



Tyson (Ariel Kimber 4.50)

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: Tyson Alexander is a long time member of a coven of witches who are more like brothers than simply friends.

There are seven of them total in the coven and all of them are male. The majority of them come together from broken, messed-up families and have nothing else in this world that matters outside of each other.

Then, six months ago, everything changed when they shared a dream about a beautiful, sad girl who was just like them. That's to say, a witch.

Then, she moved in next door to them and changed their entire lives, turning everything upside down.

And they all, every single one of them, loved her for it.

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Chapter One

The Dream

“Where are we?” I heard one of the twins ask from somewhere behind me. I didn’t bother looking to see which one had asked. While only the one had spoken the question out loud I knew the other had been thinking the same exact thing, so it didn’t really matter who had actually asked. They were two different people, but weirdly the same. When we were little boys it used to get on my nerves. I had long since gotten over it.

“What the fuck is going on?” Damien growled irately. “I fell asleep in bed beside my girl, with her naked and wrapped all around me. And, now I wake up here? I fucking told Quint not to mess with my dreams anymore. They fuck with my head and I always wake up disoriented and not knowing where in the hell I am. I wish he would have never learned how to enter dreams. Fucking asshole.”

He grumbled something under his breath that I couldn’t quite make out, probably more obscenities hurled at my Uncle.

I hummed under my breath in agreement with his last two statements. Uncle Quint learning how to enter dreams had been an absolute nightmare and invasion of privacy for the rest of us. Not to mention just knowing he could do it when it was such a rare talent left Quint a smug bastard. Until I learned how to do it, that is. At first, he was pissy and acted like I had done something to personally offend him. Then he was all about bragging on me and how us Alexander’s were the best of the best when it came to our craft. Him lumping the two of us together in anything was more than enough to

push me further away from him for a while.

Don't get me wrong, I did not hate my Uncle Quint, I loved him. He was my annoying older brother who liked to boss me around and always claimed to be right and knew more than I did about every fucking thing. He drove me nuts, but I loved him.

What I didn't love was his constant smugness and endless drive to be better than everyone else. I hated that shit. Especially when it came to our own coven. We needed to be a single, solid unit, not compete with each other over every fucking tiny thing.

"What in the fuck is going on?" Julian snarled. "That asshole Quint fucking swore to me on his dead mothers' grave that he would not pull this bullshit on me while I was sleeping anymore. I told him what would happen if he did this to me again. He'll pay for this shit."

Julian made me grin. Poor Uncle Quint, Julian always found a way to put my Uncle in his place.

"Wasn't me," Quint growled in a deep, highly annoyed voice. "Can't you feel it? It's her."

Her?

Her who?

What the fuck?

We were shrouded in blackness, waiting for the dream to take hold of us and plunge us into whatever world the creator of the dream had weaved for us.

I had never been sucked into a dream by anyone other than my Uncle Quint before. I had done it myself, but still did not understand how it worked entirely.

“Look,” Dash murmured quietly, jerking me out of my head.

The darkness was fading and there she was.

My breath caught in my throat at the sight of her.

Jesus.

Fuck.

What was this?

She lay on her side on a twin sized mattress on the floor. The mattress was covered in a thin black blanket. The room we'd appeared in was small, and, outside of the bed and a small stack of clothing on the floor, the room was barren, empty and all too depressing for my tastes. The dirty wallpaper on the wall was old, cracked in places and peeling. Even though it was coming on summer and getting really warm outside, the room held a chill to it, like the cold had seeped into the dirty walls and now it was a permanent feature in the room.

I studiously avoided looking at the girl on the bed, looking at everything else but her. And it wasn't because she was pretty (and from the small sliver of her face I could see, which wasn't much, she looked like she could be pretty) and watching a maybe pretty girl sleeping, a girl I had never seen before in my life, was creepy. No, it wasn't that at all. I avoided looking at the girl because outside of the chill the room gave off, there was something else in the air and it was coming off of her. Something I was all too familiar with because my brothers gave off the same vibe, it was that something extra special I had grown up with and around my entire life.

And it was coming from that girl on the bed.

A goddamned girl.

A girl in a shitty, cold room sleeping on a mattress on the floor. A room with dirty walls and stained, grey carpet. The floor was marked with cigarette burns and dark stains that I wouldn't have the guts to walk across on my bare feet. I shuddered in revulsion as I looked around the room, taking in the only window and noting the mold covering the wooden frame.

“How is this possible?” Quinton whispered in horror.

I knew he wasn't speaking directly to me, but I shook my head all the same, just as horrified as my Uncle sounded. This was not right, in fact, the whole thing was completely fucked.

“The Council should be notified immediately,” Julian said. “They will pull her out of here so fast and set her up somewhere she belongs.”

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I wanted to agree with him, but I wasn't the Council's biggest fan and I would never, not ever, turn some helpless girl over into their greedy, grasping hands.

"Nobody is saying shit to the Council about her," Quint growled in a harsh voice. It was deeper than normal, agitated. Julian's words had successfully pissed him off. "Why do you think we're here when I didn't bring us here and Tyson's not capable of dragging us all along for the ride? So how the fuck did we get here if it wasn't Ty and it wasn't me? Can any of you explain that to me?"

When no one answered him, his voice went lower, guttural, and I winced at hearing it. "We're here because of her. She pulled us here with her magic. She can enter and manipulate dreams but there's something blocking her. I don't understand it, but there's some kind of block around her. She has no idea what she's doing."

He was right about the block, I could feel it.

"We don't know dick about this girl," Damien grunted. "So she might be a witch and she might have been what drew us here. Who gives a fuck? I don't. I say we get the hell out of here, wake up in our own goddamned beds and forget this chick even exists."

I tuned out their bickering (it could go on and on for hours) as I turned to finally face the girl in question.

At the sight of her, my breath left me in a rush.

She was pretty, seriously fucking pretty.

Straight, light blonde hair that looked soft, so soft I had to curl my hand into a fist and press it into my thigh in order to not move closer to her so I could reach out and touch it, run its softness through my fingers, landed just below her chin. It was short but still fucking pretty. Her eyes were closed, hiding their color from me. I desperately wanted to know the color of this girl's eyes.

And I fucking hated her for it.

Most covens would kill to discover a girl and I wanted not one single thing to do with her. The only thing she would bring my family would be trouble and pain, that was all women who held magic inside of themselves were capable of. They were all selfish, self-centered bitches and the last one we had met had tried to destroy our entire family and she had used me as her tool to do so.

If I got myself a girlfriend she would not be a witch and she would have not one single thing to do with magic. She would be sweet, innocent in all things and she would never, not ever, be introduced to my family. She would have no part in my real world. This was the only acceptable way to ever allow another female into my life.

This girl, whoever she was, had no part in my life and I absolutely did not want to be standing in some run down, piss poor excuse for a bedroom that could be anywhere in the known universe.

“We should go,” I muttered and wasn't surprised to hear the heat in my voice.

“In a minute,” my Uncle Quint said as he cracked open the door and slipped out of the room.

No one commented on his departure and I wasn't really surprised. We had long since given up asking after his actions. There was no point, Quinton did what he wanted when he wanted to and he never stopped to explain himself to anyone and no way

would he start now. And, if you were to ask him he would snap at you and bite your head off. Not worth the effort.

“She looks sad,” one of the twins remarked and I kind of had to agree with whoever had spoken.

Then again, it could have simply been the room that was sad, and she only seemed that way because she was sleeping in it.

“How in the hell can you say that?” I asked. “She’s sleeping. For all we know she could be the happiest girl to ever exist.”

Julian looked around the room pointedly. Yeah, I got his meaning loud and clear.

I glanced at the bed once more to see the girl had pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. And she was still sleeping.

For the first time since the darkness left us, I noticed what she was wearing. A thin, pull over hoodie covered the upper half of her body. It was dark grey, but I think the color had originally started out as black but had faded to dark grey with age and having been washed so many times. There was a gaping hole at one elbow, leaving her skin bare and exposed. The jeans covering her from hips to feet were faded, looked to be far too large on her slender hips and had seen better days. They were so faded they were almost white and both knees had long since blown out. Her pants were a size and a half too large for her body and the hoodie looked to be two sizes bigger than what she needed to cover her too thin frame.

Her hair had shifted when she pulled her knees up to her chest and I was surprised to see her lobe and the entire curve of her ear were covered in silver hoops and studs.

My eyes roamed over her sleeping figure to the neat stack of clothing on the dirty

carpet, then they moved to the gross walls. If this girl was happy I would swallow my own goddamned tongue and choke on it.

Julian must have felt the same because he said, “This place is a shit hole. No one living in a shit hole is ever really happy. Besides, if she has magic then she belongs amongst her own kind. We know she’s not amongst her own kind because we don’t know who in the hell she is and we’ve met every known female witch in this country and she is not one of them. Do we agree that none of us have ever seen her before?”

I watched as Abel and Addison both nodded their heads together in unison, no big surprise there. Damien’s mouth was pinched in an unhappy scowl as he nodded begrudgingly. Dash’s eyes were riveted onto the girl and he looked extremely unhappy as well, but he still managed to jerk his head up in a rough nod. I nodded in agreement along with my brothers.

I wanted to reach out and touch her, see if she gave off the strange heat that came with being blessed with having magic, just to be sure.

I did no such thing.

I couldn’t touch her, wouldn’t.

Instead, I thought of Annabell and didn’t even try to fight my lip curling up in disgust. I had thought Annabell was going to be my one and only. I’d lost my virginity to her and I hadn’t minded in the least when she’d started sleeping with two of the others. Honestly, I had hoped with everything I was worth that she would infatuate the others as much as she had me. It hadn’t worked out how I had hoped. In fact, I’d say it went the exact opposite as to what I had hoped for. Not only had she turned out to be a screaming bitch but she had tried to dismember my entire family. Uncle Quint had retaliated and dished out some harsh punishment as payback that, had he bothered to ask me before hand, I would have pleaded with him to simply let it

go and leave her alone. Now every time I was forced to be in her presence her face was a permanent reminder of how she'd played me, played my brothers. Being anywhere near her and taking in her face was an all-new blow to the ego and crushed just a little bit of my soul.

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The thought of having another girl with magic mixed in with my family had a ball of dread curling in my stomach and a sour taste slithering up my throat. Bitter, I was so very bitter.

I looked down at the too thin girl on the bed in ill-fitting clothing. All I knew of her was that she looked to have some seriously soft blonde locks that I desperately wanted to run my fingers through, an insane number of holes in her ears (or, at least in the one ear I could see), and she lived in a damp, beat-to-shit apartment.

And she had magic.

She was a witch. Like me, like my family.

And, if not for the beautiful fact that she had magic, I might not have been openly opposed to having anything to do with her.

Fool me once and shame on you. Fool me twice and...

Yeah, girls with magic weren't for me. Not ever again.

I shielded my heart, brick by brick I built the wall surrounding the organ that caused me so much pain when I let it take the lead, and I turned away from the sight of her in time to see Uncle Quint silently reentering the dimly lit bedroom. An envelope crinkled as he folded it in half and shoved it in the back pocket of his jeans. From what I saw of the front of the envelope before it disappeared from sight it looked like some kind of bill. If I was correct and it was a bill then there would be a home address, a billing address, front and center on the envelope with a name of whoever

she lived her with. The sneaky son of a bitch had left to find out where we really were, to find out where she lived. So he could come back.

One look at him and the steely determination he wore on his face like it had been etched into stone and I fucking knew. I knew my Uncle better than anyone else, so I was able to read the look on his face with just one glance. Uncle Quint was not going to walk away from this witch and this pathetic, probably roach infested place without ever looking back. No, that look on his face said he'd just found a map that lead to the most beautiful, exotic treasure that ever existed in this whole freaking world and he was bound and determined to find it. All without ever having seen the other half of her face, or her eyes open so he didn't have any clue as to what color they were, or hearing the sound of her voice.

Fuck.

You either prepared to die or you got the hell out of Uncle Quint's way. I had to figure out if this girl was worth fighting with my Uncle or not.

The girl shifted slightly, and a whimper escaped her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as both twins stepped forward as if unable to help themselves after hearing her make that tiny sound.

God damn it, they were both ready to rush to her side and neither of them knew the color of her eyes or the sound of her voice yet, either.

Godfuckingdamn it.

I would have to fight them on this too if we were going to live our lives without her and leave her in peace to her own shitty one.

“Time to go,” Uncle Quint insisted. “We need to go before she joins us in her dream and realizes what’s going on. We aren’t ready for that.”

We weren’t ready for anything the draw of her implicated. I didn’t want any part in anything having to do with this girl. In a way, I hated her for making me feel anything at all, even sympathy for her.

“But, Quinton,” one of the twins said cautiously, “she clearly needs us. We can’t just leave her here.”

We sure as fuck could.

“We may be leaving her for now,” Quint said quietly, “but I promise you, it isn’t for good. You need to trust me on this, we aren’t gonna contact the Council, but we are gonna handle this situation. I give you my word.”

Masculine grunts echoed throughout the room, bouncing off the cold, barren walls. They all trusted Uncle Quint to handle the situation and take care of the nameless girl.

I wanted to put my fist in every single one of their faces in protest.

I was going to fight them on this and from the looks they were giving her I knew they weren’t going to be happy with me.

“Brace,” Quint said as he held his arms out at his sides and closed his eyes, concentrating.

I knew what to expect before I felt it.

The room around me darkened until no light remained and I felt like I was standing alone in a black tunnel.

I stood there in silence, counting. I made it to fifty-eight before my world shifted again and I sat up in my own bed, gasping, disoriented.

And I did it angry.

And I also did it not knowing that the beautiful girl we'd left in that shit hole apartment would soon become everything to me and my very reason for breathing.

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Hindsight, they say, is always twenty-twenty.

Chapter Two

Six months later

I looked down at the phone in my hand in disbelief as I tightened my grip around it painfully. I could feel it biting into my hand and knew there'd be red marks left behind but didn't care. I didn't feel anything.

I reread the text message for a third time as a muscle in my jaw ticked.

That fuckingbitch.

Would I never be rid of her and her toxic bullshit? It was becoming clearer the more I stared at that text message that the answer to that question was a big, fat,fuckingno.

She wanted to make my life a living hell because of what my Uncle Quint had done to her face and I almost couldn't even blame her for it. If someone had destroyed my face the way hers had been ruined, I didn't think I would ever be able to turn my back on them and walk away without first seeking out vengeance and raining my particular horror and pain down all over their asses. But, then, I wasn't the type to let things go, I held a mean grudge that worked just fine for me. I didn't enjoy it coming off of other people so much. Seeing my own flaws on other people wasn't exactly making me feel real good about myself at the moment.

I read the text message for the fourth time as I sighed heavily and rubbed my fingers

into my forehead bitinglly.

Belle: I'm at the Motel with the Council and I really want to see you. Either you come here or I go there. We both know you don't want me to go there. Text me a time and an address and I'll be there.

Belle?Really, Tyson?

I flinched at the sight of the nickname I'd used for her since the day I'd first laid eyes on her. Apparently, I'd never removed her from my contact list.

I didn't do the smart thing and block her number now. I wanted to but I knew better. If I blocked her and didn't meet up with her then she'd do as she said she would and she'd show up at the big house, the house where I lived with my Uncle and Abel and Addison. She never bluffed. It was something I used to find highly attractive in her, but now I found it nothing more than annoying.

Trapped, I felt trapped.

And I fucking hated it. I hatedherfor it. Hated her fucking guts.

I thought I had hated her before, but I hadn't been doing it right because this was so much more than what it had been before receiving that text. This was hate, and it was a horrible, all-consuming feeling that burned in my gut.

There was no getting her out of my life and she could destroy everything. Absolutely everything.

And Ariel...

My stomach clenched painfully at the thought of Ariel knowing about Annabell

texting my phone and seeing the nickname I had saved in it for her. She was so vulnerable and incredibly guarded when it came to her heart that it was a fight just to get anywhere with her. She fought against every feeling, every little damn thing, because she didn't want anyone to hurt her worse than she'd already been hurt. I couldn't blame her for it but it was incredibly frustrating at times and very disheartening at others. If she were to find out Annabell was texting me or that I went to meet up with her, there was no telling how she'd react, but I was willing to bet it wouldn't be good for me. It would likely turn her away from me.

I'd sooner gouge out my own eyeballs than hurt her or unintentionally push her away from me.

I couldn't risk Ariel finding out that Annabell was staying with the Council and I definitely couldn't be seen out in public with her. And, I sure as hell didn't want to go somewhere private where it would end up being the two of us alone where she could do something hideous, like, say, try to come on to me and make me vomit all over her because of it.

No, this needed to be dealt with now and before she could do something unfortunate that I would end up living to regret. It's not like she would regret anything, the bitch didn't have feelings or a heart capable of regret.

That meant, I needed to make the long drive out to the Motel and confront her there before she showed up here. If she came here then there was no telling what would come out of her mouth or what would happen to her because Uncle Quint hated her even more than I did. And that crazy asshole was capable of damn near anything. When it came to our family, he lacked a moral compass of any kind. Sometimes, I envied him his lack of morals. Other times, I wanted to strangle his ornery, pigheaded ass.

He couldn't know that the bitch was back and wouldn't be learning it from me, that's

for sure.

Dreading what I had to come face to face with, I grabbed my car keys off of the nightstand I had carelessly tossed them on to when I'd last come home after driving my car. Where I always carelessly tossed them. If I didn't put them in the same spot always I would lose them. I could keep track of everyone else's shit except for my own.

I pulled open the nightstand drawer, shut down my phone completely, and dropped it inside the drawer.

My lips curved upwards in a half smile as I reached for the only other thing in the drawer. It was the papers Ariel and I had written about each other on the second day of school when that jackass teacher had proclaimed us as partners and forced us to write an entire paper about each other. I didn't think she knew I had hers and I had no plans on telling her I'd kept them both like some love-sick sappy asshole that I actually was but didn't want anyone else to oversee me as.

Just because, I picked the one on top up and started reading.

Ariel Kimber is my partner for this semester in Mr. Franklin's class even though she very much wishes not to be partnered with me. I can't say I blame her because, along with my fellow classmates, I wasn't very nice to her yesterday. Granted, I wasn't as ruthless and horrible to her as the rest of the others had been, but it was no excuse for the way that I had treated her. I was rude and I treated her in an inexcusable manner that I feel like I will probably be spending a whole lot of time apologizing for.

I consider myself lucky for having her even speak to me today instead of slapping me across the face for even daring to breathe air anywhere near her. That taught me something else about her that I hadn't know before, she was a better person than me, that's for sure. Likely better than the rest of these losers who go to school here. That's

really no surprise to me either because everyone was a loser long before their actions marked them as such yesterday.

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Ariel wasn't a loser. She's precious and I want to kick my own ass for ever daring to speak to her in such a way. If my Uncle had been in the vicinity and seen what had gone down and heard the way I'd spoken to her he would have kicked my ass right there in the hallway and I would have laid down like a bitch and let him beat my ass because it would have been much deserved.

I digress...

As for Ariel's looks...

Well, let's just say I think she's beautiful and leave it at that. I would feel like a pervert if I waxed poetic about how hot I found her on a school paper.

But she is, hot that is.

And her voice, damn. She has a quiet voice that's sweet, she's always so soft spoken. It's very feminine and something that I find incredibly attractive. It's refreshing because I don't think she knows how attractive even her voice is. I'm not used to that in a female. The one's I've known before always knew just how attractive they were and wielded their beauty like a powerful weapon to gain whatever their black hearts had desired.

Ariel doesn't seem to have a vindictive bone in her body.

She's also been my neighbor since the beginning of the summer, and I am hating myself and my decision to stay gone for the entire summer on a last all boys camping trip because it's time I've missed out on getting to know her. If I'd have spent the

summer getting to know her then I wouldn't have been such a dick to her yesterday in the hallway. Which was my problem to begin with. Yesterday, while watching her, I felt something unpleasant slither through me because there was something unpleasant about watching her. She wasn't right. She wasn't shy, but she came off as timid and acted as if she thought the entire world should find her invisible. Which was ridiculous to me because beautiful girls were never invisible and especially not in high school. She should have hit the hot girl radar in even douche bags eyes and then been hit on left and right. Instead, everyone seemed to hate her right away.

It wasn't normal and I didn't get it. What's worse is, she acts like she expected it to some extent.

Since no one besides myself is going to read this I'm just going to put it out there and write it down for myself to read my own words back.

I think it has something to do with her being like me and the rest of my family. I think her magic gives off some sort of repellent to normal, average folks and, if that's the case, she needs me, needs the rest of us, more now than I had realized. And, because of that thought, I hate myself just a little bit.

She'd clearly made no friends during the summer while we were gone and yesterday had made it obvious she wouldn't be making any friends now that school had started.

If I hadn't insisted she'd be fine without us for the summer and we'd stuck around then she would have had friends on her first day, she wouldn't have spent the entire summer alone with no one but her mother and Marcus to rely on. I had been still too hurt by another female of her kind to even consider that this one might be different. And, in all honesty, I could only admit these things because I knew no one else would ever read them. I messed things up so badly with her from the start that I have no idea even where to begin again with her and that thought terrifies me.

She, Ariel Kimber, terrifies me and she doesn't even know it. She has the power to destroy my family and that's something I've gone through once before and have no desire to go through again. That's the only reason I'd insisted on going camping for the summer instead of staying home and getting to know the new witch next door who we'd all dreamed about becoming such a big part of our family. Because she alone held the power to destroy what was really most precious to me, my family.

And she scared the absolute shit out of me.

Proceed with caution, that would be my new life motto because I wasn't about to let my family be sucked under by another female who had the potential to destroy us.

I never received a grade for it and neither had Ariel for hers because I hadn't given Mr. Franklin the chance to even read them before swiping them from his desk. He hadn't needed to read mine and I hadn't wanted anyone else to read the things she'd written about me on hers. We'd both been given F's but I figured that was okay because he was a dick and probably would have failed Ariel anyways because he seemed to hate her from the moment she walked into his classroom, which was something I did not understand in the slightest.

As far as I was concerned, Mr. Franklin could suck it, he meant next to nothing to me. We weren't going to school anymore so neither of us ever had to think of the toad of a man ever again.

And, as far as Ariel was concerned, she never had to know I had the papers.

