



Monsters of Midlife

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Description: I've dreamt about dark, ravenous monsters my entire life. Last night I found out...all my darkest dreams are real.

At forty-five I didn't think life had many surprises left, but I was so, so wrong. Monsters do exist and last night their demigod, Ryder, came to me asking for help. I would have been more willing if Ryder wasn't my younger, too-hot-to-handle ex-husband. Apparently, he was hiding a few things during our marriage. I thought it was girlfriends when I divorced him. But according to him he's been protecting the world by keeping his kind at bay. I wouldn't have believed him except he turned into a creepy black monster with fangs, three glowing eyes, shiny black horns, and pointed ears right in front of me! Having Ryder back in my life releases something inside me I didn't realize existed. It's overbearing, angry, and chaotic. And I realize I still have feelings for him, but this time, they're unleashing the monster buried deep inside myself. I'll help him save the world, but the one thing I can't afford to do is fall in love with him again. Not now. Not ever. I'll lose more than my heart, I'll lose my humanity.

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Chapter 1

RYDER

My polished, black leather boot slammed down onto the throat of the slimy creature that bucked beneath my strength. Its slippery mass slithered around my leg, but I brought my sword down in a single deft blow, severing its head from its monstrous body. The remnants of the beast shriveled up into a puddly mess before evaporating into the ethers.

“Goddamn monsters.” I grunted over my shoulder at my right-hand man, Ratchet.

“Ryder, you wouldn’t know what to do with your manly self if you didn’t have the job of keeping all these bastards at bay.” Ratchet threw a grin at me as he plucked another arrow from his quiver and scanned the periphery of the forest.

“Sure, I do. I’d be sitting on a beach under a palm tree, sipping some exotic drink out of a coconut.” Part of me growled at the thought of living in such relaxation; a type of life I had never known. I had tried “normal” life once... it hadn’t worked out so well. Caroline, my wife, got rid of me and I was left with nothing but killing monsters to fill my days. The job I was born to do.

“Watch your back.” Ratchet raised his bow, taking aim with his arrow. I ducked as he steadied and fired at something barreling at us from the shadowed trees. It fell with a thud on the moist dirt. But the creature was not alone. We looked toward the forest and a thundering herd of monsters came pouring out. The masses were headed straight for us. Ratchet let off a volley of arrows as we prepared for the onslaught.

I backed up next to Ratchet and watched as the throng came rushing out of the woods. The rift must have opened just long enough for these monstrosities to come through. Now it was up to us to get them back again before they hurt the local population. Jackson Hole, Wyoming wasn't ready for this type of an invasion.

"They're coming in too fast!" I made an arching curve with my sword and swiped off the grotesque heads of three monsters.

"We're not going to be able to open the rift here again." Ratchet pointed at the bloody monster mess at our feet.

"Fuck." One of the dead monsters was a dybbuk. Rift openings didn't like dybbuk blood. They stayed determinedly shut when monster blood had been shed within their vicinity. It was useful if we wanted to keep a rift shut but it sucked if we needed one open.

"The only way we're going to get them into the rift is to open it somewhere else." Ratchet moaned giving up his bow and arrow for the axe he had strapped on his back.

"We need a to get them to Mount Targhee." I squinted in thought, arms raised in front of me, my sword ready to slay the first monster who attacked. "It's the closest entrance to the rift around here."

"Where the fuck is Mount Targhee?" Ratchet swung his blade, slamming it through monster flesh.

"There's one in the base of that mountain." I pointed northwest to a mountain in the far distance. "There."

Ratchet shot a glare at me. "Are you shitting me?"

“No, and the entrance is on the other side of the mountain range.” A grimace pulled at my face as I buried my sword in monster flesh, feeling its warm guts ooze around my hand. “And halfway up the mountain.”

“How the fuck are we supposed to get these monsters through the pass and into a cave halfway up the mountain?” Ratchet grunted as his axe severed another creature’s head.

I glinted a smile at him. “You forget my demonic friend, there is one way to catch a monster...”

“... and that is to think like a monster.” We said the words together. That’s how long we’d been fighting together. Ratchet was not only my best friend; he was my fighting partner. In every battle he always had my back.

It was a bit odd because he was a demon and they didn’t usually like monsters, but the demon king, Thrain had given him in service to the demigods to show his good faith. They had given him to me. It was a situation I hadn’t been comfortable with, so I had freed him of his obligation. Since then, he had never left my side and now I was pretty sure I couldn’t live without our partnership.

Still, he was a demon, and as much as I trusted him with my life, I always kept it in mind. Demons were wily creatures treading the line between the demigods and the Fae as if their lives depended on it, which in a way they did. With the world divided by the Fae and the Demigods, the demons were left to balance in between; always playing their cards carefully so they didn’t piss off either side.

Ratchet was removed from all that. The lucky son of a bitch got to work with me instead of watching a portal like a typical demon. Instead, he wandered around the edge of rifts sniffing out and destroying monsters. Bringing me in on the extreme cases, which were happening more and more often over the last couple of years.

I reached into the leather pouch I carried on my belt. Any human would think I was flashing the retro fanny pack but most of the supernaturals knew better; this was where we carried our tools. Whatever our job was, whatever our species was, they held tools of the trade. The Fae carried powders, the witches carried potions, and Demigods carried something from everybody. Thank fuck I was a demigod. I pulled out a bright purple potion.

“Not that crap again.” Ratchet wrinkled his nose in disgust and turned away.

“Ah,” I inhaled deeply. “The fine stench of a female monster in heat.” I stifled a chuckle knowing how disgusting the scent was to humans and how much it made monsters go crazy. For me, the child of Typhon, the god of monsters, and a human, it had no impact. It was like the smell of lightly turned soil.

“You cannot tell me you are attracted to the scent of rotten meat mixed with sickeningly sweet moldy apples.” Ratchet insisted, his face puckered up as if he was about to vomit.

“Pull yourself together man. We have to run.” I looked past Ratchet and saw more monsters heading towards us at breakneck speed. I started moving.

Fast.

If we didn’t get out of there, we’d be doomed. The monsters would attach themselves to somebody and then either mentally or physically torture that person until such time that they were put back into the rift by someone like me.

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“Pash lee!” I yelled at Ratchet in Russian, one of the many languages we spoke, one that made me feel comfortable under duress. “We need to move at hyper speed,” I said

“I’ve got something better,” Ratchet said. “Just wait.”

“Just wait and we’ll be surrounded by monsters. I don’t think you want to do that,” I said.

“No, but I have been dating this witch woman.” Ratchet insisted

“That older one you were telling me about?” I asked.

Ratchet shot me a sideways grin. “Oh yes and she’s been teaching me things. New things.”

“I’m sure she has,” I said with a slight smile, shaking my head. Only Ratchet would think of sex at a time like this, surrounded by seething monsters who made the hounds of hell look like lap puppies.

“Grab onto my shoulders,” Ratchet held his hands out in front of him as he began muttering a spell.

“Subito Nakata Lucia!” Ratchet’s eyes were burning fires as they rose above his scalp and drifted out of his ears. I’d always known he was a demon; I’d seen him kill many monsters in a demonic state, but to see him like this so close when I was forced to touch him...

It made a deep dark resonant laughter well up inside me.

The glee of his demonic powers filtered into me and brought out the chaos that wrestled inside me. It allowed me to be the chaotic god I enjoyed being, the creature who didn't worry about any human sacrifice or any human need. I could be just as demonic and crazy as Ratchet and just as dangerous as these monsters.

A blinding light encompassed us as Ratchet's hands clapped together. When the light faded, I could see it moving in ripples and waves across the monsters, making them all docile and calm.

"How the fuck did you do that?" I asked, shaking my head as I scratched my long black hair.

"We've got to hurry," he said. "It only lasts for about thirty minutes and then it'll be gone, and we'll be stuck in the same mess."

"Have you ever even done this before?" I asked.

"I have now," Ratchet said with a grin. "We have yet to see if I've done it successfully."

Chapter 2

CAROLINE

"Oh, my fucking god, you've got to see this one," Laney tipped forward, showing me her phone. I reached out and straightened her hand. The glasses of wine had clearly made her a little askew. Or maybe it was me who was askew. It's not like I hadn't drank half a bottle.

“No way!” I exclaimed looking at the baseball capped older man in the photo. “I’m not looking to be a geriatric nurse! Can’t you find anything even halfway decent? I don’t want some old fuck who I’m going to have to take care of in ten years.”

“You’re so damn picky,” Laney said. “Ryder ruined you. I swear, Caroline. You don’t like guys who are too young. You don’t like guys who are too old. You don’t like guys with tats or piercings.”

“I just...” I moaned. There was no way I could explain.

Laney looked at me with sympathy. “Don’t worry girl, I got it. When I think about your ex-husband, I understand why you would be picky. Damn, he was a nice piece of ass.”

“Could you please not talk about Ryder that way?” I asked. It’s not like I had a hard time remembering my too-hot-to-handle ex-husband.

“I’m sorry,” Laney said. “It’s just, you know, every woman who looked at him was thinking that.”

My heart clenched as I thought about all the women who always stared at my ex-husband. It never bothered me when we were together. Made me feel special; like I had won the lottery. My heart clenched. I needed to not think about him and how fucked up it got or how crazy I got. “I just don’t need my best friend saying shit like that.”

“Me?” Laney asked, pointing a very manicured fingernail at herself. “Oh, no. You got me wrong. I mean, he’s good looking, but he’s an asshole. Total, total asshole. I mean, I hate him. Personally, I think he’s just a piece of shit, especially for cheating. I can’t really blame the girls, even though I’m sure they were assholes, too, because honestly if he wasn’t your husband or your ex-husband, fuck, I would’ve done him

too. But no. I mean just no.”

“Maybe we should cut you off from the wine,” I grumbled. The last thing I needed was my best friend pouring out her secret desires for my ex-husband. “I’m not sure the stuff you’re saying is shit I really wanna know.”

We both started laughing hysterically.

“You know, if he wasn’t your ex-husband, you’d want to do him too,” Laney said.

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We fell against each other, tears boiling in our eyes. Because we both knew she was so damn right. Ryder McKenzie, my not-so-sweet, younger husband.

“I was a fool for falling for him,” I grabbed Laney’s phone and pulled up the dating app she’d been perusing for me. “Come on. Let’s find me a date.”

I pulled it open and started looking at images.

“Swipe left. Swipe left. Swipe left. Swipe left,” I muttered.

It was a sad truth I didn’t know how I was going to recover from my ex-husband. There was no man on the planet who was going to match Ryder for anything.

Except all the missing attributes.

Faithfulness. Monogamy. Being present. Not being a total asshole all the time to everybody we ever met.

Those were all traits that had driven us apart, but what had ultimately caused me to file for divorce was that he was gone, like, all the time. After we got married when I thought his business trips would slow down, they hadn’t. In our first year of marriage, he was home maybe three days per month.

It got worse our second year of marriage.

By the start of our third I was already filing divorce papers.

The worst thing was, he hadn't even put up a fight. What a fucker.

I kind of half-heartedly filed the divorce papers hoping he would fight me on it or say no or tell me he couldn't live without me. After being gone all the time I think I was trying to give him a wake-up call. I'd even asked him to switch jobs time and time and time again, but he'd told me he couldn't. His work was really important.

Instead of quitting his job, he'd asked me to quit mine and move to some podunk town in the middle of nowhere.

Bullshit.

That was never going to happen. I had my life in Boston as a research scientist for oncology and that wasn't about to change.

As a cancer research scientist, I was pretty busy at the fucking lab all the time. All I was asking for was someone to be there when I got home. Apparently, Ryder's work didn't allow it. He worked in the family diamond business and was constantly leaving on trips. Trips I was not invited on. We'd never even gone on a honeymoon or a vacation in the two years we'd been married. By the time I was thirty-nine, it had become too much so I divorced him. That was three years ago, and I was still single. I hadn't had a man come near my privates in years now. I sighed. It was fucking terrible.

"I really need a date," I moaned, "but I'm not sure online is the way to get it."

"Girl, we're not looking for the love of your life," Laney grabbed the phone and started swiping through the people. "We're just looking for a big dick."

I started cracking up. "I think I want more than a big dick."

“Yeah eventually,” she said. “But you’re not even trying to get into this being single thing. You’re spending all your time in the lab. You may be a step closer to finding a cure for cancer but your vag is going to dry up.”

“C’mon. We are doing this one test at the moment my in-vitro assay has shown outstanding killing of patient tumor samples. It was like a lot more than I ever expected! If it’s as effective in the murine models, then I need to start the IND to see if I can start saving patient’s lives for real. I think it’s really going to be a breakthrough.” I didn’t sound as enthusiastic as I should have. The truth was, I was drained by all the lab work I’d been doing.

“Enough,” Laney held up her hand in protest. “I can’t track you when you do the cancer research stuff.”

“I’m impressed you even like me,” I muttered. “Smart women usually don’t like me.”

“What the fuck?” Laney protested.

“I’m calling you smart, asshole,” I looked at her sideways.

Laney was the Director of Marketing at a local engineering firm and one of the smartest people I knew. She hadn’t blinked twice when she found out I was a Doctor of Research in oncology. She had just given me a hug and said I must have a beautiful heart. She didn’t know I was awkward socially and didn’t really like people, so being in the lab looking at petri dishes was pretty much the best thing I had going for me.

In the lonely years of my marriage, it had given me hope that I was having a meaningful life, because after falling head over heels in love with Ryder when I’d been in Rarotonga on vacation, I had really fucked up my life. Ryder was like becoming a millionaire and not being able to spend your money. He was the perfect

husband, but only when he was there. Which, in the few years of our time together, had been extremely limited. It hadn't been a marriage. It was worse than a booty call.

He always said it would get better. That we'd have our time together and he would whisk me away somewhere and have me all to himself. The truth was, like I kept telling him, he could have me all to himself at home. It wasn't like we had kids; we didn't even have a dog because nobody was ever in our home to take care of it. Instead, we had an empty house and an empty marriage.

I took a deep breath. After three years I shouldn't fucking miss him this much.

"Oh, you just got a buzz," Laney said. "Fuck, this guy matched with you."

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“How could he match with me? I haven’t even swiped right on anybody.”

Laney started laughing. “Oh yes you have, darling. You swiped right on like 300 people.”

“No!” I screamed, trying to grab my phone out of her hand, but she was laughing and jumping up in the air, holding the phone higher above me. Since she was five foot eleven, she had a height advantage I couldn’t match, being only five foot three. She typed away with both hands in the air while I jumped around her like a yipping little dog.

“Hey, nice to meet you. Do you want to have a drink tomorrow?” she said as she typed into my phone.

“You’re incorrigible,” I exclaimed. “You could at least show me this guy you’re setting me up with.”

“Yes, and you can thank me for it later,” she said, putting the phone down and showing me a picture of a tall, strapping blond man with a bulging chest and tattoos on both shoulders.

“I told you I didn’t like tattoos,” I complained.

“And I told you you’re not looking for a husband,” Laney giggled. “Our goal is to get you over your fucktard of an ex-husband and get the cobwebs out of your vag.”

“Maybe I like my cobwebs,” I muttered. “Maybe they make me feel safe.”

“As your best friend, I find it highly important to tell you that I cannot stand by and watch your hot sexy ass go to waste in the laboratory, even if you are curing cancer.”

“I hardly think it’s going to waste,” I said.

“He messaged back!” she said, typing into the phone.

“Oh my god, what have you gotten me into?”

“Nothing a brainiac like you can’t handle,” she said. “You’ve got a date tomorrow at two in the afternoon. Don’t be late.” She giggled and handed me back my phone. “And don’t cancel it either, or I will haunt you forever.”

It might’ve been my drunken wine haze, but I glanced at the photo and shrugged.

Fine.

I’d go and meet some guy for coffee tomorrow at two. It was Saturday and I didn’t have anything else to do except go into work, of course.

Chapter 3

RYDER

The crisis at Jackson Hole was solved. Thanks to Ratchet’s ingenuity and my knowledge of where the rifts were, we had managed to get the entire horde back into the rift and I used my powers to seal it.

It was just as the rift sealed that I got the notifications we were needed in Cougar Creek, but what we found there was the last thing I had expected. A demon had my ring.

My wedding ring.

He was lucky I didn't annihilate him. It was only through Ratchet's intervention that nothing had happened to the demon. Ratchet had insisted we got some information from him. But the demon didn't seem to know much. He'd seen some cambions, human/demon hybrids, were fighting over it and he'd gotten it off them. Focusing on currying favor with me, a demigod, he'd delivered the ring.

Now, Ratchet and I were at the Crown Hotel, the only hotel in this two-bit witch-run town. I stood staring at it knowing this wasn't a good thing. If they knew I had a wedding ring, they knew there was another person on the other side of it. If they were smart enough, they would have known how to connect the two pieces and find the other ring.

Nobody was ever supposed to find out about my wife. She was my ex-wife, now, but still, she was supposed to be a secret. I had always kept her sheltered from the supernatural world and when it had gotten too close, I'd given her up. Divorced from my true love.

That was the price.

I couldn't do my job and have a human wife. It was way too dangerous.

"Being the god of monsters sucks," I groaned, flipping the ring around in my hand.

"You're not the god of monsters," Ratchet said blandly, leaning back in his chair. "You're the demigod of monsters."

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“Semantics,” I pointed my finger at him. “God has a nicer ring, don’t you think?”

“Look,” Ratchet said. “I’m not going to argue with my best friend, okay? You know your dad was the god. You’re the demigod. You’ll live a long time, probably forever, but it doesn’t make you a god.”

“What if they have Caroline?” I asked.

Ratchet sat up from his reclined position.

“How could they find out about her?” he asked curiously. “I thought I was the only one who knew about her.”

“You’re the only one I told about her, but they must have known I was gone when Cougar Creek called.”

“And you think they went through your house while we were here?”

I looked at him, my brows knit in consternation. “Either here or Jackson Hole or any of the other thirty places we’ve been in the last twenty days fighting monsters.”

“Well, they found you in Cougar Creek,” Ratchet pointed out. “That demon didn’t seem like too bad of a fellow. Definitely trying to help you out. There’s one thing I don’t understand, if the witches didn’t want demigods to know, why did they call you out here?”

“They didn’t want the demigods involved.” I explained.

“You’re a demigod,” Ratchet rolled his eyes.

“The Demigod Corporation,” I spelled it out for him.

“You know a lot of people like the DGC,” Ratchet said. “As a matter of fact, I used to be in the DGC, an officer of the court and everything.”

“Until you realized it was much more fun to hang out with monsters,” I said.

“Do you know if they have Caroline?”

“That’s what we’re going to have to figure out.” I could feel my heart racing at the thought of Caroline being in the hands of the cambions.

“Does she even know what you are?” Ratchet asked.

“No,” I said, pressing my lips together. “It’s always been my goal that she will never find out what I am. She undoubtedly hates me enough as it is, much less letting her know she was married to a monster for a couple of years. It’s not information she needs.”

That would be the last thing she would want. I had kept it a secret from her for the couple of years we were together, telling her I traveled for business, but it had gotten too much for her because I’d been gone so many times.

My actual job was to stop the monsters from infiltrating New Attica from the rift. Sometimes I would go outside New Attica and deal with Fae country but in principle I was focused on New Attica. Still, I would spend weeks away from home gathering a crowd of monsters to deliver back to the rift. My father, Typhon, was the god of monsters, so I was able to hold a certain amount of sway with the monsters and able to live in New Attica.

One day I had returned home from a trip and Caroline was suddenly convinced I was having an affair. That could never happen. She was my soul mate. My one true love. I could never have her again, but it didn't change how I felt. The only affair I ever had was being married to my work.

It was hard protecting human lives from ravaging monsters, and sometimes when I was alone with Caroline in our bed and relaxing, I would feel guilty. I knew there were monsters breaking through the rifts and coming into earth to create chaos and wreak havoc even as we lay there together. It was my job to stop the chaos. Every time I took a rest and respite from fighting the chaos, it seemed to get worse. It required all my attention. So, when Caroline had filed for divorce, I hadn't fought her on it. I'd let her file the papers and let her think I had fallen for some other woman.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. From the first moment I saw Caroline, there had never been another woman for me. Even now when we'd been apart for years, three years, one month, two days, and half an hour to be precise, even though we were apart, we were still together in my head and my heart. I would always belong to her. There would never be another.

"Have you narrowed down where she might be?" Ratchet asked.

"We don't even know if they have her," I countered. "I need your help to figure out what happened and if she's okay."

"Why don't you just call her?" Ratchet shrugged.

I deadpanned him. "What am I supposed to say? Hi Caroline? Any half demons from hell chasing you lately?"

"That would work," Ratchet nodded like I was being serious.

“No. That is not going to happen.” I pointed out. “She doesn’t know about the supernatural world and she’s never going to.”

“So, you want me to call her?” Ratchet offered.

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“And say what?” I asked.

“Anything. We’re just trying to see if she’ll pick up, right? If she’s okay?”

I glared at him; not sure I liked this idea.

“I can tell her I have secretly undying love for her,” Ratchet grinned.

A shot of adrenaline ran through me and shot through my arms; I was gripping him by the throat before I even realized it.

“Kidding,” Ratchet choked the words out.

I released him. “No one can find out Caroline’s my wife.”

Ratchet shook his head, his finger massaging his neck. “She’s your ex-wife.”

“Would you quit correcting me on everything?” I asked in irritation.

Ratchet looked at me with a quirky side grin. “Just trying to keep you honest, mate.”

“Why don’t you figure out which cambions are the assholes who stole my ring and then we’ll go from there,” I said.

“I’ve been sending out feelers all morning to the different cambions I know and the different headhunters,” Ratchet said. “There’s one here in Cougar Creek? Antonio. He was around when they took your ring. He might know.”

“I thought about that,” I said. “Let’s pay him a visit.”

Chapter 4

CAROLINE

I stood in front of the mirror and tried not to glare at myself. I smiled attempting to look relaxed and happy, all those things men wanted in a woman. Well, let’s be real it wasn’t just what men wanted in a woman, it was what people wanted in anybody they hung out with. They wanted someone who was lighthearted and able to help them find joy. I was the farthest thing from that. I had only ever been passionate about two things in my entire life. One was science and the other was Ryder. I took a deep breath pushing the sickness in my stomach down. After three years the thought of Ryder shouldn’t make me sick to my stomach. It did more than that. It made me damp between the legs and made my heart ache. The part that made me sick to my stomach was the knowledge I would never see him again.

I needed to move on.

I had hoped once I realized he wasn’t going to contest the divorce we could at least, you know, see each other once a month or once every two months when he was in town. But after he signed the paperwork he left, and I hadn’t seen him since. He was probably already shacked up with some other woman or whoever he was seeing at the moment. I mean, the truth was, I didn’t know anything about the time he spent away from me. He could have a woman in every port for all I knew. It was pretty much what I expected.

I had to move on. I had to get him out of my system, and I had to start taking care of my emotional health. Though, as I looked in the mirror, it was clear three years in the lab hadn’t done me a damn bit of good. My skin was pasty white and sagging in places I didn’t want it to sag. Like everywhere. Who wants any part of their skin to

sag? I had filled out a little bit in my waistline. At forty-two, I wasn't suffering any signs of menopause yet. Perimenopause wasn't even on my radar. The only thing that happened was I got skinnier, because after I realized I was never going to see Ryder again, life had lost its color. And there'd been many nights when I had questioned whether giving him up for those couple of nights a month had been worth it. Maybe those two nights were enough. Maybe they were better than nothing. Maybe I was just pathetic.

I sighed, dejected at my state.

The stress hadn't done me any good. I had lost weight, my hair had thin gray lines running through it. I found it hard to believe anybody would find me attractive.

I looked back at the online profile of the man I was meeting at that afternoon.

He looked about fifty, blond with graying temples and from his pictures, at least he had a great physique. Though not on par with Ryder's, it definitely reminded me of him. My stomach roiled again as I took a deep breath trying to calm down.

"This is what you need," I encouraged myself. "This is what you have to do to move on. Ryder is not coming back, and you need to start meeting other people. And you're not going to meet them in the lab."

I straightened out my skirt and rearranged my blouse a bit. I was sure I was overdressed, but I didn't really know what else to wear. My typical clothes were jeans and a T-shirt or yoga pants and a T-shirt. Even what I wore in the lab. Nobody gave a shit. Nobody was interested in my looks; they were only interested in my brain.

"This is going to have to do," I said, taking a deep breath and straightening my back.

I wore what I wore for my annual review and hoped he liked the black skirt and white

blouse. I tried to dress up a bit with pumps, but when I looked in the mirror, I looked a little too dressy and I knew it, so I swapped them out for a pair of flats.

It didn't take long to get down to the Boston market where we had agreed to meet for a drink. I walked into the old town hall where Paul Revere had announced the red coats were coming. It was exactly how I felt with this guy. He was like an invader into my private world. An enemy coming to wage war on my private space. I chewed my lower lip for a second. If Laney had her way, I'd be sleeping with the guy this afternoon. I had made sure I wasn't going to do that, however, by not trimming or shaving anything. No way was I going to have an afternoon quickie.

Those cards were not even on the table. I glanced back at the photo. If this guy was anything like his photo, though, he wouldn't be a bad one to break my dry spell after Ryder.

The pain in my stomach started again. I pushed it away. I couldn't keep moping after Ryder for the rest of my life. He was gone.

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I took a deep breath and turned away from the mirror. I pulled my curly brown hair back into what resembled a certain amount of order with a couple of hair clips. I looked like a total nerd, or like a librarian. Nothing was geekier than a cancer research scientist.

It didn't matter what I wanted. There was no way this guy was going to be interested in me anyhow.

I pushed my way through the crowds in the town hall to find the pub. I hadn't been out here in ages. Typically, this was an area where people came for tourist summer excursions with their children. It wasn't my scene. I was a homebody. I didn't like crowds. I didn't like people in general, so I spent time in the lab.

I stopped for a moment, shooting Laney a text. "Why did you pick the Boston market?" I asked. She started to type something out and I was staring at my phone avidly when I heard a deep calm voice off to my left.

"Caroline?" The man said.

I jumped as I turned to look at him and my eyes grew wide. This guy was dangerously hot.

"Oh, hi," I said, trying desperately to remember his name as I stared at him with my stomach in knots.

He extended his hand and shook my sweating palms. "I hope I didn't startle you," he said.

“No, no,” I lied wondering desperately how I was going to get through the next hour talking to this guy.

Chapter 5

RYDER

We left the Crown Hotel and decided to walk over to Antonio’s place, which was on the far side of town, far being a relative term. It only took us a minute to get to the bridge that ran over Cougar Creek itself.

“There’s a whole lot of demigod power working on that river,” I said in a quiet tone. I glanced up at O’Halloran’s bar with its rooftop terrace. I could see Helen’s blond hair shining in the light.

“It’s what you call using your powers for good,” Ratchet said.

“We use our powers for good,” I said. I wasn’t in the mood to be questioned, certainly not now; we had other things to deal with. “We need to get to Antonio. He’s either going to be at his place with Chloe or he’s going to be up at The Estate.”

“My money is that he’s at The Estate,” Ratchet said.

