


THE SHADOW WALKERS SAGA



THE
SECRET
OF
PAIN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LILY WILDHART

THE RUIN OF SOULS

THE SHADOW WALKERS SAGA #1

LILY WILDHART

The Ruin of Souls
The Shadow Walkers Saga #1
Copyright © 2023 Lily Wildhart

Published by Bright Lights Publishing Ltd

Lily Wildhart has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, record, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the authors imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademark status and trademark owners of various products referred to in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorised, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

Cover Designer: colouranomaly
Editor: Sassi's Editing Services
Proofreader: Puddleduck Proofing
Interior Formatting: Wild Elegance Formatting

The Ruin of Souls/Lily Wildhart

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Translations](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Lily Wildhart](#)

There is no light without shadow, just as there is no happiness without pain.

ISABEL ALLENDE

CHAPTER ONE

THEN



Looking into his piercing, bright blue eyes, I question how we managed to get to this point. After everything we've been through, to end up here, with him in my arms and me praying to a god I don't believe in... that this isn't the end of our story.

There have been so many moments throughout our history that could've killed either of us. Where we could've killed each other. But we survived it all.

The rise and fall of empires.

Wars of the world.

The breakdown of the world we once knew.

Not once, during even one moment of our past, did I think I'd be the one hoping beyond all hope he'd survive. That he wouldn't leave me. Especially not like this. When he has given so much for me. Something I never would have thought possible.

I scream as I lift him onto my shoulders, his groans of pain matched by mine. I will save him if it's the last thing I ever do.

Because a Dracul saved me. My immortal enemy.

In more ways than I ever knew I needed saving.

CHAPTER TWO

NOW



“Colt, I am not having this conversation again.” I breath out an exasperated sigh and blow my hair out of my face as I struggle with my bags up the stairs to my apartment. The summer heat is stifling and everything is sticky. I swear, parts of me I didn’t realize even touched are practically glued together. So freaking gross..

“Remy, come on. You cannot be serious about marrying that douchebag. He couldn’t be more wrong for you if you’d picked up a total stranger off the street, blindfolded!” he shouts down the phone.

Colt might be my favorite brother, the one I’m closest to, but he’s also been gone since his disappearing act twenty-one months ago, just after his birthday. His disappearing act which kind of broke me because I didn’t hear from him for six months. Then I broke all over again when my bestie, Creek, went to join him traveling the fucking world eight months later and ghosted me too.

“You get to have an opinion when you’ve spent some decent time with him and are actually present, Colt. Even then, your opinion doesn’t necessarily weigh in on the decisions I make about my life. Because it’s exactly that,” I tell him as I fumble with my keys to open my front door.

“Fuck!” I screech as I trip forward over my cat, Sushi, and try not to drop my bags. My phone flies from my hand, and I huff again.

“Fucking cat,” I moan at him, placing the bags on my counter before grabbing my phone from its hiding place under the couch. Sushi wraps himself around my feet, meowing at me to feed him like the little dictator he is.

“Fall over the cat again, Remy?” Colt laughs when I finally bring my

phone back to my ear, and I roll my eyes.

“Fuck you, Colt. Just because I’m clumsy doesn’t mean you get to make fun of me from a million miles away.” I tear open a packet of cat food from the grocery bags and put it down for Sushi, then refill his water.

“Aw, come on, sis, you know I love you just the way you are. You’re my favorite sister.”

“I’m your only sister, dickhead.” I laugh. “Are you coming home anytime soon?”

“That’s actually why I’m calling... Creek and I land in two days, would you mind grabbing us from the airport?” I can hear the cheesy grin in his voice, and even if he did disappear on me, I can’t deny him.

“You’re home for my birthday?”

“Of course, we wouldn’t miss your twenty-first for anything.”

“Well, considering I haven’t heard from Creek for over a year, I didn’t really know if he’d be around, and you left before my last birthday too. I didn’t expect you to be here for this one.” I hate how whiny I sound, but Colt and Creek were the two people I was closest to in the entire world before they just both up and left with almost no explanation.

“He’s been going through some stuff. I’m sure he’ll tell you all about it when we’re home. He’s missed you a lot. You should cut him a little slack.” Colt chastises me, but all that does is piss me off more..

“Maybe, or maybe he can learn what it’s like to be ghosted with no reason or explanation. Your bromance is strong—I’m sure you’ll dry his tears.” I put away the rest of my groceries, then pop the leftover mac and cheese from last night in the microwave. I grab a can of Pepsi Max, my ultimate weakness, and drop down onto my couch.

“You and I both know that’s not how it’s going down, Remy. So, you’ll get us from the airport?”

“I will, as long as you both promise not to talk shit about Jack on the drive home. It’s three hours to the airport. I can’t deal with your bullshit for that long.”

“Fine... but you really need to dump the douchebag. I know Creek made his opinion clear before he left, and from what Dad and Bauer said, the guy’s a real tool.”

“Seriously, Colt? Give me a break. You met him once, for about ten seconds, before you disappeared halfway across the world. Maybe when you spend some time with him, you’ll see what I see. You’ll see how much he

loves me.”

“That man loves numbers and facts. He’s a fucking robot.”

“There is nothing wrong with wanting to be sure about things, Colt! We can’t all be as spontaneous as you. Some of us want to make calculated decisions. Like mine to move to pre-med next year instead of dance. It’s a better life choice. I’m still going to dance, but just for fun.” I wince, knowing that he’s not going to like what I just told him, but better to break the news when he’s on the phone. A thud makes me pull the phone from my ear and laugh. “Stupid fucking phone, stupid fucking slippery bastard case. I hope the screen isn’t smashed,” he mutters, followed by a spatter of cursing before the fumbling noise of him picking the phone back up.

“Baby sister, you have danced your entire life. One year engaged to the biggest douchebag on Earth—because who the fuck proposes on the anniversary of your mom’s death, by the way—one year, and your entire fucking plan has changed. This is bullshit and you know it!” he shouts, and Creek’s voice calls out in the background.

My heart stutters at the sound, and I shake my head. Stupid, traitorous heart. That door closed a long time ago, and it’s never going to open again. I love Jack, and he loves me. He’d never leave me the way my family has.

“A lot can change in twenty-one months, Colt. You’ve been gone a long time. Maybe you don’t know me as well as you used to. I’m going to go. I have a big night planned, and I need to sort shit out.”

“Don’t lie to me, Remy. You have a night with the new episodes of that cop series you’re obsessed with planned. I’m still addicted and it’s all your fault, so I know exactly what your night consists of.” I stick my tongue out at him even though he can’t see it.

“Fine, I have a date with the boys in blue, but, still, I’m done having this argument. Text me the details of your flight and I’ll get you both from the airport. Okay?”

“Okay, but this isn’t over, Remy.”

“If you say so, Colt.” I sound as frustrated as he does, but I really am over this whole thing with him. We’ve done nothing but argue the last few times we’ve spoken. I miss my brother. Don’t get me wrong, we’ve always fought, but lately it feels like all he’s done is judge my decisions because it’s not what he wants for me. I understand that he’s concerned, that he wants what’s best for me, I just wish he’d trust that I know myself. That I know what I’m doing. I might be his little sister, but that doesn’t mean I need protecting in

every instance of my life. The microwave beeps at me, reminding me that I put food in and I grab the mac and cheese, doing a little happy dance at the gooey goodness.

“I love you, baby sis. Always have, always will. I know you don’t believe me yet, but I have your best interests at heart, and that guy isn’t right for you. I’ll text you later.”

“Love you too,” I say and hang up the phone.

“Babe, look at this place, imagine waking up on your twenty-first birthday with this view. We should celebrate every chance we get. Life is all about the memories, right?” Jack thrusts his iPad screen in front of my face as I’m trying to put on my mascara, and I swallow the frustrated huff that threatens as I smile at him. He’s been so excited about making sure I have the best birthday, and I love him for it, but birthdays are not my favorite thing.

“It looks amazing, like paradise,” I admit as I look at the sea cottage. I’ve never even been on a plane, but this place really does look like paradise, even if it is a day’s flight away.

“What better way to celebrate than just you and me and our own piece of paradise, away from everyone and everything?” he asks as he wraps his arms around my waist and kisses my neck. I sigh contentedly and sink into his embrace, shaking off the stress of starting a new year at college.

“It will be the perfect break before the chaos begins. My residency. The wedding planning. It’s exactly what we need.”

He kisses me again and squeezes me.

“My treat for your birthday,” he tags on the end, and I try not to roll my eyes. Jack is a trust-fund baby, and after growing up the way I did, it makes me a little uncomfortable when he throws his money around, but this is my birthday I suppose, and he’s right, time is precious. We should make all the memories we can.

“Plus, the anniversary of when we got together is the day after your birthday, we could try and make a proper vacation out of it. Think of all the things we could knock off your bucket list. Skydiving, swimming with turtles, cave diving, zip lining through the jungle. We could have so much fun before adulting and life becomes a heavy reality for us both.”

“It sounds like heaven, but, remember, we’ll need to have dinner with my family too. Colt and Creek are coming back.”

“How could I forget?” He releases me and turns me so I’m looking at him, the frown on his face hurting my heart. “Your dad and brothers hate me; I can’t wait for us to move away from your oddball family after the wedding. Don’t even get me started on your so-called best friend.”

“Hey, they’re not that bad,” I counter, but we’ve had this conversation more times than I can count. My family aren’t exactly The Brady Bunch, but they’re good people. “And they don’t hate you, they’re just very protective of me. I’m the baby, it’s just the way they are.”

“If you say so, babe, but I don’t want our kids growing up the way you did, with the weird survival bullshit. It’s bat shit crazy.”

I smile at him, I know he’s not a fan of my family, but I don’t want to argue with him. Not today.

“I know you don’t, it’s part of why we’re moving, remember? Now, let’s look at this trip some more before I have to get to work, and you should get to the hospital too. You don’t want to be late for rounds.”

“I’ve got time, how about we celebrate today being a great day again?” I laugh as he picks me up, my legs wrapping around his waist instinctively as he lowers his lips to mine. He kisses me until I’m breathless and I forget about anything but him.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you,” he whispers into my ear before he rolls us so that I’m straddling him. I kiss him again, and as I feel him harden beneath me, I groan. My phone rings and he grumbles, “I swear if that is your fucking brother. Cock block,” as he sets me back on the floor. I dig my cell out of my pocket and see my favorite person’s name on the screen.

“Fallon, you okay?” I answer the call with a smile and the disdain on Jack’s face is clear. My family aren’t the only ones he’s got issues with, he’s not a fan of my “kooky” friends either.

“Bitch, that is not how you answer the phone. Is that asshat fiancé staring you down while you’re on the phone again? That shit is toxic.” I pinch the bridge of my nose, my frustration flaring at her words—the cavern between Jack and the people I love is great and I have no idea how to fix it, or if it’s even a possibility.

I really wish they could see the side of him that I get to see, the loving guy who wants to look after me, take me away for my birthday to make me smile. All they seem to see is a controlling, rich dickhead. I just don’t get it.

“I’m great, thanks, Fallon, wonderful of you to ask.”

“Oh, don’t even. You know I love you; he just rubs me wrong, there is something about him that screams bad juju. Anyway, I was calling because I heard that fine-ass brother of yours is heading back to town for your birthday. You want me to come with you to get him?”

“How did you... In fact, I don’t want to know the answer to that. Your obsession with Colt still gives me the heebie jeebies.”

“Girl, it isn’t an obsession, it is straight up lust. Have you seen that boy lately?”

“No, he hasn’t been around for nearly two years, remember?”

“You need to get over that fire. He left because it was what he needed to do. You’ll understand eventually. Same with your boy, Creek.” I roll my eyes and Jack signals to let me know he’s going to go. He looks angry, but I just blow him a kiss with a wave as he leaves. That’s a problem for future Remy.

“Is there a reason you called, other than to talk about dick bag one and two?”

“Nope, you know I’m firmly team Creek. The boy lost his mind when he found out you were getting engaged, and you didn’t even notice he was acting weird. Admittedly, you didn’t *know* what was going on, because Jack told him weeks before he even asked you, just to piss Creek off. Seeing you with Jack, when Creek is so obviously in love with you, knowing you’d likely say yes, *which you did!* I’m not all that surprised he left.”

“Don’t start, Fallon. Creek and I were never like that and you know it. You, me and him were The Three Musketeers. Creek didn’t even say goodbye, and you were as worried as I was.”

“No, I wasn’t. I knew he was going; you just couldn’t see past your worry and then anger. But if he’s coming back, maybe you two can finally work through all your issues and fall madly in love.”

“My life is not some sitcom, Fallon. I love Jack. Just because Creek is coming home, that doesn’t change anything. We’re friends, or at least, we were.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, girl. I’m telling you I’ll voodoo Jack’s ass if he doesn’t sort his shit out, clear the path for my boy, Creek.”

I roll my eyes at her. This is one thing we’ve never seen eye to eye on, especially because she knows I crushed on Creek for a while when we were teenagers, but it was just a stupid crush.

“We both know your voodoo is all in your head. Anyway, to answer your

first question, no, I don't need you to come with me, I can handle those two idiots. I've got to run, I'm due at the bar in thirty, Shelly called in sick again."

"Okay, if you say so. My voodoo is as real as you and I. I'll let you stay in denial about Creek for now, but one day, you're going to see just how right I am."

"Uh-huh, if you say so. I love you. Talk later."

"Love you too, in-denial girl."

The airport arrivals area is so freaking busy that for once I'm thankful for my height. I'm not exactly supermodel tall, but being five-foot seven means I don't have to jump up and down to look for these two bozos. I wait what feels like forever, and the arrivals lounge empties, so I start to think that I've been punked and Colt gave me the wrong flight details. I check the time on my cell again and search back through my messages from Colt to find the flight details.

Nope.

This is the flight number he gave me. What the actual fuck?

I turn to go and sit down and settle in for the long haul when voices shout from behind me.

"You leaving already, short stack?" I turn as I'm lifted off the floor and spun around. I can't help the squeal that escapes my lips. "I missed you so much, little sister!"

"Put me down, you giant oaf, you'll drop me!" I tell him. He puts me back down and I take a step back wondering who the fuck this is and where the hell is my brother. Behind him I spot Creek and my jaw hits the goddamn floor.

"What the fuck did you two do while you were traveling? Fall into a tattoo gun and mainline steroids?" The words fall out of my mouth, my filter's never been great, but what the hell? The two men in front of me are not the ones who left. They both look like they've grown about six inches and packed on about two hundred pounds of muscle, which they decided to then cover in ink. "Who even are you?"

"Don't do me like that, little bit. I'm hot!" Colt wags his eyebrows at me,

making me realize his fucking eyebrow is pierced too, and I can't help but laugh at his stupid ass. Apparently while he's changed completely, he hasn't really changed at all. He wraps me up in a hug and I groan, but despite my anger at him full on ditching me, I'm so happy he's back. I'm just not going to let him know that, that would be too easy.

"Come on, Hulk. A girl needs to breathe." I laugh and he releases me with a sheepish look before slinging his arm over my shoulder.

"Hey, Remy," Creek says quietly when I push Colt's arm off and come face-to-face with my former best friend. It takes every ounce of willpower I possess not to fucking drool over the man-god in front of me. Holy. Fucking. Hell. His long dark hair is up in a man-bun, his beard is long but hot as fuck, even though beards have never really done it for me, and every inch of beautifully muscled skin is covered in ink of some form.

Think about Jack, you love Jack. This guy is a huge dick bag. Remember he's a dick bag.

"Creek. I see you decided to join my brother's steroid and ink marathon. I guess that's why it's been radio silence, huh? Let's go, I've got things to do." He runs his hand down his face, and his eyes plead with me not to give him shit, but he was my best friend. He's the guy who didn't leave my side for two weeks when my mom died so I didn't feel alone, and then he dropped me thirteen months ago like I was nothing but trash and I haven't heard from him since. I shove my cell in my jacket and head toward the exit without looking back.

I hate being a bitch to them, but also, fuck them. I'm here, I didn't have to be. They're the ones that left. Ugh, I hate being so conflicted. These guys are my family, but also, like, who just ups and leaves without so much as a goddamn goodbye, and then ghosts you for just over a year? Yes, I'm sore about it, but then, neither of them have given me an explanation as to why they both left either. Colt at least reached out since Creek disappeared and let me know Creek was with him so I wasn't just worrying he was dead somewhere, which I legit was for the first week he went MIA. Like I said, dick bag.

I climb in the front seat of my baby, an '87 Mustang that Bauer has been helping me modernize a little. He might be a pain in the ass and like eight years older than me, but the guy is a genius under the hood of a machine. Colt lets out a whistle when he sees her. "Damn, Bauer really has been helping you make this beauty shine. He always did love machines more than

humans.”

“Will you guys get your asses in here already?” I sigh. I have a dance class this afternoon and if they don’t get a move on, I’m going to miss it. I take them both in, and eye up my back seat, trying not to laugh too much. Creek sighs as Colt laughs before folding himself in two and climbing into the car, his knees by his ears because there is no space for someone his size back there.

“If I’d known you two had, like, tripled in size, I’d have asked Bauer for his truck.”

“You and I both know our big brother would never let you drive his truck.” Colt rolls his eyes as he gets into the passenger side and slams the door shut.

“If you hurt Betty with your ridiculous meathead muscles, I’m going to break you,” I growl at him and pat the dashboard. Betty was my mom’s car, and I always loved it. Dad gave it to me when I got my license and she’s been a pet project of mine since then, well, with Bauer’s help.

“I’m not going to hurt the damn car, and the ladies love these meathead muscles.” He wags his eyebrows again and I can’t help but laugh at his ridiculousness. I spot Creek in the rearview mirror watching me but decide to not pay attention to it.

“I’m sure they do, buddy. Let’s get this show on the road. I need to drop you guys off and head out.”

“You’re not hanging out?” Creek asks quietly, and it’s almost like I can feel his relief. It stings, and I bite my lip.

“No,” I tell him sharply and put the car into gear, ending the conversation.

CHAPTER THREE



“Babe, are you about ready?” Jack shouts from downstairs as I finish setting my long hair into curls.

It’s my birthday tomorrow, but tonight is giving me so much freaking anxiety. Usually, tonight’s meal would be on my actual birthday, but Jack wanted to do something special tomorrow, although I’m not sure he ever actually sorted anything. Oh well I guess, it’s about par for course, but it’s fine. He’s busy. I get it. In the past, my birthday meal has always been something I really look forward to, and this year in particular is a celebration for me turning twenty-one, but really tonight is just going to be one big macho-bullshit-fest between my family and Jack. I just hope Maddie and Fallon help me keep the testosterone in check. I shudder even thinking about my engagement party, but let’s not go there.

“I’ll be down in a minute,” I shout back from his bathroom and straighten out the dress I’m wearing. Touching up my eyeliner, I give myself a once over before grabbing my shoes and heading down to where Jack’s impatiently waiting.

“You look hot, babe! You sure we have to go?” he says with a playful laugh, but the tension around his eyes confirms it’s not really a joke.

“Come on, it won’t be that bad, and we just won’t stay too late, okay?” I tell him, hoping to placate him while guilt eats at my stomach for dragging him with me when he obviously doesn’t want to go. I bite my lip and contemplate telling him he doesn’t have to come, but I just know that if I show up alone, I won’t hear the end of it.

He rolls his eyes at me, handing me my purse as I slip my heels on. “Let’s just get this done, shall we?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. If it wasn’t my birthday, we wouldn’t be doing this. I love Jack, and I love my family, but having everyone in one room is a nightmare. I swear I feel more stress with this than I did with my exams to get into med school. Jack opens the door and gestures for me to head out, so I smile at him and place a chaste kiss on his cheek before heading out to the car.

The drive to the restaurant is tense and despite trying to make conversation, it ends up being a quiet ride. We pull into the parking lot behind the restaurant and Jack’s even more wound up now than he was when we left, and my stomach flips. Maybe I should’ve come alone.

He climbs out and slams the door as I unbuckle, making me flinch. What a night this is going to be. I know he doesn’t like my family, but I kind of hoped he’d suck it up for my birthday meal. I swear, when it’s just the two of us, he’s the guy I met. But I put him near my family and it’s like the dark side of him comes out of hiding. I slip from the car and round the front to join him, reaching out to take his hand in mine and he rewards me with a small smile.

“Sorry, babe. I don’t mean to be an asshole. Your family just put me on edge, but it’s no excuse to be such a jerk. It’s your birthday dinner, I know what it means to you. I’m not going to let my issues mess with your night.”

“Thank you,” I say softly, glancing at the floor before looking back up at him. He seems sincere, but I already feel a little on edge from ‘handling’ him so far tonight. Here’s hoping he can actually do the whole, ‘live up to his word’ thing tonight.

We walk into the restaurant and I can’t help the big grin on my face. We’ve come here for my birthday for the last eight years, and I have so many happy memories here.

The hostess waves us to the private room in the back we always book, and I lead Jack through the restaurant. I feel him take a deep breath as I push the door open to the room and noise explodes around us.

“Happy birthday!” voices shout, and I can’t help but laugh. Bauer is closest to me and picks me up in a bear hug that is signature Bauer.

“Happy birthday, baby sister. Welcome to the grown-up table,” he says in my ear before placing my feet back on the ground and Maddie, Creek’s mom, wraps me in her arms, with tears in her eyes.

“I can’t believe how quickly you’ve grown up!” I sink into her embrace, soaking up the love from her, the woman who became everything I ever needed after my mom passed. I squeeze her tight before she releases me and takes my face in her hands, shaking her head. “Too quick.”

I laugh at her and turn to find the rest of our small group: my dad, Colt, Creek, Fallon, my other bestie, and her little sister, Rebel. Jack stands off to the side, excluded from the group, as if trying to keep himself from catching their crazy as he so delightfully calls it. I roll my eyes and finish saying hello to the group before taking my seat at the table, with Dad to my right and Jack to my left. The noise dies down as our server comes in and takes everyone’s drink orders.

Jack squeezes my hand under the table, and I gift him a small smile. I take a deep breath, because so far so good.

“So, Colt, how long are you guys back for?” Fallon asks, with a wicked smile on her face as I groan internally.

“Well, since you asked so nicely, I think me and the man bun are done with our adventures for now. It’s time to come back home,” he says to her and winks at me. My gaze drifts to Creek next to him at the table. He’s stiff as a board, and his jaw is clenched, looking to Jack at my side, who is equally as tense.

Awesome.

“Are you guys really sticking around?” I ask, my gaze bouncing between Creek and Colt as the table turns silent.

“We are,” Creek says, pulling his gaze from Jack and hitting me with those bright green eyes of his. There’s so much emotion in his eyes, it’s always been the same way.

“I guess you guys should take the next few weeks to spend as much time together as you can then, since we’ll be moving after the wedding in a few months,” Jack says, and the table explodes. I drop my head into my hands, because this is not how tonight was meant to go. Happy Birthday to me.

“Over my dead body,” Colt says, while Bauer pins Jack with a look that could be classified as deadly.

“Now then, boys, I’m sure they’re not going far, right?” Maddie, ever the diplomat, speaks up, trying to calm my thunderous father.

“Well, erm...” I sigh.

“We’re heading over to the East Coast. I have a once in a lifetime opportunity with a fellowship,” Jack tells the table, and I can almost feel the

rage coming from my dad.

“I forbid it,” he says, his voice booming across the room. Fallon sends me an apologetic look, while Rebel sits next to her wide-eyed.

“Dad, come on... You can’t do that.” I take his hand and he snatches it away.

“The hell I can’t! And you, Boy Wonder with a giant stick up your ass, if you think differently, you’ve got a lot to learn.”

“This. This right here is part of the reason why we’re moving. Your family has no idea about real life or boundaries. Remy and I are engaged. We’re going to be married. There isn’t anything you can do to stop it.” Jack levels my dad with his stare, a battle of two titans in a single look.

“Watch me,” Bauer says, his voice lethal as he pulls a gun and lays it on the table.

“You see! You’re all fucking crazy. Who the hell brings a gun to dinner?” Jack shouts and stands, yanking me up with him. “Come on, babe. We’re leaving. This is ridiculous.”

“You let go of her right the fuck now,” Creek growls as Jack’s fingers press into my upper arm. I try not to wince at his grip, but I’m pretty sure that’s going to leave a mark.

“You don’t get to speak to me like that,” Jack says, pulling me toward the door, which Colt and Creek block.

“You guys, it’s fine. We should just go,” I say, tearing my arm from Jack’s grip. He looks at me like I’ve lost my mind, but I lift my chin and look him in the eye. “You started this. You couldn’t just let me have one nice night with everyone I love.

“As for you two, I appreciate the sentiment, but standing up for me now after ditching and ghosting me for a year...it’s too little too late. Maddie, Fallon, guys, I’m sorry. I’ll be over for dinner in a few days, but we’re just going to go.”

“Okay, sweetheart, you take care, and happy birthday,” Maddie says from her chair, her hand on my dad’s shoulder, I’m pretty sure keeping him from leaping across the table in anger.

“Love you, girl.” Fallon blows me a kiss and Rebel gives me a little wave. I turn back to the door, but Colt and Creek haven’t moved.

“Please, you guys,” I say quietly, and their faces drop. I can’t quite read them, but the disappointment streaming at me from the room is overwhelming. They separate, framing the door, and Jack storms out as soon

as there's space.

"I love you, little bit," Colt whispers and kisses my cheek as I leave, trying not to let the tears in my eyes stream down my face.

I drag the covers up over my head and sink into my pillows, ignoring this shitty week. It's my twentieth birthday, which means it's also a week to the day before the seventh anniversary of my mom's death. A senseless, stupid moment of time, which spun my entire life out of control.

I remember the day the week after my thirteenth birthday like it was yesterday. We were meant to go shopping, go get our hair done. A rite of passage she said. She just had to pop out for some grocery shopping first. She and Maddie had a weekly date, though I know it's because my stupid brothers ruined my cake. I heard her yell at them last night when she thought I was asleep. So, she said she'd go shopping and then she'd be back. That's what she told me, at least...

I remember baking in the kitchen. Bauer and Colt were outside playing football with Creek, while Fallon and I were eating more of the cookie dough than we were baking, and my dad was out in the shed, doing whatever the hell it was he did out there. The kitchen phone rang, and I answered the phone laughing. Maddie's voice sounded strained, but I didn't think anything of it when she asked for my dad.

I yelled for him to come to the phone, and he ran in from the shed, his face pale. It was like he knew. He picked the phone up off the counter and I went to the oven to pull the cookies out. His cry rang out around us as he fell to his knees, and the guys all came running in. My father doesn't cry. Ever. But it was the noise he made, like a wounded animal close to death. His hands shook as Bauer took the phone from him and raised it to his ear. He listened before mumbling his acknowledgement and hung the phone back on the hook.

Bauer grabbed the keys to his truck, his twenty-first birthday present from Mom and Dad earlier that year, and lifted my dad off the floor. Colt took Dad's other side without any word.

"There's been an accident; we need to get to the hospital," Bauer said calmly, and my dad just stood there like he was numb. I remember putting the

cookie tray down and burning my hand, but not thinking much of it because it was obvious something really fucking bad was happening.

The ride to the hospital took what felt like forever, cramped in the back with Fallon, Creek, and Colt while Dad sat up front as Bauer drove. I don't remember seeing anything of significance until we got to the hospital. Bauer led the charge while my dad was completely spaced. Creek and Colt walked with him until we saw Maddie and it was like Dad came back to life. She strode right up to him, and he hugged her tight.

"She's in surgery but, Denny, it's not good," she said, her voice breaking on the words. A nurse led us all to a waiting area, and I sat there, one hand in Creek's, the other in Fallon's, just waiting. No one said it, but it was obvious.

I felt a tug at my heart, and tears fell from my eyes. I knew right then, without anyone even telling me. A few minutes later a doctor arrived and took my dad and Maddie aside. That was the only time I've ever seen my dad cry.

My mom was gone. I felt it.

Maddie came back into the room and crouched down in front of me, calling Colt over, while Bauer went to my dad.

"I am so sorry," her voice cracked, and the tears ran faster down my face.

So today, on my twentieth birthday, I'm sitting in bed, like I do most birthdays until my family dinner tonight. I do the same each year—it's how my birthday dinner tradition started, even though Colt and Creek have disappeared off the face of the Earth this year. This year could go eat shit. The only good thing about it so far has been Jack. He's been my rock, especially since those two split. Colt's been gone thirteen months, and Creek, well, he up and disappeared just after his birthday a month ago. I haven't heard shit from either of them, but I know they're together from Maddie and Dad.

Asshats.

"Babe? You up?" Jack's voice rings out through my apartment. I grumble incoherently back, but I hear his laugh as his footsteps get louder. "Come on, it's your birthday, and I made breakfast."

The comforter is ripped away from me and I groan at the sudden onslaught of light. I guess he opened the damn blinds too.

"Happy birthday, beautiful." He leans down and kisses me and despite

me hating my morning breath, he doesn't seem to care. He pulls away and grabs a mug from my dresser and hands it to me, full of the bitter black nectar that is the way to my heart.

"Thank you." I murmur happily and smile.

"You're welcome. Now come eat breakfast. I hate that I have to work today, but tomorrow, we celebrate. I know it's not a good time of year for you, but we should try to make some good memories. Your mom wouldn't want you to be sad forever." I shrug noncommittally. This entire week is my most hated time every year.

After a crappy day, and an even worse night's sleep, I wake up to find my suitcase in his car along with his and we drive for hours out to his parents' cabin on the lake. The entire place is surrounded by mountains. Its beauty is almost indescribable, and yet I feel nothing but hollow. Jack's smiles and laughter ring out around me as we pull up to the cabin, and I paint a smile on my face, but I can't feel it.

"Come on, babe, this is going to be amazing. Just you, me, and the lake. There's even a hot tub out back." He winks before climbing out of the car.

Taking a deep breath, I will myself to feel something. Anything. For Jack's sake more than mine. I know he's trying to do something nice for me, but this just isn't me. I'm not a luxury cabin in the woods kinda girl. Especially not this week. I pull myself together and climb out of the car to join him as he opens up the cabin door. Though, I'm not sure cabin is the right word for this place. Lake house maybe? It's all wood and glass, open spaces, and so freaking modern.

My cell pings in my pocket and Jack is in front of me in a heartbeat, his hand out. "No cell phones while we're here, babe. This is us time."

I hand over my phone, trying not to roll my eyes, because phone or not, I'm probably not going to be great company this week.

We spend the week hiking, going out on the lake, having picnics, and just trying to enjoy the time together, and while I'm not exactly party central, I do lose myself to it all a little.

I spend the entire week trying, but today is the day, and it's the day we're going home. I have dinner with my dad tonight, same as every year.

"Come on, babe. Let's just go for one more quick walk, and then we'll head off," Jack says with a playful smile. I'm reluctant, because I don't want to be late to see Dad and Bauer, but I smile because I can see how hard he's trying. I grab my jacket and follow his lead out to the trails.

We walk for about half an hour when Jack veers off the track and pulls me with him out on to a vista, looking down over the lake.

It's so peaceful.

"This is beautiful," I tell him softly. Mom would have loved this place.

"You are beautiful, Remy, even in your darkest moments. Even then, you are all that is light and right in this world. I knew it the moment I saw you, even in that dingy little dive bar, with the worst live music I've heard in my entire life. I knew then what I know now, and nothing has changed since that moment. I love you, Remington Bennett, and I will love you always." He takes a deep breath and goes down on one knee. Horror and happiness clash inside me. What is he doing? Why now? Why today?

"So today, on your darkest day, I want to be that light for you. For now, and for always. Will you, Remington, do me the honor of being my wife?" He looks up at me, so hopeful and full of love. I feel myself nodding, saying yes, but it's like I'm not myself. Not today. Why today? But if it was any other day, I'd be really happy, and so I find myself agreeing and kissing him. Because I do love him. I do.

CHAPTER FOUR



“You all packed and ready to go, babe?” Jack pops his head around the corner into the bedroom where I’m throwing the last few things into my bag.

“Yeah, I’ll just be two minutes. You good to go?” I smile at him as he wraps his arms around me.

“I’m ready for anything as long as it’s just us two.”

“I’m sorry it’s not the break you wanted.” I sigh as he kisses my neck, but smile. Last night might have been a disaster, but today we’re going away for the weekend. Just the two of us. It’s not an escape to paradise, but he’s been working so hard, and between studying and dancing, I’ve been all over the place too. Plus, after last night, I just want to shake it off. Knowing how much tension there is between the most important people in my life sucks. I just hope that they all love me enough to accept my decisions, and to accept that I know what will make me happy.

“Babe, as long as it’s you and me, we could be in a goddamn igloo and I’d be happy.” He kisses me again before moving backward so I can spin in his arms. I place my hands on his chest and smile up at him. It’s something I’ve always loved, that he’s that bit taller than me. Shallow maybe, but I’m not a short girl, it’s nice to feel small sometimes.

“You and me forever.” I smile wider before I lift up onto my tiptoes and kiss him again.

“Now then, no more distractions otherwise we’ll never leave.” He laughs but holds me tighter.

“I don’t see any problems with that, everyone thinks we’re gone anyway. We could just hole up in here for the whole weekend. No phones, no outside world.”

“That sounds like heaven, but I might just have a surprise waiting for you.”

I laugh at him, because of course he does.

“You shouldn’t have.”

“It’s your twenty-first birthday, babe. Only happens once. We’re doing it in style.”

“What does that mean exactly?” I ask skeptically.

“It means get your ass in gear so we’re not late!” He laughs and smacks my ass before hightailing it out of the room. I can’t help but laugh back. This week is usually the worst week of the year for me, but Jack is really trying, so this year, I’m going to try too. Mom wouldn’t have wanted me to be miserable. She’d have probably kicked my ass for being this sad for this long. My heart pulls a little, but I know the smile on my face is meant to be there, so I grab my bag and head down to find Jack.

He’s already outside, so I grab my keys and lock up before I jump in his car.

“Ready?” he asks with a huge smile.

“Always.”

I lose track of time as we drive, staring out the window while Jack sings along to the radio. The scenery passes me by without me really paying much attention, because while I’m excited about whatever he has planned, I’m also a little apprehensive. We’ve not been away like this, just the two of us, since he proposed. We don’t live together and we’re so busy all the time that we’re not really on top of each other, but this weekend, just us, nothing else... They say stuff like this is what makes or breaks relationships, and things lately haven’t exactly been sunshines and rainbows..

Stuffing down the worry that’s got me chewing at my lip until it’s raw, I finally pay attention to where we are, and my heart stutters. My jaw drops at the sight in front of me. “What the...”

“Surprise!” Jack exclaims as we pull up to a private jet.

“Surprise?” My eyes dart between him and the plane, half-excited, half-wincing at how much money he’s spent on me again.

“I know how much you’ve been wanting to go to New York, and I know you always had plans to go with your mom on your twenty-first, so I wanted

to do something special for you. My dad's plane is going to take us there, and we'll do a city flyby since it'll be dark when we arrive. I've got us booked into a hotel for the weekend, and so many other things planned. I know you hate it when I spend my money, but it's mine to spend and I can't think of anything better to spend it on than making you happy."

My mouth opens and closes, and for the first time in a while, I'm almost speechless.

"Jack, you shouldn't... I mean... holy fucking shitballs. New York?" The words fall from my mouth, my eyes widening as it sinks in. "This is amazing, thank you so much!"

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him, trying to pour every single emotion into it. He pulls back, his eyes dark with heat. "More of that in a bit, let's get on board so we can get in the air!"

A private car brings us from the airport to our hotel, hours later, and I have no words for today. It has been one of the best days of my life. I've never even flown, let alone like that. It was just... magical and a whole new type of terrifying. To be here now, in the one place I've always wanted to see, the lights eating the darkness around us... It looks like everything I ever imagined it would be, and I can fully understand why it was my mom's favorite city on Earth to visit.

"Mr. Crawford, so lovely to have you staying with us." A man with white hair opens the door to the car for us. "It's lovely to see you again, sir. Everything has been organized as you requested. Your room is the penthouse, as always, your room cards are here and if you need anything at all, please do not hesitate to call down to the concierge." He leads us inside, across the lobby to a door marked private, and swipes the plastic in his hand. The door opens to a small hall and an elevator which takes us up to the top floor, directly into the room. He leads the way down a short hall inside the hotel room into a small space with coat hooks. Jack takes my jacket with a smile and the man opens another door, leading us into what looks like a freaking apartment, not a hotel room.

"We hope you enjoy your stay," he says with a smile, and his footsteps echo down the hall until the swish of a door closing lets us know he's gone.

“Jack, this is... I have no words.”

“You like it?” he asks, sliding off his shoes and coming to stand beside me as I take everything in.

“Like it? How could I do anything but love it? This is more than I ever dreamed. This view is everything!” I look out of the windows to the sparkling sea of lights below us, and the beauty that is Central Park.

“Thank you so much, Jack, this is amazing.”

“I just want you to be happy, Remy. If I can be a part of that, I’ll do everything in my power to make it so.”

Not that I like it in this instance, but I was right.

The weekend did not go to plan. I’m not that surprised really. Being on top of each other, even for three days... well it had me worried for a reason. That, plus his work kept calling, despite him booking time away, something to do with one of his patients... but needless to say, Jack turned from loving and caring to the guy who blows up at me breathing too loud.

I’m just glad we’re home, even if it is a day early, and that he’s back at work. This might hit the top three of worst birthdays ever. It had so much potential, but well, it is what it is, I guess.

Instead, today, I’m going to have a me day. Jack has a twenty-four hour shift he picked up, no one knows I’m home—and I can’t deal with the fallout of telling them, having to explain the disaster with the judgment and I told you so’s—so I’m thinking pj day, ordering all the pizza and tacos I can eat until I made myself sick, and binging TV.

Happy Birthday to Me.

CHAPTER FIVE



I laugh as I run up the stairs, the bright light pouring into the bedroom that's full of windows, and the white curtains swaying with the breeze coming in through the open doors that lead to the balcony. The sound of gulls outside lures me toward the fresh air, and the smell of the ocean gives me a sense of tranquility.

"I know you don't think that running is something that will save you from me." His deep but happy voice fills me with joy, and I'm instantly at peace as my body relaxes back into him.

"Then don't give me a reason to need saving." I laugh as he wraps his arms around me from behind, his hot breath on my ear. I have never needed to be protected, but that's exactly how I feel right now and it's so freeing.

A groan unwillingly slips from my lips as he kisses my neck, and his hand reaches round to cup my breast, squeezing gently. His teeth scrape down my neck, and I can't help shivering in his arms.

"You are wearing far too many clothes," he breathes as he spins me to face him, and his bare chest ripples under my fingertips.

"I guess you should do something about that then." I smile, reaching up on tiptoes to capture his mouth with my own. It doesn't matter how many times I kiss him, I lose myself in him as if each one was the first. Reaching behind me, he rips apart my bindings, releasing me from the corset which falls to my feet.

He kisses down my neck, working his way down my now naked chest, capturing one nipple in his mouth, while pulling at the other with his hand,

before swapping his attention. My hands plunge into his hair and pleasure shoots through every inch of me, from my toes to the top of my head.

Who knew someone so forbidden could be exactly who I needed?

“Please.” The moan falls from my lips, and I feel him smile against my skin before his lips move south. His fingers make quick work of the leather and he peels the pants down, taking my panties with them.

I gasp as his tongue laves against my wetness; his growl makes my knees weak and I have to grip his head for support. Wrapping his arms under my thighs he lifts me, his head still between my legs, and he carries me back into the room before depositing me on the bed.

“Fucking divine.” His voice against my skin shoots electricity through my body before he licks my clit again, making me shudder and moan incoherently.

“Oh shit.” I bite down on my lip as he slides one, then two fingers inside me, hooking them just right to reach the part of me he knows drives me insane. His attention doesn’t let up as he drives me over the edge, making me cry out.

With slow and predatory moves he crawls back up my body to lean over me and kisses me, still covered in my juices. I can taste it, and that combined with feeling how hard he is against my thigh makes me want him even more. I stroke down his body, undo the button on his pants, and reach inside. He groans as I grasp him in my palm, and he kisses my neck again before biting down, leaving his mark on me. He pulls back and looks down at me, his eyes wild.

“I need to feel you, baby.” He pushes down his pants and underwear before lowering himself down to me, kissing me again as he takes both of my hands and raises them above my head, pinning me with one hand. He slides into me in one thrust as his head rests against my forehead, giving me a second to adjust to how big he is. The pain quickly subsides, and I raise my hips to let him know I’m good. His free hand finds my clit as he fucks me, holding me prisoner beneath him. The noises he pulls from me don’t sound human, but at this point, I have no control of my body—I am his play thing. An orgasm rips through me as he releases my wrists and grabs my hips, and he slows until I start to come down before he pulls out and flips me on to my stomach.

“Ass in the air, Rem,” he rasps, as if he’s barely maintaining control of himself. I get onto my knees, and his big hands grasp my waist and pull me

back toward him before gripping my hips. If I was anyone else, that shit would leave a bruise, but I love that he isn't gentle with me. He plunges back into me and steals my breath, fucking me like he's scared he's going to lose me. He reaches around me and pulls me up so I'm kneeling, his chest against my back, and he wraps his hand around my throat.

"Mine," he growls and bites my shoulder as I come again. He doesn't let up, his movements becoming faster, less rhythmic before he quickly follows. As he lets go of my hair I fall forward and he falls with me, shifting us on the bed so I'm lying on his chest.

"Always, Angel. In this life or the next. There's no one else out there for me. It's you and me," he says, kissing the top of my hair, and I breathe contentedly.

"Always."

Stretching out as I wake up, a smile takes over my face when my dream comes back to me. I feel like I should be fanning myself after that dream and clench my thighs together, unsure whether to be happy or not that Jack isn't here right now. I've never had a sex dream before, but hell yes to my imagination for last night. I know for sure I've never seen that guy before, but something about him felt familiar.

The face of my mystery man eludes me and I let out a disappointed mumble. All I really remember is his voice and how he made me feel. I guess that's why they're dreams and not reality. I sigh in disappointment and throw the covers off of me before climbing out of bed, despite the clock telling me it's four in the morning. I throw on my running gear and head out to the kitchen while I braid my hair, where Sushi wraps himself around my legs, demanding his breakfast. I feed the little dictator and scratch behind his ears before I grab a bottle of water and put in my ear buds. I tuck my key into my leggings along with my phone and head out.

After being awake for a little while and having had time to think about my dream, I feel restless. Surely, I shouldn't be dreaming about someone that isn't Jack, especially after we just had such a nice weekend away for my birthday. I felt closer to him than I have in a while. I head for the stairs to get an early jumpstart on my workout, running down the stairs as the music

blares into my ears before making my way out of my building. The park is only six blocks from here, so I start at a steady pace, trying to clear my head, but all I can think about is the guy in my dream.

He felt so real. Like a memory.

But I know I've never met him before. His eyes flash in my mind as I reach the entrance to the park, and I pause, stretching before I continue my run, and search my mind for more. *Have I met the man in my dreams? Surely I'd remember.*

I shake my head. I'm being ridiculous. It was just a dream. I take off again and run a lap around the park. As I eat up the miles, my mind finally clears and I feel at peace again, less like I betrayed Jack in my sleep. Ridiculous, I know, but it is what it is. Especially since this is the second guy I've dreamed about in two weeks that isn't my fiancé.

The sun begins to rise as I finish my lap, and I decide to stretch out on the green before heading back to my apartment. My phone rings in my pocket and I answer it without looking, trying to calm my breathing.

"Hello?"

"Remy?"

"Morning, Dad, up with the sun still I see?" I tease, and he gently grumbles down the line. My dad's not the softest of men, but I've always been a bit of a daddy's girl.

"You sound like you've been up longer than me. You okay?" His concern filters through his gruffness and makes me smile.

"I'm fine, Daddy. What's up?"

"I just wanted to make sure everything is okay for today?" he asks, but his voice changes as he speaks and it's strange, almost as if he's nervous.

"Of course, when have I ever missed today?" I rub my chest at the pang. Every year, with the exception of last year, what with Colt's disappearing act, we've all gotten together at the house for dinner. Eaten my mom's favorite meal and remembered her in our own way. The anniversary is hard for all of us, more so because it's so close to my birthday. That also makes it my engagement anniversary with Jack, but this is something I've done forever, and I know he understands that it isn't going to change.

"Of course not, I just wanted to check, what with Wonder Boy spouting off at dinner the other night." I sigh, yes, dinner was an excruciating cluster fuck, but I guess I shouldn't have hoped for anything more.

"Dad, come on. Please don't."

“I do not like that boy, Remy. He isn’t right for you.”

“So you and every male in our family keep telling me, but like I keep telling you, it isn’t your decision and he makes me happy.” I hate how much it hurts that my family despises Jack, but I also know how much I love him. My family is so overprotective after my mom, they wouldn’t like anyone I was with.

“Hmmm, we’ll see,” he mutters. “You’ll be over at the normal time?”

“Yes, Dad. Six sharp. When am I ever late?” He laughs, my penchant for being on time is something he says I get from my mom, considering he’s usually running behind. I can completely imagine it.

“Never. I’ll let you go. Be safe, Remy.”

“Always, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you too,” he says before the line disconnects, and I sigh. He never calls to make sure I’m going to this dinner, it’s just a given. He sounded on edge, but this time of year always messes with us all, so I won’t read too much into it. I pick myself up off of the ground and stretch again. I’m going to be sore after sitting down so long, but there’s not much I can do about it now, so I jog home as the sun finishes rising, trying not to let thoughts of my mom crash down over me.

I pull up to my dad’s house, and it still feels more like home than anywhere else. Yes, I get why most people think it looks creepy as fuck, but that’s part of its charm. The looming darkness, the gothic feel. I used to pretend when I was little that it belonged to an evil queen and I was a trapped princess.

The wind whistles through the trees that line the property as I climb the steps to the porch and let myself in. The house still smells the same as it always has, except the scent of Mom’s favorite meal wafts down the hall from the kitchen. I still, listening to my dad and brothers laughing, probably talking about Mom and her epic clumsiness, the same clumsiness I seem to have inherited. Even if I have been more agile of late.

“You going to come and say hello or keep lurking at the door?” My dad’s voice booms through the hall and I laugh softly, shutting the door. I have no idea how he always knows I’m home, but he always has, always will. Trying to sneak out when I was younger was a total bust, every single time.

The click of my heels echo as I make my way to the kitchen, and I find more faces than usual. Alongside Dad, Colt, and Bauer, are Maddie and Creek, with Creek's little sister, Nirvana. "Oh, hey, guys. I didn't expect to see everyone here. Nirvana, you finally home from school for the summer?"

"Yeah, Mom decided I could grace you all with my awesomeness this evening rather than staying at school for another night." Her voice twinkles, light, as if no darkness has ever touched her. "Dad couldn't make it, though. He's away on business again, but I'm far better company."

I smile at her as she comes at me with open arms. She's so much younger than all of us, in her junior year, and away at a boarding school for geniuses because her brain amazes everyone.

"Smells good, Dad." I smile at him and he hugs me as Nirvana releases me. He squeezes me tighter than normal, and I sigh. I can't even imagine how much it must still hurt for him. Mom was the love of his life. Childhood friends that became high school sweethearts and married until the day she was taken from us. It breaks my heart every time I think about it.

"Hey, sweetheart."

"Hi, Daddy," I whisper and hug him tightly back before letting him get back to preparing the feast I know is coming.

"How you doing, Remy?" Maddie asks me softly as the chatter starts up again, pulling me aside from them all.

"I'm okay, it's just hard. It's always hard." I sigh.

"I know. It doesn't get much easier like everyone always says, but this is not the end of her journey. She'll be at peace. How are things with Jack after the other night?" Her face stays soft, but I can see the twitch of her eye. She's not team Jack either.

"It's fine. We went away for a few nights to celebrate my birthday and stuff. It's just hard when the people you love don't get along, ya know?" I smile at her and grab a drink from the refrigerator.

"I can understand that. It's not that we don't necessarily like him, it's just, we don't feel he's right for you. He's so uptight and straight-laced. He's a white picket fence and two kids kinda guy, and you were always way more of a free spirit. It's like he suffocates that part of you, and we don't like to see the girl we love disappearing in front of us."

"I'm the same person I've always been, it's just my priorities that have changed. And if you guys love me as much as you say, you'd be happy that I'm happy. But enough, tonight isn't about me. Let's just help Dad set the

table. You know how flustered he gets.”

“Okay, you know I love you like a daughter, right? I just want you to be truly happy, on your own path.”

“I know. I love you too, Mads.”

Laughter from Colt’s stupid story about supposedly fighting some ninja while he was in Japan for a while fills the room, and I roll my eyes as I help my dad bring the food to the table. An English roast, with chicken and all the trimmings was Mom’s favorite. Such a weird choice, but also so freaking yummy.

Everyone takes their seats, slightly closer together tonight with the Winchesters here, but it feels like family, even if I am still mad at Creek.

“My Emily would have loved seeing all of you here, around this table, celebrating love and family. It’s been too long since she was taken from us, but I know she’s still out there, looking down on us, waiting for our next adventure together. She wouldn’t have wanted our sadness or tears, so tonight we remember her how she would have wanted us to. With love and laughter.” My dad’s voice croaks a little, it’s always so strange to see such a big man break, but no one else notices, or at least, no one says anything about it, and we all dig in as he carves up the bird.

Dinner was an event, more so than usual, full of laughter and stories about stupid stuff Mom did. New stories this year from Maddie, who grew up with Mom and Dad. Her and Nate, Creek’s dad, grew up on the same street as them; it’s so weird that such a small place could create so much love. Even my dad’s best friend, Wing, grew up right next door to him, in between him and Nate’s house. I can’t even imagine growing up like that. This house is out in the middle of nowhere, with a driveway a mile long, and acres of land behind it, but it never has felt lonely out here either.

I finish washing the last dish and hand it to Nirvana to dry before drying off my hands.

“I’m heading out. I’ve got Mom’s car keys and I’m going to Kayla’s. Creek’s going to drive her home in his car later. I miss you, you should come see me more, especially if you’re moving away like Mom said,” she says softly.

“I’m sorry, I’ve been a crappy friend lately. Is everything okay with you?” I ask her, realizing just how wrapped up in my own bubble I’ve been since Creek disappeared.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I mean, it sucked having Creek ghost me, and then you fell off the face of the earth too, but I get it. You guys have always been like two sides of the same coin. I was so shocked when he went and left you behind. I will never understand boys.”

“Ditto. They don’t make any more sense, no matter how old you are.” I smile at her.

“I guess it’s a good thing I like girls too then,” she says so quietly I almost think I don’t hear her, but I smile widely at her, because oh my God.

“Nirvana, really? That’s so cool! I’m so proud of you, and honored you’d tell me. Do your mom and brother know?” I hug her tightly. I can’t imagine knowing myself so well at her age, hell, I hardly know who I am now!

“Not yet.” She shakes her head gently. “I’m going to tell Mom first. I’m not sure how Creek will take it. He’s always been so overbearing, but also so freaking cool. I still worry though. He’s been gone a while, and he seems different since he came back.” Worry clouds her eyes and my heart breaks for her.

“Sweetheart, you have absolutely nothing to worry about. As far as your brother is concerned, you hang the moon. You always have. But if he’s a dick about it, you tell me and I’ll kick his ass. Meathead or not.” I wink at her and she laughs, the worry gone from her face, and it warms me. “I’m always here for you, okay? Even if you just need to vent or cry. You have my number.”

“Thanks, Remy. I’ve got to go, I can feel my phone buzzing in my pocket and I just know it’s Kayla losing her shit. I love you.”

“Love you too, Nirvana. Always.”

“Always,” she says with a wave before grabbing her bag, hugging her mom and Creek then running to the door. I get myself a drink and head back to the table.

Now that Nirvana has left, everyone seems so serious.

“Remy, you should sit. We need to... discuss some things with you,” my dad says, and I laugh at how serious he sounds, but everyone else at the table looks bleak. I turn to my brothers—Bauer’s just angry and Colt uncomfortable. Creek won’t even look me in the eye, and Maddie offers me a sad smile.

“What’s going on? You guys are weirding me out,” I say, taking my seat

opposite my dad.

“Before I start, I want you to know that we never wanted to lie to you, but I need you to listen to everything I have to say, before you ask any questions, or lose your shit, okay?”

“Way to keep me calm.” I roll my eyes and take a sip of the whiskey I poured, glad now I have it.

“I’m serious, Remington. I need you to listen,” my dad says, and I nod. “Okay, right. You think after doing this a few times, I’d be more prepared to tell you, but you’re my little girl, and this shit is hard.” He swigs back the amber liquid in his own glass, and I look to the others around the table, who all still seem just as uncomfortable.

“Remy,” Maddie starts. “Our families are different. I know this is all going to sound more than a little unbelievable, and I really wish your mom was here to help tell you, because she always had such a way with words.”

“Remy, you, we, all of us. We are what are known in our world as Hunters. Hunters are an elite being, descended from Angels. We are Nephilim. We are faster, stronger, smarter than you could possibly imagine. Created to help keep the balance in the five factions of our world. The Nephilim, the Dracul, the Lycans, the Witches, and the humans. The humans have no idea about any of this, and that is how it must always stay.”

I burst out laughing, because I just can’t help it. What the actual fuck?

“This is no laughing matter!” My father’s voice booms so loud I flinch. My laughter dies away as I realize he’s deadly serious.

“Hunters are the peacekeepers of the world. We hunt the Dracul and the Lycans, who feed on humans and kill indiscriminately. They are a drain on this earth and need to be wiped out for the good of everyone,” he says, before standing and pouring himself another drink.

“Remy.” Maddie says, looking me in the eye while my head spins. “I know this all sounds unbelievable, but what your father is saying is true. We couldn’t tell you before your twenty-first birthday, because of the way Hunters evolve. We live as humans until our bodies are developed enough to survive the power that comes with being what we are. If you knew beforehand, the memories that would swarm you could kill you.”

“What do you mean by memories?” I ask, confusion fully setting in.