Chapter Three

Typical Council behavior

The Motel loomed up ahead of me, dark and dreary. I couldn't imagine anyone but a

psychopath wanting to stay here in this creepy place. I wasn't surprised in the least that the Council chose this place to stay in, and not simply because it was creepy as all get out. It was isolated in the extreme and I knew that was probably the driving factor behind them moving in. The Council liked its privacy from the normal, everyday average human beings and what better place to find that than here in a serial killer's wannabe hang out.

Typical Council behavior.

They were hiding more than just themselves, and I knew it. They were always hiding something and seemed to be never capable of simply being open and honest. They also sneered at the weakest among us and adored the cruelest. My grandfather, my Uncle Quint's father, had been testament to that. They'd loved him and he'd been one of the biggest motherfuckers to ever walk the planet.

I wondered how long they planned on staying here and hoped like hell they lost interest in our coven and Ariel sooner rather than later because I didn't want to deal with the threat of them lurking around every corner.

I parked my Audi on the side of the dirt road a slight ways back from the Motel and got out. I didn't want them all to know I was here because I was certain if something bad went down then Adrian would immediately be on the phone with Uncle Quint, telling him how naughty I was and that he needed to put a tighter leash on me. The whole entirety of those pricks worked like that, thinking the only one's of us whoreallymattered were the leaders and the rest of us were simply sheep to be commanded at their every whim.

I wasn't a sheep and I wasn't about to be lead around by the leash Annabell wanted to snap back around my neck when I wasn't paying close enough attention to her. That bitch was not getting her claws back into me. Not now, not ever. And she sure as hell wasn't going to drag my family back through the mud while I sat back on my ass and

watched and did nothing. This was my mess that had started with her and I was going to be the one to clean it up.

I was so sick and tired of everything for me always coming back to Annabell and the way she'd hurt me. It had even made it hard for me to trust Ariel in the beginning or treat her as well as I should have. I still felt immense guilt over the way I had behaved towards her on the first day of school even though it had been months ago. If I hadn't allowed Annabell to hurt me before, and to still fucking control my life even though she was no longer a part of it, then I wouldn't have treated Ariel the way that I had. I needed to finally face what she'd done to me and move past it once and for all so that I could live my life outside of the shadow she'd cast on it when she'd royally fucked not only myself but two of my brothers over.

I didn't want to feel like she still had a hold on me anymore. And, it's not even like it was her who really had a hold on me, because it wasn't. It was what she'd done to me and how it had happened at a time when I was so incredibly vulnerable due to the death of my parents and how she'd tried to tear apart the only thing I had left that was good in my life anymore, that's what still had a hold on me. I couldn't get past my own stupidity over having allowed a snake to infest my family. I had always been arrogant enough to think I was smart and she'd proven me wrong in every way and made me feel like I wasn't worth a damn at all and that I wasn't capable of taking care of my family.

I absolutely loathed everything about Annabell.

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No, we weren't doing this on her terms. We were doing it on mine and I'd be damned if I let her do any more damage to my family.

I whispered a short spell as I slowly moved up the dirt road in the direction of the Motel. It would keep me in the shadows and on silent feet. It, like all magic, came at a cost and after a while would start draining on my energy. I'd need to eat something to replenish myself and for that reason alone I had always kept my glove compartment well stocked with a bottle of water and plenty of energy bars that would work in a pinch to refuel my low energy.

I knew it wouldn't be hard for the Council to see right through my pathetic attempt at shielding but at this juncture anything was better than nothing and, as strong as she claimed to be, Annabell wouldn't be able to see through it as easily as the Council would be able to. She was no where near as strong as she claimed to be. In fact, compared to the kind of power Ariel had started to give off, Annabell's magic abilities were starting to look like a joke, something laughable in comparison.

I crept along the shadows of the tree line as I moved down the dirt road. When I made it to the vehicles in front of the building I stuck to the shadows as I moved between them.

The lights in every room were lit up and the entire building gave off a bright, happy glow that was so out of place here in the backwoods coming off of this dumpy, gloomy building that it would have been laughable if it hadn't been so damn creepy. And, oddly enough, the place was eerily quiet. I knew the place was probably spelled in some way that kept the noise level down to nonexistent but it made it creepy outside to not even hear the slightest rustling of leaves in the surrounding woods.

I had no idea where I was going when I hit the front of the building, but for some unknown reason I was drawn to the stairs. I didn't question it. I let my instincts take over and followed behind them. I was half way up the wooden stairs before I realized it wasn't my instincts I was following but the essence of someone else's magic that had once violated me in a way I knew down to my very soul that I would never, not ever, fucking forget a second of. Magic that had been used against me in a way that wasn't allowed amongst the covens here in the U.S. Magic that had been used to control my every emotion.

Yeah, oh yeah, I fucking hated Annabell.

I followed the sour taste of her magic until I came to the third door on the right. Without hesitation, I placed my hand on the knob and turned. The door opened up and I stepped inside.

I wasn't surprised in the slightest by the richness of the room I'd stepped into. It looked a whole lot like a formal sitting room that belonged in a house from a different time. The floor was covered in a priceless Persian rug decorated in deep, rich colors. The chair and couch that were seated across from each other looked so delicate there was no doubt in my mind that if a heavier set person were to sit down on one and take a load off the thin, curved legs on either piece of furniture would likely snap under the weight. Maybe they were sturdier than they looked, and, given their age I imagined they had to have been to withstand the years they had without breaking, but I'd much rather take my chances and sit my ass on the floor if I had to, thank you very much. A fancy silver tea set had been placed on the center of a table in between the couch and chair. Steam rose from the tea cups, letting me know the contents inside had recently been poured.

That was one thing I certainly didn't miss about Annabell, her love for tea. She never enjoyed coffee and she thought soda was so full of sugar that it disgusted her. And she could never just heat up water in the microwave and dip her tea bag into it. Oh

no, nothing so mundane for the precious Annabell. She had to have a set up like this with the full-blown tea set every single fucking time she had her tea, which, in case you were wondering, was all the fucking time. And, it gets worse, because of how she'd been raised and the princess she arrogantly thought herself to be, she expected someone else to wait on her every single time she had her tea because she thought she was too good to pour it out her damned self and always expected someone else to do it for her.

I shook my head, amazed by how far gone I'd been in my grief and choked up by her magic to have put up with that level of bullshit from her. Because it had been me who'd made her tea and poured it for her and had treated her like she'd been a real-life living, breathing princess and she hadn't deserved that kind of treatment from me and had used my grief and her magic to take it from me all the same.

I didn't know if she'd been the same way with Julian or Damien, but for some reason, I didn't think they'd have put up with that level of bullshit from her. Which really told me something because I knew that if Ariel had asked they both would jump at the chance to wait on her. Hell, Damien already did shit like that for her with her coffee. The girl could be a little demon in the mornings until you poured coffee down her throat, once that was done she was happy as all get out. She didn't even need to ask the guys anymore, they all just automatically brought her coffee in the morning. And it wasn't because they felt like they had to or even because she demanded it of them, because she didn't. It was because she was Ariel, the girl we were all slowly falling in love with, and we relished in doing nice things for her because she'd lived a life where nice wasn't something she'd ever been used to because it wasn't something she'd ever had before.

Where Ariel had earned it from us by being her crazy beautiful sweet self, Annabell had magically manipulated and demanded it, forcing it from us.

The fact that she'd used her magic so willfully on myself and my brothers in order to

bend us to her will and get what she wanted out of us should have had me terrified to be here alone with her and should have had me turning and running for the hills straight back to my Uncle so I could get him to take care of the bitch for me. If I'm being honest here, there was a small part of me that wanted to do just that and, in doing so, get as far away from her as I could get. I couldn't do it though because it was cowardly and it would make it so I never got over what the bitch had done to me. I had to face my fears in order to overcome them, to become a stronger man than I had been when I'd been weak enough to allow her to do damage to my life the first time around. I had to do it for Ariel. She needed me strong for her. Strong enough to take care of her no matter the situation. Strong enough to know that if it came down to a magic show with Annabell that I could best her and she'd never be allowed anywhere near my beautiful, sweet girl.

I took in a deep breath and searched for the courage to get myself through this.

My vision was filled with an image of hauntingly green eyes. They held a depth of secrets and torment that I found almost unbearable to take in. Two months ago, they were hauntingly pretty. Now, they held a coldness to them that saddened me.

I drew strength from them all the same.

My girl and her immense courage and resilience gave me the strength and my own courage to walk through that stupid formal sitting room to the door that would lead me deeper into the inner sanctum of the Motel and, thus, the Council itself.

Again, I didn't hesitate with the doorknob, I simply placed my hand on it, turned and pushed the door open wide. My heart beat heavily in my chest as I waited for someone to shout at the sight of the intruder and scream for help.

I was met with entirely different sounds and a sight I wished I could unsee and knew I would spend a whole lot of time wishing it were different and having my wishes not

come true.

If there was furniture in the room outside of the bed, I failed to see it. My eyes were wide in shock and unfortunately focused on what was taking place on the bed.

I needed a bucket of bleach for my poor eyes so I could pour it over top of my head and blind myself from seeing anything further in this room.

Annabell had always been frighteningly thin, something she'd worked her ass off (literally) for. She worked out obsessively and she ate but a lot of the time she would later stick her fingers down her throat so she could vomit it all back up. The unhealthiness of it had always bothered me and I had tried talking to her about it but she'd always shut me down and refused to talk about it.

However, if I'd thought her unhealthy before I hadn't seen anything because this was a whole new level of skinny that had passed skinny and moved straight towards skeletal. Each rib stuck out with blinding clarity and, from her place on her stomach on the bed, I had a clear view of her bony, knobby spine that was clearly visible.

Adrian, who I never wished to see naked before, was on his ass in the bed with his thighs split wide, his hand gripped tight in Annabell's luscious red hair. Her face was buried in his groin and from the bobbing of her head and the sucking sounds she was making I knew she had her mouth on him and was sucking him off. Something I knew from past experiences that she absolutely loathed doing and thought was way below her princess station that she imagined herself to be a part of. She seemed to be enjoying herself just fine now.

An older man with a body full of loose skin stood at the edge of the bed with his back and his bare ass facing me. He had what looked like a painful grip on Annabell's fragile looking hips as he thrust powerfully between her thighs. Her entire body jerked forward with each thrust, as did the bed. The skin on his back and bare ass

wobbled with each thrust he made. A long, dark, thick braid trailed down the center of his back and slithered around like a snake with each move he made.

Christ.

What the fuck was this?

I backed out of the room and closed the door softly, no longer wishing for my presence to be known.

I grimaced as I rubbed my hand over my tired and now too wide for my head eyes. Annabell wasn't just staying here with the Council, she was doing them as well.

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That made things slightly more difficult for me and now I really didn't want the others to know of her presence here.

What would Damien or Julian think were they to know that someone they had been intimate with was now sleeping with more than one member of the Council? Would they be upset? Disgusted? Or, would they feel something along the lines as to what I was feeling right now?

Empty, and glad it wasn't my dick she had her mouth wrapped around.

Chapter Four

Fortunes for the Unfortunate

A bell jingled over head as I pushed the door opened wide and stepped into the warm, candle lit room. I always thought it weird that there weren't normal lights turned on hanging over head but instead the room was filled with the dull, light glow from the flames of the candles that were strewn half-hazardly around the stuffy room. That's not to say that there weren't over head lights on the ceiling because there were, they were just never in use when I came here. Though, I wished they had been.

It had been a long time since I'd walked through that door and into the shop. Not since before the summer had started. It had once been owned by an old, decrepit blind woman who saw things almost better than I did despite the fact she was fucking blind.

Her picture had been in the paper recently in the obituaries and I had been curious as

to what was going to happen to her shop now that she was no longer alive to take care of it, so here I was. The For Sale By Ownersign hanging in the window was not exactly what I had hoped to find when I got here and, for some stupid fucking reason I wasn't going to think too hard on, had hurt to see.

My father used to bring me here when I was a little boy and then when I was in my early teens. The old lady had never seemed to age or change and she'd been so familiar with my father that after the first time he'd brought me here I had asked him who she was to him, thinking they'd been friends of some sort. My father had told me that no, sadly they weren't friends.

He'd said, "That woman doesn't have any friends, son, and not because I have tried to befriend her. And it's not for lack of trying on my part, trust me, I've tried and been turned down flat on my ass every time."

"But," I said, not understanding what he was saying, "she's like us, I can feel it. And she's female, I mean, she's an old lady, but she's still a lady. Doesn't that mean we're supposed to take special care of her?"

My father had sighed heavily before kneeling down in front of me. "You're right," he'd told me, "she is just like us. But, for whatever reason, and that reason is hers alone and not ours to try and force out of her, she's hiding what she is from the world. We have to respect that and we have to respect her. And we should never tell anyone that we know she's like us, we need to keep that secret for her."

I remembered I had been confused as to why she'd want to hide herself from her own people and I had told my father as much.

"Sometimes, my son, the Council isn't always as it appears to be and sometimes there are reasons some of our females have to hide in the world away from them and away from their own people. If we come across one, we mustn't ever breathe a word aloud

about them to anyone, do you understand me?"

I had nodded even though I really hadn't understood him in the slightest. It had seemed odd to me that I had been told from the age I could understand the meaning behind the words that all female witches were precious in every way and were needed to be treated as such and coddled to within an inch of their lives. To be told to now let this one hide herself away from the Council and to never breathe a word of her existence to anyone didn't make sense to me. But my father's word was law, and I took what he said to heart.

I now had a better understanding as to why female witches would want to hide from the Council and I knew that the crippled old blind lady who'd owned the shop had been a witch in hiding from them, that there were more of them out there in the world that we had no knowledge of, and they were hiding from the rest of us.

Did that really make the ones who were out in the open to the Council and the rest of the covens as special as we thought them to be? I didn't know, nor did I care. It didn't change how I felt towards Ariel and I knew that the rest of the guys would feel the same way as I did.

My father and I had continued to come to the shop and spend money here even when we really didn't need to buy anything in particular, we did it because we were doing our part for a fellow witch and wanted to help her out in any way she was willing to allow us to, and buying her wares had been the only option available to us. After my father died, I continued coming here and buying a bunch of shit I didn't need to help out an old blind woman who didn't want anything from me simply because she had magic and my father had told me to do so.

And now she was dead.

The good news was, I no longer needed to spend a bunch of money on shit I did not

need. The bad news was, I felt absolutely fucking horrible for being relieved a woman had finally kicked the bucket and riddled with guilt because I hadn't stopped in in fucking monthsto check in on her and now that I had I got to confirm what I'd read in the newspaper that she'd died and that tacky for sale sign in the window had been what confirmed it for me.

Guilt ate at me from the inside and I wanted to turn around and walk right the fuck back out of this damn place and never turn back. Knowing what my father would do had he still been alive stopped me from getting in my car and driving away, that and I thought Ariel would really get a kick out of the shop and would love spending time here.

Would it be weird to buy not only a store but an entire building for my girlfriend? Yeah, more than likely it would be. Did I give a shit about that? No, definitely not. Would Ariel be happy when she found out what I did? Absolutely not, but I was hoping she'd walk in here, fall in love with the place and get over her angry snit as she took in all the dust covered bullshit that had probably been sitting on the shelves since before I'd been born and decided she just needed to have it all.

Without taking in the sights of the rows of shelves stuffed full of shit I did not need, or the black cloth covered table with an ancient deck of cards stacked with care on top of it, I made my way to the middle-aged man standing behind the front counter.

An hour later after making phone calls to both the real estate agent and my bank and questioning the man who'd been employed by the old blind lady for over a decade, I walked out of the shop with my own set of keys to not only the shop but the entire building seeing as there was an apartment upstairs with a back entry and an empty office space next door.

I was now, unfortunately, the not so proud owner of all of them.

At the curb where my Audi was parked I couldn't help but turn around and take a look at all I had bought.

A run-down building that had seen its fair share of better days likely eighty-five years ago stood proudly before me.

A rusty sign hung above the door.

Fortunes for the Unfortunate.

A great fucking name for a fortune tellers' shop where they sold magical paraphernalia and you could get your cards read by a decrepit blind woman. I remembered what Ariel had told me about going on a date with some douche bag who wouldn't pay to get her cards read at a fair. She'd always wanted her cards read and, to my knowledge, hadn't had it happen yet. Here, I could teach her to not only read her own but others as well.

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I couldn't keep the smile off my face if I tried.

Ariel was so going to love this place and I couldn't wait to show it to her.

Chapter Five

You're such a bitch

Out of all the things I had envisioned myself doing today, this was certainly not one of them. I'd woken up this morning feeling like it was going to be a beautiful day and excited to reach out to my girl so I could tell her about the shop and maybe convince her to drive out there with me so she could see it for herself with her own eyes and I could see her reaction to it with mine.

Before going to bed I had almost texted her to tell her about our new building and the shop but I had refrained, not wanting to wake her up if she'd been sleeping and not wanting to keep her awake if she hadn't gone to sleep yet. Not when it could easily wait until the morning. So, I'd left it alone for the night.

This morning, I'd gotten up, showered and dressed for the day. Excited, I'd picked up my cell, intent on calling Ariel, only to come up short when I came face to face with an unread text message from Belle. A-fucking-gain.

After realizing I hadn't taken the time to switch out her name in the contacts I promptly set about doing that. She was now saved under Wicked Bitch and I thought it to be rather fitting for her seeing as it was now one of the many nicknames I had in store for her and Belle was certainly long since dead and gone.

But, unfortunately, the bitch was back and I had to deal with her.

Her text demanded I send her an address for our meet or she'd come to my house.

Without thinking too much about it, I texted her back an address. And immediately cringed at how stupid I'd been afterwards. I thought about texting back and changing the meeting spot but knew that'd be stupid because she'd never stop questioning over why I'd changed spots and what was so important about the first one that made me immediately change my mind.

I left it alone, consequences be damned.

I parked right out front of the semi deserted restaurant and immediately exited my vehicle. There was no point in sitting in there feeling miserable and sorry for myself, not when I could get out, go inside and be miserable but still get it over with.

After seeing her at the Motel in all of her hideous glory, there was no fucking way I was going back out there to meet with her and there was no way I was going to be alone with her in any place, not a park, not anywhere. At least here at the restaurant there would be other people who could be witnesses if I needed any, and with Annabell there was no telling if I would need witnesses after the fact or not.

The reason I'd picked this place was because Uncle Quint and I used to come here all the time. When he'd come to visit he would take me here to get a burger, just to go and do something with the two of us when he got annoyed with my dad bossing him around. It was before he'd taken on the responsibility of being my sole guardian, but he'd never been a happy go lucky easy person to deal with and had always been moody and bossy. It had just gotten worse after my dad died.

I had fond memories here with him, which is why I had originally chosen this place. With Uncle Quint, I always felt safe. This place was so full of memories of coming here with him that it felt like a safe place to meet the crazy bitch. We were on my turf now, not hers.

Believe me, I wasn't stupid enough to think that meant this was my game we were playing and not hers. I'd never be that stupid. But maybe I could learn what the hell it was she really wanted from me so I could figure out a way to get rid of her ass once and for all without it hurting my family any more than she already had.

Sounded like an impossible task to me but one I was willing to give my all to.

The hostess greeted me with a smile I could have cared less about and, as she deflated at my lack of interest, I almost took pity on her and told her I had a girlfriend who no one else could compare to and to save her smiles for someone else. I didn't because it was none of her business and didn't want to chance Annabell overhearing me saying anything about Ariel. The less she knew about her the better off we would all be. I could deal with her stringing me along, to a point. What I couldn't deal with was her fucking with Ariel. Then the gloves would come off and I'd take her ass down.

Ignoring the hostess, I walked around her and moved in the direction Annabelle's heat was coming from. I found her sitting alone at a table in the empty dining room. I sat down across from her and didn't take my eyes off of her as she looked up at me from underneath dark, thick, lush eyelashes.

I realized then my mistake. She thought she still had me and came here to seduce me, I could see it all in her big eyes.

Fucking bitch.

"Your waitress will be right with you both," the hostess murmured in a voice laced

with hurt.

I didn't give a shit about her hurt or the fact she'd obviously been upset by not getting her chance to flirt with me. I was used to it because women were always flirting with me and they always seemed to either get pissed or be hurt when I ignored their efforts. Like their feelings were all that mattered.

I curled my lip in disgust.

Annabell was exactly that kind of female. Men were nothing but pawns in her game to her and I had stupidly been one of them.

Not ever again would I allow myself to be hurt by some evil bitch.

"What do you want with me, Annabell?" I growled at her from across the table.

She flinched at hearing my words and my jaw clenched painfully. The bitch actually flinched. Unbelievable. I had never seen her flinch at anything before, she'd always been a pillar of strength that I had found impressive, until I had figured out she'd used it against me. Now she looked hurt and it baffled me.

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My eyes widened in shock as I took her in and realized she'd left her face bare for me to see. I'd seen it before but only one time and it had been an angry red, scary, fucked up mess that had made me sick to my stomach to look at. It wasn't nearly as horrifying as it had been right after it'd happened. I was grateful for that.

It had made me damn near physically ill to know that she'd been permanently scarred because of me. Yeah, yeah, I know she'd done horrible things to me and one could say she deserved what she got, and if that one was Uncle Quint he'd tell you that by no means did he think she deserved what she got because he thought she needed more shit piled on top of having her face fucked up before she even got close to getting what she deserved. I even kind of agreed with him, to a point. But it went against everything that had been engrained in me since childhood to see a female with magic harmed in any way. Most witches could care less about what happened to the non-magically inclined but I wouldn't have wanted to see any female, witch or not, suffer what Annabell had been forced to suffer by the hands of my very scary Uncle. It just seemed wrong to me to hurt women.

It hadn't only been Uncle Quint who'd disagreed with me. All of my other coven members had disagreed, save for Dash who'd kept his opinion on the matter to himself. Like he did when it came to most things. I honestly didn't think he'd cared what happened to her one way or another. Dash had a skewed view on women in general, though, so I wasn't really sure how much his opinion in the matter would have mattered to me, if at all.

Annabell quickly masked her emotions and adopted one of profound hurt.

I shook my head. The hurt, whether it was fake or not, wasn't about to work on me.

"I'm sorry, Ty," Annabell whispered in her raspy voice that used to make my dick hard just hearing it but now had the opposite effect on me and I felt like I'd been kicked in the balls. "I miss you and want a chance at friendship with you. I think if you could just accept my apology and forgive me for how I've wronged you then I think the two of us could be great friends."

The inside of my wrist burned and I looked down at the hands I'd held tightly in my lap to keep myself from picking up my silverware and throwing it at the bitch's head.