“That’s where I’d be,” I said. The truth was I never wanted to be anywhere except with Caroline or fighting. When I wasn’t with her, I wanted to punch the shit out of everything I came into contact with. With her, I felt so peaceful and so loved and so calm; it made it hard to do my job. I did things others considered unsavory, but they didn’t bother me; my human self could easily justify the good that came from sending monsters back to the rift. It was not like I was killing them. Their bodies just disappeared here and returned to Torschpank, the native home for monstrous creatures, on the other side of the rift. Or sometimes they got stuck in the rift. That’s

where the danger was. Monsters in the rift liked to cross to the human side and see how long they could get away with staying over here causing havoc. That was my job to see them back. Fortunately for me, there were a whole contention of monsters who knew that sometimes, if you entered the rift or crossed it, well, sometimes you never came back.

“Why don’t you go up to the estate and I’ll go check out Chloe’s house,” I said. “We’ll find out if anyone’s heard anything about her or these demons. So, help me God, if anything happens to her, everyone’s going to pay.”

“I have no doubt,” Ratchet agreed.

I shot him a glare, but it had no effect on him. He turned around and in a whisp of fire he was speeding towards The Estate. I walked leisurely over the creek, looking down into the cool blue waters of the Styx, knowing there were souls floating in the river but it was so well guarded by the powerful magic of the Cougar Creek Coven, they would never escape. Cougar Creek was a supernatural tourist attraction now, with everyone coming down, not just to see the Styx flowing above ground through the town, but to meet the Cougar Creek Coven. Their ability to thwart the demigoddess Styx and the Morel and bring peace had not gone unnoticed. There was no doubt in my mind that the powerful magic they had embodied had attracted supernatural visitors and created almost like a supernatural boom town.

The Witch’s Brew Café was buzzing as I walked by, but I kept my head low. I didn’t want to draw too much attention to myself. I wanted to find out if there was a mark on Caroline, but I had to do it discreetly. I needed somebody who knew everybody but who wouldn’t let it be known I was interested in the life of a human.

Antonio was the last one who would ever tell his secrets. I had met Antonio in the wars in the deserts. I’d gone out to the gulf war because battles always attract rifts. The fabric that separates us from the monster world always gets agitated by large

swathes of death. Knowing the war was breaking out meant we needed to get out there and stop it. For years and years, I just remembered fighting day and night against the beasts with hardly any respite. It was just fucking sand and hedonistic monsters taking advantage of it to terrorize humans.

Antonio answered at the first knock as if he was expecting me. How, I don't know, but he seemed to have a sense of exactly the moment I would arrive.

"Hola amigo," he said, greeting me with familiarity. I glared at him, not wanting to recognize the term of endearment. Didn't seem to stop Antonio from treating me like I was his long-lost brother.

"Where is Chloe?" I asked, looking around their house. She was one human I was wary of. Well, she wasn't human anymore; she been turned into a vampire while on the hunt of a case she'd gotten mixed up in, but it turned out she was one of the members of the Cougar Creek Coven. She'd helped them build their foundation and stay together through the hardest times. From the things I had seen with them, the challenges and rewards had both been great.

Antonio had saved Chloe's life and stayed by her side ever since. I swallowed sharply at the thought of it. He had stayed by her side. If only I could do that with Caroline. I would never leave her but the world I was from was so much more dangerous than the mundane world she lived in I couldn't expose her to the supernatural world. If there was one thing, I knew about battling evil of any kind, the larger you flew off in anger, the more destructive you were. That was the only way to deal with true evil. It was called karma, calculated. Unfortunately for me, it was my specialty. Dishing out karma to the monsters who tried to destroy earth one person at a time.

"This ring was given to me by a demon," I said. "I want to know how he got it."

"You put a lot of faith in me." Antonio took the ring from my hand. "I like it,"

“We’re doing the same job,” I said. “You go after rogues just like I do, I simply specialize in monsters.”

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“That begs the question,” Antonio inspected the ring. “Since you are the one chasing the monsters and you are half monster, who is chasing you?”

There was a knock on the front door. We exchanged a look.

“My car is out front,” Antonio pointed out. “It would be weird if I didn’t answer.”

I nodded toward him. My work with the Cougar Creek Coven had been a little more frequent as of late, so it wouldn’t be surprising if I was seen in town.

Antonio looked over his shoulder when he got to the door and looked out the peep hole. “It’s Jane, the psychic lady of the coven.”

My brow knitted in a frown, but who was I to turn Jane away?

“Let her in.” The door opened and Jane’s lithe figure stepped across the threshold, her dark skin was warm in the room, but a shiver went down my spine and a sense of foreboding filled me as she approached me.

“They want the rings,” she said without hesitation.

“The rings?” I asked, trying to keep my face blank. No one was ever supposed to know about the rings at all.

“The ring you were given back by Ratchet.” Jane waved her hand dismissively at my desire to keep the truth from her. “You are lucky the demon owed him such a favor.”

“What do you know about the ring?” I asked.

“I know there are two of them.” Jane smiled, her hands waving down any rising nerve I might be having. “Do not fret. This is Cougar Creek. We know how to keep secrets. However, it is imperative to the protection of the world that you keep those two rings safe.”

I could feel the blood draining from my face. They had gotten ahold of one ring, my ring, the one I thought I was keeping safe. How hard would it be for them to take Caroline’s ring?

“I should never have left it with her,” I murmured.

Antonio and Jane exchanged a look.

“Wherever you left that ring, you need to get it,” Jane said. “It isn’t safe.”

Caroline was in danger. My skin prickled with anxiety and chaos flowed through my muscles.

“Steady,” Antonio cautioned.

Jane stretched out a hand and took my wrist. Her energy flowed soothingly over me, but it wasn’t enough.

I needed to protect Caroline.

“I have to go,” I choked the words out, pulling my hand away from Jane, craving the chaos that would give me the power to face her again. Angst flowed through every particle of my being.

“I think I should go with you,” Antonio offered.

“He has me,” Ratchet burst through the door, sensing the chaos as it flowed through me. He was attuned to me and from wherever he was, when he felt that chaos in me, he appeared.

“You’re not going,” I grumbled, spinning on my heel, and opening a portal in front of me. I stepped through without hesitation and closed it swiftly behind me. If I was going to see Caroline again, I was going to be alone when I did it.

Chapter 6

CAROLINE

“Magnus,” he said with a smile, realizing I didn’t remember his name.

My skin flushed a bright red as he stared at me, his eyes narrowing.

“So seriously you’re a cancer research scientist?”

“That’s what it says on my job title,” I laughed. “Just kidding. It says Associate Director of Discovery, Cell Therapy Innovation.” I had long ago stopped worrying about what my title at work was; I was much more concerned with the value of the data I was delivering. It had seemed like I was a pure scientist until I went into the pharmaceutical field, and we were looking for ways to really improve medicine that real people took. Suddenly I started to care a lot more about that than I did about climbing up a ridiculous corporate ladder. There was a rung above me that had real responsibility on it and then there was my rung where I had a group of people working for me. That I liked. I could help guide them and we got results in bite-size pieces. It was always bite-size pieces. With any luck we’d be able to take those bite size pieces and one day find a cure for cancer. We just had to keep moving from one

small research question to the next.

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I glanced up at Magnus. That's what he was doing right now, researching me. I recognized the look on a person's face, somewhat glazed over, clearly calculating something behind the clouded eyes.

"Are you profiling me?" I asked.

"I might be," Magnus tilted his head to the side.

"I think it's supposed to be a date, not an interrogation," I pointed out.

"What's the difference?" He looked like he didn't actually know the answer and wanted me to enlighten him.

"Well." I decided to play along. "An interrogation is supposed to be scary and a date, well, it's not supposed to be scary."

"Scared?" he asked. "Are you scared?"

"Should I be?" I retorted. I wasn't getting any sense he was threatening me. It was more like he was trying to be charming and my skills were super rusty, which was fairly possible. Or else he was really bad at this. "Do you go out on dates much?"

"This is my first one," he said, not looking in the slightest bit embarrassed about that fact.

"You're lying," I said. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure you out."

“Why do you say that?” Magnus’ face creased, genuinely puzzled.

“Well, it’s obvious you’re not American,” I said, based on his light yet persistent accent. “I don’t know what it’s like where you come from. But I have a feeling there’s still some type of ritual which would constitute a date prior to consummation.” I knew when I said a word like consummation to somebody, I should blush bright red and be properly embarrassed but I didn’t feel that way at all. I really just didn’t care. I was way too old for that, way past worrying. Besides with someone like this he was way too hot for me and way too young. He looked younger even than Ryder. I couldn’t tell by how many years, but I didn’t want to get to know him well enough to find out.

“Where I come from, everything is arranged,” Magnus said.

My lips twitched in irritation. There were so many things wrong with that; where was I even going to start? It treated people like they were objects made to be controlled and sold and bought depending on the price of the dowry. I knew there were a lot of different cultures that did it across the world, but I wasn’t really fond of any of them. I wasn’t a huge believer in falling in love and getting married, but at least the responsibility of keeping the marriage together was on the married couple, not on the extended family who would always have their opinion in the couple’s business.

He shrugged, his massive shoulders moving up and down in abrupt jerks. “You can’t change the world,” he said. “Not from where you are sitting.”

“Where you’re sitting is so much better?” I asked. “At least I’m trying to do something. What are you doing?”

“I’m doing my own level of research,” Magnus said. “To try to make a better future. Isn’t that all you’re trying to do?”

“A brighter future for who?” I asked. “Mankind? Or yourself?”

“In the words of the immortal Michael Jackson, I believe I need to start with the man in the mirror,” Magnus smiled.

There was something about the smile I didn’t like; it put my back on edge. I side stepped his hand as we moved to our table. I wasn’t very comfortable. I had to get out of here; this wasn’t going to work. It had been a crazy idea anyhow. I couldn’t go on a date and wipe my passion for Ryder out. It was wishful thinking but ultimately not possible. Every moment I spent with Magnus just made me miss Ryder more. It was as if I could smell his scent on the air. I hated that I could never get Ryder out of my brain, but sitting here with Magnus, it only brought him more to the foreground. I stood up, bumping the table and accidentally toppling over the salt and pepper shakers. Nervously I reached forward and grabbed some salt with my right hand and threw it over my left shoulder. “Reverse any bad attention this has garnered to me,” I murmured.

“What the hell are you doing?” Magnus asked roughly.

“Oh, nothing,” I said, suddenly feeling completely self-conscious.

“Don’t tell me you’re superstitious?” Magnus’ mouth tightened in restrained mirth.

“Not really,” I said. “It’s just a habit picked up from my parents.”

“Which parents?” Magnus asked.

I tilted my head to the side and looked at him closely. “What do you mean which parents?” My words slid slowly out of my mouth as my fingers drummed on the table. How could he possibly know?

“I don’t know. You just struck me as someone who had a lot of people trying to parent them,” he murmured smoothly.

I frowned at him. My mother was my birth mother, but my father was actually my stepfather and had adopted me when my mother had given birth to me. It was a closely guarded and protected secret because I was grateful that the con man who used to beat my mother was not actually related to me by flesh and blood.

“I’m going to go home,” I said, holding out my hand. “It was nice to meet you, Magnus. “

He didn’t seem fazed I was ending our date so quickly. “Catch you soon?” He gave me a sideways grin as if my early departure was all part of his plan.

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“Did you have an arranged marriage?” I asked.

“She died,” Magnus said quietly, his fingers wrapping around the saltshaker.

“Sorry,” I said, shuffling my feet slightly as I stood there awkward and on edge.

“It was a long time ago.”

Nodding, I scooped up my purse, dropped my hand which he had not bothered to take and moved away from the table.

First post-divorce date was a total bust. I cringed all the way home, as I undressed and even as I crawled into bed. I had no idea how I was ever really going to start dating again.

Shadows had infiltrated my dreams for so long it was almost a welcome place for me to go to as I fell into slumber. It was as if I laid back in a pillow with darkness and then slowly sank down into it, hands coming up to pull me into the dim shade where I could find rest. The dreams always changed depending on my mood. If I was anxious, so were the creatures who haunted me. I could feel them, tangible against my skin, even though I couldn’t see them. If I was happy, so were they. This darkness was a comfortable place that mirrored my emotions and helped me be centered in myself. Only lately the darkness had changed. As I slipped into slumber after my date with Magnus, I could feel something tugging at me, pulling my psyche toward the darkness quickly. It was how I had always felt around Ryder. Whether we had made love or not, falling to sleep with him was like sinking into obscurity with his arms around me, holding me, comforting me, helping me feel safe and secure.

Ryder was gone.

He had left. Now the darkness was just black and all-encompassing, a tomb where I lay at night waiting for the dawn. As I lay there now, something was wrong; something was off. I rolled over on my side, trying to get more comfortable and that's when I saw it: a small light in the corner of the room. It wasn't a bright promising "come here" light, the one I imagined death was like. This was a red glow in a black sheen. Chills slipped over my skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind it. I sat bolt upright. "Who's there?" My voice squeaked as I asked the question, and I was terrified to know the answer.

Chapter 7

RYDER

There were a lot of skill sets monsters had that humans didn't. We could cross the rift which allowed us access to our own home and others. We could shift in and out of monster form, taking on human form so we didn't look so hideous or shocking to humans or Fae or whatever other creatures we come across. The gift that was really our number one asset was the fact we could see in the dark. Perhaps it was the one thing that allowed us to do all the other things. It allowed us to see in the rift to navigate it safely. It allowed us to sense our own bodies as we were shifting and make sure we reformed in the right shape. However, seeing in the dark helped me the most now as I stood silently in Caroline's room waiting for her to wake up, waiting for her to open her eyes and to see me.

It didn't have to be like this. I didn't have to let her know I was here, and I knew that's what Ratchet would advise me to do if I would have let him. Still, the same yearning, driving desire to be with her, talk to her, engage with her, connect with her was pulling at me and driving me to show myself to her. As a monster I was able to live and breathe in the shadows. It was possible to never be seen. But with Caroline, I

wanted her to see me. I wanted to show her all of me, even the dark, scary parts. Somehow, I felt like it would heal me and make me whole. Help me to understand myself better and feel more at place on earth.

Only, if she knew who and what I really was, she would be enveloped by a terror from which she could never escape. Monsters had that effect on humans.

Now, in the dim silence of the room, Caroline lay on the bed, drifting into sleep. Her brown curly hair splayed against the pillow. I'd been resting in the shadows under her bed for a while, waiting for her to come to her room. I could've waited in the living room, but I knew she wouldn't spend time in there tonight; she would come straight to bed. She always wanted to go to bed early, around 8:30 or 9:00, so it was pretty much past her bedtime as it was.

I wanted to be in her room, watch her undress, and watch her sleep. Then, when she was the most vulnerable, I wanted to reveal myself to her. I swallowed, knowing my thoughts would have to live forever unfulfilled. I could never have her again. I wanted Caroline always. There was something about being around her that made my cock hard and made me want to reveal my inner most self. She had always had that effect on me, from the first moment I'd seen her dancing on the floor at the festival. Some monsters had come through the rift and gone to Coachella. I'd taken in a task force with Ratchet, and we'd gone undercover to go and find where they were. They were easy to spot, they were the most debauched people at the event. Caroline was not one of them. She was enjoying the music and sipping water the whole time, ignoring the younger crowd full of depravity and danger. Still, she seemed quite in her element, comfortable grooving to the music; she just wasn't partaking of any of the harder stuff. And I mean harder than water. The way the music had rippled over her body and the way she had swayed with the beat had caught my attention like no one ever had. She understood what the music was saying to her soul and there was something about the way she moved. It made one word rise up in me so strong and so forcefully I knew I would never be free from it.

Mine.

It was the word I thought every time I saw her. Every. Single. Time.

Mine.

Even now after years of not seeing her. Years of not even being close to her. Watching her lie there drifting into sleep There was only one truth.

She was mine.

I could feel the hackles rise on my neck.

Even though I couldn't have her, she was mine and she would always be mine, regardless of what happened. It didn't matter who she was with, there were something scorched in metal during the hot molten moments when we were together. Those moments bound us together and could never be unbound. I didn't know if she could feel it or not; she wasn't supernatural, but I could feel it. I knew I would never escape her, any more than she would ever escape me. It was probably something she didn't realize, since as a human she kept trying to logic herself out of it.

It didn't matter.

We couldn't be together and at this point, it was better if she didn't realize how much we were bound. I could never fulfill the needs she had as a human, to be here day and night, through thick and thin. I'd be there for her, but I had a calling to do my job to and that meant a lot of lonely nights for her.

I breathed in deeply, sucking in the air that was tinged with honey blossom and soap. It smelled of her. All I wanted to do was lie down next to her and bury my face in her hair and wrap my arms around her body.

She sat bolt upright; her fear pungent in the cool night air.

“Who’s there?”

Her words startled me, and I shut my inner light off, knowing even as I did, I had been teasing her and myself by letting it glow, hoping secretly she would sense me and reach out to me. It was a need I had; for her to see me. I needed her to reach out for me. I could not do it on my own. I could not reach out to her. It was not fair to her, but if she needed me, then I had to show up.

I knew my logic was a little bit twisted, but whatever. It worked for me at the moment and that’s all that mattered.

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I retracted the long black horns that twined in my hair and pulled back my fangs. She needed to see me in my human form, not as a monster, or even a semi monster

“Ryder.” She breathed my name and it was like a thousand butterflies flew across my chest, my heart thrumming at the sound of her voice. How long had it been since I’ve heard those dulcet tones? Now I let them roll over my body like a hot shower after a long swim in a cold pool making my appendages tingle. All of them.

Chapter 8

CAROLINE

“Ryder’s back,” I hissed the words into my phone, trying to get closer to the camera so Laney could hear me easily, but not so close that my nose looked like a balloon.

“Seriously?” Laney asked, her eyes dancing and her mouth twitching into a grin. “How back?”

“Not that back,” I said. “But he was in my house.”

“What do you mean he was in your house?” Laney leaned into the phone, her gaze wide.

I chewed my lower lip. “Like I woke up and he was in my bedroom.”

“Your bedroom!” Laney exclaimed. Her mouth curving as her jaw went slack. “Did you two do the nasty?”

“Oh, hell no,” I said. “I am never ever, ever doing that man again, never, not in a million years. Not if he was the last man on earth.”

“We’ve all heard those lines before,” she murmured.

“But I mean them.” I hadn’t slept with Ryder in three years and I didn’t plan on starting now. “He’s like a drug and there’s no way I’m taking a hit.”

“Yeah, but he comes in a nice package.” Laney cocked an eyebrow at me.

“Fine, have him,” I said, almost as a challenge to myself. Could I handle it if Laney was sleeping with my ex? I wasn’t sure but I felt a decided sense of relief when she shook her head, laughing.

“Oh, there is no way in hell I’m going to ride your horse. Sisters before misters and all that shit.” she chuckled, then her face grew serious. “If he wasn’t doing you, then what was he doing in your room?”

“He said he came to check on me. I don’t know, maybe he just needed a place to stay. I mean, he didn’t look rough or anything. He looked quite put together actually. Jeans, leather jacket, T-shirt kind of classic, right?” I commented

“Seriously, I think that guy could look good in nothing,” Laney said. “I mean not like I want to see him in nothing, but you know what I mean...he could wear a bag and still look good. That’s what I meant to say not about him wearing nothing. I’m definitely not sitting around thinking about your ex-husband but –”

“Laney,” I interrupted her, raising my hand. “Stop. I get it you fantasize about my ex. I would too if he wasn’t my ex. He’s hot, he’s got that whole good guy, rocker vibe thing going for him, but that’s not really the problem we’re trying to solve right now. The problem we’re actually trying to solve is what he was doing in my house.”

“Well, you told him to leave, right? Or is he still there?” Laney asked.

“He was gone when I woke up this morning,” I said. “I don’t know if he stayed the night or not. It’s not like I checked the couch for indentations. But the house did smell of him this morning.” A slight sigh escaped me as I thought about his pepper and copper aroma.

“His scent,” Laney said, shaking her head. “Man, I need a man who’s got a scent. The ones I get all smell of beer and peanut butter.”

“So, what am I going to do?” I asked her.

“You’re seriously asking me?” Laney said with the lascivious grin. “I’m just going to tell you to do it. Is that so wrong?”

“Yes. I already told you that was wrong. I can’t do it,” I said. She was my best friend; I could tell her anything. “I told you he’s like a drug. I mean it. When he gets close it’s not just wanting him, it’s like I feel this rise inside of me. I get feral like an animal. And nothing will scratch my itch, if you know what I mean, except him.”

“Dayum.” Laney chewed on her lower lip. “I’ll get a side helping of that, supersized.” She shook her head as if to clear it. “Right, but that’s not it, because it’s not what you’re doing. You are going to be abstinent from riding that horse. You are going to be a pedestrian. You are going to walk and be happy about it, okay?”

“Exactly. Because I’ll get sucked into him again and you don’t know what it’s like. He’ll be all running around and gone for weeks on end. Weeks! Not even days but weeks. I’ll be left alone. And somebody coming to you and telling you that you’re the world and then they disappear for weeks... My nerves can’t take that. My ego can’t take that. It just totally sucks and I’m not going to get sucked into him again.” I took a big sigh. The worst part was, I didn’t even think he wanted to be with me again. For

some reason he was just checking in on me.

“What does he want?” Laney asked.

“I don’t know. He didn’t say. I mean he said he was checking on me. Something to do with the family business,” I muttered.

“He’s still working for the family?” Laney asked.

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I rolled my eyes. “Like he’d work anywhere else.”

He was stuck in the family diamond business, and he couldn’t get out. The thing was, he never even tried even after I pleaded with him. It was worse than that, though, he never even took me into confidence to tell me more about his family’s diamond business.

“You do deserve more than that,” Laney said, her gaze serious. “You know I only want the best for you. I’ll come over after work today and if he’s there I’ll scare him out. I’ll let them know we’ve gone gay and he has to do both of us. That should frighten him away.”

I couldn’t stop the laughter from bubbling up in me. I loved Laney. She was as irreverent of herself as she was of everything around her; it wasn’t disrespectful, it was more just playful, as long as everybody understood it. They didn’t always and that’s when she hurt feelings, but I got her and she got me.

“I think we can handle this like civilized adults.” I wiped the mirth from my face. “He didn’t put up a fuss when I asked for a divorce. I don’t expect him to complain about leaving now. It’s been three years.”

“Well, he showed up for a reason,” she pointed out. “You don’t know what that is exactly and he’s most likely never going to give you a straight answer, because well he never has done, has he?”

As much as I hated to do admit it, she was right. I nodded my head in agreement. He had never done that; he had never been honest and forthright with me.

“All right, look. Let’s not make this weird, but do come over after work,” I said. “I have the strangest feeling he’s going to be around.”

“No problem,” Laney said with a grin. “I’ll bring the wine; you bring the whine.”

She ended the video call before I could give her the finger.

I stared at my phone quietly and tapped the buttons on it to pull up Ryder’s number. With him being in my house last night, I was drawn to him again. I wanted to call him. It felt normal, like ‘see if you wanted me to pick up anything on the way home from work’ kind of normal. I shook my shoulders viciously. I was definitely going to need Laney around if Ryder was showing back up in my life again. How was I going to withstand his charm, his magnetic pull and those dark brooding eyes? The way he looked at me like he wanted to devour every particle of my being and bathe in my spirit. I was going to need every little bit of help I could get if I was going to resist Ryder from returning to my life.

Chapter 9

RYDER

I walked through Caroline’s living room, what had once been our living room, taking in every single item in the room, even the empty spaces on the walls where pictures used to be. She had taken them all down. I don’t know why, but that annoyed me. It made me want to punch the wall where our wedding picture used to be.

My fingers twitched.

This was where I was supposed to be rational. This was supposed to make it all make sense. Of course, we couldn’t be together and of course we would split up. A monster and a human weren’t a logical match. And of course, she would take our pictures off

the walls; that's what anyone would do.

I inhaled deeply and slowly exhaled through pursed lips. No one understood what it was like to be a monster living in a human world. I tried so hard to fit in, to look like a normal human being, to do all the things humans did or even the things supernaturals did, like care about each other and worry about each other.

It didn't come naturally to a monster.

I only cared about two things in life: getting monsters back to their side of the rift and her. I didn't know why I was wired that way, but I was and I knew it. Unfortunately, those two things didn't go together and instead of choosing her, I chose the path that was laid out for me. The thing I was born to do: protect Earth from the monsters. A low growl rumbled in my chest, irritation brewing just beneath the surface. I closed my eyes, letting the smell of the house permeate through me. It smelled of dark wood and chicken broth with a hint of a floral bouquet drifting around the top.

It smelled like home.

My fist clenched at my side. At least there was no other smell of any other man around. No other supernaturals either. There was just her. I ran my hand through my hair, listening to the rain beat against the windows.

"This isn't healthy." Ratchet's voice cut through the air.

I opened my eyes, my body unmoving.

"I don't remember inviting you." I commented.

His laughter was rich. "If I was waiting for an invitation from you, we wouldn't even know each other. Instead, we have this amazing friendship where we spend tons of

time together and provide each other with a strong shoulder to lean on times of need.”

I rubbed my chin, staring at him. “Don’t you have somewhere else you need to be?”

“No,” Ratchet said. “I don’t believe I do.”

“Pity,” I murmured.

“The DGC sent me to mind you, so hanging out with you is actually my job,” Ratchet said with a smirk.

“Clever bastards,” I said. “I’ve never figured out why you listened to them so completely. You never go against them.” I looked at him curiously. “What do they have over you? “

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Ratchet's laughter filled Caroline's living room. "I think they are more concerned with what you are actually doing here. I thought we discussed this. Being here isn't a good idea."

"Then don't be here," I snarled. "I don't take instructions from you. You can keep an eye on me all day, but I don't take commands from them or from you."

Ratchet held up his hands and backed away from me a step. "Not doing anything, brother. I'm not worried about the job. I only took it with your permission, so it is what it is. Maybe if you told me what we were looking for I could help you look for it. We could get out of here quicker."

I took a deep breath and exhaled. I wasn't paranoid, but I didn't like trusting others. It wasn't on purpose; it was just the way I was built and even Ratchet, my best friend, required me getting used to this sharing thing.

"I need to find her wedding ring. The cambions had mine, which mean they know about her. She isn't safe."

"Right, so we are here to check on her. She's fine," Ratchet shrugged.

"The rings are made from almanite," I said.

Ratchet raised his eyebrows. "What's that?"

"A powerful metal from my father's home. The two rings together wield a lot of power. I separated the metal I had, which belonged to my father and made them into

two rings. The idea was that it would keep it safe. When Typhon had it, the metal was a single sphere he wore that granted him great powers.”

“So, you gave your human wife a supernatural metal ring?” Ratchet looked dubious.

“Her ring alone has no value but the two together can permanently open any rift on the planet.”

“Even after a dybbuk blood spilt?” Ratchet asked, impressed.

“Yes. It can seal any also.”

“Then why haven’t we been using it?” Ratchet looked confused, his brow furrowing.

“Every time you use the metal, it calls my father back.” I grimaced.

“Typhon?” Ratchet looked incredulous. “Back here to Earth?”

“It’s why I separated the metals out.” I said. “So, that couldn’t happen.”

“Typhon on Earth, not a good idea.” Ratchet pointed out. “In fact, a terribly bad idea.”

“No shit,” I shook my head. “So, I need to find her ring, we have mine back and then we can protect them and keep them safe.”

