



# SOME KIND OF MONSTER



ALBANY WALKER

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Albany Walker

Cover Art by Pixie Covers  
Edited by Elemental Editing and Proofreading  
Proofreading by Tabitha Finch

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MONSTERS MAKE ME HAPPY

Naughty girls need love too.

A beautiful monster, that's what I am. My packaging is just a little nicer than the creatures you hear about dwelling in your closet.

With three baddies for my mates, things are definitely getting interesting. I think I've even convinced them not to kill each other.

But I have a new purpose. Someone is hurting our kind, stealing Charmed magic in arcane rituals that leave my friends drained and dead, and I won't allow it.

It's time for them to find out why monsters fear me.

I am the bad guy.

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## CHAPTER 1

“*Y*ou’ve got to be fucking kidding me!” I whip my head to the left where I can see Gunnar and Calix purposely avoiding my gaze. Those two don’t work together unless it’s for me or against me. I narrow my eyes, contemplating my revenge. My entire parlor has been redone and all my furniture has been replaced. Gunnar owed me a new chair after breaking the arm of my last one, but come on. I’m not so great with change.

Grim’s presence tingles against my skin as he steps out of a portal from the other side. “Did you know about this?” I prop my hands on my hips. Grim is never one to avoid confrontation, even with me. His direct nature doesn’t allow it.

His tall frame slinks over to me without an ounce of reservation, and his eyes don’t stray from mine. I crane my neck back as he approaches to keep him in my sights. “Do you want me to kill them?” His voice is sex wrapped in sin. I shiver at the offer. He knows the way to my dark heart.

Calix makes a disgruntled sound. I don’t think Grim would actually kill him...well, maybe he would if I really wanted him to, but I know he would never do anything that would upset me. “You’re my favorite, you know that, right?” I peer up at his gray eyes from under my lashes. The rivers of lava that erupt at my statement have me biting my lip in anticipation. Grim is stoic to the point of indifference, but not when it comes to me. I get a thrill knowing he can’t hide all that pent-up power from me. My Angel of Death could make people weep with his beauty, but the monster underneath is just as beautiful.

“Hey!” Gunnar barks after my declaration to Grim, even though he

knows I'm teasing. I don't need to look at him to know that rage is simmering just beneath the surface, close to exposing his Berserker nature. Grim leans in close and ghosts his warm, full lips from the corner of my jaw over to my waiting mouth in an act of seduction you would assume was deliberate, but it's just the natural sexuality he exudes.

"You are my everything." I feel his breath against my lips, and I swoon. I'm not even a little bit embarrassed. He makes my knees weak. Finally, he kisses me. Grim doesn't hold back, he puts everything into the act of loving my lips.

A throat clears, but neither of us move to break apart. Grim's been gone for over twenty-four hours, the longest he's been absent in the past few weeks. I missed him, and that makes me a little uncomfortable.

"Where have you been?" Gunnar demands, his tone disgruntled. He doesn't care that Grim was gone, he just doesn't want Grim kissing me anymore.

I feel Grim's body tighten at Gunnar's question. My heart sinks, and I pull back from Grim but keep my eyes focused on him. "Is it happening again?" I can't tell if I sound angry or worried: probably both. I *knew* that witch would surface again—the one who taught Vanessa the ritual to steal Charmed magic without taking the backlash on her soul.

Grim turns his head slowly, his eyes already lasered on my other mate, and the mask of apathy slips back over Grim's features. "You try my patience."

I peer around Grim's cloak and see Calix, his face hardened. He's prepared for bad news, just as I am. His light hair is pulled back from his handsome face, exposing his square jaw and the darker stubble peppering his cheeks. I watch his hazel eyes and note the predator just beneath the surface is visible. I'd always wondered if shifters were real, and now I have one of my very own.

Gunnar crosses his arms over his barrel chest. "Feeling's mutual."

"What happened?" I draw Grim's attention back to me before they devolve into an argument...or should I say before Gunnar starts yelling and Grim ignores him.

"I was called to carry a Kelpie." Grim laces his fingers with mine.

"I'm guessing they didn't die of natural causes?" I ask hesitantly. Grim takes a deep breath and slowly shakes his head. "It's been weeks, right?" I settle my butt against the new couch in my favorite parlor. Suddenly, being



annoyed at Calix and Gunnar for getting rid of my furniture and replacing it without my knowledge doesn't seem worth it.

"We knew this would happen," Calix remarks, walking over and placing a comforting hand on my back.

"How do you know it was him?" I question Grim.

"It's just an assumption," Grim admits, and steps to the side, allowing Gunnar to move closer. I know they don't hate each other the way it seems sometimes—heck, they all seemed quite chummy after killing half of Vanessa's coven a few weeks ago. I bet if we could get into a little more mayhem, they would be bosom buddies once more.

"It's possible it could be another witch he's tutored." Grim's cloak melts away, and he's left in loose, black linen pants and a soft button-up shirt. His feet are bare, and the sight warms something in my chest. I know there are not many people he allows to see this side of him, and it makes me feel special that I'm included. There's something about the personification of death walking around barefoot on my floors that makes my withered heart flutter.

"Get anything from the Kelpie that will help us figure out who this guy is and where we can find him?" Calix inquires, continuing to rub soothing circles on my back.

"Not particularly. There isn't much left when the ritual is done." Grim doesn't show any outward sign that he's bothered by his announcement, but the tightening around his mouth and the hard edge of his jaw tells me all I need to know—Grim is pissed.

I let out a heavy sigh. "We can't just keep waiting for him to kill more Charmed. We need to go after his ass, find him." The powerlessness I feel colors my tone as my anger toward the unknown man rekindles. Our searches haven't turned up anything that's been helpful for finding Antonio or his fucking arcane magic.

I remember the feeling of helplessness I experienced when Aeson was trapped in his snare, and how desperate I was to save her. If it weren't for Grim, Aeson would be dead right now. As it is, she's changed. She's been touched by death, and not in the good way Grim touches me.

"There has to be something you missed," Gunnar snaps when Grim doesn't provide any more information about the male witch who had enough strength to capture my best friend—twice.

Grim, again, slowly turns his head to look at Gunnar. His face is

completely placid, but I can still feel the underlying threat of violence in the air. Usually, I like that kind of thing, but right now I'm more concerned with the death of my kind than I am with my hormones.

"Knock it off, Kitten," I scold Gunnar, who scowls at my demand, but he darts his eyes in my direction. I know he loves it when I call him Kitten, even if he would never admit it.

"I missed nothing," Grim states. "After crossing him, I went to the location where the Kelpie was found and tracked him back to another abandoned warehouse."

"You went alone?" Calix's hand falls away from my back as I abruptly stand. From the corner of my eye, I see Gunnar smirk, he knows I'm about to tear into Grim.

Grim's brow furrows, and he tilts his head to the side. "That's a problem?"

I poke my finger into his chest. "Yes, that's a problem," I snarl.

A small grin curls Grim's lips. "You're worried about me." I can't tell if he thinks it's cute that I worry, or if it amuses him.

I glare at him, feeling defensive. "Of course I worry! No one gets to kill you but me." It's an empty threat. I would never hurt him, or Gunnar or Calix for that matter. That makes Grim give me another tiny grin.

"Don't do that again," I warn. "You should have taken us with you." I cross my arms over my chest. A strange feeling of anxiety worms its way up my belly to lodge itself in the base of my throat.

Grim reaches out and brushes his knuckles over my cheek. "He poses no danger to me, Omnia, only to what I love."

"You can't be certain. He may have some sort of trap for you too." The image of Aeson held by a roughly drawn circle with runes etched inside fills my mind again. Hell, I was trapped in one too, even if it was for a short time. What if next time it's different and we can't escape it?

"You could have taken one of us." Calix motions to himself and Gunnar.

Grim gives a single shoulder shrug. "You were both here with Dami," he reasons, as if I needed both of them here to protect me.

I drag in a deep breath, hoping for patience. "Precisely why you could have taken us all with you. At the very least, you should have told me what you were doing. What if something had happened to you? We wouldn't have even known where to start looking." There's a slight edge of hysteria working its way into my tone.

Grim's brow furrows deeply as he reaches for me again, this time dragging me against his chest. I fight him at first, not liking just how much comfort I find in his embrace. "Okay," he agrees, his voice pitched low. He's holding me so close, I can feel his chin on the top of my head. I expect him to add more, but he doesn't. That one, simple word of acquiescence is all he offers, but I believe him nonetheless.

I'm certain the idea of needing to keep me informed about his wellbeing is just as foreign to him as it is to me. I went from barely speaking to anyone for days on end to having three men around all the time, questioning what I'm doing, what I'm going to do, and if I need anything. It's a little annoying, to be honest, so I appreciate him being agreeable.

Grim gives me a tight squeeze before releasing one arm and turning us so we're facing Calix and Gunnar who have moved a few feet away.

"Tell us what you've learned," Calix requests, focused on Grim.

"The ritual was performed in Savannah." Grim's fingers absently toy with the bottom of my hair.

"Georgia?" Gunnar looks off to the left, his eyes clouding. "There are a few covens out that way."

"Are you familiar with them?" Calix questions, pushing up the sleeves of his green Henley.

"No, I've been on the West Coast for years, but I can make some calls. Anything more to go on?" The hostility in Gunnar's voice has been replaced with interest.

"It was quick, like the troll who was found outside that club," Grim answers.

"Which means what?" I trade glances with all three guys.

"The ritual we stopped was meant to last for days—"

"You mean the ritual that was going to kill my best friend?" I interrupt Gunnar.

He nods and continues, "Draining her powers slowly would have ensured they got more out of it. A quick kill would have given them power, yes, but not of the same magnitude."

"So, do we think this is someone who escaped Vanessa's coven?" I sneer her name. Even dead, that bitch pisses me off.

"Could be." Grim untangles his fingers from my hair and trails them down my back. I soften against him.

"It might explain why you were alerted to this one and not any of the

others,” Calix surmises.

Grim gives a small nod in response. “Or they were just in a hurry.”

“It’s strange that he was able to kill for years—if we believe Vanessa—undetected, but he’s suddenly slipping up now.” I shift my shoulder to hide the shiver I get when Grim’s fingers find a small piece of exposed skin on my lower back.

“It could still be him. He might be desperate at this point,” Gunnar suggests.

“Or he could just be cocky,” Calix adds.

“Probably both,” Gunnar sneers, pushing his hair away from his face. “I need to make a few calls.” He leaves without another word, stomping out of the parlor.

“I have a few people I can contact too.” Calix takes a few steps in my direction and plants a soft kiss on my lips, uncaring Grim still has his arm wrapped around my back. He pulls away far too soon for my taste. “You can admit it. You like it, don’t you?”

I lick my lips. “Why wouldn’t I? You taste good.”

Calix lets out a deep chuckle, it’s sexy and inviting. “I was talking about the new furniture, but it’s good to know I taste good.”

If I were another woman, I might blush, but I’m not, so I reach for his shirt and drag him in for another kiss. This time, I’m the one to break away. “It’s not so bad, but you could have told me.” I release the fabric of his shirt and settle deeper into Grim’s side.

Calix bites his bottom lip and closes his eyes slowly. When he reopens them, he looks between Grim and me and lets out a small sigh. “I guess I should make those calls. See you soon?” His eyebrows shoot up as if there’s a question he wants answered.

Grim’s fingers find the patch of exposed skin on the small of my back again as he lowers his head to whisper, “Find us when you’re done,” near my ear.

I swallow hard. The words weren’t meant for me. No, they were meant for Calix, and I’ll be damned, but they sounded a little like an invitation.

## CHAPTER 2

The moment Calix is out of the room, Grim pushes me up against the wall, and I'm damn near panting with need. I tilt my head back so I can see his beautiful face. Reaching down, he grabs my hand and guides it to his dick. He's already hard, and the loose pants give me freedom to wrap my fingers around him.

Grim's breath hisses through his parted lips. "It's been too long since I've touched you." He plants one hand on the wall above my head before freeing my wrist, running his fingers across my collarbone and then gliding them down my chest until he presses his palm between my breasts. His eyes close as the tip of his finger taps out the rhythm of my pounding heart.

Grim drags this kind of intimacy from me at every turn. When I want to rush and just feel his skin against mine, he forces me to slow down and absorb the small moments. With my hand still wrapped around his length, I shift to stroke him. Grim's jaw tics, telling me he's grinding his teeth, but it still doesn't spur him into action.

Resigned to let him move at his own pace, I settle for touching him. Grim's eyes darken when I release him and reach up to slide the buttons of his shirt open. Normally, I would just rip it apart, since it's not like it would be hard for him to replace, but I take my time brushing my fingertips and knuckles against him as much as possible. His finger continues to keep the cadence of my pulse, but his eyes are locked on my face. I keep peeking up at him after every button slips free until the shirt splits, leaving his chest and torso completely exposed.

A small sound of appreciation escapes me. Every inch of Grim is perfection, and when I call him the Angel of Death, I'm not joking. He must

have been created by God. A very light dusting of dark hair begins just under his clavicles and flows over his pecs, tapering down his abdominals and eventually thinning into a line I would easily call a happy trail before it reaches his pubic hair.

His pants are loose enough that they expose just a hint of the thicker hair leading to his heavy cock. “Do you wear anything under your robe?” My voice is husky. I can’t help but think about how he usually chooses light clothing.

“I didn’t.” Grim leans in a little closer, and I’m rewarded with the sensation of his warm skin and even hotter breath caressing me. I swallow and let my eyelids flutter closed.

“Didn’t?” I question.

He leans in even closer. “You make me needy all the time.” Grim pushes his body into mine, and the wall at my back keeps me in place as he swivels his hips. I can feel his hard length against my belly. “One thought of your soft skin or the smell of your hair and I ache. Even the blue sky teases me, reminding me of your eyes and how they darken when you look at me, just like a storm on the horizon.”

I reach up, grab the back of Grim’s neck, and tug him down to my mouth for a scorching kiss. When I pull away, I’m breathing hard, and his eyes are alive with flames. “Take your clothes off, Omnia, I want to see every inch of your body before I sink inside you.”

Without hesitation, I reach for the hem of my shirt and tug it over my head, then my pants are gone in the next second, pooled around my feet.

Grim takes a step back and starts his perusal. His heated gaze slowly trails up from my toes, and he licks his bottom lip when he reaches the apex of my thighs, lingering there before his eyes flow further up my body. My chest is still rising and falling quickly as I drag in short pants of air.

Grim crooks his finger, beckoning me closer. Unabashed, I take one step, then another. I’m so close I can feel the heat of his skin teasing mine. While looking down at me, Grim ever so slowly makes a circle around me, examining every exposed inch of my flesh. He trails his fingers over the swell of my hip and palms my ass possessively as he returns to stand before me. I’m about ready to crawl out of my skin from my desire for him to touch more of me. His hand on my ass isn’t nearly enough.

I hook my finger in the waistband of Grim’s pants, running my knuckles along the sensitive skin near his hip. I can feel the dip of the muscle of his

Adonis belt near his groin. I've run my tongue over that spot many times. Sexy fucker.

"Enough looking." I entice him by sliding my hand right into his pants and cupping his balls. Grim throws his head back, exposing his neck to me. Taking advantage of the position, I use my other hand to push his pants down his legs and wrap my fingers around his dick the moment he's free.

Grim is the king of delayed gratification, but right now I need him too badly to let him play with me. Before he can stop me, I drop to my knees and take his tip into my mouth. When I look up, his head and eyes are lowered as he watches me. "Missed you, Loverboy."

He threads his fingers into my hair, his short nails dragging against my scalp until he takes a firm handful of my long locks. My back arches and my body sings. I'm so hot, the air moving around my body feels cold, especially between my legs.

"Stars, you honor me." Grim shifts a little and starts rocking his hips forward, pushing deeper into my mouth. I tighten my grip on his balls and work my fist up and down his length while using my tongue on his tip.

After only a few short seconds, Grim pulls back, sliding his cock from my lips, and I gaze up at him, wondering why he stopped.

"I need to touch you," he growls, answering my unasked question before drawing me up from my kneeling position. As I stand, he slants his mouth over mine, hungry and demanding. My eyes close again as I get lost in the feeling of him as he runs his hands over my sides and back. It's never enough, not with any of them. If I could crawl inside him, I would. I just have to settle for him sliding inside me instead.

The air around me stirs, the only sound our combined breathing, but I know we're no longer in the parlor. I open my eyes, and confusion about my unfamiliar surroundings tugs at me, but not enough to distract me from what's important. I'm with Grim, that's all I need to know.

Grim ghosts his fingertips down my arms and laces our fingers together, raising them above our heads. My breasts push against his chest as he gathers both of my wrists in one hand and glides the other down my body without breaking the kiss. I push up on my toes, hoping that wandering hand of his will venture farther down my body and between my legs.

Grim roughly nips at my bottom lip, and I suck in a sharp breath. In the next second, my back hits a soft surface, and Grim's weight crushes me in the best possible way. His hand is still locked on my wrists, pinning me to the

bed.

I open my eyes again and peer at the ceiling above me. “Where are we?” I shift under him, parting my legs. Grim makes a hissing sound when our lower bodies connect.

“The attic. Quit squirming, I want to take my time with you, and you’re making it hard.”

I look around again. “My attic?”

“Our attic.” Grim swivels his hips, and I feel the tip of his cock nudging against me. I curl my knees up higher on his sides, opening myself up to him. He lunges forward and bites the side of my neck, just shy of my shoulder. I go completely still under him. Grim is a biter, and I love it. There’s something inside me that turns completely pliant when he sinks his teeth into my flesh.

He holds me there for a long second before clamping down a tiny bit harder. I let out a small whimper, but it’s not from pain. Somehow, he has a direct line to my clit, and I feel like I’m already walking a razor’s edge, about to come.

Grim releases his bite and immediately starts softly kissing the slight indents his teeth left in my skin. I know it will leave a mark, one that will make me squeeze my thighs together every time I see or touch it.

I feel his thumb make a hard swipe on the inside of my right wrist before he releases one of my hands. “Reach down and guide me inside you, Omnia,” Grim orders, as his free hand palms my breast. I arch into his touch and slide my hand between our bodies, taking his dick in my grasp. As soon as he’s at my opening, he rolls his hips and slams into me, pinning my fingers between our bodies.

I start to pull my hand away, but Grim locks his hips against mine. “I want you to touch yourself while I’m inside you, feel how soft you are. Stars...” He groans, his jaw tight like he’s already struggling. Gods, I love seeing him like this, completely undone and unable to hide how much I’m affecting him.

I arch my neck up and kiss him. His lips part, and he tangles his tongue with mine in a slow dance. Unhurriedly, he pumps into me. Someday, I’m going to beg him to fuck me fast, but every time I think to rush him, he drags his thick cock against my inner walls, and I surrender to his love making.

“I said I’d never go a day without being inside you, yet I did.” Grim shifts from kissing my mouth and huffs into my ear. He stops kneading my breast



and skates his fingers over my hip and under my ass, jerking me even closer. He may fuck me long and slow, but the rough way he handles me makes me melt.

I toss my head from left to right, wanting to make him promise not to do it again, but I'm beyond words at this point. I curl my fingers around the hand pinning me to the bed instead, holding him to me the only way I can.

Grim keeps up his punishingly slow rhythm, sliding in and out of me with long strokes while I circle the tip of my finger around my clit. Finally, he releases my wrist and punches his fist into the mattress next to my shoulder. He lifts his torso off mine and grinds his hips harder against me.

The angle change has my toes curling, and I tighten my inner muscles. I'm not going to last. Not when he knows how to touch me to make my body sing. Just when I think I'm about to come, Grim stops moving. I groan and swivel my hips. "Grim." I try to make it sound like a warning, but it comes out more like a plea.

"Hmm?" he hums. "You need something, Omnia?" His voice is layered.

"I need you to keep moving," I say through gritted teeth.

"Like this?" The bastard rolls his hips. My mouth falls open with a sigh and I nod eagerly. "You like it, Damiana, when I'm deep inside you? Making you quiver?" I don't answer, he already knows I like it, he's such a fucking tease. Grim leans back so he's kneeling between my parted thighs, slipping from my body.

I sink two fingers into my pussy and use my thumb to circle my clit, slitting my eyes so I can watch him. Grim drags the side of his hand and wrist over his mouth then licks his top teeth. I pump my fingers a little faster and lift my hips so I can go deeper. It feels good, but not nearly as good as having his possessive eyes on me.

"If you're not up for the job, can you run down and grab Buzz?" I bite my lip. I'm teasing him, I would never use a vibrator to replace him, not even if Buzz is my favorite.

Grim snarls, his eyes burning bright with embers. With a quickness that surprises me, he shoves my arms away, effectively removing my hand from my pussy, and lifts me up. My heart thuds as a shot of adrenaline hits my system, making me hold my breath. I'm cradled in Grim's arms, and his embrace is tight. "I'm going to destroy Buzz, just as soon as I get done with you." Grim brutally nips my chin.

He tosses me to the bed, and I bounce, landing half on my stomach. I

can't hide the small grin that curves my lips. I love working him up. I push my hair out of my face and peer at him over my shoulder. Grim pushes me down against the mattress before I can get a good look at him, and he tugs my hips back so I'm ass up.

He runs his fingers gently over my back then down my ass until he's cupping my pussy. His caress is at odds with the tight grip he still has on my left hip. "Can that toy make you scream, Omnia? Because I can."

The air in my lungs flees as my chest hits the soft mattress beneath me. A started yelp comes next. Grim is deep inside me, so fucking deep my muscles spasm from the quick invasion.

His breathing is erratic, but so is mine. Holy hell. A loud groan of submission is next. This is a new position for us. Grim usually demands my entire focus, but now I can close my eyes and feel every inch of him inside me.

I feel his heat as he leans over my back, his mouth going to the shell of my ear. "Now, let me love you." His voice is deep and sexy as sin, but hard as stone.

"Okay," I whimper, and Grim restarts his tortuous, slow fucking again, and I love every second of it.

## CHAPTER 3

*M*y hands ache from gripping the sheets by the time I've had no less than three orgasms. Grim is curled around my back, petting my side and hip, and occasionally he dips his fingers between my legs and strokes my clit, causing my muscles to quiver again.

"When did you do this?" I look around the room with eyes that are no longer clouded with need.

"A little at a time."

"How did you even get this up here?" I run my hand over the ebony wood of the bed, admiring the intricate carvings that travel all the way up the posts and onto the canopy.

Grim kisses my shoulder softly, and I wiggle a little to get even closer to him. "I've blinked you and the Nemean, and you wonder how I moved a bed?" He blows his heated breath over my skin. I can hear the small smile on his lips.

I push my elbow back at him. "I didn't know you could carry furniture."

"It's just wood and a little metal, much simpler than another being."

Heavy footfalls on the stairs alert me that someone is coming. If it's Kitten, there will probably be stomping and a lot of shouting soon. I settle my head against the pillow.

Calix is breathing hard when he enters the doorway, his shoulders slumped forward and a dejected frown on his face. I'd forgotten Grim told him to come find us when he was done with his calls. I look over my shoulder to see Grim's reaction, but his expression is placid.

Calix bounces his eyes around the room, taking in the mostly empty space. "Of course you would have a creepy bed." He slides his hands into his

pockets, not even acknowledging that we're in the bed and naked, but his eyes keep darting back to me.

"It's not creepy," I retort, defending the beautiful piece of furniture. Calix tilts his chin down and raises an eyebrow. "It's not!"

"It looks like something you'd find in the dungeon of a convent. So, do we all get our own rooms?" Calix asks too casually.

Here they go, changing shit again. "I guess so, if you want your own room." I'm scowling, but I really shouldn't complain. The house is big enough for everyone to have their own space. If they each have their own room, does that mean we would all sleep separately?

Calix takes a few more steps into the attic, his eyes traveling over the wooden ceiling and exposed beams. I've only been up here a handful of times, but the space is nice. If I had to pick a room for Grim, this would be the one. It's somehow airy, even though the windows are tiny, and the ceilings are pitched at sharp angles. There are a few old boxes shoved over in one corner, and a thin coating of dust lingers on most of the surfaces, but it's still inviting.

Calix gives an indifferent shrug. "Might be nice to have something like this, a place where we could be alone. Not that I mind an audience." He gives me a lascivious grin. Having a private room for alone time might be nice, I'm sure Kitten would appreciate it.

Grim strokes his finger over my side, drawing Calix's gaze. "Did you learn anything from your call?" I focus to keep my voice level. I should get a reward for the effort. Grim touching me while Calix watches has my blood pumping again.

"Not really." Calix's eyes track the movement of Grim's hand, and his body goes unnaturally still. The image of him pouncing on us fills my mind. I wonder what Grim would do.

A bellow from downstairs has me blinking rapidly. Gunnar must be looking for us. Calix curses under his breath and pushes his light hair off of his forehead with jerky movements.

"Damiana?" Gunnar shouts again, this time from much closer.

"I'll be right there," I answer, sitting up a little reluctantly. I have to admit I'm a little disappointed. Gunnar isn't exactly a killjoy, but in this situation he's definitely a cockblocker. Not that I'm convinced anything would have happened between the three of us, but it *might* have.

"I'll head down, take your time." Calix lets his eyes roam over my body

again before he turns and heads out of the room. The bed shifts, and I glance over my shoulder to see Grim sitting up and stretching. I take the opportunity to admire the perfection of his body, and I let out a small sigh of appreciation. Grim turns and peers at me from under lazy eyelids. The gray of his irises is pierced with tiny smoldering rivers of fire as he watches my every move.

When our gazes lock, tingles erupt in my stomach. He gives me fucking butterflies. I always thought that was a joke, or an over exaggeration, but now I know the truth. Grim's eyes lower to my stomach where I hadn't even realized I placed my hand. "Are you well?" His brow furrows, and he turns to fully face me.

Licking my dry lips, I nod dismissively. It's hard to admit out loud just how much I like having them all here with me. I still get those moments of insecurity when I think they will just disappear and leave me alone with just my monsters again. "Yeah, fine." My voice is a little thick, but I stand up and turn away from him, hoping he doesn't notice. I look around for something to wear, since my clothes are still on the floor downstairs.

I feel Grim's presence as he approaches from behind. The brush of fabric against my skin reminds me that his room is the last place I might find a spare shirt. His arms wrap around me and settle on the exact spot my hand was just moments ago, telling me he isn't fooled by my airy answer. His fingers are light, caressing. I turn and look up at him. His eyes have settled to a clear gray, but his brow is slightly furrowed. I palm his cheek, feeling the very light scruff on his jaw tickle the inside of my hand. When his face softens, I give him a small kiss on his chin and ask, "Think you could conjure me up some clothes too?"

Before I can even blink, light silky fabric teases the skin of my shoulders and back. Looking down, I see a robe, much like the one Grim wears, only it has a deep V in the front exposing my décolletage all the way down between my breasts. I shift my leg to find it split up the middle equally as high, with only a scrap of fabric keeping it together at my waist. I trace my hands over the light-as-air material that swishes around me as if it's floating on some unseen breeze.

"No wonder you didn't wear anything under this." I marvel at the way it feels against my skin. Grim takes a step back, his eyes scanning me from head to toe. I feel the fabric shift slightly as his stare roams over me, like the material is responding to his gaze.

When the fabric caresses my nipples, I'm convinced I'm not imagining it.

My mouth drops open in awe. It feels as if Grim is touching me, even though I know he isn't.

“How is that possible?” I marvel.

Grim reaches out and pinches the fabric of the oversized sleeve between his fingers, testing it. “It’s part of me.” He gives a slight shrug, dropping his hand back to his side. “From my cloak.” In the next moment, he’s standing before me donned in his own reaper cloak. It ruffles near the bottom on the same unseen breeze. His hood is up, concealing his face, much like the first time he allowed me to see him.

I fist the fabric as it pools over my hand, knowing I don’t want it to disappear the way his does. “This is mine?” I mean for it to come out as a question, but it sounds more like a greedy demand.

“If you’ll have it,” Grim offers in that multilayered voice I’ve only heard from him a few times. He makes a striking picture, even more so when his scythe appears next to him. Tingles explode in my tummy again. As beautiful as Grim is, seeing him like this—the monster so many fear—and knowing he’s all mine sends a shiver of delight through me.

I swallow and nod, incapable of speech, because all I can think is the word ‘mine,’ and I’m not just talking about the robe.

Grim reaches out, the cloak falling away from his hand, and cups my cheek. I turn into his touch. It still surprises me how quickly I grew comfortable with all the casual touches, so much so that I crave them now.

The material around me flutters in a light caress, and I grin. I wonder if I will always be able to feel him, even if he’s not with me.

The muffled noises of the guys downstairs filter up to me. As much as I’m enjoying Grim’s company, I already miss the others, too. “Want to go see what Gunnar dug up?”

Grim plants a soft kiss on my lips and gives me a small nod, motioning for me to go. The reaper cloak dissolves, and he’s standing in front of me in the same loose pants and soft shirt from earlier. I run a hand over my side, confirming my robe is still in place, before heading downstairs to find the others.

Gunnar’s expression is set in his usual scowl when I enter the kitchen, and the counter is littered with various ingredients for some meal. His jerky movements and the way he keeps slamming shit around makes it hard to ignore the tangible anger permeating the room.

I scoot onto a stool and plant my elbows on the island, dropping my

cheeks into my palms. Calix steps out of the pantry, giving me an exaggerated eyeroll when he spies me. It's clear he knows Gunnar is in a mood too.

"How'd the calls go?" I ask them both, but I direct my gaze at Gunnar.

"Like shit," Gunnar barks, almost before I can even finish voicing the question. I widen my eyes, a little surprised at his tone. I watch his back as he lowers his head and takes a few deep breaths. "I need to head to Savannah," he announces in a more subdued voice. He turns to face me, and the frown he wears is so heavy it makes the scar through his lips pucker.

"Savannah." I tap my fingers on the counter, looking up at the ceiling as I contemplate what I should pack.

Calix saunters over and takes the stool next to me. His knee brushes against my leg as he sits. I pull my thoughts from my closet and what I should pack and give him a smile. "I've never been to Savannah, have you guys?" I make sure to include Gunnar too.

Calix shrugs. "A few times." Gunnar just grunts and crosses his arms over his chest.

"It's supposed to be one of the most haunted cities in America, right?" I bite my bottom lip and widen my eyes. "How long should I pack for, a week?" I add without letting either of them answer my first question.

Gunnar's stance softens, and he peers at me with the most puppy dog expression a hulking man like him could ever manage. "You'll come with me?"

"Of course I'm coming with you. Aren't we all?" I scoff, and look over at Calix, wondering if I made a mistake in my assumption.

"I go where you go," Calix tells me, and I grin at his response.

"I've never been on a road trip."

"Road trip?" Gunnar snarls.

I narrow my eyes and turn up my chin a little. "Yes, a road trip." Grim saunters into the room in the middle of our conversation. He moves like he's made of smoke and sin.

"We could just go... Death can get you two there," Gunnar implores.

"But I've never been on a road trip." I sound disappointed, even to my own ears.

Grim reaches for me, sliding his hand over my back and kneading the nape of my neck. His hard eyes land on Gunnar, and he drops a kiss to the side of my head. "Whatever you want, Omnia," he soothes.

Gunnar scowls but agrees. “I’ll get us a car.”

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## CHAPTER 4

Calix pushes the last of my new suitcases into the trunk. I probably won't need all four, but you never know. Gunnar brought them home when he fetched the black SUV a few hours ago.

"We should probably get going," Gunnar says, looking down at a watch on his wrist. I glance around, noting the moon is high in the sky. If Aeson was coming tonight, she would probably already be here. I just hate leaving without talking to her first. Knowing what I'm thinking, Gunnar bumps my shoulder with his arm. We can leave a message in the house for her or call the clan line," he suggests.

"I'll write her a quick note and leave your numbers too," I agree, peering up at him, noticing his scars are barely visible in the moonlight.

Gunnar nods toward the back of the SUV. "We should be done by the time you get back."

I jog back to the house just as Grim is opening the door to come out, and he holds it open for me. "I'll be right back," I call over my shoulder, already heading to the stairs so I can leave the note in my room. It only takes a moment to jot down all the guys' numbers, remind her she already has mine, and tell her to call me. Considering she's only a few inches tall, it's not hard to understand why she doesn't carry a phone.

I take one last look around my room before hopping down the stairs to meet the guys outside.

"Ready?" Calix asks as soon as I'm out the door.

I'm so eager I damn near bounce my ass to the SUV. Gunnar slides into the driver's seat, leaving the rest of us to decide where to sit. "Shotgun!" I shout, when both guys just look at me.

“I don’t require a weapon,” Grim states.

Calix snorts and rolls his eyes. “Shotgun means she’s calling the front passenger seat,” he clarifies.

“Why would weapon choice determine where you sit?” Grim takes a few steps and opens the front door, motioning for me to enter.

“It’s just something people say, because the person in the passenger seat would carry the... never mind,” Calix mumbles, giving up trying to explain the outdated idiom to Grim.

The rear doors slam as the guys get in. Grim is behind me, and I feel his knees press into the seat. I instantly feel bad for making him sit back there, since he’s so much taller than me. When I turn around, I see both Grim and Calix maneuvering to get comfortable. “Maybe we should just have Grim carry us there?”

“Second thoughts?” Gunnar sounds hesitantly eager.

I bite my bottom lip, considering. Calix leans forward, wrapping his fingers around Gunnar’s seat. “No, we’re driving,” he insists with a slight edge to his voice. I glance back at Grim. He’s settling into the seat, his knees spread wide, but he doesn’t look too uncomfortable. “It’s just a couple of days,” Calix adds more persuasively.

“You sure?” I bounce my gaze between the two men behind me.

Calix leans back and gives me an easy grin. “Positive, there’s plenty of room back here.” He rubs the space between himself and Grim in invitation, understanding the reason for my change of heart. “In case you get tired of the grump,” Calix teases in an exaggerated whisper.

Gunnar growls, and the engine of the SUV roars to life as I let out a carefree giggle. Gunnar hits the gas and kicks up a flurry of pebbles from the driveway as he makes a quick turn to get us out to the main road.

The house is all shut up and dark as we pass by, and a quick stab of longing hits me. I’ve rarely been away from my home. Although I’ve always yearned for adventure, I never really thought about not coming home at the end of the day and seeing Dare in the pantry or having Bloody Mary for a cup of tea. I trace my fingers over the window, watching my refuge disappear into the darkness. I really hope none of my baddies think I’m abandoning them.

I take control of the radio, plugging my phone into the system a few moments after we get onto the highway. The guys have all been fairly quiet so far. “Any requests?” I peer around the cab, including all three of them in my inquiry. Gunnar shrugs one shoulder, keeping his eyes on the road.

“I can’t believe I don’t know what kind of music you like,” Calix mutters to himself while shaking his head.

“I like everything... well, almost everything. Depends on my mood.”

“What are you in the mood for, Dami?” Calix makes it sound filthy and I love it.

With a grin, I answer, “You know me, I like a little of everything. Can’t seem to make myself choose.”

Calix chuckles and lowers his chin a bit. It changes the planes of his face and makes his hazel eyes seem much more predatory. I contemplate climbing over the center console and onto his lap, but I think better of it. We just got on the road, and knowing Gunnar, he’ll have a dad crisis and threaten to turn the car around.

I peer at him from the corner of my eye and giggle at the thought. I wonder if I would get a spanking. He turns his head and gives me an accusatory glare, almost like he knows what I’m thinking. I bite my lip and return to fiddling with the radio. Being in the car with these three for hours is going to wreak havoc on my hormones.

Scrolling through my music, one of my favorite songs catches my eye. As soon as I hit play, the quick tempo of drums fills the air and my body is already swaying to the beat. Once the guitar starts, I close my eyes and let the music consume me. I’ve often wondered if any of the members of this band are baddies, since so many of their songs reference monsters.

The song ends fairly abruptly, leaving the car in silence. The sound of a snicker starts slowly, but within three seconds, more snorts of reserved laughter fill the interior of the SUV, and it’s not just coming from one of them.

“That was adorable,” Calix comments, then he really starts laughing. Gunnar gives up trying to hold in his sniggering and chuckles along with Calix.

“What’s so funny? That’s one of my favorite songs,” I snap defensively. Gunnar peeks at me from the corner of his eye and smooths out his face, controlling his features.

“I just...” Calix can’t finish before he erupts into another round of laughter, his head thrown back, and he has his hand over his abdomen. I spin so I can glare at him.

“What?” I demand again.

Calix wipes the corner of his eye and finally takes a look at my face. He

sobers, but his grin isn't fully squelched. "Don't be mad. I said you're adorable." He gives me those fucking puppy dog eyes he's perfected. I narrow my gaze on him. He looks around like one of the other guys might help him. When he comes up empty, he says, "It's just, you're so beautiful, everything about you is perfect, but your singing..." He twists his mouth just a little, not saying anything else.

"What about my singing?" Gunnar clears his throat loudly, but no one else makes a sound. "Well?" I prompt.

Calix's eyes widen the slightest bit, and I watch his Adam's apple bob when he swallows. He takes another breath then wets his bottom lip. "Uh, it's nothing." He's trying to dismiss me, but I'm not letting this go.

"You were cracking up over nothing?" My tone is disbelieving.

"I could just tell you loved the song so much," Calix replies, backpedaling, but he already mentioned my singing.

"I believe he was talking about how off key you were," Grim interjects, as placid as ever. He was the only one who didn't laugh.

A frown pulls at my lips, Calix and Gunnar were laughing *at* me. An ugly feeling takes root in my stomach, and I flip around in my seat and face forward. I love singing. I've never thought about whether or not I was good or bad at it. No one has ever been around long enough to hear me sing.

"Dami..." Calix's voice is pleading, and he's no longer fighting off his laughter.

I jerk my shoulder up in what I'm hoping is a shrug. "It's fine." I force myself to smile, even though it's one of the last things I want to do, but it's more important not to let them know something so trivial could hurt my feelings so much. Leaning forward, I hit the button for shuffle, no longer interested in the radio. Another song comes on, this one is a little more subdued, and no one sings along.

Calix tries to engage me in conversation several times before just giving up when I keep my answers to single syllables. I'm not ignoring him, but I don't want to chat either. The long journey ahead suddenly doesn't seem to hold nearly as much fun as I'd hoped.

My butt hurts after the third hour, and I'm bored. City after city passes by without any differences between them other than the fast food restaurants they offer.

"We should just blink," I state, interrupting Calix and Grim's conversation.

“What? Why?” Gunnar moves his right hand from the steering wheel and places it on my thigh, giving me a gentle squeeze.

“There’s no point in wasting this much time driving when we can get there like this.” I snap my fingers. Calix stays quiet this time, not insisting on driving because I wanted to. “We could find long-term parking near an airport and come back for the car on the way home,” I suggest, proving I’ve been thinking about this for a while.

I hear Calix let out a heavy sigh and wonder if I overreacted to him laughing at me. That nasty feeling settles in my stomach again when I think about it. Nope, still don’t like being laughed at.

“If we get there faster, we will have a better chance of figuring out who killed the Kelpie. We can always drive back,” I propose, and taste the lie on my tongue. I won’t want to drive then either. I have no clue why I thought this would be so fun.

“You up for it, Loverboy?” I ask Grim, trying to sound more cheerful.

“Whatever you want, Omnia. Always.”

I catch Calix scowling at Grim from the corner of my eye. “Let’s see if we can find someplace to park,” I say, making it official. I’m over this road trip. Am I being a little bit of a brat? Probably, but at least I own that shit. “Looks like Boise would be the closest, but we would have to backtrack a little,” I tell Gunnar after looking over my map.

“If you’re sure.” He eyes me, then adds, “I’m not really worried about where we park the car. I can make arrangements to have it taken care of.”

I readjust myself in my seat and nod. “Yeah, I’m sure. My ass hurts.” Calix chuckles, but quickly cuts himself off. I feel a small stab of guilt that he feels like he can’t laugh, so I make an effort to look over my shoulder and give him a grin. He examines my face, and his lips thin at whatever he sees.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, taking his eyes off mine to look out the window at his side. He’s pouting too. Aren’t we a pair?

“We’ll stop when we hit the next city.” Gunnar lets out a small sigh, which sounds a lot like relief. Insisting we drive was really rather selfish anyway. Who cares that I’ve never been on a road trip? This isn’t some fucking vacation. We’re going so we can stop a witch from killing the Charmed.

“Do you know the Marshall House?” Grim leans between the two front seats, speaking to Gunnar, and I feel his long fingers brush against my arm before he scoots up even more and wraps his forearm over my chest. “Meet

us there.” In the next second, I’m in Grim’s arms and we’re standing on a dark empty street.

“In a hurry to get out of the car? You’ll have to go get Calix,” I remind him.

“He can find his way,” Grim offers, looking around as he laces his fingers through mine and tugs me along with him.

“He can’t travel like you.”

Grim halts. “He has means, Damiana. He will just have to shift.”

“Oh, he did mention he could travel faster when he shifted.” I look down at the sidewalk. It feels like Grim is punishing Calix because he upset me, and I don’t know how I feel about it. Well, I guess I do. I’m just conflicted about my feelings.

“It won’t take them long to find a place for the vehicle before they follow us,” Grim tells me, as he resumes walking up the street. He takes us around a corner to a mostly deserted road, but there are several buildings all lit up, showcasing a wide street lined with trees and flowerpots.

“Wait, are we in the right place?” I look around, noticing the hotel Grim is leading us toward. The front façade looks like something I would expect to see in New Orleans. Rows of long windows are bracketed by green plantation shutters, and scrolled wrought iron balconies overlook the street.

“This is the place,” Grim confirms.

The building is illuminated so brightly, I want to shield my eyes, but I squint instead. The interior lighting is a little more subdued, and I suppose humans think the light chases away the things that live in the dark.

The woman behind the wooden desk has a stiff smile and a furrowed brow. “Welcome to Marshall House, how may I help you?” Her eyes start to scan Grim, but it’s like she realizes what she’s doing, and she jerks her gaze back up to his face. Her smile becomes even more brittle.

“We’re waiting for our companions,” Grim informs her, while turning away from the woman.

“I can check you in while you wait.” She taps a few buttons on a keyboard.

Grim ignores her, so I say, “We need a suite, something with at least two beds.”

The woman winces slightly. “Unfortunately, we only have a handful of suites and none of them are available. I have a superior queen vacant, or we have a few kings left, but none with a balcony.”

I turn to face Grim. “Can you imagine all of us sleeping on a queen-sized bed?” I snort at the thought. “Kitten would be downright furious.”

“We’ll take the king,” I tell her, then add, “Looks like I’ll be sleeping on top of someone.” I chuckle a bit. It’s not like it’s a hardship.

“Uhm...” The woman stammers, and when I look back in her direction, her cheeks are flushed red. “How many will be in the room? We have guidelines for occupancy.”

“Just four,” I reply. “Three men are enough, even for me.”

“Four? Oh, I’m sorry, there is a two-guest maximum for the kings. I can get you two rooms.” Her voice goes a little higher.

“We’ll take the one king,” Grim tells her, his voice soft but firm.

The woman nods her head quickly. “Of course, sir. I’ll just need identification and a credit card to put on file.” She doesn’t meet our eyes anymore.

Grim looks down at me. “I will need to procure documents.”

Letting out an exaggerated sigh, I pull my phone from my back pocket and slide open the spot that holds my essentials. “Don’t worry about it. I like being your sugar momma, Loverboy.” I let my eyes rake over Grim. “We can work off your debt,” I purr, sounding purposely suggestive.

Not surprisingly, Grim’s face remains placid, but his eyes warm enough to let me know he’s not completely unaffected by my flirting. The clacking of the keyboard grows louder though, and the woman lowers her head as if she’s trying to hide. This is kind of fun. I wonder what she will think when Calix and Gunnar show up.

With key in hand, we head over to a small sitting area off to the side of the lobby. I like that the place seems original, or it could just be a good reproduction, but the wide staircase and wooden accents feel genuine.

“How much longer do you think it will take? Should we just go up to the room?” I glance at my phone, noting that I don’t have any messages or missed calls from the guys or Aeson.

“It won’t be long. The Berserker was eager to be rid of the vehicle.” Grim’s fingers twitch at his side. It draws my attention, because he’s usually so very still and in control of his movements.

“You good?” Taking a step closer, I invade his space.

Grim’s fingers stop moving instantly and he dips his chin infinitesimally. “This building has seen more death than most.”

I look around at the shiny checkered floor and all the gleaming surfaces.

There isn't a Magical stain left on the building, so I can't feel the deaths in the same way I can when a ritual is performed to kill the Charmed. I would never guess that this place has a deadly history. "Did you want to go somewhere else?" I rest my palm on Grim's chest. "I can call Gunnar and tell him to meet us at another hotel."

Grim places his hand over my fingers, trapping them against his chest. "No need. The divide here is just thinner. I can feel the spirits that linger."

"Ghost?" I raise my brows. "This place really is haunted?" Squinting my eyes, I look around again, this time hoping to see a specter like Redmon or Bloody Mary.

"These are shades. They gather in places where the boundaries are delicate, and the living draw them in, much in the same way flames draw moths."

"Are they stuck on the other side?" The sharp sting of pity burns in the back of my throat. All I can imagine is a creature like Theius, constantly searching for something and never obtaining it, as though it's just out of reach.

Grim places his free hand on my chin, tipping it up so I can meet his gray eyes. "They're merely shadows of the creatures they once were, Omnia. The in-between isn't a place where anything can survive for long. It's meant to be a stop, not a destination."

"Then why are they there?" I stare at the wall as if I might see the creatures of whom he's speaking.

"Most are too afraid to cross. Some are convinced they can find a way back. No one can force them to move on, not even me." Grim releases my chin, but I tuck myself even closer to him.

"What happens to their souls?" My voice is just above a whisper.

Grim rests his chin on the top of my head. I feel a small sigh leave his chest before he answers. "They dissolve slowly over time, until nothing remains but the shades."

I shiver. "Why would they choose that?" I breathe.

"They are trapped by the fear of where they would go if they crossed. We're not talking about people who lived good lives, Damiana. Most of those shades are dark witches or humans who behaved more like monsters than any of the creatures you call your friends."

"So they choose this instead of Hell?" I lean back so I can see his face.

"They choose this over the *chance* of going to Hell," he corrects with all



too knowing eyes.

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## CHAPTER 5

The front door snaps open, sending a loud crash through the lobby. Gunnar stalks in with a scowl on his face, not even acknowledging the fact that he could have broken the door off the hinges.

He ignores the startled gasp from the front desk clerk and makes his way over to Grim and me. I'm still a little unnerved by the shade conversation with Grim, but I plaster a welcoming smile on my face to greet him. "Hey." I pull free of Grim's embrace as Gunnar steps up to us.

Gunnar's eyes scan over me. Satisfied by what he finds, he takes a look around the lobby. His lips dip into a sneer. "Tell me this is only temporary."

"It's suitable for the day," Grim answers. "What about the Nemean?"

"He shifted the moment we parked the car." Gunnar shrugs indifferently.

I cover a yawn with the back of my hand. Sunrise is coming soon, and I'm pretty tired considering all I did was sit in a car for a few hours.

"Let's head up to the room. The Nemean will be along shortly." Grim places his palm on my lower back and urges me toward the elevator.

"Will it take him much longer?" I look between the two of them.

"A few hours at most," Grim tells me.

"What floor?" Gunnar hits the up arrow on the elevator.

I pull the keycard from my back pocket and flip it over. "Fourth, room four-eleven. A few hours... so he can't" —I wave my free hand around and raise my brow— "just pop up like you two once he's shifted?"

