



Midlife Shifter Unexpected

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Description: My new BFF is a witch and apparently, I'm a member of a witch's coven. Only, I'm not a witch. Word is, I'm a wolf shifter. When I said I wanted to start over again, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind. Being a shifter isn't the worst thing I could imagine. It's taken care of all the hot flashes. My body temperature now runs constantly high. I like it. Snow? Who cares? I don't need no stinking coat anymore. I can smell like ten times better than even when I was pregnant, and as for my vision? Glasses are SO last year. I won't be needing those anytime soon. But man, what about the actual shifting? That hurts like nobody's business. They say I'll get used to it, but they don't know how much it hurts, because I'm the only shifter for miles around. "They" are the coven that has accepted me and given me a new family. The threat from the cemetery is very real and the dead aren't sleeping quietly. Our coven is the frontline on keeping the dead in their graves and for some reason, they think because I'm a wolf I should have some superpower against the dead. But I don't. What I have is an amazing BFF just as powerful and middle-aged as me and I know together we can face anything. At least I think we can. We survived the first half of our lives. How hard can the second magic half be?

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Chapter 1

The cacophony of animal noises blared loudly in my head as I stood by the front door of the warehouse, staring at the menagerie in front of me.

I needed a break.

I needed a break like nobody's business.

Sunrise Doggie Daycare was bursting at the seams. Dogs chased cats sending birds flying into the rafters. It was like every single animal I had in my care was loose and wild in the warehouse. My usual knack for calming animals down and getting them all unruffled didn't seem to be working very well today.

Today the animals were running the zoo.

It had been a great idea when I first thought to go into business for myself. I'd start my own doggy daycare, which, because we lived in the country had turned into a baby cow daycare and a bird daycare and a cat daycare, and the days would turn into weeks because people would go on vacation. Even then, when I was booked out and I shouldn't take any more animals, somebody would beg me for help. I couldn't not help them, right? They had to visit their sick grandma, and the animal would be dumped on my doorstep. I couldn't say no, because who else was going to take care of the animals while they were gone?

No one, except me.

I had cornered the market ten years ago by opening the first doggy daycare. At first, everyone had laughed at me because the rural area I live in had an abundance of ranches and everyone had a friend to take care of their animals. Well, it turned out friends don't necessarily like taking care of each other's animals, it caused some friction.

Once word got out in the local neighborhood there was a reliable pet care place, requests started flooding in. People who commuted into town to work would leave their animal to be fed and let out during the day.

Over the years, it had become too much. "Isn't it, kitty?" I said, petting the calico cat that rubbed up against my legs. I reached out and picked her up. She was the pet of one of the first clients I'd ever had. She belonged to an old woman who had homed the cat with me when she had gone into a nursing home. I'd been taking care of her for years before the old woman had died and now, I just kept her around. Or she kept me around. Regardless, we seemed to have an easy-going relationship and most of the time she helped me to at least keep the other cats in line. She seemed to train the new ones on how to behave around the dogs, and she was a fierce defender of them whenever the dogs came around.

"You make a lousy full-time companion. Don't you, Miss Kitty." She never actually had a name or if she had, the old lady had forgotten by the time she had been put in a home. I had taken to calling her Miss Kitty from the beginning.

For living in a small town, owning a business, working weekends at the Sheriff's office, and knowing everybody, it sure could get lonely, and as much as I certainly wasn't out of action, what I was really looking for lately was just a friend. Someone to hang out with.

I thought about Mae.

She was meant to call me, but I hadn't heard from her. That didn't necessarily mean anything negative. She had moved here from Los Angeles, so she might just be busy all the time.

It's not like we were dating. We'd both been perfectly clear we were into men, but friendships took work, too. Miss Kitty looked up at me and purred as she pushed against my hand. I stood up and put Miss Kitty down. "You're right." I gave her full credit for the inspiration. "I should just go up to The Estate and bring her a housewarming gift. She's only been here three months." The Estate was the Victorian house that was one of the oldest buildings in Cougar Creek. The original settlers had built it and it sat up in the trees above the town guarding the old, closed cemetery.

It was only seven on a Friday evening. There was nothing wrong with stopping by someone's house at that time.

It only took me a few minutes to grab my most recent baked goods. It was one of the things I liked to do to keep my mind off things. I baked. I had done some dating since my divorce but not much. It was slim pickings in Cougar Creek itself and the neighboring ranches all came with old farmers who were either married or well past their prime.

I was not past my prime and I couldn't bear the thought that because I was over forty it seemed like only fifty- or sixty-year-olds were available to me. No way. Mae had the right idea dating Branson, who was a decade younger than Branson. Younger men were energetic, eager to please, and teachable. At least that was the fantasy.

I could go see a friend, though.

I was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, so I slipped on a vest and an old pair of black suede boots. I checked myself in the mirror. Glittering long fingernails, short red curly hair, a splash of lip gloss, that was as good as it got. I grinned at myself

checking the fine lines around my green eyes. No way was I wearing foundation. Cougar Creek did not require dressing up. I grabbed a loaf of banana bread, and pumped myself up. This was going to be fun! Mae and I had met up for a drink together in the past. We'd had tea together. We were friends. Even if she didn't call me, we were still friends.

"Right? You got this, Bianca!" I said to myself.

Miss Kitty yawned up at me. "I'll check on you before I go to sleep," I promised. My cottage was next door. It was the same two-bedroom, one bath house I'd grown up in and was one of the first settler's homes in Cougar Creek. My parents had bought it cheaply on a large lot and had eventually built a warehouse on the adjacent lot. My dad had used it for whatever business he was pursuing at the time, whether it was power washing or bucking hay. When he retired it had sat empty for years with my father refusing to sell. It stood just a couple of blocks from the town center, which ran along Cougar Creek itself and the old part of town which was more the size of a small tourist village. People came for the hot springs and stayed for the peace and quiet.

I smiled as I thought about my hometown. There was a reason I'd returned here to raise my son, Dante. The influence of this town was better than the way he would have grown up under his father's wild, roving tutelage. I had lasted about eighteen months on the road after Dante was born, but then I knew it was time to come back home.

It had gotten tight when Dante had gone to college, and I was determined to help pay his way. This meant getting rid of any paid help at the doggie daycare, so free travelers were appreciated.

I had felt pretty proud of myself when I had come up with this. I was willing to make things work and I knew how to do it; I wasn't above renting out space and doing the work myself to make ends meet and put my son through college. No problem

whatsoever.

But it didn't leave a lot of time for having friends around. That is, if I actually had friends. The weirdest thing was, even though traveling wasn't for me, I found the people I connected with the most were people who weren't from Cougar Creek. People like Jane, one of my favorite sorority sisters from college. They were a long way away though. I needed friends closer.

I grabbed a bottle of wine on the way out the door.

The drive to The Estate was quick and easy. The front gates were open, so I took advantage and made my way in. When Mae opened the door, it became obvious why she hadn't been making an effort to be my friend. She had made others. Behind her, the house was sparkling and alive. There was a blazing fire roaring in the hearth and beside it Branson sat reclined on the sofa. From the sounds of it, there were a few other people in there as well.

I suddenly felt embarrassed, standing there with a bottle of wine and banana bread. Clearly, she didn't want me around. If she had, she would have invited me.

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“Oh hi,” I said, stopping myself just before I said the idiot line about being in the neighborhood. “I wanted to bring you a housewarming gift, officially. Here’s a loaf of homemade banana bread and I brought a bottle of wine, too.”

Mae looked over her shoulder awkwardly. She didn’t budge. Clearly, she wasn’t prepared for me to be in the same room as whoever it was she had invited over. “Hi, Bianca.”

“It looks like you redecorated,” I said with a warm smile, making sure she knew I wasn’t taking it personally. Even though the truth was, it hurt.

“Oh, yeah,” Mae said. “We just did it like a week ago.”

“We?” I asked. Not trying to sound butt hurt and confused.

“Oh yeah, the club.” Mae forced out her words as if she was totally thrown off guard. “The club my aunt was a part of. I decided to join and so now, you know, I do a lot of stuff with them.” She nodded as if that summed it up.

I was out in the cold.

I took a step backward.

“I just thought I’d drop those by,” I said, making it clear I wasn’t about to stay and ruin her evening.

“It’s not like that. I’ll invite you over another time,” Mae said clumsily, trying to

preserve what remnants of our fledgling friendship were left. I guess I was her 'go out for tea or drink' friend, not her 'hang out at her house' friend.

I shouldn't be bothered. I should just let it go. I took a deep breath and turned away.

As I got in my car, I glanced up at the window and saw Trina, a tall skinny woman with a beak-like nose who ran Witches' Brew Bakery. She was doing something weird on the table, mixing things like a chemistry experiment. I saw her hand move over a jar of liquid, making it bubble green.

Did I just see that right?

I was pretty sure I saw that perfectly clearly. She just turned, what looked like plain water into something bubbling and green.

"That's not normal. There must be a Bunsen burner or something underneath it making it bubble." I rationalized. I stepped out of my car and stood on my tiptoe, peering into the house. There was no Bunsen burner. She had cooked the liquid by waving her hand over it. I looked up at her in awe. I shrieked and jumped back as her head turned to where I was standing.

Trina's dark eyes stared straight at me, narrowing as we made eye contact.

The craziest thing was, she didn't seem surprised I was peering in through the window. She gave me a welcoming smile as if whatever project she was working on... now included me.

I turned on my heel and quickly left The Estate.

Maybe trying to friend Mae was a complete mistake.

Chapter 2

I headed back to my house, feeling awkward and jealous. How did Mae arrive in town and three months later, she had a party going on at her house? How had she made friends so quickly with people who, as much as I knew them, they didn't exactly hang out with me. Not like that. I wished I could be more like Mae

The last thing I wanted to do right now was to go back to my cottage, with its low ceilings and barking dogs. No, I was going to go down to the Waldorf, leave my bottle of wine in the car, and have a whiskey sour. Matheus, the hot bartender, was probably still working the bar. It would be fun to chat with the young kid for a bit.

The Waldorf was pretty happening for Friday night in Cougar Creek. There were a lot of tourists in town which made for a fairly lively atmosphere. I joined in a game of darts with a couple of the old guys that were always propping up the bar. I thought at their age, their eyesight would be poor and they'd be a little worse at darts, but there was some sort of muscle memory that meant they hit a bull's-eye almost every time.

I didn't.

In fact, I was lucky if I hit the board and not the guy standing next to it. Not that I cared. I liked playing darts, and the random nature of where my dart landed added spice to the game. The locals were used to the way I played and they cleared the area when they saw me approach with darts in my hand and a bitter smile on my face.

I smiled at Matheus as he came by to bus the tables. Matheus was tall and lanky with sandy brown hair and bright blue eyes. He had long features, a chest to die for, and a devil may care attitude. It made perfect sense that he was a bartender. He was probably in his early thirties but he was most likely going to be a career bartender if I had any money to put on it.

“I’m feeling pretty lucky tonight, Matheus,” I said lining up my shot.

“Famous last words,” Matheus bussed a table near the dartboard. He paused for a moment, looking around at people standing in range. “Could you all please just back up? Let’s give the lady some room.”

“She definitely needs it,” croaked one of the old men with a bit of laughter.

“Hey, it’s my style. You don’t like it, move into the other room. Well, you should probably move as close to the other room as possible anyhow.”

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“Do you actually even want to hit the board?” Matheus turned to look at me, his arms full of used beer mugs.

“Maybe if we just moved the target to where the darts are hitting?”

“Look.” Matheus put the glasses down on the bar and turned back to me. “It’s really all about the way you move. The way you hold your wrist. When you let it fly, it’s all about grip, curve, and release.”

“Why when you say that, does it not sound at all like playing darts?”

Every woman in the bar wanted him. I was no exception, but I didn’t try to overstep my boundaries. I knew my position in this town. I was the crazy animal lady who lived in the cottage down the street. I was okay with that. Guys like Matheus, besides being much hotter than me, were also younger than me. They were just not in my ballpark. Nobody in this town was interested in me. I was unlikely to ever have a romantic relationship again if I stayed around here, and I was highly unlikely to ever leave this town. Cougar Creek was where I was born and raised. It was where my business was and it was my home.

Matheus sidled up behind me, reaching his arms around me. I jumped, but he smoothly surrounded my hand with his and changed my grip on the dart. He pressed his body up against me with a bulge in his pants up against my butt. I froze.

“You’ve got to relax.” He moved my arm like a noodle, trying to wiggle relaxation into me. “Then you pull your arm back.” He released my arm and showed me the motion. “Move it forward and let fly right there. Okay, here. You try.”

He stepped away like it was no big deal he'd been snuggled up against me, but I was having a hot flash like nobody's business, with beads of sweat dripping from my forehead. As I held the dart, All I could do was imagine Matheus's body folded up against mine. It seemed to work just fine, because as I brought my arm back, like I could almost feel his arm guiding me. I let fire. To my delight, I hit the board! It hit the board about two inches from the center. "Bull's-eye! Bull's-eye!" I cried

"That's not a bull's-eye," Matheus chuckled. "When you hit the red dot, that's a bull's-eye."

"This time!" I lined up my next shot.

"What's got you coming down here this time of night anyhow?" Matheus asked. "I don't usually see you on a Friday night."

"Oh my God. I just need to get out more." The whiskey sour warmed my center, loosening my moves. "I'm stuck in the warehouse with the dogs and I just need to try to do something."

"Whatever happened to Mae, that new chick?" Matheus asked. "The bad ass one you were in here with earlier in the month."

"She's got some other things going on. Not available," I muttered, letting a dart fly, hitting the outer edges of the board. Matheus and I both cringed.

"I've got some time off tomorrow," Matheus said. "I'm not doing anything. Do you want to go down and check out the hot springs? We can hang out there and grab a bite to eat over at The Crown, or somewhere else."

I stared at him blankly. "You're inviting me to go and hang out with you?" I didn't understand that term.

“Hang out,” he said. “Spend time with you. You know.”

“No, I don’t know. You mean as friends? What exactly is it?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking bluntly, because I was just too old to go through life wondering what the hell someone’s intentions were.

“Fair enough. I have an idea,” Matheus said with a sly grin. “Let’s call it a date. It will be daring.”

“You know I’m like forty-five,” I said. “And you’re like... how old are you?”

“I’m thirty-two.”

“You do not look thirty-two,” I pointed out. “You look about eighteen.”

“Thanks,” he said. “But I’m thirty-two. Well, okay, I’m actually thirty-one.”

“See, I knew you were lying. You’re younger than you say you are.”

“But I’ll be thirty-two in two weeks, which isn’t too young for you. Let’s have a date and be done with it.” He lowered his chin and shot me with a look I couldn’t deny.

“Fine,” I said, pulse racing. “We’ll go on a date.”

Chapter 3

“The sheriff said I would find you here.” Mae’s voice rose above the barking dogs as I stood in the middle of the yard, surrounded by the beasts angling for a piece of food.

“Mae?” I said in surprise. I hadn’t expected to see her here. “Did you go down by the police station first?”

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“Yeah, I thought that’s where you worked. I didn’t realize you had a whole side hustle.” Mae laughed as she edged her way through the pack of animals.

“This was my son’s business. I set up for him, but then he left to go to college so I got a job at the sheriff’s station to help pay for it.”

“After all that, you work here at night?” Mae looked positively horrified.

“Yeah, that’s the deal.” I folded my arms over my chest, wondering what she was doing here. We hadn’t parted on poor terms, but I hadn’t had the feeling she’d wanted me around.

“I wanted to apologize for the other night,” Mae blinked , her hands reaching outward to hug me.

I didn’t move. “It didn’t feel good.” My words were clear. I wasn’t afraid to speak the truth.

“Can I help out here?” she asked.

I looked at her with surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah, I wanted to talk about the other night,” Mae said. “It wasn’t what you think it was. I wasn’t trying to exclude you. They are from the club my aunt belonged to. I need to spend some time with them and invest some energy in them. It doesn’t mean that I don’t want to be your friend. I know you’re really busy, but I’m not, so if you want to hang out or if you need some help, I am here.”

I couldn't stop the stinging in my eyes, but I blinked the tears back rapidly, determined not to show her any weakness.

"Do you need to go back to the sheriff station?" Mae petted a chocolate Labrador on the head.

"No. I'm just finishing up feeding them and then I'll put them in their beds for the night." I wiped my eyes and made a motion towards the feeding bins.

"I can help you," Mae shrugged, "and then maybe you wanna go for a cup of tea or something afterward?"

"You know, that sounds really nice," I smiled, all feelings of irritation towards Mae wiped away by her simple apology. I didn't need to fall all over myself to be her friend, but I didn't have to shut her out either.

"Great. Just let me know what you need me to do." Mae said.

It had been almost two years since Dante had left for college. I rarely found myself doing things with other people's help, but Mae chipped in like a trooper, running around and feeding the dogs and making sure they had plenty of water. She was also really sweet to them.

"Do you like animals?" I asked her as we locked up the warehouse and walked towards the narrow strip that made up downtown Cougar Creek.

"Well, I kind of have a new dog," Mae said hesitantly. "He's not doing too well, but I think he's going to last a while."

"If you want, I can come and take a look at him," I offered. "I'm not a vet or anything like that, but I'm used to seeing a few things in animals."

“I don’t think you’ve met anyone quite like Carl,” Mae said.

I shrugged. Suddenly I stopped in my tracks. I reached out and grabbed her hand. “We can’t go to the Waldorf,” I said. “Let’s go to O’Halloran’s. it’s just on the other side of the creek.”

“Why can’t we go to the Waldorf?” Mae asked, looking at me with a sideways glance.

“We just can’t,” I said. Mae stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, fixing me with a stare that told me she was not going to accept my brush offs.

“Tell me what’s going on.” She reached out a hand to my elbow. “Weren’t you the one who set me up with Branson? Look how that’s turned out.” The grin on her face said more than anything else.

“I’m happy for you.” I returned her smile with genuine care. If there was one thing I’d learned in my life, it was that one shouldn’t stand in the way of romance because you never knew what chance you would have of getting it again. “We’re not getting any younger.”

“You banged the bartender at the Waldorf,” she said with a straight face.

“No, I didn’t!” I exclaimed. “But I’m so flattered you would think he’d want to bang me.”

“You’re kidding me,” Mae groaned as she shook her head. “Have you looked at your peach ass lately?”

I glanced over my shoulder and cringed at the size of my butt. “He asked me on a date.”

“Oh no,” Mae said, stricken. “A date? Like a coffee date, dinner date, or what other kind of a date do they have out here? Bucking hay? Milking cows?”

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I swatted her as I giggled. “Well, he said coffee date and then I made him ante up for a dinner date because I thought he’s so young, I can’t do the fake millennial coffee dates. It’s just not me. And I mean, it has to be at least dinner, right?”

Mae’s skin turned a little bit red. “Oh, yeah. Branson and I still haven’t gone out to dinner yet, actually.”

“You haven’t gone on a date?”

“I guess not what you would consider the classic sense of the date. A date where you’re dressed up and go out to dinner or something like that. No, I can’t say we have actually.” She shook her head, swiveling her penetrating gaze back to me. “This isn’t about me. This is about you. You said yes, I take it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I did. I haven’t been on a date for so damn long, though. It’s frightening. I don’t know. It’s just, you know, I’m like that crazy cat lady really, with two jobs and a grown kid in college. I’ve been supporting him, but I haven’t been on a date in five years. Or three. But still. It’s been a really long time.”

“Three years?”

“It won’t be a problem.” I straightened my back and smiled at her. “I mean how hard can it be?”

“The good news about dating now is that you get to set whatever rules you want to set for yourself. You don’t have to create rules about how old he is and how old you are and all that bullshit. You can just go on a date and see what happens.

“In other words, act like grown adults,” I said as we walked by the Witches Brew Bakery. Trina saw us and came out. I was a little wary of her, remembering what I’d seen through Mae’s window yesterday.

“What are you two up to?” she asked us.

“We were headed for a drink,” Mae said. “Why don’t you join us?”

It wasn’t exactly what I had in mind, but I probably needed to be a little less close minded about having more friends. I was so focused on Mae. Maybe Trina was someone who could be a friend of mine too?

Chapter 4

“I’ve got something a little better than what you’re going to find at O’Halloran’s,” Trina said with a smile.

“Do not tell me the Witches Brew Bakery has a secret menu,” I asked, snickering. “If it has a secret menu, how is it that I have not heard of this before?”

“Come in. It’ll be fun,” Trina said, deftly avoiding my question.

I looked over at Mae because I wasn’t sure it was what she had in mind, but she was looking at me. I realized we were in one of those standoffs. I looked back at Trina. She and I had been enemies since she stole my boyfriend in high school. But I needed to let bygones be bygones. If she was willing to do it, then so was I. She was probably the only other single woman with kids my age, or close to my age, in this whole town. We had been living side-by-side for more than twenty years without really spending much time together, other than when we saw each other at the kids’ sporting events and other community events.

“Let’s do it.” I nodded to Mae, knowing that she was seeking my permission.

Mae had no idea what had transpired in the past between Trina and I, and the God’s honest truth was that, at my age, I needed to let it go.

The bakery was on the corner of Main Street and had a small nook in the corner that was perfect for us to sit at.

“Mind if we sit in the nook?” I asked Trina politely as we walked through the door.

“That’s exactly what I thought you’d say,” Trina said.

“Are you going to take a break from working?” Mae asked with a smirk.

“We don’t live in Cougar Creek so we can work hard,” Trina said. “We work in Cougar Creek so we can live well.”

I laughed out loud. “That’s what I’ve been getting wrong,” I said. “I’ve been working hard and living in Cougar Creek.”

“But yeah, your kid’s in school.” Trina settled us down at the table I had picked. “Does his dad pay anything toward his schooling?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to talk bad about him. He’s not a bad guy and he did his best.”

“Sounds like he sucks,” Trina shrugged and headed towards the kitchen.

“You almost sound like you miss him. Your ex,” Mae said.

“No,” I said. “You know what I miss is the relationship. The connection, the having

somebody to do things with. You know, your person that you spend time with. The person who is used to your quirks. We had that going, but we never had a really settled down together. The only person I found suitable to settle down with was my son.”

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Mae smiled warmly at me. “You know, I thought that it really sucked when Sheriff Ted pulled me over when I first got to town, but it was like destiny because I got to meet you that night with your glittering fingernails and red curly hair and you’ve got so much energy and spunk. I don’t even know how you do it.”

“I don’t know how I do it either,” I said. “And you want to know the truth? I’m really exhausted.”

“Can you take a few days off?” Mae asked.

“I probably haven’t had a day off in four years. The hardest thing is the doggy daycare.”

Trina arrived, carrying a large tray full of tons of goodies that she sat down in the middle of the couch table. “Why don’t we get Hilda to stop by? She’s got workers that come and help her at the nursery. Maybe they can give you a hand?”

Mae’s head twisted towards Trina, her eyes wide in surprise. I couldn’t say that I blamed her. I was surprised too. Hilda was the garden store owner who I’d seen at The Estate the other night.

“Are we going to be friends?” I asked Trina.

“I think we’re old enough now. The question is, are we mature enough?” Trina laughed.

“Oh, there is some dirt I am missing here,” Mae said, grabbing one of the cups of tea

from the tray and taking a sip. “Lemon and Ceylon black tea, my favorite.”

I sniffed my tea. “Mine smells like it’s got vodka in it.”

Trina laughed. “No, it’s not vodka, but you were going to O’Halloran’s, so I thought you might like something a little tipsy.”

“I’d like it a lot tipsy,” I said with a giggle, taking a big sip of the tea. It tasted like warm elderberries and white lightning.

“I think I just lost all the hairs in my nose,” I said. The warmth of the liquor moved down to the depths of my stomach and, oh my gosh, it felt so good. It felt as though every part of me was waking up and feeling alive.

“Wow, that feels really good,” I said, immediately taking another drag from the cup.

“How come I’m not having what she’s having?” Mae asked.

“There’s a certain drink for everyone and that’s not your drink,” Trina said. “Witches Brew is special. It’s unique. You don’t want to just have what everyone else is having. You need to have something that’s attuned to your body.”

“I still want what she’s having,” Mae said with a smirk.

“No, you don’t,” Trina insisted. “What I made you is perfect for you, Mae.”

I looked back and forth between the two. They were funny as though there was a power struggle between them.

“So come on, tell me what went on between you two.” Mae nudged my elbow, deflecting any questions I was thinking.

I felt really cozy . My whole-body sizzled with energy and a mellow heat radiated from my center.

“Trina stole my boyfriend in high school.” I drained my cup.

“That’s not true. He broke up with you and went out with Hannah,” Trina said. “And then I went out with him afterward.”

“You still shouldn’t have gone out with him. You and I were friends.” I shrugged, putting my cup down on the table with a much louder thud than I had expected.

“You two are seriously arguing over a boy in high school from when you were seventeen?” Mae asked.

“Fourteen and fifteen, because she’s older than me,” I said with a smirk.

“Very funny. I’m only older by three months.” Trina pointed out, refilling my cup.

“It’s amazing how much people know about each other in small towns,” Mae said laughing. “Whatever happened to the guy?”

