do this together,” he said.

Fuck me. I was in the middle of something with an agent of Queen Marcella and involved with the wolf shifters and their moonstone. This wasn't what I signed up for.

My dad had always warned me that there'd be times every hunter was tempted to take sides. We still had morals and values of our own. We had empathy and we felt things. But he told me to turn that off. He always said, *Cry it out in the shower while you wash off the blood.*

Now I understood what he meant. If I wasn't already in too deep, I was quickly approaching it.

If whoever was after Elias considered me with him, I was screwed. I couldn't be hiding in my line of work and hunting was the only thing I was good at. It was literally my only skill.

Thanks, Dad.

I nodded. "So now what?"

"I'm going to make a shield around us and then we'll open the door. They won't see us for a few seconds so while they're looking for us, we get out of this death trap of a room. Maybe in the open, we'll stand a chance."

"Alright," I said. "I assume you're taking on whoever has that unknown magic signature. I'll take the shifters."

He cocked a brow. "Both of them?"

"You haven't seen me at my best," I said. "Two, I can handle. Four was unfair."

"Alright." He lifted his glowing hands and then swept his arms down. A shimmering gold circle appeared in front of me. I held my breath, nervous to be this close to his unknown magic. I'd seen only the dangerous aspects so I shouldn't be surprised that it could also do something good. Something less violent.

"Together, then," he said. "You take the shifters, I'll take my brother."

"What?"

"Not the time, Skylar," he said.

This was way more complicated than I thought. He was right, they were waiting for us and we needed to focus. But if

he thought I wasn't going to ask after this, he had another thing coming. "Let's get this over with."

The door flew open and I found myself staring at three huge males. As promised, they lifted their chins and turned their heads as if looking for us.

We used the moment to dart forward, squeezing between them. Once we were standing in the parking lot, I felt some of the magic dissipate and I knew the shield was gone.

It would have been nice if he could have held it long enough for us to get to his car and away from here, but I knew all magic had limits. This was his.

I squinted against the bright sunlight. The three males turned to face us, each of them wearing a grin.

The two I could tell were shifters had long dark hair. One had it in a braid, the other in a bun. Aside from a once broken and healed nose, the two faces were nearly indistinguishable. Twins were rare for shifters. They were considered to be gifted according to legends. As in, more powerful than other shifters.

Just my luck.

The third male was fair in complexion and hair. Elias had called him his brother but I saw no resemblance to the broody dark haired enforcer.

All three of them stared us down, but none of them advanced. I wrapped my fingers around the handle of my blade, ready to pull it free.

One of the shifters, Man-bun, cracked his knuckles then made a kissy face at me. I narrowed my eyes. He was going down first.

"Send the whore away," Elias's brother said. "No reason for her to get hurt in men's business."

My blood boiled and I took a step forward. Fuck taking out the shifters, I was going for this asshole.

Elias's arm blocked my path and I stopped moving. It was a good reminder to stay calm. When you fought with emotion,

you made mistakes. I stood against Elias's outstretched arm, my nostrils flaring as I glared at all three of our targets.

"You should be less concerned about his sex life and more concerned about the fact that I can kick your ass," I said.

"She's got some fire," he said, still addressing Elias.

Asshole.

"Only warning, David," Elias said. "You have no authority here."

"Neither do you," Elias's brother, David, said.

"I do, actually," Elias said. "And nobody will bat an eye if I kill you. You have no power in this realm."

I could feel the tension rising around us. It was laced with magic and hung around us like a cloud. I'd seen what Elias could do. I wasn't sure I wanted to see what two with his powers could destroy.

Then again, if David took out Elias for me, I would be free to pursue Lola's killer on my own. That thought didn't linger long. Guilt, and to my surprise, a flicker of concern passed through me. I didn't want anything bad to happen to him. Today was full of surprises. I didn't like it.

"Enough," I said. "I don't know what this feud is, but I do know we're standing in the middle of a parking lot, in daylight, in full view of humans."

There were no other cars here. No signs of any witnesses, but it could happen.

"Then we better get this over with." David's hands lit up, gold sparks dancing on his fingers.

Son of a bitch. That wasn't what I was going for.

Elias shoved me aside and ran to meet his brother. I stumbled, but quickly caught my balance. As I turned to face the remaining shifters, I pulled my knife out and raised it in front of me.

The blade was a custom magic-built knife. And it was my most prized possession. Made with silver and iron, it was toxic

to most supernaturals. Though, it would kill me just as easily as it would them. Lucky me, I can't turn into a wolf, but I got the silver weakness.

Man-bun stepped toward me, a creepy grin on his lips. "You don't want to do this, sweetheart. How about we talk while the boys work this out?"

"The condescending, misogynistic bullshit ends now," I said.

I felt the magic flowing around and out of the corner of my eye, I caught Elias charging his brother. That was his fight, this was mine.

Man-bun nodded to his twin, Braid. He hadn't said a word to me yet and his expression hadn't changed since he arrived. But now that it was time to dance, he was the one who stepped forward.

The dark-haired man locked his green eyes on me, his face impassive. The lack of expression sent a chill down my spine but I prepared to face him nonetheless.

He was about five or six inches taller than me and probably had at least a hundred pounds on me. But it wasn't the first time I'd faced odds like this.

"You waiting for an invitation?" I asked.

For the first time, his expression shifted and I noted the slightest smile on his lips. Then he doubled over, his body convulsing. I heard bones snapping as his human form changed before my eyes.

It had been a long time since a shifter attacked me in animal form. Most shifters didn't shift in broad daylight. There was too much risk of humans seeing us. Clearly, that wasn't a concern for these three.

Man-Bun growled as he too doubled over and let the change take him.

Fuck.

I hated fighting wolves. I'll be the first to admit, I felt guiltier about attacking animals. They were cute and fluffy. In

their human form, it was easier to remember they were bad guys.

I wasn't sure if that was their intention or if they just felt like they were stronger fighters in this form. Either way, I now had two enormous gray monsters circling me. They resembled wolves, but they didn't look like any shifted creature I'd ever seen.

They growled, baring their teeth, hackles raised, green eyes staring at me.

I held my ground, stance tense and ready to move in whatever direction needed. Now that they were in this form, I couldn't tell which brother I was facing, but that didn't matter. I would fight them both the same.

One of the creatures lunged at me, swiping a massive paw at me. I dodged just as the second wolf charged. I managed to avoid his snapping jaws, but just barely.

Staying light on my feet, I danced from side to side, moving away from their initial attacks as they circled me. I was used to being in tough spots, but it had been a while since I'd been hemmed in by two shifters. I had to dodge until I could find a weakness.

Without taking my eyes off them, I patted the hidden pocket on my other thigh, making sure my other weapon was tucked into place. I could feel the outline of the taser I rarely used. Knowing it was there, I made a choice.

Baring my teeth, I charged the wolf on my right. The creature reacted quickly, growling as it lifted its front paws. The huge creature didn't have to push hard to get me down and I braced myself as I fell.

Without waiting to see how far the shifter was going to take it, I lifted my knife and stabbed it in the monster's side. A howl of pain and hesitation by the wolf gave me the momentary distraction I needed to push the beast off me. I scrambled to my feet and managed two steps before the second creature confronted me.

We stared each other down. The wolf showing his fangs. Behind me, I heard the unmistakable sound of bones reforming as the injured wolf shifted back to human form. The silver in my blade would burn like fire and travel through his veins.

He'd need to get it out and hope the toxin hadn't done too much damage. He would likely live, but I knew that once he shifted back to human, he'd need at least a few minutes to recover from the silver poisoning before he could shift again.

I had a little time before the now human brother would be healed enough to help his twin. I had to make this count. I lost my knife, but aside from my taser, I had one more trick up my sleeve.

The wolf charged me. I lunged, then using all the strength I could muster, I kicked the creature in the side. It was a cheap shot and I wasn't proud, but there was no such thing as a fair fight. When the wolf landed on the pavement, I kicked him again.

The silver tips of my boots hit the wolf and I could smell the burning. Before the creature could heal, I grabbed the taser and shoved it right into the soft part of the wolf's stomach.

The light sizzled and the scent of singed fur made me gag. The wolf convulsed and I took a step back as he returned to human form.

Two battered and very naked males glared at me from the ground.

"You ready for round two?" I asked.

Sirens cut through the quiet morning air.

We all turned our heads in the direction of the sound. Flashing lights were headed our way.

Someone grabbed my arm. "We have to go."

I looked over at Elias. He was bleeding from his lip and his hair was a mess. One of his sleeves was torn and I was pretty sure I could see the first signs of a black eye. I didn't get a chance to see his brother to find out who was worse.

The human cop car turned into the parking lot, siren wailing, lights flashing. Elias pulled me along as we broke into a run.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SKYLAR

We raced past the hotel and through the parking lot of the business center. The parking lot was full now, giving us more cover. Squatting on the ground, the two of us waited in silence.

A car drove by but it didn't stop. Footsteps made me peek over the window but it was a few people in khakis headed to their car. They were engaged in conversation and had no idea there was anything odd going on.

That was a good sign. It meant the cops weren't nearby. Humans had this weird habit of stopping and staring at anything they thought they might find interesting. Even if it meant blocking emergency personnel or otherwise getting in the way. I'd seen them cause accidents simply by slowing down to stare at someone else's misfortune. It was a strange flaw of theirs.

"Come on," I said, reaching a hand down to Elias as I stood.

He accepted and stood before looking around. "We need to get back to my car."

"Don't you think they'll have your car tracked or something?" I asked.

"If my brother realized it was my car, it won't be there when we get back. He's not really the tracking type. He's more the blow shit up so you can't use it type."

“Salt the earth after the battle, huh?” I asked.

“You have no idea how close you are with that comment,” he said.

“Are you going to explain any of this to me or is it just another tally in the *keep Skylar in the dark* category?” I put my hands on my hips and gave him my most judgmental look. This whole thing was starting to get very old. It was one thing to ignore why he had the magic he did or even why he showed up at the hotel last night. But the whole brother and a couple of shifters trying to take us out is going a little far.

“Tell you what, after this is over, I’ll try to explain what I can. Right now, we need to follow our lead and get you off the wanted list,” he said.

I shook my head. “Not good enough. Those guys could have killed me.”

“You handled yourself just fine,” he said.

“First of all, I handled myself like a badass. Second, I deserve to know if I’m going to be jumped again.” I was losing patience for all of this.

“They won’t strike again until they heal up a bit,” he said as he started walking.

I grabbed his hand and held him, making him stop. He turned to me. “What?”

“Speaking of healing.” I lifted my fingers to his injured face. “Are you okay?”

He caught my hand and lowered it. “I’m fine. We need to get out of here. Just because I don’t think they’ll attack again, doesn’t mean I couldn’t be wrong.”

“I thought I had it bad as a hunter,” I said. “Always worried someone would chase me down for taking out their brother or something. I can’t imagine what you had to do to have your kin hunting you.”

“It’s a long story.” He started walking again. “But we really should go.”

“How did he find you? I thought you said that place was warded.” In theory, nobody should have been able to sense our presence or find the specific room we were in. Even if they tracked his car, the fact that they found and waited outside our exact room was too much of a coincidence. The room should have felt empty if they used their senses.

“It is,” he said. “But he’s got his ways.”

“Wonderful,” I said. “So an unknown magic user with ways of tracing through wards may or may not be coming after us sometime soon.”

“Sounds right,” Elias said.

I looked over at him and caught the rare smile. “So glad this is amusing to you.”

“I’m not sure why you’re so mad, you came out of it just fine,” he said.

“You are a very frustrating whatever you are, you know that?” I asked.

We’d reached his car and he held his hand up, gesturing for me to stop. I froze in place while he walked around it, floating his hand over the exterior of the car.

I could tell he was checking for magic or anything else so I stepped closer and reached out to feel for magic. There was a lingering trace of magic but it wasn’t enough to concern me. “They were here, but I don’t think they did anything to the car.”

Elias held up a piece of paper. “They left me a note.”

“What does it say?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said.

“Enough.” I walked around the car and grabbed the note from him. Holding it out in front of me I waited for him to take it back. He didn’t move.

“Listen, we’re stuck with each other for a bit longer and if we’re going to pull this off, we have to start being honest with each other. I get it, you’ve got some secret mission and some

dark past or some shit. But you have to be at least partially open with me or you're going to get both of us killed. I can't keep my guard up properly if I don't know what I should be preparing for."

"Okay," he said.

I opened my mouth to argue more before his response sunk in. "Thank you."

"Read the note," he said.

I unfolded the paper and read the note. *We know you have the stone. Time to pay, little brother.*

A chill ran down my spine. "I don't understand. How would they know and how are they connected in all this? Did your brother kill Lola?"

"No. He'd have the stone if he was the one who killed her. He'd have sensed it's presence." He glanced at me. "You were right to hide it. If we'd had it on us, I suspect it would be in his possession now."

"Is he working with the killer, or against them?" I asked. "If word got out about a moonstone, every coven and pack would want a piece of it."

"I'd say we're about to be very popular," he said.

"Xander," I said, my heart racing. "If they tracked it to us, they could be headed to him. Unless they went there first." I wouldn't forgive myself if Lola's brother got killed on my watch. I was supposed to stop all this, find the killer, not make things worse.

"Get in," Elias said.

Elias was speeding through the parking lot, making a hard turn onto the main road before I even got my seatbelt on. I slammed my hand against the dash to brace myself.

"Those shifters better not pull anything this time." There was a slight growl to Elias's voice. It should've sounded sinister, but it sent a shiver through me that wasn't in any way related to fear. I pushed the thought aside. Elias was bad news,

not the type of dude I should be getting any kind of emotional attachment to.

“I knew it wasn’t safe with us,” I said.

“It’s probably not safe anywhere,” he said. “We have to figure out a way to protect that stone. My brother can’t find it.”

“The stone is fine for now.” At least I hoped it was. “We can’t stop looking for the killer. We can warn Xander and then we have to keep moving.”

“This is more important than Lola’s killer. Not to disrespect your friend, but my brother cannot have that stone,” he said.

“Hey, you’re not the one who will be tossed in a jail cell if this goes sideways,” I said.

He glanced at me, then looked back to the road. “You know I said this could start a war?”

“Sure,” I said. “But it’s one stone.”

“Not to my brother. He lives for war. Any weapon in his hands is a thousand times worse than it is in anyone else’s possession.”

“That’s dramatic,” I said.

“It’s true.”

“The stone is safe, I promise,” I said.

“How do you know for sure?” He glanced at me. “We should go get it, take it far away from here.”

“You have to be the worst enforcer ever,” I said. “How often do you drop what you’re supposed to be doing for secret missions? You’re working for Queen Marcella and have something going on with your brother.”

“I never said those weren’t connected,” he said. “But I’m only an enforcer to get access to what I need for the Queen.”

“Then tell them the truth about last night. Tell them you happened to walk by. Or use your magic to make them forget

they accused me. Then you can let me go about my business and we can be done with this false partnership.” I was breathing heavy and my jaw was clenched. All of this was too much. I never asked for any of this. I didn’t want to be involved in some shifter plot to hide an artifact and I certainly didn’t want to be involved in whatever the fuck the vampires had going on with Elias.

“Look, I need you to trust me on this. I know you’re angry about your friend’s death but with my brother on the trail, I think it’s bigger than we first thought. It’s not just clan warfare. It’s something worse,” he said.

“Are you serious right now? First of all, I’m not just angry, my heart was broken. I lost my best friend. She wasn’t just some person I lived with. She was my only family. The only person I could trust.” Tears streamed down my cheeks and I didn’t try to stop them this time. I couldn’t hold back anymore. I hated that he was seeing me lose it, but I couldn’t handle the casual dismissal of Lola.

“She mattered and she cared about others and she didn’t deserve any of this.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

I turned away from him and looked out the window for a minute while I wiped the tears from my face. I didn’t even know if Lola would get a proper funeral or if I’d be free to attend. I could end up behind bars or executed. That bothered me less than having my name linked to her death. Neither of us deserved that.

I’d done a lot of questionable moral things, but there were lines I would never cross. As far as hunters went, I prided myself on my remaining moral compass. Sure, there wasn’t much of one left, but it was there. It had to count for something. I always freed the trapped victims I found and I never hurt any of them in the crossfire. Other hunters weren’t as kind.

“I need you to trust me, Skylar,” he said softly.

I turned back to him. “Why on earth would I trust you? You’ve done nothing to earn my trust.”

“I could have wiped your memory last night and you’d be in jail right now with a blank spot in your mind. You’d be wondering if you killed your friend and blacked it out,” he said.

I glared at him. “You’re a monster.”

“I know,” he said. “But I promise you that if we can’t find Lola’s killer in time, I will fix this for you. You won’t go to jail.”

“How am I supposed to trust you?” I asked.

“You don’t have a choice,” he said. “I’m the only one who can fix this for you. You need me.”

I shook my head as I kept him locked in my gaze. I hated that he was right. I hated that I was stuck with him. If I fled, I would look guilty and my name would end up with a bounty attached to it.

“I hate you, I hope you know that,” I said.

“I do,” he said. “I can live with that.”

“I’m sure you can,” I said. “I’m starting to wonder if maybe your brother is the one on the right side.”

He slammed on the breaks and pulled the car over to the side of the road. I flew forward and hit the dashboard.

“What the fuck?” I asked as I scooted back into the seat.

He parked the car and turned on me, leaning forward so his face was inches from mine. His eyes were wild, his expression angrier than I’d ever seen it. My breath caught and fear gripped me.

“My brother sold our sister to a gangster,” he said. “He traded family secrets for power and aligned with our enemies. You think I’m a monster? My brother makes me look like a kitten.”

“Even kittens have claws,” I snapped.