Gunnar crosses his arms over his chest and widens his stance. "No, he can travel much faster than a car, but it will still take him time to get here." The burnished gold door slides back, revealing a smallish elevator car. I get a

nudge to move forward and the guys both follow me inside. Gunnar hits the button for the top floor, and the door lingers open for just a moment before gliding closed silently. “I’ll see about getting us a better place to stay this morning,” he says, not in the least worried about Calix and how long it will take him to reach us.

“I would prefer something more private.” Grim seems completely disinterested, almost apathetic, but for him to have spoken up, it must mean something to him. Gunnar jerks his head once, agreeing with Grim’s words.

The elevator dips before coming to a halt, and then the door opens to a brightly lit hall painted a cheery yellow with white accents. “This way.” Gunnar points to the left. Our room is only a few steps away from the elevator. I shimmy myself between them and tap the keycard on the lock. Once it beeps and the light glows green, Gunnar reaches for the handle and pushes it open with a hard shove. It bangs against the wall.

“Geez!” I glare at him. He looks a little sheepish for a moment, and then he lifts his hand in an invitation for me to enter ahead of him. I step into the darkness and my nose wrinkles. It stinks of cleaning supplies, creating an artificial clean smell, yet under that it reeks of staleness, almost like they’re using chemicals to cover up the scent of dampness and musk. Without any light, I can already feel how stuffy the room is. “Yeah, we definitely need someplace else to stay.” Disappointment seeps into my tone.

Someone hits the lights and a lamp near the one bed glares to life. I look around the tiny room, noting the two little chairs—I really hope Gunnar doesn’t try to sit in one of those, it will break for sure—and the tiny table between them. “One bed?” Gunnar steps up behind me. “Big spoon,” he announces in the next breath.

Grim steps around me and lumbers over to the long window, pulling the curtains back for only a moment before releasing the fabric with a flick. The closest thing to disgust I’ve ever seen is present on his face when he turns to me.

I let out a small giggle at the absurdity of his reaction. Death is appalled by a fairly mediocre hotel room. Hell, this place is nice compared to some I’ve seen. But I doubt you can rent this one by the hour either like a few I’ve been to. Grim straightens and smooths his features.

I wiggle my finger back and forth under my nose, blocking my nostrils. “It stinks.”

“It’s the humidity. Everything is always damp,” Gunnar informs me, still

standing near the doorway. “You’ll get used to it.”

“I do not want to get *used* to it,” I sneer. “At least it smells clean. I think they used an entire bottle of bleach in here.”

Gunnar drops himself on the edge of the bed and the frame creaks. Those chairs won’t stand a chance. Might be funny if he ended up on his butt. “What are you smiling at?” He scowls.

I wave my hand. “Nothing, Kitten.” The glower drops immediately at my nickname for him.

“I left the bags in the car. Think you could grab them?” Gunnar tilts his chin toward Grim.

“I don’t know where the car is.”

Gunnar smiles, but it looks more like a baring of teeth. “Well, if you hadn’t disappeared so quickly...” He leaves ‘you would’ unsaid.

Grim rolls his shoulders a bit. “How far is it from where we left you?”

“About two miles. There’s a truck stop service station. I parked it on the side, out of the way of the main lot.”

“I’ll find it,” Grim states.

A bang on the door startles me and I spin around.

“That was fast,” Gunnar mumbles under his breath, as he hops up and walks the few steps to the door, opening it without even verifying who it is.

Calix has both hands braced against the doorframe. His bare chest is heaving as he gulps in lungful of air as if he’s been running. I move in his direction. “Are you okay?” He steps into the room, his nose wrinkling as he quickly glares around the space. Calix tosses the crumpled fabric in his hand on the bed. It takes a moment for me to realize it’s his shirt.

“F-Fine,” he finally pants, making direct eye contact with me after he assesses the room, seeming to find it as lacking as the rest of us.

Gunnar snorts and pushes the door shut too hard, so it slams. “Kitten, we need to use our manners,” I warn him, so we don’t disturb the entire fourth floor. The man-child gives me a slight eyeroll, and I snicker a bit. I do love his little tantrums.

“Took you long enough,” Gunnar goads Calix, even though he’s only been here a handful of minutes himself, and he told me it would probably take Calix hours to arrive.

Calix turns slowly to face the other man. There’s something exceptionally graceful about the way Calix moves. It’s even more pronounced now. I’m not sure if it’s because he just came out of a shift or not. He tilts his head slightly

and lowers his chin. “I can’t just snap my fingers and fucking appear.” Calix’s voice isn’t much more than a growl.

He’s usually laid back, making a joke out of how easy it is to rile up Gunnar, but he seems pretty on edge himself right now.

“Grim, did you say you were going to get the stuff from the car?” I interject to de-escalate the situation like a fucking adult. That’s all we need, them trashing a hotel room like a bunch of teenagers. I don’t know if I should feel proud of myself or check to see if someone delivered my AARP card for senior citizen discounts in the past few weeks.

I cut my eyes to Gunnar, as if he’s the one to blame for my newfound maturity. The look on my face must say a lot, because he jerks his head back and looks around a little confused as to why he’s on the receiving end of my ire. Wisely, he doesn’t poke at Calix again, and it seems to work. Calix, still breathing hard, returns his gaze to mine.

I school my features and wait for Grim’s response. “I will shortly, now that the Nemean has arrived,” he answers, then lifts one elegant finger into the air and makes a small circle. “This isn’t going to work.”

“What?” My mind immediately starts constructing scenarios of him telling me he’s leaving for good.

“This hovel.” Grim pulls his shoulders back as if he’s waiting for someone to argue. I don’t acknowledge the relief I feel when I realize my thoughts were misplaced. I don’t want my first thought to be that they’re going to leave me when shit like this happens, but I don’t think pretending it didn’t happen is the right thing to do to make it stop.

“I’ll get us an Airbnb,” Gunnar says, returning to the end of the bed where he was sitting before Calix arrived.

“Something with more privacy. You should have seen the receptionist’s face when I walked in. She had her hand on the phone, ready to call the cops on me, I’m sure.” Calix heads straight to the bathroom, not waiting for anyone’s reply before closing himself inside.

“Walking around half naked in the middle of the night probably didn’t help your case.” Gunnar leans back and folds his arm behind his head, relaxing.

“She’s lucky I was only half naked,” Calix retorts loudly through the door.

“So are you,” I mumble under my breath. All three of them make me irrationally territorial. I thought after a little time passed, it would get better,

but I'm still waiting.

"Don't worry, Dami. I like my parts right where they are, and fortunately for me, I know you do too." Calix struts out of the bathroom. His hair is damp around his face as if he may have splashed some water on himself. There are a few drops of water sprinkled on his chest too. I get distracted for a moment.

"I never threatened to cut your parts off." I try for an innocent sulk, but I know I fail miserably. "I just told her what would happen if she bumped into you again." He's referencing a night a few weeks ago. We went to check out Vanessa's old club. There's a new witch running it now, and we needed to make sure she wasn't up to the bitchy dead witch's antics.

Calix tosses his head back and laughs. I rake my eyes over him. Damn, he looks delectable. His easy grin has returned, and he looks at me with a twinkle in his eye. "You told her if she needed a dick so badly, you'd 'saw one off and shove it in her head.' I'm just relieved to know you weren't talking about mine."

"Of course I wasn't talking about yours," I scoff quietly. Hearing him say it out loud, I have to admit it does seem rather harsh, but she did brush up against him three times. I think I showed restraint. I mean, I didn't do it, did I?

Grim walks over and places a soft sweet kiss on my temple. "The sun is almost up. Get some rest. I will return soon." I lean against him and gather a bit of his shirt as I give him a tight half hug.

"No staying gone forever without checking in," I warn, taking in a deep breath of his unique scent. He still makes my mouth water, but I haven't been *eating* very much. I feel like something inside me shifted when I consumed those souls the night we killed Vanessa. I won't allow the fact that she offed herself before we could do it sully the memory of her death.

"Never forever." He cradles my cheeks and slides his lips over mine in a delicate dance of destruction. I lean up on my toes to steal a few moments more as he begins to pull away.

Before I open my eyes, I hear the bathroom door shut loudly. It's not slammed though, so I'll take that as a win. I don't need to look to know it was Gunnar. He's still not okay with open affection, unless it's him showing the affection, that is. Then he doesn't mind at all.

## CHAPTER 6

I'm used to waking up hot—horny too, considering I'm between at least two very sexy men—but this is damn near ridiculous. The room is so hot, I'm literally damp with sweat. I went to bed in just my t-shirt and panties since Grim hadn't returned with my things when I climbed onto the lumpy, overused bed.

I push my arms against Gunnar's chest, vying for enough space to free myself from him and Calix. He doesn't even budge, the big bastard. Instead he lets out a rattling snore. "I'm cooking. This is how I'm going to die. Stuck between you two like some fucking hog on a spit."

"Shush." Calix strokes his fingers mostly over my hair, but he misses and ends up dragging his sleep heavy hand half down my face, pulling down my lips.

"I can't shush, I can barely breathe," I growl out dramatically.

I feel Calix pop his head off the pillow. "What's wrong?" Instead of releasing me, he gathers me even closer against his body.

"Let me up. It's too hot." I groan and start to wiggle. I seriously need out of this bed. His weight slides off me and I bolt upright. "Stars, is the air even on?" I utter Grim's curse, looking around the room to see if the bed has somehow been teleported to a dimension of Hell.

"It's the South." I look over my shoulder and watch Calix wiggle a bit, getting comfortable again. He's only wearing his white jockey undies. It's a fucking sin he can make them look so good. The bulge he sports would be hard pressed to look anything but delectable in any form of underclothes.

Shaking my head, I scoot off the end of the bed. The slight whirl of air circling my skin causes gooseflesh on my arms. I make my way to the

bathroom, tugging my damp shirt off as I go, and toss it on the worn carpet.

The hotel room curtains are heavy, leaving the room fairly dark, but I'm still able to see myself in the small oval mirror over the pedestal sink. My hair is a matted mess and slightly damp at the back of my neck and around my temples. "Damn." I flip the tap on and cup the cool water in my palms to splash on my cheeks. After the third time, I decide I need more than a couple handfuls. Abandoning the sink altogether, I head to the shower instead.

The cold water makes me shiver at first, but it's such a relief that I let the water soak my hair and back before warming it up a little bit and continuing my shower.

I use the entire tiny bottle of conditioner on my hair, making sure to coat the ends the most. It's still going to be a bear to brush, but it's better than nothing. The room darkens slightly, so I peer over my shoulder to see Gunnar leaning against the doorframe. I open my mouth to ask him if he would like to join me, but he lifts his finger to his mouth, silently telling me to be quiet.

I arch an eyebrow in challenge, but before I can respond, he steals my words by sliding his big hand to the front of his boxers and gripping his dick. Forgetting all about my objection, I watch him, transfixed on the movement of his arm as he watches me while giving himself a few lazy strokes.

Gunnar pushes away from the doorframe and hooks his thumbs into the waist of his shorts, pushing them down his thighs. He's already hard, and his dick pops up a tiny bit when freed. Not taking his eyes off me, he taps the door closed a little, making sure to leave it open enough so the small bathroom won't be left in complete darkness.

I slide the shower door open and stand back, allowing him entrance. Gunnar lets out a small gasp when the water hits him. It's not nearly as cold as it once was, but it's nowhere near hot either. I open my mouth again, but he steals my voice by slamming his lips against mine in a punishing kiss. I rip my face away from him and glare, but he ignores me and crowds even closer until my back is against the white tile of the small cubical shower.

No longer even registering the temperature of the water, Gunnar strokes his fingers up my body. His touch is rough, as even the skin on the palms of his hands is scarred and callused, reminding me there isn't much that's gentle about the beast in front of me—other than his heart that is, and only when it comes to me.

He skates his wandering touch farther up until he places his hand right over my mouth and leans against me so hard my breaths turn to shallow



pants. Lowering his head, he whispers, “I need my cream,” in my ear. If my lips could move, I would be smiling at his kitten reference, but not even that is possible at the moment.

Gunnar’s free hand hooks behind my knee and jerks my thigh up high on his hip. Without any warning, he nudges his way into me. Being turned on isn’t an issue—my body craves his—but his invasion still burns a little in the best possible way. My eyes slide closed as every bit of tension that was in my body falls away when he’s finally fully inside me.

Assuming my submission, Gunnar starts to loosen the grip on my jaw. I open my eyes and squint at him in annoyance. I don’t want him soft and gentle. I want him to lose himself in me, to use me the same way I plan on using every inch of him.

Gunnar licks his lips, and as he exhales, his shoulders grow while he curls around me even tighter. I feel the slight prick of his fingernails against my cheek. He’s on edge, the monster inside him is fighting to be present, and that’s exactly what I want.

Size-wise, he dwarfs me, but we match perfectly in intensity. My hands feel small on his wide back as I skim them over him, but I make the most of it by clawing my fingers into his flesh. These scars will be mine, mine to lick and nurse until every inch of him is sated, even the Berserker.

When Gunnar opens his mouth to let out a huff of air, I see his teeth and jaw have shifted, the razor points filling his mouth in an unnatural way. In the next second, he pushes himself even deeper inside me, and I claw my way up his back until my arms are wrapped around his neck and my legs are around his waist.

His face alters to a sneer, and he growls before he really starts fucking me. I have no idea why he was worried about me making a noise, because it sounds like he’s going to put me right through the tile wall every time he slams into me. I can’t do much but hold on for the ride, but what a fucking ride it is. Every touch borders on painful, but not enough to actually hurt, just enough to make sure every nerve ending in my body is alive and focused on what might happen next.

“You make me fucking crazy,” Gunnar snarls between thrusts. I shake my head, thinking it might dislodge his hand, but it only makes him tighten his grip to ensure I can barely breathe, let alone speak. There’s not an ounce of fear inside me, and it has nothing to do with the fact that I’m basically immortal. No, it’s because I trust him implicitly. I know he would never

really hurt me.

The realization comes as my body tightens around him with an impending orgasm. I trust him, I trust all three of them. I don't even know when it happened, but the truth is there in my soul, undeniable.

Gunnar makes a grunting sound and his hand loosens. On instinct, I gasp, searching for air. Colors flood my vision that have nothing to do with what I'm actually seeing. My teeth start to chatter as I tip my head back, and the apex of an orgasm hits me hard enough that I have to grit my teeth to stop myself from screaming. A high-pitched groan that I can't contain escapes me.

Gunnar's forehead hits the tile over my shoulder as his quick, short breaths pant over my neck and chest. He continues to move inside me, his strokes smooth and deep as he holds me up completely. I don't know when my arms fell away from his neck, but I'm all loose limbs.

Moments later, it's easy to feel the tension in Gunnar's body build. I barely have the energy to open my eyes, but when I do, I see him, avoiding my gaze while simultaneously trying to look at me.

"What's wrong?" I pinch the bottom of his chin and force him to look at me. Tiny drops of water bounce off his back and splash my eyes, making me blink rapidly now that he's not completely covering me.

Gunnar swallows, his eyes as big as saucers. He looks so completely human in this moment. I move my grip from his chin and caress his jaw instead. "Are you..." He swallows, and his voice comes out a little steadier when he starts again. "Are you okay?" His brows dip with the question, furrowing into a heavy frown.

My insides go a little gooey, which should be illegal, and I slide my arm back around his neck, cuddling close to his body. "I am, in fact, more than okay. I'm perfect," I purr into his ear. Gunnar shudders as a shiver works its way up his spine.

"Are you sure I didn't hurt you?" He sounds so vulnerable.

I lean back to make sure he can see my face when I answer. "Gunnar, you didn't hurt me. That was..." I want to tell him how much it means that I trust him enough to give myself over so freely, but the words don't come easily. "That was fucking hot," I say instead. "I knew you could fuck me like you hated me."

Gunnar steps back quickly, like I just hit him. "Fuck you like I hate you?" he repeats in a horror filled whisper.

His reaction is enough to tell me I really messed up. "That's not what I

meant,” I rush out, but I know he’s not hearing me. I can see his eyes moving from left to right as if he’s examining something inside his head that only he can see.

“Gunnar,” I say, hoping to pull him from his thoughts. “I swear on everything, I did not mean that in a bad way.”

He yanks his arm away from me when I go to touch him. Recoiling, he asks, “What other kind of way is there?” But it’s not really a question.

I tip my head back and take a deep breath. There is no way I’m letting him walk away from this feeling bad about what just happened between us. Especially not because I stuck my foot in my mouth since I was experiencing real feelings and shit. “Sometimes you touch me like I’m fragile,” I start softly. “Like I might break into a thousand pieces if you aren’t careful.” I lean back against the wall and tap my fingers on the sides of my thighs. I want to cover myself now, which is so stupid. I always feel so much more exposed when I’m talking to them than I do when we’re having sex.

Gunnar’s brows drop again, and his lips turn down in a heavy frown.

“I know you don’t hate me, Kitten. I would never let someone who hated me touch me like that. I would only let *you* touch me like that, because I trust *you*.”

Gunnar does a double take, as if he can’t believe what I just said, but his eyes are still narrowed, making me feel like he still doesn’t understand what I’m saying. I reach for him again, and this time he doesn’t pull away. “I want all of you, Gunnar, not just what you think I can handle. Your monster doesn’t scare me. I love all of you.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth, my throat feels like it’s about to close up. I try to swallow, but I can’t remember how. I just keep moving my tongue around in my mouth hoping my brain will start sending the right signals again soon.

“You love me?” The suspicion is gone from his face, and it’s been replaced with a wide-eyed look of wonder as he gazes at me.

My insides are feeling kind of jittery, but Kitten doesn’t look so upset anymore, so I can get through it. I nod, or I think I do anyway. “How could I not love you?” is all I can manage to say.

Gunnar makes a noise that is half laugh and half incredulous snort. “I’ve known a lot of people, and none of them have loved me, Dami,” he murmurs, sounding a little self-deprecating.

I reach over and turn the water off just to give myself a few seconds before I respond. I don’t want to mess this up again. “Well, I do,” I tell him,

more convinced than ever that it's true. I can hear the truth in my own words.

Gunnar flips his arm over so he's now the one holding on to me. He guides me from the shower stall and reaches for a towel to wrap around me. Once he has me enfolded in the white fabric that smells heavily of bleach, he bends his knees until we are eye level and whispers out a demand. "Say it."

"Say what?" I whisper back, staring right into his eyes. I know what he wants, but I can never make things easy.

One side of Gunnar's lips lifts in a sneer that might scare other people, but it just makes me smile wider. "I love you," I tell him slowly, so he can hear every syllable. His mouth opens a little as if my words are a surprise.

My jaw drops open, too, when he seems to stumble and somehow ends up on his knees in front of me. "What the hell?" I mumble, looking at the ground and wondering how he slipped. Gunnar buries his head against my towel covered chest and squeezes me. He doesn't say anything else, but he doesn't have to. I already know he loves me. If he didn't, he wouldn't be here with me.

## CHAPTER 7

The bed is empty when I emerge from the bathroom. My steps stall. I sure didn't notice Calix leaving, I was too engrossed in Gunnar for that. I wonder if he left because he knew what Gunnar and I were doing. Who am I kidding? Of course that's why he left.

I've been able to carve out alone time with each of them for the past few weeks. Gunnar and Grim both still have duties, and Calix always seems to disappear often enough that it's not an issue, but this is proving that maybe everything is not as rosy as I like to pretend.

At home, it's as if they've worked out some sort of schedule for sleeping. Most nights I go to bed with Calix and Grim, but wake up to Gunnar and Calix. How the hell are we going to make this work long-term? Will I always have to worry that one of them will get sick of sharing me and leave? I've been getting the best of all three worlds, so I haven't let myself question it too much.

I'm still standing in the center of the room with only my thoughts and the towel wrapped around me when I feel Grim's portal forming. My stomach sours when the sins waft into the room upon his arrival. A feeling of nausea overcomes me, reminding how I would feel as a child when my mother forced me to eat.

I just manage to keep the gag from escaping my mouth when the portal closes, taking the sins with it. Hot saliva pools in the back of my throat as the urge to vomit continues to climb up from my stomach.

It takes me several long seconds to make sure that when I open my mouth, I'm not going to puke. As I turn, Grim places my luggage on the unmade bed, then he tosses Calix's large duffle bag into the chair near the

window.

“Ah, Grim.” He stops what he’s doing immediately and turns his attention to me. No one has mentioned the fact that I haven’t been hunting sins or eating them, but this new symptom makes me feel like there’s something going on other than just overstuffing myself with souls a few weeks ago. This isn’t the first time I’ve felt off when I thought about eating, but it’s definitely the most severe reaction I’ve had. What if consuming the witches’ souls really did taint mine somehow?

“What is it, Damiana?” Grim straightens to his full height and looks around as if he already knows there’s something wrong.

I wet my lips. “I haven’t eaten since that night at Vanessa’s.”

“Are you hungry?” He rounds the bed, heading in my direction. “I can feed you,” he offers, already forming the portal.

My stomach seizes. “No!” I shout, while waving my hand and covering my mouth with the other. The sins snap back just as quickly, but the feeling of nausea lingers even longer this time.

Gunnar pokes his head out of the bathroom and scowls. “What are you doing?” He glares at the back of Grim’s head.

Grim completely ignores the comment, and observes, “You’re unwell.” He says it as if it’s a completely foreign concept.

“I am right now. Give me a minute.” I groan, waiting for the feeling to subside. Gunnar stalks out of the bathroom with only a towel wrapped around his waist. Even fighting the queasy feeling, I still notice the way it splits over his thigh when he walks.

“What did you do to her?” Gunnar tries to nudge Grim out of the way to get closer to me, but the Angel of Death makes a sound that I’m hard pressed to describe—it’s not a growl, but something close. Gunnar pretends not to notice, but he stops trying to wedge his way between us.

“Omnia, tell me what is wrong so I can fix it,” he demands, as if everything is just that simple.

I pull my shoulders back and shake out my limbs a little. The feeling has mostly passed, but the memory is fresh, as are the memories of my childhood. “I think I might have screwed up.”

“No,” Grim disagrees with a quick shake of his head.

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, dude, but something is definitely wrong with me. Can you see my soul, my aura?”

Grim’s gray eyes quickly scan me, his gaze lingering for just a moment at

the apex of my thighs. He tilts his head a minute amount, but for him it's a big tell. Without finishing his perusal of my body, his eyes jerk back up to mine. "Yes." The one word comes out slow and thick.

I roll my wrist, urging him to continue. "Well, is there something wrong with it? Did eating the witches' souls screw up my homeostasis or some shit?"

"What the fuck is home... st—whatever you just said?" Gunnar looks between me and Grim.

"Balance in the body," Grim tells him with disinterest, but it's a much more simple explanation than I would have given him. Reaching forward like he might place his hand on my hip, he shifts course and cups my exposed shoulder instead. "Your soul is fine, perfect."

"Then what's wrong with me? Is it because I ate the soul and not the sin? I don't remember feeling like this when it happened when I was younger."

I'm still looking to Grim for answers, but Gunnar cuts in. "Maybe it's just like eating bad sushi." He's holding the towel at his waist with one hand. The long scar over his abdomen from the night he showed up on my floor all bloody is visible, crisscrossed with many others.

"Bad sushi?" I blink.

"Yeah, feels like your guts are going to fall out until you get rid of it... one way or the other." His lips twist in a sympathetic pout.

"You're suggesting I shit out the witches' souls?" I roll my lips in to keep myself from laughing. I know he's trying to help.

"Is there some other way you can process them?" Gunnar glances at Grim, including him in his question.

"You haven't released them?" Grim's eyes change as he examines me. "That would explain it," he mutters to himself.

"Explain what?" I watch the rivers in his eyes widen until there's not much gray left, only burning flames.

"Why you're not feeling well, why you haven't eaten. You need to release them, Omnia, or they will cease to exist."

"Are you telling me I have two witches' souls decaying inside me?" I suppress a full body shudder, but the disgust in my voice makes it clear I'm disturbed by the thought.

Grim drops his other hand on my shoulder and runs his palms over my upper arms in a soothing manner. "Not decaying, dissolving. You need to release them before there's nothing left."

“How the hell do I do that?” I gather the rough fabric of the towel over my stomach. All I can imagine is two black souls swirling around in my stomach. “Please do not tell me I have to shit them out.” I glance over at Gunnar, wondering if he was somehow right.

Grim makes a clicking sound with his tongue. “No, I will help you. I’m sorry it never occurred to me that you would be able to contain them in such a way.” Grim pulls me in and places a chaste kiss on my temple before releasing me. Turning to Gunnar, he inquires, “Have you found us another residence?”

Gunnar’s face falls. “I’ll take care of it right now.”

Grim nods once. “Good, where is the Nemean?”

“Calix,” I correct. I’ve been trying to get them to address each other by their names instead of their monsters. “I’m not sure, he was gone when we got out of the shower.”

“I’ll find him.” Gunnar drops the towel without hesitation and grabs the pants he wore yesterday, sliding them on without his boxers—they’re probably a wet mess on the bathroom floor anyway.

“Find us a place to stay first. I want to make sure Damiana is comfortable,” Grim orders, and moves over to the bed before unzipping my large suitcase.

“My service is shit.” Gunnar holds up his phone, showing the web browser trying to load. “I’ll have better luck using the hotel’s computer. Calix—” Gunnar looks at me, wanting approval for using the name. I give him a toothy grin, even though I’m freaking out on the inside. “Is probably down at the restaurant anyway.”

Grim ignores him. “What would you like to wear, Omnia?”

“Whatever, anything is fine.” Grim looks over at me then abandons the luggage and steps closer. He runs his elegant finger down my forehead and over my nose, stopping when he reaches my lips, lingering there.

“Stop worrying. I said I would fix it,” he insists.

“I’m not *worried*.” The lie turns my stomach. Grim cocks one eyebrow, it’s a very human expression for him. I lower my head and peer up at him. “Okay, I’m a little nervous. What if I can’t release them?”

The door to the room clicks shut softly, telling me Gunnar left. “You will release them,” Grim replies, making it seem like there is no room for argument. “We can do it now if you don’t want to wait.” He looks around.

“What do I need to do?” I look around too, wondering what he’s thinking.



“A light meditation. You need to be able to focus so you can concentrate on what we’re doing. That is why I was going to wait until later,” Grim tells me like it will be the simplest thing in the world.

“You said you didn’t know I could contain them. What does that mean exactly?” I drop onto the bed.

“I assumed you stripped the souls and released them. There aren’t many who are able to hold on to it. The natural process is for it to be disbursed, to move on to the next place.”

This probably isn’t the best conversation to have while in a strange hotel room dressed in only a towel, but here it goes. “What exactly am I?”

Grim tilts his head like I’ve confused him. “You are you.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not having an existential crisis here, Loverboy. I’m asking what I am. What kind of monster am I?” I clarify.

Grim lifts his chin in understanding. “You are the daughter of Lilith, a goddess of life.”

I grab onto the bed sheet, convinced someone just rocked my world off its axis if the dizzy feeling overtaking me means anything. Grim places his hand over mine. His heat and touch are welcome. “Help me understand why that matters,” he requests with genuine concern.

“I…” I start, but I don’t really have an answer. Does it really matter? It’s a name, a title even, but it doesn’t dictate who I am. In fact, it’s really the opposite of who I am. I’m an orphan, thrown away by parents who never bargained to have a monster for a child.

“It shouldn’t matter, I don’t want it to matter, but I never knew. I just thought I was other, a misfit.” I shake my head and shove the self-pitying thoughts away. “Why do I need sins to survive?”

Grim takes a deep breath and his eyes go unfocused. “Perception is reality.” He blinks slowly. “Many beings that we consider to be Charmed exist because someone, or many someones, believed them into reality. One does not exist without the other.”

“But I was born, you told me I chose to be born. What does that have to do with me?”

“Yes, you chose this life,” he confirms, squeezing my hand. “What stories do you know of Lilith?”

I scan my thoughts. “I’ll be honest, religion isn’t my strong suit, but I think Lilith was Adam’s first wife, right?” Grim nods, urging me to continue. “She was created by God, just like Adam, not *of* Adam.” I squint, not

recalling how she was suddenly no longer Adam's wife or why Eve came along. "I don't know, she's evil or a demon or something, right?"

"No." Grim says it with absolute certainty. "She was beautiful, curious, and uncontainable, but not evil."

"Did you know her?" I accuse, jealousy darkening my voice.

"We existed at the same time," he answers cryptically.

"That doesn't answer my question." I lower my chin and give him a scowl. "You called her beautiful."

"In the same way a tidal wave is beautiful, chaotic and destructive, but still stunning," Grim reasons.

"So... she was evil?"

"Not any more than you or me. We just are." I rub my temple at Grim's non-answer. "But you're making my point. Your perception, along with everyone else's, influences manifestations. You consume sins for substance because that is what one would expect from the daughter of Lilith."

My hand falls away from my face and my mouth slips open. "But I didn't know I was Lilith's daughter."

"Yet you are, just as I am Death. Consuming sins doesn't make you evil, any more than reaping souls makes me evil. It just helps you thrive on the perception of those that believe there is more to this world than what is clearly visible. Without that belief, most of us would cease to exist."

"So, is she still alive?" I bite my lip. I'm not sure I ever want to meet the woman Grim described as beautifully chaotic.

"In you. When you chose to be born here, she ended and you began."

I damn near slide off the bed in my haste to stand up. "You said I was her daughter," I argue, pointing my finger at him.

"I'm sorry I am upsetting you if I'm not explaining this right." Grim searches my face.

"Is she my mom or not?" I half shout.

Grim pushes to his feet and the door to the room opens. Calix is standing in the doorway with Gunnar behind him.

"You are born of her. You are her daughter," Grim states, and the door closes with a snap. I start to laugh. At first it's a low chuckle, then it morphs into a hysterical half laugh, half sob. These men are making me an emotional basket case. For a minute there, I thought I might have a real mom somewhere, but now I know I really am just an orphan.

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## CHAPTER 8

“...*W*aited, you have the sensitivity of an avocado.” I hear the last bit of the whispered conversation as I exit the bathroom. After my outburst, I snatched some clothes from the bed and disappeared until I got myself under control.

I snort at Calix’s assessment of Grim’s sensitivity. “Knock it off, he didn’t do anything wrong,” I defend. He really didn’t. My response had nothing to do with Grim or how he told me. It’s not like Calix or Gunnar could have made the truth easier to hear.

“At least he *told* me something. Why is everyone always acting like there’s some big secret?” I may be past the knee-jerk hysterics, but I’m still frustrated. “Why didn’t anyone tell me this sooner?”

“Does it change anything?” Calix counters, proving I’m not the only one on edge.

“No, but I still have the right to know who I am.”

Calix rolls his eyes and lets out a huff. “I have never in my life met anyone who owns what they are more than you, Dami. Knowing your origins doesn’t change who you are.” I’m not sure if that was meant to be a compliment, but it somehow feels like one. “I was born from Greek mythology, and Gunnar was changed from a human to a tool of vengeance for a witch. Does that change anything about us? No!” he answers his own question.

“Who got your hackles all riled up?” I grouse, because he’s making sense and also because he’s being kind of shitty considering I heard him chastising Grim for his delivery, and now he’s being pretty damn blunt, too.

“The South has a pretty heavy shifter population.” Gunnar slaps Calix on

the back as he walks past him. “Seems everyone already knows ole Cal is in town.” Calix lifts his lips in a sneer as he glares at Gunnar’s back.

“What does that mean?” I search Calix’s face, but he isn’t giving anything away.

“It seems he’s not quite as obligation free as he would like to believe.” Gunnar throws himself on the bed, putting his boots right on the comforter and crossing his ankles.

“Did you secure us another residence?” Grim inquires, seemingly uninterested in Gunnar’s taunts.

“Oh, the Nemean took care of that for us, even got us a car. Isn’t that right, Cal?” Gunnar is way too chipper for something not to have gone very wrong.

A soft knock on the door draws my attention. In my peripheral, I see Calix drop his head in what looks like defeat.

When no one moves to answer the door, I do. That makes Calix spring into action as he races to beat me to the door. “Hey, Dami, remember when you were bummed I wasn’t a shifter? Well, you’re about to meet a whole pack of them.”

I turn back in time to see Calix open the door. He stands in front of the threshold, blocking anyone from entering the room. I go up on my toes and lean to the side so I can see who’s there.

It’s a woman, an attractive woman, a very attractive woman. Her green eyes are the first thing I notice. They are slanted up at the corners just enough to give her face an exotic beauty that no eyeliner or makeup can accomplish. Then there’s her hair: all wild curls of black silk that cascade over her shoulders so I can’t tell how long it is. If that weren’t enough, she’s got a dancer’s body too, with long graceful limbs and a tightly tucked-in waist. I look down at myself quickly. At least I have her beat in the tits department.

When I look back up, she’s bowing her head in what seems like reverence to Calix. I take a step closer and place my palm on his back near his shoulder. He doesn’t respond to my touch, but the woman’s eyes track my movement as she lifts her gaze. Even with her head lowered, I can see her watching me.

“Everything is ready for your arrival, sir.” Her voice is sultry and soft, but still holds a hint of power. She lifts her head and raises her chin just enough to appear like she’s looking down at me.

“Sir?” I lean around Calix and peer up at him. He’s always seemed so laidback, so it’s strange to hear her address him in such a way. I’m also

visually staking my claim. If she even thinks to lay a hand on him, I will take her life and her soul.

Ignoring me, he says, "I told you I would be down when I was ready." His voice is firm.

She does the slight bow again. "Please forgive my haste."

"You're not forgiven." I slam the door in her face, and then take two steps that place me in front of Calix with the door at my back, so I feel it when she knocks again. "Want to tell me who that was and what the fuck is going on?" I ask him softly, then holler, "Don't touch the fucking door again. We'll be out when I'm ready."

In a move of utter defiance, she gives the door one more hard rap. I spin, ready to rip it open and decimate her face, when Calix pushes my front up against the door. Near my ear, he softly growls, "If you defy my mate again, I will let her kill you."

"Let me?" I scoff, but I don't argue because Calix molds his body to mine. I feel his chest expand when he draws in a deep breath near the crook of my neck.

"She is a headache and unavoidable. Unfortunately, now that they know we are here..." I feel Calix slump behind me.

With little effort, I'm able to turn in his embrace. "Is she still there, listening?" I breathe. He nods, his eyes heavy. "Tell her if she doesn't go, I will make her."

"Go," he orders, then adds, "If you defy me again, I will take it as a challenge."

I don't hear her leave, but it's clear when she does by the change in his demeanor. Calix reaches up and grabs the back of my neck, squeezing just enough that my breath catches. Ever so gently, he lowers his face to mine and kisses me. It starts off slow, but quickly becomes desperate as he clings to me.

"What's wrong?" I ask when he lets me break away. It's like my question saps the life from him, his lips stop moving across my jaw and his shoulders slump.

"Fucking pack shit," he curses. "I wasn't careful last night when I arrived, and now they know I'm here."

I twine my fingers with his. "What does that mean? Are you in trouble or something?"

I hear a snort from the other side of the room. Calix uses our clasped

hands to draw me toward the bed and urges me to sit. He kneels between my legs, holding on to the tops of my thighs like I might flee any second.

“I’m not in trouble, Damiana,” he tells me, but he still looks unhappy. “There’s an issue with the pack, they’ve been waiting for a mediator, and now that I’m here...”

“It’s your job,” I finish for him.

“It’s my job,” Calix confirms, not sounding happy.

I reach forward and run my palm over his jaw. “You don’t want to do it?”

“No. Packs, especially big packs like this one, are messy. When one side doesn’t get what they want, they turn everything into an agenda. It can take months to sort out all the shit.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll take good care of Damiana while you’re gone.” Gunnar sounds way too pleased with himself.

I tsk my tongue and give Gunnar a glare over my shoulder. “We aren’t leaving him here alone, just as I didn’t let you come alone,” I remind him. Facing Calix, I add, “All we need to do is make sure they know not to turn this into some kind of power game.” I grin and lean forward to place a soft kiss on his nose. “If they piss me off too much, I’ll just kill them all and let the chips fall where they may.”

Gunnar lets out a soft sigh. “She really is perfect.”



WHEN WE EXIT THE HOTEL, Calix is in the lead. I see the same woman standing near a small, two-seater sports car. Betty has no competition there, but the Audi isn’t anything to sneeze at, either.

Calix stops in his tracks and slowly turns his head to look at the woman. His hair is pulled back into a small bun, making the angles of his jaw and cheek seem almost harsh. His eyes are what gets me though, not an ounce of the twinkle I’ve come to know. “What the fuck is this?” He lifts his hand and gestures to the car.

“There’s a second vehicle for your attendants.” She moves to open the passenger side door like some sort of valet.

I take a step forward, regretting my shoe choice since I’m already hot, but sandals just don’t give the same vibe as a good pair of boots. “What’s your name?” She darts her eyes toward me but ignores my question. Without

moving a finger, I open myself to her aura. It's surprisingly clean, but that doesn't stop me from calling it.

She clears her throat once, then lets out a little cough, seemingly stupefied by her sudden lack of air. "I asked your name." Lowering my chin, I give her a glare.

The weight of Gunnar's arm around my neck grounds me as he leans in close and places a gentle kiss on my temple. "You should answer while you still have the ability," he says, while the woman starts to gasp.

"Kim." She slams her palm against her chest a few times, and I watch as her knees bend just enough so I can tell she's struggling.

Releasing her soul, I bare my teeth, and Kim blinks several times as if she can't believe what she's seeing. "That's right, not all monsters look the part. You'd think being a shifter that's a lesson you would have already learned."

Kim makes an effort to swallow and catch her breath, but the fear I imagined I would see on her face is strangely absent. "And your name?" she rasps, acting as if a threat to her life is no big deal.

"Damiana." I don't offer her my much easier to pronounce nickname, she's not my friend. Too bad, I might have actually liked her if she wasn't such a snobby asshole. The fact that she's pretty and looking at what's mine like he might be the answer to her prayers doesn't help her case either.

"Get me the other vehicle," Calix grits out through his teeth while balling up his fists.

"Yes, sir," Kim rushes out. Lifting her hand, she crooks her fingers, motioning to someone to come forward. A black SUV advances slowly behind the Audi. Gunnar squeezes my shoulder before jogging over to the driver's side of the vehicle. With a jerk of his head, he tells the driver to get out. The man behind the wheel looks to Kim, who dips her chin in acquiescence. Gunnar scowls at the man as he vacates the driver's seat after Kim gave him permission.

"Have you secured me lodgings off the pack land?" Calix addresses Kim.

"I have." She nods.

"Address," Calix barks impatiently.

Kim's eyes narrow just the tiniest bit, and her lips pinch before she answers, "It's off Mt. Olivia Church. There isn't a street number. I can take you... if that would be acceptable?" She adds the last bit placatingly.

Calix places his hand on my lower back, guides me over to the SUV Gunnar commandeered, and opens the rear passenger door for me to slide in



before he joins me.

Once seated, I watch Grim stroll over, towing my wheeled luggage behind him. It's strange seeing him doing such a human task.

Kim, who now has a few men standing near her, tries to ignore his presence, but I can see a few of her companions watching him from the corner of their eyes, as if not acknowledging him somehow makes him less of a threat. "Why do they pretend they don't see him?"

Gunnar hits a button on the ceiling over the mirror and the back hatch opens slowly with a ding. "Because they aren't as stupid as they act." Calix makes a harrumph sound, leaving me to believe he agrees with Gunnar's response.

Grim's figure glides past on his way to the front seat. Looking through the windshield, I watch as the man who was driving our confiscated vehicle wedges himself into the passenger seat of the Audi, leaving the remaining men to disburse to wherever they came from.

I reach over and place my hand on top of Calix's, noticing the taut line of his jaw and the stubborn set of his lips soften as he turns to me. "Do you want me to kill them?" I offer, only half joking. That brings a slight smile to his lips.

"Nah, but I'll let you know if I change my mind." He gives me a wink, but I can tell he's forcing the lightness into his tone.

I slide over a bit until I'm in the middle seat and lean my head on his shoulder while wrapping my hand over Calix's thigh. I may not be great with words of support, but I can show him I'm right here with him. He lets out a small sigh and rests his head on top of mine. "Sorry I teased you about your singing. I really did think it was cute," he whispers.

"You hurt my feelings a little, but I probably overreacted." I lean into him a little more, so he knows I'm not upset. "Kind of a bummer I have to give up my dream of joining the Spice Girls though." That has the desired effect. Calix chuckles softly, burrowing his nose under my hair near my neck.

The scenery around us transitions rather quickly from a large, bustling city to huge swaths of thick trees and sparsely placed houses. After about twenty minutes, Gunnar slows the car and turns onto a narrow gravel path, following behind the Audi. From there it's a short drive down a winding road that opens up to a clearing which reminds me a little of my own driveway.

As soon as Calix opens the door, he curses. Kim is already standing outside of the Audi along with her companion. "What's up?" I look around to

see why Calix is aggravated.

“Pack politics,” he answers, and stalks his way over to Kim. The woman takes one step back, but then seems to think better of it and holds her ground.

“This isn’t pack property,” she blurts.

I watch the smooth lines of Calix’s body as he gets closer to her, clearly ready to pounce. “It smells like pack.” His voice comes out just this side of a growl.

“It’s pack owned, but not on the land,” Kim confirms.

Grim extends his hand to me, helping me from the back seat. Keeping my eyes trained on Calix, I watch as he steps into Kim’s space and bares his teeth. The woman doesn’t meet his eyes, instead she stands as still as a statue. I can’t even tell if she’s breathing.

“Twice now you have defied me, playing games. Is this how your pack operates?”

Kim blinks twice, proving she hasn’t turned to stone. “He’s pretty pissed. I bet he wouldn’t even care if I killed her now,” I comment absently.

The man who rode with Kim sends a glare in my direction. I lift my fingers and give him a cutesy wave before I point right at him. “If you look at me like that again, I’ll pluck out your eyeballs and feed them to you.”

The man blinks a few times as Gunnar swoops me up in his arms and nuzzles my neck. “Stop threatening to maim people—you know how excited I get.”

I keep my eyes on the guy over Gunnar’s shoulder, pointing my fingers back and forth between my eyes and his, gesturing that I will be watching him as Gunnar bounces up a walkway with me still in his arms. The man’s face pinches in utter shock or confusion. I can’t tell which.

With one hard kick to the front door, the wood splinters and Gunnar sighs an exaggerated, “Oops.”

I turn my head so I can see inside the house. There’s a small foyer with an umbrella stand and a folding door closet straight ahead. To the left is a formal dining room, and to the right is a homey, well-used living room. The furniture isn’t new, but it’s in good shape. There’s no dust or odd smells though, so I take that as a win.

Gunnar adjusts his hold and lets me slide down his big body until my boots hit the floor. I give him a little peck as a thank you.

I note the lack of curtains as I peruse the house. They probably don’t think they need them way out here with no neighbors, but now I won’t have

anything to block out the ball of fire that lives in the sky all day. It's nearly dusk now, and I can see everything perfectly with how much light is streaming in through all the windows.

"Why are you looking at that window like it offends you?" Gunnar has been following me around, probably making sure I'm safe. It's so cute.

"I believe the lack of draperies is not to her liking," Grim answers for me.

I spin on the heel of my Doc Martens. "I'm that obvious, huh? I just hope the bedroom has some curtains..." The last part of my sentence trails off when I hear Kim's voice. What the fuck is she doing in here? I make my way out of the kitchen to where I heard her. The front door has been propped back in place, so it's covering most of the hole, but it will still need to be replaced.

I move deeper into the house until I see Calix standing near a doorway at the end of the hall. "I just need to grab a few things," I hear Kim mumble. "I was hoping to speak with you regarding the pack issues too." Calix doesn't say anything as I approach, but he lifts his arm when I near, tucking me into his side.

"This is your house? What the hell do you have against curtains?" Kim lifts her head but doesn't answer me. I'm starting to really take her attitude personally. Fine lines form at the corners of her eyes when she sends a shrewd look in my direction.

Never one to back down, I head right into her bedroom and sit on the end of her bed. "Nice and sturdy." I wiggle my brows at Calix. "Smells a little like dog, though."

Kim doesn't do much to hide her growl.

"What's your deal? Why are you acting like I pissed in your Pradas? Your pack is the one causing the fuckery and messing with our plans."

Kim lifts her chin just a tiny bit, but it's enough that I notice. "My pack doesn't concern you. You shouldn't be here, or them." She tips her head to the side, but I know she means Grim and Gunnar. So it's not just me she doesn't like.

I lean back on my palms. "I go where he goes, and they go where I go. You'll just have to deal with it."

Kim's eyes narrow and her arm moves just enough to make me believe she's fighting the urge not to lunge forward.

"I wish you would," I dare her, staring right into her eyes.

"Leave," Calix barks, his voice harsher than I've ever heard it. Kim turns to look at him and drops her chin. "This goes two ways. You either go now,

or I hand your dead body over to the man outside to take back to your pack.” His tone is cold, uninterested. I feel like a little of Grim might be wearing off on him.

Kim makes a show of stepping backwards and lifting her hands before walking out the door. I hear the front door slam against the ground and the floor shakes a tiny bit. “Well, I can’t say it was nice meeting her. Are all shifters such elitist assholes?”

Calix walks over and pulls me up so I’m standing in front of him. “No.” He drops his forehead to mine and takes a deep breath. “I should have been more careful when I got into town last night. I didn’t even want the local packs to know I was here.” He says it like he needs to apologize.

I brush my palm over his stubbled jaw. “It’s okay. Maybe it’s her you need to save the pack from,” I say, only half joking. Calix chuckles, and I feel a dip in my stomach from knowing I made that happen, that something I said lightened his mood, if only for a minute.

After a few more stolen moments, he wraps me in his arms and announces, “I was just really getting to like retirement.”

When we enter the kitchen, Grim is leaning against the counter with his ankles crossed, and Gunnar is rummaging through Kim’s fridge. Calix keeps my hand in his and clears his throat. “I need to go see the alpha, the sooner the better.”

Gunnar straightens, holding a medium-sized Tupperware container. He flips the lid off and tosses it into the sink a few feet away before bringing the bowl up to his nose for a sniff. He makes a sour face and lets it sail into the sink with the lid. “Can we grab some food on the way there?”

## CHAPTER 9

Calix half turns to face the back seat when we stop in front of a massive house that looks like it belongs on the edge of some cliff, not smack dab in the middle of a forest. There was no clear marker that indicated when we entered pack land, but I'm pretty sure we've been on it for a while, even though I haven't seen any other homes for the last mile or two. "Try not to kill anyone," he tells me.

I hook my thumb in Grim's direction with my mouth hanging open. "He's literally Death, and you're telling *me* not to kill anyone? Pshh."

"Oh, let her have some fun," Gunnar chastises Calix as he gets out of the car.

"You weren't saying that when she was going to kill that entire coven of witches," Calix counters over the top of the car, loud enough that it reaches all the men standing near the front door like some sort of fucked up secret service agents.

"That would have been a headache," Gunnar replies with a nod.

"You think her killing everyone who pisses her off here would be any easier?" Calix points at the men behind him as Grim gives me his hand, helping me from his side of the back seat.

"Stars, they act as if I have no self-control," I mutter, smoothing out my black romper.

Grim lifts my fingers up to his mouth and kisses my knuckles. "You test mine," he rasps, looking down at my long legs. I kept the boots on when I changed, and strangely they work really well with the short black jumpsuit. I have my long hair pulled back in a high, tight ponytail with a black leather bracelet covered in spikes tied around it, along with some other jewelry. Most

of it's stuff Aeson gave me, so it's just as much of a weapon as it is an accessory.