“Josh? Who knows? He moved out of town to Eugene. Maybe Portland. He may have left the state. He was a nice kid.” I looked at Trina not sure if she knew something more than I did.

“He was a good kisser,” Trina said.

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“He most certainly was that,” I agreed. But my mind wasn’t thinking of sixteen-year-old Josh. I was thinking of Matheus, the bartender.

“Come on, let’s go get a drink,” I stood up, lurching a bit but catching myself on the table.

“I thought we were having a drink here,” Mae said, looking a bit confused.

“Let’s go down to the Waldorf,” I smiled, swaying a little bit as I headed towards the door.

Me and Trina exchanged a look as they stood up to join me. Trina shrugged. “You two go along. I’ll get back to work.”

Chapter 5

My blood was throbbing in my veins as we walked into the Waldorf. I hadn’t felt so rejuvenated and enlivened in years. I wanted to give a holler and jump up on the billiards table and dance. It was about the only good use of a billiards table I could figure out. Nobody knew how to play the damn game. At least, nobody in Cougar Creek.

Mae was with me, bringing me some levity, and I took a deep breath instead of releasing my excitement. There was no point in freaking her out on this little outing. I was just getting to build our friendship.

“That tea made me feel so good.” I giggled as I swayed my way to a table. “Did Trina

say she put something in it?"

"Well, she doesn't call it Witches Brew for no reason. She puts tonic in most of the teas to help people feel a little better," Mae said, glancing over at me curiously.

"Well, I feel like a million bucks." I could feel the grin splitting my face from ear to ear.

"All right, million-dollar baby. Maybe you want to take it slow there, killer." She grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward a booth in the back.

"I was just gonna go say hi to Matheus," I mumbled, wondering why it was so difficult to get the words out. They all kept getting caught up in my tongue.

"He's a bartender," Mae stated blandly. "He'll come to us."

"Don't bartenders tend bar? He's going to stand behind the bar and take care of it. I should really go over there." I tried to explain to her as reasonably as I could why it made absolutely no sense for me to go sit in a corner in a booth when Matheus was right there.

And he looked good.

I mean, Matheus looked good all the time, with his full lips, dark skin and short black hair. I mean, who wouldn't want to get to know Matheus better? He had that tall bronze look about him, with chiseled features and raised eyebrows that made him seem like he was just the kind of guy you'd want to get into trouble with.

I turned to Mae. "He takes care of people."

She looked at me with complete confusion. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

“It’s not obvious?” I asked, sliding my butt into the booth. I jiggled a bit as I sat, but I didn’t mind. It kind of felt good to have curves. I liked them.

Mae was still looking at me in complete confusion. “Not in the slightest.”

I leaned in close, grabbing her hands and staring intently in her eyes. “The bartender.” I explained it slowly and clearly so that she could really understand my words. “He takes care of people.”

“Right,” she smiled, pulling her hands back from mine. “The bartender standing right here?” My gaze followed her finger, tilting my head up to look at Matheus standing right in front of me in all of his tanned beauty, his green eyes flashing at me.

“I like to take care of people,” he said with a smile, as if it was a normal part of the conversation and I hadn’t been caught completely red-handed talking about him.

My skin burnt and I’m sure it turned a bright infusion of beet red as I blinked up at him.

“You could take care of me anytime.” I said the words without even realizing they were coming out of my mouth.

Mae burst out laughing. No help whatsoever.

“Maybe I can get you a glass of water,” Matheus said, his expression carved in concern.

“Why are you looking like me like that?” I asked. “Stop looking at me like that,”

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“I think he’s just looking at you, Bianca,” Mae said, her forehead creased in a frown as she looked at me and suddenly, I became incredibly self-conscious they were both looking at me and I didn’t know what to say. My feet felt glued to the floor and my butt was sinking into the seat. My tongue felt stuck to the roof of my mouth, , and my mouth was suddenly dry. Almost too dry to speak. “Water sounds good.” I croaked out.

“I’ll have a glass of wine,” Mae said, smiling and nodding at Matheus.

Matheus glanced back at me one more time as he walked away. I could feel his eyes, but I didn’t look up at him. I was too embarrassed.

“Did I seriously just proposition the bartender?”

“Not as such, but sort of,” Mae said with a grin.

“I’ll never be able to come in here for a drink again,” I muttered.

“Not true,” Mae said. “He’s already asked you out on a date. You just seem in the mood to speed things up a bit. I can’t say he hated the idea, but I don’t think anyone’s taking you home in the condition you’re in. What’s gotten into you?”

“I don’t know. Whatever was in that tea...”

“I know the tonic’s good, but it usually doesn’t make people loopy. I wonder if you’re having an allergic reaction to it.” Mae mused, grabbing her phone, and sending a quick text.

“Who are you texting?” I asked.

“Trina, to find out what she put in your tea.”

Matheus arrived with the water, but I didn’t make eye contact. It was too embarrassing. I was still feeling a little bit loopy, but I was coming down off whatever was in the tea.

I gulped the water down. It didn’t settle well in my stomach.

“I think I need to go home,” I said to Mae, who was still staring at her phone shaking her head.

“Yeah, you definitely need to go home,” Mae stood up grabbing her purse.

“What’s going on?” I asked, stumbling after her.

“Oh, nothing,” Mae said, grabbing me by the arm. Her firm grip belied the cheerful smile she had plastered on her face. “We need to get you out of here.”

As we were leaving the bar, Matheus came over to hold the door and handed me the bill for the drinks. I handed him a twenty but he insisted I take the paper. “I don’t need a receipt,” I said, putting my hand up against it.

“Maybe you’ll take my phone number, which is written on the receipt,” Matheus said, his green eyes dancing playfully as he slipped the receipt into my pocket of my sweater.

I grabbed Mae’s arm as we walked out of the bar and my breath caught in my throat. “He gave me his digits,” I said, my teeth grating together. “Oh my gosh, I don’t think I could ever have sex with somebody that hot. I would die. I just never could.”

Mae started laughing. “Why don’t you try texting or calling him first before you take this too far down the road?”

Chapter 6

“I have to go pee,” I said as we were about to walk out of the parking lot. We had both left our vehicles back at my place.

“I’ll wait here, for you,” Mae said. “You shouldn’t walk alone.”

“I had a cup of tea and a glass of water. I don’t see why I should be this messy.” I could feel myself weave as I turned and aimed back towards the Waldorf. I really needed to pee.

Mae tilted her head to the side. “Don’t get distracted.”

I ambled back through the stained-glass doors of the Waldorf, fully intending to just go to the bathroom, but I knew this phone number thing wasn’t going to work for me. I looked around the bar, but Matheus wasn’t behind the counter; he was out bussing tables.

I walked over to the bar, grabbed a pen, pulled out the receipt, and scribbled on it. I took a deep breath. There was only one way I was going to be able to deal with this. It would drive me crazy if I just went straight home. I would just sit thinking about it.

This was a much better idea.

I walked up behind Matheus where he was clearing an empty table. I tapped him on the shoulder and when he turned around. I stood up on my tiptoes and reached up, putting my arms around his neck and gave him a solid kiss on the lips.

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It was like melting into warm butter. I wanted to do so much more with him, but no, I just needed to make sure that we were on the same page. That we liked each other.

His eyes opened wide and he grinned down at me. “That was surprising,” he said. “But I liked it.”

He glanced around the bar quickly before reaching for me again. I put my hand against his chest, holding the receipt in my hand.

“There is my phone number,” I said.

I turned and walked back out of the bar, completely forgetting that a moment ago I had to pee. Now I just wanted to put as much distance between me and Matheus as possible before I fell through the floor in embarrassment.

I burst out of the front door of the Waldorf; hands raised in the air. “Oh my gosh.”

“What did you just do?”

“I kissed a boy.”

Mae raised an eyebrow, looking at me. “You were pretty quick.”

“I had to.” I gushed the words out still feeling the rush of adrenaline. “I didn’t want to spend the next few weeks wondering if I should call him or if he was going to try. Now it’s clear. I like him, and he likes me. If he doesn’t like me then he shouldn’t call, but he does like me.”

“You’re gonna be completely neurotic about this, aren’t you?” Mae asked. “Now you’ve given him your number, you’re going to sit by your phone and wait for him to call.”

“Oh my Gosh, I am the oldest teenage girl I’ve ever met in my entire life,” I moaned.

“Let me walk you home,” Mae said.

“Okay,” I agreed. Mere minutes later, it seemed, I was home. Mae didn’t come in and I didn’t invite her. I wasn’t sure what was affecting my energy, but I needed to be alone and maybe have a hot bath. That sounded like the perfect idea.

I drew the bath and filled it with some lavender infused bath salts and a lemon grass essential oil. I fetched myself a glass of wine from the kitchen and by the time the bath had filled, my stomach had settled down . Mae and I had had an interesting night. I might have been a little crazy, but what was the harm in that at our age?

Mae hadn’t seemed shocked by my behavior, so maybe we were going to become friends after all.

I suddenly buckled forward. A hot flash started from the core of my chest and undulated through my entire frame. At first it felt like a harmless flush of warmth, but suddenly I was embroiled in the heat as it was ripped through me.

Oh, my fucking God.

I gripped the side of the counter as waves of heat and sweat poured over me.

I squinted my eyes closed. Every bone in my body was aching as if they were going to tear and break apart. My eyes flung open wide as I felt something sprout from my hands. I gripped the counter and screamed.

There was hair growing out of the back of my hands!

They were changing shape. Bony, knobby, my fingernails extending sharply forward.

What in Heaven's name was happening to me?

Chapter 7

If I had thought the aches and pains in my body that started in my late thirties, early forties were annoying or painful they were nothing, and I mean nothing, compared to the way my insides were snapping and crackling and popping right now. I fell forward, letting my whole body submit to the change overtaking me. There was no other way to put it. I was transforming. I screamed again, only it wasn't a scream, it was a howl.

Like a dog.

Or like a wolf... I stood up, and stared down at what should have been my hands, but weren't. They were paws. I brought my eyes up to the mirror. Staring back at me, stood a deep red wolf. I screamed again, and again it came out like a howl.

I was hungry. Really, really hungry

There was a knock at the door.

Food.

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A strong pulsing driving sensation had me thinking that whatever was on the other side of that door, I would be able to eat, and it would fill the hunger inside me.

“Bianca?” Mae’s voice came through the door.

I tried to talk. To tell her to run, because I could feel the driving hunger inside me going toward her... Wanting to rip and tear and shred and feed.

It came out a howl.

But she didn’t run. She opened the door.

The wrong direction! You’re going the wrong way! I wanted to scream the words at her.

I couldn’t stop the impulses driving through my body and my brain. I lowered down on my front haunches, growling and snarling at her and trying to hold back the beast within me to stop from attacking her.

Turn around!

But she didn’t do it.

“Bianca,” she said, squatting down a little bit and holding out her hand peacefully.
“It’s me, Mae.”

For goodness sake’s, I know who she was. I needed her to run, to leave.

I was like a coiled spring, every muscle in me taut and ready to go. There was no stopping it. My body released like a slingshot, flying me through the air and directly at my best friend's face. Teeth, claws, everything out.

I moved as if in super slow motion. Her hands rose in the air. purple and green light boiled around each one of them until they rose up together above her, putting a shield between me and her. I slammed right into it, electric magic coursing through my body and catching me in a seizure. I was shaking as I fell to the ground, then the world went black.

Chapter 8

“Wake up.” A gentle voice nudged me as my shoulder was prodded.

“Oh, my aching head,” I said, squinting one eye open at Mae who peered at me with concern. It felt like the world was on the verge of reeling again. I grabbed the blankets. I was on my bed.

“What happened last night?” I muttered, rolling onto my back, feeling like a ton of bricks was sitting on my chest.

“You had kind of a thing,” Mae said cautiously.

I tilted my head to the side and looked at her. “How much of it was real?”

“How much do you remember?” she countered.

My head pounded as the memories flooded in. Mae and I had met. We had stopped for tea with Trina and then gone to the Waldorf.

“I kissed Matheus,” I muttered, putting my hand on my face. “And I made him take

my number.”

“Is that all you remember?” Mae asked curiously.

I swallowed hard, thinking about the wolf I’d seen in the mirror. I would never forget that, but it sounded so crazy to say and maybe I’d been hallucinating.

“Do you know they used to serve absinthe at the Waldorf in this town?” I asked.

“I think you were the one who told me that,” Mae said. “You also told me there hasn’t been absinthe in this town for years.”

“Trina gave me something last night. I’m sure of it.”

“What do you recall?” Mae asked.

I closed my eyes and tilted my head back.

The hair. The claws. The mirror. They all flashed in front of my eyes.

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“I’m a werewolf,” I gasped, choking the words out in a hushed rush. My jaw dropped open as I turned to gape at Mae. “And you shoot...lightning? Out of your hands?” I felt completely hopeless as I said the words. My friends were definitely going to call the lunatic asylum and have me locked up.

“I’m not sure living on my own is such a good idea,” I murmured. “Ever since my son moved out, I seem to be hallucinating.”

“You’ve hallucinated other times?” Mae asked.

I took a deep breath. This was not something I had ever told anyone before in my entire life. How I’d dreamt about being a wolf and how I would close my eyes and feel myself running in the dark. I remembered feeling myself tearing into a raw piece of meat, before waking up in a cold sweat. It had only happened in the last couple of years, since Dante had left for college. I’d put it down to being single, living alone and being around dogs all the time, that maybe my subconscious was starting to think it was one. I looked up at Mae, completely drained of any resistance.

“I’ve dreamt of being a wolf since Dante left,” I said. “I’ve been feeling more... I don’t know the best way to describe it, but feral is only word I can think of.”

Mae peered at me, but she didn’t seem surprised or shocked in the slightest. She was looking at me with calm compassion which was exactly the opposite of how I was feeling. I wanted to scream and rage and...get help.

“Mae, was that real, what I saw last night?”

With a single confident nod of her head, Mae completely changed my world.

I sucked air in deep, rapid gasps, trying to get a handle on my reality. If what happened last night was real, I was a freaking werewolf. And Mae already knew.

“Are you one?” I looked at her hopefully.

She shook her head, biting her lower lip. “I’ve never even met one before.”

“What are you?”

“I’m a witch.” She leaned forward, holding out her hands to keep me calm, knowing the information she was giving me was not only going to freak me out, but it was also going to blow my mind.

She was a witch.

“Of course, you are,” I waved my hand dismissively.

“I’m a good witch.” Mae added, a frown creasing her forehead. “I don’t actually know if there are bad witches. I only just found out I’m a witch.”

I stared at her blankly. This wasn’t going well. “Can you un-werewolf me?”

Mae clasped her hands in front of her, tapping her index fingers together. “The coven isn’t sure yet.”

I gulped back air. “You have to. I mean, I have a kid. I have a business. I have a job. I live locally. I can’t be the local werewolf.”

“Calm down,” she encouraged, but I was already pacing the floor and rubbing my

hands against my arms. I had seen werewolf movies before, they never turned out well.

“What if I kill people?” The thought sank a chill through my skin and into my bones.

“You aren’t going to kill people.” Mae shook her head.

“You don’t know that.” I said. “Just because I’m nice and coherent now doesn’t mean I will be later.”

“I can protect you,” Mae said.

“What are you going to do, blast people who come at me with purple and green lightning magic?”

“I can do that.” Mae shrugged as if it was a normal thing to say. Yeah, sure, no problem. Let me blast these people out of your way.

“If I’m turning into a werewolf and you’re blasting people with purple and green magic, we kind of have a problem with the sheriff.” I spelled it out for her as she clearly didn’t get it.

“We have words that can make things invisible and wipe people’s memories,” Mae said.

“We?” I asked in complete shock. “Of course, there’s a ‘we’ now?”

“I am the High Priestess of Cougar Creek Coven.” Mae delivered this information as if it was a perfectly normal thing anyone might say.

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“I thought you said all the witchcraft stuff in your house wasn’t yours and you were getting rid of it,” I pointed out.

“Apparently it’s my family heritage.” Mae looked at me curiously. “But what I don’t understand is how you are turning into a werewolf now.”

“Trina must’ve given me something.” I frowned, moving into my kitchen. “When I drank that tea. She’s a witch like you.” My gaze shifted to the knives in the wooden block. “What are you people doing to me?”

“We’re not going to hurt you. We aren’t your enemies.” Mae spoke as if she was talking to a frightened animal. It wasn’t far from the truth. I could feel the fight or flight impulse just under my skin, ripping me away from the sane person I always thought I was.

“If Trina put a hex on me and then made me drink a potion that turned me into a werewolf, I’d say that’s not exactly someone I would consider a friend.” I raised an eyebrow at her, moving towards the knives. I didn’t think I had anything to fear from Mae, but she was able to shoot lightning out of her hands.

“She didn’t put a hex on you.” Mae said. “It was a tonic in the tea. But I think there’s more to it. She can’t force you to turn into a werewolf. I don’t have all the answers right now.”

“You knew to check on me.” I folded my arms across my chest. Mae couldn’t be the High Priestess of the coven and come out innocent in all this. “You must have known she did something to me.”

“All she told me was that she gave you a tonic.” Mae propped herself on a stool at my counter. She wasn’t going anywhere. “I also stayed here all night watching you.”

She had a point. Still, I was in the dark and needed details. A lot of details. “When am I going to shift again?”

“I have no idea,” Mae said.

“Super not helpful.” I shook my head.

“Probably the best thing for you to do is to come stay at The Estate. There’s more magic in the ground up there and we can create wards to protect you.”

“Protect me?” I exclaimed. “I’m a damn werewolf! I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about all the people I might potentially kill and eat.”

“Well, I’m worried about you.”

“Are you going to chain me up?” I asked. “Because I’m not available to be chained up.”

“No, we’re not going to chain you up,” Mae shook her head.

I still didn’t like it. Mae wasn’t the enemy I knew. I didn’t know what Trina had done to my drink and because of that, the coven didn’t feel safe for me. I didn’t want to go up to The Estate, but staying in my cottage alone was hardly an option either

My phone buzzed with a text. I grabbed it quickly, groaning as I saw that it was from an unknown number.

Hi it’s Matheus didn’t want you waiting for my text. ;-) I’m going to come by with

coffee and biscuits too. See you in five.

“You made quite an impression on him,” Mae said as I read the text out loud.

“Oh, my goodness, he can’t come over! I look like a mess.”

“You look fine, just throw a robe on maybe,” Mae said.

I looked down and realized I was wearing a tank top and underwear. “What happened to my clothes?”

“I think you shredded them when you shifted,” Mae said. “I burnt them last night.”

I hated how it sounded like we were committing crimes. “Please, go and find Trina and figure out what you can do to solve this problem,” I begged. “I’ll text you if anything weird happens.”

“I won’t be far away.” Mae said.

Chapter 9

I ran the brush quickly through my hair as I heard the knock at the door. What had I gotten myself into? I had squeezed my curvy butt into a pair of skinny jeans and put on a loose shirt that accented my cleavage and covered my muffin top. My red curls were slow to untangle so I threw them together in a messy bun and tied them in a knot at the top of my head.

“This is crazy,” I said to myself in the mirror. “What happened last night was crazy.”

I guessed this was what midlife got me, crazy nights and talking to myself in the mirror when there was a hot guy standing at my door with coffee and biscuits. I

shook my head, blew myself a kiss, and walked to the front door. I guessed my kiss had gotten him started, but he was clearly interested in a physical connection. I'd made that mistake by kissing him before the first date, but the truth was, I didn't know what I wanted. I probably didn't want a boyfriend and if I did, I wouldn't be shopping in the 'too young' category. At his age Matheus was only good for a fling, but it was going to be a fun one. I opened the door wide with a smile on my face, hoping my lip gloss wasn't smeared on my cheek.

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“You look amazing,” Matheus said, holding two coffees and a bag from the Witches Brew Bakery.

“I am not touching those things.” I had a knee-jerk reaction to Trina’s drinks and baked goods.

He glanced at the coffees, the pastry bag and then back at me. “Why, what’s wrong?”

“I got food poisoning last night.” I made up the story quickly in order to cover my visceral reaction to seeing more of Trina’s potions from the Witches Brew Bakery.

“Why don’t we go for a drive,” I said, taking the Witches Brew material out of his hands and putting them on the counters. “We can go to Jameson and stop off at Glenn’s Café. I haven’t been there in about six months, and I heard they just redid it all really nice.”

Matheus looked a bit confused. “Are you sure you want to go out and eat something after having food poisoning last night? Especially since Glenn’s is pretty heavy food.”

“I most definitely do.” I grabbed his arm and pulled him out the door. “You drive.”

The truth was, I was ravenous. I felt like I could eat twenty steaks. Whatever had happened to my body last night had left me with an appetite like nobody’s business and my muscles felt leaner and tighter. Clearly my curves were still there, but underneath them was a tightening mass of muscle that I was just beginning to feel. If this kept up, I’d be completely changed soon. I found myself hoping not. I didn’t

want to look too lean and too skinny, too muscular and too fit. I liked my woman curves. I liked the way they felt soft and pliable and smooth. I didn't want a hard body, but I would love some extra fitness and stamina.

The road out to the coast and Glenn's Café was well paved and broad, with two-way traffic going in smooth curves around a lush green valley. The low hills of the surrounding countryside edged up around us, creating a safe haven along the river and the basin of the valley. The road meandered, following the river out to the bay where the town sat in lazy sprawling lines coming off the river and along the highway. The Pacific Coast Highway was famous throughout the world for the beautiful drive through the Pacific Northwest. I loved coming out here. I loved being from here. It was part of the fabric of who I was. My family had been residents in Cougar Creek for as long as I knew. Maybe not as long as The Estate, but we didn't have much other history, other than my great grandparents being from somewhere in Europe.

This was my little bit of the world, and there was nothing I liked more than the beautiful curving drive that took us to the Pacific Ocean. The ocean had always filled me with happiness and joy. It felt like the beating of the heart, the breathing of the lung, the consistent and persistence of life. It was one of the reasons why traveling with my ex-husband hadn't worked for me. I had missed that beating heart of the ocean being so close to me.

"I don't think I've been down here in ages," Matheus said, peering through the windscreen and looking out at the weather-beaten town.

"How can you not come down here?" I asked. "It's literally twenty minutes from Cougar Creek."

He looked at me, flashing his movie star smile. "When was the last time you were down here?"

He had me there. “Six months. Although it might have been less, I don’t remember,” I defended myself. “I used to come down here with my son on Saturday mornings. We would get a coffee. Well, I would get a coffee, he would get a smoothie or a shake or a hot chocolate or something else, depending on the day. We would go and feed the seals or the seagulls or walk along the beach. It was our Saturday morning ritual.”

“That sounds great.”

“It’s one of the things that makes life beautiful and painful at the same time,” I said. “There’s those moments where everything is perfect, and you want to hold onto it. You know you can’t just grasp it in that moment and clutch it to your breast and keep it forever.”

“Isn’t that what your memories are for?” Matheus asked.

“The thing about memory is you can’t remember everything. It’s not because you don’t want to, it’s not because it wasn’t important, it’s just because you do so many things in life. You go on a trip, and have ten new experiences, but your brain is having sixty thousand different sensations a second.”

“I think it can process eleven million bits of information every second. The conscious mind only handles fifty bits of information a second,” Matheus corrected me.

“Okay fine, I was in the range,” I said. “You know what I mean. That’s a lot of stuff to remember and I’m like twelve years older than you.”

I stood there staring at him, waiting for him to choke on his coffee or stumble or freak out or laugh or do something, but he literally had no reaction.

“Did you hear me?” I asked.

He turned towards me, moving his coffee to the side. Leaning down, he brushed his lips against mine with slow luxurious movements, as if that was all he'd been thinking about for the last hour, and he'd been waiting for this moment. Now that it was here, it seemed like he wanted to save it and savor it. He tasted of bread and honey, with a slight bitterness of coffee. The moistness of his mouth on mine brought dampness to my legs. The desire rose like a wave engulfing me. I wanted him and I wanted him very much now.

I pulled back, panting heavily and looking around. My head was dizzy and my skin was hot. It wasn't a hot flash. It felt like the sensations I'd felt last night when I'd turned into a werewolf, but there wasn't any pain. There wasn't the bone crushing snap of the joints I had experienced the night before. This was more of a warm heart feeling. I wanted to rip off his clothes and mount him and ride him to the edge of oblivion. I turned away, taking a deep slow breath trying to steady myself. There was no way I could just give into the way I was feeling. First of all, we were in public. Second of all, we didn't really know each other and third of all, it was broad daylight on a Saturday morning.

All I could think about was jumping him.

"Are you okay?" He lifted my chin with the crook of his finger.

"I think that kiss just took five years off my life," I said with a smile.

"Then maybe we shouldn't kiss again," he said, his green eyes dancing at me.

"I think we should," I said. Reaching towards him, but he stopped me.

"You need to be comfortable with me first," he said. "I'm not just some young guy to have a fling with. I want you to take me seriously. I turned away from him. I wanted to kiss him again, but I was scared of anything else. I needed the cool mist on my skin

and the breeze in my hair to calm the rushing of heat in my blood and the desire that I had to bed him.