“Yes, they do. I won’t deny that I’ve got my own skeletons, but even my darkest moments pale in comparison to what my brother has done.” His eyes caught mine and he stared at me in silence for several long moments. “I will never hurt you. While you are with me, I will protect you. But if he gets a hold of that stone before us, I can’t guarantee that any of us will be safe ever again.”

I was transfixed, holding my breath as I looked back at him. A shiver ran down my spine and I found myself, once again, believing him.

Elias scared me. But there was something there, a pull that made me feel like he was honest when he said he’d protect me. And it sent a thrill through me. Nobody had ever offered to protect me before. Not that I usually needed protection, but it was strange being around someone who was looking out for me. I couldn’t wrap my head around how it was making me feel. I was confused but comforted, despite the fact that I knew I needed to get away from Elias as soon as possible.

“We should go, then,” I said.

He nodded, then moved away from me and started driving. I realized my heart was racing and my whole body was tingling. Something strange had passed between us and it was freaking me out.

I was still trying to decipher what was going on between us when we pulled into the *Wet Dog*.

There were three cars parked out front and the *open* sign wasn’t lit up. I can’t imagine they got a lot of traffic in the afternoon and probably only opened at night.

I hoped Xander was here and that we weren’t making a huge mistake coming back to this place so soon after our last visit. None of the other shifters were there to see us leave on good terms with their boss.

Elias got out of the car and I followed. We hadn’t said a word, but there was a silent understanding between us that we were in this together.

The sound of a car approaching made both of us stop right before we reached the front door.

I turned to see a white SUV stop in the parking lot. The doors opened and David and the shifter twins got out.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on edge. "I thought you said they'd have to heal up first."

"I was wrong," Elias said. "Go!"

The two of us bolted through the door. "Xander!" I yelled for the shifter. "We've got trouble."

Xander popped up from behind the bar, a wrench in his hand. He was in a white t-shirt and had grease stains on his cheek. "What's going on?"

"Someone thinks you have the stone," I said.

"Tell me it's safe," he said.

"It's safe," I said. "But that's not going to stop these guys from trying to kill us to find it."

"Which guys?" Xander asked.

The door exploded, sending shards of glass and pieces of wood flying. I covered my face with my arms.

"Never mind," Xander asked as he grabbed my hand and dragged me away from the door.

I coughed on dust and fanned it away with my hand.

"Hand over the stone, and we'll let you live," David said.

"What? Only three of you?" Xander asked as he moved toward the newcomers.

I took a step back, moving away from David and the twins.

"Three of you, three of us," David said.

"Doesn't seem fair," Xander said. "You should have brought more fighters."

"The stone isn't even here," I said. "And like we'd give it to you anyway."

“Then I guess we have to torture its location out of you.” David’s fingertips lit up with tiny sparks that reminded me of lightening. “This will be fun.”

Even with three against three, I was pretty sure we were totally screwed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SKYLAR

Fog rolled in around my ankles and I jumped back, worried it would be something toxic. As it curled around my legs, I tried to remain calm. So far, it wasn't making me feel any different and I could still breathe. As the fog rose, the trio in front of us separated, as if preparing to attack. David moved in front of me.

I shifted my position so I could be closer to the shifter twins. I figured Elias was the best suited to take on his brother. The fog continued, making it difficult to see. I reached for my knife. This was what they wanted. They were trying to confuse us, make it more difficult for us to fight. I wasn't going to allow it.

Shifters had better vision than mortals, but even we couldn't see through fog. I could however sense their movements, I could feel their elevated emotions, their desire for blood. It sent my heart pounding and I was sure they could hear it.

A snarl nearby and a whoosh of air told me the battle was on. I allowed my senses to fully open, something I rarely did, and I could almost feel the positions of the others in the bar.

Gripping my knife, I moved forward cautiously. I couldn't risk striking Xander with this and while I wasn't sure what Elias was, a knife in his side certainly wouldn't feel great.

Someone growled and turned toward the sound. I could just barely make out the shape of one of the twins in his wolf form. “You want more of my blade?”

He charged and I could make out the massive paws reaching for me. I dodged and swiped with my knife, but missed the creature. He adjusted and moved forward, prowling slowly this time. I wasn’t going to wait for him to cage me in.

Light on my toes, I feigned attack to the right then quickly changed direction. I managed to reach the wolf, my knife poised above his shoulder blade. Just before I could get the blade in, something huge slammed into me and knocked me down.

The second wolf was on top of me, pinning me in place with his huge paws. The weight of him on my chest made me cry out against the heavy pressure. I could almost feel my ribs giving way and I worried they’d crack. I struggled to breathe but I still had my weapon.

Without hesitation, I slammed the blade into the creature’s neck. He howled then snapped his jaw at me before using his paw to swipe at my face.

My cheeks burned from the fresh claw marks, my eyes watering as I winced against the pain.

I struggled under his paws, trying to free myself, trying to grab for my knife, but he held me fast.

It was as if the silver of my blade had no impact on him. I lifted my legs, using them to push against his soft belly. He didn’t budge.

What the fuck?

When we’d fought earlier, he’d gone down so easily. Terror struck me, rendering me frozen for a moment. I’d been duped. They’d held back, lulled me into a false sense of security.

Drool fell to my cheek as the growling creature lowered its jaws closer to me. I could smell his putrid breath coming out in warm pants like a dog. I turned my face away, trying to

breathe through my mouth, swallowing back the vomit threatening to rise from my belly.

My heart raced, my mind was blank. How was I going to get out of this? I twisted, grunting as I tried to wiggle out of his hold on me. He didn't even budge against my attempts.

My blade was still in his side. Why wasn't it bothering him? I glared at the monster. "Get off me, asshole."

He almost looked like he was smiling now. This beast was enjoying holding me here. But why hold me and not finish me off? It wouldn't take much for him.

I reached out and grabbed the handle of my knife and yanked it out of his side. As I lifted it to stab him again, another paw appeared and knocked the blade out of my hand.

The second shifter had joined us and from what I could make out of him through the fog he looked pissed.

I was not going to die this way.

Rage bubbled inside me. These males were connected to the death of my best friend. Elias had said they didn't kill her, but if they were after the stone, they were part of this. If they'd have found her first, she'd still be dead. They fought dirty and they seemed to get off on torturing people before they killed them.

That was not going to happen to me. I was not going to go down easy. If they were expecting me to give up and die, they were wrong. Maybe they'd win in the end, but I'd take at least one of them out with me.

With a battle cry, I called on all my strength. I lifted my arms and legs at the same time and pushed, hoping the adrenaline was enough to do something.

Flames appeared out of nowhere, catching the fur of the monster on top of me. He yowled and released me, leaping backward before dropping to the ground. A moment later, he faded into the fog, the flames gone but the scent of burning fur lingering in the air.

The second creature growled as he stepped away from me, disappearing from view. I looked around for Elias, ready to scream at him. Somehow, he'd managed to perfectly aim that fire at the wolf and miss burning me, but at what risk? And how the hell did he manage to keep that magic hidden from me in our last few battles?

That's when I realized I was on fire.

At least my hands were.

But I couldn't feel the heat of the flames.

Elias hadn't unleashed that fire, I had. What the actual fuck?

I closed my hands into fists and the flames extinguished.

That's not possible. I stared at my hands through the fog, lifting them closer to my face so I could examine them. There wasn't a scratch on me. Something was wrong. I was seeing things. Hallucinating. Maybe I was already dead and this was what happened in the afterlife. Maybe there was something in this fog that made us see things that weren't real.

An arm went around my throat and pulled me back. I gasped for breath, my fingers clawing at the strong arm as it dragged me backward. All worry for the fire was replaced by a frantic need to escape.

At least I knew I wasn't dead because I could feel the pressure of the arm around my neck. Well, at least I wasn't dead yet.

My captor dragged me through a door into a fogless room that I realized was a public bathroom. Urinals lined the wall and a pair of sinks stood on the other. In the mirror I could finally see who had me. David's arm was still around my throat, the other around my waist.

He released me and shoved me toward the sinks. I hit the counter and then turned to face him. I glanced toward the door, considering my escape possibilities.

"Don't even think about it," he said.

“What do you want from me?” I wasn’t dead, which meant there was a reason he had me in here.

“I saw your hellfire.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

He closed the distance between us and leaned in so his face was next to mine. He was so close I could feel the heat of his body. In our first meeting, I barely had time to get a good look at him. Now, I was getting too much of him.

While Elias had dark hair and eyes with equally dark expressions, his brother was his opposite in nearly every way. The sun-kissed skin of his face was framed by soft gold curls. Turquoise eyes, the color of the sea stared at me with a penetrating intensity. His long gold lashes, carved cheekbones, and strong jaw made him look like he’d been created by an artist. Like some kind of divine creature set on destruction. Between Elias and David, this family had hit the genetic lottery.

I knew looks could be deceiving. While he might appear angelic, he was nothing of the sort. David was dangerous. If Elias was to be believed, I should be trembling right now.

I tensed, grabbing hold of the counter behind me. I knew I couldn’t fight him and win. And unless whatever that fire was had actually managed to injure that wolf, my rescue attempts were slim.

My only hope was to talk my way out of this.

David inhaled, as if smelling me.

The hair on my neck stood on end and I moved even closer to the counter, wrinkling my nose in disgust. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop thinking it and back the fuck off. This is your only warning: I bite.”

He smirked as he took a step back. “Thanks for the warning. If I’m in the mood for something spicy, I’ll keep you in mind. But now’s not the time.”

“Yeah, never going to happen, asshole.” I glared at him. “If you’re after the stone, you had a hand in my best friend’s

death. I will see justice served and I won't stop until everyone involved is dead."

"That sounds more like vengeance than justice," he said.

"Same thing sometimes," I said. "I doubt anyone would care if you were gone."

"That hurts, you don't even know me," he said with a mock pouty face.

"What do you want?" I asked again through gritted teeth.

"First, I didn't kill your friend," he said. "I'm not the only one after the stone and they arrived before me."

"That changes nothing," I said. "If it had been you, the blood would just as easily be on your hands."

"Perhaps," he said. "But we'll never know."

"If it wasn't you, who was it?" I asked.

"How long have you been hiding your heritage?" he asked.

"Answer the question," I said.

He folded his arms over his chest, settling in as if he was causally chatting with a disobedient child rather than a hunter. It made my blood boil. I wasn't a threat to him, I was an inconvenience. I wish I could take him out but I wasn't suicidal. And if I was dead, nobody else would follow up on Lola. I knew how it worked, the enforcers would do a minor investigation and they'd likely leave it unsolved. She deserved justice and her killer deserved punishment.

Okay, maybe it was vengeance, but that didn't bother me. It was what I had to do. I owed it to my friend.

"You answer one of my questions and I'll answer one of yours," he said. "A trade of sorts."

"You're insane," I said.

He shrugged. "Take it or leave it. I'm sure your friends are getting tired fighting my hellhounds. Even my brother can't beat a creature that's immortal."

My jaw dropped and I quickly worked to cover my surprise. I hated the look of satisfaction on his face from my reaction. *Hellhounds*. They shouldn't even be here. Demons weren't allowed in our realm and the occasional breach was dealt with quickly. How had a pair of hellhound shifters made it through the portals?

"Yes, yes, hellhounds are very impressive and all, but I'm far more interested in you," he said. "You answer my question, I answer yours. Once I'm satisfied, I'll go and your friends might still be alive."

"Fine." I wouldn't go so far as to call either Elias or Xander friends but the thought of anything bad happening to either of them sent a rush of fear through me that I rarely experienced. I didn't just want them to be okay, I *needed* them to be okay. "What's your question?"

"Did you know you were a demon?" His expression was deadly serious.

"I'm a half wolf," I said. "I'm not a demon."

"You released hellfire. Only demons can access that magic," he said. "And now that I'm so close to you, I'm surprised I missed the hints of your demon magic before. Your wolf covers the scent quite nicely."

"I'm not a demon," I said. "Drop it. Who killed my friend?"

"Who were your parents?" he asked.

"It's my turn," I said.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Word in certain circles is a vampire in Queen Marcella's inner circle took credit for the murder. I think if you were to examine your friend's body, you'd find evidence of *feeding*."

I shuddered. Sure, vampires had to eat, but no self-respecting supernatural would allow it. It was disgraceful and wrong. Aside from that, it was illegal for a vampire to feed from a wolf.

David's smile was too self-assured. He seemed to know exactly how much his comment would get under my skin.

Most of the time, I was pretty good at keeping my face neutral. Apparently, this asshole killed my poker face. I didn't want him to know how much he was getting to me, but something about him made it hard for me to hide.

"Those are strong accusations," I said. "Tying a murder to the Queen's circle is nearly the same as saying she was in on it."

"I venture she was," he said. "And who exactly does my good for nothing brother work for?"

This time I was prepared for him to drop something for a reaction and I managed to hold back. That didn't stop my mind from racing. All my interactions with Elias played through my head in rapid-fire. He was interested in the stone, but never tried to take it from me. He went along with me, but refused to say what he'd been doing in the first place. I knew he worked for the Queen, he'd never denied that, but why not tell me something about his mission? Unless it was in direct opposition to mine.

Or was something that connected to Lola's death.

My pulse raced as I tried to playback the last two nights. Between the two brothers, wasn't Elias the good guy?

Depending on who you asked, even I wasn't the good guy. None of our hands were clean.

"Are you saying your brother was in on the plot to kill Lola?" I asked.

He grinned. "You've already had your turn. It's my turn now."

I clenched my jaw and waited.

"Was it your mother or father who was the demon?" He brushed his thumb against my forearm in a far too intimate way. It sent a shiver up my arm and down my spine.

I pulled my arm away. "I'm not a demon."

“You didn’t answer my question, little half demon,” he said. “Your wolf side is strong enough to hide your demon from most people but the fire gave you away. You need to come to terms with the fact that you are half demon.”

He brushed his thumb against my arm again. “We’ll try another approach, was your mom or dad the wolf?”

This time, I left my arm in place, letting him continue to touch me, though I wasn’t sure why. “My dad. Now, it’s my turn.”

“Ask, little demon.”

“Why haven’t you killed me yet?” It was probably a stupid waste of a question but it tumbled out, a curiosity beyond my control. My judgement was clouded, my mind feeling a little foggy. I shook my head and pulled my arm away and I felt clearer. “Your touch...”

“It’s nice, right?” he asked. “Most people are a little overwhelmed by how good the touch from an incubus feels. Especially when the attraction is mutual.”

“Enough. No more toying with me. Answer,” I demanded.

“I haven’t killed you because it’s forbidden. Demon code prevents us from killing our own kind. Though, I have to admit, I might make an exception for my darling brother. He’s a traitor, you know. He was banished for crimes against our kind.” David’s demeanor changed, his expression darkening and his hands clenching into fists.

“What did he do?” I asked.

“No more questions,” he said. “Just know that Elias isn’t who you think he is.”

I kept my mouth shut, processing his words. Elias was my only hope at proving my innocence. If I couldn’t find the true killer, I needed him to do something to help me. He was the only one who knew the truth. Though, I was doubting his intentions more by the second.

“A word of advice, darling, you’d be better off giving me the stone and going back to your life. You don’t need to be

involved in any of this. While that stone is in your possession, you're going to continue to be hunted from all sides. If you pass it to me, I'll make it clear I have it. The monsters will stop hunting you and you can return to chasing down petty thieves and minor criminals."

I narrowed my eyes. "You're insane if you think I'd give the stone to you."

He shrugged. "Fine. Have it your way. I can wait until you make a mistake and reveal its location. I'm not in a hurry. But don't be surprised when my brother presses you for it. I'm sure his boss is hungry to have it returned to her clan."

"He's never once asked for the stone." I was trying to remind myself more than inform David. Even I'd admit I was starting to question everything. David was charming and alluring. There was a part of me that wanted to succumb to him.

Stupid incubus.

It had to be his magic making me react this way. This was part of why demons weren't allowed here. Their magic was far too powerful compared with any other supernatural.

"It's a shame," David said as he took a step away from me.

"What is?" I asked, then immediately regretted falling for his bait.

"Seeing such a beautiful creature like yourself go to waste. I'm sure you'll be dead in a matter of days. Tell me, darling, do you have the shifter weaknesses? Silver, mortality?" He moved closer to the door.

I felt a release, as if I'd been let go of invisible restraints. I gasped, taking in a huge gulp of air. With David a few feet away from me, it was as if I had been released from a spell. I glared at him. That asshole had been using magic on me the whole time. *Fucker.* "What I am is not your business. You already said no more questions. So unless you're going to try to kill me, your business here is done. You and your hell wolves can get the fuck out."

He laughed. "I think I'm in love."

“In your dreams, asshole.”

He grinned. “That can be arranged.”

“Don’t even think about it,” I hissed.

He pushed the door open and the last traces of magic fell from me, allowing me to finally think completely clearly. I raced toward the door and burst out into the bar.

The fog was lifting and I could just make out the outline of two figures. One was groaning as it slowly stood from its place on the floor. The other was laying still.

My heart thundered in my chest and I moved closer, the fog dissipated enough for me to recognize Xander sprawled out on the floor.

No. No. No. No.

I ran to his side and dropped to my knees. I’d brought this to him. I came here and brought the hellhounds to his bar. I was the cause of all of this.

Don’t be dead. Please don’t be dead.

I couldn’t lose him. We’d just met, but I already felt so protective of him. I wasn’t about to let Lola’s brother die on my watch. I pressed my fingers to his neck, feeling for a pulse.

I didn’t take my eyes off of Xander but I could feel Elias’s presence as he knelt down next to me.

“What happened?” I asked as I moved my fingers, still fighting to find a pulse.

“I could ask you the same thing. You were alone with my brother in that bathroom a long time,” Elias said.

“You better choose your next words very carefully,” I snapped. Then I felt it, the tiniest, smallest sign of a pulse.

I glanced over at Elias and he looked like he was about to speak. I held up my hand in a *stop* gesture. “Unless your next words are how to help Xander, keep it to yourself.”