“What she means is that unlike humans, Nephilim do not know a true death. We are reborn. Always to the same parents, always as the same family. This is your twelfth life, but as always, you have a choice to make. You can

accept who you are, the family legacy, and complete the ritual with the Elders to have all of your memories returned. Or you can choose to live this life as a human, without your memories. Though the burden of knowing what you know, and not fighting back, could be great.”

“Denny, hush. You know you are not allowed to influence her decision,” Maddie scolds my father.

“I mean... I have... You all chose?” My words come out in a garbled mess as my world tilts on its axis.

“Wait... Mom...?” I ask and look at my father whose face is painted with guilt and sadness.

“Yes, your mom was one of us too. She died doing what she loved doing. Hunting,” Maddie says softly. “I was with her and I should have protected her, but...”

“It was not your fault, Maddie,” my father says, patting her hand.

“This is all way too much. Is this why you disappeared?” I look to Colt and Creek, and my body heats as anger begins to fill my insides. “This is such bullshit. All of you lied to me, my entire fucking life. My family. Whole lot that means apparently. Lied about who I am, who we are. About Mom. Lied so much that you fucking pair up and left without a goddamn word. Fuck this.” I stand and swallow down the rest of my glass, thankful for the burn.

“Remington, sit down,” my dad says, and I can hear how tired he is.

“No. I will not sit back down and listen to you try to explain how each and every one of you betrayed me. How you lied to me for my own good. Do you have any idea how much guilt I’ve felt about Mom dying? Thinking she was going out shopping for shit for my stupid birthday, to find out that’s not how she died at all! To find out my entire life has essentially been a lie. I don’t want this. Any of it.” I grab my keys from the counter as I leave the house, and everyone I thought I knew better than anything else, so I can try to process what the fuck I’ve just been told.

The city is unusually quiet tonight as I patrol; the full moon lights the streets casting an eerie glow. It feels like the calm before a storm. Too still. Too quiet. Even Kain’s footsteps are silent and swift as my own. Unsurprising,

considering.

“Stop it,” he says with a smile. “You keep thinking things are too quiet, and we’ll end up covered in more blood and gore than a little.”

I laugh at him. “Someone feeling a little superstitious? Even after all this time?”

“Some things are better kept as they have always been. You might call it superstitious, I call it knowing Fate’s a bitch. You don’t live as long as we have without knowing better about these things.” The playful smile on his face is one I know that few see, and I consider myself lucky enough to be one of those few.

“I still say you control your own fate.” This is a conversation we’ve had more times than I care to count, but it’s our way. It has been since our first meeting.

“How can you say that? Especially considering what we are.” He frowns, never, even after all this time, being able to wrap his head around my way of thinking.

“Because I get a choice. Each life. I get to choose which path to take. That’s not predestined. It’s not fated. It’s mine, and I own it.” I shrug as we hit the next street.

“These new and modern ways of thinking, I fear I will never change to accept them fully. Don’t get me wrong, the luxury of these times is something I’d never give up again, but sometimes I wish for the simplicity of all those years ago. Things today are so complicated. Watching what you say, fear of offending people. Humans are so... touchy.”

“I’ll give you that. Got to love this new age, seventies shit.” I start when I hear it. The sound of breaking glass ahead of us. We take off at a sprint, careful not to move too swiftly in case any humans are able to spot us. The smell of blood reaches me before my eyes take in the scene before us.

“Fucking infantile Lycans,” Kain growls. He pulls his guns from their holsters and aims them at the two Lycans in the alley. They’re cornered, and Lycans hate being cornered. The high wall behind them means past us is their only way out. Unfortunately for them, the human they ripped the throat from is still bleeding out at their feet. Rule number two. Don’t kill humans.

“We don’t bow to your rule, Hunter,” one of them says as I step forward, and he eyes my sword in its scabbard on my back. If only this idiot knew how many different ways I have to kill him available to me right now. My sword isn’t what he should be afraid of.

“Well, that makes you a little stupid. I wonder what Roman would say about that?” I tilt my head as my words hit their mark.

“You’re... You’re Remy Bennett?” the quieter Lycan asks, his voice husky from the partial change of his form. The two look at each other before dropping the human.

“How old are you?” Kain asks from my right flank.

“This is our first moon,” the first says, his anger palpable and filters through his words, and I swear. Why the fuck doesn’t Roman have these guys locked up? First fucking moon.

“You know I can’t just let you walk away from this. You killed a human,” I tell them, and fear flickers in their eyes.

“You won’t kill us,” the first says cockily. “You couldn’t, look at you. You’re tiny. Even with him backing you up.”

“Oh, boys, you have no idea,” I say, throwing the obsidian dagger from my hip into his shoulder before drawing my gun on the second Lycan. Dead shot. He falls to the ground as his brains paint the alley walls.

The first simpers, the coating on my dagger poisoning his blood.

“We never meant to...” he cries. “It was our first moon, and we avoided round up. Please don’t. I won’t tell.”

“Roman probably isn’t going to be happy about this,” Kain reminds me, covering the street for us, knowing that two Lycans is nothing that I can’t handle alone.

“Well then his alphas should have a better handle on their wolves. The Alpha of Alphas can come and see me if he has a problem with how I handle things.” I kneel down and pull my dagger from the remaining Lycan, his breathing staggered as the obsidian does its job. Blood spurts from the wound. I nicked an artery.

“You have two choices,” I tell him. “I can let you die somewhat slowly, in agony, the same way I’m sure you did to that human, or I can put a bullet through your skull.”

“Fuck you,” he stutters, and his breath becomes shallow.

“Have it your way,” I say and stand, putting a bullet through his thigh—this time I know I got the artery. The shot won’t kill him, but my bullets are obsidian. Lycans can heal from most wounds, but not those from obsidian. He’ll bleed out here, and I’ll send a clean-up crew to come and get them.

I holster my gun and wipe down my dagger before sheathing it back at my hip.

“The young ones never get any less cocky.” Kain grins, death no longer affecting either of us really. When you’ve done what we do for as long as we have, it becomes almost a part of everyday life. Literally.

I notice the blood on my top and sigh as Kain wipes some from my cheek.

“Want to head back and clean up? I’ll call my guys to deal with this,” he offers, and it warms me. No matter how much people would hate what I have with him, I love him.

“Sure.” I smile up at him, and he grins back.

“Want a lift?” He laughs, and I nod. He lifts me into his arms and I wrap mine around his neck, holding tightly as he runs faster than the wind. No human would see or hear us—it’s what makes him so dangerous.

“We’re here, milady,” he chuckles as he puts me back on my feet, opening the door to his one-story. It’s smaller than you’d expect considering his status, but I know that no one apart from us knows about his place. Well, other than Luc.

“The shower is all yours if you want it first?” he offers coyly, shutting the door behind me.

“Thanks. Want to join me?” I take his hand and lead him down the hall to the bathroom. He takes me by the waist and lifts me onto the counter, my head level with his.

“I have no idea how I’m meant to live without you,” he says softly before capturing my lips with his, hard and full of passion, and he devours me until I’m breathless.

CHAPTER SIX



It's been two weeks since dinner at my dad's, and I'm still angry. I've ignored every call, every knock at my door, every attempt at contact. I've even shut out Jack. I can't deal with any of this, but I know it's true. I noticed changes before they told me. Just stupid little things that I thought nothing of. Like catching something I'd have never been able to catch before. Being able to run farther, dance harder. Things seemed easier. I thought I was just in better shape.

But it was all a lie.

Am I overreacting about the lying? Maybe a little, but give a girl a break. What even is this life? A life of monsters, of all the things that go bump in the night being real. Dracul and Lycans, they said. Nephilim. Thanks to Google, I got way more information than I ever thought I cared for. Vampires and Werewolves. The children of Angels. It's all more than a little unbelievable.

I don't want any of this. I am not strong enough to deal with this life. No matter what they say. Twelfth life. Are they insane? And yet, I can feel the truth of it deep down inside of me, no matter how much I want to cart them all off to an asylum.

But Dad did say I have a choice. I don't have to be who they all, so obviously, want me to be. I can choose the life I have. The path I've always wanted. To be a doctor. To marry Jack. To be a mom.

Because I'd be giving all of that up. And I can't give up Jack. Can I?
I love him.

So what if I am plagued by dreams. Dreams, which I'm guessing are probably some weird form of memories, of loving others. Of fighting for more, being more. I am not that person. Not now. I want too many different things.

My breathing speeds up, as if I'm panting. The indecision of it all ripping through me.

I am not strong enough to be who they want me to be. I am not a fearless warrior.

I'm the girl who drops bottles at the bar and prays they don't smash. I'm the girl just about to start a career helping people, to take an oath to do no harm. That girl is not the same girl who would hunt and kill monsters. It just isn't.

Is it?

A knock sounds on my door, and I ignore it, just as I have the last two weeks. I haven't left my apartment, calling in sick to my job, telling Jack how I'm not feeling well sick and he needs to stay away. Not needing an excuse for my family. They know why I don't answer.

I wrap the blanket tighter around me and stare out of the window again. Trying to put my world back together. Yes, I'm being a little dramatic, but fuck me, give me a minute.

A key turns in the lock. I turn to see who the hell has my spare key when Colt and Creek waltz into my living room like they belong here.

"Get out," I tell them and turn my back to them, looking out the window.

"Remy, come on. You can't ignore us forever," Colt says and comes to stand in front of me, his arms crossed. "We couldn't tell you before now, it would've fucking killed you. Stop being such a brat."

I stay silent, not willing to be reasonable about this yet. What hurts the most, more than the Hunter thing, is my mom. Knowing that it wasn't my fault she died. The guilt that I've carried with me since she died has been crippling, affecting everything I've done. Every choice I've made. And it was for nothing.

And they knew. Colt and Creek. My two closest confidants. Thick as thieves. They knew how much what happened to Mom fucked with me, and still, they said nothing.

"Is this why you came back? Just for the big reveal? To take part in the downfall of my sanity?" I snarl, and Colt throws his hands up in the air, walking away from me.

I close my eyes against the sunlight that batters them once he moves out of the line of the window, then the darkness gets more intense. I open them to find Creek sitting on my coffee table in front of me.

“Remy, we came home for you. Just like we left for you.”

“Left *for* me. That’s a new one.” I laugh.

“Believe it or not, but it’s the truth,” he says softly as he folds his arms. His hair falls into his eyes, but he pays it no attention, his soft and steady gaze kept solely on me.

“We were a danger to you once we knew. New Hunters need training while their memories return. They can be dangerous to younger Hunters who don’t know, because we’re not as used to keeping our damn mouths shut. Why do you think I didn’t speak to you while I was gone? It killed me to shut you out like that. But it was shut you out or risk killing you,” he says, and I can hear his hurt and his frustration.

“All sounds like a good excuse to me.” I shrug.

“Fucking hell, Remy. Stop being such a fucking brat. Neither of us wanted to leave everything we knew, but we did. To keep you safe. To make sure you didn’t end up dead. We didn’t have to worry about Nirvana, she’s away at school. You are the whole reason we left everything behind and went to train with Hunters on the other side of the goddamn world, rather than stay with our family and learn from those that know us best.” Colt throws his hands up in the air and shakes his head at me.

I bite the inside of my cheek to stop the words I want to say falling from my mouth. I know what they’re saying is reasonable. It’s more than that, it’s everything, but I’m not ready to be reasonable yet. I’m fucking terrified of what all of this means.

“I need you guys to go. Please.” I whisper the words, scared that my voice will give away the tears I feel threatening. Creek looks over my shoulder to where Colt is standing in my kitchen.

“We’ll go, we’ll give you more space, but time is running out, Remy. You’re not safe if you don’t make a decision. The memories will keep trying to come, and without the ritual, that alone could kill you,” Creek says softly. “I know it’s a lot, and I know how terrified you are, I can see it, but we’ll go. Just know that we’ll be here when you’re ready.”

I nod, not daring to say another word and he stands, squeezing my shoulder before he walks away. I know there are a million questions I should ask, things I want to know about what the hell this ritual is, what happens

during it, but every time I even think about asking, opening my mouth to say the words, nothing happens. Every single question evades me. The chaos in my mind is running wild, and I've got nothing.

"I don't get why we're giving up," Colt snarls as they leave.

"We're not," Creek says softly. "We're just doing what we must for her, just like we always have."

The door shuts softly and the floodgates open. I cry until I can't breathe, grieving for the life I can't have. Whichever choice I make, I lose.

Pulling up in front of my dad's house, I shut off the car and stare at the front door. The last time I was here my entire world got tipped on its axis. But I need some more answers, and while my dad might be gruff, I know he won't sugarcoat the truth. He'll give me it straight, even if it's not what I want to hear. His mantra has always been that the two most important things in life are family and truth.

The irony of it doesn't miss me, but I guess his truth is the Hunter truth.

I take off my seatbelt and climb out of the car, still trying to convince myself that this is the right thing to do. I've never run from hard things before, I face them, head on. It's how I was raised. I'm not about to change all of that because of this, even if it is the most craptastic thing I've ever heard.

As I climb the steps, the front door opens and my dad meets me on the porch, two mugs of coffee in his hands. He passes one to me and nods toward the swing out here. "It's good to see you, Remy girl."

His voice is gruff as ever, but it has a softness, a wariness, and I hate that I'm the cause of that.

"Hey, Dad. Sorry, I just needed some space. It's a lot to process, all things considered." I smile and take a sip of the coffee, strong and sweet, just how I always have it, and he nods.

"I get that, and we never wanted to lie to you or mislead you, but I need you to know that we had no choice."

I shrug at his words and he sighs like he's frustrated as he shakes his head.

Oh yeah, like he's the one that gets to frustrated right now. I don't think

so.

I open my mouth to say as much, but he speaks before I get chance. “So, what brings you here?”

“I need more information. I can’t just make this decision on a whim. I’ve got a lot to lose, no matter what I choose.” I pull my knees to my chest and he sighs again.

“Ask away, you know I’ll never lie to you again. I won’t tell you what you want to hear either though.”

“I know, that’s why I’m here. Truth and family, remember? So, first, I need to know. Why twenty-one? It makes no sense to me. I’ve had so much time to start my life already, why bring that all crashing down now?”

He runs a hand down his face, stroking his beard as he tries to put the words together in his head. I recognize the look so I sit as patiently as I can for him to formulate what he wants to say. “The honest truth of it is, I don’t know one hundred percent. The Elders can probably answer that question better for you, or an Angel should you ever come across one, but the simplicity of it is genetics. The merging of human and Angel DNA takes longer to mature. There is something of a chemical imbalance in us until then, which is why our forms can’t take the flood of chemical and hormone release during the ritual to gain your memories again. Plus, your strengths are not unlocked until this age. There is no point in ruining the innocence of growth with the knowledge of all that is wrong in the world. Once upon a time, we tried to do it earlier, but the results... they were catastrophic. Any who discovered what they were before this age started recalling their memories without the ritual, and they died. Each and every single one of them. Our bodies just cannot cope with the influx before then.”

“Okay, well that was a lot. But I’ve got to know, what actually is the ritual?” I ask, knowing I should’ve questioned this all long before now.

He looks up at the sky, quiet for a minute, like he’s contemplating his answer before his eyes are back on me. “I can’t tell you much, because I don’t want to trigger you. But it’s a ceremony, the Elders are all there, and you’re guided through the ritual to become awakened. If I could tell you more, I would, because I know you have more questions. It’s you, you always want the who’s, what’s, when’s and how’s of everything, but I have to be careful with this.”

Not exactly what I wanted to hear, but I guess something is better than nothing. I also know that my dad is stubborn as a mule so pushing him right

now isn't going to work either. If he thinks he's protecting me, he'll keep his mouth closed as tight as his asshole.

Instead I nod, trying not to sound frustrated. "Okay, then next question... Who, and or what, exactly are the Elders?"

"The Elders are the leaders of the Hunters, our government of sorts, I guess, but also our police, our lawmakers. Our judge and jury. There are seven of them, one from each original bloodline, your grandfather is an Elder, I am his proxy, so when he dies, I take his place until he is reborn. Once he takes his memories back, I step down. Each Elder rules a territory, and we call the Hunters within the territory a guild."

"Okay. Wow. Erm. Okay," I say, trying to let it all sink in.

It sounds unbelievable. All of it. "So, we can't die?"

"Well, yes and no. We all die, but Hunters, Nephilim, whatever you want to call us, are reborn. It is a gift of the Angel blood that runs through us. But we can ask for true death, should we wish it. Some do not wish to continue the cycles, for some it becomes too much. It is not easy, but it is possible. Though, if a child dies before they reach maturity and unlock their powers, they meet the true death. It is why we protect our young so fiercely."

I blink, unable to find the words I want to say. I've seen my dad worked up, but it's like his entire being glows as he is speaking. I've never seen him believe in something so much.

"And you don't regret your decision, even with Mom?" I ask softly.

"I miss your mother every damn day. But I'll never regret my decision, and neither would your mom."

"Could she have been reborn yet?" I ask hesitantly, still not really understanding how it all works.

"Unlikely. The way the Fates pull the strings is hard for me to understand, even after living as many times as I have. All I know is, usually, we're reborn in the same time, so we can meet as the Fates intended. It's possible your grandparents are currently reborn, but I haven't heard from anyone in the factions to make me think they are. They could have taken the option of true death, but I'll doubt your grandfather would do that."

"True death?" I ask, trying to make sense of it all and failing miserably.

"It's complicated, and doesn't make complete sense to me, so I doubt I'm saying any of this properly. Your mom was always much better at explaining it, but this is what we do. Live the path laid out for us by the Fates and don't ask questions. What we do, it's in our blood, it's a part of us. If you get your

memories back, you'll see that. You'll see that we work toward a bigger goal than personal wants and needs. It is about protecting those around us who have no idea how to protect themselves. To rid the earth of the plague of monsters. The filth that see fit to ruin our world. Once you remember, you will see. You will know what it is to belong to something greater than yourself. To work toward the greater good. To never waver in that belief. Just as you always have."

"Will I remember everything?"

"Maybe, each person is different each time they are reborn. Some remember everything, though it's rare, mainly we remember snippets, strong memories, the ones that matter. Our bodies, somehow, seem to remember better than our minds. If you move forward, you'll start your training, and we'll arrange your ritual, but it will come to you quicker than you can imagine. You've always been a quick study, putting your brothers to shame. The rivalry sometimes has been the cause of the biggest headaches of my existence, but no matter what, we always follow the rules of the Hunters. Rule one, don't reveal what you are to the humans. Rule two, don't kill humans. Rule three, never fraternize with the enemy. Some soft-hearted fools in history have dared to love the filth. Defile our purity with the animals. We stick to our kind. The only gray area is the Witches, but that's for another day."

"I feel like I know so much more, but nothing new all at the same time here, Dad. I don't know what to do. I don't think I'm strong enough for the path you all want me to choose. Maybe I was before, in those past lives, but who I am right now... I'm not who you want me to be, or at least, I don't feel like I am or ever will be." I admit, vulnerability almost crippling me as put the mug down on the floor. Standing, I wrap my arms around myself, trying to not be as exposed as I feel when it seems like I'm disappoint him. "I'm sorry."

He stares out into the tree line, not looking at me once. He's silent for a few minutes and I want the ground to open up and swallow me whole. When he finally looks back at me, I can't read him at all. "Don't make your decision yet, you have no idea... If you choose not to go through the awakening ritual to officially become one of us, you have to leave us. You cannot be around us if that is the path you choose, Remy. It is not fair, but it is our way. And if you don't leave, we will, and you will not find us."

My heart feels like it's been pulled from my chest at his words, and I'm

almost breathless as I try to register what he's saying.

"How? How could you leave me like that?"

"You would have made your choice, Remy. It is our way."

I fall onto my couch and close my eyes. This day... I literally can't even. I don't want to think about it. So much has happened, when I already had enough to contemplate as it was.

No. I will not wallow. What I need is a bubble bath!

I head to my bathroom and turn on the taps, pouring in a generous amount of bubbles. Lavender and lily smell so pretty. I head to the kitchen cabinet to pour a glass of whiskey and pick the paperback up from the coffee table where I left it weeks ago. Back before my life went to shit and reading about Fae royalty was an escape from my mundane world.

A knock at the door halts my steps and I let out a breath. This had better not be someone coming to talk to me about all of this crazy.

I unlock and open the door, coming face-to-face with some poor guy buckling under the weight of the box he's carrying.

"Miss Bennett?" he asks, sweat rolling down his face.

"That's me, please, pop it on the counter," I say to him, waving him in.

"Thank you," he groans as he steps forward, struggling to lift the box, so I help him and place it on the counter. "Can you sign here?"

He passes me the little tablet when I notice his shirt.

Luna's Flowers.

"These are flowers?" I ask, and he nods.

"Only the best, as requested." I sign on his tablet and see him out before staring at the box. I open it quickly. No one has ever sent me flowers.

I open the tall box, and find the biggest vase I have ever seen, absolutely stuffed with light purple peonies. My favorites!

"Oh my," I gasp. They're so beautiful. I lift the vase from the cardboard, thankful for my limited but extra strength from this ridiculous Hunter business and discard the box before placing the vase back on the counter. The shade of the flowers is just one lighter than my eyes.

I notice the note tucked in the violet ribbon on the vase and reach for it eagerly.

*Happy Belated Birthday, Remy.
Sorry they're late.
I'll see you soon.*

I wonder who they could be from? I check the back of the note and find no name. How bizarre, maybe the shop left it off. I grab my phone from the bathroom, shutting off the cold tap to let the water grow hotter as I like it, and dial Creek.

“You okay, Remy?” he says when he answers.

“Did you send me flowers?”

“Flowers?” He sounds puzzled and my curiosity grows because it obviously wasn't him.

“Yeah, purple peonies.”

“That mother fucker,” he growls, and my eyebrows shoot up.

“I'm sorry, what?” I ask, since he obviously knows something.

“Nothing. No, I didn't send them,” he says sharply.

“No need to be so pissy, it was just a question. They're probably from Jack; he probably just forgot about them. I'll see you later.”

“Sure,” he says, and the line cuts off. I wonder who pissed in his cereal?

Fuck it. I'm going to have my bath and relax because I am done with today, despite my beautiful flowers.

I grab my drink and my book again and head into my bathroom, ready to forget about the world.

CHAPTER SEVEN



I lean down and undo my ballet slippers. Dance class tonight was abysmal, but try focusing on a plié when you've got thoughts of monsters running through your head. I'd hoped ballet would distract me from the weird new world I live in, give me a reprieve from the insanity that has become my new reality. How wrong was I?

Instead, I nearly broke my ankle when I landed wrong, and then almost took out four other dancers when I barreled into them. I guess some of that newfound strength Dad was going on about came into play. I shove the slippers in my bag and shrug on my hoodie and sneakers before heading out into the darkness.

I never thought about being scared of the darkness before. Our little town is so ordinary, and so unremarkable. Nothing bad ever really seems to happen here. Except now I know that's because two families of Hunters live here. Also because of my awesome DNA and having not done the awakening or the binding rituals yet, I'm a potential target to everything that goes bump in the night according to Dad and Colt, but I don't want to change my entire life on what if's and maybe's. Especially since I've apparently evaded these monsters my entire life so far, and they supposedly prey on humans daily—if I've survived this long without getting caught, I can continue that pattern. I don't have *that* much bad luck.

Putting my ear buds in, I play PVRIS loud enough to keep me focused, and I hold my bag tighter as I head through the streets on edge on my way home. The streets are empty, but I swear I jump at my own shadow.

I stop and shake myself. *Get a fucking grip, Remy.*

There's no one out here, and you're overreacting. This is ridiculous. I get a hold of myself and stride toward the park, where I can cut through to get home. I've always loved the park at night, how there's so little light, the stars shine brighter. More than once I've laid in the middle of the field for a while, just looking at the stars, pondering the workings of the universe.

I take a deep breath and remove my earbuds, enjoying the quiet time and the cool air hinting that fall is on the way soon. It might still be like a whole month out, but I like fall, I'll take every opportunity to relish in the thought that it's coming. I also refuse to be afraid of something that isn't even likely.

Slowing down my pace a little, I take in the small things. How bright the sky is, despite the time of day. The moon glowing like a beacon of hope. It's peaceful and calming, and I feel almost grounded for the first time since this whole Hunter insanity spilled over into my reality.

A noise behind me startles me. My heart races and I turn, releasing the breath I held when I see a group of joggers working their way through the park. So much for not being afraid.

Turning back to the path, and I move aside when the joggers reach me, enjoying the peace. Looking up at the stars, I meander down the empty path and try to spot constellations like I used to do with Mom. It used to hurt to do it without her, but I realized a few years ago that she'd love that I still do it, so now it just makes me smile.

I'm so distracted, I don't see the person walking toward me until I'm literally crashing into them. I fall back on my ass and drop my bag. That shit is going to leave a bruise. I look up to find the stranger glaring down at me.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't even see you," I say, dusting off my hands. I climb to my feet and grab my bag, but the man is still just staring at me. His eyes are difficult to avoid, piercing and so dark, it's like I'm looking into pools of shadows.

My heart races, and I clutch my bag tighter before trying to maneuver around him, but he steps in my path. "I said I was sorry, now if you don't mind, I need to get home. My boyfriend is cooking dinner."

"I don't think so, Hunter." His voice is more like a hiss, guttural, and sends a shiver down my spine. This is not happening to me right now. I feel sick, like I'm going to cry, but I don't let it show.

"I think you've got me confused with someone else," I say, trying to keep my voice steady but failing.

“Just a baby Hunter, out here all alone. Foolish mistake. What a treat you will be.” He licks his lips, and that’s when I notice his teeth. Two fangs longer than the others, so long they give him a lisp. My skin crawls, goosebumps covering me, when I make the decision. I turn around and sprint as fast as I can away from him. His laugh rings out across the park, and I realize the mistake I made. Now it’s a game, but I have no other choice.

I am not cut out for this life.

I scream as I’m yanked back by my ponytail, my bones jarring at the sudden force of the stop. He shoves me and I crash to my knees, pain rushing through me. He grabs my arm so tightly, his sharpened nails cut deeply into my skin before he pulls at my hair again, exposing my neck as he laughs.

“Such a pretty little lamb.” Warm breath against my ear makes my stomach roll as he gets closer. His teeth break the skin on my neck and pain like I’ve never known floods me. I do not want to die like this. He releases me and laughs again. “So sweet!”

Throwing my head back with as much force as I can, I almost smile when I hear the crunch as I connect with his face. Pulling myself forward out of his grip, my scalp burning, I jump to my feet and run. Main Street isn’t far away, it won’t take me long and I know there are a ton of people. I push myself harder, ignoring the pain that rips through me until I see the lights show in the distance. Adrenaline keeps me going so that I don’t stop until I’m halfway down Main Street, and then fall to the ground again, tears running down my face.

Looking behind me, I don’t see him amongst the other people who are staring at me like I’ve lost my mind, and a sob racks through me. I clamber through my bag for my phone and dial the one person I know who will pick up.

“Remy? I didn’t expect to hear from you.” Creek’s voice filters through and it makes me cry harder.

“Help me…” I manage through my tears, trying to catch my breath.

“Where are you?” his voice hardens, and Colt shouts in the background.

“Main Street,” is all I manage, and the line disconnects. I pull myself together and get out of the middle of the road, leaning up against one of the storefronts and sliding down until I hit the ground again.

The screeching of tires as a truck stops in front of me cuts through the haze. I hear someone cursing, and then look up to find Creek kneeling in front of me.

“Remy, are you okay?” His eyes run across my body as he takes in the blood, and he swears again.

“Come on, let’s get you out of here,” he says, tucking one arm under my knees and another around my back before lifting me, and I can’t find the words to stop him.

“She’s still in shock. We need to get her cleaned up,” Creek says.

“I’ve got her back. Is all that blood hers?” Colt’s voice cracks slightly as he asks Creek, who shrugs as he slides me into the back of the truck.

“I have no idea. Let’s get her home so we can check her out. She was bitten.”

“Fuck!” Colt growls as Creek climbs in next to me and closes the door. Colt rounds the truck and climbs into the driver’s seat, taking off at speed, but I don’t feel it. I don’t feel anything.

I open my eyes and realize we’ve stopped moving. I try to lift my head but my neck screams, and as I become more aware, I realize just how much pain radiates through me.

What the fuck?

I groan as I try to sit up, breathless at the attempt.

“No, sweetie, you should stay lying down,” Maddie says in a soothing voice as she takes a seat beside me.

“What happened?” I ask. I’ve never hurt like this in my life, and my memory is fuzzy.

“It’ll come back, don’t worry. The drugs in your system are likely making things seem a little out of whack. You were attacked last night. You’re at your dad’s place. Creek and Colt came to get you when you called, then they left you here and went hunting with Bauer. Your father and I patched you up, gave you something for the pain. You were lucky. It is rare an untrained Hunter can escape any of the other factions, especially a Dracul once he’s tasted you.” Worry etches her features, but she shakes her head and smiles back down at me.

“But of course, you did, you’re Remington Bennett. The fiercest of us all. You’ve always been the strongest, most stubborn Hunter I’ve ever known. The Shadow Walker.” I laugh at her words, then groan from doing so.

“Thanks, I think.” I smile, and my lip cracks. “Could I get some water?”

I lick my lips, and she nods, rushing away to get me some water. I force myself to sit up, because she was right about one thing—I am a stubborn fuck, and there is no way I’m staying lying down—but I can’t help but wonder what she meant about the Shadow Walker thing.

She reappears with my dad behind her, and I know I’m not going to be able to ask her right now.

“Morning, Remy girl. How are you feeling?”

“Like I got hit by a truck. It’s fun.” I smile and take a sip of the water Maddie hands to me.

“That’s my girl. Not letting it get you down.” He smiles at me, but the purple under his eyes is thick and deep.

“Never. Sorry if I worried you guys, you look exhausted,” I say softly.

“Oh hush,” Maddie waves me off. “You don’t ever be sorry. You were attacked. We’re expecting to hear back from the boys shortly, it’s still dark out, but they’ll be back at sunrise.”

“This is why we need to do the ritual. As soon as possible,” my dad says forcefully, and Maddie scolds him.

“You leave the girl alone. She’s barely awake, give her a minute before you start on at her, Denny. Fates help me.”

“I just mean that if she’d done the ritual by now, she’d either have her weapons or be concealed so she wouldn’t have been attacked,” he growls back at her, and I see her eyebrows lift. Part of me wants to ask about my weapons, color me intrigued, but I’ve heard enough times now that they can’t tell me anything until I remember, and I’ve basically given up asking. It goes entirely against my nature, but I’m over the constant fighting that comes with asking even the smallest of questions.

“Oh, is that right? So, the factions don’t just attack humans at random? Well, I guess we can go put our feet up then, can’t we? Our job is done.” She rolls her eyes, and I can’t help the laugh that escapes me.

“You guys, can you not? My head is killing me,” I ask. “Hilarious as this is, I want to make the most of going back to sleep before my memory of last night returns and I’m likely to never sleep again.”

“Of course, sweetie. Sorry. I’ll keep the guys away, we could all use a few more hours sleep. You rest up. Feel better. Your Hunter healing is working, so you won’t be down for much longer, though it will be slower since you haven’t completed the ritual.” She smiles at me and shoos my dad

from the room. I stop a laugh from rising again and battering my bruised everything.

I lie back down and close my eyes when the memories start to come back. A face, and a feeling of fear like I've never known.

I stretch out as the sun brightens the room, and just for a second I'm free before the memory of why I'm in my childhood room hits home. I get up and look in the mirror, and gasp. No more cuts or bruises, my ribs feel fine. Hell, I feel better than I have maybe ever.

What the ever-loving fuck?

"It takes a minute, but you get used to it." I spin and find Creek leaning against the doorframe, a steaming cup of coffee in his hands.

"I don't know that I'll ever get used to this." I sigh and sit back on the bed. Glad to be in at least a tank and some boy shorts. He laughs and shakes his head.

"You'll be amazed. Once the memories start to come back..." he pauses and looks at me, like he's staring at my very soul. My breath catches, and I hold it until he looks away. "Well, you'll see. If you complete the ritual. Though, after last night, and knowing everything... I can't imagine you ever not picking the life of a Hunter. The other factions would rejoice at the infamous Remy Bennett rejecting her heritage." He shakes his head and strides across the room, offering me the mug of coffee.

I grab the mug and close my eyes as I take a sip, unsure what to even say to that. Every time I've asked my family questions to this point, they've told me no, but Creek... Maybe he won't be such a hard ass. Maybe he'll actually clue me in a little. Figuring the worst he can do is tell me no, I take a breath and look back up at him.

"Can I ask questions? About who I was, about what you know?" I ask him quietly, and he sighs before sitting opposite me. It feels strange, looking at this man who almost looks like a stranger but feels like the person I've been closest to my entire life. His eyes are about the only thing that hasn't changed. His face is sharper, his hair longer, a beard that I never would have believed would have suited him, but somehow does. His shoulders are broader and arms stronger than I would have thought possible. Every inch of

his skin is covered in ink, telling stories I know nothing about, but I know the man beneath, and I know that he wouldn't have marked himself unless it meant something to him.

He runs a hand through his light hair, and I wait while he tries to find the words.

"I wish... There is so much... But I can't. Not until the process is complete. You need to gain your memories yourself, only if you have holes after it all can I fill you in. You have no idea how much I want to tell you... to close the gap I can feel between us. Especially when..."

He stops and I can see how hard it is for him. No matter how angry I am at him, I don't want to cause him pain.

"It's fine, don't. If you can't, then I'll just have to wait."

"Does that mean you made your decision?" he says, and I can see him fighting the joy that is trying to rise at the possibility.

"I think so." I nod, trying to tamp down the emotions waging a war inside of me.

Yes, I love Jack, but I know he'd never believe any of this, let alone be on board with any of it. It means giving up everything I've worked toward my entire life. But the idea of letting those things run free, knowing I chose to do nothing about it while innocent people are mutilated and murdered at their hands, that isn't something I can live with. I thought about it when I woke in the middle of the night, and the whole thing plagued my dreams. I could easily have been killed last night. It was a fluke and pure genetics that kept me alive, gave me another chance at life. I can't waste that chance by doing nothing.

I also can't give up the people who have always been there for me. Even with the lies and deception, I know deep down that they were trying to protect me, no matter how much it still stings.

"I just, I have a lot to sort out. I have my whole life planned, well, had. It's just..." I sigh. "It's a lot. Last night opened my eyes, in the worst of ways, but I know in my heart that I can't just keep trying to ignore that part of life. That I can't keep pretending I don't know it exists. I'd live in fear, constantly looking over my shoulder, and that irks a part of me so deep in my soul, that I know this is the right decision."

He leans forward and wraps me in the biggest bear hug of my life, and I let go of some of the rage and bitterness I've been keeping in my heart toward him, hugging him back.

“I missed you,” he breathes and squeezes me tighter. He releases me and heads toward my door. “I know this isn’t an easy choice for you. For any of us, but you’re doing the right thing, no matter how much it hurts now. There’s so much more to this, to everything, than you can imagine. I’m going to start breakfast, but don’t worry, I won’t say anything.”

“I know you won’t. Thank you,” I tell him, but what I don’t tell him is that actually, this was a pretty easy choice. Is this going to break my heart? Blow up my current life? Hell yes, it is, but will the other choice, not going through the ritual, be the better one in the long run? Something inside me tells me yes, that it would be simpler, that I’d be happier, and yet...

Last night showed me that I am strong enough for this, yes, I was scared but I didn’t break. I didn’t die. I survived. I might not have killed the Dracul, but I survived. Without any training or any idea what the hell I was doing, I survived, and something deep inside of me feels like a missing piece of myself that I’ve been searching for has clicked into place.

I take a deep breath and get ready for the day. Ready to face everyone at breakfast, and then, then I need to go and face the rest of my life with the decisions I’ve made.

The smells coming from the kitchen make my mouth water as I finish drying my hair. I throw on a pair of denim shorts, a tank, and a shirt from the limited wardrobe I still have here before heading down where I can hear hushed voices. Two guesses what they’re talking about. I roll my eyes and laugh.

“You guys suck at being stealthy. How you manage to keep the monsters at bay bewilders me.” I laugh again as I head straight for the coffee pot, which has just finished. I pour a mug and turn to face the four people looking back at me with a whole range of expressions on their faces. The amused Creek, the concerned Colt, Maddie looks almost guilty, and my dad, well, he just looks grumpy like usual.

“Sorry, sweetheart, we weren’t...” Maddie starts, and I wave her off.

“Don’t be silly, I was playing. You guys can keep your hushed whispers as long as I can get a plate of whatever that smell is.” I eye the stove behind Creek; he always could cook, but the smells of meat and herbs from behind him are divine. I flutter my lashes at him playfully and he laughs before

handing me a plate. I take a bite and groan, heading to the table to annihilate the meat, potato, and egg goodness before me.

“Am I missing something?” Colt asks, his eyes bouncing between me and Creek. “I am definitely missing something.” He eyes me almost suspiciously as he sits next to me with his own plate before the others join us. Dad and Maddie chatter away while the rest of us eat in silence. Creek smiles at me, causing me to smile back, and Colt’s frown grows.

“So... I guess you guys should know,” I tell them after I finish eating. The silence that drops into the room is almost deafening. “Last night opened my eyes. A lot. This Hunter thing is a lot. Like beyond anything I could have ever even imagined.”

“Remy, you don’t have to decide yet,” my dad says gruffly, and I shake my head.

“No, Dad. I do. I’ve already made my decision. I have so much to lose, no matter what I choose, but I can’t give this up knowing the truth. I choose to be a Hunter.” I finish saying the words, and I feel something settle inside of me, almost like I just stepped onto a new path of my fate. “I couldn’t continue living my life, knowing what I know. Looking over my shoulder every day, being afraid of the dark. Giving up my family, my heritage. Knowing that people were dying, that maybe they wouldn’t if I hadn’t made the selfish choice to ignore the knowledge that I have now.”

Maddie’s eyes well, and she blinks to wash away the tears that threaten. I can’t tell if she’s happy or not. My dad’s face barely changes, but he does give me a small smile with a nod. “Well, good. I’ll contact the Elders to prepare the ritual.”

“Hell yes! Little sis is with us once again. Remington motherfucking Bennett, ladies and gentlemen. Factions beware, ’cause my sister is a badass!” Colt says and I laugh at his enthusiasm. “You knew, didn’t you, asshole?” he says to Creek who shrugs and stands, clearing the table.

“If I did or not, I’m just glad she made the choice she did,” he says softly with a smile before loading the dishes into the dishwasher. I feel a little guilty, he saved me, cooked, and is now cleaning, but he looks almost content doing what he’s doing, so I smile back.

“So, now that you guys know, I have to go blow up my life,” I say with a heavy breath.

“I know this is hard, sweetheart, and if you need any help, we’re all here. For anything,” Maddie says, and my dad grunts his agreement.

“Well, first, I need to deal with school, unenroll from everything I just started, cancel my whole life I guess, and then I need to speak to Jack.” I hold my head in my hands before running them through my hair.

“I’m sure I don’t have to tell you this, but he cannot know, Remy. He can’t know any of it,” my dad tells me, and while I know he’s not sorry to see Jack go, I can see in his eyes that he’s sorry I’m hurting.

“I know, Dad. I won’t tell him. He’d try and have me committed if I started talking about this stuff in front of him. I just need to kinda break my own heart and hide it while I break his, and that’s not easy.” Maddie stands and comes to hug me while Colt squeezes my hand.

“I can’t tell you I know what this is like, I’ve loved my Nate since I was nothing more than a girl, but I can’t imagine how much it would hurt to have to let go of him like you’re having to do. Regardless of our feelings about the young man, we know that for you this decision was harder than it was for us. None of us have ties to the human world like you do.”

“Thank you. It hurts, and I don’t think it’s hit me how much it’s going to hurt yet, but I know this is the right decision.” I smile at her as she squeezes my shoulder.

“Can you give me a ride back to my place?” I ask Colt.

“Sure thing, little sis. You about ready?”

“Yeah, I’ll leave my stuff here from yesterday, I just need to grab my bag.”

“You ready, man?” he asks Creek.

“Yeah, I’m good to go,” he replies and shrugs his hoodie on.

“I’ll see you soon, Pops. Mads,” Colt says, hugging them both as he heads out, Creek doing the same.

“If you need anything...” Dad says as I hug him goodbye. “Anything, Rem.”

“I know, Dad. Thank you.” I kiss his cheek before hugging Maddie and heading outside toward my new life.

CHAPTER EIGHT



This week has been, well quite frankly, a shit show.

I've removed myself from the resident program I joined ready to move with Jack, I canceled my dance classes earlier than I'd already planned to, much to the dismay of my instructor, canceled all of the funding I'd secured for myself to study. Basically, I erased all of the plans I've spent the last year making, and now I'm sitting on my couch, spinning the engagement ring on my finger, trying to work out what the right words to say are. I know that, really, there are no right words for what I'm about to do. My heart feels like I've cut it out of my chest slowly, but I know that the decision I've made is the right one. That this is the path I'm meant to take, the path that I can live with happily.

Jack is on his way, he sent me a text ten minutes ago saying as much. After me dodging him for the last few weeks and my lame ramblings of us needing to talk, I know he knows something is wrong. He has to. Right?

When his key twists in the lock of my apartment door, Sushi leaps from the couch and runs toward my bedroom. He never did like Jack.

Strange little cat.

I take a deep breath as the door opens and Jack comes in. I smile at him, but his face is like thunder. Awesome.

"Are you sick?" he asks brashly as he closes the door before looking me over.

"No, I'm not sick." I sigh.

"Then what the fuck has been going on? You've been weird for fucking

weeks! You've hardly answered your phone except for this morning, even then it's been a few mumbled words. I've barely heard from you," he says, just standing by the door with his arms folded.

"Maybe you should come sit." I motion to the couch, and he stomps his way over and sits on the lone chair rather than with me. This sucks, but I guess it's better that he's angry. It'll be easier for him this way.

"So?" he says, and as much as it pisses me off, I swallow it. This is my fault after all. I can't be angry that he's annoyed and very obviously mad at me already.

"So... we need to talk. I didn't mean to avoid you, not really, but I needed some time to think about everything," I tell him, trying to stop my voice wobbling. "I know we had all these plans, but this isn't working for me, Jack. Not anymore. The tension between you and my family, us moving away, me becoming a doctor. I feel like I've lost myself to the life you want us to have. I thought it was what I wanted too, but after everything that's been going on, I realized that this isn't the life I want."

"This isn't the life you want?" he asks quietly, and I look up to see him staring at me as if he doesn't even know me, and I shake my head.

"I thought it was, I did, and I never wanted to hurt you, but I can't do this anymore, Jack. I love you, I do, but I don't think we're right for each other. I've realized that we want such different things from life, and no matter how much I love you, I can't just leave my family behind. I can't cut them out of my life as if they don't exist because you guys don't get on."

"So, this is about them?"

"No, this is about us, but they are a part of me, Jack, and you don't accept them. You can barely stand being around them. But I don't want to talk about that. I'm talking about us."

"Well, it doesn't sound like there is an us anymore, Remy. It sounds like you've made that decision alone already and it doesn't matter a flying fuck what I think or how I feel about it." He stands, almost shaking, and I can feel the waves of anger radiating from him.

"I'm sorry, Jack. I don't ever want to hurt you."

"You know what, Remy? Fuck you. If you didn't want to hurt me, you wouldn't be doing this. Shattering our life, all of the plans we built. You should have realized long before now what you really wanted. Or you should have at least had the decency to talk it out with me before you made a decision alone. So, fuck you, fuck this, fuck all of it," he spits, holding his

hand out to me, and I place the ring in his palm.

"I really am sorry, Jack, but this is for the best. For us both, even if you don't see it right now," I tell him as he storms across the room. "Your key is on the counter, and that box on the floor is the few things you've left here."

He pulls his keys from his pocket and wrenches my key from it before slamming it down on the counter, picking up his own along with his box.

"Fuck you, Remy!" he shouts before leaving my apartment and slamming the door closed.

Tears run down my face, but I know no matter how much this hurts, no matter how much my heart feels like I just shattered it to pieces, this is the right decision.

Now I just need to pick up the pieces of my shattered life and get on with it, but first, I need my best friend and about three pints of chocolate ice cream.

After a full day of pity partying to myself, I gave in and text Fallon to tell her I broke up with Jack. She responded immediately saying she was grabbing supplies and heading over. That was twenty minutes ago, and I'm still in the same spot on the couch that I was in when Jack left earlier.

The lock turns, then Fallon saunters into my apartment like it's her own, placing her bags on my counter before kicking the door shut and turning to me. "You get tonight to pity party, and then tomorrow, we are back on track, you hear me?"

"But, Fal, I just..." I say, and my voice rasps from the crying I've done throughout the day before breaking.

"I know, sugar," she says, coming over and hugging me tightly. "Tell me all about it."

She's interrupted by a knock at the door and stands. "That must be the pizza guy, so hold that thought!"

She hurries to the door and takes the pizzas from the guy, flirting as she does, tipping him before she closes the door. I watch as she potters about the kitchen, grabbing glasses, putting more ice cream in my freezer, and grabbing the other bag and the pizzas before coming back to me. I feel so pathetic just sitting here like my life is ending, but I can't help it. This might have been my

choice, but that doesn't make the decision any easier. Not really.

The smell of cheese hits me as she puts the boxes down on the coffee table, then pulls out a bottle of whiskey and pours us both a glass. She hands me mine as I reach for the top pizza box and pull out a giant slice.

"So, let's try this again. Tell me what happened."

I let out a happy groan as I chew the deliciousness that is my cheesy slice contemplating how to explain it all. "I'm not even sure where to begin, but I ended it. I told him that this isn't the life for me, that we're on different paths, and that it wasn't going to work. He was so hurt, so angry, and I just... I could see it, his heart breaking at my words, the rage it created. I never wanted to hurt him."

"So, you made your choice, huh?" she says, and my gaze whips to her.

"What?" She can't know. Dad said humans don't know. Oh shit, did I say something I shouldn't have already? Did someone else tell her? My mind races through every possible probability until she laughs.

"Stop freaking out. Yes, I know what you are. I've known our whole lives. Yes, you can be pissed at me too, Goddess knows Creek was. But yeah, I know your secret. It's why I've been MIA the last few weeks, giving you space. I wanted to be here for you, help you, but Mama had me freaking locked down because this is 'Hunter business' and I'm not supposed to interfere. But you called, and Mama wasn't around, so here I am."

"How the fuck? What the...? I am so fucking confused right now, Fallon." I open and close my mouth a few times, trying to form the right words but nothing comes out, so I take a swig of the whiskey, the burn comforting as my world shifts again.

"So, since it's a day for revelations, you should probably know, I'm a Witch," she says with a small smile and takes a drink of her own, emptying her glass.

"You're a Witch?" I ask, stunned. How is this even my life right now?

"Surprise!" she says, throwing her hands in the air, making fucking jazz hands, like this isn't a big deal. "But I'm what you guys would call a good Witch. My family has worked with yours since the beginning of our line."

"You mean, everyone else knows? I have so many questions, and yet, no fucking words. Was everyone in my life hiding stuff from me?" I ask, my mind blown. Was I keeping the Hunter stuff from her? Yes, but I'd probably have caved at some point and told her anyway, hoping I could protect her, especially if I am as badass as everyone's made out so far.. Her being a Witch

makes a lot of things make more sense, but holy fucking shit.

"I know, it's a lot. Especially after everything you've obviously found out in the last few weeks, but we can't reveal ourselves to humans, and if you'd have made the decision to reject your Hunter heritage, you'd have left me behind too when you left with Jack. I couldn't have told you, no matter how many times I've tried. It's a spell—it binds us from revealing who we are to those who are not of the factions, or those who are unaware or make the choice to not live this life. It sounds more complicated than it is, and I didn't mean to just dump this on you when you have so much going on, but I hated having secrets from you." She smiles sadly at me, and I realize that all of these secrets must have weighed heavily on those around me. They suck for me, but it couldn't have been all fun and games for them either.

"Wow. So, you're a Witch? You can do magic and shit?"

"I can do magic and shit." She laughs, shaking her head. "But there are limits and restrictions on what we can do. There are others, who don't abide by the rules of the coven council, those who fell on the side of the Dracul, and the Lycans, and then there are those who go to whoever pays the most money, who have no respect for the power we wield or its consequences, but yes, I can do magic and shit."

"This is... it's so cool, and yet, kinda terrifying that I have been blindly walking around blinkered all this time, not having any real idea of what was happening in the world around me."

"I know, but no more blinders for you. Now how about we eat our own weight in this pizza and get stinking drunk to ease your very obvious broken heart and we talk about all of this tomorrow, when the hangover is rife, but I have a little something-something to ease it," she says and winks at me. "Ah the joys of potions, especially now you can know about them. Praise the Goddess for that!"

"That sounds kind of amazing," I say with a small snuffle, thinking about Jack's face again when I told him we could never work. "It hurts, Fal. I didn't want to hurt him, but how could I make any other choice?"

"I know, sugar, I know. It will get better. Love is the one thing that rules all of us, faction or human, and the matters of the heart are one thing that no spell can heal. But you did the right thing. If the stories I've heard about the fearless Remy Bennett are anything to go by, you might have just turned the tide in the war we're facing."

"There are stories?" I ask, shaking my head, because I have no freaking

idea how this is my reality right now.

"There are, but until your memories are back, which is going to take a while, I can't say shit. Sorry."

I shake my head and wave at her nonsense. "It's fine, you're not the first, and you won't be the last, I'm sure. I don't understand it all, but I am so glad that you know and I have someone other than the guys to speak to, because everything, all of it, is just so freaking much!"

"Oh, I know, and you don't know the half of it yet. Now, how about we put on Dear John, stuff ourselves with this pizza, and pity party, right?" She laughs and takes a giant bite from the pizza slice in her hand. I laugh back at her, and I know I made the right choice in asking her over. There is no one quite like your best friend to help heal a broken heart.

CHAPTER NINE



“Remy, for fuck’s sake. This isn’t hard, you just need to relax.” Bauer huffs as I bend over, trying to catch my breath. Eight hours I’ve been at his place, which I’m now renaming, because this place isn’t his house, it’s fucking hell. “Just because this is easy for you, you jerk. You’ve been doing this for a lot longer than I have,” I pant.

“Actually, no. You’ve had more lives than I have; you’ve done this a hell of a lot more than me. You just need to give in to it. Your instincts will kick in if you let them, if you stop with the overthinking!”

I glare at him and drop to the floor.

“I don’t know how to do that, Bauer. I get it, you’re frustrated, but guess what? Me fucking too. This, all of it, might not be weird to you, but you have your memories back, you’ve had years to adjust to it all. I’ve had a few freaking weeks, and I still have none of my memories. Except for fragments that are either dreams or memories, but I’ll be fucked if I know the difference at this point. But this, the fighting, this is all new to me right now. You can’t treat me like some honed warrior, even if I was before, because that’s not who I am right now.” I raise my head and stare at the ceiling of his basement torture chamber and try to even out my breathing.

I know I’m a dancer and might run most days, even if I’ve been slacking a bit lately, but this kind of training, this is a whole new world. Circuits, skipping, cardio, and that was his goddamn warm up. Then he gave me the stupid wooden staff I threw to the floor a few minutes ago and attacked me. Hoping my instincts would just kick in. When it was obvious it wasn’t

happening, we tried all sorts of combinations, and while I'm better than I was when we started, I'm not learning as quickly as he hoped.

As in, I'm not an instant fucking badass.

The urge to roll my eyes is real at his obvious disappointment.

"Remy, I never expected you to be who you've always been. I don't know what I expected." He runs a hand down his face before sitting opposite me on the floor.

"It's weird. I'm always the eldest, and yet, you taught me most of what I know. Where you've had, like, twelve lives, I'm on my sixth. You are the best of us, at least any of us that I've ever met, and you've always just picked up where you left off. I can't say much more than that, because it could still be dangerous, but something feels different this time. You're different."

"Of course I am, jackass. I had a whole life that I just blew up so that I could be this person. From what Maddie said, that's unusual. But this life has shaped me. Losing Mom changed me. I don't know if we lost her this early in other lives yet, so I can't say for sure. I will get there, I'm positive, once my memories are back, but for now, treat me like an absolute moron with this stuff. Please, I freaking beg you. Eight-hour workouts are not usually my life." I laugh and lie back on the mats covering the ground.

"Oh, believe me, I can see that, and despite the ritual not happening for another few weeks, you'll thank me for this beforehand. Your body is already starting to change, the Angel blood is awakening, you're stronger, faster, more lethal. Honing your skills, even with just the basics before the memories come back will be good. It means that when you remember how to do what you used to do, your body won't be working against you. Unfortunately, muscle memory isn't something that carries over. Just the knowledge, so you still need to train."

"Ugh, this sucks, why can't I just wake up a total badass?" I groan, and he laughs at me.

"Because that would be far too easy. And a Hunter's life is anything but easy. That was the first rule you taught me. That this life is hard, but there are so many things that make this life worth the insanity it brings." He stands and smiles down at me, offering me a hand up. "That being said, get your ass up off my floor, you caught your breath, so now we start again."

"Sadist. You're a goddamn sadist," I hiss as I take his hand and he helps pull me to my feet.

"Yes, yes I am. Which is why I'm the best teacher you'll have. Dad

doesn't have the patience, Colt would baby you, and Creek, well, he's Creek. It's why I always train you when I'm about. You're just as much of a sadist as I am, Rem. You'll see." He winks and throws the staff back at me. "Now get yourself into the starting stance. We're not leaving here until you disarm me or pin me. Time to up your game."

I take the stance he showed me hours ago and prepare myself. Taking deep breaths, I steady my heartbeat and try to focus on the new things I discovered I can do, like the sharper sight, the insane hearing, the ridiculous speed... when I can tap into it anyway.

I hear him take a breath a second before he launches toward me and I do what he asked. I don't think, I just do. I raise the staff as he brings his in an arc over his head and I meet his blow. The force of it shakes my arms, but I just grin at him before pulling back and trying to go offensive rather than the defensive stance I've been in all morning.