Uncle Quint had inked his blood along with a protection spell into the inside of my left wrist. It was a permanent tattoo that would sometimes need a reboot in the magic and blood departments that had freaked me out when he'd first offered to put it on me. Tattoos were for life unless you wanted to pay a shit load of money to have them removed and needed to be thought about thoroughly before getting one. Uncle Quint had refused to take no for an answer and I'd been pissed but yielded to his wishes like the good little boy he often times forgot that I wasn't but more often than not likely wished I was.

Now I found myself grateful for his pushiness and need to get his way on everything because he'd once again saved my ass in a really big way.

That tattoo on the inside of my wrist burned to let me know when another witch was trying to use magic against me and it also kept me safe from it actually working against me.

This bitch, this fucking bitch, was trying to go against the law and use magic against me to control me a-fucking-gain.

My blood boiled.

But cooled almost immediately because I feared there was absolutely nothing I could

do about it. I had witnessed with my own two eyes her on her stomach getting it from multiple Council cocks. The same Council who was supposed to have punished her for her behavior the first time. And maybe, for her, it even was a punishment, a hideously fucked up punishment.

But it wasn't enough for me.

Who knew?

And here I was just talking about how I didn't think it right to hurt women. Now, I was thinking in my head that Annabell wasn't hurt enough for what she'd done.

I shook my head to clear it and glared across the table at her.

I didn't bother bringing up the fact she'd tried to use magic on me. She'd only just deny it and then tell me to prove it.

Fuck her.

"What do you really want, Annabell?" I demanded to know.

I desperately needed to know why in the hell she was here. Not because I really wanted to know but because I had a sick feeling in my gut that she was here to fuck with my family and seek revenge against my Uncle for permanently scarring her face and against me and the other guys for allowing him to do it in the first place. Briefly, I wondered if she knew it had been Julian who'd made the concoction that destroyed her face in the first place. I seriously hoped not because I didn't want her to single him out like she was now doing to me.

"I told you," she rasped out. "I want you to forgive me and I want to be your friend."

She pouted and I couldn't help my lip from curling in horror, this time at the sight of the ruined side of her face, her destroyed lip, in the form of a pout. It was disturbing, really.

Her big eyes blinked at me doe-ishly and my wrist burned again. Her face wavered slightly before clearing and I felt my lungs burning in rage.

She thought I couldn't see the messed-up half of her face because she was pouring out magic at an alarming rate that was going to burn her out before long because she was covering her scars and hiding things with magic so the world around her only saw the pretty part she wanted them to see. I couldn't blame her for it and completely understood why she usually wore a mask that covered up that half of her face. Covens all across the U.S. talked about the half mask she wore to cover up her scars and sneered whenever her name came up in conversation. Hearing people talk shit about her hadn't made me feel any better but worse because initially my instinct had been to shut that shit down and attack them for saying bad shit about her because she had meant that much to me. It had burned me up inside to not defend her even though she'd done her damndest to destroy me. I had gotten passed the initial need to defend her but that didn't mean I had ever enjoyed people verbally slamming her because I hadn't. It had always made me feel like shit about myself whenever I heard the whispered words behind hands about her whenever I was around.

How stupid and pathetic had I been to let her sink her claws in and take advantage of me in the first place? Beyond anything comprehensible, that's how fucking stupid I was.

"I don't want to be your friend," I growled at her.

She blinked and I caught the surprise on her face before she masked it.

"Ty," she muttered huskily.

Yeah, right. I didn't think so. Right now, I wanted to hug my Uncle Quint because she couldn't figure out how her magic wasn't working on me and it was confusing her. What's more hilarious was the fact I knew she couldn't keep up her magical act for a whole lot longer without passing out face down on the table. I would have jumped up and cheered if that were to happen. Then, I would have left her ass there to fend for herself because not even I was willing to help her out anymore and I had a feeling that after she'd just tried to force herself on me once again that never again would I give a shit if she were hurt or not.

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It killed a little piece inside my soul to admit it, but I didn't think I'd jump in the water to help her out if she were drowning. What's more likely is I would have turned my back on her and walked away. Which killed me and I shouldn't have been surprised by that either. Every thing she did hurt me, what was one more thing? This was nothing in comparison to all the rest.

"What can I get you to drink?" A hopeful female voice asked from beside our table.

I didn't even bother looking at this one either even though I knew that hopeful tone was in her voice because she found me attractive and wanted me to notice her. No such luck, girl, not even on your best day.

I didn't even have to look at her to know she wasn't up to Ariel's standards. For one, she gave off no seductive heat. Heat I wouldn't give up for the cold, not ever again.

One look at the evil sitting across the table from me and I couldn't help but grimace. There were different kinds of levels to heat. The kind where you'd happily walk into the flame, allow it to burn you up entirely and you'd love every second of it, even if it did leave you charred on the outside. Then there was the other kind. The bad kind. The kind that burnt you to a crisp and left you a tiny little black ball that not only flaked off disgustingly when you touched it but it left a sour, bitter taste in your mouth afterwards. Guess who was who...

Annabell turned on the poor waitress with a viscous sneer that made her fucked up face downright nasty to look at.

"What's the matter with you?" She sneered at the waitress who took a hesitant step

backwards away from our table. And, who could blame her? I wanted to back away as well.

"I'm sorry...ma'am?" Came from the timid but no longer hopeful waitress. Now she sounded tense and scared.

I couldn't blame her for that, either.

Unlike the waitress, I knew what was coming and I wasn't tense or scared.

Only pissed and sad. Sad because I had actually allowed that hideous thing seated across the table from me to touch me in any way, and sad because she'd been my first love and the whole thing had been a lie. Weren't first loves supposed to be sweet until they were over, like puppy love?

If so, I had been surely cheated.

As gently as I could, I pried the menus that I had no intention of looking at out of the waitress's hands before telling her in a kind voice, "She'd like some time to pursue the menu before giving you her drink order, or any order for that matter. If that would work for you?"

The waitress let go of the menus and stumbled back, further away from our table. I wished it had been me stumbling back away from the table, away from the bitch across from me. I wondered if the waitress knew just how lucky she was. Doubtful.

"That's..." She stammered. "That's... fine."

She cleared her throat once before turning around on her cheap, white sneakers and fleeing from the dining room.

I almost got up and ran after her. Almost.

"You're such a bitch," I muttered under my breath towards Annabell.

Her eyes flashed dangerously before she leaned forward and spat at me, "How dare you call me a bitch!"

I dared because she was one.

Christ, how could she be so offended by the damn truth?

Her expression changed drastically and the half of her face that wasn't ruined curled upwards in a sinister smile that gave me the chills.

"What's her name, Ty?" She rasped gleefully. "This new chick who thinks she's all that and has the Council all up in an uproar?"

The hackles on the back of my neck rose as I realized she was talking about Ariel, even though she clearly had her information wrong. The person she described didn't sound like my girl in the slightest. She was sweet, humble, she didn't think she was all that at all.

Once again, Annabell was proving just how big of a bitch she was. But she scared the shit out of me because I didn't need her thinking any thoughts about Ariel. Ariel, unlike myself, didn't have a tattoo on the inside of her wrist that kept crazy bitches from using their magic on her. If I hadn't been trying to keep the whole thing on the hush hush I might have gone to Uncle Quint and demanded he put a similar tattoo on our female so she didn't succumb to this psycho's magical whims.

I knew better than to go running to my Uncle Quint, though. He'd burry this bitch and then the Council would come after us all. They'd also likely start looking for another

female to slate their carnal needs with. And we sure as shit did not need them looking in our coven's direction for a way to fulfill that particular need.

"She's none of your business," I growled menacingly at her from across the table.

"Ohhhh," she purred happily. "Tyson thinks he's big and bad all of a sudden and is going to threaten the little girl for inquiring about his hussy girlfriend."

I snapped my mouth shut and bit back the retort that was sharp on the edge of my tongue ready to be flung back at her. I might have been cool with finally shitting on her but that didn't mean I was cool with having her toss it in my face. What could I say, we were all hypocrites at times. There was nothing for it.

She arched a dark eyebrow and asked in a voice that mocked, "Do you looove her, Ty? Does she hold a special place in your heart?"

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My nostrils flared in rage. Never before had I wanted to strike a woman like I did this one in that moment. The more she talked about Ariel, the more I wanted to lash out at her.

"Does she wrap her sweet little mouth around your cock? I remember how much you li-"

She let out a squeak as I leaned forward quickly and reached across the table. I wrapped my hand around her throat and gave a gentle squeeze. I wanted to wring her scrawny neck and shake the shit right out of her.

"Don't you ever," I snarled as I pulled her by her neck across the table as I leaned across it to meet her half way until our faces were mere inches from each others. "Talk about Ariel like that again. Or, I swear on my mother's grave, Belle, you will live to regret it."

She jerked back suddenly and, not wishing to further hurt her at the moment, I let her go.

"Fine," She snapped snottily at me and both my eyebrows shot up in surprise. She was giving up? Just like that?

I didn't trust it or her. She was up to something.

Dare I ask her why she'd given up so easily? It wasn't like her to not put up a fight to get what she wanted.

The poor, unfortunate waitress chose that moment to return with glasses of ice water in her hands. If she were smart she'd forget we were here and not come back for more of Annabell's verbal abuse. I shook my head at the poor girl who was obviously not the brightest bulb in the box as I winced internally.

"I don't want your nasty water," Annabell spit the words out at her. "How do I know you haven't contaminated it? If it's not in a sealed bottle then I don't want it. Take it back."

The girl stood there in shock while she stammered foolishly. Ignoring her, Annabell picked up her menu and snapped it open with a flourish.

I'd decided I'd had more than enough of this bullshit and pushed my chair back. I stood up, placed my hands on my hips and glared down at the snake seated before me.

"I'm outta here," I muttered irately. I was not sticking around for whatever torture she wanted to dish my way. I'd had more than my fair share already. I turned and aimed my glare at the waitress whom I no longer felt sorry for. "Get a clue and stay away from her. She's a vile bitch who's going to get off on your misery. She's also stingy, so it's likely she won't tip you at all and make you run your ass ragged while she's here. Were I you, I'd kick her ass out now and save myself the headache."

The tattoo on the inside of my wrist blazed as Annabell waived a hand loftily in the direction of the waitress who'd immediately snapped her mouth shut as her eyes glazed over.

"What did you do to her?" I asked curiously, as if I actually cared, which I did not.

"Never you mind," Annabell snapped at me as she pushed her chair back and stood up to face me. "And let's not pretend like you honestly care about her, because you

don't. You don't care about anyone besides your damn family and we both know it."

She was right, of course. I didn't give a shit about anyone outside of my family and that included her. I just wanted her gone for good and out of my life once and for all.

I didn't see this happening anytime soon.

"I'm outta here," I repeated as I turned around and attempted to get the fuck away from her. I should have known she wasn't ready to let me go. When would I learn?

"I want to see Damien," She purred seductively.

I whipped around and glared at her dangerously.

"You leave my brother thefuckalone," I snarled at her. It didn't matter that Damien might not consider me to be his brother at the moment, he was mine, as he always would be.

She laughed hysterically, her entire body shaking with her mirth.

"I'll see you soon, Ty," she said through her laughter as she moved away from the table. She walked up to the waitress who stood there stupidly without moving or even blinking. Annabell slapped her sharply across the face while she kept laughing. The sound of her palm meeting the poor girl's cheek rang out through the empty dining room. I winced, taking pity on the poor girl as red bloomed on her face.

Annabell wasn't just a bitch, she was out of her fucking mind.

She turned back once on the way to the door to blow me a kiss before turning around and exiting the building.

I had a bad feeling things were going to get much worse before I saw the back of her for good.

Chapter Six

Invader of my dreams

My phone's constant vibration drew me out of my stupor. A stupor I very much didn't want to be drawn out of. I was rather enjoying the thoughtless state I'd found myself in. I hadn't slept in days and had finally given up trying and now stared off at the wall, seeing absolutely nothing.

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At least the memories had finally faded and I could find peace in the nothing going on inside my brain. Something I found myself thankful for.

I rubbed my tired eyes before picking the phone up where I'd carelessly tossed it beside me on the bed. It had been vibrating off and on for days on end and I hadn't once bothered to look at it. I had no idea why I did now and I was slightly irritated with the stupid thing because the battery life should have run out by now.

Just my luck that it hadn't.

The screen was cracked from where I'd thrown it at the wall in a fit of rage after coming home after my lovely lunch with the wicked bitch that was my ex girlfriend. The cracks weren't bad yet but they'd soon spread and it would be a bitch to see anything on the screen. I'd need to buy myself a new one. Something else I blamed that bitch for.

I pulled up my text messages and the most recent one had been from Annabell so I opened that one first.

Wicked Bitch: I grow tired of this game, Ty. I want to play a different one.

Below was a picture of Ariel standing beside her Rover with the driver's door open. She had a big pair of sunglasses shoved up on top of her head, pushing her hair back from her face when the damn things should have been covering her eyes because she was squinting as if the sun were blinding her.

She was such a damn crazy person, it wasn't even funny.

I wanted to smile at how beautiful she looked even though she was a nut when realization slammed into my gut like a heavy fist and I was left with nothing I'd ever dare smile about. Not ever.

The evil ex not only knew what Ariel looked like but she'd obviously been following my girl.

I scooted to the end of the bed and got my feet planted firmly on the floor before it started rising up my throat, looking for a place to escape. I bent forward at the waist and reached out for the metal waste basket that sat beside my nightstand.

Once I had the basket in hand, I threw up, emptying out the contents of my stomach inside of it. I was lucky I had lined the inside of the basket with a plastic grocery store bag otherwise all I would have succeeded in doing was making an even bigger mess of things and ended up with vomit on my floor.

Inside, I seethed as my heart clenched painfully. That fucking bitch had gotten close enough to Ariel to take pictures of her. Who the hell knew how long she'd been following her around for. Or how close she'd actually gotten to my girl. Annabell knew how to do things Ariel had no knowledge of, like basic self-defense and how to fend off an attacker with magic. Ariel hadn't been taught any of that. I had no idea what she'd learned with Adrian outside of how to bleed herself for their gain, but I was almost certain it wasn't basic self-defense. They'd want her vulnerable and defenseless. And I had no idea what types of books she'd been reading on magic. I had never looked through the one's on her shelf that Uncle Quint had picked out for her out of his own private collection but I was also willing to bet that self-defense hadn't been on his mind when he'd picked them out. He would have gone more for general, basic info and steered clear of anything that might get her into trouble. Besides, he'd want her to be coddled and handle the defense part on his own.

The vomiting had finally stopped, my stomach was empty of all contents and there

was nothing left to purge. I set the basket down on the floor with a thump and swiped the back of my hand across my mouth.

Who else was she following? Was my whole family now in danger because of this bitch or was it just Ariel? Something had to be done to get rid of her for good because I couldn't have her coming back and doing this again. There would be no hiding her from Uncle Quint if she kept coming back, he'd kill her if he found out she was taking pictures of Ariel and practically stalking her.

My phone vibrated again with another text message. I wanted to ignore it but couldn't afford to now that she'd upped the game with pictures and was talking about wanting to play. I'd played with her before and lost horribly. I didn't want to lose anything else to her.

I picked up the phone and read.

Wicked Bitch: She left him outside all by himself. Doesn't he look lonely? If he were mine, I'd never leave him alone like this. That bitch doesn't know how to play with you guys the right way. I do.

Below was a picture of Damien asleep and outside in his backyard. He was laying on a round rug that had been covered in pillows and blankets. He was tucked away under thick blankets and looked peaceful. I had no idea why he'd be sleeping in his backyard when I'd never heard of him having done such a thing before and it wasn't like he was in a sleeping bag or a tent or anything. It was bizarre and made no sense to me. What I did understand, however, was that Annabell had somehow gotten into his fenced in backyard and close enough to him while he was sleeping to take a fucking picture of him. This was different than being at the same gas station as someone even if you followed them there and taking a close-up picture of them that they weren't aware of you taking. This was way beyond that level of stalker and straight to the depths of fucking psycho crazy stalker bitch who was potentially

dangerous. And she needed to be stopped.

My eyes ran over Damien sleeping peacefully and knowing he'd been violated in some way by someone we'd once been with and my gut clenched painfully.

I leaned over the basket and dry heaved.

Nothing came up but I couldn't seem to stop even though there was nothing to get out. When I was done, I nudged the basket with my foot, sliding it further away from me.

I wrapped my arms around my stomach and laid back on the bed. My mouth tasted like shit and my stomach felt like I'd been knocked down and kicked in the middle over and over again.

There had to be a way to get rid of her from our lives but not make the Council pissed at us and want to come at us with everything they had. If she were hurt physically and they couldn't use her body for their pleasure and gain anymore then they would take that out on my coven if we were to blame.

There had to be a way.

Think, Ty, think.

My father had made me read every single day even though I'd hated doing it. I always wanted to be outside and doing anything but being locked up in the library with dusty old books. My father hadn't collected them to the extreme my grandfather had but he hadn't been too far behind him.

He didn't make me read for hours and hours a day, every day. It was more like an hour every day on top of my school work and they were always books having to do

with magic.

Still, my mind blanked on what I needed to do to handle this situation with the ex. Magic was the answer, I just had to find the key.

I blew out a heavy breath as I laid back on my bed. I forced my body to relax as I closed my eyes. I needed a break and I needed to step back from the problem in order to find a solution. If I kept at it tonight I'd only end up exhausted and with nowhere to go from here.

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I blanked my mind, forcing myself to think of nothing but the darkness I saw behind my eyes. I focused on nothing as I willed myself to fall asleep.

This was something my father had also worked hard to teach me how to do. He thought being able to fall asleep at will was a skill any good dream walker should be able to do. Uncle Quint could do it at will as well. Unlike me, he hadn't had a nice, patient teacher. Instead, he'd had grandfather who'd used physical pain as a means to motivate. My father had learned the same way, which is the only reason I knew what had been done to my Uncle. He never talked about grandfather or about his childhood. But my dad had shared with me, thinking one day I would need to know so I'd be able to better understand Uncle Quint. I was glad he'd taken the time to share with me and thought it made all the difference in our relationship because if I hadn't known then I probably wouldn't have put up with half the shit I did from him.

I crossed my arms over my stomach and sank deeper into the mattress as my mind began to drift off.

Sleep came quickly and before I knew it my world was incased in thick grey smoke that billowed all around me. It was so thick that my ankles disappeared and my feet were non-existent.

I groaned internally as I shifted my weight heavily from foot to foot.

Being here hadn't been my intention and proved just how sleep deprived and messed up my head was. I had simply wanted to go to sleep and dream of nothing, think of nothing, for a couple of hours max so I could start fresh and refreshed once I woke up again.

What I wasn't trying to do was project myself out of my body and into a walking dream. I was too tired for this shit and didn't even want to know who I was subconsciously looking for and seeking out.

I ran my hand over my tired eyes as I put one foot in front of the other and started making my way through the smoke like fog. Standing in one spot, waiting for someone or something to come at me was entirely useless and would do me no good. I'd still be tired but time would feel like it was dragging on against my will. I'd gone that route before when I'd been dragged under against my will and only chasing after sleep and wound up right where I was now.

Sludging through grey.

It felt like I'd walked for hours before a noise to the right stopped me where I was. I cocked my head to the side and listened intently. My ears straining to hear the slightest thing.

Silence greeted me.

I clenched my fists tightly at my thighs and trudged on.

On nights like tonight, I had to ask myself if this really was a gift or a curse. What if I never woke up and was stuck here to wander aimlessly? I shuddered at the thought. I never wished to know such a horror and wouldn't wish that fate on anyone, not even my worst enemy.

Five minutes drifted by in a stupor.

Then twenty.

Twenty minutes turned into an hour.

After a while, time really held no meaning for me. I was exhausted and my eyelids drooped heavily. I wanted nothing more than to wake up so I could try to fall back asleep again and maybe actually sleep for a change. I needed it, desperately.

As time wore on, my body began to feel weighted down, as if I'd been drugged, and I almost sat down on the cold ground and closed my eyes despite the fact it would bring me no relief.

A scream, high and filled with panic rent through the air as my tired body jerked back to life almost as if someone had flipped my switch back to 'on'.

I took off, running in the direction of the scream as another one ripped through the air.

I tripped over something I couldn't see and went down hard. I lay on the ground, sprawled out on my stomach with my cheek pressed into the cold, damp dirt. I lay there for a split second as I blinked my eyes in stunned disbelief.

Some unseen force pushed on my chest from beneath me, beneath the dirt, and my body flew backwards. I was airborne for a few seconds, my arms and legs wind milling uselessly through the air before my back crashed into the dirt and the breath was once again knocked out of me. My body seized as I struggled to draw in air.

“What the fuck?” I grunted painfully as I rolled over to my knees. I put my palms in the dirt and shoved my upper body up out of the dirt.

Once I had my feet under me again I tried to control my breathing enough to reach inside myself and draw a layer of my magic out and wrap it around myself like a comfortable blanket. A protective blanket, using my magic like a shield.

Just what in the fuck was going on here? I had never been attacked in the dream plane

before. It was always just me, whoever I brought with me, and the object of my thoughts. I hadn't brought anyone with me and I didn't think I'd been thinking of anyone when I fell asleep, at least no one who'd physically assault me.

A chill crept down my spine and I whirled around, searching for the person I'd felt watching me. No one was there and nothing but the rolling fog greeted me. I didn't need to see them to know they were there, I felt the eyes on me like a physical touch.

Another scream rent through the air from behind me and I whirled around in that direction, momentarily forgetting the person watching me, the invader of my dreams. Completely forgetting I'd just taken a header and face planted right in the dirt. The only thing that registered to me being the horrifically shrill screams that continued to grace the air waves.

My neck itched as I ran, letting me know that the person who'd attacked me with their magic and had been hiding away watching me was still watching me and likely following me. I had a feeling that whoever this person was they were the reason behind the screams even though they were following me and nowhere near where the girl screaming was.

I made it to the edge of the fog where it abruptly stopped and I skidded to a halt, coming up short at the sight that greeted me. The clearing was as familiar to me as my own backyard. It was the clearing on the other side of Marcus's house, where we usually did our full moon rituals and drew energy down from the moon while offering up pieces of ourselves to it and Mother Nature. I'd been here hundreds of times before in reality. But I'd never been here before in my dreams, I'd had no reason to come here outside of my waking hours.