Calix slams his door and stands by my side while Gunnar comes over from the driver's side to take his place, leaving Calix to take the lead, so I end up being flanked by Grim and Gunnar.

The front door opens, and Kim stands in the entry. Her face is already set in a scowl. "Goddamn, she needs to get laid," I mumble under my breath, not really thinking about being in the middle of a bunch of supernatural beings, but it's clear a few of them heard me when several of the men chuff out laughs and quickly cover them.

Kim's nostrils flare, but she ignores my comment. When Calix reaches the top step, she lowers her head and says, "Alpha Torin welcomes you."

"Where is he?"

"I'll take you to him," Kim offers.

We follow in Calix's wake as he trails behind Kim. She's not rushing, but she's not wasting time either. It doesn't really give me much time to look around and admire all the mansion's splendor, but I don't really care to, either. However, what doesn't go unnoticed is the amount of people milling about. Even in a house this big, it feels overfull. Gunnar is walking so close to me that our arms keep brushing.

After several minutes—and many hallways—Kim stops in front of a set of large, wooden double doors. She tips her ear toward the entry, listening, then lightly taps her knuckle against the wood before turning the knob right after not waiting for a reply. Calix's steps falter, but he recovers quickly as he makes his way into the room behind Kim.

As I cross the threshold, I feel a wave of agony lash out as if it's looking for a new host. My eyes are immediately drawn to a large, prone figure draped half on and half off a couch. His head is back, and his eyes are closed—he's passed out if I'm not mistaken. Yet the furrow in his brow is deep, as if he may be experiencing a bad dream. I let my eyes continue over him, examining the creature that is the source of so much pain. His long, grayish hair is matted and unkempt, and his clothes are wrinkled and stained, but I don't see any evidence of a wound.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Calix turns to face Kim. His lips are pulled back in a sneer. The man on the couch doesn't even twitch, but Kim does. I watch as she forces herself to look at the man. Her shoulders fall a little, but she pulls herself together and stands tall against Calix.

The door gently closes, drawing my attention to Grim as he comes up to my side.

“This is Alpha Torin. He recently lost his mate to childbirth, and he’s... struggling.” She seems to be having a hard time putting her thoughts into words as well. It’s clear she cares for this man.

I take another look at him, this time opening myself to see his aura. “Oh, my,” I breathe. Torin is *broken*. His aura is in tatters, and it’s barely being held together with wisps of red and black. I nudge my way past Grim and Gunnar, only to find Calix in my path. I place my palm over his chest, and he reluctantly lets me move past him. I take a seat on the edge of the sofa, near the alpha’s hip. Being this close to him is like standing outside in the middle of a thunderstorm. The air is charged with angry energy just looking for a place to go.

“This isn’t an issue that needs mediation. He’s grieving.” Calix keeps his eyes on me, but he’s speaking to Kim.

“It will be three months in four days. His mourning period is almost over.” Kim’s tone is flat, but somehow it still resonates with pain. “Every day that passes, more of the pack show up here. They need their leader. Several have already expressed concern. If they challenge him...”

“He’ll die.” I run my hand over his knotted hair, and he still doesn’t stir.

Kim sucks in a breath as if my words are too much to hear, even though I know they are the same words she was thinking. “Why are you touching him?” She steps closer to me, but Grim moves into her path. “He would never be part of” —her lips lift in a disgusted sneer— “whatever this fucked-up shit is.” She sends her judgmental gaze over all four of us.

“Honey, I know you’re hurting, but don’t insult my mates again.” My voice is firm. I feel a lot more sympathy toward her than I did before, but that only goes so far. “You think I want another man? Three is enough, even for me, plus I got the perfect lot.” I lift my hand in an invitation for Kim to look at them.

She doesn’t take me up on the offer, but I don’t take offense. Grim moves away from Kim and comes to my side. “He’s begging for death.” As soon as Grim speaks, Torin fights to open his eyes. Instead of seeing Grim, his weary gaze lands on me first.

There’s relief in those dark brown orbs, and only the tiniest thread of fear. I stroke his hair again. “Finally,” he croaks, making it clear he hasn’t used his voice in a long while as he leans into my touch.

“Alpha?” Kim reverently whispers, as if she can’t believe he spoke. Torin closes his eyes again, exhaustion already pulling him under.

I reach out and slap the man’s cheek. His eyes snap back open. “Wakey wakey, Wolfy,” I singsong. The corners of his mouth turn down in a frown, and Kim gasps as if I’ve committed the ultimate sin.

“Wolfy?” Torin grumbles.

“Hi there, I’m Dami!” I introduce myself as he blinks at me. After a few seconds, he looks up and notices Grim at my side. He makes a move to sit up, but he just ends up sliding back over, so I help him adjust.

“Don’t touch him,” Kim spits.

Her voice draws Torin’s attention. He looks around again, and this time I think he actually sees that there are several people in the room. “What is this?” His eyes come back to me, but now they hold suspicion instead of salvation.

“It’s time for you to shit or get off the pot, Wolfy.” I purse my lips in sympathy.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Torin growls at me, and it makes me smile. It’s the first bit of actual life I’ve seen from him.

“How about you go take a shower?” I pinch my nose, indicating that I think he stinks. “Then we can talk all about it.”

“Who are you?” he asks incredulously.

“She is no one, Alpha,” Kim starts.

I click my tongue. “You know, I’ve just about had it with your attitude. Sit down and shut up!” Kim slides backward, carried on an unseen wind. Her arms reach out as she tries to catch herself, but it’s no use. Her calves hit the back of an empty chair and she drops like a deadweight. It’s the first time since I sent the guys flying out my front door that I’ve used that sort of power, and it wasn’t even intentional.

I drop my gaze back to Torin. “I think she means well, but damn, she’s fucking annoying.” Torin’s eyes narrow as he looks me over again. “Do you need help getting to the shower?” I ask, before he demands I get the hell away from him. Gunnar growls in disapproval, so he’s the one I volunteer to help. “Kitten can help you.”

“Is this a dream, or am I really losing my mind?” Torin searches everyone’s faces, and when he finally focuses on Calix, I see realization dawn on his features. He glares over at Kim, but he looks away quickly as if he’s sickened by what he sees. Kim lowers her head in shame.



Calix takes that as his cue to step in. He crouches next to the sofa, placing a hand on my thigh. “We just want to help.”

Torin’s face morphs, and the confusion he was feeling gives way to the sorrow deep in his soul. His dark eyes brim with unshed tears, spiking his dark lower lashes, and my throat threatens to close up in response. I don’t even know this man, yet I feel his anguish. “Please just take me.” He ignores Calix and looks at me, like I’m his salvation.

“Oh, Wolfy.” My heart breaks for him.

“Is death truly what you want?” Grim’s voice is calm, unaffected. I peer up at him, marveling at the fact that he deals with this kind of loss constantly.

“Can you bring her back?” Torin already knows the answer, I can tell by the way his chin trembles, but he can’t help but ask anyway.

“No, no one can do that. But is this what she would want for you?” Grim reasons.

The shifter drops his head in disgrace and gives the tiniest shake of denial. “Alpha,” Kim interjects again. Torin’s shoulders slump even more as if the weight of the word is enough to crush him. I don’t think she realizes she’s not helping. “I’m sorry, Torin, so sorry, but I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t get through to you, and I was afraid they would kill you the moment your mourning time was up.”

“I don’t give a fuck!” he shouts, his entire body vibrating with restrained emotion.

“But the pack?” Kim murmurs, as if she can’t believe his words.

“Without her, I have no pack!” He springs forward, but he can’t keep himself upright. Calix ends up jumping up and wrapping his arms around the large man’s frame to keep him on his feet.

Kim’s mouth falls open as a single tear drips from her eye. She’s pushing too hard, too fast. This man is struggling for his next breath, and she wants him to lead an entire pack.

I take charge before she can do any more damage. “Calix, since you’ve already got hold of him, you get to help with the shower. Kim, take Gunnar to the kitchen and make Torin some food, something easy to digest. Clear broth, rice, maybe some crackers to start with.” I have some experience with those things and know they go down much easier than a lot of other foods.

Torin takes a little more of his weight off Calix, supporting himself. “She calls you Kitten?”

Calix snorts and throws his thumb in Gunnar’s direction. “No, he’s

Kitten. Don't ask," he warns. Torin takes a few shuffling steps with Calix at his side in case the big man needs some help, but he mostly manages on his own.

As soon as they're out of the room, I spin on Kim. "Unless your plan is to have him throw himself off a cliff, I suggest you shut up about what you need." I take a few steps in her direction. "Have any of you stopped for one fucking minute to wonder what *he* needs? He just lost the love of his life and a child."

She's shaking her head before I can even finish. "You have no clue what would happen to a pack this size without a powerful alpha to lead it."

"I know the only time I saw relief in that man's eyes was when he mistook me for Death and thought I was here to take him to the other side. Do you think he's the same person he was three months ago?" Kim rolls her lips in but doesn't answer. "Newsflash: he's not. Probably won't ever be. This pack doesn't need a mediator. It needs a fucking heart. I only just realized I have one, and even I can see that."

I turn away from her before I end up punching her in her stupid face. "Go do what I told you to do," I order, expecting Gunnar to make sure she follows through.

Grim pushes my hair away from my face, brushing his fingers over my cheeks and around to the back of my neck. I tip my head back and let out a deep sigh. The sting of pain hasn't dissipated, even though Torin isn't in the room. No wonder the man can't get any relief.

"He may not make it, Omnia. I need you to be prepared for that."

I almost want to chuckle at his announcement, but I manage to hold it in. "I would feel a hell of a lot better about giving that man what he wants than I would about convincing him he needs to live for the sake of his fucking pack." But then I remember Aeson, and how desperately I wanted her to live. I'm sure there are others who love him, maybe not in the same way she did, but love him just the same.

"What was her name?" I croak. My voice is weak now that I know it's just Grim and me in the room.

"Louise." I don't need to elaborate for him to know who I'm talking about.

"I don't know the right thing to do," I confess. Maybe I should have just let Calix handle this instead of sticking my nose in everyone's business.

"Either way, it's his decision. We can help him see that there are reasons

to live, but we can't make him fight to be here." Grim sounds wise and resigned. Something inside me thinks he already knows what the outcome will be. Just as I'm about to ask him if he knows what's going to happen, Calix comes out of the hallway, his head lowered and his palm on the back of his neck. He looks about how I feel—defeated.

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## CHAPTER 10

“*H*e’s showering,” Calix informs us.  
“Should one of us be in there with him?” I look between the two men.

“I just wanted to give him a little privacy. I’ll check on him in a few minutes.” Calix leans against the wall with his head tipped back, exposing his throat. But that’s not what’s drawing my attention—it’s his eyes. They’re trained on me as if I might disappear if he’s not watching my every move. I make my way over to his side and slide my hand into his. Grim lumbers around the room, examining everything he can see. There are a few plates—some still full of food on a table near the door—they look like they may have been left there today. At least we know someone was trying to take care of Torin, even if it was half-assed.

“Kim said his mourning period was almost over. What does that mean?” I keep my voice low. I don’t know how well the wolf in the bathroom can hear me over the spray of water.

“It’s custom...” Calix shakes his head. “More like a law, I guess. In the shifter community, if your mate dies, you have three months to mourn: no challenges, no duties. That goes for the alpha or any other pack members.”

“And his time is almost up,” I state, even though it’s not necessary. Kim made it clear that not only is the pack looking for its leader, but there are plenty of others out there who would be happy to take advantage of Torin’s situation to take over his pack. I have no idea what kind of a leader he is, but it would seem that Kim and many others must think pretty highly of him, or they would have just let him rot away up here. Plus, I would have known if she had been lying about wanting to save him.

Calix pushes off the wall with his shoulders. His face is drawn, he looks tired, and our day has barely started. “Yes, it is,” he confirms, before giving my fingers a gentle squeeze and releasing me to head back toward the bathroom. The door snaps quietly closed behind him.

I’m still in the same spot when the door opens again, and this time Torin exits with a towel around his very narrow waist. I stifle a gasp when I see his body, he looks emaciated. He’s so thin that his stomach is damn near concave, and something tells me heroin chic isn’t his normal look.

I avert my gaze before he can catch me staring. The sound of his damp feet shuffling down the hall fades, telling me he’s heading in the other direction. When I look up, Grim is standing before me, his eyes soft and concerned. I have so many things I want to ask, like why would he do this to himself, and why would someone let this happen to him? But the words get caught in my throat when I meet Grim’s soulful gray gaze.

Having only recently found him and the others, I don’t know how I could go back to life before them. I have no idea how long Torin had with Louise, but does it even matter? Would their only having a few months together lessen his pain? I swallow the lump in my throat and realize the answer is no, it would not matter, and that realization terrifies me.

I feel Calix at my side. I’m so distracted, I didn’t even sense his approach. I avert my gaze from him and Grim, feeling far too exposed. Sensing the retreat, Calix reaches out and cradles my cheek in his palm, encouraging me to look up. Just as he begins to speak, I see Torin over Calix’s shoulder. His steps falter when he sees the intimate way Calix is touching me. For just a moment, I see something in his eyes that looks way too familiar: longing. “It’s going to be okay.” Calix leans forward, obscuring Torin from view, and places a featherlight kiss on my lips.

By the time Calix pulls back, the wolf has walked past us and is making his way back to the sofa we originally found him on. His clothes somehow mask the fact that he’s not much more than skin and bones.

I give Calix what I hope is a thankful smile and return to the living space, taking a seat on the edge of the couch, even though this spot feels scarred with pain and loss. Grim and Calix follow me over, and Calix situates himself next to me on the sofa so he’s between Torin and me.

The look I saw on the wolf’s face in the hallway is gone. It’s been replaced with hopeless indifference. The silence in the room is thick, as if no one knows what to say, or at least how to say it. I’m tempted to open my

mouth and blurt something out, but I bite the inside of my cheek to make sure I don't give into the temptation. I'm way out of my element here, and I don't want to say or do something that would make matters worse.

"I get why you're here... but there's really no point." Torin breaks both the silence and my heart, if I'm honest, with his words.

Calix gives a barely discernible nod as if to say he understands. Surprising me, he asks, "Do you have a successor in mind?" I can't believe he's going to accept the fact that this man is willing to die so easily. I open my mouth but snap it closed when I feel Calix place his big, warm hand on my leg. Instead, I focus on Torin and his reaction to Calix's question.

The wolf's eyes go a little unfocused as he thinks. After a long pause, he says, "Maybe, but I'm not sure they would win a challenge from an outside threat."

Calix sucks in air through his teeth, making a whistling sound. "Not strong enough to secure the pack? That's a lot of upheaval if outsiders think they have a chance to take a pack this size." Torin's brow furrows deeply, and he frowns at Calix's statement. "That could mean challenge after challenge. Someone will have to protect the females, maybe we could see if another strong pack would be willing to..."

"Wait a fucking minute," Torin growls, interrupting Calix. It's the first time I've seen the wolf show any fight.

One corner of my crafty, scheming lion's mouth tips the tiniest bit before he schools his features. "Do you have another solution? An alliance with another pack maybe?"

"Do you ever shut up?" Gunnar's snarled words make it to the room before he does. The door gets bumped open hard enough that it hits the wall. No one seems to notice or care.

"I was only pointing out the obvious," Kim replies as she enters the room, her nose turned up in the air.

"Well don't," Gunnar snaps while glaring at the back of her head like he wants to rip it off. I can't help the little grin that graces my lips. I like the fact that my kitten doesn't seem to like the shifter.

Kim ignores Gunnar's comment for the most part. Her eyes are now glued to her alpha as she slowly steps over with a tray in her hands. The smell of soup isn't nearly as unpleasant as usual. It actually causes my stomach to let out a small growl. Calix's head snaps around in my direction, his eyes a little wide. "Was that you?" It comes out more like an accusation than a

question.

I place my hand over my belly, feeling like it betrayed me. “Shut up.” I half pout that he called me out.

Torin leans around Calix. “Are they not feeding you, little dove?”

A crashing noise draws my attention just as I’m about to answer. I look over to see Gunnar close to full Berserker mode as he glares at Torin. Oh, I think I might wait this one out and see what happens. I’m usually the one who gets all jealous. Of course, I’ll stop it before anything happens to the wolf. A fight just wouldn’t be fair for him right now. Plus, I have every confidence Gunnar would kill him, even on Torin’s best day.

“If you would like death that badly, I can assist.” Grim’s cool, detached voice detonates much like I would expect a bomb would, and everyone in the room stops breathing—including me. The sexy fucker. I can’t help but get all excited about his willingness to kill for me.

“Aren’t they the best?” I whisper to Kim, forgetting we are not anything even remotely close to friends.

She has her fingers curled around the fork that was on the tray as if she’s ready to use it to defend Torin. Maybe she’s not as unredeemable as I thought. I guess I should get a handle on this before they end up killing the guy we kind of need to save. “Kitten, come sit down before you break anything else.” I pat Calix’s hand, which is still wrapped around my thigh. His movements seem ultra-slow as he tilts his head to examine the wolf next to him. “No need for concern, Wolfy, they take very good care of me.”

Gunnar’s jaw is still squared out when he stomps over to the couch and takes up residence behind me with his beefy arms crossed over his chest. “Quit calling him that,” he demands. I pretend not to hear him and cover my smile with the back of my hand. Leave it to him to be territorial over a nickname.

“You can hold on to that if it makes you feel better, but I think it would serve a much better purpose if you gave it to him for eating. It wouldn’t help you anyway,” I advise Kim just above a whisper. I don’t mean for it to come out as a threat, but that’s how it sounds, even to my own ears.

Kim takes one slow step backward after placing the fork back down on the plate. It’s the first time I notice there’s much more than soup and rice on the tray. I roll my eyes but don’t say anything. I’m sure she knows much more about a shifter’s diet than I do. The slab of meat might be just what the doctor ordered for Torin.

“Food makes them much less dangerous,” Torin tells Calix, as if he’s departing some sort of wisdom on how to take care of a woman.

“So, we were talking about new alphas,” I blurt, to get them off the topic of my stomach. I eye the soup again, wondering why it looks and smells so damn good.

“Right,” Calix grates through his teeth. “If you don’t have a successor, then you need to appoint one, unless you’re just planning on handing over your pack to the first shifter who challenges you.”

Torin leans back against the sofa, his eyelids sliding closed. “I hadn’t thought that far ahead,” he admits dejectedly.

“Well, you better. We aren’t baby-fucking-sitting a wolf pack for months. We have to stop a witch from killing Charmed,” Gunnar interjects, his aggravation clear in his tone. I think he’s feeling insulted that Torin implied they weren’t taking proper care of me.

“Alpha.” Kim’s voice is low, a little pleading. I watch the side of Calix’s face as he eyes her, trying to tell her to shut up with just a look, but she’s too focused on Torin to see Calix’s warning. “The pack needs you. *We* need you.” The way she says the word ‘we’ makes me think she’s speaking in more than the royal term.

Torin lifts his arm and uses his inner elbow to shield his eyes. Calix takes the opportunity to thrust his arm in the air to get Kim’s attention. “Shut up,” he mouths viciously. Kim’s face sours, but she holds her tongue.

“We have three days to get this handled. Your involvement isn’t an option,” Calix states. I can hear the frustration in his voice. I feel like he was having at least a little success at getting Torin involved in the pack before Kim opened her mouth.

I give her a scowl, but she’s not even looking in my direction. Three days isn’t a very long time to convince a man who seems ready to die that he has plenty to live for, especially if Kim keeps reminding him that he has an entire pack relying on him.

“You need to eat something. You can’t be passing out before we get some of this shit sorted,” Calix urges.

Torin lets his arm fall away from his face and flop to the side. “I’m not hungry, feed it to your dove.”

“What’s with the nicknames?” Gunnar snarls.

“Tell you what, Wolfy, I’ll make a deal with you. You eat, I eat. And no more of the dove crap. My fellas don’t like it.” The food really does smell



good, and if I have to puke it all up in a little while, it will be worth it just to make sure Torin gets something in his system.

“Damiana.” Grim says my name as if he’s warning me.

I wave away his concern and talk to Torin. “I usually have a very special diet, you see, but I consumed a few souls” —I roll my eyes— “and now my system is all out of whack. But that fucking soup smells divine, and I’m feeling a little peckish, so what do you say?”

“Consumed a few souls?” Kim’s words are laced with horror.

“She’s kind of judgy for being a wolf shifter.” I hook my thumb in her direction then turn to face her. “They were witches—witches who were performing rituals on baddies to steal their powers. Should I have let them go around killing my friends?”

Kim’s curly dark hair slides forward from behind her shoulders when she looks around at everyone else as if she can’t believe she’s the only one who finds it offensive. She thinks I’m a monster.

I’m not sure if I should feel proud or pissed off. How would she react to Uncle or Dare? Hell, she would probably run from the room screaming if Bloody Mary showed up. A deviously nasty idea forms in my mind.

I tsk my tongue and dismiss her. “She’s not just judgy; she’s also an asshole. Let’s eat before I decide I want another soul instead of the soup,” I remark, and it only horrifies Kim even more. I have no intention of killing her, but she doesn’t need to know that.

“She’s still young.” Torin inches forward and grabs the large bowl of still steaming soup before extending it out to me. I can see a fine tremor work its way up his arm, but I ignore it, just like he does.

“Are you sure, Dami?” Calix softens his voice, taking a little of the weight of the bowl from Torin and making sure it gets passed safely to me.

“I’m sure.” I give him a reassuring wink then add, “A deal’s a deal. I eat, you eat.” The heat of the bowl feels good in my hands. My mouth actually waters a little when I cradle it in my lap. Damn, I think I really am hungry. What the hell does that mean?

I can feel Gunnar looming over my shoulder and Calix scooting closer like he might need to grab the bowl at any moment. Ignoring them, I stir it with the spoon and make sure I get just the broth. From experience, I know that passes through my system just like water. My first sip is tentative, but hell if I don’t moan in approval. It’s *delicious*.

I lift the spoon and nod to Torin. “My compliments to the chef.” A small

grin forms on his lips, and he reaches for the plate piled high with rice and what looks like ground beef in a rich brown sauce.

“As long as you don’t eat him,” Kim mutters under her breath. I hide my smile behind another spoonful. She’s got moxie, I’ll give her that.

Torin makes a low rumbling sound in his chest that has me looking up. I assumed he was appreciating his meal, but he’s glaring at Kim instead. I think that noise was meant as a warning. She lowers her eyes and her chin.

I keep my gaze on Torin as he gracelessly shovels a few bites into his mouth, barely even chewing before he has his fork loaded again. It seems his body is taking over for him. The dish is empty before I even get brave enough to eat a noodle. He reaches for the slab of meat next, his fingers pulling it apart as he shoves chunks into his mouth. It reminds me of Theius. Something on my face must betray my thoughts, because Calix reaches over, ready to take the bowl. “Everything okay?”

“Fine, I was just thinking it’s been a while since I’ve seen Theius,” I reply. He hasn’t been back since I asked about the witches and told him about Gunnar. “Can you let him know it’s okay to come back for a visit?”

“I’ll see that he gets word,” Grim volunteers rather quickly while eyeing me, his forehead furrowed in a slight frown. I’m sure watching me eat is as strange for him as it is for me, but I can’t seem to help myself. It’s too damn good. I stir the soup again, this time bringing up a small carrot with a spoonful of broth. Before I have the chance to overthink it, I eat it too. “Oh, yum. Why is this so good?”

“I don’t think you’ve been feeding her enough,” Torin comments, while tearing into another chunk of meat, still fully engrossed in his food.

Lifting the bowl from my lap, I hand it over to Calix, even though all I want to do is eat more. Not understanding why I want to eat it is making me hesitant. I’ve held up my end of the bargain though. I ate. Torin is still eating, so I can call that a win.

## CHAPTER 11

It's early morning by the time we make it back to Kim's house right outside the pack property. The sun is just coming up over the horizon. Instead of seeing it as the catalyst of my loneliness, because none of my baddies would visit me during the daylight, I see the beautiful way the early morning light twinkles on the slightly dewy grass, and the way it shimmers on Kim's metal roof, causing a mirage of heat waves to rise up into the sky. I've seen all these things before, but before my vision was distorted with isolation.

Gunnar parks the car and Calix, who's been very quiet since we left Torin's, climbs out the rear passenger door. I open my door to find Gunnar standing just outside waiting for me, further proof I'm no longer alone just because the sun is out. I take his proffered hand, and we make our way up to the porch. The front door is propped into place from the inside. Calix reaches in and shoves it to the side, allowing us to enter.

"You didn't have to kick the door down," Calix scolds over his shoulder, stating the obvious. I'm sure Gunnar knows he didn't have to do it. He did it to be an asshole, because Kim was being an asshole.

"But it was fun."

Calix scoffs at Gunnar's response but heads straight for the kitchen. Unlike me, none of them ate while we were at Torin's. Blessedly, I never did get sick, not even a little, and I'm wondering how long it's going to take before someone wants to talk about it. Thankfully, everyone still seems to be too engrossed in pack issues to worry about why I've suddenly developed an appetite.

I reach for Grim's arm as he starts to follow Calix into the kitchen and

release Gunnar's hand, giving the Berserker a nod to go ahead without us. "Grim, can you show me how to release these souls or whatever?" I feel a little crazy asking, but maybe it has something to do with why my body is so fucked up right now.

He turns his arm over and reverses our hold, so he's now cradling my arm. "Certainly, my apologies for the delay."

"It's not your fault. It's just... yeah, I'm just ready now." I push my hair back over my shoulder with my free hand. I don't like knowing I have two souls cruising around inside me, nor do I want to be responsible for creating shades like Grim told me about at the Marshall House.

Grim looks around. "Come with me." I don't know why, but my stomach erupts in nervous butterflies. What if I can't do it?

He takes us upstairs to what I think is just a spare bedroom. The bed is made up, but I don't see anything personal, leading me to think no one sleeps here regularly. It makes me curious why Kim lives outside the pack land. "Should I change?"

Grim looks me over. "Yes, get comfortable." I leave him standing in the spare room to go change.

"Have a seat on the bed," Grim instructs when I return in yoga pants and a t-shirt. I hesitate for just a second. The reasons I want these things gone haven't changed just because I'm nervous.

"Should I lie down?"

"Whatever makes you feel more comfortable, more grounded."

"Grounded? Maybe I should just sit on the floor or outside." I chuckle to hide the wobble in my voice and my uncertainty.

"This is fine, Omnia."

I scoot into the center of the bed and fold my legs under me, placing my palms on my butterflied knees. "Okay, what next?"

"Close your eyes, relax."

I do as Grim tells me and let out a long breath. I feel the bed shift as he takes a seat near me. I'm tempted to peek at him, but I fight the urge.

"First, I want you to think about your breathing: in through your nose, out through your mouth." Grim's voice is low, calm.

I try to forget why I'm doing this and just focus on what I'm doing. After a minute or so, he says, "Now I want you to envision yourself sitting on the bed. Imagine what you would look like, as if you could see yourself in a mirror."

I think about the clothes I just put on, the way my hair looked the last time I saw myself in a mirror. It's surprisingly easy. It's almost like I can really see myself sitting on the bed. Grim is to my left, his gray eyes trained on me.

His mouth opens and I hear him speak. "Stop looking at me and focus on yourself, your aura. What do you see?" The fact that he knows I'm looking at him almost distracts me enough to snap me out of the vision, or whatever this is. How the hell does he even know I'm looking at him?

I force myself to look at myself sitting on the bed. My hair looks a little frizzy. "I don't see my aura. It's just me."

"Shush," Grim admonishes. "Keep looking, look past the exterior."

I watch my lips poke out in a pout and immediately school my features. It wasn't even intentional.

It takes me several more minutes, but after focusing on my breathing and just staring at myself on the bed, my features start to blur, and I notice a slight shimmering around my body, almost as if there's a hidden light source coming from behind me.

Within seconds I can see the full effect. There are several colors swirling around the center of my body. I inhale sharply when I see a green glob that keeps darting all over and disappearing around my back. A more sluggish bit of orange is hanging around my feet. Instinctually, I know these are the foreign souls.

Another bit of bright yellow, almost gold, catches my attention, but Grim speaks and my incorporeal self almost jerks back to my body. "You see them, what doesn't belong," he mutters. I pull myself back again so I'm hovering far enough away that I don't feel like I'm going to be pulled back into my body. I *can* see them; how does he know?

"Now, instead of thinking of your aura as a shield to protect you, think of it as a screen that allows things that don't belong to pass through."

In my mind, I imagine what that would look like, and the shift happens almost immediately. The green invader pushes past my mostly grayish blue field, and once it's through the barrier, it almost explodes as it expands into millions of tiny pinpricks until I can't see any of the green any longer.

Grim lets out a little sound of approval. I turn my attention to the orange glob near my feet and catch a glimpse of the small, yellow blip again, but nothing about it feels wrong or intrusive. Instead, it makes me feel almost happy, but I can't explain why.

Without any prompting from me, the orange slowly ebbs away from my aura and disappears almost immediately the moment it's free.

"Perfect." Grim's voice draws my attention, and I open my mouth to tell him that wasn't so hard, but I'm snapped back into my body and I end up mumbling some sort of nonsensical syllables. I sway like I just got off a carnival ride, and a laugh erupts from my gut. A giddy feeling of euphoria fills me, and I launch myself at Grim.

He catches me against his chest with ease, and his chin tips down so I get the most perfect view of his gray eyes as little flames of fire flicker to life. "Thanks, Loverboy," I murmur, as the laughter dies and a new emotion blossoms to life. I've never had anyone to rely on—well, I didn't know I had anyone to rely on. Turns out Grim has been with me from the beginning.

I curl my arms around his torso and nuzzle my cheek against his soft shirt. "I already feel better, thank you." Instead of speaking, Grim gently places his arms around me and strokes my hair.

Not that long ago, this kind of touch would have made me very uncomfortable. I would have hidden my feelings behind my sexuality and just tried to fuck him. I'm not saying being this close to Grim doesn't make me want to jump his bones like a greedy trollop, but there's something really special about just letting him or the others hold me.

"Food's ready!" Gunnar bellows from the bottom of the stairs.

"Do you think they heard him back at the mansion?" I tease, while pulling back from Grim.

"Doubtful, but not from lack of effort," he deadpans.

Standing, I reach down and offer Grim my hand. He accepts it but doesn't pull against me to rise. "Did you just make a joke?"

"Did you think it was funny?"

"I did, but I'm pretty easy to impress." We walk out of the room hand and hand. I decide I'd much rather sleep in there than in Kim's bed. She probably has some reverse succubus powers that would sap my lust for sex, or worse, the guys'. I don't think I could go back to Buzz and still be satisfied after knowing what it's like to let someone actually know my body, what I like, and what drives me crazy.

"Then yes, I was jesting," Grim responds, not realizing my thoughts have already wandered elsewhere. He places my hand on his bent arm and escorts me down the stairs like a debutant at her debut. I love every second of it.

The smell of food hits me and my stomach doesn't revolt at the thought.

My mouth doesn't immediately start to water like it did with the soup, but I'm definitely intrigued. I note the three plates already filled on the table as Grim guides me over. I'm not offended they aren't offering me any; I'm sure they think I ate the soup just to encourage Torin to eat.

Grim pulls out my chair before taking a seat himself. I lean over and smell the food on Calix's plate. "What do you have there?"

"Pancakes. I found some chocolate chips," Calix singsongs. "Want a bite?" I know he's only offering to be considerate, or from habit, but I nod my head.

"You do?" Gunnar drops his fork, surprised by my response.

I place my hand low on my stomach. "I think I still feel kind of hungry."

"Did you help her get rid of the souls?" Calix's brow furrows.

"Yes, she did remarkably well." Grim picks up his silverware and holds them as if he's been trained in fine manners.

"Well then, feed her. She's hungry," Gunnar demands, scowling at Grim, assuming I want my normal fare of sins.

"I believe she said she wanted the bite he offered." He points at Calix, using his butter knife. It shouldn't be threatening, but it somehow is.

"Wait, you were serious?" Calix looks around like he's expecting one of us to say, 'just kidding.'

Feeling slightly self-conscious, I give a half shrug. "Yeah, maybe being around you guys eating all the time is making food more tolerable." As a child, I always thought being made to eat was a form of punishment because I would always get sick after. "Or maybe..." I pause to sort the thoughts streaming through my mind. "I don't know, Grim said I should have been born normal." I give a small, self-deprecating laugh. "Maybe that's what this is. Me being normal."

Neither of the explanations makes a lot of sense, but I don't have any other theories just yet. Hell, who knows? This is probably all some sort of a fluke. Holding on to the souls for so long and not being able to consume sins just confused the hell out of my body, so it's looking for sustenance anywhere it can get it.

Calix scoots his entire plate and his chair closer to me. Using just the fork, he cuts into the thick pancake, taking a small piece off the corner and offering me the morsel. Without hesitating, I lean over and take the bite. The syrup drips down my chin then lands on my shirt. "Great," I mumble around the super sweet tidbit.

“Well?” Gunnar is leaning over the table, waiting for some kind of reaction from me. The thought of swallowing doesn’t make me want to puke, so I do. “How is it?” he asks impatiently.

“Really sweet, but good.” I lift my hand, but Calix catches me before I can wipe my face. He licks the pad of his thumb and runs it under my chin, taking the sticky syrup, and then he pops his thumb into his mouth, sucking it clean.

Well damn, I’m half tempted to lie on the table and cover myself in the sticky shit and let all three of them clean me up.

“Eat more.” Calix inches a little closer, and his hazel eyes are glued to my face in a way that I think would normally have Gunnar complaining.

“Only if she wants to,” Gunnar interjects.

“Do you want more?” Calix’s voice is deep. Fuck me, but I’m pretty sure he’s absolutely turned on right now.

“Maybe just a little more.” I watch his pupils dilate, and he cuts off another piece, this one just as small. He lifts the fork again, but when it hits my lower lip instead of going into my open mouth, I’m pretty sure he did it on purpose. I take the bite and lick my bottom lip, watching as Calix’s breathing picks up.

“Fucking shifters.” Gunnar slams his fork down and shoves his chair away from the table. I watch how stiff his shoulders are as he stalks away, leaving his food mostly untouched.

Grim picks up his and Gunnar’s plates before he stands. “I’m trusting you to curb your urges and to listen to her.” I’m a little confused as to why Grim is leaving and what he means with his instruction.

“I will,” Calix answers gutturally.

“What’s happening right now? It was just a few bites of food.” Grim doesn’t stick around to answer, he follows Gunnar deeper into the house.

I’m still staring after him when I feel my chair get jerked to the right and turned. Instead of facing the table, I’m now facing Calix. My knees are between his legs, and with deft movements, he grabs the underside of my chair and tugs me forward so I’m as close to him as possible without kneeling him in the balls.

Calix doesn’t answer me either. Instead, he gets another bite of food ready for me. “This okay?”

I give myself a second to think about how my stomach is actually feeling. “Aren’t you going to eat?”



“Not until I know you’ve gotten enough.” Calix’s eyes roam over me as if I were sitting at the table naked, not in a shirt with a syrup stain over my tit.

I lean forward and speak softly. “Do you have a food kink or something?” It’s clear he’s worked up. Even if my knee weren’t resting against his dick, I would know just by the way he’s looking at me.

“Not a food kink.” He shakes his head, but his eyes are locked on mine. “Feeding my mate,” he growls, and runs his tongue over his top teeth. It’s a predatory thing to do. The bite of pancake is still poised in the air, and there’s syrup dripping on his jeans and he doesn’t even notice.

“So, this is a shifter thing?” I make the connection to what Gunnar said as he stormed away from the table. “This is important to you.” I frown, how did I not know this?

“Have you had enough?” Calix’s hand starts to lower.

I’m feeling okay, and I can tell this is really important to him, even if he’s not saying it. “Just one more bite.”

Calix dips the food back into the syrup and extends it to me. His entire body moves with his arm, leaning in close to me. I take the bite, never breaking eye contact with him.

He makes a grunting sound and tosses the fork back to the table. Before I’m even done chewing, he reaches forward and hauls me against his body. I wrap my arms around his neck as he arranges my legs so I’m straddling his waist.

I can feel his hardness beneath me, and his body is throwing off all kinds of heat. Feeling his excitement arouses me, but it also makes me a little sad. I didn’t know this was something he was missing. What if I can’t give it to him regularly?

Calix nuzzles his nose against my throat, his lips dragging all over my skin as he explores. I feel his hand clamp down on my shoulder, crushing me to him. In that moment, I know I would suffer a little belly ache for him, for this. Anything that’s important to him is important to me.

Calix’s free hand skates down my body, and he cups my breast. I arch the little amount his grip allows, loving the way his touch feels on my body. We’re pressed together so tightly, I can feel how fast his heart is beating and hear how hard he’s breathing. My eyes fall closed, and I forget about everything but this moment. I don’t worry why or how we ended up here, I just enjoy every fucking second of it.

Calix pulls at the collar of my shirt and tugs it down, his lips pressing

against the newly exposed skin as if he can't get enough of me. His grip on my shoulder lessens as I feel his fingers trail over my back until he's cupping my ass and grinding up into me.

We have way too many clothes between us for me to feel anything except the pressure where we're connected. I claw at the back of his shirt, more than prepared to shred it to get to what's underneath.

Calix shifts his legs and tightens his hold on my ass as he stands. He never makes it fully upright though, because he bends over and lays me on the table. His hand swipes across the tabletop, and a I hear a plate crash against the floor. I freeze. I don't know if the sound is enough to have Gunnar running in here. When I don't hear any yelling, I open my eyes to find Calix staring down at me. His eyes have taken on the golden glow he seems to display when he's shifted into his lion form.

I trace my finger along his cheek, and he leans into my caress, his lips parting on an exhale. I move my touch lower, but the fabric of his shirt stops me from touching his skin. "Take this off," I order.

Keeping his lower body against mine, Calix leans back and pulls his shirt up and off before tossing it carelessly to the side. I sit up and remove my shirt and bra too.

The soft hair on his chest teases against my skin as he leans down and covers me. The hard table beneath me doesn't give a bit, so he feels extra heavy against me. Calix kisses me softly, tasting my lips and mouth as if I'm delicate, before moving back to my neck and chest. His tongue is even rougher than usual, it catches on my skin and makes me shiver in delight.

As he continues down my body, I feel his fingers hook the waistband of my pants. Without prompting, I lift my hips, urging him to take them off, but he doesn't. "I'm going to devour every inch of you, Dami." He gently sucks the underside of my breast into his mouth and pulls hard enough to leave a bruise. I arch up and cradle the back of his head, feeling his long, silky strands sift through my fingers.

When his mouth latches onto my nipple, I fist my hand in his hair and begin to roll my hips when he swirls his tongue around my bud. The dual textures of his tongue are wreaking havoc on my senses. Just when I get used to the roughness, he curls his tongue back and I feel the slick, smooth underside slide across my nipple.

I damn near whimper when he releases me and turns his focus to my other breast. When I arch up again, he cups my pussy. A soft feral sound

comes up from his chest and vibrates my skin.

“You’re burning up and so wet. I can feel how much you need me.” Using the tips of his fingers, Calix pushes my damp panties to the side and runs his fingers up and down my lower lips. I lift my hips, hoping he will slide his fingers inside me or at least find my clit, but he doesn’t. Instead, he puts a little extra pressure on the heel of his hand and my clit throbs in response.

“Take my pants off and put your mouth on me,” I beg, shimmying my legs in an effort to get the material off.

I feel Calix grin against my skin before he flicks my nipple with his tongue. My lower body tightens, making me feel like I might orgasm already. “Eager, are we?”

I lift my head and look at him, his eyes meeting mine, but he doesn’t stop licking and sucking my nipple. The way his body is curled protectively over mine makes me want him even more.

I reach down and try to pull him closer, my nails scraping against his side, and he sucks in a sharp breath, hissing.

Using two of his fingers, he parts me and slides his middle finger inside me. His movements are shallow from the restriction of my pants, but it’s still enough to have my head dropping back against the table with a thud.

After giving a little more attention to my tits, Calix finally works his way down my body with light kisses and caresses. My heart rate kicks up when I finally feel him start to tug my yoga pants down the rest of the way. I lift my hips off the table to help him. Thankfully, he takes my underwear too, leaving me bare assed on a stranger’s kitchen table. Not a new experience, but it’s different because I’m with Calix. I don’t even consider asking him if he wants to go to the bedroom.

In the back of my mind, I know Grim or Gunnar could walk through the door at any moment, and that excites me even more. Locking his hand around my ankle, Calix pulls me to the edge of the table so my ass is perched right at the end. He hooks his foot around the leg of a chair and drags it over before taking a seat, positioning his face right up close and personal with my pussy, as if he’s about to sit down to a feast.

The first brush of his lips has me letting out a soft moan. When his hands join in—one under my ass and the other over my pubic bone—I let my legs fall open. Reaching above my head, I grip the edge of the table. Calix’s tongue makes a long, lazy swipe up my center, and the rough texture against

my soft skin has me squirming.

“Sit still,” he growls, and tightens his grip on me. I think about telling him to shut up and get to work, but he slides his tongue inside me, and I do, in fact, sit still. My entire body freezes as every nerve ending in my body focuses on the spot between my legs.

Holy fuck, it’s like having a hot as hell bullet vibrator teasing my opening and rolling up to my clit. “Oh, God!” I groan, as every muscle in my body relaxes. I don’t want to move an inch or do anything that would deprive me of the unbelievable sensation of his mouth between my legs.

Calix hums, a sound of pure satisfaction. After only a few minutes of being under his swirling tongue, my body slowly starts to tense as an orgasm builds. He traces a circle around my clit before sucking it into his mouth. My back arches clear off the table. Hell, I would probably be floating if he didn’t have such a tight grip on my hips.

My head starts to thrash from left to right as I tighten my knees around him. The chair screeches across the floor as Calix stands abruptly. He lifts my legs without taking his mouth off me and slides them over his shoulders. My upper back is the only part of me left on the tabletop.

I can feel my heart thundering in my head, but I don’t give a fuck if I pass out as long as I get to come first. Calix leans forward, placing his palm on the table, and curls over me so I can see his eyes as he devours me. If I thought his eyes were glowing before, it was nothing compared to what’s happening right now. His normal hazel eyes are almost completely gold, like two glimmering topazes burning just for me. His free hand slides from my hip, over my stomach, and grabs my breast roughly, kneading the plump flesh. The dual sensations are too much and I cry out as my body spasms. My legs quake every time his tongue or lips touch my clit.

I ride out the waves of pleasure as Calix lowers me to the table. I’m so blissed out I don’t even realize he lowered his pants, but I know it the moment he enters me in one deep thrust.

My inner muscles milk him, greedy from my first orgasm. Our eyes meet, my gaze lazy on his. Calix’s mouth is parted, and his lips are wet with my juices. I reach up and grab him by the back of the neck and drag him down. I can taste my pussy on his lips and smell myself all over him, and I like it. Our tongues tangle, our teeth clashing in a bid to taste more of each other as he starts fucking me.

He pulls back, gasping for breath, as he rests his forehead against mine.

Our eyes remain locked as he reaches for the edge of the table and uses it as leverage to go even deeper inside me. No words are spoken, but none are needed.

My back is damp with sweat, so every pump of his hips has me sliding a little, as small moans leave my lips. Calix's rhythm builds until his pace is almost frenzied, every slap of his hips creating a little tap against my clit. I rake my nails down his back and whisper, "Come for me."

"I can't, not until you do." His voice is almost pained, his jaw tight. Releasing my breast, he skates his fingers down my side and back to my ass. I pant as I feel the tip of his finger rimming my ass. He slows his thrusts just enough to gather my wetness to use as lube, then he pushes one finger inside me.

Calix's eyes close and he groans. "You're squeezing me, sweetheart. So fucking tight." My climax hits me hard and fast. I buck under Calix, my body reacting on its own.

Calix pins me down harder and finds his own release within a few seconds of mine. His pace eventually slows, but he doesn't stop grinding himself inside me for a good few minutes.

My arms fall off his shoulders and land with a slap against the table. I'm spent. I don't think I could get my legs to work even if I tried, but I'm not ready to put forth the effort. Calix pets my hair reverently, kissing my cheek and ear. "I fed you," he mutters, possessive and dark. Hell yes, he can feed me anytime, especially if this is how it ends.

"I'm pretty sure you do have a food kink, but you won't hear a single complaint from me." My voice comes out raspy, making we wonder just how loud I was.

"You're my only kink, sweetheart." I let out a small sigh after his sweet words.

Calix eventually helps me stand. My legs are a little wobbly, but nothing I can't handle. "Oh, shit." I cover my mouth with the back of my hand when I see the state of the kitchen. The four-person table is listing to the side. I bend over, and sure enough, one of the metal legs is all bent out of whack. That's also when I see a broken plate of food on the floor, the syrup from the plate splashed up all over the lower cabinets.

"I'm not cleaning that up!" I call out quickly, like I'm a child saying 'not it.'

"Who cares? Gunnar already broke the door—what's a table?" I let Calix

lead me from the mess. Neither of us bother with our discarded clothes; they probably have glass or syrup on them anyway.

“Where is everyone?” I whisper, as he guides me into the room with my luggage.

“Don’t worry, they didn’t go far.” He pats my bottom, urging me to the open suitcase. I grab a black shirt off the end of the bed, and as soon as it passes over my head, I know it’s Gunnar’s. It smells like him. I inhale deeply, bringing the fabric up to my nose.

“Are they upset?”

“No, get in bed.” Gunnar’s gruff voice has me turning toward the door. Calix disappears into the bathroom, shutting the door softly behind him.

“Can we sleep in the other room? Kim has no fuck shui.”

“You mean fung shui?” Gunnar arches one brow.

“Uh-uh, I know what I mean.”

“That’s my shirt.” Gunnar ignores my comment and saunters slowly over to me.

“That a problem?” I grab the collar again, bringing it up to my nose to take another sniff. He grunts out a content sound, grabs my shoulder, and spins me so we’re heading out of the room and into the other.

## CHAPTER 12

My heavy boots make clomping sounds as I stomp down the stairs. I'm already frustrated, and we haven't even left Kim's house yet. We spent the entire day with Torin again yesterday, and I don't feel like he's any closer to a decision about what he's going to do with his pack than he was the first night.

He's eating, which could be a sign of something, but who fucking knows? He vacillates between desolate and crabby, favoring the latter when Kim is around.

Adding to my pissy mood is the fact that I haven't heard from Aeson since we arrived. Plus, Grim left this afternoon, and he still isn't back, which makes me think that witchy fucker Antonio is up to no good.

"What's wrong, my lady?" Gunnar meets me at the bottom of the stairs, stopping me from going into the kitchen.

I roll my eyes, but I'm no longer bothered by the honorific. My lips fall into a slight pout. "I feel like we're running in circles. Well, not even running, but just... at a standstill or something. Yesterday was a complete bust, and we're no closer to plucking out Antonio's eyeballs." I pinch my fingers together, miming squishing the tiny orbs.

Gunnar tilts his head to the side and a half smile graces his lips. Stepping a little closer, he wraps his arms around my waist, hoists me up from the last step, and then turns to head toward the kitchen while carrying me. "Well, you accomplished something." He slides his grip down to cup my ass and grinds his stiff dick against me. "You know what it does to me when you talk about maiming," he coos against my neck sweetly. He's so easy to please.

"Are you gonna eat this or not?" Calix grouses.

Gunnar slides me slowly down his body before depositing me in one of the chairs. Grim's absence is noticeable when I look around the table. There are, however, three plates, one with less food than the others.

"Hungry?" Calix's brows are high on his forehead.