Elias narrowed his eyes. He looked pissed but I didn’t care. I had to save Xander. I looked back to the fallen shifter

and started checking for wounds. Was he passed out or was it something worse?

Then I saw the familiar blade handle sticking from above his left hip. The bastards had stabbed him with my knife. Xander was slowly dying of silver poisoning.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SKYLAR

“We have to get him to a healer,” I said.

“You got someone in mind?” Elias asked.

“Yeah. There’s a healer who works for the guild sometimes. She’ll help without asking questions.”

Elias nodded. “Let’s get him there.”

If anyone else was in the bar, they never showed themselves. Elias and I worked together to get Xander off the floor. I strained under the weight of the shifter. He was a large man but I found out that he was solid. I knew most shifters were strong, they seemed to build muscle easier than humans, but Xander was surprisingly well built. Not that I had many to compare to him. I didn’t get intimate with shifters.

In fact, I hadn’t been intimate with anyone in over a year. My last relationship was with a mage who promptly dumped me when he found out what I did for a living. It was always the same story. If I was up front about what I did, they no longer wanted my number. If I waited to tell them till we got more serious, they left when I let the truth out. I had reluctantly come to terms with the fact that I was going to be single forever unless I wanted to date another hunter.

“Help balance him for a minute,” Elias said.

I shifted my weight so I could support most of Xander. His head lulled forward, his eyes still closed. My face was near his

chest and I pressed my ear against him. There was still a faint heartbeat. A tiny bit of the tension I was holding eased. We just needed to keep him alive until we got him to the healer.

Suddenly, the weight released and Xander's body was no longer resting on me.

"I got him," Elias said.

I took a step back and looked over at Elias. He was carrying the unconscious shifter like a baby. Or a bride. It was almost comical seeing the huge shifter in Elias's arms. It wasn't as if Elias was a small man. He was a few inches shorter than Xander and not as broad. Yet, somehow, he managed to walk forward, injured shifter in his arms.

I ran toward the door and opened it so Elias could pass through. Then I ran ahead to his car and opened the back door. The two of us managed to situate Xander across the back seat. We had to fold his knees to his chest, but we got him in.

Elias and I got into the car and I gave him directions to Shelly Maribel's house. She was the best healer I knew and she'd helped me out of a few tough spots over the years. Not to mention the regular stitches and patch ups. She was a mage who had specialized in healing magic. You'd be surprised how few mages went down that path. Most of them went for the flashy magic. Especially since they chose their path when they were young and few kids were interested in healing over learning how to blow shit up.

As we sped through the late afternoon traffic, my mind wandered back to what just happened. I'd been so worried about Xander I hadn't had time to process what David had implied in the bathroom. Okay, he didn't imply. He flat out told me I was half demon.

I glanced down at my hands. I'd seen the fire with my own eyes, yet I still didn't believe it. How could I suddenly create fire out of nowhere? It didn't make sense. It had to be a mistake.

What if David sent the fire my way and then tried to trick me? What if that was part of his whole plan? He sure tried to

vilify his brother. What if the whole thing was an elaborate ploy to get me to betray Elias?

I glanced over at the enforcer. He was a demon. It was all coming together. It explained why he never told me what he was. Demons aren't allowed in our realm.

Knots formed in the pit of my stomach. I was in the car with a demon. I didn't believe most of what David said, but what if he was right about Elias? What if I'd fled one bad guy only to get in a car with another?

Then again, he was helping me take Xander to a healer. Would a bad guy do that?

But what was he doing with the Vampire Queen? How was she involved in all this?

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. There was too much in my head. Too many unknowns. I was used to being told who the bad guy was. I got a name on a piece of paper with a list of their transgressions and their known abilities. The pay scale was based on how difficult or dangerous the mark was considered. I had the information before I started the hunt.

Now, I was starting to wonder if I was traveling with someone I should be hunting. Instead of hiding and waiting to strike when the time was right, I was letting him learn my weaknesses and I was right out in the open.

Xander moaned and I turned around in my seat to check on him. He was still unconscious but the fact that he'd made a noise seemed promising. I climbed over the center console so I could see the knife wound I'd wrapped with bar towels. They were red, totally bled through.

"Shit." I'd had to weigh the options between removing the knife and causing him to bleed out over the silver remaining in him. I chose to eliminate the silver but I wasn't sure I'd made the right call.

"What is it?" Elias asked.

"He's bled through the bandage," I said. "Your car is going to be a mess."

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” he said.

I crawled back to the front seat and looked around to see where we were. We were nearly there. “Turn here.”

Elias followed my directions until we ended up at a strip of townhouses. “Park there,” I pointed to the empty spot in front of Shelly’s unit.

“I’m sure dragging out an unconscious body isn’t going to draw any attention to your friend,” Elias said as he put the car in park.

“The whole complex is inhabited by supernaturals,” I said.

“Seriously?” Elias asked.

“Martin Moore owns the whole thing,” I said.

“No shit,” Elias said. “How didn’t I know that?”

“Maybe cause you’re spending too much time on your demon missions instead of doing your job as an enforcer.” I opened the car door and got out, not letting Elias respond.

He joined me next to the rear door. “David told you?”

“David told me a lot of things.” I opened the car door. “You need help getting him out?”

“No, I got this, go get the healer.”

I left him to carry the shifter while I pounded on Shelly’s door. “Shelly? I got a big one for you.”

The door opened and the tiny waif like mage looked out at me through her screen door. She lifted her dark brows. “Please tell me you didn’t bust your stitches.”

“No, it’s not me,” I said.

Elias approached, carrying Xander in his arms again. “You’ve got stitches?”

“She always has something healing,” Shelly said.

“This isn’t about me.” I pointed to Xander.

Shelly’s eyes widened and she quickly opened the screen door. “Oh, my. He is a big one.”

“Silver poisoning,” I said. “Maybe more. But that I know.”

“Is he a mark?” Shelly asked.

“No, he’s a friend,” I said.

She pulled her hot pink hair up in a messy bun and rolled up the sleeves of her black cardigan. “Bring him in to the kitchen.”

I let Elias walk in first, then followed him, closing the door behind me. Entering Shelly’s house was like walking into a museum with an apothecary shop attached. Her living room was lined with shelves full of antiques and curiosities. Things in jars, models of creatures, and a few stuffed ravens. She’d once told me they were her childhood pets and she’d had them stuffed so they’d always be with her.

Once you passed through the living room, you entered the kitchen. But it was only a kitchen in name. In reality, it was her infirmary. A long table was covered in sheets and padding. She even had paper that she changed out after each patient. On the wall, there were shiny stainless-steel instruments and a few shelves with vials, potions, and elixirs.

I knew for a fact her oven was full of towels and bandages and her fridge was full of foods and supplements for a variety of species. The only evidence of her using this space as an actual kitchen was the electric kettle and teapot on the counter.

Elias set Xander on the table and Shelly stepped forward. She quickly went to work cutting off his pants. “Tell me what you can.”

I turned to Elias. “Did you see any of it?”

“No, they separated us and we were each fighting one hound,” he said.

Shelly froze mid-ship. “Hound?”

“Hellhounds,” I said. “And a demon.”

She let out a heavy sigh. “Guess I better restock my supplies. If we’ve got demons on the loose, business is going to be busy.”

She went back to snipping away the pants and then set down the scissors. After pulling on a pair of purple gloves, she carefully removed the towels I'd wrapped. "Can you hand me the alcohol?"

I grabbed the bottle off the counter and passed it to her. I'd been here enough to know my way around. I wasn't proud of that, but what can I say, hunting was a dangerous job. And sometimes I made mistakes. Or I bit off more than I could chew. Thankfully, it was usually only a few stitches or cleaning bite wounds I couldn't reach myself.

Shelly poured the alcohol on the wound, cleaning the blood away. For the first time, I was able to see the damage my blade had inflicted. Aside from the deep gash, a series of black spider-web like lines radiated away from the point of entry.

I winced at the sight. I knew what silver could do to us, but I'd never seen it this far along. Guilt squeezed in on my chest, making it harder to breathe. It was my weapon that did this to him. Why hadn't I hung on to it tighter? I'd made too many mistakes in the last two days.

"You can help him, right? It's not too late?" I asked.

Shelly turned to me, her brow furrowed. "There aren't a lot of weapons that can make a wound like this."

"I know," I said. "Someone got a hold of my blade."

"I keep telling you to retire that thing," she said. "It's not worth the risk. Sooner or later it's going to be used against you."

"Thanks, Mom," I said sarcastically. We'd been having that argument for years. I wasn't about to get rid of my knife. Yes, it was risky to carry it around since it could do so much damage to me. Most shifters didn't use anything silver for that reason. But I wasn't a shifter. I didn't have their strength. When I went against them, I needed something to equalize me. My knife allowed me to feel like I had a chance. And so far, it had saved my life more times than it had hurt me.

The thought hung in my head. I wasn't the one who was hurt here but the ache in my chest was almost as if a piece of me had been injured. I didn't even know Xander but I felt like we were connected. It had to be because of who he was to Lola.

Shelly grabbed several tools and items from her shelves and hooks then set them on the table next to Xander.

"You two out," she said. "I need to concentrate."

"You can save him, right?" I asked.

"If you let me work, he's got a chance," she said. "Go."

Elias grabbed my hand, intertwining his fingers with mine. I was surprised that his touch was comforting rather than startling. I must really be upset about Xander. Everything about Elias was so confusing, yet, I supposed I was desperate for some companionship right now.

"We'll wait outside if you need us," Elias said as he guided me away from the kitchen.

"Please, save him," I said.

Shelly nodded, then turned her attention back to the shifter.

I followed Elias out of the townhouse and back into the warm afternoon sun. In some ways, it felt like it had been months since I first embarked on this quest to find Lola's killer. It also felt like I just left my apartment; as if Lola's body was still warm.

I let go of Elias's hand and took a few deep breaths as I walked around in the grassy space in front of the row of townhomes. Cars drove by on the street in the distance and several people were waiting at a bus stop nearby. Life continued for the clueless humans. They weren't worried about demons, or vampires, or moon stones, or a shifter who was fighting for his life. Things were so much simpler for them.

"He'll be okay," Elias said.

I stopped walking and turned to Elias. "What happened in there? Why are they chasing us?"

“I really didn’t want you involved in this,” Elias said. “I thought if you were out of the loop, you could go back to your life and not get dragged into this mess.”

“Elias, I’m in this whether you want me to be or not. No more dodging my questions. I deserve to know what I’m up against.” I folded my arms over my chest and stared at him. “Now.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ELIAS

“Tell me what happened with David?” I didn’t even realize she was missing until Xander went down. I wanted to go after her, but I was busy with the two hellhounds. Jasper and Hadrian were notorious for their brutality. Of course they’d partnered with my brother.

“You first,” she said.

“Alright.” I could tell she wasn’t going to budge on this one. “I really was trying to protect you.”

“I never asked for your protection,” she said. “I asked you to do the right thing and get me off the suspect list. If you’d just been honest, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

“No, you’d be dead,” I said.

“Explain.”

“David’s after the stone but he’s not the one who killed Lola. However, I know him. He’d have gone after anyone who ever had a relationship with Lola in the hopes of flushing out information. And he sure as hell wouldn’t have missed that loose floorboard.”

“Okay, so the killer wasn’t as good at his job as your brother, but why is he here in the first place? Why would a demon even care about some stone that impacts shifters?” she asked.

I ran my hand through my hair. “They’ve been orchestrating chaos for years. Pulling the strings of world leaders, manipulating business people, dividing.”

“Humans?” Her brow furrowed.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because they want your world,” I said.

“So why not just come through a portal with the demon hoard and kill us all?” She said the words as if it didn’t even sound the slightest bit strange. For some reason, that made me like her more.

She wasn’t afraid of the idea of demons pouring into her realm, she just wanted to know where to point her knife. I could almost feel her already thinking of strategies and ways to fight. She was so different from every other female I’d ever met. She was focused, determined, and fearless.

“It’s not that simple,” I said. “The demons are powerful, sure. But they have to get here first. The portals have been disabled on their end and they’re guarded and locked down with serious magic.”

“So how does fucking with politics help them?” she asked.

“They’ve been trying to force a war,” I said. “And they were failing. Humans didn’t rise up like they wanted.”

“So they need something more drastic.” She dropped her arms to her side and took a few steps toward a nearby tree before turning and walking to me. “They couldn’t get the humans to go to war so they’re trying to start a supernatural war.”

“That’s my guess,” I said. “I can’t see why else David would care about the moonstone. But if he can get it in the hands of the wrong people, it could initiate a war.”

“Can’t you just destroy it? It is demon magic and you are a demon,” she said.

“I am, but I don’t know the ritual or spell needed. If I had some directions, maybe I could,” he said. “For now, we have to keep it away from David.”

“So what do we do?” she asked. “You have a plan to stop him, right?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it,” I admitted. “But we can’t worry about that right now. First, we have to find Lola’s killer.”

“David is going to come after me again,” she said.

I tensed. This was what I really wanted to know. What had my brother said to her? “Tell me what happened.”

“He thinks I’m part demon or something so he said he won’t hurt me, but he wants the stone. I’m pretty sure he’s tracking us...”

She was talking about David, but I wasn’t listening anymore. I was too focused on the first bombshell she dropped. *She’s part demon?*

That explained so much. It explained the magic I could sense from her and why I connected with her differently than I should.

“... he probably won’t, don’t you think?” Skylar cleared her throat.

“I’m sorry, go back to that first part,” I said.

“That he wants the stone?”

“No, that you’re part demon,” I said.

“It’s ridiculous,” she said. “I’m half wolf, half human.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Parents lie all the time. Often when they think it’ll protect their child. Demons aren’t exactly legal here.”

She laughed. “So the illegal demon who works for the enforcers wants to lecture me?”

“I’m not lecturing you,” I said. “And yes, I’m a demon. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I was looking out for myself

and for you. I didn't want you guilty of associating with a demon."

"That's a thing?" She sounded skeptical.

"It's actually illegal to knowingly help a demon," I said. "But as long as I kept my identity secret, you were protected."

"Well, there goes that," she said.

"Skylar, I'm trying to be serious here," I said. "Why did David say you were part demon?"

She sighed, then her eyes widened and she closed in on me, jabbing her pointer finger in my chest. "This is your fault."

I grabbed her wrist and lowered her arm, keeping hold of her. Touching her was comforting. Even if she was glaring at me like I was the one who attacked her. I couldn't help it. I wanted the closeness even if it was while she was angry. What the fuck was wrong with me? Usually, I avoided angry females.

Especially angry demons.

And while she was denying her heritage, I was more sure with each passing moment. "What happened, Skylar?"

"There was fire. Someone must have cast it while I was fighting one of those brutes. It threw him off me and David saw it and said it was hellfire. Which means, it was you." She was holding her breath and I got the sense she was hoping I'd tell her I did it despite the fact that we both knew better.

"Skylar..."

"Don't say it," she said, pulling her arm away from my grasp.

I held her tight, keeping her right in front of me. "Skylar, just because demons are vilified doesn't mean they're all bad. Being part demon doesn't change who you are. It's always been there."

"If that fire came from me, it changes things," she said.

“No, it just makes you stronger. It gives you more power; more ability to protect yourself. Which, now that you’re on David’s radar, you’re going to need.”

“This is still your fault.” She said the words, giving me blame again, but there wasn’t any malice behind them.

I smiled. “It is my fault. And I’m going to get us out of it.”

“Together. I don’t need saving.” She stared at me, her silver blue eyes locked on mine. She was stunning. The most beautiful creature I’d ever seen in my life. The pull to her was overwhelming, I needed to protect her. I needed her to be safe, always. I just needed her.

Without thinking, I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers. She tensed for a moment, then relaxed as she joined in the kiss, moving her mouth in time with mine. It felt like an explosion. My skin tingled and my whole body urged me to claim her. To make her mine.

I slid my arms around her waist, pulling her closer to me. Our bodies pressed together and I deepened the kiss, savoring every moment. Her lips were soft and her kiss was firm, determined, hungry.

My hand tangled into her hair as I held her closer to me. I wanted more. I wanted all of her.

“Skylar,” Sherry’s voice broke the moment.

Skylar pushed away from me, then looked up at me in surprise. She’d joined in the kiss, but now that the moment passed, she looked like she wanted to forget it. Or slap me.

My heart hammered in my chest and a weight settled in the pit of my stomach. I couldn’t let her forget it. In fact, I needed more of her. I needed all of her.

The drive was insatiable. I couldn’t explain it, but Skylar had gone from an inconvenience to my priority. How the hell did that happen? Then it hit me. From the moment I met her, I’d been unable to think about anything other than her.

My chest tightened as I watched her jog toward the townhouse. Somehow, I’d managed to fall for Skylar in a day.

That didn't seem possible, yet here I was.

I shook my head, trying to tell myself I was being insane. It had to be the shared experiences or the adrenaline. There had to be a logical reason why I was feeling so attached. I knew as soon as this was done, she'd go back to her life and I'd be back to mine.

Even if I wanted to follow my temporary feelings, I couldn't. There wasn't time for a distraction like a relationship. While I'd told her David's reasons, I hadn't explained any of mine. While I had to stop David, it wasn't the sole reason I was here. It was far more personal and I had to admit, for the longest time, I would have said protecting the human realm wasn't my job.

But Skylar lived here. And if the demons came through, she'd be more at risk than most humans. She was already on David's radar and once he set his sights on something, he was relentless.

I knew he'd keep to the code for now. He wouldn't hurt her now that he knew she was part demon. But that wouldn't last forever. Eventually, he'd tire of waiting.

We had to find Lola's killer and figure out a way to destroy that stone before he knew what we were up to. I just had no idea how we were going to pull it off.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SKYLAR

My lips felt like they were on fire in a good way. As I made my way to Sherry, I couldn't shake the taste of my kiss with Elias. It was one of those toe-curling, sensual kisses that sends shivers to all the right places.