He laughs as I parry back, using the movements he taught me, with a flair of my own that when I quiet the voices in my head, comes through. Who would've thought he'd be right? Maybe I should pay more attention to him. I smirk when my offensive makes him take a step or so backward, then a lethal smile graces his face and I see the moment he decides to stop pulling punches.

Apparently, even though he wants me trained, my big brother does not want me to beat his ass, at least not yet. Not that there's much risk of that, but I just know I got too cocky, and now I'm going to hurt. A lot.

Faster than I thought possible, he strikes, and despite my new speed, I have absolutely nothing on Bauer and I end up on my back, winded with the end of his staff grazing my throat.

"Nearly." He winks at me and pulls back the staff. "Definitely an improvement. I could almost see when you stopped overthinking."

I sit up and try to catch my breath again. "This is a severely unfair advantage you have."

"Humbling, isn't it?" He laughs. "Come on. Again."

"Slave driver," I grumble and get to my feet again.

"You're damn straight I am. I told you, we quit when you pin me or disarm me. The rest is up to you."

I almost growl as I drop into my starting stance, holding the staff a little differently to what he showed me, and far more comfortably. "Bring it, asshole."

He laughs at me, and for a second, I think I've bitten off more than I can chew, but I see him feint right as I drop and swipe at his ankles with my staff. He jumps backward before I can make contact, but the hesitation is enough that I have time to catch him with a blow to his ribs, dropping him to one knee. I lunge again, hoping to win, just once, but I should have known better. I jump into the air but get pushed backward by a powerful force and fly into the padded wall before sliding down onto my ass.

"Don't get so cocky, Remy. Cold and calculating is what will keep you alive in this world of ours. Cocky and hotheaded will get you dead real quick. You had a dozen other ways you could have attacked but you chose to try and showboat. This is not a competition; this is life or death. Yours, mine, our family's, Fates, every family alive." His voice shakes, and I'm not sure if it's anger, disappointment, or adrenaline, but regardless, I'm flooded with guilt and shame. He's right. I just wanted to win, to make it stop. I wasn't thinking about anything else, and considering what was at stake, I was being a foolish child about it.

Maybe I would be better off not knowing all of this, but I've made my choice, and I'm going to embrace it if it's the last damned thing I ever do.

After the hardest and most thrilling workout of my entire life, I'm sprawled out on the floor in Bauer's basement, trying to figure out what my new life is going to look like. How it's even going to work. I'm going to need a new job, because God knows that working in a bar every night probably isn't going to work, and my excuse of being sick isn't going to last much longer either before they decide to fire my ass.

Bauer left me to my aches, pains, and musings about twenty minutes ago after Colt called. I didn't bother asking what it was about because the look on Bauer's face was enough to shut my mouth. My eldest brother isn't exactly the most talkative of people on a good day, though knowing what I know now, it makes a lot more sense. He's way older than me, which means he's had to tread carefully with his words around us all for a while. I can't even imagine how hard that must have been, how alone he must have felt being the only one. I know he had Dad, Maddie, and Nate, but when we were younger, Bauer, Colt, Creek, Fallon and I were almost inseparable. Then Bauer grew

up and left the four of us to it, which meant that Colt and I were thick as thieves even at home, with Bauer on the outside.

My heart hurts a little for him and how lonely that must have been. Though, I have no idea if there are other Hunters around here, people his own age for him to train with, to talk about stuff with. I can't imagine having found all this out and not having everyone I love around me to help me deal with it, even if I didn't want their help to start with. I'm beginning to think the time he spent at college wasn't actually at college... Just another excuse, especially since he supposedly dropped out halfway through his second year, deciding it wasn't for him.

Yep, that would make much more sense... Goddamn all of these family secrets.

"There she is, badass extraordinaire. Bauer beat you bloody yet?" Colt's voice rings out across the room, laughing as he descends the stairs into the basement.

"Not quite," I call out, not moving. The floorboards creak as his steps move closer, and then his face is looking down at me with a wicked glint in his eye.

"Maybe you should train with me instead. I learned a whole host of new tricks traveling to the other side of the world, you know." He holds out a hand to pull me up, which I take and stand on my aching legs.

"Don't be ridiculous," Bauer's voice joins us. "You know as well as I do that when she has her memories back, she'll kick both our asses all over the place, at the same goddamn time. She's trained with the best of the best in every fucking life. Always learning something new to put us in our place. Don't give her reason to break you when she's back to her old self." Colt laughs at his words and shrugs.

"You're not wrong. I swear my arm still aches from—"

"Colt, shut up!" Bauer rolls his eyes, and Colt looks at me guiltily.

"Sorry, I just got caught up. Don't want to break you."

"Don't sweat it, Bauer's been breaking me all damn day."

I laugh. "So, what secrets did you spill to make our big brother look like someone pissed in his cornflakes this morning?"

Colt starts laughing as Bauer just stares at me like I've got two heads. "Holy shit, she really is starting to come back."

Bauer shakes his head and laughs under his breath. "That she is."

"Anyway, I didn't tell him anything. I asked him if I could come over,

since you're training now, I thought you might want your old friend," Colt tells me with a secretive smile.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I roll my eyes at him as he backs up and heads back to the stairs up to Bauer's kitchen.

"Come on, you'll see," he says, and I look to Bauer, who shrugs his shoulders but shakes his head at the same time.

"You don't think I should see whatever it is yet?" I ask softly.

"I think he's pushing too much too quickly because he misses hunting with you. He means well, but he seems to keep forgetting you're still vulnerable. That said, maybe what he has will help your training." He shrugs again and heads up the stairs, leaving me to decide whether or not this is a step I want to take.

I know this is all going to take time, but I'm also the nosiest person you'll ever meet. I just like to know. But could that impulsivity be my downfall right now?

Bauer didn't seem to think it would be too dangerous, and since he's the most experienced of us all right now, I decide to just go and see whatever it is that Colt has for me.

What's the worst that could happen, right?

I push the door from the basement to the kitchen open and find the two of them lounging in the room, Bauer sitting on the counter by the window and Colt sprawled in a chair at the small table in here. The light from the windows floods the space, and as much as I love the light of the summer sun, I'll be happy to see the fall descend fully and have the beauty of colors that it brings.

"Okay, so what is it that you brought for me?" I ask.

"First, do you forgive me yet? For disappearing on you, I mean. It sucked, and then I stole Creek away, for the good of you both, but I know how much that would have hurt you. That was the last thing I wanted to do, but I didn't see any other way to keep you safe." Colt looks me dead in the eye, pleading with me.

"Honestly, not yet, but I'm working on it. It's, well, it's a lot. I'm just trying to push through it all, and push down anything that distracts me from

what I'm trying to do. The pain, the heartache, it sucks, but that's what I've got right now. What you did hurt me, and while it might have been for my own good, it stings," I tell him as honestly as I can. This isn't what I had in mind when I climbed the stairs up here. I've tried to focus as little as possible on all the hurt and bitterness inside of me. The pain would drown me if I let it out, and so I stuff it down every single morning when I wake up so that I can breathe. The pain of Jack, of him leaving a box of my stuff outside my door, not even bothering to knock when he left it. The pain of Colt and Creek disappearing. Yes, I'm dealing with it badly, but I'm doing the best I can.

I'm getting there, and somehow with Creek it's easier because Colt left already. I'm trying to let go of my anger—my mom always said holding onto it is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Useless and disappointing. So, I'm trying, but I'm only human after all. Or well, not.

"I can understand that," he says, some of the pep gone from his voice. "Okay, anyway, the reason I'm here. I'm way too excited for this, and you won't even have a real clue yet, but there is no way I'll last until the ritual, and you'd probably kick my ass if I did."

He rambles as he moves into the other room, reappearing with a case.

He places it on the table before me, and it's like all the air is sucked from the room and I can barely breathe as I reach forward and undo the locks on it. I lift the top and sitting in the old and worn violet velvet, the same color as my eyes, sits a sword. I reach forward to touch it when a pain unlike anything I've ever known stabs through my skull. I grab my head and try not to scream at the pain as I feel myself fall from the chair. I barely hear as Bauer wraps himself around me, lifting me and walking me back down to the basement, where he places me on the floor, I think.

I can't see, my eyes clenched closed as I struggle against the pain in my head, so overwhelming I want to throw up. I curl up into a ball, trying to fight the pain back, but it's useless. A voice, so soft it almost doesn't register, tells me that it's Bauer I feel back at my side, and then something cold against my lips. I open my mouth and he pours the foulest tasting liquid I've ever known into my mouth. His urges for me to drink it down only just break through the pain. I swallow, trying not to gag.

The cold liquid hits my stomach, and it rolls. Curling back up into the ball, I pray to whichever gods might exist to save me from this pain.

After what feels like forever, the pain starts to ebb. My mind begins to drift and I give in to the wave of darkness and emptiness that washes over

me.

Darkness still surrounds me as my eyes flutter briefly, before I try again. It takes a second for my eyes to adjust, but when they do I notice the dim light filtering in from above me, helping me take in my surroundings. I'm on Bauer's couch in the basement. Lowering my head, I assess my body, taking in the aches and pains I know should be there, but other than the throb in my head, the rest of me feels fine, albeit tired and nauseous. The world tilts a little as I sit up slowly, and I realize the pounding in my head might just be a little worse than I first thought.

"Bauer? Colt?" I call out, my voice hoarse. I guess I screamed more earlier than I realized. Footsteps move across the room above me before coming quickly down the stairs.

"Oh, thank Fates, you're awake," Bauer says softly, and then hands me a bottle of water. "Sip it slowly, Remy, I mean it. You scared the absolute shit out of me."

"Sorry," I rasp before taking a sip of water from the bottle. The icy cold feels so good that I want to chug the whole bottle, but knowing Bauer, he'd rip the thing away from me before I got the chance. "What happened?"

"Too much, too soon is what happened. The exact reason we don't tell Hunters about their lineage until they're of age, even then, while you're stronger, until you've completed the ritual, you're still at risk. Seeing that sword before your birthday would have killed you. I was scared it still might."

"How long was I out?" I ask, trying not to focus on the fact that I could have died. Because holy fuck. And that pain... if this is why everyone lied to me for so long, I forgive them. Fuck feeling that ever again.

"A few hours. I called Dad, he contacted the Elders and brought the ritual forward, they're all on their way here now. We'll do it this weekend. It's not worth the risk of waiting any longer." His eyes wrinkle with concern as he looks over me again, making sure that I'm really okay. I try not to worry about what the ritual entails, because I've tried, multiple times since I asked my dad, to find out what it is, with no joy. Plus, my head hurts so much that I really don't fancy playing ten rounds of, *if you'd just tell me*, with Bauer.

"Okay," I tell him, I'm not going to fight him, I don't have the energy, and the sooner it happens, the sooner I know what the deal is and it's all finally done with.

"Good. Now, you're staying here tonight, I've made up the spare room. I need to call Colt, so let's get you upstairs so I can update everyone that you're awake."

"Oh God, Colt. Can I call him? Or at least will you tell him, I don't blame him." I look up at him and he shakes his head.

"You're not calling him, you need to rest, but I'll tell him. It won't make much difference, but I'll tell him." He picks me up off of the couch, so much bigger than me that I feel about ten again, but I'm so woozy that I don't fight him on it.

"Thank you for looking after me." I sigh, and close my eyes.

"That's what family does, Remy. I might not have been around that much the last few years, but now that you're back, that's going to change. I'm always here, no matter what, okay?"

"Thanks, Bauer." I mumble groggily and let sleep take me away again.

CHAPTER TEN



Today is the day.

Today is the day of the ritual, which is why I'm lying in my bed, under my covers, pretending that the sun isn't rising and that today isn't the last day of the life I've led until this moment. After today, everything changes, and there's absolutely no going back.

Until now, I've not been able to ask questions, so despite my curiosity I've kind of stuck my head in the sand, but now... well, now it's real and I'm kind of crapping my pants a bit. I'm sure it can't be *that* bad.

Right?

I cover my face with a pillow and scream into it, hoping that the nervous energy rattling around inside of me disappears with the exhale. But as is the story of my life at the minute, no such luck.

My phone rings on my side table and I let out another muffled scream. Last night, Jack drunk dialed me like a dozen times, leaving me a rainbow of messages, with everything from "I love you" to "you ruthless bitch, you ruined my life". So, yeah, that was fun and exactly what I needed before today.

After what feels like ten minutes, it stops ringing and then starts again, so I give in and throw the covers off. I pick it up and see Creek's face looking back at me as I answer the video call.

"Morning, sleeping beauty," he laughs, and I give him the bird.

"Screw you, this is not a time for humans to be awake at." I stick out my tongue at him and laugh at the ridiculousness of it.

“It’s a good thing you’re not human then, isn’t it?” He laughs back at me as I roll my eyes.

“Still weird, super weird. Like I might have made this decision, but the fact that monsters actually exist? That I’m not human? Yeah, I don’t exactly have my mind around that yet. Probably won’t for a while.” He pulls a face at me and I laugh at him, I missed this. I missed him.

“Yeah, it took me a while too. I’m so glad we can talk about this now, and that we can talk more freely after today. It felt like half of me was missing these last few months without you, Remy. I can’t... I don’t want us to ever have to be like that again. Not in this life.”

“Well, I don’t plan on going anywhere anytime soon, so hopefully we won’t have to.” I smile at him. “Now, I need to get my shit together before I head to Dad’s. I should probably get going, but thank you for being my alarm clock.”

“Well, that’s why I was calling. There’s been a slight change in plans. I’m going to swing by and grab you, and then we’ll head to the chambers. Your dad and my mom were summoned there early, your brothers are heading there together in a bit, and so that leaves me to come get you.” He looks almost awkward, and it hits me how much he’s changed, how much we’ve both changed since he left. Nothing used to be awkward between us. But then, before he left, I didn’t have to fan myself after seeing him. How he turned from my cutesy best friend to this beautiful hulking man, I don’t care, but sweet Jesus, even when he’s awkward he’s ridiculously hot.

“That’s fine. Do I need to wear anything in particular? I probably should have asked this already.”

“No, but I’d wear something, erm...” He blushes. “You’ll be stripped down to your underwear during the ritual, so something suitable for that I guess.”

I can’t help but laugh at him.

“Erm, why the fuck do I need to be naked?”

He laughs at my screech as I try to not look like I’m as horrified as my reflection currently shows. “Not naked. Underwear. It’s because of the heat and the markings. That’s all I’m saying. It’s nothing crazy, don’t worry.”

“This entire thing is crazy,” I utter before taking a deep breath. “So something that won’t scandalize the Elders or my dad or brothers. Got it.”

“I missed this,” he says quietly. “I missed you, us. I just wanted you to know that,” he says softly, and I can’t help but smile at him.

“I might not have completely forgiven you yet for ditching me without a word, but I missed you too. And I’m glad you’re back, that you’ll be with me today.”

“Me too, Remy. I better go, but I’ll be over soon. I’ll text before I leave.”

“Okay, see you soon.” The screen goes black and I sigh. I can only hope that things go back to the way they were with us. God knows, with all this crazy I’m going to need my friend.

I climb out of bed and put the coffee pot on before jumping in the shower, keeping it cold enough to shock me into alertness, because alert is something I am not right now. I pull out my least scandalous underwear and dress. Putting my long hair into a high ponytail so it’s out of the way, I drift back to the coffee machine that is practically calling my name. My phone buzzes on the counter and a quick glance lets me know that Creek is on his way. The anxiety hits me sideways and I sink to the floor, cradling my coffee.

I made the right decision. I know I did.

Right?

I haven’t felt like this in... well, since my mom died. Like my entire body is on fire but turning to ice all at once. Like I can’t take in enough oxygen, and the world gets smaller with every missed breath.

Dropping my mug to the floor, I clutch my arms and hold myself, trying to make it recede. Even just a little. Just enough that I can catch my breath. So I’m not a fucking mess when Creek gets here.

Please God, just let me survive this. It’s not going to be that bad.

It can’t be.

Someone would have told me that much, surely? I know they won’t give me details, but they’d tell me if I was at risk.

Right?

Right?

Fuck my life. I made the right decision. I tell myself this over and over until a knock at the door breaks my train of thought. It opens seconds later and Creek finds me sitting on the floor in my kitchen, hugging my coffee cup. He doesn’t say a word, just comes and sits next to me and puts one arm around my shoulders, hugging me tight. We sit there for a few minutes until I can breathe properly again, and I lean my head on his chest.

“Thank you.”

“Any time. I didn’t realize it still got you like this,” he said, concern lacing his words.

“It hasn’t, not for ages, but I guess with everything that’s been going on, it just crept up on me. I haven’t been running like I usually do, which probably isn’t helping.” I shrug and he squeezes me again before jumping to his feet and helping me up.

“I guess we better get this show on the road,” I say with a sigh.

“I’ll be there every step of the way. And if you need a minute, just signal, like we used to. I got you.”

“Thanks, Creek,” I say and hug him again.

“Always,” he says into my hair before I pull back.

I slip on my chucks and grab my leather jacket and keys. “Let the madness begin.”

We pull up in front of the ominous looking building and I look to Creek, because surely this isn’t the place.

“Ermmm...”

“I know, it’s weird and it’s creepy, but that’s kinda the whole point. It keeps people away. Prying eyes aren’t exactly what we want around here. Though, if anyone did try, they’d have a hell of a time trying to get through the security.”

The location isn’t exactly helping the anxiety from earlier, but I steel myself, pushing it all the way down and locking it in a box. I will not let it win or defeat me. Not today. I’ve survived worse. Hell, I survived losing Mom, I can survive this. Taking a deep breath, I clear my head and his words sink in.

“There’s security here?” I ask, shocked, because this place looks like a rickety, falling-down hellhole.

Creek laughs at me and shakes his head. “You should have learned by now that when it comes to this new world, nothing is what it seems.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I guess I am, and I guess we should stop procrastinating and head in before your dad or one of your brothers comes out here to drag us inside.” He smiles at me, and the rising storm inside of me settles. It’s always been that way, and I’m glad it still is. He’s my anchor, keeping me rooted when my world gets too much.

“Yeah, wouldn’t want to start today off in an embarrassing way. Not like these guys aren’t going to see a whole lot of me soon anyway.” I roll my eyes. “Is there a reason for the semi-nakedness?”

“I am sworn to secrecy, you shouldn’t even really know that bit, so keep quiet. The walls around here literally have ears.”

I laugh, some of the remaining shivers of anxiety melting away—he’s always been able to make the voices quiet. To make me feel safe—and unbuckle myself but take his words on board. I’m still not exactly thrilled about the secrecy, but the jig is almost up, and this is definitely a ‘fake it ‘til I make it’ moment. He joins me in front of the truck before leading the way to the building. He looks up to the top right, and lifts his arm to a small box to the right of the door, which scans his wrist.

So freaking bizarre.

“Told you security was tight.” He laughs, seeing my face.

I shake my head as a buzzer sounds and the door opens. “Into madness we descend,” I say, to myself more than anything, but he chuckles as he enters through the door and starts going down the stairs, which are lined with lamps holding flaming candles to light the way.

When we reach the bottom, we’re faced with a long corridor, lined with doors, but at the end of the hall, huge double doors loom down upon us, and I just know that is where we’re headed. I follow Creek down the hall, the ground no more than packed dirt, dusty from the insane heat down here.

“Ready or not,” Creek says as we reach the doors and he pushes them open. I stop in the doorway and take in the sight before me. A domed space, with no windows, lit by dozens of candles around the room, and symbols etched into the stone walls. Directly opposite me is a raised platform, with seats spaced equally across. I guess they are the seats of the Elders. What gets me though, is the altar in the middle of the room. It looks so out of place here, its sleek black shininess stands out amongst the dirt and stone. Similar symbols that are etched into the altar are on the walls.

A shudder runs down my spine and I clamp my lips shut to stop from uttering a word.

“Where is everyone?” I ask Creek quietly.

“Probably in the antechamber at the back. Let’s go to the preparation room; you can change in there,” he says and spins on his heel back down the hall. I follow him to the third door down and into the room beyond it.

“You can get changed in here. There’s warm water in the taps, so you can

clean up if you need to, and you'll find a robe on the back of the door. Strip down to your underwear, and put on the robe. You'll be collected when they're ready."

"You can't stay?" I ask, taking in the foreboding little room.

"I can't, this is meant to be a time of reflection. To come to peace with the decision you have made, to accept everything that is to come on the new path you have taken. I imagine Mom will be here soon to walk you through it all properly. I am not your guide, but you'll meet them soon too."

"My guide?" I ask, and he shakes his head.

"I'll see you out there, okay?" he says and hugs me tightly again. It centers me and stops the shudder that threatens to rack my body. I don't want to be afraid. I made this choice, and regardless of the chaos it brings and the pain caused by it, to me and everyone else, I know that I was meant to do this. I was meant to be here. So, I take a deep breath and release him.

"I'll see you out there," I say to him and shut the door as he leaves, leaving me with nothing more than my thoughts.

I sit in the dark room, illuminated only by the flicking of the candles. I have no idea why all the candles when there is obviously electricity here for all of the security—it must be a tradition thing. It's so quiet, I almost daren't make a noise.

My thoughts fly a million a minute while I try to prepare myself for whatever is about to happen. A guide, Creek said. What the hell is a guide?

I'm pulled from my thoughts by the door opening. I stand just in case I need to move, and Maddie's smiling face appears.

"Oh, sweetheart!" she says and rushes in to hug me. "I can't believe this day is here already! Your mom would be so proud of you. I'm sorry she can't be here to help you with all of this, but I will be with you every step of the way, okay?" She brushes some hair from my face that's fallen from my ponytail and sighs.

"Thanks, Maddie. It's all a little daunting," I tell her, and she laughs.

"It's so funny to see how you are without the past influencing you. I've always thought it. Just don't let the past change you too much, okay? Now, your guide is on his way, he's one of the Elders, he will complete the ritual

and will be the one to guide you through your memories and get them in order, at least the ones that appear at the start. After the initial flood, as memories come back they seem to automatically make sense and slot in. It's a funky process, and I'm glad I'm not a guide so I don't have to think about how it works. But, Ben is an old and dear friend of our families, and he asked to be the one to guide you through this."

"Er, okay," I say, not really sure what to make of it all, but I shrug because the "who" doesn't really make a difference to me at this point.

"He's just outside, so I'll go grab him, and then he'll walk you through some stuff before we get started, okay?"

"Sure." I smile at her halfheartedly.

She opens the door and waves in an older man who instantly strikes me as kind. His smile is soft as he enters and looks me over.

"Good morning, Remy. I'm Ben, it's a pleasure to meet you, again," he says and shakes my hand, the calluses on his rough against the soft skin of mine.

"Hi," I respond, unsure what else to say because this feels awkward as hell.

"I'll see you soon. Love you, Rem," Maddie says and waves, leaving the two of us alone in the small room.

"Come, child, I know this must be a lot for you to take in. Now, before we complete the ritual, I want to go through some things with you. I know your family may have started to explain some things about who and what the Hunters are, so why don't you tell me what you've got a grasp on so far and I can expand from there." Ben's kind eyes make me feel better in all of this madness. The Elders, from what I can make out from the little I've been told, sound kind of terrifying, but he's a good guy. I remember when he would visit when I was a child; he always had so much patience—I guess that's why he's the guide. Though I dislike that he also kept secrets from me, I understand.

Kind of.

Hopefully I'll understand more soon and this underlying betrayal that I've been trying not to pay attention to, simmering away inside of me, will start to die down. I don't like feeling this way, it's why I've not acknowledged it, but that doesn't mean it's not there.

Taking another deep breath, I try to focus on what he said and organize what I want to say before speaking, rather than the word-vomit that usually

happens to me.

“So, this all still sounds ridiculous inside my head, and even more so when I try to say it out loud, but essentially, monsters are real, and I’m a monster Hunter.” Well, I failed at the no word-vomit thing. Heat creeps up my neck as I blush, the words still feel absurd, even though I know their truth.

“Do not worry, child, in these modern times when the fear of the supernatural is merely just something for the movies, you are not alone in your hesitance to believe. Both your brothers and your friend, Creek, struggled with accepting the reality we live in.” His voice is warm and smooth, and his words make me relax. I try not to smile at the thought of Bauer trying to accept this as truth, sometimes it’s hard to remember that he’s only five years older than me when he acts like I’m eons younger than him, but I remember when we were kids, he’d ridicule us for watching scary movies, berating us for being scared of something so obviously untrue that we were only scared of our imaginations.

“Thank you.” I smile at him.

“Let me start from the beginning, shall we? So, as I’m sure your father told you, we, the Hunters are Nephilim. Of Angel blood. Our people have been around since the beginning of time, protecting the humans and ensuring they never become aware of the true world. Our faction is governed, if you will, by the Elders, and each Elder looks after their own territory, which we usually refer to as a guild. We are not immortal, but we are pretty hard to kill thanks to our blood, and we are reborn if we are killed. You, I believe, are on your twelfth rebirth, and in each life you have chosen the life of a Hunter, so you will have many memories coming to you. You may not regain all of your memories of your past lives, which is why we do this fun little bit in each life, so you have the facts. You may regain all of your memories, but usually the process takes around six months. After that point, anything that is missing is unlikely to come back.” He pauses and watches me as it all sinks in. Twelfth life. I mean, I know my dad told me that already, it just hadn’t sunk in until now. Well shit, maybe that explains all the fucking sex dreams recently. My heart skips a beat as I think of Jack and the look on his face when I broke off the engagement; my ring finger still feels bare.

“Now, the reason you are finding out now, rather than when you are younger, is because of the power of the memories and the steps of the ritual. Your powers as a Nephilim do not awaken until near your twenty-first year.

I'm sure you've noticed some things already, more strength than you had before, maybe better sight or hearing, being faster and more graceful than you once were. That is your body finally accepting the power in your blood.

"We must wait until your power is accepted, because otherwise the memories, the sheer intensity of the power, would kill you. So do not be too hard on those around you." He looks at me knowingly. "They left to protect you. New Hunters are less on guard, they have to learn, but once our memories are fully restored and we can be sure of our words and actions, it is safe to be around our young again. I understand you had a small taste of what happens when knowledge is given too soon."

He looks at me and I blush a little. He's not wrong. I swear I can still feel a ghost of the pain in my head.

"Any questions about the Hunters yet?" he asks, and I shake my head.

My mind hasn't stopped whirring since I found out what I really am, so I just want to listen and soak it all in. While training has been one thing, I haven't given myself a chance to focus on the fact that monsters are real, and that's what I'm training for. I've always been great at compartmentalizing, and I'll be fucked if I didn't shove that little nugget in a box so far down into the depths of my psyche.

"Not about Hunters, about the ritual, but not Hunters," I reply, and he smirks at me.

"If I could tell you, I would, but honestly, it's better to go in blind. I promise it's not bad, it's just easier not to overthink the maybes."

"If you say so," I mumble, rolling my eyes. 'Cause not knowing is so not going to make me overthink it.

He chuckles at me, shaking his head.

Glad I amuse him. Ugh.

"Okay, so now you know more about us, I'll explain a little more about the other factions. There are our enemies, the Dracul, who you would associate with vampires as the modern world has deigned to call them. They are not sensitive to sunlight as the myths describe, but they do prefer to hunt at night, so they're essentially nocturnal, also garlic, wooden stakes, crosses, all of that is utter nonsense. The Lycans, again, you would probably know them as what cinema has called werewolves. You've got to love the modern spin on everything." He shrugs with a smile and a sparkle in his eye, as if he's teasing me. "Again, not sensitive to silver as the myths would have you believe, but a lot of the rest is right. They're a patriarchal system for the most

part, led by alphas, and are stubborn and pig-headed.”

Leaning back, I try to process his words. Even if I knew some of this from researching, it is still all a fucking *lot*. Especially hearing it out loud.

“These two factions are a drain on our world. They prey on the weak, the humans. They feed on them, kill them for sport, or keep them as pets. Both factions can be made as well as born, but those who are made, if not done properly, are even more dangerous—they are the scourge of the earth, and the filth must be destroyed.” His warm voice, now cold and venomous, shocks me. His eyes bleed with pain, and I imagine that when my memories come back, I’ll feel the same sort of hatred he does. How dare these factions treat humans this way?!

“And then, then there are the Witches. They are a torn faction, some work with us, some for the filth, and others will simply work for whoever pays the most. They are rarely a loyal bunch to anyone outside of the coven, though this isn’t always true, as you yourself will come to remember, but we do occasionally need their gifts.” The venom in his voice lessens, but I can tell that he doesn’t like the fact that Hunters must rely on the Witches for anything. One thing I have noticed is that Hunters are a proud, stubborn, egotistical bunch. None more so than the Elders. Though, considering what Fallon told me when she announced she was a Witch, this little bit of information isn’t something I didn’t already know, but I’m not going to interrupt him when he’s obviously working toward something.

“The Dracul and the Lycans, while they are tough to kill, it is not impossible. We have blades and bullets made with materials that are deadly to them, their one main weakness. A Dracul’s weaknesses are different to those of the Lycans, but you will garner all of this in your training and from your memories as they come back to you,” he tells me and pats my hand, gone is the angry cold warrior, his warm, soothing demeanor back. It throws me that he could be these two very different people, but I guess with many lives, and the many different people you are, personality whiplash is to be expected.

“Have we known each other before?” I ask hesitantly, and he smiles.

“We have. When we are reborn, it is always to the same lines, and our eyes or birthmarks tell us who we are. Your eyes have always been the bright violet you possess, in your first life, you were almost condemned by the humans to be a Witch because they are so unusual. But it is how we always know that you are Remington Bennett, along with the birthmark on the inside

of your left wrist.” I gasp and look down at my wrist, the strange star there that has always been. “It is the sign of the Bennett line, each of your family has one, and then they each have their own differentiating marks too.”

“This is so weird, so my brother is always my brother?”

“I can see how it could be that way, but yes, if your brother is reborn in the same life cycle as you, then he is always your brother. Sometimes new lives are born, for example, in your first life, it was just you and Bauer. Colt didn’t appear until your third life. But you don’t all always appear in the same cycle. So, some of your cycles, you’ve been an only child, some were all three of you, sometimes, just two of you. There isn’t an exact science as to how or why, it’s more about the need of time. Anyway, as I was saying, Creek isn’t always reborn when you are, he didn’t show up until your fourth life I believe, but when he is reborn, we always know that you are coming. The two of you have been friends for centuries. The Fates play a very strange game with us all.”

“So, you mean fate makes us friends?” I rub my temples, because this is all a lot.

“Something like that, but as your memories return, you will see what I mean.” He pats my hand reassuringly.

“So, the ritual. Is it painful?” I ask hesitantly, almost not wanting to know. Yes, he already told me not to ask, but I can’t help myself.

He shakes his head at me, pinching the bridge of his nose before looking at me again.

“I should’ve known you wouldn’t take my advice on going in blind. But no, it’s not painful. Not as such, but it does depend on how much comes back to you at the beginning, if it’s one big hit or a trickle. It is different for each of us each time. Fate is a bit of a minx like that.” He winks at me and I laugh, some of the tension leaving me.

“Thank you, I needed that.” I smile.

“Of course, my dear, it is what I am here for. Now, speaking of the ritual, if you have no other questions, since you’re dressed, we shall begin.” He stands and offers me his hand. I take it and stand beside him. Ready or not, I guess.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



I follow Ben back into the main domed room that Creek showed me earlier, except now, all but one of the Elders' chairs are full, and my family and friends are dotted around the edges of the room. Even Nate made it back. I smile at him and he winks at me, setting me at ease a little.

I pull the robe tighter as we walk across the room to the altar. My hair floats around me, free from its binding, and Ben takes my hand.

"I present Remington Elise Bennett to the Elders, ready and prepared to take her oaths as a Hunter," he says, and they all murmur their acceptance back.

"Do you, Remington, swear to uphold the Hunter laws, our way of life, and vow to protect our faction against all odds, at all costs?" the man in the center chair of the platform asks and I gulp, because I don't even really know what I'm agreeing to. But I clear my throat regardless.

"I do," I say clearly, trying to hide the nervousness I feel.

"Then let us begin," his voice booms around the room and it's as if a blanket settles over me, a weight I didn't feel before. Ben motions for me to remove the robe and lie on the altar, so I do, and holy motherfuckers this shit is cold. I can't help the goosebumps that cover my body as I lie down, trying not to squeak as my bare skin comes into contact with the dark stone.

"*Fata vocant, ad hanc adducere nos ut in venator nobis,*" Ben says as he stands at the head of the altar, placing his hands on my temples. "*Rogamus autem vos, Angelus scientiam, ut restituat in aedis dedicandae se unum ex memoria vobis.*"

I lie still when the room begins to get brighter and heat rises from the altar below me. The symbols carved into the stone around me begin to glow, and I just know that the symbols beneath me are glowing too.

"Close your eyes," Ben whispers to me, and I do, unsure of what is to come.

"Remington Bennett, your body is marked with the symbols of the Angels, one for each life you have had, for each life you have dedicated to the cause." His voice rings out, and I feel the symbols on my body, they almost itch, and it's as if they're coming to life.

"Angelus autem ducibus nobis dona puer hic noster de quo in suis bonis quasi unus accipit vera semita."

His voice grows distant, and the pain increases as the marks on my body increase in heat.

"Ut rogatus est, et illud fieri."

The Latin becomes nothing more than a whisper as agony racks my body and my mind, and I feel tears stream down my face as the intensity grows too much.

Pictures inside my head hit me, feelings, faces and so much more. My mind screams at the flood of memories until I can't hold it any longer and the screams escape me. I try to move, to escape, but my body is held in place, trapped. And then, a warmth washes over me and the pain subsides as the heat grows at the back of my neck, a pressure growing, and just when I think I can't take it any longer, it releases, and I hear an intake of breaths and groans in the room around me. Relief floods me momentarily and I open my eyes, sitting up slowly, finding the others in the room sitting on the floor, either groaning or holding their heads.

Well shit.

"What the hell was that?" one of the Elders asks, looking to Ben who is sprawled on the floor at the head of the altar. I jump down and go to him, his nose bleeding.

Please don't let me have killed him.

I check and he's still breathing, so I shake him gently, and he moans as he comes around, opening his eyes slowly.

"Are you okay?" I ask, and he laughs.

"I'm quite fine," he says, sitting up.

"You need to explain," one of the female Elders says. "This is quite unusual."

I look around the room at the bewildered looks of my family. Of course, I get to be the weirdo among the freaking monster Hunters.

"It was the power of the Angel. Apparently, Remington here was Angel-blessed in one of her past lives, and because the flood of memories was more than I have ever known, possibly because of her age span, the Angel's protection kicked in to keep her safe."

The others in the room all look at me, a mixture of shock and awe, with a hint of suspicion from some of the Elders too.

"Angel-blessed? Well, I'll be damned." Dad's voice echoes across the room, and I look at him as I slip the robe back on from where it was pooled on the floor.

"Erm, are you sure it worked properly? I don't feel any different," I say quietly to Ben as I help him stand.

"Yes dear, it went almost exactly as planned. It will take a few days, and then all that was restored today will become a part of you fully. You may feel a little disoriented for a few days, so I suggest resting. But, let me be the first to say, welcome to our faction." He bows slightly and I cringe a little, trying not to let it show because why the hell would he bow?

"Thank you," I say to him before turning to my dad, who has moved to stand at my back.

"Thank you, all of you, for receiving us, and so quickly," he says, meeting each of the Elders' eyes.

"You are welcome," Ben tells him with a warm smile, and I feel my dad's hand settle on my shoulder.

"Let's get you dressed, Remy, and then we can head back to the house." His gruff voice reassures me, he's still my dad, I'm still me, even with everything. I nod and walk from the room, leaving behind the noise of chatter that starts as I leave.

Hurrying into the room I was in before, I discard the robe and throw on my jeans, T-shirt, and chucks, slinging my jacket over my shoulder, and hauling ass out the way we came in. I don't want to be here longer than I have to be. This place creeps me out... a lot.

"Where you running to?" Creek calls out behind me as I reach the stairs to climb out of here.

"I need some air, you coming?"

He nods and jogs toward me, joining me as I almost run up the stairs, pushing open the heavy door with a thud. I suck in deep breaths of the fresh

air and just breathe until my heart stops racing.

"Well, you just always have to outdo us all, don't you?" Creek teases, nudging me with his shoulder.

"What can I say, I'm just that awesome." I laugh and walk toward the car. "I suppose everyone's going to want to know about the Angel-blessed thing, huh?"

"You could say that." He laughs. "I've never, in all my lives, heard of anyone being Angel-blessed, so I'm going to guess that, yes, people are going to have questions." I groan and he laughs again as he climbs into his truck.

"Want to grab donuts and coffee on the way back? Give yourself some more time and a little space, before the madness at your dad's begins?"

"Yes, hell freaking yes. You are a godsend, Creek Winchester!"

"Technically, Angel sent, but eh, details." He laughs, and I shove him playfully. "Buckle up, Angel-girl. Donuts are calling to me!"

We pull up my dad's driveway and I groan. I might have just shoveled my way through three raspberry glazed donuts, and I'm not even a little guilty about it, but my stomach is now so bloated that I feel like I need to unbutton my jeans.

"I told you that you shouldn't have eaten that last one," Creek gloats, and I just give him the bird.

"You don't get to donut-shame me. I needed them. Every single one." He laughs and shakes his head at me before his face turns serious.

"How is your head? Has anything filtered through yet?" he asks, almost eagerly, and I hate to disappoint him, but I shake my head.

"Other than the itching on the back of my neck, I don't feel any different at all really." I shrug, unsure if this is a bad thing or not.

"Let me see your neck?" he asks, so I unbuckle as we pull to a stop and turn in the seat, lifting my hair off the back of my neck, and he gasps.

"Holy shit, Remy. You're marked by Leviathan," he says, the awe in his voice startling me. "Your Angel mark is bigger than usual, it goes down under your top, but sitting above the Hunter's usual marking, is Leviathan's sigil. I'm going to take a stab in the dark and say that's who blessed you, and holy shit."

"Who the hell is Leviathan?" I ask, dropping my hair back into place.

"We should go inside, your dad will know more than I do," he says before jumping out of the truck and grabbing the boxes of donuts from the back seat. I sigh, because that isn't what I wanted to hear, and I'm sure that when my memories come back, I'll know who the bloody hell Leviathan is, but for now I'm clueless. Climbing out of the truck, I try not to scratch the itch at the back of my neck, which has started to descend over my shoulder. Shaking it off, I close the door and follow Creek across the drive, where I can already hear voices from the back of the house.

Oh, the wonders of Hunter hearing. I try to shut it out, I don't need to hear all the voices, but it makes a lot more sense now why my parents bought this place—it's so secluded there's no other houses within miles, so no extra voices to filter out.

I pull my jacket tighter as I head inside and Colt meets me at the door with a stupid grin on his face.

"Hey, little sister. Welcome to the clan for reals."

"You're such a goofball, Colt." I push him out of the way, and he laughs again.

"Yeah, but you wouldn't change me for the world!" His voice follows me as I walk through the house back to the kitchen where everyone else will be congregated. It has been the same way for as long as I can remember.

I enter the room and it goes quiet, except for the sound of Colt still laughing as he walks up behind me.

"So, that was fun," I say with a shrug and take off my jacket, the temperature inside here hot as hell. I look around the room and take a seat at the table, grabbing another donut and ignoring the fact that I'm going to practically burst. Emotional eating is a real thing.

"Remy," my dad starts, but Maddie interrupts him.

"Now then, her memories won't be back fully for the next few days, so no questions, from any of you." She pins everyone with a look that says not to give her shit, and Nate laughs next to her.

"My wife, badass, mother extraordinaire, and layer-down of the law." He takes a sip from the mug in his hand, his eyes still dancing with laughter.

"Don't you start." She rolls her eyes at him, but the rest of the room murmurs in agreement.

"Remy is marked by Leviathan," Creek drops, and all gazes shoot to him before turning to me.

"Leviathan? That isn't possible," my dad says as Bauer leaves the room, and the stairs creak under his weight as he climbs them. I assume he's going up to the library, because as much as my eldest brother loves cars, he is also a total book nerd. "Remy, will you show us your mark?"

"Sure, I just showed Creek. I don't understand what the big deal is though." I stand and turn my back to them, pulling my hair up.

"Erm, Remy, it's still growing," Creek says and Maddie shushes him.

"Growing?" I ask warily.

"Yes sweetheart," Maddie says softly, closer to me than I thought. "I've never seen anything like it, but it's beautiful. The back of your neck, and from what I can tell, it's growing across your shoulder."

She pulls the back of my T-shirt from my neck and hums. "Just as I thought. Your Hunter mark is there, in the middle at the base of your neck, but it is surrounded by the mark of Leviathan, and then something extra that I don't recognize. It's like roots, or vines, with bursts of color and symbols. I imagine Bauer will want to start looking into this straight away."

"Will I not remember what it means?" I ask, puzzled.

"Not necessarily," Bauer says as he re-enters the room with a book bound in brown leather, that looks older than anything I've ever seen. He sits across from me at the table and opens the book.

"This is the mark of the Hunter," he says, showing me an image on a page surrounded by text that I only half recognize.

"Is that Latin?" I ask and he nods.

"It is the old language," Dad answers from across the room.

"Once your memories return, you'll be able to read it, write it, and speak it as well as the rest of us. And anything that's missing, Bauer can help you with," Nate says reassuringly.

"Okay. Can I see that?" I ask Bauer who nods and spins the book so I can see the image. It looks so strange, and yet at the same time, so familiar. A circle, wrapped in vines, and a sword through the middle, the hilt above the circle, as if the sword is piercing it.

"Every Hunter has one," Bauer says and lifts his arm to show me his, on his wrist, surrounded by tattoos so that it's almost hidden. "We tend to disguise them when they're in an obvious place, so it's not just like a beacon to the other factions. They appear in different places in each life, but your old mark will be represented by a constellation, which people just assume are weird birthmarks, just as you always have. The more marks, the more respect

a Hunter is given in the community. Unless they have been cast out as rogues for whatever reason."

"We can be cast out?" I ask, my head whipping to my dad, Nate, and Maddie. Creek and Colt are unusually quiet, but then, they've always been the most in tune with me, so I guess they're trying to give me the space Maddie called for.

"We can," Nate says. "It is unusual though. If a Hunter breaks our laws, depending on the crime, there are two punishments. Banishment, which is being cast out of the community, or death. Upon rebirth, if killed, Hunters are usually not given the choice again until they have cycled at least twice as a human as part of their punishment."

"Holy shit," I say, wide-eyed. "Nice of you all to have left out these wonderful snippets of information until there's no turning back."

"Remy, you have never been cast out or killed for breaking laws," my dad says, and Nate looks at him. I can't read it, but it's as if I'm missing something, a silent conversation between them. My dad shakes his head subtly and I tuck that away, because I'm definitely missing something here—maybe my memories will reveal the full truth. "I'm sure you have nothing to worry about."

I look back to Bauer who is scanning the book again, biting my tongue rather than going off about everyone just casually leaving those details out. Even Ben didn't mention those.

Assholes. All of them.

Swallowing the anger that spikes, I shake my head and focus. "Is there a picture of Leviathan's mark in there, or am I going to have to do a weird mirror jig later?"

"I'll find you a picture of Leviathan's mark," he tells me, "but your mark is more than just that, hence the book. As for our laws, there are a lot, most will likely come back to you but the most important ones are do not betray your faction, do not allow humans to become aware of any faction, and under no circumstances, no mixing of the factions."

"No mixing of the factions? What the...?"

"There have been Hunters in our history who thought the monsters were more than the filth that they are," my dad says with disgust. "They thought they could be saved, that they were not so different from us. Fools."

"Oooohhhh." My dad's disgust is matched on every face before me. I guess it's because I don't have my memories, but I don't get it. Love is love,

right? But I'll be keeping those thoughts to myself; I don't think this is the crowd for it. And who knows, maybe I'll change my mind once the memories come back.

"Exactly. But for now, try not to worry about all of this. You just need to focus on staying rested and letting the memories come back to you."

"Well, actually, I was thinking we could have some fun, see how much is back subconsciously," Colt says with a devilish glint in his eye. "Throwing competition, anybody?"

Nate and my dad laugh as Bauer and Creek roll their eyes.

"Really, Colt? You just don't want Remy to beat you." Maddie says with a smile.

"Hey, I'll take what I can get for as long as I can. I'm all about playing the odds to my advantage."

"What do you mean throwing competition?"

"Knife throwing," Creek informs me with a grin. "It might be a stupid competition, but it's fun as shit. Plus, you used to kick everyone's ass, almost every time, so it might be nice, treat you to some humility in case everything comes back before you need to hone your skills."

"Is this a good idea? I've never thrown knives in my life, and if my ball throwing skills are anything to go by, this could be dangerous."

"You'll be fine, we're Hunters. We're made of tougher stuff," Colt says cockily.

"Or at least we heal quickly," Creek says with a shrug.

"Why not?" Nate shrugs, and my dad shakes his head.

"Fine, come on. Let's get the targets set up. Colt, your idea, your responsibility, so you get to help me and Nate haul everything out of the shed." He strides across the room, giving me a small smile, and heads out the back door into the yard, with Nate, Colt, and Creek in tow.

"Men, I will never understand them. No matter how many lives I live. Their incessant need to compete for everything never changes," Maddie says sitting next to me. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay, I think. I'm a little freaked about the weird blessing and my freakazoid mark that's apparently growing, but otherwise, I'm okay. I mean, I'm sure there's going to be a point where I have a complete meltdown, but that's future Remy's problem. For right now, I'm dealing."

"I'm glad to hear it, sweetheart. I know none of this is easy, but I must remind you that you can't say a word to Nirvana," she urges.

"I know, I would never endanger her. She's going through enough as it is, she doesn't need any of this on top of it, even if she could know." I smile at her and she returns it.

"She told you?" she asks, and I nod. "It figures, she's always seen you as a big sister more than anything else. I'm glad she has you to confide in. And I'm glad you'll be there when it's her turn for all of this."

"Me too. I can't imagine going through all of this with no one around to answer questions, and just stop my general freak-outs. I can't imagine how hard it must have been for Bauer."

"There is a reason that boy always has his nose in a book when he's not hunting," she says with a sad smile. "Your mom was great with him though. Your dad and Nate, they can be a little draconian with their methods, so be thankful it's Bauer training you. In the lives where you were the only child, your arguments with your father while training are almost legendary. Your mom would lose her mind."

"I'm looking forward to remembering." I sigh wistfully. It will be nice to have all these memories that everyone else already seems to have.

"Don't forget, you might not remember everything. It is rare for a Hunter to regain all of their memories. I've only heard of it happening once in all of our history, so there might be holes, or stories someone has that you have no recollection of. You'll learn to embrace it. It also takes time, so try not to get too frustrated. With as many lives as you've lived, I can tell you, there are always things you'd rather not remember."

I hug her as shouts carry through to the house from outside. "I guess we better head out there."

"Oh no, I'm not getting involved. They're all such sore losers. You go, I'm going to whip together some food for lunch. I have a feeling everyone's going to be hungry after this." She chuckles and shoos me out of the door.

I cross the grass until I find the four of them about half a mile from the house, with five targets set up, each one farther back than the one before it. The fifth one is so far back, I can barely see the black dot in the center.

"This doesn't look impossible at all." I roll my eyes and they all chuckle.

"It'll be good practice. You can always have a few practice shots at the trees if you want. Seems fair," Colt says cockily.

"Hand me the stupid knives," I tell him, putting my hand out to him. He hands over five blades. I put four of them on the ground at my feet and get a feel for the one left. The weight and balance of it feels so familiar that I hide

a smile and watch as each of them takes a turn at the first target.

Everyone hits the yellow ring, so close to the black dot, but not quite there.

I step up to the mark on the ground, and palm the knife until it feels just right. Reaching back, I throw the knife forward, watching in awe as it hits the yellow ring. Not quite where I was aiming for, but for a first go, I'll take it. I whoop and Colt grumbles behind me.

"Beginner's luck."

"Don't be sore, Colt." Nate chuckles as my dad makes a note of who came closest and we get points, one to five depending where we hit. I got two points, having come fourth, with only Creek below me. He gives me a smile that lights up his whole face and I know he's not pissed I beat him. It's only the first throw anyway.

The second target goes much the same, yellow ring all around, but this time I get third, and Nate grumbles too about stupid girls and beginner's luck, while I do nothing but smile. Something about this feels so right, like something I've done a million times before. Like this is my thing, when I've never really had a thing other than dancing, and I'm not going to lie, it feels kind of epic.

"This is why you have the Archer's mark," Creek whispers to me from behind, closer than I'd realized he was standing.

"I have what?" I ask, not moving away from him, barely any space between my back and his front.

"The Archer's mark. One of your constellations. You've always been an excellent marksman. Your constellations represent parts of you from each life. Colt knows this, I don't know why he always thinks he'll beat you, but every life, he always tries. I just like watching him eat his words." His breath warms my ear and I shiver.

"Your turn, Creek," Nate says, eyeing us with another look that I can't read. Creek steps away from me and to the mark for the third target and hits the red ring with a shrug. I see my dad and Nate's knives in the yellow, my dad's closer than Nate's, but still no black dot.

Colt swaggers forward and throws, but his frustration is clear before he releases the knife and builds further when it rides the line of red and yellow. "Fuck's sake."

"It's okay, you might still beat me," I goad, and he gives me the finger, making me laugh. "It's all just good fun, you big baby. Suck it up."

I step forward and take the spot he was just in. Taking a deep breath, I focus on the target, filtering out the world around me in a way I didn't think possible. Without thinking too much, I release the knife and wait, holding my breath as it hits its mark. Riding the line of the yellow ring and the black dot.

"Well, hot damn!" My dad whoops, "she's still got it." I clap my hands and grin at his praise while the others just grumble. "That's my girl," he says as I walk past him and gives me a high five. I haven't seen my dad this loose and happy in forever, it's nice.

"You showing them how it's done?" Maddie calls as she reaches us back here, protecting her eyes from the sun.

"She sure is," Nate shouts back, and she laughs.

"Lunch is nearly done, so don't take too much longer."

"Yes, ma'am," Nate tells her with a salute and I laugh as she blows him a kiss. I wonder if my parents would still be as happy as they were if Mom was still alive.

I watch as they each throw at the fourth target, closer this time than last, but I still take top place when I graze the center dot again.

"Last chance, Colt. You're third. Your sister is winning. You think you can take her? There's only a point in it." My dad goads him light-heartedly as Colt steps up to the mark.

"Shut it, old man. I've got this." He rolls his shoulders and stretches out his neck.

"Get on with it, stop delaying the inevitable," Nate calls out with a laugh. Apparently they don't mind losing as much as my brother does.

He throws and lets out a yell as his knife hits the center of the target. "Hell fucking yes. Now you can go eat crow, old man."

Nate waves him off and goes to retrieve the knife. "Only fair that we clear the board for everyone on this one."

The others take their turns, none coming as close to the central dot, but not seeming to mind. I step up to the mark and Creek appears behind me again. "You've got this. I've seen you make this hit without even thinking about it more times than I can count. Your mind is remembering, even if you can't tell. Don't think, just let go."

I take a deep breath and try to focus like I did before, filtering out the noise, letting go of everything, and focusing on nothing but the target and the weight of the knife in my hand. I line myself up and close my eyes, letting my instincts take over as I release the blade.

"Holy shit," I hear Colt say before I open my eyes and see my knife embedded deep in the target, dead center.

"Wooooo!" I cry out and Creek laughs, lifting me up and spinning me around.

"I knew you could do it," he says as he puts me back down, and Colt groans.

"Come on, this is so unfair!" he whines, and I can't help but laugh.

"Better luck next time? It was only one point, who knows, maybe it was a fluke." I wink at him, and my dad and Nate laugh.

"Something like that," my dad says, shaking his head. "Colt, get this shit packed up, we'll meet you inside."

"Come on, man. I'll help you," Creek says to him as I head inside with my dad and Nate, to find a grinning Maddie flitting around the kitchen, setting the table and humming to herself.

"You show them how it's done?" she asks when she turns and sees us.

"You know she did," Nate says with a wide smile. "Colt was pissed as ever. Poor guy, you'd think after this many years, he'd have accepted it."

"He'll never accept it—he's a Bennett," Bauer says as he appears in the room.

"Did you find anything?" I ask, but Maddie interrupts before he has a chance to respond.

"Enough of that. It can wait until after everyone eats."

"Yes, ma'am," Bauer says with a smile as she clucks at him, and he takes a seat at the table. I sit down opposite him, in the seat I've sat in all my life, and the others join us as Maddie lays out a feast before us. How she whipped this up while we were outside fucking around astonishes me. Cooking is not a skill of mine. The eggs, ham, cheeses, and pastries make my mouth water as she adds potatoes and other meats too.

"Dig in!" she announces and it's like feeding time at the zoo. Luckily, I grew up like this, so I'm used to practically fighting for my food, but I guess that's part of the fun of eating like this, with the ones you love.

I stuff my face, despite the donuts earlier, and content sighs and groans ripple around the room as Maddie smiles from her seat.

"I'm glad that you all enjoyed it." She beams. It's so hard to try and imagine her out killing beasts and kicking ass when she's always seemed like such a homebody to me. She excels at the things I know I never will; she's such a mom. That's something I don't think I'd be that great at, and

considering this life, I'm not sure it's something I'd choose.

It hits me then that I don't know if I've ever had children, and I'm not sure that I want to know yet, so I tuck the question away for another time. Maybe once my memories are back, I won't have to ask.

I stand and start to clear the table. Bauer joins me and helps me load the dishwasher while the others all talk around the table.

"So, did you find the mark? Do you know what I means?" I ask quietly, hoping that the others' conversation will distract them enough from my question.

"I did, but I don't know, there isn't much information about it, or about being Angel-blessed, at least, not that I could find yet. I'll keep looking though."

"Thanks, Bauer. I appreciate it."

"Anything for you, Rem. Now you should probably go rest. It might not feel like it right now, but the ritual takes a lot out of you. The next few days are going to suck." He gives me a sad smile and I worry about how much he's not telling me.