I hesitantly stepped out of the fog as I cautiously looked around me. I was more aware of what could potentially be behind me than I was as to what was going on in front of me even though I was facing ahead. The danger was behind me and it

deserved my attention more than some screaming female I did not know did.

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The screaming stopped as soon as I stepped out of the fog. I might have thought that weird if the entire dream hadn't already been weird in the extreme seeing as nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

I was half way across the field when a twig to the right of me snapped and a person came crashing through the forest. A tall, thin figure dressed in something black with bare legs stumbled out of the woods and fell, landing on their hands and knees in the tall grass. It wasn't until her pale blonde hair caught in the moonlight that I realized it was Ariel who'd stumbled out of the woods and it had been Ariel who'd been screaming bloody murder all this time.

My heart skipped a beat inside my chest.

What the fuck was she doing here? She wasn't supposed to be here.

"Ariel," I shouted her name as I took off running in her direction. No matter how hard I pushed myself, no matter how fast I ran, she never seemed to get any closer, always remaining a good twenty feet away from me. Always out of my reach. It didn't seem to matter to me because I kept on running towards her all the same, hoping that something would change and I'd finally be able to reach her.

It never happened.

I watched in horror as she climbed to her feet and didn't even twitch when I yelled her name over and over again.

I hadn't noticed when she fell that she'd landed in a small puddle that happened to be

the only one around. I didn't know who was controlling this dream but when I found out I was going to drag their ass over to that fucking puddle and attempt to drown them in it for this bullshit.

Mud streaked down her bare legs and I finally noticed what she was wearing. A thin, long sleeved black thermal up top and short black shorts on bottom. Her feet were bare and I wasn't at all surprised by this because she was wearing what she'd gone to bed in. It wasn't her dream and she clearly wasn't in control of it so she had no control over what she was wearing.

Then it struck me. This was my dream and I was supposed to be in control of it. Yet, somehow, I was not. I wasn't in control of anything.

Dream walking was a rare talent. The ability to take control of someone else's dream? Even rarer. That took a whole wealth of magic that was on par with the kind of talent and strength a person had to have to be on the Council. It terrified me.

The only thing I was sure of, the one thing this fucked up dream state I was stuck in proved, was that Ariel was indeed a dream walker, she wouldn't have been able to be sucked in otherwise.

I stopped running, gave up on it entirely, and stood there stupidly as my body shook uncontrollably with rage and my chest heaved from the effort I'd put into running flat out to get to my girl and getting fucking nowhere.

Ariel whipped around frantically, her eyes searching, scanning the woods she'd emerged from.

"No, no, no." I heard her whisper desperately.

My heart clenched painfully at her whispered plea and the frantic look in her

beautiful green eyes. She'd been clearly running from something and she looked like she expected it to come bursting out of the forest from where she had come from and leap out at her and physically attack her.

She absolutely needed me to be there with her, standing beside her and whatever the hell she'd been on the run from. She needed me to protect her.

Even though I knew it was futile, I started moving towards her again. It felt like I was trudging through fucking quicksand and getting nowhere fast.

I was tired of this bullshit and there was no way I wanted to sit here and watch as something came out of the woods and tried to eat my girlfriend. I would blast the fuck out of this goddamn dream with my magic if I had to, I didn't care how bad that would hurt either of us and that we'd be painfully wrenched out of our dreams. Nothing in here could physically harm us in the real world. It could traumatize us to experience horrible things in here but it wouldn't and couldn't physically jack up our actual bodies that were sleeping at the moment. So, at least there was that. But I wasn't sure Ariel even knew that. As far as I knew, none of the guys or that old windbag Adrian from the perverted Council had explained anything to her about how dream walking worked. Which was pretty shitty now that I was thinking about it. That made the fear in her eyes and the terror on her face all the worse. She had no idea that what happened in here wouldn't hurt her in the real world. Hell, for all I knew she thought this was the real world.

God damn it.

She needed me to be there with her and to tell her what the hell was going on so she wouldn't have to look so damned scared.

A surge of rage tore through me and I forcefully shoved out with my magic and stumbled. Heat surrounded me as the hair on my body rose, including my head and

my body hummed with energy.

I fell down to my knees as I breathed in the thick air that surrounded me. When I'd pushed out with my magic I hadn't expected that much of it to come pouring out of me, I hadn't even known I was capable of pushing out that much magic at one time. There'd be a price to pay for it later and my energy level would be dwindling soon until I ran out of steam. That meant there wasn't much time left and I had to use what little time I had to get my girl and get us the fuck out of here before whoever was playing with us stepped out from their coward's place in the shadows.

I climbed to my feet and wobbled forward on shaky legs. I was pleased when nothing held me back this time and I found myself free to move forward at my own pace.

"Ariel," I shouted as I began running at her.

This time she heard me and her head whipped around in my direction.

"Ty?" She asked in her sweet voice, sounding confused and scared out of her fucking brain.

"I'm here now," I huffed out loudly as I ran at her. "Everything's going to be fine."

I wasn't exactly sure that this was the truth but what I was sure of was that this was what I was expected to say to her and what she'd need to hear from me at the moment. If it turned out to be a lie then I would force myself to apologize to her later on, after we'd made it back to our physical forms and all was right in our worlds. Well, as right as shit could be for us when our lives were always running on chaos and crazy.

She stood there staring at me with parted lips and too wide for her face eyes as she watched me running at her. I had no idea why she hadn't come towards me when

she'd first laid eyes on me or why she'd just stood there like a damn statue but didn't think I had the time to ask her about it. Maybe she was going into shock?

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I made it to her and immediately wrapped my arms around her and pulled her body into my front. She came willingly and wrapped her arms around my middle just as tightly as I had her shoulders. Her shaking hands went to the back of my shirt and she gripped hand fulls of the material into her fists. She clung to me and I realized it wasn't just her hands that were shaking but her entire body. She shook uncontrollably from head to toe.

She stuffed her face in my neck as she breathed out, "Ty, oh my god, Tyson. You're here. I can't believe you're actually here. There's something... I... I think there's a person out there that chased me through the woods and I don't even know how I got here and I don't know what the heck is going on, Ty. I... I have no idea what I'm doing here or how in the heck I got here. Why are we here, why are we in the field where you guys have your moon rituals or whatever the heck you call them? I-"

Jesus.

The more she talked the harder her too thin frame shook.

To shut her up and shut this shit down before she could become any more hysterical, I cut her off and hurriedly explained the situation, or, what I knew from my end of the situation. Which really wasn't much but was more than she knew.

"We're dreaming, girl," I told her hurriedly, my words coming out in a rush. I needed to explain to get her to calm the fuck down and before the motherfucker in charge of this little game made his or her appearance. "You're a dream walker like Uncle Quint and I are. We always thought that maybe you were one but, obviously, haven't had the time or inclination to explain all that means to you yet."

"I know I'm a dream walker, Ty," she said quietly, cutting me off.

My surprised eyes shot down to her upturned face to see her looking up at me with eyes that were still too wide for her face but I was pleased to note she'd lost the terrified look to her and had calmed down immensely.

"You do?" I asked.

"What is this place?" She asked without answering me.

I sighed and gave her what she wanted. She might have known she was a dream walker but she clearly didn't know shit about what that meant. "This is a dream. I thought it was mine but maybe, just maybe, I'm thinking that it might be yours now. It might have always been yours and, when I fell asleep, I got dragged into it by that fuck, whoever he... or she is. There's obviously someone here with us and I think that person was who was chasing you through the woods. They were following me too. I-"

She cut me off to ask, "How can they be chasing me if they're already following you? That doesn't make any sense."

I applied pressure with my arms, squeezing her tightly, not to hurt, just to get her to pay attention and to help get my point across.

"Girl," I said impatiently, "It's a fucking dream. There are some things that you just cannot explain because there's no explanation for them. Like magic. I can't explain magic to you or why we've got it. It's something I can show you or try and teach you how to use but I can't tell you why you have it inside of you or why you're capable of doing certain things with it and not others. Dream walking is a lot like magic, you have to practice and use it in order to understand it."

"Okay, Ty," she whispered before shoving her face back into my neck. Her fists unclenched and she let go of my t-shirt. Her hands flattened against my back and she smoothed out the material she'd bunched up. I didn't tell her not to bother because it seemed more like a nervous gesture than anything else, almost as if she needed something to do with her hands before she smoothed them up my back and tangled her fingers in my long, shoulder length hair. I was glad for her sake that I hadn't worn my hair up in a pony tail slash bun today. If she wanted to get her hands in there than I was more than happy to allow it.

"How do we get out of here, Ty?" She asked.

I sighed.

Wasn't that the question of the hour?

I had never been trapped in a dream under someone else's control before so I wasn't entirely certain as to how we were supposed to get out of here. Did it work the way it usually did? Did all I need to do was think about being back in my bed, back in my real body, and then will myself there? Was that all it would take, because I could easily do that. I had practiced until I'd nailed that shit down and could take myself from dream to body in no time with very little effort on my part. The problem with this was, I had no freaking idea if Ariel was capable of doing this because I was almost positive she'd never tried before, never even had reason to try before. If I left her here to finish out her dream as whoever was controlling this saw fit, there was no telling how many hours she'd be stuck here and there was absolutely not telling what she'd be forced to endure while she was stuck here. Then, I'd feel like a monumental fuck head for the rest of my life because I'd left her behind, even when I knew it wouldn't harm her physically.

"Since you're all knowing and all now when it comes to being a dream walker," I said sarcastically, forgetting I needed to tread carefully due to her emotional state, and

asked, "do you know how to get yourself out of a dream?"

I damn well knew she absolutely did not because if she did then she wouldn't have been running through the woods, scared and alone. She'd have transported herself back to her slumbering body, back to her comfortable bed in the sweet little cottage she called home.

"I... I..." she stammered and I seriously wanted to kick my own ass because I was not always a nice guy and this was one of those times where nice had seemed to escape me. I think it was due to that terrified look she'd had in her eyes and the fact there was some unknown person fucking with us and I really wanted them to step out and show themselves so I could have a target and knew where to aim when it came to getting us both safely the fuck out of here.

"No, Tyson," she muttered. "I have no idea how to get us out of here which is why I asked in the first place. Geez."

I sighed. She sounded upset, pissy even and I immediately felt better about the situation. She wasn't shaking anymore and, in her ire with me, had momentarily forgotten she'd just been terrified moments before.

I let her go and stepped back a step. I had to lift my hands to my hair and neck to pry her hands out of my hair.

"Ty," she hissed at me. "What are you doing?"

I let her go and held up my hands, palms up, in between us.

"Put your hands in mine, girl," I instructed her. "Your palms facing down, right on top of mine."

She did as told, and followed my instructions to the letter.

"Relax," I told her.

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Her lip curled and she sneered at me. "You relax. I'm going to freak out and lose my mind because this dream is absolutely horrible and I'm trapped here and it's absolute bullshit. I want to go home, Tyson."

"Girl," I said tiredly. "Shut up. I'm gonna try to get us out of here but you panicking and freaking out and swearing at me isn't going to help the situation out any. So calm down and relax."

I could see it in her eyes, she didn't want to listen to me and she wanted to have a mini freak out just to spite me, which was something I'd noticed she'd been doing a lot lately and it was something I found fucking hilarious, even when it was directed at me.

"Fine," she huffed and glared at me.

I had to bite my bottom lip to keep myself from grinning at her because I was sure my grin would turn into laughter that would only serve to further piss her off.

"Are you scared now?" I asked her.

Her torso jerked like I'd hit her and her surprised eyes moved from my mouth to look me in the eye.

"No," she muttered irately. "Not really. Not since you showed up."

I laced her fingers through mine and squeezed lightly. I didn't need her to touch me but I did it anyways because I wanted her to feel grounded and I needed her ass calm.

"Close your eyes," I ordered and she immediately complied.

Thank fuck.

I did not want to have to put up with her being surly and stubborn, not tonight. No, tonight I was in no mood to find it cute and there was a chance I'd snap right back at her if she gave me any more shit.

"Now I want you to draw in a deep, cleansing breath and let it back out. Over and over, until you're nice and relaxed."

Again, she did as she was told, breathing deep and letting it go. Over and over again. Eventually the rigid set to her shoulders relaxed and the tightness faded away from her face. It didn't take long at all, maybe five minutes tops.

When her body was no longer strung tight and she looked completely relaxed, she opened her eyes back up and looked at me. There was no fear or hesitation in her eyes now. They were clear and all for me.

"What now?" She asked quietly.

"Now, I want you to think about leaving. Think about your bed, where you went to sleep tonight. Think-"

"Umm..." She mumbled. "I kind of didn't go to sleep in my own bed tonight."

My lips parted in surprise before I could catch myself. Her eyes darted from my eyes down to my mouth then back up to my eyes again.

"Where did you go to sleep?" I asked curiously and I was glad to note there was no jealousy inside of me at all. I was only curious, wondering which one of my brothers

she was curled up against in the real world and happy she wasn't alone.

"Dash's room," she muttered and pink hit her cheeks. She was embarrassed and hadn't wanted to tell me who she was sleeping with.

Damn, but I wanted to laugh in the face of her embarrassment. Not to be a dick but because there were seven of us and eventually she'd never sleep alone, so it was something she'd need to get over and get used to. And I wouldn't be the only one who'd be demanding to know who'd she'd been in bed with the night before.

"Right," I muttered. Then, in my normal voice, said, "Then close your eyes and think about Dash's bed where you went to sleep tonight."

"I can do that," she told me and looked relieved to be able to close her eyes and not look at me anymore.

I shook my head in amusement.

"Right," she said, "I'm good, Ty. What now?"

"Now," I said and was cut off by a horrible crash coming from the woods behind us before I could get any more out.

Some kind of animal snarled and I hissed, "Fuck."

Male laughter, manic and loud, echoed all around us.

"Fuck," I hissed again.

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As much as I wanted to know who was behind this, I really did not want to stick around to get a load of what ever animal it was that had made that horrible noise. And I really didn't want it anywhere near Ariel. We might have been able to wake up whole and in one complete piece but that didn't mean things couldn't hurt us while we were here, we could feel pain inside the dream, it just wouldn't follow us outside of it. But that meant an animal could rip into us and we'd feel it until we woke up. I had no desire to be ripped apart by some unknown beast and I really didn't want to watch it happen to Ariel.

Fuck no.

I shook Ariel's hands to get her attention back on me. She was currently looking behind me with huge eyes and she'd started shaking again.

The laughter continued on around us.

Shit.

"We gotta go, girl," I rushed out. "We gotta go right fucking now."

"Ty," she screeched, still not looking at me and with her eyes aimed behind me.

"Fuck it," I snapped and pulled on her hands. She crashed roughly into my chest and I let her hands go and wrapped my arms around her once again.

I buried my face in her neck and breathed in her sweet cinnamon scent. I wasn't sure if I had enough juice left to get us both out of here but I was sure as hell going to try,

there was no way I was leaving my girl behind. No fucking way.

I flexed my magic, pushing it out around us in a tight circle.

"What was that?" Ariel breathed in a shaky voice, having felt my magic wrap itself around her.

I ignored her in order to concentrate and thought of her lying next to Dash with that stupid fucking cat curled up at her feet. And I thought about my own bed where I was all by myself and I pushed my will into my magic.

"Tyson," Ariel cried out and the fog was back.

The world around us swirled, disappearing into the fog and her body started to fade in front of me. I pulled back to look her in the eyes.

"You can't sleep in Dash's room anymore," I told her urgently. "You need to be sleeping under your dream catcher so shit like this doesn't happen."

Her eyes widened further as she shook her head. "I wasn't thinking," she whispered. "I forgot all about it."

"It's okay, girl" I told her. "Just have him sleep in your bed with you from now on, where it's safe."

"Okay, Ty," she said sweetly before fading away completely.

I closed my eyes and when I opened them again I was in my room, laying down on my bed.

And I didn't remember anything from my dream.

Chapter Seven

That motherfucker Chuck

I pressed my foot down on the gas pedal as I floored it, speeding away from the Council's motel and the absolute fucking horror show we'd just rained down on some of the people staying there.

Quickly, I tore my eyes off the road and glanced at my partner in crime, even though I didn't want her to be, in the seat beside me. She was turned around in her seat, watching the motel get smaller and smaller as we drove away.

Guilt assaulted me.

I shouldn't have brought her here with me. I should have left her crazy ass behind at Dash's house where she was as safe from the world as she could be, despite what had happened there months ago when she and Dash had bled all over the front steps. There was now spells in place surrounding the property for protection. Not just for my girl but for Dash as well. Uncle Quint wasn't interested in taking chances when it came to our safety anymore. That was one close call too many for any of us. Uncle Quint wasn't interested in taking chances with the two people in our group who were the heart of us and who'd been physically abused the most out of us.

Ariel turned around in her seat and plopped down.

I should have never involved her in my bullshit with Annabell.

Tears poured out of her eyes, rolling down her cheeks. I hadn't realized she was crying until I saw the evidence of it leaking out of her eyes.

The urge to grab her and shake some damn sense into her was strong. She felt too

much for people who didn't deserve anything from her, not so much as a backwards glance. Certainly not her wasting energy on tears.

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"Why am I crying?" she asked in a voice that shook.

I was just asking myself that same exact question, I thought.

"Because you just watched someone die," I told her instead of saying what I'd been thinking.

At least that's why I assumed she'd been crying, really I didn't understand it and that was the most obvious answer I could come up with.

"We don't know that he's dead," she whispered hoarsely.

She had to be fucking kidding me. Chucky was as dead as dead could be.

"We should call someone," she continued to whisper. "Like, for an ambulance or something. He needs help."

He didn't need help. What he needed was a goddamn body bag and a trip to the morgue.

"Girl," I muttered irately, "he's dead. Fucking dead. And, we're not calling anyone. We're going home and going to bed."

"We can't just go home and go to bed like it's any old night," she snapped at me and I had to bite back my smile, pleased she was no longer crying and some of her fire was returning. I didn't think I could stand any more tears from her, they hurt my heart.

"Yeah, we can," I told her seriously. "And that's exactly what we're going to do. We're going back to Dash's and we are going to sleep. What we aren't going to do is call the police and ask for an ambulance and send them out to where the Council is currently living. That would be the absolute biggest mistake we could ever make. And, I'm telling you, someone probably heard you screaming and went out to check. If he was still alive and there was anything they could do for him, I'm sure they are doing it. If he is dead, well, then they are probably going to bury his body somewhere and that will be the end to that. They won't care because he doesn't have any magic and he tried to kill two of our coven members and they won't give a shit about him dying."

"So, we just go home?" she asked incredulously. "Just like that?"

I strangled the steering wheel, trying to choke the life out of it. Unfortunately, you couldn't strangle inanimate objects to death.

I sighed, and said, "Yeah. But tomorrow we will have to call Uncle Quint and the other guys over and fill them in on what happened and that is not going to be fun at all."

Honestly, there hadn't been much about my life lately that had been a whole lot of fun and this night had ranked right up top of the very long list of shit.

My night had started out with an almost frantic message then phone call from the ex. She'd hit a whole new level of crazy, demanding to know how serious Damien's relationship with Ariel had progressed. Then she'd gone on bizarrely about how sweet he'd looked sleeping outside underneath the stars and it had been the only time she'd seen him let down his guard. And, if she hadn't sent me that photo, I'd have no idea what the hell she'd been on about but what I did know was that the crazy leaking out of her voice had absolutely terrified me. She'd sounded obsessed and jealous as she talked about him and it worried me almost as much as that picture of Ariel she'd sent

me had. She was incredibly dangerous and I now had to worry she'd hurt Damien when my main focus had been only on Ariel before but there really was no telling what she'd do, what lengths she'd been willing to go to.

So, I'd started pouring through books, looking for a spell, anything really, to work in my favor and help me get rid of her. I had locked myself away in my bedroom and tirelessly poured through everything I could get my hands on. I didn't sleep or eat until I found what I'd been looking for. Something that would shut her up for good and get her out of my hair and away from my family.

I'd promised her sex to take her mind off of Damien, picked up my forced partner in crime and the two of us cruised on over to the motel.

No big deal, right?

Wrong.

Things had gone great with Annabell and she'd choked down the concoction I'd whipped up for her like a good girl. For all my talk of being uncomfortable with harming her, I had really changed my tune. As it turned out, I didn't like it when people, even ones I'd fooled myself into thinking I had once loved, threatened my family then all bets were off and I had no problem with putting my hands on her, holding her down and forcing my potion down her throat. In my eyes, she'd deserved it.

It had gone so smoothly that I was almost in shock at my good fortune just to walk out the door and straight into yet another problem. That motherfucker Chuck. Who'd taken a serious tumble down to his death, something Ariel seemed to be struggling with.

I knew Ariel was upset by my lack of concern or care at his death but I didn't have it

in me to reassure her when all I felt about him being dead was immense relief that the chapter in my life where I had to worry about him harming my family was finally over and we could all breathe a little easier.

Add it to the fact Annabell would no longer be a threat and I really shouldn't have found the day to be on my shit list. I should have been celebrating. Instead, I was tense and quiet as I drove my girl, who was probably scared of me now given what she'd seen me do, home so we could get some sleep before we faced the next drama.

Which came the next day when we faced down the other guys and told them I'd been keeping secrets and had been forced to drag Ariel along with me for the ride.

Needless to say, they'd been pissed and it had just been one more thing I hadn't enjoyed doing but was seriously relieved when it was all said and done.

I slept just fine that night for the first time in a long time, but like most good things in my life, it was bound to not last for very long.

Chapter Eight

The possibilities were endless

I fidgeted nervously as I stood in front of the dirty window that could have used about twelve bottles of Windex and some serious elbow grease to cut through the grime so the actual inside of the store could be seen.

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I needed to hire a cleaning crew to get in here and clean the place up. First, everything would need to be gone through, the entire fucking building, and I would need to look into finding employees to work the joint.

If my family wasn't interested in it, that is. I hoped they wouldn't look at me as if I were a damn crazy person.

Damien and I were on the mend, fucking finally, and I was hoping Julian wouldn't be too far behind him. I really wanted my family to be whole again, it had been broken long before Annabell had come along, so much so I wasn't sure if we'd ever been whole. Most of us came from broken families, though my immediate one hadn't been broken, the one my father had grown up in had been.

But, my family now?

We were a merry band of misfits who'd grown up clinging to each other because we hadn't been allowed out into the real world to play with other kids. Instead, we'd been carefully watched because you never knew when our magic would make its first appearance and the Council thought our children were better off and better protected when they were around children of their own kind.