Chapter 10

The next hour and a half were almost like torture. He was chatting to me and talking to me, but I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't think about anything other than pressing my body against his and letting him have his wild way with me. I tried to listen, and I tried to focus, but I found my attention constantly wavering as I wondered what it would be like to be lost in his arms.

I knew this wasn't normal for me and I didn't think it was just because I was middle-aged that I was feeling so randomly horny, but I was absolutely in heat for this guy.

He was quite charming, a bit like my ex-husband. He had spent a lot of time traveling around the states. He'd grown up on the East Coast in a really cool climate, but it had gotten too cold in the winters for him there. After traveling around America he had found Cougar Creek. He had decided after two years he wanted to settle here. That was something we definitely had in common.

"But what was it about Cougar Creek particularly?" I asked, "What convinced you?"

"I don't know. I just got a feeling about the place." His smile warmed my insides.

I must've missed about three or four stories about his journey to get to California while I was daydreaming about him stroking my inner thighs, but I understood he'd been a rolling stone until he found Cougar Creek. The funny thing was, I was from Cougar Creek and I had tried to be a rolling stone with my husband, but it hadn't worked at all for me. Cougar Creek was home, and it was where I was going to stay.

Maybe our age difference wasn't such a big thing. Still, I needed him to drop me off at my house before I made a fool of myself.

Chapter 11

Moments after Matheus left me at my cottage, there came a knock on the door. I opened it to find a very concerned looking Mae and Hilda. Hilda made her way in first without asking. "How are you feeling?"

"Have you been watching my house?" My mouth was agape as they began unpacking their bags onto my counter.

"We might've been," Mae said.

"Stalker much?" I asked.

"Cautious," Hilda said. "We also figured this would be where you came back to."

"Why did he leave?" Mae's head tilted to one side.

My face tightened in a frown as I almost sucked in my lower lip. "He didn't want to stay."

"Did you invite him to?"

"No! What sort of a woman do you think I am. Besides," I groaned, "how could he not know I want to get in his pants. I mean...look at him!"

"Exactly," Hilda giggled. "Everybody wants to get into his pants, I imagine."

"Not me," Mae said with a grin.

“Hmm, well, you’ve got your own boy toy, haven’t you,” Hilda said. “Enjoy it, ladies. You’re at that special age where you can date him or his daddy.”

“You should at least give Matheus a chance,” Mae said.

I stared at her, nonplussed. “Don’t you think that’s a recipe for disaster? Falling for a younger guy?”

“I did it,” Mae said, stating the obvious.

“That’s probably why I’m a little leerier,” I said. “It’s working so well for you and Branson, how could it possibly work for another couple?”

“I don’t think we have a corner on the market,” Mae said. “All I’m saying is, there are a lot of perks that go beyond the bedroom. He’s very energetic and very sweet and always coming up with something new and different to try. There are things he just doesn’t know that are hilarious. Like how to rewind the tape cassette without a tape deck.”

“How did you even discover that?” I asked.

Mae started laughing. “At The Estate, I found an attic. There’s a ton of stuff in there, including one of those old dual cassette tape beatboxes that people used to carry around. I pulled it down and was playing a tape the other day. One got stuck and I had to show him how to rewind the tape cassette.”

“I don’t think there’s any way I’m going to try to have a relationship with anyone while I’m turning into a werewolf unexpectedly,” I said, shaking my head and pushing away all thoughts of giving Matheus a chance.

“Well, we’ve got some bad news there,” Hilda said as she began unscrewing lids on

bottles and smelling the contents.

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“Those were exactly not the words I wanted to hear come out of your mouth,” I said.
“Before you tell me the bad news, is there any good news coming?”

“Well, sort of,” Mae said. “It depends on how you look at it.”

“Trina, didn’t give you some werewolf turning potion,” Hilda pointed out.

“That’s good,” I nodded.

“It does mean there is no cure,” Hilda explained. “There’s no antidote you can take to turn you into something else or turn you back into what you were.”

“What are all those then?” I asked, motioning to the potions strewn on my kitchen island.

“These are just tonics to help smooth the transition.”

“What transition?”

“You’re transitioning into being a werewolf,” Hilda said, as if it was an obvious fact I had already accepted.

“I did not agree to transition into a werewolf,” I argued. “I did not agree to it at all. You guys did this. Turn me back.”

“We can’t.” Mae sat on a stool at the kitchen table.

“You have to be able to turn me back. You turned me into this.” My voice rose in pitch as my anxiety bubbled over. I couldn’t actually be a werewolf.

“Well, we didn’t quite do that,” Hilda spoke calmly, clearly trying to settle me down.

“Well, Trina did,” I insisted.

“In fact, she didn’t,” Mae shook her head.

“Well, then who did?” I asked in confusion.

“Trina gave you a tonic.” Mae put the kettle on as she spoke. “But it wasn’t a tonic to turn you into a werewolf.”

“That’s what it did though,” I pointed out.

“It was a tonic to bring out your latent supernatural powers.”

“Latent?” I asked.

“You’ve been a werewolf all along. You just were never transforming into the wolf.” Hilda clarified succinctly.

“What are you talking about?” I said. “If I was a werewolf, I would know about it.”

“Well, you know about it now,” Hilda chuckled, measuring different concoctions into a tea pot.

“I didn’t agree to know about it now. I didn’t agree to be a werewolf.”

“There have been shifters in these parts for probably a thousand years,” Hilda said.

“They were the first people here. You just have some shifter blood in you. There’s different types of animals, you just happen to be a wolf.”

“Does that mean all my family are wolves?” I asked. “My son?”

“We’ll have to see if he shifts,” Hilda said, “but there’s a good chance he has the gene too. For some reason, it does skip generations, but it must’ve been laying dormant in your bloodline for a long time if you’ve never heard anything of it or never been chased out of town.”

“Well, we did come here unexpectedly. That’s the story we were always told. My grandfather got a DUI and lost his driver’s license and couldn’t get to work in Iowa, so him and my grandmother had to come out to California where he could live walking distance from work. He worked at the gas station, just there.” I pointed northeast of the cottage.

“Well, your grandfather was probably a werewolf. They often hide it, like a disease.”

“So, I guess that’s good news. Grandpa wasn’t an alcoholic he was a werewolf,” I said, shaking my head. My bones started to ache. “If I’m a werewolf, where is my pack?”

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“Well, it sounds like it would only be your son. There are no known wolves in all of Oregon. There are some up in Northern Seattle, but shifters are rare nowadays in North America. Most of them immigrated to Australia back when that became the shifter world.” Hilda stated everything like it was common knowledge.

“Great, so I’m a party of one,” I murmured, still trying to get used to the idea that I’d turned into a wolf.

“You have us,” Mae said with a grin.

“We will help you get settled as much as possible,” Hilda said.

“I want to find out why Trina thought that I had werewolf blood in me.” I took the cup of steaming tonic Hilda held out for me. “What in God’s name made her give me that tonic?”

Chapter 12

I agreed to go up to The Estate for the evening. Not only because I wanted to confront Trina, but also because I didn’t want to be alone. I had been alone for most of my adult life, besides my son. Typically, I didn’t mind, but the fact I was now a werewolf and likely to shift into a wild snarling beast at any point in the upcoming future was a little more than I had expected to take on this week. The idea of being around people, especially people that understood what I was, probably better than I did, wasn’t such a bad idea.

I had been curious about The Estate ever since I was a little kid, but there was never

any chance to go in it. Not with the Hayes in charge. The Hayes was the title that had been given to Mae's aunt when she had taken over ownership of The Estate. As the owner of The Estate, the Hayes ruled the cemetery around it and made everybody fear to go up in that direction. We all knew the cemetery was off-limits, though it didn't stop some of the town kids from trying to get in. Heck, it didn't stop us from going, but something always happened, to keep us out. To this day I still didn't know anyone who had actually been inside the cemetery. Well, I didn't until now. As the new owner, Mae had obviously been into the cemetery.

I had gone up to The Estate to look for Mae, but that was the closest I had ever been.

Just to the front doorstep.

Now As I climbed the stairs with Mae in front of me and Hilda behind me, I knew I was going to go inside. I couldn't stop the small thrill of excitement that pumped through my blood at the thought of it. I finally get to go into the Hayes house, The Estate, and see what it was like.

The door creaked open, and Mae walked in, straight toward the kitchen. I entered the foyer and paused there for a moment. It was a large room with three doors and an archway leading off from it and a large staircase going to the second floor. The house itself was a Victorian two-story house, built in a time when there was plenty of wood but less money. Even for the prosperous Hayes family, this had been a large enough house to build in Cougar Creek, but for me, it was a mansion compared to my small two-bedroom, one bath cottage. I didn't mind. I loved my cottage, but this was just magnificent. I took a deep breath. I wanted to look in every room, but I knew it was a little bit rude to ask to.

"Get into the kitchen and face your demons then," Hilda said.

"What do you mean?" I raised an eyebrow at her.

“How was the tonic?” Trina called from the kitchen.

“Oh, I see.” I turned with purpose and walked with a firm stride to the kitchen. I wanted to find out what Trina knew and what she thought she knew. I didn’t even hesitate when I first saw her. “What made you think I was a werewolf?”

“Well, I thought you had supernatural blood, but I never guessed it would be werewolf. I mean, I know you like dogs, but you never struck me as a werewolf type. You’re kind of sweet to be a werewolf.”

“She’s sweet, but direct.” Mae busied herself stoking the fire that lined one wall of the large kitchen.

I wasn’t that direct. I wasn’t about to tell them how my feelings got hurt the night I showed up and wasn’t invited in. I wasn’t going to tell them how much I wanted to be a part of their club. I knew how pathetic that would sound, and there was no way I was going to be pitiful.

“What made you think that I had supernatural blood, and if you thought that, why didn’t you do anything about it before? I’ve known you my whole life... Literally my whole life. We went to kindergarten together. Now here we are in our forties, and you finally give me a tonic to release my latent magic powers?”

“It’s not my fault you didn’t know you were a werewolf,” Trina said coldly. “It’s not that I don’t feel for you, I do. It’s just it’s not my fault, so if you’re angry take it out on somebody else.”

“You still didn’t answer my question,” I pointed out. There was no way I was going to back down.

Trina rolled her eyes and folded her arms across her chest. “You sparkle,” she said

succinctly.

“What are you talking about?” That was the last thing I was expecting to hear.

“Yeah, what are you talking about,” Mae asked, tilting her head to the side to look at Trina.

“She can see auras,” Hilda said. “It’s a rare gift. Sometimes it’s mixed blood or something that’ll do that to you, but it’s rare to see it in a witch.

“So, what you were saying is you can see my aura –“

“– yes... And it sparkles,” Trina said.

“Why did you not tell me that before now?”

“There didn’t seem to be a very good reason until now,” Trina said. The room got super quiet. Only the sound of the fire cracking in the fireplace invaded the quiet of the evening.

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“What’s happening now that makes it a good reason?” I asked into the silence.

But the only response was everyone looking away.

Chapter 13

I could tell by the silence in the room I’d asked a question no one wanted to answer.

“Do you guys have a problem?” I asked.

“You could say that,” Mae nodded, but her gaze shot to Trina. “I don’t think that gave you the right to tune her into her supernatural powers.”

“It’s not against any code,” Trina shrugged. “You can’t deny we need her. The cemetery is getting worse.”

“Getting worse?” Just my luck I didn’t get brought into the supernatural world to meet hot guys, travel the world, and have a party.

“It’s been, you know, coming to life a wee bit,” Hilda explained.

My eyes grew wide and my nostrils flared. “I didn’t sign on for a zombie apocalypse,” I stammered. “Not cool. I don’t want to find out about the supernatural world in the final book of the series when everyone is about to die!”

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” Mae asked me, holding out a pendant in her palm. I took it from her hand. It was a pentacle in a circle, with stones at the end of

each point and one in the center.

I shook my head. “Isn’t it like some sort of witchy symbol, a trinket?”

“It is a witch symbol,” Mae said. “It’s not a trinket. This is part of The Estate. It came with the house. I found it in my aunt’s things.” She waved her hand over it and smiled, looking up at the other two women in the room. I couldn’t because I was too busy staring at the pendant. The stone in the center was sparkling fire like little lightning bolts of purple and green.

“Oh my God, that’s your magic,” I said.

“That’s my magic.” Mae pointed to the stones in the center, but as she waved her hand over the pendant again, a second stone started glowing in green sparkles.

“What’s that one, the green one?” I looked around the room assuming it was either Trina or Hilda.

But they were all looking over at me. “Oh, that’s you,” Mae said.

My eyes went wide. “What is it, some sort of a tracking device?”

“It’s more like an on switch, a transformer switch. I’m plugged in, so my light is on. You’re plugged in, so your light is on too. We just need the other four stones to light up.”

“You need four more supernaturals?” I asked. “What’s wrong with you two?” I asked, pointing at Hilda and Trina.

“We aren’t part of the accords,” Trina said.

“There were six families in the original agreement, one from each group, and they made a pact to help protect the cemetery from intruders,” Hilda said.

“The coven, the witch’s coven, we are the first line of defense,” Trina explained. “We keep up the wards and the barriers that keep out most of the people.”

“Now that the Hayes is here,” Hilda nodded toward Mae.” We have greater protection, but there’s been problems recently, and so now we need to invoke the pentacle.”

“I was testing out to see if you were one of the members of the pentacle,” Trina said.

“How could you possibly know that?” I asked.

“There are a lot of magic people in the world, but they don’t see it, so I can’t go around telling them they’re magic people. They have to be able to see it and do it for themselves. If you tell someone that they’re magic and they can’t do it, then they go crazy. There’s no way I could force you to be a werewolf or a shapeshifter, but I can bring out your natural abilities.”

“Can I get you a cup of tea?” Mae asked.

“Last time one of you got me a cup of tea, it didn’t turn out so well,” I smirked.

“I promise it’ll just be tea with a bit of a boost in it,” she said with a smile.

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“All right, look. I need a touch of reality. I’m going to call my kid,” I said. “Do you have a signal up here?” I pulled my phone out and looked at it.

“The best,” Mae smiled, holding her finger up and letting her purple electricity fly out of it.

I let out a startled scream, before turning away and heading out the back door and to the backyard. “What the hell is that,” I said, nodding to the animated half dead, zombie like dog that was groaning and barking and growling in the backyard.

“Don’t mind Carl. It’s my dog,” Mae said. “Well, it was my aunt’s dog now –”

“– I remember Carl, but he’s dead,” I exclaimed. My nerves suddenly registered the craziness that was around me. “He’s dead. I remember when he died. The Hayes made a big thing of it with the Sherriff. Had him investigate the neighbors for dog poisoning. I know he’s dead.”

I felt Mae’s hands on my shoulder, stroking me lightly, and heard the smile in her voice as she spoke. “Carl was dead, but we needed the stone to go back to the cemetery to protect it from the vampires who attacked last month, so we removed the stone from Carl’s grave, and he came back to life.”

“You have a zombie dog,” I said, shaking my head.

“Well, yes, yes I do,” Mae said. “But it could be worse. My locksmith was a vampire. He tried to kill me.”

I whirled on her with a shocked expression, my mouth wide open. “Vampires? Seriously?” Just the thought of the blood sucking creatures brought the hackles up on the back of my neck. That age old rivalry between werewolves and vampires must be true. I could feel it in my blood. “How did you get away?”

“I didn’t.” Mae said. “I killed him.”

There were footsteps by the door of the kitchen, and I looked up to see Anita and Drake, Trina’s children. The kids, who were the same age as my son, Dante, had all gone to school together. It was little surprise that they had stayed home and close to their mother. It was no surprise they were part of the supernatural world.

“She stabbed him through the heart with a stake made of a piece of firewood. Can you believe it?” Anita said. “It was pretty amazing.”

“It’s never amazing to take a life,” Mae admonished.

“Vampires aren’t alive,” Drake countered.

“I’ll be back in a second.” I inched past the zombie dog trying not to get brains on my jeans. The zombie dog was going to take a little getting used to, although he was cute and his one eye that looked at me seemed happy and joyful enough.

Dante didn’t answer the phone. I was disappointed and was about to step back into the house when my phone rang. I grabbed it thinking Dante had called me back, but it wasn’t him. It was Jane, my best friend from college, calling me from Boston.

“Jane, are you there?” I asked, waiting for the video connection to work. I could see my own face just fine and assumed my connection was working like a charm. I had four bars and a 5G posted up by my full battery signal.

In a second, her bright face showed up on my screen. Her skin glowed with a tan warmth that I had always been jealous of, but she was so lighthearted and effervescent with her French accent

“Bianca, I got you!” Jane was full of excitement. “I’ve been trying to get a hold of you. I’m coming for a visit.”

“Um, no,” I said, suddenly panicked at the thought of my friend showing up. What if I turned into a werewolf while she was here? What if she saw? How was I going to explain that? And...

...Matheus. I mean, Jane was pretty open minded but Matheus and I were ten years apart. In fact, oh my gosh, he was ten years older than my son. He was the same distance from my son as he was from me in age. Now there was something wrong with that. I just couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was.

“What are you talking about, Bianca?” Jane asked. “I’m allowed to come home? Right?”

“Of course,” I smiled nervously, hoping I hadn’t said any of that out loud.

“Is there something going on that you want to tell me about?” Jane asked.

Clearly, I had the poker face thing down really, really badly. “No, no. When are you coming out?”

“I was thinking of coming out for Valentine’s Day?” Jane’s French accent made it sound so romantic.

“You don’t think that’s a little weird?” I asked. Though I was completely relieved it would give me about a month to figure out what to do with Matheus and then maybe

I'd have a handle on being a werewolf too. There was no way I was not going to see one of my oldest friends.

"Just kidding," she said.

"What do you mean just kidding?" I asked, my palms suddenly clammy.

She had had the camera close to her face and I could tell she was driving in the car, but it wasn't until she held her camera out that I saw exactly where she was driving.

"I'll be there in 30 minutes, ma chérie. Surprise!"

Chapter 14

“I have to go,” I said, returning to the entrance of the kitchen. Carl the zombie dog looked at my boot. I felt too bad for him, wretched beast he was, with one ear flopping forward. He looked too cute. I stopped myself just before I leaned forward and gave him a scratch behind the ear. He was dead. But what were the parameters around being dead because he was moving and apparently, he ate, so who knew?

“I thought you were staying the night here?” Mae said. “I don’t think it’s really safe for you to be out there.

“I have to go home,” I said. “A sorority sister of mine from back in the day is showing up unexpectedly.”

“Unexpectedly?” Mae and Trina exchanged a look. “Nothing’s really happening unexpectedly. Maybe there’s something more to it?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with your world,” I said. “She’s just going through a hard time in her marriage and decided to come out and see me.”

“Don’t you have anything you can give me to suppress the werewolf tendencies that I might have tonight?” I asked.

“I can give you some teas to make you sleep. It doesn’t guarantee that you won’t transform, but a lot of times feelings will be inhibited by sleep. Most shifters won’t just casually shift in their sleep and wake up in their animal selves. It doesn’t typically work that way. It has to be a conscious desire to shift, or at least a basic

animalistic one.”

“What you’re saying is as long as I fall asleep, I should be fine?” I said.

“Yes, and this should help you sleep heavily.” Trina handed me a small vial of tonic.
“Just put it in a cup of tea.”

“Before you go, could you do something for us?” Mae asked.

“What is that?” I was already halfway out of the kitchen, through the foyer and toward the front door.

“We need some help in the cemetery.”

I stopped in my tracks and slowly turned around, looking directly at Mae. “You’re inviting me to the cemetery?” I asked, barely disguising my clear excitement at the very thought of walking on that hallowed ground.

“Why couldn’t you have asked me at a different time? Now is not really a good time. Jane is super smart and she’s intuitive. I don’t know a better way to describe it, but it’s like she can sense stuff. It’ll be hard enough not letting her know that I’m a werewolf, much less me showing up late and all flustered. I don’t think I can do that. I just need to get home and get centered.”

“It’s not going to take very long. We just need to do one simple thing,” Mae pleaded.
“While you were outside, we were talking about it and trying to figure out what it was that you can do and what your special power is, besides being able to turn into a werewolf. We think it’s your sense of smell. We know there’s something wrong in the cemetery. We can sense it, but maybe if you went down there you can sniff it out.”

“You’re kidding me, right” I asked. “You literally want me to go in and smell your cemetery?”

“You don’t understand. I can’t explain it all right now, but we need to protect that cemetery at all costs. That is the whole point of this pentacle,” she said, holding up the pentacle for emphasis. “My whole purpose and being the Hayes, the whole purpose of The Estate, is to make sure the boundaries of that cemetery don’t ever get breached.”

“Based on my experience having grown up in this town, your family has been doing that really well for the last two hundred or so years. Getting into that cemetery was always the biggest thing on the kids to do list every year.” I wanted to edge toward the door, but Mae was standing in my way and clearly not about to move.

“We’re having a problem, and the reason why we’re coming together is to protect the cemetery. I’m just asking, could you spare a few minutes to go down there? We can do a full formal tour later, but I’d like you to go ahead and just get a first take on the situation.” Mae was strong and single minded. But she was more than that. She was vulnerable and needed help.

I looked at her, my heart melting slightly. Here was someone I could see a growing friendship with, and I wanted to not only encourage it but secure it. Even now, when things were going crazy in her life, she reached out to me to help and support her. Period.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll come with you to the cemetery, but I can only stay for ten minutes max.”

“I hear how important Jane’s visit is to you and we won’t keep you, I promise,” Mae said.

“Well,” I said with a shrug. “As unexpected as it is, I guess this place is important to me too.” If it was important enough for my ancestors to stick around and offer the protection of their lineage, then I guess there was a reason I was here to help out. It wasn’t what I imagined my mother had expected would happen for me, but I had no idea whether she knew about our werewolf status or not. My guess is she had no idea either.

Mae jumped in my car and rode down the hill beside me. “I’m kinda new to all this too,” she said as I shifted the car into gear. “I just found out that I’m a witch and the High Priestess of this coven a few days ago. Since then, I’ve almost been killed by a vampire, have adopted a dead dog, and I rearranged my living situation. For the rest of my life, I plan on living in this house, so to discover you, my only friend in town, are also supernatural is something I’m really grateful for. I don’t want you to get too weirded out by everything going on. From what I’ve seen, Hilda and Trina seem to have a pretty good time with this magic thing and if we can get a handle on it, we can have a good time too.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t turn into a big hairy beast every full moon. Is it a full moon now? I don’t think it’s a full moon, and I turned into a werewolf last night, so first I’ve got to get a handle on what it means to be a werewolf. You don’t actually have that problem. You have the problem that you get pretty green and purple sparkly lights out of your hand. See, I don’t think that’s quite the same problem that I have.” I ended in exasperation.

“I’m sorry,” Mae placed a hand on my elbow. “I don’t mean to upset you. I was just trying to relate,”

“It’s not you.” I glanced over at Mae. “According to that pentacle we are in this together, whether we like it or not,”

“Well,” she shrugged, “I like it. I don’t mind the supernatural stuff. It’s kind of fun

anyway.

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“Can you fly?” I kept my eyes on the road barely believing I was asking a question like that in all seriousness.

“No,” she said, “but I asked the same question. Just park by the gate and we’ll walk inside.”

“What exactly am I sniffing for?” I threw the car into park.

“Anything out of the ordinary.”

“What’s ordinary in a graveyard?” I asked. “The stench of dead bodies?”

“Maybe,” Mae said.

“You guys can’t smell anything?” I asked.

“Trina thought she smelled something the other day, but it turns out it was like a dead skunk. None of us have that as our superpower.”

I glanced at her as I grabbed the handle of the car to get out. “You said this is just one of the disturbances in the cemetery. What other types of disturbances have there been?”

She shook her head, opening the car and getting out. “You don’t want to know,” she said as she shut the door.

I gulped. If I was going to be a part of dealing with this problem, that was exactly

what I was going to want to know.

Chapter 15

The cemetery was overgrown all around the gate. Whatever they were doing for the cemetery, they weren't maintaining the graves.

"Was somebody buried here recently?" I asked as we walked through the gate. I noticed to the right of the pathway there was some fresh dirt.

Mae stared briefly at the upturned earth. "No," she said tersely. "That's part of the problem. We started seeing it a few days ago. Disturbed graves."

"It's right down this pathway," she said, leading me down a path. It was covered in trees and had moss covered graves in all nooks and crannies of the glen that we walked through. The air was fresh and clear, with the scent of the moist evening. I was finally in the cemetery, the place I had thought about since I was a little kid. My blood was racing as if this was one of the places I was always meant to be in my life. I felt excitement bubbling in my bones.

"It's so beautiful here," I said with delight to Mae.

She nodded.

"Why didn't Trina and Hilda come with us?" I asked.

"No, Hilda has been pulling a lot of double shifts lately trying to find out what's making the earth move here. She needs to rest up."

"Does it just happen at night, or does it happen in the day also?" I asked.

“It only happens at night, but that’s not unusual. it’s being caused by magic. Magic is always fed by the moon and is much more common at night then in the day.”

We stepped into a glen that had green groundcover everywhere. It looked like a verdant delicate carpet under our feet. Halfway in the vale, the ground was terribly disturbed, with big piles of fresh mud slung up from holes down in the bottom. I walked up to it and looked down into the hole.