Bauer wasn't wrong. I went up to my old room yesterday afternoon and fell asleep. The strangest dreams haunted me, and when I woke up this morning I felt like death. Genuine death, and fuck my fucking life. I threw up the minute I stood, so that was fun. So much for the all powerful, kick-ass Remy Bennett my brothers keep going on about. I feel like shit.

After the excitement of all that, I shoved some dry toast down my throat, even passing on coffee, and came back to bed. I've tried to go back to sleep for the last few hours, but I just can't. The headaches that keep assaulting me are devastating. Each time I come out of them, I feel a little different, like I'm a different person, but only kind of. It's the weirdest sensation. But one upside, I'm remembering things. Like the names of the constellations that make up my birthmarks, or old Angel marks, or whatever the hell it is. I can't remember why I got those specific ones yet, beyond the archer that Creek told me about, but I have the weirdest snippets. I feel so shitty, I haven't even taken a second to look at my marks. I've seen hints over my shoulder, Bauer says it's growing, so I'm just going to wait till I don't feel like my eyes are

going to fall out of my head by trying to catch a glimpse myself. Especially with everything hitting me like it is right now.

I have memories of moments with people I don't know, like the dreams I was having weeks ago. I know that Kain is someone I've worked with a lot, but I also get the feeling he isn't someone I should mention to my family, but I have no idea why. Instinct tells me to keep my mouth shut though, so that's what I'm going to do. Not everything is meant to be shared, my mom used to tell me that when I was younger, and it's never made more sense to me than it does now.

I also know that I'm meant to have the sword that Colt tried to give me before. Now that my memories are starting to filter through, I feel like I'm missing a limb without it. I've had the sword forever, it's been with me through everything. That much I know.

I also remembered about obsidian, how it is a Lycan's greatest weakness, and that iridium in any form is enough to kill a Dracul, but you're still better off taking their heads. Apparently, my film references are completely wrong, because according to Ben and my newfound memories, sunlight, garlic, holy water, mirrors—all big myths. They don't sparkle either.

Bummer.

They look exactly like humans, except more ethereal; the only difference is the copper ring around the outside of their irises to give them away. Not exactly the most obvious detail but thank the Fates for Hunter eyesight apparently. I don't remember much about Lycans yet, I'm pretty sure that will come, but the Dracul haunted my dreams last night.

“How you feeling, Remy?” Colt pokes his head around the door of my bedroom, letting in a dim light, which still manages to make my eyes water.

“I'd be better in darkness,” I tell him, pulling the comforter up over my head. I hear his chuckle and a click as the door closes.

“That better?” he asks and the mattress dips. I pull the comforter back down and find him sitting cross-legged at the end of my bed. Seeing his hulk at the end of my queen bed is amusing as fuck, because he looks so out of place, but I swallow the laugh, because my head hurts enough as it is.

“Much, thank you.”

“How's your head?” he asks, and as I sit up properly, I get the feeling he needs to talk. It's not often he looks this serious.

“It's been better, stuff is starting to come back to me. It's a bit of a jumbled mess, and I feel more confused than anything, but I could be worse I

guess." I shrug. "Is it always like this?"

He nods, looking solemn. "Yeah, it sucks ass. I was in bed for a week, but then, my ritual wasn't as dramatic as yours. I didn't get all of my memories, even after six months, so there are still gaps, but most stuff has been filled in. The important stuff anyway." I smile at him and he shrugs. "I think you might get it all back."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Being Angel-blessed is no joke. It's like a fairytale to Hunters. A story from generations before us. From the beginning. Of those who managed such feats that they became Angel-blessed, with great powers, beyond those of a normal Hunter. And, I mean, you were kinda beyond anyway. If I'm honest, it kind of scares me, Remy. It's going to make you an even bigger target, and not just to the other factions. Not all Hunters are what they seem, so just be careful, okay? Once it's safe to fill you in completely, I will. I trust you, you're blood. I know you wouldn't betray us, or the faction. You've always been about the greater cause. Just trust me, and outside of the people you know closest, trust no one. Not even the Elders."

"I'm not scared, Colt, I mean, look at how the mark tried to protect me at the ritual, and something inside me tells me that was just a tiny warning hit. But if it makes you feel better, I'll be careful."

"Thanks, Remy. Bauer asked me to check on you and your mark. Get some pictures." He waves his phone in front of his face. "That okay?"

"Sure," I nod and move so my back is facing him. I lift my hair out of the way, and close my eyes as the flash lights up the room.

"So, this is weird, but... can you lift your top?" I can practically hear him squirm behind me and I laugh.

"Colt, it's just my back, it's not like we've never been swimming together." I roll my eyes and lift my tank top, his intake of breath making me pause.

"It's grown, hasn't it?" I sigh.

"You could say that, yeah." He snaps a few more pictures and I pull my top down. "You need anything else before I head out? I'm hitting the gym with Creek for a bit before our patrol tonight."

"No, I'm good, thank you. Just tell Bauer to let me know what he finds. Oh, and can you send me those pictures? As soon as I can stand the light, I want to take a look." He nods and my phone buzzes on the nightstand. "Thanks."

"Anything for you, little bit. Catch you later."

"I'm not going anywhere." I reassure him and lie back down, wondering what Colt meant about the Elders but too tired to really care about asking. I close my eyes and decide not to worry about it. Fates knows I've got enough to worry about right now as it is. My head starts pounding, a low thrum, and I know what's coming, so I get comfortable and pray for sleep.

The branches of the trees whip my face as I tear through the forest, running faster than I ever remember running. I hear them behind me, the rogue Lycans from the nest I found tonight. Of course, I'd insisted on coming alone, one little Lycan nest is nothing, I'm a fucking idiot.

I pause, holding my breath and focusing on listening to their steps. The thuds of movement become rhythmic, and I realize they've shifted. Mother fuckers.

I debate climbing the trees, wolves and climbing, not two things that typically go together, but that seems like the easy way out, and Remington Bennett has never taken the easy way out. Never.

I take a deep breath and start running again. I head west to the clearing I found on the way here, knowing that I've got a better chance of surviving if I have space to fight, rather than darting through these goddamn trees.

Howls ring out around me as the wolves notice the new hint of fear in my scent. The pounding behind me grows closer and I push harder—this is not my night to die.

I reach the clearing, completely empty, lit by the glow of the full moon. If Lycans could only shift with a full moon, that would make the rest of the month so much easier.

"Hunter," the half-shifted man growls as he breaks the tree line.

"You guys should have just gone on your way, rather than chasing me. That was a stupid idea."

"You slaughtered our mates!" the woman who just broke the tree line screams.

"You shouldn't have left the safety of your pack, I guess. Rogue wolves are easier to track. Easier to put down." I shrug, faking the nonchalance I wish I felt.

I draw the swords from my back, only one of them lethal to the Lycans emerging from the trees, but considering there's six of them and one of me, I'll take my chances on any injuries. I already took out six of these shit heads. I have no idea how so many rogues banded together. Usually they travel in pairs, or as a foursome max.

I spin slowly, making eye contact with each of them, taking note of the markings on those who are half turned, or in their human skin. There are twelve packs on this continent. All led by the Alpha of Alphas, Roman Knight. But some of these markings don't belong to the American packs. I don't even recognize some of them, but I can't focus on that right now.

"We are pack," the first man who spoke growls, his voice more wolf than man. At his words, two of the shifted charge toward me.

I raise my swords, ready for their attack. They come at me from opposite sides, and I don't even think, I just feel. I raise one blade and drop one knee as the first jumps for my throat. My blade pierces their chest and I drag downward to the stomach, blood spraying around me, covering me, but I barely notice it as the other charges straight for me. It knocks into me, throwing me backward. I groan as I roll but end up crouched as it charges me again, and the half-turned woman runs at me too. I sheath the obsidian sword, and pull the gun from my thigh holster.

"Fuck this shit." I aim and fire, the woman almost looks stunned as the bullet hits her in the heart and she drops as the wolf bites down on my shoulder. I grit my teeth as it locks on. This isn't my first bite, but Fates, does that shit hurt. I swap hands on my gun and shoot the wolf between the eyes. The whine as it releases my shoulder and falls to the ground barely registers as I shoot two others who start moving toward me.

"Really? Do you have a death wish?" I shout to the others, but I can tell that the rage and blood lust have taken them. Fucking rogues.

"Guns are for the weak, Hunter. And there was me thinking the great and legendary Remington Bennett was more of a Hunter than that," the leader goads, but I roll my eyes, feeling the holes on my shoulder starting to close.

"Guns are for the clever, moron. But if you want to do this the old way, I am more than happy to kill you with my hands." I smirk and sheath my sword and gun.

"That ego is going to be the death of you," the other man on the edge of the clearing says quietly, but it still reaches me, like he knew it would, and I shrug.

"I earned my ego, pup."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," he mutters and moves quicker than I've ever seen a Lycan move. I duck and feel his fist glance off of my wounded shoulder rather than my face where he was aiming, but I don't manage to escape the second fist to my ribs. I grit my teeth and pull a throwing knife from my hip.

Fuck this.

I jab at the Lycan, quick, fatal hits. Throat, thigh, chest. So quick he doesn't register until it's too late. I feel movement behind me and throw the blade backward, then I hear the moment it hits its mark in the other man's throat.

"I tried to warn you. I was even going to let you live to make better choices, but you fucking morons just couldn't take the out. Couldn't just go back to Roman. Now look at you." I shake my head and wipe some of the blood from my face, feeling it smear.

"You will regret this," the wolf at my feet utters, his breath labored.

"I don't think I will," I say, kneeling down to him and putting my hands on either side of his face. I twist, and the bones snap. He'd have bled out anyway so this seems kinder. I'm a Hunter, not a sadist.

The gurgled breath of the other wolf reaches me, and I sigh. I turn and head over to him, removing the blade from his throat and wiping it on my leather pants before tucking it away. He grabs my ankle, and his claws tear through my pants and Achilles. I bite my lip to stop from screaming but grab my gun and shoot the mother fucker between the eyes before falling backward onto my ass.

"Fuck!" I shout into the silence of the forest. There is no way that is going to heal quickly enough for me to get out of here on my own.

"You need a hand?" The voice echoes around the clearing, and my head droops.

"And you couldn't weigh in before now?" I bite out.

"You know I couldn't."

"Fucking bullshit faction politics."

"It is what it is."

"Are you going to help me or not?" I clench my teeth as I try to stand and fail.

"I will. I'm just cherishing this moment, when the great Remington Bennet needs my help." His dark hair reflects the moonlight, and his laugh does

things to my body that it has no business doing. He sniffs my arousal as it peaks. "Needs more than just my help," he says, practically purring.

"Roman, I swear to the Fates."

I wake up in a pool of sweat, panting. What the fuck was that, and why was the Alpha of Alpha's helping me?

CHAPTER TWELVE



Four days have passed, and I finally feel like I can breathe again. While my memories are not even close to back and I'm more confused than I've ever been in my life, I'm keeping everything to myself until I understand more. Like why the hell I was working with Roman Knight, and who the hell Kain is and how he factors into everything.

Other stuff makes more sense. I remember more about what we are, our ways, and it's strange, because I see the old me in my mind, and it's like it's a different person. I don't feel like her, I don't think I even really look *that much* like her, except for my eyes. Maybe my cheekbones and lips too, I guess.

Maybe I'm just in denial still, because really, I can tell that it's me, even if my brain doesn't want to accept it yet. It's my violet eyes that give it away. There really isn't much denying it, no matter what my logical brain tries to make me believe.

I shower and dress for the first time in days, and that alone makes me feel a lot better. On my way down the stairs, I hear banging in the kitchen, followed by Bauer cussing. I guess he's trying to cook. It never was a skill of his. Of any of ours other than Mom really.

I laugh when I find him covered in what I'm assuming is egg, from the looks of it. The glass bowl lies on its side at his feet, the rest of the mixture pooling around him.

"Having fun?" I smirk, and he looks up and groans.

"Barrel of laughs. Can't you see this is my favorite thing?" he mutters as

he bends down and picks up the bowl.

"How about I clean that up while you change, and we go out for breakfast? Molly's still does the best breakfast stack on this side of the world." I smile, and the one he gives me in return warms my heart. I haven't been that close to Bauer in recent years, but now with some of my memories back, I know that we weren't always as distant as it's felt lately. Sometimes, he's been like the other side of the same coin that is me.

"I'm glad to see you're feeling better, but yeah, that sounds great. We better check to see if the others want to come. If we go to Molly's without them, heads will roll." He laughs and heads upstairs to change while I clean the gloopy mess up.

Once it's dealt with I pour myself a coffee and just enjoy feeling more like myself than I have in a while. The cloud of everything with Jack doesn't seem so dark and heavy anymore. Fates knows I've dealt with worse heartbreak than that. In this life, and in others. Even if I don't remember what they are, I can feel it. That this isn't going to break me. The weight of all things Hunter weighs down on me, but it also doesn't feel crippling, as if I know that my memories are coming back and I know I can deal with the burden it brings, like I have a dozen times before.

I smile into my coffee cup as Colt bounds into the kitchen with a huge grin. I guess it makes more sense to me now why my brothers never moved out of here. Safety in numbers, out in the middle of nowhere so should anything happen, no innocents get caught in the crossfire, but if they think I'm giving up my apartment, they can think again.

"You're back!" he says as he slides into the chair beside me. "And we're going to Molly's!"

"You're very excited for this time of day." I laugh.

"It's Molly's. Of course I'm excited! I've been gone a long time. There were no Molly's out there. I missed that place *hard*. I texted Creek, he's going to meet us there. I swear he was more excited about that than going on patrol last night," he says, shaking his head, before leaning forward and pulling something out of his back pocket. "Your keys. Your cat is a menace, but he's been fed, watered, let out, and let back in. I have the cuts to prove it. Little shit."

I laugh as he rolls up his sleeves, seeing the faint lines that are obviously from Sushi are almost healed.

"Big bad Hunter can't even take on my poor little pussy cat. How on earth

do you survive out there?" I tease.

He shoves me gently and I laugh again as Bauer joins us. "Dad's not coming, he's working on something this morning, but asked us to bring him something back."

"Sounds good to me," I say, standing as my stomach growls.

"I call shotgun!" Colt shouts and bounds out of the house. I swear to all the fates, he has Peter Pan syndrome.

"I guess you're driving," I say to Bauer, since my car is still parked at home.

"Fine by me," he says with a grin. "Better than letting you drive."

"Hey! I am not a bad driver."

"Whatever you say!" He shakes his head as he chuckles, and I follow him out of the door.

Breakfast was amazing as ever, and being around those three as they gossiped away about this and that felt so natural, so right. They were talking about a night from about a hundred years ago, and I laughed with them as they told the story, right before it popped into my head. It is still the strangest sensation, but with each memory that comes back, I feel more myself. More confident in the decision I made. And yet, my heart still hurts, even though it's been broken before. Being around everyone makes me feel like I'm home, but a part of me still misses Jack and the chance of a normal life. Still misses dancing and the pressures of my job.

Bauer dropped me off at home twenty minutes ago, and I've been pottering around, trying to figure out what to do with myself. I have so much weird nervous energy.

My phone rings, startling me from my ponderings. Creek's face stares up at me from my phone and I smile.

"Hey, what's up? Miss me already?" I joke as I answer the phone.

"Hey, I was just deciding what to do for the day, and I wondered if you were up for a drive?" Creek's gravelly voice filters through the phone, and I tamper down the wistful fluttering of my heart. Not only is it way too soon since everything with Jack, but Creek is my friend, always has been, and that's it as far as I can remember. The last thing I want to do is ruin that.

"Sounds fun! Can we take my Mustang?" I plead. I miss driving her. The last time I did was when I picked them up from the airport.

"We could, except, where we're going might just kill her, so probably best to just take my truck." I can hear his smile in his words.

"*Fine!*" I concede. "How long 'til you're here?"

"Well, I mean, I'm kinda downstairs already."

I laugh at his words.

"Of course you are." I shake my head. "Give me two minutes and I'll be down."

I grab my jacket and pull on my Chucks. My jeans and T-shirt should be good for wherever we're heading, so I pull my ridiculously long hair up into a messy ponytail and grab my keys, scratching Sushi behind the ears before I head out and down to where Creek is waiting.

Parked just outside of the main door, Creek's huge truck idles, and I can see him grinning down at me. I pause, the truck is identical to Colt's and I flash back to the other week, when the Dracul attacked me. His face is all I can see, and I'm rooted to the spot.

"Remy, you okay?" Creek's voice pulls me from the memory, and I shake it off.

"Yeah I'm good." I walk to the truck and pull myself up into the cab. "Just having a moment."

"You went pale as fuck." Concern laces his voice as his eyes look me over.

"I'm fine, really. So where are we going?" I ask, and he takes the hint to drop it.

"Well, that's a surprise. Don't want to ruin it."

"Of course not." I shake my head with a smile and buckle myself in. "Come on then, off on the adventure we go."

We drive for what feels like an age, catching up on everything he's been up to since he left. The guilt he feels about ghosting me is obvious, so I try not to be too prickly about it, but that betrayal is still there a little, even with me knowing. Apparently emotions and logic don't go hand in hand. But still, I try to just enjoy having my friend back and hearing about his globetrotting adventures. Training with Hunters on the other side of the world. "Wait, the Van Helsing's exist?" I ask, because no freaking way.

"Yeah." He laughs. "The ones I met were absolute pricks. So far up their own ass, as if their name meant something other than the fact that one of

them obviously slipped somewhere and let a human know the truth. Even if it's spun as a myth."

"No freaking way." I sit back and reel. "Dude, they're like famous."

He laughs at me and shakes his head. "Maybe, but you'd hate them. So freaking arrogant, and really not all that great Hunters. Now, the Nagasaki family? Them, you'd love. True Samurai, and they still honor the codes of the old times. I learned a lot from them. Colt, though, he was *way* too Colt for them." He laughs and I join him, because I can only imagine.

"That doesn't surprise me at all."

Creek pulls off the road we've been on for a while and turns onto a dirt track. "Nearly there."

He looks over to me, and I can't read him, but it feels like I'm missing something. We sit in comfortable silence while we finish the drive, pulling up to a hidden lake. A house is off far in the distance, the whitework gleaming in today's sun, but obviously run down and abandoned.

The birch trees circle the lake and lead a path up toward the house, and the whole place just feels peaceful.

"This place is beautiful." I sigh, and climb out of the truck.

"It really is," Creek says as he joins me at the front of the truck, the soft cool breeze wrapping around us.

"It feels so... It feels almost like home." I sigh again, because something about this place resonates deep inside me, and Creek smiles at me.

"Something like that. Come on, I need to do some work up at the house, but I brought a picnic for after. I figured you'd be up for helping, keep you busy, and you always were a sucker for being by the water."

"Sounds like fun. Is this place yours?" I ask as we start the trek up to the house, enjoying the sounds of the birds and the ripples on the water.

"Kind of," he says with a shrug. "I know you said earlier you were feeling better, but how has it been? The memory dump, I mean. Have you gotten much back?"

"I mean, I've got a lot of weird stuff back. Feelings and moments, but nothing monumentally life changing. I remember rituals, every one of them, I remember training, and my love of the fight. I've had a few dreams, which I think are other memories, but not much about my actual lives. I've remembered a lot of Hunter lore, random as fuck information, but not much about who I was, if that makes sense?" I shrug.

"It does, it'll come. It's the same for all of us—it takes time. Just be

patient. Ben told you it can take time, right? Trust him. Trust me." He smiles down at me, towering above me now, and it's still a little strange, him looking like this, so different but still being the guy I've always known.

"Have you spoken to Ben since the ritual? Is he okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine, and he's been around. He usually stays for a bit after, even when the other Elders return back to wherever they're stationed. He is always the guide for us; we've known him a long time."

"Oh," I utter, unsure of what else to say.

"He thinks something is happening within the Elders, something he's being kept out of," he tells me, and I sigh in frustration, a little confused by it all, because what he's saying is not too unlike what Colt was talking about before.

"Yeah, Colt mentioned something about it."

"Well, just keep your guard up, okay? Even with Ben, we might have known him a long time, but a lot can happen in between cycles." His smile is tight and doesn't reach his eyes. "Anyway, enough of that. I hope you're ready to get messy."

We stop at the back of the house, where he reaches up and plucks a key from the doorframe and opens the door. "Mind your step."

I follow him in and gasp at the sight before me. The inside has been completely gutted, the brickwork is exposed on one side of the room, and the other walls are all whitewashed. The majority of the downstairs has been opened up into one space, the kitchen to my right, and the rest stretching out around us. Something about the room just feels so familiar.

"You've been working pretty hard, I see."

"I haven't been home long, but I wanted to get a start on it. The vision for this place never really got realized, so I wanted it to be right. It's huge, so huge, so I decided starting down here was a good idea. There's still the sunroom and the library separate down here, plus the utility. There's stables outside that need patching up too, and that's before I even think about the next two floors, but I'm happy with what I've managed so far."

"Can I look around?" I ask wistfully.

"Sure. What's mine is yours." He smiles at me and it warms me. "Just be careful where you stand."

I nod and take off to explore, leaving him to get started on whatever it was that he brought me here to help with. I'll help, but first, I want to look around.

I discover seven bedrooms, four baths and what looks like a game room over the next two floors. This place is huge. I make my way back to Creek and find him topless, paint roller in hand.

Holy freaking cow.

Like, I knew he'd gotten ripped, because, well, he's a hulk of a man now, but holy freaking ovary explosion. I clamp my lips together to keep the word vomit from spilling out, because nope. Can't start drooling over my lifelong best friend, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to ogle the fuck out of him while his back is to me. I might be his friend, but I'm not fucking blind.

"You want to come and help, Remy?" he asks without turning around, but I can hear the laughter in his voice. Shit. Stupid Hunter hearing.

"Yeah, sure, just getting my bearings," I say with a blush. "Where do you want me?"

He looks over at me with a heated stare, but I turn away and take off my jacket. "There's another roller on the counter. These walls need another coat of white before I start on the floors. White paint on gray carpet isn't the easiest to get out."

"Sure thing!" I say, almost too eagerly, and go and grab the roller before joining him again.

"Did you enjoy exploring?" he asks, looking me over again.

"This place is phenomenal, Creek. I'm almost jealous it's not mine." He smiles at me, but disappointment clouds his eyes.

"Thanks. It'll be better once it's finished." He shrugs and begins painting again. I pull my phone out of my pocket and press play on my music list, *Wildwood Kin's "Steady My Heart"* pours through and I smile before I start painting too.

The silence isn't uncomfortable, so I don't think. I just lose myself to the physicality of painting. It might not exactly be strenuous, and with my new Hunter strength, I don't tire, but it's more than I've done in a long while.

We finish the room in almost no time, and I look around, trying to envision the place when it's finished, when a memory hits me. I've been here before. With Creek. I see the room, not as it is now, but what it was. Before. In another time. He looks different, but I know it's him. He looks so jaded, and yet, so at peace. The vision flickers before disappearing, and I come out of it to find him staring at me.

"We've been here before," I say, my voice barely more than a whisper, and he nods, still looking sad.

"It was so different. *We* were so different." I chase the memory, but nothing else comes. "I only saw us, in this room, in a different time. I don't know when, or why, but..."

"It's strange when they hit you like that." He smiles softly and comes toward me. "But sometimes they show you exactly what you were missing." He stands so close to me, and it's as if I can't breathe. My eyes meet his, and it's like I'm stuck. Fixed in place, unable to move. His hand lifts and brushes the hair fallen from my ponytail behind my ear, and his thumb strokes my cheek so softly. My breath hitches as I lean into him.

"Yo! Where you guys at?" Colt's voice reaches us, breaking whatever spell we were under, and I step back from Creek, trying to steady my racing heart.

"We're in here," Creek calls out, walking toward the sound of Colt's voice.

Holy shit, what the hell was that?

"I figured I'd find you guys here. I brought something for Remy. She's had the ritual now and I decided she shouldn't be without it all for much longer," Colt says as he enters the room, a black duffel slung over his shoulder, his gaze bouncing between us, trying to read the room. "It's looking good in here, man."

He claps Creek on the shoulder, and they do that weird bro hug thing they do, and I shake my head.

"What did you bring me?" I ask, once I feel back in control of myself.

"Well, I mean, I tried this once already, but you've done the ritual now, so we should be good to go." He shrugs with a carefree smile, letting go of whatever tension he felt in the room as he entered.

Easing the duffel onto the floor, Colt kneels down to unzip it before pulling out the box he showed me those weeks ago at Bauer's. The sight of it makes my heart skip a beat and I can't help the gasp that escapes as I rush over to him.

"You brought my sword!" My cheeks almost hurt from the huge smile I can't get rid of.

"Swords." He smiles. "And your guns. Dad had them all stored in the armory back home, but a Hunter shouldn't be far from her weapons once she's been awakened. It's like an itch at the back of your brain that you don't notice until it's gone."

I look at him and realize he's right. There was a buzzing, dim enough to

dismiss, but with my sword within touching distance, it's silenced.

"Thank you, Colt. How... how did I get these?" I ask as I drop to the floor and lift the boxes. I move them to the counter in the kitchen, eager to open them, yet hesitant.

"Well, the black-hilted one, the obsidian blade, that was a gift from Creek here. Your old sword was shattered after a particularly gnarly fight with some pissed-off Lycans. But the iridium one, the one in the box, I don't actually know. You didn't have it one life, then when I cycled back, you'd had two lives without either of us and you had it. You could ask Bauer, but I'm not sure he knows either." He shrugs without a care.

The blade practically sings as I open the box, like it's happy to be reunited with me, and I'm flooded with a sense of joy and peace as I lift it from its violet velvet setting and unsheathe it. The sword is perfectly balanced, the perfect length, as if it was made for me. The decorative hilt glints in the sun-filled room. I twirl the blade cautiously, getting a feel for it, and a stupidly big grin spreads across my face.

Hello, old friend.

I re-sheathe it and place it back in its box, not wanting to get too carried away, but I know that this blade isn't going to leave my side for long from now on. The guys both watch me, grinning, like it's my birthday and I'm surrounded by a pile of gifts. I try the other sword, the gift from Creek, and again, the metal sings as I slice the air with it. It's not as intricately decorated as the other, but the mark of the Hunter is etched into the top of the blade, just below the hilt.

I move to the smaller boxes and find two guns. Small, but perfectly sized for my hands. One black, one silver, both with symbols carved into them. I recognize the symbols from the altar at the chambers, but I'm still unsure of their meaning. "The black is for obsidian bullets, the silver for iridium. Keeps things simple, and the markings help keep your shots true. Not that you need the help," Colt says with a shrug, while Creek stands in the corner with his arms crossed, silently watching, his face unreadable.

"Thank you, Colt." I sigh happily and put the guns back in their boxes before hugging him.

"No worries, little bit. They're yours, we've just been keeping them safe." He shrugs as I let him go. "You guys need any help here?" he asks, looking to Creek, who shakes his head.

"Nah, we were about done."

"Okay, cool. Want to head to the range? Give our girl a whooping before all of her skills come back? Let her play with her toys?" Colt asks, wagging his eyebrows, and the piercing bounces, making me laugh.

"Thanks, but we actually had plans," I tell him and stick out my tongue.

"Without me?" he says, staggering back, a hand on his chest. "You wound me!"

I laugh at his dramatics, and even Creek cracks a smile. "Sorry, bro."

"It's all good, I get it. The dynamic duo is reunited." He pretends to wipe a tear from his eye, and I swipe him in the gut.

"Shut up dummy. You two have been off having the greatest bromance of all time for over a year."

"Yeah, yeah. Everyone wants a bit of me, I get it." Creek laughs, whatever was up with him seemingly forgotten.

"What can I say, man, I miss your sweet sweet lovin', it's been too long." Colt laughs and I giggle, because they're both as ridiculous as each other.

"I missed this," I say, because this is exactly how it used to be, before they both up and left, making their choice to become Hunters. I can't begrudge it, because I wouldn't want them to be any different, if they had we wouldn't be here now, but no matter how much I try to let it go, it still stings a little. I try not to think about it, because if I do, I'll think about Jack too, and that's all just a whole well of hurt I don't want to dive into today, or any day soon.

"Aww," Colt says, wrapping one of his barbarically big arms around my neck. "I missed you too, little bit, but I'll be on my way. Don't forget we're patrolling again tonight," he says to Creek.

"Looking forward to joining us this weekend, Remy?" he asks me, and I gasp.

"I'm hunting this weekend?" I say.

"Yeah, didn't Bauer tell you? You'll be going out with the two of us, giving Dad a night off. The old man is slowing down, just don't tell him that because he'll still take your head off your shoulders." The excitement bubbles up inside me. The restlessness I've been feeling is finally getting the outlet I've been looking for.

"He didn't say a goddamn word, but hell yes I'm excited." I smile at them both. Colt's grin matches my own, but Creek just looks forlorn.

"Right, I'm off. I'll catch you later, man. Don't get up to too much trouble, you guys," Colt says, grabbing the duffel and throwing it over to me. "Be

careful where you keep that shit."

"I will. Stay safe," I tell him as he turns to leave.

"I always do." He winks at me before bumping fists with Creek and leaving.

"Well, hurricane Colt has officially left the building." I try to keep things light, considering what nearly happened before Colt barged in. I don't really know how I feel about it yet, so I'm really hoping he doesn't bring it up.

Please let the fates be on my side with this one.

Woah... what the... Fates? Where did that come from? Weird as fuck.

This mind meld thing is insane.

"That he has. You hungry? Ready for that picnic?" Creek asks with a small smile.

Relieved that he's not going to comment on before, I nod. "I sure am. I just need to clean up."

"Use the bathroom on the next floor. The water is all still running, might be cold, but it's there," he says to me. "I'll get this stuff put away and then we'll head back down to the truck."

"Sounds good, and thank you for today. I needed this. Just something normal." I hug him tightly.

"Anytime, Remy. If you ever need to escape just say the word, and we'll run away, however far and for however long you need."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



The feeling as I strap the swords across my back and fasten the gun holsters to my thighs is exhilarating. It just feels... right. As I take a look at myself in the mirror, I can't help but laugh. I knew my love of leather would have its time, and that time is most definitely here and now. My black crop top and leather under-boob waistcoat shows my midriff just enough that the tattoo on my hip is on show where it peeks up over the top of my ripped, black skinny jeans, the fishnets under them also peeking through.

I pull on my chunky heeled boots that I found in a sale years ago to complete the look.

I almost look as badass as everyone's been telling me I am.

My mark has started to creep round my shoulder and down my arm, and having looked at the pictures Colt sent me, I have no idea what it's building to, but I can't help but love it. The Hunter's mark is topped with the mark of Leviathan, a crown, with one single drop of blood hanging from it, but the unknown part are the vines that seem to grow from the base of my Hunter's mark. The thorned vines that grow over my shoulder and down my arm, interspersed with symbols, some from the altar that I recognize, others that no one seems to know what they are.

I'd be worried, but it hasn't caused me any harm up to this point, so I have no reason to fear it. Especially with the Leviathan mark, I know it's a protection of some sort, I just wish I remembered how I got it and why.

"Are you about ready?" Creek calls out from the main room of my apartment.

"Nearly!" I shout as I grab the cloak Dad gave me this morning. Apparently, it's been mine since my first life. Made of a material discovered by the Hunters, almost impenetrable, yet supple and soft.

It's matte black to help me hide in the shadows, and honestly, it kind of makes me feel like a badass. I slip it on and lift the hood, which paints my face in shadow without restricting my vision in the slightest. This might be my new favorite thing other than my swords. Well, not new, but yeah. I drop the hood back and take one last look at my badass self in my mirror. Walking back out to the main room of my apartment I find Creek and Colt sitting on my couch, football on, eating my pretzels.

"Just make yourself at home, why don't you?" I laugh, shaking my head. "And here I was thinking you guys wanted me to rush."

They both turn to look at me, Colt with a stupid grin on his face, mouth full of pretzels, looking like a dork, but Creek... His eyes darken with heat as he takes me in, inch by inch. Goosebumps cover my arms as he basically undresses me with his gaze, but I shake it off. Creek is my best friend. That isn't a line to cross. If we haven't before now, it's definitely not a line I'm going to take a run at. Maybe when we were younger, but now, with all things considered, it just doesn't seem like a good idea.

Right?

I bite my lip as Colt turns back around and elbows Creek.

"You ready?" he asks, and Creek grunts at him. "Let's head out then."

"Where are we going?" I ask, because my swords aren't exactly inconspicuous, and while maybe a hundred years ago no one would think twice about the sight of them, in this world, people are definitely going to look at us sideways.

"We're just doing a patrol of the abandoned warehouse blocks a few towns over, tonight. Nothing too extreme for your first hunt," Creek tells me, and I roll my eyes.

"So much for the fun of the hunt."

"There's plenty of time for that, and this still needs to be done. We've found more than a few rogues in similar places since we've been back. It's as if the Lycans and Dracul have been drawn to this place in the last few months, and no one seems to know why, but activity is definitely up."

"Oh, okay then. Well, after you guys I guess." I grab my phone and keys from the counter and slip them in my back pocket, not like I can carry a bag with all of this gear on.

I follow them out of the apartment and down to the waiting truck. Colt climbs in the driver's seat, so I assume it's his truck, and Creek climbs in the back with me. We drive in silence, the anticipation in the air building, and I can feel the adrenaline flooding me. We leave the city lights behind us as we head down the dark, quiet roads to wherever it is we're going.

A short while later, Colt pulls off of the road and I see dim lights, not too far off. We pull up to the gates of the complex and stop.

"Ready or not," Colt says softly, and I climb from the truck and come round to the gates where they're both waiting for me.

"Okay, so we're going to stick together tonight, and if anything happens, please don't jump in the deep end, Remy. It's your first night back, and you are not back to your old self yet," Colt pleads with me, and I sigh.

"Sure thing, *Dad*."

Creek shakes his head at me, but doesn't respond. He signals to be quiet, then to his ears. I focus on my hearing, pushing the Hunter gifts to reach out around me. I don't hear much, other than the scurrying of animals in the fields behind us.

A crow catches my attention, because it flies and lands just beside us with almost no sound, and I thought only owls did that... It's almost like it's following us. Watching us. It looks almost...

Nope. Not going there.

I shake myself, pushing the crazy thought away. Apparently my imagination is running rampant tonight. The crow is not stalking us.

Colt scales the gate first, heaving himself over the top and dropping down almost silently on the other side. He waits a second, checking to make sure it's clear before motioning for me to climb over. Taking a deep breath, I step up to the gate and Creek's hands find my waist, helping to hoist me over. I swing my leg over the top, and then hang down the other side, landing as quietly as I can manage. Creek follows quickly and silently—how two guys as big as they are can move that quietly baffles me, but I guess it's all part of the Hunter toolkit.

A woman's laugh twinkles out in the distance as a breeze tears past and a man appears before us.

Dracul.

"Oh yay, dinner is here. It's been so long since I tasted Hunter," he says, his head tilted, his eyes manic.

"You guys talk too much," Colt says and pulls his gun, aiming straight for

the Dracul's heart.

"Maybe that's because I'm just the distraction," the man cackles, and I duck on instinct as a blade flies over my head and lands in the heart of the Dracul before us. I spin, Creek and Colt along with me, to find three more Dracul.

"Oh goodie," Colt says. "And I thought tonight would be quiet."

He steps forward at the same time as Creek so they both cover me slightly. I turn my back to them and focus on the Dracul that appeared first, the blade in his chest removed and his grin gleeful.

"Pretty little Hunter, I think you'll taste good. Maybe I'll hurt you just enough that I get to keep you for a while," he says, and Creek growls from behind me.

"Oh, aren't you just a big ball of crazy?" I smile at the Dracul. "We'll see which one of us is bleeding at the end of this, shall we?"

A calm sweeps over me. It feels familiar and comfortable. A killing calm. Instinct rides me as I pull my sword, shutting out the other two and focusing on the creature before me. I smile at him and lunge forward at the same time he does.

The motherfucker is fast!

I swing the sword and glance a blow on his arm, and I laugh as I hear him hiss.

"Not so pretty anymore, am I? And you thought this would be easy," I taunt, the sound of the fight behind me threatens to distract me, but I focus, knowing that Creek and Colt will look after themselves and each other.

"You little bitch. You'll pay for that," he says and throws the blade he took earlier at me. I dodge it, but not quickly enough, and it embeds itself in my shoulder, rather than my throat where it was headed.

Holy crap that hurts.

I sheathe my sword on my back, knowing I'll be useless with it now that my shoulder is fucked up, and grab my gun. In a blink, the Dracul becomes frenzied. I dare a glance at Creek and Colt, and their Dracul are distracted by the scent of my blood.

"I was right, such a tasty little Hunter. So sweet. You don't smell like the rest. What a treat, what a treat indeed!"

He rushes at me, and I lift my gun to shoot him, but he crashes into me before I can get the shot off. Fuck, I am rusty. His claws tear into my arms where he holds me against the ground, and I feel the blood spill.

His saliva drops down onto my chest as he stares down at the blood. I wrestle to get him off of me, but even with my Hunter strength, this Dracul is beyond strong. He releases one arm and licks the blood from his claw.

"Such a tasty little Hunter," he says, his teeth elongated and making him lisp his words.

I try to reach for my other gun, but I am pinned. That's when I notice the silence, then wetness rains down on my face.

I blink and find the Dracul above me headless, and a very pissed-off Creek looks down at me.

"Shit, Remy. Colt, she's bleeding badly."

"Fuck!" Colt shouts and runs over to me. "All four are down. Grab her, I'll get the gate open and we'll get her to Fallon. She can help heal her."

"Can't I just heal?" I ask, wincing at the pain ripping through me as Creek pushes the Dracul off of me and scoops me up into his arms.

"Not this time, Rem. The Dracul around here have started coating their claws in a poison that seems to slow our healing. The knife wound, you could heal from easily, but the rest, we need a Witch."

"Fuck."

"Yeah, fuck." He jogs and I try to stay as still as I can, but the blood loss makes me feel dizzy, so I close my eyes.

"Hurry, Colt," I hear the sounds muffled, as if far away, and drift into a calm as the doors slam shut and we move.

Blood sputters from my lips as I try to breathe in, coughing the thick liquid up my throat.

"Fuck, no, Remy, you don't get to leave me like this. Not now." Creek's face appears in front of mine, and I feel his arms wrap around me. He scoops me up from the ground, the warehouse where we just emptied a Dracul nest now silent as the cold seeps in.

"It was a lucky shot," I say, coughing.

"We're going to get you healed. You just need to hang on... The Witch's shop isn't far from here."

"Creek. It's too late." I sigh sadly, accepting my fate and rest my head on his shoulder as he runs with me, not listening to my words.

"Just hang on, Remy. We're so close."

"Creek," I say, my breath rattling. "Stop."

He halts, the night closing around us, the only light for miles from the moon above us. "It's too far," I say with a rueful smile. He looks down at me, tears on his face.

"I can't do this without you, Remy. It's too soon. This is so fucked up. I'm not giving up." He starts to run again, as fast as his Hunter speed can carry us across the terrain back to the city where the Witches reside. I close my eyes, accepting my fate. This is not my first life, and it will not be my last, though I wish it hadn't been ripped from me so soon.

Not when we barely had a chance to explore what we finally discovered.

"Just a little longer, hold on, Remy." Creek's voice filters through my ears, bringing me peace, and I smile. I have known love in many forms, but the love Creek gifted me with is possibly the purest I've ever felt. Unyielding, unfaltering, and all-encompassing.

"I love you, Creek." The words are breathy, only just audible as my heartbeat slows and the blade that sits in my heart destroys me with every second that passes.

"I love you too, Rem. In this life and all others that come. Please don't leave me," he pants, and his tears splash down onto my face. "It's not fair. I only just got you."

"I'm sorry. Tell my family I love them and that I'll see them soon."

"No, Remy, you'll see them soon enough. We're almost there. Just another minute." His movements grow faster and then we stop, a smash of glass filters through the air before Creek's voice yells out.

"What on earth!" a woman's voice reaches my ears as the darkness starts to close in around me. "Quickly, bring her over here. There's not much time."

We move again, and I hear the sound of crashing around me before Creek's warmth leaves my back and I'm laid down. "We may be too late." The woman's hushed voice sounds afraid.

"Heal her," Creek growls, and takes my hand.

"I love you," I whisper. "It's okay."

"Shut the fuck up, Remy."

I scream as the blade is pulled from me and pressure applied. The darkness starts to close in further when a warmth floods me. Witch Light. The heat grows to the point of making me want to scream out again at the burning, but I have no voice as the magic holds me in place.

As quickly as it started, the heat recedes, and I take a deep breath.

"Thank you, thank you!" Creek utters above me, but I can't speak, I can't move.

I feel warmth and pressure against my lips as Creek kisses me.

"Don't you ever do that to me again, Remington Bennett. I will always catch you, I will always be by your side, through anything, but fuck you for cutting it that close."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



"I think she's coming around." Voices filter in through the darkness, and my head throbs as I open my eyes to what is, thankfully, a dimly lit room.

"Girl, you need to up your game, because dying on me is not an option," Fallon huffs as I sit up. I look around the room and realize I'm in Fallon's kitchen. On her dining room table.

"I'll keep that in mind," I tell her with a painful grin.

"She'll be fine," Fallon says over me to where Creek and Colt are hovering. "The poison is out of her system; it's just the blood loss making her groggy, but that will pass quickly. She's already healing faster than usual."

I look around the room. Creek's gaze meets mine, and the worry and the pain in his eyes flood me. The memory, or dream, or whatever the hell it was, hits me again and I look quickly away from Creek. Holy shitballs. Maybe it wasn't real, right? It could just be a hallucination. I was dying. This happens.

But I look at him again, and I feel it, I know that it's true. My heart falls as quickly as it soars, because it's still broken. I might have immersed myself in this new reality to try and forget, but my heart still misses Jack. It hasn't been very long, and despite everything, I did love him.

I shake it off, if Creek remembers, he hasn't said anything, so I'm sure as hell not going to. Not yet anyway. It's too soon. I have other things I need to focus on.

"Thank you, Fal," I croak, swinging my legs off the table, still a little lightheaded but stronger than when I first opened my eyes.

"Anytime, sugar. I was going to swing by and find you guys tomorrow anyway, so honestly, this saves me a journey." She winks at me and I bark out a laugh.

"What's up?" Colt says as he and Creek follow us into the sitting room.

"I need you guys to retrieve something that was stolen. I'd do it myself, but it was stolen by a Dracul."

"How the... nope, never mind. What did they take?" Colt asks, shaking his head.

"My Witch talisman. It was my great, great, great, few more great grandmother's. Passed down through our line. It's been in my family since the beginning, Simone created it, and she was one of the most powerful Witches of all time. It holds great power, and Goddess only knows what those beasts want with it, but it can't be anything good." She wrings her hands in her lap as she tells us how it was stolen from her mother's store. She had taken it off to clean up after a spell had messed up, and when she came back, it was gone. She traced it with a spell to a Dracul nest, but as her power is limited without the talisman, there was no way she was going to try and get it back alone.

"We can get it," I tell her. "It's the least we can do after tonight."

"We are not your errand boys though, Fallon. You'd be wise to remember that," Colt says, and I whip my gaze to him. What on earth is that?

"Oh, I know. Hunters rarely deem themselves low enough to help mere Witches, despite our allegiance and expected obedience when required." She rolls her eyes, and I know that I've missed something between the two of them while I've been wrapped up in myself. I look back to Fallon, who shakes her head subtly, so I don't say anything, but I give her a glare to tell her we'll be talking about whatever the hell this is.

"We should be going. I'm so tired," I say and stand, Creek following suit while Colt and Fallon seem to have a silent battle going on. "Colt."

He looks at me, the fire in his eyes dims, and he shakes it off. "Sure, let's get you home."

I want to question what the hell that was but he stands and marches out of the room before I get the chance. I look at Creek, who shakes his head a little, but that just makes me want to know more. Turning back to Fallon, I open my mouth, but the tight set of her jaw and the crinkle of her eyes tell me that whatever just happened, it's not good.

"I'll see you soon, Fallon," Creek says before I get chance to open my

mouth, and he follows Colt, leaving just Fallon and I in the room.

"Thank you again, Fallon."

"Oh, girl, shut up. There isn't much I wouldn't do for you. That brother of yours though," she almost growls the words.

"We are going to talk about whatever the hell that is, and soon, but if I don't get to bed, I'm going to sleep where I stand," I say and she laughs at me, some of the tension leaving her.

"Go, rest. Be careful. Maybe have one of them stay with you tonight just in case. Blood loss is no joke, even for a Hunter." I roll my eyes at her mothering, but she smiles at me.

"Love you, girl."

"Love you too. Text me the address, and I'll drag that pair out tomorrow. We'll get your talisman back."

"Thank you. Really."

"Anytime," I say as I hug her and then head to the truck outside where I'm met with two surly Hunters sitting in silence.

"I don't want to hear anything about nearly getting myself killed. Can you please save your lectures for tomorrow? I really do just want to sleep."

"I'm staying at your apartment tonight, to keep an eye on you. Blood loss —" Creek starts.

"Is no joke, yeah, Fallon gave me the speech already. It's fine by me, you can take the spare room. It's not like you haven't before. But no lectures," I cut him off and he nods while Colt sits, stewing in whatever is up with him.

We drive in silence until Colt pulls up at my apartment. "See you tomorrow, Colt."

"I'm not around tomorrow, little bit. But I'll see you in a few days. Try and stay out of trouble?"

I roll my eyes and hug him around the chair. "I'll try."

He grumbles at me, so I smile at him, because I know it'll poke at him, and climb out of the truck as they fist bump.

Jeez, they're such bros sometimes.

Creek joins me on the pavement before we head into my building. I try to shove away the awkward feeling that envelops me at being alone with Creek in my apartment. Stupid fucking memories. What use are they when they just make my life harder?

"Are you okay?" he asks me softly as he shrugs out of his jacket and kicks off his boots. I perch on the edge of the couch and undo my boots, my

cloak already in the laundry basket after the whole “using it to try and staunch the blood from my arms” thing. That’s what I get for not wearing it because I was too warm. In the future, I’ll suffer the heat it gives and protect myself.

"I'm fine, just kicking myself about tonight." I shrug, only half-lying.

"Remy, don't. It was your first hunt in this life. Your memories aren't all back, and we weren't expecting there to be anyone there, not really. Especially not three older Dracul. Even if they were rogues, age, in this case, means strength. The older the Dracul, the more skilled they are. They're faster, stronger, more ruthless, more battle worn. Those ones tonight, felt old. Not ancient like the original family lines, though most of those are now dead or in hiding, except for the head of the Dracul of course. You have nothing to berate yourself about, Remy. You handled yourself way better than I did my first hunt." He smiles at me, and I try not to read anything into it or about how my name sounds on his lips. Just because in that memory he said he loved me, when he kissed me...

I bite my lip to stop the tingling feeling, and I realize I should really be listening to him rather than staring at his mouth.

"My first hunt, I nearly got the Hunter with me killed. We came across a mated pair of Lycans in a killing frenzy, and I froze. It happens. Knowing these things exist and facing them are two very, very different things."

"Thanks," I smile at him, suddenly feeling the need for a cool shower. I'm not sure what it is about him, but there is something. Maybe the look in his eyes, the protective stance he has, or maybe I just really need to get laid, but everything about him right now is making me *sweat*.

"I'm going to grab a shower and then head to bed. You know this place as well as I do—help yourself to whatever."

He nods, his gaze roaming my body, his eyes heated but then turning cold when he sees the dried blood on my arms again. "Night, Remy."

"Night, Creek."

"So, remind me why we're heading into a known nest of Dracul? Not even rogues, with no backup and no idea as to how many are in there?" Creek hisses, and I smile at him. We're hidden in the shadows as we creep up on the

abandoned hotel.

"Because Fallon saved my life, and she asked us to." I roll my eyes at his bitching. He's been grumbling about this since I mentioned it to him this morning, as if he'd thought I'd just forget Fallon's request.

"We should have come with Bauer, especially with Colt out of town."

"Bauer has his own shit to deal with, and I'm not going to leave a powerful Witch's talisman in the hands of some Dracul." I shrug and move forward, pulling myself up over the wall at the perimeter.

"Yeah, yeah. Still stupid. Mom or Dad could have come with us," he grumbles, but I ignore him.

"I'm sure we'll be fine. We're not here to kill anyone. In and out."

"Yeah, I know. No killing unless necessary," he says rolling his eyes playfully, then his look hardens. "They're not rogues, but they're still Dracul, Remy. Do not think you can trust them."

"I'm not an idiot, Creek. Stop treating me like a child. You don't have to come in with me." He grunts at my declaration, but I'm this close to leaving him outside anyway. I've had enough. "Well then, shut up and back me up already."

"Fine. Let's go," he says, waving forward as I take in the building before me. I studied the old blueprints for this place at the library earlier today, learning the exits, the layout. Though it could have been changed by its inhabitants, I doubt it. "We don't have much time before they awaken. They may be already, in which case, this is suicide."

I nod at his words and creep across the lawn as silently as I can manage. We work our way around the building where a broken window offers itself up as our entry point.

"I don't like this, Remy. Something feels off."

"Shh!" I glare at him.

I pull myself up on the window frame and step into the dark room, letting my eyes adjust to the pitch black surrounding us. I pause, listening for movement beyond the room. Though the darkness is thick, it is not so late in the day that the Dracul would stir, but still, after yesterday I am taking no chances.

I step farther into the room and Creek joins me, standing close to my back, so close that I can feel the heat coming from him and I have to make myself concentrate on the task at hand.

He taps my shoulder, making me jump slightly, signaling the way he is

going, so I take the opposite side of the room, and search as quietly as I can for the talisman. While I don't think for a second it would just have been abandoned, I'm not going to leave an empty room unsearched. I think back to the picture Fallon sent me of her wearing the talisman. A necklace, the metal dark, holding a pendant. A yellow gemstone, framed in the dark metal, twisted in the most intricate ways.

I clear my side of the room quickly, since it's almost bare, and meet Creek at the door. He signals to me, telling me he's heading right out of the room, so I nod, and tilt my head to tell him I'll go left, going toward the front of the hotel while he heads further into the depths of the hall.

I watch him go, silent in the darkness, and try not to worry about sending my best friend, and Fates knows what else he was before, into a pit of our enemies, quite literally, alone. He wouldn't have gone if he didn't think he could handle it, and I know that deep down. I trust him not to get himself killed, so I take a deep breath, exhaling slowly as I creep toward the entrance hall of the hotel.

I hear voices as I get closer, and I halt. Hunter hearing is good, but the Dracul senses make ours seem almost human. Their sight, hearing, sense of smell, speed and brutality are almost unrivaled.

I tread carefully as I move forward and try to work out what they're saying without being detected.

"They will come for this, Alex, you fucking idiot. Why on earth would you take a Witch's talisman, and why the hell would you bring it back here? We will have to move the entire family. They will know about this place, you fucking moron." The woman's voice, full of rage, makes me shudder. I'm glad I'm not Alex.

"We can use this," the male insists. "We have Witches who rally to our cause. We have been seen as vermin for too long. We can rise with the power of their line on our side. This talisman could help us turn the tide! Lift the veil on the truth, make people see what once was!"

"You're nothing but a fool!"

"Lysandra, that is enough." A dark voice ripples through the emptiness and caresses me, and I realize I know that voice. I hold my breath, because how do I know that voice?

"Alexander, she is right. Taking that talisman does nothing but give the Hunters more reason to come after us. It is a beacon to the Witches; they have already traced it. Hunters are here." My stomach drops at his words. He

knows we're here, and now so do the rest of them.

"We must leave!" Lysandra's voice is shrill. "They cannot get the little ones."

"We must fight!" Alex cries. "There are more of us than there are of them."

Footsteps rush into the room before me when I feel eyes on me from behind. My breath catches when I see the man from my memories.

"Remy?" His voice is barely a whisper, but my body reacts violently. As if my heart has been torn from my chest. "You're back."

"Kain?" I stutter, and his eyes shine.

"You remember." I shake my head at his words.

"No." The word takes the light from his eyes and my stomach flips at the pain I see in them.

"You must go. Quickly. Your partner is on his way back, unharmed. I ensured it."

"Creek," I utter the word, and pain paints his features again.

"He is here this time?" I nod but still do not understand fully.

"There is no time, you must go." He pulls me close, quicker than I have a chance to react to, my body melting in his arms. "I have missed you, more than you could ever imagine. But you must go."

He releases me, and my legs almost fail, my body not wanting to leave him behind.

"The talisman..." I whisper.

"I will ensure its safety, and I will find you. I will always find you."

"But how?" I ask, but then I notice the detail I missed before. The elongated fangs, and the circle around his eyes. It can't be...

"Because a love like ours can never be broken," he says, kissing me, so passionate but so quick that it steals my breath. "Now go, Remy. Please. I will distract them as long as I can."

I move back to the room where I entered as quickly and as quietly as I can, trying hard not to look back at the man, no, the Dracul, who made me feel so much, so quickly. I shake my head to clear my thoughts, because I have never felt so confused, and spot Creek in the distance, heading toward me.

"We need to go. Now," I tell him.

"Did you get the talisman?" he asks, I shake my head, and we slip out of the hotel and run the distance back to my car a few blocks away. We dive

into the car, and I catch my breath.

"What happened?" he asks, looking me over to make sure I'm in one piece.

I manage to keep my breath steady as I respond.

"I heard them talking. They were not happy it was taken—I have a feeling it will be returned. Then they realized we were there, which is when I hauled ass back and found you."

"That's so weird," he says, looking at me as if he knows I'm not telling him everything.

"I guess. I'm just glad we got out of there unscathed." I awkwardly smile at him.

"Are you okay?" he asks, watching me closely.

"Fine, just a close call, and only my second time out." I shrug and start the car. Creek broods the entire drive back to my apartment. His mood is almost suffocating, and I spend the entire ride trying to not focus on it, but it's like a dark cloud pressing down on me. This shit is so confusing, but I don't know if I'm just seeing things that aren't there with my memories starting to trickle in.

Maybe it's just me?

I glance over at him and blow out a breath, the look on his face causing me to bite my lip. Nope, not just me.

Part of me wants to ask questions—a huge part—but conflict rages inside of me that maybe I don't want to know what this is yet. That maybe I should wait until I remember more before I start reading into all of this.