I push the small pile of fluffy eggs around a little. They smell pretty good, and I haven't had any adverse reactions to my newfound hunger just yet, so I might as well. "It's weird, right? After all these years, how can I suddenly eat now?" Acknowledging the fact doesn't stop me from placing a bite into my mouth.

"Maybe you should have been consuming souls instead of sins all along. Maybe it triggered some kind of transition," Calix supplies while watching me eat, instead of eating his own food.

"I guess that makes as much sense as anything else. Are we heading back to the wolf's den after this?" I know I'm the one who started this conversation, but it makes me uncomfortable, so I switch topics.

"Yeah, Death said he would meet us there when he was done." Calix accepts my subject change easily.

"Did he say where he was going or why?" I place my fork down after only a few bites.

"He didn't say," Gunnar answers, but from his tone, it's clear we all know that the only reason he would have left was if another Charmed were dead.

"So, what's the plan? We only have today and tomorrow to figure out what the hell Torin is going to do before all hell breaks loose, right? We need to get him to either lead or pick a replacement who can withstand an outside challenge, or shit is about to get really messy with that pack."

"And the Nemean," Gunnar adds, not even bothering to look up from his plate.

Calix shoves his dish away, even though it's not empty. "Pretty much. I'll be stuck here until the dust settles, longer if the alpha who takes over doesn't inspire trust, otherwise there will be an exodus of members seeking out other packs, going rogue." He pinches his temples between his fingers, as if the thought alone is enough to give him a headache.

"Does he seem any closer to deciding what he's going to do?" I ask. Calix was the last one to speak with him early this morning before we left to head back to Kim's for the day.

"Not really. He keeps going back and forth."



“Tell me about it.” Gunnar leans back, crossing his arms over his chest. “At least when we first got here, he knew what he wanted.”

I reach over and swat his arm with the back of my hand. “He wanted to die,” I hiss.

“Yeah, should we really be interfering with that?” Gunnar glances between Calix and me. “It’s fucked up. The guy has a shit ton of responsibilities, and he loses the one thing that gives him peace. You telling me you wouldn’t do the same?” His eyes are locked onto Calix now.

“I don’t have an entire pack under me,” Calix retorts defensively.

“Would it matter?” Gunnar isn’t letting up.

Calix raises his hands in surrender, but his face tells another story—his lips are pulled tight and his eyes are narrowed. “I’m not saying either way is wrong. I’m just saying as an alpha, he knew the risks and responsibilities involved, and now he needs to decide. If he wants to waste away until he joins his mate, so be it. But there needs to be someone to replace him. A pack this size with this much power…” He lowers his hands and shakes his head slowly. “I’m trying to avoid a war.” He pushes away from the table without looking back.

I place my palm on the table, preparing to rise so I can follow him, but Gunnar stops me by laying his hand on mine. “It’s my fault he’s pissed. I’ll talk to him.”

My mouth wants to fall open in surprise, but I just blink a few times. “Sure, I’ll clean this up and get ready to go.” I watch Gunnar’s back as he trails after Calix, and then it dawns on me—he’s not the only one changing to accommodate the others. The proof is in my hands as I carry the dirty dishes to the sink. I never would have done anything so domestic for someone else before them.



THE DRIVEWAY IS LINED with more cars than yesterday when we pull up to the front of the mansion. I let out a long, low whistle. Calix’s sigh is audible.

There’s a group of about eight men standing in the front yard that I haven’t seen here before. They stick out like sore thumbs, decked out in biker leathers. Their eyes are glued to our borrowed SUV, and they’re not bothering to hide the fact that they’re curious about who else is arriving.

“Why are all these people here?” I ask Calix from the back seat, while Gunnar puts the vehicle in park and cuts the engine.

“Everyone is watching to see what happens,” Calix answers, then opens his door without another word. I scramble for my door handle, but he somehow beats me to it and extends his hand to me. It always makes me feel like some movie star when they do this, and the vain part of me loves the attention.

I place a soft kiss on Calix’s lips when I’m standing in front of him. He smells and looks so good I nearly forget about our audience. When I pull back, Gunnar is behind me, looking over my shoulder with a menacing scowl.

There’s a noticeable uptake in whispers and quiet conversations. Without meaning to, I send out my senses to see if there’s a threat. There is just about every sin you could imagine drifting on the air, but none of them appeal to me. Other than taking what Grim has to offer, I’ve never really consumed baddies’ sins. I’m currently surrounded by monsters and their immoralities, yet none of them are appealing.

I sneer when one of the bikers tilts his head and examines me, as if he can’t quite figure out what I’m doing here. I wrap my hand possessively around Calix’s and reach for Gunnar’s arm with the other. His fingers are too meaty to hold hands with, but oh do they have other wonderful uses. I’m thinking about Gunnar’s thick fingers and what they can do to me when one of the bikers lets out a hearty laugh and hollers, “Calix!”

“Fuck me,” my golden-haired hottie curses under his breath. He does a manly chin jerk and plasters a calm look on his face to cover the aggravation that was there moments ago.

“Holy hell, it’s been ages.” The guy is making his way over to us, wearing an easy grin on his face. “Tammy is going to be so excited she came when she realizes you’re here.” The man just keeps talking while he approaches. It seems like he and Calix are old friends. My ears perk up at the mention of Tammy.

Completely ignoring me, he wraps his arms around Calix in a tight, quick hug, slapping him on the back—a little too hard for my liking—before releasing him completely.

“I didn’t even know you were in the States! What gives? You can’t call? That’s going to piss Tammy off.” He elbows Calix in the arm jokingly. I’ve already decided I do not like Tammy, and this man is quickly working his

way onto my shit list.

“Don, this is—”

“Damiana.” I cut Calix off before he can finish. “I don’t know who Tammy is, but you should warn her that Calix is taken.”

Don’s dark eyes drop to me, and he doesn’t hide his perusal. I kept it simple tonight—black boots, tight jeans, and a spaghetti strap top. The few extra seconds he spends staring at my tits do not endear him to me. He lets out a chuckle. “Honey, Tammy would eat you up and spit you out.”

I lean forward just enough so when I whisper, he’ll still hear me. “Not if she’s dead.”

The man’s eyes dance in a way that I think he might be just as turned on by violence as Gunnar. “If you don’t stop looking at me like that—”

“I’ll let her pluck out your eyeballs.” Gunnar plants his hand on Don’s chest and gives him a little shove before looking at me for approval.

“Who says chivalry is dead?” I coo up at him.

“Honest truth, friend, on both accounts. She could kill you where you stand without batting an eye, and…” Calix releases my hand to wrap his arm around my waist. “I most certainly am taken.”

“Aw, you’re getting an extra special blow job for that.” I lean into Calix’s side.

Gunnar scoffs. “What about me? I said I would let you mutilate him.”

Before I have a chance to tell him he deserves a reward too, I feel Grim’s presence as a portal opens. I don’t feel ill like I did the last few times, but I don’t feel the need to feed either.

The Don guy takes a slow step back, and the group he left moves up behind him. I glance over my shoulder to see Grim’s cloaked silhouette bathed in moonlight a few feet away. I spin away from Calix, and scold, “You weren’t supposed to stay gone long.”

“Forgive me, Omnia. I had matters to attend to.” Grim’s cloak melts away as he walks toward us, revealing dark jeans and a dark shirt.

“Holy shit,” someone behind me breathes, as if he looks more frightening now than he did in his cloak. I examine him, I just don’t see it. The only thing scary about him right now is how fucking perfect he is.

“You should check in more. I worry.”

Grim dips his chin and lowers his eyes before coming to a halt right in front of me. “Are they bothering you, Damiana? I could dispatch them,” Grim tells me, but looks over my shoulder. The embers in his eyes flare, and

I inadvertently shiver as his words warm my black heart.

I turn so Grim is pressed up against my back, and I have Calix and Gunnar at each side. “I don’t think that will be necessary, will it, Don? Besides, if anyone gets to kill them, it will be me. Especially Tammy.”

Don raises his hands and takes another step backward, though I can still see the slight gleam in his eye. “Not necessary at all.”

“This is pretty far for a friendly visit,” Calix addresses Don, ignoring that the rest of us just threatened his life.

“Pack like this is too big to risk falling into the wrong hands. I’ve been hearing that Torin ain’t doing so good. Not that I can blame him. Tough shit all the way around.” Don’s demeanor is decidedly more serious.

Calix nods in acknowledgement. “Well, I have some things to take care of. It’s been good seeing you. Stick around, okay?”

Don reaches his hand out to Calix and makes eye contact with me. “My apologies to you both. I didn’t comprehend the situation.”

I give him a happy grin in response. He’s not being disingenuous. “No worries. Just make sure you tell your friend. I wouldn’t want to kill her over a misunderstanding.” I chuckle.

Don scrunches up his nose and tilts his head to the side. “You’re remarkably straightforward, and a little strange,” he comments hesitantly.

“Astute observation. We have to run along now. Wolfy’s waiting.” I point over to the wide front door of the mansion, which just opened. Torin is standing in the entrance. The food has worked wonders on his physique. I can tell, even from this distance, he’s bulked up. The scowl on his face is speaking volumes too.

I wave my hand in the air eagerly. “Hey, Wolfy.” His face softens for a tiny second as he glances at me, but the snarl returns to his lips immediately when he looks at all the people congregating on his lawn. It’s good to see him out of his room; it might help him to see something other than just his grief-soaked walls.

Kim steps up next to Torin, her arms crossed over her chest and her leg kicked out to the side. “Great, it’s the joy succubus,” I mumble under my breath. “Hi, Kim, weirdest thing...” I start walking up to the front porch. “Your kitchen table broke. Don’t worry, no one was injured, but man, they just don’t make things like they used to, am I right?”

Kim’s indifferent little pout falls as she gapes in disbelief. “You broke the table?”

“I mean, was the craftsmanship that great to begin with? I probably did you a favor. Somebody could have gotten hurt on that thing.”

“How did you manage to break my table?”

I place my hand on my chest in mock outrage. “Have you no concern for my wellbeing? For the wellbeing of Calix?” I tsk. She’s so easy to rile up—fun even. Every time I’m just starting to think I like her, she somehow shoves the stick higher up her ass, and it’s blatantly obvious no one did any prep work, otherwise she might have found that she likes it.

“Hey, Becky, that skirt is killer.” I wave at one of the other ladies I spoke to last evening.

“Thanks, Dami.” She grins and walks past us to another hallway. I see the way her eyes track Torin as she goes. Yesterday, when I went for a look around the house, it was very clear that everyone here is concerned for their alpha, and that they really are grieving with him and want him to return to the pack as their leader. He’s respected, loved even.

It makes me want to push him to keep going instead of giving up. “So, Wolfy, what do you think about all these folks who have come for a visit?” Torin growls in response, and Kim perks up a little.

There might be some hope for him yet.

## CHAPTER 13

“Tell me why you came to the city.” Torin rips a hunk of meat off the end of a rib bone. I can hear his teeth grinding on gristle and small bones, and my teeth ache in sympathy.

“To find and kill a witch,” Gunnar answers. He’s eating too, but his manners would be considered refined compared to the wolf’s.

“You came all the way across the country for a single witch?” Torin’s eyebrows rise.

“He’s a very naughty witch.” I put some distance between myself and the table. I may have a small appetite now, but if I keep hearing Torin snap bones and pulverize them, I might just decide I’ll never eat again.

“Must be to have gained your attention. What’d he do?”

“He’s performing ritual magic, killing Charmed and stealing their powers, but he’s figured out a way to filter and syphon the magic so he doesn’t take the backlash,” Calix informs him.

Torin lets out a low whistle when he’s done chewing. The table is constantly being restocked with food, and the wolf is just eating and eating. I can’t believe he still has room for it all. You’d think by this point he’d at least have a food baby pooch.

“How’d you get roped into this?” Torin doesn’t need to elaborate, we know he’s referring to his situation.

“That would be Kim.” I roll my head to the side and give her a droll look. At least she’s been keeping her mouth shut.

“I’m on... extended leave.” Calix pushes back from the table a bit. “I haven’t been keeping up-to-date on what’s happening. Someone noticed when I came into town.”

“Hard not to notice,” Kim scoffs, and pushes her curly dark hair over her shoulder. “You’re lucky the humans didn’t see you, it’s not like you were taking precautions.”

“Stars, don’t you have someone who can take one for the team and fuck the stick out of her ass?” I direct my question to Torin. “I will donate a ball gag to the effort.”

I see Torin’s tongue move behind his lips as he tries to school his features. I’d like to think he was hiding a smile, but he was too quick to cover it for me to know. “Do not speak like that,” he admonishes.

Kim doesn’t hide her triumphant grin as she gives me the side-eye, that is until Torin turns his head and makes it obvious he’s talking to her and not me. Good thing too, I would have given him an earful. I’m not one of his pack. “You’re lucky he isn’t stringing you up by your shorthairs. Speak to him like that again, and I will.” Torin’s voice is all growly.

I don’t stoop to Kim’s level and smile at the fact that she got in trouble, but on the inside, I might be doing a fist pump to the alpha for finally taking charge.

“My apologies, Calix, Alpha.” Kim lowers her eyes and her head.

“I started it.” I wave my hand. “She’s just pissed at me. But seriously, not getting dick turns me into a mega-beast too.”

“Can we not?” Gunnar grumbles.

What?” I ask innocently, then focus back on Kim. “I’ll get you a Hitachi wand, problem solved. Five minutes and you won’t even remember what dick is.”

“I destroyed that.” Grim crosses his arms over his chest and lowers his eyelids, looking very smug for a monster who rarely shows emotions.

“He did,” I confess, then whisper, “But I have three dicks at my disposal, so...” I’m definitely winning at life, even without my wand.

“No, we’re done with this conversation.” Gunnar stands up and moves around as if he doesn’t know what to do with himself.

“Okay, okay. We can talk later,” I offer to Kim, but I just don’t think she’s too into having me as a friend. I miss Aeson and Bloody Mary. She would always pretend to be outraged at all my sex talk, but I know she’s a secret freak in the sheets, you can just tell these things.

“How do you know the witch is in my city?” Torin brings the conversation back around to the more comfortable topic of death and bad magic.

“We followed the bodies,” Grim replies.

“Fuck, that’s... People are dying in my territory and I didn’t even know?” Torin’s eyes go a little cloudy. I can tell he’s thinking about how much he’s lost, and it’s not just his mate.

“We could use your help with this. You know the city better than anyone, I’m guessing.” Torin starts to nod before Calix is even finished. “But we need to get what’s happening here sorted first,” he adds.

The wolf’s head stops moving and he freezes. I would be willing to bet he’s not even breathing. Eventually, he turns his head and looks out the window. It’s still dark, but I can see the earliest hints of a glow on the horizon off to the east. The sun will be up soon, strange how sometimes we feel like our world is ending, yet every morning the sun is there to remind you that the world just keeps spinning with or without us.

“I will lead my pack...” Kim lets out a gasp and starts mumbling her thanks to whomever she prays to. “Until I find a successor.” Torin stands and rolls his head around on his shoulders as if he’s preparing for a fight.

I watch Kim’s face fall as tears gather on her lower lashes. The hope she felt just moments ago is crushed under Torin’s announcement. I’m sad for her, sad for Becky and all the other wolves I’ve met over the last few days. I wonder if Calix somehow saw this coming, and that’s why he asked the biker guy to stick around. Funny, I can’t remember his name, but I have no problem remembering Tammy’s name. I guess it’s not all *that* surprising.

Calix stands and moves so he’s in front of Torin. The wolf has a few inches on him in height, but Calix’s presence more than makes up for it. “I appreciate you coming here. Fate has a strange way of intervening.” Torin reaches out, and he and Calix clasp each other’s forearm in a kind of embrace. It feels formal, like a decision has been made.

Kim stands slowly, wiping under her eye, and erases all evidence of her emotions from her face. “I’ll let them know to prepare the hall for this evening.” Her voice is a little flat, and without waiting for a response, she heads out of the room.

“I’m going to go with her. See you guys in a bit.”

“Stay out of trouble,” Gunnar calls after me as I’m rushing to catch up with Kim.

I roll my eyes and give him a wave over my shoulder. “You too, Kitten.”

Kim doesn’t slow her steps, but she does turn her head to glare at me when I make it to her side. “Can you even help being insulting?”



“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Do you think he likes you calling him Kitten?” Not only does she sneer the word, but she rolls her eyes, too.

“I happen to know he loves that I call him Kitten. Why the fuck would I want to insult him?” I’m already rethinking my decision to go with her.

Kim stops in the long hall and tilts her head just enough to make it clear she thinks she’s looking at me like I’m an idiot. I grit my teeth, telling myself this chick just got dealt a hard blow and she’s probably just lashing out. “He’s a man, and you call him Kitten like he’s some helpless little creature.”

“Ha! Gunnar helpless? Now that’s funny. You know nothing about him or me.” I return her glare, looking her up and down. “You have to be one of the most self-absorbed, shallow assholes I’ve ever met. And that’s a big deal coming from me. I dine on the sins of jerks like you.”

“You what?” She takes a step back from me like I just told her I have herpes or something.

“You know what? Fuck you. I came out here to try to cheer you up, to say that maybe he would change his mind, but with judgmental people like you, why would he? It’s pretty clear you’re way too human for me.” I give her a double finger salute and head off in the opposite direction of where she’s going, but I turn a corner before I make it back to Torin’s room.

I’m so mad right now I don’t want to be around anyone. “She’s lucky I didn’t rip her face off,” I grumble, while walking down yet another hallway. That’s the last time I try to be friendly with that chick.



I’M MILLING around a ballroom in my jeans and a tank top, knowing I’m way underdressed for the event, but not giving a fuck. All the women around me are either decked out in gowns or something I would wear for hunting. I’ve gotten a few looks, but nothing more than I’m used to.

Calix, Grim, and Gunnar are equally out of place. None of us guessed we would be attending a party this evening—well, I didn’t, at least.

I got here early enough to see someone removing the small, ornate throne-like chair that was sitting next to the larger one Torin is now poised in. Louise’s chair. It made my heart ache for him.

I glance around the now full room, wondering if anyone here is still

considering challenging him. From the heavy scowl on his face to the balled up fists on his thighs, I don't think it would be a good idea. He's a far cry from the man who was pleading with me for death just a few nights ago. In his place is an angry man who looks like he would like to beat someone to death just for the fun of it. Everyone has kept their distance. Even Kim.

I saunter up to his dais and plop myself on one of the steps. "This is not at all what I thought a shifter party would be like." I roll my head back so I can see Torin. He's upside down, but whatever.

Torin places his elbow on the arm of his chair and uses his hand to cover his lips. "Pretty fucking lame," he murmurs, but his face is still curled into a sneer.

I face the crowd again and watch Calix as he extricates himself from a group of particularly talkative shifters. "Can we go home now?" I half whine when he approaches.

"Home is pretty far away," he teases, and gracefully lowers himself to sit beside me.

"You know what I mean." I lean over and nuzzle against him until he lifts his arm to accommodate me. I look over the crowd and open my senses. The sins waft over to me just as if I were at Rumors or any other club I use for hunting.

Lust, jealousy, even a little wrath. I follow that thread and it leads me back to a man with light hair and small features. His face is a mask of calm, but inside he is fuming with rage. Grim wanders over, and I lean a little closer to Calix to keep the man in my sights. The very first stirrings of hunger awaken within me.

"I'll be right back." I kiss Calix's jaw and trail my hand over Grim's chest as I saunter across the room. I don't need to get much closer, but my guys are too distracting, so a little distance from them is good. I can feel their eyes on me as I walk, so I put a little extra sway in my step. It would be easier if I was wearing heels, but I manage.

I stop when I'm on the fringes of the group the man is standing in. Without being too obvious, I look at his aura, noting the muddy color. This isn't his first bout with wrath, he's a vengeful man.

As the thought forms, so does the realization that he is a man, not a shifter. I scan the room again. How many humans are here tonight? Why are they here? Does Torin know?

He must; they all must. I would have known sooner, too, if I'd actually

been paying attention. I give a few people who look at me a fake smile and move a little closer to him, curious why he would be among a wolf pack.

The man closest to him drops his hand on the angry man's shoulder. "Hopefully it won't be too long now. The morning period is over, so things will get back to normal."

The angry guy shrugs the other man's hand away. "Don't act like you know shit about it. You wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for me." Oh, juicy. I move even closer, pretending I'm making my way across the room.

"I'm just saying your turn will come. Now that he's back, they can change you," the other man soothes, trying to console his friend.

"Yeah, and maybe if I hadn't brought you here, I would have already been changed instead of you!"

"Considering I'm already a wolf, maybe you should think about who you're talking to."

Fury fills my senses. I watch a vein in the pissed off human's neck pop out, and his face goes all purple. He looks like he's about to have a stroke. I wiggle my fingers through the air, feeling the wrath dance along my skin, and giddy excitement fills me. I forgot just how much I like this. I embrace the dark feeling of rage and drag it inside. It fills me in a way that makes me feel like I'm bathed in a warm glow.

I giggle, and it draws both of the men's attention. "Don't mind me, I'm just passing through." I know I'm still smiling. I probably look a little deranged, but who cares? I feel like I just found something I didn't know I lost.

"Who's she?" the angry dude hisses. "Somebody else who's going to get picked before me?"

"She showed up a few days ago with those guys over there." I keep walking as if I can't hear them. "They've been with the alpha most of the time. I think the blond guy is a big deal among the shifters. I don't know for sure though, nobody tells me anything important yet, I'm too new."

"She's probably fucking him," he sneers.

I stop in my tracks. "Who do you think I'm fucking?" My voice comes out louder and angrier than I intended. The new wolf's eyes widen, but the angry dude just scowls at me like I'm the one doing something wrong by eavesdropping. I snap my fingers a few times near his face. "Hello, I'm talking to you."

The wolf lowers his eyes and his head. "I'm sorry," he mumbles and

backs away. He may not be smart, but he's not stupid either.

"You're probably fucking everybody to get to the top of the list."

I jut out my hip and tick off my fingers. "Calix, Kitten, and Grim." I hold up those three fingers. "Doesn't look like everybody." We're drawing a little attention, and a few people move in closer.

"That's probably just today. Give it time," he jeers.

"I wish I had time for all three of them already today, but the night is still young." I waggle my eyebrows.

"Slut," he snarls, and looks around. It's the first time he's noticed his friend has abandoned him and that others are watching our exchange.

"You're lucky I'm already full and in a good mood, you sour little man." A tinge of anger tarnishes my wrath high.

"Yeah, sure." The guy turns and slams smack into Torin's chest. Gunnar is standing just behind him, with a murderous glare directed at the guy who just called me a slut. My heart rate picks up. I do love a good beatdown. I take another look at the guy. I can tell he takes care of himself, he's fit. He probably thinks he's pretty tough among humans, but there are not many humans here tonight.

"Are you insulting my guest?" Torin's voice is low, menacing.

"A-Alpha," he stutters. I let out a scoff. The guy is not worth my time or Gunnar's.

I strut past Torin and give him a light tap on the shoulder as I pass. "I don't know if you're thinking about changing him or whatever, but he's got some issues. Just a heads-up."

Gunnar's eyes track my movements as I get closer to him. "Hey, Kitten, don't you just look lovely, all angry and snarly," I coo, and slide the front of my body against his. My lips just skim the skin of his neck above his collar, so I plant a soft, open mouth kiss there.

One of his arms wraps around my back. "I can't leave you alone for five minutes before trouble finds you." His words are a little slurred, since his jaw is shifted to accommodate his razor-sharp teeth. "I don't like trouble."

I spin and lean back against Gunnar. "Kill him if it makes you feel better, but I warn you, it's going to be very underwhelming." I wiggle my little pinky finger, implying that's all it would take for my man, no, my Berserker to get rid of him.

Torin looks over his shoulder and meets my gaze. "I'll take care of him for the insult." His dark brown eyes are alive for the first time this evening. I

think Torin needs this way more than Gunnar does. Besides, I have a better idea to make sure Gunnar finds release.

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## CHAPTER 14

*T*ow Gunnar away from the small group that's formed around Torin and the angry man. He doesn't resist, but he keeps turning around to see what's happening behind us. "Come on, didn't I promise you a special blow job?"

That gets his full attention. His hand tightens on mine, and he turns that intense stare to me. "Huh?"

"You heard what I said." I spin around and start walking backward so I can see his face. "Your dick, my mouth, interested?"

His eyes dilate and his head moves up and down as he swallows. "There will never be a time when the answer will be anything but fuck yes."

"Then come on." I turn around again, and he ends up pulling me along until we find a mostly empty hallway. There's a woman coming out of a door, but she doesn't notice us at first because she's looking down at a dainty little purse clutched in her hands.

Gunnar heads right for the door she's exiting, mumbling, "Pardon," as if it's a habit while poking his head into the room. The woman gives me a saucy wink as we pass. She must know what a man on a mission looks like.

Gunnar pushes the door open too hard, as is his custom, and it slams against the wall. I don't even bother saying anything. I have a single second to look around as Gunnar leads me over to a small sitting area of what looks like a ladies' bathroom. There is a small bench, which is large enough for three women to sit on, with rolled sides instead of arms, and it's placed in front of the mirror.

Gunnar puts one big palm on my shoulder and pushes down, and the other goes to his fly to release his pants. Without resistance, I lower myself to

the floor so I'm kneeling before him. His chin is tilted all the way down, but I can still see the squareness of his jaw and width of his massive shoulders, so I know he's still part beast.

I stare up at him from under my lashes, and even though I'm the one at his feet, an intense feeling of power comes over me. His nostrils flare as I lean into him, allowing my breasts to brush against his legs. He's already rock-hard when he pulls his cock out of his pants. I hum in appreciation.

Gunnar's hand slides up my shoulder and he grabs the back of my neck, dragging me forward to shove his dick into my mouth. I run my hands up his thighs until I can wrap one around his base and slide the other into his pants to cup his balls. He's hot as fire, and the zipper of his pants pinches the back of my hand as he spreads his legs a little more to accommodate me, but I don't care.

A toilet flushes in the background, but I don't let it stop me from taking him deep while I work my hand up and down his length. I pull back, only keeping his velvety tip in my mouth so I can use my saliva as lube as I work him over.

Gunnar fists my long hair roughly while he trails the fingers of his other hand reverently along my jaw. The sound of a metal lock disengaging snicks sharply in the otherwise quiet room. I turn my head slightly and slit my eyes to see a woman exiting one of the stalls. Her gaze is already glued to Gunnar's back. We didn't surprise her. I wonder how long she stayed in the little cubical before deciding to finally come out.

Keeping my hands moving, I pull my mouth off Gunnar with a pop. He growls and pushes himself against me again, tightening his grip on my hair. I don't care that she knows I'm sucking his cock, but the thought of her seeing his thick shaft makes me see red.

"Out!" I demand, then swallow Gunnar so deep that even if she were to look back all she would see would be my mouth stretched around him. She leaves without even washing her hands—nasty—only peeking over her shoulder right before the door closes.

Gunnar doesn't even seem to notice the entire interaction. I look up at him again. His mouth is slightly slack, and I can see his inhuman teeth. I rise up higher on my knees and squeeze his balls a little tighter while increasing how hard I'm sucking. He pants and jerks his hips forward, and his dick hits the back of my throat. The muscles there constrict on reflex, so I breathe through my nose, but my breaths are short from the way he starts fucking my

face.

If I could smile, I would, but I'm too busy making sure he's satisfied while I try to breathe in enough air to keep going. I remove the barrier of my hand on his base, and he really loses it then. I don't even have to suck anymore. My jaw is open as far as it can go, saliva drips down my chin, and Gunnar is in complete control of my next breath. There is nothing pretty about this. It's raw and dirty, but oh so fucking hot. I can feel how swollen my clit is, and every time I move from left to right, the seam of my jeans gives me delicious friction.

Within moments, he's coming, with his hips shoved forward. I can feel the thick vein along his length pumping against my tongue as he comes down the back of my throat. I don't even try to breathe. I know if I do, I'm going to end up with come dripping out of my nose, and that's too messy, even for me.

Thankfully, he pulls back quickly, and I gulp in gasps of air while swallowing. I wipe my chin with the back of my hand and extricate my other from his pants. His zipper has done a little damage. I've got a few angry scratches and a raw spot that's oozing a little blood.

Before I even have a chance to catch my breath, Gunnar slides his hands under my arms and lifts me off the floor. He takes the two steps to the bench and sits down with me straddling his lap. I lean my body close to his, but he stops me by slipping his hand between us and cupping my pussy, his palm putting pressure right over my clit.

Our foreheads connect and I look down. "If I knew I could get you out of here without anyone seeing, I would slice" —he runs his thumb up the center seam of my pants to the bottom of the zipper— "these open and fuck you."

Gunnar can do wonderfully horrible things with a knife. Not only did I see his skills that night at Vanessa's, I've watched him practice with them often enough at home. The thought of him with a razor-sharp blade so close to my skin, trusting he would never hurt me, has me damn near pleading for him to do it. So what if I walk out with crotchless jeans? I'm kind of okay with that. I wrap one arm around his neck and place my lips near his ear. "I wouldn't stop you."

He shakes his head. "You're burning up." He skims his hand up and pulls my button to the side, opening my jeans, before dragging the short zipper down. I hold my breath when his fingers touch my skin. I scoot my body closer to his. Gunnar looks over my shoulder. "Let me see if I can lock the



door.” He pushes me off him, and I’m left standing on wobbly legs.

“You didn’t care about a lock a few minutes ago,” I challenge.

“Yeah, well, you weren’t naked then. Fuck!”

“No lock?”

“Who the hell doesn’t put a lock on a bathroom door?” He turns around with a scowl. I saunter over, pushing my pants down my hips as I go. “What are you doing?” His eyes are locked on my exposed skin.

“I’m sure we can find a way to make sure that door stays closed, Kitten.”

He bites his bottom lip, indecision warring on his face. “I could hold it closed,” he offers. I push my jeans down until I encounter my boots. I’m not taking them off, I refuse to be barefoot in what’s essentially a public bathroom. I must look pretty silly shuffling the rest of the way over with my pants around my ankles, but Gunnar watches me like I’m Aphro-fucking-dite.

“No one has tried to come in yet,” I cajole, spinning so my ass is before him. I bend over and press it right up against him.

“Dami,” he growls, but he grabs my hips and pulls me even tighter against his body. I go up on my toes—as much as I can in the boots—feeling the rough fabric of his pants against the back of my thighs. Reaching between our bodies, he slides his fingers up and down my pussy. I push into his touch, wanting him inside me. I don’t even care if it’s just his fingers at this point.

I hear and feel a thud against the door when Gunnar jerks a little, followed by a feminine, “Ooh.”

“Fuck off!” Gunnar barks loudly. His scarred, callused hand slides up my back, and he wraps his long fingers over my shoulder before tugging me up. “Elbows back,” he whispers near my ear. I do as I’m told, and he tucks his arm between my inner elbow and back, reaching across until he can grab my other arm near my bicep. My spine arches in the slightly uncomfortable hold.

That’s when I feel Gunnar lining himself up to slide inside me. I wiggle a bit, eager for his cock. His fingers pinch my arm harder. “Be still.”

With one quick thrust of his hips, he’s inside me. My inner muscles quiver, and I let out a low groan. With my pants around my ankles and him holding my arms, I feel restrained. I relax he muscles in my arms and legs, fully giving myself over to Gunnar.

This ability to let myself go, to trust him and the others, is still rather new to me, but welcome all the same. The fact that he’s rough and takes what he wants makes it even hotter. The toes of my boots barely touch the ground after he slams his hips against my ass a few times. He spins quickly, and the

side of my face ends up against the center of the door. Good thing I don't need to worry about germs.

The new position gives his hips and legs more movement, so I end up cradled in the curve of his body, relieving some of the pressure on my shoulders.

Our combined breathing is loud as it echoes off the tile walls. Before long, I can feel my orgasm building. It starts low in my stomach and makes me feel like I can't catch my breath, or like I need to hold my breath, I can't decide. Gunnar leans forward and licks the side of my face from just under my jaw to my cheek. That primal act of lust pushes me over the edge, and I come hard, a keening noise escaping my throat.

"Oh, fuck." Gunnar's grip on my arms loosens, and they fall to my sides. I'm too tired to even push myself away from the door. "S-Sorry, sweetheart," he rasps against the back of my head when he stops sliding in and out of me after riding us both through our orgasms.

Eventually, he lowers me so my boots touch the ground. There's a good possibility the door is the only thing holding me up.

"It's okay, you can explain to Grim why I have road rash on my cheek," I tease. Quicker than I expected, he grabs my shoulder and spins me. I nearly topple over because my jeans are still around my ankles. He catches me easily before examining my face.

"Shit," he curses, and brushes his thumb along my cheekbone.

I swat his hand away. "I was just teasing."

"You do have a red spot." His eyebrows pinch in the middle.

"Calm down—it will be gone in like five minutes. I'm not going to tattle on you."

"I don't give a shit if you tell him. I just didn't mean to be so rough."

I roll my eyes at his statement. "In case you were wondering, I fucking loved it *and* you, so stop."

Gunnar's shoulders slump. I just witnessed his little man swoon. It's adorable. Recovering quickly, he gets a small smirk. "You only love me for my cock."

I know he's teasing, but I correct him anyway. It's getting easier to share my feelings with them, even if I feel all weird and shy about it afterwards. "No, not just your cock. If I cut it off tomorrow, I would still keep you around."

Gunnar half scowls, half winces, and grabs his dick and bends a little to

shove it back in his pants. “Stop talking about cutting off dicks. I’m gonna get nightmares.”

I giggle and stoop to grab my jeans. Of course that would be the moment someone tries to come into the bathroom. The door smacks my bare ass, and I go flying forward. In an effort to stop my fall, I end up punching Gunnar right in the dick.

“Oooaf.” Gunnar groans.

When I look over my shoulder, there’s a woman standing in the open door with her head tilted to the side as if she’s trying to understand what she’s seeing. After righting myself, I drag my pants up my legs and shimmy to get them over my hips. “Bathroom’s all yours.” I wave her toward the stalls and grab Gunnar’s arm. He’s still cupping his crotch.

“Come on, Kitten, I’ll have to kiss it better later. We don’t have time for another quickie.” It takes me a second to find my bearings so I can head back to the ballroom, but the noise is a dead giveaway, telling me that I’m on the right trail.

When the doors open, I’m greeted with total anarchy. I raise my arms up high. “Now this is a party!”

## CHAPTER 15

Tables are turned over and people are fighting, fucking, and just about everything in between. Torin is sitting on his throne with blood on his chin and hands, but he looks bored as hell as he watches the melee in front of him.

I find Calix near the dais. His eyes are a little feverish as he scans the room, his fingers twitching like he wants to get in on the action. I wave my hand in the air to get his attention. When he doesn't notice, I place my fingers in my mouth and let out a loud whistle. Every person stops, and all heads in the room turn in my direction. "Carry on," I encourage, as I tow Gunnar along behind me. He's still grouching about how he'll never be able to have children and such, but I ignore him and head over to Calix.

His nostrils flare and he tips his head back in the air, scenting it. His eyes darken when he peers at me, I'm sure his keen senses give him a pretty clear idea of where Gunnar and I have been. When he swipes his bottom lip with his tongue, wetting it, I blow him a kiss. That tongue should come with a warning label.

"So what did we miss?" I ask when we reach him.

Calix grabs my jaw and turns my face to the side. I tilt my head a little, trying to hide the red mark that may or may not still be there.

"What happened here?" Calix questions. His voice is low and calm, but something about it feels forced.

"What?" I reach up and place my hand against my cheek.

"If you don't know what it is, how do you know where it is?" Calix moves his eyes from mine and stares over my shoulder.

"That's nothing; you should see my ass. I got spanked by a door," I quip,

trying to ease the building tension.

Calix looks down at me again. “Did someone hit you?”

“Stars, no.” I switch from covering my cheek to holding the wrist of his hand that’s still cradling my jaw. I don’t want to rub that Gunnar and I just had a quickie in his face, but I won’t lie to him either. I step a little closer, and he lowers his head to hear me as I whisper. “I was up against the wall... and there was, well... friction.” I widen my eyes a little. “I’m fine, I promise. Nothing to worry about.”

Calix moves lightning fast and wraps his arm around my lower back, pulling me closer. “I don’t like him marking up your skin.”

“He wouldn’t hurt me, just like I know you wouldn’t either, and I’d kill anyone else who tried—with a hacksaw, or a dull butter knife, ya know, to make them really regret it.”

Calix snorts and wraps me in a hug. “Only after I broke every bone in their body.” I nuzzle my cheek against him and take in his scent. He smells like home.

“Where’s Death?” Gunnar asks a few seconds later.

“Somewhere out there.” Calix releases me with one arm but keeps the other around my back as he scans the crowd.

“What?” I search through the carnage. It’s hard to tell who’s fighting and who’s fucking at this point. It’s just a mass of limbs. I walk forward, forcing Calix to either come with me or release me.

Instead of looking with my eyes, I open my senses. Grim’s unique aura of death and power quickly reveals his location. He’s donned his robes with his scythe curved over his head. There’s a body at his feet and, as he takes a step forward, I notice the macabre trail of blood that blooms behind him.

I suck in a gasp. If he’s hurt, I will destroy everyone in this compound. My vision blurs until he’s all I see. “Where is all that blood coming from?” I take another step off the dais.

Calix grabs my shoulder. “It’s not his, Dami.”

A path clears for Grim, and silence follows in his wake. As he grows closer, I can see the dense fabric of his cloak is darker at the hem, soaked with blood. What the hell happened here?

“There’s a reason everyone fears Death, Damiana,” Calix whispers, then backs away from me.

Unconvinced Grim’s okay, I half run the rest of the way to him, lifting his hood back the moment my hands touch him. I need to see his face. His eyes

are full of fire, no gray to be seen, and he's pale, but the rest of him is perfectly fine. I reach out to touch his face, but he pulls away.

"Not yet, Omnia. I am Death."

"Not to me you're not. Besides, touching you would be worth the pain." I trace my fingers over the porcelain skin of his jaw. He's cold under my touch. "What happened?" I bounce my gaze between his eyes.

"That man made me very angry."

"Who did?"

"You are a goddess, and he spoke to you as if you were nothing."

I place my hand on his chest and feel the quick beat of his heart. "The angry dude? He was just talking shit, Loverboy. He didn't hurt my feelings."

"He died a thousand deaths, and he will die thousands more before I allow him to pass." Grim's posture is rigid.

"Whoa, okay. That's a lot."

He leans forward, and his voice becomes layered as if many people are speaking at once. "If I end them all, we will no longer have to be bothered by such nonsense."

"Grim," I say slowly. "You don't need to do that. None of these people are going to hurt us."

"I could end everyone." Again, his voice is layered. I might finally be seeing why he inspires such fear. "If I kill them all, the witch will be dead, and we can go home. I like our home. It's quiet there."

Holy hell, he's not just talking about everyone here, he's talking about everybody, maybe even the entire world. "We can go home right now, Grim, just you and me. We can take a break from all the noise."

The entire room is collectively holding its breath.

"Doesn't that sound nice? I could check on Dare, make sure she has enough to eat. See if Aeson stopped by..." I'm trying to remind him that there are far more people in this world whom I want to save than I would like to see dead, even if one of them is the bastard witch.

"Yes, we can go home now. I will end them later." His voice is his own, but cold and detached.

"Or... just a thought, we could not end the world. I mean, I haven't even had cake yet. How will I get to try cake if there's no one to bake it for me? I don't trust Kitten's cooking." I place my hand by my mouth like I'm whispering. "He burns everything, and Calix eats all those vegetables." I know I'm rambling, but I'm trying to bring him back to me.

I wave my hand. “We can figure that part out later. Let’s go home and let everyone else clean up this mess. You know I hate cleaning.” I wrap my arms around his body. He feels as hard as stone, but he embraces me back. I make eye contact with Calix and Gunnar, hoping my gaze tells them that everything is going to be okay.

I don’t even have time to blink before we’re standing in my kitchen. All the lights are off and the drapes are pulled closed. I let out a sigh of relief, but I don’t unwrap my arms from Grim. I do, however, lean back enough to look up at his face. “How about some hot cocoa, Loverboy?”

Grim looks around my darkened kitchen and his robe dissolves—I wonder if it will be cleaned of all the blood when he dons it again—leaving him in soft sleep pants, no shirt, and bare feet.

“I think I would like to lie down.” My stomach drops. That’s not what I was expecting. Grim admitted he doesn’t require sleep like the rest of us, though there have been a few times I would argue I’ve caught him sleeping, or resting for lack of a better word, but never for long.

“Okay.” I look toward the clock on the wall, noting the sun will be up soon. “We can do that,” I agree easily.

Grim lifts his hand in invitation, and I immediately step forward and take his fingers in mine. He leads us through the house and up the stairs to my room. “Get comfy, I’m going to shower.”

Grim lifts my fingers to his lips and kisses my knuckles softly before he releases me. I half expected him to join me in the shower, so it throws me off a little as I watch him move across the room toward my bed. Allowing him his solitude, I head into the bathroom, lighting a few candles as I go. The familiar fragrance of my house and the scents of the candles give me a sense of peace. Maybe coming home, even for a little while, was a good idea. I’ve only been away a few days, but I missed all the little things I’ve come to take for granted.

Not wanting to waste too much time, I tie up my long hair in a bun and take a quick shower. It would still be damp tonight if I went to sleep with it wet.

After toweling off, I blow out the candles and crawl into bed with Grim, naked. I curl my body close to his, laying my hand on his chest and my leg over his. He doesn’t even stir, but the slow thud of his heart under my hand tells me he’s okay.

Sleep is slow in coming, but I lie still so I don’t disturb him, and say a

little prayer to anyone listening that he will be more like himself when he wakes up this evening.



I WAKE UP ALONE, which is rather strange in and of itself. Since the guys have pretty much moved in, someone is usually around. “Grim?” My voice is raspy and low. I wait, but he doesn’t answer.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I grab the robe Grim gave me. The material feels amazing against my skin, so I don’t bother with panties. I doubt anyone else is here anyway, especially with Grim’s presence—my baddies seem to keep their distance from him.

“Hey, you down here?” I call, as I make my way downstairs. Grim steps out from the doorway leading to the kitchen. I scan his face. His eyes are the same intense gray as usual, and he has a little more color in his complexion. “Hey.” I soften my tone.

“Good evening, Damiana.” Grim’s voice is subdued. He’s a master at hiding his facial expressions, so it’s a big deal that I can see the dip at the corners of his mouth, even if it’s slight.

I make my way down the remaining stairs and stop when I’m right in front of him. Grim’s stiff, and he almost looks wary. Before I have a chance to second-guess myself, I step even closer, wrap my arms around his torso, and nuzzle my face against his chest. Grim’s clothes are ridiculously soft, probably made from angel feathers or some shit.

His arms come around my back, and he lowers his head until it’s resting on the top of mine. “Have you been up long? You could have woken me.”

“I wanted you to rest,” he replies without answering my question. I stay wrapped in his arms. I don’t know how to bring up last night, or if I should ask him if everything is okay. I’m shit at this kind of stuff, but I really feel like him considering ending the world isn’t something we should just ignore.

I lean back to see his face and admit, “You’re freaking me out a little, Loverboy.” Grim’s eyes close on a slow blink, and it takes a few seconds before he opens them again.

“I apologize. I lost control last night. I shouldn’t have allowed myself to get so angry.” His eyes are trained over the top of my head.

I reach up and palm his jaw. “Grim, I don’t care that you got angry,



you're allowed to have feelings. If you wanted to slaughter everyone in that room... well, except for Kitten and Calix, I wouldn't have cared. I would have helped you if you needed me to. What's freaking me out is how you were after... and now. Like you're not really here with me."

Grim doesn't move, but his eyes shift to look down at me. "And if I destroyed the world, what then?"

"I'm not going to pretend that I would be happy about it. There are a lot of people I care about in this world, Grim." I fist the fabric of his shirt. "But when it comes down to it, I care more about you. I would forgive you, still love you, even if you did do it. That probably makes me a psycho or unhinged or some shit, but it's the truth. Want to know what else I know is the truth?"

Grim barely moves his head an inch, but I see his tiny nod.

"I don't think you would do it, no matter how mad you were. We all feel like we want to set the world on fire sometimes. You just have the ability to actually do it. It doesn't mean you would have gone through with it."

Grim wets his lips. "I'm not used to being so angry," he admits.

I tap my fingers on his chest. "Well, I used to be angry all the time, so I have lots of practice. Plus..." I waggle my eyebrows. "I can show you some really great ways to take the edge off."

The corner of Grim's lips tip up, and he lowers his eyelids. I can just see the glow of those fiery embers stoking to life. It's the first time since last night that I can take a deep breath. I didn't realize how scared I was that something had changed within him or with us. His hands, which were holding me gently, caress me instead. He leans down and rests his forehead against mine, and I close my eyes. With a whispered confession, I give Grim my truth, and it rings with certainty in my soul.

"I would burn the world for you too."

## CHAPTER 16

“*I*t’s been *days*, and we still don’t know shit,” I grouse as I sulk.  
“Do you want to just go home and wait to see if Antonio shows up again?” Calix offers.

“We don’t have to go home, but do we need to stay here?” I hate Kim’s house, and Torin seems to be getting his shit together with his pack, for now at least. The party that ended in bloodshed did wonders to convince anyone who wanted to challenge the alpha to back down.

“We could find another rental if it’s a big deal to you.” Gunnar is cleaning a blade with an oil stained cloth. He even fixed Kim’s front door, and Calix jerry-rigged the kitchen table legs. The thought of Kim loading it up with groceries or food and collapsing the thing gives me secret joy.

“I mean, do we need to stick around here? Do you think Torin still needs you? He seems somewhat stable.”

Calix snorts. “He’s killed about ten shifters in the last four days. I’m not sure that’s anyone’s version of stable.”

I wave my hand dismissively. “So he has a little pent-up aggression, better he takes it out on assholes than self-destructing.”

“Torin mentioned last night he wanted to help us get rid of Antonio.” Calix looks slightly guilty. “I may have encouraged the idea so he would stop picking fights and find another purpose.”

“Gahhh.” I toss my head back. “Shouldn’t he be busy finding someone to take over the pack for him? I thought he was going to go rogue wolf and shit.”

Gunnar chuckles. “I thought you liked the wolf.”

“I do,” I say in a rush. “But... should we be encouraging him to get

involved with Antonio? What if something happens to him? It would be our fault, and then Calix would have to deal with the whole pack-needing-an-alpha issue again. It gives me a headache just thinking about having to deal with Kim again on a daily basis. I think I would just put us both out of our misery and kill her this time.”

“I’m not going to throw myself at the witch so he can kill me, doll. Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Torin deadpans.

“Are you part Brownie?” I scowl at him. The man, or should I say wolf, can move as silently as my best friend.

“No.” He slaps the side of my foot that’s hanging off the arm of the chair in a teasing manner. “If a guy is in my city killing Charmed, it’s my duty to make sure he’s stopped.”

I sit up and look around to see if he brought Kim with him. I really don’t understand their relationship. She seems to worship the ground Torin walks on, and he just tolerates her, for lack of a better word. “But we’re here to take care of it for you, so you don’t need to worry your big head about it.”

“My big head? If your eyes were any bigger, you would look like a kewpie doll, *doll*.” I swear to the stars, Torin is like the big brother I never knew I had or wanted. I reach up and touch under my eyes and frown.

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to insult her, considering the last guy who did is stuck in some sort of purgatory, reliving his death over and over?” Calix drawls. I don’t think any of us expected the familial relationship Torin and I have apparently forged almost overnight.