“Did you look at the jewelry box?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“What about upstairs?” Ratchet gazed upward. “Does the place have an attic or a

basement?”

I nodded. “It has an attic, no basement.”

“Why don’t I go take a look up there? There’s got to be boxes or something. Is there any place you remember hiding things when you were married?” Ratchet asked.

“I looked at all those places,” I said. “There’s got to be some new hiding place.”

“Why do you think she’s hiding it?”

“How the hell do I know what human women think?” I asked. “Maybe she wants to never see it again. That’s most likely the case.”

“Isn’t that sweet,” Ratchet grimaced as he lifted up a vase and looked under it.

“I don’t think her ring’s going to be under the vase,” I said.

He turned and his gaze bored into mine. “But tell me why you even thought to do it.”

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“It seemed safe.” I muttered. It just made sense at the time.

“Says the delusional man who stepped in front of an oncoming truck.” Ratchet shook his head.

“It’s not that bad,” I growled.

“No, it wouldn’t seem so through rose-colored glasses.” Ratchet took three strides across the room, standing right in front of me. He was one of the few beings who could look me straight in the eye.

“I don’t like any of this one bit,” he said. “I told you she was trouble from the minute you met her. And there’s been nothing in the last years to change my mind.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to ever change your mind,” I said with a snort. “That’s why everyone likes having you around, because you cut through the bullshit. I don’t think you know how to lie to anyone even if they asked you to.”

“Then believe me when I tell you that being here is a bad idea,” Ratchet said, he opened the front door showing me the way out.

Maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea. I had been away from Caroline so long, I forgot what it was like to engage with the human world. Instead, I was dropping in and out like she was a supernatural and used to monsters teleporting into her home.

I raised my shoulders to my ears and let them drop in a solid shrug. I hadn’t asked for his opinion, and he knew it, but this time I was going to acquiesce. Slightly. We could

go somewhere for a while and return when Caroline was home.

I walked to the door, stepping across the threshold. I needed that ring back and I had to get it from Caroline herself, apparently.

Still there was a feeling of dread deep in my stomach knowing that if Ratchet was having a bad feeling about this, there was no way in hell it was going to end well.

Chapter 10

CAROLINE

He wasn't there when I got home, but I could sense him in every part of my body; he had been in my house. And not just from the night before; he'd been in during the day. His scent clung heavy in the air.

I glanced at my watch. It was fifteen minutes before Laney would show up. It would be way too neurotic for me to call her now; like I was afraid to be alone. I hadn't faced Ryder in three long years, but that space hadn't prepared me to see him. It just made it harder when he had suddenly shown up standing in the shadows of my bedroom, dangerous and dark. He could've easily taken me if he wanted to, but he hadn't and I didn't want him to. At least if I kept telling myself that, maybe then it would be true.

The doorbell rang and I ran to get it.

"Thank God you're here!" I said, flinging the door open.

My breath caught in my throat. The wrong person. Very much the wrong person.

"Ryder." My words caught in my throat, almost revealing the thoughts I just had. He

stood in front of me, his broad features and shoulder length black hair a frame for his large almond eyes which were staring at me, searching me, as if he was going to uncover something he was looking for right here in the doorway of my house. I just couldn't quite tell what he wanted.

"Caroline," he said, his voice abrupt and clipped. Fine. I knew this Ryder. This was the Ryder I had divorced. This was the Ryder who'd broken my heart. The cold, distant Ryder who wanted nothing to do with me. I swallowed hard.

"What do you want?" I asked, not daring to show him an ounce of feeling.

"May I come in?" he asked.

I tilted my head to the side and laughed drily, opening the door wide and sweeping my arm to the side to welcome him into the house. "Would it matter if I said no?"

He moved past me and into the living room. "Well, it would matter."

"But you'd still do it," I said to his back.

"Do what?" he countered.

"Come into the house," I said, choosing my words carefully.

"There's been a problem in my family's business," Ryder said.

"Your family's business has never been any business of mine," I said, trying to ignore the stabs of pain that knowledge caused. Ryder had a family I'd never met. Some siblings, twelve, maybe more, I don't know and their mother. He'd always managed to keep that part of his life incredibly separate from me, so now when he came to me with a "family problem" it was hard for me to take him seriously.

“I’m looking for something I left with you,” he said.

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“You didn’t leave anything,” I said. He had in fact left a big black hole where he had been in my life, a big empty cavernous pit that threatened to swallow me whole in its inky darkness.

His eyes widened slightly and then narrowed, traveling down my face to my décolletage. I hated the way my skin heated up under his gaze. If he could see my temperature, he would know how breathless his proximity made me. He was unrelenting in his gaze. I was about to tell him to back off; tell him to close his eyes, turn around, and get the hell out of my house. I certainly didn’t need to be teased with the presence of my sexy ex-husband. I didn’t need him anywhere in my life.

He stepped closer to me, as if he was stalking his prey on the savanna. A black panther out for the kill. The only problem was, I was his prey. My heart beat faster, pressing my chest against my shirt. He took another step closer. I wanted to take a step back, but I also didn’t want to show any fear. I wanted to be brave and strong and true. This was my house.

My body though, my body wanted him to be closer to me, to be within touching distance, within kissing distance. I wanted to feel him again against my skin.

My breath caught in my throat. I held it there as he stepped the final step, closing the gap between us, his head tilting to the side as his gaze riveted on my chest. I glanced down and suddenly I realized it wasn’t the modest sweater that had gotten him so bothered. My hand flung up, catching the piece of jewelry dangling from my necklace in a fist.

“Your ring,” I murmured.

His hand went around me taking the small of my back pressing me towards him as he lowered his face to my neck, his lips brushing my skin causing a tingling sensation to spread throughout my body.

Oh God, he still had the ability to claim me.

I was his and I hated that he knew it.

I felt his teeth bare against my neck and I gasped as they nibbled at my skin, his hand held my neck steady and suddenly he jerked his head back and broke the chain around my neck, my necklace and wedding ring falling into his open hand.

“I need this,” he said, holding the ring up in the palm of his hand.

I frowned. We were divorced but the ring was mine. “You gave it to me.”

“I made a mistake,” he said.

I hated how his words forced a sword of pain through my stomach and up to my heart. Those were the words he’d used to describe our marriage: it was a mistake. When I’d filed the divorce papers, I had expected more from him, some sort of an argument, a fight, a fuss, but he hadn’t done anything. He’d just said, “You’re probably right. It was a mistake to think it would work.” With those few words, he had destroyed all of the hopes and dreams I’d had when I’d met him. When we had gotten married, it had all gone to shit. He had just become the absent husband.

“Is there anything else you want while you’re here?” I asked him tightly. “I would prefer if you took it all now and don’t come back rather than just coming popping in once every three or four years.”

“That’s all I needed,” he grumbled.

“Good,” I said, taking a deep breath and walking toward the door, my skin still trembling from the close encounter with his teeth and lips. Why did he have to take the ring like that? He could’ve just asked me for it. I would’ve given it to him.

No.

He was always testing my boundaries; it was his favorite thing to do with me: taunt me. I had become his plaything, even though he didn’t play with me very much. I walked resolutely toward the door holding it open. “Now that you have what you want, you can go.”

He looked at me, sucking in his lower lip for a moment before letting out a long, slow breath.

“Are you well?” he asked.

His question caught me off guard, charming in its sweetness and simplicity. “I’m okay,” I said. No, I wasn’t. Not after feeling like he just undressed me with a single question. “Please, go.” There was a slight pleading tone in my voice that he seemed take pity on. He nodded moving past me.

He walked across the porch before stopping at the top of the stairs and looking back over his shoulder, he fixed me with a stern gaze. “There’s more to all this,” he said. “Just be careful. Don’t assume everything’s safe.”

My gut tightened at his words. There had always been something dark and dangerous about him, but I wasn’t sure what this could mean.

“Are you in danger?” I asked. I didn’t want to fall for his lies or half-truths, but I also still cared about him and there was no reason why I shouldn’t be there to help a friend.

“No, I’m fine,” he said. “I meant in relation to you. Just be careful and call me if you see anything weird.”

“Call you?” I asked, quite surprised. “Are you staying in Boston?”

“No,” he said. “But I’m available if you need me.”

I watched him walk away, knowing this was trouble.

Chapter 11

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RYDER

“I got the ring,” I growled at Ratchet as I got into the back of the limo.

“That was fast,” Ratchet said. “I wasn’t sure if you were going to need back up.”

“Thanks, but I think I can still handle a human woman,” I said, never wanting to let him know the true depth of my feelings. At least not wanting him to know outright. I didn’t want to name it and have it become this thing. It was already hard enough the way it felt inside me. “We’re going to Hellions.”

Ratchet rolled his eyes upward and shook his head. “Of course, we are. What part of ‘this is not a good idea’ do you not get?” He rubbed his hand over his face and into his fiery hair. “It’s like you’re out for self-destruction, man. They hate you at Hellions. It’s like first you were crazy to rock up to your ex-wife’s house and now you want to go to Set’s Place? First rip your heart out and now you want to get your body mutilated?”

“I want to know who is after the almanite.” I grabbed a water out of the side of the limo door and twisted the top off.

“It can’t just be enough that we have it?” Ratchet asked, staring out the limo window at the Boston cityscape as it went by. The lights danced red and gold across his face.

“No,” I said. “Because if Set is doing this, I need to put a stop to it. Whoever is doing it needs to be stopped. They need to know this is a dead end with a brick wall and a hard stop right against me. I don’t want any messing around with this. No one’s

getting the adamantine in these rings. Not any entity in any of the spectrums. This could forge the key to unlock all the rifts.” I rubbed my thumb along the rings nestled on my pinky and my ring finger. My wedding band and Caroline’s. Forged from the adamantine of my father’s orb they had the power to create a universal key to open all the locks simultaneously; that was why I’d had it melted down. Somehow, though, somebody knew the secret. They knew what was in the rings and I needed to find out who it was.

The limo pulled up outside of the speakeasy themed bar that was Set’s place. Set was a demigod of the Undirheim, with high connections in the DGC. It never paid to be on his bad side, especially because he had equally low connections in the local Undirheim.

Decades ago, we’d gotten in a fight over a human woman. Set was planning on coming out to her and letting her know about the magic world. I found out about it and turned him in. The DGC severed the relationship he had with the human. They weren’t always against it, just most of the time. And they won’t really force you to do something. They’ll just take all your contracts and make your life a living hell and cut off all your funds if they know about it. Set didn’t pay any attention to the fact that telling the human put her in danger to the supernaturals. It made her a target, because most supernaturals didn’t like humans who knew about them. The supernatural world I lived in was full of people who didn’t mind killing a human and wouldn’t even think twice about it.

I definitely needed to find out who was aware of Caroline. That was far more pressing to me than who was aware of the metal. They could open the universal gates of monsters and let them wreak havoc all over the face of the planet for all I cared, but they better not harm one hair on Caroline’s head. I needed to keep her safe, so the rift could never be allowed to be opened. It would destroy the world Caroline lived in.

I stepped out of the limo and walked past the line, ignoring all the humans who stood outside the speakeasy. I could feel the ripple of their eyes on me as I passed. It was hard not to stand out when you were a demigod among humans. I was used to their eyes raking over me. The men sizing me up to see who would win in a battle. Hint: it would be me. And the women sizing me up to see if they stood a chance. Newsflash: not a one. Not since I met Caroline. I didn't really understand the hold that woman had on me, but I would pray at her altar for the rest of my life.

The demons disguised as bouncers at the door stood in front of it as if they were going to stop me. I decided I was going to play the game. I paused. "I need to see Set," I told the first security guard. Ratchet was right behind me and the two of us could take the two of them.

Ratchet leaned forward behind me. "Steady. This isn't meant to be a punch up."

I opened my hands out wide and looked at him quizzically. "I just asked him if we could see Set," I said innocently, but Ratchet knew me too well and knew I was thinking about smashing the guy's head into the brick wall next to him and moving past him; my hand twitched in irritation.

Ratchet slipped past me, looking up at the two bodyguards. Ratchet wasn't small, but he was wiry and a couple of inches shorter than the bouncers. "This is Ryder," Ratchet said, pointing a finger at me. "You might've heard of him. He's one of the demigods."

The security guard looked down at Ratchet, his eyes blinking impassively. "You don't think I can recognize a demigod when I see one?"

We did have some sort of a sheen about us that made us something different.

"I just need to talk to Set." I leaned back to seem less imposing. "It's not a big deal."

“We’re just seeing what Set has to say about that.” The bouncer lifted his finger to his ear where a comm device rested. He looked up at me, giving a slow-motion nod of his head as he lowered his bulky hand and unhooked the red velvet rope. “My colleague will take you up,” he said, motioning to the younger, blond guy who was behind him.

The crowds parted as we made our way through the packed speakeasy and to the back recesses of the club. I didn’t like the way the crowds closed behind us as we were led farther down the tunnel of hallways to a back office. The doors opened and I stepped into the cave that was Set’s office. My nerves rattled and my senses stood on edge. I suddenly had the feeling I was stepping into some sort of a trap, but I still wasn’t sure exactly what it was.

Set stood by the massive fireplace that contained a roaring fire. The black stones lining the hearth glowed with an unearthly sheen.

“What can I do for you, Monster?” Set’s sharp features didn’t look away from the fire.

“Your demons stole something from me.” My words were a low growl. I ignored his attempted insult. I was a monster, and I didn’t care. The reality was, we were both demigods, the children of a god and a human. We were on equal footing here and Set knew it.

Set’s talons tapped on the stone. “They are Thrain’s demons.”

“You have a huge sway in Undirheim,” I pointed out. “They couldn’t have done it without your permission.”

“You got it back.” His gaze finally looked at me, his eyes glowing orange. Set’s human form was like any demigod, unworldly in its finesse, the fine lines of his face

making it clear to almost anyone he was not your average person. While I could see the talons and the flames, a human wouldn't. They would just see a handsome man with a dark gaze.

I saw a child of the devil.

"It was no thanks to you," I pointed out.

"Last time I checked I don't owe you any favors," Set ground the words out.

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I frowned at him, the wheels in my brain slowly turning. “No,” I agreed. “You don’t. In fact, you have stood against me on many fronts. Not the least of which your desire to bring monsters to Earth.”

“I don’t touch your monsters,” Set countered., his distaste apparent.

My monsters. How I hated that word. But the truth was, they were my monsters. I was one of the only monster demigods on the planet and if something happened with the creatures, it was my responsibility to send them back home.

“Come and have a drink with me,” Set stepped forward and waved over a servant to fill two whiskey glasses.

“I’m not interested in having a drink with you.” I growled. “I want you to back off of my life.”

“You are making too many assumptions,” Set smiled at me, taking a sip of whiskey.

His smile.

The whiskey.

Everything that was happening was exactly what Set wanted. That couldn’t be good for me. Set and I were opposing forces in the DGC.

“How are things in the monster world?” Set asked conversationally stretching out his hand with a glass of whiskey.

Distraction.

Chaos rose within me as I felt the lies. Set never wanted to speak with me. My hand flew through the air, crashing the glass of whiskey to the floor.

Caroline. I had to get back to Caroline.

Set's grin said it all as he began to laugh. "It's too late, Monster," he said. "She's already dead."

Chapter 12

CAROLINE

I sat nestled on the couch wrapped in the old, crocheted blanket my grandmother made me. It's childlike lavenders and pinks always lifted my spirits and made me feel a little bit of wonder and joy. But right now, I did not feel that, no matter how hard I tried. All I could feel around me was this deep cavity where my heart once dwelled. It had been so long since I'd felt anything there. Now I sat in a state of shock on the couch staring at some show on the television. I wasn't even really paying attention; all I was thinking about was Ryder. How he had been in my living room and as much as I wanted to deny it, it felt like he almost could've claimed me if he had wanted to. He hadn't. He wanted his wedding ring back for work purposes. I had no idea why, but I could only imagine it was to get his parents' wedding rings back.

He must've met somebody new.

"It's none of your fucking business," I grimaced to myself, clenching my hands to stop from smacking myself.

It was none of my business. I didn't want to know and I didn't need to know. All I

needed to do was get on with my life. I had done it the only way I had known how. I ignored my feelings and carried out my research work with careful analytical focus, conducting painstaking experiments that took all my focus to carry out correctly. There had been no room for Ryder in the last three years. There had only been my work and Laney sometimes on the weekend when I didn't spend it at the lab.

Today, though, I'd been too distracted to stay late at work. Instead, I'd come home to fall into a mosh pile on my sofa and wait for the feelings to disappear again. Now I was desperately waiting to slip into the place where I didn't have to think about the perfect guy who'd broken my heart. Mr. Right, who had decided he didn't want me anymore.

I wanted to crumble forward and cry, but I couldn't even do that. My insides felt shriveled and dried. I had cried all those tears for months after Ryder first left...waiting, hopelessly believing in some small part of myself he would come back to me. I had fantasized he would return. Then the grim realization came that he wasn't coming back.

He was gone.

I had determined to pick my life back up again.

I thought I had been doing well. I thought I was looking good and doing all the right things, but with Ryder back in my life for one minute, I was a mess. Curled painfully on my couch in a comfort blanket. Just add ice cream and I'd be a teenage girl.

Only I didn't feel like a little girl. I felt like a worn out, dried up, used, middle-aged maven nobody was going to want to look at twice, especially not somebody like Ryder. That ship had sailed. I was going to have to get used to just being middle-aged, frumpy, and unwanted.

The room dimmed around me. I wasn't sure if it was the unshed tears or my constricting heart, but it was hard to breathe. A low rumbling filled the air. I bent my legs, placing my feet on the ground.

Earthquake.

I looked around at the walls. They were shaking and rumbling. My porcelain teapot, sitting decoratively on the living room side table, rattled.

I glanced at the table through the kitchen door and then at the doors. Maybe I should move under a table for some protection. The ceiling rippled like a wave was moving through it.

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“Holy fuck.” I stumbled to my feet, difficult to keep my balance on the wobbly floor. I fell into the couch before I righted myself. Gripping the couch, I managed to move across the room.

“Get out!” I couldn’t tell who or what was shouting at me; it could’ve been a voice in my own head, but I knew it was right. I needed to leave the house immediately. The way the ceiling was wobbling, it was going to go at any second. I glanced into the kitchen, considering making a move toward the table, but just then, the ceiling beam fell, crushing the table beneath it.

“Holy shit!” I whipped around to the front door dashing for safety. It was clear there was not going to be any safety in the house. Just as I got to the hallway the wall buckled as the ground shot up and a massive rock came pushing up into the center of my living room. A huge gaping cavern opened, and the floor tilted. My furniture slowly began sliding in. I dashed for the front door, just grabbing the handle of it as the floor gave way beneath me and slid into the dark recesses of the yawning hole.

“Fuck!” I screamed as I grabbed the doorknob hanging at a horizontal angle over the hole that had erupted in the earth beneath my house. I swung my other hand up, clinging to the brass handle desperately, but my hands were clammy. There was no way I was going to be able to sustain this. I looked down into the gaping, dark hole. Falling would mean certain death.

The muscles in my arms shook as I gritted my teeth and gripped the door. “Help!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, but there was no way it would be heard over the grumbling of the moving earth. This wasn’t just an earthquake; it sounded like the ground was hungry for me, like it wanted to devour me and eat me whole. I shut my

eyes tightly, not daring to look down into the blackness beneath me. My hands were slick with sweat, sliding down the brass doorknob. My grip weakened until only four fingers held me to the door.

It was hopeless.

The wall crashed, splintering above me, knocking my grip loose.

I tumbled, screaming into the blackness.

My arms were yanked back with a firm grip on both my wrists in one massive hand. Ryder was there, holding me in his impossible grip over the cavern.

“God dammit, Caroline,” he grunted as he pulled me up and put me down on the ground, immediately releasing my hands.

I looked from him to the big gaping hole my house was falling into. My gaze whipped back at him. “Let me take a wild guess. You have something to do with this,” I yelled.

And then I saw that look I used to see all the time when we were married, where there was just a moment’s hesitation before he answered me, and in that moment, I knew he was making a conscious decision lie to me.

I turned and started walking away.

“The same old fucking Ryder,” I said. “You need to have a lie on your tongue or else you’re not talking.”

He reached out and grabbed my wrist in his massive hand and pulled me back to him, crushing me in his arms as he looked down at me.

“Are you okay?” he asked roughly.

I struggled to get free from him. I didn’t need sympathy or his pity now. I didn’t need him to have a free grope either if that’s what he was trying to do. I just needed to get away from him and find out what the fuck happened to my house.

I looked up into Ryder’s eyes and realized with sudden clarity as he looked down at me, he had absolutely no intention of letting me go.

Chapter 13

RYDER

She was there. She was safe. She was alive. They knew who she was. They had found her. They had tried to get her. I was going to kill Set. I was going to ring every goddamn ounce of blood out of his godforsaken body.

Anger thrummed through my body, setting my back on edge. Caroline was human. The fall into Undirheim would’ve killed her. Her body would be gone and her spirit, her essence, the thing that made her uniquely her, would be lost to the River Styx. As a demigod, it would be hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years before I saw her again.

My arms tightened around her body. She seemed so small and frail. I knew as a human she was perfectly capable and brilliant and strong but compared to me she was as fragile as a morning blossom. Deep anger welled inside me. I wanted to lash out at anyone who wasn’t her. I encircled her like a metal cage, protecting her and stopping anything from getting anywhere close to her. I was here to protect her, whether we were together or not.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said gruffly, turning to the side but still keeping one arm

encircling her shoulders.

I moved her toward the waiting limo. I had left the club so fast I hadn't even brought Ratchet with me. So, he was bound to show up. The silent alarm that triggered any time I was near danger would definitely alert him; in fact, he should probably already be here. I glanced around.

"I'm not going with you," Caroline said.

I turned and looked at her as she slipped out from under my arm, standing facing me with her hands on her hips.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, anger so close to the surface. I knew there was a chance it could spill out onto Caroline. I took a slow and steady breath, trying to calm my agitation, but I knew it would only do so much.

"You can't just come back into my life and rescue me from, from whatever that is," she stammered, her arm flailing towards the gaping hole.

"Get in the car," I growled.

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“I’m not going to go with you.” She said it like I would listen to her

“It’s not safe here,” I ground the words out.

“And I’m supposed to think it’s safe with you?” she asked. “All this crap started when you came back into my life. You can’t come in here with your half-truths and lies and just expect me to drop everything and come with you.”

She turned and looked at the pit, her eyes wide with shock as she realized her house was gone. “What happened?” She asked softly.

“Looks like an earthquake,” I said gruffly, stepping toward the limo and motioning her toward it. She was so damn stubborn. She was completely ignoring me. Instead, she started to walk toward the edge of the hole.

“Caroline, get back! It’s not safe.” I insisted.

She didn’t pay any attention to me. Instead, she started clambering over the rocks.

“It’s completely unnatural,” she said, standing on top of the rocks and looking up and down the street. “Nothing happened to anybody else’s house.”

I heard a popping sound that heralded the arrival of Ratchet. I glanced over into the shadows of a nearby cluster of trees. We used shadows to teleport between locations. I had traveled from the club in the shadows of the same trees, the limo making its way separately. My driver, Danny, was a satyr; he used to run with Tony Furlan’s crowd on the West Coast until he’d gotten married and wanted to settle down. I kept

him with me; he was part bodyguard part driver. He stood now at the front of the limo, his arms folded over his chest, staring at the hole as he glanced over at me.

“Looks like demons, boss,” he said

I motioned for him to keep his voice down. The last thing I needed was Caroline listening to us talking about things like demons. She was out of earshot and Danny just shrugged. “Well, it does.”

“I know exactly what it looks like,” I said. A hole made by demons.

I stormed over to Caroline. “Get down off the stack of rocks.” I didn’t stop, though. I walked straight up to her. I realized she was going to put up a fight, but the truth was, there wasn’t any kind of a fight Caroline could put up that would stop me.

I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder; she immediately started beating on my back. “Put me down you big oaf!”

“We’ve resorted to stealing humans now?” Ratchet said as he walked up.

“Would you shut up?” I grumbled, stomping toward the car with Caroline over my shoulder.

“You’re kidnapping her?” Ratchet asked incredulously. “That’s your solution to keep her from Undirheim?”

“I can’t just leave her out here for anyone to come and get,” I pointed out. “Look what just happened.”

“He’s got a point,” Danny agreed with a shrug.

“I said I wasn’t going to go with you, and I meant it,” Caroline said as I set her down on the ground by the door to the limo.

“I heard what you said.” I stared at her blankly. “But it’s not enough to stop me. Even if you’re too stupid to see how to take care of yourself.”

“Too stupid?” she exclaimed. “Did you just call me stupid?”

“Technically I don’t think he did. He said you were being stupid, which is more like a case of the stupids,” Ratchet said.

“It’s an action not a condition,” Danny agreed.

Caroline’s gaze whipped between the two in exasperation.

“Looking at the state of that hole, I would have to agree with Ryder actually,” Ratchet said. “As much as I hate to. The pit is something else. It swallowed your house. Imagine what it would do to you. I don’t think this place is geologically safe.”

“I heard you say something about Undirheim. Isn’t that the Underworld?” Caroline looked directly at Ratchet.

“Here we go.” I muttered. Now we were going to have to fuck with her memory again. I hated doing that, but there’d been a couple of times when it had been necessary. The first time was when we had first made love. I’d gotten so carried away I’d let my monster form show. I couldn’t control it. The second time had been right before I left her; my anger had taken control of me, the chaos, and I had not been able to control my shift when she first told me she was leaving me. I realized not only was there nothing I could do about it, but I shouldn’t do anything about it. Us splitting up was the right decision, no matter how much it hurt. Still, my anger with the situation was uncontrollable. It had driven me wild and made it me shift in front of her as I

punched a hole in the wall. I had seen how much it terrorized her and even though I had gotten rid of the memories for her, I would never forget the look on her face as she saw me in my monster form.

I was not fit for human consumption.

Chapter 14

CAROLINE

“Where are you taking me?” I asked in harsh tone. The door to the limo closed silently and all was quiet in the interior. Ratchet sat to my left on the other side and Ryder sat across from me, watching me. I stared at the door briefly, trying to figure out if there was any way to get out. I knew better, though. Limos were a part of Ryder’s family business and always had been. Something about the diamond industry required them to all have drivers and limousines, I guessed. I couldn’t deny the luxury of the plush interior. I’d always had a taste for the finer things in life and this limo was no exception. I ran my hand along the teak lined door.

“Where are you taking me,” I asked, softening my tone. Harsh words never worked for Ryder.

“To safety,” Ryder said.

I looked at him sideways, but he was staring out the window. “What happened to my house?”

“No idea,” Ryder muttered, without looking at me.

“You have an idea,” I insisted. “You showed up and the next thing I know our house is demolished, and... your family is in the mining business.”

“We don’t destroy people’s homes,” Ryder said.

“But you know how to dig a hole,” I pointed out.

“Yeah,” he said. “We know how to dig a hole. It doesn’t mean we dug one.”

“Then how do you explain it?” I asked, “because I don’t have any other way. I mean, we can call the city and find out if there were any massive sinkholes suddenly appearing around the city. I mean, I suppose it has been a thing before, hasn’t it? Just not typically in urban Boston.”

“Call who you need to call, but I don’t think a sinkhole explains it.”