Right?

Maybe?

Who the fuck knows, 'cause I sure as hell don't.

I let out a sigh of relief as we pull into the parking lot of my building. I love this car, but right now, I want to not be trapped in such a tiny space with him.

"Are you staying again?" I ask him before we get out.

"I might as well. The house feels a little weird with Dad home."

"Okay." I smile at him and head in, glad that it's too late to come across any of the other residents in the building.

"You want something to eat before we crash?" Creek asks as I close the door to the apartment, shrugging off my cloak.

"I can always eat, you know that." I spin and come face-to-face with him,

barely an inch between us.

"Remy..." His voice breaks, and I suck in a breath. His hand reaches up and cups my chin gently, forcing me to look into his bright blue eyes. I shudder at his touch, and the world falls away as he leans forward, pressing his lips to mine, so softly that I think I might have imagined it. Creek pulls back and sighs before kissing me again, this time with a hunger. I wrap my arms around his neck, my hands in his hair as he lifts me, cupping my ass to bring me to his height. He pushes my back against the door, and I moan at the contact.

Creek pulls back, catching his breath, and resting his forehead on mine. "I don't know if you're ready, but I couldn't not kiss you. It has been too long, and after everything last night, and tonight..."

His words trail off and I just kind of blink at him in shock as he releases me, placing my feet back on the floor.

"It's too soon, but I remember. A little at least," I tell him, and he nods. I am definitely going to need another cold shower after this.

"I can wait. I'll always wait for you," he says with a smile, which makes my heart beat a little faster. He heads toward my spare room, leaving me to wonder how the hell I can react so strongly to two men. My heart tells me that I'm not ready to face those questions yet, but I'm not likely to let either of them go.

"How is it possible that you are nothing like what I was taught to believe?" I sigh, cradled in his arms, and he holds me tighter.

"Because men have long twisted our story for their own gains. I am only glad that you could see through it, that you can see the truth of who I am."

"I will always know who you are, I will always see you. I do not care what you are, just who you are. That is what matters to me. You fought for me, you saved me, against your own kin. Even though it might hurt you. Even as the leader of them all, you sacrificed for me. That shows me more than some words from bitter old men." I lift my head from his chest and nip his jaw playfully.

"You are more than they realize, Remington. Your path will be littered with pain and sorrow. I only hope that I can help you light that path in your

darkest moments." I sigh at his words and kiss him again softly. Not thinking about the fact that this man is meant to be one of my greatest enemies. A monster they tell me, but they do not know him. They do not understand, and so, they can never know. Even those closest to me will never know where my heart truly belongs.

"I have something for you," he says, the fire roaring at our feet dancing in his eyes. He stands from our pile of blankets, naked as the day he was born, and I try not to stare, though I fail. He walks out of the room, chuckling softly and shaking his head, as if he knows, while I wait quietly for him to return.

It doesn't take long, and he flashes back in front of me with a devilish grin. "Nearly got you." He laughs, and I join him.

"Nearly." I smile, but his smile turns serious as he brings my attention to the box in his hands. "This has been in my family for generations, passed down to the warriors, a reminder that even our own kind are not always our allies."

He sits opposite me and opens the box, revealing a sword, sheathed in black, laid in violet velvet that matches my eyes. "I want you to have this, Remy. It will protect you, even when I can't. A reminder of what you mean to me, a reminder that I am with you, even when I'm unable to reach you, in this life, and the ones to come. I know that this is not your first life but know that I will follow you to the ends of the earth, in every life I am blessed to be a part of, that I will defend you, even in those I'm not."

He lifts the sword from the velvet and takes the blade from its sheath. "My family crest sits here in the hilt, hidden from those who might hold it against you, but known to those who need to know."

His hands place the blade in mine, as I take in its beauty. "This is iridium?"

He nods at my question, and my heart soars at his trust in me. Such a blade could end his existence, and yet, here he sits, gifting me something dear to his heart, to keep me safe against his own kind.

"Kain, I cannot accept this." I tell him as I hand it back to him, a little sad because it is exquisite..

"You can, and you will," he says, placing the sword back in its covering and box. "So that I know you will always be safe against those of my kind who wish you harm. So that I know I am protecting you, even when I can't be there myself. Please, take it for me, even if not for yourself."

His plea makes my heart skip a beat and I nod. "For you, I will do anything."

He kisses me again, softly at first, laying me down as his body ripples above me. I run my hands down his sculpted chest and sigh into his now hungry kiss. I will never get enough of him. Not in a million lifetimes.

I pant as he kisses lower, dragging his teeth over my throat. "Please."

His laugh vibrates against my skin, making me shiver. "Patience."

My chest rises and falls with every shallow breath he steals while mapping out a trail down the line of my throat and across my collarbone. I can barely think, primal instinct taking over, lust and love dancing together in a whirlwind of passion. His lips move to my breasts, and I gasp as he takes one into his mouth, flicking my nipple with his tongue, his teeth scraping the skin while his hand toys with the other. My back arches into him and he smiles against me.

"Kain," I cry his name, breathless as he works my body, heating my core, making me slicker than I thought possible.

He kisses his way down my flat stomach, his hands sliding softly down my body to push my knees apart as he trails down. When he reaches my navel, his tongue circles the sensitive spot, his teeth nipping and slightly breaking the skin.

The sensation is overwhelming, my body reacting instinctively. As his mouth trails lazy kisses down between my legs, I grip the blankets with both fists, eyes tightly shut in hopes of regaining some semblance of control, but it's all in vain.

Kain is playing my body as though I'm his favorite instrument, owning it as though it is his birthright. My hips push into him, pleading for more, so much more.

I know he's hard, his need is a powerful thing for his kind, yet he's taking the time to make me beg. Stories told long ago never gave his kind any credit yet here he is putting my needs before his own.

"Kain, please," I beg, for him, for me. For us.

"Not yet," he growls, "I need to taste you and I want to watch you lose yourself."

The sensation of his tongue sliding along my folds conjures a cry that shakes the walls and maybe the entire planet. I feel him on my pussy but also in my heart and mind. It's like he is everywhere, touching and loving me, worshiping every inch of me with his tongue.

I moan again as I feel his fingers enter me, hooking them just right, but when his teeth bite around my clit and his tongue lavishing that greedy little nub, I lose all semblance of control. Thrashing and begging. Almost with tears falling down my cheeks as the pleasure overrides every other sensation known to our kind.

"Please, Kain. Please, now," I cry, choking on my own words as my desire takes on a life of its own.

His lips brush against my skin as he smiles before he takes one last taste, then peppers kisses across my stomach, over my breasts, and pays special attention to my nipples. His hard body slides its way up mine until he thrusts into me in one long, powerful stroke, his teeth breaking the skin of my neck at the same time, and I cry out. The pain heightening the pleasure, his need mixing with my own as he gives me as much as he takes. The sensations in me build with each movement as I match the lazy pace he's set, our bodies moving together as one. His hands pin my wrists above my head as he takes what he wants from me, his pace increasing, his control slipping as we lose ourselves in each other. I writhe under him, hissing at the restraint, wanting to touch him. He releases me and claims my mouth as he claims the rest of me, pushing me further to the brink.

His kisses trail back to my breast, where he bites me again, making me cry out. I drag my nails down his back, drawing blood of my own, awakening the most primal parts of him. He thrusts into me even harder, faster, claiming me as his own. His teeth release me, and he flips us, so he is beneath me.

I kiss him till I'm breathless as he meets me thrust for thrust. His hand moves to my clit, and it's all I can do to stay upright. He works me to the edge of the abyss, and I bite down on his shoulder, stopping the cry as I fall over the edge, pleasure filling my body until I can barely see, and he finds his own release.

"I love you, Remington Bennett," he whispers to me before kissing me again softly.

"I love you, Kain Michaels." I sigh contentedly as he moves onto his back beside me and gathers me onto his chest. I practically purr at the contact, sore in the best way, and I sleep, more soundly than I have since I discovered what I am.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I pad into the main room, my pajama shorts and tank barely enough to protect me from the chill, but coffee calls my name like a mean mistress, so I don't mind. It's still early, early enough that the sun has barely risen in the sky to heat us to unbearable temperatures, but my mind has so many thoughts running through it that sleep isn't my friend.

I move to the kitchen and find the coffee pot full and a note leaned against it.

Remy,

Dad called, so I headed home. Nothing to worry about. I wanted to talk, but it will have to wait. Don't overthink it.

I'll wait for you forever.

Creek

Well shit.

I let out a sigh and pour myself a cup of coffee, because after yesterday, and Kain, and my dream last night, I don't even know what to do with myself. I've never felt more conflicted, not only because of Creek and Kain and the more than obvious way I respond to them both. The memories of

loving them both. But the fact that Kain is meant to be one of my greatest enemies? Yeah, I'm not ready to process that properly yet. I guess my thoughts the other week about love being love, are ones I've always had.

I falter at the thought. If Kain is that different from what we're told, are all of the Dracul that way? Have I, have we all been killing innocent people? I sit on my couch and wallow in the possibilities.

How is it possible that all of this could be happening to me? The mess I find myself facing in this life is the culmination of my actions in my past lives, but I must have known how I felt about Kain when I loved Creek before. Was I as conflicted then as I am now?

A low throb resounds in my head, the pain making me close my eyes.

This is all so much.

I just wish I could remember. Remember everything. To have everything make sense to me.

I rest my head on the back of the couch, trying to make my thoughts be ducks in a row, rather than raving freaking squirrels, as Sushi jumps into my lap, purring as he circles and lies down.

"Things used to be so simple, Sush. Why can't things still be simple?" I mutter.

The peace in the room is interrupted by a knock at the door. I lift Sushi from my lap, his hiss at me a sign of his displeasure, grumpy cat, and move to the door. I look through the peephole and see no one but open the door cautiously anyway.

There is no one, and I look down the hall, again finding no one. I go to close the door when I notice the box at my feet. I bend down and lift the dark box wrapped in violet ribbon. I close the door quickly, hurrying back to the couch, placing it on the coffee table to stare at it in confusion and a little intrigue.

Who the hell would be leaving me gifts at my door?

My mind flickers to Jack. This is something he would do, but if it is him, whatever is in this box isn't something I want to see.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I pull the black envelope from the top of the box, the back sealed with wax, the symbol matching that of the hilt on my sword.

Kain.

*My darling Remy,
I am sorry our reunion was cut short last night.
Our time always feels too short. Meet me in three days at dusk. I will be
where you found me.
The others are gone.
Yours Always,
K*

I sigh at his words, and my heart clenches at the thought of seeing him again. Especially after my dreams of him. Will seeing him trigger more memories?

I pull the ribbon on the box and find a black dagger, the hilt topped with a violet gemstone. Shaking my head, I lift it to inspect it. The blade looks as if it is made from the same material as the altar I had my ritual on. His house crest is engraved on the blade, just under the hilt.

It's beautiful.

I look back into the box to find Fallon's talisman, and I smile. He returned it, just as he promised.

Making my decision to meet him, I know I'll have to find an excuse to not be around in three days' time, but first I need to speak to Fallon.

"Wait, wait, wait." Fallon practically squeals from her perch on my couch. "You mean to tell me Creek kissed you? Like twice... and you had memories about him telling you he loves you, and you haven't mentioned that to him yet? Mind blown, Remy. Mind. Blown. I need more details!"

I shrug at her outburst, because I kind of expected it, but at the same time, I haven't told her about Kain yet and I don't know if I even can.

"Can I ask you a really, out of this world, question?"

"Out of this world is pretty much my specialty, shoot." She grins at me, and I know she has no idea what's coming.

"Are all of the monsters really as bad as my family makes them out to be? Or are there exceptions? Dracul who actually feel? Lycans who don't just want to dominate the world?" I wrap my arms around myself, preparing for

the worst. Ready myself for the fact that in my past lives, I must have taken one too many hits to the head.

"No, they're not all that bad." She says before biting her lip, chewing on it like she's nervous that she said as much.. "Just don't tell your dad I said so. Hunters are... well usually they're pretty biased. Once upon a time, all of our factions lived in relative peace. Hunters were created, essentially, to police the factions, to keep the rebels in line. At least that's what I garner from my ancestor's journals."

"Woah." I lean back against the arm of the couch, facing her. "Why don't I know this?"

"Well, I mean, you might, you just don't remember knowing, but probably because it's some closely guarded secret in the Hunter world, and if the Dracul or Lycans were to say something, no Hunter would believe them. Witches, we always ride the lines, but still, it would be thought of as some myth or some lie. I'm only telling you because you asked, otherwise I'd keep my mouth shut. Goddess knows what sort of trouble I could get into for telling you this." She sighs and shakes her head.

"Have you... ever, you know..." I say awkwardly, and she laughs.

"Have I ever what? Fucked a monster? Yes, yes, I have. Like I said, they're not all bad. There's a reason you hunt rogues when you first start out. So that you see the worst their kinds have to offer, so that if you later come across someone different, you think it's just another lie, a deception to draw you in and get you killed. What makes you ask anyway?"

She watches me closely, and I try to keep my face straight and not squirm under that gaze.

"What happened?" she asks, and I shift in my seat. I don't know about old me, but this me has never been any good at lying.

I reach around the couch to lift the box holding her talisman and hand it over to her. "Open it."

She unties the bow I put back in place and lifts the lid.

Her eyes go wide as she sees her talisman.

"You got it back?" she asks. "But I don't understand... why the box? And why so big?"

"I didn't exactly get it back." I sigh, running a hand through my hair.

"Girl, why are you so nervous? Your eye is practically twitching." She watches me closely, taking in everything. "Tell me what happened."

"Well, I took Creek to the address you gave me, to get your talisman. And

there were definitely Dracul, but it was not some rogue nest. It was a home... a vampire clan lived there. There were children, families, but they discovered we were there."

"Oh shit." Her eyes go wide at my words.

"Something like that, but then... then someone helped us escape. He delivered that, or had it delivered here this morning."

"What the ever-loving fuck?! A Dracul helping a Hunter..." She looks like I just dropped a nuclear warhead on her world, and guilt ravages me. I should have kept this to myself, I knew it, I just... it was selfish of me to want some help navigating the craziness I find myself in the center of.

"I know. I mean, I have no fucking idea, but I know," I say with a small shrug.

"Who was it? Did you know him?" She eyes me, like she can sense I'm holding back details, important details.

"Do you really want to know?" I sigh, knowing that once she knows, she can't not know, and I don't want her to put herself in a shitty situation because of me.

"Oh, shut your face. I'm your best friend, if you're in a pile of shit, of course I'm going to wade in and be in it with you. Goddess only knows how your family would react, but me, I'm Switzerland, baby. I'm not going to judge." She pats her black curls, and I wonder if she has any idea, but I know she doesn't. She can't.

"Does the name Kain mean anything to you?" I ask her, and she stares at me, mouth opening and then closing, eyes wide. She looks like a Japanese Koi at feeding time and I almost laugh at the sight, almost. This shit's too serious to actually laugh right now.

"I... Kain... Surely... Holy shit," she mumbles and then starts pacing the floor in front of the windows of my apartment.

I sit silently and let her process. Apparently, she knows more than I do about who he is, and I just dropped another bombshell on her. The guilt gnaws at my stomach, but I swallow down the sick feeling that floods me, a small weight lifted from my shoulders knowing I'm not alone and that Fallon will never betray me.

She slides down the wall, sitting on the floor, and Sushi jumps into her lap, purring as she strokes him.

"What did he look like? Because it can't be..."

"He was... beautiful, in a strange way. He had dark hair, longer on top so

it kind of fell in his eyes, which were the brightest blue I've ever seen, even with the amber ring. He was tall, definitely well over six feet and broad, though not like Creek, but definitely lean beneath the black shirt and pants he wore. There was just something about him. Like a confidence in every word, in every action." I look back at her and she's practically gawking at me.

"Did he have a ring? A silver ring with a black stone? Did you see any markings on his skin?" she asks, and I shake my head.

"I didn't have time, it was so quick." I contemplate telling her about my sword, about the dagger, but I hold it back, something telling me that she's not really ready to know the whole story yet.

"Okay, well holy shit. I think that was Kain Michaels," she says, and I nod, recognizing the name from my dream.

"Who is he?" I ask, and her gaze snaps back to mine.

"Wow, your memories really aren't back yet. I'm surprised your brothers haven't given you the low down. You should really ask them for a history lesson, because holy shit man." She runs her hands through her hair, and I notice the slight tremor. Her words barely more than whisper. "Kain Michaels is the last known living Dracul of the old times. Back when the factions were at peace, the Dracul were ruled by three royal families. Rumor has it, the rest have been killed or are in hiding, but Kain, he is a man of legend.

"He fought in wars that are merely myths now. He has destroyed entire empires and brought down kings and dictators. He is a force.

"The King of the Dracul is what they call him now. The last hope of the Dracul to bring peace back to their kind. To bring back the old ways, and supposedly let the other royals out of hiding. The story goes that he was always the general of the Dracul, his father was a great mind, but no one would plan, strategize, and execute like Kain, and so he became the protector of the Dracul. The other royals looked after politics, keeping the relationships up with the other factions, keeping their people fed, keeping them in line. Kain was the one who went to war with our factions, up against humans, alongside humans, to make the world a better place."

"Sounds like you like yourself a bit of Kain." I wink at her, tamping down the jealousy that flickers in my heart, and she barks out a laugh.

"The things I've read about him... It's hard to see him as the monster everyone wants to make him out to be, but then, I've never met the guy. I only have secondhand stories. But knowing what I do about the Dracul and the Lycans, compared to the stories the Hunters give, I kind of admire him a

little. Giving up everything for his kind. Rumor has it that he had a love once, and the Hunters killed her. That's what sparked the war between the two factions and what spiraled down to the world as we know it today, but there's no firsthand stories of it in the journals, so it could just be nothing more than a story. But the romantic in me likes to believe it's true." She shrugs, a bit more relaxed.

"If it is him though, Remy... You have to be careful. I have no idea why he would help you. Even less of an idea as to why he would help you help me."

"I will. It's not like I'm going to go out hunting for him. Well, I mean, you know what I mean." I laugh, hating that I'm not going to tell her about his note, about my dream, but something inside me urges me to guard those secrets with my life, and I'm going to trust that instinct.

"Well, that is a relief! Now then, enough talk about magic and monsters. You need to dish about Creek! But first, I need something stronger than this soda." She stands and shakes her head.

"Help yourself." I wave to the kitchen, and she puts her hands on her hips.

"I know you are not going to make me drink alone, Remington Bennett." She eyes me, her eyebrow raised, and I can't help but laugh.

"Fine, but I'm only having one. I'm training with Bauer again tomorrow, apparently getting my ass handed to me this week means I need to step up my training."

"And so it should! Now then, whiskey or tequila?" she asks as she opens the door to my freezer.

"Dealer's choice." I smile at her as she moves around my kitchen like it's her own, and I feel lighter, even if a little disturbed at the new knowledge about the man in my dreams. What I still don't understand is who the other man in my dream was all those weeks ago. His voice... I can still hear it as if it were yesterday, and that voice doesn't belong to anyone I know.

I shake off the thought, because Fates knows I have enough to deal with right now as it is, and Fallon hands me a glass before sitting opposite me on the couch again.

"Spill..." she says with a wide grin, and I sigh, ready to spill my guts about the one thing I know I can tell her everything about.

"So, we started off as we always have, except for me still being pissed at him for leaving. I know, I know he had a good reason, but you tell that to my stupid girl hormones. Anyway, things started to get better, and then there was

this moment and I thought he was going to kiss me, but Colt happened."

"Fucking Colt," she grumbles.

"Right? And don't think I'm not going to ask more about that by the way." She waves me off.

"Don't change the subject!" I laugh at her impatience and continue to tell her everything again, from the beginning, enjoying the down time with my best friend, pretending we're nothing more than two human women and that man-trouble is the biggest worry we have in the world.

I pull up to Bauer's house, ready to enter his hellish basement again for a day of getting my ass handed to me, and sigh. I wish I had more of my memories back, wish that there was a way for me to get them back faster, to trigger a waterfall of knowledge so I understood more. So I understood what led me to fall in love with the king of the Dracul. Because from the memories that I have got, that's what they're telling me. Could it have been a ploy? A trick. Could I have been sent to infiltrate enemy lines, to get on the inside to bring them down that way?

Or was I a traitor to my faction?

I can't imagine being a traitor, betraying my family in a way that would cause them such devastation, but I can't ask, because if I did betray them, if it wasn't a ploy, then the fallout would be catastrophic, and if I'm being honest with myself, it didn't feel like a ploy. Not in my dreams or when Kain kissed me.

And yet, the memories I have with Creek, they make everything so much more confusing. The lines are so blurry, and I want to go back in time and kick past-me, because that bitch is causing me some serious headaches in this goddamn life.

I rest my head on the steering wheel and try to gather my thoughts so that Bauer doesn't suspect something is wrong. That is the last thing I need. Him prying, trying to work out what's wrong with me.

I push it all down so far down into a box that I visualize chaining up and putting at the very back of my mind. It probably doesn't do a damn thing, but it makes me feel better. I gather myself and climb out of my car and find Bauer opening his front door. I wonder why he has this place, considering he

still lives with Dad, but I guess everyone needs their own space sometimes.

"You okay?" Bauer asks as I approach, looking concerned as he leans against the doorframe, arms crossed.

"I'm fine, just tired. I guess nearly dying will do that to a girl." I shrug, but immediately regret my words at the look on his face.

"Well, that isn't going to happen again, and I'm going to see to it. We'll be training hard, and a friend of mine from the other side of the world happens to be on his way here for business, so he's going to help us out too." He moves back, letting me in the house and then shuts the door before joining me in his kitchen.

"Who is he?" I ask, curious, because Bauer having friends isn't really something I expected. He's always been a bit of a loner.

"He's someone I trust with my life, and yours. I met him when I first became a Hunter. We trained together, went hunting together. Traveled a lot. You thought I was off at college, but I was just off seeing the world, killing the filth." I hold in the wince at his tone, his words, and smile at him.

"Oh, wow, yeah I totally didn't link you being at college with this crazy. I've been so wrapped up in my own stuff, it hadn't even crossed my mind. Sorry. So, who is this friend?"

A car pulls up outside, and Bauer smiles, heading back to the front door.

"Bauer, man it is good to see your ugly mug." The laughing voice reaches me as I watch out the window as the man who looks the same age as Bauer walks up to the house.

"It's been a while, Archer. Come on in." I hear the smile in Bauer's voice and lean on the counter as their footsteps move down the hall.

"Archer, meet my pain in the ass little sister, Remy. Remy, this is Archer Doturo," Bauer says as he walks in, Archer in tow, who studies me from across the room. He's as tall as Bauer, so around six' four, not quite as broad, but it suits him. The main difference is the air he carries. My hackles rise, and my internal warning bells go off. This guy is bad news. How does Bauer not see that? I smile through my panic and wave.

"Nice to meet you, Archer." He nods back to me, and I can see him trying to measure me up with his stare. Seriously though, how is Bauer not feeling this tension?

"Likewise, I'm sure." His British accent comes off as blunt, so I'm sure Bauer doesn't think anything of it, but his entire facade puts me on edge.

"I'm training with Remy today. I figured you wouldn't mind helping out.

Two minds are better than one," Bauer says with a manly tap on Archer's shoulder, and Archer looks me over again.

"Training the legendary Remington Bennett. I'm sure the honor is all mine," he says. "We've not had the pleasure of meeting, in any lifetime, but I have heard more than a little about you, Remy." His smile doesn't reach his eyes.

I try to smile at him again. "Well, let's hope I don't disappoint the legend of my past."

My snark rattles through, and Bauer looks at me funny, as if telling me to stop being so rude, but I can't help myself. He's under my skin and he's barely been here five minutes.

"Let me go change, and I'll join you."

"Awesome, man, we'll be down in the basement. You're staying in the room up the stairs, at the end of the hall on the left. Make yourself at home."

"Thanks, I slept a lot on the flight over here, so I'm ready to go." Archer nods at me before leaving the room, a second before Bauer storms over to me.

"What was that?" he asks, his voice an angry whisper through gritted teeth.

"Something about him isn't right, Bauer. I can feel it."

"He has saved my life more times than I care to count, Remy. Your instincts are all over the place at the minute while you adjust to Hunter life and your memories fall into place. Keep yourself in line. This is the one and only time I'll say it." I step back, unused to his anger being aimed in my direction, and I get the feeling I don't know the whole story here.

"I'll try," I say, not willing to promise anything.

"Good. Let's go," he grits out the words and stalks over to the door that leads down to the basement, nearly ripping it from its hinges. Jeez, my brother is touchy today, and I get to train with that now. Yay me.

I lie on the floor and groan. Apparently training with them one on one hasn't broken me enough, now they want to try and train me together, because Dracul and Lycans rarely travel alone. How fun for me!

They're currently conferring in the kitchen, talking about how they're

going to continue my torture... sorry, training. If I wanted, I could use my Hunter hearing to find out what bullshit they're planning, but honestly, I'm just kind of exhausted, and grateful my speed, hearing, and sight upgrades were something I just took to. I didn't have to learn to switch them on and off. Running around like the Flash probably would have created some questions.

My body shouldn't ache this much. Hunter strength and healing are meant to make me feel amazing, or so Colt told me. He lied. I think Bauer is just trying to prove to me that I can still hurt, I can still die, and that I need to learn how to fight properly, to keep myself alive and not aching like I just went eleventy-billion rounds with Tyson.

I groan as I sit up, crossing my legs and bowing my head, feeling the stretch of my spine as I pull forward. I go through the motions of the stretches I used to do after a hard-core dance session and loosen my muscles, preparing myself for the next onslaught.

Their voices grow louder as I drop into the splits and lean my body down my right leg, enjoying the burn of the stretch. "You about done?" Bauer asks, and I turn my face to him, where my forehead rests on my knee in the stretch.

"Just about." I smile sweetly, knowing it's going to piss him off more but struggling to care after he's been such a jackass all morning. I sit up and twist, mirroring the stretch on the opposite side, and feel their eyes on me.

Surprisingly, Archer wasn't as much of an asshole this morning, leaving that fully to Bauer, but something about the set of his face as he watches me makes me think that that's all about to change.

"I hear you've had a few run-ins with the Dracul so far?" His voice floats across the room to me as I pull out of the stretch and stand.

"Yeah, Colt said their activity has increased lately, that there's been more gathering near here, so I guess that's why." I shrug and grab my water bottle, guzzling down the cold nectar.

"Well, something is happening, because the Alpha of Alphas is here. We tracked his movements from Europe. We've lost him in the last few weeks, but he was traveling in this direction, so Bauer wants us to try some other techniques, in case you come across Dracul and Lycans together."

"That could happen? I thought factions kept to themselves for the most part?" I ask, my gaze bouncing between them.

"So did we," Bauer says with a grimace. "No one seems to know what the fuck is going on, but we need you to be ready for whatever is coming. Our family holds this territory, and we'll be damned if we let the monsters overrun

our home."

"Okay then. I guess we better get to work." I nod, because despite the panic rising in me at my broken memories, I can't let it show. I can never let it show.

"After this, we're heading to the gun range—you're coming with," Bauer orders, and I shrug. Not like I have anywhere else to be today.

"Whatever you say." I bounce on the balls of my feet as I notice their movements, separating, circling me on the mats.

I barely have a chance to take a breath when they both lunge for me, and I relax into the calm I've noticed settles over me when my adrenaline runs high, and so does my fury. My thoughts shut down and my body takes over, dodging fists, ducking and rolling, hoping to pit them against each other but knowing that that isn't likely to happen.

Bauer throws a fist toward my ribs and I jump back, into the waiting arms of Archer. His hold tightens and I struggle to escape, bringing my elbow back into his gut, swinging my fist down into his crotch, and stomping on his foot, then charging at Bauer as his friend falls to the mat.

I spar with Bauer, but he's faster, stronger, and more trained than I am. We parry, but I don't get a chance to land any decent shots before Archer roars behind me, then runs toward me. I don't hesitate and jump as he reaches me, flipping backward over him as all of his speed and rage crash into Bauer and they fly backward into the wall.

I smile from my crouch on the floor, because holy shit, that just happened.

Laughs and groans come from the pile of limbs across the room, but I stay planted, waiting, wondering if they're going to attack again. Adrenaline floods me, and I feel it, that spark, the joy of the hunt, and I'm glad Bauer doesn't let me train with my weapons yet, because my fingers itch to a throw blade. To finish the job. My instincts have not yet calmed down enough to recognize that they don't actually want to hurt me.

"That's enough, Remy," Bauer's voice calls across the room as he and Archer approach me slowly. "Pull yourself out of it."

His voice is calm, soothing. They both watch me, my stillness as I calculate their movements. "Come back to us, Remy."

I close my eyes and shake it off, remembering where I am, that they are not the threat my body is telling me they are, and take a deep breath. I sit back down on the floor and they start to come closer, still slow enough not to

trigger whatever it was that was riding me.

"I've never seen it. I thought it was nothing but a story told as part of the legend," Archer says, almost in shock as they sit opposite me.

"Seen what?" I ask, tilting my head at them.

"When you fight, when you truly give yourself over to it, you get what legend calls the fire. You slip out of yourself, you become little more than your instincts, able to tear through legions without a second thought. What just happened was just a very, very small hint of it. I've rarely witnessed it, but those times you slipped into it, using it in battle, both against human and monster, have helped change and shape the course of history," Bauer says cautiously.

"You make me sound like an animal." I roll my eyes, because everyone keeps talking about my past and I really have no idea about it—it does little more than make me cringe.

"Not an animal. A weapon, one of the greatest in the Hunter's arsenal, and now with your Angel mark..." Archer's voice trails off, but his eyes almost glow with the possibilities, and the alarm in my head goes off again. I don't want to be a weapon for the Hunters. I want to be myself.

"I am not a weapon," I tell him gruffly. "I am a person, and how the fuck do you know about my Angel mark?" I cross my arms and shoot a look at Bauer, at least he has the decency to look guilty. I purposely didn't put my hair up to keep it covered, and I have a long-sleeved crop on to hide my arm, since the vines now dangle toward my elbow, though it does appear to have stopped growing.

"After your ritual, word has crossed the globe about what happened. Yet another myth that appears to be true. What is it about you, Remy, that makes you so special?" he asks, the calculating look on his face sends a shiver down my spine. Bauer seems to catch on to my unease and stands.

"My sister always has been a little different, but she's just the same as you and me. I'm going to throw some food together. I suggest you guys shower and change, then we'll head to the range." He holds out a hand for me to pull me up and I take it while Archer gracefully stands.

"I don't have anything to change into. I'll just go like this." I motion to my workout gear. Leggings, a girl's best friend. "I am definitely up for food first though."

My stomach rumbles at my words, and Bauer laughs, while Archer still just seems to study me. I watch him closely as he does, trying to figure out

what it is about him that just doesn't feel right. Like my spidey senses are all tingly and going haywire.

Torn between trusting him because Bauer does and trusting my own intuition, I keep my mouth shut. But I'm watching him.

Something tells me my intuition has never led me wrong, and that if I ignore it... well, who knows the consequences I might face.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



I close the door to my apartment and want nothing more than to fall face first on my bed. This day has been the longest, between the training, the gun range, and dealing with Archer and his creepy ass. He was quiet at lunch and then left me and Bauer to it at the range as I worked my way through so many different guns it was hard to keep track. While I have my own guns, apparently, I need a good range of knowledge, and so much has changed with weapons since my last life that I need the training regardless.

I also signed up for a Krav Maga class that Fallon emailed over to me, because why the hell not? At least it won't be my brother kicking my ass.

Sushi wraps himself around my ankles as I lean against the door, meowing as I pick him and his bowl up to feed him. I bury my face in his fur and he purrs, making me feel more human than I have in a while, just finding comfort in my cat. Laughing at how ridiculous I sound in my own head, I fix his dinner before looking in the refrigerator to find something for myself. All I see is bare space, a whole lot of nothingness.

Takeout it is, I guess.

I rummage through the drawer holding the Holy Grail, the takeout menu bonanza that I've managed to collect. It's not that I eat them often, but sometimes they are the only thing that's suitable.

I dial for the local Chinese restaurant, because Ming's is by far the most superior Chinese food of all time, and try not to drool as I place my order.

I drop my phone on the counter after I hang up and pad to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, I notice how tired I look, and yet, my skin almost

glows. I lift my top over my head and pull my hair to one side as I try to take in my new marking, which looks like a freshly inked tattoo. No wonder the boys are all covered—it's not exactly inconspicuous. Maybe I can get my whole arm done, work something into what's already there to hide the rune-like symbols that are intertwined with the vines. The more I look at them, the more familiar it feels, almost like a map I think I've seen before. A memory tickles at the back of my brain, but no matter how long I look at it, nothing comes. Sighing, I turn on the shower and finish undressing before stepping underneath the hot water, breathing in the steam helps to clear my head.

I don't think about anything as I stand under the stream and just be, letting the water wash everything away. A bang pulls me out of my stupor, making me jump. I dash out of the shower and wrap a towel around myself, surely my food isn't here yet? I rush to my front door, peeking through the spy hole and see the back of someone. I open the door, keeping the chain on, considering my current state of dress, and peer through the gap.

"Sorry, I totally spaced. You guys were super quick tonight," I ramble, when the man turns and I realize he's not holding my food.

"You're not the delivery guy," I say warily, wishing I'd put more on than my towel.

"No, I'm not." He smiles at me, the look almost feral.

"Can I help you?" I ask, and he glances through the gap, realizing what I'm covered with and his smile grows.

"I'm sure you could." He winks at me and I try not to gag, because no. "But that isn't why I'm here. I'm here to give you this."

He reaches into his leather jacket and pulls out an envelope, handing it over to me. I take it. Something so small, and yet, the man opposite me seems so menacing.

"Nice to see you again, Remy," he says and walks away, leaving me wide-eyed at my door. I come to my senses and slam the door shut, my heart racing.

What the actual fuck?

I throw the envelope on the counter as if it burned me. Who the hell was he, how does he know me, and how the fuck does everyone seem to know where the hell I live? I run my hands through my wet hair and pace, contemplating opening the small envelope.

"Fuck this," I mutter and turn all of the locks on my door, understanding why Bauer insisted on installing so many, including the deadbolt now. I

check the windows to make sure they're all secure, and head back to the bathroom. I finish my shower and dress, coming back into the main room as someone knocks on the door again. My body stiffens, still on alert, wondering where the next threat is coming from. I move over to the door, as quiet as I can manage, and look through the peephole again. A spotty teenager waving a bag of food in front of the glass greets me and I roll my eyes.

Way to overreact, Remy.

I unlock the locks and open the door, smiling at the kid as he hands me my food. Grabbing my wallet from the counter, I pay him, tipping way quicker than usual before slamming the door shut and putting the locks back in place, no longer hungry.

I contemplate calling Creek or Fallon. Even Bauer, but I have no idea what's in that envelope, and knowing my luck, it's something else that I won't be ready to share with everyone yet.

Fuck my life.

I sigh in exasperation and drop on to the couch, trying to ignore the envelope on the counter, because I'd like just one night of peace. Flicking over to Netflix, I put on *The Vampire Diaries*, laughing at the irony of it all, and binge watch, trying not to focus on the shit storm that is my life until I fall asleep.

The light flooding through my windows wakes me and I groan at the crick in my neck. That's what I get for falling asleep on the couch, I guess. I stretch out and lie back down as Sushi makes himself comfortable on my stomach.

The envelope from last night flashes into my mind and I sigh. Of course, I couldn't rest, why would my mind let me have even a moment of peace? Though, not going to lie, the binge-watching last night was a brilliant distraction, and is definitely going to be a new coping mechanism of mine. Apparently, vampires on the TV aren't anywhere near as terrifying as they are in reality. Though that Elena chick seems to have as many issues in her life as I do right now. I roll my eyes at the amount of drama it all equates to.

I almost miss my simple life with Jack, and just for a second, regret fills my heart at the decision I made. It leaves almost as quickly as it came while I

let myself wallow.

This would all be so much easier to navigate if I could just remember. That's when I realize I'm meant to meet Kain tomorrow evening.

Shit.

Of course I am. I wonder if he will tell me more about my past.

Or will he try to protect me from it all? My skin heats at the thought of his kiss, at the memory from my dreams of him, our time together. The pieces in my mind tell a story of a passionate, all-consuming love, like the ones you see in movies, but all I have are pieces. I struggle to make my mind believe what my heart tells me, that I've loved him for a long time.

Conflict wars inside of me, between my heart and my mind. Between what I feel and what I've been told. The thought that I might have lied to my family, betrayed my faction, and yet, I was the one that said love is love. What if what I've been told is all lies, like Fallon hinted at. That the Dracul, the Lycans, that they are more than what we are told to believe. Even in my first life, the war between the factions had been going on for an age, or so I was led to believe. Could history be changed so easily? And why would we want to?

I close my eyes at the thoughts. How could I possibly even begin to comprehend the enormity of it all without all of the information, and yet, I fear that there is no way to get all of the information. Even if the knowledge exists, who would risk the wrath of the Elders of the Hunter faction, to tell me the truth?

I could hear a version of the truth from Kain if what Fallon read is true, but can I trust him?

My mind feels like it is going to explode with all of the questions running through my head.

Fuck this.

Knowledge is power, and there is one place that might have the knowledge I crave. My dad's library. Even if it doesn't have everything I seek, maybe I can learn more about myself, about the mark I carry and who the hell Leviathan is or was. Maybe that will give me some idea of where to begin.

I jump up and rush to change and brush my teeth before grabbing my keys, my new mission at the forefront of my mind.

I pull up at my dad's and the house is dark, which is weird. There's always someone here, though I guess with Colt away doing Fates only knows what and Bauer busy with his asshole friend, I figure my dad is out. I slide out of the car, thankful I still have my own key.

The porch steps creak as I make my way up them, which makes me realize just how unnaturally quiet it is here. Glancing around, I notice how still everything is. Movement catches my eye, and I see a crow. It's almost like it's watching me. He lets out a caw and flies up into the trees, and I shake my head.

I'm losing my freaking mind. It's not the same crow from before and it is not watching me.

Refocusing, I listen harder and realize there's not even the sound of insects. Something inside of me goes off, like a bolt of recognition, and I rush into the house.

That's when the smell hits me.

Blood.

I race toward the smell and try not to scream when I find him. I pull out my phone and call Fallon. She answers on the first ring as I kneel beside my dad and feel for a pulse. It's there, but it's weak. What the fuck happened here?

"Fallon, I need you to get to my dad's. Now. Hurry." I disconnect the line, not wanting to waste precious time, and call Bauer. It rings on speakerphone as I tear my shirt to create a tourniquet on the wound on his thigh.

"Remy, what's up?" Bauer says, the noise around him so loud I can barely hear him.

"It's Dad. You need to get here. Quickly. There's so much blood."

"I'm coming, Remy. I'll call the others."

"Fallon is on her way."

"You did good, Remy. Just hold on and do your best." The line goes dead and I try to assess where the rest of the blood is coming from.

"I've got you, Dad," I say, for him as much as myself. I tear open his shirt and find two bullet wounds. I place my hands over them to stop the bleeding as much as I can, and pray to every god I can think of that help arrives soon.

Memories flash in my mind, so much death. So much blood. I try to focus on my breathing, focus on keeping my dad breathing. It feels like a lifetime until I hear the screech of tires and then footsteps thundering toward me.

"Holy shit," Fallon gasps before she kneels next to me, blood coating her knees as she does. "There's so much..."

"Fallon, take over for Remy on that stomach wound. Remy, you press as hard as you can on that shoulder wound, you hear?" Fallon's mom, Marie, sweeps into the room, and I can almost feel the power rolling from her. Relief fills me, because if anyone can help my dad, it's Marie Laveau. She kneels on my dad's other side and places a hand on my shoulder.

"This thigh tourniquet might just have saved his life, Remy. Well done." She undoes the tourniquet and blood spurts from the wound. "Whatever it was, it hit an artery."

She places her hands on top of the wound and starts speaking, the words foreign to me, muttering under her breath. Light fills the space beneath her hand, and I feel the power in the room—my neck heats in response to it, itching suddenly, but I try to ignore it and keep my hands on my dad's shoulder.

"Remy!" Bauer's voice calls out, and two sets of footsteps race toward us as Bauer and Archer find us, and my shoulders slump. I never considered myself the damsel kind, but right now, I've never been happier to see my brother. He kneels on my other side, placing his hand on top of mine. "I've got this; you can let go. You did good."

His voice is so soothing, and I feel someone at my shoulders peeling me away while Bauer takes my spot. I look up and find Creek behind me, Maddie and Nate standing in the doorway. Creek bundles me into his arms, and I let him as shock takes me. He leads me to the kitchen, Maddie with us, and they help me clean up as best I can.

"Do you know what happened?" Maddie asks softly as Nate appears from the other room.

"He's healed, but he lost a lot of blood. Marie got the bullets out, but they're not a metal I recognize." Anger coats his words, but worry lines his face.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"It means that the tides are turning. Someone found a material that Hunters aren't resistant to. If it wasn't for Marie..." His words filter away as he shakes his head. "What happened?" He pins me with his gaze, and it burns into my soul.

"I don't know," I tell him and hang my head as Creek runs his hand up and down my back, trying to soothe me. "I came over to dive into the library,

to try and learn, or encourage my memories. When I got here, it was still, so deathly still and quiet. I just knew something was wrong. I rushed in and I found him. That's when I called Fallon and Bauer."

"That was quick thinking, and you must have remembered something of your training because that tourniquet saved his life. Whoever did this must have left just as you got here, otherwise it would have been too late." Marie and Fallon join us in the kitchen, cleaning up their hands and then joining me and Creek at the table.

"His wounds were grave. We have healed them as best we can, but the strain on his heart from that much blood loss... only time will tell if it was enough," Marie says solemnly.

"You can't heal his heart?" I ask, confused.

"We are limited with our healing. We are not healers, but we have some healing ability. A true healer may be able to help but depending on how long it takes one to get here..." Her words trail off as Bauer and Archer join us in the room.

"He's in his bed. We cleaned him up and sorted as much as we could," Bauer says, his eyes not leaving mine. "Did you see anything?"

I shake my head, wishing my answer were different. That I could help in some way. "Do you think this was one of the factions?" I ask, the words barely a whisper.

"Of course it was." Archer scowls.

"But what about—" I start, but Archer cuts me off.

"Those filthy, mangy animals did this. Why on earth would you think otherwise?" The venom in his voice is unmistakable.

"Just that if it is a new weapon, then how would they have got their hands on it?" My words hang in the air, silence surrounds us.

"I guess we'll have to wait for your father to wake up and tell us what happened," Nate says, calling an end to the conversation. "Thank you for your assistance, Marie. Fallon. As always, you have our gratitude."

"It was our honor." Marie nods to him. "Our family have long been friends to the Bennetts and Winchesters. We will always assist when we can."

She stands, Fallon mirroring her. "We shall be on our way, but if you need anything, please just call."

"We will," Maddie says, hugging her tightly. "Thank you."

"I will call the Elders, let them know what has happened," Nate says and heads outside.

"Are you okay?" Creek asks me softly, drawing small circles on my back.

"I don't know," I tell him. I want to be strong. I want to be this legendary person they all expect and want me to be, but I am not the person they think I am, at least not right now. Right now, I'm scared that my dad isn't going to survive, scared that I might have been the cause of this somehow, scared that if they discover the truth, I'll lose everything.

Eventually, everyone leaves except for Creek, who helps me clean up the blood from the wood floors. I scrub, scrub as if each stroke could undo what happened. As if it could take back the fact my dad is upstairs, fighting for his life, and there is nothing I can do to help him.

"He's going to be okay," Creek says softly, looking at me as I sit back and huff, blowing a stray piece of hair off of my face.

"I hope so," I tell him, and my voice croaks. "How do we deal with this so often? So much death?"

"You just do, and after a while, you get used to it. Once your memories settle, you will understand."

"And what if this wasn't one of the other factions? You and Colt both said something about shady shit going on with the Elders."

"The Elders would never. There are not enough Hunters in the world as it is; it's hard enough to keep afloat above the flood of Dracul and Lycans. They would never dare give our enemies the weapons they need to win the war we have fought for a millennia."

"But how do you know?" I press, hoping for any hint of possibility that this could be something else.

"I don't," he says, shaking his head. "But until your dad wakes up, we won't know the truth. I need you to not focus on the "who" right now. What were you looking for when you came here?"

"I was searching for answers. About me, my past at least. I see Bauer poring over so many books, I wanted to try and find some stuff out for myself. Did I ever keep journals?"

His eyes go wide at my question, and I shake my head, recognizing the look on his face as the one where he absolutely knows something but isn't going to tell me a goddamn thing.

"Never mind." I sigh. "I'm going to head up and grab a shower, then go to bed. You don't have to stay; I can keep an eye on Dad," I tell him, as I wring out the last cloth, it finally coming out clear rather than pink.

"Don't be stupid, Remy. I'm not going to leave you alone. Not now, not after everything. You don't have to be this strong in front of me. You can lean on me, like you always have. You can trust me," he says, the sincerity in his eyes like a punch to the stomach, because if he knew, I'm sure he'd turn his back on me too.

"I'm not trying to be strong, Creek. I'm just coping, the best way I know. You can stay if you want to." I sigh wearily, standing up and stretching out after being on my knees for Fates only knows how long.

He stands up and steps toward me, so close I can practically feel him on me, despite the small space between us. And I like it. "Remy, please. Don't shut me out. If nothing else, we have been friends our entire life. Even if you want nothing more from me, let me be your friend."

I look up into his eyes and find nothing but compassion and understanding. My guilt overwhelms me and the tears I've been trying to hold back spill over. His arms wrap around me, holding me tight.

"He's going to be okay, Remy. Your dad is a tough son of a bitch." His words make me cry harder. Why did past-me have to screw present-me so hard? Why did I have to see Kain, and why is Roman here?

There's so much I don't understand, and what happened here tonight just adds to the pile that already feels like it might topple at any moment.

I pull back once I get the tears under control and steady my breathing.

"Thank you," I tell him, and he smiles at me before kissing my forehead.

"I'm always going to be here for you, Remy. Even when you don't want me to be. Even when you think no one else has your back. I will be here."

Why does he have to be so damn sweet? I hug him tightly again before heading upstairs to check on my dad, who is still sleeping deeply. I jump in the shower and wash away today as much as I can. The sounds of Creek pattering around downstairs comfort me, and deep down I'm glad he didn't leave. Exhaustion so deep I can feel it in my bones sets in, and I know I wouldn't sleep if he wasn't here.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Morning comes and despite the exhaustion, I barely slept. The fear of something going wrong with my dad, or whoever was here returning and hurting him or Creek, kept me up. I yawn as I descend the stairs and jump when I crash into Creek at the bottom.

"Sorry, half dead here," I murmur as he steadies me, his hands on my waist. That's when I realize all I have on is a nightshirt that comes to just below my ass, and my cheeks heat. "Erm... I need coffee... yeah, coffee."

I watch as he realizes what I'm wearing, and my words barely register with him. His grip tightens slightly as his eyes take me in slowly, inch by inch, and my nipples pebble under his intense, heated stare. His sharp intake of breath tells me he noticed, and my blush deepens. Nope, no matter who we were, the thought of him and me like that still seems so confusing, no matter what younger, teenage-me dreamed of.

"Remy." My name on his lips sounds like a plea, and despite everything he said yesterday about being my friend if that's all I want, my body tells me that I want so much more. I lean forward and brush my lips across his cheek. The gentlest of kisses, and he stiffens.

"Morning," I whisper before pulling back from him. While my body might be ready, my treacherous mind is still whirring about a million miles a minute trying to make sense of everything. I remember that I'm meant to meet with Kain tonight, and it steels my resolve to not make anything messy here, not until I understand more, no matter how much I might want to.

"Morning," he rasps, letting go of my waist and taking a step back.

"Thank you for staying last night," I say to him, pretending nothing just happened. I make my way into the kitchen and pour myself a cup of coffee, putting some bread in the toaster, because I can't remember the last time I ate.

"It's fine, you guys are family, and you needed me whether you wanted to admit it or not. I checked in on him this morning. He's still asleep and he's got a slight fever, but otherwise he's okay. Bauer called; he'll be over in a bit so you can head home for a while."

"Thank you. I've got to head to the bar later to pick my stuff up from there after my Krav Maga class. I can come back after." I smile as I take a sip of my coffee.

Oh, hello, sweet nectar.

"Okay, Colt is on his way home. His trip was extended and he wasn't due for another week, but with everything happening, he cut the trip short."

"Where is that brother of mine?" Nobody has said much about it, but that makes me more suspicious.

"No idea. But it's got to be pretty far away if it's taking him a few days to get home."

"Makes sense. I wonder what on earth he's up to."

"Who knows? The Elders obviously have him chasing something down and will likely be furious if he hasn't retrieved it, even under the circumstances. He's got a knack for tracking stuff down, so that would be my best guess." He shrugs and grabs my toast as it pops up. I slather it with butter and groan as I take a bite.

"Something about toast in the morning is just freaking orgasmic." I sigh, before demolishing the rest.

"You need to look after yourself better." Creek eyes me with concern. "When did you eat last?"

"Just now." I roll my eyes at him. "I'm fine. I'm going to check in on Dad and then attack the library. Are you sticking around?"

"No, Dad wants me back at the house. I'm guessing he wants to find out who did this, sooner rather than later, and he isn't going to wait for an official investigation. He has no patience." He runs his hand through his long, dirty-blond hair, gathering it and putting it into a man bun. The look combined with his beard and his ink makes me squirm. Why, oh why, does he have to be so damn hot these days, especially when I already fight the way my body reacts to him?

He smiles like he can read my mind and I stifle a laugh.

Nope. Not today.

"I'll see you later then?" I say as I head back to the stairs.

"Sure, let me know when you're back here and I'll swing by, keep you company again."

"Thanks. Oh, what do you know about that Archer guy?" I ask, and he raises an eyebrow at me.

"Not too much, why?"

"No real reason. Guy gives off major asshole vibes, and something about him seems... off. I don't have a better explanation but I don't trust him. Plus, he just happens to show up out of the blue with no warning, and then this happens to Dad... I just, I don't know, something doesn't add up to me. It feels wrong."

"Trust your gut, Remy. It's never steered you wrong yet. If you don't trust him, I believe you. I'll speak to my dad about him later, see if I can get any details on his family."

"You're the best." I smile as he reaches the front door.

"I know. Catch you later, Rem." The door closes behind him and I drop my chin to my chest, trying to center myself as his footsteps sound off the porch and crunch across the gravel in the front yard.

If only life were simpler. If there weren't so many strings to unravel, it would be nice to indulge in the feelings between us.

I make my way up the stairs and pop my head around the door to my dad's room. He's still out cold, but he looks so pale and fragile. I check his pulse, just to settle my nerves then leave him to rest, knowing he wouldn't want me hovering and fussing, even though he nearly died. Stubborn old goat.

I throw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, then head to the library on the third floor. I used to love this floor as a kid. The entire floor is nothing more than a library and a bathroom. I got lost in here for hours at a time when I was younger, reading about adventurers, slaying dragons, the Fae courts, and people with magical powers. If only little me had known what I do now, she'd have wondered at the magic of it all.

Adult me? I'm just trying to survive the process.

I head to the back corner where Bauer is usually hidden and pull random titles from the shelves. I have no idea where to start, but any knowledge is better than no knowledge. I flip through the pages on some, scanning the contents, trying to trigger something inside of me to remember.

Finally, I pick up an old leather-bound book that feels soft and looks as if it's been read more than a little bit. Untying the leather strap that keeps it closed, I open it and realize this is a journal. I scan the page, and I realize it's one of Bauer's.

I close it, because reading that would be such an invasion of privacy, but at the same time, maybe it will tell me something about myself.

No.

I shake my head and put the journal back where I found it. I won't do that to him, because Fates knows I'd lose my shit if someone did it to me. I just wish I knew where I'd kept mine. I pick up one of the other books, *The Myths and Legends of Angels*, the mark of the Hunter stamped on the front beneath the title, but nothing else. I open it, the pages yellowed and handwritten, but more than one style, as if many people have added to the book to pass on the growing knowledge.

I lose myself in the book, taking in the stories, the adventures and the battles of old, including the story of the creation of Hunters. It started with the fall of the Angel of War. A great general of the Angel legions, Leviathan. He betrayed their laws for the good of his people and was punished for it. Those who followed him, who believed in his actions, fell alongside him, left to roam the Earth, unable to return to Avalon, the realm of Angels.

My heart hurts for the general, doing what he knew he must, no matter the cost, regardless of the consequences, to save the ones he loved.

I sit back and close my eyes. What happened to the Angel, and why do I now bear his mark? Did I pick up his cause, betray the laws of the faction, for a greater good? I sigh and rub my eyes. I need to find out how to trigger more memories, yet I dare not ask the Elders. With all the warnings from Colt and Creed and what's now happened with Dad, I don't trust them, even though I'm told I should. I wish Mom were here—she would know exactly what to say. I'd like to think she wouldn't condemn me for my past choices too. She'd understand that the heart does what it wants. She always said that your heart was the greatest tool, the best guide, and the most trustworthy of deciders. That to follow your heart was the right path, no matter the obstacles you face.

I rest my head on the table, wishing she were here with me, my heart heavy. She would have been the best at helping me acclimate to this world. Patient to a fault, she would have explained everything, answered all of my questions, and been the best guide when I needed it as well as picking me up when I faltered.

"Remy, you here?" Bauer's voice echoes through the house, and I sigh.

"Just up in the library," I call out, knowing now that I don't have to shout for him to hear me. The stairs creak as he makes his way up to me, finding me in his corner, books scattered around me and my head on the table.

"You okay?" he asks, sitting opposite me. "This is some heavy reading." He lifts the books, chuckling at some of the titles I pulled out.

"I just wanted to find a way to trigger some memories. I hate not knowing everything, being in this limbo. I feel like I'm trying to do a jigsaw puzzle, but half of the pieces are missing," I groan, and I hate myself for it. I've never been this whiny.