“It’s a grave,” I said, shaking my head. I looked at the claw marks on the side of the grave. “That wasn’t someone digging up a grave, that was...” My voice trailed off into the grim reality of what I was seeing in front of me.

“It came from inside the grave,” Mae finished the sentence for me.

The cold chill traveled over my back causing the hairs of my neck to stand up. A little growl emitted from the back of my throat.

“Zombies.” Dread trilled in my bones. “Of all the supernatural species and awesomeness in the world that I could be subject to, that I could experience, like unicorns maybe or Ewoks or anything, I get zombies.”

“You’re confusing science-fiction with supernatural,” Mae pointed out.

“You know what I mean, like not real.”

“Yeah, but this is real,” Mae said.

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“Yeah, I’m starting to figure that out,” I grumbled, sniffing around at the grave. “But the point is, why does it have to be zombies? I don’t want it to be zombies. I want it to be something else, anything else. Just not dead creepy things.”

“Carl’s not a dead, creepy thing,” Mae pointed out.

“I beg to differ with you,” I said. “Carl is very much a dead creepy thing. You just think he’s cute.”

“But don’t lie. You think he’s cute too,” Mae said.

“Okay, he’s a little bit cute,” I agreed. “But it’s mainly just his left ear. His left ear is super cute, like if there was just a left ear, I would like cuddle that left ear all day long.”

“I need you to smell this glen,” Mae said. “It has the freshest graves in it.”

“Do you want me to sniff out the zombie?” I asked. “Figure out where they are?”

“We know where it is,” Mae said. “It’s back in the hole.”

“Seriously? It dug the hole and then came up, didn’t do anything, and went back down the hole?” I asked looking around.

“We’ve begun to see more and more holes around the cemetery, and we just think that pretty soon, all the zombies are going to be coming out of the ground. I don’t know if the walls of the cemetery are going to hold them in or not.”

“Can I throw up now?” I said, my stomach turning in knots.

“Not until you smell the place,” Mae insisted. “We’re trying to figure out where their power is coming from.”

“You want me to smell power?” I asked grabbing a branch and pulling it toward my nose. “How does one smell for power?”

“I don’t know. Just close your eyes and try?” she suggested. “That’s all I’ve ever been doing.”

“And how is that working for you?” I asked with a slight grin. “Just kidding. I know how tough this has been.”

“Have you thought about what you’re going to tell your kid?” Mae asked me.

“No, I have not found one single thought about what I’m going to tell my son. I’m hoping to not have to tell him at all, but I guess we need to find out if he’s going to be a werewolf or not.” I muttered.

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing about my daughter. The vampires already know about her, and I need to get her out here as soon as possible to talk to her about this whole thing, and probably protect her at this stage.”

I hadn’t even thought about all of that. “Is my son in danger?”

“Eventually he could be,” Mae said.

It was too much. “I’ve got to get home. Jane’s going to be there. I’ve got to deal with one thing at a time. Let me just smell around and then I’ll let you know.”

Mae dutifully closed her mouth, and I closed my eyes, standing there in the silence. I slowly inhaled deeply through my nose, tracing each scent as it came in one nostril and out the other.

The stench of rotten corpses was ripe in the air. It reminded me of a time when I would be walking on a country road as a kid and discover roadkill that had been there for a few days. The ravens would've picked out inside its guts, but the stench would still be ripe in the air as its bloated corpse rotted in the sun. It smelled like the sweet-sour smell of three-day dead flesh.

"How old is this graveyard?" I asked.

"A hundred and fifty years old."

"How long ago did they stop burying bodies here?" I asked.

"God, I think probably just my family has been buried here, like my aunt and my grandparents, in the last fifty years." Mae turned to me a look of horror growing on her face. "My aunt. You don't think my aunt has anything to do with this?"

"I can't say if she does or she doesn't, but most of the dead in this grave should be skeletons by now if it has been more than fifty years. Even your own grandparents, it's been a few years. it's not like there's going to be a lot of fresh corpses, are there?"

"OK, so skeletons are coming out of the graves?" Mae asked.

"No, you don't get it. I'm smelling fresh dead people," I said. "Like someone who was alive a few days ago but is now dead."

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“You’re telling me you smell dead people?” Mae asked. “Couldn’t that be the skeletons?”

“It seems highly unlikely. Why would an animated skeleton create the stench of a corpse?” I looked at her and shook my head. “I really must go. But the truth is, whatever is going on in here, it’s not long dead corpses. There are fresh corpses around here somewhere that’s causing a sickly stench. Once you find the fresh corpses, you’ll find whatever it is that’s disturbing the graves.”

Chapter 16

Jane was standing on my front doorstep when I got there, looking all neat and prim and east coast in a short skirt with boots and a puffy coat lined in, what I can only assume was fake fur, but knowing Jane, well, it might be real fur. Who knew?

“Sister!” she said, throwing her arms up in the air as she got out of the car and ran forward to give me a hug.

“How are you still rocking a miniskirt at... what are you, two years older than me? You’re forty-seven years old. How are you rocking a miniskirt?” I asked. “And in the freezing weather.” I looked at my black leggings and oversize sweater. I guess we all couldn’t be Jane Lacroix.

She’d been the University star of our sorority, dating all the major sports players in college while getting straight A’s to boot. We’d both been studying liberal arts in Boston, but she had decided that she wanted to transfer into something different, so she’d transferred into urban planning. Her efforts to improve the local town where

she lived had never gotten a notice and she was covered in the media. She was one of the local big developers that everybody liked, because she fought for the little people and for the environment and for sustainable living.

It was shocking that she was out here now.

“I feel like you should’ve booked a room in the crown hotel, but I don’t even think that would be up to your standards,” I said, almost embarrassed for my hometown.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she insisted. “I’m just so happy to see you. We could be staying in a cardboard box for all I care.”

“No, you’d be freezing your ass off if you were staying in cardboard box in that outfit.”

“Good point,” she laughed. “Let’s go inside. It is a little chilly.”

“No problem.” I opened the door, allowing her in. “I’ll just get the fire started,” I said, grabbing a couple of sticks and going over to the wood burning fireplace that my grandparents had used before me.

“Oh my gosh, isn’t this just the most delightful little home I’ve ever seen in my entire life,” she said, smiling at the miniature space.

“Delightful is the realtors’ way to say tiny. I think you forgot the other word ‘cute’ in there. That kind of nailed the entire real estate way to sell this house,” I said with a grin.

“Oh, come on, it’s fantastic and you know it. Half the people in the cities across this entire country are dreaming of living in a place exactly like this. In a small town in a small house with a manageable walking distance down to the local café and the bar.

Hey, that's a good idea. Let's get the fire built and get the house warmed up and then while it's doing that, why don't we walk down to the local bar. I think I passed it on the way in. The Waldorf? Let's have a little hot toddy."

"I've got some Brandy here if you like," I said. "There's no way we're going down to the Waldorf tonight."

Jane looked over at me, her gaze perceptive. "Oh, do tell," she said, lowering her chin. "Did something go on at the Waldorf last night or the night before? Were you dancing on the tables or doing some other nefarious deed?" Her eyes got wider. "Like the bartender?"

Heat burnt up my skin as the words came out of her mouth.

"O.M.G." She emphasized each letter. "It was the bartender. You did the bartender. Oh my God, you are living the dream!"

"I-I-" words stammered from my mouth.

"For real. How old is he? You know, I've always had this fantasy of having a younger lover. I mean, Jack was great, and you know we're not really ending with animosity. Well, OK, maybe there was a little animosity. I might have slashed the tires on his car, but other than that I was good. I only did it because she got the dog and I really wanted the dog. First, she moved into my house and then she ended up with the dog, but never mind. I ended up with a lot more stuff than that. You just can't buy another dog; you know what I mean? I love that dog."

I looked at her. She was like a wind-up doll on steroids.

"I'll take you over there where I work and show you a bunch of dogs," I offered.

“That’s right. You have a dog kennel, don’t you?” Jane asked.

“I do, but I haven’t been paying enough attention to it lately,” I said.

“Because you’re doing the bartender.”

“I am not doing the bartender,” I said.

“The bus boy?” She asked curiously. “Or do they have bouncers? They probably wouldn’t have a bouncer in a town like this. A bouncer is really something only found in the city.”

Words left her mouth a mile a minute. She was so rushed and fabulous I could hardly stand it. I just wanted to soak up her energy and let it super charge me.

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“Are you hungry?” I asked, changing the subject away from bartenders and busboys and bouncers.

“Not in the slightest,” she said. “I ate in the airport before the flight, and I couldn’t eat another bite until tomorrow.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t look like you’ve eaten a bite in the last two or three months,” I said. “Where do you put anything you eat?”

“You know I’ve always had a high metabolism,” she said. “I can’t help it. I just do, you know? This is just me.”

There wasn’t an ounce of fat on her body. She was lithe and skinny and proud of it.

“You must work out?” I asked.

“I don’t do much,” she said. “I run a 5K every day, but-”

“You what?” I asked, nearly falling off my chair. “A 5K? Every day. Are you insane? I couldn’t run a 5K if my life depended on it.”

I almost said if a werewolf was chasing me, but I stopped myself.

“Oh, of course you could. It doesn’t really take that much. You just have to start doing it,” she said. “You know, I just started by running two miles in morning and then when I finished that I would, you know, get bored. So, I did the run again and well, two miles and two miles is four miles. Boom you’ve run a 5K. I’ll be running

one tomorrow morning. You can come with me if you want. It'll be great fun."

"I'll be sleeping," I said. "And you can just go and do your run. I'm sure you didn't fly all the way across the country just to go for a 5K run in the hills."

"No, I did not," she said. "I came here to deliver a warning."

"A warning?" I chuckled. "You make it sound so ominous. Is there a horse head in my bed?"

"No, not that kind of a warning," she said. "I'm not here to threaten you. It's just this isn't something that can be discussed over the phone. It's too personal."

"And clearly serious," I folded my arms and leaned back against the counter. "What got you on a plane and in a car to make it all the way here?"

"I had a premonition of your death."

Chapter 17

I woke up the next morning to the birds chirping and Jane in the living room talking to someone.

I glanced over the clock. It was eight o'clock. Who would come over at this time of day? I needed to get up and walk over to check on the animals but as I lurched out of bed I stopped as my feet hit the ground. I recognized that voice.

Matheus.

How could she be talking to Matheus? What was he doing in my living room? Obviously, he was trying to see me, but oh my gosh, he left me saying he wanted me

to take him seriously.

“I missed you,” he said to me as I walked out of my bedroom, throwing my robe over my pajamas.

“Clearly, I had houseguests,” I said. The last thing I wanted to do was admit that I had seen his messages and ignored them because I was so busy trying to figure out this whole werewolf thing. Standing there in front of Matheus and Jane, I suddenly felt very self-conscious. What was I going to do if I suddenly shifted in front of them? There was no one over here who knew what I really was. I needed Mae or Trina’s help and I needed them quick.

“Are you okay?” Jane asked me. “Your skin doesn’t look very good.”

“Can I get you some water?” Matheus asked.

“No, I’m fine,” I said, clutching my hand my throat. Maybe I could just pass it off as a flash. “Just, you know, a flash,” I said with a shrug, leaning forward, feeling like my stomach was about to hurl.

Jane stepped between me and Matheus.

“Matheus,” she said. “That is your name, right?”

“Yeah,” Matheus tried to look around Jane.

“I don’t really think Bianca is feeling very well right now, so let’s let her rest. You can come back later. I promise. But right now, I think she’s probably going to have to call in sick. Maybe you can go over to the dog kennel and feed the dogs?” she said with a smile. “That’d be great. Thanks for the help.” She showed him to the door and let him out.

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“How do you do that? How do you handle people so well?” I asked in awe of her finesse.

“Oh my goodness,” she said. “If you don’t handle him, I will. He is divine with a capital D. I am not going to stay very long, based on what you’ve got prowling around. In fact, if you need me to check into the Crown Hotel, I will go right now. I understand why you were thinking that would be the right place for me. You need this little two-bedroom place all to yourself and your love honey.”

“You did not just call him my love honey, did you?” I asked.

It was so refreshing talking to Jane. It was like having a breath of spring air and remembering what it was like to be normal again. It was like having me without all the supernatural crazy. I mean, the truth was, I kind of didn’t mind all the supernatural crazy. It was kind of fun in a way, but there was also a part of it that I didn’t know if I was quite ready for it. Although apparently the universe thought I was, or else it wouldn’t be happening. It was as if I had known about the wolf within me my whole life, but only now I was able to connect with her? I felt a burst of youthful excitement again.

“He is going to be your love honey,” Jane purred. “I can smell it on him.”

Smell.

The smell of rotting corpse suddenly came to my nose. I cringed, but it wasn’t actually happening; it was a sense memory, yet every muscle in my body was repulsed by the sickeningly sweet fetid smell of rotten corpses that was nestled in my

nasal cavity.

A flash of a symbol came to mind.

I didn't remember seeing it at the time, but the symbols on the grave were there in the memory. There was something about them. I needed to smell around a little bit more and find out what it was. I might be able to track the actual smell and find the corpses.

There was a lot of work to be done.

But then it struck me, and I remembered.

"You said I'm going to die," I said. "And you said it so convincingly last night that you actually got on a plane and flew all the way across the country. And then you wouldn't tell me any more about it."

"Everything I had to tell you, I told you last night," Jane said. "It was just a sensation, like there was you and it was dark and there was death. That's all I can tell you. It was just the smell of dead bodies, a sense of darkness, of fear, of your body decomposing and changing."

"My body changing?" I asked. Maybe she meant when I turned into a werewolf. There was a small death of my human form then. Maybe that was what she was talking about. I didn't know how to broach the subject without making it sound like I was crazy, but I was going to try. "What if it was something such as the death of a former self in metaphorical way? It's like the death tarot card we all used to do with the sorority. It just really means change, right? So, maybe-"

She cut me off fast. "This was not metaphorical. Do you think I would've flown across the country just to tell you that you were going to have a life-changing

experience? Girlfriend, that is not what I did. We're all going through menopause. We're all having a life-changing experience and no one is talking about it, but that's not what I'm here to talk about. No, you were like literally dead. D.E.A.D. Dead."

"Did Matheus have anything to do with it?" I asked, hoping against hope this wasn't the case and that he was cleared of all suspicion based on Jane's intuition.

"Oh no, he's fine, honey. Don't let anything stand between you and that hunk of toasted spice." She let out a low hum of appreciation.

"Look, based on everything you said, we've got to go." I insisted. She was going to have to meet Mae and the sooner the better. "I have to take you somewhere and introduce you to some people and you've got to tell them stuff. You can't just sit on all this information yourself."

"You're still in your pajamas," Jane pointed out. "I'm still in my sweaty workout gear, so when I shower, and you change and then we'll go and meet these new friends of yours. I can tell them about it, because ma cherie, you need friends right now. I'm sure of that."

Chapter 18

It was hard trying to fill Jane in on everything that had happened up at The Estate over the last two-hundred years. What made it easier was all the stuff I couldn't tell her. I kept it down to a bare minimum that the Hayes family had been around since the beginning of time, as far as Cougar Creek was concerned, and they had a lot of power in the area. The descendent we were meeting was now in charge and we were going to go see her and maybe her premonition of death had something to do with it. At the end of the day, I'd rather have them speak to each other rather than me being the go between.

Jane seems to take it all on her stride. As though going to somebody's house for a tonic was a normal thing to do. I guess it helped that I didn't tell her that I turned into a werewolf. That would create feedback of the not too positive kind, I was sure.

Mae, Trina, and Hilda were all in the kitchen when I arrived. The kids, Anita and Drake, were minding the bakery. Jane was immediately impressed with the way Trina was setting up all the potions on the table.

"My grandmother used to do this," she said. "She was a Creole lady who brought a whole bunch of voodoo magic from her grandmere. I remember as a child she always made me drink lots of tonics."

"Are you sure your family's Creole?" Hilda asked.

"Yes, absolutely positive, we are as mixed as blood can be." Jane grinned, clearly proud of her heritage.

"This is the woman I texted you about today," I explained. "Jane's a sorority sister of mine. She sometimes has the gift and she's been seeing me in precarious situations and...and..."

I couldn't even bring the words out.

"I saw her dying." Jane didn't seem to have the same sensitivity.

"That's pretty dire." Hilda's gaze bored into me.

“Did you find any of the dead bodies?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Mae said.

“What do you mean, dead bodies?” Jane asked.

“It’s one of the reasons why I brought you here. I was thinking that perhaps if you had the gift of the sight, you could also help us find some dead bodies.” I raised and lowered my shoulders as if I could shrug away the creepy oddness of the request.

For the first time, I saw a look of doubt cross Jane’s face. It made me nervous because she was typically very unflappable, but who wouldn’t be flappable at the thought of a dead body?

“Did you kill anyone?” she asked, including all four of us in her gaze.

“No, of course not!” I exclaimed. “At least, I didn’t.” I looked at the other three.

“I killed the locksmith,” Mae answered the question seriously.

“But he was a vampire, Bianca,” Trina said. “Doesn’t count.”

“I wish I wasn’t in a situation where I actually had to ask that question,” I pointed out.

“Me too,” Jane said. “Me too.” She shrugged herself out of her coat and put her purse on the table, moving some of the potions slightly out-of-the-way. “Now. Why do you

think that there are dead bodies around?”

“How much can we trust her?” Trina asked.

“I trust her with my life,” I said.

“How much do we trust you?” Trina asked.

“You tell me,” I said. “You’re the one who turned me into a werewolf.”

“A what?” Jane asked. Clearly that wasn’t what she was expecting to hear at all.

“I didn’t turn her into a werewolf,” Trina addressed Jane. “I accentuated some of her natural instincts of being a werewolf, nothing more.”

“You’re a werewolf and dead bodies are turning up. Is nobody else seeing the connection here between these two things?” Jane asked.

I whirled on her. “I’m not turning people into werewolf dinner. I’ve only shifted one time so far and Mae was there the entire time, so it couldn’t possibly be me.”

“If you turned into a wolf only one time and one person watching, who’s to say that you didn’t turn again when no one was there?”

“The one time I remember turning into a wolf,” I said. “I had full clarity when I was in my wolf form. So, there was no way I was out there ripping up people and eating them for sport.”

I swallowed a little bit as I heard the words come out of my mouth. There was something different though. When I was a wolf there was something, I couldn’t quite name; a hunger to tear and eat and gnaw on flesh. It was something I hadn’t told

anybody about.

My phone buzzed. “Have to get this. It’s the Sheriff,” I said.

“Bianca, where in the tar blazes are you,” Sheriff Ted asked.

“I’m at The Estate,” I replied. Why?”

I opted for the truth, knowing that I was a lousy liar. There was no point in making stories up.

“What are you doing up there?” Sheriff Ted asked. “Never mind. Look, a body turned up in the forest just outside of the cemetery gate. I want you to come and take a look.”

“What do you mean, take a look? I’m the dispatcher. I don’t go to crime scenes.” I’d seen enough of C.S.I. to not want to go near a real murder scene. “No dead bodies.”

“A dead body hasn’t turned up in Cougar Creek in forever, so you’re going to meet me there and act as my deputy.”

He hung up the phone before I could even ask for more information. He sent me a text with a pinpoint on the map showing me where I was going.

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“I think I found your dead bodies,” I said, holding up my phone to show the little red dot on the map. “The sheriff said some hikers found them a few hours ago.”

“We were concentrated at the cemetery. They already breached it,” Mae exclaimed.

“Can Jane stay with you?” I asked. “I really need to go meet with the sheriff.”

“Why don’t you take her with you? Maybe she can tell something about the crime scene that the rest of us can’t,” Mae said.

“We’ll go inside the cemetery on the other side.” Hilda confirmed with a nod.

“Everyone must be careful,” Jane warned. “I have a premonition; the killer is not far away.”

Chapter 19

The crime scene was close to the cemetery, but it took a long time to get there by the fire roads that lead the way around through the forests. The area was all state park land and regularly used by hikers going from the coastal towns, stopping off at the hot springs and then hiking through the forest toward the larger inland towns.

“You seem to have been caught up with a lot of crazy stuff lately,” Jane said as we navigated the dirt fire roads.

“I’m surprised you’re not running screaming somewhere else in the world. Anywhere but here,” I laughed. “You’re doing the opposite, though. You’re like, all in.”

“Are you kidding me?” Jane said. “This is the most fun I’ve had since I was a little kid watching my grandma do voodoo down by the bayou.”

“That didn’t really happen.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s what actually happened,” Jane said. “You don’t know everything there is to know about me.

“Well, you probably know more than you ever wanted to know about me,” I chuckled as I dropped the car down a gear to take a particularly sharp turn.

“ I think it’s very exciting and interesting. In fact, I think I might stick around a while,” Jane said.

“Let’s find out who’s killing people first before we decide whether you’re sticking around or not,” I said. “But if you do decide to hang out, I could use some help with the doggie day care.”

“That’s not the only thing you need help with,” grinned Jane with a knowing look that made me blush.

When we got to the crime scene, the sheriff was already there, but I could see why he called me in. Word had already gotten around to the locals, and they were starting to gather around the site to find out more about what had happened.

“You need me for crowd control, don’t you?” I asked the sheriff.

He turned to me, looking like a Santa Claus in Khaki green with his bushy white beard and rosy red cheeks.

“Yes, I do,” Sheriff Ted glanced at the burgeoning crowd.

I turned to Jane as I made my way to the sheriff's car to get the crime scene tape. "Walk around the side and see if you can get any insights into what actually happened here. We need to know if it's supernatural forces causing these dead bodies or if it's something else."

"Ten four," Jane gave me a salute. "Oh, I feel so James Bondish."

"James Bond was an international spy," I said. "We're probably just researching a hunting accident."

But as I turned the corner to look at the crime scene, I realized I was wrong. Horribly, horribly wrong.

"Oh, mon Dieu," Jane said in a hushed voice.

The path led around the bend in the creek where there was a clearing with a large oak tree. The bodies of two people were strewn all around the glen. Torn limb to limb, their bloody carcasses created macabre decoration in the foliage.

"I don't think this was a hunting accident," Jane leaned over and whispered to me.

"What, did you use all of your psychic powers to determine that?" Was all I could stammer out.

"There's no need to get snappy with me," Jane said. "This is not something I come across every day."

“Me neither.”

I walked up next to the sheriff, who was standing there, looking grimly at the scene in front of him. “We need to get photographs of all this. I need you to get me some specialists asap.”

I thought I was going to hurl.

“They are supernatural beings,” Jane whispered, as I moved by her placing tape around the crime scene.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I can sense it. Also, they wear necklaces that hide their true form. Whoever killed them wanted us to know that they were dead but didn’t want anyone else to know what they were.”

“They are harpies,” Matheus said quietly coming up behind us, his face etched with grim lines.

“Harpies?” I wasn’t sure what shocked me more. The fact they were supernatural beasts or that Matheus knew this information. If he knew...what was he?

“They live down by the seaside.” Matheus moved over to the sheriff. “You should go out there and have a talk to some of the colonies of people that live out in the trailer parks. That’s where these people are from.”

“How do you know?” Ted looked suspiciously at Matheus.

“I work at the Waldorf,” Matheus cocked an eyebrow at the sheriff.

“Do you recognize these people specifically?”

Matheus frowned, looking around the bloody scene. “I see a lot of people at the bar, Sheriff.”

“Is there any way this could be an animal attack?” I asked as I reviewed the position of the torn limbs, clothes still on the bodies.

“Look at this.” The sheriff pointed to the forehead of one of the decapitated heads. “There are symbols carved in the flesh of both of these bodies.”

I watched for hours as crime scene specialists from the nearby town photographed the scene, took measurements, fingerprints, and look for microscopic evidence.

Time passed slowly and throughout it, the sickening stench of blood and slowly rotting corpses filled the air. I had heard a story about how harpies were the Watchers at the cemetery. I didn’t have any idea why someone would kill one, though. Much less, two.

Jane, for her part, walked all around the area, but she didn’t provide me with anymore insight.

“It’s all very dark, as if there is a smudge in the memory of the space. Normally there’s an imprint of what happened in a space, but in this case, it’s like nothing happened here. It’s all black and then all of a sudden they’re dead and strewn around the glen.”

I looked closely at the symbol on the chests and foreheads for a long time, but it wasn't until the coroner was just about to zip up the body bags that I suddenly realized I had seen the symbols before, imprinted in the dirt on the ground near where I'd been the day before in the cemetery.

I had to go back in the cemetery and make sure, but just as I was letting Ted know that I was going to have to go, Matheus moved next to me.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked, putting an arm around my shoulder.

"Yeah," I lied, so grateful for his strong arms around me, holding me up. To be honest, it felt like everything was crumbling down around me. On top of being a werewolf and on top of liking a guy who was much too young for me, now there were dead bodies. My body shook against his as he rubbed my shoulders.

"It's going to be alright."

"You don't know." I breathed in his scent of pine needles and wildflowers. Being near him drew wild spirals in my head and made me want to lose myself in him. "It's just something people say."

"No, that's not the energy to have around us," he said. "Let it go a bit. Here, I'm going to do something for you."