He was right. It didn’t mean he had anything to do with it. It could just be some bizarre coincidence except... “You thought I was in danger,” I said. “That’s why you came here. You thought I was in danger and so you came here to protect me. It’s what you said when you were in my house earlier. Then danger happened and you were right there. So, how do you explain that?”

Ratchet’s eyes left Ryder for a moment and settled on me. “You’re not just another pretty face, are you?”

“Ratchet, shut up,” Ryder snarled.

“No, don’t shut up, Ratchet,” I goaded him. “Tell me what caused the sinkhole to swallow my house just now. You know more than you’re telling me.”

“I’m not going to tell you anything,” Ratchet said with a snide smile. “What’s the fun of knowing if you just tell everybody what you know? I prefer keeping secrets.”

“So, you admit there’s a secret.”

“I didn’t admit to anything.” Ratchet slid me a grin.

“I’m taking you to a safe house,” Ryder grouched.

“A safe house?”

“Clearly you are in danger,” he pointed out.

“From whom?” I leaned forward but stopped short of touching his knee to get him to make eye contact.

“We don’t know yet, but it’s someone who has something against the family business.”

I crossed my arms and threw myself back against the soft leather of the seat. “Great. I’m your prisoner because someone is trying to take over your company and this involves me.”

“I’m sorry.” The words were stiff and unfeeling from Ryder’s mouth.

“Hope it’s not far from my work.” I grumbled.

“You won’t be going to work anytime soon,” Ryder explained.

“You’re not in charge of me,” I frowned. “You can’t just make this decision about where I’m going to go and what I’m going to do. We’re not even married and even if we were, you wouldn’t be able to make those types of decisions for me. I’m going to work. I’m not going to miss a day of work over this little inconvenience.”

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Both Ryder and Ratchet looked at me, their eyes wide and mouths slack with shock.

“You just lost your house and all your belongings,” Ratchet said. “You call it a little inconvenient?”

“I was starting to get sick of stuff anyhow.” I returned his gaze with a steely one of my own.

“Cold,” Ratchet said.

“I’ve been around long enough, and I’ve seen enough to know, really deeply, possessions don’t mean anything. They just come and then they go and when you die somebody else has to get rid of them.”

“Or when you leave,” Ryder shifted his gaze to me briefly.

“You didn’t leave much,” I responded. “I’ve gotten rid of all your stuff though. By the time we actually split up, well, there wasn’t much of you in the house.”

I was surprised there was no note of bitterness in my voice. I had grown accustomed to the idea he wanted out a long time before and he had just been too much of a chickenshit to actually say it. He wanted out of our relationship for at least a year. I was sure of it. It was apparent by his long absences. When I had filed the papers, he had finally felt free enough to actually do what he had wanted to do all along, leave. Now it was as if the final death knell to our relationship had come when the house had fallen into the Earth. I swallowed hard, grinding my teeth together slightly, making sure I didn’t show any remorse. It had been our house for only a couple of

years and he'd never been there. Since he left it had been my sanctuary. However, it was always bittersweet because he had left me alone there. This was probably the shakeup I needed to move on.

"Take me to the Wyndham in downtown," I said, pulling out my phone and preparing to text Laney. "The one right across from my work."

"No." Ryder whipped the phone out of my hands.

"Give me my phone!" I frowned.

"Not possible." With a single closing of his fist, he crumpled my phone into a wad. He bounced it into his other hand, crushing it to dust and dropping the pieces on the floor.

"That...that is not possible," I murmured, even though I had just seen it with my own eyes.

"You don't need a phone right now," Ryder said.

"You can't just destroy my personal property!" I exclaimed. Though I knew it was futile. There was not actually anything I could do to get my phone back. I stared at the pile of dust on the floor of the limo.

"Just go with it," Ratchet advised.

I looked out through the shadowy streets, the sun setting over Boston, we were on the outskirts of town, entering an industrial area. "Where are you taking me?"

"My parents' place," he stated succinctly.

“Your parents’ house?” I asked as we pulled up to a metal gate with a key card entry. I peered out the window. On the other side of the fence there was an old, seemingly abandoned airstrip. “Your parents don’t have a place in Boston.”

“Correct,” Ryder said as Danny, the driver, slid his window down and entered a key card into the metal slot.

The gates opened and I peered through the front windshield.

“It’s an airfield.” I murmured.

“You’re going to stay with me for the foreseeable future,” Ryder said. “I need to make sure you’re safe and the enemies of my family aren’t doing crazy things to you.”

“See, I told you that you knew more about this than you were letting on,” I pointed out.

Ryder glared at me. “I don’t know anything more than I told you, but I know you’re in danger and I want to protect you.”

“Does the place come with servants?” I asked. Because the last time I checked my house was buried six feet under and I needed a place to stay.

Ryder deadpanned me. “I thought you didn’t like servants.”

“That was the younger me.” I barely remembered when I had been fighting for everyone’s rights. “The new me just wants someone to take care of my laundry and my food while I sip a glass of wine on the veranda.”

“Liar,” Ryder growled.

I didn't say anything more as the limo slide into the airport. Anything I said would incriminate me. All I truly wanted was to get back to work. As soon as Ryder dropped his guard, even a little bit, my plan was to escape and make my way back to Boston.

Chapter 15

RYDER

“Rmh mgl oep denjv?” Ratchet said softly in his native demon tongue. I glanced at him sharply.

“Nothing,” I responded in English to his query about what I was doing. He knew better than to address me in the demonic language. It was not meant for humans to hear. it was against the DGC rules for New Attica. Clearly, he felt some level of urgency. Caroline’s eyes narrowed as she looked from Ratchet to me. She knew I was foreign to America and had lived in many places. I told her my family was of Armenian descent, which was true of my mother, but she had never heard me speak it. I was hoping Ratchet’s words might sound Armenian to her, but she didn’t buy it.

She knew something was up.

I didn’t like where this was headed. She had already been asking a ton of questions I couldn’t answer or didn’t want to. The last thing I needed was for her to have more clues of the supernatural world. She was brilliant, practically a genius. Undoubtedly, she could repeat every word we just said.

Instead, she looked out the window. “Where the hell are we?” She asked as the dark metal gates in front of us opened and the limousine pulled into the airfield.

“An airfield,” Ratchet offered unhelpfully.

“Why the fuck are we at an airfield?” Caroline asked. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

The limo pulled up next to a reasonably sized private jet. Ava Sharp, the captain, crew and a witch to boot, stepped out of the jet as the limo pulled up.

I didn’t wait for Danny to open my door; that wasn’t really our deal. I stepped out of the limo and went over and shook Ava’s hand. She was a tall, slender brunette with lavender eyes and a crisp set to her jaw. Ava was a survivor.

“Special cargo?” Ava looked over my shoulder toward the limo.

“Highly fragile,” I said. “Human.”

“Since when do you hang out with humans?” Ava put her hands on her hips.

“You’d be the last one I would expect to ask that question.” I pointed out.

Ava was well known for fraternizing with humans. She was pretty famous in the supernatural world, but I knew she was the one person I could trust, the one person who had kept secrets much longer and much darker than I ever had. She was famous in the supernatural world, or infamous, for being the illegitimate child of a murdered priestess and a Warlock. Priestesses were meant to remain vestal virgins, the fact one had birthed a child was unheard of. Ava had left the supernatural world after years of ridicule and ostracism. I had always kept tabs on her. I knew she’d be a talented witch, but as it turned out she was an even more talented pilot. Sometimes I had her do errands for me. Even though she tried to steer completely clear of the supernatural world every time. She was the only pilot I would trust in a case like this.

“We just need to get to the airfield in Alameda,” I said. “Undercover with no one knowing where we left from or where we’re going.”

“You want to land in the airfield in Alameda?” she asked. “It’s a little hard to get in there unnoticed, but it’s where I grew up, so I’ll get it done.”

“I’ll leave it in your capable hands, captain,” I said, turning toward the limo. “Get out of the car.”

I saw Ava raise her eyebrows abruptly at me. I realized my tone was a little bit harsh, but there was nothing to be done about it. I wasn’t here to play Mr. Nice Guy. I needed to get Caroline out of here as quickly as possible.

She didn’t come out of the limo. Ratchet was standing on the other side of it. He and I exchanged a look.

“Do you want me to get her, boss?” Ratchet moved toward the door.

“I’m not your boss,” I grunted.

Ratchet rolled his eyes, but I leaned my head into the limo and glared at Caroline, who was huddled in the corner on the far side. “Get your ass out of the limo right now and get it on that plane before I take it out forcibly.”

“You can’t just kidnap me,” she said.

“I’m not kidnapping you. I’m telling you to get out of here and get your ass into that plane.” I pointed at the plane for emphasis as if she couldn’t understand.

Caroline turned away from me and opened the door, slamming into Ratchet’s gut; he doubled over in shock and what looked like a bit of pain.

She stood on the far side of the limo, her hands on her hips, glaring at me. She looked over to Ava, her gaze narrowing, and I could only figure she was assuming the worst.

But that was hardly the point.

“I need you to get on a plane now.” My voice was low and sounded like danger even to my ears.

“You having problems with your cargo?” Ava asked as she checked her fingernails.

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“I am not some fucking cargo,” Caroline said, glaring at Ava.

“Maybe that was a wrong choice of words,” I pointed out to Ava.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“We don’t have all day, so either she comes willingly or...?” Ava shrugged her shoulders, and I knew exactly what she was alluding to.

My gaze went to Ratchet, and he nodded as well. He knew exactly what needed to be done. I was the only one hesitating.

“Get in the plane. This is the last time I’m going to say it.”

“Or what?” Caroline said, moving away from me and stepping toward the gate to the airfield as if she were going to walk.

I crossed the distance between us in three long steps at a pace she could never keep up with and I grabbed her arms quickly.

“Let me go,” she said. “You’re a monster.”

“Yes, I am a monster,” I growled at Caroline.

“I told you that,” she hissed back.

“It’s not what I mean.” I ran my hands through my hair, trying to explain to her even

while I kept a tight grip on one of her arms.

“Just show her,” Ava said, shrugging her shoulders.

“It’ll be the fastest way,” Ratchet agreed with a nod. “Maybe then she’ll understand.”

This was crazier than anything I had ever expected to do, but my relationship with Caroline was ruined anyhow. What did it matter if she knew what I really was? A monster.

I took a deep breath and allowed my body to relax. It wasn’t always the easiest thing, staying in human form; it required a lot of emotions and at the same time, a defense mechanism. The truth was, though, I had to be very careful. If I shifted into monster form right here in front of Caroline, there was always the danger, well, I would lose control.

And I couldn’t afford to do that, not with her. Not with any human really, but especially not with her.

“What the heck’s going on?” Caroline’s voice was hushed and worried, but I didn’t pay much attention to it; I couldn’t. My body was shifting and moving, growing larger as I let the monster form take over, trying to hold it in check enough to make sure I didn’t actually attack her.

“Get in the plane.” The words flew out of my mouth in desperation as I felt my body shift and grow. The talons on the end of my fingers came out. I heard Caroline scream as the horns protruded from my black hair and the long teeth that grew out from my mouth. I took a step toward her, but Ratchet held up his hand. Caroline was standing there frozen screaming, staring at me and then suddenly her eyes fluttered to the back of her head, her lashes batted a couple of times and she swayed and fell backwards into Ratchet’s waiting arms.

“Give her to me,” I said with a growl. Ratchet acquiesced, carefully placing her in my arms. I carried her slowly toward the plane, shifting into my human body, even as I held her.

“That’s one way to impress the ladies,” Ava said, stepping aside and giving me leave to board the aircraft.

Chapter 16

CAROLINE

“This will be where you stay,” Ryder said as we walked up the front steps to a massive gray Victorian house that sat on a large lot in the corner of Alameda. It was a small island in the Bay Area separated from the mainland by a couple of small bridges. At least that’s what Ratchet had told me when the plane landed. Ryder had remained ominously silent for the entire flight.

He was a monster.

I had seen it with my own eyes. When I had come to on the plane I had just stared at the back of his head. He had been sitting up in the cockpit next to the pretty middle-aged pilot. I probably would have been jealous if I wasn’t in such a state of shock.

“What are you?” I had asked Ratchet, but he had simply looked at me.

“Not a monster.” Then he’d gone back to staring out the window.

Clearly no one on the flight was going to tell me shit about this.

As I trailed Ryder into the house, I took a deep breath. The house was stunning. Painstakingly restored to its original Victorian glory with polished wood, chandeliers

and high ceilings, but it was the least of my worries at the moment.

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“What exactly is after you?” I asked Ryder as he stopped in the living room.

“Demons,” he grunted. “And they aren’t after me. They’re after you.”

“Demons,” I murmured the word not sure if I should laugh, cry, or collapse. Instead, I glared at him angrily. “You couldn’t have told me about this like a few years earlier?”

“They weren’t after you before.” He looked at his watch and then turned to Ratchet. “Where is she?”

“Right here!” cried a woman’s voice as the front door flew open and a dark-haired woman in a velvet flowing dress came swirling into the room. Silver jewelry hung off every part of her. Her fingers were covered in rings and her wrists were covered in bangles. She had a stack of about five thick necklaces around her neck. Her long black curls fell in waves across her shoulders, slightly gray around the temples and fine lines hinted at laughter around her bright blue eyes. “Sorry, I’m late Ryder. I got held up at the temple.” She whirled on me with a huge grin that crinkled her face and made her radiate joy. “You must be Caroline!”

“I am.” I stared at her not wanting to like her but finding myself drawn to her all the same. “Are you a monster, too?”

Her laughter filled the living room. “The Goddess, no! I’m a witch.” She placed her palms together and gave me a slight nod of her head.

“Sophie’s going to look after you,” Ryder said.

I looked at her sideways, my gaze dubious. “You’re going to protect me from demons?” Clearly, she had some hidden talents that weren’t apparent from her diminutive frame.

“Not really,” Sophie said. “You know each witch has a special magic and mine kinda sucks.”

“You can do magic.” My mind reeled at the words that were surrounding me.

“I can do spells and things, but my special talent is making clouds.”

“Clouds?” I repeated.

“Enough.” Ryder interrupted, stepping forward. “Sophie is going to be your companion in the house, so you aren’t alone.”

“Where are you going?” I asked, suddenly a bit nervous. I didn’t want to need him but based on the fact that he was a dreadful monster and there were demons after me, I didn’t exactly want to be left alone with a witch who could just make some clouds.

“To destroy some demons,” Ryder growled moving towards the front door.

“Don’t worry,” Sophie winked at me. “We’ll have fun.”

Ryder paused, his hand on the front doorknob. “You’re not to leave the house.”

“Why not?” Sophie put her hands on her hips, challenging Ryder.

I liked her already, though I was feeling completely overwhelmed by the fact that not only did Ryder have a life completely different than the one he’d explained to me for the years that we were married, but...it was supernatural. There was a whole lot more

to not only him, but the world in general, that was making my mind reel.

“Sophie, show her to her room and then get her a refreshment on the terrace. I’ll be back later,” Ryder said to her.

“You know the entire island is warded, Ryder,” Sophie said. “No demons can get in or out.”

“Keep her here. I’ll be back later.”

Sophie rolled her eyes at me as she turned and led me up the stairs and down the hallway to a large room that was apparently going to be my bedroom. It was a large room full of antiques. By modern standards it was overdecorated. Maybe if it was the 1700s it would be considered pretty tame. I went idly to the large dresser.

“A bunch of your clothes are in there,” Sophie smiled.

“Who are you?” I asked, suddenly having a sinking feeling she might be involved with Ryder. “How do you know Ryder?”

She held up her hands against my aggressive tone. Clearly, I was still territorial over Ryder. “We are just friends,” she said. “Sometimes when he gets hurt, he comes here to get some healing. That’s it.”

“When he gets hurt?” I looked at her quizzically.

She shrugged her shoulders, lowering the corners of her mouth. “It is the nature of his job.”

“What exactly is his job?” I hated having to ask. I thought I at least knew Ryder a little bit. In the last twelve hours I realized I didn’t know him in the slightest.

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She seemed to think twice a little bit about saying any more. “I guess when he wants you to know he’ll talk to you about it,” she said.

I pressed my mouth shut, not wanting to consider what she knew about my ex-husband and all the things I didn’t know; it was crazy. How could I still be hung up on this guy who had clearly moved on and had a whole life of his own? A life in a world I had never imagined.

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach and my skin felt clammy as the reality of what I was discovering began to sink in. The world was full of magical, dangerous creatures and my ex-husband was perhaps one of the most dangerous.

A deep sigh escaped my body as I sat on the stool at the foot of the bed. Whatever was going on with Ryder and with all this craziness, it was a little much for me and I didn’t really know how to deal with it. I stood up abruptly and began pacing.

“Hey, why don’t we go out for a drink,” Sophie asked.

My eyebrows raised and I sucked in my lower lip. Ryder was a monster. “I’m not sure I’m supposed to go outside.” They had flown me halfway across the country to hide me on this little island of Alameda. Apparently, it was a place where he thought I would be safe.

“Oh, don’t worry about Ryder,” Sophie said. “He’s a stick in the mud at the best of times.”

A chuckle bubbled up from within me. I wouldn’t necessarily have called him a stick

in the mud, but he did have his rules and regulations he liked to follow; there was nothing I could do about it.

“He won’t even know we’re gone,” Sophie said.

I looked at her dubiously. “He said demons are after me.”

Sophie shrugged. “It’s probably not as bad as he made out. I know you can’t go out in public really, but no one’s going to recognize you at Furlan’s. It’s just a few blocks away.”

I knew I shouldn’t go out. Ryder wouldn’t be happy about it. That settled it for me. I turned back to Sophie and smiled. “I would love to go out for a drink,” I grinned. “But within reason.”

It hadn’t escaped me that my entire house had been swallowed into a hole in the ground. I had barely escaped. I actually was in some sort of danger. Sophie seemed willing, though, so if we walked a block down the street and had a beer what harm could it do?

“Excellent choice,” Sophie said. “You have nothing to worry about. I’ll be with you and no one’s going to mess with anyone at Furlan’s. Not with the way that old goat runs the place. We’re just going to have to get you dressed in something a little bit different.”

I looked down at my black slacks and my white button-down shirt. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“Well, it’s fine if you’re going to be a waiter,” Sophie said with a grin. “But it’s not really going to work for us at Furlan’s. We’re going to need something a little more, you know, sexy.”

A deep laugh erupted from within me. “Sexy isn’t exactly my thing.”

“Au contraire.” Sophie raised her eyebrows at me. “I’m quite impressed with the way you flow. I don’t think you even realize it. You just need to get out of your restrictive clothing.”

I looked a little dubiously at what she was wearing. The blue, flowing velvet dress looked phenomenal on her, but it was definitely not my style and not going to work with all of my curves. She walked over to the closet and began flipping through a bunch of clothes hanging there. I looked curiously and was relieved when Sophie held up three options. One was a long red dress very similar to hers, another was similar in green but with a short skirt; a very, very short skirt. I just shook my head, laughing.

“No way,” I said, pushing them to the side.

The next option was a black knee length skirt I quite liked. It had a lift to the edge of it, giving it a sassy appearance. She paired it with a purple silk blouse.

“That would be just fine,” I said. “Thank you. It’s the perfect blend of conservative fun.”

“Then hurry up, woman,” she said flinging the clothes at me. “We better go out as quickly as possible because if Ryder does find out we left, we’re both going to be in serious trouble.”

I looked at her and gave her sideways grin. “That’s exactly why I want to go. “

Chapter 17

RYDER

“Where are we going?” Ratchet asked as we got back in the limo.

“Clayton.” My words were for Danny, the driver, but my gaze was out the window.

“Mount Diablo?” Ratchet asked in surprise.

Danny just glanced over his shoulder but gave me a quick nod. He would never go against my command, even if it was unheard of for a monster to travel to Mt. Diablo.

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“I need to find out who is after the rings,” I grumbled. “It’s the closest entrance to Undirheim.”

Ratchet sucked in his cheeks. “And you think walking into Set’s domain is the answer.”

“No,” I said. “Set distracted us but I have a sneaking suspicion he’s not the one trying to get the metal. For all his darkness, he’s not a fan of monsters so why would he want to unleash monsters on the world. It doesn’t make sense. He would just as easily unleash demons against earth if he could get away with it.”

“Good point,” Ratchet nodded. “But I don’t understand what your actual plan is. We’re going to walk into Undirheim and talk to Thrain? Find out what his demons are doing?”

“Something like that.” I turned away from the window and toward Ratchet. “By the way, don’t ever speak the demon tongue in front of Caroline again. You could have condemned her.”

“They’re not going to condemn a human who has heard a couple of words in the mother tongue,” Ratchet argued.

“You don’t know what the DGC is capable of. They’re doing all sorts of crazy shit, lately,” I said. “It’s hard to know who to trust.”

“Well, I hope you still trust me.” Ratchet looked at me quizzically.

“As if that was ever in doubt.”

“Didn’t you ever think of telling her before now?” Ratchet asked.

“No,” I said, but I was lying. I had thought about telling her. A lot. But it had been for selfish means. So, I could be better understood or feel closer to her. It didn’t seem fair to burden a human with all the horrors that existed around them; they already were aware of science and space and the fact there was only a thin veil of blue between them and certain death. How could I take away her innocence? How could I remove it and make every breath she took potentially be her last? She was living on the edge of a dark and dangerous world, and the only thing protecting her was me. There were monsters around every corner ready to pounce on humans and kill them and yet most humans went through their lives completely unaware of this. They naïvely believed their greatest fear was the dark universe outside of their protective bubble.

“So, this is your plan?” Ratchet asked. “Keeping Caroline locked in your Alameda home until the world is a safe place for her?”

“Based on her house being consumed by a sink hole into Undirheim, I think it’s clear the world isn’t safe for her right now,” I grumbled. “And Set has something to do with it.”

“That does not answer the question I asked,” Ratchet countered.

“She’s there as long as I say she’s there,” I spoke bluntly. “Last time I checked it was my house and she is my ex-wife.”

“Emphasis on the ‘ex,’ maybe?” Ratchet raised an eyebrow at me curiously.

I glared at him. “This isn’t the time.” I didn’t need to be goaded. I was close enough to blowing up regardless. Chaos rippled just beneath the surface.

“No problem,” Ratchet shrugged. “It’s none of my business anyhow.”

“Damn right it’s not any of your fucking business,” I grumbled. The last thing I needed was anyone, even Ratchet, to know exactly how much I still felt for Caroline. The more people who understood my true love for her, the more danger she was in. Of that, I was sure.

It wasn’t long before we were in the small town of Clayton, which marked the demon entrance to Mount Diablo, a portal to Undirheim. The demon guarding the portal looked unimpressed when we pulled up in the limousine and I stepped out. Demons tended to not like demigods very much because we operated on different wave lengths. Demigods wanted to preserve human life and demons just liked them when they were dead. I wasn’t a newcomer to demons though, considering my best friend was one.

When Ratchet stepped out at the limousine the demon guarding the portal lowered his stance a bit. He knew Ratchet was on demigod business, but still he was a demon. It made our entrance a little more reasonable.

“I want to speak to Thrain,” I said.

“What makes you think Thrain wants to see you?” The demon was irreverent of my demigod status.

“I don’t remember asking if he wanted to see me or not,” I said with a grunt. Thrain was the demon overlord, but the demons only got access to earth because of the demigods and the Fae who ruled sections of the earth. This section, New Attica, what humans called North America, was ruled by the demigods. There was no way he would refuse a direct request by a demigod to come and speak. Just in case he felt like it, I shifted into my monster self, complete with horns, fangs, and tail. And then I spoke in the demonic tongue.

“Hrl dlaeji rmwl flj fglmcnjv hrl bm. Lnhrlg Thrgmnj dlmbi nhr al je eg rl dlmbi nhr hrl dlanved segwegmhnej dnglshbo. Oep hlbb rna hrmh nz rl rmi m wgefbla nhr seanjv he hmhc he al.” I ground the words out translating them in my head. “The demons have been breaking the law. Either Thrain deals with me now or he deals with the Demigod Corporation directly. You tell him that if he has a problem with coming to talk to me.”

I could feel Ratchet’s gaze on me. The threat of bringing the DGC down upon Thrain wasn’t idle but it was harsh. The DGC were in control of New Attica, but they weren’t very popular. They made laws people hated and then insisted people abide by them. I personally didn’t mind so much because I had one job as far as the DGC was concerned: to keep monsters away from Earth. My most important job, though, that trumped even what the DGC needed of me, was to keep demons away from Caroline.

We didn’t have to wait long for Thrain to show up.

He stared at me in my monster form. As the demon overlord it hardly impacted him. When he stood in his demonic form with fire flying off of his shoulders and hair, he was probably just as gruesome if not more so than me.

We were two alphas ready to clash.

“Why are your demons breaking the law?” I asked without introduction. Thrain and I knew each other. Our paths had crossed in Cougar Creek and various other cross-species incidents.

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Ratchet raised a finger to get my attention and I suddenly realized I had to be careful or else I would give away Caroline's existence and her location without even meaning to. By the look on Ratchet's face, he already calculated that long before we got here but he'd been silenced by me.

"My demons have done nothing wrong," Thrain said. "They do their job taking the souls of the dead away."

"There was a report of an attack in Boston," I responded. "A human's house disappeared and there's only one place it could've gone. I was there to witness it and it went to Undirheim. So, perhaps you want to rethink this before you start defending your demons."

Thrain cocked his head to the side, glancing over at the portal keeper who had called him forward. "Do you know anything about this?"

"It was ordered by someone," I pointed out. "So, whether it was your people or not I'm going to hold the demons responsible until we find out who it was. And I'm going to leave Ratchet here until you tell me something,"

Ratchet's head whipped around and looked at me with dismay on his face. "I'm not staying here."

I turned back to look at Thrain. "Ratchet doesn't want to stay. So, he'll probably start killing other demons and causing a scene if I leave him. Who knows? He can get crazy like that. You better figure it out. I know Set was involved because he acted as a decoy while your demons did the deed."

“You can’t come into my world accusing my people of doing things,” Thrain argued. “I’ve always been honorable to the DGC, and I have never interfered with living humans.”

“I’ll give you twenty-four hours to sort it out and find out who did it,” I negotiated.

“I’m not staying here for twenty-four hours.” Ratchet growled towards me.

“I can help out a little faster,” the demon who guarded the portal said. We all turned to him.

“What do you know?” Thrain grumbled at him.

“Not much,” he said suddenly taking a step backwards from his overlord. “I just heard some demons talking that there was a bet one of them lost, but it wasn’t to another demon.”

“Was it to Set?” I asked.

“No,” the portal guardian took a deep breath, clearly not relishing the information he was about to impart. “A demon lost a bet to a monster.”

“There are no other monsters operating on earth,” I said with surety.

“What about the one in Cougar Creek?” Ratchet asked.

“Torn? He’s the last one who would be going around hurting humans. I’m positive.” I vouched for the kind monster who was making a life on Earth. “It can’t be him. Are you sure they said it’s a monster?”

“Demons may manipulate but they don’t lie,” Thrain pointed out. “If he said a

monster is responsible for this thing, you're barking up the wrong tree, Ryder."

"I'm going to have to agree with him," said Ratchet. "We're looking for a monster, not a demon."