Elitest fucking snobs, the whole lot of them. Where they said they wanted to keep our children safe what they were really saying was that they didn't want the poor humans tainting us. Or, maybe they feared we'd run off with them and never look back. Hell, I was no longer a child and I still wanted to run away and hide from those arrogant, self-serving fuckers.

After knowing Rain Kimber, Ariel's father, was a hunter and that there were honest-to-goodness people who hid from the Council made me feel slightly validated in my opinions and thoughts.

"Ty?" Uncle Quint's voice came hesitantly from behind me.

I flinched at his tone. Hesitancy wasn't something I was used to hearing in his voice. He was always so self-assured and confident. To think he felt anything but because of me made me feel like the worst kind of asshole.

He was upset with me, I knew, because I'd dragged our girl into unknown situations where she could have potentially come to harm. I was upset with me too, even though she'd practically forced herself on me and the situation. She would not take no for an answer, no matter how hard I'd tried to dissuade her.

Still, Uncle Quint had barely spoken two words to me since he'd found out about everything and I'd taken the coward's way and texted him with an address and a message that said it was incredibly important he meet me at this address. It was a dick move and I should have met with him face-to-face instead.

I got my emotions in check, showing nothing more than my blank face that oftentimes came across as unfriendly looking, and turned around to face my much beloved uncle who was mostly my brother and braced for the absolute worst.

He had every right to be angry with me and I would take whatever he decided to throw my way.

His face might have been blank, much like my own, but his brown eyes were incredibly kind.

I shouldn't have been worried. My Uncle, even pissed at me, would never not be there

for me when I said I needed him and he'd never abandon me. Not ever.

I was stupid for forgetting the loyalty that came with his love. He had my back, no matter the circumstances or how angry he was about my previous behavior or actions. We were family and that's what it meant to be family.

"Uncle Quint," I choked out, cringing at the emotion I'd showed in my voice. It was at odds with the blankness I'd worked so hard to put on my face.

He arched a dark eyebrow, clearly amused by my rare show of emotion outside of anger.

Suddenly, I felt the urge to lunge forward and punch him right in the face. Or, maybe a kidney.

Quint frowned as his eyes roamed over my face. His lips pursed and he looked angry, like he'd somehow read my thoughts and knew I wanted to punch him in the kidney or face. Finally, a normal reaction out of him. I relaxed immediately. I was probably more at home with his anger than he was.

Still, I was a little nervous. What if he thought I was stupid? I did not want to disappoint my Uncle any more than I already had in the last month.

He had to get this.

He had to.

"Why," Uncle Quint growled, "are we here?"

"I bought this building," I told him honestly.

This time, both eyebrows rose as he took in the building in question.

He didn't look impressed and I wasn't surprised. The building needed a whole lot more than Windex and elbow grease to not look like a dump.

"Why in the hell would you buy a building?" He asked incredulously. "And especially one that looks like this one? Are you gonna tear it down and put up something else? And, seriously, Ty, what's with this neighborhood? They should have evicted the people in this building years ago because it runs down their property value."

I ran my fingers back through my hair, gathering it up at the back of my head. I twisted a hair band off of my wrist and pulled my hair into a bun at the back of my head. This was the longest my hair had ever been and I needed a haircut but with everything going on around me all the time, I hadn't had time to get one. But it was driving me crazy and I'd taken to putting it back into a messy bun at the back of my head.

I had a theory on why the neighborhood hadn't kicked the old lady to the curb and it had everything to do with magic. I wondered what normal humans saw when they looked at the building. Did they see something witches couldn't see? Or, maybe they'd seen a dump too but had just let it be because she'd been a lonely old lady and it was a dick move to try and kick her ass out.

"Dad used to bring me here," I blurted out.

Uncle Quint moved closer to me until we were standing side by side in front of the grimy window. I turned and faced the building proper, staring inside, trying to make out what lay behind the glass.

"Why?" Quint asked curiously, sounding like he really wanted to know the answer to that one word question and I wasn't surprised to hear it. If it had to do with my dad, then he would want to know it. He loved my dad and I knew we both wished he'd been Quint's dad too instead of his brother.

"I wasn't entirely sure why he brought me here at first." I told him honestly. "This place has always been run down and, from what I could tell over the years, she'd never made any attempt to make it any better."

"She?" Quinton asked quietly. There was a growl to his voice that I didn't care for all that much and I figured it was there because we were talking about an unknown female and the only female he cared to talk about was ours.

I shook my head and smirked at him sadly. I'd never cheat on Ariel, not for anything. Quinton knew me better than to ever question that and if he didn't then I really might go ahead and punch him.

"A witch owned this building before I did," I told him. Then I went and told him all I knew about her, all my father had told me, which, arguably, wasn't much. He listened in silence while I talked and we stared at our reflections in the window.

When I was done speaking he turned towards me with bright, almost glowing brown eyes. His mouth was pinched tightly and his cheeks were flushed angrily.

"How many of them do you think are out there?" He grated out past his clenched teeth.

"I don't know," I whispered sadly. And that was the truth. But I had a sick feeling there were a whole lot of them and they were all in deep cover, hiding from the rest of us. Who knew what they did for work or how they hid what they were from the general population, but it made me sick to my stomach to think about.

It made me think it was time for a change and I had a feeling I knew just where to start and his name was Rain Kimber. If he was to be taken at his word then he'd been helping out rogue females for a long time now, or at least his family had been helping them. He'd obviously stopped when Ariel had gone missing as a young child and he'd been all about looking for her for the past however many years. He'd know how we could find them, how we could help them.

My eyes raked over the run down building with a whole new light, finally seeing the potential in the place. I would need to see the office and the apartment before bringing the topic up with Uncle Quint, but I was hopeful the spaces could be cleaned up just like the shop could and then the possibilities were endless.

I just hoped Uncle Quint and Rain would think so too. My original reasons behind buying the building had been purely selfish and had riddled me with even more guilt over the old broad being dead. It felt good to have a different agenda where the building was concerned, a chance to slightly do some good for our fucked up community, even though nobody outside of my family needed to ever know about it. And, gods help us all if the Council ever even found out I'd thought about harboring rogue's. They'd kill us all, my entire coven.

Chapter Nine

He loved her

Quinton eyeballed me carefully as I pulled the key out of the lock and twisted the knob, opening up the door that would lead us into the musty shop. My nose twitched from the dust and I wondered if the place had been locked up tight since I'd left with the keys because it badly needed to be aired out.

"Where's the fucking light switch," Quint bitched from behind me.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that I had absolutely no freaking clue where the light switch was or if the lights even worked. I'd never been here where there were lights on in place of candles lit up dangerously and strewn all over the place.

I reached around, feeling the walls anyways, in search of any kind of switch. I made contact with one and flicked the switch up. A buzzing hummed through the room as crappy, florescent lights flickered to life from the ceiling. I cringed, almost preferring the soft glow of candlelight to the harsh brightness of the overhead lights.

"It'll need new lights," Quint muttered from behind me. "Something not from the Stone Age and a whole lot less harsh on the eye."

I grunted in consent.

I shut the door and locked the deadbolt as he wandered further into the room. I laid my back against the door as I watched him silently wander through all five rows of shelves that were in the center of the room. He'd occasionally raise his fingers and trail them over certain objects while keeping his opinions to himself. When he'd wandered through all the rows he walked over to the back wall to stand in front of the floor-to-ceiling book shelves that were crammed full of books.

The books took up the most of his inspection.

Of course, he'd spend the most of his time in front of the books. He'd inherited a great library from my grandfather and I often times thought books were his first love. He never allowed himself to indulge in anything outside of reading. It was almost sad but I couldn't feel too bad for him because with knowledge came power and my Uncle was one of the smartest people I knew. He was also scary and most other covens would consider him to be powerful and no one dared go against him. Unless you were a family member, that is; we tried his patience as often as we could and said to hell with his beastly side that others pissed their pants when faced with.

He pulled out several books from each shelf, dusted them off and carefully thumbed through the pages. Some of them he'd gently put back in their original place. Others, he'd place in front of the other books on the shelf.

I would need to shake him down before he left the building to make sure he didn't steal any of my books without asking. He'd eventually return them, I was sure, but he wouldn't ask before taking them. Since I now owned the building and everything inside of it, he would see it as his right to "borrow" whatever he wanted because he was a firm believer in what's yours is mine when it came to the family. Unless it came to his shit, that is. Then he wasn't about sharing at all and he'd get pissed when I went in there and "borrowed" things. Of course, I rarely returned the things I borrowed from his room so I guess he had reason to feel that way, but, still, we were family so it was all good. Which meant when he stole books from my new building and returned them after he was done with them I wouldn't say shit to him about it and would look the other way.

Finally, and what looked to be reluctantly, my Uncle wandered away from the books. I counted six he'd pulled out of their places and left on their sides in front of the others. I shook my head but said nothing. If he wanted to take them, I'd let him.

The overhead lights continued their humming as Quint approached the small table covered in a black cloth where the ancient deck of tarot cards sat on top of it in a neat pile.

Without hesitation, Uncle Quint picked up the deck of cards, flipped it over and began thumbing through it.

"These are gorgeous, Ty," he murmured. "Did you look at these?"

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"No," I grunted, regretting the fact I hadn't at least picked the deck up and looked through them. I hadn't really looked at anything in here, only seeing it as a bunch of crap nobody needed.

"These are handmade, crafted with care and they are absolutely priceless," Quinton said in a hushed voice. "Ty... these... the Council would want these for themselves. Like our ink drawings, they would want them if they knew about them. I know you put yours up in your room and that Ariel has hers up in her room because you put them up, but if the Council were ever to see them they would try and confiscate them from us. There aren't many families left out there with these types of things left over from our history, and the ones who have come out with theirs, they have been taken away from them. I've allowed you to put yours up and to put up ours in Ariel's room because there is no way, *nofuckingway*, Ty, where I would ever allow anyone to take these things from our family. I know you're thinking right now that I allowed it because I would never be able to imagine a time in your lives where the Council would frequent your bedrooms but that is not it. I swear to you, it is not. After what they allowed Annabell to do to so many covens, including ours, they hold no real stock with me because they are broken, corrupt and I will not follow laws and rules that the corrupt try to enforce. I no longer consider them to be our governing force and will not abide by anything they try to force on me or our coven."

My breath caught in my throat as my body locked into place.

Was he...

He couldn't be...

Was he trying to rebel against the Council, to denounce them? Dethrone them, even?

I shook my head. This couldn't be happening, this was too dangerous to be happening, especially since we had Ariel to protect and keep safe from them now.

Why in the hell would he openly start dissing the Council now? What was going on with him and why didn't I already know about it? I mean, yeah, we knew he was pissed about how this whole thing with Ariel was being handled but this... this was an outright verbal declaration of war. That's how serious the Council would take his words.

He could not mean what I thought he meant, he absolutely could not.

We had Ariel to think about now. Now was not the time to start a rebellion against the Council, the rebellion his words were stating him to be pronouncing.

I wanted to grab his shoulders and shake him.

It was safe to speak such treasonous things with me, we were family and I would never fuck him over or sell him out. No torture would ever surpass my love for my family.

But...

This was serious and he shouldn't be speaking of it so openly. What if the Council had been here, or knew this was her place? What if they had known where she'd been the entire time she'd been here and had the place bugged?

I needed to hire a security team to sweep through for bugs or anything else that shouldn't be here.

"Uncle Quint," I whispered as I waived my hand around the space and pushed my pointer finger to my lips, hoping he would get the message.

If the Council had known about this place and the old blind lady who'd run it then I wasn't so sure I wanted to own it. I'd rather have it mowed down and turned into a parking lot than run a space they monitored.

Uncle Quint needed to shut the fuck up until we knew for certain there weren't any outsiders in our domain.

Eyes just slightly darker than mine narrowed on me before he nodded his head once in understanding.

"Hmm..." He muttered noncommittedly and I knew he understood my silent command.

He pulled out his phone and immediately began tapping at the screen. My phone beeped moments later with a text message.

Uncle Quint: I will contact the security company who installed the system at our house and get them out here to check the place over. You're paying for it, though.

I smirked at him. No way was he going to make me pay for it, he was just giving me a hard time because that's what he liked to do.

I didn't mind him taking over and deciding what to do with the place. It was a big help on his behalf when he didn't need to help me at all.

"Show me the rest of the building," he demanded.

"I haven't actually seen the rest of the building," I admitted sheepishly.

Quinton sighed heavily and rubbed his hand over his eyes. “Don’t you think you should have seen all of it before you bought the whole damn thing, Ty? Not smart at all. What if the rest of it is dumpier than the outside? Then you’re fucked. What were you thinking?”

I rubbed the back of my neck in embarrassment.

“I was thinking about Ariel,” I told him honestly. “And how I think she’d love it here and she’s always wanted to get her cards read and hasn’t ever had it done. She will get a real kick out of this place. And she really needs something to do with her time, I thought this was perfect for her. I know she’s going to start training with... us soon but she’s still got a lot of time on her hands and I worry she’s going to get more depressed unless we find something to occupy her time with. We are never going to be comfortable with her getting a new job and working it so that she’s away from us and on her own for long periods of time throughout the day. She could work here, we all could, and she can train with Ra... with her magic, and learn how to read the cards so that she could even do readings for others eventually. It’s perfect.”

Shit.

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I'd almost slipped up and talked about Rain in here before knowing if it was safe to do so. We really did not need the Council knowing anything about him right now, not with Quint talking the way he was.

Quinton shot me an ugly look before asking, "You think she needs a job or something to do with her time?"

I sighed and rolled my eyes. That's what he got out of what I said? Good grief, he really was an asshole.

"No, Uncle Quint," I sighed heavily. "I don't think she needs a fucking job but I do think she needs something to do with her time. Everybody does. She needs some structure in her life, something to do with her time. In case you missed it, she doesn't have any friends outside of us and she spends most of her time hidden away at Dash's. She doesn't go to school, and, yeah, I know she passed her GED but that's beside the point. She doesn't have anything to occupy her time with, she needs a purpose. We just came in, took over her life, or we tried to, and I really don't want her to get depressed. She needs things to do with her time besides hanging out with whoever is around and learning magic when we feel the gumption to teach it to her. She needs more than that and you know it. This is the perfect opportunity for her. She can learn and earn some extra cash at the same time. And," I held my hand up silencing him before he could argue with me. "You and I both know she doesn't ever spend the money Marcus left for her. She never spends money on anything except for maybe gas for the Rover and if she ever eats anywhere that's not at home. She needs to earn her own money and here she can do that. We can set her up with a paycheck for the time she spends here. It's the perfect way to give her money and the only way she'll accept it from us."

His face had hardened and turned a darker shade of red by the second as I spoke. He didn't like what I'd said, not at all and I couldn't really blame him. Quint was raised with an old school father who had certain ideals and expectations where the females in his life were concerned. Now, I'm not saying Uncle Quint was anything like my grandfather because he wasn't. But, and that's a really big but there, he wouldn't want his woman working for a paycheck when he could easily afford to buy her anything her heart desired and would see it as an insult that she'd rather work some crummy, low paying job rather than take the debit card and live an easy life of luxury.

Part of me wanted to do the same and coddle Ariel and give her the best of everything. The other part of me, the smarter part, knew she'd feel smothered and rebel against being treated like that. She'd see it as a hand out and hate us for it.

"I see your point," my Uncle grumbled gracelessly. "It's not healthy for her to have nothing to do with her time, but I guess I was just hoping she'd take that time to get to know us better and to get so in with us that she'd never want to leave."

My eyes narrowed on him. "You'd let her leave?" I asked him, sounding incredulous.

He winced and I knew he'd never let her go.

My mouth fell open when he said the unexpected and I ended up being wrong.

"Yeah," he whispered darkly. "If she really wanted to go and wasn't happy with us, with me, then I'd let her go. It would kill me, but I'd do it. For her."

I fucking knew it.

He loved her.

And not a puppy love kind of love, but a soul deep kind. The kind of love that would

crush him and he'd never recover if she ever did leave him.

And I did not find one single thing to be jealous of or upset about. I felt nothing but happiness for my Uncle because he deserved to love and be loved back and he deserved to be loved by a girl like Ariel. And she did love him back. I know she'd not said as much out loud because there was no way any of the guys would have been able to keep something like that to themselves and wouldn't have gone blabbing to the rest of us. But I knew she loved him. It was there for anyone who knew her to see when she looked at him. Maybe not always when she was talking to him or about him, but it was there when she looked at him. It was also there to see in the way she put up with all of his bullshit but didn't let him walk all over her at the same time. I wasn't so sure he saw it or knew exactly how she felt about him, it was always harder to tell when it was your heart on the line.

I wanted her to love me as much as she loved him. Hell, I just wanted her to love me at all. I knew better than to get jealous, though. There was no room for jealousy in this relationship of ours. This was a lesson I had learned all too well once before and knew better than to repeat it now or ever again. Jealousy would tear my family apart faster than any female ever would.

"Well," I said quietly, "she's not going anywhere. She's with us now and she doesn't want to ever leave us. We just need to make sure she's happy, too."

"Alright, Nephew," he mumbled. "You're point has been made and I can't say that I disagree with you."

I blew out a gust of air in relief. That could have gone really bad and I counted myself lucky it hadn't. Especially since I knew he was upset with me when he showed up here, I shouldn't have been doing or saying things to upset him but to try and make things right between us. Instead, here I was irritating him and pushing his buttons like normal.

It was a good thing we were family and, therefore, forced to love each other. If we weren't family we'd probably hate each other because we argued so often and constantly got on each others nerves.

"How 'bout we tour the rest of your building now?" He asked in a teasing voice. "I mean, you've gotta at least be curious to see what you've paid for."

I shrugged. "Sure."

No matter how hard he tried to rile me up about the fact I'd bought a building without seeing it in its entirety, I refused to be embarrassed.

We spent the next hour and a half going through the entire building in all of its grimy glory. Uncle Quint managed to keep his snide comments to himself the entire time, for which I appreciated because the place was definitely worth a few snide remarks.

It needed a lot of work. A lot of work.

The apartment above the shop reeked like cat piss and cigarette smoke. I wondered if this was where the old blind witch had been living and, if so, what the hell had happened to her cats. I liked cats but no fucking way was I bringing one home that pissed all over the place, I wasn't interested in cleaning that kind of mess up on the daily. I might adopt one if it were cute though, but, then again, maybe not. Ariel only seemed interested in getting a cat if it was that ugly hairless kind and I thought those were expensive so there was no way there'd be one hidden away up here in this mess.

If the smell wasn't bad enough, every single ounce of wall space was covered in disgusting wallpaper that looked to be straight outta my nightmares. The carpet looked like it had unfortunately been white at one point in time but was now mostly yellow and covered in stains. It needed to go but Uncle Quint and I pulled up a corner in every room and miraculously discovered beautiful hardwood underneath all that

ugly carpet. Unlike the wallpaper, the carpet could easily be removed and tossed into a dumpster. I added getting a dumpster out here onto my mental to do list.

The kitchen was small, the appliances outdated, and the entire room needed to be gutted and replaced. The price tag just kept climbing higher and higher.

The one and only bathroom was small and scarily covered in an offensive shade of pink. The bathtub, the sink, even the tile around the shower head. It, too, needed to be gutted and replaced.

Outside of the kitchen and the bathroom, there was a rather large living room and two decent sized bedrooms. All in all, it wasn't a bad space. I could pay people to fix the shit that needed to be fixed and then rent it out easily if I wanted to.

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I had no intention of renting the space out but I did have other plans for it.

After we left the apartment we went down the back set of stairs to where there was a door that led to the outside of the back of the building, a door that led to the office space and a door that led to the back of the shop. The space needed new lighting in the ceiling so that it was actually well lit and would make whoever had to walk through here feel a whole lot safer as opposed to the shady dark that filled the space now and could easily potentially hide people or things in the shadows.

Another thing I added to my mental to do list.

I stuck my key in the lock, turned the knob and, hopefully not unfortunately, let us into another space in the building. This had once been an office space for some low rent attorney but had been empty for several years now because the attorney had been dirty and found himself in a jail cell beside a bunch of hardened criminals he'd lied and cheated in order to keep out of prison. Thankfully for him he'd mostly been good at his job so I imagined he had a better time in prison than most attorneys did. When you worked for the bad guys instead of against them, prison didn't really seem like a bad place to be.

I didn't know about Quint, but I walked through that doorway with a heavy heart and ready for disappointment.

It didn't take long for my spirits to lift and my attitude to change.

There was no dirty carpet in here and no cat piss smell. It was dusty and in need of a cleaning, to be sure. But that was only due to the fact the space had been closed up

and unused for years and not because anything in there was really dirty.

Uncle Quint knelt down and brushed the palm of his hand across the hardwood floor. He swiped away several layers of dust to reveal a beautifully polished floor that didn't need anything outside of an initial cleaning.

"Nice floors," he muttered appreciatively and I found myself sighing in relief. Thank fucking god there was something nice in the place.

Towards the back, there was a small, galley style kitchen with barely any room to maneuver but it wasn't in need of a facelift. The appliances were black and probably bought not long before the attorney had found himself in prison. Nothing in there needed to be replaced.

The doorway to the entrance and the kitchen opened up to a small reception area with two other doors.

I peeked in the first door and was relieved to see a small, white bathroom that was so different from the bathroom in the apartment upstairs it wasn't even funny.

The second door was different from the first because the top half of it was covered in a piece of frosted glass and had a name printed in black across the bottom. A peek inside showed a spacious room with a large, wide window that had been boarded over. I knew from having seen it from the outside that there was nothing wrong with the window, so I wasn't entirely sure why it had been boarded over.

We left the office without speaking and headed back into the shop.

Uncle Quint stopped in front of a door tucked underneath a tilted ceiling that clearly was underneath the stairs leading up and he knocked his knuckles against it.

"What's in here?" He asked me.

I shrugged.

Really, how the fuck was I supposed to know?

"Don't know," I muttered. "Only one way to find out."

Quinton smirked at me happily before turning his back on me and going for the door handle.

The door opened and he pushed his way inside. I didn't know what the hell he had to smirk about but I dutifully followed behind him.

A click sounded right before light burst to life. I blinked away the dark and grimaced at the string that hung down from the ceiling where Quinton was lowering his hand.

A wooden set of stairs led down into a dark abyss and there were no railings on either side of the stairs.

I shook my head as I followed Uncle Quint down the stairs. I wasn't surprised he walked right down them as if he'd been there before a thousand times and knew just exactly what he was walking into. He acted as if he owned the place.