"I get that, Fates knows we've all been there, but sometimes there is no way to trigger them. They either come or they don't. Is there something specific you're trying to unlock?" He looks at me sincerely, never suspecting the truth.

"Kind of, but I don't know exactly what's going on, so I don't even know where to go to trigger it," I half-lie, deciding that tonight, Kain is getting a barrage of questions, whether he wants them or not. Even if he can't answer everything, hopefully filling in the gaps will help some things make more sense. Even if only a little, or to nudge me closer to the truth of things.

"Well, if there's anything I can do to help, just ask, and if I can answer, I will." He smiles at me and pats my hand.

"Do you know where I hid my journals?" I ask him, hopeful, but not expecting an answer really.

"I don't, sorry. You were always very protective of them. We even tried a treasure hunt once, when we were bored, to try and discover the truth, but no, I have no idea. Sorry."

"It's okay, was worth a shot." I shrug and smile.

"How is Dad?" he asks, standing with me.

"He's the same," I tell him as we head back down. I've been up here for hours barely moving, and oh man can I feel it. Sitting poring over books is not something I do very often.

"Okay. At least he's no worse." He breathes a sigh of relief and I feel bad that I've not been more concerned, yet again wrapped up in my own drama.

"I'm going to head home for a bit, then to my class. I've got to swing by the bar and pick up my stuff after, but I'll be back tonight, okay?"

"Yeah that's fine. I cleared the next few days so I can be here. You don't need to worry about coming back if you've got stuff going on." He smiles

and pulls me in for a bear hug. I sink into him; the comfort and safety of my big brother has always been the same. Always my protector. Always looking out for me.

“Thanks, Bauer. I’ll text you and let you know if stuff changes, but if not, expect me back.” I grab my stuff from beside the door, along with a bag of laundry I found by the washer. “I’m taking the laundry with me; I’ll get it done at my place and bring it back later.”

“Thanks, Remy.” He smiles at me as I wave when I leave.

I wonder if he’d be so thankful and understanding if he knew where I was really heading tonight.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The shadows wrap around me like a second skin. While Kain said to meet at dusk, the sun was hidden today and darkness came in quickly.

Having checked the perimeter, I walk toward the abandoned hotel, straight up the front steps. I slip in through the huge wooden doors as quietly as I can.

The entry hall is a big open space, with stairs on either side of the room. This must be where I heard them the other day. I step forward, and the wooden floor creaks beneath my feet, making me flinch.

"You came." Kain's voice echoes through the room down to me. I look up and see him standing on the first-floor mezzanine. I wonder how I could have not remembered him fully, because the way my heart races upon just seeing him, I know I recognize him on a deeper level.

He moves humanly slow as he walks down the stairs, meeting me in the middle of the room. I gasp as he caresses my cheek, cupping my chin as he joins me, so close it's hard to see where he ends and I begin. My hands reach up to his arms almost instinctively, his muscles jumping beneath my touch, and his eyes almost glow.

"I did not know if you would." His words caress my skin, and a happy sigh escapes me as he lowers his head and kisses me softly, just a whisper of his lips upon mine. "I missed you, mon amour. It feels like it has been forever since my heart felt yours."

He rests his forehead on mine and pulls me tight into his embrace. His scent fills my nose and memories flood me. Our times together. The laughter,

the love, but the darkness too. The secrets, the hiding, the fear.

"I remember," I gasp. "So much... and yet..." Words escape me, because there are still so many holes, but one thing I know, with every part of me, is that loving Kain was not a choice, not a plot. Loving him was something that swept me up and carried me away. Made me realize so much wasn't right.

"My first life... you were there... you showed me the truth."

"As I will always do, my love. You brought me back to life. Our meeting in Paris is one of the fondest memories I have, and I will cherish it for my entire existence. I have searched for you every life you've had since then. I have always found you, and I always will." He kisses me again, and I feel it in every inch of my body. My toes curl at the rush of love that sweeps through me and I tangle my fingers in his hair.

"You cut your hair." I smile. "It was longer when I saw you last?"

"It was, but these modern times called for a change. Much about you has changed, but you are still my Remy."

"I don't understand... there is so much still missing." I've just gained a whole load more new memories and yet I'm more confused than ever.

"I know, and I wish I could answer all of the questions I know you have, but I cannot. You always told me that I should not. Not until it was time, and not enough time has yet passed."

I frown at his words, but I can feel the truth of them. "Past me is a pain in my ass."

He chuckles and pulls me into his arms again. "You say the same thing in each life, mon amour, but each time, you are thankful for it. Eventually, at least."

"How did you find me?" I ask, hopeful that he can at least answer that. He pulls back and leads me over to the couches in the corner of the room, sitting but keeping contact with me, as if unwilling to let me go again.

He loosens the collar of his shirt and pulls from it a necklace that looks suspiciously like the talisman of Fallon's, except the gemstone is red. "This was made for us, by Antoine Laveau. It contains your blood, and it heats when your life is restarted. It always takes me time to reach you, and sometimes, sometimes life is at a point where I cannot make myself known to you, but I am always there, even if only in the shadows to guide you. To help where I can." His eyes are sad, and it breaks my heart. "At least, I have found you now, before it is too late. This life, I will not let you go so easily as I have before. I have missed you too much and searched too hard. Darkness is

coming, and I will not let you be taken away by it."

His declaration stuns me. I can honestly say I didn't see it coming but at least his words almost explain the dreams that have been haunting me. The feelings I have for Creek do not make anything any easier for me. I'm also curious about what he means by *darkness is coming*, but that's another thing for future Remy to deal with.

"I know your heart does not belong solely to me, I made my peace with that long ago, but if you will let me be a part of your life, let me back into your heart, I will love you and treasure you with all that I am. Protect you with every tool at my disposal." He kisses me again, and I lose myself in him, forgetting any and all questions I might have in this moment, barely taking a breath when he moves me so I straddle him. His hands roam my body, lighting a fire in their path.

"I have missed you so much I cannot say, but you cannot stay here, Remy. It is not safe for us." His words bring me back to reality and I sigh. "Believe me, I dislike this as much as you do."

He chuckles, his hardness beneath me proof of his words. "I have somewhere, unknown to those who would betray us, but you should know that Roman arrived here. I know you and he... have history." His face shutters, unreadable, and I realize that beyond the dream I had with Roman, there may be more to it. "I should not say a thing, but I do not know why he would risk coming here. Not with the Elders still not scattered and especially with my clan having declared the territory. It is unusual. I am still waiting to hear from him, but I want you to be prepared if you come across him or his kind."

"Thank you," I tell him with a small smile. "My brothers told me the Dracul presence here is substantial currently, is that you too?"

"It is not. I came here because of rumors; rumors I hope cannot possibly be true. It was happenstance that we crossed paths, but I have never been so thankful to the Fates for it."

I frown, because rumors that strike fear in the heart of the King of the Dracul, the warrior who built civilizations as easily as he tore them down, is something to be afraid of, no matter what the threat.

"Is there anything I can do? Can I help?" I ask. His blue-eyed gaze meets mine, and his eyes soften.

"Not yet, my love. I do not wish to put you in any more danger than you're in until you are ready. You will kick me at that point for protecting

you, I'm sure, but regardless, I will take the punishment. You are my heart, and I will always protect you, even from yourself." I sigh and lean forward, my head on his chest.

"We must not linger here, but I couldn't go any longer without seeing you. Can I see you again?" He strokes my hair and I melt against him once again.

"Of course, but I need to tell you, that Creek... he and I... it is complicated," I say quietly.

"It is always complicated, mon amour. I do not wish to share you, but if the only way I can have you is to do so, then I will."

I shake my head, the thought of it impossible. To love them both. To be able to have them both. I mean, as far as ideas go it's not the worst. But Creek would never... he would never accept that I could love someone that he hates so much. Right?

I say nothing, just taking comfort in his arms for the small amount of time we have left together tonight.

"We must go, Remy." He says softly as his arms tighten around me.

"Okay," I agree, but I have never felt more unwilling to leave. "How will I see you again?"

He smiles down at me as I lean back, and pulls a cellphone from his jeans. "Modern technology is a wonderful thing."

He passes it to me, and I put my number in. My phone pings seconds after handing it back to him.

"Now you can reach me whenever you need." He smiles before leaning forward and kissing me softly again. I sigh as we part and he lifts me with ease to my feet, standing swiftly as he does.

"I will leave first, ensure it is safe. Wait two minutes before you leave." He runs his thumb across my lips, his eyes flash with heat, and then in an instant he is gone.

My heart thunders as my brain swims with this new knowledge, the love, the pain, all of it. It threatens to overwhelm me, but I take a deep breath and shove it down. Later.

Later I can sift through everything, but for now, I have to get myself together. I wait the two minutes he requested before I leave and walk on silent feet back to my Mustang, parked three blocks away. I pull the keys from my pocket and unlock the car. A breeze rushes past me, his scent hits my senses, and I know that that was his goodbye. That he kept me safe, even

when I didn't realize. Just as he promised he would.

I pull the car up in the driveway at my dad's and rest my head on my steering wheel. So much happened tonight, even though so little transpired. Chunks of my memory still float out of my reach, and I can't help the frustration I feel. The guilt from my selfishness reaches up and hits me as I realize I haven't thought about my dad once since I left here. I groan and shake off what I've learned tonight. My dad needs me, even if he's still unconscious. I need to get a grip on myself. My family has always been there for me. They've helped me, even when I didn't want or need it. The least I can do is be here and be present, rather than being wrapped up in my own shit.

I climb out of the car, take a deep breath, and head into the house where I find Bauer and Creek sitting around the table, talking in hushed voices.

"Remy," Creek says, seeing me first, giving me a look that could make a girl swoon. Bauer's head flicks to me and he gives me a taut smile.

"What's wrong?" I ask warily. "Is it Dad?"

"Oh, Fates, no. Dad is fine," Bauer says quickly. "Sorry. We just got news from Archer. Roman Knight has been spotted in the city, and nobody seems to know why."

I feign shock and sit beside them. "Roman Knight, Alpha of Alphas, right?"

"The one and only," Creek says, and fear flickers in his eyes. It disappears a second after, but I tuck it away to look into later.

"Have you guys met him before?" I ask, looking between them. Bauer shakes his head, but Creek nods.

"Just once."

"And he still lives?" I ask, knowing that the opportunity for any Hunter would have been too great to pass up on.

"It's complicated." His voice strains before he empties the rest of the glass in front of him.

"I won't ask," I say, and he relaxes a little. "I'm getting the impression that questions are not the way forward." I laugh, and Bauer shoots me a look.

"What? Every time I ask a question, I get told to wait. So I'm waiting, kind of." I stick my tongue out at him and he shakes his head.

"Only you could hear that Roman Knight is in town and shrug it off like I just told you what's for dinner," Bauer says while rolling his eyes at me.

"Well, I mean, he hasn't caused any trouble yet, or you'd have said something. And since the Dracul activity is up in town too, something is obviously happening. Maybe we need to dig a little deeper. Maybe I can look into it?" I offer, shrugging my shoulders, like I'm doing this for them, not to meet Roman. I mean, really, it's for both reasons, but they don't need to know that, and since Dad is okay, I don't see how offering myself up could hurt.

"Not a chance in hell, Remy," Creek says, gripping his glass so tight I fear it might shatter. "You're still going through your awakening. He'd chew you up and spit you out."

"Oh, shut the fuck up." I roll my eyes and they both gawk at me, mouths open. "What? He doesn't know that I don't have all of my memories back. And it's not like I was suggesting I just rock up and knock on his door, announcing myself. I was just going to poke around. I want to be useful, and you guys keep pushing me back. I get it, you want to protect me, but did you ever think that maybe I don't need you to protect me? I've heard stories and remembered even more at this point. I might not have everything, but I know for sure that I'm not some goddamn helpless freaking fairy princess who needs to be locked in a goddamn tower."

I hadn't realized how much it was getting to me, everyone trying to protect me, and as much as I appreciate where they're coming from, I'm starting to feel stifled. Like they're trying to clip my wings.

"Well, I guess more of the old Remy is back than I realized," Bauer says with a frown. He stands from the table and leaves the room without so much as a backward glance.

"What crawled up his ass?" I ask Creek, who's just looking at me like he doesn't know where to start.

"Remy, Bauer has seen you rush into things more times than he can count, and while you're some person of legend, you're still his little sister and he's nearly lost you too many times. He might have only been around for six of your twelve lives, but he feels the loss of you each and every time. He is the cautious brother, he thinks before he acts, unlike you and Colt who act first and damn the consequences."

"Oh," I say, unsure what else to say, especially when he seems so disappointed.

"Yeah. So maybe just try not to rush into danger so much before you remember. I know it goes against your nature, against the very grain of who you are, but with your mom gone, your dad already riding the line, and Colt not here, Bauer is struggling. Even more so with this new Hunter killing material that no one seems to have a clue about."

"I didn't know," I say quietly and reach over, finishing the whiskey Bauer left behind.

"I know you didn't, you have a tendency to get a little wrapped up in your own head, and that's fine. We love you, and we wouldn't change a thing about you. Usually you're wrapped up because you're trying to keep one of us out of the line of fire, but just for now, take it easy? Don't go rushing off into the night with any heroics, okay?"

"I can do that." I sigh. Fuck my life, poor Bauer. I'm such a selfish bitch right now, and I kind of hate myself for it. "Is there anything I can do here?"

"No, Bauer's got everything handled. Just be here for him, especially until Colt comes back." I nod at him and slump in my chair.

"Sorry."

I sigh again, and he puts his hand on my thigh. "Don't be sorry, Remy. Just know that you have people counting on you, watching out for you, even when you don't want it."

"Are you okay?" I ask, noticing how tired he looks.

"I'm fine, I've just been helping Dad look into the material in the bullets we pulled out of your dad. No one's heard even a whisper about it, and its composition is so strange."

"I'm sure your dad will work it out." I smile and squeeze his hand.

"I hope so, because the other factions are deadly enough. With this at their disposal, they could wipe us all from the earth and wreak havoc until we begin to cycle back." His head droops, his chin resting against his chest, and it hurts me to see him so harrowed.

I stand and wrap my arms around his shoulders. He turns and buries his face in my chest, his arms tight around me. A shudder runs through me, and I wonder again how I can care so deeply, react so extremely to both him and Kain.

Especially knowing that despite Kain's declaration that he would share me, I will have to give one of them up. I'm not sure I could ever choose and I sure as hell couldn't be with them both and lie to one of them. It is bad enough the lies and secrets I carry already.

I stroke his hair and just hold him until the tightness in his shoulders seems to subside. Creek has always been a sensitive soul. So strong, so willing to carry the burdens of others, but so unwilling to let others carry the weight on his shoulders. It is a privilege that he still lets me be that person for him.

"You should sleep," I tell him softly, and he pulls back from me, looking into my eyes and making my heart flutter.

"I could say the same about you."

"I will, once I check on my dad and my brother." I smile down at him.

"Fine," he says, pushing his chair back and standing with a groan. I follow him up the stairs, trying my best not to appreciate the man in front of me when it seems so inappropriate, but Fates above, I only have so much strength.

"Stop checking out my ass." He laughs softly, and I swat it.

"Shouldn't put it in my eye line if you didn't want me to ogle." I match his laugh with my own, grinning at his back.

He walks down the hall to the bathroom, and with one final glance at him and that ass, I go the opposite way to my dad's room where the door is already ajar.

I walk into the silent room, and find my dad with more color in his face than he had this morning. I smile, thankful that he seems to be healing quickly. With the bullet matter unknown, we don't know how long it will take for him to heal fully, but I have hope that it won't be long. My dad is a fighter—he won't let something like this keep him down for long.

I take his hand and just sit with him in the silence for a while, enjoying the peace of being able to be here with him.

When I feel myself drifting toward sleep, I put his hand back by his side, and make my way to Bauer's room. I knock, but snores answer me. I sigh, sorry that I missed him, but there is always tomorrow to apologize for being such an ass.

I head to my room, and don't even bother with the light when I enter. I kick off my Chucks and strip down to my tank and panties, undoing the ponytail in my hair, sighing with the relief of it. I slip beneath my sheets before I sense that I'm not alone. I hold my breath, but I realize it's Creek, and he's already asleep on top of the comforter. He must have been waiting for me.

It is not the first time he's slept beside me, and I don't want to disturb him.

He looks so peaceful so I turn over, and close my eyes, the soft sounds of his breathing lulling me to a deep sleep.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



I wake, the heat stifling. That's when I remember I'm not alone, Creek is wrapped around me, like my own personal cocoon. I smile, even if uncomfortable from the heat. I try to lift his arm to get up, but he groans and pulls his arms tighter.

"Go back to sleep," he murmurs, burying his head into my neck. I shiver at the feel of his lips on my skin, goosebumps covering my entire body.

"Maybe I don't want to sleep," I whisper back to him. He pulls me even closer, and despite the comforter between us, I can feel his hardness digging into my back.

"Do not tease me, Remy." His voice, full of sleep and gravelly, makes my pussy clench. I might have said I wasn't ready, implied that it was too soon, but my traitorous heart seems more than ready to move on from Jack, despite the lack of time, recognizing that what I felt for him was not true love. Not like I feel for Creek. For Kain.

I shift in his arms, turning to face him. He maneuvers so that he is under the sheets with me. I run my hands up his bare chest, feeling the muscles below tense at my touch, then resting my hands there between us. His eyes close at the contact, as he leans his head toward mine, so close I feel his breath on my cheek.

"What are we doing?" His words are so soft, almost a plea. I answer him with a kiss, and his lips devour mine. He moves us so that he is above me and kisses me with so much passion it steals my breath. His kisses trace to my neck as he grinds down into me, and I bite my lip to stifle the groan that

escapes me. His hands move upward, lifting my tank, and I pull up slightly so he can remove it, throwing it to the floor before his hands and lips are back on me.

"Creek," I gasp. He marks a path down to my breast, kissing, licking, and sucking, and I know he's marking me. Laying his own claim, in a place few will ever see. His mouth moves to my nipple and I tangle my fingers in his long, wild hair.

His hand moves slowly, softly down to my wetness, and I gasp as his fingers stroke my clit as his mouth sucks on my nipple.

"Holy shit." I can't help but grind against his hand at the sensations. His fingers work me into a frenzy, not relenting until I topple over the peak he led me to. He silences my release with his mouth on mine, swallowing my screams.

He pulls back and looks down at me with a panty-melting smile.

"Morning," he says softly.

"Morning." I blush. He rolls off of me and pulls me into him so my head rests on his chest. I lie there, not knowing what to say when we just obviously blew past the line I tried to draw in the sand to stop anyone getting hurt. To stop things getting even more complicated than they already were.

"Stop overthinking it, Remy." Creek laughs underneath me. The sound rumbles through his chest, and I smile at how well he knows me. Maybe it will be okay. Just maybe it will all work out, but for now, I'm going to enjoy this.

I reach down and cup him, hard as steel beneath my fingers, and his sharp intake of breath widens my smile.

"You don't have to, Remy. That's not what this was."

"Hush," I say, kissing him gently again. I trace my fingertips back down his chest, and slip my hand beneath his sweatpants.

Commando. Interesting.

I tease the tip of his cock, so hard and so warm beneath my touch, loving the way he feels, how he reacts to me. I slip from his grasp and pull down his sweatpants, revealing him to me. And holy mother of all that is right with the world. He felt huge beneath the material, but to see it...

Just wow.

I move down the bed, sitting between his legs, and lean down, swiping my tongue around the head, stroking him as I do. His breath hitches and he groans as I take him in my mouth, his sounds encouraging me.

He holds my hair and he guides me further down onto him until he reaches the back of my throat, making me gag before letting me up for air. My eyes water, but the shudder that runs through him excites me enough to do it again. His hand guides my head down as his hips thrust up, and delight in how lost he seems. I look up at him because I want to see him as he comes undone. His hooded eyes are full of heat staring back at me like I'm his queen.

"Fuck, Remy." He tries to lift my head, but I keep sucking his thick cock until he empties himself down my throat with a shout. I swallow and lick my lips, smiling up at him. He sits and pulls me up to him, so I'm straddling him and kisses me again so softly.

We sit in comfortable silence like that until I hear movement downstairs.

"I think we woke your brother," Creek says, and I can feel his awkwardness already.

"If we did, so be it. I'm pretty sure my brother isn't a saint." I shrug but get up from his lap.

"I'm going to jump in the shower, want to come wash my back?" I ask with a cheeky wink.

He groans and rubs a hand down his face. "You little temptress."

He looks conflicted, glancing to the door and then focusing back on me. He seems to make up his mind as he leaps from the bed and scoops me up into his arms, making me squeal.

"I will never get enough of you."

This day has been exhausting. After my extremely nice wake up this morning, that I can't find it in me to regret despite the complications it brings, my day spiraled. Not wanting to leave the house, Bauer had us all running drills and circuits on the land behind the house. I don't remember the last time I sweat that hard without it being fun.

My body is now sore, and not in a good way. I slip down onto my couch with a sigh. Colt texted us all earlier to let us know he'd be back tomorrow, with no more information than that, and still no reason as to why he had to up and leave.

My mind whirrs as my body sinks into the cushions below me. I kick off

my shoes and curl up. I know I need to move. There are still things I need to do, especially since only Nate and Maddie have been patrolling since my dad's accident, but I can't muster the energy to worry about it.

My phone vibrates on the table and I groan.

Please don't be important.

I lift my phone and see Kain's name. I maybe should have been more discreet, but no one really pays attention to my phone except for me.

KAIN:

I miss you, mon amour. Not long until I will see you again, however Roman's arrival is causing problems. A gift for you, to remind you of me until we meet again. K.

The text makes me smile, even if it doesn't all make sense. He's so old school, even in a text. It's kind of... adorable. Probably won't tell him that to his face though. I place my phone back down when the knock sounds against my door. Wondering who the hell that is, I stand, opening the door and coming face to face with nothing but air.

I look down and see the small black box, again wrapped with violet ribbon. Glancing around again to see if there's anyone lurking, I don't sense anyone there, so I wait a full minute, trying to use my hearing in case I'm missing anything. I decide there really isn't anyone there so reach down and claim it, shutting and locking the door behind me.

My phone buzzes again on the table, but I ignore it and look down at the small ring box, my breathing shallow. I untie the soft ribbon slowly, drawing it out, unsure if I want whatever is in the box. I lift the lid and gasp at what I find.

A black iridium wishbone ring, with a pear-shaped amethyst set in its center.

It's beautiful. I lift it from the box and slide it onto my index finger, the fit perfect. Such a thoughtful gift, the elements that represent us both. The iridium for his greatest weakness, and the amethyst for my eyes. I go back to the couch and pick up my phone to thank him, when I spot another message from him.

KAIN:

A treasure for my treasure. One I have kept for a millennia and gifted you a dozen times. I hope you like it as much in this life as you have in your others. K

This ring has been mine for longer than I remember, and that he kept it safe for me makes my heart burst. Such a small thing, but representative of so much. I lie down, my mood suddenly plummeting.

How on earth will I choose when the time calls for it?

I take a deep breath, deciding that now is not the time to worry over it. Fate only knows how many other things I have to juggle right now as it is. I head to bed, and leave the window open for Sushi to return when he sees fit.

I run through the passageways, so dark that I can barely see my hand in front of my face, but I let my instincts guide me. The sound of steel on steel rings out in the distance, and I push harder. If I don't get there... I don't want to think of what could happen.

The air whips past me as I move as fast as my body will carry me, barely a shadow to mortal eyes. That's when I hear the roar, and I fear I am too late. Lights flicker in the distance, and I know I am close. So close.

I hurtle forward and crash into the room, finding the two of them locked in battle, their movements so fast, each as strong as the other.

I cannot let them kill each other; my heart could not take it. I watch, waiting for an opening to bring an end to the madness, and rush forward, knowing that this will be the end of me in this life but knowing that it is a sacrifice I would make time and again.

I reach them and feel the blade pierce my heart. For a second, everything stops, no one breathes as they realize what has happened.

"Remy, no!" Creek catches me as my knees fail and falls to his knees with me, cradling me in his arms.

"What did you do!" Roman roars, pulling at the dark locks of his hair.

"Stop, please." My words pierce the air as blood trickles from my mouth. "Stop this madness. You cannot kill or blame each other. The choice was my own."

"I do not understand," Creek says as Roman paces in front of us before crumbling to the floor on my other side.

"My mate..." his hushed cries make tears well in my eyes as Creek's gaze snaps to Roman.

"That isn't possible," he grits out before looking back down at me. "Tell

me this isn't true, Remy."

He pleads, and I know he doesn't understand, he couldn't, and yet I beg him to try with my eyes.

"Nothing is impossible in our world, Creek," I say and rest my hand on his cheek as tears stream down his face.

Roman lifts me from Creek's arms and cradles me against his chest.

"Where are the Witches? We must get her to one," he growls. "Your foolishness and bigoted hatred will be the death of her."

"There are none. They fled when your kind came to the town. Her death is on your hands." Creek's words are laced with venom, and I wince.

"Stop it, please. Just stop. You both live in my heart, and I could not choose, so I chose myself. Either of your deaths would have broken me, but you are both stronger than me. Try, please, to mend the bridges that were burned by our ancestors. Learn, as I have, the truth of it all." I try to breathe, but my heart stutters in my chest, failing me.

"Remy, no," Creek's voice breaks as Roman kisses my forehead.

"Go now, my mate. Suffer no more. I will find you again."

CHAPTER TWENTY



The call came in as I was brushing my teeth. The message was simple. Get my ass home.

Fucking pushy asshole men.

I might have woken up on the wrong side of the bed. I might have woken up with the red mother saying hello. Regardless, I don't appreciate the summons, the dictation of my movements, especially when I had plans. Those plans included getting real cozy with my couch, the ice cream in my freezer, and the latest season of Vampire Diaries. How bloody dare they summon me.

All because Colt is home. No update on Dad, he's the same. I checked first thing before I made my plans. But *no*, Colt, the freaking douchebag, stomped all over my plans.

Am I whining? Hell yes, I am. Am I going to apologize for it? Absolutely not!

I rinse my face and shut off the taps before pulling my mess of hair up into a messy bun on the top of my head.

They should be thankful I got dressed and put a goddamn bra on today. Makeup can suck it.

I feed Sushi and grab my phone and keys before heading down to my car. The smell of leather when I climb in calms me a little, but I still feel the irritation, like bubbles beneath my skin. I love this car. I close my eyes, rub the steering wheel, and take a deep breath, not willing to sacrifice my baby because I'm in a shitty mood and end up rear-ending some asshole on the way

over to my dad's.

I swear, if they don't have breakfast waiting...

I put the car in gear and ease out of the spot, cranking the music up so loud I can barely hear myself think. The perfect way to spend this journey. PVRIS fills my car with their haunting melodies, and it's almost enough to lift my mood, especially with the hint of fall peeking through. The leaves turning to those beautiful browns and reds rather than just green.

I wind down the road to my dad's house and turn off into the driveway, slowing as my tires crunch on the gravel. By the time I reach the front of the house, I notice the three other vehicles already parked there. Bauer. Colt. Creek.

Awesome. A full house.

I park and take a minute to tamp down the irritation as much as I can. Don't get me wrong, I know without a doubt if they piss me off today, I'm likely to fly off the handle, and considering my new skills, that's not going to end well. So I try the breathing exercise from my new meditation app and try to visualize the overwhelming rage draining from me.

After a few minutes, I climb from the car and head inside the house, to more voices than the three I expected to find. I stroll through to the kitchen and don't find anyone, so make my way back through to the family room, when the voices stop.

"Holy shit, it's my Remy girl!" The man, with skin so dark it almost glows, practically runs toward me and lifts me into his arms, spinning me in circles. I hold on tight, because what is this madness?

He lets me down, squeezing me into a hug before noticing how stiff I am.

"She's only two months into the awakening, Gabriel," Colt says behind us.

"You don't remember me yet?" he asks with a pout, and I shake my head.

"Nope, sorry." I shrug and take a step back, noticing the other faces that I don't recognize in the room. "What's going on?"

"What's going on is my bestest, baddest bitch doesn't remember me," he huffs. "Rude. Well, I'm Gabriel. Nice to see you again, I guess."

I laugh at him, because he's outrageous but obviously brilliant.

"Obviously, I'm the freaking worst. But seriously, what's going on?" I look to Bauer, who's standing at the front of the room, wondering why no one let me know what the hell was going on before I rocked up in here.

Colt moves his head, motioning to meet him in the backyard, so I leave

the room, leaving everyone in there still looking at me like I'm some show clown.

"What on earth is this, Colt?" I hiss.

"This is a gathering, because the faction activity in Salem's Bay is getting out of control. These are people our family have trusted for an eon. I thought Dad would be awake by now, that it would be okay to bring them here to help."

"Is that why you left?"

He shakes his head and runs his hands through his hair.

"No, I left because we have reason to believe that two faction leaders are coming here, and the Elders wanted to know why. No one seems to know, and that dick bag Archer is here now too, tracing the Lycans. There's too much going on and no one seems to have a fucking clue why." I gulp at his words but shake off my unease.

"This is insane, you know that, right? I thought I was meant to tread lightly these first six months, so that I don't seize and die in an overabundance of memories or some other crap. And yet, you bring all these people here, people that obviously know me, or at the very least, of me, from their stares, while I'm in the middle of my freaking awakening. Great idea, Colt."

"I didn't have a choice, Remy. There are too many of them gathering on the outskirts of our city. We needed a force, in case things go bad. Especially with Dad out of action. There aren't enough of us here to go up against these sorts of numbers." He paces on the porch as I lean against the house and I roll my eyes.

"And what of the Elders? Are they concerned about helping us right now? Or are we just disposable to them?" The words are sharper than I intended, but the resentment in them rings true, and I realize I'm getting more of myself back. Colt's head whips up to meet my gaze and he rubs the back of his neck, picking his words carefully.

"Remy, we've had this conversation more times than I wish to count. The Elders explain their actions to no one."

"Well, maybe just because that's the way it always has been, doesn't mean that's the way it should be. How much else are they keeping from us? What else are they hiding?"

"Enough, Remy," Bauer says sternly as he steps out onto the porch. "We will not go through this again. Not right now. We have enough to deal with."

"Fine. I'm going to check in on Dad," I say and move past him into the house, trying to keep the rage that's simmering beneath the surface in check. As I climb the stairs, more things click into place. My inherent dislike of the Elders, my impatience of no one ever questioning what we're told, or anything at all really. I begin to understand why it was so easy for me to fall in love with Kain, and with Roman if last night's dream was any indication of a memory, which they so often are these days.

I sit on my dad's bed next to him. I wish I could just talk to him about it all, but the problem with remembering is remembering how he didn't believe me. Or how he wouldn't listen to me, refusing to believe there was anything wrong with our ways or our unyielding laws and belief systems that were out of date and just wrong. I knew otherwise.

Yes, some of the Dracul and the Lycans were out of hand. Yes, some of them attacked humans, hunted them, kept them as pets. Those ones, I would hunt to the ends of the earth. But the others, the ones who just wanted to live their lives with their families, experience the ever-changing world in all its wonder. Those ones, I refused to hunt. If not outright to the Elders, then in my own way. Would I find them? Of course, I'm good at what I do. I'm one of the best. But would I slaughter them when they have done nothing but be born, or made, into a faction that wasn't my own? Not a chance.

I pushed for us to be better, trying to bring others to my way of thinking without risking a blade through my heart, or the true death. But so many refused to see the truth, even with the world as accepting as it was among the humans in this lifetime, I could see it still in the Hunters I've met. That unwavering faith, the belief that the monsters are nothing but filth, pests to be exterminated to create a better Earth.

It is the one time I have been glad of the struggle for Hunters to conceive. So that our numbers don't grow so much that that ideal might become a reality. Because the barbaric ways of this council of Elders would do it if they had the opportunity.

It hits me, the reason for the extra Hunters.

It is not a precaution but an opportunity for extermination. I scramble to pull my phone from my pocket and bring up Kain's number. I try to call but am not surprised when it goes to voicemail.

ME:

You need to get your people out. Quickly. Hunters gather.

I send the message and pray that his pride does not get in the way of protecting his people. I do not understand why he would bring his clan with him on a hunt. The warriors, yes, but not the women and children. Were they as fierce as the men, yes, but so many would be put at risk. Maybe my thoughts are draconian, but having lost my mother, I can't think of a worse fate for a child to exist without theirs, regardless of who or what they are.

It changes you.

I take a deep breath and try to calm my racing heart.

"Remy?" I open my eyes and gaze at my dad at the sound of his voice.

"Dad? You're awake! Holy shit. I'll get you some water, hold on." I jump from the bed and rush to the bathroom, grabbing a glass of water. "Bauer!" I shout as I rush back to the room. I help my dad sit up and then hand him the glass.

"Sip it," I scold him when he takes a gulp and glares at me over the rim, but he changes to sips of water. I might have issues with my dad, but that doesn't mean I'm not glad he's awake.

Footsteps bang up the stairs as Bauer, Colt, and Creek barge into the room.

"You're awake," Bauer says, stepping forward.

"Have I been out long?" he asks, his voice still croaking after being asleep for so long.

"Not too long, a few days," Bauer answers him. "What happened?"

My dad's eyes harden, and his entire body almost shakes with rage. "We were betrayed."

After Colt got the other Hunters settled in a hotel in the center of Salem's Bay, he came back with Nate and Maddie in tow. While he was gone, Bauer helped Dad about, getting cleaned up, while I sat and talked with Creek. I didn't mention the dream, because if it wasn't a dream, if it was real, then I'm sure he knows, and I have no idea how to tackle that. I don't know if we've ever discussed it before, in our lives between then and now, and it's making me feel anxious as hell.

"Are you okay?" Creek asks me, watching me closely as I nurse my cup of coffee.

I let out a huff and blow some hair off my face. "I'll be fine."

I hope the answer is enough, but I don't have to worry, because Dad and Bauer appear in the kitchen, where the rest of us are seated, waiting. Being watched and analyzed is not on my to-do list today, hell none of this was, though I can't be anything but happy and relieved my dad is finally awake.

He makes his way across the room, shrugging off Bauer's helping hand, but Bauer moves like his shadow, just in case.

"I am not decrepit, boy. I can walk," my dad scolds, but Bauer rolls with it.

"I never said you couldn't, old man. But you've been out cold with no food for days; the likelihood of you falling is real, considering how long you've been healing. I'm pretty sure you don't want to be sidelined again because you fall and break something," Bauer bites back, and I catch my dad's smile before he wipes it away and sits down at the head of the table, exactly where he should be.

Creek jumps up, and starts rummaging through the fridge, as if not knowing where he can help with this, and so, he'll feed us all. The room is quiet other than his movements for a few moments while everyone waits for my dad to speak.

"Have you found out what they used to injure me?" He roams his gaze over the room, meeting each one of ours until settling on Nate.

"Not yet, but I'm working on it. I've been using limited resources, because I didn't know who attacked." My father nods at his words, and now that I know more, it makes sense that we kept this mainly in house and why Colt was touchy about Dad still being asleep with the other Hunters here.

"I brought the Bellos' back with me from Africa. We need more manpower here with the surge in numbers, I thought they would be best. Abel agreed to come," Colt tells him and my dad nods.

"Good idea. They have been friends of ours for many years. I do not believe they would turn against us now."

"You said we were betrayed?" I ask, since no one else seems to want to say it.

"I was attacked by a Hunter. I do not know who, the coward attacked from behind with the shots before I disarmed him, but his face was covered. I only know he was human from his eyes. No amber ring. No silver flecks." He bows his head as if ashamed before straightening.

"Do you know why?" I ask, the rest of the room deathly quiet, and he

shakes his head.

"I have no idea, but for it to happen so soon after knowledge of your Angel mark spread, I do not believe in coincidences." I suck in a breath at his words.

"This is my fault?"

He looks me in the eye, hesitating before shaking his head, but the hesitation was enough.

"It is no one's fault but those who sanctioned it, or those who carried it out. There has been unrest in our faction for many years now, but the splintering grows. The Elders do not seem worried about it, but warring amongst ourselves when our enemies grow in strength and number is not what we need to be doing. That said, I want to know more about the bullets, the blades he used. Maybe if we can find out what, we can discover who and why."

"I'm working on it," Nate says.

"I'm glad you're okay, Denny," Maddie says softly. "Now, how about for a change, instead of storming off to the depths of battle, we just celebrate that you're back with us and healthy. Creek is already cooking enough to feed an army. How about we bring Abel, Celeste, and Gabriel back, and invite Marie, Fallon, and Rebel over? Make a night of it."

"Maybe he should rest," Bauer inserts, but my dad shakes his head.

"I think a night with my family, including our extended family, is exactly what I need." I read between the lines, knowing that my dad will speak to Abel, Celeste, and Marie about what happened to him. Find out if anyone has heard anything. How better to disguise a meeting to our enemies than as a revelry.

But a spark of hope ignites in me, and I hold on to my father's words. Dissent in the Hunters, while terrible, could be exactly what I have hoped for so long. Maybe others have discovered what I have, that not all is as it seems, that things do not have to be the way they are, the way we have been told they always were. The lies of the Elder council poison us, and while no one seems to know why the change happened, I know that it did.

Another thing for me to think about later.

Colt leaves the room, his phone to his ear, most likely calling Gabriel, while Maddie calls Marie. I pick up my own phone and see a message from Kain.

KAIN:

A war is coming. We will not flee when all we have dreamed of is within our grasp. K

I steady my reaction, careful not to portray anything but mild disinterest at the screen, before I tuck it back away in my pocket. Hope swells in my chest, but I school my emotions.

"Who is patrolling tonight?" I ask, since it has been so long since I've been out, but the opportunity to get out and speak to Kain feels within my reach.

"Some of the Bellos' cousins volunteered. After being stuck on a plane for way too long, they jumped at the opportunity to be outside," Colt says as he walks back into the room, and my heart sinks a little.

"You're heading out tomorrow, so get your rest tonight. Your first solo hunt." He winks at me and I smile, feeling far more confident in my abilities than I have since my ritual.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I leave my apartment on foot. I'm heading out of the city, but with the harvest festival coming up next week, parking here has been impossible. The colder air stings my cheeks, but I relish it. I've always been a fan of colder climates.

My swords are tucked under my cloak, and considering the crowds, I'm happy with my decision. Even if it were closer to Halloween, costumes aren't considered normal for adults around here. I make my way through the crowds of people for the four blocks it takes to reach my car before jumping in and cranking the heat up high. The cold, I like, freezing fingers, not so much.

I start the car and set the location of the warehouse two towns out on my phone before making the slow drive in heavy traffic out of the city. With the increase in activity in the areas, our patrol borders have been widened. We're apparently the only Hunters on this half of the continent, which explains the amount of camping trips Bauer and Dad used to take, leaving Colt and I at home. Not that I was ever bothered—I am not a camping kind of girl. Can I slum it when needed? Yes, but would I choose to? Not in this life, or any other.

The road's clear, and the lights fade away, darkness creeping in, only broken by the lights of my car.

A flash to my left catches my eye, and I slow the car to look, to make sure that I'm not being tailed. I look forward a moment too late to see a man in the middle of the road. I slam on the brakes but I know the collision is coming. My poor Mustang. I brace myself as best I can as I hit him, my car spinning,

hitting something else which flips it up into the air. The car rolls and I struggle to keep myself tucked in, but fail at the force of the movement. The car skids to a stop and I groan. Suspended upside down, blood running up my face, and my shoulder feels like it's been dislocated. I touch it and grimace. Yep, definitely dislocated.

I hear cheers around me and shake my head. I must have hit it harder than I thought. I clamp my teeth as I pop my shoulder back in, whimpering as I do.

I try to reach for my phone, but the seatbelt pins me in place, and of course, I can't reach the blade in my ankle holster either.

Fuck.

The cheering grows louder and shadows appear on the ground as the light grows around me, flickering, as if it were firelight.

I see feet at the window beside me before their owner crouches down and smiles at me through the space where there used to be glass. The smile chills my bones, and I try not to panic.

"Pretty little Hunter we caught here, boys. I think we should have some fun. Her blood smells delightful." His eyes glow silver before he stands and the door is ripped away.

Lycans.

Hollers and whoops cry out into the night, and I wonder how they found me, how they traced me, or was it sheer dumb luck on their part that I was headed out this way? They don't seem to know who I am, just that I'm a Hunter, but I guess my blood would give that away. My vision blurs as the world tilts, but I force myself to focus. Hands reach in and pull at the seatbelt, snapping it, grabbing me before I drop and wrenching me from the car.

Dazed and injured, I struggle against the man carrying me, but it hurts to breathe and I realize my ribs are likely broken. I just hope I haven't pierced my lung.

I stop fighting, trying to gather some strength and take in my surroundings. The light I saw must have been the bonfire being lit that now sits in the middle of this field in the middle of nowhere. I look around and realize this isn't just a few Lycans. There are at least a dozen. What the fuck are Roman and his alphas up to, letting a cluster of rogues grow to this size? Hunters are not the only ones who were meant to police the factions.

"Fancy trying to find dinner and stumbling across a Hunter, boys. The huntress must be with us tonight," the man roars, and the cluster roars back. Just what I need. To be dinner. A few more steps, and the man holding me

drops me to the ground. I groan as my bones rattle on the impact.

I try to stand, managing to get to my feet. I rush the Lycan closest to me, grabbing the blade from my ankle to do as much damage as I can before I start to run.

Running from a cluster of rogue Lycans is probably the most idiotic thing I could do. They enjoy the hunt, the chase, just as much as the kill, but if I'm going to survive, I need to get the hell out of here.

So I run, my breaths stabbing with each lungful of air I suck down, but I push through it. I am miles from the edge of Salem's Bay, and there is no traffic on this road. Likely why the Lycans chose to set up camp here.

I tune into my hearing as I run, my eyes already scanning my surroundings, seeing further than I would usually to ensure I don't fall into any other traps. I hear them, so close behind me, so I push harder. Their speed typically is faster than mine, but not if they're not shifted, and the time it would take to shift would definitely give me a chance to get away. I just have to hope they don't contemplate the shift being worth it.

When lights appear in the distance, relief floods me, then a blade buries itself in my thigh and I fall to the ground. The Lycans get closer, and I try to stand again, but I can put no weight on that leg. Fuck.

A roar, louder than any I've heard tonight, cracks through the silence and I wince, but the rushing footsteps behind me slow to a stop. There's a rustle in the grass in front of me when I see him.

Roman Knight.

He runs straight past me, half-turned, and barrels into the group behind me, quickly followed by two fully shifted wolves. Screams cry out behind me, and it takes everything inside me not to sob.

I put a leash on my emotions and shove them down as the screams and cries around me die.

The two shifted wolves appear at my sides, scenting me before howling.

"You're bleeding," Roman says roughly, kneeling beside me. He pulls the blade from my thigh and I clamp down on the scream that threatens. I hear more than see him take off his T-shirt and wrap it around my thigh. "It has not hit anything important, but it is deep. You will need to see a Witch."

"Thank you," I say shakily and roll over, sitting up, careful not to knock the material on my leg.

"What the fuck are you doing out here alone?" he roars down at me, and it raises my hackles.

"Who the fuck are you to shout at me about being out here? You don't own me, and you sure as hell don't get to dictate my actions."

"Who the fuck am I? I swear to all the Gods of the realms... Fucking hell, Remy." He paces in front of me and pulls at his hair. His chest heaving as his anger rolls off of him. "Who the fuck am I...?. Do you not remember?"

I just look at him and cross my arms, raising an eyebrow. I'll be fucked if I'm going to tell him. He might have just saved my ass, but he does not have the right to speak to me like that.

"You must remember—you let me help you. Who the fuck am I... really? I'm just the guy who saved your pretty little ass." He rolls his eyes at me as he continues to pace.

"Are you going to tone down your inner asshole, or are you going to get the hell out of my face?"

He barks out a laugh at my words and the two wolves beside me just whine, lying down and putting their noses beneath their paws. I'd laugh if I wasn't so focused on the man in front of me. The bigger threat, no matter our history.

"Tone down my inner asshole, nearly get pulled to pieces by twelve fucking Lycans, but I'm the asshole." As he paces, his movements slow as if he's working through the anger inside him, settling his wolf, as if tearing the other Lycans apart wasn't enough to let his wolf know I'm okay. Although his pacing does give me a chance to check him out properly, not that I should be right now. I have more than enough to deal with as it is and I mentally scold myself for potentially making things even more complicated than they already are, and curse past Remy yet again. "Fucking woman, doesn't understand. Yes, yes, she's alive, she's safe, but fucking hell."

He pulls at his hair, his musings quieting before he stops and just stares at me.

"You remember me? Who you are to me?" he asks, his eyes finally calm, no longer glowing.

"I remember," I tell him, unwilling to be the one to break eye contact, and he laughs before walking away.

"The only female in all of history who refused to look away." He shakes his head but smiles. "Why are you out here?"

"I was meant to patrol two towns over. Your arrival and the surge of Dracul has the Hunters on edge."

"I had a feeling Kain would be here too." He frowns. "You met with

him?"

I keep quiet, not yet trusting him with that information. I may be his mate, but the wolf inside of him is a tricky beast. It would do anything to protect me, even from myself.

"Of course you have. Your bleeding is slowing."

I roll my eyes at his ease of conversation switch.

"Why was there a rogue cluster so big?" I ask him, pinning him with my gaze.

"The same reason there are issues in your own house. War is coming," he tells me, his face unreadable.

"And where do you fall in this war?"

"Wherever you stand," he says, and the wolves beside me howl their agreement, loud enough to make my ears ring. "Did you get my flowers?" he asks, and I look back at him, puzzled. "For your birthday," he sighs, exasperated. "Purple peonies."

Oh, holy crap. "That was you?"

"It was me—they used to be your favorite."

"They still are." I smile at him. "Thank you."

"Are you ready to head back?" he asks, and I nod as I reach out to him to help me stand. He moves toward me and rather than helping me stand, he scoops me into his arms.

"I can walk," I tell him with a huff.

"I know you can, but let me do this. For me, not you. The wolf will not settle until the bleeding stops. Keeping you close makes him happy." Frustration trickles through me at his words but I don't argue as he begins the walk back toward my city. I get the feeling that arguing with him is a battle I'm not going to win, but that doesn't mean I'm going to make it easy on him.

I'm Remington Bennet, dammit. I'm not some damsel that needs saving... well I mean, I guess I did, but still. So not the point.

I'll let him take this win, promising myself I'll take the next one.

I limp across my apartment to let Fallon in. I texted her once we were close to the city limits, despite my protests that I was fine, Roman wouldn't put me

down until we reached the apartment building. Growling and grumping about his stupid breakable mate.

Fucking Lycans.

"Girl, I do not know what it is you have landed yourself in, but you and I... we need to talk." Her voice is shrill as she storms into the room. "I swear I only hear from you when you're broken."

"I'm sorry, and yes, we'll talk, but I'm still kinda bleeding. Can you help? I mean, it's probably basically healed by now." She waves me onto the couch, so I close the door and limp back to where she's perched.

"Pants down," she insists. I roll my eyes but do as I'm told. Then lie down so she can get access to the wound on my thigh.

"It's nothing major—you're lucky. A few inches different and this could have been dangerous. What happened, and why did you call me for something that would have healed in a few hours?" She quirks a brow at me, and I roll my eyes.

"I was ambushed by a cluster of rogue Lycans. Twelve of them. They wrote off my goddamn Mustang. I want to kill them all over again just for that." I grit my teeth as her hands press against my skin and the heat increases.

"Holy mother of fates, twelve? That's not a cluster, it's a goddamn rogue pack!" She sucks her teeth and makes a disapproving noise. "How the hell did you get out of that with only this and a few other cuts and bruises?"

"Are you sure you want to know? Because it's a whole thing and it could get me killed," I tell her honestly. Fate knows she deserves the truth, and I already know she's more liberal than the Hunters. The Witches just are.

"How much trouble are you in?" she whispers.

"At the moment, not too much, but if people find out the truth, then a whole fucking shit pile." I sigh and she removes her hands from my thigh.

"You can put your pants back on. You're all fixed. I have a feeling we're going to need pants and tequila for this conversation." She shakes her head, a little wide-eyed. She grabs two glasses and the bottle while I put my pants back on before we settle back on to the couch.

Fallon pours us out a decent drink and throws hers back, giving me a tight smile and then pouring herself another. "Okay, let's go."

"Honestly, I'm not sure where to begin, and I still don't know everything," I say quietly, but she gives me a look that tells me she's not leaving without the truth.

"So... I told you about the whole thing with Creek already, though that escalated this week, but there is more. Past Remy screwed me, Fallon. And yet, I get it." I take a deep breath and look her dead in the eye. "So, it turns out past me was as open and loving as I am now... and as open-minded as the Witches. I know that the Hunters' stories, their ways, don't make total sense, and I know that because Kain Michaels was my lover, no, he was my love, in my first life and many since then. I've always known the rocky truth, just not the whole story of why things are the way they are."

"Holy shit! Kain Michaels... Damn, girl, that vampire is one fine piece of man meat," she exclaims, her eyes wide, and I can't help but laugh at her. "Keep going!"

"Well, it turns out that Kain wasn't my only dalliance into other factions. I'm not sure which life it was, but in one of them, Roman Knight recognized me as his mate. I don't know how or why, or even much more than that yet, but *that* is how I got out alive tonight. He found me and tore the Lycans to pieces with two of his pack. That's why I called you. The overbearing asshole made me call you on the way back. He literally wouldn't put me down until he heard you agree to come over and patch me up."

She let out a whistle and fans her face, looking more excited than disgusted, which is honestly what I half-expected, because what even is this life that I've led.

"I don't know how it all fits together, but I know that Creek knew, in whichever life it was, that I was Roman's mate, because he killed me."

"He did fucking what!" she screeches, and I shake my head.

"He didn't intend to; he was fighting Roman."

"And you barged in there like a woman possessed. Holy mother, Remy."

"I know, I know, but then there's Creek. And now they're all here. Together. In my goddamn city, in this one life. Each of them wanting a piece of me." I shrug and tip the tequila she poured down my throat. "That's essentially it in a nutshell."

She sits there, blinking at me and looking kind of shell-shocked. I give her a minute and pour us both another drink.

"What are you going to do?" she asks me, sipping her drink.

"I have absolutely no idea. I mean, what can I do? I can't ask my family for help; they'd probably kill me, literally. I can't be with all three of them, but I have no idea how I'd choose, because my stupid heart belongs to each of them. But also, I have no idea what it is that is still missing from my stupid

memories. I'm hoping that past me had a goddamn plan, some way of working out where the hell she was going, because the path she's leading me down is murky at best, at worst, the true death." I gulp before swallowing the contents of my glass, finally feeling a light buzz but it does nothing to help the impending dread that fills every inch of my body.

"Girl, I say have some fun. Have a little harem, why the fuck not? The boys can learn to play nice, maybe even nicer than nice." She winks at me, and I burst out laughing.

"Could you imagine the looks on their faces?" I giggle and she laughs with me.

"I would pay to see it, sugar. Pay to see it!" She claps her hands in time with her words, making me laugh harder. "Erm, excuse me, what is that on your finger?"

She eyes my ring and waves her hands, grabbing for mine. "It was a gift."

She eyes the ring on my index finger. I'm just glad the other men in my life haven't paid any attention to it. "Is that iridium? Oh my freaking fates, is this from Kain?"

She gasps as her gaze whips up to meet mine and I nod. "Girl, I need me a Dracul King—this is beautiful." She fans her face, making me laugh more.

"I mean, you can't have him, he's mine." I stick my tongue out at her and she laughs right back at me.

"Territorial already, I see," she says, and I sigh.

"Honestly, I don't know. When I'm here, like this, no not really. But when I'm with him, with any of them, I don't even really want to test the theory."

"I can imagine. But getting real, if Creek knew once, maybe he'd be more open to helping you than you think? And Colt is more open-minded than people realize too," she says, and her skin almost glows at his name.

"What on earth does that mean?" I ask. "I'm not the only one who has been keeping secrets."

"It doesn't mean much." She says. "Honestly, I don't know what any of it is, but when things make more sense, I swear I'll explain."

"Just not in too much detail." I laugh and she rolls her eyes.

"With the amount of dick in your future, I can keep that to myself. Where are all of your many men anyway?"

"No idea. Roman left begrudgingly after he carried me here."

"He carried you here? Oh damn." She practically swoons, but I continue.

"Kain is holed up somewhere, said he'd come for me when it was safe,

and Creek... Well he's probably off with my brothers somewhere up to Fates only knows what."

"Honestly, I don't know whether to be jealous of you or feel sorry for you." She smiles sadly. "Whatever you choose, someone is likely to get hurt, and I know that's the last thing you want. Just follow your heart, Remy. It's never steered you wrong yet. Jack being the exception of course."

"Jack was..." I take a breath. "Jack would have been good for me if I was human. If I was human, my family probably wouldn't have disliked him as much either. Things would have been easier, that's for sure. And yet, as much as I want to throttle past Remy, I can't find it in myself to regret my actions in my previous lives. My heart is so full. I just wish Mom were here. She'd know what to do, what to say."

Fallon nods at my words.

"Yeah, your mom would have been on board, and on your side to the end." She smiles sadly at me. "You could speak to my mom? She's always felt the same as you, that love is love regardless of your faction. She hates the racism and bigoted nature of our kinds. I'm pretty sure she plays with the other factions as a big fuck you to those who look down their nose sometimes. It's just the way she is. It's why I was always surprised that she and your dad worked together so well, but I guess because she was so close to your mom, it makes sense." She shrugs and I shake my head.

"Thanks, but I don't think even Marie would be able to help me out of the mess I seem to have created for myself. One advantage to the swell of Lycans and Dracul, plus everything with my dad, is that people seem to have forgotten about my Leviathan mark." I shrug, trying to see the silver linings where I can.

"Small wins." She smiles.

"I've just tried to keep it covered as much as I can. I think it's stopped growing now, but I don't understand the symbols intertwined with it."

"Maybe ask one of your lovers. Creek obviously doesn't know much, otherwise he would have said, but one of the others might." She shrugs and my eyes widen. I hadn't thought of that.