Chapter 18

CAROLINE

I was pretty sure we were way past the time we were allotted to be at Furlan's Bar, which was apparently a satyr bikers' hangout. I had a few drinks in me and was feeling good. I'd learned a lot about Alameda. It was the home of the witches, and they kept a barrier around the place to keep it safe. That was why Ryder thought it would be a safe place for me to stay. Alameda was an old 1950s town, but it had a naval base taking up one side of it. There were two main streets. The one we were on made up of low-rise brick buildings and on one corner was a dark building with a large black paned window. It was clearly to protect all the nefarious residents inside the bar.

Truth be told, I hadn't been into a bar like this before. I was a little more used to the uppity Bostonian polished wood, brass, and stained-glass Irish bars that covered my home turf. This was a little more 1950s Americana with a row of motorcycles parked out front. Didn't look like the kind of place I'd frequent at all.

"Are you sure this is safe?" I asked Sophie, leaning in a bit after my third drink.

"Yes," she chuckled as she smiled and put her hand behind my back to steady me.

The interior had booths made of red leather, a throwback from the 60s when apparently it had been considered cool. The stench of the bar wafted over me. It was like the bar hadn't had any fresh air in it; the stink of stale liquor and cigarette smoke

clung to the air, leaving a cloying smoky taste in my mouth. I wasn't quite sure I was a fan of it, but it didn't seem to matter to Sophie. She had moved through the crowd and straight up to the bar where we had stood drinking ever since our arrival. I glanced around at the people in the bar, who all periodically stared at me. I didn't think a middle-aged maven would get that much attention, but it was like they knew I was different. They knew I wasn't one of them. I didn't care. They served alcohol. I wanted alcohol, and that seemed to be a good enough reason for me.

Ignoring everybody, I turned back to Sophie.

"Can I borrow your phone?" I asked.

"Nope," she said. "That would be way against Ryder's rules."

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“You’ve already taken me out of the safe house.” I pointed out.

“Good point,” she nodded. “Who are you going to call?”

“I just want to check on my best friend. She has no idea where I am, and she’ll have a search party looking for me if I don’t send her some kind of signal.”

Sophie looked sympathetic. “I get it. Ava, the lady who piloted you here? She’s my BFF.” She handed me her phone. “Text only.”

I grinned not sure if it was the liquor or the idea of connecting with Laney.

“Laney it’s Caroline.” I typed. “I’m okay.”

“WTF?!” The response was immediate. “Your house disappeared! They are searching the ruins for your body!”

“I’m fine. I’m with Ryder.” I paused waiting for her response.

“I should have known.” Her irritation was apparent.

“Call off the manhunt,” I said, assuming it was on the news.

“Fine. That guy Magnus came looking for you,” she typed. “You didn’t like him, did you?”

“No.” She of all people knew I was still stuck on Ryder even though he was a lost

cause.

“Cool. I went on a date with him because we were both worried about you.”

“Go ahead.” I wrote the words out; secretly happy she was seeing someone.

“Times up,” Sophie plucked the phone from my hand. “I’ve got to go. Talk later.” She said the words out loud as she typed. Then she wiped her hand over the phone and all the messages Laney and I had been writing disappeared.

“Did you just use magic to delete your messages?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“You could have just hit delete,” I pointed out.

“I was wiping them from her phone also and removing the number. She can’t be able to find you.” Sophie explained.

“Fine,” I murmured forgetting how I was being held in Ryder’s world, a world I was completely not familiar with. I glanced around at the satyrs and other dark creatures lurking in the shadows.

“What would you like for your next drink?” Sophie asked, raising an eyebrow at me as she leaned in. She whispered quietly, “Don’t mind everybody in the bar. They just haven’t seen a human in here in a long time. In fact, maybe they’ve never seen a human in here.” She glanced over in the corner at one of the weather-beaten looking men with a long mustache and long hair.

His gaze was like steel as he stared at us. The bartender was looking at him, too. I suddenly realized everybody was waiting for the guy in the booth to make a decision.

“What is happening?” I asked Sophie.

“That’s Tony Furlan. He owns this place. He’s deciding if you can still drink here,” she murmured. “Humans are known for having a low tolerance.”

“Maybe we should’ve called ahead?” I asked Sophie.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, flashing a bright smile across the bar at the old Satyr.

He shook his head but gave a shrug and a slight nod afterwards and the tall, blue skinned bartender quickly grabbed a couple of glasses and started mixing drinks.

“I haven’t ordered,” I said.

Sophie shrugged. “I guess Jack thinks he knows what you want.”

Jack came over and put a couple of cocktails in front of us.

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“You’re not allergic to egg, are you?” he asked, his long blue fingers elegant against the pale frothy drink.

I shook my head, eyeing up the pink drink. He put a shot of whiskey in front of Sophie.

“How do you get the top shelf whiskey and I get the kid’s cocktail?” I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders but smiled at me. “Just taste it. Jack has a knack for knowing exactly what you’re going to like, so don’t be surprised if you fall in love at first sip.”

She raised her glass of whiskey toward me and gave me a warm smile. “Here’s to you arriving in Alameda amongst us,” she said, holding up her glass. I wasn’t sure I wanted to toast considering I had pretty much been taken to Alameda against my will, but it seemed like I didn’t really have much choice. Otherwise, I would seem a little bit rude. So, I clicked my glass and took a sip. In seconds the alcohol hit my mouth and I felt alive. It traveled down my body, tingling in every molecule as it went.

“I can’t believe it,” I murmured. “You’re totally right. This drink is divine, and perfectly suited for me.”

Sophie shrugged. “Jack doesn’t get it wrong.”

“Can I get another one?” I said as I quickly downed the drink in front of me. I usually didn’t drink very heavily, but the stress of the last few days was catching up with me and I could suddenly feel the tension melting out of my body at the taste of the drink.

I wanted more.

“It’s usually not a good idea to have five of Jack’s drinks. They’ll sneak up on you. Before you know it, you’ll be singing on the stage over there.” She started laughing.

“Oh, I don’t sing,” I said. “I definitely do not sing. Not unless you want to empty the bar really fast.”

Sophie chuckled. “No singing. Got it. Check.”

“Why did you bring her here?” A deep voice boomed in my ear and I turned around to find Tony Furlan standing right next to me, his long gray hair held in a ponytail behind him. He looked like a dangerous old biker, but I saw his goat legs and his horns. He was more than a dangerous biker. He was a dangerous supernatural biker. I inched a little closer to Sophie not because I was particularly afraid he would do anything dangerous to me but because she knew him better than I did and if he was going to do anything she would at least be able to react and respond.

“She’s just another customer,” Sophie said, staring Tony in the eye.

“She’s not a welcome customer,” Tony responded, folding his arms across his chest.

“Well, that’s a little rude,” I interjected, the pink frothy alcohol making me feel a little bit more confident. “I wouldn’t say that about you if you came in my bar for a drink.”

Tony looked down at me, his gaze cold and hard. “Well, when you go and buy your own bar, you can do exactly as you please,” he said. “Right now, though, you’re in my bar, and in my bar we have people who are customers and people who want to be customers and people we allow to be customers. They are different categories of people.”

“Look,” I said, putting my drink down on the counter and my hands on my hips as I turned on him. “I was just flown across the country against my will in order to protect me from some unknown threat that has recently demolished my entire house and made it disappear. I’m kind of having a bad day and I kind of need a drink. This is the nearest and safest place I can go to because I’m not allowed anywhere else according to Ryder.”

“You’re with Ryder?” He glanced over at Sophie as he asked the question. She gave a slight nod. Tony nodded, stepping back. “Well, you’re welcome here then.”

A tall blond man entered the bar. He had an aura similar to Ryder, like he could command the room with a single look. “Aurelius,” Furlan greeted him with a firm handshake.

“Aurelius is a demigod,” Sophie whispered in my ear.

Aurelius glanced over at Sophie and gave her a brief nod before he and Furlan turned and walked back to the booth in the corner. I gave a little shake of my shoulders, trying to brush off the ill will he’d just thrown at me.

“It’s karaoke night,” Sophie grinned as she glanced over at the stage where a couple of the biker satyrs were playing with a mic stand and a mixer.

“Oh no,” I said. “I told you when I walked in the bar I wasn’t agreeing to sing and I’m not about to start now.”

The bartender put another drink in front of me. I had a quick sip and suddenly my body was feeling very warm and tingly and content and happy.

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” Sophie said. “I’ll do it with you. I love doing it.”

And before I knew exactly what was happening, I was standing up on stage in front of the microphone. There was a monitor in front of me showing me lyrics as the music struck up. I looked with terror out to everybody in the audience, who were all staring at me. But there must have been something in the drink I'd been given that kind of gave me some courage.

Sophie leaned over to me. "Just close your eyes if you know this song or stay focused on the monitor if you don't. It'll be fine. Just go with it. Feel the music. Go with the flow." I couldn't close my eyes because I didn't know the words to the music. It was some odd Depeche Mode song called Somebody. I remembered the song from back in the day and as the gentle piano notes strung out, I found the words were in my head perfectly. I closed my eyes and began swaying with the music, singing the lyrics of a person who was looking for somebody to love. The music flowed through me and up through my voice. I didn't pay much attention. I was just feeling the emotions of what the words meant to me, looking for love and finding somebody who will understand you but also who might also disagree with you.

The music and words floated in the air, hanging there in bright notes. The room was silent when the song ended, and I opened my eyes. I swayed gently against Sophie. "I think I'm a little drunk," I murmured. She studied me with her mouth slightly open.

"That was insanely beautiful," she said, her eyes glistening with tears. I looked around the bar and suddenly realized everybody was staring at me, but they all looked quite morose and sad. A few of them were crying and one sat in the corner sobbing.

Tony Furlan stood up from his corner, looking as angry as I could ever imagine. He stormed over to me but addressed his words to Sophie. "Get her out of here," he said. "I'm not looking to have a bunch of people crying in my bar. This is meant to be a place of joviality and fun. Not of depression. She totally just killed the mood."

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I took a deep breath. “I am... I’m sorry,” I stuttered. “I don’t usually sing. I don’t know what got into me. I just suddenly felt like it.”

But I could see by the look on Tony’s face he wasn’t having it. It was time I to leave. Sophie had my arm in her hand and was pulling me toward the door. Everybody was staring at us silently as we walked out. It was the same as when we had walked in, except now many of them were crying.

Chapter 19

RYDER

I kicked open the door of Furlan’s bar, shedding bright California light into the deep dark recesses of the pub. I thought I probably didn’t have to make such a dramatic entrance, but I was pissed and my anger needed release. My blood boiled in a way I couldn’t even describe.

She had disobeyed me.

Caroline hadn’t listened to me; she hadn’t done what I had told her to do, which was stay put. In two seconds, I was across the bar and had my hand around her wrist, pulling her towards me.

“Let me go,” Caroline said, yanking her arm away from me, but my grip was strong, and it only resulted in her hurting her wrist.

“I told you not to leave the house,” I growled.

Sophie stepped in between us. “It was my fault, Ryder. I convinced her to go.”

“I’ll deal with you later,” Ryder’s tone was as cold as steel.

“Nothing happened.” Caroline still tried to tug her wrist out of my grip, but I was not going to let her go. Not a chance.

“You were there in Boston. You know exactly what happened,” I said. “Even worse than that can happen now. You’ve got to listen to me. You’ve got to do what I tell you to do.” Even as I said the words, I knew there was little to no chance she was going to listen to me.

Caroline was anything but conducive to taking directions, least of all from me.

Unfortunately, it was one of the things I quite loved about her. Unlike any other woman I had ever met, she was not easily thwarted and certainly wouldn’t just take people at face value. She dug in, knew her mind and kept things her way. Now, I stood there staring at her, watching her chest rise and fall as she took deep breaths trying to calm herself down.

“We do not encourage the laying on of hands in an aggressive way in this bar,” Furlan’s voice rasped behind me. He sounded like he’d smoked three packs of cigarettes a day for the majority of his life.

The whole bar was quiet watching us. I felt my back stiffen and my jaw clench.

“Is that how you speak to a demigod?” I drew myself up to my full height, letting my horns and fangs show, but out of respect for Furlan, I loosened my grip a bit on Caroline’s wrist. She took full advantage of it by yanking her arm back to herself. I scowled at her, but I didn’t make an effort to get it back. The DGC already got enough of a bad rap without me making us look like a bunch of assholes in public.

“Maybe there’s somewhere a little quieter we can talk?” I asked.

Tony looked sideways at me. “I think we were asking you to leave. She’s different.”

“Be that as it may, I’d like to speak to you alone,” I said.

Caroline huffed, hands on her hips. “If you’re going to be talking about me. I’m coming with you.”

“You’re coming with me because I have to keep an eye on you,” I said. “Clearly you can’t be trusted to follow directions.”

“I’m still unclear as to when you began thinking I take directions from you.” Her tone was belligerent.

“You’re in way over your head, Caroline,” I said. “You need to start listening and doing as you’re told.”

Her face went bright red, and I could see the anger boiling in her eyes as she gave me a death glare, but I didn’t care. I had faced down worse with the monsters that I was constantly battling, and the reality was, if I couldn’t get her to listen to me, she was going to wind up dead.

“You’re really killing the buzz of my bar,” Tony said. “Come to my office.”

“I’ll wait for you down here,” Sophie smiled at Caroline.

“There’s no need for that,” I growled. “I’ll be here with her the whole time. I’m not letting her out of my sight.”

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“Possessive much?” Sophie asked with a jaunt of her shoulders.

“Mind your own business,” I said. I knew I sounded like an asshole, but frankly I didn’t care. If I had to be the asshole to keep Caroline alive, then so be it; I was going to do that. I glared at her. “Up the stairs.” I pointed to the corner of the bar where stairs led up to an office.

She looked like she was about to argue with me, but she didn’t. Instead, she followed Tony, and I walked closely behind her, trying not to look at the way her ass moved while she walked.

The room above the bar had a one-way mirror looking down into the pub below. I glanced down and saw Sophie had indeed pulled herself up onto a barstool and was waiting patiently for Caroline. What was it about women that made them stick together? I had no idea, but in a way I was grateful Caroline had a female friend out here. I would’ve just preferred if it had been one who wasn’t about to get her into a lot of trouble.

“Stay away from Sophie,” I said to Caroline.

“You told her to watch me!” she exclaimed. “Besides you can’t tell me who to hang out with and who not to hang out with. We aren’t married anymore.”

“Oh my God you were married to Ryder?” Tony let out a laugh that sounded like a goat bleat.

“Yeah,” Caroline said.

“That must’ve been quite the adventure,” Tony said, a smirk on his face as he went to his desk and leaned up against it.

“You wouldn’t believe it,” Caroline said. “He was never home and when he did come home, he had a lot of crazy stories. None of which were as crazy as the truth. At the end of the day, it doesn’t change the fact he spent years lying to me.”

“Yeah, lies can really ruin a relationship,” Tony said. “Honesty is the most important thing in any relationship. If you can’t be honest with the person you’re in a relationship with, who can you be honest with?”

“I’m standing right here.” I glared at Tony. “And I don’t really take taking kindly to this conversation. My marriage with Caroline was nobody’s business but ours, and I’ll thank you to never mention it again.”

He held up his hands and took a step backwards. “No problem demigod, I got you. Your relationship, your business.” He turned to Caroline and said, “but if you ever want to talk about it, I’m here for you. I’ve had my share of relationships too and they’re always a little bit hard to handle, especially in the supernatural world.”

“We are not here to talk about relationships,” I insisted. “I need protection for her.”

“Who is after her?” Tony rubbed his hand on his chin.

“We aren’t sure,” I told a half truth. There was no way I was turning and letting them know monsters were at the heart of this. “Someone is trying to get at me, and it seems like the only way they can get at me is to get to her. They found out about her.”

A slight smile played on Tony’s mouth as he looked at me. “What does it matter? You’re not in a relationship with her anymore.”

I could tell he was poking me and trying to get a response. Inside it was working. My hands clenched at my side as I wanted to punch him in the face. I also knew showing any emotion was going to be my downfall. The last thing in the world anybody needed to know was I still had feelings for her. It only drew more attention to her and put her in darker danger. What no one seemed to realize is that she didn't want me anymore.

"I'm doing what any decent human being would do for a friend," I said. "Someone's out to kill or kidnap her and I'm not about to let that happen, not to her, not to anybody."

"You can't save the world Ryder," Tony said.

"I can try," I said with a steely gaze. "Now do you have some people to guard her or not?"

Chapter 20

CAROLINE

"Did it ever occur to you," I said, stepping forward between the two men as they were having their stupid discussion about relationships and putting me in some sort of ivory tower, "I don't exactly want to be safe and I'm not looking for some hero or white knight or anything like that."

"Well, that's convenient," Tony said, "because I think a monster is hardly what I would consider a white knight of any sort. Sounds like he's just trying to stop you from getting killed."

I glared over at Ryder. He had been a bit controlling when we'd been together, but this was like controlling on steroids. "You can just tell me what to expect. I'm not

going to be some damsel in distress,” I insisted.

He crossed the room in two forceful strides and gripped my arms in his hands as he glared down at me, his face inches from mine. Pure anger flashed in his eyes, and I thought for a moment he was going to shake me. I even felt Tony tense up and move a little closer in case I needed protection. I didn’t bat an eyelash. I stared him directly in the eyes. I wasn’t about to be afraid of Ryder. I was going to stand up to him and I was going to claim my freedom.

No matter what.

“Maybe you need to understand a little better what you’re up against,” Ryder said. “These creatures are after me. I don’t know exactly why, but they are, and they found out about you, so what I need is time to go and find the fucking beasts and stop them in their tracks from hunting you down and killing you because when supernaturals kill people they don’t just snap their fingers and you die.”

His intensity was causing chills down my spine and the hairs on the end of my arms to stand up.

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“When a demon kills you,” he continued, “they do it slowly. They like to torture their victims for a long time and carefully tear them apart bit by bit. Some demons, the worst of them, will eat the flesh of the victims while they’re killing.”

I swallowed hard. He made it sound so real. It was a little more than I could take right then, but I was daring to take the challenge of getting away, because at the end of the day, I wanted to have my freedom.

I glanced over at Tony, who was standing there watching with his arms crossed. He gave me a brief nod. “He’s absolutely right. Demons are nothing you want to mess with and if they are after, you just lay low. Whatever happened between the two of you, I don’t know, but Ryder is not a bad guy. He’ll go out there and try and get the demons before they can attack you. He’ll spend every effort he possibly can to do that.”

“What am I supposed to do until then? Sit locked up in a castle tower somewhere and wait?” I asked

“Yeah, that’s about it,” Ryder said. “It’s why I brought you to Alameda and I was planning on coming to talk to Tony. The satyrs have a different way of doing things and well, they are just below the realm of what the demigod corporation considers legal.”

“Well, if you’ve got demons after you, we need to keep her off the ground and you need a strong patrol,” Tony said.

“That’s for damn sure.”

“What about the Temple of Sedona?” Tony asked

“That’s the first place I thought of,” said Ryder. “But I think it’s a little too obvious. She’ll be noticed there. I think she’s better off here with a satyr guard.”

Tony looked at me, then he looked over at Ryder. I had the distinct feeling he was leaning towards helping me.

My house was gone. I was back in some weird sort of entanglement with my ex-husband and if I chose to try to fight these crazy demons who I had no powers against, I was most likely going to die. But if I went into hiding, there was a good chance Ryder could stop the attacks and I would be safe, and maybe I could get my life back.

I inhaled slowly, hissing the air through my teeth, almost swallowing the words even as I said them out loud. “I’ll go wherever you can keep me safe.”

I glanced over at Ryder and he looked visibly relieved as he turned to Tony. “So, what have you got?” he asked.

“Do you wanna know the truth?” Tony responded. “She’s in the safest place she could be. The witches rule Alameda and I’ve got a lot of wards around it to keep the demons out. Made a really smart choice bringing her here.”

“But I need her under some type of protection,” Ryder said.

“I think he just said he was going to give me protection,” I said. At least that’s the way I had understood it. I couldn’t hide the fact I wasn’t really in the mood to stay in Alameda for any indefinite period of time, but if this place was warded by the witches and the satyrs that would keep out the demons then staying here would probably make sense.

Ryder moved closer to Tony, and I could feel his back rise as he grew taller and bigger, invading the space. Tony was clearly the alpha of his pack, but Ryder was going to show his dominance in the location, even though it was Tony's own pub.

"She needs more protection than just staying in Alameda," he said.

"But if the demons can't get into Alameda, why should it really matter?" I asked. There was a knocking on the door and Sophie came in like a bubble of joy. "Hey, they're asking for her to sing downstairs again," she said. "Aurelius just got here. Are you guys done up here yet or what?"

I felt lighthearted when Sophie entered the room, like something had been lifted from my shoulders. I didn't want to impose on her, but it felt good to have a female friend around, someone who could support me and connect with me in this male dominated, testosterone driven environment.

"Great. Why don't you guys decide where you're going to stuff me and keep me safe and I'll go down and have another song," I said. Without waiting for another word from the two of them Sophie and I walked out of the office and down into the pub. "Whatever you do, don't leave the pub," Ryder called after us.

"What is he, your dad?" Sophie asked.

"No, but he's sure acting as if he wants to be," I said.

Sophie laughed. "And it doesn't sound like 'it's in a 'who's your daddy' kinda way, unfortunately."

"No, those days are long gone between Ryder and I." I stopped my mind right there not giving it a second to think about all of the passionate nights I had spent with Ryder when we were married and in a good place, loving each other. No, those

moments were long, long gone.

I tripped after Sophie down the stairs. She already had the music primed and ready to go by the time I got to the stage.

“What song did you pick?” I asked.

“I thought we could do something a little bit different,” Sophie said. “I’m just going to have the band play, and we’re going to sing. We don’t have any lyrics. I just want to test something out. Let’s see what happens.”

I glanced at the musicians who were standing around the stage. They all looked similar in a strange way, angular features and black hair of varying length and they all wore the same necklaces around their necks, little black chokers that had a pendant hanging down the center.

“What are they?” I whispered to Sophie.

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“Harpies,” she whispered. “The necklace keeps them in human form.”

It glowed slightly when they spoke. They were talking amongst themselves, not to me. I moved over to the microphone, closing my eyes and grabbing it as I listened to the strains of the violin and the guitar playing together on the stage. I opened my mouth and began to sing. I sang the notes, lifting high above the noise of the crowd and bringing a calm quietness to the room as all eyes turned toward me.

Aurelius stared at me, his eyes opening wide.

His eyes misted over as others in the pub began to cry. I looked quizzically at everybody, not sure what was happening, but even the bartender was crying. I glanced at Sophie, who was on the stage with me. She and the band members all had tears streaming down their faces. The violinist stopped and the rest of the band faded to silence. She walked over to me quietly as the noise in the pub started up again. People began talking, but this time their voices were rushed and low, as if they were all talking about something bad that had happened in their lives.

An exceptionally pale Aurelius rose and rushed out of the pub.

“What’s happening?” I asked the violinist who came up to me, her large black eyes blinking wide as she dried her own tears.

“You have no idea what you are, do you?” she asked.

“What do you mean, what I am?” I said. “It’s pretty simple, I’m human. I’m a research scientist from Boston.”

“And you’ve lived your entire life not knowing who and what you truly are,” the violinist said.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked solemnly, biting my lower lip, feeling like she was going to tell me something monumental that I really needed to know. Something that would help me understand my life better, but the deep feeling of dread inside me made me think maybe I didn’t want to know exactly what she was going to tell me.

“You are extremely rare.” She glanced over at Sophie, including her in the conversation. “In fact, I don’t think we know of any like you, at least not in New Attica.”

“What am I?” I ground the words out slowly as Sophie reached out and gripped my hand.

The violinist took my other hand. “I’m so sorry.” She spoke like I was cursed. “You’re a banshee.”

Chapter 21

RYDER

A banshee? I heard the words just as I opened the door from the stairs and came into the bar. My teeth grated against each other; my lips drawn in a firm line. How could I not have seen it? How could I have been married to her and not have realized?

Well, she’d never sung before, but that was hardly the point. I should’ve known. I should’ve sensed she was supernatural. I walked up to her and reached out to grab her wrist, but she yanked her arm back before I could get it. “We need to get out of here now,” I said, glaring down at her.

“Did you know I was a banshee?” she asked, her voice strained.

“I had no idea, no. Let’s get out of here before people start asking questions,” I said.

I turned back to look at Tony. “I’ll be back shortly to sort things out with you. I’m going to take her and get her tucked away.”

“That’s a pretty good idea, considering she’s a banshee,” Tony commented with a frown.

I put my hand on the small of her back, figuring it was the most she would accept and pushing her toward the door, knowing all eyes were on us and there would be one burning question in everybody’s mind.

Who was going to die tonight?

Because that’s what happened when you heard a banshee sing.

It wasn’t until we got to the front door of the bar that two of the satyr bikers stepped in front of us. They were bulky and imposing. I could’ve easily taken them out regardless, but it wasn’t exactly something that would improve my relationship with Tony. He wasn’t likely to help me if I started making a mess in his bar, especially a mess of his own people.

The satyrs didn’t try to hide their physical forms from us, not in here. Their horns were out and their fuzzy goat legs were splayed in the strong stance of “We’re sure as hell not moving.” One had on a T-shirt and a leather jacket, the other one just a leather vest.

Caroline looked at them, not afraid, but more annoyed and perturbed. I think that was why I worried about her. She didn’t seem to understand when she needed to back off.

She ran at everything full bore without taking a moment to pause. And this just wasn't the world you wanted to do that in. Especially as a human, or a banshee I guess now. I still didn't understand how I had missed it.

"We're leaving," Caroline said to the Satyrs who were staring down at her nervously.

"Your woman is quite ballsy," the one in the leather jacket said to Ryder.

"We want to know who it is," the satyr with black hair and the leather vest stated.

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“What do you mean who it is?” Caroline asked, utterly confused. She glanced over her shoulder to look up at me to see if I had any idea what they were talking about.

Unfortunately, I did. I knew exactly what they wanted to know. I was pretty sure Caroline didn’t have the answer though.

“We want to know who’s going to die,” the leather-vested satyr said.

Caroline’s eyes opened wide. “What do you mean, who is going to die? No one’s going to die. At least, I don’t think anyone’s going to die. Why would someone die?” She looked at me completely confused. “I mean, I almost died when my house sank into a big hole, but I have no plans of dying anytime soon.”

“We aren’t talking about you dying,” the other satyr said.

“Why in God’s name would you think someone was going to die?” Caroline asked.

“It’s what happens when a banshee sings,” I said, my voice completely dead pan. There was no way I was going to let the satyrs know I was just as aware as they were that a banshee singing meant someone was going to die and it was either going to be someone in this bar or a close relative.

“No one’s going to die,” Caroline said. “Like I know you guys are all supernatural and things and now all of a sudden you think I’m a banshee because everyone started crying when I was singing but that’s not necessarily the case. It might just be what you’re thinking. So, I don’t have any instinct that anyone in here is going to die. I think you guys should all just go back to your merrymaking while I go off with Mr.

Grumpy Pants here so he can lock me away in a closet and keep me safe from whatever it is he thinks is chasing me.”

By then Tony was up close and personal on my side. “You don’t have any idea who is going to die?” he asked. “I’ve never actually met a banshee before so I’m not quite sure what your powers are like.”