What was wrong with me?

He was a demon, after all.

And so are you.

I sent the thought to the back of my mind. I didn't have time for self-reflection on all that right now. Maybe I was a half demon. Maybe I wasn't. Maybe it was all some trick to get me to play into their hands. I wasn't sure what the goal was, but it seemed like something a demon would do based on all the stories I'd heard.

"How is he?" I asked, pushing all my inner turmoil away. Now wasn't the time.

"He's awake," Sherry said as she held the door open. "We're past the worst of it. He should live but he needs to rest here overnight. He needs to fully heal to regain his strength. Right now, he can't shift."

Relief swept through me. Not being able to shift was a nightmare for a shifter, but it was temporary. He'd recover. "Thank you."

“He wants to talk to you.” Her eyes left me and looked past me. “Alone.”

I didn’t need to look back to know that Elias was behind me.

“Should I wait out here with your *friend*?” Sherry asked.

I tensed, knowing she’d seen the kiss. I didn’t even know what that kiss meant yet and I sure as hell couldn’t explain it to anyone else. “Yeah, thanks.”

Sherry nodded and stepped out of her home. I entered and walked to the kitchen infirmary where Xander was sitting up on the table.

My shoulders dropped and I let out a long breath. “Thank the gods you’re alive.”

He chuckled. “I hear it was your blade that almost did me in.”

“Yes, but I didn’t stab you, so there’s that,” I said.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” he said. “I couldn’t see anything in that fog. I was worried something happened to you.”

“You were worried about me while you were dying?” I asked.

“Maybe I like you,” he said.

“You don’t even know me,” I said. “I thought you didn’t like hunters.”

“I know you enough,” he said. “You were my sister’s best friend and she was an impeccable judge of character.” He looked down and swallowed hard.

I could tell he was struggling and the loss was weighing heavily on him. He hadn’t shown me that before. He’d seemed almost detached when we first met. I figured it was because they’d spent so much time apart. Maybe it was. Or maybe he was afraid to show his feelings.

I moved closer to him and set my hand on his. “You don’t have to be an alpha in front of me. I won’t tell.”

He looked up at me. “I haven’t told the pack she’s gone yet.”

“Thank you. I know this is hard for you,” I said. “I promise, if you give me until the end of the day, I will find her killer.”

I had to, or I was headed to jail. Best case, I ended up on the bounty list I used to hunt from. And trust me, you did not want to be a hunter on that list. When a hunter’s name popped up all rules were thrown out. Nobody gave you the standard week to hunt down your claimed mark without competition. All the hunters went for you. It was a challenge, a badge of honor. You were seen as a traitor and every hunter wanted a piece of you.

I’d seen it happen twice.

Both times, the hunters on the list didn’t make it back alive.

I wasn’t ready to die. But even more, I wasn’t ready to give Lola’s killer any more time. I couldn’t risk that the killer would get off or escape. With each passing second, I was giving them more time to flee. It was killing me.

“I’ll wait to tell them, then,” he said. “It’ll help reduce violence.”

“There’s something you should know.” I didn’t want to say it, but if David was telling the truth, and Lola had been fed on, Xander would want to know. It was a serious violation of shifter and vampire treaties. It was enough to start a war, which I was told was David’s goal. I wasn’t sure if I was playing right into his hands. Maybe I was. But Lola was my best friend and she deserved better. She deserved justice, whatever that looked like.

“I don’t have proof yet,” I said.

“Tell me,” he said, his hand tensing into a fist under mine.

“David, that demon who has been on our trail, he claimed that the killer fed on Lola.”

I could feel the tension in the air around me as Xander's mood shifted. His jaw tightened and his expression was downright murderous.

Feeding on a wolf wasn't only illegal, it was considered the ultimate disrespect. I was sure there were some wolf shifters out there who got off on it and volunteered. Hell, I'd heard of the occasional vampire-shifter couple. But it wasn't talked about if it did happen. It was disgraceful and I knew it prevented the shifter from certain rituals after death.

Xander threw the sheet that was on his lap off him and swung his legs off the edge of the table.

"Whoa," I moved my hands to his bare legs. *Holy hell those are some quads.* If he wanted to restrain me, or move me out of the way, he'd have no problem. Yet, he froze under my touch. "Please, stay here. Heal."

"You know I can't," he said. "I need that fucker dead."

"I know. And I'm going to make it happen," I said.

"You're traveling with an enforcer," he said.

I winced. Everything about Elias was weird right now. He was an enforcer, but also a demon. And he'd kissed me. It was a lot to process but there wasn't time.

"What if that goody-two-shoes wants to bring the killer in alive?" he asked. "If someone fed on her and they're allowed to live, Lola can't be buried with our family."

"I won't let that happen," I said. "I swear to you. I will see this is done right."

"I need to go with you," he said.

"No, I can't have more blood on my hands," I said. "I just lost my best friend, don't make me lose you too."

The words surprised me. The thought of anything happening to Xander made my heart ache.

"Please, heal. Get better," I urged.

"Lola deserved better," he said.

“I know.” I moved so I was in front of him, our faces nearly level due to the table. “You have to get better. If I fail, if I don’t find the killer in time, I need you to finish this.”

His hand caught my chin and he stared into my eyes. It was like the whole world ceased to exist and it was just the two of us. “Promise me, if you need help, you’ll call me. I heal fast.”

“I know, but Sherry says you need to stay tonight. You need to finish healing.”

He dropped his hand from my chin and set it on my hip. It was an intimate touch that sent my head spinning. I knew I should step back, away from him, but I didn’t want to. I needed to be close to him.

“I’m going to finish this,” I said. “I’m going to deliver justice for Lola.”

“I know you will,” he said. “But if they hurt you, I’m killing all of them. I won’t stop until every last one of them is dead.”

His words sent my heart racing. I’d never had anyone look out for me and suddenly, two males were essentially swearing fealty to me. I had no idea what was going on, but I couldn’t make myself fight it. It felt *right*.

Xander leaned in, his face so close to mine. I could see the dark stubble on his face, his full lips, his strong jaw. He was everything I’d ever fantasized about in a male. I wondered what it would be like to taste him, to feel his body against mine.

“Skylar?” Elias called.

Xander dropped his hand and pulled away. “You should go.”

“We’ve got a lead.” Elias stepped into the kitchen. I watched his eyes move from me to Xander, then back to me.

Guilt rushed through me. I’d just kissed Elias outside and here I was with Xander’s legs on either side of me, my body pressed up against the table.

I stepped back in surprise. I hadn't even noticed that I was in such an intimate position with him. *What the fuck was wrong with me?*

I didn't rush into relationships. Shit, I rarely had them at all. What was I doing? This wasn't good for my focus. I needed to ignore these males and get back to the task.

"Feel better," I said to Xander, then I turned to Elias. "What did you find?"

His eyes were still on Xander. "One of my informants heard a vamp bragging about tasting a wolf princess."

Xander growled. "He's a dead man."

"I've got this under control," I said to Xander. "Please. Stay here."

"This one," he lifted his chin toward Elias, "is probably going to make you bring the bastard in alive."

Elias walked past me and stopped in front of Xander. Tension hung thick in the air and I was worried I was going to have to break up a fight between them.

"Someone took my sister from me," he said. "She was sold into slavery and beaten to death after years of abuse."

I stared at him, unable to react. Everything inside me seemed to break for him. The pain in his voice was raw and real. I wanted to comfort him and destroy the people who were at fault at the same time.

"That's why I'm here," he said. "And I will kill every single one of those slavers until there are none left."

A shiver ran down my spine. This was the intensity I'd seen when we first met. The anger, the lack of remorse, the monstrous side of Elias.

"Then you understand," Xander said.

"Better than you could ever know," he said.

Elias's phone dinged, breaking the stare down between the two of them. He glanced at the screen, then looked up at me.

“We gotta go if we want to make it to the Clover Coven by nightfall.”

I tensed. “We have to solve this tonight. I don’t want to risk ending up in jail.”

“We better hurry,” Elias said.

I walked over to Xander and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Don’t worry, we’ve got this.”

He grabbed my upper arm and pulled me closer, planting his lips on mine for a brief kiss. It was hard and fast and intense, even though it was short. I stumbled back from him, my whole body on fire.

“Be careful,” he said.

“I won’t let anything happen to her,” Elias said, then he turned and walked out of the room.

Xander let go of my arm and nodded at me. I nodded back, speechless for once.

As I followed Elias out of Shelly’s house, I touched my lips with my fingertips. I’d been kissed twice in the last hour and both kisses had sent my heart reeling and my head spinning.

If I survived this, I had some serious shit to work out.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SKYLAR

The sun was low in the sky as we pulled away from Shelly's. I wasn't sure what we'd encounter with the Clover Coven but their vendetta against the High Moon Pack was enough to make them suspect. Add in the rumor Elias's informant passed along about one of them bragging, and it seemed like we were finally on the right path.

The hard part was finding enough information from our visit to find out who was directly connected. Maybe we'd get lucky and the asshole would be at their nest when we arrived.

"You have a plan for this?" I asked.

"When did you and Xander become a *thing*?" Elias asked.

"There's no *thing* between me and Xander."

"Do you always kiss random shifters?" he asked.

"Oh no. You're not going to throw shade at me after what you pulled outside the townhouse. You kissed me this afternoon, too, if you don't remember."

"I remember," he said. "You also kissed me back."

"Maybe I shouldn't have," I said.

"You definitely shouldn't have. Xander's better for you," he said.

“Change the subject now,” I demanded. “We’re in the middle of something far bigger than who I do or don’t kiss.”

He cleared his throat. “When we arrive, let me do the talking. One of the high-ranking members owes me a favor. I might be able to cash it in.”

“You waited until now to tell me that?” I asked. “Why didn’t you just make a phone call?”

“There are protocols you have to follow. I want to keep this relationship in good standing and not get blacklisted.”

“You work for their queen, shouldn’t they give you whatever you want?” I asked.

“We’ll see. Now that David’s involved, we need to tread lightly.” He sounded nervous. That wasn’t a good sign.

“Is it going to fuck everything up if I go in with you?” I asked.

“There’s no way it’s not already common knowledge that we’re working together,” he said. “Trying to hide it will look bad.”

“Great.” I shook my head. “I’m sure they’re going to love me waltzing in there. You know, I’ve put several of their members behind bars. And I think I’ve given a few the final death.”

“I know,” he said. “Just let me take the lead and I think we can get what we need and get out of there alive.”

“You sound so optimistic,” I said.

“We’ll be fine, I’m sure.” He turned onto the freeway and hit the gas. “You have your stake just in case, though, right?”

I reached for my hidden pocket at the rear waistband of my pants. The stake was where I’d placed it after I changed. I didn’t even remember moving it there, but it was second nature. So many things I did in my life were out of habit. I’d grown up in the hunting world, a shadow hiding from two other worlds.

“I’ve got it,” I said. “I will defend myself if needed, but you realize if we kill one of them on their property, we’ll be in deep shit.”

“I know,” he said.

“On the other hand, if we let that stone get into your brother’s possession, or whoever else is after it, we’re facing a war.” *How had I gotten into this mess?*

“We’re not going to let any of those things happen,” he said. “And if they do, they won’t be your fault.”

“I never said they were,” I said. “I’m pretty sure you’re tied up in all of it somehow, though.”

“It sure feels like we’re both part of it, even if we never set out to be,” he said.

Somehow, in the last twenty-four hours, my whole life had gone to shit, and I’d lost control of everything.

I looked out the window, watching the sun dip lower in the horizon. It would be dark enough for vampires to venture out any minute. This was their time of day, the time all supernaturals waited for. It had become my time of day due to my line of work, but I never felt like I belonged. But I never fully belonged in the sunlight with the humans, either. Now, I wasn’t sure of anything anymore.

I wasn’t even sure who I was. Was I half demon like David suggested? Or was there some other explanation for everything that’s happening?

We drove in silence for the next twenty minutes, my mind spinning in a million directions. The one thing that centered me and got me back to where I needed to be was my focus on finding justice for Lola. I had to keep that at the forefront. It was the only thing that made any sense right now, even if her death was senseless.

I missed her. I wished I could walk into her room and plop down on her bed and tell her this bombshell about my heritage. And that I’d kissed someone. Well, two someone’s. But there was no way I’d admit to my friend I’d kissed her

brother unless I knew it was going somewhere. And it wasn't, right?

Both of those kisses had to have been reactions to the impending doom we were all facing.

The car slowed as Elias took the exit. We were in the outskirts of the city, a place lovingly known as *Dead Man's Row*.

Decades ago, it had been an epicenter of industry. Several major car companies and others had manufacturing plants and warehouses here. None were operational anymore. The whole area seemed to have a permanent brown haze in the air, despite the fact that nothing had been in use for decades.

Right now, though, the brown haze wasn't visible. Instead, the lights on long abandoned buildings illuminated broken windows and graffiti.

I'd never been through here at night. Not even on a hunt. Just driving past the rusting buildings and shattered glass windows was enough to send a shiver down my spine.

A few kids darted out in front of Elias's car and he slammed on the breaks. The kids stopped and hissed at us, their feral expressions and fangs giving them away as vampires.

They scrambled away, through a hole cut into a chain link fence, onto the grounds of the old rubber factory.

Everything about this place was what you'd expect to see if Dr. Suess had written horror instead of children's books.

A pair of women walked by, pushing a baby stroller, followed by a group of teenaged boys.

The vampires were awake and going about their business. It was like a backward version of a suburb with all the happy morning population going out for their exercise and walking to the park. Only, humans couldn't see in the dark and they didn't want to drain your blood.

I took down vampires regularly, but I was rarely around more than three at a time. In the last few minutes, we'd driven

past more vampires than I usually saw in a week.

Elias turned and parked in front of an old stone cathedral. The building had been stripped of its religious iconography and one wall was completely covered in graffiti. A dozen cars were parked out front and lights flickered through the remains of stained-glass windows.

“A church?” I asked. “Isn’t that a little cliché?” Lots of vampires over the years had taken an interest in renovating old churches into homes and other buildings. A tongue in cheek response to the myth that vampires can’t be on holy ground.

“Hipster vampires,” he said.

I glared over at him and caught the smile. “That was an actual joke.”

He shrugged. “I’m not perfect.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Some of the nerves I’d felt rolling through me released. *We can do this.*

Just because I’m literally walking into a vampire nest, doesn’t mean I’m not going to make it out alive, right?

In the darkness, the cathedral took on an eerie, haunting look. It was a towering structure with a bell tower and several steepled rooftops. At one point, this cathedral had probably been beautiful.

I followed Elias up the crumbling cement steps. The entrance had three huge doors with carvings over each one. They’d been chipped away or eroded over the years but you could still make out some of the shapes.

He knocked on the door and I stood next to him, forcing myself not to reach for my stake. That wouldn’t be a great first impression. I’d wait to grab it if I needed it.

The door swung open with a creak that sounded like it was right out of a haunted house. They were really nailing the whole creepy vampire coven thing.

A female in torn jeans and a black tank top stared down at us. She was obviously chewing bright pink bubble gum. An odd choice for a vampire. Though, I could clearly see her

fangs as she loudly smacked her gum. Maybe that was the point. To draw our eyes to her mouth.

She lifted a dark pierced eyebrow and shook her head to send the black bangs covering her right eye out of the way. I had to admit, she pulled off the Emo look well.

“Who are you?” she asked, her tone bored.

“I’ve got an appointment with Jonas,” Elias said.

The vampire looked skeptical. “You do?”

“He’ll be expecting me,” he said.

Another female vampire joined Emo vampire, sliding her arm around her waist. The newcomer had hot pink hair in a short pixie cut and a ring in her nose. “The visitors smell delicious.”

“We’re not on the menu,” I said, more aggressively than I meant.

“Pity,” pink haired vampire said. “You seem like you’d be good for both a meal and entertainment.”

“Tell Jonas that Elias needs to speak to him,” Elias said.

“Sure,” Emo vampire said, opening the door wider. She stood back so we could walk through.

A chill ran through me as I stepped into the repurposed church. Candlelight flickered and glowed, illuminating the derelict space in a series of shadows and unstable light. Nearly every surface was covered in candles or melted wax. They must have burned hundreds of them every night. It made for quite the ambience but it wasn’t exactly practical.

Aside from the candles, the huge open space was missing the usual signs of a church. No pews or pulpit. Just couches, tables, and trash. It was as if I’d walked into a frat house that hadn’t been cleaned in a decade. There were even empty pizza boxes and piles of clothing scattered around. Vampires didn’t need to eat so the takeout was the result of human guests. My stomach tightened. I didn’t want to think about humans getting stuck in this place.

The door slammed behind us and I nearly jumped at the sound. It was aggressive and unnecessary and I knew what that signaled.

“Where’s Jonas?” I asked.

“He’s not home,” Emo vampire said. “But how about we entertain you while you wait.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Tell us where to find him. We don’t have time for games.”

We’d drawn a crowd. A dozen vampires moved slowly toward us, closing us in on all sides.

“You both smell so different,” a male vampire said as he approached. “So wonderful. I just want a taste.”

I pulled my stake out from its pocket. “I don’t think so. Back the fuck off.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

ELIAS

This whole thing was a mistake. Jonas was the leader of the Clover Coven and with his protection, we'd be fine here. But without him, these feral vampires were dangerous. And they were far more likely to ask for forgiveness than bother holding back.

"Where is Jonas?" I asked.

"He's gone." The crowd parted and a tall, muscular vampire with fair hair and a neck tattoo walked forward.

He stopped in front of me, his dark eyes moving from me to Skylar. Everything inside me started to feel like it was boiling over. I took a step to the side, moving in front of Skylar. I wasn't going to let this asshole threaten her even if it wasn't going to amount to anything.

"Where did he go?" I asked, trying to maintain my cool.