He turned to Jane.

"Can you stay and help her with the doggie daycare?" he asked.

"You can't ask her to help me." I made to push him away, but his hands were firmly holding my waist.

“It would be my pleasure.” Jane said. “In fact, I’m going to move into the loft above the warehouse for my stay here if that is alright with you?” The lovely Creole nodded towards me.

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“Really?” I asked. “You want to stay and help out?”

“I wouldn’t dream of having it any other way.” Jane grinned.

“Did you just get me a week off from work?” I looked up at Matheus, every muscle in my body wanting to stand on my tip toes and kiss him.

“You’re going to have to work on the murder,” Matheus said, “but not tonight.” He waved over to Ted. “Sheriff, Bianca’s had a shock seeing all this. Now that the coroner’s office is here and everything’s getting buttoned up, she’s going to take the night off. She’ll come in and help you tomorrow morning with more of the case. Does that work?”

“Of course.” Sheriff Ted frowned at me as I pulled myself out of Matheus’s arms. I was grateful Matheus was asking for me. “She’s going to need some time to recover. You get her home now and take good care of her.”

Jane winked at me and took me under her arm. “Love you. I’m just going to finish up here and then I’ll take your car back to The Estate and meet up with Mae if that works for you.”

“I think that’ll work just fine,” I grabbed the helmet that Matheus offered and slid onto the back of his motorcycle, wrapping my thighs tightly around his to make sure I didn’t fall off onto the uneven road.

I never expected to be perched on the back of Matheus's motorcycle, clinging to his waist while he drove out of the forest. At first, I thought he was just going to take me home, but once we hit the paved road it became clear he was heading towards the coast.

The bodies. The bits of bodies. I opened my eyes wide taking in the greenery and trying to wipe out the taint of blood that was on everything I looked at. I would possibly never get the images out of my head. You can't unsee dead bodies.

"Where are we going?" I yelled over the wind.

"Harpies." Matheus's single word floated to me, and I was left wondering again who he really was and what he knew.

I hadn't thought much about it when he said he knew the victims, but now we were headed down to the seaside to a trailer park and I was with somebody I didn't really know. He was a local, but how local was he? He'd only been here for five years, and we'd just left dead bodies of people he said he knew.

I sucked in my lower lip. Jane had seen me dead. She hadn't mentioned how she'd see me die. She didn't say if I was murdered or if I'd died in a motorcycle accident, but she hadn't seemed particularly worried when I said I'd was going with Matheus to check something out. She had just kind of shrugged it off like it was no big deal. Truth be told, I didn't think there was any way Matheus could be a murderer . I mean, how many bad guys bring you coffee and pastries first thing in the morning and were as sweet as he was?

There was no way, but it was more than that. Every psychopath could do the right thing at some point and then turn around and cold bloodedly murder somebody, but I had a feeling about Matheus. I had a sense about him that he wasn't that guy. That he was someone who was meant to be in my life. He was going to mean something to

me, and, truth be told, that was the thing I was the most afraid of.

My problem wasn't me not taking him seriously. I could take him seriously all day and all night, but my fear was that he wouldn't take me seriously. I was forty-five. What if he wanted to get married and have kids? He was totally young enough to do that and I was way past kid wanting years. Even though I could probably still have one, I would not want to go back and raise kids again.

I leaned my head on his back, watching the Oregon ranches zip by. If it wasn't for my life being so crazy right now, this could be a perfect moment. The gold light reflected off deep verdant fields created a scenic backdrop. The heat from his body radiated through me. There was a dampness between my thighs just thinking about what he would be like naked and in bed. He'd asked me not to think about him like that but to take him seriously. It was hard not to, but I wanted to respect his opinions, his needs, his feelings. I wanted to take him seriously. I had to at least try.

The ride ended before I'd come close to sorting my mixed emotions out. The minute we stopped, I slid off the back of the motorcycle, took off my helmet, and looked around. We were in one of those rundown trailer parks right by the edge of the coast. A place where I had never thought in a million years I would visit.

"Remind me why we aren't waiting for Ted to come and handle this business?" I asked.

"This wasn't some normal killing."

"We don't even know what happened," I pointed out.

"This was some ritual event," Matheus said. "It looks like the bodies were pulled apart by an animal, but the symbols say something different."

“Okay, but why are we here? This isn’t our job.” I was feeling completely queasy at the thought of watching someone discover their beloved family members was irrevocably dead.

“These guys come to my bar regularly. It’ll be easier coming from me than the sheriff.”

I took a sideways glance at Matheus. He was a man of power. He was generous and kind and very sensitive, but he knew who he was. He was one of those quiet guys who was comfortable in himself. He was super interesting.

“You know the families?” I asked.

Matheus gave a singular nod. “Yeah, I know them. They’re going to want to hear it from somebody they deem as friendly. They’re not going to want to hear this type of news from the authorities.”

“Were they caught up in some sort of, you know, ritual black magic kind of stuff?”

Matheus shrugged. “I wouldn’t necessarily call it black magic, but they definitely have their own power that they like to do that isn’t mainstream. Basically, we need to get in before the police do.”

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“How do you know this? I thought you were a rambling man and just ended up settling down here for no reason whatsoever.”

“Before I came to Cougar Creek and before I started wandering around America, I was in the military,” Matheus said.

I wasn’t surprised. The neat look, ridiculously musclebound, fitness focused. It didn’t surprise me one bit.

“You know these people from the military?”

“Something like that.”

Whatever his relationship was with them in the military didn’t seem to translate that well. A row of tall, skinny black-haired people came walking toward us.

“Good Lord, are they all related?” I asked.

“Not really, but kind of,” Matheus said. “They’re all connected. The families go back a long time. They’ve all lived in this region for generations.”

“They aren’t trash,” Matheus said sternly. I liked his response.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” It was impossible to convey my embarrassment, but an apology was a start.

“Gordy,” he said, walking up to the woman who stood at the center of the group. “I

have some bad news for you. Two of your own are dead. Looks like a ritual killing outside the cemetery.”

The woman stood tall, her face still. Not a single emotion showed on her face, not a single weakness, nothing. She just stared at him.

“Who did it?”

“Nobody knows. Sheriff Ted is obviously doing his due diligence and has called in the coroner’s office. He might call in the FBI special crimes unit, but if we can produce the murderer, it will stop a lot of the problems before they start. The last thing we need is a lot of people nosing around our business.”

I looked sideways at Matheus. “In your business?” Suddenly the burly man wasn’t seeming so goody two shoes. Not that I knew how not goody two shoes he was. Not yet, anyway.

“I care for the community.”

“Do you have something to do with those two people dying?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Absolutely not,” Matheus said. “I just recognized the symbols. They were the same symbols they carved on me when I was taken prisoner in the war.”

“Prisoner of war?” I asked. “Which war?”

He stared at me blankly. “For our kind there is only one war in recent history. The Legendii war is what separated the demigods from the Fae.”

“And the rest of us just got shuffled along at their discretion,” Gordy nodded. “This isn’t a safe place to talk. If you want to talk to us, we need to go inside.” She

motioned her way to the nearest house trailer, with pink flamingos stuck in the ground outside, their little plastic wings whirling in the wind. I'd never seen anything so kitsch in all my life.

Matheus walked in like it was a normal to be invited into a supernatural's house. Who was I to judge? I lived in a two-bedroom, one bath cottage. Some of these places were probably better decked out than mine.

I followed him quietly up the patio stairs.

Chapter 21

When we got inside the house, Matheus went immediately to the yellow dining room table and sat down as if he'd been here before. I glanced around the inside of the trailer. It was a doublewide. It wasn't small, but there was no place to sit close enough to be part of the conversation he was having. I made my way into the living room and sat down comfortably on the worn black leather sofa that was there that clashed dramatically with the brown and orange shag rug that lay across the floor. Three young people came in and perched all around me. They looked to be in their late teens, early twenties. They stared at me like I was an oddity.

"I'm sorry for your loss." I broke the silence. "My name's Bianca. I'm a friend."

The girl to my right nodded, her head bouncing rhythmically in a motion the others repeated. "I'm Enid," she said. "Sad day when we lose our own people, and under such vile circumstances."

"Do you think you might recognize any of the symbols we found at the site?" I couldn't bear to tell them the symbols were carved in the flesh on their bodies. "We need to find out who the symbols are connected to, to know who killed them

“Do you have drawings of them?” Enid asked.

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I shook my head. "Photographs on his phone," I said nodding towards Matheus. "On his phone. I understand if you don't want to look at them. But it's the nearest thing we have, and the fastest way will be able to show you."

"It's okay. I can see them," she said.

I pulled up the pictures that were just the close-ups of the chest, hoping that would at least make it a little less shocking. She looked at them a moment in the fading afternoon light, her stare impassive. Too impassive. It was the look of somebody who didn't want me to know what they were thinking or feeling. She was carefully controlling every inch of her face, making it expressionless. No doubt, no uncertainty, no recognition, just a bland apathy that made it impossible to read.

"You know what these are." I played a hunch.

I caught her off guard a bit. She looked ruffled as she turned and looked at the teen to her right.

"We want to help," I said. "We understand you've lost two of your family members today and we just want to find the person who did it. We can't do it without your help."

"Shouldn't they be taking us down to the police station for questioning then or something like that?" Gordy asked stepping into the living room.

"No," Matheus said. "We aren't here with the police,"

“She works at the sheriff’s office.” Gordy pointed at me.

“How could you possibly know that?” I asked.

They all stared at me like I was a complete idiot.

“Just because you don’t remember seeing us,” Gordy said, “doesn’t mean we don’t remember seeing you in the cop shop.”

“Look, I’m terribly sorry.” My skin flushed with embarrassment. “Names were never my thing. My name is Bianca. I work at the sheriffs as a dispatcher, but I only work part time on some nights. I’m sorry I don’t remember you. We really are here trying to help you find out who did this to your family. Is there anything you can tell us about the symbols?”

My words seem to mollify the woman and she took a deep breath. “The boy who died is my nephew and the girl is his girlfriend.”

“Do you know anyone who could’ve done this?” I asked.

Gordy shook her head, rubbing her arms around her shoulders. “No idea whatsoever,” she said.

I glanced at Matheus, who was talking animatedly to one of the older harpies as he left the kitchen and made his way out of the trailer. Clearly, he was getting the information I was not.

“Thank you,” I said. “I think we’re done here.”

I said my goodbye to the teens and followed Matheus, who seemed to be holding court outside with a group of the harpies from the trailer park.

Silence descended on the group as I walked up. Matheus put his arm around me, but I didn't mind. He was affectionate and after everything I'd been through, I could use a little warmth.

"Thank you for the information," Matheus said. "We'll be going on our way."

I didn't say a word until we were walking back toward the bike. But I couldn't stop myself. "What information? They haven't told us anything."

"They didn't tell you anything, but it doesn't mean they didn't tell me something." Matheus chuckled.

"What did you find out?" I asked in a hushed tone as we pulled on our helmets.

"The last place anyone from here knows of those two going was to The Estate. Your new friend Mae is going to be the number one suspect in this case, I imagine."

Chapter 22

"Where are we going, now?" I yelled over the wind as we missed the turn off to Cougar Creek. I wasn't nervous of Matheus anymore. I just had a lot going on in my head, and it was probably time to go home.

"My place," he yelled back in response. "I've got something I want to show you."

I could only imagine what that was, but maybe I was just being hopeful. I shook my head. The last thing I imagined this guy was going to be doing right now was planning for an afternoon rendezvous at his house. Not when he had been all Mr. Serious.

Everything felt crazy with me turning into a werewolf and dead bodies showing up.

At least we knew that I was not responsible those dead bodies. There was no way I would've mauled humans and written symbols on them.

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Matheus lived in a converted small barn on somebody's back road ranch on the outskirts of Cougar Creek, which basically meant he lived absolutely ground zero in the middle of nowhere. I didn't mind. it was nice to ride down the flat curving roads that ran out amongst the ranches. I had always loved this part of the region, where the farms melted into the hills before they ran into the sea. It felt like the world was created with a fluid motion of a loving, abundant creator's hand.

It turned out Matheus's converted barn was on the old Smalley ranch. The Smalley's had moved off the property when I had been in my twenties, and they'd sold to a young city couple who had decided they wanted to try taking up ranching and raising their kids in the country. They had taken some of the smaller houses and parts of barns and converted them into rental units. It was clever. It supplemented their income, so they didn't have to work so much for their mortgage.

I had known all that in principle, because of course I heard things around town, but what I didn't know was that Matheus, my favorite bartender and all of Cougar Creek's, was living out there.

We dismounted the bike and he bent over and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. It was quite charming, but I was a little confused. "What's going on?"

"Well, I know things have been a little crazy lately for you and I just wanted to make sure you knew that I'm still digging you."

My skin burned bright red. I wanted to tell him I was still digging him too, but how obvious was that? I mean, who wouldn't dig him? So instead, I just sort of turned away. "Is this your place?" I changed the subject.

“Yeah, I rent it from the Beckwiths.”

“That’s the name of the family that bought this place?” I asked. Their kids had been just ahead of Dante in school. He hadn’t liked them very much, but I’d put that mostly down to childhood politics.

“Yeah, they’re an older couple,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. I couldn’t help it. “They’re a little older than me.”

“They have grandkids.” He ran his hand through his hair, shaking his head. “You can’t catch me out with your age-related hang ups. I’m not buying it.”

“You like kids. You want them?”

“Maybe I already have some.” He grinned at me, folding his arms over his chest.

My eyes opened wide. I had not expected that response. “Do you?”

“A man never knows for sure.” His smile didn’t budge an inch.

What was I doing? He was baiting me, and I was buying it hook, line, and sinker. I needed to back slowly away from the hot mess this guy was going to make me. Cancel that. I needed to run screaming from him.

“I won’t keep you long. I just want to show you something.” He walked around the bike and led me toward the small barn that had been converted into his living quarters. He pushed his weight against the barn door. It slid open revealing an open plan living area with a small staircase leading up the side, to what looked like a sleeping quarters loft area above. He closed the door, leaving us inside the dimly lit modernized barn.

He stood looking at me.

“You’re special,” he said.

“Why are we here?” I asked, trying not to feel awkward, but the truth was, I was starting to. It wasn’t because I was alone with a man in his private quarters. It was because I was alone with him, and even though I shouldn’t think about him like this...I did.

I wanted him.

There was probably very little he was going to do or say that was going to stop me from having those feelings about him.

“Now this is going to come as a shock to you. I’m not trying to freak you out. I told you the other day I wanted you to take me seriously, but then I realized there’s all this stuff about me I’m not telling you. I thought it would be good for me to show you who I am. Maybe that will help you take me seriously.”

“Why do we have to take everything seriously?” I asked. “Didn’t we just have something serious happen today? I think that’s enough seriousness for one day.”

“You don’t understand. I want to protect you. I want to help you because I know things are going crazy right now. There’s no way I can do what I need to do without you knowing everything about who I am.” He reached down, grabbed the shirt around his waist and pulled it up, revealing the most perfect set of abs I had ever seen in my entire life, topped with bulging pecs and flexing biceps.

“Oh, for God’s sake man, would you put your shirt back on?” I said in exasperation. “You want me to take you seriously and you take your shirt off? That’s just not fair. It’s basically illegal.”

I turned my back to him as I heard a zipper fly down. Had he undone his pants?

“Not fair,” I said. “I think this is straight up cheating.”

“Turn around,” he said. His voice was low and commanding, compelling me to do as he asked. I turned around to face him, and my jaw dropped.

“No way,” I said, my voice low in shock.

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“It’s who I am,” he said, standing there, his hands to his sides, letting me look at him in all his glory. I’d seen naked men before. Not a lot, but enough. However, I had never seen anything like Matheus.

“You’re a satyr,” I said in a hushed tone.

“I’m impressed you know the name. Not everybody knows what we are called.”

I kept my eyes up because his thing was hanging out and, oh my gosh, what was he saying?

“You might want to cover that up if you want me to take you seriously, because there’s only one thing I can think about when you’re naked like that.” He stood before me magnificent with goat legs and small horns protruding from the top of his head. But there was one thing that grabbed my attention the most. I waved my hand towards his very large member that was pointed straight at me. I didn’t care what he was, I wanted him, and I wanted him even more now. I wanted to run my hands up his furry legs and feel his head and grab his manhood and feel its girth in my hand. “But how do you...how do you... You don’t look like that when you’re wearing jeans.”

“No,” he said with a laugh. “We have a special kind of magic.” He reached around his neck and took hold of a small pipe that I had never noticed before hanging on a necklace. At least when I’d seen it, I had thought it was just a charm. He pressed his lips against it, making a high-pitched whistle which was barely audible. Before my eyes, his body changed. He was standing there fully naked as a man.

“Oh, come on. That is just unfair,” I said. His cock was pointing skyward, just begging for me to touch it.

He was moved toward me faster than my brain could process . “Can you take me seriously now that you know what I am?”

“Yes,” I murmured, my skin flushing a hot red, my hands hanging awkwardly at my side.

“I see it in you, too. I know you’re from our world, and I know you don’t know anything about it. I can help you,” Matheus said, his hands gripping my shoulders. “I can help you understand what’s happening with Trina, Mae, and Hilda.

“Can we not talk about any of them right now?” I asked. “There is nothing more that I want than this, spending time alone with you.”

He reached forward wrapping his arms around me and lifting me toward him. His lips pressed against mine as his manhood pushed into my midriff, causing instant dampness between my thighs. His tongue explored my mouth, slowly savoring my tongue as he palmed my breasts.

“You have been growing into a woman,” he murmured against my neck.

“What do you mean?” I dipped my head back as his lips ran a trail of moisture along every nerve ending in my neck.

“I’ve been watching you since I got here, waiting for you to bloom as only a woman in midlife can do,” His words were soft and gentle against my skin, warmth and tenderness alive in every syllable.

“Why would you be watching me?” I still didn’t get it.

“I’ve wanted you since you first walked in my bar,” he said. “You’re the reason I’ve stuck around so long.”

He deftly lifted my shift over my head and unsnapped my bra. My breasts fell forward into his waiting hands. He lifted them to his mouth, catching first one in his mouth and then the other, dancing softly between the two and creating a thrilling twin line of excitement straight to my core.

I moaned against him. “Why would you wait so long for me?”

“Some things... some people, are worth waiting for,” he murmured, pulling my nipple into his mouth and rolling it around on his tongue causing me to arch my back digging my nails into his shoulders.

“How did you know it would be like this?” I drew my breath in sharply.

“You are a beastial, like me,” he said. “We can recognize each other, but you and I are connected on a much deeper level. You are mine.” He stood up, taking my hand directing it to his hard, huge cock which I could feel throbbing in my grasp.

A groan escaped my lips as I tightened my hold and slid my other hand forward until I was pinching the skin of his balls just tight enough to feel him wince as he thrust his hips forward.

“I want you.” I slid to my knees, not about to let his glorious feast of a cock slide by me without wetting it with my lips. I adored the bluntness of his tip as it pressed against my lips. I opened them slightly, letting my tongue slip out and moisten him. His groan made me smile as I opened wider letting him slide in until it pushed against the back of my throat.

“Good God, woman.” Matheus hands gripped my hair, and he pulled his hips back,

leaving drops of his heat in my mouth. He only waited a second before his hips slid forward and I opened my mouth wide, wanting to take as much of him as I could. Then he pulled back. I rode his rhythm, the whole time one hand was twisting and pinching on his balls whilst the other was caressing the remaining amount of him that couldn't accommodate, moisture flooding my thighs as I listened to him groan with arousal. "I want you. I want you. I want you." The words came out of his mouth like an ancient chant from the depths of his being. He pulled back, removing himself from my mouth. I felt bereft but he positioned himself quickly on top of me, laying me back against the floor. Neither of us cared about the hard wood beneath us as he positioned his massive manhood above me.

I leaned up for one last lick before I lay backwards letting him spread my legs wide. "Mine. Mine. Mine." He held his cock in one hand and rubbed the blunt tip of it against my sex until I was moaning and grasping at his ass trying to pull him towards me.

I needed him inside me with an urgency that built painfully, I needed him to fuck me into oblivion. Now!

I dug my fingernails into his ass, pulling him towards me, my hips lifted up to feel him thrust deep in one swift movement pausing only briefly to allow my body to adjust whilst a feeling of completeness overwhelmed my senses. I bucked as he pressed deep into me, but he didn't relent setting a pace that was brutally demanding. He drove me into submission, thrusting forward again and again. My ecstatic screams must have startled anyone within a mile radius as he leaned down and bit my neck with a final powerful thrust his heat flooded inside me. I was in sensual overdrive as every nerve in my body exploded with pleasure making my toes curl with the most forceful climax I had ever felt.

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I sat bolt upright from a sound sleep as the sun was setting through the window. I was lying alone in Matheus's massive bed where we had luxuriated the afternoon away, making love until I had fallen asleep.

From the smell of pancakes and rattling of pots and pans I could tell Matheus was in the kitchen cooking something.

"I have to check on the dogs." I muttered to myself. Not just them but I needed to check in with Sheriff Ted, with Jane, with Mae. I suddenly felt completely overwhelmed. I had abandoned my entire responsibilities for the day and instead spent it in bed with a man.

No. A half-man. He was a satyr.

I couldn't even begin to describe how incredibly sexy it was. His arousal in the bedroom made my knees weak just thinking about it.

I wrapped a sheet around myself and made my way towards the kitchen area. "You should never have let me fall asleep."

"I assumed you needed the rest." Matheus looked up from the salad he was making to give me a smile that made me blush. It was an intimate smile. A smile that said he knew what I sounded like when I had an orgasm. I smiled back.

"Just because someone is asleep does not mean they should be asleep," I said. "Didn't you pick me up from a crime scene where I have friends? Don't you think I should be with them right now?"

“Last time I checked they were fully grown women and can pretty much handle themselves,” he said.

“Did you ever think maybe I am one too?”

He gave me a grunt and moved over to kiss me on the cheek. “No, because you’re mine, and my woman requires being taken care of by me.”

I took a deep breath, not sure how I felt about that. There was something incredibly sexy about being called his woman and I wanted to fall into that, but then there was a whole other part of me that was like ‘wait a minute, I’m forty-five years old.’ I’d been a woman on my own for the last twenty years and I didn’t need any man telling me what to do or helping me do things.

He stood there; his arms folded over his chest.

“Done processing all that now?” he asked with a smile.

“Not even close,” I said.

“Well, you go and get that processed and I’ll just keep making you something to eat,”

“I don’t have time to eat. That’s what I keep telling you.” I wasn’t sure if I was more exasperated or charmed. Probably more frustrated. I couldn’t just spend all afternoon with him having him take care of me. “I have to go and check on my friends.”

“Your friends are not more important than you having a healthy nutritional start to the evening,” Matheus said with a grin, placing a salad with little strips of grilled chicken on the table for me.

“You made this?”

He looked at me then rolled his eyes. “It’s just a salad. I am not thirteen. I know how to be a man.”

“Men have changed so much since I was dating men your age.”

“You’re still dating me irrespective of my age,” Matheus said. “I insist.”

I shook my head at him. “Are you sure you really want to date somebody my age?”

“I don’t care how old you are,” he said. “You’re amazing. You raised your kid on your own, you worked two jobs, you stayed in one place your whole life.”

“No, I traveled with my husband years ago,” I said. “Just to be clear, but it wasn’t for me.”

“Cougar Creek was for you,” he said.

“That’s why I’m sure we’re so much alike, because I feel the same way about Cougar Creek.”

Matheus pulled me towards him and gave me a cuddle. “I have a good feeling about us.”

The way he said that, his positivity and excitement, made me so nervous. I’d never been that great in relationships though I only had my ex-husband for comparison.

“You don’t have a girlfriend around here? I asked. “Do you?”

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“No,” he said. “I’ve never dated a human woman.”

“You know I’m a werewolf?”

“Yes.” He nodded as if it was a normal conversation. “Who do you normally date?”

“I don’t date much.” I bit my lower lip and sucked it in. He was a satyr. They were renowned for their sexual appetite. “Do you mean to tell me you’re not trying to find a nymph? Isn’t that what satyrs go for?”

He stopped cleaning the dishes and fixed me with a gaze that was unflappable. “I do not spend my time chasing after nymphs. I haven’t done that since I was young.”

“Exactly how old are you?” I asked.

“I’m not that old,” he said with a grin. “I was born right at the end of World War I.”

My jaw dropped open. “World War I,” I said, quickly doing the math and ended up with 1918. “If you were born even in 1920... Oh my God, you’re like a hundred years old?”

“Yup,” he said. “But age is just a number. I try not to think about it. “

“How can you say age is just a number when you are like fifty years older than me. More than fifty years older than me. You’re like, old.”

He looked at me with amusement.

“I didn’t hold your age against you when you thought I was... How old did you think I was? Like thirty?”

“This is going to take me a little bit of time to get used to,” I said, taking a bite of the salad. “And I really do need to get back to my responsibilities. My business doesn’t run itself.”

“Just understand that moving forward, Bianca, I would like you to be my girlfriend?”

“Did you seriously just ask me if I will be your girlfriend?” I asked. “That’s got to be one of the most adorable things I’ve ever heard in my entire life.”