“Well, I’ve never met a banshee before either,” Caroline said. “So, I have no idea how any of this is going to play out. I can tell you one thing for sure; I have no premonition of anyone dying.” She looked up at me. “Can we go now?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” I said, giving her a steely glare. She should’ve left when I first told her to leave instead of causing all this fuss. I stepped around her and right through the middle of the two satyrs. Tony nodded them back. He wasn’t stupid enough to cause a problem with a demigod, even if the demigod was half monster.

We stepped outside of the bar and the sea salt in the air filled my nostrils. Alameda always reminded me of some of the salt flats where the often rifts were, but there were no rifts here. This was a perfectly safe place, one of the safest in all the world, even from monsters.

I hoped.

It wouldn’t be long before the demons at least located where she was.

“What about Sophie?” Caroline asked, glancing back into the bar.

“I’m here,” she cried, bursting out of the front door. “Sorry it took me so long. I just had to say goodbye to a couple of friends. Can you believe you’re a banshee?” she asked in exaltation.

“No, no I can’t believe it,” Caroline said in all truthfulness

“Maybe this isn’t the best place to talk about it. Let’s get back to my house and this time don’t you dare leave it.” I growled.

“Like for how long?” Caroline asked.

“Not until I tell you that it’s safe,” I said. “It won’t be safe as long as the demons are after you.” There was no point in telling her it was probably monsters going after her. I was still trying to wrap my head around that myself. “Sophie you’ll have satyr backup now. You’re not to go anywhere. I trusted you before and I’ll give you one more chance at this.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Sophie said giving a sarcastic curtsy.

“It’s her life at risk.” My voice rose and I whirled on her, chaos rippling through my body. “Do you understand?”

“Down, monster killer,” Sophie quipped. “I got it. We go to your house, satyrs come to guard us, and we stay there until further notice.”

“You’re going to buy into this?” Caroline asked.

“Yes, I am.” Sophie looked over at me. “And you should too. He’s no joke. He’s going through a lot of trouble to keep you safe and if he’s doing that, there’s a good reason. One of the reasons is, you’re actually in real danger. And the other reason is probably because he’s probably still in love with you.”

“Enough!” I exclaimed. The last thing I needed was her knowing I had a thing for her. It was probably going to be the fastest way to get her to run away and get herself killed by some crazy demons. “Ava told me you would be helpful Sophie.”

“Don’t blame her,” Caroline said, fixing me with a steely gaze. “I am under no confusion that you actually have a thing for me. I think you made that point perfectly clear this whole time, but since that’s the case, you must really think something’s going to kill me, so fine. I’ll give you two days to find the thing that’s trying to kill me and after that I’m out.”

I glared at her back as she flounced off toward the house.

Chapter 22

CAROLINE

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The Victorian house had a tower where Ryder had put me, but unlike Rapunzel's tower, this one offered 180-degree views of the bay area. It would've been spectacular if I didn't feel like I was completely trapped.

I slipped off my clothes and turned the shower on, staring out at the view. Without thinking I stepped into the walk-in shower, screaming as the boiling water scalded my skin.

A loud thudding thundered through the house.

I screamed again waiting for the burn to die down as I huddled just outside of the water's heated spray.

"Caroline!" Ryder burst into the room.

I hastily clutched a towel against my bright red skin, dripping wet as I tried to cover myself. "What the fuck?" Ryder snapped at me.

"I could ask you the same question," I said. "This is my room, I thought. Or because it's your house you have rights to walk into any room you want to?"

"Just trying to find out if everything is all right." Ryder demanded.

"I'm fine," I grunted, trying to find a bigger towel. The redness of my skin now was due to embarrassment rather than the hot water. How could I be caught here in nothing but a slim towel that certainly didn't cover my curves or shadowy parts?

Ryder closed his eyes and turned away.

Of course.

He wanted nothing to do with my body anymore.

Asshole.

“The water is too hot,” I said. “I’m sure it’ll be fine in a minute.”

“Right, okay, fine then.” He grunted and turned his back. “Let Sophie know if you need anything else.”

“She’s fine.” I shook my head. “She’s not my servant. Or are you paying her to hang out with me?”

That would suck but I needed to know.

“No.” Ryder choked back a grunt and turned around, slamming the door behind him.

The next morning, I slipped into jeans and a t-shirt and went down to the modernized kitchen where Sophie was waiting for me.

“Is Ryder gone?” I asked not sure what I wanted the answer to be. I wanted to be around him all the time. I just wished he wanted to be around me.

“Yes.” Sophie said.

Clearly, he did not.

“These digs are pretty nice,” Sophie continued. “It’s a pity you can’t enjoy them more.” She ran a hand along the top of the gray cement countertop.

“I’d enjoy them more if I wasn’t afraid someone was trying to kill me,” I pointed out. “Then there’s the added complication of being a banshee.”

“Yeah, that’s really weird, isn’t it?” Sophie glanced up at me.

“What do you actually know about banshees?” I asked.

Sophie shrugged. “Well, I don’t know a whole lot. I didn’t exactly study hard in school.”

“All right, well what do you know about banshees?”

“They’re Fae, so it means you’re Fae for a start,” Sophie explained. “You’re a very special type of Fae, one that heralds death.”

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“Well, isn’t that charming?” I retorted. “Exactly the kind of role I wanted to have. The herald of death.”

“It’s not quite that bad. Well, I don’t think it’s quite so bad,” Sophie mused. “When somebody hears the song of the banshee, it means somebody in their family will die.”

“Yeah, but it could be anyone,” I said. “I mean, you were in the pub. I was in the pub. I don’t have any family left, but should we be worried about it?”

“I don’t know,” Sophie said. “I’m going to call my parents just to make sure.”

Sophie moved off to the window to look at the view as she rang her parents to check on them and I suddenly had an ill feeling in my stomach. What if I was the harbinger of death? What if somebody did die last night based on my singing? I went to the computer in the corner, hit the internet, and typed in ‘banshee’ to look up the details. It seemed like Wikipedia didn’t have exactly the most interesting information and I had to dig a little deeper while Sophie’s carried on a conversation with her parents. It took a lot longer than that. We had ordered pizza and were nestled on the sofa looking up different information to pass to each other.

“It doesn’t always mean someone’s going to die,” I said, quoting from an obsolete site run by a group of people known as The True Faith. “Sometimes they say it just means there’s going to be an illness in the family or in the area.”

“Yeah, but you have to understand it’s not your singing that makes people die. They were going to die anyhow. The whole purpose of the banshee is to let people know something bad is about to happen.”

“Great, so that’s why I went on stage at Furlan’s and began to sing?” I asked. “To warn people something bad was going to happen.”

“You might not even have known what was driving you,” Sophie said. “These things are often out of our control and all we’re doing is following our instincts and letting them guide us. I mean you told me in the beginning that you hated karaoke and then all of a sudden, you’re up on stage impacting everybody in the room with your soulful singing. It’s quite bizarre and beautiful.

“Easy to say if it’s not your family member who’s about to die,” I pointed out. “Do we know everybody who was in the bar last night? I mean, maybe we should check in on them.”

“We won’t have to check in on anyone in the bar,” Sophie said. “They’ll all be checking in on themselves. Nobody here is going to listen to a banshee and then just sit around in the bar. Matter of fact, I bet if you went for lunch right now, you’d find the place completely empty and everybody at home taking care of their family or at least checking on them.”

“Great, one more reason for Furlan to have a thing against me.” I ran my hands through my hair.

“You know the one thing you are not paying attention to is the fact that this probably means you and Ryder have a lot more in common than you originally anticipated,” Sophie commented.

“Ryder and I are through.” My voice was a little harsher than I intended. “He doesn’t care about anybody but himself. He certainly doesn’t care about me and hasn’t cared about me in years.”

“He seems to care quite a bit,” Sophie said. “Based on his grave desire to protect your

life and keep you out of danger. He got Ava to fly you across the country just to make sure you didn't get attacked by a bunch of demons. He's hiding you out here to protect you and he's going against what he's supposed to be doing right now, which is fighting monsters, in order to fight the demons who are tracking you. If that's not somebody who cares for you, I don't know what is."

I swallowed hard, taking a deep breath. Everything she said made sense and sounded logical, but it wasn't what I wanted to think about right now. I was done with Ryder. We were over. That ship had sailed, and I had been the one to hoist the anchor and call the winds to get away from him. There was no way in hell I was going to entertain the idea of being with Ryder again. It had taken me three years to get him out of my system. There was no way I was going to let him back in.

The truth was, I still wanted him. There wasn't a single part of me that could deny the truth. The only thing standing in my way was the fact he didn't want me. I didn't care what Sophie said about him. She didn't know him the way I did. I had been his lover, his friend, his confidant, and finally the neglected remnant of his life that he suddenly realized he didn't want. It didn't matter if he was off fighting monsters. I mean, okay, fine, he didn't have a girlfriend, and he was trying to save the world, but he had lied to me the entire time. He hadn't taken a single moment to tell me the truth and now there was nothing. There could be no truth and honor between the two of us, none whatsoever.

What I did have to figure out a little bit more of was how I was going to navigate being so close around him and not falling for him again, because the truth was, he was irresistible to me. There was a part of him that drew me to him. I didn't know if it was because I was a banshee and Fae or because he was half monster and demigod, but I knew I still wanted him, regardless of how he felt about me, and that was the most embarrassing and shameful thing of all. It was something I would never ever let him see.

“Oh my God,” Sophie’s quiet breathless voice pulled my attention out of my self-reflection of my life with Ryder. She was on the phone.

“What is it?” I whispered to her. “Is it Ryder?”

She shook her head and held up a finger, her eyes glistening with tears. I took a step backward, a chill coming over my entire skin as goosebumps crawled down my back. The feeling of doom and dread filled me. This wasn’t going to be good. And I had a feeling I knew exactly what I was about to find out.

“Okay,” Sophie said. “Thanks for letting me know.” She hung up the phone and looked at me, her face serious. “Aurelius. His wife, a demigod, just died.”

It hit me like a punch in the stomach. I didn’t know these people. I had heard the names, I’d seen Aurelius at Furlan’s last night, but I didn’t know them. And still I felt the pain and anguish of the death as if it were someone from my very own family.

“Oh my God,” I said. “I caused her death.”

“No, you didn’t she’s been dying for a long time now.” Sophie said. “Demigods have a life span of over 500 years, but then they just start to fade away. She’s been fading away for a while.”

“Aurelius, he was at the pub last night, wasn’t he?”

She nodded. “Yeah, yeah he was,” she said quietly.

“He must hate me,” she said.

“No.” Sophie reached forward and stroked my shoulder with her hand. “He knew she was dying. Hearing your song would’ve just given him warning that it was coming

soon.”

“He ran out after my song ended.”

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“Aurelius would have taken the opportunity to have his last moments with her. Hearing you sing gave him a precious gift he would never have had without you being in the pub singing.” Sophie explained.

I listened to her words and understood the logic of them, but it didn’t change the way I felt, like I was some walking mess of an individual, a harbinger of death, who was going to sing and cause tears throughout the world until the day I died myself.

Chapter 23

RYDER

Caroline was sobbing on the couch when I walked in the door. I stood stock still, not daring to move. Every muscle in my body wanting to run to her and scoop her up and take away any ounce of pain she was feeling. I wanted to help her release her fear and uncertainty and whatever it was she was going through.

I glanced over at Sophie, who was sitting next to her on the sofa, one arm on her shoulder, trying to give her support. I shook my head and waved her out of the room. I wanted some time alone with Caroline. Sophie didn’t even question it or begrudge me space. I didn’t trust Sophie much. She’d already taken Caroline out of the safety zone. Witches always had their own agenda; they always had things they wanted that were separate from what the DGC wanted. However, they fell in line with the DGC because the DGC was in control, so they had to. As far as witches went, Sophie seemed to understand the importance of protecting Caroline now, and I hoped she wanted to help. She nodded her head slightly as she walked past me toward the front door.

“I’m going to go check on a few things. Just text me when you need me back here,” she said. She lowered her voice as she leaned in. “I don’t think she’s doing well with this whole banshee thing.”

That was hardly any surprise, but I understood the problem. I just didn’t know how to fix it.

Caroline looked up at me, her eyes bloodshot and swollen. Tight lines were drawn in anger across her face. It’s not exactly what I was expecting, but I wasn’t surprised.

“You could’ve told me,” she said with a hiss.

“Told you what?” I asked, glaring at her and trying to discern exactly what I was in trouble for this time.

“You could’ve told me I was a banshee.” She raised her hands in the air for emphasis.

“You are making an assumption,” I pointed out, “that I knew you were a banshee.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the god of monsters?” she growled at me. “Doesn’t that give you some level of insight into what people are?”

“I guess I just had a blind spot where you were concerned,” I said gruffly. My face was as stern as I could make it. I didn’t want her to see any sign of emotion. The last thing she needed to know was that I couldn’t get her out of my senses. There was nothing I could do to keep this woman out of my blood. No matter how far I went, no matter how many monsters I fought or females I met, it was always her I wanted to come home to. This woman was no longer mine, though. She was no longer my wife, not my girlfriend, we weren’t even friends. No matter how desperately I wished all that were not true.

“Okay, so you’re a banshee? So what?” I asked. “I’m a monster. Does it make any difference?”

“I am a harbinger of death,” she said, her voice horrified. “Yeah, I think there’s a little bit of a difference there.”

“It’s not like you’re killing people,” I said. “It just means when someone’s about to die you’re going to have some awareness of it, more than others would.”

“Well, I don’t want to have any sense of anyone else’s death,” Caroline said.

I desperately wanted to go to her and put my arms around her and hold her and make the pain go away. I could see how she was confused and unsure of what she was, but instead I just stared at her, feeling useless. I was trained in fighting monsters. I was born to fight monsters. Comforting women, even a banshee...well, it wasn’t one of my skills. You would think I would’ve learned how to do that when we were married, but I guess I hadn’t been paying much attention or else she wouldn’t have divorced me. Ever since then she had seemed a bit broken. I had this sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach I was part of the reason. Never in a million years should I have gotten involved with her when we first met. I should’ve left her alone instead of imposing myself on her. I hadn’t been able to get her out of my system. I needed her. The same way I needed her now, but those days were gone.

She stood up and came toward me angrily. “Make it stop,” she said.

“What do you mean make it stop?”

“Stop me from being a banshee,” Caroline said, her eyes pleading up at me with more trust and desperation than I had seen in her face before.

“I can’t do that,” I said.

“Of course, you can,” she said. “You’re a god damn god of monsters. You must be able to do something with those powers.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m the demigod of monsters,” I admitted. “That’s the truth. I’m half god, half human and I can turn into a monster. Doesn’t give me the power to change a being from what they are. You were born a banshee. It’s a type of Fae that can tell when death is coming.”

“You must’ve known something about this?” she asked

“When it comes to you, I have a lot of blind spots,” I said through gritted teeth. “The reality is there’s nothing I can do about this. You are a banshee. The best we can do is put you in touch with some people, some other Fae, who can teach you a little more about using your powers.”

She was standing right in front of me and clearly wanted to punch me in the chest. I didn’t blame her. I was mostly hating on myself too, but there was no way I was going to show her my pain. That wasn’t going to help her. She was completely lost and confused in a brand-new world and there was unfortunately very little I could do to help her come to terms with it.

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“Do something,” she pummeled her fist against my chest, her eyes brimming with tears. “I don’t want to be the one to tell people they’re going to die, or their family is going to die. I didn’t even have any idea about Aurelius or his wife. Now he probably hates me and feels like I brought it on.”

“That’s not true,” I said crossly. “And if it was, if he laid one hand on your head or even looked at you the wrong way at any point, well, that would be a demigod fight for sure. I didn’t know he was in Furlan’s. He didn’t know you were a banshee and even if he had, he wouldn’t have been able to stop the fact his wife was dying. Your singing didn’t kill her. It just told him she was going to die.”

Her shoulders and her head bowed. I could see her shake as more tears welled in her eyes. Her head leaned closer to my chest, and I wanted desperately to put my arms around her to comfort her, to hold her and tell her everything was going to be okay. If I gave in, if I showed her an ounce of emotion, I was just going to make a fool of myself. She would understand I was still in love with her, I couldn’t live without her, and the minute she knew that, it would put us both in danger. She was already in danger enough. The only way to get her out of danger was convincing people she was unobtainable. That would give me the time to find who or what was coming after us and to neutralize them.

I took a step back from her and she stumbled forward a bit, but I put a hand forward to steady her, barely touching her with the tips of my fingers on her shoulder. If I touched her anymore, I’d pick her up and take her to the bedroom and have my way with her. Regardless of whether she wanted me to or not. I could feel the monster sliding over me even as I touched her.

“Ryder?” she asked, her voice trembling as she looked up toward me.

“You’re not to leave this house, not until I find and stop the creatures attacking you.” I growled as I finished speaking. Then, without another word, I turned and walked out the door before I did something I would certainly regret. I stood on the other side of the closed door listening to her sobs, wrenching at my heart.

Chapter 24

CAROLINE

He left.

He left me standing there like an idiot. I had turned to him for comfort, and he had done nothing, absolutely nothing. I don’t know why I expected anything else. And the second he walked out the door, Sophie was standing there, as if she’d been right outside the entire time just waiting for him to finish doing whatever we needed to do together, which was apparently very, very little. The look of pity on her face when she walked in the door just pissed me off and left me wanting to get out of there as fast as I could, but I knew she was under strict orders to not let me go anywhere. I needed help. I needed her on my side. I just had to figure out how I was going to do that.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, yeah I’m all right.” I wiped my eyes.

“You don’t look all right.” She went to the kitchen and brought back a damp towel.

“Well, thanks. That makes me feel special.” I grumbled taking the cloth and putting it on my face to reduce the swelling.

She gave a light chuckle. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by that. I just meant you've been going through a lot lately and," she nodded towards the closed door, "Ryder's kind of an asshole."

"Kind of?" I asked. "Last time I checked I think he was a complete asshole."

"He's not really good with feelings," Sophie said.

My head whipped around at her and I stared. "Did you and him..." My voice trailed off hating the thought Ryder had been with somebody else even though we'd been apart three years. It made sense he would have seen someone else, but it would be terrible if it was Sophie, my only friend here.

"No, no never," Sophie said with a laugh and a smile. "Damn, demigods don't usually demean themselves with witches if you know what I mean. Although, come to think of it, they don't usually do it with humans either."

"I thought we had established I'm not a human," I sighed. "I'm a banshee."

"Well, yes, that appears to be what you are. It's only a handful of opinions, though," she pointed out. "You'd have to go to the temple in San Francisco to find out for sure."

"The temple in San Francisco?" I asked.

"Temple Cyrene," Sophie said, then she noted the look in my eye. "Don't be getting the wrong idea. We're not going there."

"I didn't say anything about going there. I'm just asking questions. You've got to remember I'm completely new to this world and I have no idea what's going on." I stopped short of blinking my eyes at her.

A look of sympathy passed over Sophie's face. If we'd met under different circumstances, we could probably be quite good friends, but as it stood now, I wasn't convinced she had my best interests at heart. It seemed more like she was willing to do the demigods' bidding.

"Well, you know there's a Demigod Corporation, right?" she asked.

I nodded. The words had been tossed around enough. "The DGC, right?"

"Demigods use the witches to create wards. We have great protection skills. It's kind of our niche as it were, but for the witches to maintain their power, we must have temples where we focus our energies and then all the witches kind of thrive off the energy of the priestesses. It magnifies us. So, we put different temples in different areas where there are ley lines. Those temples are where we pray and raise the energy that the rest of the witches all use."

"Are the priestesses Fae or are they witches?" I asked.

"Oh, they're handpicked witches who are elevated to the status of priestess. You won't find many Fae on this side of the world. All the Fae have lived over in Europe and Asia ever since the wars when the demigods took over North America and renamed it New Attica."

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“But you’re saying these priestesses have powers?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, her eyebrows rising as she nodded, wide-eyed. “They’ve got tons of power.”

“So maybe one of them could help me?” I tried to make it sound like I was just thinking out loud.

Sophie tilted her head to the side. “What do you mean help you? I think you’ve got all the help you can get with Ryder. He’s a demigod.”

“The only thing Ryder’s good for doing is protecting me from whatever is chasing me,” I pointed out. “And, by the way, whatever is chasing me is only after me because of him, so I don’t really see my association with him as a good thing in that regard.”

Sophie gazed at me. “I don’t like the look in your eye.”

“There’s no look in my eye.” I relaxed every muscle in my face I could find, keeping my expression bland.

“Yes, there is.” She wagged a finger at me. “There’s a look in your eye that says you’re going to ask me to do something against what I’ve been asked to do by Ryder.”

“I was only thinking that by going to this Temple Cyrene in San Francisco I might find some answers.” I shrugged innocently.

“That’s not going to be allowed. There’s no way in hell I can take you to San Francisco. I couldn’t even take you a block away without getting busted by your ex-husband.” Sophie scooted away from me on the couch. “Besides there’s satyrs crawling all over this property now.

Damn, I forgot about the satyrs. I pursed my lips in thought. “Can we get a priestess out here?”

Sophie laughed out loud. “No. That’s a hard no. Priestesses don’t leave the temple. It would be considered sacrilegious and inappropriate.”

“It’s settled then,” I said with a nod. “We have to go.”

Sophie shook her head. “What do you think the priestesses are going to do for you?”

“They can relieve me of this banshee problem.”

“That’s not true. They can’t change who you are. If you’re a banshee, you’re always going to be a banshee. There’s not going to be anything they can do about it,” Sophie insisted.

“You have to help me, Sophie.” I gazed at her intensely. “I’m not going to get in trouble. I’m going to follow what Ryder told me to do.”

“Not if you’re trying to leave the property,” Sophie shook her head.

I reached out a hand to calm her. “I’m going to stay out of trouble, but I need to go and see the priestesses in the temple.”

Sophie’s eyes widened as she thought about it. I could practically see the gears working behind her eyes. “Show me the article you read.”

I went to the computer where I had the article saved. “It says right there, if you are having challenges, struggling, or having problems then you should go to them, and they will help you. Also, right here...read this.” I moved my finger across the screen to guide her gaze. “They can relieve you of your powers. Please, please help me. I’m going to die if I have to stay a banshee.”

I could see her softening and I felt my body tense. She was going to do it. I could feel it every ounce of my body. I could see her caving in.

“Two hours,” she said. “We have two hours. I’ll take you there through a private witch port system. You’ll have thirty minutes and then we’ll need to come back. Immediately. Ryder has just left, and I know he’s going to do some research, so we should have enough time, but you can’t stay there long. If you do, well, there will be a lot worse lock ups than this one in your future.”

Chapter 25

RYDER

“Where have you been?” My brother embraced me warmly as he opened the door.

“You know,” I shrugged as I followed him into the low rise, modern home he shared with our mother in Bodega Bay. “I’ve been doing the work.”

“Right,” he nodded, leading the way to the living room.

“Still single?” I asked, always wondering why my handsome brother never settled down.

“I’ve met someone,” he shrugged. “Too early to tell how that’s going to turn out.”

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The familiar scents of lamb and rosemary wafted from the kitchen as my brother made his way to the side table and took out two glasses. He held up the decanter of whiskey, raising an eyebrow at me. I shrugged in acquiescence. Sharing a drink with my brother was one of the few pleasures I allowed myself in life.

“Mom cooking?” I asked.

“What else would she be doing on a Sunday afternoon?” My brother smiled, his blond hair falling just in front of his eyes. “Hope you just didn’t come here to see her. It’s been a while since you’ve come for dinner.”

“I’ve missed you.” I ran a hand through my hair, suddenly feeling exhausted. “It’s been rough out there.”

I rarely let my guard down. There was always a monster around every corner that would take advantage of the minute I turned my back. I was always either in defense or offense mode. Before and after Caroline there was always my small family. It was only here, with my mother and brother, that I was able to relax. My brother was a child of Typhon also, although we couldn’t be more different. Where I had embraced the supernatural world, he had chosen to live among humans and take care of our mother, who had suffered a mental breakdown when she had realized the “man” she was in love with was in fact the god of monsters.

The real god of monsters.

He had no heart, no level of caring, and no real desire to be with a human woman except to use her for his own pleasure.

She had been in love with him, though. When he had disappeared, leaving her with two young sons, she had collapsed and never quite recovered. She'd raised us both in the human world, knowing the supernatural world existed, but denying it at the same time. When the DGC had come to her to claim my brother and I, she had negotiated with them to only take one of us. Being the eldest, I had volunteered, and everyone had agreed. I took care of the world monster problem; my brother took care of our mom.

My mother was human, nothing more, nothing less. But the status of having demigod children allowed her a lot. Even though she was never completely happy with us when she discovered we were half monster and she had consistently tried to keep us out of the supernatural world, she couldn't stop it. We were demigods and didn't really have a choice in the matter. When she realized demigod lineage came with quite a sizable pension from the DGC, she had come to terms with it, although frankly I don't think she ever truly liked that part of us. My brother had seen fit to change his stance and act more human than demigod, which seemed to keep her happy.

"How's she doing?" I motioned towards the kitchen.

"The usual," his gaze shifted to me. "If she's cooking, the rest of the world doesn't exist and she's happy."

"But she can't cook all day and night," I commented.

"Exactly," my brother murmured.

"I'm glad you're here to care for her," I raised my glass to him.

He clinked his glass against mine.

“I need to talk to her,” I looked at him seriously.

My brother sighed. “That doesn’t usually end well.”

“I wouldn’t ask if it weren’t urgent,” I said. “I’m still her child.” No matter how she felt about me personally, she would see me.

“Is that Ryder?” I heard my mother’s voice coming from the kitchen.

I called out to her. “Yes, it is Mom.”

“Tell him to get his ass in here,” she said immediately.

“Sounds like she’s having a good day,” I rolled my eyes at my brother.

He looked intrepidly at me, but there wasn’t much he could do. I was the heir apparent to everything of my father, I was first in line to be the monster’s demigod.

The house was an old mansion that had been built in the early days of settlement, only instead of being made from wood like most of the buildings, it had had been made out of stone brought over from England. We hadn’t built the house, but when my mother had seen it, she had fallen in love and insisted she couldn’t live anywhere else. My brother was completely indulgent of her whims and had agreed to buy it, insisting I pay for half of it. I had done so happily. Now I walked into the kitchen grateful to see her cooking again.

There was a long period of time when she had only been writing. It was going to be her great memoir, making sure everything she had seen and experienced was handed down to posterity, even though she knew it was completely against the laws of the supernatural world. Never would her memoirs be published. If they were, it would be nothing but fiction and the rantings of a crazy lady.

“Hi, Mom,” I said, leaning forward and dutifully kissing her on the cheek.

“Ryder,” she said quietly, looking me up and down as if I was maybe wearing the wrong outfit. Or maybe she was looking to see if I had grown a second head. My mother still recognized us as her kids. There was the dutiful son who lived like a human and acted like a human and for all intents and purposes was a human. And then there was me, who had gone full bore into the monster world, carrying out my duty to the supernatural world. Somehow, she had always figured that meant I had joined my father’s side and I think she secretly was waiting for me to one day bring news of him.

I never did.

Typhon was gone.

The gods of Earth were gone forever.

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What she never seemed to realize was she was my mother and I loved her, I felt bad for her lost love, but from that point of view, I understood it. Caroline was in my house but lost to me.