“If Death wants to take me.” Torin widens his arms and plops on the sofa opposite Gunnar.

“See? You do have a death wish.” I point in his direction. “And I don’t look like a doll. Unless it’s one of those creepy dolls. I would be okay with that.” I nod, but they all ignore me.

“Where is the reaper anyway?” Torin looks around.

“He’s everywhere,” I whisper, and wave my fingers under my chin.

“Shower, I think,” Calix supplies at the same time.

“So, any news on the witch?” Torin makes himself comfortable, draping his arm along the back of the couch.

“Nothing from the Pixies.” Gunnar puts down the blade he was working on and picks up another from the coffee table.

“Grim hasn’t been called away, so we’re not even sure if the guy’s still in the area,” I mutter dejectedly. My Loverboy is still a little more reserved than

usual—similar to how he was when he first revealed himself to me—but he’s coming around slowly. This wouldn’t be a good time to push him, though. I don’t think it would end well for anyone involved.

“I wish we knew a way to track the asswipe down before he killed someone else, instead of always being one step behind him,” Calix grumbles, summing up exactly what I’ve been thinking.

“I have a pretty good relationship with most of the Charmed around the city. Let me see if I can find anything out. You said this guy’s name is Antonio and he runs with the witches, right?”

“Yeah, he was working with the head of the coven, kept a pretty low profile.” Gunnar examines the tip of the blade he’s cleaning, his eyes going unfocused. “Fuckers were killing right under my nose and I didn’t even know it.”

“I’ll see what I can find out. A few of the guys mix it up with the witches. Some of them even come to the pack looking to get changed into a shifter for a more permanent magical solution. Might be a good enough incentive to loosen lips.”

“Couldn’t hurt; it’s worth a shot,” Calix agrees.

“How exactly does that work? The change, I mean?” It seems like the witches should just all become shifters instead of killing people to get powers. Torin tilts his head to the side, examining me then Calix.

“Lycanthropy is contagious. All it takes is a bite for them to become infected,” Calix informs me.

“Why doesn’t she already know this?” Torin questions.

“I never asked,” I counter, defending Calix when it feels like Torin is accusing him of something. “Plus, Calix is the first shifter I ever met. Well, that I ever got to know anyway. I may have met others.”

“What, were you living under a rock?” Torin snorts.

“No, but none ever came to me. Forea’s not a shifter, right?” I ask Calix.

“Forea, you know Forea?” Torin’s eyes are wide with disbelief.

“She lives in the forest near my house.”

“She’s in every forest. And no, she isn’t a shifter,” Calix answers.

“But you’ve spoken to her?” Torin presses with a little bit of awe in his voice.

“Yeah, I feel like she speaks in riddles half the time though.”

“So, wait.” Torin sits forward and places his elbows on his knees. “You’re saying Forea came to you, and others have too?” He looks over at

Calix for an explanation.

“Lots of baddies visit me all the time. Well, I haven’t been getting as many visitors lately,” I reply, then lower my voice, “but I think Grim scares them a little.”

Torin barks out a short laugh. “Ya think?”

I ignore him and get back to the topic at hand. “How do people know about shifters so they can ask to be changed? Isn’t there some rule about secrets and shit?”

“We keep it under wraps, but there will always be people who believe there is more to the world than what is easily seen.” Torin makes it sound simple.

“Why don’t the witches just become shifters then, instead of stealing powers?”

“They can’t and don’t turn everyone, and not everyone wants to be bound to an animal.” Calix shrugs. “They think they’ll remain more human using witchcraft, plus just being a shifter doesn’t make you magical. Charmed, sure, but Torin can’t cast a spell to make himself more handsome or to stop aging.”

“Yeah, I come by all this naturally.” Torin crosses his eyes and purses his lips. I snort at the way he’s making fun of himself. I may have three mates, and I’m not looking to add more, but I can admit he’s damn good looking. Much more so now that he’s not all skin and bones. He certainly has the silver fox thing working for him.

Grim enters the room and walks over to sit on the arm of my chair. His posture is perfect, and even in dark jeans and a t-shirt, he looks like he’s posing. I smile up at him. “You were in the shower for a long time, everything okay?”

“Adequate, considering I was alone.” My eyes bug out a little. Did he just tell me he was in the shower jacking off? I’m probably just reading too much into the statement. I have such a dirty mind.

I stifle a giggle and glance over at Gunnar who’s shaking his head with a sneer on his lips. He’s thinking the same thing as me.

“Torin was just offering to talk to a few of the local witches,” Calix says. He probably knows that this conversation could devolve into sexual innuendos quickly. He knows me too well. We really were all made for each other.

“Isn’t that nice of him to offer a hand?” I roll my lips in to hide my smile.

I really can't help myself from teasing.

Calix turns his head slowly to stare at me. I know exactly what he's thinking: 'Really?'

"I suppose. Antonio may already be cultivating a new relationship with other witches," Grim muses. "Although his hand won't be needed. Your hand, however..." Grim grabs my hand and places it on his dick.

"Jesus!" Gunnar barks.

I just toss my head back and laugh. Grim is definitely feeling better if he's actually comfortable enough to joke and tease around Torin, even if his humor is super dry.

I give him an affectionate little stroke and promise, "Later," before removing my hand from his crotch.

Torin has a strange mixture of emotions on his face when I look up. The subtle tipping of his lips says he gets the humor of the moment, but the way his eyelids are a little low, paired with the crinkling high on his cheeks, tells me it's more of a wince than a smile. I want to reach over and grab his hand to tell him that I was blessed with more than one mate, so maybe he will be too, but I bite my tongue. That's not something I would want to hear if something happened to one of my guys. It might actually make me go on a murder spree.

I clear my throat. "Anyway, talking to the witches is a start. It's better than just sitting here on our butts."

"Ah, but it's such a nice butt," a feminine voice purrs.

I jump up and bellow, "You! Where the *fuck* have you been?"

Aeson looks completely unapologetic as she saunters into the room—all five plus inches of her, give or take. "I missed you too, Dami." She stops a few feet shy of Torin and lets her eyes roam over him as if he's a snack and she's starving. Placing her hands with red tipped fingernails on her hips, she says, "Well, hello there, big boy," in some sort of mock, Betty-Boop accent.

"You can't just pretend you didn't ditch me for over a week."

"I got a little tangled up with an Alven. I didn't even realize how much time had passed." She shifts her attention to me.

"Who's Alven?" I grouse, but I'm too curious to stay mad.

"Not who, darling, what. Alven are water fae," she tells me, and moseys over near the chair I was sitting on.

"Is that a Brownie?" Torin asks out of the side of his mouth, as if she can't hear him.

“Aeson’s the name, wolf. You’re charmed, I’m sure.” With quick, deft movements, she grapples her way up the table leg and perches on the top, examining Gunnar’s knives. “Nice craftsmanship. Not Brownie, but eh...”

I fall back into my chair. “Was this a good tangled or bad?”

Aeson turns to look at me slowly as if my question is absurd. “Good for all parties involved.” She winces. “Except that chap who couldn’t walk, he may recover though.” She shrugs and hops over to my thigh.

“How’d you know where we were?”

“Samson. He checked in with the boys,” Aeson answers, then perches herself on the arm of the chair opposite from Grim. I look over at him.

“You sent Samson to them?” I swoon. He’s so thoughtful.

Torin leans a little closer to Gunnar. “Is this kind of thing normal?”

“Just thank the stars she’s here and you aren’t at her place,” Gunnar retorts.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I glare at him.

“Most people don’t have Nettle Rats living in their pantries, or the crooked man stopping over for a visit. Don’t even get me started on Uncle.”

“Are we going to go over this again? He’s a sweetie,” I defend.

“Maybe to *you*, but I’m sure there are many others who would disagree.” Gunnar lifts his arms. “I’m just saying, being around Dami, it’s a good idea to be prepared for the unexpected.”

“The crooked man?” Torin looks around, waiting for someone to explain.

“Unless you want him to visit your nightmares, it’s better not to ask,” Calix mumbles.

I click my tongue. “You’re being dramatic.”

“I’m really not,” Calix counters.

“Want to tell me why you’re in Savannah in the late summer?” Aeson makes a show of wiping her brow of nonexistent sweat.

“Antonio,” I sneer.

“Oh, so the slippery fuck is in town?” Aeson taps her hand on her thigh, and I can see the scheming glint in her eyes.

“He may be,” Grim confirms.

“Well, it looks like I arrived just in time.”

## CHAPTER 17

“*F*unny how we can be clear across the country, and everything is just the same.” I look out over the crowd of bodies dancing and drinking.

“Did you expect it to be different?” Calix wraps his arm around my waist, and I lean back against him.

“I think I did. Lame, huh?”

“Not lame, sweetheart.” His hand wanders a little farther down my body and I don’t stop him, not even when he slides his fingers between my legs.

“Whatchya doing?” I murmur.

“Touching you. Want me to stop?”

“Uh-uh.” I lean my head back until it’s resting against his chest and widen my legs. I knew this flared skirt would come in handy tonight.

Calix pushes my lacy panties to the side and glides his fingers up and down my slit. The loud thrum of the music is tickling my bones and filling my chest with every low beat of bass. Everyone around us is too lost in their own worlds to worry about mine. “Remember the first time you came over and asked to sit down?”

I nod. How could I forget? It was the first time I’d seen the real him, and I was drawn to him immediately. I didn’t know why then, but I do now.

“I imagined what it would be like to touch you then, to slide my hand up your thigh, wondering if you would be wet, hot.” He nibbles the back of my ear.

“I would have been. I wanted you too.” His finger slides farther down, and I feel him graze over my clit. A heavy sigh falls from my lips.

“I followed you home. You didn’t know that, did you?”



I don't answer, just give a slight shake of my head. "I shifted when we reached your property so I wouldn't be tempted to follow you inside the house. Would you have let me inside, Dami?" He pushes his finger inside me and begins to fuck me with it. It's not enough, I want more.

"I probably would have tried to kill you, or at least pretended to try," I reply, forcing my voice to stay even. Calix chuckles, and I feel it rumble up my back.

"I bet you would have enjoyed the fight." He slides another finger inside to join the first. At this angle he can't get deep, but knowing we're in a crowded room full of people and he's got his hands on me, in me, is more than enough to have me panting for release.

Calix uses his foot to hit the inside of my shoe, forcing my legs farther apart. I can feel the bulge of his cock against my ass, so I grind on him a little. The song changes, and he speeds up his rhythm, fucking me to the faster tempo.

A hand brushing against the front of my thigh has my eyes snapping open. I'm okay with providing a little show, but no one else is allowed to touch me. Grim's tall figure looms over me. His face doesn't give his thoughts away, but the way his fingers are sliding up my leg makes me think he approves.

Holy hell, just thinking about being between him and Calix is enough to have my pulse racing. "Are you just going to watch or help me out?" I feel Calix's lips move against my temple as he speaks.

"Spin her," Grim demands.

Calix slowly slides his fingers out of my pussy, making sure to tease my clit briefly before removing his hand completely. The next second, Grim grabs my upper arms and spins me so my ass is against him. He's already hard. I wonder how long he's been watching.

Calix slides his glistening fingers into his mouth and sucks as if he's eager to taste me. It's hot enough that I clench my thighs, but Grim isn't having any of that. His hand snakes down my body and he grabs my ass cheek possessively. His other hand comes up in front of my face, and he orders, "Spit." I don't pretend I'm too ladylike for that shit; instead, I pull his fingers into my mouth and curl my tongue around them a few times while collecting saliva. When I pull them out, there's a string hanging from his fingertips to my lips.

He uses the hand on my ass to separate my cheeks and rims my rear

opening with his slickened fingers. I drop my forehead against Calix's chest and breathe through the slight burn that makes me want just a little more. I feel another hand on my hip as Calix fiddles with the side of my panties, then they break away and slowly start to slide down my leg.

Completely unencumbered now, he pushes both of his fingers back inside me. I grip the front of Calix's shirt and groan as the sensation of both of them touching me at once about knocks me off my damn feet.

Grim steps even closer to me so his hand is crushed between our bodies, but it doesn't stop his finger from moving in and out of me. I want to curse the fact that we're out in public and not at home in our bed—where we could take this much further—but considering being here is what it took to get both of them to touch me at the same time, I guess I should just be happy with the moment and hope for more later.

My heart is beating so fast I feel like my entire body is vibrating with the thrum. Everything around me seems to fade away, and the thrill of exhibitionism is completely overridden as they bring me closer to orgasm. "Sweetheart, you're killing me," Calix murmurs.

I groan out a plea, but the sound is swallowed by the music. I'm killing him? I'm about to fucking combust. Calix hooks his fingers inside me and pushes his thumb against my clit. My body tightens as the first wave of euphoria crashes against me. I tilt my head back, and Grim's hand wraps around my waist, keeping me from collapsing to the floor. My orgasm is fast and dirty, and neither of them stop finger fucking me until I literally push Calix's hand away from my clit. Every touch was sending little shockwaves through my body, making my inner muscles constrict around them.

"What the fuck are you two doing?" Gunnar growls. I open my eyes but leave the back of my head resting against Grim. "You're supposed to be watching the shifters and the witches."

Calix pats the side of my hip after pulling his hand out from under my skirt. "They're right over there." He tips his head to the left. "We have it under control."

Gunnar scowls. "You can't even keep your dick under control."

When my knees no longer feel like they'll buckle when I walk, I move out from between the two of them. "Quit being a party pooper. You weren't complaining when I had your dick in my mouth at the party a few nights ago." I raise my brow in challenge.

Gunnar lifts his lip in a sneer, but smartly keeps his mouth shut about the

matter. “I got you a water,” he offers instead.

“Thank you, I’m parched.” I crack the top and take a big gulp. All that heavy breathing can sure dry a girl out. I offer it to Calix, but he lifts a bottle of beer to his lips, so I turn and give it to Grim who takes it. Tipping his head back, he drains the rest of it with just a few bobs of his Adam’s apple. I have no idea why the move is so sexy, but it is.

“Should we go over now, or give them more time?” I lean a little closer to Gunnar. “Wait, where did Torin go?”

“Shit!” Calix curses.

“See? You should have been paying attention.” Gunnar sounds pleased with himself.

“I was, fucker. He was there when you walked over.”

“Jesus, you act like I need a fucking babysitter,” Torin deadpans, ignoring Gunnar and Calix’s bickering.

I spin around. There are several people watching him, both men and women, some with interest while others seem wary of him. “I just wanted to make sure our ride didn’t bail.” I punch him in the arm. It’s not the whole truth, but he doesn’t need to know that. “Did you find anything out?”

“I’ll leave that to them. I don’t really associate with the witches.” Torin looks over the crowd much like he did at the party at his own house, like he’s seen it all before and it bores him. We should probably try to make sure this night doesn’t end like the other—in bloodshed. Unless it’s Antonio’s, then I’m totally on board. I’m not going to get my hopes up by thinking finding him will be this easy though.

“Is the coven leader here?” I look around, expecting to see someone like Vanessa sauntering around the club with an entourage and too much lip filler.

“That’s him.” Torin openly points to a man seated in a semicircle booth by himself. His eyes are already on us. I note the graying hair near his temples. He looks like he could be anywhere from his late thirties to early fifties, and he wears the distinguished gentleman look well. There’s a short glass of amber liquid resting near his hand, and I see the twinkle of his cuff link from across the room.

“You guys gave him one hell of a show.” Torin chugs his drink, seeming rather disinterested. I have a moment to wonder if it was a good idea to bring him here. It was just a few days ago when he was wasting away on a couch.

“Oh well, then we should probably go introduce ourselves.” I don’t wait for the others. I know they will follow me.

He never once breaks eye contact with me as we approach. As we grow closer, I focus hard to see his aura. It's taken some practice to isolate auras in such a busy place, but it's coming to me easier every time I try. Not long ago, I would have had to touch him to glean any useful information. He's not covered in soot the way I expected him to be, instead his aura is mostly green with some red laced throughout.

Gunnar somehow ends up in front of me when we reach the man's table. I step to the side and give the Berserker a glare before looking at the man seated in the booth. He seems completely calm, even with Grim standing on my other side. His presence seems to make most people very uncomfortable, so it's notable that this witch doesn't seem bothered.

"Hello," he offers in a light, friendly voice.

"Hi, I'm Dami. What's your name?" I push Grim to the side with my body and take a seat at the edge of the booth. My legs are still trembling a little, so the break is welcome.

"Gregory." He steepled his fingers on the table and examines me with shrewd eyes. "Excuse my forwardness, but what are you?"

"Direct, I can respect that," I reply, even as Gunnar lets out a little growl. "It's okay, Kitten." I reach out and pat the side of his thigh. "What I am isn't nearly as important as why I'm here. Now that would be a good question to ask."

The man dips his head in what seems like an apology. "Forgive me, I've just never met someone with so much potential."

"Potential? That's what you're calling it?" Torin chuckles and drains another glass. "What he means is raw power."

"Why are you here, dear lady?" the witch inquires.

"I'm looking for someone, someone it would be in your best interest to help me find, if I'm being honest."

"Why is that?"

"Well, you see, it's another witch. One who's been very naughty and needs to be stopped. I'm afraid if we don't put a stop to him sooner rather than later, it may be bad for your entire species." I take a closer look at Gregory's aura. It's pretty clear he has evidence of sins on his soul, but that works in his favor right now, because I know he hasn't been working with Antonio.

"This witch you're speaking of—what have they done to warrant your attention?"

Calix slides into the other side of the circular bench so Gregory is trapped between us. “As I said, he’s been a very bad man, and he hurt a friend of mine.” I don’t tell him who. I would never betray Aeson that way. Speaking of the Brownie, she’s around here somewhere, probably learning way more than we have just by observing. One of the reasons Brownies are so dangerous is because they can go virtually unseen.

“That is certainly a shame. Is that why you’ve collected this group? To avenge your friend? If I join the effort, do I get the rewards?” Grim moves so fast it’s as if he blinked the few feet to Gregory. He leans over the table, his hand wrapped around the witch’s throat.

From my seated position, I can see the red flames dancing in Grim’s eyes. Gregory finally shows the first sign of fear—his eyes widen and his face goes unnaturally pale. Torin lets out a belly laugh, sounding slightly unhinged.

I lay my hand on Grim’s forearm to calm him. “Not smart, Gregory,” I admonish him. “Grim, let’s not kill him until we see if he has any information for us. Plus, it will leave Kitten in a right mess. We did just kill the coven leader of our city.”

“I don’t care,” Gunnar spits. “Kill him.”

“You’re not helping,” I snap at Gunnar. “Grim, let him go please. You won’t speak like that again, will you, Gregory?”

The witch never even bothers lifting his hands to fight off Grim; he knows it will be no use. He does, however, give the slightest shake of his head—as much as Grim’s grip allows.

“See? He just didn’t know you guys are mine and I’m yours.” Grim turns his head and looks at me. His eyes are full of flames and I sigh a little. He’s just so monstrously gorgeous.

“Mine,” he growls.

“Ours,” Gunnar amends.

“You should let him go. He’s turning purple,” I urge. Grim releases the witch with a shove. In the next second, he snatches me up from the bench and forces me to stand right in front of him. I feel how heavily he’s breathing when he molds our bodies together.

Torin takes the seat I vacated. “Hey, Greg,” he greets the witch.

“Alpha.” The man croaks out the greeting, not taking his eyes off the threat behind me. Surprisingly, he doesn’t look as frightened as he should.

“My apologies.” The witch dips his chin and closes his eyes briefly. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

“Not fucking accepted. You should have just killed him,” Gunnar grouses. Grim doesn’t acknowledge either of them, his posture rigid behind me. If the man makes one more misstep, there will be no saving him.

“I would be happy to help in any way that I can,” Gregory offers. He’s telling the truth.

Calix has been quiet, but he’s been assessing the entire time. I note the fact that he didn’t try to stop Grim from strangling the witch. Maybe I should tell them just how close he was to losing his shit the other night. Would they even care?

“The witch we’re looking for is a male. Goes by the name Antonio.” Calix’s voice is calm but cold. I don’t think Gregory made himself any friends tonight. Not that I blame the guys. If some chick just blatantly alluded to getting busy with my men, I probably would have killed her. The difference is, I would have stopped with just her. I’m not sure Grim wouldn’t have reaped the entire club. “He would have come to town within the last couple weeks,” Calix continues.

“No one has come to me, but I’ve noticed a few of my seekers have gone missing. I assumed they’d turn up eventually.” He gives a slightly indifferent shrug. “Could that have something to do with this Antonio?”

I look over at Gunnar before answering. “It could. He was working with the coven leader in Washington, but maybe he’s starting off smaller here.”

“If I may ask…” Gregory looks to Calix, seemingly the most reasonable one of the group. “What kind of trouble were they getting into? It might help to know what I’m looking for.”

“Torturing and killing Charmed to steal their powers.” Gregory blinks at my announcement. “But he’s—”

Gunnar clears his throat, interrupting me before I can tell Gregory that Antonio has found a way to kill without taking the stain on his soul.

“A terrible deed for sure,” Gregory concedes. I tilt my head. He’s being honest. He must catch my movement, because he turns his attention back to me. “You seem surprised.”

“I am. You’re a witch. Isn’t that how you all get your powers?”

“By killing? No, it is not.” He shakes his head vehemently. “I’ve never killed anyone. Certainly not a Charmed one.”

“Well, look at that, you learn something new every day.” If I didn’t know for sure he was telling the truth, I would think he was lying.

“Not all witches are dark.” Gregory widens his arms as if to encompass

the area around him. “You can amass great power without the sacrifice. It just takes patience and persistence. Unfortunately, most do not possess either.”

“Yeah, aren’t you a special little snowflake?” Gunnar snarls. I can’t fight the grin tugging at my lips. Gregory has unleashed my kitten’s claws.

Calix places both of his palms on the table and rises slowly from his seat. “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what would happen if we find out you know more than you’re letting on.”

Gregory reaches for his short glass and takes a slow, measured sip. This guy’s got some balls on him, either that or he genuinely doesn’t fear death. “If I learn anything, I’ll be sure to let you know. Killing for power can only lead to our demise,” he states, making sure it’s known if he helps, it’s because he’s choosing to do so, not because we are forcing him.

Torin rises and he stumbles just a little to the left, proving all the alcohol he’s consumed is affecting him. “Alpha, blessed be.” Gregory lowers his head in respect. Torin’s eyes are glassy, probably from the liquor.

“Too late, I’m already fucking cursed,” he mumbles, and walks away without looking back.

I let out a small sigh. I wish there was something I could do for him. Sometimes when I look at him and see the pain living in his eyes, I regret that we came here, even if it means we saved him. “I’m going to go make sure he doesn’t do something he’ll regret.” I squeeze Grim’s hand briefly before jogging to catch up with Torin.

## CHAPTER 18

“*W*hy the fuck did I think it was a good idea to drink my weight in tequila?” I hear Torin’s sharp voice after I slam the door. Well, at least I know he stayed here instead of running off into the woods after I finally went to sleep this morning.

“Good morning, Wolfy!” I shout loudly and obnoxiously. Torin’s face scrunches up in a scowl before he glares at me.

“If I didn’t like you so much, I would eat you!” he mutters.

I click my tongue at him. “Unfortunately for you, I’m not on the menu. Plus, I would slice off your eyelids and feed them to Dare, then I would make you watch as she nested in your pancreas.

“What the fuck?” His face scrunches up even more.

“Oh, I would love to have his teeth for a necklace. Let me know if you decide to pursue this avenue,” Aeson chimes in.

“Bloodthirsty lot.” Torin covers his eyes with his inner elbow and crosses his ankles over the end of the sofa, seemingly going back to sleep. His shirt is off, and I catch Aeson licking her lips as she does a long, slow perusal.

“Too bad he’s so large.” She purses her lips and tilts her head from left to right. “I bet that witch could make me a potion to make him just the right size.” She continues to examine him.

I gesture for her to follow me into the kitchen, but I don’t miss the slight lifting of Torin’s lips. “You can’t have him,” I whisper once we’re out of the room.

“Why ever not?” Aeson gives me an indignant glare.

“He’s grieving.”

“Best way to get over someone is to get under someone new,” she purrs.



I can't help it, I laugh. "You're such a whore."

"Says the slut who's fucking three men." Her little face is pursed in the sweetest smile.

"What can I say? I learned from the best, you hussy." I reach in the fridge and pull out a carton of vanilla yogurt—which is not usually to my taste—but this shit is good. Throw in some chocolate chips, and it's damn near perfect.

"Finally eating, are you? I guess three dicks can build up an appetite. Or you're pregnant." Aeson cackles at her statement.

The yogurt container slips from my hand and hits the floor, the white goo exploding upward. My mind finds the truth in her joke, piecing together the reality in an instant. The hunger, the yellow glow from within my stomach, the feeling of happiness... "I think I'm going to throw up." I run to the sink and lean my head over the white porcelain, waiting for my stomach contents to empty, but the only thing that happens is my breathing speeds up, along with my heart rate.

"Dami?" I feel Aeson's little hand push back the curtain of my hair so she can see my face. "Oh, darling," she coos.

"I've never even had a period." I don't know how to sort through my emotions. "How could this even be possible?" I look over at the one woman in my life who hasn't left me, hoping she will tell me I'm overreacting, that I'm not pregnant, but I know that to be a lie.

"Dami, you're not human, so you're not bound by the rules of science. Magic is in your veins." Her voice is pitched low as she tries to be comforting.

"I don't know how to be a mom. My mom was a monster, a real one. What if I'm like her?"

Aeson tsks and looks at me with what I can only assume is disappointment. "Damiana, I have watched you care for creatures who terrify others. The baddies—as you call them—don't come to you because you're powerful. They are drawn to you because you accept them as they are. How could you be anything but a wonderful mum?"

Tears prick my eyes, but I don't allow them to fall. "I don't know which of them is the father," I confess, as if I've committed a cardinal sin.

"It doesn't matter," Aeson assures me.

"What if it does to them? How am I going to tell them?"

"Tell who what?"

I snap my head up and straighten my back at Calix's voice. I don't turn

around, though, for fear he will see the unshed tears in my eyes. I blink rapidly several times.

“Tell them to stop being such nosy buggers,” Aeson snaps flippantly.

“I spilled yogurt all over the floor.” I’m grasping for anything other than what I’m really thinking. “It’s all over the table and wall.” I reach for the washcloth and turn on the hot water. Just because I don’t like to clean doesn’t mean I don’t know how.

“I was going to leave the mess for someone else to clean up, but since you caught me.” The lie burns my tongue. I’m so glad it’s not Grim standing in the doorway. I force some lightness into my tone. I have a lot of practice faking my emotions.

I drop down to my knees, cloth in hand, and start to scoop up the mess, but my thoughts are consumed with going over every single time I’ve slept with each of the guys, so I end up just smearing the yogurt around.

Calix chuckles and takes the cloth from my hand, then he rinses it out at the sink. He squats in front of me, his eyes soft and worry free. For now. “I’m good at cleaning up messes.” He winks and takes over the job. I just keep staring at him. I can’t force myself to get up off the floor. Will the baby have his hazel eyes, Grim’s gray, or Gunnar’s and my blue? Aeson’s words echo in my mind, ‘It doesn’t matter.’ Stars, I hope she’s right.

Torin makes his way into the kitchen. His eyes are a little wild when our gazes meet. He knows. He doesn’t even have to say anything, and I know he knows. He must have been listening to Aeson and me. I plead with him using my eyes, begging him not to say anything. He looks away first, his lips pinched.

Calix lifts his head and his face falls when he sees me. “Everything okay?” I open my mouth to answer him, but nothing comes out. He looks even more concerned.

“She’s fine. We were just talking about my vaginal dryness and you interrupted us.”

Aeson plants her hands on her hips. Calix’s eyes widen for just a heartbeat, then he resumes cleaning up the floor with renewed vigor.

“Come on, Dami, let’s go finish our conversation where we won’t be disturbed.” I force my legs to move, and out of the corner of my eye, I watch Aeson give Torin a stare down while Calix is distracted with cleaning. The way she draws her black painted fingernail across her throat—giving the wolf a warning to keep his mouth shut—would normally make me laugh, but right

now I'm too numb to do anything but accept the out she just gave me to get away from Calix and Torin so I can come to terms with the fact that I'm pregnant. Fucking hell.

A nervous laugh bubbles its way up my throat when we reach the stairs. I place my palm on the ground next to Aeson and she climbs aboard. "Vaginal dryness?" Gunnar pokes his head out of the bedroom, his hair still damp from the shower, and his eyes land on me.

"I can cure that for you." He smirks.

"Oh you can, can you?" Aeson chirps.

Gunnar jerks his head back, not realizing Aeson was even with me. "Nope." He pops the 'p' sound and ducks back into the bedroom, which makes me laugh even harder. We make our way into Kim's room. I place my hand on the bed allowing Aeson to step off.

"Thanks, I needed that," I tell her, referring to the moment of levity.

Aeson places the back of her hand on her forehead like some old-fashioned cinema damsel. "And that's what killed her, folks. The rampant rumors of her dry pussy. She eventually succumbed to her plight and shriveled up and died from lack of dicking."

"You're such a drama queen. I'm sure we could find some poor sap who would give your arid pussy a jizz bath."

Aeson gets a faraway look in her eyes. "Yes, I'm quite sure one load from the wolf and I would be soaked for days." She throws herself back on the bed, spread eagle style.

My thoughts immediately return to the reason my best friend just threw herself under the bus for me. I'm pregnant.

My hand goes to my lower stomach. I'm tempted to try the meditation technique Grim taught me to see if I could feel that glow again. When I felt that warmth, everything seemed right. Now that I know what it is, maybe it would help abate some of this panic making my throat feel tight. Fear is not an emotion I'm used to.

Aeson senses the mood shift and tilts her head back to look at me, then she rolls over so she's on her stomach with her palms propped under her chin. Put a little pair of wings on her and she would make the cutest goth Tinkerbell ever. "I'm going to take that smile and the fact that you're no longer threatening to throw up as a good sign," she comments hesitantly. My smile slips. "Oh dear." She sighs.

"I just never even thought about being a mom. I didn't even know it was

a possibility. Fucking hell, what if I would have gotten knocked up by some random hookup?”

“I don’t think *that* would have been a possibility, Dami.”

I start worrying the skin on the side of my thumbnail, something I haven’t done in years. Not since boarding school. “When should I tell them? How should I tell them? Am I going to have to go to a human doctor?” Horror fills me.

The thought of Grim, Calix, and Gunnar all standing in a delivery room threatening the doctor and nurses with death might be kind of funny though. Then I remember I’m going to have to push a baby out and I grab my pussy in sympathy.

“Now’s not the time to diddle yourself,” Aeson scoffs.

“I’m not diddling myself. I’m comforting my puss. She might never be the same after this.”

“Oh, shut up, you’re speaking like a daft man.”

“It’s gonna fucking hurt though,” I exclaim.

“They have drugs for that sort of thing,” Aeson counters, dismissing my concern.

“A baby.” I shake my head. There’s no denying the facts, but I don’t think it’s truly sunk in yet. I feel like this is both happening to someone else and me at the same time.

“Dami.” Aeson’s voice is in full comfort mode. “I want you to know this is your body, your choice. You don’t have to tell anyone.” Her eyes are blown wide, and she bites her lower lip as she finishes.

I get choked up even thinking about what she’s implying. I shake my head vehemently in refusal. “No, I could never.” I don’t ever want to think about that again.

Aeson’s entire body sags in what I’m hoping is relief. “Okay, good,” she breathes, confirming my interpretation of her reaction.

“I don’t know how they will feel about it though.” I try to imagine each of their responses and fail miserably. “Do I tell them together or separately, now or when we get home?” I’m rambling, but I can’t help it. My thoughts are shifting wildly.

“All of it is up to you, Dami. But if you’re asking for my advice, I would suggest you tell them sooner rather than later.” She reaches over and places her tiny hand on my leg. “My instincts tell me you’re worrying for the wrong reasons.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’d be more worried about having three rabid mother hens than I would be about them being upset.” She retracts her hand. “Heaven forbid if you should stub a toe, Death may start the apocalypse.” She rolls her eyes.

I snort, but she’s not wrong. “Maybe I should wait to tell them until after we get rid of Antonio?”

Aeson winces. “It’s your call, but they won’t be happy when they find out you kept this from them,” she remarks, and it sounds like a warning.

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## CHAPTER 19

“*H*ave you heard from the witch?” Gunnar pushes Torin’s feet off the end of the couch, and the big man catches himself and sits up. “Are you just moving in, or what?”

“Technically, it is my house since it’s owned by a member of my pack.” Torin lifts his brows.

“Yeah, but you also have a swank mansion down the road,” Gunnar reminds him.

“Yeah, but you guys don’t want anything from me, and they want everything,” he mumbles under his breath, and Gunnar drops the topic.

“The witch?” Calix reminds him.

“No, but he doesn’t have my direct number. I’ll check in with Kim in a little while. I’m sure she would have gotten hold of me if he reached out.” Torin’s gaze keeps straying back to me every few seconds. I pretend not to notice as I play a game on my phone.

“Where did the Brownie go?”

I roll my head to the side, looking at Torin. “She’s around,” I hedge. If he thinks he can safely out me without her being in the room, he’s deadly mistaken. “Maybe she went to get that shrinking potion she was talking about. I told her it might be a bad idea. Who knows what it might shrink, and if it would ever go back to the right size?” I make a point of looking down at his groin. Torin immediately looks away from me, and I don’t notice him staring so much anymore. Men are so predictable.

Grim saunters in from the kitchen. I wet my lips and look around, confirming they’re all here. This is the first time all of us have been in the same room all day. “I was thinking that maybe we should go home today. It’s

been over a week since I've been there, and it's not like we can't pop right back if we need to."

"You're leaving?" Torin looks a little panicked.

"Just for the day. I want to sleep in my own bed. You can still hide out here," I offer, feeling somewhat guilty, as if I'm abandoning him.

Grim lifts a lock of my hair and rubs it between his fingers. "I can take you now if you wish."

"Not without me. You got her all to yourself last time." Calix stands up as if Grim may try to steal me away right now and he's planning on hitching a ride.

"Let's wait and see if the witch gets back to Torin." I return my gaze to my phone, knowing I'm just delaying the inevitable. A few more hours couldn't hurt. I already told Aeson about my plan to go home this morning before bed so I could tell them. It's been a challenge keeping it to myself all night. Grim has asked me more than once what I was thinking about when he caught me zoning out. I made sure to keep my answers vague so he wouldn't sense the lie. I'm not even sure if he would be able to, but better safe than sorry.

"Are you sure it's safe there? I mean, Antonio knows where you live, right?" Torin interjects. "Maybe you should just stay here."

I look over at him, and he seems genuinely concerned. During all my anxious thoughts, I never really considered that Torin might be extra sensitive about a pregnancy. He did just lose his mate in childbirth. I don't think that would be a fate he would wish on anyone. What can I say to let him know the reason I want to go home is so I can tell them about the baby?

"I'm going to pretend you didn't just insult me by assuming I couldn't keep my mate safe," Calix deadpans.

Torin opens his mouth but snaps it closed before grabbing the back of his neck and replying, "Some things are out of our control." Calix examines Torin, his eyes shrewd and assessing.

I toss my phone onto the couch next to me. "Actually, we can just go now. You can call Calix if anything turns up, right?" Before Torin can respond, I add, "Aeson will be back soon, she's just letting the local assassin band know she's in town out of courtesy."

Everything happens rather quickly from there, and before I know it, I'm standing in my bedroom sandwiched between Calix and Grim, which is a nice place to be most of the time.

Gunnar hollers needlessly from downstairs. "I'm down here."

I let out a soft chuckle, then I take a deep breath. "Let's go downstairs. There's something we need to talk about."

Calix grips my shoulder roughly and spins me. His hazel eyes are intense on mine. "I will kill him. He won't stand a chance."

"What are you talking about?" I jerk my shoulder free.

"If you think I will allow him to touch you, if you think any of us will, you're wrong."

I look around. Gunnar is now in the room too. All three of them are watching me with varying expressions, but none of them are looking at Calix or saying anything about the way he just handled me. "I have no clue what the fuck you're talking about. But if you ever," I snarl, stepping closer to Calix and getting right in his face, "touch me like that again out of anger, I will slit your throat and watch you bleed." I stomp out of the room. Rage is simmering under my skin, and it's so potent that I feel like I might burn the house down.

"Damiana," Gunnar calls, but I ignore him.

"Motherfuckers."

I feel the house literally shake as they chase me down the stairs. Grim ends up appearing right in front of me at the bottom of the steps.

"Move!"

"The Nemean thinks you want the wolf," Grim tells me, not stepping out of my way or beating around the bush.

I shove his shoulder. It's not lost on me that I just pushed him, yet I threatened to kill Calix for doing something similar. "Then he's an idiot, and so are you for believing his bullshit!"

"I told you," Gunnar snaps.

"Fuck! I'm sorry, but I heard you say you didn't know how to tell us something this morning, then Aeson came up with that bullshit lie about vaginal dryness. I don't know what to think!" he shouts, still angry.

"That has absolutely fucking nothing to do with Torin!" If I had neighbors, they would be in lawn chairs listening to this shit show.

"Then what were you talking about?" Gunnar's voice is hard as he crosses his arms over his chest and stands next to Calix in a united front.

"Fuck you, I don't need to tell you shit." I start to walk away again, but they all follow me. "Fucking idiot. That's his automatic assumption? That I want to fuck more people? Like the three dicks I have already aren't enough



for me?” I’m talking to myself, and my body is damn near vibrating with fury.

“You’re nice to him—you call him ‘Wolfy,’” Gunnar reasons, not helping their case.

“Of course I’m nice to him. Contrary to popular opinion, I’m not a heartless bitch, and he just lost his fucking mate.”

Grim distances himself from the other two men, his eyes glued to me. “You should be quiet now,” he tells them.

“No,” Gunnar insists. “She admitted there is something she is keeping from us. I want to know what it is.”

I shake my head. There is no way I’m telling them now, especially not like this. I force some calmness into my tone. “No, I’m not ready to talk to you about it now.”

Gunnar scoffs, like I’m being childish. It takes everything in me not to say something snide to him. He looks at Calix as if he’s waiting for him to add something, but he doesn’t. Instead, Calix turns his back to me and walks away without ever acknowledging he did something wrong. It makes my chest ache.

I wet my lips. “Grim, I’m sorry I pushed you when we were near the stairs, that was wrong.” I don’t wait for his reply, instead I stride past him and into the foyer then right out the front door.

The air is much cooler here, and dawn is still a few hours away, so my yard is blanketed in darkness, leaving just the moon and stars to cast a gloomy glow. I can’t even make out the tree line from my porch.

When it’s clear no one is going to follow me this time, I lay my hand over my lower stomach and whisper miserably, “Well, that didn’t go how I expected.”

After pouting on the porch for an hour, I make my way back into the house, taking it as a sign of growth that I didn’t need one of them to convince me to come back inside. Yay me.

Calix’s head pops up when I amble into my favorite parlor. I already knew they were here. I’m still upset about what he did, but I don’t know how to have a productive conversation about it.

Gunnar’s arms fold over his chest as if to protect himself from me. I feel defeated before I even speak, but I don’t let it stop me. “Yeah, so it sucks that you don’t trust me. It makes me feel like you think I take this for granted. I get that you guys got the raw end of the deal when it comes to getting me as

your mate, considering I got all of you, but I wouldn't do that to you, not to any of you." I don't know what to do with my body. My hands feel awkward at my sides and weird when I put them on my hips, so I end up just fidgeting around a bit.

I expect someone to say something, to maybe even deny that they got a raw deal, but no one speaks up, and it hurts. I swallow the lump in my throat, not knowing what else to say since they aren't even speaking.

I hook my thumb over my shoulder. "I'm tired, so..." My nose sounds clogged, but I ignore it. With that I leave the room, my head high, at least until I make it to the stairs, which is when I allow the façade to crumble as I slowly make my way up to my room.

When I shut the door behind me, I lock it. It's the first time in months I've locked them away from me, but I need the space now. I don't think I could handle them ignoring me again. I'd rather shut them out before they can do it to me.

I take a nice long shower, and a few tears might have even fallen, but I'll never tell. Then I pull on a pair of leggings and one of my own oversized shirts. The sheets are freshly laundered: the benefit of hiring a cleaning crew that actually works, even if I'm not home.

I don't expect sleep to come quickly, but when I close my eyes, I'm surprised at how tired I feel. I let my mind go blank, and every time a thought tries to intrude, I cover it with a blanket of blackness until I eventually drift off.



THE SOUND of the door handle jiggling wakes me. I mistake the sound for the crooked man, but then I hear, "No, I shouldn't have let you talk me into leaving her alone." Grim doesn't bother whispering. I still pretend to be sleeping when I feel the rift from his portal.

"Leave him be, it's almost time for her to get up anyway," Calix mutters dejectedly from the other side of the door.

"Wow, he's still being an asshole, huh?" I croak, my voice deep from sleep.

"I can get rid of him if it would please you," Grim offers.

I take a deep breath and sigh out, "No, it would not please me."

“I didn’t think it would. May I stay?”

“I guess.” I shrug. Seems like a full day of rest didn’t fix our problems. That sucks.

I don’t know where my phone is at this point, so I ask, “What time is it anyway?”

“Five seventeen,” Grim answers. The fact that he’s just standing near the door takes me a little by surprise. I thought he would have come closer. I’m at a loss. I don’t know how to fill the distance developing between us, especially after last night.

“I guess I should get up,” I mutter, even though I don’t really want to get out of bed.

“It’s still early.” How should I take that? Does he want me to stay in bed? When I don’t move, he finally makes his way closer to me and slowly sits on the edge of the bed. “The Nemean and Berserker think you want to be left alone because we’re idiots, but I think you already know we are idiots and we should be begging for your forgiveness.”

I dip my chin and pull up the blanket so Grim can’t see the messy grin on my face. “They’re dumb,” I mutter with my mouth still hidden under the blanket.

“But I’m not?” Grim looks over his shoulder so he can see me.

“You haven’t apologized yet.”

Grim places his palm on the bed and climbs closer until he’s lying next to me. While looking right into my eyes, he tugs the blanket down so he can see my entire face. “I’m sorry. Sorry that I didn’t rip off the Nemean’s arm when he touched you in anger. Sorry I let my disquiet allow me to question your loyalty.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “If he ever does it again, you won’t have to rip his arm off, because I will. Then I’ll beat him with it.”

“I don’t think you will ever have to worry about that. The Nemean isn’t any happier with himself than you are.” Grim slides his hand over my side to rest on the flare of my hip.

“He sure has a funny way of showing it.”

“I didn’t say he wasn’t an idiot, just a remorseful idiot.” Grim’s statement makes me chuckle. When he leans in for a kiss, I don’t stop him. It’s soft and sweet. It says just as much as his words do, and I eat up the affection.

Grim ends the kiss with a few soft pecks before pulling back and observing me. Looking into his beautiful gray eyes, I remember how this

whole thing started. “There is something I need to talk to all of you about.” I was nervous about their reactions yesterday, and after the argument last night, I’m feeling even more vulnerable.

Grim wraps his hand around the nape of my neck and closes his eyes while placing his forehead on mine. “Would you like me to get the others?” His voice is deep but soft. He’s either picking up on my apprehension, or I’m reading way too much into his response.

I stroke my fingers over his jaw and dance my touch over his lips. Grim’s eyes open, and I make sure that my face isn’t betraying my emotions by giving him what I hope is a reassuring smile. “No, you don’t need get to them. I’m going to get dressed and I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Grim presses a quick, hard kiss against my lips and kneads his fingers into my hip before shoving himself up from the mattress. When he reaches the door, he grips the knob and looks over his shoulder, his eyes roaming over me like it may be the last time he gets the privilege. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Grim,” I call before he leaves. I almost tell him right then, but I stop myself. “Nothing, I’ll be down in a minute.” Once he’s gone, I flip onto my back and stare up at the ceiling. I need to quit freaking out. This isn’t a deal breaker, or it shouldn’t be anyway. Sure, it’s fast, and really unexpected, but the realness of having a baby is actually starting to sink in, and I’m kind of... excited. Really fucking scared, but inexplicably delighted too. I’m a mess.

I need to remember that this may come as just as much of a shock to them as it did to me. I thought I was going to throw up when I learned the truth—it was a knee-jerk reaction—and they may have a similar response. “Don’t overreact, even if they do.” With that little pep talk out of the way, I toss back the covers and climb out of bed.

If I didn’t know for certain they were here, I wouldn’t have a clue. The house is as quiet as a tomb and feels as somber as one as I head into the kitchen. All three of them are sitting at the table, and every eye turns in my direction as I enter the room. “Hey.” I wave because I don’t know what to do with myself, and now this feels as if I’ve made too big of a buildup.

Grim rises and pulls out an empty chair for me to sit, but I’m too anxious for that. “I’m gonna get a drink. Anyone want anything?”

They all decline. Heading over to the fridge, I grab a bottle of water and lean my ass against the counter, keeping the island between us. “So... I wanted to talk to you all about something I realized yesterday morning, and I thought it would be better if we came home... came here,” I amend, then add,

“So I could tell you.”

“What is it?” Gunnar leans his arms against the table.

I wet my lips. It’s now or never. “First, I want to say I didn’t plan this. I didn’t even know it was possible.”

“Dami, please, you’re killing me. What’s wrong?” Calix’s hands are balled up into fists on his thighs.

I lower my eyes to the floor. “I’m pretty sure... I’m pregnant. Not pretty sure, just sure. And I didn’t do it on purpose. I don’t know anything about kids. And it’s not like I need to trap you guys. Pretty much already did that, which was also unintentional,” I ramble. When I’m brave enough to actually lift my gaze, I wish I had a camera.

Grim’s eyes are as wide as I’ve ever seen them, Calix’s mouth is actually gaping open, and Gunnar is just sitting there blinking rapidly. “Can you say that again?” Calix is the first to speak.

“I can, but it’s not going to change the truth. I’m pregnant,” I tell them, enunciating the words slowly.

“That’s what I thought you said.” Calix scratches the top of his head.

“Like with a baby?” Gunnar whispers.

A laugh escapes me. I feel kind of bad, I was that shocked too. “Who knows? Between the four of us, it might just be a fucking octopus. It’s not like any of us are rocking normalcy.”

“A babe,” Grim breathes reverently. “That was the extra presence within you when you began meditating.” He’s speaking to himself. His chair tips backwards as he rushes to stand before coming around the counter. The next thing I know, Grim is on his knees in front of me, his hands inches away from my lower stomach as if he’s afraid to actually touch me. “I felt her.”

“Her?” I have to grab the counter when my knees buckle.

The sound of another chair scooting back has my eyes jumping up to see Calix hustling across the room like his feet are on skates. It’s the least graceful I’ve ever seen him. “What do you mean you felt her? Is something wrong?”

“She wasn’t calling to be reaped. I just sensed her when I helped Damiana release the captured souls.” Grim’s hands are still hovering over me.

“Can you feel her now?” Calix asks in an awe filled whisper.

“Just a spark,” Grim murmurs. At least no one is freaking out—yet. I look over to see that Gunnar is still seated at the table, his eyes unfocused as he

stares at nothing.

“How do you know it is a girl?” Calix shuffles his way even closer.

“I just do.” Grim finally places his hands on my hips and looks up at me. His gray eyes are still wide, but with wonder instead of shock. “We’re creating something.”

I shrug and kind of nod at the same time. “I think we already did the creating part.”

“She’s been eating. Is this why you’ve been eating? How far along are you? When will she be here?”