I had been around too long. I knew how these things worked and they don’t always end well. They often ended with a lot of tears and miscommunication. With everything the way, it was, I wasn’t ready for that right now.

He looked at me hopefully, smiling like a sweetheart. How could I say no? I was just not ready right now. I needed some time to think about it. A lot of changes had happened in my life recently and I needed to get a handle on them before I committed to anything else.

“It’s not as simple as being your girlfriend. It’s not that easy for me.”

“What are you afraid of?” he asked. “Or is it that you don’t like me?”

I didn’t like him? This god-like creature had been alive over a hundred years and he was asking such sweet things?

“Of course, I like you. I like you a lot. It’s just so overwhelming and commitment scares me. “I’m going to give you some time to think about it, but don’t think I will be dormant and quiet during that time,” he said. “I am going to win you over so that

you won't be able to think about anything else other than the joy you feel being my girlfriend." He gave me such a dashing smile; it was impossible not to understand his meaning. I couldn't quite my finger on what was troubling me. I was going to have to ask Jane about this. Maybe she had some premonition about whether this was going to end in tears or be a good match. I liked to pretend I had a good idea of how to handle any given situation, but I had grown to realize there were a lot of things I knew nothing about. All I wanted to do was run and hide from this gorgeous man who wanted so much to be my boyfriend.

"I'm just going to take a quick shower before I head out," I said, finishing the food he'd placed in front of me. The last thing I needed to do was show up to see Jane and Mae smelling like a hot afternoon of sex.

I went to the bathroom and stripped down, looking at my body. So much had happened to it in the short time since I had rekindled my friendship with Mae. Apparently now it could transform into a wolf and whatever it did when Matheus was making love to me, well, that was just out of this world. NI looked at myself naked in the mirror, curious at how this middle-age curvy body could transform into a gigantic red wolf.

I stepped into the steaming shower, feeling the water pounding against my body. It felt so good as I'd forgotten to take a shower since I'd first transformed into a wolf. I scrubbed all my bits, enjoying the man scent of Matheus's body wash and shampoo.

Standing in the shower, I suddenly felt that ache in my bones that I'd had the night before. They whined and groaned as they rubbed against each other as I started to transform.

Oh. Em. Gee.

I was going to transform into a wolf.

Right here in the shower.

In Matheus's house.

This time it was worse. The pain was greater, the feelings were completely uncontrolled and they surged through my body, blocking me out until there was nothing except for darkness and the searing pain of the transformation.

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The last thing I heard was a howl erupting from my lips as I came crashing out of the shower.

Chapter 24

“Bianca, Bianca, wake up,” Jane’s French accent lured me out of the aching darkness.

I opened my eyes, groaning. My head was a splitting mass of nerve endings. I was in my room. In my house. Somehow Jane was with me.

“Wolf,” I said, reaching down to feel if I had any clothes on.

“I’ll get Mae,” Jane said. “She is here too.”

I didn’t know how much Mae was going to help. The last thing I remembered was being in Matheus’s shower and now here I was in my own bed.

I held up my fingernails. They were raggedy and broken and covered in dirt. There was a bitter taste of copper in my mouth.

I didn’t know what happened while I was a wolf, but I had a sickening feeling in my stomach that I didn’t want to know.

“Matheus is a satyr,” I blurted out as Mae walked into the room.

“Yeah, he’s in the books as being a local resident,” Mae nodded.

“You don’t think you should have told me something like that?”

Mae shrugged. “Most supernaturals keep to themselves or only socialize with supernaturals. I didn’t really think it would be an issue until you know, well, until Matheus showed interest in you.”

“Where is he?” I asked, panic edging at my voice.

Mae and Jane exchanged a look. “You showed up in the middle of the night,” Mae said.

“I need to call Matheus,” I said, grabbing my phone and quickly texting him.

Where are you?

There was no answer. I stared at my phone for another minute. Still no answer.

“Can we go over the Waldorf?” I asked. “I want to see if he’s working.”

“Yeah, we can go and look for him, but we also have to figure out what to do about the dead harpies,” Mae said.

“My concern is not with the people who are already dead,” Jane answered, shifting her eyes toward me. “My concern is with those who may be dying soon.”

“Quit pointing at me and saying I’m going to die soon,” I said. “It’s hard enough being in my forties and not thinking about that anyhow.”

“Sorry,” Jane said, pursing her lips.

“We went down and saw the harpies yesterday,” I said. “I didn’t know what they

were, but Matheus knew them. He knew the two who had been killed. The harpies didn't recognize the symbols that were drawn on their chests at all."

"We need to get the photos of the symbols on the chests again." Mae said.

"I have those." I quickly texted the image to her.

"We still can't answer the question as to why they were killed." Jane said. "They were murdered in such a horrific manner."

I felt a sickening feeling in my stomach as I glanced at my phone again. Where was Matheus?

I jumped out of bed and pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. "Let's just go down to the Waldorf and see if they've heard from Matheus." Nerves made my hands clammy. Why couldn't I remember what I did in my werewolf form last night?

Maybe something had happened. Maybe, maybe...I'd killed them.

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It was a short walk down to the Waldorf but with every step closer that we took, I felt more nervous. I was pretty sure Matheus was not going to be there.

I was right. The grumpy old owner, Heath, was behind the bar. His grizzled mane of gray hair and beard made him look like Neptune rising out of the ocean.

“He didn’t show up for work today,” Heath said.

“Is that normal?” Mae asked.

“Not in the slightest,” Heath said. “That guy is here every day on time, washed, cleaned, and ready to go. He is nothing if not consistent. The bastard’s almost always in a good mood, too. He’s really fucking annoying.”

“We have to go by his house,” I said. “Something’s wrong with him. Where did you guys find me?”

“I heard you come in at about midnight,” Jane said.” I thought you’d been having a night with Matheus, so I figured I just make myself at home until you showed up. When you got home, you went straight to bed and shut the door. I didn’t see you until this morning covered in dirt and blood.” She paused. “I’ll drive.”

Jane had rented a convertible mustang. She dropped the top and the three of us jumped in and cruised the back roads to Matheus’s house. I was nervous, but at least the wind in my hair kept my complete terror at bay for a few more minutes.

What if we went there and found him dead? It was a resounding thought that I didn’t

dare to share with anybody. There was no way in hell I was going to set the stage.

I needed to see what condition he was in and then I'd know what I had done. If I had come home covered in dirt and blood, I had definitely done something last night.

Matheus's place was deadly quiet. My nerves were on fire as I knocked on the barn door and it slid open under my touch. I walked into the house. I sniffed the air, but I didn't see much. The shower door was shattered and there was blood on the floor, where clearly, I had cut myself with the glass. In the living room there were signs of a struggle of some sort and more blood.

"Can you smell anything?" Mae asked.

I sniffed the air, my heart racing. Something was wrong. It smelled of me and Matheus and sex and blood, but there were so many other smells inside the room it was impossible to trace just one. Matheus's scent was everywhere. There was no telling when he had touched the door or where he had gone. But one thing was for sure. There had been an incident here and he was nowhere to be seen.

"If I'd eaten him, there be more blood, right?" I asked.

"If you had eaten him, your belly would be out to here," Jane said. "Relax, girl. You didn't eat your boyfriend."

"The only problem is, we don't know where he is," Mae said. "The last thing we want is to end up like the two harpies we found in the forest."

My heart clutched in fear. Where was Matheus?

Chapter 25

“His motorcycle’s gone too,” I said, standing out in the gravel area outside his barn.

“Maybe he just went for a ride,” Jane suggested.

“Right after seeing me bound out looking like a werewolf and bleeding and maybe taking a few bites out of him? No doubt he went to get his bike.”

“He might’ve gone to get back up,” Mae said. “I was reading the other day that the satyrs tend to run in gangs and work in group operations.”

“Great, that’s just the thing we have to worry about. An invasion of satyrs into Cougar Creek.” I murmured.

“I don’t know. It sounds like it might be a good time now?” Jane asked. “You can’t argue with the need for back up at the moment.”

“Do you have the photos of the symbols on the chest?” Mae asked. “I think we need to go and look for those. We still have a murder to solve. I think your boyfriend might’ve just gone on an escapade.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I said.

“Are you sure about that?” Mae asked.

“Yeah, I’m completely sure. He actually asked me to be his girlfriend.”

“Ooh la aa,” Jane said.

“I told him I’d think about it.”

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“And you are?” Jane asked, a little smile in her voice.

“No. Well, you know, he’s a satyr, so...

“I thought I had it good with my cougar shifter,” Mae grinned like a Cheshire cat.

“You will decide when it is the right time for you,” Jane smiled, patting me on the arm. I only hoped it was that easy.

It didn’t take us long to get up to The Estate. Trina and Hilda were waiting for us. They had the symbols drawn out on a piece of paper ready for when we arrived.

“We need to go back and find out exactly where these symbols are in the cemetery. We just need to find them.”

“You’re still convinced that it’s a supernatural killer?” I asked.

“Absolutely. They wouldn’t be killing supernaturals and leaving symbols if it wasn’t the case,” Mae explained.

“I think we should form a search party and just fan out across the entire cemetery and take a look.” Trina fiddled with the hem of her sleeve.

“That sounds good to me,” Hilda said.

“Let’s split up so we can cover more ground. We’ll go in pairs because we don’t know what’s out there. Anita and Drake, you go together and Hilda and Trina, you

go. I'll go with Bianca and Jane. We know the area the least, but we'll start at the back and then fan out and make a simple walk straight through the grounds."

"I'm sure the symbol is at the cemetery," Jane said.

"How did you get your psychic powers?" Trina asked curiously.

"I inherited them from my mother and my grandmother before her. They were witches, but not like you. I mean, they made potions and they did spells but there was something different about them.

"I imagine there was," Trina said.

"How old did you say you are?"

"Just turned forty," Jane said it like it was a badge of honor.

Hilda and Trina exchanged a knowing look and a nod.

It didn't take long to get down to the cemetery where we split up. Mae, Jane and I stood at the front entrance as the others moved to the sides.

"I think we've got the center covered," Mae said. "So why don't we spread out? Go like six feet apart and then we'll just walk straight through the cemetery and all the way back."

Hilda shrugged. "We're going to have to make a few passes to cover all the ground with just the three of us."

"True, but what we only have to cover the center section," Mae pointed out.

I stood between Mae and Jane. “Not exactly what you thought you were getting into when you flew out here to meet me?”

“The premonition let me know it was going to be pretty dire, though I couldn’t say I expected to be crawling through a cemetery looking for symbols that highlight witchcraft and dead bodies. No, I must admit that was not on my list at all.”

We walked quietly forward as we took in the area around us.

When we got to the glen where we had first seen the symbols, I slowed down. “It’s just up here,” I led the way to the upturned graves. “I think I saw them in here.”

We walked over the dirt, but the rain that had come before had wiped the symbols clear. “They’re not on the dirt anymore,” I said, frustrated.

“We’re going to have to keep looking,” Mae said.

The trees began to thin out as we left the copse where the disturbed graves were.

“What are those?” Jane pointed at the concrete doors pressed into the side of the cliff at the far end of the cemetery.

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“Those are crypts,” Mae said.

I sniffed the air.

“The smell is coming from one of the crypts,” I said. “I’m sure of it.”

“The murderer can’t be coming from inside the cemetery,” Mae said. “There’s no way that whatever’s killing people is inside of here.”

“Nobody is saying that,” Jane said. “We’re just trying to find the matching symbols inside the cemetery. I mean, clearly the murderer left a signature. He left something he wanted people to find.”

“It’s right there.” I pointed at the third concrete door in the row of crypts. “Those were the symbols.” I walked with determination toward them, knowing they were the marks we were searching for.

“Stop,” Mae said. Her voice was so commanding and so direct and so clear I could hardly disobey her. I stopped slowly and turned around. “I don’t know a lot, but I do know that is the most dangerous grave in this entire cemetery and I would not go anywhere near it.”

Chapter 26

Mae let out a call that must’ve been the secret Cougar Creek Coven whistle, because within moments, Anita and Drake and Trina and Hilda all showed up where we were standing.

“The symbols from the dead body are on that crypt,” Mae said. “What can you tell me about it?” She looked around at the other members of the coven.

“It’s an unmarked grave except for the symbols around it,” Trina said. “It’s been unmarked forever. There were some rumors early on that some creature was locked up in there and those symbols were etched in the door to harness the creature and keep it sealed inside.”

“OK, so if there is a living creature sealed inside a crypt in my cemetery, how is it that bodies are turning up outside of the cemetery with the same sacred markings on them the crypt has?”

“Well, they’re pretty cool designs,” Drake shrugged. Anita elbowed him.

“Is there any way the creature inside there could be getting out and killing people?” I asked, a little worried, because if the creature was anything like me, maybe he just didn’t remember what happened.

I quickly checked my phone just to see if Matheus had messaged again, but there was still no sign of him.

“No, the symbols on the wall are cuneiform writing. They are ancient spells to keep both the dead and the undead contained.”

“What do you mean, undead?” I asked.

“Like vampires,” Drake said.

Anita turned to them all. “You guys really need to be a little more inclusive of these inexperienced witches and dumb things down a little bit for them.”

“I didn’t realize it was exclusive,” Trina pointed out.

“I don’t think it gets much more exclusive than a private coven that you can only belong to based on your bloodline.” Anita argued.

“Do not start getting on your soapbox about inclusion, please. I will make sure we speak in ways they can understand.” Trina pursed her lips.

“Here’s what I think is happening,” Hilda said. “I think somebody on the outside is making sacrifices to whatever creature is in that tomb. The symbols from a human sacrifice will nullify the symbols on the crypt. They will stop working.”

We all stood in the glen, staring at the door in deadly silence.

“It’ll escape,” Mae said.

“We don’t even know what it is,” I said softly.

“It’s not going to be anything pleasant,” Anita took a step backwards. “If someone went through all that trouble to lock it up and seal it. Now someone’s going through the trouble of killing harpies in order to break the spell that’s holding the creature in...I’m sure it’s not a pleasant monster.”

“There has to be more to it,” I said, “because if it was just a matter of making a sacrifice and using those symbols, then we should already know what it is. It should already be loose. The creature should be alive right? But the creature isn’t alive. I don’t hear any banging on the door, or any dreadful screaming, so what’s next?”

“Well, we need to do some research and find out exactly what spell the murderer is doing to try to wake the creature in the cemetery.” Mae pointed out.

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“Don’t you think we should be trying to figure out what type of creature is in the cemetery?” I asked.

“I have scoured The Estate and all the records of the cemetery, and I have found absolutely nothing about those crypts,” Mae said. “I could look around again, but to be honest, I think we’re going to find out what’s inside that crypt when it comes barreling out, trying to kill us.”

“Well, that’s a cheery thought,” Drake shook his head.

“We need to have a plan,” Trina said. “I think we need to find a spell to wake creatures up and one to bind them. We need to know what happens next so we can get ahead of it.”

“Maybe Drake, you and Anita can do that,” Mae nodded. “Hilda and Trina, can you look through our historic records and see if there’s anything that you can find that will show us what is actually inside there?” She looked over at Jane. “I know you don’t know us very well, but you seem to have taken all of this in stride.”

“I am having the most divine time with you!” Jane exclaimed. “My life before this moment was boring and now, I am so thrilled to have a group of people and a mission. It is fabulous. We shall do this. We should find out what the creature is in there and who is killing people to bring it back to life.”

“The vampire’s dead,” Mae said. “It’s hard to imagine who else is doing this and it’s only just started.”

I cringed on the inside. All these deaths started when I turned into a werewolf. How did Trina know it wasn't me doing this? Maybe when I went into a trance and became a wolf, I did crazy things. I mean, those bodies looked mauled by an animal.

"I have to go down to the sheriff's office," I said.

"That's a good idea," Mae agreed. "Get any information they found down there and let's compare it to what we have. We'll figure this thing out."

"My biggest concern," I brought up, "is that this killer wins and manages to release whatever it is that's captured in the crypt. Then the cemetery will be breached. There's no way around it. The creature will rise up and there is no way our words will keep it here."

Chapter 27

I left Jane with Mae. They seemed to hit it off just fine and I knew Jane would handle the doggie daycare for me

I wondered how was I going to handle the sheriff? Just lie? "Everything is just wonderful."

How was I going to deal with being a werewolf? And where the hell was Matheus? What if his body was strewn in tiny bits somewhere? I felt sick to my stomach just thinking about it.

"Where are you?" I sent a text, not expecting a reply and not getting one. I grimaced at my phone wanting to throw it against the wall. Where was he? What had happened to him? Everything was so crazy at the moment I didn't need one more thing to worry about.

Sheriff Ted was standing in the conference room when I arrived at work. It was a pretty unusual sight to see. He actually had a billboard out with drawings on it, maps showing where the bodies were found and pictures of the victims. He was really going at it like it was CSI.

“I went down and interviewed the victim’s family yesterday,” I said.

“You shouldn’t’ve done that without me.” The sheriff looked nonplussed, his arms folded over his chest and lips pursed.

“Just wanted to get it out of the way and start helping.”

“Did you find out any new information?” he asked.

“Just that they were a couple of teens that liked to go hiking in the woods.” I paused, concerned about the questions I had next, but I was compelled to ask them. “Listen, Sheriff, is there any chance this was a wild animal?”

“Clearly, they were ripped up by something, but I’ve never seen body parts strewn around so drastically.” Sheriff Ted pushed his hat back and scratched at his forehead. “I think the weirdest thing is that their hearts were removed.”

“Were they left anywhere near the premises?” I asked. I hadn’t known this piece of information, even after being at the site so long.

“No, they were nowhere to be found. I think we’re dealing with a cannibal of some sort, some Satanic ritual where the murderer draws symbols on the body, tears them apart and eats the heart.” Sheriff Ted stared at the photos of the bodies with his hands on his hips.

“The bodies looked torn apart with brute strength.” I shook, turning away from the

images.

“The person we’re looking for is probably a sizable man of unusual strength. It’s definitely not a wild animal if you consider the symbols drawn on the bodies.”

“Could it be a woman of unusual strength?” I asked.

“It could be, but statistics show violent homicides tend to be committed by men.”

“Do you think it has anything to do with The Estate?” I asked, feeling a certain amount of relief. He had a point about the symbols. Even if I had torn the bodies up while in a werewolf stupor, I would not have painted the symbols on them.

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Sheriff Ted scratched his head. “Somehow the murderer knows Mae, the new Hayes? So, we’ll look into it.”

“I think we need to find out who the victims knew and what they were trying to do. What were they doing out in the woods? They weren’t dressed for hiking. They looked like they were just out for a regular walk.”

“Did you find their van anywhere nearby? I know they had a van, Mae mentioned it when I questioned her.”

“No, there were no vehicles in the vicinity.”

The less questions he had for me the better. One thing that was abundantly clear: the sheriff was never going to find the killer. He was basically looking for a normal man of unusual strength. He was way off on the wrong track. He had the brute strength part right, but this thing or things that killed the harpies and used their bodies as a sacrifice to something hidden in a crypt was nowhere near a “normal man.”

No. My guess was The Estate had an enemy that somehow had it in their head to destroy the cemetery from the inside out.

Chapter 28

It wasn’t until two in the afternoon that I finally heard from Matheus.

“cu soon”

That's all the text said.

Still, I thought I was going to jump through the phone and hug him, I was so grateful to receive a text from him.

I didn't mind texting, but I was a little too excited to hear his voice. I immediately dialed him, but he didn't answer. I frowned. How could he text someone and not answer the phone? Unless there was somebody else with him. I closed my eyes. The last thing in the world I needed was feelings of jealousy. That type of thing was so far in my past, I never wanted it to rear its ugly head. I had spent all day at the police station, supporting Sheriff Ted as he had tried to fend off the feds and defend his own interest in the case. I mean, it was a local story. The last thing in the world he needed was for other people to solve a case that took place on his patch. When there was a weird murder, the weird murder specialists were brought in from the federal government. This would definitely be considered a weird murder. Our goal was solving the murder before the feds got called.

While we had been going over the paperwork, I'd scoured it, looking for any traces human or animal attack. The preliminary report had come back saying that it was an animal attack.

I couldn't stop the feeling something terrible had happened to Matheus, but I couldn't say anything; it wouldn't be appropriate. I had to stay focused on being the Sheriff's deputy, that's what happened in small towns. We all had to fill in as needed.

"Any sign of Matheus?" I texted Mae.

"We've got some feelers out in the satyr community, but I wouldn't worry too much about it. Satyrs are known for roaming. Maybe it was all just too much for him and he took off. I'm sorry, but sometimes it happens."

My gut wrenched and my heart sank just thinking about the fact that he could've walked away from me. I mean, I knew it was a one night and we aren't kids, so we didn't need to pretend it was something more than that, but I couldn't shake the feeling there was something more between us. Something intimate and sexy and close and divine, something that I wanted to do again. Maybe he'd left before I turned into a werewolf. Maybe he had just run away.

I lifted my head back and rubbed my tired eyes. I'd been staring at paperwork since I'd gotten to the office, and I hadn't had any sleep in what felt like days. There was so much going on and I was so stressed. It was dragging on my mind.

The door to the police station opened and a loud noise caught my attention. I looked up. Matheus stumbled through the door, looking like he'd been mauled.

"What happened?" I cried, jumping up and running forward to help him to a chair. His arm looked like it was broken.

"What are you doing here? You should be at the hospital," I said.

"I had to see you," he said. "They are coming for you. You must go to The Estate It's the only place you'll be safe. Now let's go." He growled as he stood up from the chair.

"No way. There is no way we're going anywhere until you go to the hospital."

"They're right behind me. Let's go." There was something in his tone that scared me enough to take action. There was an intensity and a need. He wasn't joking around. The ultra-masculine satyr was afraid, but I knew he wasn't afraid for himself. He was afraid for me.

With his good arm he threw me on the back of the bike, tearing out of the parking lot.

I clenched my arms around his waist. I'd never seen him drive so fast. As much as I loved it, this was terrifying. Clearly, he knew how to drive the beast, but when he angled it to within a couple of inches off my knee on the ground, I couldn't help but let out a scream. It would normally take me a decent five minutes to get to The Estate from the police station, but he had me to the bottom of the porch steps in three minutes.

As soon as I dismounted the bike, he jumped off with put a protective arm around me as he rushed me up the stairs to The Estate. He didn't even bother to knock on the door. He just pushed it open and brought me to the coven, who were gathered in a room that was overwhelmingly red. It had a large fireplace against one wall and each of the coven members seemed to have their own spot. They looked startled to see him.

Mae stood up from where she sat in front of the roaring fire. "Is everything alright?" She stared from me to Matheus.

"No, everything is definitely not alright," Matheus said. "She's a freaking werewolf."

My back arched. "There's nothing wrong with being a werewolf. You have goat legs."

"That isn't what I meant," he said. "You don't understand. You guys live out here in your little coven and you don't get any information. I mean, I know about you, but did you even know about me?"

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“Yeah, we did,” Mae motioned me to sit on the couch. “We knew you were settled here, but you didn’t seem to bother us, and we didn’t have any need to talk to you.”

“It might’ve been a bit more helpful.” Matheus was looking more and more annoyed by the minute.

“Why?” Mae asked in exasperation, hands on her hips.

“Because I remembered a story I had heard once on my travels. I went to investigate it and it was, in fact, true.”

“What is true?” My tone was terse.

“It was always said that if shifter ever turned up in southern Oregon there would be a price put on its head. Basically, this was intended to be a werewolf free zone and now you’ve created a werewolf in our midst... You’re going to need to protect her. She’s got a price on her head.”

“By who?”

“That’s not how it works,” Matheus said. “When someone puts a price on your head, it’s a very big deal. All the assassins find out and they go and look for the kill.”

“Great we already have an assassin here and now we’re going to have to worry about more coming just for me?” I cringed

“Well, you’ll need to stay at the estate from now on until we can figure out who’s

behind this,” Mae said.

Great. I was a werewolf. I couldn’t go to work. I couldn’t go to the police station. I had to stay locked up behind wards at The Estate because somebody was trying to kill me. All of this was starting to really suck.

Chapter 29

“I told you she has a bad star over her,” Jane said with a shrug.

“You’re supposed to be one of my best friends,” I said, looking at her. “Could you stop with the hoodoo voodoo shtick? I’m not going to die.”

“You’ve got a much better chance of staying alive if you stay at The Estate.” Mae said. “Jane, you’re welcome to stay here too. I wouldn’t want you to be killed by association.”

“I don’t think it was meant quite like that. Take out this person and you know; we’ll give you an extra five hundred bucks if you wipe out the people next to them.” I said.

Jane looked nonplussed. “I can’t stay locked up in here. How are we going to find who is killing the people and who will look after all the animals?”

“We are not,” Mae said. “We’re going to dismantle the creature that’s inside the crypt and stop the entire cycle. It has to end.”

“That’s the universe saved,” I said. “What about my assassin? How common are assassins in your world anyhow? I mean is it a normal thing where people learn to be killers?”

“It was a very crucial job during the war between the demigods and the Fae,” Hilda

said. “But more than that, it’s a good paying job.