“And what are you doing here in the Bay?” my mother asked. Her pursed lips and drawn eyebrows clearly telling me she didn’t expect I was doing anything good.

“I have a problem, Mom, and I need some help.”

“You need help from me, a mere human?” she asked.

I swallowed hard and ignored her tone of voice and even her words.

It was best to deal with my mother just straight up front. “Yes,” I said without elaborating.

“At least there’s no more monsters breeding in the world,” she said. My fist clenched at my side at her words. It was no secret she wasn’t fond of me, but her need to rub it in every time I turned around drove me crazy.

“Besides, I’m way too young to have grandchildren,” she said, brushing her hand carefully through her hair and she sniffed.

“You’re sixty-seven, mom,” I said. “I think it’s a perfect age to have grandchildren.”

“I don’t have any,” she said hastily.

“Well, it’s true you don’t, but that’s not what I’m here to talk about,” I pointed out.

“What do you need?” my brother asked stepping into the kitchen.

“I need a safe place,” I said.

“And how do you expect a mere human to help you with this problem?” my mother asked.

“Well, I think that might be part of the deal. They’re trying to get to me, and I’m worried they might’ve tried to get to you.”

“There’s been nothing strange going on here at all,” my mother said. “If you can’t protect yourself in the supernatural world, I don’t know how we’re supposed to protect you in the human world.”

“I’m not asking for protection,” I said. “I need a sacrifice.”

“What?” My mother’s eyes grew wide.

My brother leaned in to listen to my words.

“We’re trying to flush out whoever is after me.” I looked him in the eye.

“You want to use me as bait?” he asked.

My response was succinct. “Yes.”

“I’ll be there for you, brother. Just tell me what you need done.” He clasped his hand on my shoulder.

“I want you to come to the temple with me and offer yourself as a sacrifice to the priestesses,” I said.

My brother, who had lived his entire life as a human, looked confused. “What’s that going to do?”

“It’s going to make it obvious I have a brother for a start, because it’s not like you are the most known person. Even though you belong in the supernatural world, you choose to hide out in the human world, so I want people to know you’re here and then maybe we’ll see what happens.”

“What exactly is this priestess sacrifice?” my mother asked.

“It’s nothing bad, Mom,” I explained. “It just means he offers himself to the temple to work in service to them.”

“But won’t I be protected by the temple in that case?” my brother asked. “How is anyone going to attack me if I’m in the temple?”

“Don’t worry, Magnus,” I told him. “We’re going to use the one in San Francisco, the Temple Cyrene. We must head down there now. Every day we wait, creates more and more danger.”

Chapter 26

CAROLINE

We took the ferry over to San Francisco. Sophie said it would be easier. I checked her phone as we were driving, because there was a string of messages to me. They were all from Laney. She was freaking out. I looked at the messages and then I looked at Sophie. “I need to answer her,” I said. “She’s not going to rest until she finds out what’s going on with me. She’s my best friend.”

“I totally get,” Sophie smiled, the bay breeze lifting her dark curls. “My best friend’s Ava and when she goes AWOL it totally throws me for a loop.”

“What can I actually tell her though?” I asked.

“Well, you can’t tell her the truth,” Sophie said. “She’ll be out here on a plane in a second trying to understand this world we live in. There aren’t any rules about sharing this world with humans, but humans don’t usually last too long once they find out about it.”

“Why is that?” I asked.”

“Because they get nosy, and they start asking a lot of questions and then eventually something dark and dangerous will get them.” Sophie shrugged. “The supernatural world isn’t really made for people without some sort of connection or power.”

“Is that why Ryder hid me away for so long?” I asked.

“Ryder was always trying to protect you,” Sophie said. “That’s really obvious. The best way to protect a human from the supernatural world is to not tell them about it. But the reality is you’re not human. You are supernatural. So, there is that.”

“I’m just going to tell her I went on vacation with Ryder,” I said. “It’s not really the truth, but it’ll at least keep things in the realm of reality a little bit more.”

I pulled up the text messages and stared at the ever-increasing messages left by Laney.

“I’m still with Ryder,” I wrote. “We decided to take a short trip to San Francisco.”

“Be careful what you write, because she could also be being tracked by supernaturals,” Sophie said. “And if that happens then they’ll find you.”

“You’ve got to text more often!” Laney typed immediately upon receipt of my message.

“I’m sorry.” I typed.

“Nvm. Are you and Ryder like working it out?” She wrote.

“Something like that.” I was being cagey, but I couldn’t tell her much. I didn’t want to put her in danger or let her know where I was.

“I went by your home. There’s a big fence around the hole.”

I glanced out at the bay thinking about the words to say next. “Apparently my house was situated over a giant sinkhole and suddenly sank. It was one of the reasons why Ryder and I decided to get out of there.”

I hated the feeling I got in the pit of my stomach when I was lying to my best friend and not quite telling her the full truth, but like Sophie said, if the demons were really after me, then I needed to do something to help stop them from attacking my loved ones.

“I’m still seeing Magnus!” I could practically feel her enthusiasm across the text. It made me smile. Laney was pretty picky about guys she dated so clearly this Magnus guy must have something special.

“This is our stop,” Sophie said as the boat pulled towards the harbor.

“I’ve got to go. I’ll message you later,” I wrote to Laney. “And tell me all the details about you and this guy.”

“Will do, love you!” Laney sent me a stack of hug and kisses emojis.

The ferry boat slowed down. We were in the Mission District of San Francisco. I only recognized it briefly from a short trip there as a kid with my parents when we’d gone to see Fiddler on the Roof staring Yul Brynner. I’d never quite understood why we had to travel all the way to the West Coast to see a musical, but I think my mother had a crush on Yul Brynner and wanted to see him in person.

“Come on, it’s just this way. Down this alley.” We walked down a small road that led into the industrial section in San Francisco. All the warehouses were all decked out and modernized. It was apparently where a lot of the tech companies were located.

In the center of the gentrified warehouses was a church that must’ve been there since almost the founding of San Francisco. it was built out of wood and in a Victorian style with gingerbread fringe and a tall white steeple.

“Are you telling me that’s a supernatural temple?” I asked. “It looks like a protected

heritage site.”

“The supernaturals have been in San Francisco since the city first formed,” Sophie explained. “This was never a church. It was always the Temple Cyrene, for the priestesses.”

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I frowned. “If the witches are based in Alameda, why didn’t they put the temple there?”

“There are different factions of the witches and politics get involved, but I think what happened back then was that San Francisco was the center for the witches. There was a falling out and a group of them broke off and moved to Alameda. They didn’t desert the temple though. They just wanted a little bit more privacy and ability to create wards that would actually work.”

We walked up to the front door and knocked on it as if we were at somebody’s house. It took a while, but there was a slot on the front door that opened, and the face of a wizened old man appeared. “What?” He spoke perfunctorily.

“We’re here to see Grimelda,” Sophie said.

“Do you have an appointment?” The man asked, his voice cracking with age and some unfathomable accent.

“I have the monster’s wife,” Sophie said and even through the dim interior I could see the look of shock and surprise on the old man’s face. The door quickly unlocked and opened.

“Get her in here quick.” He stepped back and motioned us in.

“I’m not a wife anymore, I’m an ex-wife,” I insisted. “And he’s not a monster.”

“Ryder is the demigod. A monster’s practically the same thing,” Sophie said. “Do

you know when you're born a half breed like that, you pretty much choose one side or the other. You can choose your human side or your monster side, but it's very difficult to choose both. He chose his monster side. "

"Well, that's apparent," I said grimly.

We stood in the entrance hall of the church, which smelled like frankincense and myrrh. The whitewashed wood gave it an earthy tone that immediately made me comfortable. The old man didn't, though. He stared at me, his hands folded in front of him, clenching so hard his knuckles were white.

"What are you doing with her here?" He looked accusingly at Sophie.

"It's not her fault," I interjected. "I asked to come here."

"Follow me." He led us quickly down a damp hallway and into a small cell like room at the very end. There were three chairs. We were told to sit in two of them quietly and wait for Grimelda, who was on her way immediately to us. I didn't know what to expect, but the beautiful young woman who walked into the room wasn't anything like the old creepy man who had welcomed us into the temple. She had an unearthly air about her that made me think even though she only looked like she was about twenty-five, she was probably more like two hundred and twenty-five.

"You brought the monster bride to us." She spoke only to Sophie.

"I am not the monster's bride." I insisted. "I married Ryder. He never told me he was a demigod or a monster."

Sophie chuckled at this. "That's because he tends to think of himself as the God of Monsters," Sophie chuckled. To my surprise Grimelda let out a small giggle, also.

“We discovered yesterday that she’s a banshee.” Sophie’s eyes flicked to me as she explained to Grimelda why we were there.

“I need to get rid of these powers,” I said. “I’m forty-five years old. I haven’t had these powers my whole life and I certainly don’t want them now. Can you help?”

“You are Fae, my dear,” Grimelda said, opening her arms out wide and giving a slight raise of her shoulders. “There’s really nothing we can do about it.”

“Well, can’t you remove the banshee part? Can’t I be Fae but not banshee?” I pleaded.

“Fae are very unusual creatures. They are born with certain gifts and there’s nothing you can do about it. It’s in your DNA. You’re a banshee. It probably only came to the fore when you got surrounded by all the magic that resides in Alameda. Is that when it appeared?”

Sophie nodded. “Yes. At Furlan’s.”

“Makes sense,” said Grimelda. “All that satyr energy brings out the wild in people.”

“So anytime anyone around is going to have someone die soon, I’m going to start singing like that?” I asked.

Grimelda shrugged her shoulders a little. “I’m afraid that’s the case.”

“Isn’t there something you can do to dampen the power?” I asked.

Grimelda wasn’t listening to me anymore, though. She was looking up, her head tilted to the side. Then her eyes glanced back at me. “Are you expecting Ryder here?”

“Oh God no,” Sophie said, her eyes filled with fear. “He can’t know we’re here.”

Grimelda smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I thought that might be the case.”

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“Can’t you help me?” I pleaded.

“There’s nothing we can do for you, my dear.” Grimelda was kind but adamant. “We can help you get out of here before Ryder finds out you’ve left your safe house.”

She stood up and instead of going to the door we had come in; she took me to her wall. Waving your hand over one section of it, the wall disappeared in the doorway opening a hidden passage.

“Go straight down through here.” Grimelda pointed into the dark interior. “If you follow the path and always go to the left, it’ll take you down to the Embarcadero train station.”

“We need to get back to where Ryder’s expecting you to be,” Sophie insisted.

“Ryder is a demigod,” Grimelda said. “They get a bad rap, but they do try to protect humans to the best of their ability.”

“I don’t trust him,” I insisted.

The priestess looked at me with the wise eyes of someone much older. “You must learn to trust him. That’s the biggest problem here, not the fact you’re a banshee. The biggest problem is that you don’t trust the one person who is truly trying to protect you.”

My eyes widened as I gazed at the beautiful priestess. Could she see Ryder’s heart? I wanted to ask so many more questions, but there wasn’t time.

“Come on,” Sophie grabbed my wrist and tugged me into the dark passageway.

Chapter 27

RYDER

I tried to not storm into places. It wasn't the easiest thing for me, but I had to remember I was half human, and I couldn't let my monster side get the better of me. Ever. Not if I was to remain on the Earth plane.

I'd been to Temple Cyrene numerous times. It was one of my brother's favorite temples. Even though he never let my mother know he sometimes went there to pray. He was so devout in trying to be human, he would make great offerings to the priestesses in order to, as he put it 'stay focused on his good side,' the human side. Not the monster side, which was apparently evil.

Considering all the things humans did to each other, I wasn't so sure about that. Humans, well, let's be honest they could be more monstrous than those of us who are monsters. The only difference was we didn't really have a conscience about it. The humans did have a conscience about it, so they had to justify their actions. Monsters didn't have that dilemma.

Tymer met me at the door. He was the wise and old eunuch who looked after Temple Cyrene. A good friend of mine years ago, we had grown apart when I had gotten married and moved to Boston.

Undoubtedly, he knew about her now. It seemed the whole supernatural world was aware I had been married.

“Long time no see, brother,” Tymer said, opening the door wide.

We gripped each other in a back slapping hug before I fixed him with my gaze. “I need to see Grimelda.”

“A busy day for the priestess,” Tymer muttered. His eyes floated to the corner of the room, not looking for anything, more like looking internally. I knew the priestesses could communicate telepathically, but it was always unsettling.

His gaze turned back to me, eyes clear and pale blue. Slightly watery as it was with all the eunuchs in the temples. I never quite understood why, but I assumed it was because they were constantly living in dark cells and when they came out to the light it was a little bit bright or maybe it was the incense that was constantly burning in the temples.

“She’s going to see you, but it’s going to take a few minutes. Shall I take you to the antechamber?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “And in the meantime, you can catch me up on a couple of things.”

He glanced at me sideways and laughed. “Don’t you think it’s you who are to be catching me up on a few things?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, I’m not the one who got married in secret,” Tymer said.

I felt the blood drain out of my face as he said it. “Everybody knows.”

“Probably,” he said. “It’s not like it’s any secret anymore. Even though I’m sure you were trying to keep it a secret for a very long time.”

“You know what danger it puts her in now everybody knows,” I said. “I’m trying to find who’s after me and who has been attacking her.”

“She’s a human, right?” Tymer asked.

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“I always thought she was,” I grumbled. “As it turns out, she’s a banshee.”

“Banshee? In new Attica?” Tymer asked. We had entered the antechamber, which was a large stone room with the walls draped in curtains. There was a side table with a couple of decanters of purified water on it. Tymer helped me to a glass of water and handed it to me as he toasted.

“Well, congratulations on your wedding, my friend. I never got a chance to toast you before.”

“I’m not married anymore,” I grunted.

“I don’t understand,” Tymer said. “I thought this whole thing was over your wife?”

“My ex-wife,” I said, gritting my teeth because I hated the way it sounded. She was my ex-wife. I never wanted that. She was mine and I wanted her.

Tymer, being a eunuch and living his life in temple, was perceptive. He took a sip of his water and after swallowing it he looked me steadily in the eye. “You still need her.”

“It’s none of your business,” I almost spit the words at him.

But Tymer was my friend. He’d been my friend for hundreds of years. He didn’t deserve that kind of treatment from me, even though my monster side was aching to tell him to fuck off and leave me alone. But he wasn’t asking to be nosy. He was asking because he was concerned.

My shoulders sagged a little as I thought about it, but the truth was never far from the forefront of my mind.

“She doesn’t want me.” I shrugged my shoulders like it was no big deal. I knew Tymer could see straight through that, though he didn’t say a word.

“I see,” Tymer said, giving a slight nod. “Come, let’s see Grimelda. Maybe she can help with something.”

In moments we were before the high priestess. I didn’t waste any time. I held out the rings. “I need a place to hide these,” I said to Grimelda, who sat on the dais in her throne room, staring down at me in quiet serenity.

“Is that your father’s adamantine?” Grimelda asked.

“Yeah, that’s exactly it,” I said. “We have to keep it safe, but they’re going to kill her to try and get to me and it.”

“All things must die, Ryder,” Grimelda said. “Even you, a demigod, will one day fade away and die. But she, well, she is human. She will die much sooner than you will.”

“I understand those things,” I said. I could feel the hackles of my neck rising and the black bristly hair of my monster-self beginning to poke out of my shoulders. I took a deep breath to calm myself and stay in my human form. “That’s not the point,” I said. “The point is I don’t want her to have a premature death at the hands of the supernatural world just because she happened to be married to me.”

“Well then maybe you should focus on what people are trying to do to you and why,” Grimelda smiled.

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to do,” I grunted. “Can the rings stay here?”

“They may stay here,” Grimelda said.

“And Caroline?” I asked hopefully.

“She is welcome also, but only of her own volition. I can extend an invitation, but it’s up to her to choose to come, I will not keep a prisoner against their will.” Grimelda explained.

I sighed. “Can’t we just magic her into thinking she wants to say?”

“You know it doesn’t work like that,” Grimelda said. “You’re going to need to go back and convince her she’s going to want to stay in the temple for whatever reason. We’ll make her very comfortable and give her a place to stay while you figure out who’s trying to disturb you.”

“That’s going to be an impossible task,” I said.

She looked at me kindly and smiled. “If she does not want to be here, then it is probably not the place for her,” Grimelda said. “What you need to find out is what does she really want? Where does she want to be? Who does she want to be with? Once you discover those things, it will be much easier to hide her and protect her. But you can’t just command her to do certain things. You must ask it of her.”

I turned away from Grimelda, my fists balling together. What she was asking me to do was very human. It was against every fiber of my being. I needed to get back to Alameda, get Caroline, and talk some sense into her so I could deal with the real problem: the unknown creatures trying to invade Earth.

CAROLINE

The passageway was dark and narrow as we hustled through the bowels of the temple. It didn't take long to get down below to where there was a gridiron gate that separated us from something that looked to me like a sewer tunnel. "Are you serious?" I asked. "We're going to go in there?".

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“Only if I can get this lock open,” Sophie said, waving her hands over the lock in a series of complex moves.

Nothing happened.

“Shit,” she said.

“If we can’t get it opened, we have to go back into the temple? Or do we have to stay the night here until Ryder leaves the temple?” I asked.

Sophie rolled her eyes at me. “Patience, grasshopper. Just give me a chance at this.”

“I thought you were a witch. Can’t you just do shit?” I muttered.

Sophie looked at me and sighed, her face scrunched up in what looked like an awkward moment of pain. “I never said I was the best witch in town,” she said. “It’s just a matter of trying to figure out exactly which magic spell is going to work to get this lock open.”

“Well, hurry up, I’m feeling a little claustrophobic.” I could hear the stress in my tone.

“That’s really not helping.” Sophie turned back to the lock and tried a new finger dance in front of it. Suddenly a spark of light came up and the lock snapped open.

“You got it,” I cheered and gave her a pat on the shoulders.

She glanced at me and raised her eyebrows. “Did you have any doubt?”

“Yeah,” I shrugged. “I did.”

“Come on, let’s go.” She pushed open the gate and led me through it. We ran for what seemed like quite a while, but she had a glowing blue light that shone from her hand that gave us just enough light to make sure we could see where we were stepping. Shadows moved in the dark, and I muttered a prayer under my breath that they were just average rats.

“There aren’t any creepy creepies down here other than normal shit, right?” I asked.

“You’re going to find out the farther you get into this supernatural world that everything is creepy and supernatural,” she said. “At least that’s the way I see it. Even the things that aren’t supernatural have an impact on both worlds, so we have to be careful of them. For example, the subway,” she said as we came out of the door through a side alley and into the BART station.

The train was just pulling in the station. We dashed for it, sliding in just as the doors shut and grabbing a couple of seats off to the side where nobody else was sitting.

“What do you mean, the subway?” I asked. It was a quick ride over to Oakland where we would be able to take a bus into Alameda and get back to where we were supposed to be before Ryder found out we weren’t there.

Hopefully.

“Nothing,” Sophie said, pressing her lips together and clearly not willing to say another word. “Just hang tight and we’ll get you back where you’re supposed to be. I told you this was a fool’s errand. Anyhow, we should never have come.”

Suddenly the train came to a halt.

“What the hell?” I asked as I jolted forward.

“It’s probably nothing,” Sophie said, but by the look in her eye, I didn’t really believe her in the slightest. She stood up and grabbed my hand, pulling me toward the door at the far end of the car.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

She didn’t turn to me, simply kept moving. “Just making sure we are in a safe position.”

“We’re in a tube under the San Francisco Bay. How is any of this actually safe?” I insisted.

“Well, hopefully there’s nothing untoward happening in the tunnel,” she muttered. “And, hopefully it’ll hold.”

“Hold against what?” I asked.

She didn’t say anything at that; she just kept pulling me toward the end of the train. As we moved from one car into the next; I glanced over my shoulder. A massive beast with a gaping maw and three rows of teeth was running toward us.

“Shut the door!” Sophie said. “It’s a hellhound!”

I slammed it right in the beast’s face. It’s teeth crashed against the glass, cracking it. I stood in shock as it smashed its head against the glass again, trying to break through.

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“Come on!” she cried.

We ran as fast as we could, other riders staring after us and screaming as they saw the hellhounds smashing time and time again against the door behind us.

We got to the end of the last car in the train, but the door was locked shut. “You better work faster on this one than the last one,” I said, watching as her shaking fingers moved in intricate patterns over the lock.

“I got it, I got it, got it, I got it,” she repeated the words like a mantra. It made it sound like she didn’t have it but she was going to have it if she kept saying the words.

It worked!

The door burst open, and we ran out and slammed the door behind us.

“We’re on the rails,” I looked around intrepidly.

“Not for long. Get the hell up here,” Sophie insisted, pulling me up to the side where there was a small shelf that we could walk along. We weren’t walking, though not at all.

We were running for our lives. My heart pounding in my chest as my breath came shallow and painful. There’s no way at forty-five I was prepared for a sprint against some hellhounds.

“How did the hellhound get into the train?” I gasped.

“That’s one of the things I was telling you about the normal world impacting the supernatural world. You guys build your shit or humans build their shit through places where they shouldn’t be building things. This train line made a gaping hole through the corner of Udirheim.”

“Oh my god, so it’s like a fucking Disney ride to hell?” I asked.

“Humans can’t see it, but yeah, it’s something like that,” Sophie said.

Suddenly a loud growl came up from behind us as the hellhound broke through the door of the train and started screaming toward us.

“Oh my God we’re going to die,” I screamed, my legs stiffening up. I could barely move as I watched the beast come barreling toward us.

My voice started keening louder and louder, but the hellhound wasn’t alone; there were two more right behind it. My legs burned in pain as we ran forward through the dark tunnel of the underground rail station.

“Can’t you do something?” I cried to Sophie, but the look of pure terror on her face made it clear to me she didn’t have any skills up her sleeve that were going to solve this problem.

I glanced over my shoulder. The hellhounds’ eyes glittered in the night and drool came off their multilayered teeth as they grinned slowly, approaching us as our steps wavered. We couldn’t keep running anymore; it just wasn’t possible. We didn’t have the stamina or the energy to get away.

This was where we were going to end the line, in the dark bowels of the earth with the hellhounds gnawing on us. I reached forward and grabbed Sophie’s hand. “I can’t run any further. I’m done.”

She stopped, gripping my hand back and staring at the three hellhounds who were slowly prowling toward us. “We can’t outrun them anyway,” Sophie said, “not really.”

“Have you got any magic up your sleeve they can take care of a hellhound?” I asked, my hand shaking as I realized we were about to be ripped to pieces by the beasts.

“There’s nothing a witch can do to stop a hellhound. You’d have to have a shifter here to help.” Sophia whimpered.

I felt a rising inside my chest as if something were getting ready to explode out of me. The pressure built until I couldn’t stop it anymore. I opened my mouth and a loud keening erupted from me. The hellhounds looked up as I started singing, my voice piercing the air in a high, shrill keening. Sophie covered her ears, completely hunched over, clearly not wanting to listen. The hellhounds started whining, their pitches going in time with what I was singing. Slowly they crept forward, whining and pushing their heads to the ground and scratching their ears with their paws.

“They’re bowing to you?” Sophie asked.

The biggest, meanest looking hellhound came walking toward me and began rubbing its head against my leg. I raised my hands, not wanting to touch its fur. It was all curly and matted.

“Pet it,” Sophie insisted.

“It’s probably going to take off my hand if I reach it out toward it,” I complained.

“No, it’s going to be fine. Keep singing and hold your hand out,” Sophie insisted. “It’s trying to Omega to you. You have to Alpha it.”

I did as commanded. Much to my surprise, the animal placed its head in my palm. My voice died down and almost immediately the animal started growling again.

“Keep fucking singing,” Sophie swore. “They’re convinced you’re their alpha.”

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“I can’t keep singing nonstop,” I rushed the words out as I went back to the keening song that seemed to be making the hellhounds docile and peaceful in my hands.

“Just give it a little bit longer. They’ll bond. The other two are coming forward now,” Sophie pointed out. Much to my surprise, all three of the hellhounds were now bowing in front of me.

“I think they’re going to become loyal to you,” Sophie said.

My voice faded out, but this time they didn’t growl.

“The singing made them docile.” Sophie smiled.

I relaxed, petting the hellhounds and smiling at them.

It was a moment of respite before a loud rumbling filled the air.

“Caroline, watch out!” Sophie shouted. I turned my head just fast enough to see the tunnel wall breaking and water burst into the tunnel.

Chapter 29

RYDER

I could feel the break in the rift. It was like a jarring motion going through my bones. The jolt was so strong it was clearly local, but that sounded crazy, because although a rift ran through the San Francisco Bay, it wasn’t like it had been used in eons. I never

faced monsters coming through this rift, but I could feel it cracking and breaking now in an instant. I stood outside the temple, staring toward the water, turning instinctively where the rift was cracking.

“Ratchet,” I said loudly, using a telegraphic magic system that allowed him to hear my message immediately. It was a special capability we had. “There’s a break in the rift in the Bay Area.”

I glanced around. There was nobody watching. Taking a deep breath, I allowed my body to shift and form and change its shape, black hair flying out from the pores of my body as my face elongated and I turned into the monstrosity I actually was. Black wings protruded out of my back and stretched to the side. The wards I had on me would keep any human from seeing me but this was the only way I was going to get to the break and the rift with any amount of speed that would allow me to stop the damage being done.

With a bit of luck Ratchet would meet me there.

Beating my wings, I rose in the air, sailing over the bay bridge. The water was turbulent and crazy, as if a maelstrom was happening right near Treasure Island, which connected one end of the Bay Bridge to the other.

Water Monsters.

I hadn’t seen any of those in years. My wings moved up-and-down in large sweeping motions, propelling my body through the cold San Francisco air. When I got to the top of the maelstrom, I didn’t even hesitate. I pointed my head down and dove right into the center of it, both hands out, willing to face whatever beasts were down there causing havoc. The water surrounded me, and I pushed through, forcing my way to the center of the maelstrom. It was then I saw the subway tunnel. BART: the Bay Area Rapid Transit system. Why the hell would monsters be attacking a BART train.

“About time you got here!” Ratchet screamed at me over the sound of the swishing water.

“Where are they?” I yelled.

“They’re inside BART. The train’s filling with water. People are down there, and they’re all going to die.”

Why had the monsters suddenly attacked a BART train full of humans? The thought breezed through my mind as I pushed my way down to the edge of the tunnel. We had to get the train out of the tunnel before the hole sealed up.

“I’ll go to the monsters, you seal the hole,” I screamed at Ratchet. His demon capabilities were better suited for the water than mine. I broke a hole in the tunnel, crashing in through the crack, and then to my horror I saw a circle of monsters surrounding Sophie and Caroline. The only thing stopping them from being killed were the hellhounds that were standing between Caroline, Sophie, and the demons.

“What the hell are you doing down here?” I yelled at her.

“A little help please?” she screamed back at me, seemingly unimpressed with my monstrous form.

I had gotten the monsters’ attention and they turned on me. The water was filling up the tunnel even as Ratchet was working to try to seal off the tunnel.

My job was to save Caroline.

The monsters came at me in force. There were more of them than I had expected, and it seemed like reinforcements showed up the minute I did. They had burning hands and fiery hair and they immediately started throwing firebombs at me which didn’t

exactly go well with the black hair that covered my body.