My head is about to spin with all the questions Calix just threw at me. I open my mouth to tell him I have no clue, but he starts speaking again.

“We can’t go back to Savannah, it’s too dangerous. Call Torin.” As soon as the name falls from his lips, Calix turns and looks at me. “He knew. You told him before you told us?” he accuses.

I shake my head and try to answer, but I get cut off again, this time by Grim. “The wolf,” he snarls. “How does he know?”

“Are you actually going to let me speak? I don’t want this shit to get out of hand again because of a misunderstanding.” I plant my hands on my hips and glare at both of them. Grim rises to his feet but doesn’t back away, while Calix has the good sense to lower his head. I peek over at Gunnar again. His mouth is moving, but he’s not speaking.

“We can most certainly go back to Savannah, and Torin only knows because he was eavesdropping on Aeson and me while we were in the kitchen. I never talked to him about it, and he never talked to me.”

“So Aeson knows?” Calix questions. “I knew that vaginal dryness story was such bullshit.”

“She said something to me about eating... and it all connected in my head.” I point to my temple.

“This is what you wanted to tell us?” Calix winces and lets out a heavy breath.

“You grabbed her.” Grim shoves Calix’s shoulder hard enough that he stumbles back. I put my arm against Grim’s chest to stop him from advancing on Calix.

“Enough, not right now, not after you let him get away with it yesterday.” I scowl, and Grim backs down immediately. Using the extra space, I step away so I’m no longer caged between the two men and the counter.

“Don’t start this overprotective crap already,” I grouch, then I turn to face

Gunnar. I didn't really know what to expect from any of them, but seeing him so completely still and absolutely quiet didn't even make the list of how I thought he would react.

I take the seat next to the big man and lean over so I'm in his field of vision. He blinks several times as if I've broken some sort of trance. "It's a lot, I know."

Gunnar snaps into action and grabs my hand. "You may not possess me, because I am my own, but I give myself to you freely. I pledge your name will be the only name I cry out for."

"Did you just marry her?" Calix stomps over, incredulous.

"Aye," Gunnar confirms.

"You didn't even ask her."

"She's accepted my gifts, and I've spoken the vow."

"What about us, you selfish cock?" Calix snaps.

"We are all bound to her, Nemean. Nothing chan—" Gunnar doesn't even get a chance to finish because I burst out laughing and he stops speaking mid word. "What's so funny?" he demands instead.

I lift my hand. "I have no clue!" I'm laughing so hard I can barely breathe. When the giggling finally subsides, my side hurts and so do my cheeks. I'm honestly not sure what I found so funny, maybe it was the ridiculousness of him just declaring us married, but I feel a tremendous sense of relief. I'm pretty sure it has a lot to do with the fact that they took the news much better than I did.

"It wasn't that funny." Gunnar pouts.

"I'm not laughing at you, Kitten. If speaking those words are important to you, then they're important to me. It's just this is all so crazy. I couldn't have even made something like this up, and here I am, living it. We all are."

## CHAPTER 20

“*W*hy are we still discussing this?” I’m about ready to beat my head on the table. Here I thought the biggest issue would be them fighting over who the baby daddy is, but no. It’s all about the fucking bubble they think I should live in now. “Grim has *tethered* my soul to my body, what are you so worried about?”

“I still don’t like it,” Gunnar grumbles, brooding over in the corner.

“And you’ve made that abundantly clear,” I mutter, putting my head in my hands.

“None of us like it,” Calix adds.

“So, are you saying this is a three against one kind of thing?” I tilt my head so I can see them all from behind my hands. Before they can answer, I warn, “Because that would be a mistake. I’ve never asked for your permission, nor do I plan to.”

“We are just concerned, Omnia.”

“You’re concerned, I’m concerned. We’ll all be concerned *together*. You’re not leaving me here locked up with a babysitter while you guys go and solve all the problems,” I mock.

“One of us would always be with you,” Calix offers.

“Come on, guys. I’m dealing with enough. I don’t need you acting like the world would end if I stubbed a toe.” I’m starting to sound whiny, even to my own ears.

“Fine.”

“Fine?” Gunnar questions Grim’s statement.

“Yes, fine. Damiana’s right. We should stay together; it’s best that way.”

“Why are you giving in so easily now?” I can’t help but be suspicious of



Grim's complete about-face.

"Because you are stubborn and would never stay put regardless." Grim runs his hand over his torso. "I also find it very unsettling to think about you not being within sight."

"You find that a little off putting, do you?" Calix jabs at Grim's formal tone.

"It's like you know me or something," I praise Grim, giving him a huge smile. It doesn't hurt that he admitted he doesn't want to be away from me.

"I guess I can answer this now that it's been decided," Calix mutters, pulling his phone from his pocket. "Yeah?" he barks. After a brief pause, he replies, "We'll be there at sundown tonight."

I sit up a little. I was expecting that we would return to Savannah sooner than that, but there are still a few hours before this morning's sunrise, so that means we have all day at home. "Yeah, everything is good...family stuff," Calix adds, not sounding very happy that he's explaining himself to whomever is on the line—Torin, I assume. He hangs up shortly after and tosses the phone on the table.

"I'm going to shower, I bought us another day at home." He stands up and stretches his neck from left to right.

"Did he say anything about the witch?" I inquire, watching the way his shirt lifts just above the waistband of his low-slung jeans, giving me just a peek at the tanned skin under his bellybutton.

"No." Calix's answer is short, as is his tone, like he's upset. Before I have a chance to ask what's wrong, he turns and heads out of the kitchen.

"Are mood swings contagious during pregnancy?" I joke, looking at Gunnar and Grim.

Gunnar snorts and leans back in his chair. "You don't get why he's pissed?"

I raise my eyebrows. "I mean, I can guess. He doesn't want me going back to Savannah." I hope that's all it is. He seemed fine about the whole becoming a baby daddy thing.

"I think the fact that the wolf is damn near obsessed with you has more to do with it, my lady." Gunnar gives me a droll look.

Now it's my turn to scoff. "Torin's concern is for a pregnant female, it has nothing to do with me in particular."

"For his sake, let's hope that's true, because the Nemean has far more patience than I do." Gunnar smiles, but it's all sharp teeth and implied

threats. I plant my elbows on the table and give him a goofy grin. I'm so easy—just a hint of violence on my behalf and I swoon.

Grim draws my attention when he rises from his seat. His cloak, which is so dark it almost seems to absorb light, encases him as if it's always just out of sight and waiting to be donned. I reach for his arm, wrapping my fingers around him like I might be able to keep him from leaving. "You're going?" I whisper, half worried that another Charmed is calling him to be reaped, and half sad that I can't keep them all to myself forever.

"I won't be gone long," Grim assures me.

"Is it...?" I don't finish my question. It's bad enough that I feel guilty for taking time from our hunt for the witch to deal with our new little issue, but I also know I did the right thing by telling them.

"No, Damiana, it's..."

Before Grim can finish, someone speaks behind me. The voice has me snapping my head around. "Hello, Mouse."

"Boogey?" Just beyond the shadows, I can see his sharp white teeth and his claw tipped fingers. I haven't seen him in years, not since I was a teenager. I rise from my chair slowly so I don't spook him.

I've never seen him anywhere but under my bed. He was one of the monsters that would still visit me when I was away at boarding school. I would lie in bed at night for hours talking to him. Even though I never really saw him, he was my first crush. How cliché. I was in puppy love with the monster under my bed. Secret whispers shared in the dark about how we wished things could be different for both of us. All he wanted was a life, to be able to walk around in the daylight, and all I wanted was to be accepted for what I was.

Boogey needed things I couldn't give him, like fear. Every once in a while, I would hear other girls from the dorm screaming in the middle of the night and I knew it was him grabbing a hand or foot that slipped out from under the covers. I wasn't jealous really, but it made me feel like I was never enough.

He didn't follow me when I moved. I was sad, but I understood. The rumors of my dorm being haunted and cursed had grown so much since I'd been there, the place was feared by everyone on campus, not just the unfortunate souls who had to be housed there. I think he lived off the fear in the same way I dined on sins.

"Been a while," he mutters.

I feel Grim's long fingers wrap over my upper arm as he steps closer to my back. Boogey retreats a little farther into the shadows, but I can still make out his teeth. "Someone's been recruiting at the school, Mouse."

"What?" I step forward a little, not wanting Boogey to disappear.

"A witch, I hear the girls' whispers." His voice still sounds exactly the same, husky and dark, as if it's made from the shadows themselves.

"Tell us what you know," Gunnar demands, now standing next to Grim. I grab his forearm tightly. I don't want him to scare Boogey away.

"Your legacy still fills the halls. None of us have forgotten you." I see a black tongue whip out and curl around his teeth.

"What kind of recruiting?" I prompt, hoping Gunnar will let me do the talking. Boogey may be terrifying to humans, but he's always seemed very skittish to me.

"Mostly he lies. Promising power if they join him. He says he's the one who gifted you with dark powers."

"Antonio?" I look over at Grim, who is studying the darkness Boogey is hiding in.

"I thought you should know." Then softer, he adds, "Goodbye, Mouse."

"Wait!" I call out, and take a few steps in his direction, but he's gone, disappearing into the shadows, leaving only his sad voice ringing in my ears.

"I don't like him," Gunnar snaps.

"You don't like anyone," I retort.

"Well, I really don't like him. And why did he call you Mouse? You're about as far from a mouse as I am from being a kitten." He gives me an accusatory glare.

"You'd have to ask him, and since he's gone..." I leave the rest hanging. "Do you think it was Antonio? I mean, nothing else would make sense, but why would he be snooping around a school I haven't been to in over ten years?"

"Stranger still that he had a house right down the street from your parents," Grim adds with a calculating look in his eye.

"If he is the one snooping around the school, then who killed the Charmed in Savannah?" No one answers me, because no one knows.



I HOP up off the couch when the doorbell rings. “Got it!” I can already hear stomping feet on the stairs behind me, so I pick up the pace. By the time I rip the door open, I’m a little winded.

“Goddamn it, Dami,” Gunnar growls. I grin because I love to piss him off, but it immediately falls when I see who’s at the door.

“What are you doing here?” I lean against the doorframe, not inviting her in.

Kim rolls her eyes as if she’s already praying for patience because she has to deal with me. “It is my house, you know.” Under her breath, she adds, “It’s bad enough I have to ring the fucking bell.” Her eyes go behind me, and I know Gunnar is standing a few feet away. “I need to speak with Torin.”

I turn just in time to see Gunnar lift his hand in an invitation. “Do me a favor and take him with you.” Torin’s presence is still a sore spot, even after a week of being back in Savannah. The fact that he seems determined to keep his distance from his pack while actively looking for a successor is the only reason I think Calix is tolerating him. He knows that if Torin just walks away, he will be the one who has to deal with the pack until someone can hold the position without being challenged.

“Don Warren is here to see him,” Kim spits, as if the words taste bad in her mouth.

“Don, that’s Calix’s friend, right? The one who kept going on about his sister?” Gunnar waggles his eyebrows at me. He gives just as good as I do and loves pissing me off just as much. I tip my nose in the air and pretend like I’m going to just walk past him, but instead I wrap my arms around his neck and jump on his back. Gunnar doesn’t miss a beat, and he loops his arms around my legs to help hold me up. “He’s in there taking up the entire couch with his fat ass,” he adds, as Kim steps past us.

I chuckle. Torin really *has* put on some weight. He’s not fat by any means, but definitely much heavier than when we first met, which feels like forever ago now. We follow Kim into the living room. Torin is eyeing Samson, who’s doing a marvelous job of pretending no one else exists in the world until he sees me clinging to Gunnar’s back like a monkey. In my head, I hear him click his tongue. For a Hellhound, he’s quite regal, but for all I know they all are—I’ve only ever met him.

I tap Gunnar’s shoulder, and he lets me slide down his back after bending his knees to make sure I’m closer to the ground. “Hey, Samson.”

*Hello, Damiana.* Even the way he says my name sounds proud.

“Another of her friends?” Torin asks behind me. Since we’ve been here, I’ve had a few baddies stop by. The wolf seemed most disturbed by the sea creature I call Melvin. He resembles a giant worm with fins and hundreds of rows of serrated teeth disappearing into a black hole of a mouth. Not that I’m judging the wolf. I guess Melvin could seem scary if you didn’t know him.

Samson’s long, barbed tail flicks a few times as he watches Kim from across the room. She’s doing a good job of pretending not to notice him, but she’s in a room full of supernatural creatures, so it’s impossible to hide everything. Especially when her eyes keep darting in the hound’s direction. Is that interest I see?

“Alpha.” She dips her chin in a respectful manner. “Alpha Don Warren is here to see you.”

Torin taps his fingers on the arm of the couch then lets out a heavy sigh before rising to his feet. “You know him personally?” he asks Calix.

Calix wets his lips then glances in my direction before focusing back on Torin. “Yes, he’s the one we talked about,” he confirms.

Not wanting to ignore Samson, I step a little closer to him and plop on the floor. *I was surprised to find you are still here*, he remarks, speaking directly into my head.

“Yeah, we haven’t had much luck finding the witch we came here for.” I lean back on my palms. “Is something wrong?”

*No, but Death is away.*

“Ahh, Grim sent you?” I smile.

*No one sends me anywhere, Damiana, but he did ask politely. Who is that?* He doesn’t have to elaborate. I know who he’s asking about.

“That’s Kim, the most uptight shifter I’ve ever met.”

Samson tilts his head a bit and makes a slight humming noise. A wicked idea forms. I lean in a little closer and whisper, “You should tap that.”

His red eyes dart to mine, and I’m pretty sure I see a spark of interest there.

Unfortunately, Kim and Torin head out shortly after she arrives. Samson never really got the chance to speak with her. I’m willing to bet that will be the only time I ever think her leaving is unfortunate. He didn’t end up staying much longer himself, just long enough to check up on us.

Calix leans back on the sofa, spreading his arms over the back, and lets out a long breath. “This is it. If Torin finds a reason not to relinquish his leadership over to Don, I’m going to assume he’s going to stay in control,

and we can leave.”

“Really?” I ask eagerly. Don’t get me wrong, Savannah is a beautiful place. I love how awake the city is all night long, and how the urban sprawl can’t quite take over the backcountry feel with all the park-like squares dotted through the city, but I want to go home.

“Yeah, I don’t think we’re going to find Antonio here, and it’s time Torin decides what his future is going to look like. If we stay, we’re just enabling him not to take the next step.”

Gunnar leans against the wall near us and gives a definitive nod. “Good,” is his only response.

“Aeson will be happy,” I say, instead of admitting how relieved I am to know I could be sleeping in my own bed with a few of my fellas as soon as the morning. Aeson returned home a few days ago, realizing that being here wasn’t getting anything accomplished. We’ve all given up hope of finding the witch here at this point.

“Just Aeson?” Calix smirks at me.

“No, I think Dare probably missed me too.” Calix shakes his head at my answer, never losing the grin. “So now we just wait. How long do you think it will take him to decide?”

“I don’t think it will take long. Did you see Torin’s face when Kim announced Alpha Don?” Gunnar’s brows are high on his forehead.

“I didn’t notice anything unusual,” I admit.

“I don’t think Torin’s quite ready to give it all up. He just needed a little time and some space to see that,” Calix explains.

“That’s good though, right? Everyone in the pack seems to love him.”

“He’s a good leader,” Calix answers, which I take as a yes.

I toy with the inside of my cheek while gathering the courage to ask a question I’ve thought quite a lot about. “Is there a chance he could find another mate?”

Calix’s hazel eyes grow very serious when he meets my gaze. “No,” he says emphatically. “Never another mate, but that doesn’t mean he won’t be happy or find love.”

“But how can you be sure? I have three.” Gunnar shoves off the wall and makes his way over to the chair I’m sitting on, taking my hand in his.

“I guess it could be a possibility,” Calix admits reluctantly.

“I feel like there’s a but coming.”

“If that were the case, Torin would already most likely know. It wasn’t an

accident we all came to you at the same time. Call it fate, or what you will, but he would know,” Calix states solemnly.

“So you’re saying I don’t have a number four and five out there somewhere?” I tease to lighten the mood.

Gunnar breaks his quiet spell by growling and hauling me up against his body. I giggle. “I’m kidding. Even I couldn’t handle more of you.” I boop his nose.

“Damn right!” he mutters with a scowl. He’s so adorable.



THE FRONT DOOR OPENS SLOWLY. I sit up a little and end up spilling some of my yogurt on my shirt. “Damn it.” Using my finger, I scoop it off my boob and stick my finger in my mouth.

“I got something you can swallow.” Gunnar leers at me.

“By my count, you still owe me.” I make sure to give my finger a few more swipes just to show him what he’s missing.

Torin makes an appearance in the doorway of the living room, his head down as he leans against the wall. I watch his chest expand as he draws in a heavy breath. “It’s time for me to take responsibility for my pack,” he declares, sounding a little sad but resigned.

“You need them,” Calix replies, and it’s the first time anyone has mentioned that it’s not just the pack who needs their leader, but an alpha who needs their pack.

Torin nods, acknowledging the words. “Thank you for stepping in and giving me time.” He almost seems embarrassed to say it.

“You did all the work,” Gunnar tells him, and it’s easy to see the reluctant friendship that’s formed between the three men, even Grim, but he’s still not here.

Torin looks over at me then averts his eyes. “Sometimes I still want to run until I can’t remember, until I’m nothing but the animal.”

“I know,” Calix murmurs.

“But then I would have to forget her, and I just can’t.” I swear my heart breaks all over again for him when I see the sheen of tears clouding his eyes. I feel like an intruder, as if I shouldn’t be here while he’s sharing his soul.

“It’s not fair, and it fucking sucks, but that’s the tradeoff. She’s worth the

pain.” Calix doesn’t look away from Torin’s anguish.

“She’ll be waiting for you.” I whip my head around to see Grim standing on the other side of the room. I can’t believe I didn’t feel his return.

Torin’s face crumples, but he fights to keep the tears from falling. I wish I had something to say, some magical words that would ease his pain, but I can’t force a syllable past my lips. When I’m tempted to look away, I don’t, I watch as he takes a few precious moments and shores up the walls he’s built over the last several weeks, the ones that will allow him to function until it’s not so hard to remember his mate without feeling like he might fall apart.

“Thank you again.” Torin dips his chin and looks at each of us in turn. “You are always welcome here. If you ever need anything, I’ll be there.” With that, he turns away and walks out of the house just as quietly as he entered, and I feel like we let him down.

I look at Grim, knowing there are tears streaming down my face. “Isn’t there anything you can do?” I know the answer, but I have to ask.

The Angel of Death walks over and kneels at my feet. “I cannot create, Omnia. I can only ruin,” he replies, as if he believes himself to be a failure.

“That’s not true, Loverboy.” I feel the truth of my statement, and the lie that accompanied his. Reaching out, I take his hand and place it on my stomach, hoping he understands because words are just too hard right now.



## CHAPTER 21

“*T*his is a bunch of bullshit!” I toss my cards on the table. Uncle’s long, pointed fingers trail over the marbles, collecting his winnings. I rub my hand over my rounded belly and wonder how it is I haven’t won a game of cards in so long. It makes me think Uncle used to *let* me win.

He rises slowly, untangling his long limbs and revealing how very tall he is. I tip my head back. “Don’t be a stranger.”

Uncle’s lips peel back at my words, illuminating his rows of razor-sharp teeth in a macabre smile. “Stranger danger.” He chuckles, and it sounds like metal gnashing together. I feel a strong kick from the baby high up in my ribs. “Ugh, I need to get up.”

I use the arm of the chair to stand. Who knew having a big gut would throw off your center of balance so much? Uncle offers me his hand, and I take it, lifting myself the rest of the way up. The pressure in my chest dissipates, but I need to pee almost immediately. I groan and Gunnar pokes his head into the parlor. I’m honestly surprised he hasn’t checked up on me twice already. He’s the mother hen of the group.

“Everything good?”

“Fine, I just need the bathroom.” I roll my eyes. He moves into the room as if he’s going to help me there. “I’m eight months pregnant, not a fucking invalid.” Pregnancy has not turned me into a Suzy Homemaker. This shit is hard, and anyone who says it’s not strange having a little alien creature inside you kicking and rearranging your organs is a lunatic.

As I pass Gunnar, he trails his hand over my ass, and I damn near melt right there. Stars, I’m fucking horny all the time—not that I wasn’t before—

and boy they sure know how to use it to their advantage. “Stay put, I’ll be back,” I growl, as I speed waddle my way to the nearest bathroom.

Grim is standing near the door when I get out, dressed in only a pair of low-slung linen pants. “Uncle’s gone.” He runs his eyes over me as if I’m some fucking goddess, not a legging- and t-shirt-clad heifer.

“He is,” I confirm.

No sooner do the words leave my mouth when I hear an enraged, “Hey!” shouted from Gunnar. Before I can even blink, Grim swoops me up in his arms and carries me to the attic. Gunnar’s “Fucking poacher!” is muffled, but still rings clear, even up here.

Grim grins down at me with smug victory and satisfaction. “You can tell me how your trip went later.” I wrap my arms loosely around his neck, pushing my butt back so my belly doesn’t get smashed up against his flat stomach. I miss molding my body to his.

“Later,” he agrees, and leans down to place a soft kiss against my lips. I know I’m going to be giving myself over to him for the next hour or so. Grim still fucks like he has all the time in the world, which he kind of does.

He peels my clingy shirt off and tosses it carelessly on the ground. His eyes go right to my tits. They’re a little larger, but my nipples are much darker, a dusty pink, and he can’t ever seem to get enough of them. He palms the weight of each breast in his hands, thumbing my nipples and making my back arch.

“Did you miss me?” His voice is deep and low.

“I always miss you, even when you’re in the same room. I’m like some sort of death dick junkie,” I confess, but I don’t feel an ounce of shame. I know it’s the same for him. He’s only been gone a few hours, but he frequently leaves for hours at a time, so it feels like he’s never home enough.

There haven’t been any more unexplained Charmed deaths, not since Savannah. We went to my old school when we first returned from Torin’s, but left without any answers. I couldn’t even find Boogey to see if he had any more information to share with us. None of us have admitted it, but I think we’ve all kind of given up on trying to find Antonio, at least until after the baby is born anyway.

The past few months have flown by. Much to my astonishment, I was already over three months pregnant when I realized it. Our due date is just a very rough estimate, though, given by the doctor after doing an ultrasound to measure the baby, since I don’t have a history of menstrual cycles to use as a

predictor.

Having three men in the ultrasound room went against the hospital rules, but no one was brave enough to ask any of them to leave. We got a few strange looks, but I think it had more to do with their good looks than it did with the fact that I had three baby daddies listed on my information form, and they were all with me. The place was filled with pregnant chicks, and if they were anything like me, they were all probably wishing they were in the same boat. I can't even be mad at them for it.

Grim slides his hands down, barely touching my belly on the way to remove my leggings—the damn things are only held up by my hips and a prayer anyway, I can't stand anything over my belly at this point. He doesn't stop until he's kneeling before me. I have to bend at the waist a little so I can see his face. Not too long ago, I would have hooked my knee over his shoulder and let him show me how much he's missed me, but I'm afraid I would topple over because my balance is shit, so I brace my hands on his shoulders while he explores my exposed skin with his hands and soft kisses.

After a few tortuous moments of him touching me, he gives my ass a little crack with his palm. "Get on the bed."

I turn around and give him a good view of my ass. The slap is still smarting, so I know he left a red spot, plus it's one part of me that I feel is still completely mine. So much about my body has changed; it takes a hell of a lot of confidence to embrace the transformation.

Grim is on me before I can even reach the bed. His front molded to my back. He must have lost the pants at some point, because I can feel the velvetiness of his cock against my ass. I moan when he wraps his arms over the top of my chest, crushing me to him as tightly as possible. Reaching my hands back, I feel the tight muscles of his legs under my palms.

Taking my weight, he lifts me, and my chest constricts from the tight embrace, making it a little harder to draw a breath, but who cares about breathing when I can feel the head of his dick slipping between my legs? Without having a free hand, it takes Grim a second to get our bodies lined up, but when he does, he lets me down just enough so that his cock is seated deep inside me. In this position I have no control, and all I can do is curl my knees up a little against his body.

As he takes a step forward, he goes a little deeper. My inner muscles clench, already anticipating an orgasm. When we reach the bed, he leans over until I'm kneeling on the mattress and he's standing behind me. My body

goes slack as he starts to actually move, thrusting in and out at a slow pace designed to make me crazy with need. Stars, this man fucks like he has something to prove each and every time. Good thing I'm the only one that will ever be the recipient.

"Three, Omnia." I know what the words mean. He's going to make me come three times before he's finished. It's a blessing and a curse, one I will bear any time he wants it.

His hand splays over my back, caressing my skin. His reverent touch makes me feel worshipped in a way that I can't quite articulate. He just makes me feel everything.

I grind back and lift my belly off the sheet to slide my hand between my legs. Using my middle finger, I circle my swollen clit. Combined with his thickness inside me, it's enough to send me over the edge for the first time.

Grim grabs my long hair in his fist and growls, "One," in my ear while my body is still trembling. Pushing me down sideways, he climbs on the bed and rolls over onto his back, his hands are already on my hips, dragging me over until I'm above him. Even in this position, Grim doesn't relinquish his power.

He controls how deep he goes and sets the pace with his fingers digging into my hips. I'll have bruises later, ones he will kiss with his angel lips before whispering nonsensical words across my skin, making me remember just how they got there.

His eyes are on mine, heavy-lidded and bright with flames that could consume the world, but he looks upon me as if I am his world. I throw my head back and pant out a breath. I can feel the sweat dotting my skin, and when he lifts me again, his hand slips and he growls when I drop to his hilt.

"Stars," he curses, and goes completely still. I milk him with my inner muscles, but he doesn't break. The seam of his lips is tight, as is the side of his jaw. I know he's clenching his teeth. I lean forward to kiss him, but my belly gets in the way and I end up grunting instead. Not the sexy kind either.

The corner of Grim's lips slip up just a millimeter when he realizes my plight. He rolls us over so I'm on my side and turns his body until we're forming an X. Reaching for my ankle, he lifts my leg high in the air, and it allows him to go so much deeper. I think my eyes roll back in my head for a second. "Here comes the second," he boasts, and his grip tightens. Sure as the sun rises, the heavy feeling low in my stomach intensifies, and my body coils tight until one deep stroke at just the right moment sends me over the edge. I

moan out his name along with a few soft praises.

He rides me through the orgasm, caressing every inch of my body. My nipples and clit are so sensitive, I almost push his hand away when he touches them, but I love the way he groans when my muscles squeeze around his cock, and I know that when I come again, he will be coming with me.

The bedroom door opens, drawing my attention. With heavy-lidded eyes, I see Calix in the doorway. It's not the first time he's joined us. After the night at the club, we've had our fair share of threesomes. The best cure for a down day is to let two men, who are hotter than sin, show you just how much you mean to them, and suddenly swollen ankles and bigger hips no longer seem like a big deal.

"Are you just going to watch?" I run my hands over Grim's chest. That's all the invitation Calix needs to strip off his shirt and hop out of his jeans.

Grim and Calix manage to find a way to ignore each other's presence and work together at the same time. It's quite miraculous, and it's always been this way between them. Without speaking, Calix kneels on the bed while Grim moves me around until I'm on all fours between them. Calix's dick is already hard when he takes it in his hand and gives himself a few strokes. I look up at him from under my lashes and moan the moment he slides his cock into my waiting mouth.

Grim gives me one hard thrust, shoving me forward a little, and I gag on Calix's dick. Grim chuckles, but it's a dark sound, while Calix lets out a moan as my throat constricts around the head of his dick.

I try to look over my shoulder to give Grim a nasty glare, but Calix palms my jaw, tracing my cheek lovingly with his fingers, and I forget why I was mad. We quickly find a rhythm, as if we were always meant to do this, and it's not long before I get that weighty feeling again, the one that tells me I'll be coming soon. My hips start to swivel more, and my sucking grows almost feverish as I chase the euphoria I know is coming.

Calix tosses his head back and tightens his fist in my hair. He can read my body just as well as I can read his. He's close, too.

Grim cracks his palm against my ass again, and I jump. His fingers are dangerously close to my ass as he spreads my cheeks, going as deep as he can. I whimper when his thumb rims my opening before sinking in. A guttural moan hums past my lips, and Calix starts coming down the back of my throat. I swallow just as I start coming for the third time.

Grim's not far behind. He groans and locks his hips against my ass,

pumping into me without moving. I slide Calix from my lips, his dick is still semi-hard and glistening from my mouth, and then I fall onto the bed on my side. My entire body feels used in the best possible way, but I need a fucking nap after that.

“Go to sleep. We’ll be here when you wake up.” Grim strokes my hair away from my face. I didn’t even realize I said that out loud.

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## CHAPTER 22

Gunnar eyes the big bowl of frosted shredded wheat I'm eating and gives me a dubious look. "What? I'm hungry."  
"Why don't you try some real food then?"

"Because this tastes better." I half pout, half snarl, and Gunnar raises his hands in surrender. "Did Grim leave again? And where's Calix?" I woke up alone after my nap—well, I guess it wasn't a nap, considering I slept from three a.m. to six p.m., but whatever.

"Not that I know of. He was around a little bit ago."

"I'm here," Grim says, entering the room and stepping over to give the top of my head a kiss. I crane my neck to look up at him.

"You haven't left in a hurry like that in a while. Anything I should know about?"

"I've spoken to any and every person I thought might assist us in finding the witch, but it's as if he's disappeared," Grim informs me.

I push my bowl away, then glance around the table. "You guys have still been looking for him?"

"Just keeping our ears and eyes open," Gunnar tells me.

"Why didn't you say anything to me about it?"

"There hasn't been anything to tell you. I haven't been called to reap a soul. We've learned nothing new."

"You still could have said something," I mutter dejectedly.

"We are now because there's something to tell you." Grim curls his hands over the edge of the counter and leans back. It makes the veins in his forearms stand out, and I have to remind myself I'm not supposed to be lusting after him right now.

“You found something?” I nearly whisper.

“Not something, someone,” Gunnar chimes in.

Grim nods. “More of a conclusion we’ve come to. The last person who has even hinted at seeing or hearing anything was that Bogman who was infatuated with you.”

“Bogman? Oh, you mean Boogey,” I correct.

“Yes, him,” Grim agrees.

“Should we go try to talk to him again?” I’ve always thought it was strange that he sought me out here, but when we were at the school it was as if he wasn’t even there.

“I’d like to question that guy.” Gunnar pushes his knuckles into his fist, and I can hear them pop from across the table. I already know what kind of questioning he would like to do to Boogey.

“I want to go too,” I tell them, even though I know they’re going to argue that I shouldn’t. “The school’s not too far. I can drive down and meet you there. I’m sure Calix would ride with me.” They all know I won’t let Grim blink me anywhere. After the baby started moving, it just seemed too weird. What if something happened to her? Irrational? Probably, but who knows what could happen?

Gunnar and Grim look at each other. “You want to go?” Gunnar asks hesitantly. “Maybe we should just wait.”

I slit my eyes and stare him down. “I’ve been trapped in this house for weeks. Grim feeds me sins, you guys are fattening me up with food, and before you know it, you’re going to have to roll me out the door. The only place I ever go is to the doctor’s office. And I’ve only been like twice!”

“Whatever you want, Omnia,” Grim concedes without an argument, and I feel like he gave in too easily. Now I’m suspicious, so I eye him.

“We just have to wait for the Nemean—”

“Calix,” I interject.

“For Calix to return. Plus, it’s already late, the school’s offices would be closed to visitors at this hour,” Grim finishes.

Ah, now I see his angle. He thinks I won’t wake up early to go with him. “Where did Calix go?” I choose to ignore his other statement.

“Shopping.” Gunnar rolls his eyes.

I wrinkle my nose and grin. The one thing I was not prepared for was how much I would love little baby clothes. Stars, Calix brings me home a new load of tiny little onesies and dresses every week. My baby girl already



has a closet full of shit, and he's constantly bringing us more. She'll never be able to wear it all.

"We'll have to just get up early tomorrow and go," Gunnar says with a fake wince, already assuming I'll decline and stay in bed. I'm not that lazy.

"Great, that will give me time to find something that fits."

Gunnar's mouth opens, but he doesn't say anything, so I fold my hands in my lap and wait for the next excuse. "Death?" Gunnar looks to Grim for a solution.

I turn my attention to him as well. "What will it take for you to stay home?" Grim asks, never one to beat around the bush. The gorgeous fucker jerks his chin in the air and gives me those damn stormy gray eyes.

I pretend to play dumb. "Are you trying to bribe me to stay home?"

"Anything you want," he offers.

"Anything?" I tap my finger on my chin. "Oh, the places I could go." I sigh wistfully.

"Within reason," Gunnar pipes up. When I give him a saucy look, he straightens his back and glares at me. "Not gonna happen, Dami, so don't even ask."

I start to pout but end up smiling. "I'm not that twisted, Kitten. Besides, I'm much too selfish to ask what you were thinking. What if one of you liked it and then I would have to share all my dicks?" I shake my head and purse my lips.

"I wouldn't like it," Gunnar mutters, and I snicker. I don't know what it says about me that he thought I would ask them to fuck each other. Oh well, I accepted I was a twisted bitch a long time ago.

I stand up and saunter over to Grim. His eyes track my every movement, and that's how I know what I'm about to say is true. "You'll give me whatever I want anyway, Loverboy, and I'm still going." I plant a tiny kiss on his lips then flounce away—well, as much as I can flounce anyway.

"Stars!" Grim grouses.



"ARE you sure you wouldn't rather stay home and open up a fresh gallon of yogurt? I got cookies," Calix cajoles.

"Yogurt doesn't even come in gallons, that's ice cream." I can't help but

give him a little bit of fruitless hope. “What kind of cookies?”

“Oreos, and chocolate chip, the chewy kind.”

“And the brownie ones you like,” Gunnar adds.

“Since we’re already halfway there…” I pretend to weigh my options.

“Damn it, I told you, you should have said something before we left,” Gunnar snaps.

“If you think some yogurt and cookies are enough to get me to say home, you don’t know me as well as you think.”

“And that’s why I didn’t even really try.” Calix sighs. Gunnar grumbles under his breath, and I swear I hear a few curses. I reach over and take Gunnar’s hand to show him I was just teasing with my comment about him not really knowing me.

“Does the school know we’re coming?”

“No, I think it’s better if we just show up. Plus, we can tell them we’re looking into different schools for our little monster.”

I immediately wrap my arm over my big belly. “I’m not sending her away to school!”

“Of course not, it’s just a good excuse to get into the school and tour some classrooms. Last time we were there, we barely got to even see the kids, let alone speak to them about dark magic and promises from a witch.”

The baby kicks, and I get a silly grin on my face. “It feels like she has claws when she goes at my guts. Do you think she’ll have sharp teeth?” I’m so excited to see her. When we went to the initial ultrasound, she looked just like any other baby blob on the screen. I wanted to get one of those 3D ones now that I’m further along, but the guys talked me out of it.

“Damiana, she will most likely be born a human baby. Even born shifters are born human,” Calix tells me, bursting my bubble.

“Gods willing, she will look just like you. Can you imagine a female version of us?” Gunnar shakes his head as if the thought is terrible.

“I think she would be lucky to have your teeth, or Calix’s ability to shift. Maybe even be able to portal like Grim.” We all talk about her like she will have a piece of each of them, and she will, just not genetically speaking.

“We’re here,” Gunnar announces needlessly, as we pull up to a gatehouse. A uniformed guard steps out of the little building. He gives the car a superficial onceover while Gunnar rolls down the driver’s side window.

“Help you?” he mumbles. His suit is generic, and so is everything else about him. Considering how many times I snuck out of this place as a child, I

don't think they put any more effort into the security staff than they did back then.

I lean across Gunnar and give my belly a little rub for emphasis before saying, "We're here for a tour."

The guard's brows dip low. "Open house is in July."

"Oh darn, we just returned to the area, and this is where I went to school, so..."

"You're a legacy?" He scratches the side of his face with his stubby fingers.

"Can you just call us in and tell them we're willing to make a sizeable donation to ensure the acceptance of our child?" Gunnar taps his fingers on the steering wheel. His patience is already waning.

The guard nods his head knowingly and steps back into the little brick building. I catch sight of a television as the door closes. "Takes his job seriously, that one."

"Money talks," Calix remarks from the back seat.

I turn and grab the seat so I can see Grim behind me. "You're awfully quiet back there. Everything okay?"

"I'm horny," he says, as if it's the perfect time to divulge such information.

"Fucking hell." Gunnar smacks his forehead on the steering wheel.

"Me too, Loverboy, me too." I turn around in my seat and wonder if we could find a few minutes alone to remedy the situation for both of us. Then I remember it's Grim I'm thinking about. He doesn't understand the meaning of 'quickie.'

Might be fun to live out some of my teenage fantasies though. I always had to sneak out to find some action when I lived here. I was never brave enough to bring a boy back with me. I was too worried I would get expelled and sent home to my parents, and that was a risk I wasn't willing to take.

The guard pokes his head out of the door and waves us in as the little red and white striped pole lifts into the air, allowing us to pass under it. "We could be serial killers for all they know."

"I mean, isn't he like the original serial killer?" Calix points over at Grim.

"I don't kill that many people, I just collect them," he counters, then he tilts his head to the side. "Well, once you add them all together over the years..."

"I'm talking about people who do it for fun."

“So, you mean the Berserker then?” I can hear the smile on Calix’s lips.

“You’re next on my hit list,” Gunnar grumbles.

“Okay, enough foreplay. We need our grownup faces on. We’re expectant parents and all that shit.” I flip down the visor and open the mirror to check my hair. I have it in a loose braid over my shoulder. I’m wearing a fitted dress that shows off my belly and clings to my ass. I don’t bother getting dressed up very often anymore, so I figured I’d do a little something extra, plus it makes me feel good.

“Who’s the husband, and who’s security?” Gunnar inquires, as he pulls into a parking spot right near the arched front entrance.

“Let’s play don’t ask, don’t tell. Keep them guessing.” I snap the visor closed.

“They’re so easily confused. It might not be the best way to gather information,” Grim cautions.

“It’s the kids we need to talk to anyway, a bunch of teenage girls.” I look my guys over as they line up after getting out of the car. “All of this will loosen lips. The ones on the face,” I warn. “The only thing they will be curious about is how they could get three fine specimens like yourselves of their own.”

“Might even feed into Antonio’s claim of her being a dark witch, if what the Bogman said is true,” Calix muses.

“Good, now, if it’s the same old bat...”

“Good morning!” I turn to see a chipper blonde hustling her way over to us, her hand is already lifted as if she’s ready to clasp any one of ours.

“Not the same old bat,” I say under my breath. “Hi!” I add louder and wave eagerly.

“I’m Head Mistress Anita Vogel.” She makes a point of looking around our group. “You’re interested in enrolling a child?” The way she’s squinting her eyes makes me think she’s suspicious.

I rub my tummy. “We left little Aeson at home.” Not a lie. “With the new little one coming, we wanted to plan for the future.” It makes more sense to want placement for an older child than already be looking into boarding school for the baby. I don’t think most people are that neurotic.

“Oh, I see. Forgive me.” She rolls her eyes in a self-deprecating manner. “Come on in. You mentioned you were a legacy?” She scans me again, keeping her focus trained on me as she stays near my side while leading us back into the all too familiar building.

Once inside, the smell hits me first: antiseptic, but somehow stale too. “Not much has changed.”

Anita—because I refuse to address her as Head Mistress—opens a heavy wooden door and holds it open for all of us to enter. There’s a secretary sitting behind the same nondescript desk that was here all those years ago.

“Greene retired?” I look around, wondering when the old bat finally gave up her position.

“Tragically, she died about six years ago,” Anita informs me and nods to the secretary. I figured it would have taken an act of God to get that woman to give up her power here. “Hold my calls, Martha. Why don’t we head into the conference room? There’s enough space in there for all of us to be comfortable.” It’s the first time she’s mentioned the guys’ presence. Once I took the lead by speaking, she’s kept her focus solely on me.

Anita stands near the head chair, waiting for each of us to take a seat before taking hers. Grim decides to stand behind me while the others each take a chair at my side. Her shrewd eyes catch it all.

“So, tell me about Aeson.”

I’m not too surprised she remember the name. Like Calix said, money talks. The run-down carpet and faded drapes tell me the school really needs some. Either that, or all the money it receives is being funneled elsewhere. “She’s a tiny thing, wild as they come.” I grin at the way the truth can so easily be twisted. “I was hoping we could tour the school, make sure it would be a good fit for our girl.”

Anita winces slightly but catches herself quickly. “We usually only allow visitors during open house, but...”

I raise my brow. “I’m not willing to pledge a donation when I can’t assure my girl’s safety and education.” I move to stand, and Gunnar and Calix are so in tune with me, they rise as well. “I don’t have time to wait until next year.” I make a point to run my hand over my extended tummy.

Anita pushes her chair back and rushes to say, “I think we can make an exception. You are a legacy, after all.”

## CHAPTER 23

“I can’t believe she pretty much gave us free rein of the school because she wants our money. Our kids would never come here,” Gunnar grouches.

“They wouldn’t anyway,” I remark.

“I know, it just pisses me off. Why the fuck do people even have kids just to ship them off for someone else to raise?” Gunnar’s comment hits a little too close to home. I don’t have an answer for him, but I completely agree with him on the sentiment.

“Where should we go first? It’s still early. I don’t want to interrupt a class, plus we wouldn’t get any answers from the girls then anyway.” I glance down the quiet halls as memories of how lonely I was here assault me.

“Let’s look at the facilities first, like the gym and pool,” Calix suggests, and points in the direction of the sports annex.

“How are we going to question the children?” Gunnar’s eyes are scanning the entire place as if he’s considering every security lapse, and there are plenty. I know from experience.

“Lunch will be our best bet, the commons outside is where most of the girls used eat.”

We spend a few hours walking around, nodding at teachers and students who give us double takes. Gunnar’s mood sours with every passing minute. “Well, now we know the witch wouldn’t have any problem infiltrating the school. All he would have to do is flash a little cash and this place would feed him the girls on a fucking platter.”

I reach for his hand as we make our way back toward the main school building. Instead of using the path we came on, I take a shortcut through the

area near the dorms. My heart rate picks up the closer we get. “Dirty magic,” I whisper. The closer we get to the buildings where the girls sleep and spend their free time, the stronger the sickly feeling gets.

“I feel it,” Grim murmurs.

“Is he here?” Calix nearly growls.

“I don’t know. I just know someone is doing magic over there.” I point toward the dorms.

“Let’s keep going,” Gunnar says. “We can sneak back in tonight—it’s not like it will be fucking hard—and get some answers.”

“Should we still talk to the kids at lunch?” I’m more than willing to admit they know how to approach this better than me.

“Yeah, keep the questions about the school, but see if you can find anyone tainted with the magic.” Gunnar tightens his grip on my hand. It’s a solid plan. If we ask too many questions it might frighten Antonio away, or at least have the girls warning him we’re asking around.

“Maybe I should see if I can find Boogey and ask if he knows anything else?” I suggest, already knowing Gunnar is going to hate the idea.

“How would you find him?” Calix gazes down at me.

“When I lived here, all I had to do was hang my foot or hand over the bed. If he wasn’t busy, he would be there.”

“Busy doing what? Crawling up someone else’s skirt?” Gunnar mutters.

I swat his chest. “No, and slow down. I have to pee again.” My hand is still trapped inside his, so he’s damn near towing me along.

“Sorry.” He slows immediately. “If you hadn’t swallowed a basketball, I could carry you.” He stares down at my protruding belly and gives it a sweet caress.

“That’s not a basketball, it’s gallons and gallons of jizz,” I quip. Calix snorts so hard I think I see spit or snot go flying.

Gunnar tugs me to his side and gives me a sideways hug. “You’re so romantic.”

I smile up at him, because he no longer looks like he’s going to murder some unlucky soul who happens upon us. “What can I say? I’m a giver.”

He swats my ass and starts walking again. I can tell by the set of his shoulders my joke helped lighten the mood, which makes me feel good.

The shortcut feeds us right to the commons outside the lunchroom. The weather is cool enough that I worried the girls would all be inside, but I needn’t have. I forgot just how desperate they would feel to get away from

the staff, so a little cold weather isn't a deterrent.

The girls don't hide their interest in our group. Almost every eye in the place is trained on us. It makes me feel a little better. If these girls were afraid, they wouldn't make it so obvious. Even with us strangers among them, they still feel safe here.

Finding the magic users isn't hard. Even without the goth modifications to their standard uniforms, I would have known it was those girls from a mile away. They're all older, probably juniors and seniors if I had to guess. Stars, was I ever that young? I avoid their group, making my way over to the younger girls who are all sitting closest to the entrance of the school. Every year, the girls will move out a table until, like the girls tainted with smutty magic, they will be on the outside ring of tables, farthest from the teachers' prying eyes and ears.

"Hey." I blow out a breath, not having to pretend too much that I'm a little winded from my long walk. I swear my lungs have shrunk by half. This kid takes up a lot of real estate. Most of the girls chirp back with 'hi' and 'hello,' but a few are a little more shy and just stare at me.

I notice Grim keeps his distance, only staying close enough to hear us, but not encroaching. Calix takes over the lead spot next to me, while Gunnar steps to the side. His face is twisted up as if he doesn't quite know what to do with himself when he's not scowling.

"Mind if I take a seat?" I plop my butt down on the hard cement bench without waiting for a reply.

"Do you have a kid you're sending here?" an inquisitive little girl with a brunette bob asks.

"I don't know. Do you girls like it here?" I regret the question the moment it's out of my mouth.

The same little girl shrugs. "It's better than home," she answers casually, the way only children seem to master.

Gunnar clears his throat. Hell, if I don't get him out of here soon, there is going to be a whole hell of a lot of orphans, or I'm going to have to open up my own boarding school. Who knew the brute had such a soft spot for kids?

"Can I tell you a secret?" I mock whisper. Every little girl at the table leans in and holds their breath. There's nothing more valuable than a secret in a place like this. "I went here when I was a little girl."

"You did?" a blonde with a chubby little nose inquires.

I nod and purse my lips. "I just wanted to see the old place." I don't want



to offend them and say I wouldn't send my kid here, but I don't want them to think of me as the kind of mom who would leave her kid here either. "It still looks the same." I make a point to look around. "Do the older girls still sneak out and have parties in the woods?"

A few heads nod quickly. "Madalyn said she saw a boy!" the brunette who looks to be about eight confesses.

I bring my hand up and cover my mouth in pretend outrage for her. "No!"

"Uh-huh, they are going to get in soooo much trouble." She shakes her head as if she's so much smarter than the older girls.

I snicker but cover it by clearing my throat and nodding. "Boys are dumb anyway."

"You have three with you," the littlest one informs me on a whisper, as if I'd forgotten.

"Yes, but these boys are special. They're very nice to me and take good care of me."

"Are they your boyfriends?" another asks.

I bring my finger up to my lips to indicate I've got another secret for them to keep. "All three." I raise my brows and smirk.

"I want three boyfriends to take care of me when I leave here," the littlest one chirps.

"You have to make sure they're special boys, like mine," I caution. She nods knowingly and gets a far off look in her eyes. I bet she might just do it. "Thanks for sharing your table, ladies. I have to get going."

"Bye," they chorus and wave. Their heads are already close together, whispering, before I'm even gone.

Once we're out of earshot, I say, "We don't need to stick around. I know which girls are messing with magic, they won't be hard to find tonight."