I wasn't about to argue about who'd bought the place, not when he was walking down those stairs first and headlong into the unknown dark.

Chapter Ten

Love you, Uncle Quint

"Jesus, fuck," Uncle Quint muttered under his breath.

I couldn't blame him, I, too, was looking around the space with wide eyes, taking everything in.

When we made it to the bottom of the stairs, I had followed behind Quint's dark shadow until he stopped abruptly and another click sounded as another bulb flicked to life.

Another fucking pull string.

I had sighed before looking around the basement we stood in.

Then I looked around in disbelief.

Jesus, fuck, was right!

"Maybe we should just burn the place down," I said in horror. "There's no fucking way I will ever be comfortable owning a place like this now."

"It can be cleansed," Uncle Quint muttered in disgust.

I shook my head. I didn't believe him.

There was no cleansing for a place like this. It was a goddamned horror show.

"We should call Julian," I muttered.

"Fuck Jules," Uncle Quinton muttered back. "We should probably call the cock sucking Council in on this shit."

I agreed, but shared anyways, "I don't actually think any of them are cock suckers, so I don't think it's fair of you to call them that."

Quinton glared at me. Under any other circumstances I would have grinned at him.

The room around me kept me from grinning.

The walls down here were painted an absolute shade of black so dark it sucked away some of the brightness coming from the light bulb hanging down from the ceiling.

There was a circular alter in the middle of the room draped in a heavy black cloth. The entire table top was covered in bowls and jars. Some of the jars were filled with what looked and smelled like old blood. The bowls that were crusted with it smelled rotten. A wide, circular mirror lay face up underneath the table and was smeared in blood. There were black candles on the floor, ringed around the table. The cement floor was covered in splotches of wax from where previous candles had been placed on the bare floor and burned out. There was a smell to the room that wasn't old or musty like I thought I would get when we came down here but instead sour, almost rotten.

"Well," Quinton drawled. "At least we know how she stayed hidden away from the Council now."

"Please tell me you don't think there are bodies, either animal or human, down here that once belonged to all that blood."

Uncle Quint shrugged like it didn't matter either way to him.

"I think the smell is just from the blood," he said casually. "Besides, I don't see anywhere to hide a body, even a smaller one, like an animal."

That was reassuring.

Not.

"Unless," he muttered thoughtfully, "something's been walled over. This space

doesn't run along the entire building."

"Jesus," I muttered, hoping he was joking but knowing there was no way in hell he was anything but serious.

"Maybe you should run your hands along the walls," he suggested darkly. "See if you can feel anything out of whack."

I shot him a dirty look. "Why do I have to do it?"

"Because it's your shitty building," he shot back.

Oh yeah, it was my shitty building. A building I was regretting purchasing by the second.

It seemed the old blind bat wasn't exactly an innocent witch in hiding after all.

Reluctantly, I walked around the room, running my hands along the wall, searching for any change in the surface.

Thankfully, I found nothing. I turned to tell Quinton he was wrong and something under the stairs caught my eye. Without pointing it out to my Uncle, I moved that way to investigate.

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I ducked underneath the stairs and walked straight towards the open doorway hidden beneath the stairs.

I hesitated before stepping into the dark space, After what I'd seen in the first room and the smell down here I did not want to walk willingly into a dark room just to stumble into what ever nasty thing that lie in wait for me. Blindly, I reached up, searching for a string to a light and felt nothing. I stepped further into the room with my right arm up-stretched high above my head. Finally, my fingers came into contact with what I was searching for. I pulled on the string and a light clicked on.

I frowned as I looked around the space. The walls in here weren't black but gray and, even though the smell still lingered in the air the further I walked into the room, I could tell it originated in the other room.

"Did you find your dead bodies?" Uncle Quint shouted from the other room.

Even though he couldn't see me, I shook my head.

Boxes upon boxes upon boxes lined the walls and covered almost every ounce of floor space. Thankfully, no dead bodies but the shit was a fire hazard to be sure. Most of the boxes were old and weathered with time.

"Well," Uncle Quint shouted. "Don't leave me hangin'. What the hell's in there and why in the fuck aren't you saying anything?"

"It's just boxes," I yelled back.

"What's in them?" Quinton shouted.

I rolled my eyes.

Like I'd had time to check out the insides of the boxes yet. What an asshole.

I didn't reply. If he wanted to know so badly, then he could look for himself.

Curious myself, I stepped up to the box closest to me and peeled open the top flaps. A puff of dust blew up in my face. I covered my mouth and nose with my hand as a coughing fit seized me.

"Ty?" Quinton shouted in concern. "What's happening?"

The sound of heavy footsteps pounded on the floor behind me, coming closer with each step. I ignored him and dug around in the box. There was nothing special inside, just a bunch of old photo albums filled with people probably long since dead.

I made it to the next box just as the pounding on the floor stopped right behind me. Uncle Quint was smart enough to not ask me what was in the box again and instead decided to look for himself, for which I appreciated.

We moved through the room in silence as we each took a look inside box after box. It was like a whole lifetime worth of shit had been stored away down here. I gave up after finding a bunch of dirty pans inside box five and shook my head.

"It's like a goddamn storage unit down here," I muttered disgustedly. "Who in their right mind holds onto dirty pans?"

"Is that what you found?" Quinton asked in an amused voice.

I ignored him and headed towards the door.

"Don't you even want to know what I found in my boxes?"

If it was anything like what I'd found then the answer was a big fat no.

"There are detailed journals in the ones I've looked through," Quinton said to my back.

Damn it. He'd gotten my attention with that one.

I turned to face him and asked, "What are they about?"

Uncle Quint smirked at me but thankfully told me what I wanted to know without hassling me beforehand. Mostly unheard of.

The smirk faded away from his face. "I've scanned a few pages in each one I've found so far. Some are lists for the store, but they aren't what you'd think. They're not about inventory. More, they're about the people who've walked in the front door. Descriptions, names, and every single item they purchased. She wrote in notes about them in the margins, what she thought about them, whether she liked them or not and what she thought they were gonna be doing with the items they bought."

That seemed weird to me and I wondered if there were detailed descriptions of my father and I in one of those journals.

Then a weirder thought came to me.

"But she was blind," I told Quint. "How did she know what everyone looked like when she was blind? I mean, I always knew she could see things better than most people but different than actually seeing them."

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Quinton pursed his lips as he eyed me. "You have to ask that? It's magic, Ty. She was a witch and from what I sensed in the other room, an incredibly powerful one. There's really no telling what in the hell she was capable of. In some of the notes she's made on some of them, she wrote down-"

He snapped his mouth shut and looked around the room cautiously. He pulled out his cell phone and started to tap at the screen.

Uncle Quint: She wrote down when she thought someone came from a family who'd once held magic. We should leave all of this here and come back and look through it after the team has gone through the building and made sure it's not bugged. Then we should go through all of this.

Uncle Quint: The Council would kill to get their hands on this. Some of the names mentioned are female. You know what the Council would do with them if they thought there was even a hint of magic in their system. Breeding.

I swallowed thickly. He hadn't seen what I'd seen at the motel and I hadn't told him. I wasn't surprised he already knew what they were doing, though.

"They're all doing Annabell," I blurted out, not caring in the least if one of the pigs overheard me. "I saw..." I trailed off and winced. What I'd seen wasn't worth repeating. It had been Annabell acting like the whore I'd already known her to be but hadn't seen before with my own eyes.

Uncle Quint cocked an eyebrow. "They're all doing Annabell?" He repeated.

I nodded.

"The Council?" He asked, seeking clarification.

Again, I nodded.

He looked at me thoughtfully before asking in a quiet, hesitant voice, "You see that shit with your own eyes?"

There I went again, making him hesitate.

"Yeah," I told him honestly.

"Did it bug you?" He asked in that same voice.

I eyed him sharply. "What?" I asked. "Why would that bother me?"

I had bothered me. It made me feel a little bit dirty because I'd had my dick in her before and I was really wishing I could take it back and it sucked that I couldn't wipe the memories from my mind of her wet heat wrapped around me because they made me fucking sick to my stomach.

No way could I explain all of that to him. He was my Uncle, more like my brother, and sometimes my best friend. We talked about a lot of things and I knew I could tell him anything. But talking about sex had never been on the table before and I wasn't ready to place it on there. The only time I'd ever heard him brag about any kind of physical interaction with a female had been when he'd gotten to kiss Ariel first. Otherwise, he was discreet and I knew absolutely nothing about his past lovers. I did, however, know that when and how he had sex with Ariel wasn't something I wanted him to tell me about and it wasn't something I wanted to hear about from anyone unless it was something Ariel wanted to share with me. For her, I'd suck it up and

listen to whatever it was she wanted to tell me. But I didn't want to hear about it from anyone else, that's for damn sure. If I talked to Uncle Quint about sex right now then I felt like I'd be opening the door for it to come back up later on down the road.

"Do you still have feelings for the bitch?" He asked me and I felt my chest squeeze tightly, painfully.

I should have expected this but I had not. Instead, I was left feeling blindsided.

"I would never hurt her," I ground out, knowing he'd understand I meant our girl and not the other one.

"Harboring feelings for this old bitch is going to hurt Ariel's feelings, Ty." Quint growled at me. "If you don't know that then maybe you don't know her at all. She might not always let it show but she feels deep about every fucking thing. Finding out you're still into this bitch will crush her. And then that will fuck her up even more because she's gonna feel like garbage for being upset you have feelings for some other chic when she's got feelings for six other guys besides you. You know she loves you, right?"

I had been getting angrier and angrier with each word that had come out of his stupid mouth to the point I was no longer angry but absolutely enraged. Then he'd said those five words.

You know she loves you, right?

That had taken the wind right out of my sails and I'd completely deflated, all of the angry energy draining out of me.

No, I didn't know she loved me and I was absolutely certain she hadn't told my Uncle she loved me, either.

However, what I was certain of was that she loved him without a fucking doubt.

"You know she loves you, right?" I shot back.

Quinton's mouth fell open in surprise and his eyes lit up.

"Did she tell you that?" he whispered hopefully.

Shit. That wasn't a voice I was used to hearing him use often. He wasn't a hopeful person, he was the type of person who knew he'd get what he wanted out life because he went out and made it happen on his own.

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Ariel hadn't told me she loved him, she didn't need to. But, I wasn't going to tell him the details of the conversations Ariel and I shared, that wasn't a trust I'd betray, even to my Uncle.

"We should stop talking about this," I suggested. "What Ariel tells me or doesn't tell me isn't any of your business."

The light in his dark eyes faded. "So, she didn't tell you she loved me," he surmised.

"No," I sighed, knowing full well if I didn't tell him the truth then he'd never let up and drive me nuts. "But it's obvious. She feels deep for you and I really don't want to talk about it with you."

"That's bullshit, Ty." he shot back at me immediately after I stopped speaking. "We can't bottle things up and refuse to talk about them with each other when it comes to shit with her. It involves all of us and if we keep things secret then there's a chance it will all blow up in our faces. We've gotta be open and honest with each other. That's the only way a relationship like this is going to be successful."

I wanted to snap at him that he wouldn't know how a relationship like this worked successfully because he'd never been in one and it's not like he'd grown up in one, either. His dad had refused to settle down with just one woman and traded them up like most people trade up socks when they've gotten worn and holey. He didn't know anything about a healthy relationship.

"Listen," I started.

"No," Quint snapped at me. "You fucking listen to me, Nephew. You climbing in your own head and shutting yourself off from the rest of us isn't the way we do this. I know you were hurt your first go around with a female but Ariel isn't fucking Annabell and the guys are different this time around. It's not just three of you, it's all of us and we are all fucking in, all the way. You don't get to pull yourself away from the rest of us, not this fucking time. If you do then you run the risk of ruining this for the rest of us and I can't allow you to do that."

I studied him for a moment and took in his rigid posture and clenched fists. He looked ready to take a swing at me if I made one wrong move and I couldn't even blame him. I was acting like an asshole and I was doing everything he'd accused me of doing. Shutting them out was a defense mechanism I had every intention of using so I didn't get my heart ripped out of my chest again and shoved through a wood chipper. I wasn't sure if I'd have any of it left if I went through that again. The stupid organ had already been super glued back together once and I'd done a shoddy job at it. One wrong move too many and the whole thing might splinter apart and I'd be left bitter and broken.

"You got a problem with her loving more people than just you?" Quinton asked incredulously.

I shook my head. I really didn't have a problem with her loving more than one person. In fact, I wanted her to love them. It meant she'd have a harder time ever leaving us if she loved all of us. I just didn't want to have to talk about it with the rest of them.

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him. "I'm not talking about this," I told him harshly.

Quinton took a step towards me and raised a fist. He jammed his fist in my direction and gritted out, "The fuck we aren't talking about this. What the hell's the matter with you? You're going to fuck this up for the rest of us and I'll not allow it. First, you take

her to the motel with you to see that fucking bitch. Then, if that's not bad enough, you're keeping secrets from me and now you've bought an entire fucking building. You're out-"

I leaned forward at the waist and clenched my own fists. Enough was enough.

"First of all, I bought this building with my own fucking money," I snarled at him. "I do not have to ask you for permission before spending my own goddamn money. How dare you imply that I need to ask you for permission. How dare you act like my fucking father when you are anything but, Uncle."

He flinched and I knew I'd struck a painful blow.

I didn't care and kept going anyway.

"You and I are family and I will love you like a brother until the day I fucking die and I love you even more because you've been my guardian since the day my parents died, and you and I both know I'm not just talking about legally. I appreciate everything you've done for me, but I'm an adult now, Uncle Quint, you're going to have to let me make my own mistakes and you're going to have to let me be man enough to fix them. I know I made a mistake getting involved with Annabell the first time around. I know it's my fault the others got sucked into her dark web of bullshit and lies. I fucking know it's all my fault." He opened his mouth to speak but I unclenched my fist and raised my hand, shoving my palm towards his face in a silent gesture that screamed shut the fuck up.

"It is my fault and nothing you say is gonna make me change my mind on that. She came at me when I was weak and vulnerable and I opened the door for her to waltz right in and do her worst with our family. I was trying to make it right by handling her on my own so that none of the rest of you had to deal with her and my shit again. And, I was trying to save you. She's doing the Council, Uncle Quint. All of them.

They want to breed her and are working really hard at knocking her up. If I had allowed you and Jules to get involved you would have probably hurt her. If you hurt the Council's new piece of ass there was no telling how they'd retaliate. And you damn well know that. If-

He interjected, "If she'd threatened my family then, yeah, I would have hurt her. No questions asked, I would have gotten rid of her permanently this time."

I sighed in relief, glad to hear him admit what I'd known all along.

"I took care of her permanently without physically harming her... much." I told him something he already knew.

"I know, Ty," he said tiredly. "But you still took Ariel with you and you put her at risk. Now, you're pulling away and acting out. I don't know what to make of it. My first instinct is always to fight with you and force you to tell me what I want to know."

He ran his hands over the top of his head in a show of nervous aggression and I knew his urge to hit me had finally left him and it'd left him frustrated instead of angry.

"I didn't take her with me because I wanted to," I admitted. "She forced herself on me and I knew if I'd have turned her down then it would have killed whatever affection she's got growing for me. I have to be careful with her because it's like every time we take a step forwards in our relationship something happens and she takes two giant steps back. And, besides, I wanted her to know that I don't feel anything more than hatred and disgust for Annabell, so she came with me. I made sure she was never in any real danger and I would have protected her with my fucking life if it had come down to it."

"I believe you," Quinton said instantly, shocking the shit out of me. "And I trust you

with her."

My lips parted in surprise and I stared at him.

"What you need to figure out how to do, Nephew, is learn how to trust the rest of us with, not only her, but you as well. If you'd shared what was going on with me, I would have trusted you to take care of it on your own and if you couldn't and things got away from you, I would have been there to have your back when you were ready for me to have it. All of us would have given that to you. What I don't understand is why you'd want to take the whole burden of it on your own shoulders and keep it from the rest of us."

"I told you," I grumbled. "It's my fault she was in our lives in the first place. I was trying to protect the rest of you from any more bullshit she might cause and I was trying to make sure none of the rest of you got hurt by her again."

"But, Ty," Quinton said quietly. "Who was making sure you didn't get hurt by her again? Who was looking out for you?"

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The backs of my eyes stung as I blinked rapidly, making sure I didn't shed any tears in front of him.

I got his message loud and clear. He was so upset because he was worried about me and was pissed I hadn't given him the chance to take care of me and have my back. It would have hurt him to see me get chewed up and spit back out by that bitch again.

I didn't answer him verbally but instead moved forward and into him. My shoulder hit his as I lifted my other arm up behind him. I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled his forehead into mine.

"Love you, Uncle Quint," I muttered before giving his neck a squeeze and letting him go.

I cleared my throat as I stepped back and, avoiding eye contact with him, looked around the room.

"We should get out of here and do that thing we were talking about," I muttered thickly.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather we burned the place down?" He asked quietly.

I sighed, knowing him letting it go was his way of letting me know we were okay.

As soon as we were out of the building he made the call to the security place he'd mentioned. We waited outside for them to show up half an hour later. They combed through the entire building and found absolutely nothing. No bugs, no cameras, nada.

We were in the clear and he didn't even joke about burning the building down again.

We might have been better off if we had, though.

Chapter Eleven

You've got really big balls, kid

"What's the meaning of this?" Rain growled in a voice full of gravel as he looked down his nose at me. "You think you can just phone me up and demand I meet you somewhere?"

I winced.

Shit.

Ariel's dad really did not like me. I wanted to not care but it still hurt me just a little bit. The man standing in front of me meant the world to my girl and I didn't want him to hate me. Normally, I wouldn't give a fuck, but since Ariel meant the whole world to me and he meant that to her, I really wanted him to like me. Hell, I'd even settle for him just not hating me. That was better than nothing.

Ignoring his angry glare that promised me violence if I didn't answer him, I gestured towards the building and asked, "Do you know what this place is?"

Rain sneered at me before pursing his lips and looking around, taking in our surroundings. His brow scrunched up and he shook his head.

"I've never been here before," he growled dangerously and I knew if I didn't start talking soon, he'd kick my ass.

"I thought you'd be interested to know," I hurried to get out, "that an old, blind witch used to own this building and she ran a shop called Fortunes for the Unfortunate. She was hiding out in plain sight from the Council. Uncle Quint and I have been going through journals she kept and we found out some interesting things. According to her written words, people have been coming here for years, looking for sanctuary and hiding from the Council. She had a whole network of people helping her out but never actually says who they are. She also kept records of everyone who ever walked into the building. Some of them she sensed magic in but not enough they'd register on anyone else's radar as a witch. But they bought instruments of magic, so she knew they were practicing in secret and hiding what they were. There's a lot of shit that the Council would want to get their hands on that we are going to need to figure out how to keep safe. There's also a lot of journals left that Uncle Quint and I haven't had a chance to read through yet. There's just too many of them for the two of us. And, there's boxes of other shit in the basement and after going through it for hours on end, Uncle Quint and I figured out that not all of it belonged to the old woman. Some of it belonged to the people who sought out sanctuary here. She kept what they couldn't take into hiding with them, in hopes of one day they might come back for it or send word to her on where to send it. I can't bring myself to throw the shit out but it needs to be gone through and properly sorted and labeled. I-"

Rain impatiently cut me off. "What the fuck are you telling me all of this for?"

He sounded angry, but I wasn't stupid and I didn't miss the way his lanky body had stiffened or the way his green eyes, the exact same shade as Ariel's, had widened when I'd gotten down to business. This shit was right up his alley and he was perfect for it.

"Shop needs a guardian, so to speak," I told him and he raised a dark eyebrow in surprise. "There's also an empty apartment upstairs." I failed to mention that it was a dump, but whatever, he didn't need to know that bit just yet. "I figured with you doing what you do and all, and you being estranged now because you've been hunting

for Ariel for so long, well..."

I trailed off. Shit. Maybe this wasn't such a hot idea.

Rain rubbed his hand over the back of his neck, looking uncomfortable. Standing on the sidewalk in his long black trench coat and shitkickers on his feet and the dead eyes in his face, he stood out like a sore thumb. Perhaps we shouldn't have done this in broad daylight and instead met up at night where he would have blended in with the shadows. People'd be staring soon if we didn't go inside.

I shrugged uncomfortably. "I know you're looking to spend more time with Ariel and I thought you'd fit in here perfectly. The old witch was able to work her shop here without drawing any unwanted attention to herself and the Council never knew she was here all this time. It'd be a safe place for you to hang out and the perfect place for you to work with Ariel on all that you want to teach her without having the other guys hovering over the two of you while you do it. I also heard you were looking for a place to stay that was closer to Ariel and not with the rest of us. Two birds, one stone."

He crossed his arms over his chest and a hint of black ink peeked out from under his sleeve. I'd never gotten to see his tattoos because I'd never seen him without long sleeves on but I was curious because I'd heard some of them were spells and held magic and I had never heard of such a thing before Uncle Quint had forced my tattoo on me. It wasn't something commonly practiced.

"Why would my daughter be spending time here?" He growled at me. "Is Dash kicking her out?"

I blinked at him.

"What?" I asked. "Why would Dash ever kick her out?"

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Rain's lip curled in a sneer. "Why the fuck do any of you ever do anything? I worry about her there with him. He's damaged because of what's been done to him and it's no secret he doesn't think much of women outside of what they can do for his dick."

A blast of heat rolled off of him and smacked into me. I stumbled back a foot and almost went down to a knee. I held my hand up, palm out, trying to ward off another blow.

Shit and damn, this was not good.

I tried to reason with him.

"I don't know how you missed it, but Dash is all about Ariel now and he'd never do anything to hurt her. He'd never cheat on her and he sure as shit wouldn't kick her out of the cottage. If it were up to him she'd live out there with him for forever."

The heat scorching my skin slowly retreated and I could finally breathe again. I rubbed my arms, my skin felt tight. I looked at my exposed arms and groaned. There was a faint pink tinge to my skin, testifying to the fact I'd been fried.

This was not going nearly as good as I had foreseen it going.

"If he hurts her," Rain growled menacingly, "I will tear his heart out with my bare hands. The same goes for the rest of you bastards."

Eyes wide, I nodded.

"Got it," I mumbled as I continued to rub at my arms. "I'll spread the word to the others."

Secretly, I hoped he had this talk with each and every one of them and deep fried their asses as well. I didn't want to be the only one, might as well spread the love around a bit.