A few of the vampires stifled laughter and when I risked a glance around, I noticed that some of them had their eyes lowered. Their body language was screaming at me. They weren't happy with this and some even looked downright heartbroken.

"You killed him." I turned back to the vampire with the neck tattoo, meeting his dark eyes. I had no fondness for Jonas. He was the kind of vampire that gave all vampires a bad name. He was scum who would work for the highest bidder

without any moral obligations. The coven he operated didn't care who they took down as long as their needs were met.

Which meant he attracted like types.

It was a matter of time before one of his ranks rose up and took him out. When you associate with liars and thieves, they'll turn on you for the highest bidder.

My chest tightened. "Who paid you to off him?"

His smile told me I was right. He hadn't made the decision on his own. Someone else had a hand in this. *David*. It had to be my brother. He must have arrived here first.

While he might not have been the one who took out Lola, he probably paid someone here to do it. And even Jonas wasn't stupid enough to take out a shifter princess. If he found out who Lola was, he'd have backed out.

Then David would need a new vampire to pin this on.

"I had an arrangement with Jonas and I'm happy to extend those same terms to the new leader of the Clover Coven," I said.

"I'm aware of your arrangement," Neck Tattoo said. "But I don't play well with others."

"You're going to need protection from time to time," I said. "Or money."

"I have both of those things and they come from a higher power than you," he said, taking a step to the side. His eyes weren't on me anymore.

Once again, the vampire's attention was on Skylar. "You smell scrumptious, sweetheart. Ever experienced a vampire kiss? I think you might enjoy it. You seem like the kinky type."

Skylar took a step forward, stake raised in front of her. "Go ahead and try me, darling. Find out just how kinky I can get."

I fought back the smile. As much as I was driven to protect Skylar, I knew she could handle herself. Despite the fact we were surrounded by more than a dozen vampires, I was pretty

sure she'd find a way out of something like this unscathed without my assistance. Not that I was going to chance it, but it was oddly reassuring knowing she could take that asshole out.

"Look, I just need to know if it was one of your guys who took out Lola Vega," I said. "Yes or no, that's all I need. Then we'll be on our way."

"The wolf princess?" Neck Tattoo drawled. "I heard she squirmed when they put the pins in. Wish I had been there to taste her myself."

In a blur, Skylar charged forward, landing a kick square in the vampire's chest. He went down with a surprised grunt and Skylar climbed on top of him, stake raised. "You fucker! I'm going to kill you slowly you piece of shit."

Just as a group of vampires closed in on Skylar, I lost sight of her as someone landed a punch in my face.

I reeled, nearly falling back from the surprise. I was so focused on Skylar, I hadn't noticed the vamps were surrounding me. I pulled my arm back and landed a punch square in the face of my assailant. He flew backward from me, not able to handle the strength of my blow.

While the others closed in, I risked a look at Skylar. She was on her feet, her knife and her stake out now and was surrounded on all sides but holding her own. If I didn't take care of the vampires trying to get a piece of me, I wasn't going to be able to help her.

Three vampires closed in on me. Two females and a male. All with rainbow colored hair and black outfits covered in chains and metal hoops. They were clearly embracing the fact that eternity meant exploring whatever the fuck you wanted in terms of fashion. The male snapped his jaw at me while the females bared their teeth. They grinned as they closed in on me, confident that they had me outnumbered.

Whoever had hired them and taken out Jonas didn't warn them about me. I got the distinct impression that the lack of advance notice was on purpose. There was no way they'd crowd around me like this if they knew what I was capable of.

A sounder strategy would be to come at me one at a time, which was what anyone who knew what I could do would attempt. Not that it would save them, but it would delay the inevitable.

“Oh, no you don’t, mother fucker,” Skylar yelled.

I couldn’t look back to check on her but I could tell from her tone that she was stressed. There wasn’t time to fight these vampires slowly. I had to help her.

I called my magic, summoning that dark part of me I didn’t like to use. Oddly, since I’d met Skylar, I’d been using it more than I had in decades. The drive to protect her couldn’t be extinguished. It was worth calling up that magic. When I was younger, I thought it was a curse. Now that it’s finally serving some good instead of being used to further causes I didn’t support, I felt differently about it.

Gold sparks crackled on my fingertips. A female vampire growled at me, her eyes darting to my hands then back up to my face.

“You’ve heard of me, haven’t you?” I asked. “You know what I can do.”

She took a step back while the other two advanced.

“I don’t give a shit who you are,” the male said. “Your sparklers don’t scare me. Mage magic tricks aren’t any match for our strength.”

He charged me with a roar, his long arms outstretched. He ran toward me and I lifted my hands, sending my magic out in a pulse. Gold lightning shot from my fingers, hitting the vampire in the chest.

He stopped moving and convulsed a few times before exploding, sending blood and entrails and bits of singed vampire flesh all over the two remaining vampires.

The female who had backed away from me took off at a run while the other started screaming. She ran to the bloody mess that had been a vampire and knelt next to it. She let out a wail of pain before turning her gaze back to me. Baring her

teeth, she rose from the ground and then pulled a knife out of her belt.

She paced in front of me like a lion staring down her pray, her eyes darting between the gold dancing on my hands and my eyes.

“You sure you want to do this?” I asked. “You’re going to follow him to the final death.”

“You underestimate me,” she said as she moved her knife from one hand to the other.

“You sure about that?” I asked. “We just wanted information. We didn’t come here to clear out your nest.”

She growled as she tensed like a spring. I knew she was going to charge me any second and I was going to have to add more vampire guts to the floor.

A blur of silver hair flew past me and the female vampire’s eyes widened, her gaze moving to Skylar.

I took a step back, out of Skylar’s warpath. She lunged for the vampire and the female hissed at her, slashing Skylar with her knife.

They fell to the ground, the vampire on top of Skylar. They rolled around, both females fighting for dominance. I moved forward, then stopped. I couldn’t engage. If I accidentally touched Skylar, she’d go the way the last vampire had.

“Skylar, move out of the way,” I yelled.

She ignored me as she took a punch to the jaw. My pulse raced. I had to help her. A knife slid across the stone floor and I realized it wasn’t Skylar’s knife. The vampire was unarmed. Skylar was holding her own. And while I still wanted to intervene, I knew she could manage.

I looked around the church and saw a few bodies littering the floor and the other vampires seemed to be gone. Most of them must have fled while we were fighting. Knowing the kind of disloyal scum the Clover Coven attracted, I didn’t expect them back until tomorrow night. They’d crawl back

like cockroaches after dark and out of the remains, the strongest would claim the title of new leader.

I'd have to start all over again to gain a new informant. Usually, though the leader of this group was eager to work with me. While they were on the outskirts of Vampire society, they rarely turned down the protection I could offer as an envoy of the queen.

Feeling more secure in our surroundings, I turned back to the fight. Skylar was now on top of the vampire, her knee holding down one arm while she held the other arm. I was no longer worried, now I was watching with rapt attention, impressed by her skills.

With her free hand, Skylar held her silver blade to the female's neck. I could see blood trickling out from where the blade bit into the skin.

The vampire hissed in pain, probably feeling the silver in the blade. I called my magic back, knowing that if Skylar needed back up, my normal strength would be enough.

"Who are you working for? Why are you after the stone? Who took out Lola?" Skylar shouted.

"Please, I don't want the final death."

"Talk," Skylar demanded.

Something gold fell from under the vampire's black shirt. A necklace that looked far too familiar. I moved closer and knelt next to her.

"Stay back, you freak." She started to squirm harder, desperate to get away from me. The knife cut deeper into her neck and she winced but continued to fight.

Skylar glanced up at me. "She saw you explode her friend, huh?"

"Keep him back and I'll talk," she said.

Skylar nodded at me and I stood, then walked a few steps away. Slowly, she lifted the knife off the vamp's neck.

“You try to run, I’ll have him break out the gold sparkles and take you out,” Skylar said, her voice cold as ice.

It stirred something deep inside me. Something I usually left hidden, the darker part of me that wanted to come out to play. Skylar seemed to speak to all parts of me. The good, and the bad.

“I won’t run,” Vamp said.

Skylar stood and slid her knife back into the pocket on her thigh. The vampire sat up and looked at me. She was clearly terrified. “You’re not going to explode me?”

“Not right now,” I said. “But explain that necklace.”

“Necklace?” Skylar crouched down to look at the charm on the female’s neck. The vampire tensed as Skylar neared, but allowed her to look.

“Why are you wearing the royal crest?” Skylar asked, then she stood and turned to me, her hands on her hips. “You better have a good explanation for this.”

I ignored her, despite the fact that I could feel her anger rolling off her in waves. “Where’d you get it?”

“He gave it to me.” The vampire nodded to the pile of vampire guts and goo a few feet away.

“Where’d he get it?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “He probably stole it.”

“Take it off,” I said.

Without argument, she unclasped the necklace and threw it toward me. It landed on the blood-soaked floor. I picked it up and looked closely at the round gold charm. It was a perfect copy of the royal seal and I could feel the remnants of a protection charm embedded in the soft metal. It was the same necklace worn by every member of the royal family, down to the enchantment.

“This is authentic,” I said.

“Where did he tell you he got this,” I said. “He must have said something. There’s no way he stole this.”

“He said a friend gave it to him, but that’s what he always says about pretty things he brings me,” she said. “I swear, that’s all I know.”

I looked at Skylar. “What did you get out of the others?”

“Nothing,” she said. “They wouldn’t talk and now they’re dead.” She glared at the female vampire.

“I told you everything I know,” she said.

“What happened to Jonas?” I asked.

“Max killed him,” she said. “He challenged him last night and won in the battle.”

“Why?” Skylar asked.

She shrugged. “He didn’t say.”

“Great, we caught the vampire that knows nothing,” Skylar says. “I should have killed you.”

“I’m new,” she said. “But if your offer stands to make a friend in the Coven, I’ll play ball.”

“Okay,” I said, pulling a business card out of my pocket. “When they come back and a new leader is crowned, you call me. I want to know who it is and if they’ll be open to working with me. Find out whatever you can.”

She nodded as she accepted the card.

“Trail’s cold,” Skylar said. “We’re running out of time. If they didn’t do it, who did?”

“I’m not sure,” I said as I shoved the necklace into my pocket. If someone in the royal family was connected to the Clover Coven, there was a good chance there was more to this than we knew.

Skylar’s phone rang, a shrill sound echoing through the large stone building. She pulled it out of a pocket (how many pockets did her pants have?) and answered.

“Hey, Heidi,” she said, then she waited. Her eyes widened and she looked over at me. “We’ll be right there. Don’t move. Stay where you are.”

She hung up the phone and looked at me. “We’ve got a problem.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“That was my friend,” she said. “The one I asked to watch the *item* for me. There’s a group of people outside her building. Could be vampires.”

“Let’s go,” I said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SKYLAR

Finding the royal seal around the vampire's neck gnawed at me. David had accused the queen of being involved and added Elias to the blame. Knots twisted in my stomach as I recalled his reaction to the necklace. He seemed surprised, which went against part of David's accusations.

There was still the matter of the fact that the royal family was connected to this.

Elias started the car. "Is it still where I dropped you earlier?"

"Yes." One point for Elias. He hadn't demanded to follow me and didn't know if I'd requested my friend to move the stone to another location. There was a sense of trust there. He relied on me to do what I said I'd do.

"Why did that vampire have the royal seal?" I asked. "I've never seen it on someone before."

"I'm not sure," Elias said. "But it can't be good."

"David said the queen was involved in Lola's death." I hesitated, unsure if I should add the part about how Elias wasn't on my side.

"That's impossible," he said. "The queen is funding my quest to hunt down the traffickers who took my sister. They're vampires, she could easily turn a blind eye. But she came to me when word got out about what I was doing."

My brow furrowed. “That’s how you came to work for her?”

He nodded, keeping his eyes on the road. “She’s eliminated the old ways from her court. The groups like the Clover Coven are hanging on to the last remnants of what Vampire life used to be. She’s trying to change things.”

“That doesn’t explain how that necklace got there,” I said.

“No, it doesn’t,” he agreed. “But we’ll figure that part out later.”

He was right. There wasn’t time for that rabbit hole right now. And if the royal family was somehow involved in all of this, I wasn’t sure there was much I could do. They had resources and connections. I was a nobody with a guild membership and fighting skills. Which would be useless if the royal vampires came after me.

It was one thing taking down the dregs of vampire society. Fighting millennia old vampires was a death sentence. They had skills I couldn’t even begin to imagine and more experience than I’d ever gain in multiple lifetimes. I wouldn’t stand a chance.

I had to hope it was an awful coincidence and that I wasn’t trying to keep the stone away from them.

“What did you tell your friend?” Elias asked. “About the stone?”

“Nothing much,” I said. “I told her it was a family heirloom that I was protecting for someone and that she should call me if anyone showed up asking about it.”

“She said they were outside the building?” Elias asked.

“At least they were when she called. She’s got very good senses for a mortal. I’m sure she can tell something’s off.”

“I’m glad she called you,” he said. “Let’s hope nothing exciting has happened while she waited for us.”

I nodded and swallowed against the lump in my throat. I shouldn’t have involved her in this. If we were too late I’d never forgive myself.

I never wanted to involve Heidi in this. It sounds stupid now, of course. By leaving the stone with her, I put her at risk. In my defense, I thought I'd be able to get it back before anyone found it. When I hid it with her, I didn't know just how far this thing went. It wasn't a roving vampire attack or revenge against her pack; everything about this was calculated. And as much as I hoped it wasn't the case, the royal vampires were somehow involved. I had a feeling we were not even near the truth of this.

In the darkness of early evening, we raced down the highway back to the city. Most of the traffic went opposite from us, people who worked late in the city heading to their homes in the suburbs. It was a little too early for the night life to really kick off. Most of the clubs didn't get loud or crowded till after midnight. With the massive supernatural population, things got wild here in the wee morning hours.

Elias pulled into the tiny gravel parking lot to the side of the house and turned off the engine. "I don't see anyone."

I took a deep breath. "If they're not out here, they're probably inside."

"I don't know what we're going to find in there," Elias said. "I'll go first."

"You still don't think I can handle myself, after everything we've been through?" I asked.

"I know you can handle yourself," he said. "But if I have to use my magic, I don't want you in the way."

"Remember that my friend is in there. And she's mortal. Don't go blowing her up or I'll never forgive you," I said.

He was silent for a moment, as if taking in my words. "If she's important to you, she's important to me."

He turned and started walking. It took me a second to shake his words from my head. *What the fuck was that all about?*

I hurried after him, joining him at the front door. Usually, I wasn't so brazen when going after a mark. I'd search the place, find the best entrance, sneak up on them if possible.

But I wasn't solo on this and my companion's magic was deadly.

For the first time since I met Elias, a thrill rushed through me knowing his magic was on my side. The fear that usually accompanied my thoughts was missing. Was it possible I was starting to trust him?

I didn't have time to analyze my feelings for Elias right now. Especially since I'd have to find a way to explain that kiss and I just couldn't go there yet.

We had work to do.

Elias kicked in the door and it blew from its hinges landing flat on the ground with a thump. A cloud of dust billowed up around it and I waved my hand in front of my face to send it away.

"Subtle," I deadpanned.

"You liked it," he teased.

I rolled my eyes, but he was right, I kind of did. I'd help Heidi fix it later. We stepped onto the fallen door and walked into the foyer. It was set up like a sitting room right out of the Victorian era, complete with uncomfortable but beautiful furniture, small tables with sculptures, and leather-bound books.

"Don't come a step closer." The speaker had a thick, southern accent. "Or this girl goes the same way as your other friend."

My chest tightened. Whoever that was, he'd all but admitted he killed Lola. I couldn't see the perpetrator, but I knew the setup of the house well enough to make a guess. Beyond the hallway, there was a large formal room that was often used for services for the deceased. A smaller room where they'd lay out the coffin was partitioned off with a velvet curtain. The office was beyond that, a place I'd never been. From the sounds of it, the voice was nearby. Likely in the large service room.

Elias took a step off the door onto the ancient, polished wood floors. They creaked under his movement.

“I only got a taste of your other friend before her blood went cold. I might drain this one dry,” he drawled.

“That has to be the guy.” My words came out small, my voice choked. I’d been hunting her killer this whole time with nothing but red in my vision. Now that it might be time to take him down, something else fought for dominance.

Justice.

Lola deserved that. She deserved to be avenged, but she also deserved to have the truth known. If I took this guy out, would the enforcers just brush it under the rug? If we brought him in alive, would he get off? I’d been worried someone higher up would pay off the system to get this asshole out. Now, I wondered if that was worth it to find out who wrote the check. This was so much more than a single person working alone.

“Maybe hold off on the sparklers for now,” I said. “If he really is the killer and he really did take a bite out of Lola...” I cringed, still pissed about all of it: the fact that my best friend was dead, the fact that they might have fed on her. None of it was okay. I took a breath. “If they did, we might be able to get a fang match.”

I hated saying that. I wanted the killer to suffer the way Lola had but I also wanted to make sure we had the right guy. What if this was so big, they’d set someone up to take the fall? What if the man holding Heidi was a decoy?

I felt a little insane even thinking like that, but this case was making me question everything.

The one thing I did know was that Lola entrusted me with the stone. It was the only way I could honor her memory. I had to do what would help me most on that quest. Finding out if this vamp really was the killer was more important than letting Elias blow him to bits.

So far through this thing, I’d been set on revenge. But after discovering how much bigger this was, I was rethinking a few things. As long as I had that stone (and hopefully I’d still have it after this) I was in danger. If I wanted to keep it safe and

honor Lola's memory, I had to solve this all the way to the end of the trail.

"Lola deserved better than all of this," I said.

"Yes, she did," Elias said.

"I hear you out there, and I'm serious, I'll kill the girl," he said.