Just as I was fighting two off with one hand, one flew up in the air and hurled its complete body at mine, knocking me to the ground. In seconds five of them were on top of me.” The monsters pummeled my head, and my chest, their legs kicking me in the groin. It was hard to gain purchase in the water that was flooding around me, but I knew I had to.

“Ryder!” Caroline screamed.

“Get her out of here,” I yelled to Sophie.

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I couldn't even look up to see if she listened to me, but I knew Sophie understood the laws of the supernatural world and would do what was necessary to protect Caroline. Even if Caroline didn't know what was best for her in the situation.

The only way I could be sure they had gone was because the sound of the hellhounds diminished. Now there was nothing but the sound of fire and water all around me as the monsters slammed into me. I took a deep breath, inhaling gulps of air before I dove under the water. The monsters would have to follow me. It would put their fire capabilities to the test. Fire monsters were highly unusual and unlike demons they could still fire underwater, but it dampened their capabilities.

I hoped they followed me, but I noticed it only three did. That meant the rest were going after Caroline. I turned around, pulling out my large talons and made short work of the three demons following me, tearing their arms from their bodies and putting long bloody wounds down their front and their backs in swift motion.

I looked up, coming out of the water in a surge of motion. I saw Caroline perched upon a shelf with a monster grabbing at her. She was kicking out at it but just as I approached, the monster grabbed her leg and pulled her under water. The hellhound yelped behind her in abject misery as Caroline disappeared.

Every muscle in my body strained to get closer to where Caroline was. Pushing me farther and farther hoping to get to her before the monster drowned her or worse, took her across the rift. If they got her to the other side of the rift it would be almost impossible to find her. They would be able to hide her there for lifetimes.

My heart lurched in my chest as I raced forward, grabbing Caroline's wrist just as the

monster entered the rift. Turning to kick around, I swung her away from the monster and placed my foot squarely in his chest, kicking him into the rift and then saying the incantation that would close the rift behind him. The hellhound jumped in the water, cooling himself off, and Caroline collapsed into my arms. She didn't care I was in my monstrous form.

"Ratchet, get us out of here," I said, and immediately a portal opened up in front of me. I stepped through it. It took us to the tower in the house in Alameda. The portal closed behind us, as Ratchet and Sophie lurched out of the room.

Caroline shivered, clinging to my body. I desperately needed to feel the security of her body and make sure she was really there and safe, held tightly in my arms.

Chapter 30

CAROLINE

His arms encircled me, and my head rested against his chest when I came to. My body was soaking wet and shivering as he held me I could feel the heat of his body slowly warming mine. Even though we'd gone through what I could only imagine was a portal of some sort, we transferred directly from where I thought I was certainly going to die back to the safety of my room in Alameda. His arms around me reminded me of our time together, how he always used to call me and hold me when I had the worst days. I found myself murmuring into his chest and leaning in, looking to be consoled.

Abruptly he put me on the ground, feet first, and took a step back.

"What the hell were you doing?" he asked, his body rigid and his face angry. Hard lines of irritation drew his mouth down.

“I went to the temple,” I said, my body still shaking from the cold and my teeth chattering as the warm of his body heat dissipated, I wrapped my arms around myself to preserve as much residual heat as possible.

“I told you not to leave here. I told you not to leave here at all.”

“You’re not the only one who gets to make decisions about my life,” I said, angrily stepping toward him. “I’ve just found out a few things about my life that I need to sort out. This isn’t all about you.”

“None of this is about me,” he said. “I can handle myself just fine. This is all about you and trying to keep you alive when someone is clearly out to kill you. You don’t even seem to get that or care.”

“Oh, I get it now,” I said, petting the hellhound who’d made it through the portal and was pressing up against my leg. “It might’ve taken me a couple of chances, but my house just disappeared into a hell hole, and I almost got drowned in a train under the bay! It’s now perfectly clear my life is in danger and there’s not a lot I can do about it.”

“Yes, there is. You can stay put exactly where I told you to stay put.” Ryder stood towering over me, his body a dark shadow in his monster form. He grimaced at me, his fangs showing as his gaze darkened.

I didn’t care that he wasn’t human. It didn’t matter that he was frightening. He had black hair, black skin, black talons, and black horns jutting from his head. Large fangs protruded from his mouth as he yelled at me. None of it fazed me. In fact, I hated to admit it, I found the whole thing entirely sexy. I couldn’t help wondering for a second what changes the transformation had made to his manhood.

“Take off your clothes,” he said.

“What the fuck?” I asked, staring at him.

“You’re freezing,” he said. “The wet clothes aren’t helping. Take them off and I’ll grab you a blanket.”

“I’m still perfectly fucking capable of taking care of myself,” I said, pushing past him and going to the bathroom.

He moved past me, opening the bathroom door and stepping inside it.

“How the hell am I supposed to change my clothes if you’re constantly everywhere I am?”

“It’s not like I haven’t seen you completely naked before a time or two,” he said gruffly. “I’m just making sure there’s nobody in the bathroom about to attack you.”

“I thought this place was supposed to be safe. Isn’t that what you said?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s supposed to be safe but after what just happened with the hellhounds and Sophie, I’m just making sure.”

“Where is Sophie?” I asked, lifting up my shirt and taking the wet things off. If he didn’t care about me being naked, why should I? We were clearly done and there was nothing going on between us, so what did it matter if I change my clothes here or there? I knew the shivering had to stop. I dropped my panties and my pants and my bra quickly onto the floor. He didn’t even look at me. His eyes were averted. He turned and walked out of the bathroom. Not surprising since he didn’t have any interest in me whatsoever.

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I went into the bedroom to grab a towel and wrap it around myself.

He was standing in the corner, staring out the window down at the bay. I came and stood next to him, watching the vortex of water. “What’s going on there?” I asked.

“Ratchet is sealing the rift,” Ryder said.

“Who’s Ratchet?” I asked.

“My right-hand beast,” Ryder said.

“So, he helps you clean up all the messes?” I asked.

“Yes, something like that,” Ryder said.

We stood there in silence for a moment, watching the maelstrom of the water slowly disappear and the water became still, normal, like I supposed the bay always looked.

I was suddenly acutely aware of the fact I was wrapped in nothing but a towel and standing next to the hot mess that was my ex-husband. I could feel the heat radiating off his body and it left a tingling inside me, between my legs. It would be so easy for him to turn and just take me.

He didn’t want me, though. He didn’t want me at all. I had to remember that.

His eyes didn’t leave the glass, looking out at the bay. “You told me you would stay,” he said. “You lied to me.”

“I wanted to not be a banshee,” I murmured. “Is that too much to expect?”

He turned and looked at me, his eyes blazing with rage. His hands gripped my shoulders and the towel fell to the floor. My nipples pebbled in the cold air, and I saw his gaze flick down my entire body, flashing red in his eyes.

“You could’ve died,” he growled.

“I didn’t,” I said. “I’m here.”

And before I knew it, he leaned forward and was crashing his mouth against mine, his tongue exploring every part of my mouth as if he had never tasted me before. His tongue was much larger in his monster form than I had remembered in his human form. It was stronger; it was more powerful. My thighs became slick and wet thinking about what he could do to me.

I stumbled backward under the forcefulness of his passion and a growl erupted from him as he picked me up and threw me on the bed. My legs splayed everywhere. I could suddenly see his erect cock emerging from the hair that covered his body and oh my God it was large and black and the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my entire life.

How was it that as a monster he was different than when he was a man? I didn’t really worry about it though. I just wanted him.

Even though I felt a little crazy. How could I want such a beast? But it was Ryder. It was my Ryder. It was my husband, and he wasn’t taking no for an answer; he was on top of me before I could even move. The thing was, I didn’t want to say no. I wanted to feel him inside me in every way shape and form.

My legs were splayed wide open, showing him every part of me that he ever wanted

or at least the physical part of me he wanted. It must be some sort of a monster thing. Fight and then fuck. That's what it felt like. It wasn't personal. At that moment, I didn't care because I could use a fuck right about now myself.

"Ryder." I said his name softly, but he was not paying any attention. He was growling as he rolled his head down and crawled toward my pussy, his long black tongue licking up the inside of my legs from my ankles up each side as if he needed to taste the salt on my skin and lick it off every single piece. My thighs were slick with juices as his tongue approached my arousal. I waited in tantalizing anticipation as the pointed tip of his black tongue flecked against my clit. My whole body began to tremor and shake as he flicked his tongue back-and-forth and back-and-forth, until I exploded in bliss and increased need, it felt as though I needed every part of him at that moment just to survive.

"Oh my God," I said, grabbing his horns and pulling his head deeper into my thighs, feeling his tongue deep inside me. And then it got hot.

His tongue heated up.

I gasped in excitement as waves of trembling heat roiled through my body.

The whole time he was sucking and licking and tugging at my pleasure spots, his hair on his face tickled my thighs and making my body buck hopelessly underneath his insistent tongue.

My mind was dazzled, but I needed him. I needed him inside me even more.

I held his horns and lifted them up and looked at his face. It was almost like the beast inside him was taking over. He was glaring at me, his eyes intensely focused.

"Bring me your cock," I said in no uncertain terms. He might be the beast in the

situation, but I had needs to be fulfilled also.

“You get my cock when I say you get my cock,” he growled at me. “I’m not the nice guy you were married to before, Caroline. I will take you the way I want to take you now or I’ll take you later, but I will take you in my way.”

My eyes grew wide as I stared at him. I felt another orgasm coming on just by the tone in his voice. His eyes devoured my body as his hands reached forward and his nails very carefully trailed over the tight skin of my breasts and tickled my erect nipples.

“Spread your legs,” he commanded.

I looked up at him and I didn’t dare not do what he asked. I also wanted to. Badly. Slowly I spread my legs for him until he was staring directly down at my sex, his eyes narrowed and cloaked with desire.

“Wider,” he said.

Chapter 31

RYDER

I stared down at her. Lying before me her legs spread. She was the temple where I wanted to pray. Every ounce of her soul lying before me waiting to be taken. My body stretched in desire for her in a way that was not human. My manhood grew monstrously. I saw her eyes widen as they locked on the large black shaft protruding from between my legs. My body was formed half as a monster and half as a human. It was the best I could do; I couldn’t control the monster while my desires were engaged. I needed to be inside her. It would take some careful effort. I had to restrain myself enough to make sure I didn’t hurt her in the process of seeking pleasure for both of us.

I leaned forward, gripping her wrists in my hands.

“Are you sure?” She murmured quietly, her eyes taking in the size of my manhood with uncertainty.

For years I had made love to this woman as a human. Carefully, not just controlling, but using magic to control my shift to make sure she never got one single moment of understanding that I was a monster. All that was over now. She knew exactly what I was, and she was still willing to have me.

“I want you,” I growled. “I want every last part of you.” Even to my own ears it sounded like danger, but I couldn’t stop myself. I wanted her surrounding me and holding me close inside. I wanted the feeling I had when I was within her. The certainty of my cock knowing she was the only one who would ever be the right one for me.

I placed the tip of my cock against the gentle folds of her womanhood, feeling the hardness of the tip rubbing gently against her entrance.

“Harder,” she moaned.

I chewed on my lower lip for one second, but her words spurred me forward, bringing my hips forward in a slow thrust. I began to peel back the entrance to her most private sacred place as I slid myself slow and deep inside her. Inch by inch I slid against her wetness, barely able to control the wave of desire that rolled over me and entangled every particle of my body as the sensation of entering her overcame me. A shiver rose through me as my hips rocked forward. I could feel her quivering and clinging to me as I was spreading her apart.

“Ryder,” she moaned, grabbing my shoulders and gripping onto me as if I was the last life buoy in a stormy sea. “I need you.”

She whispered the words in my ears as my head bowed forward, my eyes closed. I felt like I was praying as I took a deep breath and with one last thrust, I fully entered her. A scream escaped her. The scream of lost passion, of pain, of desire and pleasure. We both stilled in the moment and I could feel her heart beating in her chest

as my cock throbbed inside her. Her breath came in whispering staccato movements against my hair.

We rested together, fused as one, for what felt like an eternity. How long had I wanted her to know who I really was? How long had I desired to make love to her in my true form? I knew that wasn't possible, but this was as close as it was going to be.

And it was amazing.

"What is the feeling?" she murmured.

I knew exactly what she was talking about. It was the swelling and throbbing of my monster cock inside her, sending rippling sensations through both of us.

"The more I desire you, the more it grows," I whispered.

"I want all of you," she smiled up at me like the sun shining through dark clouds.

I gazed down at her, my eyes narrowing. "We are just getting started, my dear." I thrust myself back inside her with enough control to make sure it wouldn't hurt her; her body shattered, her pussy releasing juices all over me, giving me the wetness, I needed to be able to slide in and out. I moved slowly and gently, waiting for her body to stretch and mold around mine. I raised my head and smelled the air. Her sweet scent filled the air around us with her arousal. It smelled like lime and jasmine on a hot summer day, driving me forward to bury myself completely in her heat.

My cock was like a heat seeking missile as the waves of pleasure overtook me and my ability to control myself weakened.

It was always her.

Caroline.

She was always the one driving me, calling my name, and finally after three years of celibacy and craving her and wanting her finally here in this moment I could have her, all of her.

As she rocked her hips forward, I felt the sense of loss as I pulled out of her. Both of us clung into each other, wanting nothing more than to be back together as one. The wave of desire washed over me, tingling up my skin and heating every part of my body as I drove myself back into her again and again and again, our bodies sliding together as she thrust herself forward to meet me. She reached up and grabbed my horns, pulling my face down to her in an impassioned kiss. Her tongue in my mouth as though she didn't care I was this monstrous beast.

She knew me.

She knew how I was and who I was, and she wanted all of me. She had always been the only woman for me ever.

Caroline. Caroline. Caroline.

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Her name was like a mantra on my lips as I thrust into her body, being overtaken by desire. I lifted her hips and grabbed her ass until she screamed out in ecstasy, throwing her head back as she orgasmed and her wetness flooded over both of us. My body shattered with impossible craving as finally after all these long years without her, I had her. I filled her with everything I had. She was the blood in my veins and the yearning in my soul. She was everything to me.

My world.

My body shuddered as I cried out in ecstasy and released hot steamy cum to her welcoming chalice.

My body folded forward I scooped her up in my arms and I held her tightly against her my entire body shaking with the power of my orgasm.

It was cool in the dark shadows of the bedroom. Caroline's head nestled against my shoulder, her body warm in my embrace, her breath soft and whispering against my skin. It was all I could do not to wake her up and make love to her again.

I couldn't.

I could never do that again. It had been a mistake. Even in the quiet moments here with her asleep, it didn't make sense. We always had great chemistry, but she didn't really want me. Not in the way I wanted her. She didn't love me anymore and I would be an idiot to think she did or even if she should. Especially after the things I had done.

I gently moved my arm out from underneath her head, resting it back on the pillow. She moaned lightly, rolling over and reaching for me, but I slid quickly out of her grasp and she clutched the duvet instead, pulling it against her and slipping into a quiet sleep. I walked out of the bedroom and into the living room, staring out at the dark waters of the bay that shone with reflective lights.

“Who was behind these attacks?” I muttered the words quietly, even though the truth was I wanted to scream them in frustration.

I grabbed my phone, dialing the only number I had on speed dial nowadays.

“I need you to watch her.” Ratchet knew it wasn’t a request. I needed someone to be with her at all times to make sure nothing happened to her. “Get here as soon as possible.”

I hung up the phone, my hands going to her wet sweater that was lying on the floor. It smelled like more than bay area water. It smelled like monsters. I was going to stop this once and for all, even if I had to go to the DGC to stop it.

Chapter 32

CAROLINE

When I woke up, he was gone.

Of course, he was. I didn’t know why it surprised me.

I clenched my eyes shut and ran my hands through my hair.

What had I done?

I had made love to Ryder of all fucking people. He was the one I was trying to get over, the one I was trying to get out of my system, the one who had shown me he was a monster. The one who had kidnapped me, the one who had locked me up, and I'd had sex with him like some sex starved student in need of deep fucking.

What an idiot I was.

I had fallen for him.

I had let him into my bed; I had allowed it to happen. There was no one to blame but myself. The raw loneliness I felt inside me and the need to have him back again immediately. I felt bereft with him gone. I missed his passion and his comfort. Instead, I was locked up. Even if it was in a luxurious Victorian, it didn't change the fact I was locked up and unable to leave this place.

Somebody was moving around downstairs.

Great.

I knew the satyrs were outside. We'd narrowly escaped them before with Sophie's cloud magic. I didn't think the satyrs were meant to be in the house, though.

I sat up and looked at the mirror. My hair looked like I'd been well fucked, which was true but not exactly the impression I wanted to make on whoever was assigned to watch me.

Ratchet, no doubt.

I quickly went to the shower, scrubbing off the smell of Ryder's body. Trying to get rid of every last touch he made against my skin. Not because I wanted to, but because I had to. I had to make sure I couldn't remember how magical he felt, how insanely

beautiful it had been to have his skin against mine, his tongue in my mouth and his cock inside me.

I scrubbed my skin until it was bright red. And then I leaned against the shower wall and let the tears fall. They weren't tears of fear; it was the loneliness and missing Ryder that had always stayed with me. All those long times he had been gone when we were married, all of those times he had left me alone. All the trauma of that was repeated.

He'd left me yet again with no word of explanation.

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As always, I was an afterthought in his life, never allowed to be the center of it, never allowed to truly be part of it.

The tears fell with the water from the shower until there were none left, the shower drowning out the sound of my sobs until I could compose myself. I let the hot water pour down on my face, feeling its refreshment and wishing it could wash away the pain and loneliness I had every time Ryder left. The only time my life seemed right was when he was fully within me.

That was impossible.

He was unreliable. He came and left as he pleased. It was exactly how he treated our marriage, and he wasn't acting any differently now; I didn't know what I was thinking. I swallowed hard and turned off the shower. I wasn't going to stand for this. I didn't need him; I didn't need to be protected by him. I didn't care if I didn't understand the world. There were other people here who did, other people who would help me. And I certainly needed the help.

I quickly dried off and put on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be able to get out of here, but at least I'd be able to try to make some connection with the outside world.

Great. I was going to have to face the person watching me. I pulled my hair back into a tight ponytail and decided to face my guard.

Some guy, undoubtedly a guard intended to 'protect' me, was in the kitchen making eggs and bacon.

He looked up with a big smile as I walked in the room. “You want some breakfast?” he asked.

That’s when I realized how ravenous I was. I hadn’t eaten in what felt like days and now it was time for me to get my strength back.

I sat down on a stool at the counter, nodding. “Yeah,” I murmured. “I also want a phone, Ratchet.”

“No phone.” Ratchet replied.

“I know you have one,” I said.

“I do,” he retorted, “but I’m not supposed to give it to you.”

“That couldn’t possibly be true. Ryder knows I’m going to have to check in with work. He’s an asshole, but he’s not that much of an asshole. He knows I need to talk to my staff, at least to make sure my experiments are going well. We aren’t dicking around making new algorithms for Facebook where I work. We are trying to cure cancer. So maybe you can be a little helpful and hand me your phone. You can watch me as I use it.”

He served up the eggs and bacon onto a plate, placing it in front of me.

“Me watching you is the only way you’re going to be able to use a phone,” he said.

“Of course,” I said compliantly. “I just need to ring my colleague Laney.”

“Text should do,” Ratchet said

“Fine,” I said, holding out my hand. He placed the phone in my hand but didn’t move

away, making sure he could see everything I wrote. I had to be really careful with what I wrote to Laney, but I needed some level of help. I hopped into his text and typed out a quick message to her.

“Make sure those experiments are running well.”

Ratchet looked at what I wrote. “Good enough,” he said. He handed it to me and let me send it.

“On a date with Magnus!” Came Laney’s response, followed by a series of hearts. She was clearly falling for the guy.

“The eggs are burning,” I said, pointing back to the stove. Ratchet turned to grab the pan off the stove and in a split second I switched apps, opening WhatsApp and typing to Sophie to come over as quickly as possible. I hit send and closed the app just as Ratchet turned around. He read Laney’s response and then grabbed the phone.

“That’s enough,” Ratchet said.

I stared at the phone as it disappeared into his pocket. That message to Sophie was my only hope to get out of here. I didn’t care how many monsters were after me. I just needed to get as far away from Ryder as possible.

He was by far the biggest monster to fear.

* * *

Continue the romance of Ryder & Caroline in book 2: MONSTERS OF MAYHEM

Or read on for a sneak peek!

Prologue

LANEY

“Hello,” I typed. “Where the hell are you?”

Here I was typing random messages to a phone number I didn’t even know, but it was the only one I had to get a hold of my best friend, Caroline.

I didn’t dare type all the things going on in my life, even though I was dying to tell Caroline every detail. How was I supposed to pour my heart out to some random phone number that I was sure wasn’t even hers. She’d said that when she had first texted. That goddamn ex-husband of hers was doing something, I just didn’t know what.

Oh my God!

How much did I need my best friend? I just started seeing Magnus and I was falling head over heels for him and there was no one to even tell. I almost felt bad for my thoughts but maybe I should’ve had more than just one friend. The only problem was Caroline was the best friend I could ever. She was always there for me. She’d always been there to laugh at my mistakes and cheer me up when I was down. Caroline was my drinks date and my stay in for a movie date. She’d just always been there and now ever since Ryder had shown back up in her life, she’d disappeared.

Completely.

Just like he used to do when they were married.

If it wasn't for the random text messages I received from her from an arbitrary number, I'd be filing a missing person's report. The sink hole that swallowed her house now had a big fence around it and she hadn't even come back to check on that.

I looked in the mirror double checking my final choice of outfits for my date with Magnus. It was going to be our third date and I was dressed to impress. My shoulder length red hair was pulled back in soft curls away from my face with a couple of tendrils hanging down to frame my high cheekbones. I knew I was a little bit on the curvy side but at forty-four, seriously, who gave a shit?

Right?

I had earned my curves thanks to my supreme ability to bake. I'd earned that superpower through years of baking. It was a little thing I was proud of. Even now I could smell the soufflé rising in the oven. It should be timed just right for when Magnus got here. No man had ever been able to resist my soufflé. It was like a straight shot from there to the bedroom. After two dates I was ready for it.

The dark green dress I was wearing highlighted the green in my eyes and there was just enough cleavage to show I was a woman but not so much that I looked trampy. I knew Magnus was younger than me. I didn't have an exact idea of his age he couldn't be more than mid-30's. Tall, blonde, and godlike he was everything I'd always dreamed of having in a hot piece of man flesh. Well mostly. He didn't live in Boston so that was a bit of a problem, but maybe that was a good way to start a relationship, right? Maybe that was a way to make sure we didn't get in too hot and too heavy too fast.

Because the truth was, I was falling for him heavily.

"Ugh!" My frustration came out in a loud groan. Where was Caroline?

I picked up my phone determined to try to get a hold of her again, but this time I wasn't going to text. I glanced at the last ten texts I had sent her. They were blue. They'd gone through to an iPhone but none of them were answered. I wasn't going to quit on her just because of that. I dialed the number waiting to hear the computer voice telling me that nobody was going to answer the call. I nearly fell over when the phone picked up at a woman's voice said, "Hello?"

"Caroline! Caroline, is it you?" I ran quickly from my bedroom, which always had bad reception, and down into the kitchen where I could also keep an eye on the soufflés.

"Is this Laney?" The woman asked and I could tell it wasn't Caroline.

My shoulders fell but at least somebody had answered the phone. "Yes, how do you know my name?"

"Caroline has been talking about you," the woman said.

"Who is this?" I asked. "And where is Caroline?"

"My name is Sophie," the woman said. "We need your help."

The front doorbell rang just as the timer on the stove went off. The soufflés were ready and Magnus was here. But Caroline was more important than any of that.

"Where is she? Where do you need me?" My voice strained through the phone.

"I'll reach out to you later," Sophie said and the phone went dead.

"No!" I exclaimed glaring at the phone and wanted to throw it away. I thought of dialing back but the timer on the stove was still going off and Magnus was now

knocking at the front door.

“Just a minute,” I yelled at the front door as I ran into the kitchen to turn off the timer and carefully, very carefully remove the soufflés from the oven. They were perfect they’re moist chocolate tops risen and beautiful. They, like me, were ready to be devoured.

Well, I thought I was ready for it, but after being able to talk to that woman on the phone, Sophie, I didn’t know what to think.

A knock came again at the front door. I took a deep breath and try to calm my nerves. There was no point in looking like a crazy woman. I smoothed my skirt as I walked to the door. This was a guy I really liked. I didn’t want to scare him off.

My heels clicked across the floor as I walked to the front door pulling it open with a big smile on my face and a swivel in my hip. Just enough to show him what my curves could do, but not so much that I would knock anything over.

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“Laney you look radiant,” Magnus smiled down at me and every part of me, particularly the part between my legs, melted.

God, I just wanted him to undress me right here and now and take me on the couch, on the floor, on the kitchen counter...I didn't care. This guy did things for my blood that I didn't think were possible at my age. I felt like a teenage girl. Well not quite like when I was a teenager. I didn't have these feelings until I met my ex-husband.

That should be a red flag.

Right there.

I pushed it out of my brain. I wasn't shopping for a husband. Never again.

But I could sure spend a lot of time with Magnus. That was a fact.

“Are you okay?” He brushed my cheek with the back of his hand. “You look a little flushed.”

I shook my head trying to clear it a bit of everything going on. I quickly dissected what I could and couldn't tell him. Telling him I wanted him to take me on the couch that very minute was probably out of the question.

“You remember that friend I was telling you about? My BFF Caroline?”

Magnus nodded as he stepped into the house. “I remember you mentioning her. Is she all right? Have you heard from her lately?”

“No not at all, but I called that number she texted from before and somebody answered.”

Magnus raised his eyebrows appearing interested which I was grateful for. He certainly didn't have to show any concern for my life but it seemed he did.

I led him to the kitchen as I spoke. “I made us some soufflé.”

“Did you get any information from the person who answered the phone?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No. She said she would call me back later. I don't know she sounded nice and I guess she sound like she was really concerned and taking care of Caroline. But I think they need my help.”

“Caroline's off with her ex-husband,” Magnus pointed out. “So, why is some women calling you?”

I frowned wishing I knew the answer. “Well, that's the mystery I'm trying to figure out.”

“Why don't we do some reconnaissance on the phone number and see if we can track who it belongs to?” Magnus suggested.

I bit my lower lip and nodded. Glancing at the soufflé on the counter. My one-way ticket to getting undressed was going to have to wait. If he was willing to help me find Caroline then it was important to let him help me do that.

“Did she give you a name?” he asked.

I nodded. “Her name is Sophie.”

“Give me her number.” Magnus smiled reaching forward and massaging my

shoulders. “Don’t worry, Laney, I promise you we will find Caroline and discover exactly what’s happening with her ex-husband. We will bring him to justice if he’s done any harm to her. I promise you.”

I looked up at his chiseled features incredibly grateful to have him with me as I was facing these trials. He was the only one who seemed to want to help. He bent down and brushed my lips with a gentle kiss.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “It means the world to me that you’re willing to help me find her.”

“Don’t worry will track her down.” Magnus spoke with steely resolve. “Make no doubt about it.”

* * *