Then, for some insane reason, I decided to overshare. "I bought the building partly because my dad always told me that we needed to do whatever was in our power to help the old broad even when she so obviously didn't want handouts from us. So, I bought the building partly out of guilt. The other part of me did it for Ariel. She told me this story once about going out on a date with this guy and him taking her to a carnival or fair or what the fuck ever it was." Holy fuck, I was rambling and I couldn't seem to shut my stupid mouth and continued.

"She said there was a fortune teller's stand and she had wanted so badly to get her cards read. Unfortunately, she had no money of her own and her date had called the whole thing stupid and refused to pay for what he considered a waste of time and money because the lady was a phony. Ever since, I had promised I would read the cards for her and teach her how to read them herself. Something always happens, we are always too busy and I have just kept pushing it further back. I guess I thought," I paused as I waved both my hands uselessly towards the building, "she'd really get a kick out of this place."

Shit, I shouldn't have told him about her date sucking so bad, he didn't need to know that. Actually, he didn't need to know most of what I'd blurted out. Christ, maybe it was contagious, usually it was Ariel blurting everything out and now I was doing it. She was starting to rub off on me.

Rain eyed me curiously and I watched in fascination as life slowly bled back into his beautifully sad eyes. I couldn't feel weird calling his eyes beautiful when they were

almost identical to my girls' eyes.

Rain cocked his head to the side as he studied me, his eyes going from my boots all the way up to the top of my head, measuring me up. I stood tall and let him look his full. I wasn't going to flinch or wilt under his dark, careful gaze.

Finally, after what felt like hours, he asked, "What does everyone else have to say about you buying a building out of guilt and your love for their girl?"

Without thought, I replied, "She's my girl, too, and I could give a fuck less about what anybody else thinks."

The corner of his lips curled upwards in the ghost of a smile.

"You've got really big balls, kid," he mumbled under his breath. "I'll give you that."

He was wrong. My balls were average in size. My dick, though, was an entirely different story.

Seeing as the only person besides myself who'd be enjoying my big dick from now until the day I died was his daughter, I felt it best not to share with him and kept my mouth shut. I didn't need to give him any more reasons to want to kick my ass, at least, not until the pink on my skin had faded back to its normal tan. If he had another go at me right now, I'd likely end up with major burns instead of the ones I had now that would be gone in a day or two.

Rain was flat out grinning at me now and there was a weird, wild light in his eyes that kind of terrified me. At least when his eyes were dead I knew what to expect from him. It reminded me of Ariel. She often got a weird light in her eyes before saying or doing something nutty. I had a feeling this was something she'd inherited from her father.

Without a word, Rain turned his back on me and headed down the sidewalk, towards the front door to my building.

Guess we were going inside after all. I sighed in relief, happy that crazy light in his eyes didn't mean he was ready to fry me again.

He spoke over his shoulder as he walked. "Did you know that your Uncle offered me room and board at the house beside Marcus's?"

My eyes widened in surprise. I hadn't actually known that Uncle Quint had offered him a room at our house. Wasn't that something he should have asked the rest of us who lived there with him about first? That arrogant fuck Quinton didn't give two shits about what the rest of us thought. He wanted to keep Rain close so he could keep an eye on him, no matter what we wanted and no matter how buddy-buddy they seemed.

"You didn't know, did you?" Rain asked when I failed to respond.

I shoved my way past him and pulled my keys out of my front pants pocket. They jingled as I searched for the right one. I found it and inserted it into the deadbolt. I turned the key and heard the click of the bolt coming free. I twisted my key back before pulling it free of the lock and sliding it back into the front pocket of my jeans.

Hands free, I twisted the knob and pushed my way inside. The bell jingled to life above me, signaling the arrival of a newcomer. Sadly, there was no old, blind chick left to hear it. The obituary had said she'd died of natural causes and I hoped it was true and had nothing to do with magic. That could cause me a whole new level of problems I didn't want to bring down on my coven.

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Ignoring how freaked out that made me feel, I told Rain over my shoulder, "No, I did not know that Uncle Quint offered you a place to stay in our house. I don't mind, though." That was a lie because I kind of did mind, I thought we should have had a vote about it or something. "And I know the other guys won't mind you living there either." Now this last part, I wasn't sure if it was a lie or not but I didn't feel bad about telling it if it was.

"I turned him down," he told me as I heard the door close behind him.

I found the switch for the shitty lights and flipped them on.

"Why?" I asked curiously as I turned and crossed my arms over my chest.

"Because my sister is buried in the basement," he told me bluntly.

My eyes widened in shock and I fought the urge to take a step back away from him. He didn't seem upset but he was a volatile man, he'd already fried me once with his magic, I wasn't looking for another go around with it. He was unpredictable and slightly unstable, it would seem. I knew there was no love lost between him and his sister, but death did strange things to people, it made you care when you wouldn't have before.

"Who told you that?" I whispered. No one should have shared that little secret with anyone. It was something we were taking to our own damn graves.

He arched an arrogant eyebrow and mimicked my arms crossed over my chest. "No one told me, boy. Now that I know she's dead, it made tracking her ass down way

easier and I used magic to find her body. Why's she down there?"

Why, indeed.

"Fertilizer," I said dryly. "Julian claims the life force comes up outta the ground and goes into the plants he's got cooking down there."

"You got any other dead bodies buried down there?" He asked seriously.

That was none of his damn business, and he knew it. I gave that question the lack of a reply that it deserved.

He shrugged and chuckled before gesturing around the room and asking, "Do you mind?"

"By all means," I muttered ungraciously.

He wandered around touching things gingerly and without asking questions. Before I knew it we were upstairs in the apartment. I stayed by the door and let him wander around at his leisure. When he was done he gestured towards the door and we went back downstairs. I unlocked the offices and let us in. I'd saved the basement room for last.

"This'll do nicely," he told me.

I cocked my head to the side and asked, "Nicely for what?" I wasn't following.

"For where I'm going to live," he stated simply.

That wasn't exactly the plan. I had thought he'd want to live upstairs after it was remodeled. This space was cold and not homey in the slightest. Then again, it wasn't

like Rain was a warm and cuddly guy.

"What are you going to do with that shit hole upstairs?" He asked.

"Gut it," I answered immediately. "I already hired a team to come in and do it. Then everything will be nice and new up there. Are you sure you wouldn't rather have a nice and new apartment than this space?"

"This space is clean," he told me. "And the right size for me. I don't have a lot of stuff and what I do have is safely locked up in storage. I'll hire a company to get out some furniture and some of my other shit and have it brought here. I-"

"We actually have a storage facility," I shared helpfully. "Uncle Quint rents some of the units out but most of it he keeps freed up for the rest of us. I have a unit I use to keep a lot of my parents' things in and I know the twins have some things stored in a unit, too. We've got lots of furniture if you need anything and I'm sure Uncle Quint would let you have a unit for yourself seeing as your family now and all."

He studied me curiously and I was really getting sick of him doing that. It's like he took in everything and wasn't impressed by anything.

"Appreciate it," he grunted. "I'll talk to Quint. Do you have a spare set of keys for me?"

I did and told him so. I had spares made for Ariel and Quinton as well. The rest of them could ask first and I'd have a set made up for them. I didn't think it wise to tell Rain I'd given a set of keys to his new apartment to my Uncle. That was a gross invasion of privacy on a whole new level that he was better off not knowing.

"When's Ariel coming?" He changed the subject by asking me.

"Was she supposed to be coming?" I asked back. I hadn't told her anything about the place yet, I had been avoiding her like a little weak, bitch since the day after that douche bag Chuck died. I didn't like the way she'd looked at me with something not right in her eyes. Not accusation, exactly, but more like she had no idea who I was anymore. And I was fucking terrified she'd be afraid of me now, or not like me anymore. I couldn't handle something like that so I'd been avoiding her in order to not have to face the possibilities.

Rain glared at me. "You got a problem with my daughter?" He snarled at me, all signs of friendly long gone. We were in hostile territory and I needed to tread carefully here or he'd fry my ass again. It was a trick I needed him to teach me, for protection purposes, of course.

"No," I told him honestly. "I'm worried she's going to have a problem with me."

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"What the fuck are you talking about?" He snapped at me. "It's obvious she's in this for the long haul with your coven. Why are you making shit up when there's nothing there? It's stupid to create trouble where there is none."

I sighed heavily as I turned my back on him and walked towards the door. We were done here, I was ready to get out of this place.

Rain grabbed ahold of my shoulder and forced me to stop. I whirled around and snarled in his face. "Keep your fucking hands off of me."

"Stop acting like a rabid dog," he snarled right back, leaning into my face. "And tell me what the hell your problem is."

I shrugged his arm off and moved back a step, beyond angry at him having put his hands on me.

"Don't you ever put your hands on me," I gritted out as I took another step back and away from him. I did it because I didn't trust myself to be within arms reach of him because I really wanted to put my hands on him in return and it wouldn't do to hit Ariel's dad. I already had enough problems.

"What's your problem with my daughter?" He repeated on a low growl. His green eyes were burning with rage and I took another step back. This put me closer to the door but I wasn't fooled, I wouldn't make it before he got to me if he wanted.

"I told you," I snarled, "I don't have a fucking problem with her. Right now, the only problem I have is with you grabbing on to me and thinking it's okay to get up in my

shit when it's not. You need to back the fuck off right now before things get any worse here for us and we can't go back from it."

"I'll back off when you tell me what's going on," he shot back. "She's my daughter and she means everything to me. I'll not get her back after all this time just to watch you mess things up for her. You better start talking, boy, and I'm not joking."

I was shaking as my back hit the door. It was an effort to control my rage, I usually didn't have this amount of control over my reactions and usually just let it all out when I got pissed. It never really ended well when I acted rashly, but it was a personality flaw I was working hard to change and failing spectacularly at. His words, though, grounded me in a way I'd never been grounded before and took some of my rage away.

"She watched me shove him," I said in a shaky, flat voice. "Then he fell to his death. Because of me. And, what's worse, is I don't even think that's what bothered her but the fact I didn't care about it afterwards. While she was crying and upset because she'd just watched someone die, all I cared about was the fact he was finally dead and gone and maybe because of it my family could breathe a little easier. I kept seeing her face up all cut up and bleeding while Dash was on the ground in a fucking bloody mess and I did not give two shits that that piece of garbage was dead. And, what's worse than that? I was pissed at her that she could even shed a fucking tear for him and felt a little betrayed that she cared so much when I didn't think she should have cared at all. I know how fucked up that is because I know her and I get why that ate her up inside, I really do, but I didn't like it at all. She doesn't do violence very well because she's spent the majority of her life being beaten down and she feels everything deep. It still cut me to see her crying over someone who hurt our family so badly, herself included. I-"

I stopped speaking suddenly and swallowed thickly. I shouldn't have told him any of that shit. I needed to learn how to keep my mouth shut and stop with the oversharing.

Rain's anger deflated before my eyes and his face softened.

"She doesn't understand what it means to be a part of a family and a part of a coven just yet," he said in a soft voice. "But she's learning and you're going to need to be patient with her and cut her some slack. From what your Uncle has told me, she watched the person she thought was her mother die and hasn't been the same since. Maybe watching this kid die triggered that memory for her and brought it all back to the surface again. I don't know that she's processed Vivian's death yet and she refuses to talk about her with me now, says it's a betrayal to the mother she doesn't remember to talk about the one who raised her."

Everything he said was true but I didn't know about that last part. "She really won't talk to you about Vivian anymore?" I asked.

When he shook his head I muttered, "That can't be healthy."

"Just cut my girl some slack, okay?"

I nodded. I had no intention of bringing any of that shit I'd just spewed out up to her. It would hurt her feelings and really upset her to know it bothered me that she cried over Chuck dying.

"Do you think I'm an asshole?" I asked Rain.

"No," Rain said in a hushed voice. "I think you're someone who loves his family very much and that family now includes my daughter. I personally like the idea of you being so upset over what happened to her face that you'd be pissed she cried over the death of the person who scarred her for life. Do I want you to take that out on her? Fuck no, she's a confused girl who needs love, not anger. But, if you keep going the way you're going, with everything bottled up tight like you've got it, then you're going to explode and there's no telling who will get hit with that shrapnel. You need

to let it out. I don't want that shit raining down on my daughter and her getting cut up in the process."

"I'd never hurt her," I hurried to tell him.

"Don't you think keeping your distance from her isn't already doing that?"

Honestly, I hadn't thought about it that way. I thought maybe I was making things easier for her by not forcing her to see my face at the moment because I didn't want her to have to remember watching another human being die.

Rain gave my shoulder an affectionate squeeze and I didn't yell at him for touching me again. I let it go and we continued on our tour. I shouldn't have been surprised but was when he wasn't appalled by the basement. He didn't even ask where all the blood had come from. I caught the gist of his muttered words as he walked around the room and I hadn't liked what I'd heard. I heard words like *interesting* and *recreate* and I tuned him out after that.

After my talk with him today and Quinton the other day, I realized something. I really was an asshole. Pushing my family away, keeping secrets and now avoiding Ariel out of guilt. I was lucky any of them still talked to me and I really needed to make things right with my girl before she gave up on me.

Chapter Twelve

Fuck Yeah

Soft knocking on my door woke me and I came awake with a start. I rolled out of bed and landed heavily on my feet. I stumbled to the side, put my palm in the bed and pushed myself up to standing straight.

"Christ, I'm coming," I grumbled sleepily in a thick voice as another soft knock sounded on the door. I had finally crashed hard and gotten my first real healthy dose of sleep in what felt like weeks. Judging by the way my head pounded I'd either gotten too much sleep or not nearly enough.

I stumbled through the dark room towards the door. Why the hell was someone knocking? They usually just barged right on in because no one in this damn place ever gave a shit about privacy.

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I yanked open the door and growled angrily, "Leave me the fuck alone, asshole."

Bright green eyes set inside the face of the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen filled with hurt and tears immediately began to pool at the base of her eyes. Her ash blonde hair had grown down well past her shoulders since I'd first met her and hung loosely around her face. She chewed on her lip nervously, sucking the black ring in her bottom lip into her mouth.

"Shit," I muttered as she lowered the hand she'd had raised to knock on my door. "Sorry, girl. I was asleep and wrongfully assumed you were one of the guys here to bug me. Sorry."

Shit. Yeah, I'd already said I was sorry, I didn't need to repeat it a bunch like an asshole. That would only serve to make her more uncomfortable with me than she clearly already was.

"I'm sorry, Ty." She mumbled quietly in her soft, sweet, feminine voice that I always felt straight in my dick every time she spoke to me. "I shouldn't have bothered you. I don't know what I was thinking coming here, but I'll just... um... leave you to it now, I guess."

She released the ring from her mouth as she played with the hem of her hoodie nervously, tugging it down roughly.

She turned to walk away but before she could get more than a step further away from me I reached out and grabbed ahold of her hand, stopping her.

"Please," I said when she finally looked back at me over her shoulder. "Believe me when I say that wasn't directed at you."

She gave a small, hesitant nod and I took advantage of her hand in mine and gave a gentle tug towards me. She stumbled backwards and crashed into my front. I wrapped my arms around her middle and lifted. She squealed as she placed her hands on my arms and clung to me.

I backed up into my room. Once we were both on the right side of the door, I turned around and, without putting Ariel down, lifted my bare foot and kicked the door shut.

I hustled us over to my bed, turned so my back was facing it and fell backwards. Ariel cried out in either shock or surprise as we fell. I landed on my back with Ariel still wrapped up safely in my arms and on top of me.

I dug my heels into the bed as I pushed my way up towards the headboard. When the back of my head hit my pillow, I rolled over onto my side and released Ariel. She scrambled out of my arms and turned over on to her back with her face turned towards me.

"Give a girl a little warming next time, Ty." She joked as she lightly slapped her hand against my chest.

My lips curled up in the ghost of a smile as I laid my right hand on her stomach and pressed my face into the hair at the top of her head. I inhaled the scent of cinnamon that clung to her hair and usually her skin.

"You smell like Dash," I informed her. "Like cinnamon."

She giggled quietly. "Damien and Julian think it's nice," she told me in confidence. "Neither one of them seemed to know it was Dash's scent. It comes from his

shampoo. There's always a bunch of new girly crap showing up in the bathroom at home and I always just assumed it was Damien who bought it and put it in there for me. Either way, it doesn't matter, I can't bring myself to use any of it. Dash's scent is just so familiar to me now, so comforting."

Her cheeks tinted lightly with a blush and I bit my lip hard so I wouldn't smile at her and make her embarrassment any worse.

"I know that's weird," she mumbled. "I really am a freak."

The urge to smile immediately disappeared and I leaned back from her hair and scowled at her.

She frowned when she saw my face and her eyes filled with concern. "Ty, I-"

"Shut up, girl," I whispered fiercely and her mouth immediately snapped shut at my tone. "The last thing you are in this whole fucking world is a freak and I really don't want to ever hear you talking like that about yourself, it pisses me off. There's absolutely nothing wrong with you. You live with Dash now, it would make sense you would find his scent to be so comforting. You associate him with home now and this is the first really safe place you've ever been in before. There is not one thing wrong with that. If I'm being honest, I'm a little jealous of Dash right now because I'd love for you to carry my scent around on you all the time too. It's cute and sweet."

What I didn't tell her was the thought of my scent rubbed all over her skin made my dick even harder than her voice usually did when she said my name all soft and sweet like. I didn't think she'd appreciate hearing that from me at the moment, or probably ever.

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense," she mumbled without meeting my eyes. "I do feel safe there and it really does feel like home to me. I didn't think I'd ever get this level

of safety and comfort from living somewhere but I've finally given up on waiting for the next bad thing to happen and have just been trying to focus on my magic and being happy. For once in my life, I think it's finally safe to be happy. And I have Rain now, so I've got a whole lot to be happy about."

I noticed she'd said she had Rain to be happy about but hadn't said fuck all about the rest of us. Except for Dash, of course. It seemed he made her all kinds of happy. The lucky dick.

I slid my hand around her waist to her side and stroked my fingers up and down her ribs. Her breath hitched as her eyes widened and finally made contact with mine. Fucking finally.

"Are you afraid of me now?" I murmured. I couldn't hold it in any longer. I needed to know if things had changed between us because she'd seen me do such a horrible thing even if it was an accident, I'd still showed zero signs of remorse and I had no intention of faking it for her now or in the future.

Her brows furrowed in confusion. "Why would I be afraid of you, Tyson?" She asked in a voice laced with worry. "I feel like you've been avoiding me for the past week and I didn't know why. Which is why I showed up here in the first place. I wanted to know why you were upset with me. I don't know why you'd think I would be afraid of you, though. What are you even talking about?"

I sighed in relief.

"I'm not upset with you, girl," I told her honestly.

"Then, what's your problem?" she demanded to know and I found myself having to bite back yet another grin when it felt like I hadn't had a reason to smile in weeks, maybe even longer. I'm surprised my face didn't crack from lack of having moved in

that direction.

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"Chucky," I explained my problem with one word. She was a smart girl, she wouldn't need me to explain any further.

"Yeah," she said quietly as she scooted closer to me and didn't stop until her sweet body was pressed up tight against mine. "What went down with Chucky was completely messed up."

Talk about an understatement of the fucking century.

Jesus.

"Yeah, Ariel," I agreed with her. "That wasmessedup."

Her nostrils flared angrily as she fisted my t-shirt in her hands. She was cute when she was pissed off. In fact, she was always damn cute.

"Are you laughing at me, Tyson?" She asked tersely. "Because if you're laughing at me about this then you're messed up, too, and that's not cool."

"I'm not laughing at you," I rushed to assure her.

"Maybe we shouldn't be talking about this," she muttered, still sounding pissed but moving more towards disgruntled and I knew I needed to set this shit straight before things really went down the shitter for us.

"I was worried you'd see me differently after that night," I shared. "Because it's my fault he's dead. It's my fault you had to see that shit and if you do see me as

differently now, well, then that's my fault too. And that doesn't feel all that great."

Her body twitched but she closed her eyes tightly.

"Ty," she breathed out softly. "What the hell's the matter with you? Really, I want to know."

I flinched at her question but couldn't help but feeling amused at hearing the curse word come out of her mouth. Still, to this day, the twins still claimed she rarely swore and if she did swear at you it was because you were a complete asshole and deserved it because only an asshole could make a girl as sweet as Ariel come at you with dirty curse words. They were delusional and the sad thing was they knew it and had no fucking intention of ever changing it or their absurd ways.

"Why do you always take on the blame for everything?" Ariel asked seriously as she pressed her hand into my abs and pushed herself up until she loomed over me.

She didn't give me the chance to answer her, not that I had an answer for her because I had no idea what the hell she was talking about. I didn't take on the blame for everything, only the things that could be laid at my feet.

A small hand came at my face right before Ariel placed the soft palm of her hand against my cheek.

I froze, afraid to move. It was rare when Ariel initiated physical contact and I took it as the precious gift that it was. I didn't want to move because I didn't want to break the spell and make her pull her soft hand away from me.

"If anyone is to blame for what happened that night, Ty, it's that douche bag Chuck. Adrian told me that he wanted to do bad things to me before Quint even messed with him. He was not right in the head. He just kept coming at me, coming at us, over and

over again and, despite the weak assurances from the Council that he wouldn't be coming at us ever again, there was no stopping him. He was mentally unstable and obsessed with me. He stabbed Dash and cut open my face, for goodness sakes. I'm glad you stood in between the two of us that awful night because, Ty, I don't think you were paying enough attention at the time to have noticed, but I was absolutely terrified of him and thought he was going to hurt me again. If he had touched me I swear, Ty, I fucking swear, I probably would have passed out from sheer terror. I was huddled against the door, shaking in my boots, and, if I had thought I could have made it, I would have bolted and left you there alone to deal with him. Which would have made me the worst kind of coven member possible and likely made Uncle Quint hate me."

She pressed the pad of her thumb gently into my lower lip when I opened my mouth to combat her words, stopping me from speaking.

"No, Ty," she growled adorably. "I don't want to hear whatever messed up crap that's about to come oozing out of your stupid mouth. I don't want to hear it, and, I'll remind you of what I just said, It's stupid." She shook her head in disgust and did it sadly. "I don't know if you were always like this or if the change in you happened after what that greedy cow did what she did to not only you but Damien and Julian. But I think you're a little bit broken inside, Ty. I didn't see it at first, only having seen your asshole side and your confident attitude. Somehow, I missed this side to you. I see it now and, oddly enough, I don't even dislike it. It makes you seem less perfect, less intimidating and I know it makes me a bad person for feeling that way but I don't even care. Don't take that as me saying I'm going to take advantage of this side to you because I never would do that to you. What I will do, though, is have a care with you when that's not something I even thought to do before."