AFTER A TOO-SHORT NAP, we're back at the school. This time we don't bother with the gate house. Gunnar parks the car up the road at a nearby convenience store, and we hoof it the rest of the way. My feet are actually tired from all the walking I've done today, but I'm not letting Grim blink me to the school, so sore feet it is.

The old worn trail through the surrounding woods is still here, proving

that the girls are still being girls, just like I was, and sneaking out regularly. Grim is leading the way, while Gunnar brings up the rear of our group. As soon as we're close enough, I feel the brush of dirty magic against my skin, so I grab the back of Grim's shirt to stop him. I don't want any of us wandering into a trap left by the witch. Which reminds me, Aeson is going to be pissed when she finds out we came here tonight without her, but she's busy with some big job she won't tell me about until the mark is dead. "Watch for a snare," I whisper. My gut is screaming at me that we're walking into a trap.

Instead of heading toward the dorms, I urge Grim down a path to the right. It's the clearing most of the girls would hang out in when they weren't brave enough to actually leave the school grounds. We're only a few feet from the clearing when I hear muffled cries.

My heart slams against my ribs. Could he be here right now? Pushing even closer with a little more urgency, I hiss when I get a glimpse beyond the trees. There's a small group of girls, maybe five, all dressed in black cloaks that look like they came from a Halloween store, forming a rough circle.

Inside the circle on the ground, tied up with bright yellow rope you might find in a gym for climbing, is the little brunette from this morning. Her hair is a mess from thrashing about on the dirty soil, and her face is tear streaked, but her eyes are angry as she fights her restraints. There's a wide silver band of tape covering her mouth, which explains how they're keeping her so quiet.

As I move to step forward, a hand snaps out and holds me back. I feel Gunnar's heavy breaths against the side of my head as he speaks softly into my ear. "Wait."

I want to throw his arm off me, but I know he must have a reason, so I look around and take in the entire situation instead of rushing forward.

"What now?" one of the girls asks.

As if the question prompts action, another girl bends down and gets close to the little girl's face. Her eyes widen a bit, but she does a good job pretending not to be frightened. "I want to ask you some questions, but I can't do that if you don't shut up!"

The little girl's nostrils flare as she tries to catch her breath, but she does stop mumbling. "Good. If you scream, I will put this right back on," the older girl warns, while grabbing the end of the tape, preparing to rip it off.

The brunette nods eagerly. "Ouch!" She winces as the older girl moves back toward her, as if she may replace the tape, so she chants, "No, no, no,"

in a much lower voice.

“Then keep quiet,” the cloaked figure hisses. The girl proves her bravery even more when she narrows her eyes on the older girl above her. The heavy feeling of wrath fills the clearing. If I had to guess, I would say the little girl is plotting some form of retaliation. The purity of the emotion sends a shiver down my spine. Yum.

A couple of the girls forming the circle start to shift nervously. “Come on, Carly,” one insists, looking around briefly. Humans always ignore their baser instincts, telling themselves the feeling in their gut is just anxiety instead of acknowledging it’s the primal part of their being trying to warn them.

“Are you ready to tell me what she said to you?” the one kneeling asks. She must be Carly.

“I told you what she said, you dummy,” the little girl snarls. Oh stars, I like her. Carly reaches out and pinches the girl hard enough to make her yelp. I move to step forward again.

“We won’t let them hurt her,” Gunnar breathes.

“They already are,” I hiss.

“Shut her up. Did you hear that?” All the girls start to look around. Damn it, I was too loud. Calix gives me a warning glare.

“Tell me everything she said.” Carly ignores the other girls’ worry and questions the kid.

“She said she went to school here, and she wanted to see if it was the same.” The little girl shrugs.

“And?” Carly prompts. “What about all the guys with her?”

“She said they were her boyfriends.” The girl continues to struggle, making it clear by her tone she thinks Carly is stupid for even asking these questions.

“Listen, you little bitch, I need to give him answers, so there better be more, or I’ll leave you out here for the animals and bugs to eat,” Carly threatens.

The likelihood of an animal eating this little girl is low, but the look on her face tells me she either doesn’t know that or is just afraid of being left out here. Not that I blame her.

“Carly,” another girl whines, “hurry up.”

“Shut up, Allyssa.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say. I told you the truth.” The small girl chokes up a little. My black heart cracks with the sound. I feel

completely responsible for what's happening to her right now.

"I need you to tell me the truth, Lily. That's all. Then I will let you go, and we can pretend this never happened," Carly cajoles.

"I don't know... she said her boyfriends were special... and took good care of her." Lily starts to sob softly. She's telling the truth. I didn't tell her anything important.

Carly slams her hand down next to the girl's head. "I need more. He won't tell me the next step if I don't have more!"

I glance around at the guys. We're all wondering, what next step? "Just tell me what to say," Lily cries.

"Carly," a girl hisses, "this has gone too far, I'm not going to let you hurt her, she's just a kid."

Carly stands up and turns to face the girl who spoke up. Her hands are balled into fists, and I can see the smudge of dirty magic tangling around her feet, swirling as if she's getting ready to strike. "You gonna stop me, Bridgett?" she singsongs in a mean girl fashion.

Bridgett takes a step back and looks around at the other girls. Most of them have their gazes averted, pretending to find the ground very interesting. Seeing she doesn't have any backup, she swallows. "You said we were just going to question her. She told you what she knows. Let her go so we can get back to the dorm before someone realizes we're gone," she reasons.

"I have to tell him something or he won't come back." Carly looks down at Lily, who's still struggling, but most of the fight has left her now.

Grim glides into the clearing, cloak and scythe on full display, and the moonlight glints off his blade.

Several girls scream, a few run. Self-preservation at its finest. Gunnar releases his hold on me, and I step out too. The few remaining girls other than Carly—who seems to be too frightened to even move—flee. Lily looks up at me when I kneel at her side. "Hey, kiddo." I keep my voice light.

She opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. Her eyes are huge as she stares at me. I'm not sure if the lingering fear she's experiencing is from what just happened or if it's me that scares her.

"Let's get you up." Gunnar quickly cuts the ropes, and I slide my hand under Lily's back to ease her into a sitting position.

"How are you here?" she finally says, never having taken her eyes off me.

I ignore her question. "Are you okay? They didn't hurt you too badly, did they?" I glare over my shoulder at the ringleader. Grim and Calix have her

positioned between them so she can't get away.

When I look back, Lily is shaking her head. "You want me to walk you back to your room? Those girls won't bother you anymore, I promise."

"What are you going to do to her?" She narrows her eyes on her tormentor. That little bubble of vengeance pops up again, so I stroke my hand over Lily's matted hair, tasting the sin.

"She's not worth it, little hellion. I'll make sure she learns her lesson." Lily lets out a heavy breath, and most of the anger she was feeling goes with it. Gunnar helps Lily off the ground. When she's on her feet, she dusts off the back of her sleep pants and squares her little shoulders. Stars, I like this little girl, she's tough as nails.

I take her little fingers in my hand and walk us right past Carly, stopping once we're in the wannabe witch's line of sight. "I'm just a phone call away. If you ever bother my little hellion again, I will stake you, strip the flesh from your bones, and let the ants devour you. Slowly." I smile down at Lily. Her eyes are wide, but a genuine smile lifts her lips at my proclamation.

We walk away then, hand in hand. Once we reach the sidewalk that leads to the dorms, Lily tugs on my fingers. "Thanks for saying that to scare her. I don't think she'll bother me again."

"I didn't say it to scare her, silly, I wanted to warn her what I would do." Gunnar clears his throat and gives me a barely there shake of his head.

"Really?" She looks up at me with her big brown eyes.

"Yeah, I don't like bullies."

"Me either. My dad's a bully. That's why my momma sent me here."

"Who's your dad?" Gunnar no longer seems concerned that I might scare the kid with my talk of murder.

"Bronson Cartwright," she sneers. "When I get bigger, I'm gonna take everything from him." Her words ring with truth. This brave girl believes to the very bottom of her soul that she will follow through with her promise.

"Good for you, little hellion." I swing our still joined hands as we walk. I should probably be concerned I'm corrupting her, but I'm not. Some people deserve what they have coming. Her dad seems like just the sort.

I give her my number, telling her I expect her to check in weekly so I know the girls are behaving. Lily cradles the scrap of paper Gunnar managed to find to her chest. "You never told me your name." She blinks up at me.

I snort. "It's Dami."

"Like the bad word?"

“Pretty close,” I reply. “Go get some sleep. Call if you need anything.”

“Okay, thanks, Dami.” Her face flushes prettily when she says my name.

“I’m going to take care of her dad so she can go home,” Gunnar growls, as soon as the kid disappears through the door.

“You’re so sweet,” I coo. “Let’s go see if we can figure out what Carly’s been up to.”

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## CHAPTER 24

“Someone will come looking for me,” Carly says, but it’s a lie and she knows it.

“Oh yeah, you think one of those chicken shits is going to run to a teacher and tell them you guys were out in the woods assaulting a little girl and got caught by the Grim Reaper?” I give her a dubious stare.

“Wh-What?” she stutters, her eyes were already wide, but now they’re comically so.

“Oh dear,” I murmur. “You want to sit at the big kids’ table, but you don’t know what’s on the menu?” I pretend to be sympathetic. Really, I just want to beat some answers out of her for screwing with a kid half her age, especially when she had four other girls with her for backup.

Carly looks around again, expecting help from somewhere, but there’s none to be found, not from our group. Reaching up, she tries to fist a small pendant around her neck on a leather string.

Before her hand can fully close, I jerk the cord, intending to break it, but the rope is deceptively strong, so Carly ends up half falling, half tripping as I drag her closer. Her arms reach out to steady herself, so I get a better look at the little trinket she was grabbing for. “What do we have here?”

“That’s mine.” She reaches to pull the cord from my grip, but I swat her hand away, tugging her closer to examine the pendant. It looks like a bunch of geometric shapes layered over each other.

“You know what this is?” I jerk her around by the string to show it to Gunnar, and she stumbles.

“Some kind of rune, but I don’t know what for,” he answers.

“She seems awfully concerned with it.” I wrench her around a bit more

by the cord, testing to see if it will break.

“Jesus!” Carly hisses.

“Don’t you wish. Time to start talking, Carly.” I shove her away from me and warn, “Don’t fuck with that thing around your neck.”

“What do you want?” She swipes her hand under her nose. Messy.

“What every girl wants. To stand on the bones of my enemies, and to look fabulous while doing so.” I shrug. “I already have everything else.”

With his cloak still covering his head and face, Grim steps forward and demands, “Tell us about the witch. Where can we find him?”

Carly starts shaking her head before he can even finish asking. “I don’t know how to get a hold of him. He promised he would be back, but it’s been months.”

“I don’t know. You were acting like there was some urgency when you were torturing the hellion.”

Carly wets her lips, her eyes darting around a bit. “I knew he would be back soon because you’re here.”

“How would he know I was here if you didn’t tell him?”

“He just knows things. I don’t know.” She goes to lift her hand as if she may reach for the necklace, but one look from me has her lowering her fingers.

“I’m gonna need more than that, Carly.” I use her name because I want her to understand that I know who she is, and I could find out everything I need to know about her. “What does he want with me?”

“He said you took something from him and he wanted it back.” When I open my mouth to ask her what, she speaks first. “I don’t know what it is, he never told me. I swear.”

I look over at Gunnar. “Could he mean Aeson?” I’m at a complete loss for what else it could be.

My question goes unanswered, but Calix asks, “When did you see him last?”

“Two months ago. Maybe.” Carly shrugs while wringing her hands together.

“You’ve been doing magic.” I point down at her feet, even though I know she will be oblivious to the taint left behind. “Dark magic.”

“He showed me some stuff.” She looks down, but I can see the flush of red creep up from her neck to her jaw and cheeks.

*Ewww*, I think, but I keep it to myself. “What did he show you?”



“Some wards and stuff.” Her face is bright red now.

“What was the next step you mentioned?” Calix presses.

Carly bites her lip and looks down at the ground. “I don’t know where to find him,” she hedges, but she’s telling the truth.

“Tell us what he taught you,” Gunnar pipes up.

Carly whimpers and turns away from him a bit, as if to hide. “He showed me what he could do.” She wraps her arms over her chest, still mostly looking at the ground.

“Come on, Carly, like what?” I urge.

“He messed up Sarah’s face,” she blurts. “Gave her something, and she got these boils or something all over her face that left scars.”

“Who is Sarah?” This isn’t getting us anywhere.

“She was the HBC.”

I widen my eyes. “Here at school, a student?” Carly nods. “He took out your competition. What did you give him?”

Carly’s arms tighten around her body. “Ugh, got it.” I look away. Foolish girl. He probably didn’t need anything from her to scar up the other girl. It just gave him something to hold over her.

“We still need to know what you meant about the next step,” Calix reminds her.

“Since I gave him that... he said he would show me how to stay young and beautiful forever.”

“This guy is a creep.” I almost feel sorry for Carly, but it’s a fleeting emotion. “What’s up with the necklace?” I prod.

“He gave it to me.” She reaches up, almost taking it in her hand again.

“Well, I want it, so either hand it over or I’m going to take it. And just for the sake of being honest, if I have to take your head off to get it, I will.”

Carly curses under her breath. “I’m going to untie it,” she cautions, while lifting her hands slowly.

Gunnar opens his hand, waiting for Carly to drop it. The moment the pendant hits his palm, he falls to his knees and hisses out, “Fuck me!” I rush over to his side, but he lifts his empty hand and warns me away. “No, just wait.”

“What is it?” Calix stalks a little closer. Grim grabs Carly’s arm when she turns as if she may run.

“Some kind of spell,” Gunnar rasps, while gritting his teeth.

“But she was wearing it and it didn’t do anything to her,” I reason.

“She’s not Charmed,” Calix states.

I spin around, expecting Antonio to show up any second now that his trap has been sprung. “Can you move? Is it a snare?”

“It’s not a snare,” he grinds out through gritted teeth.

“Drop it!”

“I can’t.” When he flips his palm over, the only thing remaining is the black leather cord, that is until I look a little closer and see the image that was on the pendant is now marring Gunnar’s palm like a tattoo. Calix steps closer to get a better look. “It’s some kind of fucking binding spell. I can’t...” Gunnar stretches his neck from left to right.

“Can’t what?” I prompt.

“I can’t access my Berserker, I’m as useless as a human!” he spits.

“Did you know about this?” I turn on the girl, ready to rip her soul from her body.

She’s inching backwards, and her eyes are as big as saucers as she shakes her head in denial. “He told me it would protect me. I didn’t know,” she sobs, crying in messy, snotty heaves.

I know she’s telling the truth, but it doesn’t abate my desire to rip her apart. “What would you like me to do with her?” Grim asks, his tone flat.

Gunnar speaks up. “She’s a stupid kid. Let her go.” I spin on him and narrow my eyes. He’s the last person I would have expected to release her without punishment. Gunnar pushes himself up from his knees, and his eyes lock on mine. “Leave her,” he says again, this time with more emphasis.

I look over my shoulder. “You better hope I never see you again, little girl. If you even breathe wrong, I’ll be back, and nothing will stop me from hanging your guts in the commons like a fucking garland.”

Carly swallows and Grim releases his hold on her arm. Without any prompting, she takes off into the woods, running away like her ass is on fire—I wish it was.

“Good thing we brought the car,” Gunnar scoffs, trying to make light of the situation, but I see the way his jaw tics and the way his fists are all balled up as if he’s waiting to beat someone to death.

“This motherfucker is really getting on my nerves.” I’m so mad I can barely see straight. The only thing overriding it is my concern for my Kitten.



“How do we get rid of it?” We’re all in my bedroom at home. Gunnar has become more and more withdrawn since arriving home a few hours ago. Our conversation hasn’t evolved much since getting here either.

“The only way to get rid of a spell like this is for the caster to remove it, or to kill him,” Gunnar admits finally.

“I vote for the latter,” I chime in quickly.

“We haven’t had much luck finding him, let alone killing the bastard,” Gunnar mutters with his arms crossed over his chest.

I rise from the end of the bed and stand right in front of him. His eyes track my movements, but he doesn’t unfold his arms to invite me closer. “We’ll find him, Kitten, and I might have an idea how.” I hold up the leather strap he dropped on the ground after absorbing the rune.

“What do you plan on doing with that?” Calix asks from behind me.

“I think it’s time we call in a favor from Torin.”

“What can the wolf do?” Gunnar lowers his hands to his sides with a gleam of interest in his eyes.

“It’s not the wolf, but someone he knows.” I raise my brows. “Maybe the witch from the club can track where this spell came from.”

“Shit!” Calix curses. “That’s a good idea.” He’s already scrambling out of the room. If I had to guess, he’s on his way to get his phone to call Torin.

Gunnar peers down at me, and one side of his lips tip up the slightest bit. It’s the first time since leaving the clearing he hasn’t looked completely wrecked. Snapping his hand out, he grabs the back of my neck and drags me forward for a hot, hard kiss. I lean into him and the kiss, bracing my hands on his impressive chest. When I pull back, I look right up into his eyes. “I think you’re the perfect monster, even if you don’t have the teeth to prove it,” I whisper. Gunnar places his forehead on mine and lets out a heavy breath.

I feel Grim’s portal opening, so I spin around to find my angel holding a very disgruntled Torin by his upper arm. “Wolfy! Just who I wanted to see.”

“You could have called,” he mumbles, and wipes his hands over his face. “Damn, are you having triplets?” He eyes me up and down.

Grim sends him stumbling with a well-placed jab of his elbow, which causes Torin to snicker and hold up his hands in surrender. “I’m just kidding, doll, you look great.” Grim hits him again with another jab.

“So, not that I’m complaining, but to what do I owe the honor?” Torin looks around. “This your bedroom? Damn, where do you even get a bed that big?”

I snap my fingers. "Focus."

Torin blinks at me a few times and a slow smile forms on his lips. "I forgot how much I like you."

Gunnar growls, proving the loss of his magic hasn't changed him too much. "I need a meeting with the witch from Savannah. I thought Calix was going to call you, but it seems Grim decided not to wait."

"The witch, what was his name?" I tap my forehead.

"Gregory," Grim supplies. I don't know if it's a good or bad thing that the Grim Reaper remembers his name. Oh, well.

"That's it. Do you know where to find him?"

"I'm sure he will be at the club tonight. He is most nights," Torin replies. I look over at the clock. It's six a.m. Most days I'd be sleeping or getting ready for bed at this time.

"Do you have his number or another way to get a hold of him?" I question, not feeling very patient. Antonio may already know we were at the school and what happened to Gunnar.

"I can get it if it's important," he offers, as a more serious expression falls over his features. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm hoping with his help, shit is about to get a whole lot better," I answer.

## CHAPTER 25

Torin hits a button on his phone and shoves it back into his pocket. “He gave me an address. You sure you want to deal with this guy? Witches are sketchy.”

“I agree, but yes,” I reply. “Grim, can you go fetch him?”

“I’ll get him, but I don’t want to bring him back here.”

“Don’t want him in the love den, I get it,” Torin quips. It’s been several months since I’ve seen him, but he seems more relaxed and comfortable than I’d ever known him to be. It’s nice.

“Can you stop worrying about my sex life for a few minutes? Where should we take him?”

“I would say the club, because he’d probably be comfortable there, but I don’t want the other witches knowing our business,” Gunnar muses.

“Where did you live before you moved in here? If you say that office with the dumpster couch, I will seriously question your judgment.”

“No,” Gunnar scoffs, then he lets a little wince slip. “I had an apartment. It wasn’t much better, but I hardly spent any time there,” he defends, before I can even say anything.

“I know a place,” Grim interjects.

“You?” I can hear the shock in my tone.

“Yes, it will do.”

“This I gotta see,” Gunnar mumbles under his breath.

I’m just as curious. “So where is it?”

“I’ll give you the address, it will take you a little time to get there. Call me when you arrive.” With that cryptic statement, he disappears.

“So, I should just wait here, cool. It’s not like you pulled me out of bed or

anything,” Torin mumbles into the air as if Grim might still be able to hear him.

I get a text on my phone a few seconds later with an address. I show the screen to Gunnar, who just shrugs in response.

We get Torin all set up in one of my guest bedrooms, making sure to avoid the rooms Gunnar and Calix have taken for themselves. He’s leaning back on the bed with his arms behind his head. “I’m kind of awake now, got anything to eat?”

“Kitchen’s downstairs. Help yourself to whatever you want.”

“You still get all those visitors?” Torin looks around like a monster might crawl out of the closet. “Maybe I should just go with you.” He moves to sit up and I snicker.

“What’s the matter, Wolfy, scared?” I taunt.

“No,” he scoffs, but he still eyes the room dubiously.

“If you don’t want anyone stopping by, just leave a light on. No one would bother you anyway.”

“Where’s the Brownie?” he asks with his head tilted a little to the side.

I lift my finger to my lips and make a shushing sound. “Can’t tell you, or she would have to kill you.” I grin at the way his expression falls. “You don’t become one of the top assassin bands by eating bon bons on your bestie’s couch. She’s working.”

“Fine, whatever,” he grouses.

I go to leave the room but poke my head back into the open door. “If you go into the pantry, knock first. Let Dare know you’re coming in.”

“Who’s Dare?” Torin looks at me sideways.

“My friend. She just had a mischief and she’s a little cranky.”

Torin blinks. “A what?”

“Babies, she just had six babies.” I guess not many people know a group of rats is called a mischief. It sounds way better than saying a litter.

“Six, I won’t bother her,” he mumbles.

“It’s okay—just knock. I don’t want her poisoning you or anything.” Torin opens his mouth but then snaps it closed and shakes his head in a weird up and down and side to side motion. “I have to go meet Grim. Be back in a few.”

Calix and Gunnar are at the bottom of the stairs waiting for me. “Got the address?” Gunnar leans over as I show him my phone. “I think that’s downtown.” He pulls out his own phone, and within a few seconds, he

confirms the location with a navigation app. “Let’s head out, it’ll take us a least twenty minutes to get there.”

“Not quite what I expected,” Calix comments, as we pull up to an old hotel. The building is grand in the way that newer construction can’t manage. There are even a few gargoyles stationed on the front façade.

“You thought it would be a cemetery?” Gunnar quips, which makes Calix chuckle.

“Where are we meeting him?” I look around, expecting Grim to step out of the shadows.

“Text him and let him know we’re here,” Calix suggests. I do just that, and before I get a reply, Grim does indeed step out of the shadows of the building. We all climb out of the car and head to the alleyway.

“Where’s the witch?” I look around.

“I left him on the roof.” When we’re close enough to touch, Grim takes my hand.

“The roof?” Gunnar leans back and looks up at the impressive building. It must be close to twenty stories high. “Did you used to come here and look down on the lowly humans and brood?”

“I’ve never brooded,” Grim deadpans.

Calix snickers. “You don’t do anything but brood.”

I squeeze Grim’s hand in mine. I’m happy that they’re all so much more comfortable with each other, but we need to get to the witch. “Please tell me this place has an elevator?”

“I can blink you there,” Grim offers, even though he knows how I feel about supernatural travel right now.

“Yeah, that’s a no for me. Let’s hope they let us in this joint.” All four of us make our way around to the front of the building and into the entrance. There’s a man waiting to hold the door open, and he dips his head at us as we pass through the glass and gold door.

Gunnar walks right past the front desk and to a bank of elevators off to the side like he’s completely familiar with the place. No one stops us, but I don’t think getting to the roof is going to be this easy though.

Sometimes I hate being right. The elevators need a special key to get to the top two floors. We debate going back down and renting a suite, but we just don’t want to waste that kind of time, so Calix ends up breaking the lock on the door blocking the stairway. That was easy enough for him, but walking up the two flights of stairs nearly kills me. My stomach is even

tightening a little. It's been too long since I've done anything that could be considered a workout. Unless you count vigorous sex, then I do that daily, but let's be real, even then the guys do most of the work. I'm a lucky girl.

We find the witch perched on the ledge of the building, his back to the wide expanse of darkness behind him. "That took considerably longer than I expected," he remarks conversationally.

"Most things do. How are you, Gregory?" I make sure my voice is even, that I'm not panting from being out of breath before I speak.

"Surprised to find myself in Washington." His brows are high on his head.

"You did say you would be willing to help," I remind him.

He nods. "Why am I here?" he questions, cutting right to the chase.

I fist the leather cord in my pocket. "If you have an object that belongs to someone, can you trace where it came from? Who it came from?"

"A homing spell?" His brows dip low. "It depends on what the item is and how important it is to the person it belonged to."

I drag the string from my pocket and open my palm, exposing it to him. "This held a spell." I purposely don't look over at Gunnar. He's already explained that there is nothing Gregory could do to get rid of the spell, not even cutting off his hand would take away the binding.

"Where's the spell?" Gregory gives me a dubious look, as if I'm somehow trying to trap him. "What kind of spell was it?"

"Does that information help you track the person who cast the spell?" I counter, folding the cord back in my fingers.

"Not likely. I just like to know what I'm getting in to." Gregory is proving he's smarter than most of the witches I've met.

"Antonio gave this to a girl, a human girl, and it didn't affect her, but it put a binding spell on a Charmed one." Gregory's eyes dart around our group. I'm sure he's wondering which of us has been muzzled.

"I already know where the girl is. I want to know where the witch is. Can you use this to track him to where he is now? Or at least where he was?"

Gregory's eyes come back to me. He swallows and lifts his hand, showing me his palm. "I can try, but I'm not making any promises. The human may have complicated things if she contaminated it with her essence."

I fist the rope for a second longer before dropping it into his palm. This is our best hope at getting a step ahead of Antonio, and I'm not ready to let go of that hope yet.



I stand back and wait for something to happen once it's in his hand, but Gregory just examines it for a moment and looks back at me. I hold my breath, waiting for his response. "I can't do it here," he blurts when we all just stare at him. My shoulders fall a little. "I need a circle and my scrying mirror for the best results," he mutters defensively.

"Calix and I will take Damiana home. Death will make sure you have what you need." Gunnar steps up to my side and takes my hand after his statement.

"It would be best if I were near my coven," Gregory adds.

"Whatever will give us the best chance of finding him," I concede. I wish we had a definite answer if it was possible or not, but I guess a 'maybe' is better than a 'no.'

After a quick but hard kiss, Grim places his hand on Gregory's shoulder, and in the next moment, they're gone.

Calix and Gunnar lead the way off the roof. I take a second to look around, noting I need to ask Grim why he is familiar with this place.

Going down the stairs is easier, but still not wonderful. My stomach is tight again when we reach the final landing before we can go over to the elevator. "Should we worry about these cameras?" I lift my chin at the black domes dotted along the ceiling.

"Nah, they probably only look at them if there's an issue. No one will even know we've been here." Gunnar pushes the down button for the elevator.

I rub the side of my stomach where it feels the tightest. The baby shifts positions, and I get a jab to my bladder. "Oof, I need a bathroom."

Calix chuckles good-naturedly. "What's new?"

"You try having a watermelon dancing on your guts and see how you like it." I roll my eyes.

"I'll leave that to you, thanks." He wraps his arm over my shoulders and pulls me in tight. "Can you wait until we get downstairs, or do I need to break into one of these rooms?" He nuzzles the side of my head a little.

"I can wait." I sigh. The early stages of pregnancy were kind of fun, weird but fun. Now I'm at the point where I'm just uncomfortable all the time. There's still a big part of me that doesn't want to rush things, though, since I'm nervous about the birth and what comes after.



GRIM POPS up while I'm just dipping my toe in the water for a bath. I know I'm not supposed to elevate my body temperature too much, but everything aches, and I want a bath, damn it.

"Stars, you each need a bell," I grumble.

"You're just distracted. I got home several minutes ago. I also made sure the wolf was returned." I let out a long breath as the water surrounds me and I become buoyant. I've always taken my body for granted, which is not something I can easily do now that I have a belly that could double as a watermelon. Grim's statement is true though. I've become complacent, relying too much on the guys, especially while I'm at home.

We've only been home from the hotel for a little while, so I don't know if his quick return is good or bad. "What did the witch say about finding Antonio?"

Grim perches on the edge of the tub, not caring about the water that has splashed on the side and will soon soak into his pants. "The tracking spell leads back near the school."

"Shit." I slap my hand on the water. Dead end.

"But... he doesn't think it's attached to the girl. He thinks Antonio is close to the school or was when he made the amulet. I sit up a little, beads of sweat already dotting my upper lip. Grim's eyes travel over my exposed flesh. "He said the magic is strong on the cord. It's too heavy to come from the human."

"Holy hell, he could have been right under our noses. Did he narrow down the location?" I prepare to stand, but Grim stops me with a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"We're not going until later. The witch is making us a few things to make sure once we get him, he can't get away."

I let my arms sink back into the warm water, and allow the thought of finally getting rid of the fucking witch sink in. "Do you think he knows one of us absorbed the spell?"

Grim dips his fingers into the water then traces them over my arm and up to my shoulder. "I don't know much about witch magic, but I would assume he would have some way of knowing if the spell was activated," he mutters distractedly.

"What if it had been you or I who touched it? I wouldn't even be able to eat if it were I, and who the hell knows what would have happened if you weren't able to reap. I don't like knowing something like that can happen

—*has* happened to Kitten. I know it’s making him crazy. The Berserker has been with him for so long.” I let all my thoughts trickle out as Grim moves around until he’s rubbing his strong fingers over my shoulders in a massage.

He kisses the side of my head and mutters, “Yes, I’m very relieved the Berserker took the spell instead of you. You were very close to touching the pendant. Not something we will allow again.”

“I don’t think Gunnar is relieved.”

“He is, Omnia, we all are. I assure you. He can survive without the beast—we all could. But you would slowly starve.” His voice grows hard. “The spell will die with the witch; there is nothing to worry about,” he declares with complete confidence.

I wish I shared it.

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## CHAPTER 26

“*T*hat’s it?” I inquire. In my warrior’s scarred palm are several little amulets. I’m apprehensive about him touching them, especially considering he still has the marks from the last spell he touched on his hand, but he and Grim have assured me he’s perfectly safe.

I woke up from my too-short nap feeling slightly anxious, and my stomach still feels tight after climbing the couple flights of stairs last night. After we get rid of this fucker, I need to start yoga or something. I can’t stand being this uncomfortable.

I look over at the clock, and it’s barely ten a.m. I should still be sleeping, but I’m already dressed and ready to search the area Gregory pinpointed.

Knowing he might have been this close for all this time pisses me off. His running off to Savannah made sense to me. I’m sure he knows if we get a hold of him, he won’t stand a chance, so why stay so near? There has to be something we’re missing. Or he’s no longer by the school, but that’s too depressing to even think about.

“What will those do, and how do we get them to work?” I motion to the little trinkets Gunnar has.

He pinches one between his fingers, moving it left and right to catch the light. “They are designed to trap the witch much in the same way he was able to trap Aeson. Only he doesn’t need to step on these for them to activate.” He tosses the little thing in the air and snatches it back into his fist. “We do, however, need to get close enough to him for them to actually be effective. If we can put it on him in some way, that would be the best, but if we get that close, we might as well just let Death do his thing.”

“What about that? Can you just end him if you see him or something?” I turn my attention to Grim.

“I would need to touch him, and since we know he has the ability to bind our powers, I’m not sure if I should.”

“So that leaves me.” I shrug, totally okay with ripping the guy’s soul from his body. I don’t need to touch him, hell, I don’t even need to get that close to do it.

“It’s not going to be that easy,” Calix warns. “I’m sure this guy will have the place warded, maybe even have wards that could stop you from feeding off of him. If he’s smart enough to figure out how to syphon Charmed magic without the backlash, I’m sure he’s got some shit up his sleeve we won’t see coming.”

I rub my tummy again when the baby gives me a few well-placed jabs. *I know, I’m tired too, baby girl.* A heavy feeling settles low in my stomach, almost like a cramp. Great, now is not the time for a poop break. I glare over at Gunnar. No one takes more joy from the fact that I have to shit now because I eat more than he does. Somehow, I feel like he fucking jinxed me when he suggested I needed to shit out the souls I was hoarding when we were back in Savannah. Talk about taking something for granted. If I never poop again after this baby is born, I will be a happy bitch.

He looks around when I scowl at him, wondering what he did. Thankfully, the feeling passes within a minute or so.

“You’re saying if we can get that on him, we can hold him in place and just kill him the old-fashioned way?” I question.

“Yup,” Gunnar snarls. “I can’t fucking wait.”

“How do we get him to stay put long enough to make that happen? If he has the place warded, I’m sure he’ll know when we breach them.”

“It would be easier if I could travel, but we’re going to have to rely on Death for that.” Gunnar grumbles, his lips set in a hard line.

“We need you to figure out where the wards are so we don’t tip him off that we’re there. Then tall and creepy blinks in, getting close enough to plant that” —he points at Gunnar, meaning the amulet he’s now holding— “and trap him so he can’t escape while we break the wards he has in place, and then we cut the fucker’s head off.” Calix makes it sound so simple.

“Wouldn’t Grim just be able to blink in and cut his head off all at once? Why will we need to break the wards?”

“We have to assume he has the place set up like the house he trapped

Aeson in.” Gunnar crosses his arms.

“So, if Grim goes in, he’ll be in a trap too?” I’m definitely not liking this.

“Maybe not,” Grim offers, but it doesn’t make me feel any better.

“What if we can’t get through the wards?”

“The Savannah witch told me how to break a ward, and he gave me this.”

Grim holds up a thin piece of white chalk, the kind teachers used to use to write on a blackboard.

“A stick of chalk?” I can’t hide the disbelief in my voice.

Gunnar walks over and inspects the stick in Grim’s hand. “It’s not just regular chalk, witches make it with spelled materials,” he informs me, then adds, “That should work.” I note the appreciation in his tone as he nods at Grim. “Wards are complex, but the foundation is simple. One line out of place, or in this case a broken circle, and we can disrupt the magic.”

“Why the hell didn’t we just break the circle Aeson was trapped in then?” I throw my hands in the air, wondering why my bestie had to die and be brought back if it’s really that simple.

“First, the Brownie was already trapped. We’re going to break the circles before they’re activated. Second, we didn’t have the tools.” Gunnar points to the chalk Grim is still holding. “Lastly, you were in the house alone, and we didn’t know what else was waiting for you. Sometimes brute force is the way to go.”

“Whatever, as long as it ends with him dead, that’s all that matters to me.” I’m fully willing to admit they understand way more about the supernatural world than I do.

“That is the plan,” Gunnar mutters.

“What’s the plan?” Calix asks.

“Killing Antonio,” I reply, and look him over. He’s fresh from the shower and looking oh so yummy. A smirk lifts the corner of his mouth. He knows exactly what I’m thinking, not that I was trying to hide it.

“Are we ready then?” Gunnar questions.

I force myself to look away from my sexy man beast and let out a little sigh. I would much rather be under or over Calix than making a twenty-minute car ride back to my adolescent home away from home. “Ready, Freddy.”

“Who’s Freddy?” Grim frowns. I just smile and shake my head.



THE RIDE back to the school is tense. We're all aware there's a chance we're finally going to get rid of this asshole once and for all, but the thought of how many times he's evaded us without us even catching a glimpse of him puts a damper on the excitement. Plus, I'm still feeling sore and achy, even after a long soak in the tub.

Gunnar pulls over onto the shoulder of the road. We're still a good five miles from the school. I hope he's not expecting me to walk that far. "I checked Google Maps. There's a place not too far up the road where he could be holed up. If he's not here, there's one other place, but it's more of an outbuilding. I can't see anyone living in it long-term, unless it's been heavily renovated since the last time the satellite photos were updated."

"I don't get why he would even stick around here. It doesn't make sense." I climb out of the back seat.

"Why does it need to make sense? You think someone who kills to get a magical high is rational?" Gunnar reasons.

"When you put it like that, I guess not," I concede, and stretch out my back. "But don't you think it's strange he had a place near my parents' house and now he's hanging around here?"

"He's probably chasing your power," Calix says bluntly. "Vanessa said he was coming after you."

"I just figured that was more of her shit-talking."

"Think about it. This guy kills for power. He would have felt you the moment he got within a hundred miles of Washington," Gunnar adds.

"Damiana, you and I will be able to sense the magic before the others. We will lead." Grim doesn't even comment on the conversation we're in the middle of, just makes it clear he doesn't care about Antonio's motives, only when we can end him.

"No, that's bullshit. We can't risk her stepping into a snare." Gunnar's face is flushed red. If I didn't know he couldn't access his Berserker, I would say he was only a second away from hulking out.

"She has the most experience with his wards, including breaking them," Grim replies, sounding completely reasonable.

Gunnar is already shaking his head. "No, no way. It's fucked up that you're even suggesting it."

That gets my back up. "I'm going to pretend like you aren't being a sexist asshole right now, and that your utter love and devotion to me is making you a little loopy." Gunnar opens his mouth, but I lift up my hand to stop him.

“Grim is right, and you know it, Kitten. I’m not the damsel in distress—never have been. I thought you liked that about me.”

“I would love you either way, so don’t pull that shit with me. And don’t be fucking mad that I’m worried. This guy is an unknown. Look at what he did to me, and he wasn’t even fucking there. I don’t want to risk you.” Gunnar keeps his voice low, but the fervor in his tone tells me how important this is to him.

I step closer to him. I can see the wild intensity in his eyes. “It’s going to be okay, because you’re here with me. You, Calix, and Grim will make sure I’m okay. I’m not going in alone. We’re just going first because it makes the most sense,” I reason with him.

“Death, you better fucking know what you’re doing,” Gunnar snaps, looking over my head.

“Things would be much easier if I just ended everyone.” Grim sounds a little cold and detached.

“Oh, don’t start that shit again. I need someone around to deliver this baby, and what would I eat?”

“We won’t have to worry about stealth if you guys don’t shut up. We’re standing on the side of the road arguing.” Calix looks over all of us like we’re wayward children. A smile lifts my lips when I think about calling him Daddy.

“Whatever you’re thinking, not right now,” he admonishes me. I drop the grin in exchange for a glower. “Death and Dami lead, we bring up the rear.” Calix gestures to Gunnar, who is scowling so heavily, it’s a wonder his face doesn’t freeze like that.

Grim starts walking into the tree line, his steps slow and measured. I begin to do a half jog to catch up, but my baby bump bounces uncomfortably, so I just power walk. I think back to the night we snuck into the witch’s house, what the wards near the doors and windows felt like, to see if I can feel anything similar around me.

We walk several hundred feet before something brushes against my senses that doesn’t feel quite right. I stop dead in my tracks and raise my arm out to bar Grim from moving, too. “Wait,” I whisper, even though I feel like we’re alone.

“What is it?” Gunnar whispers back.

“I’m not sure, give me a second.” The feeling is pretty much the opposite of what I expected. The traps that held Aeson and me in place—even the first



ward I encountered at Vanessa's club—felt thick, like I needed to physically push through them; this almost feels like it's beckoning me to come closer. Like everything I ever wanted is about twenty feet ahead of us.

I don't trust the feeling. "There's something, but it's..." Before I can finish, movement ahead of us distracts me. "What the fresh hell was that?" I blink several times, because my brain is telling me what I think I saw couldn't be right.

Someone grabs me by the shoulder and drags me backward. I know it's either Calix or Gunnar, so I don't take my eyes off the ghoulish sight in front of me.

"Is that..." Calix mumbles without finishing.

"Looks like we found the place," I conclude, watching the forms in front of me wither as if they're decaying at a rapid rate, but it somehow doesn't stop them from slowly milling about like some sick imitation of a guard dog.

"They're soulless," Grim comments, though he looks almost as baffled as I feel.

"What the fuck is he playing at?" Gunnar hisses.

The thing moving on the ground just a few feet away snags my attention. Its back half is mostly a greenish glob of goo, and every time its hands pull it forward, a little more gets left behind in its wake. "Was that a fucking mermaid?"

I lift my gaze when my brain refuses to make sense of what I'm seeing. Reaching out with my senses, I taste the beings, but just as Grim said, they're empty vessels. There's nothing I can do to stop them from coming forward. I'm guessing Grim's ability to kill them would be useless as well.

"Anybody have any ideas on how to deal with a bunch of zombie monsters?" I ask. Gunnar wraps his hand over mine and opens my fingers, placing a knife in my palm. I look down at the blade, it's nearly a foot long. Where the hell did he have this thing stowed?

"If they get past us, take off the head or rip out the spinal cord," he says simply. When I look to the left, Calix has already transformed into the Nemean, his golden fur casting an eerie glow over the grotesque scene before me.

"This is a distraction," Grim snarls.

"Well, it's effective," I mutter.

Gunnar pushes to the front of the group, a knife in each hand. I watch his profile as he opens his mouth and lets out a battle cry that sends a shiver

down my spine. Berserker or not, he's still a warrior. The beings surge forward as if triggered by his outburst, pushing past an invisible barrier that seemed to keep them at bay.

Their movements are sluggish, but there are so many I can't imagine how we'll be able to cut through them before Antonio—the sick fucker—has a chance to get away.

Calix bounds forward and grabs the mer-thing's head, ripping it clean off its body. The gore dripping off his jaws is enough to make me want to retch, so I look away.

Grim moves with the same elegance he always does, his sickle appearing in his hand as if it was always there, only unseen. With efficient movements, he tilts his arm sideways and cuts a swath through the endless mass of mindless monsters, leveling them with a single blow. A few who still have shoulders attached wiggle on the ground, as if they're still trying to serve their purpose.

The fight is strangely silent. The only noises are from Calix's wide maw as he tears through the bodies and Gunnar's low grunts of fury. "Watch for snares," I caution the men, walking behind them as they clear a path.

My black heart sings with the carnage being left in their wake. The destruction they can create could end worlds, and all because I asked it of them. A sick smile forms on my lips. Woe to the witch who thought to take what is mine.

Grim takes out several more bodies with well-placed attacks high enough to remove numerous heads at once. Calix continues to bound through the pack, mauling as he goes, while Gunnar's speed and efficiency with which he ends the things is awe-inspiring.

There's no place for pity here. These creatures are long since dead, and only animated by a witch that deserves the same hell he's brought to so many.

The rage inside me builds. It's different from the potent feeling I've taken from so many others. It's mine, it's raw, and yet it still fuels me. A veil of darkness falls over my vision as I scan the horde. I see a fine mist of purple trailing off each body as if they're being controlled by a puppet string. Without a doubt that it would be possible, I flick my hand and sever each thread connected to the soulless bodies.

The power snaps back deeper into the woods, leveling the area with a sonic-like boom that tosses the guys all backwards several feet. I alone am

left standing amid a sea of decaying corpses. Just as the purple thread of power appeared, so does a transparent wall made from the same sickly purple mist where the ghouls were before they advanced toward us.

I can see the arc of a circle as it cuts right through trees and rocks, but there isn't just one. Several smaller circles are within the much larger one, forming rows of protection. Gunnar would have been very close to crossing over the first line had he cut through the group much farther.

I don't have to look to know the guys have recovered from the backlash of me breaking the spell and are all gathered around me. Calix has already shifted back into his human form and is pulling his dirt stained shirt over his head—please let that be dirt.

“What the hell was that?” Gunnar growls and looks around, as if he's waiting for the things to spring back to life.

“This motherfucker just flipped my bitch switch. Grim, give me the chalk.” I throw out my palm, knowing I need it to disrupt the largest circle, assuming I'm the only one who can see it.

My fingers tingle when he touches my hand to place the stick in my grasp. The fact that he just hands it over, no questions asked, fills me with another emotion—pride. They trust me. They may want to keep me safe and protected, but when it boils down to it, they're confident I can handle myself.

“Time to hunt a witch!” I damn near purr with excitement.

## CHAPTER 27

The spell grows stronger the closer I get. “We should hurry.” Gunnar steps up his pace, but I reach out and stop him when he would have gone past me. The urgency filling him isn’t his own. It’s the spell, fooling him to come closer, quicker, to pass the barrier without thought.

“There’s no hurry, Kitten. He’s waiting for us.” As I speak the words, the truth of them rings clear. The zombies weren’t meant to stop us, only to alert him that we had arrived. He thinks he’s the spider calling the fly. He should have realized he’s invited a scorpion into his web instead.

“Stay back,” I warn, when we reach the purple mist. I search the ground until I see a thin, barely exposed copper wire as it disappears right into the trunk of a tree, he used magic to set this circle. I examine the chalk in my hand, wondering if we shouldn’t have brought bolt cutters instead.

“What is it?” Gunnar crouches next to me.

“This is what he’s using to hold the circle.” I point to the wire. “How is chalk going to disrupt this?”

“Magic is all about intention,” Gunnar informs me. “We have the opportunity to break his intent before it takes hold. Your will, your intention, must be stronger.” He meets my stare.

“What if I don’t believe in this crap? Can we just ignore it?” I unintentionally look down at his hand where the rune is still marring his skin.

Gunnar shakes his head, his lips thinning. “No, he believes. That’s enough. Just like with Uncle and Bloody Mary, they’re here because enough people believed them into being.”

“I still don’t see how this can help.” Frustration has me fisting the stick.

Gunnar reaches for my hand and gently pries it open.

“What do you want to do, Dami?” he asks with a patience he usually doesn’t possess.

“I want to break this fucking circle, break all of them.”

“Then do it.” He shrugs as if it’s that simple. When I open my mouth to argue, he lifts up one eyebrow in a challenging manner, and says, “Do it!”

Shear frustration has me scoring the chalk over the wire with a quick snap of my wrist. There’s a slight hissing sound and a fissure forms in the wire, breaking the copper, and the haze of purple drops to the ground like a curtain falling before disappearing into the darkness.

I look at the seemingly innocuous white stick in my hand and my mouth falls open. I can’t believe it worked. The intent was there in spades, but I never expected it to actually work.

“You’re surprised? You just severed a magical connection with dozens of corpses without more than a thought, but this surprises you?” Grim squints at me.

“But this is just chalk.” I examine the dust on my hand.

“And that was just a wire,” Calix counters.

I rise to my feet and extend my hand toward Grim. “Maybe you should hold on to this. I might break it.” My fingers are trembling, but I ignore it. He gives me a look that says I’m being absurd, but he takes it from me anyway.

When I turn around, I’ve either lost my expanded sight, or all the circles have been broken. I don’t trust the latter assumption, so I don’t tell the guys.

Pushing onward, we continue at our slow pace, edging our way through the forest and getting closer to the witch. I open my senses, searching for anything out of place, and come up empty. The sickly feeling that accompanied the corpses evaporated just as quickly as the spell was broken.

My heart starts to beat fast. We can’t let Antonio evade us again. There’s an urgency to the desire to get rid of him now. I wanted him dead because he posed a threat to people I care about, but then he fucked with my best friend and made it personal. I knew I would never stop searching for him, but even then, he was just a thorn in my side, not a real threat. However, the risk of letting him live has grown to a point where we can’t allow him to escape us again. If power is what drew him to me, he’s about to learn he should have left well enough alone.

The outline of a building finally comes into view. I actually stop in my tracks because I wasn’t expecting to see it. As I examine the structure, more

of what's been hidden behind a ward invades my senses. This isn't like the thin purple mist. This is like the heaviness I felt at the club and the place where we found Aeson. Dirty magic happens here, and by the feel of it, it's a lot.

"Jesus Christ," Gunnar mutters when he gets a look at the building. It's covered in symbols and runes. Every square inch of the old wooden slat boards is marked with symbols, and I have no idea what they mean.

"Can you decipher any of that?"

"Not with any certainty. There's just too much. It looks like spell over spell." Gunnar's wide shoulders are bunched up, and he still has his knives fisted in his hands. He looks over at me. "If I had to guess, I would say they are warding spells. Some designed to keep people away, others to protect what's inside."