"Fallon, you're a genius."

"Oh, girl, I know, people just underestimate me at every turn." She winks at me and finishes her glass. "Right, I better head back, Mom will be waiting up for me. You'd think I was twelve, not twenty." She rolls her eyes and stands. "If you need me, I'm here. For anything. Even facing off against your

family.”

"Thank you, Fal." I hug her tight. "You're the best."

"Don't you forget it," she says with a wink before releasing me. "You lock this door behind me. You might have a harem of protectors out there, but there's also way too many beasties out there that you seem to be able to piss off or attract without even trying."

"I will. You going to be okay getting home?"

"Yeah, I ordered an Uber. It'll be here any minute."

"Okay, stay safe, Fallon. Call me if you need me."

"Ditto, girl. Ditto."

I close the door behind her and lean against it. That went better than I thought it would.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Patrols and training. That is what my life consists of at the minute. Creek is out with Colt and the Bellos, hunting, and I try not to hope that they aren't successful, for fear of the knowledge I now carry. The guilt they will carry when the truth becomes known.

Because it will.

It's the one thing I am focused on. I can control it, I can research, make the world the way it once was. So many other things are outside of my control, but this... This I can try to make happen. I try not to think of the fallout that may come with it, but surely it can't be worse than the chaos we face currently.

My dad and Nate have been working round the clock with Maddie to discover what the weapons that were used against my dad are. Roman has fallen off the face of the earth, no one has seen or heard anything of the Lycan alpha, and Kain... He says he is staying away for my own good for now, though not for long.

I shake my head as I throw another fist at the punch bag in front of me. The boxing gym is old and smells like men and sweat, but no one pays attention to the girl beating the crap out of a bag in the corner, and this has been the best outlet for all my newfound rage. I stumbled across it this morning and decided to take a peek, but this place is a hidden gem that I will keep in my ever-growing vault of secrets.

Sweat runs down my back as I take my frustration at the whole world out on the bag in front of me until my arms are so heavy I can barely move them.

I grab my water bottle and gulp it down, groaning as my phone pings inside my bag.

I ignore it, trying not to focus on the new Hunter killing weapons, the rumors that made Kain stiff with fear, and the war that we are on the brink of, on top of my own disastrous love life, or what little of it exists right now.

My phone continues to ping in my bag, only adding to the rage I can't seem to let go of. I rip off the gloves that I borrowed from the reception and root through my bag for my stupid phone. Four missed calls from my dad, another two from Maddie, and a handful of messages.

COLT:

Remy. Call me when you get this.

CREEK:

You need to come to your dad's. I hope you're okay. Sorry I haven't been around much.

KAIN:

Something is happening. Whispers grow louder, and I worry for your safety. Please let me know you are okay. K

And then an unknown number.

UNKNOWN:

Meet me. Tonight. R

Roman.

I respond to the first two, telling them I'm on my way, and let Kain know that I'm perfectly fine and not a freaking china doll.

I go to respond to Roman last, unsure what to say, so I say nothing and tuck my phone back in my bag. I wipe my face with a towel and head out of the gym, returning the gloves as I leave. I try not to stomp my feet or act like a brat as I make the walk out and call for an Uber to my dad's. Roman had my car towed, but no one else knows that it's a write-off yet. I try not to think of it, just another thing on my ever-expanding list.

How it has only been just over two months since my awakening is beyond me. It feels like a lifetime already, though that could be because of the memories.

I clear my mind on the ride over, letting go of some of the worry, trying to breathe deeply to settle the turmoil inside of me. I pull out my phone again as we head down my dad's driveway and bring up Roman's text.

ME:

I can't tonight. Something is happening. Are you back?

It doesn't take long for his response to come through.

ROMAN:

I never left. Just sorting business. If not tonight, when?

Saturday?

I mull it over in my mind. It's Tuesday according to my phone, though with no job, it's been hard to keep up with the days. Thank the Fates for Hunter savings—I won't have to work for this lifetime, or many others.

ME:

Saturday works. Where?

I wait not so patiently for his reply to my message but it doesn't take long.

ROMAN:

I will pick you up. Be safe, you never know what lurks in the dark.

His response sends a chill up my spine. Not only has he been here this entire time when everyone thought he'd vanished, but now he gives me some cryptic warning. Awesome. I try not to think about the fact that one of the world's deadliest predators can disappear from the face of the earth and move around in the shadows without anyone realizing.

The Uber stops in front of the house, and there are so many cars here.

Great.

I thank the driver and climb out, watching as he leaves, just for another moment of peace before I face whatever waits for me inside the house. The voices reach me before I even get to the door, and I realize they're in the backyard.

I walk on the wraparound porch to the back of the house—the laughter of children, with squeals, and the smells reach me before I get back there, making me smile despite my slight irritation.

A cookout.

They harassed me for a cookout.

I roll my eyes, but wave as people spot me, and head into the kitchen.

"Oh, Remy, sweetheart, you made it!" Maddie exclaims with a big grin. "We thought we should celebrate your dad's recovery, plus, with Colt's birthday next week, it seemed like something fun to do since we had everyone here."

"You realize they made it out like someone was dying to get me here?" I tell her.

"Of course they did, they didn't think you'd come. You've been distant lately."

"What..." I interrupt but she waves me off.

"You've been present in body, Remy. But your mind... like I say. Distant. We understand, we've all been there, but we didn't know if you'd come for this. Just know that you can talk to us. We've all been through the awakening. I don't even want to think how many times. Your struggle isn't new to any of us, even you, but you won't understand that until it is complete. I know it is obscure, but I am always here for you. No matter what." She squeezes my shoulder before turning back to the chopping board in front of her. Salad bowls galore scattered across the kitchen. I shrug off my jacket and hang it over the back of a chair.

"Can I help?" I ask, guilt coloring my words, because she's right. I might have been here, but I haven't been, not really. Other than my stolen moments with Creek, my mind has been whirring, trying to make sense of everything, of the mess I've landed myself in.

"You sure can, after you shower." Her raised eyebrow as she looks me over makes me laugh. "The potatoes should be cooled by now—you can make the potato salad," she says with a warm smile, and I can't help but wonder if her words of *'no matter what'* would still be true if she knew.

Running upstairs, I take the quickest shower I've ever had and throw on some fresh clothes before joining Maddie back in the kitchen. I grab the potatoes, and everything else I need from the refrigerator, and lose myself in the motions of it, just enjoying the quiet comforting presence and trying to be here with my family.

The laughter of the Bellos' children makes me feel lighter as I help Maddie carry everything out from the kitchen and lay it on the tables that are outside. My dad, Nate, and Abel are all manning the grill, beer in hand, while my brothers and Creek mess around with the kids, playing what I think is meant to be football.

I smile, wider than I have in a while as the sun shines down on us, not a

cloud in the sky, and appreciate everything that I have.

"Grub's up!" my dad yells, and like a swarm, everyone descends on the tables Maddie and I just laid out while Dad brings over trays of burgers, chicken, and steak. Creek comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and hugging me. Blush stains my cheeks as he kisses the top of my head, both our families watching.

Shock covers their faces momentarily before they smile and get back to the food.

"About time." Colt smiles. "Maybe now he'll stop brooding."

"Shut up, man." Creek laughs and squeezes me tighter. I try to not let panic overrun me at his declaration to everyone without us having spoken about it. I guess after the other morning, with our history, he just assumed. He couldn't know how complicated everything is in my head, my heart.

"You okay?" he asks, and I try to relax my stiffened state.

"Yeah." I smile up at him, and he kisses me softly. I lean into his kiss, gentle but hot enough to make my toes curl.

"Let's get you something to eat." He smiles down at me and I nod. He takes my hand and leads me to the other side of the table, passing me a plate before starting to fill his own. Maddie catches my eye and makes a love heart sign with her hands, and I shake my head with a grin, trying not to blush again. I add some food to my plate, and Creek adds extra helpings while I roll my eyes. I am never going to eat this mountain.

"When did this happen?" Dad asks as we sit down next to him.

"This time you mean?" Nate laughs next to him.

"She hasn't gained all of her memories yet, this could be dangerous," my dad says to him, concern evident on his face.

"I'm fine, Dad. I've remembered some. Not all, but I'm okay. We're okay," I say, squeezing Creek's hand and realizing the truth of my words as I say them. We will be okay. Even if he rejects me for my choices, I know I have to tell him. And if he does, it will hurt, but I will still be okay. I think.

"Hmmm," he gripes, but goes back to eating his food.

"Took long enough, especially after last week," Bauer says as he sits opposite us and I just shake my head. My family has the tact of a freaking sledgehammer.

"Shut up, Bauer," I whisper-shout, looking around, thankful no one else is paying any attention.

We sit and eat, my hand in his, and just enjoy the company around us.

Enjoy the peace, because I fear there won't be much of it in the next few months.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



I don't have to patrol tonight, Fates knows there are plenty of people scattered out there doing it right now. I find myself back at the abandoned hotel. Hoping to see Kain, but knowing it's not likely. Trying to trigger another wave of memories. If he is the one who told me the truth about the change in the relationship of the factions, surely he is the one to trigger the memory of why. Unless he never really knew.

I don't know what I'll do if that's the case, but I head into the abandoned hotel anyway, not really paying attention to my surroundings, too lost in my own head.

"What are you doing here, Remy?" I spin and come face-to-face with someone I don't recognize, but that voice... I know that voice.

I keep quiet, still while he watches me, and I realize he was the Dracul I heard in here the other week before Kain found me. "Who are you?"

"You wound me, Remy. You don't remember me?" he says, a hand on his chest, taking a step back as if truly wounded by my words, and I laugh.

"Always the joker, my friend." Kain's voice echoes through the hall. "She is only two and a half months into the awakening. It is lucky she remembered me, otherwise we might have all been dead the other night."

The stranger looks back at me, eyes wide. "You were hunting us?"

Kain's footsteps draw closer until he is between us, and I shake my head. "I was searching for my friend's necklace."

He nods, piecing it together.

"Luc, here, is my second. And a dear friend. You can trust him as you

would trust me," Kain tells me as his arm wraps around my waist, holding me close to his side.

I smile at him, and his grin grows wide. "Oh, this is going to be so much fun."

He rubs his hands together at his words and Kain laughs. "Do not tease her; she might not be awakened fully, but she will remember eventually."

"Oh, the fun we three had," he sighs reminiscently. "The adventures we had. Do you truly not remember?"

I shake my head, and his smile falters.

"So be it. If it doesn't come back in time, then we shall regale you with the tales of the past while making new memories!" he says with a glint in his eye.

"I'd like that," I tell him honestly. "But we have a problem."

"What is wrong, ma chérie?" Kain asks, and I pull away from his side.

"Roman is here, I ran into him a few nights back, and I remember..."

"Love, I know of your relationship with Roman, as well as the others. I told you I didn't always find you in time."

"But the three of you are all here now. All at once. What am I supposed to do with that? Creek basically paraded me around as his in front of the Hunters today. I cannot lie to him, but my heart can't let you go either."

"I will say it as I have said before. I will share your heart, so long as you will have me. Mine belongs solely to you, always and forever. I will take whatever pieces of you I can."

His words make my heart swell, knowing that no matter what, he will be at my side.

"I could not ask that of you."

"Sure you can," Luc says with a laugh, and I roll my eyes at him.

"You do not ask, my love. It is offered willingly. I will not let you go again."

I nod at his words, unsure what to say.

"I cannot promise the others will be as willing, but I have seen how they love you. I think you may be worrying about things that do not matter, or will not matter once you are honest with yourself and with them."

Would having all three of them really be a possibility? Would it make me selfish to want more than one, but not allow them to find another, because Fates knows that the more I remember, the worse my jealousy grows.

"Thank you," I say and walk back into his open arms.

"Now that's all cleared up, do you want to come with us?"

"Where are you heading?" I ask, knowing I will say yes regardless.

"Quiet," Kain says sharply, and I practically hold my breath. They both go so still, sensing something beyond my Hunter capabilities.

"Shit," Luc hisses. Kain looks at him, talking in that way that only people who have known each other lifetimes can. Luc nods subtly before moving closer to us.

"What's going on?" I ask quietly as Kain lets me go and flashes away from us.

"Rogues. So many rogues," Luc says. "We need to get you out of here."

"I will not run from a fight, Luc. Not when you both hurl yourself toward it. That is not who I am."

"I know, but I had to try. He will kill me if anything happens to you under my watch." He hands me a sword from his belt, palming the other.

"It's not what you are used to, and probably a little heavy, but since you are practically unarmed, this will have to do."

I curse myself for not arming myself before coming here, the idea of it still foreign, though I don't think I'll forget again.

"How many?" I ask quietly as I follow him up the stairs to the next floor as swiftly as I can.

"At least fifty," he hisses. "They must have scented him."

"Why are they attacking him? He is their leader."

"Not everyone appreciates the way of the Dracul. Some people rebel against the Hunters' tyranny, blaming Kain for its longevity. Think he is unsuitable to lead, despite his history, because of you. That his feelings are tainted and that his duty to his own kind comes second." He shakes his head. "It is ridiculous, but the murmurings of mad men have raised riots and rebellions throughout history. It is why there are so many rogues right now. The house numbers are shrinking, we are still a force, but they are gathering, much like your Hunters."

His words barely leave his mouth when he darts forward as a Dracul rushes us. He grabs the rogue by the throat and tears with his claws, blood pooling on the floor beneath him faster than I can blink.

"They are coming." The only warning I get before the front doors burst open and the hall is flooded with bodies. Half rush forward, off into the direction that Kain fled, the rest up the stairs toward us.

I shut down the thoughts in my mind and give myself over to the Hunter

instincts that guide me, slipping into that killing calm. I rush forward to meet them, the sword an extension of myself as I cut through one of them, and two surround me. I curse myself again for not having brought my own weapons.

They charge at me, and I fly backward from a force at my back. It takes a second to realize that Kain now stands where I stood and the two Dracul are already headless. I blink, watching as if mesmerized, as the man who has been so gentle with me becomes the man legend talks of. In the time it takes Luc to dispatch of the two Dracul with him and join me, Kain has torn through the rest of them, like a man possessed. Covered in blood from head to toe, he faces the last standing rogue.

"How dare you come here, to my home, and attack me!" His voice bellows, the foundations of the hotel practically shaking at the force of the sound.

The Dracul almost curls in on himself at the shout, but Kain does not stand down. He grabs the rogue by the neck and lifts the man into the air. I watch as he squeezes the rogue's throat, cutting off his air. Not enough to kill him, but enough to make him hurt.

"They said you had betrayed us. Sided with the Hunters. That's why so many of us are disappearing." The words come out scratchy as he tries to speak around the lack of air.

"Kain." His name slips from me like little more than a breath, and his eyes dart to me, the amber ring of his eyes having overtaken most of the blue. He turns back to the rogue, squeezing tighter before throwing him back.

"Go back to whoever he is and tell them that I was merciful with you tonight because of a Hunter. She is the one who saved your life. As for the missing Dracul, I am here searching for them. Why would I be here if I were stealing them away? Fools!"

The rogue nods, on his knees, cowering.

"Get out of my sight."

The man scampers down the stairs and out of the hotel.

"Well, this was messy." Luc laughs and I shake my head.

"Much as I appreciate your brute strength, you didn't have to pull me from the fight," I tell Kain, hands on my hips, trying not to lose my cool.

"Uh-oh. You're in trouble again." Luc laughs and leaves us, I'm assuming to get someone in to help with this mess.

"I know you can fight like the best of us, mon coeur. But I could keep you from harm, and so I did. You have not yet awakened fully. I could not risk

you so casually."

I huff at his words.

"What is it with stupid alpha egos that keep telling me I'm not ready to fight," I grunt, and he walks over to me slowly.

"I am sorry, Remy. I did not mean to offend you."

"Fine, it's fine. I'm being a brat. I know it, you know it. Luc knows it." I hear his laughter ring out and it makes me smile a little. "I'm just sick of being in this in-between place."

He moves to hug me before realizing the state of him and stopping. I laugh at him, the Dracul who needs blood to survive, not remembering he is dripping with it.

"We should get out of here," he says, and I nod.

"Luc, do you have things sorted?" he asks, and Luc's voice reaches us from wherever he is in this infernal place.

"I do. Have fun, kids." I laugh at his words and shake my head.

"Would you like to come with me, Remy? We are staying in a hotel not far from here. I can get cleaned up, and then we can talk."

"I would like that." I smile at him and he shrugs out of his suit jacket, using it to wipe the blood from his hair and face.

"That will have to do for now." He smiles at me and lifts me into his arms as I try not to think about the blood.

"Close your eyes. It's been a while," he says with a wide smile, showing his fangs. I close my eyes and hold on tight. Wind wraps around us, so tight I think it might collapse my lungs. It only lasts a few minutes, but then we still, and I open my eyes to darkness. Kain places me down, and then with the click of a light switch, the room lights softly.

"I'm going to go get cleaned up, make yourself comfortable," he says smiling down at me, his eyes back to the bright blue I've come to recognize. I nod and he strolls across the suite and into a door on the opposite side, which I can only assume is the bathroom. I shrug out of my cloak and kick off my boots. Some people would say heeled boots are no good for running or fighting. To them, I say two words—fight me. I strip off my jeans and tank, the blood basically dried now, but still pretty gross.

I head to open the door closest to me, hoping to find a closet, and smile when I come across neatly hung clothing. I grab one of the white shirts and slip it over my shoulders, so long it covers me to just below my ass. I smile at my reflection and run my fingers through my hair to de-knot it as much as I

can.

I sink into one of the chairs that looks out of the window, the city lit up below us, so many lights and such a pretty view against the black of the night sky, listening to the sounds of the shower. Anticipation builds in me, the low burn in my stomach growing as I wait for him.

He pulls open the door to the bathroom, steam pouring out, revealing his flawless figure. The contrast between his pale skin and dark features coupled with the hazy mist of the room gives him a mystical air, a presence beyond this realm. He's fascinating and delectable, mouth-watering and mysterious. Mostly, he's all mine.

I sway across the room to him, stopping just outside of his reach, my gaze unable to stop from trailing up and down his body.

"I think you have some drool, just there," he jokes, pointing to the corner of his lip, and I stick my tongue out at him.

"You come face-to-face with all of that and not drool a little," I tell him as I stand, and he does a double take, realizing I'm wearing his shirt and not much else.

"I prefer the view I have, thank you very much," he says, the bulge under his towel twitching. In a fraction of a second, he pulls me against him, his tongue licking my lips, his teeth capturing my bottom lip, slowly pulling it away before releasing.

"Well, I suppose I shouldn't drool too much." I shrug, playing it cool and knowing very well that I'm about to light a fire under his domineering ass. "I'm surrounded by bodies like yours a lot."

I don't have time to take my next breath as he slams me into the nearest wall, his body flush with mine, his naked chest heaving with desire.

"Is that so?" he asks. His gaze roams my face and travels down my neck, stopping at my chest. "You know, you look rather tasty in my shirt," he croons, his fingers nimble as he meticulously unfastens each button. "I'm suddenly starving for you."

As he pushes the shirt off my shoulders, it falls off my arms and pools at my feet. He hooks his thumbs in my lace panties and snaps them off without a care or a thought. He's not rushed, he's enjoying the slow burn, the anticipation game. Loving the way it's making me lose my mind.

"Do you know what happens, Remy, when you try to tease the beast inside me?" he asks, quietly and calmly as though asking about the weather.

"I think I might," I sass back, knowing he's going to fuck it right out of

me.

Reaching behind me, I unfasten my bra and let it join my other clothing on the floor and stand there, at his mercy, naked and trembling with need. "I think I like it when your beast comes out to play."

His hand is suddenly at my jaw, holding me a prisoner of his lust, his beast dancing in the pupils of his eyes. The bite of pain as his fingers dig into my skin makes me wet, it calls to my inner wanton, the woman that needs to be fucked like her life depends on it.

"Oh Remy, the things you say..." his words trail off as he places both of his large hands on my ass, turning and sitting me down on the countertop, the mirror behind me and sink to my right.

"Lie down, little minx," he whispers, already pushing me down, his palm on my chest, so I'm resting on my elbows. My ass on the edge of the counter, my legs open wide for him to see every inch of my hungry pussy. "Now put your head back and watch me while I punish you with my tongue," he commands, dropping to his knees with one fluid movement.

Punishment?

In what world would him eating me out be considered a punishment?

I don't have time to ponder that question when his fingers dig into my thighs and his mouth attacks my lower lips like a starved man. With my head tilted back, all I see is the movement of his dark head rhythmically bobbing up and down, mimicking the sensation of his tongue licking from bottom to top. The barrier of the mirror makes the sensations more erotic somehow. The view more sensual.

His thumbs separate me and I hiss at the sensation of his fingers on me, opening me up for his viewing and tasting pleasure. Every touch, every breath is in his control. Every sensation is of his making. When he reaches my clit, his fangs drag down my skin as they extend, the pinch making me tremble with anticipation. Taking a gulp of air as his tongue laps up my hard nub, nothing could have prepared me for the intensity of his first bite on my engorged clit. My entire body lifts from the counter and if not for Kain's hold on me, I might have fallen to the floor, my entire being melting as the orgasm rips through me.

"Holy shit, what was that?" I ask, breathless, but his only answer is to do it again and this time, he drinks.

My orgasm hits all over again, lights and sounds and electricity ravaging my entire body as he sucks in my blood and my juices.

"If that's punishment, Kain, I might be a naughty girl more often," I pant, my whole body still on fire from the orgasm that never ends.

"Now," he says, standing and looking down on me with eyes the color of lust, "I'm going to fuck you until you're too tired to sass me anymore."

The towel wrapped around his waist falls to the floor along with my jaw. He isn't just big; he's long and silky with a vein that screams desire and want.

"Don't worry, little minx, it'll fit nice and snug." And before I can catch my breath to argue, he picks me up and carries me into the shower. The cold of the floor makes me shiver as he places me on my feet, and I look up at him. He brushes my wet hair from my face before bending down to kiss me again. Losing myself in the feel of his lips on mine as his hands wander over my body, I surrender myself to him. His hardness digs into my stomach and I smirk, pulling away from his lips, kissing down his chest, lowering myself to my knees. Looking up at him, I notice the amber taking up most of his eyes again as I lick from the base of his cock to the tip. His groan rattles through him and he clenches his fists at his sides, not taking his eyes from mine. Thrill runs through me at his response, urging me on as I cup his balls softly and take him into my mouth, as far as I can before hitting the back of my throat.

"Fuck, Remy," he groans, and I smile around his cock, repeating the movement and swirling my tongue around the head. I bring my other hand up and wrap it around him, moving it with my mouth, drawing snarls and moans from him.

"Enough," he barks and pulls me to my feet, taking my mouth with his, bruising my lips with his kiss. His arms lift me, and I wrap my legs around him as he backs me up against the tile wall of the marble shower and slams into me. I hold on to his shoulders as he pumps relentlessly into me, his movements hard and dominant, his groans an echo of my own with every thrust he delivers. I am nothing more than wanton need as he drives into me.

"Do you know how much I desire you, mon amour? How much I have fantasized of you?" His tender words a complete contrast to the bite of his tone and violence of his fucking.

I nod, incapable of forming words.

Digging his fingers into my ass, he demands, "Say it."

He thrusts in and grinds against my tender clit, stealing my breath, my words.

"Y-yes," I stutter, his cock working its magic on my brain and body.

"Do you know how much I love you, mon amour?" he continues, pulling out quickly and pushing in just as fast.

"Y-yes, oh fates, yes!" I cry out as another orgasm starts to build from deep inside my belly, my heels pushing into his sculpted ass, begging for more.

"Good girl," he murmurs in my ear. "Now come," he commands and as he thrusts inside one last time, his fangs latch onto my neck and both of us fly into an orgasm that has me seeing stars. Our bodies convulse as he pumps his seed into me all the while sucking my life source for his own. He gives and he takes, and I will happily give and take as much as he is willing to offer.

"I love you, Kain, so much." I sigh as my climax finally relents, our bodies slowly coming back to earth as Kain licks up the errant droplets of my blood, leaving me breathless.

"Moi aussi, je t'aime. De tout mon coeur."

"What does that mean?" I ask, my voice but a murmur.

"I, too, love you. With all of my heart."

Slowly and carefully, Kain releases my thighs, putting me back on the ground so I can try to stand my own, not an easy feat when your legs feel like jelly.

With one arm, he secures me in place and with the other, he lathers me up with a loofah. His movements are gentle and slow, running over my body as he worships my skin. We both rinse before turning the water off and he carries me out of the shower and onto the plush carpet. With one thick, soft towel, he dries me off, no words, only our breaths and thoughts to accompany us. He repeats the action on himself before carrying me to the bedroom and laying us down on clean sheets.

We're both in a haze of love, our fucking still buzzing in our veins.

"That was..." I don't know how to finish that phrase; it was so much.

"That was us, mon coeur. And that was only the beginning."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



I walk through the forest barefoot and at one with the nature around me. It's so green and lush, with the sound of wolves playing in the distance. The air here is so clammy, the smell of rain from the fall last night. The canopy of leaves and branches below keeps the beating sun from my already-golden skin.

We've been here for months, enjoying the freedom that comes with the forest. Hunting and foraging for our food, reveling in the outdoors. Just being pack. After a rough few weeks of establishing myself within the pack as Roman's mate, things have finally settled down and we've almost established a routine.

Four wolf cubs barrel toward me in the undergrowth, their black and white pelts so soft usually, but now caked in mud. Their silver eyes glow, their excitement and joy palpable. One jumps up at me and I catch her in my arms, scratching the space between her ears with my nails as her tongue lolls out of her mouth.

"Come on, you guys, let's head back for dinner," I say to them, and they yip and howl back at me, the pup in my arms jumping down and rushing ahead of me back to our camp. I take my time, walking humanly slow through the trees on the path that has become established since we've been here.

As much as I love the pack and I wouldn't give it up for the world, sometimes I need some time to myself. If you'd have told me a year ago that I'd be here, I'd have laughed in your face, but meeting Roman Knight changed my entire life. I already knew that something was amiss, a hole in

my memories clawing at me, pleading with me to understand, and that's when I met him. The most domineering asshole, with a heart of gold. I've never met anyone like him, not in this life or the five before this one.

My lives have been peppered with moments of joy but ruled by death and torture. At least, for as much as I can remember. For some reason, my memories barely came back, and with my mother and father refusing to fill in the gaps, there is no one else I can turn to. No siblings, no cousins, or other Hunters my age, at least none within the Hunter families we dealt with. Life was lonely before Roman. It was nothing but my duty. Following orders I didn't believe in, from a man I was starting to resent. My father is a hard man, his beliefs resolute. When I began to question the way we live, he threatened to have me cast out, and so I left, traveling halfway around the world by sea, running as far from him as I could.

That's when Roman found me.

Or well, that's when Roman tried to kill me.

I still take pride in the fact that I was the first person in existence to pin him. Female or not, I pinned him, and then he claimed me as his mate. Marking me, taking my blood, before I even really knew what it meant. The beginning was hard as he adjusted to the fact that I wouldn't just lie down and let his word be law. That I had my own opinions and that I would voice them. I was not a usual woman of our time. I refused to cower, to bow down to his whim. It's the reason he claimed me, and I secretly think he gets off on the conflict.

We moved the pack deep into the forest when rumors of wars ravaging the world began. Conquerors wanting to claim lands that are not theirs to take. Slaughtering the humans in droves. If this were another life, I might stand up and fight alongside the humans, but it's not. I am pack, and that means I protect them first, above all costs.

I break through the tree line into the clearing where we made camp in this humid, sweltering place that is hidden so deep in the forest we have not seen a human for much time. I spot Roman on the far side, close to the waterfall pool, with the pups climbing all over him, his laugh booming across the space.

My heart warms seeing him so carefree. It is so very rare that he gets to be this way, but life has been easier, simpler, since we came here. The outside world less of a threat. I make my way over to the fire where the cooks are preparing dinner and offer my assistance, before being waved off.

Cooking for the pack is deemed a privilege and no one wants to sacrifice that.

Roman sees me across the clearing and stands, telling the children he'll play more tomorrow, before striding toward me. He captures my lips with his, his hands buried in my hair as he claims me, not caring who can see. I hold on to him, my hands on his biceps, which twitch beneath my touch, giving as much as I get with his mind-blowing kiss.

"You've been gone longer than usual," he murmurs when he breaks the kiss, his silver eyes studying me. "Are you unhappy here?"

I shake my head at his question and smile. "No, I just wandered farther than I have before, so it took me longer to return."

"You should not wander too far; you do not know who travels this place. It could be dangerous." His concern warms me, his dominance not steering his words but his love for me.

"Then it is good that I am not just anyone, and capable of looking after myself." His hand grips my throat, not tight enough to steal my breath but enough to keep my attention on him.

"You are mine, and while you can look after yourself, you will not put yourself in such situations." He growls, kissing me again, his hand still on my throat. I melt into him, the pressure only making me want him more, and I know he scents it when his chest rumbles.

"Later. Later, you and I will finish this," he says with a heated look, releasing me and storming back to the cold pool and diving in.

I wake in my room, sleep still clinging to me, and groan at the sunlight filtering through. I haven't had a good night's rest since earlier in the week in Kain's hotel room, and that was the first time since spending the night with Creek in my bed. I'm beginning to think I'm only ever going to sleep well with one of my men beside me. When I started to think of them as *my* men, I've no idea. My dreams are full of memories. Some of them haunt me with the things that I've seen, others make me squirm when I wake up, practically setting my pussy on fire.

I huff, aware that I'm seeing Roman today. I put him off during the week, but I am nervous about seeing him. Especially since more memories are

returning and the thought of seeing him practically makes my ovaries explode. Underneath it all, like a stone in my stomach, though, is my guilt. Because Creek still doesn't know. His sweet kisses and soft words. Not quite declaring his love for me, but close enough that I know it's coming. The guilt eats at me, because I know I cannot say it back. Not because I don't feel it, because I know I do. But because of the others. I slept with Kain after Creek told our families I was his, and I've barely been able to look him in the eye since. Until he knows about the others, about everything, I can't tell him, because I can't hurt him more than I know I'm already going to.

The fact that I'm going to meet Roman tonight, rather than see Creek again, deepens the pit in my stomach, but I need to find out more.

I will tell Creek, I will. I just need to see what this is with Roman, if he even wants me as his mate in this life. I've noticed that I've only been with him in two lives. I know one was my sixth with Kain, who found me in the life I was with Roman but kept his distance so as not to dampen my happiness, but I do not know the other. I only know it was a different time. I have no recollection of any others and so, I have to wonder how the pack handles that. How he deals with it. If he even wants that again or if he has moved on to another and is here to tell me that.

Even with his wolf being protective the other night, and the flowers, he's made no other moves toward me, and so I hang in the balance, waiting for the ax to fall.

He told me he would come and collect me, like a prize, but I swallow that thought. He wasn't always such an asshole. Sometimes he was sweet, caring. The domineering side of him is always present, but what else could I expect from the Alpha of Alphas? I am just happy that he always seemed to accept that I would not bow to his every whim and hope it is still the same.

Because even if he does not want me, if he has moved on, a piece of him is still mine. While it might make my life easier, a piece of my heart would leave with him.

I throw off the sheets and head to the bathroom, not bothering to dress because I have nowhere to be just yet. I turn on the shower to let it heat and move to the kitchen to start the coffee pot, yawning as I go through the motions.

"As much as I love the view, I'm surprised to find you naked." I scream as I spin and find Roman sitting in the chair by my window, Sushi in his lap, purring under his hand.

“What the ever-loving fuck are you doing here, and how the hell did you get in?” I refuse to cover myself in my own home, so I let him stare.

“I told you I would collect you, did I not?” He raises his eyebrow, his only movement apart from stroking my traitorous cat. I’m kind of jealous.

“Enjoying stroking my pussy?” I quip, and his eyes darken.

“I suggest you shower quickly and do not test my patience, Remy.” His eyes glow, and I know I’ve pushed his buttons enough.

“Fine, but don’t think this is over. This,” I wave my hand around the room, “is not okay.” He glowers at me but doesn’t say a word as I stomp to the bathroom to prepare for the day.

I take the world’s quickest shower, making sure to keep my hair up and dry, having realized he’d have smelled my arousal. Groaning at the thoughts of missed opportunities, I get my hormones under control, refusing to be led by them, and dress. Thankfully, my waist-length hair sits in natural waves, so after running a quick brush through it, I’m ready for the day, whatever it should bring. I slip a hair tie in my jean pocket just in case.

“Are you about done?”

I spin at his voice and find him standing in the open doorway, filling the space. His arms above him, leaning on the top of the doorway, his muscles bulging. I curse myself for being so easily distracted by him. I’m going to blame it on the dreams, the memories.

“I am glad to see your patience is as lengthy as ever.”

He grins lazily at me, but his look is entirely predatory.

“I’m glad I do not disappoint.”

I stand before him, hands on my hips, refusing to back away, to look away first.

He belts out a laugh and steps back from the doorway allowing me to pass. “Better view back here anyway.”

I roll my eyes at him but grab my boots and begin to put them on. “They’re not going to work, princess.”

I glance at him, and I want to wipe that smug grin from his face, but I’m also not stupid enough to wear the boots just to spite him. “Fine. And don’t call me princess. I wonder, is pissing people off to this extent a skill you were born with or one you learned?”

His eyes flash when he gives me a predatory grin. “I guess you’ll have to stick around long enough to find out, won’t you, princess?”

A bemused sigh escapes me as I flip him the bird, and I swear his chest

rumbles, part laugh, part growl.

I remove my boot and grab my Chucks from under the coffee table and slip them on instead, trying to ignore his snickering. “Any chance of telling me where we’re going?”

“Not one. Oh, but you should probably take these.” He reaches into his pocket and throws me a set of keys. “Your car, fully restored.”

“What? How on earth did you manage that so quickly?”

“I am a man of many talents.”

“I don’t know... Thank you, Roman.” I smile softly at him.

“Guess I’m more than just an asshole, huh?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



“I’d have thought you’d miss the great outdoors,” Roman snarks as we walk back up to my apartment. “I wanted to show you the place where our pack will gather once they arrive.”

“Roman, you took me on a two-hour drive and a four-hour hike, just to show me a spot. If the pack had been there, I could understand it, but why?” I practically growl as I yank the door open from the stairwell to the hall.

“Maybe I missed you. Maybe I wanted to spend some time with you,” he says, and I glare at him.

“Or maybe, you wanted to see if I could still keep up with you, even when you’re in shifted form,” I snark back, halting only to open my door, which swings wide with the force of my push. “Maybe you wanted to see if you could piss me off with all your little digs and taunts.”

“If I did, it obviously would have worked,” he says, grinning at me as he grabs a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

“Oh, of course, just make yourself at home,” I huff, because his presence is too much for this space and I feel like I’m on edge in the place that is usually my retreat. “But really, what was today about?”

I drop onto the chair by the window and watch him as he prowls around the place, taking in each detail.

“It wasn’t about anything, other than your time,” he says softly, so softly I almost miss it, and I realize that beneath the domineering, alpha mask is the man that very few must get to see. The man who loved me enough to risk his pack and accepted our bond as mates.

“Roman, I...” my words are interrupted by the sound of a key in the lock of my door. Before I can move it swings open and Creek stands in the doorway, Roman between us, growling.

“What the fuck?!” Creek shouts, pulling the gun from his shoulder holster and pointing it at Roman as he steps forward and closes the door.

“Creek, I can explain.” I move forward, but Roman snarls, keeping me behind him. “Roman, he’s not going to hurt me.”

I gulp, hoping my words are true.

“It wouldn’t be the first time.” The words rip from Roman, more animal than human.

“That was your fault, you fucking animal,” Creek hisses, and I ease my way between them.

“Remy, you need to start talking. What the fuck is Roman Knight doing in your apartment?”

“You already know,” I say quietly but firmly, meeting his gaze. “I know you do, because I remember.”

He looks gutted, like I just drove a blade into him, and lowers the gun. “I thought that we...”

“We need to talk,” I say to him, moving closer before turning to face Roman, making sure I’m fully between them. “Roman, can you give us some time? I can call you later or something.”

He growls again, and Creek’s hand comes to my waist but I plant my feet so he can’t move me.

“If he hurts you, Remy, I will kill him.”

“I’m not the one who would hurt her; that was your fault and you know it!” Creek snaps from behind me.

“Enough. Please.” I push Creek backward into the kitchen, freeing up the pathway to the door for Roman, whose eyes glow so bright, I fear he might shift. “Wait here,” I say to Creek and move slowly toward Roman.

“I will be okay,” I say, putting my hands on his chest before placing a soft kiss on his cheek. “Please.”

He stands tall before reaching down and kissing me, as if claiming me as his own before ripping away and leaving without another word. The door slams as I turn back to Creek who looks at me, a mix of broken with an edge of betrayal.

“You need to explain, Remy.”

“I know.” I sigh. “Maybe you should sit.”

He shakes his head and crosses his arms, leaning against the counter.

“You want a drink? Cause I sure as fuck need one.” I move around him and pour myself three fingers of whiskey and throw it back before pouring another. I grab a glass for him, and he takes it.

“So, I guess, I need to start from the beginning...” I say and dive into the tale of how my memories came back about them, all three of them, and I pieced together that I loved all of them in different lifetimes, but in this lifetime, they were all here, all holding a piece of my heart. Willing to take me, however they could have me, if only I would love them too.

“I love you, Creek. I always have, I think, even since we were kids. It’s like I just knew. I wanted to tell you everything before, but I was afraid. Afraid that you would reject me. That you’d hate me.”

I watch him, on edge, as he takes everything in, and try not to let my emotions get the better of me, but I can’t take the silence.

“Creek, say something. Please...” I trail off, an insecurity that had never been present before. Not with Creek. But now he knows, and it could change everything, but I couldn’t lie to him. Not anymore.

“Remy,” he breathes, his voice soft, gentle, calmer than I expected. “Come here.” His request is part command, part plea. As though being this far from him is a travesty.

He walks us to the couch, pulling me in to straddle him, my arms around his neck covering the colorful tattoos that adorn his entire body. “There is nothing you could say to me that would change the way I feel about you.” Fisting my long hair in his fingers, he pulls me back, exposing my neck. I think he’s going to kiss me but, instead, he runs the tip of his nose along the column of my neck until he reaches my jaw where he leaves a tender kiss. Repeating the same action on the other side of my neck, he again kisses me gently on my jaw.

“Even this. Did you fuck the Lycan yet?” I shake my head as much as I can, my scalp stinging from his grip. “The Dracul then?”

“Yes,” I breathe, not used to seeing this side of him.

“Did he bite you here?” he asks as he kisses my pulse point, his hand keeping my head back.

“Did he make you bleed?” His words aren’t harsh but there’s an edge to them that, instead of scaring me, turns me on.

“Yes,” I whisper, grinding my core on his ever-growing thickness.

“Did you enjoy it?” His mouth now on my collarbone, nipping a path

from one side to the other.

“Fates yes,” I am panting now, remembering the way Kain had licked up the droplets he’d caused with his teeth.

With my eyes closed, I see nothing, but I feel every one of his moves. Every lick on my skin and every pinch of his teeth. I know he’s comparing himself to Kain, but he shouldn’t.

“I am going to show you how much I love you, no matter what you tell me. I am going to make love to you until you forget anything but us.” Make love to me... Because that’s what this is. He looks at me like he wants to worship my body and my mind, like I’m the reason for every breath he takes.

“Every day for the rest of my life, if you’ll let me.” Instead of pulling my hair, he pushes my head closer to him, just shy of our lips touching, “Don’t you know, Remy? I would destroy the world and create a new one if you asked it of me.”

Slowly, deliberately, he brings our lips together. First gliding from side to side, taking our time, breathing in our scents, listening to our shallow breaths.

“Kiss me, then, Creek. If you’ll have me, knowing everything, then I am yours,” I whisper, our mouths finally breaching the space between us, our tongues dancing to a song of our own making. With my hands on his bare chest, I dig my nails into his colorful skin, my pussy begging to be filled, to be loved by this man.

The sound of ripping alarms me at first but I can’t bring myself to look, my attention fully on his kiss. It’s only when I feel the cool air touch my back that I realize Creek has just destroyed my tank top. The leather pants won’t be as easy to discard.

“Take them off,” he demands, biting my bottom lip before putting his hands on my hips and pushing me to stand.

I do as he asks, shimmying off my pants like a cat in heat, my purple eyes fixated on his green ones, bright, almost luminous with lust. I’m about to pull down my underwear when he stops me, a gentle touch to my hand. “Let me,” he says, scooting up and pulling me between his parted knees.

Placing a kiss on my stomach, he licks a path from my panty line to my navel, circling it before placing both of his hands on my ass and lifting me up to his face as he lies back on the couch.

My pussy, albeit covered by the thin material of my underwear, is at his mouth. His hot, wet mouth. His tongue pushing the material inside me, rubbing against my clit, feels fucking divine and I moan from the pleasure of

it.

Another rip and this time I know what it is without seeing. My ass is bare and soon my core will be at his mercy. “Oh fates, Creek, that feels so good,” I cry out as his tongue spears inside me, licking up every drop of my juices. My gift to him. Reaching my clit, he sucks the nub into his mouth and just as I’m about to feel the orgasm rip out from deep inside me, Creek pushes two fingers inside my pussy from behind and I’m done. I don’t recognize the cry that bursts from my lungs, I only know it belongs to Creek.

Before I have time to regain my senses, Creek is up and within seconds he’s naked, his cock proud and ready to make me his.

Sitting back on the couch, he spreads his legs and lets me straddle him once more, both naked, both filled with undeniable lust. Both feeling the love emanating from our very pores.

“You may love them, Remy, but know this,” he pulls me close, the tip of his thick cock just resting at the entrance of my hungry pussy, “you will love me too. Because I,” he enters me, slowly, deliberately, and painfully filling me one torturous inch at a time, “belong,” he grips my hips and buries his cock so deep I can feel him in my heart, “to you.”

My hair falls on either side of us, our gazes prisoners of each other’s as I take control of our lovemaking, rising and falling in tempo with our breaths. Faster and deeper with every second closer to paradise. Purple eyes to green eyes, man to woman, Hunter to Hunter. We are one soul, one love. The faster I fuck him, the deeper his nails dig into my skin. The louder I cry, the further I fall for him until, finally, with our bodies joined to the hilt, we simultaneously halt with the saving grace of an orgasm beyond anything I’ve ever felt.

Sliding his hands up the length of my spine, he hooks his fingers at my shoulders and pulls me closer, grinding his long, hard cock deeper still and suddenly we’re falling over the edge together.

We cry out, our heads falling back, our mouths parted on a gasp, and our souls intertwined by our very essence.

“I love you, Remy, now and for always.”

“I have no idea how I let you talk me into this,” I huff as Colt pulls the chair

out for me. “I can get my own chair.”

“Come on, little bit. It’s been forever since we hung out, just the two of us. And after your birthday months ago was... well it wasn’t exactly a celebration, then everything that’s happened since, I wanted us to do something nice. Especially since I missed last year, too.” He smiles that cheeky smile at me again, and I cave.

“Fine, fine, I’ll play nice.” I laugh and take a seat. He pushes me under the table before sitting down opposite me. “I don’t even remember the last time I came here.”

“Franco’s is the best Italian on this side of the world, and I’ll fight anyone who says otherwise.” He grins, and I laugh at him.

“So... you and Fallon, huh?” I ask as I wag my eyebrows, and he groans.

“No, Remy. Just no.”

“Oh, come *on*. She’s been so tight-lipped, but I know, I *know* something is going on,” I tease.

“Remy, please just drop it. She’s not a Hunter, so nothing can come of it.” He smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Does it matter that much to you?” I ask, for myself as well as him, and he shakes his head.

“It doesn’t. But it’s not just my opinion that matters. The Bennetts are a respected Hunter family. An affair with another faction, even with an ally, would devastate the people closest to us,” he whispers and picks up the menu.

“The people closest to us should love us, regardless of who we’re with.” I frown but pick up my menu too, because he doesn’t seem to want to talk about this anymore.

“You and Creek though, that’s a good match. That’s exactly what people expect,” he says with a tight smile. “I’m happy for you.”

“I hope you find happiness, Colt. No matter who it’s with.” I reach over and squeeze his hand.

“Thank you, now enough of this crap. Let’s eat some good food, and then I’m thinking laser tag.” He grins again, and I laugh at the childish glee on his face.

“I haven’t been to laser tag in *foreverrrrrrr*. Hell yes!” We order when the waiter approaches and just shoot the shit, and after eating the most beautiful chicken Alfredo and garlic bread, I am bloated as hell.

“I have no idea how I’m going to run around laser tag right now.” I puff up my cheeks and he snort-laughs at me.

"You look like a hamster." He chuckles, rubbing his own stomach. "But we'll walk there, work off all these carbs, plus you can't back out. Creek and Bauer are on their way back from the airport, douchebag Archer was summoned home, thank the Fates, so they're going to join us."

"You don't like him either?"

"Guy is so far up his own ass, I can see his eyes in his mouth. Thinks he's better than the rest of us, when he's a subpar Hunter at best. He's a damn good tracker, I'll give him that, it's why he was sent after Roman, but that's about it."

"I'm glad he's gone; Bauer was weird with him around."

"You noticed that too, huh?" he says, leaving cash for the bill and standing. I follow him out of the restaurant and out into the bright street. Fall is officially almost here, but the sun is still high in the sky.

"It's hard not to notice. It's like he's harder and just not Bauer."

"I think something happened a long time ago and Bauer just doesn't want to let his guard down, even if he says he can trust Archer with his life. He won't talk about it, just brushes me off, but yeah. It's weird." He shrugs.

We stroll in comfortable silence to the laser tag warehouse and sit in the sun waiting for Creek and Bauer to arrive. A few minutes later, Bauer's truck pulls into the lot and they climb from it. My mouth goes dry as I take Creek in, his hair down and wild, like he's been running his hands through it, and that white T-shirt is tight as sin on his arms.

"Down girl." Colt laughs and I shove him gently, rolling my eyes.

We play wrestle until the two reach us when I victoriously get Colt into a headlock and bounce around to celebrate my victory. Bauer bursts out laughing while Creek just shakes his head. "You guys never change."

"I don't ever want to." I smirk as I release Colt and give him a hug. "You guys ready to be annihilated?"

They all laugh at me, shaking their heads, but make their way inside. I feel giddy, like a kid. We haven't done anything like this in years, and with all of the stress and headaches of everything recently, this is exactly what I need.

We pay the woman at the counter and then gear up. Glad I wore Chucks, shorts, and a T-shirt today, I don't have any hindrances. I can't stop the huge grin on my face as I pull my hair back into a ponytail. Creek walks toward me, somehow rocking the chest piece, his eyes dancing when he reaches me. He pulls on my ponytail, and I sigh, falling forward to rest my hands on his

chest as I kiss him softly.

"Hey you."

"Hey." He smiles. "How you doing?"

His voice is gentle and his smile soft, it melts my heart. That he can still look at me like this, love me like this, knowing what he knows. I feel so much lighter, closer to him, now that he knows.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

"I told you, beautiful. Nothing in the world would change what you mean to me or how I feel about you." He cups my chin and kisses me softly, and I melt against him.

"I guess the love birds are teaming up." Colt laughs and I roll my eyes as I pull away from Creek, but he keeps me close, his fingers intertwined with mine.

"It's us four versus the team already in there according to the guy who gave me the gear," Bauer says. "Poor fuckers."

"Yes!" Colt whoops and I laugh at them both.

"Is that even fair?" I ask and Bauer shrugs.

"Nothing is fair in love and war. You'd do well to remember that, Remy," he says, looking at me funny, but whatever it was disappears and he smiles. "Let's get this done."

He slaps the laser gun against his shoulder and heads into the dark room, Colt bouncing behind him as I lead Creek behind them.

"I was right, not even close to fair." I laugh as we hand the gear back to the guy behind the counter, who just looks at us wide-eyed. After a few hours of decimating any team that came up against us, barely taking a hit, we decided to call it a day.

"So much fun though," Colt says, his eyes glittering, still riding the win.

"It's been a while since I had that much fun," Bauer agrees, looking more carefree than I ever remember seeing him.

"Oh, Mom will kill me if I forget to tell you, we're throwing a surprise party for your dad this weekend. At his house, because his place is bigger than anyone else's, and we'll never get him out. Saturday morning. Be there by ten or face her wrath." Creek smirks, hugging me from behind.

"Dad hates surprises," Bauer says, eyebrows raised.

"You tell my mom that. It's his fiftieth—there is no way in hell she's letting it go."

"Didn't Dad say he just wanted a quiet night?" Colt asks Bauer, who nods.

"Yep. I'll hide in the back and make sure to stay there Friday night so I'm not late," Bauer says as he leads us out of the restaurant.

"I'll do the same," Colt agrees.

"Maybe I should too, and we can make him a small dinner?" I say, and they murmur their agreement. "Awesome, I'll shop before I head over."

"You guys need a ride?" Bauer asks Colt and me.

"Sure, just to Franco's. We walked here from there earlier," I say and climb into his truck. The drive to Franco's doesn't take long, and it's only a few minutes until I'm climbing back out of the truck, Creek at my back.

"Can I come back over tonight?" he asks quietly, and I smile up at him.

"Yup. You can come over with me now if you like?"

"Not expecting any other visitors?" His eyes darken a little at the question.

"I'm never expecting visitors, they tend to just appear out of thin air, but no," I reassure him. While he might be okay with me being with them, he is still a Hunter. I don't expect him to just get over his prejudices overnight.

"Then yes, I'll come with you now." He kisses me before turning back to my brothers. "I'll catch you guys in a bit. Safe patrols tonight, boys."

"Be good, boys and girls. Don't do anything I wouldn't." Colt belts out a laugh as he climbs into his truck, and Bauer waves before he drives off. We get into my car and Creek puts his hand on my thigh, fingers stroking the soft skin as I start to drive, the heat increasing already.

"You better be ready to finish what you start," I purr, my eyes focused on the road ahead but my body completely attuned to the man beside me.

"Don't I always, beautiful?" Creeks asks, licking his lips as his hand squeezes my bare thigh. I'm suddenly more than happy with my decision to wear shorts today. My apartment isn't far off, but maybe he can get an A for effort.

"Yes, but this is going to be cutting it close. There's barely ten minutes left before we reach my building. I doubt you could make me come in that sort of time." I shrug because we could always play catch up once we get home.

"Is that a challenge?" he asks me, determination in his tone.

“It is what it is, Creek. You can’t...” One long finger slides up the leg of my shorts and breaches my entrance without hesitation, making me lose my grip on the steering wheel.

“Holy shit, warn a girl before you do that.” I moan as he drags my juices from the opening to my clit and rubs in deliberate circles until my legs begin shaking.

“Still think I’m at a disadvantage, here? That I’m not up to the challenge?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, pushing two digits inside me, my eyes losing their focus, my legs spreading wider still to accommodate his movements.

“I—no—um.” I’m an incoherent mess by the time he pinches my clit and leans in to suck on the column of my neck. I close my eyes for the briefest of seconds but it’s enough to make us swerve. Luckily, Creek has better reflexes than I do right now and brings us back to the correct side of the road.

With less than five minutes before we get home, Creek has a thumb on my clit and two fingers inside me, pumping against my walls and sucking on my neck, urging me to pull over.

And I do, because I don’t want to die in the middle of an orgasm, although there are worse ways to go, I suppose. Once we’re safely parked on the side of the road, I let my head fall back and give Creek more room to maneuver.

“Fates, that feels so good,” I moan, my hands gripping the steering wheel like my life depends on it.

With a quick flick of his thumb on my clit and two pumps of his fingers inside me, I arch off the seat and let out a cry of pleasure, Creek never relenting the pressure, riding out the orgasm along with me.

I can’t breathe.

My chest heaves and my breath is coming in hard, broken pants. Meanwhile, Creek is watching me, slowly circling my clit and spreading my juices all around my pussy, a satisfied grin planted on his lips.

“Gloating is not a good look on you, Creek,” I tell him, barely able to speak and lying through my teeth. There is no look he can’t pull off, but that’s beside the point right now.

Bringing his cum-covered fingers to his mouth, he licks them, one by one, a glint of pride shining in his beautiful green eyes.

“Like I said, beautiful, I always finish what I start.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Dinner last night was full of love and laughter, and it hurt my heart to see that beneath it all, Colt was hurting. It makes me so angry that the Hunters' ways are the way they are. That no one believes in what once was or sees what could be if we stopped fighting each other.

Do the rogues still need dealing with? Of course, but the rest? Imagine how much more peaceful life would be if we could all live together harmoniously like our ancestors did before the Hunters decided for whatever reason to change it all up.

I vow, here, for him, for me, for any others who have fallen short because of this insanity, that I will find a way to end it. Even if it takes me another twelve lifetimes.

I climb out of bed and open the curtains, stretching as the sun creeps up into the sky, painting it pink. Thinking about my dreams last night, I feel settled from the onslaught of memories. Fights, love, travel, happiness, and more sadness and pain than I want to think about, but I'm finally starting to feel like my old self. More confident, more self-assured. The knowledge that no matter the enemy, I have people on my side and the skill set to keep us alive, even if I need a little help sometimes. I know I don't know everything yet, but I feel like I know enough that I can finally start to be a help, rather than a hindrance. I've no doubt Bauer will be more than pleased for me to stop pestering him with questions.

I throw on shorts and a cropped T-shirt, wanting to enjoy the last warm days of the year. With fall basically here, the weather could change at any

moment and plunge us into its freezing depths.

I pull my hair back, preparing to be pulled into the kitchen with Maddie because she loves it when she can gossip with us. I know how much she misses my mom, and I'd probably rather be in there with her than dealing with the guys.

Another barbecue she said. Even more people this time.

I roll my eyes but smile; her heart's in the right place at least. Though my dad is going to be grumpy as shit. He was bad enough that the three of us were making a fuss last night, cooking him steak, giving him presents. Apparently, he's too old for presents, but I still saw how much he liked the Desert Eagle that Creek helped me find for him.