“Yes, pretty cool actually,” Drake said. “There’s actually a program you can go to at the Crown Academy up in Quebec . There’s an assassin school there. That’s what I’d like to do one day if I ever get set free from guarding the cemetery,” he added with a laugh.

“You couldn’t live without me,” Anita said giving her brother playful punch.

“Good. I’ll have someone to come with me to practice on,” Drake said, giving her a bit of a karate chop. She laughed and kicked him in the head.

“You guys are a little Spartan,” I said. “Maybe you’ll need to teach me some of your moves before you go off to college, since I’m going to be defending my life for the foreseeable future.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of this,” Mae said. “I know for a while it’s going to feel like you’re living in prison, but the reality is, the safest place to be is The Estate. That gives you access to the cemetery and right now, if there’s a price on your head and a killer on the loose, I don’t think you should be going anywhere.”

“How am I going to survive?” I asked.

“You don’t have to worry about money too much,” she said. “As a member of the coven, you will get a stipend.”

“How can she be a member of the coven?” Matheus asked. “She’s not even a witch.”

“Is that the prerequisite to being in a coven?” I asked. “I think they do inclusion nowadays, Matheus. Maybe they didn’t cover that in Satyr school.

“I don’t see any reason why she can’t be a part of the coven,” Hilda shrugged.

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“The pendant dictates she is part of it,” agreed Mae. “She’s one of the six and who knows? Maybe she can do magic. Maybe she’s a hybrid werewolf witch.”

“Maybe someone’s been reading too many pulp fiction books. You can’t “hybrid” your way out of everything.” Trina argued.

Anita’s eyes widened in shock. “Underworld is not pulp fiction. it’s high culture.”

“It’s so retro,” Drake said, not agreeing with his sister for once.

“How can Underworld be retro? It just came out,” I said. “I mean, like 5,10 years ago.”

“Try like twenty years ago,” Anita said.

“2003,” Trina cut in. “You’re both wrong.”

Zombie dog Carl scuttled up and started licking my sneaker. “Ew Carl, stop! You don’t know where that’s been.”

“Just think where Carl has been,” Mae assured me with a chuckle.

“Ew, if I’m stuck here and if we’re going to solve the crime and also try to find out who has put a hit on me, we’re going to need a crime board,” I said “I need a whiteboard on the wall.”

“I’ve got it,” Drake said, waving his hand almost nonchalantly and a whiteboard

appeared.

“And pens,” I added. “How easy is it for you to produce images?”

“It’s not a problem,” Anita said. “If our magic fails, we always use the Internet.”

I drew the details of the murder up on the board in the same way the police would do in a crime scene investigation. “Two harpies were killed and we believe it’s to wake the creature that’s inside the cemetery. Do you think it is a Vampire?” I asked.

“I just found reference to it in one of the old almanacs. It just said that there was blood sucking beast that was dead and deservedly buried in the cemetery even though it breathed. That’s what I read.” Trina showed the image from the book to up so the others could see the dark, hairy creature that was hand drawn in the almanac. Anita waved her hand and prints from the book appeared on the white board.

“That would be the logical choice,” Mae said. “However, it doesn’t look like one.”

“There’s only one real way to find out,” Hilda pointed out. “We need to open the crypt.”

“All due respect, but that seems like the craziest idea I’ve ever heard,” I said. “There is an enemy out there killing people. Another one wants to kill me, and you think opening a grave is going to solve these problems?”

“Or face a raging ravenous beast and get eaten,” Drake said. “I wonder who they would bite first time. Opening the grave while the beast is incapacitated seems an obvious choice.”

I couldn’t argue with his logic. We had to enter the crypt.

Chapter 30

It was an all-hands-on deck meeting of the coven with Jane, Branson and Matheus in attendance. “Does anyone even know how to open a crypt?” I asked. “I mean, it’s not like you just walk up and knock on the door and turn the handle, is it?”

Jane shrugged. “I suppose we would need a crowbar or something like it, no?”

“I think we can get it,” Branson said, looking over at Matheus and giving him a nod. Matheus gave a single ascent of his head.

“Sure,” he said. “We’ll handle it.”

I hadn’t actually spent much time around Branson, so when he’d showed up at the house, I’d been surprised to see him. I could see the minute that he showed up that everything between him and Mae was rosy. He’d grabbed her in a bear hug and given her a resounding kiss.

My heart kind of went out for them. I mean, I knew Matheus liked me, but how long was that going to last? It’s wasn’t like we were going to get married and have babies or anything like that. At least Mae had found a man. I still wasn’t sure if Matheus and I were that compatible in our goals, although, oh my, we were compatible in bed. My knees still got weak thinking about it.

“So how do you know if there’s a price on her head, specifically,” Branson asked.

“There’s always been a price on a wolf shifter's head in this area. There is in a few other counties as well, but I haven’t investigated them. I just noticed because I’ve always had a thing for wolves.”

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“Ooh la la,” Jane said with a wink. “Of course, you have. For now, you found your own wolfy.”

“I have,” Matheus said, reaching over and giving me a great big hug.

“We’re burning daylight, people,” Mae said, motioning everyone to the door. “We might want to get a head start on getting that grave open before the sun sets.”

“Do you even hear yourself?” I asked. “Open the grave before the sun sets. You do have some level of comprehension about how wrong that sounds, right? Like most people don’t go open up graves at sunset.”

“We’re trying to open it before sunset,” Mae said. “So that we cannot get attacked in the dark by whatever creepy thing is in there.”

“You make it sound so delightful,” I said. “Makes me want to just run out and join your coven.”

“You don’t get an option on joining or not joining,” Mae said. “I mean, you could shirk your responsibilities for sure, but you are definitely a part of the solution here. The whole point is that we want to help, and we are not some damsels in distress, sitting on the sidelines waiting for the big buff guys to come along and rip open the grave.”

“Well, do you have a better solution?” Matheus asked.

“Did you ever think about using magic?” Hilda asked.

Matheus and Branson exchanged a look. Clearly, they had not.

“We have heightened capabilities,” Matheus said. “We don’t have magic skills like you guys.”

“Well, I suggest you step back and let the ladies do the work,” Hilda said, leading the way outside.

It didn’t take us long to get down to the cemetery. We took the back pathway that led to the side gate that was Hilda’s gate. Each member of the coven had their own gate. I was told they could each only open their own gate to help protect us and let us know that if any of the gates were breached. It would be the responsibility of that coven member. There were five gates in all. As a new coven member, I would not be getting a gate. There was something else that Mae had explained to do with the pendant, but I didn’t really quite understand it. The coven was there to protect the cemetery and then the pendant was the super protector. I did know there were dead bodies turning up and nobody here had a clue as to who was doing it.

We walked through the cemetery, along the weeds and overgrown pathways until we reached the back cliff. The cemetery, strangely enough, wasn’t built on particularly solid ground, but the soft earth wasn’t enough to cause all the holes that had been formed. The crypts were carved into the cliff stone. Inside the rock was where the tombs had been carved. I could only imagine by magic. I had heard they carved tombs like this in Egypt, but why they needed them here I had no idea.

“Look at the symbols on the door,” Trina pointed out. “Those are the binding symbols that keep the door closed. There will be something on whatever is inside to keep it docile, maybe even asleep. But it is not dead.”

“Is there a chance that your family imprisoned someone wrongfully?” Anita asked.

Mae looked over at her. “Considering I’m just getting to know my family and their heritage; I have no idea. I sure as hell hope we’re not the bad guys, because if the good guys are killing people to get them out of our prison, I’d hate to think about what we are doing to keep them there.”

“We’re not the bad guys.” Hilda waved her hand dismissively in the air. “We’re not good guys, we’re not bad guys, we’re just guys that have one job to do and that’s to protect the cemetery and keep everything around it clear and clean.”

“No one ever explained to me why that was,” I said.

“Well, demigods rule this area and for whatever reason, they want to protect it. Only the Hayes knows why.” Trina nodded toward Mae.

“Can’t tell you,” Mae shrugged, not even apologetic in the slightest, “but the protection of the world requires it. At least the protection of the demigod world.”

“How do we do this?” Anita asked as we stood outside of the crypt. The strange symbols were carved all over it.

“They look like they’re bleeding,” I said, moving closer to the grave.

“Don’t,” Hilda shouted, but it was too late. A blast hit me as I approached the crypt. It lifted me into the air, knocking the wind out of me as it threw me to the ground.

Chapter 31

The blast was loud and forceful. It took a moment for the ringing in my ears to stop and for me to get my bearings again. Matheus lifted me to my feet and asked me if I was okay. I stared at him, feeling mostly dazed and confused.

“What was that?” I heard Anita ask.

“It’s a protective spell,” Trina said, “but what I don’t understand is how anyone is getting their magic inside our cemetery. It’s not possible to do that.”

“They aren’t coming from outside of the cemetery,” Hilda said. “Whatever’s in there must be awake, or at least its energy has been tapped. Beings inside of the cemetery are protected and guarded and held in place, but it doesn’t mean that their magic is capable of being used. It would appear this creature is trapped by the cave and perhaps his magic has been muted. Whatever sacrifices the killer on the outside is doing, it is working to wake this one up.”

“We cannot have the cemetery breached, not from the inside and not from the outside,” Mae said insistently.

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“I think I know what’s making your holes,” I said, looking down into one of them. A skull was smiling up at me, stretching up from its neck. Its skeleton arms reached to the ground; hands still stuck in the dirt that had been taking it at one point. “The skeletons are coming to life.”

“There’s no such thing as a skeleton coming to life,” Trina said. “Any animated corpse is a zombie, even skeletons, and zombies have the power to create more of them.”

“But why are they being reanimated?” I kicked the skull back into the hole.

“Perhaps it is whoever is making blood sacrifices and trying to wake the creature inside the crypt. Perhaps they are trying to raise a zombie army too.” Drake said. “That’s what I would do if I were an asshole and trying to cause a problem. Imagine if you could get all those skeletons to bite all the people in Cougar Creek and have a whole town full of zombies.”

“There’s no cure for being a zombie, is there?” I asked.

“No,” Hilda said. “Even severing the head doesn’t always work. The most useful thing to do is to crush the skull into a pulp. That tends to cause a level of damage that can’t be fixed.”

“Sounds charming.” Jane said.

“So, if we can’t get near the door, how are we going to open it?” Drake asked.

“Just a minute,” I said. “There’s somebody on the outside of the cemetery trying to create spells to awaken and release whatever is inside that crypt?”

“Yes.” Mae agreed.

“We want to find the killer, but we don’t want to release what’s in the crypt.”

“No, we want to contain the creature and see if it has any clues as to who is trying to release it.” Mae clarified.

“But by the very act of releasing it, we are playing into the killer’s hands,” I said. “It’s a trap.”

“How could it be a trap? We can't even get close to the door,” Anita said.

“Oh, we can get through the door.” Hilda gave Anita a wise look. “We weren’t born just yesterday. We’ve got some power.”

“We've looked through everything. I just found reference to it in one of the old almanacs. It just said there was a blood sucking beast that was dead and deservedly buried in the cemetery even though it breathed. So even if we are playing into their hands, we just have to be a little bit cleverer. We aren’t opening the crypt to let the beast or whatever it is free, we’re opening the crypt...”

“To kill the creature,” Branson said.

“You can’t just randomly decide you’re going to kill something when you don’t even know what it is,” I said. “What if it’s a unicorn? You going to kill a unicorn? We shouldn’t be disturbing this creature that was locked up for some reason. We need to find the killer.”

Everyone turned to Mae.

“It’s your call,” Hilda said. “You are the high priestess.”

Mae looked at Branson with a frown on her face as she chewed on her lower lip.

“I hear what you’re saying, Bianca,” she said. “But the truth is, we’ve exhausted every other option. You’ve spoken to the harpies, we’ve searched through all of the libraries, we’ve done everything we know how to do and right now, it’s time we figured out the mystery of what’s entombed behind there. We need to know why it is so important for somebody to get in, because I’ll tell you right now, that’s not the main purpose of the cemetery.”

“What is the main purpose?” I asked.

“Confidential,” Mae said.

God I really didn’t like that, but okay. I was the new kid on the block. I needed to not make a stink of it.

“Open it,” Mae said.

“You got it, boss,” Hilda said. She waved her hands and a bunch of vines started growing toward the tomb. “You were blasted by a spell that responds to blood. It’s a blood spell, so when it felt your blood, it pushed you away as it’s only allowing the blood of the person bound to those victims to come anywhere near it.”

“Wow, you guys do all the fun stuff don’t you,” I said, shaking my head. It was bad enough I turned into a wolf. The last thing I wanted to do was start playing with blood.

The vines weaseled their way into the cracks between the stone door and its archway and wound their way up into the crypt.

Even as the vines exerted effort, I could see Hilda was straining.

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Trina leaned in and held up her hands and so did Mae. All their energy flowed together toward the vines, giving them more strength and power. Anita and Drake raised their hands also, until the entire coven was sending magic toward the vine to strengthen it. The door bulged under the pressure.

“Mon Dieu,” Jane murmured. “I have never in my whole life seen something like this. It is, how do you say, incredible.”

At that moment, the vines around in the door loosened their grip on the stone door, letting it fall forward and shatter on the ground in front of us.

Chapter 32

We all stared at the entrance to the crypt. Branson and Matheus immediately stepped forward in front of the rest of us. Drake looked around like he knew he should do it too and didn't want to, then slowly took a hesitant step forward.

“You guys stop,” I said. You have no idea what's in there. I know you're both beasts, but this is Mae's domain. let her handle it,” I said.

Mae nodded at me with a smile. “Thank you, Bianca. Whatever is in the crypt, my ancestors put it in there and I'll be the first to take it out.”

Mae walked slowly forward, but it didn't seem right watching her walking woman as brave as can be into the dark. She held her hands out, glowing purple and green so she could emit light, but still. Something could come at her from anywhere in the dark and she wouldn't have a sense of what it was.

“I’m coming with you,” I said.

“Nonsense,” Mae said. But it was too late. I could feel it inside of me for the first time. I had shifted twice now, but this time, I could feel it coming. It was coming because I needed it, because I wanted it, because I knew that in order to protect Mae the best I could possibly do, I had to be a werewolf.

“Good idea,” Branson said, shifting into a cougar. We couldn’t speak, but we were animals and we understood what was going on. I sniffed the air. It was hard to describe the taste of dust and debris that wafted out of the inside of the crypt. It smelled of stale cobwebs in the floating dust and something deep; a sweet-and-sour kind of smell that left a taste in my mouth even though I was nowhere near the source of it.

I didn’t wait for Mae to give any instructions, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to wait for Branson. I was going to go and see what all the fuss was about. What was the worst that could happen? Truthfully, I didn’t want to think about it, but I needed to find my way. I entered the crypt which stretched out ahead of us into darkness. It was larger than I imagined and inside we found an inner chamber which was where the sweet stench was coming from. Lying on the center of a marble table in the dark dim recesses of the crypt was the beast or whatever word you would use to describe the thing. It was dead. I turned around and shook my head to Branson. He walked around the corpse. It was some strange type of monster, something like I’ve never seen before. As I sniffed around, I realized the smell wasn’t coming from the body; it was coming from oils that were slathered on to the body and like an oil slick under it. The monster was covered in black hair and was almost skeletal remains. Its fangs stretched down to the bottom of its lip, jutting out. It had a thick neck and long ears, but whatever it had been in real life, it was no longer.

I looked up at Mae.

“If those idiots are messing with the crypt,” Mae said. “They're trying to raise the dead. That'll be more trouble for them than it is for me.”

“I think you have to report this to the DGC,” Trina said.

“The Demigod Corporation,” Anita explained to me.

“Even if it's dead?” Mae asked.

“I think we have a bigger problem than reporting to the DGC,” I said, thinking of ten other problems. “There is still a killer on the loose.”

“We need to find the killer before we tell the DGC,” Mae pointed out.

“No, I suppose you're right about telling the demigods,” Trina said. “It's just, how are you going to hide the death of the harpies?”

“You can always pay the harpies to keep their mouths shut,” Matheus said.

Mae looked at him and raised an eyebrow. “Satyrs were always known for being a bit out of the law.”

“We get the job done,” Matheus grumbled.

I sniffed around the crypt a little more, but the smell of rotten bones was overwhelming, so I went back outside. That was when it struck me. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but it was why it had been possible for me to shift, just because I wanted to. I was learning how to handle this, rather than random shifting when I couldn't control it. When I blacked out, it terrified me. I never wanted to have that experience again, but right now, we had a killer to find. The truth was, I probably had the best nose for the job.

Part of me wanted to see how fast I could run on all fours. I wanted the exhilarating feeling of the free rush of the air running through my hair and I also wanted to see what I was capable of. Right now, we didn't have any other choices. We were dead in the water, so if we were going to try to figure out who killed those harpies, we were going to have to take a different tack.

I nodded to the others and made my way to the cemetery fence. Branson cocked his head and started to follow me, but I growled and snapped at him to get him to go back. In a single bound I was over it and in the forest. This was going to be a solo job. Part of me needed time alone to process some of the things that had been going on. There was the stuff with Matheus and my fear of being a werewolf. I was afraid of ripping guts out of those people nearest and dearest to me. I needed some time to sit around and think. Going for a run in the forest might be the perfect excuse. They say killers go back to the scene of the crime, and I could only hope that the killer would show himself if a lone supernatural showed up. Maybe they would try to attack me, and we would find out who it was.

Chapter 33

I had thought that I was out on a race for a killer, and to find clues and to sniff things out, but that wasn't what happened at all. I went to the crime scene, but it was overrun with cops and FBI. They were still looking at things, even though it had been a day, so instead I decided to go for a run. If there was something that I had learned at my age, it was that you had to take advantage of the things that were in front of you. As much as I wanted to solve the problem of the murder, and as much as I wanted to not be a werewolf, I still had to really enjoy the day and each moment I was given. I wanted to enjoy the experience that had been put before me. Here I was, standing like a wolf, able to run through the forest of my hometown and see it in a way I'd never seen before; racing with the wet ground under my pads and my claws.

I never knew I could run so much as a wolf. It had nothing to do with my age. I

hadn't gotten any younger. I just had more stamina in my four legs to carry me farther and faster than with my two legs. I raced along pathways and through the undergrowth of the forest until suddenly I stopped, not quite realizing where I was. I had an idea of the general vicinity, but it was difficult to see, exactly which way everything else lay in the deep forest.

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The sun was setting behind the trees., I would need to get home sooner rather than later. I turned back to return the way I came. I figured I could probably use my sense of smell to track my own steps back home, but as I turned to walk back down the path, a little growl interrupted my steps.

Three pairs of eyes stared at me through the bushes. The owners of the eyes walked toward me from three different directions. I'd been told that there were no other werewolves around here.

It definitely was a wolf pack, but they were not werewolves. They were just hungry, ready to tear me to pieces and separate me limb from limb. The scene from Jurassic Park flashed before my eyes where the small little dinosaurs destroyed the flippant tourist. I wasn't a tourist here and I wasn't about to make that mistake. Wolves were deadly. Even if I was one.

They slowly circled me, inching closer and closer, their steps making a muted crackling on the leaf covered earth. There was no way I could take all three of them, no way at all. I started growling, but even my growling seemed odd and strange. I didn't know how to be a wolf. I had all the right parts, but I didn't know how to put them all together. All I wanted to do was kick and slap and punch and run. I crouched down low as if I might spring on one of them. The only thing I could think of was that if I could entice one of them to attack me, I could leap out of their way and attack another one at the same time. I growled at the smallest one. It was an obvious target.

I didn't know if it was because I was a werewolf, but I felt so powerful and cocky. My brain was functioning at full awareness and I was able to preempt their intentions even though they hadn't moved beyond circling me slowly.

The largest of the three wolves, a red coated female moved into position to pounce on my back. I twisted and turned and flung myself back at the lead wolf. Our bodies crashed in midair, knocking the wind out of both of us. I had expected it, so I was ready. I jumped back up, not ready to go toe to toe with the wolf again. I'd definitely made my mark, and she had the slices on her belly just to prove it.

The wolves turned and ran yelping through the woods.

"What happened to you?" Matheus asked as he gamboled into the clearing.

I shifted into my human form. The process was getting easier and easier the more times I did it. The hints Mae had given me earlier certainly helped.

"Yes!" I said. "Did you see that I single-handedly fought off three, count them one, two, three wild wolves. They were huge wolves and I beat them. I beat the biggest of them. Did you see?" I was so excited I couldn't stop bouncing up and down.

"Yes, my darling," he grinned at me. "But you would've been killed had they been supernaturals or werewolves. We've got to get you in some real training if you're going to survive and become one of the guardians of the cemetery."

"The cemetery has a guardian," I joked. "It's Mae, that much I remember, so no thank you. I need a job, but I definitely don't need that"

"The last thing in the world you need, my dear, is another job," Matheus laughed.

"Do you have a last name?" I asked him.

"No, ma'am," he said.

"You sure it's not Beelzebub or something crazy like that, right?" I asked.

Matheus laughed at my words. “No, I’m not the devil,” he said. “I’m just a satyr. I’m just like you, only I don’t have to shift as much of my body. Just my head and legs.”

I leaned up to give him a kiss. I was losing myself in the way he held me so strongly and warm in his arms. He reached around my waist and then dropped lower and lifted me up.

“No,” I said. “No, not out here. No grass, no dirt, nothing.”

“This is where it’s the most natural,” he grinned pressing his hips against me.

“I thought you came out here to bring me some clothes,” I said. “I’m just going to shift back into a wolf and run off.”

“I don’t want you to have any clothes.” I pressed my face against his skin, and I could hear his heartbeat. So strong and so rapid and slightly different, like it was a double beat

“Does your heart beat differently?” I asked.

“No one’s ever been able to explain the satyr heartbeat, not even the human scientists who were told about it. I always say it’s because we’re so passionate about life, we’re trying to live it twice as much as everybody else.”

“If you slowed it down maybe you would live two hundred years?” I asked, snuggling into his chest as his arms held me tight.

He shrugged. “What’s the average life expectancy for a human right now?”

“About eighty-five,” I said. “I am at forty-five, my middle years. There is nothing that can change that.”

“You’ll probably live longer, that's what usually happens to the weres, but you’ll still age.” Matheus stated it like an unemotional fact. I liked it.

“Good. I’ve earned my ability to age and I don’t want that frozen-in-time vampire thing.” I grinned and kissed him.

“You will age slower, and you’ll have more stamina.” He grinned, his fingers tightening on my hips.

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“I think we’ve got plenty of stamina between the two of us,” I said, luxuriating in the feeling of his fingertips stroking against my skin. My nipples became hard. I looked up at him, ready to lose myself in surprise. I realized that he had fallen silent. Instead, he was staring in horror over my shoulder.

Chapter 34

“Move,” he screamed as he grabbed both of my arms and pulled me to the side. He threw me on the ground, startling me, but I realized he was trying to get me to shift. I lay in the damp leaves, looking over my shoulder in horror as the most disgusting creature I had ever seen in my life rose its beastly head out of the ground. It had six legs and walked like a spider, but it wasn’t a spider. It had the body of a beast and the face of a gargoyle, the most hideous gargoyle I had ever seen.

“Run!” Matheus said to me, but I couldn’t. How could I just leave him standing there facing that thing?

I hyperventilated, begging my body to shift. It hurt, but I was elated when I felt the cracking of my bones. I couldn’t face that monster as a human. I might still be terrified as a wolf, but at least I was armed and relatively more dangerous. I moved next to Matheus so we could face the creature down.

“You’ve got to run,” Matheus said as the creature advanced toward us; slow growls and high-pitched wheezing coming from it. It was like nothing I’d ever seen on the planet.

“It’s a monster from the rift,” Matheus warned. “You’ve got to get out of here.”

We couldn't just leave it to wander around. What was Sheriff Ted supposed to do if he found this thing? I tugged at the fur on Matheus's leg as the creature crouched on four of its legs. It was getting ready to spring. I let out a massive howl. We weren't far from The Estate. Mae was only a couple of miles away and might hear the howl.

There was no time. The creature suddenly bounded up and flew through the air, its six legs stretched out towards us. I almost screamed, but instead I decided to leap towards the creature to stop it from hitting Matheus. His soft skin had no protection against the beast. I didn't know if mine did either, but I was willing to give it a shot and at least I had teeth and fangs.

I landed against the beast's chest as it was coming down on Matheus. My teeth and nails sank into its abdomen. Its stomach exploded into a slimy mess of blackish purple slime which filled my mouth and covered my paws and fur. More slime flooded over me, but I didn't care. The beast was falling over as I ripped and tore at it. I imagined it had been trying to kill Matheus and me. This was the creature who killed the harpies.

As I shredded its insides, it suddenly turned into smoke and disappeared. All that was left was the slime dripping in my mouth, in my hair, and over my eyes.

I lay there as a wolf, unable to shift back, covered in the slime of the beast and frozen even though the beast was gone. Matheus ran over to me and went down on his haunches.

"You crazy woman!" he exclaimed.

I stared up at him, unable to move.

"You're paralyzed," he said. "Not forever." He placed his hand on my furry wet shoulder. "It's just that it was a monster of the third order. You're crazy for going

after it alone. I know you killed it and that's incredible, but you're going to be paralyzed for a while. You won't be able to get out of your wolf form and you won't be able to do anything."