I nod, that makes sense. "This isn't like the circle magic. I can't see a way to break it," I confess.

"We knew he would have safeguards in place," Calix reminds me.

"I'm going in alone," Gunnar declares.

"Ah, not happening." I cross my arms over my chest, making sure not to stab myself with Gunnar's giant knife.

"He's already bound my powers, Dami. It's the only thing that makes sense. If one of you guys walk in there, you might be in the same position. I'll go in alone, get close enough to use our binding spell on him, then take him out." He says it like it will be so easy. "Plus, I know what to look for, so I don't get caught in a trap."

"No, we should stay together. I mean, look at this place: the entire house is a trap." I throw my hands toward the building.

"He's right, Dami, and we're right here. If anything goes wrong, we'll go in, but let's let him try first," Calix implores.

I look at Grim, hoping he will be the one to see reason, but he just stares back at me without saying a word. He doesn't have to. I can tell he's on board with the plan. "It doesn't feel right," I argue. "I'm telling you I think we should all stay together."

"Give me ten minutes. I may not have my ability, but I can still take this guy."

"Even if you could go Berserk, I still wouldn't want you to go in there alone, it's not about that," I snap angrily. "I thought Grim was going to blink in, drop the amulet, and get away so you could kill him." I look around.

“That was when we thought we had the element of surprise. He knew we were coming, expected us,” Calix counters.

“I don’t like it.” Everything in me is telling me not to let him go inside, especially not alone, but I feel like I don’t really have a choice. I expect them to trust me, so I need to trust them too.

“Ten minutes,” Gunnar pleads, sensing my indecisiveness. “He won’t expect that,” he whispers, turning his back to the house. “I’ll head into the woods, backtracking until I can get around to the other side of the house. You guys do something to distract him, call his attention to your group, he won’t even realize I’m not with you.”

“We can do that.” Calix balls his hands into fists, accepting the challenge.

“Here, take this.” Gunnar hands over a small square to Calix. The silver metal glints as he turns it over then looks up at Gunnar.

“If I’m not out in ten minutes, make sure he has to come out, plus it should break the wards.”

“You want him to light the fucking house on fire?” I hiss.

Gunnar shrugs. “I should survive it, and we don’t have an accelerant. It will take a while to get going.”

“This place is a hundred years old and entirely made of wood. It’ll go up like a fucking bonfire!”

“We’re wasting time,” Grim states, ignoring my comment.

“You better figure something else out, because we are not burning that building if you’re inside it.” I will not budge on this.

“Then I guess I better just kill him quickly.” Gunnar smiles then reaches for me, planting a bruising kiss on my lips. When he tears his mouth from mine, he’s still smiling. He gets off on this shit. If I didn’t feel like he was in danger, I probably would too, but I’m too worried about him.

“Why don’t we just light it up now? He would still have to come out, right?” Gunnar tilts his head to the side. His face is still close enough to mine so I can see when his eyes go a little unfocused.

“I guess I’m just used to running into trouble, not waiting for it to come to me,” he admits without shame.

“Maybe there is something else we can do.” Calix looks down at the Zippo lighter in his hand.



NOT KNOWING if Antonio has eyes on us or not, we emerge into the clearing where the house sits. We don't try to hide our presence at all, but Gunnar stays back in the woods, moving slowly around to the other side of the house. A black car comes into view, parked near the small front porch.

It's sleek, and while not anything as special as Betty, it still pains me to know what we're about to do to it. Calix's shirt has already been ripped into shreds, and he has the fabric fisted in his hand. With one quick jab, he breaks the driver's side window. Holding up the ribbons of material, he ignites the ends and tosses them quickly into the car.

Calix jogs backward, watching as black smoke starts billowing out of the vehicle. The smell is wretched, but I don't see any flames, just heavy smoke. "Fucking leather seats. I got some on the floor, so it's going to take a minute to get going," he mutters, sliding the lighter into his front pocket.

Movement from the house catches my attention. Did that curtain just move or was it my imagination? That's right, dumbass, watch what we're doing.

Within moments, the area around the back of the house lightens as the flames Gunnar took with him catch fire. I was right, the place goes up like a match while the car fire is still struggling to smolder.

I hate that Gunnar is away from us, but we needed eyes on the other side of the structure in case Antonio tries to escape that way.

My body feels tense, poised for a fight, even though the only way things will get physical for me is if shit goes really bad, and I'm not planning on that happening. I scan the house inch by inch, waiting for the asswipe to manifest like a fucking magician, but nothing happens for several long minutes. I start to shift from left to right. "Where is he?" Fuck, maybe lighting the place up was a bad idea. "He couldn't have gotten away, right?"

"Give it time," Calix says calmly.

The roof of the house starts to billow black smoke. I lift my forearm to shield my face from the heat. It's hot as hell, and we're standing back several feet. The noise of the fire grows to a roar, until it sounds like a freight train bearing down on us as the flames engulf the building.

Finally, the front door crashes open, and at that exact moment, I hear a scream echo from Gunnar. The figure coming from the house is much too small to be him, so I search the area, wondering where it could have originated from.

He lets out another howl, this one filled with pain, but the noise cuts off



all too quickly as if something took his voice.

The figure at the door walks out slowly, as if fire isn't chasing him. Every inch of my skin crawls when I see him. "Boogey?" I mutter hesitantly. I'm so completely confused as to why he would be here.

I look behind him, expecting to see someone else emerging from the fire-ridden house, but there's no one.

Grim steps up close to my side as my childhood crush runs his gaze over me. His lips lift in a sneer when he eyes my rounded stomach. My hands come up to rub it protectively. I don't like the way he's looking at me.

"Why are you here?" My voice is unsteady. I really want to know where Gunnar is, but I need to deal with this first. Even though the light of the fire should be illuminating him, he's still mostly made of shadows.

"Would this be better?" He makes the slightest shift, but everything about him changes. Now he's a man. He looks human. This is the image of Antonio I've come to know. My mind scatters.

I'm so confused. I don't know if Antonio is pretending to be Boogey, or if it's the other way around. "What the fuck is going on?" I snarl, ready to rip his throat out either way.

"Come with me and I'll explain everything," he offers. His face may look like Antonio's, but his voice is all Boogey. The sting of betrayal has me clenching my teeth so I don't lash out. If he thinks I would go anywhere with him, he really is delusional.

"You know me better than that, or should I say I thought you did." I make a point of wrapping my hands around Grim's and Calix's. I'm not the lonely little girl I once was, hurt by the fact that I never felt good enough for anyone.

The sharp edges of the amulet Gregory gave Grim poke into my palm. I'm not sure if Grim's intent is for me to take it from him or not.

The windows on the house shatter as a small explosion rocks what's left of the building. The roof collapses, and none of us react.

"I know that you'll come with me if I tell you it's the only way to save the other one," Boogey says, while wearing the witch's face.

"Where is he?" I break away from my men, keeping the amulet in my fist as I do. It's clear I'm going to have the best chance at getting close to him.

"Come here, and they can go get him—what's left of him anyway. The fire was a bad idea." He fake winces.

"Damiana." Calix says my name like a warning, but I don't know if he

really is trying to warn me, or just make Boogey think that I'm going against his wishes.

The image of Antonio drops, and he's the Boogey I grew up with again, the one that held my hand under the bed. My stomach tightens, and I feel like I might throw up.

"Ignore him," Boogey coos, as if he's happy I'm listening to him.

"Tell them where Gunnar is and we can talk." I cross my arms over my chest and give Boogey a hard look. If he knows me at all, he would never expect me to give up easily or be bossed around. I test the air, calling his soul to me, but nothing happens. Is it because he's protected, or because he doesn't even have a soul like the creatures he manipulated?

"He's in the cellar. I might have spelled the entrance to look like the back door." I'm sure he survived the fall... now the fire?" He winces.

"Go get him," I order, without taking my eyes off Boogey.

From my peripheral vision, I watch Calix dart past. "Send him too." Boogey nods behind me.

"He's stubborn." I look over my shoulder, making sure the fucker in front of me believes he has an advantage, but really, I want him to make his move. I want him close enough so I can activate the amulet. I should have been paying better attention, because I have no idea how to do that, other than to get it close to him. "Grim," I call, but he doesn't even look at me. His red, blazing eyes are all for the guy behind me.

"Don't waste your breath, Omnia." His voice is layered, as if hundreds of him are speaking at once. It even sends a shiver down my spine. Every ounce of trepidation I might have felt evaporates. I know no matter what happens, I'm going to walk away from this, and so will Calix and Gunnar, but I want answers.

"He's..." I start, but Boogey grabs me roughly as I turn back around. His arm is around my throat, and I stumble a little. It's easy to lose your balance when your center of gravity is so skewed.

Grim charges forward, but I stop him with a raised palm. With my other hand, the one with the spell, I reach up as if to loosen Boogey's grip on my neck, and the metal hits his skin and sizzles. Boogey lets out a started yelp and flings me away, digging into the black rune left behind on his arm. The useless trinket that held the spell falls to the ground.

Grim pulls me away from Boogey as he continues to dig into his arm, his claw tipped fingers are covered in gore, but the mark remains. "What did you

do?” He moves like he might jerk forward, but he’s stopped by an invisible barrier. Not even the spittle flying from his mouth flies past.

“Would you look at that?” I tilt my head. “How does it feel to be caught in one of your own little traps?”

“Fuck you!” He slams his hands against the barrier and looks around. I don’t want to dillydally too much, because I know snares are breakable. I’ve broken more than one myself, and he has much more experience than me.

“Let’s end this quickly, shall we?” I mutter. “Tell me how the hell any of this is possible.” Boogey ignores my question and slams his fists on the invisible barrier created by the ward, his features distorting until he morphs back into the witch.

Grim steps forward. His cloak is on, but the hood is back, exposing his devastatingly handsome face. His scythe is glowing the same red as his eyes, as if fire is dancing along the blade. “He’s a Boogeyman. They are able to create visages to inspire fear.”

“So, he’s not Antonio? I don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand anything!” the witch shouts. “You get to fucking live. All the rest of us are forced to exist in the shadows, just real enough not to wither away, yet you waste what you’ve been given, feeling sorry for yourself because the humans don’t like you, and your mommy and daddy were afraid of you,” he mocks.

I raise my hand as if I might try to wring his fucking neck right through the ward, but Grim grabs my wrist, stopping me. “He’s baiting you.”

“Dami, wait,” Boogey cries, and his voice sounds young, sad. He sounds and looks like the same lonely baddie I thought I knew when I was a child. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I just wanted to be more powerful so we could be together, really be together.” He licks his lips, his black tongue slithering along his too-white teeth.

His lie holds a whisper of truth, so I examine him as he continues. “The witch wanted monsters he could use. He thought if he could filter the power through us instead of humans, it would last longer. Neither of us expected just how well the spell would work. I got all the power with none of the backlash.”

“Then what?” I press, wondering what’s taking Calix and Gunnar so long.

“Then I didn’t need the witch anymore.” Boogey steps back from the barrier, his arms falling to his sides. “He was my first sacrifice. I killed him the moment I knew how to do the spell,” he explains, like he can’t believe I

didn't already come to the same conclusion.

In the next second, Grim's sickle slices through the air, and Boogey's head thumps to the ground. His body stays upright for a sickening second before it drops like a sack of potatoes. I plant my hands on my hips and glare at Grim. "I had a few more questions."

"The Berserker is calling me."

Everything else falls away—Boogey, the fire, the betrayal, every question I thought was important. I suck in a horrified breath and run to the back of the house.

"Gunnar!" I scream his name in a voice I've never heard. Every syllable is barbed with pain as it's ripped from my throat.

Grim is already kneeling on the ground next to Gunnar, who is lying flat on the dirt twenty feet from the back of the building. His face is marred with soot, and I can see some blisters along one side of his jaw, as well as other spots where it looks even more raw. His clothes are singed, but as I search over him, I watch his chest expand with a heavy wheeze before he starts barking out a racking cough. Calix helps him turn to the side and his entire body shudders with the effort.

I fall to my knees, sobbing as I hit his back with weak fists. "Don't do that, you can't do that!" He lets out a groan that makes me cry even harder.

"I'll be fine now. The bastard is dead... He is dead, right?" He lifts his head off the ground, but it falls back onto the dirt with a thud as his eyes close.

"He is dead," Grim confirms. "If I would have waited any longer to kill him, you would have died."

"So, you're okay? You're yourself again?" I ask hesitantly.

"Yeah, fucking Death saved me," Gunnar mumbles as his body goes slack.

"I think he just passed out." Calix chuckles. I look over at him and note he has some burns on his arms and hands too.

"Are you okay? Thank you for saving him, both of you." I look between them with tears brimming in my eyes.

## CHAPTER 28

“Oh, fuck!” I reach for the side of my lower stomach. The intermittent tightening I’ve been feeling over my belly has ramped up from uncomfortable to downright painful.

“What’s wrong?” Calix inquires. A wide swathe of gore is smeared across his face in a macabre reminder of what we just went through. Gunnar opens his eyes and rolls his head to the side, allowing me to see various burns marring his flesh. Good thing I know he heals fast.

He must see my concern, because he says, “It’s nothing. Why are you bent over and breathing like that?” His eyes roll around in his head a little, proving his injuries are not nothing to worry about and he’s fighting to stay conscious.

I hold up my finger and grumble as the tightening in my stomach intensifies. “What the fuck?” Grim curses. I lift my head and look at him. The only time he swears is when we’re fucking. It’s a rare show of emotion for him.

“Are you...?” Calix doesn’t voice the rest of his hesitant question, but I nod.

“Yup, I think so. Apparently she didn’t want to miss out on all the action. I’m just a little late getting the memo.” I straighten up a little, and my lower back aches with a twinge of pain.

I expect someone to burst into action, but instead all three of them just gape at me, each with varying expressions of horror. “Now’s when we go to the fucking hospital!” I bark.

That spurs them to move. Grim reaches for me, and I know his intention is to blink us there, so I swat him away. “No, no way. We’re driving.”

His eyes are wide. I've never once seen this man afraid, and he looks damn near terrified. "I'll get the car." Calix is gone the next instant.

"You've gotta clean yourselves up. You look like you just left a massacre, which is true, but we can't go to the hospital like that." The tightening in my belly starts again. "Ugh..." I groan. It couldn't have even been more than a minute or two since the last one. Grim moves closer to me, lays his hand on my back, and begins to slowly rub. I don't know if I want to shove him away or crawl into his arms. "This actually hurts," I mutter incredulously.

"Oh, Dami, of course it hurts. Did you think it wouldn't?" Gunnar questions softly after sitting up. He winces, and I feel a little bad for complaining about being in pain after looking at the side of his face, which is still all red and angry.

I still growl, "Shut up."

Gunnar lifts his hands in surrender as the sound of a car speeding down a dirt road, throwing rocks and hitting bumps, fills my ears. "Calix's here, let's get you to the car."

Grim keeps his hand on my back and guides me around to the front of the house. We have to step over discarded clothes to get there, but I barely notice. Good thing Grim can conjure up clothing. Calix pulls up as close to us as he can. Gunnar was slow to rise from the ground, but he wobbles behind us, seeming to grow stronger, or at least steadier, with every second that passes. "Move faster," Grim orders.

"You move faster," Gunnar retorts defensively.

"Both of you get in the car." My voice is harsh and low as I climb into the back seat. Grim slides in next to me before Gunnar has the chance.

"You're such a dick," Gunnar grumbles, as he slams the door after gingerly getting into the front seat. Calix hits the gas and we speed away from the scene. I lean my head back against the seat and rub my belly. Despite the pain, a wave of relief settles over me. Antonio, or Boogey, is dead. I don't have to worry about him hurting my friends or him coming after me.

"Is it coming again? I thought contractions started out slow, like ten minutes apart." Calix turns halfway around between the two front seats to watch me.

"Watch the road! When they first started, I didn't realize what it was, my stomach just felt tight." I lean back and enjoy the temporary reprieve sitting

offers. “But no, I’m not having one right now,” I tell him.

“How far is the hospital? I should just take her.” Grim looks out the front windshield.

“It’s not far, everything is fine,” Calix assures him.

“Just drive,” Grim orders.

“I can drive and talk. He is such a dick,” Calix laments, talking to Gunnar.

The rest of the ride to the hospital passes in a blur. I have another contraction, which Grim holds my hand through. Sitting no longer feels like a reprieve. I want out of the car. Being able to walk and move around through the pain feels easier.

Gunnar gets out of the car first when Calix pulls up right in front of the emergency room entrance. The moment the double doors open, letting out the despair and antiseptic smell, my teeth start to chatter. His face is still a little red and swollen, but it looks more like he was in a fight than burned.

I’ve only gone to a few appointments. Needing a doctor is something new to me since I’ve never gotten sick, but giving birth in the hospital was something I insisted on. However, now I just want to turn around and go home. I’m not sure I’m ready for this.

Gunnar takes my hand and guides me through the doors. There’s an attractive woman behind a high desk who stands when she sees me waddle in, and it’s definitely a waddle. “How can I help you?”

I slap my hands on the counter and lean over as another wave of pain starts. “She’s having contractions.” Gunnar rubs my back as I breathe through the pain.

“Is she registered here? Has her doctor been notified?” she asks in a calm voice. I’m sure this is something she sees regularly.

“Get the doctor,” Grim orders from behind me. I reach out and end up snagging his shirt in my fist.

“No, we thought we had more time for that.” Gunnar keeps his tone even.

“How many weeks are you? Do you have a history of premature labor?”

Instead of answering, I turn my head into Grim’s chest and rock from side to side. It’s easier to take the pain when I’m moving. “This is our first baby. Her contractions are only minutes apart,” Calix answers. I don’t even know when he arrived. I thought he went to park the car.

“You’re the father?” I can hear the woman’s curiosity in her tone.

“Is there someone here more competent than you?” Grim growls. “We

need a doctor.”

“So, this is an emergency?” she inquires. If my guts didn’t feel like someone replaced them with a vise, I would smack her upside her head.

“Get me a fucking doctor!” Grim shouts. It’s the first time I’ve ever heard him even raise his voice. I expected Gunnar to be the one hollering.

I pat his chest. “Please calm down. They will kick you out and I need you here. I need all of you here,” I whisper. Now that the pain has passed, I stand up straight and look the woman in the face. She has a phone receiver in her hand and her eyes are wide.

“How do I register? I need to see a doctor.”

“Just sign in here. We’ll get you right back,” she says softly.

“You could have just said that in the first place,” Calix snaps, and snatches the electronic pen attached to a little blue screen she pointed to. “I’ll do this,” he mutters, dismissing us from the counter.

Grim leads me a few feet away. It’s the first time I’ve realized we aren’t alone in the waiting room. I ignore the stares and lean against Grim. Gunnar comes over and stands behind me. It’s rare for him to be this close while I’m touching one of the other guys, and his effort doesn’t go unnoticed. With every twinge, I expect the pain to return, but I get a short respite.

Calix meets us near a vending machine after filling out the form. “Do you want to sit down?” He looks at the industrial plastic chairs and scowls.

“No, I think the contractions are slowing down. Maybe we’ll be able to go home.” I breathe a sigh of relief.

“We should just go. I’ll bring a doctor to you,” Grim offers.

“No, we need to be here, they have all the equipment,” Gunnar reminds Grim. We’ve actually had this conversation before.

“Where are they?” Calix looks back toward the front desk.

“It’s only been ninety seconds, calm down,” Gunnar replies.

“Stars, I think we’re in the twilight zone,” I mumble, surprised he’s being the voice of reason.

“Daniella,” a male nurse calls after stepping out from a set of double doors. “Daniella?” He looks right at me.

“Damiana,” I correct.

“Sorry about that.” He plasters a weak smile on his face. “Do you need a wheelchair?”

“No, I’d rather walk.” I head in his direction, and all three guys follow.

“Who’s the... father?” He glances at the three of them.



“We are,” Gunnar answers. I figured we would have to talk about this once we were in a room, not in the lobby. Not that I care.

“Ah... which one of you will be coming back with her?” The nurse hesitates.

“All of us.” Grim steps forward and looms over the guy. The nurse blinks several times and does a little shake of his head. If I had to bet, I’d say Grim just gave him the glowy glare.

“I’m afraid that’s against policy,” he mumbles.

“You’re not going to win this one,” I deadpan. “Make it easier on everyone here and just ignore them... please,” I add as an afterthought.

He must agree, because the double doors open again, and all of us follow him back to a little curtained-off cubical. I can hear other patients’ monitors beeping and the hushed sounds of people talking.

The nurse grabs a folded gown from the top of a pile and hands it to me. “Put this on so it opens in the front. Do you need a hand?”

Gunnar snatches Grim’s hand out of the air when he reaches for the nurse. “We got it.”

“I’ll be back in just a few.” The guy’s feet couldn’t carry him any faster unless he was running.

I face Grim, giving him a droll look, but it morphs into a grimace as a contraction hits me hard and fast. This one doesn’t have a lot of buildup. Scratch that: there’s plenty of buildup; this one is just twice as intense. “Holy shit demons.” I lean forward and plant my hands on the plastic-coated mattress and cheap white sheet.

Gunnar steps up behind me and spans his hands over my lower back. His thumbs are in the center above my tailbone, and he starts circling them while applying a lot of pressure. “You’ve got to breathe, Dami,” he mutters softly, while his fingers do some sort of magic on my back. I take a deep breath in through my nose and blow it out of my mouth. “Good, just keep breathing,” he encourages.

“What the hell is he doing?” Calix asks.

“Shut up, it’s working,” I snap. As soon as I stand, Gunnar steps back, giving me a little space. Calix is holding the gown up, his face slightly solemn. Grim helps me undress quickly. Thankfully, the robe-gown thingy is so big I can still close it over my belly. I start to shiver almost immediately. I don’t think it’s just because it’s chilly in here, but Grim pulls up a heavy woven white blanket from the end of the bed to cover me when I get situated.

I note a pair of shoes nearing from under the drapes. “All set?” a heavily accented male voice inquires, before he pulls back the curtain without waiting for a response.

He doesn't seem bothered by the fact that there's barely any standing room left in the tiny space. He shoulders his way through the group to stand at the end of my bed. “Good evening, Damiana.” He doesn't pronounce my name perfectly, but it's better than most. “And how are we doing?” The guy is young, fit, and good-looking. I couldn't care less, but I don't think the guys will feel the same. Great.

“That's what I came here to find out.” I can already feel another contraction coming, so I close my eyes and breathe. Gunnar leans me forward and rubs my lower back as best as he can while I'm sitting in a hospital bed.

“Contraction?” His voice becomes high at the end. “Good, good, let's see how things are going. Can you lie back for me?”

“She's hurting, let her get through this,” Calix barks.

“This is the best time to check. Might be uncomfortable, but it gives me an accurate assessment,” he states pragmatically. “Lie back.”

“You don't have to, sweetheart. Wait until you're ready.” Calix's tone is soft, but his face is hard as nails as he glowers at the doctor.

“It's fine, let's do this.” It's rough, but I lie back and scoot down on the bed like the doctor asks. As soon as he reaches for my gown, Grim grabs his hand. The doctor's mouth opens and he bends his body, trying to get away from the pain Grim must be inflicting on him.

“Do not touch.” Grim's voice is no longer just his. Oh, shit.

“Grim,” I call through clenched teeth. His eyes, full of flames, dart to mine. “C'mere.” I beckon him over with a wave of my hand. I'm already exhausted, and we just got started.

He drops the doctor's hand and is up near my head in a blink. His hand goes to my temple, and he brushes my hair away from my face. “He's got to touch me, Loverboy, he needs to see how the baby is.”

“The machine will do it,” Grim decrees, being very unreasonable.

“That's not how this is going to work; you knew this,” I remind him. By now, the contraction is over and I can look him dead in the eye. “Let him check me out so we can make sure she's okay.”

His beautiful gray eyes narrow, but he scowls. “Fine.” He whips his head to the side so he can stare down the doctor.

I give the doctor a nod to go ahead. He's wearing a fairly nasty scowl on

his face as he stretches out his hand, moving all of his fingers. Eventually, he goes for the hem of the gown again, his eyes on Grim instead of my crotch where they should be. Great.

“Are we sure we’re doing this?” Calix looks around, his eyes wide.

“Doing what? Having a baby? It’s a little late for that.” I lean my head back when I feel the doctor’s cold, glove-covered hand touch my inner thigh. I don’t want to do this any more than they want him to do this, but like I said, not much of a choice at this point.

I jump when his fingers touch my labia. This is weird. I curl closer to Grim and bury my face against his shirt, it’s soft and smells like home. A hand lands on my upper arm from the other side of the bed.

“Hurry up,” Gunnar demands from farther away.

“How long have you been having contractions?” the doctor asks, removing his gloves with a snap.

“A while, but only this strong for a little bit, maybe an hour.”

“I’ll call up and get you a room. You’re a little over four centimeters and the head is low. We need to know how far along you are so they know to have the NICU on standby if need be.”

“Thirty-two weeks,” Gunnar tells him before I can.

“But it was an estimate. My periods have never been very regular.” The lie tastes like ash on my tongue.

“Lungs should be fine then. I’ll make sure they’re on standby just in case.” The doctor stands to leave. “Do you need anything for the pain now?” he inquires, before pushing the curtain aside.

“It’s going to get worse, right?”

“Yeah, you’re still in the early stages,” he confirms.

I let my head fall back against the bed again and the sheet crinkles under me. “I’ll wait a little.”

“A note of caution.” He turns around and glances at each of us. “They won’t tolerate this shit up there. You give them grief, they will kick you out, and you will *not* be allowed back in. You want to be with her when the baby’s born? Calm the hell down.” With those parting words, he leaves. I can’t even blame him, we’re kind of a handful.



THE HOURS TICK BY SLOWLY, yet so fast. I finally received an epidural about thirty minutes ago, and I'm kicking myself for not doing it sooner. I don't have anything to prove, and this shit hurts. I feel like my guts are being turned to soup.

Not surprisingly, but very conveniently, all my nurses are female, and there's no shortage of them, either. I think most of them are coming in to see my guys rather than me, but they always make a point to pretend to check up on me.

The ER doctor's warning about them not screwing around up here was total crap. Every time I turn around, another one of them is giggling and asking if the guys need anything. They even ordered dinner for them from the cafe downstairs. I didn't get shit but some fucking ice chips.

Assholes! "What are you grumbling about?" Grim pushes my hair away from my face. He's much calmer now. I think the epidural helped him too, except the part where he had to leave the room. I thought that might lead to dead bodies, but Calix convinced him to leave so they could help me manage the pain.

"I'm having a baby, my vag is going to be all stretched out, and they're flirting." I narrow my eyes. "You better still love me after."

Grim gives me one of his rare wide smiles, the kind he reserves for me. "No one has ever loved anyone as much as I love you." He leans in and kisses the side of my mouth. I nuzzle my face against him when he starts to pull away.

Now that I can think past the pain, fear is infiltrating my thoughts. "What if I can't do this?"

"You're already doing it," he assures me. I look over and see the numbers on the machine next to me. It tells me the baby's heartbeat and it's monitoring my contractions. I can still feel the tightening, but the pain that comes with it is just an echo.

A nurse walks over, her voice unnecessarily loud and chipper. "Ready for me to check you again? It's been a little bit since you got the meds. They working good?"

I nod on both accounts. At this point, I know the drill when they want to check me—heels near my butt, knees out wide. She gloves up and slides her hand under the blanket. I squirm from her touch, but the sensation is much duller now.

"Oh, oh, oh, you're just about ready," she singsongs. "That was fast."

Your body relaxed a little and did all the work.” She pulls off the gloves and starts moving around the room, turning on brighter lights and pushing the privacy curtain out of the way. She even drags over a low stool near the end of the bed.

“I’m going to page the on-call doctor.” Then she’s out the door. Two other nurses come in just a few minutes later. One is pushing a tall metal cart that has a tiny little cot about waist high with bright lights above it. There are monitors and buttons all over it, much like the ones next to my bed.

“Stars. I’m about to have a baby?” I fist the sheets and my heart monitor beeps, but everyone ignores it. Gunnar comes over to the side of the bed and takes my hand in his. “What if she’s different?” I widen my eyes, hoping he’ll understand my concerns.

He kisses the side of my head and gives me a lazy shrug with a grin. “So what?”

“But...” I don’t know what else to say because he’s right. Whatever she is, she’s ours, and I will protect her. Worst case scenario, Grim could have us out of here in a second flat, and it’s not like anyone could stop us.

“She’ll be perfect, just like you,” he promises.

The next few minutes pass fast. The doctor comes in, he checks me again to confirm I’m ready, and then they start really preparing the room. The bottom half of the bed is removed and cold, silver stirrups flip up from the side. If I thought it was bright in here before, I was mistaken. You could land an airplane in this joint now.

With the doctor face deep in my crotch and all geared up like he’s Dexter committing a homicide, he looks up at me and tells me to bear down like I’m going to the bathroom the next time I feel a contraction.

Seconds later, I get to try out the tasks. “No, back here.” I jump when his finger goes near my ass.

“Hey!” Calix barks.

The doctor ignores him. “Like you need to poop,” he instructs instead. And this is the moment I get embarrassed. “Try again on the next one,” he says happily.

There’s barely any time between the feeling of pressure, so I push again, this time lower, and the doctor’s response is immediate.

“I see the head, good girl, keep going.”

“Oh, fuck.” I look over just in time to see Gunnar’s eyes roll back in his head as he goes down. I swear the floor shakes when he hits like a mini

earthquake.

“The tough ones are always the biggest babies.” The doctor smiles up at me from between my legs while two nurses try to wake up Gunnar. “A few more good pushes like that and we will have a baby.” His bushy dark brows wiggle up and down.

“How many more?” I pant for breath. That was just the first push, and I’m fucking tired of it already.

“As many as it takes.”

I want to weep, but I just tuck my chin down and push every time he orders me to. It’s not a couple pushes—it’s too many to count. I think about giving up once or twice. Gunnar, who’s now seated right next to my head, is telling me how great I’m doing. I want to poke his eyes out.

“I’m going to shove something up your ass and make you push it out if you say that again,” I warn, sweat dripping down my face.

He smartly shuts his mouth and just holds my hand. Calix is near my hip, but I catch him leaning over to look between my legs every once in a while. He looks a little green too. I hope he falls on his dick if he passes out.

“That’s not very nice,” the doctor chastises me. I didn’t even realize I said it out loud. Grim is right behind the doctor, watching his every move. I swear to the stars, at one point, I saw his scythe in his hand, ready to kill the man. “Now this is it. You push hard, and we have a baby.”

“There’s no fucking we, I’m the one having a baby. Are you pushing a basketball out of your twat?” I half yell, half growl, and push as hard as I can. The sweet relief is instant, and so is the horror of how weird it feels to literally gush fluids out of your vagina that you have no control over.

“Ah, there she is.” My eyes slit until they’re almost closed and my head drops back. Her tiny little body is in the doctor’s hands. Her puffy lips are a little blue, but then she opens her mouth and lets out a wail.

I cry then, too, racking sobs right along with her. Gunnar kisses my head and rises to follow the nurse who took the baby over to the cart. Calix isn’t far behind. Grim comes to my side and cradles my face in his hands. His eyes are bright, and he murmurs whispered words under his breath against my lips.

I don’t try to understand what he’s saying, I just let him comfort me while the others make sure the baby is okay.

I reach up and clasp his wrist, making sure he doesn’t let go. “I’m never having another kid!”

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## CHAPTER 29

“Evening, gorgeous girl,” I coo, while Nyx wraps her chubby fingers around mine. Her large, gray eyes stare up at me with an innocence that makes my heart ache. It’s strange how my emotions are so inexplicably tied to hers.

She’s cradled in my arms where she fell asleep hours ago. Calix offered to put her in her crib, but I love the way her little body fits so perfectly against mine.

Grim leans over my shoulder. Even though all the books say he’s not close enough for her to see, her eyes seem to change focus, and she gazes up at him. After a little wiggle, she opens her perfect little mouth into a circle for a yawn.

My little goddess has all four of us wrapped around her finger. She’s also spoiled rotten. Calix brushes his fingers gently over the snow-white peach fuzz covering her head. Her lips purse, and I know she is seconds from crying.

Consuming food during my pregnancy should have been a warning for how much she would eat, but it still surprises me how often she wants to nurse.

“Eat, sleep, shit, repeat.” Gunnar leans over and scoops her up. He holds her neck securely and brings her close to his face so he can coo at her while heading out of the room. Having four people to split diaper duty with is pretty amazing. I would definitely recommend it to all families.

I rise from the chair and stretch. I’ve never, in my life, sat still for such long periods, but there is something seriously magical about a sleeping baby that allows the time to pass so effortlessly.



“Uncle was here,” Calix tells me.

“He was? Was I dozing?”

He shakes his head. “He said he was just checking on you. I told him where you were and to go see you for himself, but he said he would wait.”

“For what? A written invitation?” I scoff.

“I think he’s worried you won’t want him around the baby.” Calix has a soft smile on his lips as his eyes run over me.

If I thought I was a mess eight months pregnant, I was wrong. My shirt has stains over my left nipple from leaking milk, and I haven’t changed my yoga pants in two days. I can’t believe he can even look at me and smile. You’d think he’d be escorting me to the shower. “That’s stupid. How will she get to know him if he’s not around?”

Calix shrugs. “I tried telling him. I think he needs to hear it from you.”

“Make sure someone tells me next time he comes, please.” Nyx lets out a loud squeal as she starts to cry and my nipples tingle. I grab both my tits in my hand and whine.

“I’ll go grab her.” Calix gives me a soft kiss on my temple before jogging deeper into the house.

I feel Grim’s warmth as he moves behind me. He pulls my back tight against his front and runs his hands down my sides. “Want me to hold those for you?” he whispers near my ear. I tilt my head to the side a little to give him better access.

“Not unless you want milk all over your hands.” I chuckle.

Instead of answering, he runs his palms over my arms until he’s cradling my hands. “Happily.” He nips the side of my neck roughly, and I let out a little whimper.

“Knock it off, you’re not getting near my pussy for a while. She needs recovery time.”

Grim clicks his tongue at me. “I’m not a savage, Omnia, but I can’t help how seeing you makes me feel.” Calix walks in while Grim still has his hands over mine, cupping my boobs. He lifts an eyebrow but doesn’t say anything about it.

Talk about an ovary destroyer. Watching him or any of the guys holding my little girl and I’m already rethinking the whole ‘I’m not having any more kids’ statement, and it’s only been two weeks since I gave birth. Funny how you forget how hard it was, how badly it hurt. Not that the recovery after is easy, either, and I heal way faster than a human. I hope they are as pampered

as I am. But then again, I don't know many humans who have three men looking after them. Splitting the work between us sure seems to make things easier.

"Where do you want to sit?" Calix gently bounces Nyx while patting her butt.

"How about the living room? I'm getting tired of these four walls." Gunnar has been nesting. He made a nursery on the main floor and in the bedroom closest to mine. I heard him talking to Grim the other day about renovating to make our room bigger and possibly moving Nyx's nursery across the hall.

Calix turns around and heads to the main parlor. It seems like so long ago since he came here for the first time and we made out on the couch. The memory brings a smile to my lips. Grim rocks me back and forth a bit before asking, "What's the grin for?"

"I was just thinking about when you guys first came to me." I spin so I can look up at his face. His gray eyes, the exact same shade as Nyx's, peer down at me. "I almost swallowed my tongue when I saw you without the robe. Calix had already left me hot and bothered, then you came along and I wanted to jump your bones." I toss my head back and let out a throaty laugh. "I thought you guys might have been coming to tell me you were my dad or some shit. Thank fuck I wasn't lusting after my pop."

Grim palms my ass and pulls me even closer. "Imagine how I felt. I watched you grow up. One day you were this little creature I wanted to care for and protect, then the next time I see you, this..." He places my hand on his dick. It's hard, but Grim is always hard. I don't even know how he has blood flow to his brain.

That makes me laugh even harder. "My poor Loverboy. How old was I? Legal I hope?" He narrows his eyes at me and gives me a look that says I'm going to pay for that comment.

Gunnar pokes his head into the room. "Want me to try to give her a bottle?"

"No, I'm coming. It's okay if she cries for a minute or two. The books say it's good for her lungs."

He rubs his hand over his forehead. "I know, I just want to help." He and Grim both follow me into the parlor. Calix is trying to comfort Nyx, but she's really wailing. Her little face is all red, and her tiny hands are balled into fists as she noses around on his chest looking for something to latch on to.

Calix looks at me with a helpless stare. “I’m sorry; she’s cranky.” I take her in my arms, and she quiets quickly, letting out little grunts instead.

I settle into a chair and get her set to nurse. Her eyes drop closed immediately and her body relaxes. I thought I would hate this—thought it would be weird to nurse her after only ever thinking about my breasts being for sexual pleasure—but it’s completely different from anything I could have ever imagined. Feeding her actually gives me great joy. Maybe it’s because my mom could never feed me and never even made an effort to try something other than a bottle—not that I can blame her for not knowing I needed to survive. But it still gives me immense satisfaction knowing I’m taking care of her.

Gunnar turns the TV on, and Calix hands me my phone. I smile at him gratefully. Without it, I would probably fall asleep. I jump when I hear my name shouted. “Damiana!”

“Oh, shit,” I whisper. “What do you think she’ll be madder about? Us killing Antonio or me not waiting for her to get back until I had Nyx?”

“Nyx,” all three of them say in unison.

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Oh, good, I couldn’t control that.”

“I cannot believe I had to hear that you had the baby from the crooked man!” She’s not even down the stairs and she’s screeching. “Where are you, you traitor?” She rounds the corner, her hands are on her hips, and she’s frowning, but the moment she sees me and the baby cradled against my chest, she stops dead in her tracks and her hands fall to her sides.

“Shush. I’m sorry, Aeson. Nyx had her own agenda.”

“Nyx, the goddess of night?” she says softly in awe.

“Come say hello, Aunty.” Aeson’s eyes jump to mine and she can’t hide her grin, but she fucking tries.

“At least you chose a decent name,” she mumbles instead, focusing on the ground as she walks over and grapples up the chair leg to sit on my shoulder. “Look at those cheeks,” she whispers in reverence. “I can’t believe I missed it. You were early,” she accuses, still staring at Nyx.

“A little, she was almost six pounds though, and she’s gaining weight fast. The doctor observed her for two days to make sure her lungs were good before they kicked us out.” I look over at Gunnar.

“What? Their rules are stupid,” he grouches.

“No weapons in the hospital isn’t a stupid rule, Kitten.”

“How else can you protect your child? Humans are weaklings and they

don't even allow them to have a weapon." He shakes his head like he's baffled. "I'm with Grim, next time we bring the doctor to us." For a moment, I'm enamored by his use of Grim's name until I realize what he said.

"Next time?" Nyx jumps and lets out a loud cry from my outburst. I rub the side of her head and shush her softly. Aeson scoots down until she's sitting on my boob right in front of Nyx's face. My little girl opens her eyes and stares up at my best friend. There's no fear, no judgment, and there never will be. We will raise her not to fear the darkness or what may lurk there. But I will make sure she knows evil exists, and it's rarely the creatures that look the part.

"Yes, next time." Grim nods his head.

"Sure, that will happen, we'll have all the babies." I smile through the words then drop the grin and deadpan, "As soon as you're the ones growing and birthing them."

"We have time to convince her," Calix remarks dismissively. I know he's right—it probably won't even be hard to persuade me—but I like to give them hell anyway.

Aeson brushes her tiny hand over Nyx's cheek, and my baby girl closes her eyes again while she finishes eating. "Tell me what happened with the witch," she coos softly to make sure she doesn't disturb Nyx.

I wince, she already knows. Well, it's not like it was a secret, but I wasn't sure the news would get back to her because she was on a job. "It was Boogey, can you believe it?"

"I heard, the slime." She settles herself on the arm of the chair where she can look at me and the baby.

"From what we've gathered, it's been him the whole time. Boogey admitted to killing Antonio after he taught him how to perform the ritual, and from the number of bodies that were piled up near his safehouse, he's been doing it for quite some time," I inform her. "I know you wanted your pound of flesh. Sorry you weren't there."

"Shit happens. If I made it my goal to hunt down everyone who tried to kill me, I wouldn't have time for much else," she quips.

Gunnar gives me the 'I told you so' look. I make a face that I'm sure isn't very flattering in return. He cracks a smile.

"So, this is what you guys do now, sit around like a bunch of house ninnies? Aeson looks around the room, so I do, too. All of the guys are relaxed, Calix even has a blanket draped over his lap. Gunnar is munching on

a bag of candy, and none of them look repentant about how things have shifted. I can't say I am, either. Not too long ago, I craved companionship. I lived for visitors. Now I still get to enjoy my guests, but I don't have the crippling loneliness I always lived with before.

"Yes, I plan to get a dad bod," Grim declares plainly. I snort.

"On you it would probably work, but don't rush into anything there, killer." Aeson gives the perfect specimen of a man a long, appraising look, and I'm not even mad at her for it.

Gunnar responds by grabbing the remote and turning on the TV, then he shoves his hand back into his bag of candy, perfectly content.

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## CHAPTER 30

*T*hree years later

A GIGGLE ERUPTS down the hall. Nyxie is playing hide and seek with Cece. I can see the evidence of her wet footprints on the carpet. “You win again.” I drop my cards on the table. Uncle, who I now know was only ever allowing me to win, takes his marbles.

I hear heavy footfalls rushing behind me, then a squeal when Calix roars at the girls. Nyxie bounds into my lap, panting and still giggling. I grunt but wrap my arms around her little body. Cece pokes her head around the corner. No matter how many times we remind her she’s safe here and free to roam about, she still mostly keeps to the shadows.

“I hungry.” Nyx pouts.

“When aren’t you?” I stand and hoist her onto my hip then tickle her little belly. I have no idea where she puts all the food. I’m pretty sure she has the same metabolism as her daddy, and no matter what she ate, she would still be perfect.

Nyxie laughs, tossing her head back so I can see her blunt little teeth, some of her molars have come in and she loves to bite. I think she gets that from her dad too.

“Cece, want a snack?” I don’t look in her direction. The attention makes her even more shy. I hear the plodding of her wet feet as we make our way into the kitchen.

I have a few candles burning on the counter so it's not too bright. Cece hops up onto the stool next to the one I placed Nyx on. Uncle is looming in the hall. My fearless little lady waves him in and demands, "Come, Uncle. Snacks."

She has way more control over him than I ever did. He slinks into the kitchen at her summoning. "What do you want? An apple, grapes, yogurt?" My fridge looks much different than it once did. Most of the garbage has been replaced with healthier snacks.

"Chocolate sammich." Nyx smacks her lips as if she can already taste it. I make it a point to look around as if I'm searching for her fathers and bring my finger up to my lip to shush her. But she knows I'm a push over and will give her adorable little face anything she wants. Hell, she has everyone she's ever met wrapped around her perfect little finger. I guess that's what happens when you're born half angel.

"How about for you, Cece?"

"Can I have something crunchy?" Her voice is as soft as a butterfly wing.

"You got it." I make her a plate of carrots and cucumbers with a side of dip and add a handful of chips.

Calix slinks into the kitchen, his eyes bright. He's been playing hide and seek with the girls for the last hour. "You didn't even tell me it was snack time." He frowns at Nyx, who looks completely unrepentant.

"It's snack time."

Calix scrubs his hand over the top of her white-blond hair. "A little late now." He chuckles as she bats his hand away. "You shouldn't be eating anyway. It's almost time for bed."

I slide Nyx's Nutella sandwich with the crusts cut off in front of her, and she pounces on it as if she hasn't eaten in days. Her appetite is all Calix and Gunnar.

Calix leans against the counter and gives me a grin that usually means he's up to something. Either that or he's about to extort me for sexual favors since I got caught giving Nyx a sugar-loaded snack. I'm not even sorry, especially with the way his eyes are warming to molten gold.

Calix drops a kiss onto the top of Nyx's head and tells her, "Finish up your snack, and I'll put a movie on for you two. You'll never fall asleep after eating that."

She peers up at him with smears of chocolate on her cheeks and big eyes. "*Addam's Family*," she bargains.

“Sure.” He sighs as if he’s doing her a favor. She’s watched the movie a hundred times, but I’m sure it feels more real to her than Disney princess movies do. The girls finish up quickly, and Calix helps Nyx down from the stool.

“I’ll be back for you in a minute,” he warns me, looking over his shoulder.

“Promises, promises,” I singsong. The moment Calix disappears with Nyx and Cece, so does Uncle, fading into the darkened hallway as if he travels in the shadows.

Calix is only gone for about five minutes before I feel him come up behind me. He molds his front to my back and cages me in against the counter. “I can’t believe you got away so fast.” I turn so I can see him. I let my eyes travel over his features. He looks exactly the same as the first time I saw him—light hair, long and a little wild, with hazel eyes that shift in the light to a beautiful amber. He’s devilishly handsome and all mine.

“I have my ways,” he damn near purrs, but he makes it sound much more appealing.

“Who did you bribe to watch them?” I run my finger over his chest, enjoying the way his pupils dilate.

“There was no bribing.” He lowers his head and nuzzles his nose against mine. “Someone volunteered,” he whispers across my lips.

I grin, I’m not surprised. We have a system that’s worked really well for us over the past few years. Carving out alone time with each of them hasn’t been as challenging as I once thought it would be. I tip my head back, and Calix’s lips hover over mine. I feel the heat of his breath as he grabs my ass and jerks me forward so I can feel just how excited he is about our stolen moment together.

“What is it with you and kitchens?”

He starts slowly kissing me, but I feel the smile tugging at his lips. “Maybe I do have a food kink after all,” he concedes, and seals his lips to mine. Calix kisses me as if he still savors my taste, his hands coming up to cup my cheeks. I lean my breasts against his chest, eager for the warmth of his touch and the heat that comes along with it.

I trail my hands down his body until I encounter the waist of his jeans. I make quick work of the button and zipper before sliding my hand inside and wrapping my fingers around him. Calix lets out a soft grunt and dives deeper into my mouth, his grip shifting until his hand is fisted at the nape of my



neck. Within seconds, he's breathing heavily and grinding into my hand. He abruptly pulls back and rests his forehead against mine, and pants, "As much as I'm enjoying this, we have other plans this evening."

"We do?" I can't keep the disbelief from my voice as I lean back to get a good look at his face. Calix hasn't shut me down for sex since we first got together, and he wanted to make sure I understood how much was at stake. That's no longer in question—I want everything from him and more.

"We do." Grim's voice fills my ears. I turn, surprised to find him leaning against the doorway with Gunnar by his side.

I plant my hands on my hips and look between the three of them. "Why do I feel like you are all up to something?"

"You know you love everything we get up to," Gunnar teases. I smile, because he's so fucking right.

"Well, don't keep me waiting." I roll my wrist to urge them on.

"How does a few nights away sound?" Grim tilts his head to the side, and I can already see little flames dancing in his eyes.

"Away from where? Home? What about Nyxie?"

Calix adjusts his pants so his dick isn't about to fall out, but he doesn't bother buttoning them. "Nyx will stay here with Torin. Aeson and Samson already promised to stop by, plus we will only be a blink away."

I bite my bottom lip. I haven't been away from Nyx for longer than a few hours, but looking at all three of my guys and knowing the debauchery we could get up to—not that we don't already—the decision is an easy one to make. "I'm in!" I know I don't have to worry about Nyx, her extended family loves her just as much as we do. Plus, like Calix said, I'm only seconds away no matter how far we are. "What do I need to pack?"

Gunnar's smile grows until the scar marring his lip is barely visible. "Absolutely nothing."

I toss my head back and laugh. "Sounds like my kind of party."

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