"I'm unarmed." I pulled my knife out of my pocket and threw it toward the voice. "I'm coming in. I just want to talk."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SKYLAR

I was surprised Elias didn't try to hold me back as I took a tentative step forward.

"Wait," Elias whispered.

There it is. I turned to him.

He held up his phone, a text message on the screen. I read the words, expecting something awful.

I'm calling in backup and I'll go around back. Yell if you need me and I'll be there.

I nodded once and managed a smile before turning away from him. I heard the sound of his footsteps as he walked over the fallen door, then I heard nothing.

Holding my hands out in front of me, I moved slowly toward the back of the house. "I just want my friend out of harm's way."

"If I see so much as the hint of a weapon, I'm slitting her throat," he hissed.

"That would be a shame," I said. "Waste all that delicious human blood."

"Not helping," Heidi said through gritted teeth.

"I told you to keep quiet," her captor said.

I heard her whine but I couldn't yet see her. Though my blood felt like it was on fire at the thought of this asshole hurting my friend. I wasn't going to let him get away with this. He'd already gotten away with too much already.

I stepped around the corner and into the dim light of a single lamp. Way to make it look more cliché than needed. I could see Heidi now, tied to a chair, wrists bound, a look of panic in her expression.

"It's going to be okay," I told her. "I'm going to get you out of this."

Her eyes were filled with tears but she nodded at me, her expression hardening. She looked determined, focused. It was as if the fear had dissolved into anger. That was a good thing. I could use that.

I looked from my friend to her captor, then quickly surveyed what I could see of the rest of the room. At first glance, he was alone, but I could feel the presence of other supernaturals nearby.

Vampires. All of them.

They were out there, lurking in the shadows. Waiting for their signal to attack. For now, I couldn't do anything about them. I was here for Heidi. And the little gold locket that glinted from her neck.

They didn't have the stone.

I returned my attention to the vampire holding my friend. He had a small switchblade against her neck, but he wasn't pressing it to her flesh. Either he had no intention of killing her or he was afraid he'd press too hard. Or he was serious about preferring to drain her.

The thought made my stomach lurch. As much time as I spent around supernaturals, the thought of drinking blood still made me nauseous. Hopefully, nobody would ever turn me because what kind of a vampire threw up at the thought of eating?

"That's close enough," he said.

“Lower your weapon,” I said. “I’m here in good faith. You’re in control. Take the knife away from her before you slip.”

To my surprise, he lowered the blade. He grinned at me, showing his extended fangs. His pupils were already dilated, a sign that he was ready to feed. Heidi’s blood was probably too much for him. Soon, he’d give in to the craving.

That meant that once again, I was looking at a younger vampire. He didn’t have full control yet of his bloodlust. Which meant, he probably wasn’t here by choice.

Someone hired him. Probably with promises to increase his status within the vampire community. Since they were immortal, it could take hundreds of years to get in with the *cool kids*.

“You’re right about one thing, darlin’, I’m in control here,” he said with a drawl.

I winced at the pet name. He didn’t know me. Why did these assholes always think it was okay to call me cute names? It was demeaning. “Well, tell me what you’re after, Peach Blossom.”

He arched a brow. “Peach Blossom’s cute, but the name’s Cliff.”

“Alright, Cliff. Let’s work this out. You were sent here to capture my friend for some reason. I’m guessing I can pay better than your boss. What do you say, can we come up with a number?” I asked.

“This isn’t about money, darlin’. There’s nothing you can give me, other than the stone.”

Fuck me. He sure as hell wasn’t getting that.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said. “I’m sure there’s some pretty jewels waiting to be placed on the corpses, am I right, Heidi?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “There’s a ruby the size of a half dollar in the safe if you want a stone.”

“Don’t play dumb with me.” He returned the blade to Heidi’s neck. She tensed and her eyes widened again, the fear returning.

My pulse raced as the blade hovered above the gold chain. He had no idea how close he was to everything he wanted.

“I can’t read minds, Cliff.” I took a careful step forward.

“No closer,” he said. “And don’t give me that bullshit. You have the moonstone. We traced it’s magic here then it vanished. The trail’s cold.”

“What the fuck is a moonstone?” I asked.

“Nice try, but your friend here already confessed that you visited her,” he said. “She was difficult to compel, but we got that out of her. But it seems she can’t remember the nature of your visit.”

Anger surged through me, overriding how impressed I was that Heidi resisted. I’d hoped the necklace was as powerful as my father said, but I had never seen it in action. It must have prevented Heidi from being able to speak about it. Or Heidi was very, very strong willed. Which was totally possible.

Either way, nobody uses compulsion on one of my friends. “You used compulsion on my friend? You mother fucker!”

“Don’t worry,” he said with a grin, “I took it off so she’d be fully aware when I feed on her.”

“If you lay one fang on her so help me...”

“You’ll what?” He lowered the switchblade and took a step toward me. “Where were you when I tasted the princess? Where were you when I stuck silver pins inside her and questioned her? Where were you as we let her bleed out on the floor?”

I snapped.

On impulse, I reached for my stake and threw it at Cliff.

It landed in his thigh with a satisfying thwack.

He groaned, then cried out as the switchblade rattled against the ground. Dropping to his knees, he looked up at me,

those fangs fully bared. “You missed, you bitch.”

“I didn’t miss,” I said. “I’m going to turn your ass in.”

He laughed. “You think this is over?”

“It’s over for you,” I said.

Something rustled in the shadows and I dove in front of Heidi, blocking her from whatever was coming.

A dart flew through the air and landed in Cliff’s chest. The vampire’s eyes widened in shock and his jaw dropped open. He clutched his chest and gasped for air that his lungs couldn’t use.

Black veins climbed like spiders up his neck and down his arms. Soon, his face and hands were covered in them and his skin turned gray. He tipped to the side, landing with a thud on the wooden floor.

His body convulsed a few times, then, blood flowed from his mouth and nose. Unblinking eyes stared up at nothing, glassy and empty.

A gust of wind filled the inside of the house, my hair flying in my face. The wind roared in my ears. I closed my eyes against the intensity and covered my face as I leaned over Heidi, trying to shield her from whatever was coming.

Then, the wind died down just as abruptly as it arrived.

I stood and looked down at my friend. “You okay?”

She nodded.

I glanced over at the fallen vampire. The black spiderweb like veins covered all exposed skin. His complexion was ashen, unlike anything I’ve ever seen.

It sent a chill all the way to my toes.

Even in the supernatural world, there were things that were far too unnatural and dangerous to consider. The dart sticking out from his chest fell into that category. It had some of the signs I’d expect from silver poisoning, but even silver bullets couldn’t do what that dart had done.

Someone had weaponized something that caused instant, final death for vampires. What did that mean for the rest of us?

I reached out with my magic, feeling for the creatures who were lurking in the shadows. They were gone. It was so empty, I started to wonder if I'd been imagining them all along. But someone had sent that dart. Whoever it was, I was sure they hadn't stuck around. Vanished along with the spontaneous indoor windstorm. Who even had the power to do that? That was mage territory, but I'd only sensed vampires. And lots of them. But what if they'd never been there at all?

Nothing was adding up. The more time I spent on this case, the weirder things got.

Lola's killer was dead, that was the point of this, wasn't it? Why did it feel so hollow? I shook off the feeling of impending doom that was seeping into my being. I should be celebrating right now, I should feel vindicated.

"He's the one who took out Lola," Heidi said through gritted teeth.

"I think so." He sounded so sure of himself in his confession but it came across as almost too obvious. It made me uncomfortable. Maybe that's why I was feeling off. It was all wrapping up too nicely.

I grabbed my abandoned knife from the floor and quickly freed Heidi from her restraints.

Heidi rubbed her wrists as she glared at the dead vampire. She walked over to him and kicked him in the side. Hard. With a grunt, she kicked him again, and again. "You asshole. You deserved to die, you piece of shit."

She stepped back and took a deep breath, her eyes finding me. "Sorry. I needed to let that out."

"I get it. You okay?" I asked.

"I'm okay but you and me need to have a serious talk," she said.

Something prickled on the back of my neck. A sense I wasn't familiar with. Fear, pain, a cry for help. "Hold on."

I took a step away from Heidi and sent my senses out one more time, fully opening myself up in a way I rarely did. Faintly, I could feel the tangled dark magic I'd grown used to sensing the last few days.

Elias was in trouble.

"It's going to have to wait," I said, already heading for the door. "Come on. My friend's in trouble."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ELIAS

Skylar's instincts were spot on. I could sense the vampire nearby. I could also sense a few more of them, but I've seen what she can do. If they wanted us dead, they'd have already struck.

They wanted to talk to Skylar. No doubt to find out where the stone was hidden. While I had my doubts about bringing a human into this, the woman had stashed the stone somewhere the vampires couldn't find it.

If she could hold him off long enough for the enforcers to arrive, we could catch this asshole. Quickly, I typed out a text on my phone. "Wait."

Skylar turned to me, a look of annoyance displayed in her features.

I held my phone up, showing her my plan. She nodded once, her expression hardening into resolve.

This was it. This was checkmate. We were going to finish this thing. A bittersweet feeling swept through me. While I wanted Skylar to be free of this, and I knew I had to get back to my own work, I might miss having her around.

None of that mattered, though. This was always temporary despite the longing tugging at my chest. That same protective urge toward Skylar threatened to make me turn back to her but I fought it and left the house.

Quickly, I typed a message to Cain, then hit send. I knew I'd have backup in ten minutes. I had to neutralize any threats and get Skylar and her friend to safety before then. It was more than enough time.

It was time to finish this.

I walked around the building. There were several odd additions that made the footprint sprawl and turn in strange ways. They looked old and likely not up to code. Aside from the unusual structure, there was an aura to the place that didn't feel quite of this earth. Though, I suppose that could be the veil that Skylar mentioned. With all the death the mortuary held, it was bound to take on some restless spirits or other qualities.

When I reached the back yard, I found a wide-open grassy area. A stone structure that looked a whole lot like an altar stood near the back with a pergola over it. On either side of the pergola were stacks of chairs.

Using my senses, I reached out for signs of enemies hiding back here. All my feelings led me back to the house. They were condensed indoors, waiting for Skylar.

Fear prickled along my skin. I was worried about her in there alone. The only way I could help her now was to take out some of the hidden threats.

Creeping along the back of the house, I stopped a few times to peek in windows. I caught a glimpse of Skylar, her hands in the air, talking to someone who was leaning over a woman in a chair.

So far, so good.

He was distracted, and she was safe.

I continued along and found a sliding glass door that led to a large open room that reminded me more of a church than the crumbling cathedral we'd been in earlier this evening.

Another alter stood at the back of the room and rows of chairs faced it. This room wasn't empty, though.

As soon as I stepped in, I could feel the signs of life. Well, undead, actually. Skylar had asked me to keep my sparks to myself around the hostage and the murderer. She never asked me to promise the same for the others.

I let my power flow to my hands, sending a tingling sensation into my fingers as gold sparks sizzled and popped.

It was enough to bring out the few hiding creatures. Curiosity killed the vampire, right?

Three undead emerged from the shadows, hissing and baring their teeth like threatened animals.

I wasn't going to mess with the theatrics tonight. I needed to be able to clear this room so I could focus on Skylar. If she needed me, I could sweep in and help her without getting distracted.

The surge built, my magic amplifying. I let it flow, then lifted my hands, sending the gold lightning toward the threats.

Sparks and flashes of light illuminated the room, making me squint for a moment against the brightness. Then followed the sound of snapping bones, exploding flesh and splattering blood.

I was getting used to the sound of exploding vampires. This time, I didn't even flinch.

The creatures were all over the floor, all over the walls. Entrails and skin hung on the backs of chairs and a few pieces of red fleshy goo dripped from the ceiling fan.

I felt a little guilty for the mess. This was Skylar's friend's place. I'd call my cleanup crew when this was settled. By sunrise, it would be back to new. I wasn't sure how they did it, but they always returned things back to normal.

Quietly, I passed between the sliding glass doors and walked into the backyard. Since I'd left the front door open, I could sneak back in without Skylar or the killer knowing.

And he had no backup now.

While I was planning to stay true to my word about not using my magic on that bastard, I didn't say I wouldn't use

other means to capture him.

Each minute that ticked by without Skylar freeing her friend was another second closer to the murderer losing his temper or getting desperate. Desperate men, human or not, were dangerous. They were unpredictable and they did things without thinking. That's when mistakes were made.

As I crept through the yard toward the front, the wind rustled the leaves in the tress and a dove called, breaking the silence of the night.

It was a largely commercial part of town, which meant there were few humans around. It was about as quiet as you could get from them. Humans were notoriously loud creatures. Clumsy, awkward, and unaware of their surroundings, they usually announced their presence long before you ever saw them.

So when one appeared in front of me, seemingly materializing out of thin air, I had to admit, I was impressed. She lifted a gun, pointing it at me. "Stay where you are."

"You're aiming that thing at the wrong person," I said.

"You're not a person," she said.

I tried to make out her features, but she was keeping to the shadows, making it so even I struggled to see her. From what I could gather, she was about as tall as Skylar and had dark hair pulled up away from her face. She was probably one of those humans who got wind of supernaturals and tried to catch one to prove her cause. Or one of the vampires did something to her and she wanted revenge. I approved of that, but now wasn't the time.

"I don't want to hurt you, and you don't belong here," I said.

She smirked. "Your kind always seem to underestimate me."

"Your weapon can't hurt me," I said. "Please go. I don't want to harm you."

She pulled the trigger, sending a bullet my way. I didn't even bother to dodge. It would sting, then I'd pull it out and I'd be healed by the time I got to the front door. The part I was the most upset about was that I now had to waste time wiping this human's memory and sending her on her way.

The bullet hit hard, with a force that surprised me, dead center in my chest. I had to admit, the woman had killer aim. Searing pain spread from the site of impact and I winced as I reached for the bullet.

My fingers brushed against the source of the pain. It wasn't a bullet, it was a dart. Blackness seeped in around the corners of my vision and my head was spinning.

The pain mixed with nausea, a strange combination. I dropped to my knees, unable to move.

"What?" I managed only the single word, before falling to my side, paralyzed. I couldn't move at all.

Stinging pain spread slowly from the source of the wound, traveling through my chest to my arms and stomach. It moved through me like poison flowing through my veins.

It didn't make sense, I was impervious to poison. I was immortal. There wasn't anything in this realm that could kill me.

Yet, I could feel myself dying. My quest was unfinished, nobody would avenge my sister, and David would be left to his own devices. But none of that seemed to matter as much as the grief that hung heavy at the thought that I'd let Skylar down. If she survived, I could let the rest go. Skylar had to be okay. It was the only thing I could think about, the only thing that mattered.

My only regret as the poison seeped in was that I didn't have more time with her. I ached for her touch, longed to taste her kiss, feel the softness of her hair. As my senses dulled, I reached out for her, trying to send my final thoughts her way.

Skylar, you're on your own. Please, be safe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SKYLAR

“What the fuck are you?” Heidi asked as she followed me. “I get that those other fuckers were vampires but I can’t figure out how you fit in with all this.”

“I’ll explain later, I swear. Right now we have to find Elias,” I said.

“I am so lost,” she said. “Is Elias a good guy or a bad guy?”

I glanced at her. “That’s a loaded question. I think he’s a good guy.”

“You think?” she clucked her tongue.

“I hope he is.” I stopped right outside the door, the memory of the stone flooding back all at once. “Nobody’s touched the necklace, right?”

“Nobody even noticed it,” she said. “Who are we looking for?”

I felt guilty for bringing her into it, but it turned out to be the right choice. Though, I had a feeling the trauma of getting held hostage by a vampire would sink in sooner or later.

“Elias. He’s a cop, well sort of. He’s been helping me find Lola’s killer.”

“So much explaining to do,” Heidi said.

“In time,” I said.

Reaching out with my senses, I locked on to the faint trace of Elias’s dark magic. It was fading fast. I took a few steps at a time, pausing every so often to adjust my direction so I could follow the feeling of his magic. Heidi stayed at my heels, stopping when I stopped, following along in the dark. She had to be totally freaked out but she was handling it well.

“There was a stone inside the necklace?” Heidi asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Huh. They kept asking me where I’d hidden a stone. They hypnotized me or something. I had to answer. It was so messed up. But I didn’t know anything about a stone so I couldn’t answer. Now I see why you wouldn’t tell me.” Heidi sounded like she wasn’t upset at all.

Okay, she was handling this whole situation *very* well. “There is a stone and it’s more valuable than you could ever know. I’m sorry I brought you into all this.”

“I always suspected vampires were real,” she said. “I just thought maybe I was insane. This sort of makes me feel validated, you know?”

“Uh-huh,” I said, half listening to her as I continued around the house toward the back yard. Had he been ambushed back here?

As I stepped into the outdoor ceremony area, it felt like my heart fell to the ground. Elias was on the grass, unmoving.

“No, no. I can’t lose anyone else. This can’t be happening.” I rushed to him, nearly collapsing at his side. “Elias, talk to me.”

“Oh my god, they shot him,” Heidi said.

I looked from his closed eyes to his chest, where the dart was still sticking out of him, right near his heart.

Elias didn’t have the black spider veins on his skin the way the vampire did, but whatever was in that dart was bad enough to take down a demon.

I tugged the dart out and tossed it aside before returning my attention to his face. Cupping my hands on his cheeks, I leaned over his face. “Elias, wake up, asshole. I need you.”

“Is he a vampire too?” Heidi asked.

“No,” I said. “He’s something else.”

I pressed my fingers to his neck and leaned my ear against his chest, listening and feeling for a pulse. I could still sense his magic, but it was fading fast. Under my fingers, I could just make out a faint pulse.

“He’s not breathing,” Heidi said.

I tilted back his chin and plugged his nose. I took a CPR class in middle school, but it had been a long time. At this point, I was pretty sure I couldn’t make him worse. I placed my mouth on his and blew in a breath. Then another.