I tried to open my eyes wide, but it really wasn't working.

He looked at me kindly. "Don't worry. I'll take care of you," he said. Your friends are coming now. I can hear them.

"What did you do to her?" Jane asked as she walked into the clearing.

"Well, she didn't die," Trina said. "So that's one of your premonitions that hasn't come true."

"No, this is my premonition. Look, she's dead."

"She's not dead," Matheus said. "She's just paralyzed.

Mae came up. "We heard her howl. What's going on?"

"She's going to need to be taken care of for the next 24 hours until she shifts back into a human form and has gotten some movement back."

"Did she just kill a tier three monster?" Drake asked, looking at all at the pile of slime around me.

"That's wicked," Anita said. "I told you she was bad ass. She's just like Mae, but she doesn't even see that about herself."

Before I knew what was happening and without any input from me, since I was paralyzed, they covered me in a blanket and wrapped me up. It was a strange feeling

to be immobile. I was so used to doing things myself, whether it was for my son, the business, or for Sheriff Ted. I was always active and wasn't used to being taken care of. I'd be lying if I didn't say it was slightly fantastic to lay there and be carried around, though the thrill was going to wear thin real quick.

"Don't you worry," Jane said. "I will keep you company."

"We need to take her back to The Estate," Matheus said. "It's not safe for her out here. I'm going to stay with her twenty-four, seven to guard her. She's completely in danger."

"If the monster was attacking her, is it the same monster that killed the harpies?"

“It would make sense.”

“But why would a monster be out in the forests of southern Oregon?” Trina asked.

“We haven’t seen activity like this around here ever.”

“We haven’t seen activity like any of this,” Hilda said. “You need to start looking at all the pieces. Mae was attacked by a vampire, which she had to kill. We felt the threat of having the cemetery at risk, so we took out the pendant, and then through some clever thinking on Trina’s part, we found another member of the pendant. Bianca was then required to kill a monster. It is as if each member of the coven is being put on trial.”

Chapter 35

They cleared the area in front of the fireplace in the Red Room. Where there used to be a coffee table, there was now a large mattress that looked surprisingly like an overgrown doggy bed. Even out of the corner of my eye, I could see that. They laid me down on it and got the fire going.

“I’ll make a tonic that we can rub onto her muscles,” Trina said.

I only hoped they’d give Matheus the tonic to rub on me, but it seemed Matheus was thinking of other things. “I’m sure it was a hit on her directly.”

“What? Do you think the monster killed the harpies accidentally?” Mae asked.

“Regardless, we know the monster didn’t come of its own accord. Those things have

trackers. They do what their boss tells them.” Branson explained.

“Who rules the monsters?” Mae asked. “Do they fall in the demigod bucket or the Fae bucket?”

Drake leaned forward enthusiastically. Monsters exist in the rift in the darkness outside of our world. Sometimes they end up on our side of the rift, but there are only three that can do that.”

“What do you mean three?” Jane asked.

“Well, there are different tiers of monsters and it kind of determines how much intelligence and capabilities they have. The one that came through is a tier three, so it’s smart enough to do what somebody tells it to, but it’s too dumb to think for itself, which makes it a dangerous creature indeed.” Drake had clearly spent some time studying these creatures. “Those monsters are owned typically by demons or by higher monsters. Tier Two tends to serve Tier One and higher. The tier one, well, they’re like Bianca. They’re shifters. They change shape into monsters but other than that, they have a human body.”

“What I’m not understanding is the connection,” Mae said. “The vampire was here and I killed him. You warned me others would come. Is this the next wave?” A monster?”

“If this was the next wave, you would know it. There’d be more than two dead out in your yard,” Branson said.

Trina finished the salve and held it out to Jane, who came over and started rubbing it against my muscles. At least, I think that’s what she was doing. I couldn’t turn my head or see anything. I was stuck in frozen in wolf form.

“So, if there’s a monster here, they can be told what to do. Who is it telling the monsters what to do?” Mae asked.

“It could be anyone,” Hilda said. “You could drop a contract with a demon to use as monsters if you wanted to.

“They’re mainly controlled by demons and other monsters, but they’re on the demigod side. At the top of the food chain is Ryder, the God of Monsters.” Drake made it sound like it was an introduction at a sporting event.

“What a title. I’d love to meet the guy one day.” Jane chuckled.

“He’s not a God. He’s a Demigod. They need to stay away from here,” Trina said. “I am not a fan.”

“Is there a reason a monster would come to this place?” Mae asked. “I feel like I have one million questions and nobody has any answers.”

“Well, that might be because we don’t have all the facts,” Trina said.

“I’m not hiding anything from you,” Mae said. “You know everything that I do.”

“Actually, we don’t,” Trina said. “We don’t know why the cemetery is so important.”

Mae looked at her strangely. “Do you need to know that?” she asked.

“Well, the problem is, you have a lot of questions,” Trina pointed out. “We may not have all the answers, but until we understand the big questions, it’s really hard for us to figure out what’s going on with everything else.”

“I can’t tell you the purpose of the cemetery,” Mae said. “That’s the whole point of it

being guarded and protected.”

“Maybe that was true at one point,” Trina said. “But people are dying here and people are getting hurt and if we’re going to fight for this, we need to understand what it is. That will help us to be able to tell you who might be after it.”

Mae stood tensely in the center of the room; her jaw clenched. “I cannot tell you,” she said. “My family has kept the secret for hundreds of years.”

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“That is true,” Hilda said. “But our families have been protecting yours for hundreds of years, also in ignorance. The fact that they allowed you to step into this position is another problem. You weren’t given all the information. If you’d been given the information from them, then maybe you would be able to put the pieces together but we are half blind and you’re half blind. Together we do not make a completely sighted person. We make two half blind people with monsters, vampires, and zombies sure to come if we don’t get this sorted.”

“It would be kind of cool to know why the cemetery is so important,” Trina said. Anita just stood quietly by, not saying a word. I was sure she was just curious as the rest of us. It was quite amazing to me how long they’d gone, never knowing for generations the purpose of the very thing they were guarding.

Mae had her arms folded across her chest and was shaking her head.

“I’ve got to think about it, you guys. I understand what you’re saying. I hurt you and it’s important to me that you understand that I hurt you. If I tell you the truth of the cemetery, I will be breaking a rule of trust. I’m so new to this world, I don’t even know what that means.”

“Could put you in jail.” Matheus said gruffly.

“We’ll give you your space,” Hilda said, motioning the kids to the door. “Just make sure the guys stay here to protect you .”

“Like you have to tell me to stay here?” Branson said. “I’m not a dog.”

Pain arched through my body as I shifted slightly.

“She moved,” Jane said.

“The poison’s wearing off,” Matheus said. “That’s earlier than I expected. It must be because she’s a werewolf. She is still very stiff.”

“Keep using the salves and when she’s able to actually move, I’ve created a tonic. It’s on my table over there. Warm it up. You could even throw in a little nip of whiskey if you want. It’ll warm her up and get her insides working again,” Trina said as she ushered her children out the door.

“Thank you, Trina,” Mae said. “I know we don’t always see eye to eye, but I appreciate you.”

“No, I don't suppose we will ever see eye to eye,” Trina said. “But we have bigger things to worry about than your opinion versus my opinion.”

“I’m going to go check the perimeter,” Branson said, giving Mae a quick kiss before he left the door. I really admired their relationship. They seemed to be making it work. Branson had eyes only for Mae and he took such great care of her, always protecting her and making sure she was safe. I knew it was his job as part of The Estate, but still, he did it with so much care and concern, the same way Matheus was taking care of me right now.

I slightly tilted my head and gazed at Matheus. His bright green eyes and brown curly hair fell forward as he smiled down at me.

“We’ll have you better in no time,” he said, leaning down and giving me a kiss on my long wolf nose. He stroked his thumb over my forehead and it felt so good. I closed my eyes and felt myself drift into a calming sleep.

Chapter 36

My eyes opened wide in the pitch-black night. I had fallen asleep in front of the fire, but now the fire was out. I sat up. I was no longer in wolf form. My body ached.

I sniffed the air. There was something rotten. It wasn't the smell of dead bodies. It was the scent of long-term decay wafting on the high winds that tore through Cougar Creek. The howling of the wind had woken me.

I was covered in a blanket but naked underneath. Someone had thought to set clothes out on the couch for me to put on if I happened to shift while everybody was asleep. Matheus was still curled up on the couch. But I didn't want to wake him.

I slipped into the kitchen, thinking that maybe a cup of hot tea would be good.

Mae was sitting there by the fire, wide awake. She had her arms folded around her stomach.

"Is everything okay?" I asked quietly.

"It's all too much," she said, looking at me, her eyes wide and concerned. "I think you're the only one I can talk to about this kind of stuff because I feel so overwhelmed. I came up here to sort my life out after leaving my husband and, you know, now I'm dealing with vampires and monsters and satyrs and shapeshifters. I think we even have zombies now, and I don't know how to stop them. I have no clue as to what I'm actually doing and I always thought that at this stage of my life, at this age... I mean, I'm forty-nine. My birthday is in a few months and then I'll be the big five-oh. I thought at this stage I would actually know a few things, that I'd have some of the answers and...Holy fuck, I don't."

I sat down next to her and a cup of tea floated from the kitchen counter to the table in

front of me by the fire.

“You are not alone,” I said, reaching out and clasping her hand. “I’m just as confused and lost as you are.”

“That’s supposed to be helpful?” she asked.

“I don’t know, maybe. Maybe middle-age is kind of like being a teenager again. You know how when you were a teenager, you were creating dreams and visions for the rest of your life and you were hanging out with like-minded people, mostly other girls, and having a good time. You know that? Maybe we can do that again.”

“I’ve got a boyfriend now,” Mae said.

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“I might have a boyfriend too,” I giggled, “but I don’t think that impacts us. We’re not getting married. We’re not having kids anymore. We’re free almost like we were in our twenties, you know? We can just have a boyfriend and that’s it. It doesn’t have to be all some deep, dark, meaningful, love kind of thing.”

“But how is that going to help us solve our problems with monsters and zombies and vampires?” Mae asked.

“That pendant exists for a reason,” I said. “You and I are connected to a bond that was made maybe centuries ago by our ancestors. There has to be a reason for that. There has to be a way we can draw our energies together and do something that will help calm the cemetery.”

“It’s like the ground is alive down there, all the bones under the earth are crackling and moving and digging. How are we going to get anything to calm that down?”

“Well, we can tackle each problem one thing at a time,” I said. “If Matheus is right and there’s an assassin after me, the best thing we can do is keep me inside The Estate and inside the cemetery. That solves that problem. The monster is dead. The one in the crypt is dead for all intents and purposes that we can tell. So, all we have to do is calm the dead in the cemetery and find out who was controlling the monster and slaying the harpies.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Mae said.

“I like to break things down section by section and try to figure them out.”

A loud scream carried on the howling wind. Mae stood up.

“What was that?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Mae responded, “but we better figure out what it is.”

“Should we get the others?” I asked.

Mae shook her head. “Jane went back to your doggie daycare. Branson is already outside on the perimeter walk, and if that scream isn’t waking Matheus up, he should sleep. “She held her hands out as she walked toward the back door, the purple and green lights crackling in her fingertips.

“I’m going to send out tracers to find the scream,” she said.

“Should I shift?” I asked. I wasn’t sure what form I was most useful in.

“Not yet,” Mae said. “I still haven’t figured out how to understand you when you’re a wolf. Let’s go find out what the problem is.”

“If it looks bad, we’ll call in the rest of the coven,”

We went out to the back porch and she let the tracers from her hands fly out. It was with little surprise that they led directly to the cemetery.

“I can’t see where they’re landing. We’re going to go down there. You ready for this?”

Hell no, I wasn’t ready, but under the circumstances, I didn’t see that there was any other option.

Chapter 37

Lights were glowing along the pathway leading down the gates to the side of the cemetery. There was a loud click clacking in the air, a sound like a million cicadas surrounding us.

“What is that sound?” I gripped Mae's hand. It was so overpowering I didn't even think I could see straight, let alone think.

“I don't know,” Mae said, leaning into me. “It sounds like...”

And then I knew exactly what it was, even as she said it.

“Bones,” we said at the same time, looking at each other with our eyes wide. My hands were suddenly clammy, but I didn't let go of Mae's. Somehow the energy that was coming off her hand was warming mine, giving me strength as we moved down the path inside the black wrought iron fence that guarded the cemetery. The light from her hands increased as the tracers guided us along the path. We arrived shortly at Hilda's gate. At least that's what I called it; I think it had a different name, like her last name, but I was still learning so much of what was actually going on here.

As a high priestess of the coven, Mae was able to open the gate.

“Are we seriously going in there?” I asked in horror. Mae looked terrified, but her back was straight and her eyes were serious.

“It's our cemetery to protect,” Mae said. “Either we go in there and do our job, or we fail.”

“Well, in order to do that, I think it's best if I'm a wolf,” I said.

“I agree,” whispered Mae.

I reached into the pit of my stomach where I knew the beast lived and I tugged, even though I dreaded the pain that would rip through my body as the animal emerged. My bones cracked and stretched. My muscles ached as hair sprouted all over my body. I found myself standing next to Mae on all fours, my head almost level with hers. At least I was a giant wolf, though I didn’t know how I was supposed to combat whatever was going on in the cemetery.

The light was leading us into the glen.

“The Glen of the Fae,” Mae said. “I was worried about that,”

What I couldn’t figure out was what she thought we were going to do once we came across whatever was making that racket.

“If we don’t do something soon, the whole town’s going to hear it and the sirens are going to go off. They’ll come to find out what’s going on.”

The lights calmed down in Mae's hands as a high-pitched shrieking started. What was she doing? We needed her power here; I still had no idea what I was expected to do. I mean, I could bite and claw, I supposed, but I’ve never been much of a fighter. A single lucky win against a monster did not a warrior make.

I glanced over at Mae. She must’ve seen the worry in my eyes.

“I’m texting Hilda,” she said.

This seemed to be a good time to wait for backup, but as I looked up the path, I realized it was too late. Standing behind me on the path was a fully formed skeleton. To its left was another skeleton; to its right was another skeleton. As I slowly turned in a complete circle, I realized that the dead had risen out of the ground and were surrounding us, moving forward in a slow circle.

“Stay calm,” Mae said, her voice shaking.

I had nothing to say; my legs shook as they approached us. Their bones rattled against each other. There was no doubt they were the living dead.

“These are the remnants of the Fae buried here,” Mae said. She crossed her purple and green lightning, sending out a blast toward them and taking out a couple of the zombie skeletons. I turned and growled at the ones to my right, but they didn’t seem to care about my growling; they simply kept walking slowly towards me.

“They’re being kept alive by magic and they’re secreting saliva. They will transfer their poison to you if you let them bite you,” Mae said.

Great. That was exactly the news I wanted to hear today.

I nudged up against her, trying to get her to grab onto me. The only way we were going to get out of there was by busting through the lines.

It was almost as if Mae could read my thoughts.

“We can’t just run away,” she said. “We have to do something about this. There’s no one else who’s going to do anything about it.”

But we were surrounded by zombie skeletons and we were vastly outnumbered, so what were we supposed to be doing about it? I barreled toward those nearest to me,

knocking them down. I watched their bones rattle apart and fall in a big pile on the ground, but they rattled back together and rose up to meet me.

Multi-limbed creatures formed from the skeletons, with protruding tentacles and skulls that were filled with gnashing teeth.

“Oh my God,” Mae said, blasting a row of five skeleton creatures that were coming toward her. “We’re not going to make this.”

It seemed the more bones were knocked out, the more and more bones came to play, and suddenly the monstrous beasts that were surrounding us. One of them lashed out it’s gaping maw straight for my face.

Chapter 38

I dodged the massive bone beast as it was about to attack me. The bones formed into giant claws, one on each side of a massive neck that was now sporting more than a dozen heads, all with extensions reaching out. Whatever was animating the dead, it was definitely doing it with one purpose in mind, and that was to turn other creatures into what it was. The living dead.

With a giant roar, a massive cougar jumped into the center of the fray. It must have been Branson. We stood next to each other, growling together. I wanted to ask him where Matheus was, but I couldn’t talk and we had enough to deal with. Just as quickly as he had arrived, Branson bounded off. I saw that Mae was surrounded. He ran toward her to knock out some of the bones that were gathering around her.

Hilda, Trina, Anita, and Drake all came running. Trina was pale white, looking horrified, and I could only imagine what it would be like to fight in this environment with her children at her side. I’d be more worried about protecting my children than I would be about protecting myself, but right now, we had to protect each other.

“What can we do?” Mae shouted at Hilda.

Hilda created vines and used them to tear apart the bones as they were forming into another beast.

Drake and Anita stood back-to-back and flung what looked like fire balls at the zombie creatures. It was a pretty impressive move. Trina was blowing up the bones and keeping them slightly at bay, but there was no way we were going to be able to fight them off much longer. The clacking of the bones and the high-pitched keening, was bringing the bones to life. More and more were coming from the ground every moment.

Hilda and Trina rushed to my side. “We need to form a circle together. It’s the only way we’re going to survive. We are gravely outnumbered.” Hilda said.

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I didn't think there was any way we were going to survive.

"What happens if one bites us?" Anita shouted over the keening.

"They are being raised by black magic. They are being raised from the dead, so you would die and then be raised." Hilda explained.

These skeletons were zombie makers. If we didn't stop them, they would turn all the humans of Cougar Creek into zombies.

"If these things make it past the wards that protect the cemetery, all of Cougar Creek will be destroyed," Mae said.

"Not just Cougar Creek," Trina said. "It is an infestation of black magic that will turn Cougar Creek and all of the people there into zombies."

"Don't you think it's time we called the Demigods?" Mae asked.

"No!" Everyone said in unison.

"This is especially not the time to call them. They will have this place in lockdown so fast. We know we can solve this problem." Trina stressed.

The massive bone creatures were held together by some sort of twisted form of black magic. Teeth sprang out from their skulls, sharp like fangs. They made me want to retch, but instead I had to fight them. I had to snap and claw at them and do everything in my power to keep them from biting me and the ones I cared about. The

coven was fighting hard, but we were surrounded and there was no end in sight to the bones.

Suddenly I heard a high-pitched whistle. I looked around. There was nobody else reacting to it but I could definitely hear it. I looked at Branson, but he didn't seem to notice it. It was coming from the other side of the glen, on the other side of the bone creatures that were attacking us. I looked at the creature in front of me and it heard it too. It was a sound that only the bone creatures and I could hear. They paused for a moment in confusion and I saw through the trees, at a distance, Matheus. He was in satyr form, his horns out and his hooves sharp. He was playing a pipe.

They responded to the sound of his pipe. It was the only thing that made sense. It didn't seem like there was anyone else's magic here. As much as Matheus was trying with the pipe, I could tell he wasn't about to become the Pied Piper and lead the sinewy bloody bone monsters away from us.

I watched one of the creatures turn toward him, though not in a way that suggested it was going to follow him, either out of the cemetery or back to its grave. The creature was livid and angry and going in for an attack. Mateus was trying to distract another group of bone creatures and didn't see the one coming after him. I let out a loud, vicious bark repeatedly and went charging through a bunch of the boney beasts. I shattered some of them and made my way to the other side.

To Matheus' side.

When I turned to look back, it appeared hopeless. Matheus and I were outside of the circle of bones. Even though more of the creatures were coming toward us, his pipe was keeping them at bay. I knelt down, trying to nudge him to get on me. If he could get on my back, I could push through and get the pipes back into the center of the circle. That way, we could save the coven.

The pipes would keep the skeleton monster at bay for a while, at least long enough for them to get away. Perhaps Branson and I could carry them out to the safety of The Estate. Hopefully keeping the wards would at least keep these diabolical monsters inside the cemetery where they belonged, even if we couldn't keep them in their graves.

As I bowed down, Matheus seemed to understand and he jumped on my back. I took a running charge at the circle and leapt through it, breaking bones that shattered sharply against my shoulders. Matheus stayed on and the second we were inside the circle; he played the pipe louder and louder.

I let out a squealing howl as I felt poison go into my bloodstream.

"She's been bitten," Trina shouted.

In seconds the rest of the coven was around me as I sat there howling. The pain was intense. Anita knelt to put her hand on the wound.

"I'll take the poison out," Anita said. I watched the green sludge of poison rise up into the air and out of my skin.

But even as each molecule was dragged out of my skin, it created so much pain I couldn't stop howling. Finally, out of breath, I lay still and listened to the silence of the night.

The clacking was gone. The keening was gone.

"What happened?" Drake asked. "Why did they stop?"

"Maybe because they bit one of us?" Trina mused.

“No, I don’t think that,” Hilda said. I think it’s her,” she said, pointing at me. I looked around at each of them.

“The howling?” Mae asked.

“Exactly,” Hilda said.

The skeletons all stood at the edge of the clearing, swaying slightly, their bones lightly clicking against each other, but the agitated clack clack that had happened before was gone.

“Bianca, howl again,” Mae said.

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I sat back on my haunches and let out a howl. The bones settled down and calmed themselves.

“Keep doing it, keep doing it,” Anita and Hilda said.

I howled and howled until I couldn’t howl anymore, and with each howl, the bones retreated, until finally they were all back in the ground.

“Can we close the holes up?” Anita asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Mae said. “This is a cemetery, not a boneyard. Everyone should be in the ground with the ground on top of them.”

At first, I thought they were going to ask me to do it, so I trotted off, looking around the cemetery and keeping an eye out for any loose bones that might be needing to be helped back into their graves. It wasn’t until I got over to the corner of the cemetery where the Celtic crosses were that I saw a platform. Suddenly it all made sense.

The pendant, the werewolf, the platform.

I leapt up on the platform and from the top of it, I could see the slopes of the entire cemetery. I could see where the rest of the coven were. I let out a howl, my voice echoing across the cemetery. It wasn’t until the howl died down and I rested my head that I looked down at my front leg and saw that the wound from the skeleton bite was growing angry and infected.

I tried not to show my pain as we made our way back to the house. I had shifted back into human form and the wound was hurting and making my arm was weak.

“It’s not going away,” I said to Hilda, who was walking just behind me.

“It will,” Hilda said. “It can’t fight the double magic that you have inside you,” she said. “It’s second grade dark fairy magic.

“So, are you saying that it can’t turn me into a zombie?” I asked.

“If it had bit you while you were in your human form, then yes, it could. Those cells are weaker, but since you were in your wolf form and we applied the antidote immediately, then you don’t have to worry about it,” she said.

“I will keep an eye on you and decide if you need any more treatments, but the only thing that can stop this type of magic if it does take hold is a dark Fey, and that’s the last thing you want to have around here.”

When we got to the house, Matheus carried me up the stairs to the porch and into the house. We went straight to the red room and he laid me down on the sofa in front of the fire.

“I’m going to be spending a lot of time in the cemetery,” I said, leaning into him.

“I like to think of it as a place where there’s meadows and flowers and deer and wildlife,” Matheus said with a smile. “It’s the kind of place we could hang out in quite a bit of the time.”

“So, you’re going to go down and hang out while I’m sitting on in the cemetery?” I asked.

“I’ll go anywhere with you,” Matheus said.

“I can't just spend my whole time at the cemetery,” I said. “I have a job. I work for the sheriff and I also have a business.”

“Well, it seems like Jane is taking very good care of the business,” Mae said. “If we could make it possible for you to spend more time working for the coven, would you be willing to do that?”

“It seems like I’m destined to do that whether it’s easy or not,” I said. “We were all going to die out there if it wasn’t for the one thing I can do, which apparently is make a lot of noise.” I reached over and squeezed Matheus's hand, grateful for his companionship.

“Working with the coven comes with a stipend,” Mae said. “You don't have to work for the sheriff anymore.”

I snuggled in tight against Matheus’s arm. “Are you sure you’re up for hanging around for all this chaos? Wasn’t it what you said you didn’t like my world?”

“If I don’t stick around to help you, I’m pretty much thinking you’re not going to make it,” Matheus said.

“He actually might come in handy,” Hilda said. “Those satyrs make pretty good bodyguards at the end of the day.”

“Well, he can always be my bodyguard,” I said, pressing myself back against him.

Matheus wrapped his arms around me. And I felt a deep well of contentment inside, sitting in front of the fire with a man who cared about me and who I cared about. It had been a long time since something like that had happened and I really enjoyed it. I had lived in this town for twenty years and had mostly been single the whole time. I wasn’t friendless, but I had nobody close, no connection, no tight group of friends that would always hang out together.

Now I had that.

I was bound to this group. They were my family. Eventually I would bring my son to know these people and we would find out if he was a werewolf also or not. For now, I was content to know that these were my people. They belonged to me and I belonged to them. It had been destined long before by the pendant and I was the happy recipient of my heritage. Finding a home in the family, even though I'd been here for so long, was quite surprising and fulfilling. Where there was family, there was strength. The opportunity to leave the job at the sheriff's office and focus just on being with my friends was exactly what I wanted in life right now. It felt almost like a second set of teenage years.

The supernatural world was giving me semi-retirement and something delightful to do; spend time with my new family and battle the demons and monsters that were surely coming.

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