I bounce down the stairs, and find Creek, Maddie, and Nate already down here. I guess I got up later than I realized. "Morning, beautiful," Creek says as I approach and pulls me in for a chaste kiss.

"Morning yourself." I smile up at him, kissing him on the cheek again before heading over and hugging Maddie and Nate.

"You're in a good mood this morning," Maddie coos and steals another hug, making me smile.

"I am, what's not to be happy about?"

"Indeed," Nate says looking between Creek and I. "Bauer and Colt have taken your dad out for a bit, so you're on set up duty with us. Creek and I were just about to head out to my flatbed and pull in the extra tables and chairs, so you're helping Maddie in here."

"Fine by me," I say, then he and Creek head outside.

"I'm so happy that you're happy, sweetheart. It warms my heart to know you guys found your way back to each other. Your mom would be happy for you guys, too." She wipes at her eyes and I refrain from rolling mine.

"Maddie, did I ever have kids?" I ask, and she looks at me wide-eyed.

"I don't think... Oh, screw it. No, you didn't, sweetheart. You always put the faction first, and with it being so hard to conceive for our kind, you always said someone who desperately wanted children should be the one to have a baby. It's why we were so shocked when Nirvana popped along. We've always been happy with just our boy, but I'd always dreamt of having a little girl. She was a surprise; I'll tell you that! I can't believe she's growing up so quickly."

"This is her first life?"

"It is. And it makes me worry, it's so much harder, the first time. You've

got no memories to fall back on, and she'll be so reliant on the rest of us, and at much more risk because she's so untrained."

"Then it's a good thing she'll have all of us. It will be nice to have another woman out there on patrol with me." I wink at her and she laughs.

"I imagine it will. Your mom and I used to love it. I'm a bit too slow these days, I'm afraid, but I keep the archives up to date and keep the other families up to date and in loop with the Elders."

"I wondered why you hadn't been out. What are the archives?"

"They're our most treasured possession, though few outside of the Elders get to see them. They are a full and detailed history of our kind, all the way back to the beginning with Leviathan."

"Oh wow, I bet that's an interesting read," I say, trying not to show my excitement. This could be exactly what I need. The proof to show the other Hunters the truth.

"I imagine it is, but the only people who read the histories are the Elders. The scant few of us others that have access only get to update it."

"That's a bit strange isn't it?" I ask, my disappointment leaking through.

"Maybe a little, but the Elders govern us, their word is law, so it makes sense that they are the ones with the histories," she says with a smile. "Now then, why don't you get started with the decorations while I get the oven heating?"

"Of course," I agree, trying to tuck the archive information away for a later date. "Where are they?"

"There's a bag or six out on the porch, sweetheart, thank you."

I spend the next hour blowing up balloons, putting out tablecloths and decorations, and hanging bunting. Maddie sure went all out, and just the thought of my dad's face when he sees all this makes me struggle not to crack up.

Voices grow louder in the house before people start spilling out into the yard. Abel, Nate, Creek, and Gabriel each carry speakers, which they put around the yard, while Fallon, Rebel, and Marie bring out a ton of fairy lights and start stringing them around the trees that line the space.

Maddie comes out and starts instructing people where to set things down, like a true dictator at work, and I lean back against the table I just finished setting, enjoying the sun on my face and the flurry of people.

Creek and Gabriel head toward me, laughing. Creek pulls me into him, as if he can't stand the distance between us, and Gabriel grins.

"Oooooooh, I knew it wouldn't take long!" he exclaims, clapping his hands. "Girl, you and this fine piece of man meat would make the most beautiful babies!"

I laugh at him, but Creek looks down at me lovingly. "Maybe one day."

I shake my head at him but don't say a word, because it's not something I've really thought about, despite what Maddie said. I'm not sure I'm cut out to be a mom, not with the life I lead. And with the men in my life, who would be the one I choose? Would the others be happy with those decisions? I haven't even managed to get them in a room together yet, let alone think about those sorts of things.

My phone pings, and I look down to see the message from Colt.

"They're two minutes out," I tell Creek, who kisses the top of my head and goes to tell Maddie.

"Remember me yet?" Gabriel says, watching Creek's ass as he walks away.

"Kind of, I remember drinking, lots of drinking," I say, and he belts out a laugh.

"There always was a lot of drinking after a hard night. We had so much fun stationed in Romania, the stories of the vampires everywhere. Those people know how to drink."

"It's all still coming back in pieces. It's still so jarring to see parts of the world that I don't have any recollection of going to. So many places I always wanted to visit, and it turns out I've been to some of them a dozen times over."

"I feel you. But it gets easier. After the awakening period, what's not there isn't coming back, so it's easier. Plus, people can fill in some of the holes for you without risking too much. These six months can be as dangerous as the first twenty-one years. It's less risky, but still, the risk of death is there."

"I think I'd rather just know everything all at once, rather than snippets. It's driving me insane." I shrug.

"Yeah, but you'd lose yourself. We're each a little different in every life, and as we remember, those previous lives of ours merge, our old habits, phrases, moods, all of it comes back a little and merges with who you were. Imagine waking up being little miss sunshine, then having all your memories dumped on you at once and turning into a walking rain cloud. It would be too much."

"I guess you're right."

"Oh, girl, I am. Now, come on, Maddie is waiting, and that woman terrifies me."

I laugh at him as he pulls me to where everyone is gathering as Maddie hushes us all with Dad and my brothers so close.

Less than a minute after we're silenced, the squeak of brakes and the slamming of doors announce their arrival, but there are more voices than I expected. I stifle my laugh as Bauer tries to maneuver Dad and his grumpy ass to the garden.

"I don't understand why you couldn't just get it by yourself," he says as he steps into the yard.

"Surprise!" everyone yells. My dad spins, seeing us all, and grumbles.

"I hate surprises."

I laugh, as do most other people around me.

"Stop being such a cantankerous old man and come down here, Denny," Maddie demands, and he makes his way toward her, still grumbling as she pulls him into a hug. My focus is pulled back to the door where my brothers appear, and I'm surprised to see Ben behind them. I make my way toward them when Fallon grabs me, pulling me into a hug.

"Where have you been hiding, missy?" she says, and I relax.

"I've been busy with my little harem," I whisper to her, and she bursts out a laugh.

"Well, that's the best excuse I heard all year."

"Creek knows," I tell her, and her eyes go wide.

"Holy fates, Remy. How? When?"

"Not here," I tell her. "Later."

"I'm going to hold you to that!"

"Fine by me. I'll see you in a bit. I just want to grab my brothers," I tell her, hugging her quickly before trying to spot Ben in the crowd. I can't see him, so I head for the kitchen, knowing that's where Maddie will be, and likely Ben too.

The wave of cool air hits me as I enter the house, and I almost shiver.

"Remy, just in time! The brownies have just finished cooling. Can you cut them up and pop them with the others?" Maddie asks as she whirs around the kitchen, taking advantage of her Hunter speed to get things ready.

"Sure thing. Hey, Ben." I smile at him as I grab a knife from the drawer and start cutting the brownies into tiny squares.

"Good to see you, Remy." His warm smile reaches his eyes and he steps

closer to the counter to avoid Maddie's flailing. "I hear you're doing exceptionally well with your training."

"Thanks, my brother is something of a slave driver, but I've been trying to keep up as much as I can, despite hiccups. Lots of reading too, looking into our histories, making sure I have the bigger picture."

He quirks a brow at my words, but doesn't say anything, as if he knows what I'm thinking. "Indeed. And your memories?"

"Coming thick and fast each day. Don't get me wrong, there's some stuff that I'm missing, but for the main part, I remember a lot," I tell him, and the truth of my words hits me. Between the constant dreams, things coming back to me as I read, as I spend time with my guys, my family, I remember more than I thought I did.

"I'm glad to hear it. Our memories are our most powerful tools. Our most powerful weapons."

His words trigger me, and I feel myself falter, as it hits me. We've had this conversation before, and before that... Ben knows. He knows everything and he's on my side. He wants to help me. My eyes go wide as he nods at me, as if aware of what just happened inside my head. He raises a finger to his lips and then points to his watch.

"Later." He grins and then heads into the garden with the others.

Holy crap. I try to tamp my excitement at the possibilities and focus on enjoying the day with my dad. The door opens, and the man of the hour walks in.

"Hey, Dad, what's up?"

"So many people," he grumbles, but he's smiling. "You know how much I hate surprises."

"Oh, I know, but it's your birthday. You can't just let it pass you by." I hug him quickly, because hugging is not a thing Denny Bennett does.

"I could have quite happily let it pass by, thank you very much."

"Denny Bennett, you will stop your whining this instant," Maddie says, tossing the towel in her hands down onto the counter. "Emily would have done it, and so she would have wanted *me* to do it. You know that as well as I do, so you are going to go back out there, socialize, and enjoy your birthday, dammit."

I look at her wide-eyed before turning to my dad, who looks as shocked as I feel. Maddie never loses her cool.

"Yes, ma'am," he says, swiping a brownie, making her roll her eyes.

“Denny?” Nate asks as his head pokes in the door and takes in the room. “Erm... maybe you should come back outside, Den.”

“Already on my way,” he says, grinning wider than I’ve seen in a while, and I laugh. The two of them look like scared little boys as Maddie stands with her hands on her hips, looking like she is not to be messed with.

This all seems so surreal. Like with the insanity of my life lately, this is almost normal and it’s weird as hell.

“Men. I swear, they don’t grow up, their toys just get more dangerous.” She rolls her eyes as she huffs. “Now then, sweetheart, why don’t you start taking this lot outside and grab those brothers of yours to help.”

“You got it!” I say with a grin and grab as many trays as I can without running the risk of dropping them, then back out of the kitchen into the yard. Music is playing, the sun is shining, and everyone looks so carefree. I don’t remember a time when everyone looked this relaxed. Kids are with sitters, so everyone is able to just let loose and enjoy the company of their loved ones.

Night falls and the fairy lights glow, brightening up the space. People are dancing, drinking, and enjoying themselves. The night feels free, the people freer, not a care in the world, but I can’t help but feel on edge. Seeing the glances between Colt and Fallon all day, my heart hurts for them, but there is nothing I can say to make a difference to my brother. It’s not a surprise that Fallon and her family left earlier. If I was her, I wouldn’t be able to face all of this, hide how I feel, and hide my resentment alongside it. The Witches are an ally to our faction; there is no reason for them to be kept apart and yet, they are.

“What’s wrong?” Creek asks as he sits behind me on the bench seat at the picnic table, wrapping his arms around my waist and resting his chin on my shoulder. “You seem tense.”

“I can’t shake this feeling. Like we’ve missed something.” I’m not mentioning Colt and Fallon to him. Their business is their own, and it’s not my secret to tell.

“I’ve always trusted your gut, but maybe it’s because we’ve been working so hard since your awakening. We haven’t had too much opportunity to do this sort of thing. Usually, things aren’t as crazy as they are

right now, or at least that's what Dad told me. The increase in the other factions' numbers around here have had people on edge, but things have been quiet since the Lycans attacked you. I can only assume those two have finally got their people in line, even if only because of you." His words sound true enough, but something still doesn't feel right.

Kain and Roman have always had a good hold on their factions. Either directly or through those beneath them, but it's the rogue activity that made them both come here. It's the rogues who have been banding together in a way unlike anything I've ever seen.

A shudder runs down my spine as the first scream happens. The lights go out and we're thrown into darkness.

"Shit," Creek says, standing and keeping a hand on me. Our eyes only take a second to adjust, and that's when I see them. Dracul and Lycans surround us, coming through the tree line, others pouring from the wraparound porch. There must be at least fifty of them... and no more than twenty of us.

Silence hangs in the air and time feels like it's stretching out. Hunters gather, creating a circle of sorts, and we move to join them as my dad's voice rings out in the dead space around us. "What is the meaning of this?"

There is no response except for the snarls of the rogues as they attack. I shut everything out, thankful that I've had time to regain enough memories since I was last attacked, that I barely even feel fear. A killing calm sweeps over me as I rush forward and join the fight around me. Weaponless, we're at a disadvantage, but sheer force of will pushes us forward.

I use my opponents' speed and strength against them, using it to snap their bones before twisting their necks. It might not kill them, but it will put them down for long enough that we can work through them to get to our weapons. Or at least I hope so.

I try not to think about the people around me, the people that I love and hold dear, while I focus on taking out as many of the rogues as I can. A Lycan dives for me, and I dart backward, then feel the teeth of a Dracul tear into my shoulder.

When the fuck did they start working together?

I shove my elbow backward into the Dracul's gut, and he releases me from his bite so I throw my head backward, shattering his nose, but that gives the Lycan the opening to attack. His fists rain down upon my ribs, winding me, but I refuse to give in.

“Maddie!” Nate’s cry comes from behind me, and it gives me the boost I need. I place my hands on the Lycan’s head rather than dodging his blows and twist as hard as I can. The bones shatter and he drops to the floor. Before he even hits the ground, I spin to face the Dracul, my blood running down his face. The pain of my shoulder barely even registers as I dart forward and begin the dance again, distracted by the scent of blood. I put him down too.

The sound of a shotgun cracks out in the air, and my gaze whips to the direction of the noise. My dad and brothers emerge from the house, weapons in hand.

It does not take long for the rogues still standing to flee, not all making it out as my faction rains their anger down upon them. Soon, silence fills the air once again, the disabled rogues shot, no longer a threat, the sounds of crying the only thing to break it.

“Celeste,” Abel cries, dropping to his knees, her head in his lap, her throat ripped out—so is her heart.

“Is everyone else okay?” I ask my dad as I reach him, but he shakes his head. I follow his line of sight and see Gabriel on the ground, not getting back up, and next to him, unmoving, is Ben.

“No,” I gasp, my feet moving before I take note, bringing me to the fallen Elder. I don’t bother checking for a pulse, the hole in his chest tells me he’s not getting back up. The matching one in Gabriel breaks something inside me.

“How the fuck did this happen?” I look to the Hunters around me, still standing, anger a matching look on every face. “And how the hell did we not know about rogues banding together in these numbers?”

No one says a word as I look back down to Ben’s face. “This will not go unanswered,” my dad says, fiery rage heating his words. “We will mourn and give the fallen the respect they deserve in passing, but then... Then we hunt.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



It's taken two days to get to this point. To contact the loved ones of the fallen and make the necessary arrangements. The faction is up in arms about the loss of an Elder, and my dad has been asked to step up in the interim.

To cover and look over our territory on this continent.

In those two days, I have been bitched at by my brothers, their emotions overrunning, about being too calm, too still. What they don't know is that the anger is there, deep in the pit inside me, but I hone it, as I have always done, to be unleashed when it is most needed. Which will come when we hunt.

Bauer has already started putting feelers out, trying to find out some news on when the rogues from those two factions started working together, who leads them, and whether it was planned by the heads of those factions. He doesn't know what I do. That Roman and Kain would never put my life at risk by attacking like that, but still the question remains, if not them, then who?

I told neither of them what happened, and yet, they both still knew. Blowing up my phone day and night for the last two days while I've spent the time talking to funeral homes, arranging a plot for Ben, a cremation for Celeste and Gabriel as per Abel's wishes, while the others bitched and moaned, getting very little done.

Maddie looked as exhausted as I felt when I left my dad's last night. I finally called it a day around midnight, crawling back to my apartment, to my bed. Which is exactly where I am now, trying to not think about everything I

lost when Ben's life was taken. All the possibilities squandered. Because I don't want to be a selfish, heartless bitch. But my friend is gone. I know I will see him again, but it will not be in this lifetime. Of that I am sure.

The funerals are tomorrow, so I am taking today for myself. A day away from everyone, to just be. To embrace the fact that I survived and take care of myself. Just for one day. So, I climb out of bed, head to the bathroom, and start to run myself a lavender and lily bubble bath.

Sushi appears at my feet, so I pick him up and pet him, enjoying his quiet company. "I better get you some breakfast," I say softly and pad my way through to the kitchen, going through the motions, almost feeling like I'm in the past, before I knew about Hunters and monsters and magic. When I'm done with Sushi's breakfast, I pop some bread in the toaster, then put on the coffee machine, enjoying the stillness of the morning.

I eat my breakfast while I wait for the tub to fill, and once it is, I sigh happily as I sink into the hot, steaming water. My hair piled on my head to keep it dry as I can, I lie back and let the water relax the kinks and tensions of my muscles.

Closing my eyes, I let myself drift off and think of happier times. Trudging across Europe with Kain. Exploring ruins buried deep in the green forests with Roman. Living the life of luxury with Creek in England, amongst the royals we had befriended on the battlefield.

So much time, so many memories, and so much love. I wonder how I will manage to keep them all in this life. If they will learn to tolerate each other, possibly even befriend each other, or more, because of their love for me. To keep me happy.

I lose track of time, lost in my memories enjoying the peace they bring, and trying not to grow frustrated at the things that are missing, the things I still don't know.

The water cools, and my skin starts to prune, so I climb from the serenity of the water and wrap myself in towels, drying off quickly before slipping into my nightgown. Padding into the kitchen, I open the refrigerator and gaze longingly at the cheesecake Fallon brought over yesterday. Ten in the morning is too early to eat cheesecake, right?

Just as I shut the door, taking a step away from it, a knock halts me in place. Roman would have likely broken in. Creek, Fallon, and the rest of my family would have used their keys. I turn back, open the door, and come face-to-face with Kain.

“Hello, mon amour,” he says as he sweeps into the room, capturing my face in his hands and kissing me so sweetly, filled with so much love, it warms me to my core. “I have been so worried about you. I heard what happened and have been trying to find out what is going on, but even my sources are slow in returning. How are you feeling?”

He pulls me into his arms, and I melt against him, letting his warmth seep into me. “I’m okay. Angry, sad, and confused, but I’m okay,” I tell him as I step back and pour myself a mug of coffee, offering him one at the same time. “You truly know nothing?”

“I do not. You did not think me a part of it?” he asks, his eyes wide with hurt. His posture slips, and any reservations I might have had disappear completely.

“Never. I know you would never put me in harm’s way or want to hurt me.”

“Good, ma chérie. I would never—all I want to do is protect you. If I thought you’d let me, I’d have you on a plane before sundown, far away from this place and all that is coming.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, confused.

“I told you of the rumors I heard, well, they speak of creatures I have not faced in my many centuries. Creatures of nightmare brought to life.” A shudder runs through me at his words.

“Let’s hope that they’re just rumors to distract from the rogues banding together.” I sigh, feeling the weight of it all on my shoulders. “Have you heard anything about a material that Hunters are unable to heal from?” I ask as I twist the iridium ring on my finger. “My dad was attacked, and I meant to ask, but I’ve been so wrapped up inside my own head, everything has just run away from me.”

“Do not berate yourself, Remy. Others will try to pull you down with every opportunity as it is. You have been dealing with a lot, and once your awakening is complete, you’ll be surprised to realize this happens to you a lot. You love working out puzzles, you always have, so not having all the pieces of your own mind is enough to drive you mad. You get lost, so far down that rabbit hole, sometimes you do not emerge until the process is complete. You are doing well to be as present as you are. Many Hunters do not do as well. Why do you think your brothers and your father are so lenient with you right now? They all struggled much worse than you. That you were able to hunt alone already is a testament to how much stronger you are than

most.” He wraps me back up in his arms and holds me close, letting the words sink in.

“As for this new weapon, I will speak to Luc, see what he can find.”

“Thank you,” I breathe, taking comfort in his arms.

“For you, I would break the world in two to discover all its secrets, so you should know.”

“You say the strangest things.” I giggle. “But that’s part of why I love you.”

I lift up and kiss him, showing him just how much I love him with my kiss.

“Well, isn’t this just a pretty picture?” Roman’s voice fills my ears, but Kain holds me still in his arms.

“Roman,” Kain says calmly, smiling at him.

“It has been a while, old friend,” Roman replies, and my jaw just about hits the floor.

“Wait, you two are friends?” I ask, taking a step backward.

“The years are long, and when you are gone, friendship is sometimes what gets us through waiting for you,” Kain responds.

“Well, slap my ass and call me Sally.”

“Don’t tempt me, princess,” Roman says, his eyes heating at the thought.

“Oh hush,” I tell him “What are you doing here?”

“The same as he is, I imagine. Making sure you’re okay. I tried to reach you before, but since this is your first time at home, it’s the first time I’ve been successful.”

“Sorry to inconvenience you,” I sass, rolling my eyes at him.

“I am glad to see that some things never change.” Kain chuckles, his smiling face making me laugh.

“Well, maybe if he could just tone himself down a little,” I say, sitting down. “But as you both can see, I’m fine. Today is a me day, a day of relaxing before the funeral tomorrow.”

“I understand, mon coeur, we shall leave,” Kain says, catching my hand and placing a kiss on it.

“I’m not going anywhere, not until I have more information,” Roman grunts. I swear if I roll my eyes any harder, I’ll be able to see my brain.

“What information?” I ask, trying to be patient.

“I was worried about you. The news of Lycans and Dracul working together has the packs up in arms. I’ve heard from ten of the twelve alphas

across the world these last few days, each asking questions, none with any idea that this is why their rogue problem seemed to be dying down.”

“I know no more than you at the moment, old friend. It would seem even the Hunters struggle for information. Why don’t we leave our heart in peace and see what we can find out?”

The key turns in my door and I panic, not knowing who could be walking in.

“Calm, princess. It’s the boy wonder,” Roman says as Creek enters my apartment, his face thunderous when he takes in the room.

“Well, isn’t this just fucking cozy,” are the first words from his mouth, and I sigh. I really need to change the locks.

“Don’t you start, boy,” Roman growls as the door slams behind Creek.

“Roman, anger will not help this situation,” Kain says, putting a hand on Roman’s shoulder, as if to hold him in place.

“You’re seriously here with them, after everything?” Creek says to me, the anger rolling off him.

“They had nothing to do with what happened. You know how I feel about them; why would they not be here?” I hold firm, refusing to back down, because despite his words before, knowing something and seeing it are two very different things.

“How do you know they had nothing to do with it?” he bites, and Roman growls again.

“You mind your words, boy.”

“Call me boy one more fucking time,” Creek snaps at him.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, take it down a level. I didn’t invite any of you here. Today was meant to be a day for me to not stress the fuck out. But look at you. Each of you tell me that you love me, you understand that I cannot choose, and yet you cannot be in the same room without wanting to tear each other apart.”

“Calm, my love,” Kain says soothingly, making his way to my side. “Creek, I assure you, neither Roman nor I had anything to do with the attack on your people. My word has been my creed for a long time, so take it as binding.”

“And I’m just meant to take you at your word?”

“You are. If anything, we are here to help. We each have resources, but if we pool them, imagine the possibilities.”

Kain’s calm seems to reach out of him and settle around the room,

turning down the tempers of the other two.

“Fine, fine.” Creek agrees reluctantly, running a hand down his face, deflating before my eyes. “I came to make sure you were okay—you seemed so withdrawn the last few days. I guess I wasn’t the only one.”

“You’re more alike than you realize,” I say with a small smile.

“I don’t doubt that at all.” Kain says as he returns my smile. “However, now that we know you are safe, Roman and I will take our leave. We have much to look into.”

Roman looks at Kain, questioning him, but says nothing. “I guess I’m going,” he huffs to me. I stand and Kain kisses me, gently but with so much passion, it makes my toes curl. Roman must be able to smell it, because his chest rumbles and Kain steps back.

Roman approaches me and takes me in his arms. “One day, very soon, I’m going to remove the scent of these two from you and make you mine.” His mouth devours mine, and I whimper underneath him.

He pulls away and heads to the door, Kain in tow.

“Until later, my love.”

“Later, princess.”

The door closes behind them, leaving me with Creek, who looks like he’s as turned on by their kisses as I am. He shakes his head, as if clearing his mind, and clears his throat.

“They’re... something else,” he says, and I laugh lightly.

“You could say that.”

“I came here, really, to see if you would consider not joining the hunt that I know is going to happen. I’m more than aware that you can protect yourself, but now I know for sure that they are not behind it, I worry even more. I can’t lose you, Remy.”

“Why? Why would you ask that of me when you know better than most who I am? Would you sit it out? Stand by when the ones that mean the most to you in the world risk their lives. If I asked, would you stand down?” He has the decency to look embarrassed, but I can see he still does not regret it.

“I had to ask, Remy. Your dad and brothers will feel the same. You have not completed your awakening, and that makes this so much more dangerous than it is for the rest of us.”

“No, I will not stay behind, Creek. I know you mean well, I do, and I love you for it, but no. Dangerous or not, the people who died were my friends too. It is my right to join the hunt, and I’m taking it. Everyone speaks of the

legend that is Remington Bennett, but no one wants to let me become that person.”

“That’s because, sometimes, when you did the things that made that legend, you lost yourself. Doing those things broke you, because even though your actions were justified, your heart has always been so big and the guilt would eat away at you for the lives you did not save, or those who died at your hand who were only following orders. Becoming that person isn’t something you ever wanted,” he says, and I sigh, because I can feel the truth of his words deep within that pit of instinct inside of me.

“You might be right, but regardless, if a hunt happens, I will be there, alongside you and the others,” I tell him firmly, not willing to let this continue any further.

“Okay. I don’t like it, but I’m not going to try and stop you. I asked, so at least I know that I tried,” he concedes, and I try not to look victorious.

“Don’t sound so glum. We have the rest of the day to enjoy before the sadness of tomorrow.” I wink at him, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Now that is something I can get on board with.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Today is the day. After the shit show that has been the last few days since we laid our fallen to rest, tonight we hunt the ones who attacked us. I barely slept a wink last night thinking about it. Torn between worlds. My argument with Creek the other day did not help matters—things are still a little tense between us. He really does not want me to join the hunt, and while he didn't press too hard about it, my brothers and my dad are on his side. They had no qualms in letting me know just how much. Only Maddie sided with me, telling them to let me make my own choices, as they had the freedom to make their own. I take a deep breath and try to let go of the anger I've felt for the last few days at their nonsense.

The floorboards outside of my room creak. I hold my breath and reach for the dagger under my pillow. Climbing from the bed as quietly as I can, I wish I had worn something to bed last night. I slip on my shirt discarded on the floor from last night and make my way into the hall.

"It's just me," Roman calls out, and I straighten.

"You have got to stop breaking in," I say as I walk into the kitchen and find him leaning against the counter, holding out a mug of coffee for me.

"You need to get better security." He grins, and I take the mug from him.

"Look at you, being all domesticated." I smile and his eyes slit.

"There's no taming a wild animal, princess." He grins again, smug and provoking. I lean back against the doorframe, making my shirt part slightly, giving his wolf a peek of what could be his before I take a sip. When his hands clench around the lip of the counter, nearly shattering it into dust, it

gives me more pleasure than I'd happily admit.

I revel in these moments of control, few and far between, but guaranteed to get me wet in an instant, and he knows it. His nostrils flare, his silver eyes focused only on me as their pupils restrict into two slits, I know he can smell my arousal and it is making him lose the control he's so desperately trying to cling to.

"Why are you here? In my apartment, uninvited?" I ask, taking another sip of the sweet nectar, acting like he isn't devouring me with his eyes.

"I came to ask you not to go tonight." My arousal suddenly dies at his request and from the look on his face, he knows it too.

"You don't get to ask that of me. If you're here, then you know. You know that Ben was killed, who he was to me. My family. Lycans and Dracul banded together to attack us at my family home, Roman. It cannot go unanswered."

"I know that, I've spent the last three days looking into what the hell is going on. They are the pack deserters, banding together with the rogue Dracul. Something is being planned, and the secret's kept so hidden, I haven't unraveled it yet, but my instincts are screaming that something is going to go wrong. You need to stay home. Or come with me. But you cannot join the hunt tonight."

"No, Roman. That isn't who I am. I'm not going to let my family walk into this without me. Especially if it's an organized thing like you suggest."

"I said no, Remy," he roars. I slam the mug down on the counter, and it falls to the floor, shattering as I turn to him, my rage rising.

"You knew who I was, what I was when you took me as your mate. Bond or not, I'm not going to change. This is who I am, Roman. You either love me as I am or you reject me. We have not renewed the blood bond in this life. You do not have to stay if you cannot accept the life I choose."

"And what of the others? Have they accepted you as you are? Do they not object to you throwing yourself into this mess?"

"Kain respects my decisions. He never asked me not to go, because he knows who I am and would never ask me to change. And Creek might not be happy with my choice, but he would not tell me what to do as you are trying to."

"And they accept sharing you?"

"You know they do. Kain was always aware, and now so is Creek. You saw it for yourself. I love them both, just as I love you despite our bond not

having been sealed. The choice is yours if you can accept me as I am, with them. I will not force it. Just as you cannot force my decision here.”

“And if I want you to myself? My wolf doesn’t share well. He also doesn't like the thought of you in danger.”

“Then you and your wolf need to have a talk and sort your shit out. This is my life, Roman. I will not have it dictated to me. Not anymore. I have made my decision.”

“Those decisions could get you killed!” he roars, but I refuse to back down.

“They could, but if that happens, I’ll know that I died being true to myself, not bending to the wills of others. I want you in my life, Roman. You just have to decide if you want to be a part of it.”

He growls and paces in front of me. “Fucking woman. I should bend you over my goddamn knee.”

I throw my hands in the air, because I swear to the fates this domineering, alpha asshole is pushing me to my limit, though I won’t lie. The thought of him spanking me doesn’t exactly turn me off.

“I’d like to see you try it,” I taunt him, playing with his control and knowing damn well I’m going to lose and end up with an ass as red as my blood.

Roman stops dead in his tracks, his body eerily still except for his chest heaving with the exertion of retaining his dominion over me and over himself.

“What did you just say to me, princess?” he asks rhetorically, I think. He turns his devastatingly handsome face slowly toward me, eyes boring into mine as though my taunting him is inconceivable.

“You heard me, Roman,” I tell him, pushing the pieces of the shattered mug to the side with my foot and stepping over the spilled coffee. “I said,” taking two more steps closer to his humming body, fists clenched at his sides, a snarl inching up the side of his lip, “I’d like to see you tr—”

I don’t get the chance to finish my phrase, of course, and in an instant I’m shoved up against the wall, his body flush with my now naked chest. Looking down at where my shirt has completely flown open, he grins like the killer I know he is, like a predator about to devour his prey. Like an alpha about to exert his control.

And I just might let him.

“Do you know what happens when you play with my wolf, princess?” he

asks, and I know for a fact that's rhetorical but screw it, I want his beast to come out and play.

"I get bitten?" I ask, leaning in and licking the seam of his mouth.

That's all it takes for him to pick me up and walk us the few steps to the couch where he sits with me across his lap, my ass high in the air, my head practically hanging by his thigh. My ass is bare, no underwear, no bra, just a billowy shirt that offers zero protection from his large, calloused hands.

"What are you doing?" I squeal as I try, though not very hard, to get out of his grasp.

Gathering a handful of hair in one hand, he pulls it to the side and tells me, "Watch me punish you."

Memories of Kain punishing me with his tongue flash across my mind. My males love to think that making me come is a punishment. Silly, boys.

With his other hand, he pulls down my shirt until my arms are held prisoner by the cuffs. Making quick work of the material, he knots my wrists together and warns me, "That's because you defy me."

Wetness crawls down my thighs. His voice, the low baritone of his desire for me, caresses my skin with each syllable.

Taking a deep breath in, he chuckles. "You're wet, princess. My little warrior likes to be tied up and helpless," he taunts, firing me up with words that paint me as weak. I'll show him weak.

Arching my back to jump off his lap, I feel the first sting of his large, calloused hand. Slap. And it hurts so good. My ass cheek flames with the sudden, harsh contact.

"That's because you dare talk back to me when all I want is to protect you."

I'm panting, fighting my natural urge to demolish the threat and my sudden desire to beg for more.

Roman slides his palm across my burning cheek, down between my globes, and dips a finger inside my pussy, growling when all he finds is my warm juices. I'm so turned on right now, I couldn't hide it even if I wanted to. And I don't ever want to hide my need from Roman.

I'm practically purring as his finger thrusts deep inside me that I don't register the second contact.

Slap.

Oh, mother of all that is carnal, I want to rub myself on his thigh, brand him with my scent but mostly get some friction on my clit. I want to come so

badly already; I can almost feel the pain of it. Roman chuckles, widening his stance, so my pussy is no longer touching him.

I growl, turning my head to look at him, my eyes warning him that I can only take so much before I fight back. “That’s because you taunt my inner wolf when I’m trying to be reasonable,” he says, two fingers sliding inside my pussy, curling until he finds that sweet spot that makes me jump, makes me want to cry out.

And I do cry out. I scream from the lack of friction. From the need to come. From the loss of sanity every time he touches me so briefly.

When his fingers slip out, he makes eye contact with me and brings his dripping wet fingers to his mouth, sucking on them and lapping up every drop of my juices.

“That’s because I love the way you taste.”

Next thing I know, he alternates cheeks as he spanks me like an errant child, fueling my cries and rubbing his palm on the sore spots for his punishing pleasure.

When he stops, I’m a blubbering, fidgety mess with only one need. To come. Now. I need the release or my sanity will forever escape me.

“I believe you owe me an apology, princess,” he whispers, his hands deadly still.

“For what?” I breathe out, but he doesn’t answer me. Sliding one finger up the slit of my pussy, he doesn’t stop until he reaches the crease of my ass and circles that puckered hole.

Did I say I was losing my mind back there?

No, this was going to put me over the edge of sanity. “Apologize and I’ll let you come,” he murmurs, almost crooning like I’m a wayward child that needs to be chastised.

But I really want to come so I give in to his demands. “I’m sorry. I’m so...so...oh my Fates!” Pushing his thumb into my ass and hooking two fingers inside my pussy, he brings his thigh back underneath my clit and allows me to rub myself to orgasm as he fucks me with his fingers.

“That’s my princess, come for me. Give me your pleasure,” he croaks, his voice telling me he’s just as affected by this little scene as I am.

Within seconds, my back arches and I throw my head back on a scream that can probably be heard for miles around us. Roman doesn’t relent, he fucks me harder, plunges deeper until he can no longer take the sight before him. He picks me up, throws me on the couch, my wrists still tied behind me,

and in one smooth move discards his clothes so he's completely naked and hard as a fucking hammer.

I lick my lips at the sight of him. Big and thick. Tall and wide. He's the epitome of maleness, the reason females desire alphas. And he's all mine.

With my lip trapped between my teeth, I clench my thighs together. Fuck me, he shouldn't be allowed to be this hot. Roman kneels on the couch and then picks me up, facing me away from him, and impales me on his steel-hard cock from behind. His arm wraps around me, and he puts his hand against my throat, pulling me up so my back is against his chest while he fucks me.

With every thrust inside me, he tells me a story. Of a man who loves a woman. Thrust.

Of a man who will die protecting the woman he loves.

Thrust in, pull out.

Of a man who would slay all others if his love is in danger.

Thrust in and...

"Fuck!" we both cry out as he fucks me to within an inch of my life.

When we both come down from our life-altering orgasm, he releases my wrists from their bonds and wraps my arms around his neck.

"I have lived without you for long enough, Remy. I do not know what I would do if something were to happen to you tonight, and I hadn't at least tried to stop you." The sincerity in his voice, a rare show of vulnerability, is like a knife to my heart. As much as being a Hunter is in my blood, being a protector is in his. I hurt him; I see that now.

"I'll do my best to make sure nothing does, so long as you promise to do that again," I tell him, resting my head on his shoulder as he lays us both down on the couch, a blanket suddenly covering us both.

"Deal," he whispers, tightening his hold and placing a tender kiss on my forehead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



After spending the day wrapped up in Roman, I'm sore in the best ways and I can still feel him on me, but now, I'm geared up and ready to go and avenge my friends.

The faction has been able to pull so little information about what is going on, and how it's staying so under wraps is beyond me—it has everyone more than a little on edge. What we did discover, thanks to Colt, is where the rogues disappeared to when they ran after the attack. A warehouse, so close to where we were that first night I went hunting with him and Creek. It feels like a lifetime ago.

I pace in the hall of my dad's house while I wait for the others, with Creek watching me silently. Stillness is not something I feel right now. We're meant to be meeting the others in less than ten minutes, and these guys are fucking around, making last minute changes, probably making sure to keep me on the sidelines as much as they can.

"Let's go," my dad's voice booms as he storms from the kitchen. It's so strange seeing him geared up. It's not something I'll ever get used to. Bauer and Colt follow him, so Creek and I bring up the rear, all piling into Bauer's now-modified truck. He spent all day replacing the glass and paneling to essentially make this thing a tank. A bulletproof tank.

He starts it as we buckle up, and we head out in silence. We meet the others at the rendezvous with seconds to go, and then head up the envoy out of town. A few other Hunter families who were close by made it in time for the hunt, but fewer than Dad was hoping for.

Regardless, no one was willing to wait any longer.

The trip is silent, the tension so thick you could cut it with a knife. Creek takes my hand and squeezes it. I squeeze his back and give him a tight smile before I slip into that place inside me, the one where I'm not really myself. I haven't dared reach into that pit of darkness before now, but not knowing what we're facing, I brace myself for the fall into whoever that Remy is. The cold, calm brutality of the pit washes over me. My body stiffens, and emotion drains from me. The darkness passes us by, nothing but black, broken up by the light of the trucks.

We take a sharp turn, and we're here. I climb from the truck and join with the others. We're still about a mile from the warehouse but approaching on foot is more discreet.

"We had a chance to scope this place out a few weeks ago," Colt says, his tone commanding, and it startles me that my carefree, cheeky brother is the same person in front of me. I guess I'm not the only one with darkness inside of them. He rolls out a blueprint of the warehouse on the hood of the car so that we can all see.

"Exits are here, here, and here. There are only a few windows, and I'm thinking they're too high to assist anyone. However, there are three levels to the place, with stairwells here, here, and here. We'll move in threes, with three people remaining outside should anyone try to bolt and in case anyone calls in the cavalry. Understood?"

He barks out commands, and people break off into groups, double-checking their gear before we start the hunt. I hear my name and pay attention.

"Remy, Creek, Bauer. You guys will take the back entrance that leads straight to a stairwell. Kody will cover the door." I nod and take a deep breath. Creek and Bauer can look out for themselves; I have faith that everyone here can, but I still worry that not everyone is making it out of here.

"Let's go!" We move as one, merging with the shadows, steps silent as we cross the distance to our objective. There's no moon tonight, so the darkness is thick, and I'm grateful for enhanced Hunter eyesight. I can see just as clearly in the darkness as I can in the day.

Bauer taps my shoulder, and we branch off toward the back exit, following his lead. I only met Kody today; he's not much older than me, but he seems like he's a bit of a liability. I clear the thought from my mind and focus as the warehouse comes into view. I crouch beside Creek, hidden by

the bushes that surround the warehouse, making sure the coast is clear.

I close my eyes and will my hearing to extend, but the warehouse seems silent, as if empty, or warded so that it seems that way. With no one in sight, Bauer motions for us to move closer. We reach the door, and he points to the rune symbol on the frame.

I was right, it's been warded, which means there could be Witches here too. Just fucking great. What the hell is this?

Bauer looks at his watch, and as the hands move into place, we breach the door. No one waits on the other side, so we move in, like a well-oiled machine. Bauer takes the lead, gun at the ready, with Creek behind me. We move through the darkness as if we belong to it. Gunfire sounds in the distance, and I try not to let it in, to not think if that's our shots or theirs. We reach the first floor, slowly entering the room that spans almost half of the entire warehouse. Once Bauer confirms it's clear, we move in farther when the thud of footsteps race above us, rushing toward where we stand.

We separate, moving for cover, making sure to have eyes on the only other door in the space, the stairwell to the next floor.

Dracul and Lycans flood the space, and we move forward, diving into the onslaught. I lose track of the others as I work my way through the Lycans and Dracul. I hate to think how many Kody has had to deal with, but the bottleneck should help him.

I pant as I shoot and slice, trying to clear the path, but it feels as if they're never ending. How did so many of them congregate here without anyone knowing? I cut through the obstacles in front of me, not paying attention to the amount of blood covering me until I reach the stairway to the second floor. I look behind me and my eyes go wide.

Kain.

I rush to him, my heart racing. "Why are you here?" I ask, looking around to make sure Bauer doesn't see him.

"I came to help, to keep you safe. I didn't mean to come in here, but I smelled your blood, and getting to you overrode all sense," he says, eyes taking me in.

"None of it is mine, well not much," I say, and he loosens a little. "But you can't be here."

"Remy, be careful!" Bauer roars and runs toward us, the last of the rogues in the room put down. I spin to face him and move to cover Kain. Creek stares in horror as Bauer raises his gun.

“Bauer no!” I shout, but the gunshot rings out as I leap in front of Kain.

I hit the floor with a thud, Bauer still as a statue, looking at me like he doesn’t know who I am. “Run!” I tell Kain, who looks at me, pain and devastation covering his features, but he does as I ask and flashes away. I only hope he gets far from here, far from the Hunters who would end him without hesitation, as the burning in my chest grows.

“What the fuck was that?” Bauer roars as Creek appears at my side, applying pressure to the wound.

“We need to get the bullet out,” Creek says, panic lacing his words. I nod at him and bite down as he pulls out a knife, opening the wound and reaching in for the bullet. The pain overwhelms me, so much so that I nearly pass out, but I hold on, because fuck. Bauer.

“Bauer, you don’t understand,” I groan. “He’s not who you think he is.”

“He is the head of the *fucking Dracul*, Remy. He is our enemy, and you just stopped me from killing him. Do you know how fucking long we have been hunting him? And then he just shows his face here. He must be a part of this, why else would he be here!”

“He was here for me. To try and keep me safe. To help us.”

“You’re out of your goddamn mind.” He paces the space, gunfire still sounding in the distance, but I can tell he’s not focused on that anymore.

“Please, Bauer,” I rasp, as Creek lifts my top to put a tourniquet bandage on the wound until I can get back to a Witch.

“You fucking betrayed us, Remy! How could you?!” He storms off up the stairs to the second floor, and a tear runs down my face.

“It’s going to be okay, Remy.” Creek tries to soothe me and scoops me up into his arms. I don’t say a word and let the tears fall, because I know he doesn’t believe his words any more than I do.

Creek carries me from the warehouse and back to the trucks, where we left Marie and Fallon. Fallon rushes to me as Creek explains what happened. I stay silent, unable to say a word, because I know that everything is going to change.

“Oh, Remy,” she gushes as Creek places me on the ground. He removes the bandage while she goes to work healing the hole in my chest. They talk

above me, but I don't hear their words, lost inside my own mind. Memories flash in my head, this life merging with past ones. My mom's face front and center, soft, as if she stands before me, knowing the truth and understanding.

But my brother, the others, they will never forgive me. Even Colt, with his obvious love for Fallon, will not forgive this, because they don't know what I do. They wouldn't believe me if I had the truth to give them. I know it, and that's why I haven't tried before. Because even when faced with the truth, my family wouldn't believe it. They'd cast me out before they believed their way of life to be wrong.

Fallon's hands lift from my chest. Having barely felt the searing heat of the healing, I sit up and rest my back against the truck.

Waiting.

Waiting for them to come back, and for my world to implode.

The smallest thread of hope stays that maybe Bauer won't say anything. Maybe he'll cool down and speak to me first.

But when I see my dad walking toward me, covered in blood, Bauer at his side and Colt on the other helping Nate to walk, I know that it's too late.

I stand to face them, Creek rushing to his dad. I watch as he pleads with his dad, but Nate's face falls before hardening, and he shakes his head at him.

My dad reaches me and slaps me around the face so hard I fall to the ground.

"You are no daughter of mine. You betrayed your family, your faction, with your actions. You are a disgrace to the Hunter name." He spits at my feet and I wince.

"Denny," Marie starts, but he silences her with a look. "Place the traitor under arrest. She will face the Elders for her actions." He turns and walks away from me without a backward glance. I look at Bauer who looks as sad as he is angry, but he turns and follows my dad.

"Colt," I start, but he shakes his head.

"How could you, Remy?" he says, his voice thick.

"If I could just explain," I cry, but he, too, turns away from me and joins the others. Marie reaches down to me and wipes the tears from my face.

"Don't let them see your pain. You own your choices, whatever they are." She looks at me, straight in the eyes, and I realize that she knows. Fallon looks guilty behind her, but I do not care. Not anymore.

"They will kill me," I tell her but take her hand and stand.

"There is more at play here than you know," she says, and Fallon's eyes

go wide.

“What did you see?” she asks quietly, but Marie shakes her head. Creek approaches me, shackles in hand, and it breaks me.

“I am sorry, Remy. I tried to reason with them,” he says, devastated.

“Don’t. Keep it to yourself. All of it. There is no reason for you to be locked away alongside me,” I beg him, and he shakes his head.

“No, Remy. I can’t let them do this to you. Not when I knew, and I supported you. I can’t let you carry this alone.”

“You can and you will,” Marie says in a hushed whisper. “This is her journey; you must support her in other ways. You cannot help her if you are locked away.” Creek looks at her and she nods. I put my hands out in front of me and let him shackle my wrists and then my ankles.

“I love you,” he whispers, with shining eyes.

“I love you too. Always.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



I walk into the room I've only been in once before, devoid of emotion. The chamber of the Elders. The same place my ritual took place, except this time I am not looked at with honor and respect. This time I am looked at with distrust and fury.

I should feel something, anything, but instead, I'm numb. They have kept me here for two weeks, locked in a small room with no light, fed once a day, just enough to keep me going until today. I am covered in dirt and grime from the room, which contained no more than a bucket in the corner to demean me further.

I have not pleaded with them though. There is no point, of that I am positive. If I had hope, maybe it would be different, but instead all I have is knowing.

Knowing that nothing I could say will make a difference.

So I've refused to speak until today. But I fear that still they will not listen.

I can feel my father's disgust more than any of the other gazes on me and while it registers that I should maybe feel shame, I don't. He doesn't understand, and I don't expect him to. He doesn't know. He couldn't.

But the other factions are more than these people think of them. They are more than just beasts that don't understand anything but the joy of the hunt, the kill, the taste of blood. They are more like us than these people could ever know, have ever cared to know.

I feel it inside of me each time Kain looks at me, with each kiss. I feel

how much more there is to him. He is more than the head of the Dracul, more than the power that radiates from him. I know it with the way that Roman loves me, the way his need to protect me overrides all other instincts. They are not the beasts my faction makes them out to be.

Creek steps beside me and brushes his hand with mine. I don't know how I got to be so lucky, to be loved by these men so faithfully that they give me the space to love them all, even if it has been for a short time. I do not regret the decisions I made, in this life or the ones before, to love them. To be blessed with such love is a feeling like no other.

The candles illuminating the room flicker as the door opposite us opens, and the Elders enter the room, their faces hidden by the hoods of their cloaks as they step up on the raised platform before us. A Hunter I do not recognize comes forward and drags me to the middle of the room, my family standing to my left and only Creek behind me in a show of support. The anger and confusion rolls off each of them and it threatens to suffocate me.

“Remington Bennett. You stand before us here, with the witnesses of your kin, standing accused of betrayal of the faction of Hunters. With aiding the escape of one of our deadliest enemies, Kain Michaels, the head of the Dracul. The most dangerous and bloodthirsty of them all. How do you plead?” The Elder's voice echoes around the stone room, and I shudder.

“Not guilty. He is not who you think he is. If you would just listen...” I try to reason, but I know there is no use when I see their shadowed faces remain beneath their hoods. They do not even lower them, not deeming me worthy of seeing them.

The people in here have been fixed in their ways for centuries. I just wish I knew why. The stories from Kain of how life once was haunt me, but he did not know of the reason for the change, and without all of my memories, I am clueless at how to make a difference. If Ben had survived, things might be different.

“Your words betray you, as you betrayed your faction. Your pleading will do you no good here, girl. To sympathize with our enemies is to be our enemy, and so you will be placed with the same fate we place upon them. The True Death.”

“No,” Creek shouts, but it feels so far away, and I sink to my knees. I knew the consequences of my actions when I made them, but I would do the same thing, time and again. My family, as much as I love them, are wrong. They are blinded by a hate that I have never felt. That I could never feel.

“Your mother would be ashamed of you,” my father spits at me, as Maddie and Nate hold him back. Bauer just stares at me like he doesn’t know me. My big brother, who I had hoped against all odds would have my back when the time came. Bauer, who turned his back on me and told my father what I had done. My heart breaks when I look at my family, all looking at me as if they don’t know who I am. Colt is the only one who looks conflicted. Like he wants to speak out, to help me, but he’s still feeling the betrayal of my actions and stands with those who are against me.

“You can’t do this!” Creek shouts, and I turn to find him struggling against three Hunters who have him pinned to the back wall. A Hunter steps up beside me, Easton, my grandfather’s right-hand man, and draws his bastard sword from the scabbard at his waist. I kneel on the ground and send up a prayer to any gods who might listen, to the Fates themselves, for the ones I love. To keep them safe when I no longer can.

“You choose not to fight?” the Elder asks, and I look up at him from where I kneel on the sandy floor.

“I am shackled and weaponless. It would be no real fight. I will accept the fate I have been dealt, but know that in every life, my feelings have remained true. I know your secrets; they will not stay secret for long. The world will know the truth, and when that happens, you’ll wish you had made a different decision.” I hold my head high as I say the words.

“Very well.” The Elder says, waving his hand at the Hunter beside me who raises his sword, not looking even remotely fazed by my words. Thinking himself, all of them, to be untouchable. I look to my family and a tear rolls down my face.

“I love you,” I whisper to Creek and take a deep breath before bowing my head. The sound of metal slices through the air as I close my eyes, but suddenly the ceiling explodes and chunks of rubble and dust rain down around me.

The Hunter beside me turns his sword to the man kneeling in front of me, his black wings stretched out so far that they almost touch either side of the room. His head rises and shakes, the dust flying from his dark hair. Whispers ring around the room between the Elders and the Hunters. A real-life fucking Angel just exploded into the room and I can’t think of one thing to say.

“You will not harm her!” His voice echoes across the space. “She is bound to me, and I to her. Any harm against her is harm against me.

I gasp at his words, because I have no fucking idea who this is or what the

hell his words mean.

He stands and turns to me, his gray eyes capturing mine, and my breath catches. I recognize him from a dream. I blush as I remember, and he steps closer, lifting my chin with a soft finger.

“Remy.” He sighs. “Always causing so much chaos. Stand, please.”

I stand up and it’s as if the room is holding its breath. “Will someone fucking unchain her?” he growls.

“What is the meaning of this?” the Elder who sentenced me to death asks when he finds his voice. The Hunter who was going to kill me sheaths his sword and unlocks my shackles. My wrists are raw from the rub of the metal.

“You dare question me?” the Angel’s voice booms, and the room shakes, more dust falling around us. I look to my family who are all kneeling, as are the other Hunters around the room. Only Creek remains standing, looking unsure as to if he can approach me.

“I am Leviathan, General of the Death Dealers, Archangel of War, and the creator of your faction. My word is your law and you will do my bidding unless you wish to meet the fate you so casually dealt to her.” The Elder shrinks back at the Angel’s words.

“This girl is the balance, the *Nisi Vita*, and should be treated with the utmost respect, not chained like some animal.”

“She betrayed us!” another Elder speaks up.

“She did nothing more than she was meant to do,” Leviathan answers, and confusion clouds me.

He turns to me and tucks a fallen piece of my hair behind my ear.

“Hello again, sweetheart.” He hugs me tightly. “Don’t worry, you will remember.” He winks and lifts me into his arms before shooting into the sky, leaving the shouts below us.

Thank you so much for reading *The Ruin of Souls*! I hope you loved the start to Remy’s breach into the unknown. The whole gang returns in the second book, [The Birth of Chaos](#). Available to pre-order now!

“A new take on reincarnation, with a badass demon hunter heroine who will make you laugh till you cry. Wrought with angst, drama, and passion with a whole host of supernaturals, The Shadow Walkers Saga is a dark, wild

ride you won't want off of anytime soon.”

- Sign up for [my newsletter](#) for release updates for upcoming releases & more!
- Join my Facebook group, [Lily's Wild Hearts](#), for exclusive giveaways and sneak peeks.

Thank you for all your help in spreading the word, including telling a friend. I greatly appreciate every reader and hope that you will consider leaving a review. Reviews help readers find books that they will enjoy! Please leave a review on your favorite book site.

TRANSLATIONS

Mon Amour - *My Love*

Ma Chérié - *My Darling*

Mon Coeur - *My Heart*

Fata vocant, ad hanc adducere nos ut in venator nobis. *Fate, we bring to you your hunter.*

Rogamus autem vos, Angelus scientiam, ut restituat in aedis dedicandae se unum ex memoria vobis

We ask of you to return the memories of the one upon this altar who is Angel born.

Angelus autem ducibus nobis dona puer hic noster de quo in suis bonis quasi unus accipit vera semita.

May this child be guided by the Angel, down the path of the past.

Ut rogatus est, et illud fieri.

As it is asked, so shall it be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lily is a writer, dreamer, fur mom and serial killer, crime documentary addict.

She loves to write dark, reverse harem romance and characters who will shatter your heart. Characters who enjoy stomping on the pieces and then laugh before putting you back together again. And she definitely doesn't enjoy readers tears. Nope. Not even a little.

Visit her website at www.lilywildhart.com to sign up for the newsletter or find her on social media through the links below.



ALSO BY LILY WILDHART

THE SECRETS WE KEEP

(Dark, Mafia, Why Choose Romance)

[The Secrets We Keep](#)

The Truths We Seek

**

THE KNIGHTS OF ECHOES COVE

(Dark, Bully, High School Why Choose Romance)

[Tormented Royal](#)

[Lost Royal](#)

[Caged Royal](#)

[Forever Royal](#)

**

THE SAINTS OF SERENITY FALLS

(Dark, Bully, Step Brother, College Why Choose Romance)

[A Burn so Deep](#)

[A Revenge so Sweet](#)

[A Taste of Forever](#)

**

THE SHADOW WALKERS SAGA

(Dark, Paranormal/Fantasy Why Choose Romance)

[The Ruin of Souls](#)

[The Birth of Chaos](#)

[The Secret of Pain](#)

The Misery of Shadows

The Reaping of Envy

The Rise of Dawn