When I blew the third, his mouth moved, his lips reacting to me. As if on instinct, I kissed him back, abandoning the mouth to mouth.

I pulled away and looked at his now open eyes. My whole chest was filled with giddy flutters at seeing him alive. “Thank god.”

“Kiss me again,” he said.

I wanted to. I did. Every part of my body was practically screaming to be with him, but now was not the time.

“Please,” he said. His tone was desperate, pleading. I’d never heard him speak like that.

“Can’t it wait?” I asked. “We’ve got to finish this.”

“I can’t move,” he admitted.

“What?”

“The dart,” Heidi said. “It’s like the one they shot the vampire with.”

“Murderer is dead?” Elias asked.

I nodded.

“You’re safe,” he said, a smile on his lips. “Kiss me, please.”

“Oh, just humor him,” Heidi said. “He’s either dying or really hurt. Plus, if you won’t kiss him, I will.”

“Do you think now is the time?” I hissed.

“I’m an incubus,” he whispered so low only I could hear him. “I need it.”

Of course he was. David had confessed that to me in the bathroom. Why would Elias be different? While most of us went our whole lives never meeting a Demon, it was common knowledge that Incubi got their magic from sex.

My cheeks heated and flutters of anticipation filled my chest. I’d been drawn to him without knowing why but him being an incubus cleared a lot of that up. Was all of my attraction from his magic?

“I won’t hurt you,” he said.

“I know you won’t.” I knew he wouldn’t hurt me but I didn’t know if this was real. I felt things for him, but that was part of his magic.

I was in so much trouble with this. Never get emotionally involved in a hunt. I had broken that rule over and over the moment someone brought my best friend into this mess. Now, I was adding to it by letting my feelings get mingled up in something that was probably nothing more than food for him.

I wanted him. Even if it was his magic calling to me.

Gently, I leaned down and carefully set my lips on his. I wasn’t afraid of him hurting me, especially not in his state, but I was afraid I’d hurt him.

He kissed me back with an intensity that nearly knocked me backward. His lips moving in time with mine, the perfect amount of pressure, the perfect motions; a perfect kiss.

His tongue slipped into my mouth and I moaned as he flicked it against mine. It was just a kiss, but I was feeling the effects of it all the way to my center. Who gets wet from a kiss?

Tingles spread up and down my arms as he nipped at my lower lip. I tangled my hand into his dark hair and resisted the urge to climb on top of him. I was panting now, feeling like a woman in heat, ready to move to second base. Fuck that, I was ready for a home run.

A hand slid up my back, then fingers worked their way into my hair. A second hand was on my hip and a moment later, I was on my side, with a demon pressed against me.

I broke the kiss and stared into his dark eyes. His arms were around me, holding me in an intimate embrace. I didn't want to leave. I never wanted to leave.

“Wow,” Heidi said. “I was ready to grab some popcorn.”

I shimmied out of his hold, my face burning in embarrassment. I wasn't exactly the exhibitionist type.

With a space between us now, I pushed myself to standing then offered my hand. “Can you stand?”

He accepted and I helped pull him up, surprised by how much he used my hand for support. He was still clearly recovering from that dart.

Before I could ask about it, several dark figures raced into the back yard, weapons raised. “Freeze!”

I spotted the familiar look of enforcers as lifted my hands. “Hey, same team.”

“The suspect is inside,” Elias said, easily slipping back into the formal conversational voice he used when around the other enforcers.

They lowered their weapons. “Cain's in the house, she'll want to see you. And your tag-along.”

“You got it,” Elias said.

I lowered my hands. “Took them long enough to get here.”

“I suspect they weren't in a rush to save you,” he said.

“Or you,” I added.

“That is problematic,” he said. “Especially in light of the new weapon we’ve discovered.”

I looked over at the dart I’d tossed on the grass. “What was in that thing?”

“I don’t know, but we have to find out. Before that weapon, there wasn’t anything in your realm that could kill me.”

“I *knew* there were multiple realms,” Heidi said.

“Heidi, is it?” Elias started walking toward my friend.

I moved in front of him, blocking his progress. “No.”

“She can’t remember this. It’ll be very confusing for her.”

“No,” I said. “She can handle it.”

“Do you have one of those things from *Men in Black*? Is that how you keep vampires a secret?” Heidi whispered. “So cool.”

“Please,” I said. “I can handle her.”

“What about the stone?” he asked.

“We don’t tell anyone,” I say. “I’m going to find a way to destroy it. It’s the only way.”

“I’ll help,” he said.

“What about your work for the queen?” I asked. “And the enforcers?”

“I’ll figure it out,” he said.

“What if the queen is in on all this?” I whispered.

“We’ll deal with it. Together.”

“What queen?” Heidi asked.

“Elias, I don’t like to be kept waiting,” Cain said as she rounded the corner of the house.

“Sorry, Cain,” he said, moving away from me quickly.

She locked her gaze on me. “You survived.”

“You sound disappointed,” I said.

“It means more paperwork for me.” She glanced at Heidi. “Especially when there’s a human involved.”

“You, stay here,” she said, pointing to me. “Elias, I need the rundown of what went on here. Inside. Now.”

I bit back a snarky comment. Elias had no idea what happened inside as he was out here, but what did I care? As long as I was off the hook, I was happy. Well, as happy as I could be considering the whole cluster fuck ahead of me.

There was still the matter of the stone, and a demon with a pair of hellhounds hunting me. And possibly vampire royalty. I was in such a mess.

I looked toward the starry sky and imagined that Lola was up there somewhere, in some kind of shifter afterlife. I missed her so much, but it helped to think that maybe she was still with me. Even if it was just in my head.

I love you, Lola, but you sure left me a mess to clean up.

I smiled at the thought. Lola would have gotten a kick out of listening to me bitch about this. But she’s also entrusted me with the stone. As long as I was standing, I wasn’t going to let her down.

“So, is this what you do when you turn me down for bar hopping on Friday nights?” Heidi asked. “I mean, with a dish like Elias, I get why the men at Kelley’s Pub don’t do it for you.”

I turned my attention back to my friend. “I have a lot of explaining to do.”

“Yeah, you do,” she said. “Start with this: are you a vampire?”

I laughed. “No, vampires can’t go out in the sun.”

“What are you, then?” she asked.

I paused. Until last night, I’d never doubted that I was half human. Which meant, I could say I was human without feeling guilty. After all, I couldn’t shift into a wolf so why bother with that part? Now, I wasn’t so sure. If David was telling the truth, which I hated to admit, I suspected he was, I was half demon.

Did that change anything? Did it change who I was or what I was about? I had made hellfire. Did that mean something else was possible? Was I changing?

I looked into Heidi's blue eyes. "Honestly, I'm not sure. I thought I was one thing, but I might be something else."

She shrugged. "Fair enough. Growing up, my parents always said we were Irish. When I took that DNA test I found out I was pretty much all Norwegian. Doesn't matter. I'm still me. You still you?"

"Yeah," I said. "I suppose I am."

"Okay, so vampires are real. What about the rest of the creatures? Werewolves? Gremlins? Trolls?" She threw her arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer to her.

"You know, most of those are real, but not in the way that humans think they are," I said.

"Fascinating." She dropped her arm. "So the ghosts that live in the mortuary... I'm not insane. They're really there, right?"

"Yeah, they're there."

"Wow," she said. "So, what is your boyfriend, then? He's not a vampire. I saw what those darts did to a vampire."

I swallowed, surprised by the rush of panic the reminder of almost losing Elias brought me. "First, not my boyfriend. Magic cop. It's a really long story that will involve a pizza and lots of booze."

"I'm in. You tell me when, and I'm there."

I frowned. "Not at my place, it was ransacked when they came for Lola." My heart ached, but not for the loss of the stuff. I could get a new place to live. But it wouldn't be the same without Lola there.

"I'm going to miss her too," Heidi said. She wiped the tears from her eyes and her expression hardened. "I'm glad he's dead."

I was glad he was dead, too. But who had killed him? The whole thing was unsettling. I felt like I was left with less answers than I was before I found Lola's killer.

Elias walked out through the sliding glass doors. "They confirmed finding fang marks on Lola so they've determined it wasn't you."

"That was all it took? We could have just called them and told them to check her for fang marks?" I asked.

"Hunter," Cain called, coming out of the doors right behind Elias.

"Yes, enforcer Cain?" I asked with mock sweetness.

She ignored my tone. "We have it on good authority that the killer was looking for a moonstone in your apartment. You haven't seen anything like that, have you?"

I tensed. Why would Cain be asking me about this and how would she know? "Like a piece of jewelry? Is that a wolf thing?"

"It's a valuable ancient artifact that was last traced to someone in her pack. They were holding it illegally and rumor has it, Lola took it when she fled. Probably figured she'd fence it if she fell on hard times. It's not easy for a wolf to be without a pack."

I knew the last comment was a dig at my mixed heritage. "Some wolves do better on their own."

"Maybe," she said. "Either way, if you come across it as you're cleaning up the mess, let us know." She pulled a business card out of her pocket and handed it to me.

"Does this mean I'm no longer a suspect?" I asked.

She eyed me up and down, as if looking at something disappointing. "For now. But in your line of work, I suspect it's a matter of time before you cross the line."

I smiled. "I look forward to working with you again, then."

She waved my comment off with a flick of her wrist, then turned to Heidi. "This is the human?"

“Heidi,” she said. “Humans have names.”

“Right, Heidi. I need to ask you some questions,” Cain said.

Heidi followed Cain a few feet away, stopping in front of the glass doors that led to the back of the mortuary. I noticed blood splatters on the glass.

“You took out the vampires in the back, didn’t you?” I asked Elias.

“I told you I’d give you back up,” he said.

“How did you get shot?” I asked.

He relayed the story about the seemingly human woman with the dart gun. I listened with rapt attention. It sounded like a hunter, but there were no human hunters. At least not fully human.

“She must have come through after she got you and taken out the vampire,” I said. “But why?”

“Keep him from talking,” Elias said.

“But who hired her? What was the point of that? I thought they were after the stone,” I let the words hang between us and checked to make sure Cain was still busy with Heidi. I looked back at Elias. “How did Cain know?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t tell her.”

“Everyone is after this thing, aren’t they?” I asked.

“I think it’s safe to say we can’t trust anyone,” he said.

“Wonderful,” I said. “It’s going to make it that much harder to figure out my next steps.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You’ve got help. There’s me, and I know Xander is waiting for you to call him in.”

“I thought you were out as soon as this was over,” I said.

“You think I’d miss the thrilling conclusion of this?” he teased.

Knowing I wasn’t on my own was reassuring. Strange for someone who was used to working alone, but in this case, it

felt like I'd have help rather than the burden of another set of hands. Unlike the few times I'd teamed up with other hunters when I was younger, my current partner could take care of himself.

"Come on," Elias said. "Let's get your human friend and you home."

"I'm not going back to my apartment," I said. "But I could use a lift to a hotel. Any hotel except the Essex House."

We both laughed. Then, he brushed his fingers against mine for a brief moment as if he was considering taking hold of my hand. My breath hitched at his electric touch. I had to admit, after that kiss, I was still ready to go. I still wanted more.

"You can stay at my place if you want," he said. "Probably safer than a hotel."

I hesitated. There was a part of me that wanted to follow him to his place to do anything except sleep. But that wasn't possible. At least not now. We weren't out of this yet.

"We can't go to your place. And we probably can't use your car, either. David found us despite the wards at the hotel."

"Hotel?" Heidi said as she walked back toward us. "I am missing a lot of this story."

I laughed. "So much. But it'll have to wait. I'm afraid you probably aren't safe, either. They tracked the stone here, they'll come for you."

"Super," she said. "So what's the plan?"

The sliding glass door slammed as Cain closed herself back in, drawing all our attention to the house. "Does that mean she's done with us?"

"For now," Elias said. "But Cain isn't our biggest issue."

I looked over at my human friend. She was smiling and unharmed. Somehow, she'd managed to get out of this without a scratch. I didn't think she'd get that lucky again if more supernaturals came for her.

“Can you get someone to cover for you at work for a while? Maybe take that trip you’ve been putting off?” I knew Heidi’s long-distance boyfriend had been begging her to visit.

“Yeah, maybe it’s time,” she said. “You’ll take care of yourself?”

I nodded. “I’ll call you as soon as it’s safe. And I’ll explain everything. I promise.”

Now that I’d lost Lola, Heidi was pretty much it in the friend department. Regret swirled through me for all the lost time with Lola. I didn’t want to feel that way again. I needed to know Heidi was safe and that we’d have time to hang out when things were better.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll Uber to the airport. I’m sure there’s a flight that leaves in the morning.”

“Promise me you’ll be on it,” I said. “But don’t send me any messages or call me. I’ll call you when it’s safe.”

“This sucks, you know that,” she said. “Lola was my friend too.”

“I know. And when we finish this, you and me are going to get drunk in her honor.”

“She’d like that,” Heidi said. She stepped closer and wrapped her arms around me. I embraced her back. My stomach was in knots, worried about her and angry at myself for dragging her into this.

The only thing that made me feel better was that I knew her boyfriend, a musician, was constantly on the road. I wasn’t even sure where his home base was when he wasn’t touring. The band had taken off last year and embarked on a world tour. He’d asked Heidi to join him, but she wasn’t thrilled with the idea of watching a bunch of strange women throw themselves at her boyfriend every night.

I felt bad encouraging her to join him, but I needed her to be away. The fact that she’d be in a different city every night made it that much better.

“Hey,” Heidi said, as she pulled away from the hug. She unclasped the gold chain from her neck then relapsed it. I stretched out my hand and Heidi set the locket into my palm.

I put the necklace around my neck, grateful for the spelled locket. The stone was safely tucked inside, away from anyone’s grasp. For now. This gift left behind by my mom turned out to be exactly what I needed more than twenty years after she died. In a way, it made me feel closer to her than I had my whole life. As if I’d gone to her for advice and she’d delivered.

“Good luck. And please be careful,” Heidi said.

“I’ll do my best. And thank you. For everything.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SKYLAR

This time, we called an Uber. I wasn't taking any chances of going anywhere in Elias's car.

It was clear we couldn't trust anyone or anything, but there was one place we might be safe. At least for a little while.

If anyone had a warded room, it was Shelly. While I was pretty sure Elias's connections might be able to help us find something more long term, I wanted someone neutral. Shelly fit the bill. If you could pay, she'd assist. No questions asked.

Granted, I knew she had a moral code she followed because once she'd tipped me off that a wanted criminal had visited her, but not until he'd left her home. Though, she made me swear to never tell that she'd tipped me off.

Since that once incident, I'd trusted her more than I probably should. And considering Elias hadn't offered any other options, I wondered just how accurate my instincts were right now. While I trusted Elias, I didn't trust his contacts.

The Uber driver didn't ask any questions and we didn't offer conversation. Getting picked up at a mortuary was weird enough. Add in the time and it was even stranger.

The watery early morning light tinted the sky a striking purple blue. The first few rays of sunlight painted streaks of pink and gold in the clouds. It was a gorgeous sunrise.

If I wasn't so tired, I might have considered staying up to watch the rest of the rise. Instead, I could only think about a bed or a couch. Shit, even the floor worked right now.

I knocked on Shelly's door, then waited. Like me, Shelly had to sleep nearly as much as a mortal. Mages weren't gifted with the supernatural ability to skip sleep like some creatures had. Shifters could go for days, but I wasn't a shifter.

I wasn't human either.

But I was far too exhausted to open up that train of thought. I needed sleep. Then coffee. In that order. Then, the thinking and planning.

I knew this was a temporary reprieve. Assuming Shelly even let us stay. But it was needed. Before we could regroup and figure out the next steps, I had to recover.

Shelly opened the door. Her bright pink hair pulled into a messy bun. Her eyes were ringed with dark circles and she was in a fuzzy bathrobe. "I wondered when you'd get here."

"It was a long night," I said, a little surprised by her comment. She'd said Xander needed to rest overnight, she never asked me to come back for him so quickly.

"Hurry in," she said, pushing past me as I entered. She looked around outside, as if checking to see if we were alone. Then she closed and locked the door.

To my surprise, she lifted her hands and I could see pink threads of magic flowing from her fingertips. She mumbled a few words and the door glowed bright fuchsia for a moment before returning to normal.

"Did you just ward the door?" I asked.

"You two are being hunted," she said, her hands on her hips. "I can't say I'm pleased with you bringing this to my home, but based on the visitor who came looking for you, I'm taking a side for once. Yours. You've never destroyed anything."

That's when I realized her entire front room, with all its crazy antiques and beautiful old items, was in shambles.

Shattered glass and pieces of plaster littered the floor. Her beloved stuffed Ravens were sitting on a chair, the only item she'd bothered to pick up. Claw marks shredded the wallpaper. Her furniture was covered in a layer of white dust.

"Shelly, what happened?" I asked.

"You know I'm neutral; everyone knows I'm neutral." She shook her head. "But these creatures weren't from around here."

"David," I said. "He was here."

"Is that what he's called?" She clucked her tongue. "Beastly thing. Shifted in front of me and I swear to you he looked just like a hellhound. Don't tell me this was the demon you mentioned."

"One of them," I said.

Her eyes widened. "How many are we talking about?"

"They usually travel as a group of three," I said. "Two hellhounds and," I glanced at Elias, "something else."

"Well, he sure messed things up looking for you. I told him you weren't here but he had to check for himself. Clumsy oaf." Shelly clucked her tongue.

"I'm so sorry, Shelly. We shouldn't have come here." I turned to Elias. "We have to go somewhere else."

"I'd say you do," she said. "Your shifter friend left shortly before you arrived. Off to find you and warn you, I suppose."

"He needed the rest," I said. "Why would he do that?"

"He's got a fondness for you, I can sense it," she said.

A cuckoo clock chimed and the little bird popped in and out, chirping with an annoying sense of alarm.

Shelly tensed. "You have to go now. Someone's coming again. They must have followed you here."

She walked back to the front door. "You're being sloppy, Skylar. Your father taught you better."

I bit down on the inside of my cheek. I could do better. “I’m sorry, Shelly.”

“No time for that now.” She opened her front door. Instead of the parking lot, there was another room.

“What the?” I blinked a few times, trying to make out the new room I could see through the door.

“It’s a portal,” Elias said. “Your friend has a gift.”

“You don’t think I’ve stayed alive all these years because of my healing abilities alone?” Shelly said with a grin. “Come on, everyone through.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. “I am so glad you’re on our side.”

“This is it, though,” she said. “I can give you this place to use, but I can’t help anymore. It’s too risky.”

“I understand,” I said. “Thank you.”

I walked through the portal, Elias behind me. We turned back to face Shelly who was still standing in her townhouse.

“Be careful, Skylar,” she said.

“We will,” I said.

She started to close the door and I stepped forward, blocking the progress. “Can I ask one last favor?”

She waited quietly.

“When Xander returns, can you send him here if he wants to join us? I didn’t even get to tell him what happened,” I said.

She nodded. “I’ll send him.”

“Thank you, Shelly.” I smiled as she closed the door. The path I was on was dangerous and I owed Shelly a debt I’d likely never repay. I could keep her out of it, though. That was the least I could do for the gift she’d given us.

I looked around the room. We were in what appeared to be a tiny apartment. Right now, we stood in the center of a simple living room with an old tan couch and a bookcase filled with average looking books. There was a shriveled plant on the

windowsill and the coffee table was covered in dust. She clearly hadn't been here for a while.

I walked to the window and peeked out into the sunlight. In the distance, I could make out the crumbling smokestacks and derelict buildings. "We're in Dead Man's Alley?"

"Probably the safest place we could be," Elias said. "They're more likely to think we'd flee than stay in the center of our enemies."

"Enemies," I said, the word hanging heavy in my chest. "The vampires, of course. But don't forget the demons. And maybe even the shifters. Why not, right? Oh, yeah, and the royal vampires, I'm sure they're going to be after us now too."

"It's going to be okay, Skylar," Elias said.

The whole room seemed to be spinning, my pulse racing as the realization of what we were up against seemed to grow more insane by the minute. "How is this going to be okay?"

"Skylar..." Elias winced, grabbing his chest with his hand. He stumbled forward, managing to make it to the wall for support.

All worry about the looming crisis ceased, completely replaced by concern for Elias. I ran to him. "What's wrong?"

He was breathing too fast, his face too pale. I reached up and cupped his cheek. Elias was burning up.

I managed to guide him to the couch and get him seated, but he wasn't speaking to me and his eyelids were growing heavier by the second. He was not okay. Not at all.

I lifted his shirt to check the wound and gasped at the sight. A large black circle sat in the center of his chest and black veiny marks radiated from it. He hadn't healed fully.

"Elias, why didn't you say anything?" I was practically yelling at him and tears blurred my vision.

His eyes were closed now, his breathing slowed.

Terror gripped me, the fear of losing him was unbearable. I climbed over his legs, straddling him, then threw my arms

over his shoulders. Leaning down, I pressed my lips to his.

Elias didn't react. I pulled back and looked at him. His eyes were closed and my thoughts went right to the worst case scenarios. I'd waited too long, he wasn't coming back.

I couldn't accept that. As adrenaline surged through me and my pulse skyrocketed. "Elias, don't leave me."

I cupped his cheek with my hand and slid my fingers into his soft, dark hair. He couldn't be gone. I couldn't lose him. Not now. Not after everything we'd gone through.

Not when I was just starting to realize how much I needed him.

Desperate to get a reaction, I lowered my mouth to his and traced my tongue around his lips before sliding it into his mouth.

A strong hand moved to the small of my back and his lips began to move. I made a noise that was somewhere between laughter and a gasp of surprise.

"Don't do that to me again," I said, punctuating each word with a kiss on his cheeks, jaw, and forehead.

His hand caught my chin and I looked into his dark eyes. There was hunger there but also tenderness. The look alone was enough to make my thighs tremble. I slid my hands under his shirt and he caught my wrists.

"We don't have to do this," he said. "I'll be fine."

"I want to," I said. "And you're a terrible liar."

"If you go any further, I'm not going to be able to stop," he warned. "You've never seen the real me."

"The gold sparks and exploding vampires isn't the real you?" I asked.

His hand moved from the small of my back, up to my neck, his fingers gently teasing my hair. "That's not the part of me I ever wanted you to see."

"Then show me the other part," I said, my voice coming out huskier than I meant. I was practically panting, my body

aching to be with him.

It had been a year since I'd been with anyone, why not him? Why not follow this strange attraction and see where it takes me?

Elias let out a low growl just as his mouth claimed mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ELIAS

It had been years since I'd let myself be with a woman in a truly intimate way. As an incubus, I had to feed, but I could go long stretches without. Still, any relations I'd had over the last decade were all sex, no emotion.

That wasn't possible with Skylar. I knew if I gave in to her, I was letting my heart take the lead rather than my magic.

It was foreign territory for me. I'd never been in love and never sought company based on the companionship it could provide. Once I went here, there was no going back.

Alarm bells blared in the back of my mind, telling me to ease off, to let this go. I got what I needed. I could likely heal enough from a kiss here and there, but I didn't want to heal. I wanted Skylar.

I wanted all of her.

The primal demon part of me that I worked so hard to suppress growled, rising up to claim the gorgeous woman offering herself to me.

My mouth found hers, our lips moving in perfect rhythm. Hungry and desperate. She was just as eager as I was.

As I worked the buttons on her pants, I could feel my full powers emerging. There was no holding back.

I felt the horns sprouting from my head, a feature I usually kept masked with my magic. I knew soon enough the little sparks that accompanied my deadliest magic would begin to sizzle along my skin. Normally, I didn't worry about my partner, or I tugged on their emotions enough to dull the sense of fear that came from my true form. But this was Skylar. My Skylar. I couldn't do that to her. I wanted her present, in control, safe. I needed her to see me and know I would never harm her.

It took every ounce of my willpower to pull away from the kiss and I looked from Skyley's swollen lips to her hooded eyes. Her shoulders rose and fell as she panted, already feeling the effects of my magic.

"I won't hurt you," I assured her.

Her eyes widened and she jumped at the sight of the dancing electricity sizzling over my flesh. "It's you, isn't it?"

I nodded. "When I don't contain it."

She reached her hand out slowly and gingerly touched her fingertips to my forearm. When nothing happened, she flattened her palm and slid her hand up my arm until she reached my shoulder. Then, her attention turned to my head and her hands reached for the horns.

"Gentle," I said.

She nodded but continued her exploration. When her soft fingers made contact with my horns it sent a shiver of elation down my spine. She gripped them, and squeezed gently. I moaned. It was too much.

I wrapped my arms around her and turned so she was on her back on the couch, her legs still around my hips. I shifted so I was facing her. I leaned down, pressing my erection against her mound, our clothes annoyingly in the way. But I wasn't in a hurry. I could spend the rest of my life exploring her body.

When I pushed her shirt up, she pulled it the rest of the way off. I stared down at her soft stomach and the delicious curve of her breasts.

Her pants were low enough from my unbuttoning that I could see the waistband of her panties. I started there, pressing a kiss to the sensitive flesh on her hips, then working my way toward her belly button, then up to her breasts.

She squirmed under me, her breathing getting shallower by the second. When I reached her breasts, I cupped each gorgeous mound before using my teeth to tease each nipple through the fabric of her black bra.

She moaned, her hips rising. Her fingers worked their way into my hair, guiding my face to hers. She pressed her lips to mine then pulled back slowly, nipping at my lower lip, before sliding her tongue into my mouth.

I groaned into the kiss and lowered my body closer to hers. Her breasts pressed against my chest, my hips gyrated against hers ever so slightly.

Her hands moved to my back, then to my chest, and to my surprise, to my hips. She fumbled with my jeans, trying to get the button open.

I smiled into the kiss and she laughed, tossing her head back. "I'm a little out of practice."

"Don't worry, I can give you all the refreshers you need." I climbed off the couch and pulled my pants off, tossing them aside.

She propped herself up on her elbows, watching me. When I removed my underwear, I have to admit, her face gave my ego a boost.

"Damn," she said under her breath.

I smirked. I'm an incubus, I charm whomever I want into bed, but I wasn't used to genuine admiration. Though, I had to admit, the feeling was mutual.

"Damn, yourself," I said.

"You haven't seen me without my clothes on yet," she said.

"You're right." I moved back to the couch and hooked my fingers under the waistband of her pants. I waited for a few

heartbeats, giving her time to stop me if she wanted to.

She bit down on her lower lip and held her breath in anticipation. I grinned. That was a green light if I ever saw one. Quickly, I pulled her pants and panties off together and tossed them aside.

Skylar tossed her bra, adding it to the pile of clothes. “Fair is fair. You showed me yours.”

I leaped back onto the couch with a growl and Skylar squealed, laughing as I settled in between her thighs. She wrapped her legs around my hips, practically begging me to fill her pussy.

Her hands glided over my chest before sliding around my arms to my back. Her fingertips and palms leaving a trail of tingles wherever they touched. “Elias...” she said my name softly. It was an intimate, personal invitation I understood in my very soul. It was nearly enough to send me over the edge.

I entered her, slowly at first. She gasped, her body clenching around me. I groaned. Her pussy was perfect and I wasn’t even all the way in yet. With another thrust, I filled her, my cock thrusting deep inside. I used my thumb to massage her clit as I drove into her over and over.

With a sharp intake of breath, her fingernails bit into my back. “Oh my gods.”

“The horns aren’t the only magic I have,” I said.

With that, she reached for them, but I grabbed her wrists, pinning them down. I wasn’t ready to end this yet and her touch had felt too good. “Let me take care of you.”

I felt her tension release as she gave in to me, willing to trust me fully, ready to succumb to pleasure. That’s when it hit me, the bond connecting us, tying my soul to hers.

The air around us seemed to sparkle, and everything was more vibrant, more alive. She reached for my face and our eyes met. I knew she could feel it too, but I wasn’t sure if she knew what it meant.

Skylar was my mate.

I claimed her mouth again and she moaned into the kiss. Her hips lifting in time with my thrusts. She dug her fingernails into my back again and tossed her head back, breaking from our kiss to scream in pleasure.

Grabbing her thighs, I moved to my knees so her ass was in the air. She looked up at me, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright. “Don’t stop.”

With a growl, I pushed deeper. Her back arched and my mouth moved to her nipples. She moaned as I sucked one nipple at a time into my mouth and flicked each sensitive nub with my tongue.

Her breathing grew faster, her hips rising with each thrust. I knew she was close. I could feel the power from her lust feeding me. It was intoxicating. In all the times I’d engaged in anything sexual, I’d never felt a rush like this. The stories were true. Sex with your mate was the ultimate recharge for an incubus. And *holy shit*, there was emotion there too. I wasn’t just pleasing her to feed my ego or my magic. With each cry of pleasure, a burst of happiness exploded within me. I was getting more satisfaction in her nearing orgasm than I was from my own.

Skylar cried out, her fingers digging into my back. I lifted her, bringing her chest to mine. The two of us locked in an embrace. Her body shook as waves of bliss rolled through her.

I tensed as my own climax approached. With a groan, I released. My whole body felt the tingling power of that orgasm. Sparks danced over my skin and I held Skylar closer, breathing her in.

Sex was usually of no consequence for me. I could make my partner forget the encounter and often did when I first arrived in this realm. It was about fuel. Replenishing my magic.

Not with Skylar. With her, it was about connection.

Her heartrate was returning to normal, her breath warm and even against my skin. I looked down at her and there was

no mistaking the satisfied look in her eyes. Gently, I kissed her.

“The stories about incubi in bed were not an exaggeration,” she said with a grin.

I pushed the hair on her face behind her ear. “You’re not so bad yourself.” I wanted to bask in her post-coital glow forever. Shit, I wanted to cuddle. I wasn’t even sure if I knew *how* to cuddle.

Suddenly, a bright pink glow filled the room and I released her legs. Skylar pulled away from me and we both turned toward the source of the light. The door we’d walked through not long before was lit up, the glow nearly blinding.

I helped guide her off the couch and the two of us stood facing the door. “Get behind me.”

For once, she listened. I suspected it was only because she was naked, but I was grateful either way.

The door opened and Xander walked through. He stopped when he saw us. His whole body tensed and he growled.

The door closed and the pink light dissipated. I felt Skylar moving behind me and turned to look at her. She was holding her t-shirt over her. It barely covered her tits and pussy.

“Xander,” Skylar said, breathless.

Xander glanced at Skylar then turned back to me. “What are you doing with my mate?”

“Your mate?” I straightened. “Skylar is mine.”

“I don’t think so,” Xander said. “I felt the bond with her. Skylar, you’re my true mate.”

“Skylar, you felt the connection we had,” I said, turning to her. “You know what there is between us. You felt the mating bond.”

Another growl alerted me to Xander changing right for me. His fist made contact with my jaw before I could react. I stumbled backward, uneasy on my feet. I was still recovering

from my injury and my senses felt like they were moving underwater. Laggy and slow.

Still, I was able to regroup fast enough to land a blow of my own, my fist hitting the shifter's cheek.

"Enough!" Skylar shouted as she squeezed in between us. She stretched her hands out, creating a gap between me and Xander.

"This isn't the dark ages. You can't fight for my honor or some shit. It doesn't work like that." She was naked, standing in the middle of both of us, her expression pure steel.

"I don't even know what I feel but I sure as hell am not going to follow some archaic mating bond myth because you two oafs say so." She dropped her arms, then crouched down to pick up her abandoned t-shirt. After tugging it over her head, she turned to look at each of us in turn.

"We aren't going to solve this if you two are at each other's throats," she said.

"He's an incubus, Skylar. He makes people feel things. He's playing you," Xander said.

"No, he's not," she said. "For some stupid reason, I trust him. But I also trust you. If you two can play nice, you can stay. If not, you know where the door is."

"I'll take watch," I said. "Skylar needs to sleep."

"Alone," Xander said.

"Agreed," I replied.

Skylar pulled on her pants. "I don't know what is going on here but we've all had a pretty rough last few days. We all need some rest."

She walked toward the other door and opened it. "I'll be in here. Try not to kill each other while I'm asleep."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

SKYLAR

There was little chance of falling asleep quickly. The bed was covered in a thick layer of dust, the air felt stale, and there were two males in the room next door claiming to be my mates.

My face still felt flushed from my encounter with Elias. It had started as a way to help him heal, but it had turned into something so much more meaningful. While I couldn't say that what I felt was a mating bond, I did know there were sparks. Literally. Aside from the bursts of light on his skin, there was the electric buzz that came from his touch, his kiss, his cock. Being with Elias didn't feel like empty pleasure. It felt like something greater than that.

Was it a mating bond?

My whole life I thought I was half human, which meant I didn't get most of the perks of being supernatural. I never expected to experience a bond so I never even asked about it. Now, I felt like I was a child learning about sex for the first time.

Sex with Elias certainly felt different than sex I had with other partners. I figured that was because he was an incubus and knew his way around a woman's body.

Then there was Xander. Where had that claim come from? We'd spent minutes together. We hardly knew each other.

Then again, in the stories I'd heard about mating bonds, they were like that. Instant fireworks.

Xander made me feel things, but what attractive male didn't make my hormones take notice? Okay, sure they were in overdrive around him, but that doesn't mean anything, does it?

I turned on my side, trying to send the thoughts from my mind. They seemed so petty and unnecessary right now. I reached up for the locket, brushing my fingers over the charm. There were bigger problems in my life.

I was the keeper of the moonstone, a job I didn't ask for. But then again, Lola hadn't either. For her, it was simply the luck of her birth that put her in its path. She wasn't chosen based on her merit or her skills or even who her friends were.

For me, it was a burden passed on in a different way. But in some ways, it made the weight that much heavier. Lola was counting on me to step up if she couldn't. And she knew that would be in the event of her death.

It was literally her final wish.

I had to succeed. And not just until someone else could carry the stone. I had to find a way to end this.

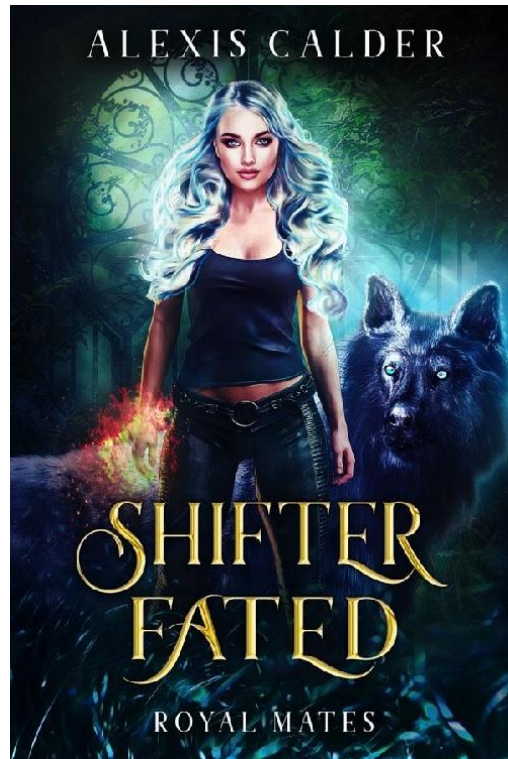
I knew there had to be a way to break this curse, to get rid of the stone for good. And I was going to make it happen.

Pulling the musty covers under my chin, I settled in for sleep.

THANKS FOR READING!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexis Calder writes sassy heroines and sexy heroes with a sprinkle of sarcasm. She lives in the Rockies and drinks far too much coffee and just the right amount of wine.