She stopped pressing on my lip with her thumb to gently swipe it the rest of the way across but she didn't give me a chance to speak and kept right on talking. Not that I had anything to say. My brain was as frozen solid as the rest of my body. Except for

my heart, that normally useless organ was beating double time like I'd been running in a fucking marathon.

"I've been selfish for months, Ty." She said shocking me even further and my hands itched with the need to touch her but I kept them where they'd landed when she sat up and that was at my sides.

"So stuck in my own head and focusing on my own pain and miserable existence that I didn't pay enough attention to what was going on with the rest of you. That was my bad, my mistake, and it's on me, all on me, Ty. But I'm in a good place now with everything and my eyes are finally wide open and aimed at something other than my own damned self for a change. I think it's high-"

Finally, my body came unstuck and my brain came back to life. I sat up and passed my elbows into the bed. The move brought me closer to Ariel, right into her personal space. She stopped speaking and her hand dropped away from my face.

"You're not selfish," I told her and, at hearing my words, her lips pinched tightly and she shook her head in the negative.

"I am," she replied immediately.

"You're not," I stressed.

"It took me a couple of days to realize why I'd been so upset and crying when he died. And, do you want to know what I came up with? I cried because I felt guilty. I felt guilty because I was relieved he was dead I was glad another human being was dead because him being dead would make my life a whole lot easier. That's fucking selfish, Tyson. Not to mention it's gross and totally messed up. But, I promise, that's over with now and I'm paying attention now. I'm going-"

My heart burned inside my chest as I snarled, "Shut up," right before turning my head up and slamming my lips against hers. She let out a little sound in surprise before melting into me. Her lips parted hesitantly and I slid my tongue inside, not at all hesitantly.

Her lips moved against mine as I explored her mouth with my tongue. She made a different kind of noise in the back of her throat as she pressed her chest deeper into mine and wrapped her arms around my neck. She clung to me as I deepened the kiss.

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I came up off my elbows to wrap my arms around her. One hand moved to her lower back just above the waistline to her pants, I slid my hand inside her hoodie and whatever shirt she had on underneath and pressed my palm flat against her heated bare skin. The other hand went to the back of her neck where it slid up and I tangled my fingers into her hair at the back of her head.

I used my hand in her hair to angle her head slightly to the side so I could deepen the kiss. She moaned sweetly into my mouth and the noise coupled with her tits pressed up against my chest sent a burning wave of heat and raw lust straight down to my dick.

Her arms around my neck loosened so she could get her hands into my long hair at the back of my neck. Her fingers tangled in my long hair much the same as I had my fingers tangled in hers.

She tore her lips from mine suddenly, breaking the kiss but not going far from me. Her mouth just inches from mine, she sucked in a lung full of air deeply that caused her chest to expand and I groaned as her breasts moved against my chest.

"Ariel," I said huskily, knowing I needed to stop this soon before things got too heated and became out of control. I didn't think she was ready for things to go much further than kissing and I didn't want to push her or do anything that might make her uncomfortable. We had the rest of our lives together to get to know each other in a deeper manner and there were six other guys besides myself she had a relationship with. I didn't want to be the one to overwhelm her or the cause of her withdrawing.

In a bold move that caught me entirely off guard because I hadn't thought her capable

of it, she swung one of her knees over my legs to press it into the mattress on the outside of my thigh and she climbed into my lap.

My hand in her hair immediately loosened as her heat came into contact with the hardness that was my dick and I dropped my hands to her hips. I pushed her hips back slightly, moving the lower half of her body away from my dick before I gave into the urge to hold on tight and rub the fucker up against her.

"Ty," she said hesitantly as she gave a tug on my hair, jerking my head up and my eyes moved away from my hands on her hips to meet her vibrant green eyes. "Did I do something wrong? I thought you liked it."

My head twitched and that wasn't the only thing. Couldn't she tell just how much I liked it? Maybe I had moved her back in enough time before she fully grasped exactly what was going on in my pants.

"I liked it," I told her honestly and I really wished I hadn't had to say it out loud. I wasn't embarrassed but I didn't want to say or do the wrong thing to embarrass her.

She tilted her head to the side and studied me curiously. "Then, why are we stopping?" She asked. "Why are you pushing me away?"

All this talking and her having moved her tits off of my chest had served to cool my system down and, though my dick was still hard, I no longer felt like I was out of control and might do something I shouldn't have.

"I need to be careful with you," I told her authoritatively.

She pursed her lips angrily before asking, "Who says so?"

"Ariel," I started but didn't get any further.

"I don't want you to be careful with me, Tyson." She whispered fiercely. "I want all of you to forget about how you met me, to forget about the things you saw that pretender woman do to me or the things you know that I've gone through so you can treat me like a normal girlfriend and not someone you think you have to treat like a fragile, useless thing."

I frowned at her.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked her.

"Everybody treats me like I'm special and not the good kind of special but the kind that needs to be treated with kid gloves all the time because there's something wrong with me. Well, I'm ready to be done with all that because I'm way over it. I don't treat any of you differently because you're a little broken or weird or whatever. I treat you all the same and I don't let your pasts get in the way of that. I want a clean slate, too."

She looked so damn serious with her lips pursed angrily and her body held rigid. She was pissed and there'd be no getting out of having this conversation with her, no matter how hard I tried. I didn't want to talk to her about any of this because she was right, we did treat her with kid gloves all the time and I honestly didn't see the gloves coming off any time soon. Except for maybe with the twins. They were over slow and cautious and ready to go, saying she was more than comfortable with us and that they thought we were too careful with her. I even agreed with them sometimes but I wasn't willing to be the one to test the waters and have it backfire on my ass.

"I don't think we should be having this conversation right now, girl." I told her something I really wanted her to agree with me on and let it alone.

I should have known not to get my damn hopes up. She was far too stubborn for her own good and definitely for mine, that's for damn sure.

"When do you think the right time will be to have this conversation then, Tyson?"
She asked sarcastically. "Never, maybe?"

Never worked just fine for me if that's what she wanted. I kept my mouth shut because I didn't think it wise to share that with her.

"Or," she hissed out, "maybe you'd like to wait and we can talk about in, oh I don't know, say, twenty-five years from now. Get serious, Tyson."

Oh shit. This was not going well at all and it was safe to say my dick wasn't hard anymore. At least there was that.

She put her hands on my chest and gave me a shove before sitting back and swinging her leg over me and climbing out of my lap.

Yeah, this was not good, not at all.

God damn it. I did not want to do this with her.

I laid back on the bed and rubbed my hands over my tired eyes. It was like she had come here looking for a fight with me and wasn't going to stop until she got what she wanted out of me.

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"Fuck this," I muttered, not about to give in and be a dick to her no matter how much she acted like she wanted it.

"No, Ty," she hissed. "Fuckyou."

Yeah,I thought,fuck me.

I sat up and swung my legs over the side, ready to get up and get the fuck out of here until after she was gone. And, if she didn't leave but ended up in bed with someone else, well, then I would just have to really get the fuck out of here and maybe go to Julian's or Damien's.

"What are you doing?" She asked my back as I stood up from the bed.

"I'll tell you what I'm not doing," I said quietly, "and that's fighting with you."

"I don't want to fight with you either," she whispered.

"Then, what the fucks your problem?" I shot back as I turned around to face her. I placed my hands on my hips and glared down at her.

Damn it. Now I was doing exactly what I said I wasn't going to do.

"I came here because I want you to stop avoiding me and I wanted to work this out with you because it's been bothering me to think you're upset with me. And now it's worse than it was before."

I shook my head. "We already talked that over and moved past it. That's done. You don't need to worry about that anymore."

And that was no lie. We were done with that and should be in the clear but, for whatever fucked up reason, we were worse off than where we had started.

"I.... I... Ty..." she stammered while looking confused. "I'm so messed up."

My head jerked when she'd said that and I studied her carefully. I had no idea what the hell she was talking about, she looked the same as always.

"How're you messed up?" I asked her in a quiet voice, wanting her to answer me without the bullshit this time.

"I," she said and then stopped. She swallowed loudly before lifting her hand towards her face. She hesitated before trailing the tips of her fingers down the pinkish white scar that curved around the apple of her cheek.

Watching her make that move had my body getting tight and my chest seizing.

"He did this to me," she said quietly. "Left his mark behind for me to wear every day for the rest of my life. But it's worse, Ty, so much worse."

"How's it worse, baby?" I whispered as I uncrossed my arms and moved back towards the bed, back to her.

I sat down on the edge of the bed with one leg bent into the bed, my other leg over the side of the bed with my foot on the floor and my upper body turned Ariel's way.

She lowered her hand from her face to press it into her middle where she moved it around to several places, stopping and pressing in deep in certain places. My eyes

watched her move and it got hard for me to breathe as her hand roamed around her belly. I knew what she was doing and why she stopped where she did.

"Left his marks on Dash," she whispered in a voice that wobbled. "I see them when I close my eyes. I see him plunging that knife in over and over again every time I close my eyes."

"Baby," I whispered as I reached for her.

She scooted back on her knees, just out of arms reach.

"I close my eyes," she said in that quiet, wobbly voice, "and I see his arms wheeling around in the air and the look on his face right before his body connected with the cement. The noise it made. The blood that immediately pooled out of his head. I see it every time I close my eyes and you know what, Ty?"

She stopped speaking and looked at me with those big green eyes of hers that were filled to the brim with raw emotion and none of it was good.

"What?" I gritted out roughly, my voice clogged as I choked on my emotions.

She pressed her hand back into her belly as she shook her head slowly from side to side.

"I see her head as it made contact with the corner of the counter and then she sprawled on the floor with her blood pooling around her head and I feel like a horrible person because I'm glad they're both dead because it means they can't hurt me anymore. And... and," she held her hands up helplessly in front of her body and she looked at them like she had no idea how they'd gotten there. "And I need you to tell me I'm not a terrible person, Tyson. You weren't there when she died, you didn't see it, but you were there when he died, you saw it, too. And you did not care at all. You didn't try to

hide that you didn't care he'd died and, I might not have understood it at first, but I don't think you're a terrible person because of it. So, why do I feel like a terrible person? Why can't I shake this? They were both awful people and, I would never say they deserved what they got, but-

I'd heard enough and was done with this shit. She had no reason whatsoever to feel like a terrible person. If she was a terrible person, then I was the goddamn devil.

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I shoved her hands out of the way as I reached for her. I shoved my hands in under her armpits and lifted her up. I hauled her across the bed and dropped her into my lap. Her side was to my front with both her legs draped over my thigh and her ass firmly in my lap. I wrapped my arms around her, one of my hands went low on her back and the other one moved to the back of her head. I pushed on her head and she got with the program as she got my meaning. She collapsed against me, her arms going around my middle as she stuffed her face into my neck.

Immediately, wet hit my skin where her face was and I silently cursed.

Jesus fucking Christ.

"It's gonna be okay, baby," I assured her quietly as she burrowed into my body and I held her tighter.

My eyes went to the door when I heard it creak open. Uncle Quint stood in the door, staring at Ariel in my lap crying. She didn't even know he was there. Uncle Quint's face got tight, his mouth pinched and he shook his head slowly before backing out of the room and closing the door quietly behind him. I didn't know what the hell that meant and I didn't give the first fuck. He was probably just being his normal brand of nosy asshole that had no problem bursting into my space without knocking in order to keep tabs on Ariel.

What an asshole.

"You're not a horrible person," I told Ariel as I pushed my Uncle out of my mind and focused solely on the sad and confused girl in my arms. "Those two, your fake mom

and Chuck, they were the horrible people, girl. Not you, though, never you."

The wet coming out of her eyes had started to soak into my t-shirt there was so much of it.

I laid back, taking her with me and, so lost in her own despair, I didn't even think she noticed I was moving her around.

I rolled to my side and held her tightly in my arms and pressed up to my chest, front to front, our legs tangled together.

I held her there until she stopped crying and the shaking stopped. Eventually, she lay there, still and unmoving with her hand fisted into the back of my t-shirt. One side of the neck of said t-shirt completely soaked in her tears.

I lifted my hand to her face and brushed the hair back out of her eyes, tucking it back behind her studded ear.

Her eyes were scrunched closed tightly as if to keep the world around her out if only she didn't have to look at it. Her beautiful face was finally red and splotchy from something outside of embarrassment and I felt bad for thinking she looked better when embarrassed and was glad she hadn't made the unnecessary effort to put on makeup today because it would have been smeared all down her face.

"Do you feel better now that you've got that out of your system?" I murmured.

I hoped like hell she said yes and wasn't disappointed when she muttered back, "Yeah, Ty, I feel better now."

She didn't sound very convincing but I'd give her the benefit of the doubt and take her word for it. She'd just cried her eyes out over feeling guilty she was glad two people

were dead when they didn't deserve her guilt. She didn't need me to give her shit on top of that.

"Okay, girl," I mumbled back, not contradicting her even though I didn't believe her, giving her what I thought she needed. And I was glad I did it when her eyes opened and she looked up at me with green eyes full of relief and a small smile on her lips.

"Thanks, Ty." She whispered. "Sorry I cried all over you and got your shirt wet. I don't know what's wrong with me right now."

I shrugged my shoulders, letting her know I didn't care and it was no big deal to me.

"It's just a shirt, girl," I told her. "I've got plenty of them and I know how to use a washing machine to get your snot out of this one."

Her arms around my back tensed, her green eyes flashed and she snapped, "I didn't get snot on you, Tyson. That's gross. I can't believe you think I'd be that gross with you."

I grinned at her broadly and her body started as her eyes dropped down to my mouth and her lips parted sweetly.

"You okay, girl?" I asked, wondering if she was staring at my mouth like that because she wanted to kiss me or if I had something stuck in my teeth.

"Yeah," she mumbled and said no more.

My grin grew until it turned into a smile and my lips twitched with suppressed laughter.

She liked it when I grinned at her and she definitely wanted to kiss me. I had been

noticing this more and more lately, her staring at my mouth like that after I smiled at her and I liked it a whole hell of a lot.

“Do you want me to put my tongue in your mouth?” I asked her seriously.

"Do I... Do I, what?" She sputtered as she looked at me in horror.

My smile stretched as wide as it could get.

"My tongue, girl," I said around my smile. "Do you want me to put it in your mouth? You keep looking at my mouth like you expect me to do something with it. So..." I trailed off and shrugged like it was no big deal to me either way. Which was a straight up lie.

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She glared at me as she moved to push herself away from me. I didn't let her go but held on to her tighter.

"Tyson," she growled low and adorably in warning.

I wanted to laugh in her face. There was nothing threatening or scary about her at all.

"I don't mind," I told her generously. "In fact, I'm fairly certain I'll enjoy it as much as you do, maybe even more."

"Tyson," she hissed like an angry cat. "This isn't a joke."

She was right, it wasn't a joke. In fact, it was pretty fucking serious.

"If you want more of that," I told her seriously, "all you need to do is speak up and say so or make your moves. No one will turn you down if that's what you're worried about. Unless it's the twins or probably my Uncle, then there's a good chance you might not have to put yourself out there to get whatever it is that you want. They'll probably go for it before you become brave enough to do it on your own."

Her eyes skirted to the side as color once again hit her cheeks.

Jesus.

"Umm..." she mumbled. "Dash kind of put the brakes on the physical too. He doesn't think I'm ready."

"Are you?" I asked bluntly and her eyes shot back to me. "You don't have to make the first move with me, girl, I'm not going to make you do that shit. But, that being said, I'm also not going to make any move on you though until you tell me you're ready. I don't want to push you too far too fast and fuck this up with you. I think you and I both get we've got baggage separately and now we've got baggage between us. We need to be careful so this thing we've got building between us stays good and never goes sour."

Her fingers trailed lightly down my back in the whisper of a touch and any amount of amusement I had been feeling immediately faded at the feel of her soft touch on me again. Again, when she'd initiated it.

"Thanks for taking care of me, Tyson." she said quietly. "Just now like you always do. You're the best friend a girl could ask for."

I frowned at her and told her harshly, "I don't want to be your friend, Ariel."

She flinched when I said her name.

I sighed. I mean, yeah, we could be friends, but first and foremost, I wanted to be her boyfriend. And I wanted her to call me her boyfriend before she thought to call me her friend.

"Yeah, you do, Ty." she told me authoritatively. "You want to be whatever I need you to be; whatever's best for me is what you want to give me. You and I both know it's true and you shouldn't try to lie to either one of us."

I narrowed my eyes on her. She had no problem meeting my eyes now and the seriousness in them caught me off guard. She was all over the place tonight and I was too slow to keep up with her mood swings.

I opened my mouth to demand an explanation to her fucked up words but snapped my mouth shut when her hands roamed further down my back, stopping briefly when she came into contact with the waistline of my jeans.

She drew in a breath sharply before her hands went lower and she palmed my ass in her hands.

"Ariel," I hissed as my dick twitched back to life.

Not this shit again.

God damn it.

What the hell was she doing?

"This is me telling you, Tyson," she murmured as her eyes dropped down to my mouth once again. "That I'm ready to take things to the next level. And you're going to give me that without worrying it's going to change things between us or drive me away because that's not going to happen."

I wanted to believe her, I really did. But it sounded too good to be true.

"How can you be so sure?" I whispered fiercely, wanting the answer almost as much as I wanted to stick my tongue back in her mouth. Almost, but not quite.

"Because you love me," she said simply and my heart skipped a beat. "And I love you. And you give the people you love what they need, it goes both ways, so there's that."

I had no idea where the sudden burst of confidence she was showing came from but I liked it. Still, because I wanted to know, I asked, "And what is it you need from me?"

I was momentarily ignoring the fact she'd proclaimed we loved each other. She was right on my end, of course, and I wasn't surprised she knew I loved her. I wanted to believe that she loved me, and made she even did, but I'd wait until she was less emotional for her to tell me again and believe it.

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She gripped my ass tightly in her hands, squeezing, and I closed my eyes against the desire that shot through me.

"Ariel," I groaned her name in warning as she shuffled closer to me, not stopping until her body was pressed up tight against my front.

Good Christ, here we went with this shit again.

"What I need," she said in a breathy voice, "is for you to stop treating me so carefully and act like I'm your girlfriend for once."

Damn.

That was not what I wanted to hear her say. It sounded too much like she wanted me to have sex with her and we were not going there now, probably not going there for a while. Not until I'd had a talk with the rest of the guys, a conversation I'd almost rather be tortured than actively participate in. But I was going to do it anyways because we all needed to be on the same page where she was concerned. It was like my worst nightmare come to life.

"Tyson," she whispered my name and the confidence had started to slip away, leaving fear of rejection in its place.

"Fuck," I hissed.

Okay, so I couldn't sleep with her until after the other guys were all on the same page.

But that didn't mean I couldn't stick my hand down her pants, play with her for a bit, and make her come that way.

Her hands left my ass and she went to turn away from me, mumbling, "Sorry," in embarrassment.

I was an asshole, to be sure, but I'd never not give her what she wanted if I had it in me to give it to her.

I grabbed ahold of her hip, stopping her before she could roll away from me. My hand uncurled from her hip and slid around to the small of her back where I applied pressure and pushed her front back into me.

Her eyes were wide and wounded, thinking I'd rejected her. Her lips were parted and her lower lip quivered.

"Fuck," I hissed again before I bent my head down and roughly placed my lips to hers.

She made a small, surprised noise as I took advantage of her parted lips and slid my tongue inside. Her hands immediately went to my side and she clutched at the material of my t-shirt there, bunching it up. Tentatively, slowly, she pulled her fist up my side, taking the shirt with her and exposing my skin to her.

I cupped the side of her face with my hand as I deepened the kiss. She whimpered in the back of her throat as she let go of the shirt and her hand slid around my side, hot against my skin and moved back down to the waistband of my jeans.

In a bold move that had me tearing my mouth away from hers and sucking in a sharp breath, she slid her hand under my jeans, under my boxers and right in.

"Fuck," I snarled as her soft, warm hand cupped my ass cheek and she squeezed gently. Even though it made my dick jump and strain against my zipper painfully, I made no move to adjust it, instead letting her take the lead for now and allowing her to do what she wanted with me until I couldn't take it anymore and it was my turn to finally put my hands on her. For now, I'd let her explore.

She moved her mouth around my jaw and trailed kisses down my neck. Everywhere she touched me, my body burned. Her tongue flicked out as she moved her lips against me, tasting my skin.

I couldn't not touch her anymore.

My hand trailed up her side, under her shirt as the other one cupped the side of her face closest to the bed. I pressed her head to me as she kissed down my neck and moved to my collarbone. I skimmed up her ribs with the other hand, stopping when I hit the edge of her bra.

She sucked in a sharp breath and, much to my disappointment, her mouth left my skin. I held on to her side, under her breasts, as she sat up and threw her thigh over my lap, straddling me.

I grunted as she landed heavily on my crotch and I could feel the intense heat of her core as it rubbed up against my jean covered dick.

Christ.

I needed to get her off of my dick and take control of the situation before she got carried away with me and I was too far gone and simply let her.

Her hands pulled on the hem of my tee as she dragged it up my body, I sat up and raised my arms for her when she made it to my chest. She pulled it over my head

none to gently and I lowered my arms so she drag it down my arms. Once I'd cleared it, she carelessly tossed it over her shoulder.

"Girl," I grunted as I took in the heated look in her eyes and flushed face.

Her eyes darted to mine and she licked her lips before they raked back down over my body and, fuck me, that was all kinds of hot too.

She bent back over my body and her lips landed on my collarbone, picking up where she'd left off before ripping my tee away from me.

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I looked down and watched her as she moved her mouth all over my body, caressing me with her tongue. I'd groaned when it'd flicked out against my nipple. Her teeth gently scraped against it as her hands trailed down my sides and I'd had enough.

This was supposed to be about her, not me.

I shot up and she fell back, making a surprised noise and whispering, "Ty? What are you doing?"

"I'm gonna make you come, baby," I told her honestly as I pulled on the hem of her shirt and dragged it up her body. She mimicked my moves from earlier and raised her arms above her head so I could drag the hoodie over her head and up off of her arms. When I had it free of her I tossed it to the side and did the same with the tank she'd been wearing underneath the hoodie.

"I," she said breathily as her chest heaved. "Well... no one but me has ever done that before."

Yeah. Fuck yeah, but I liked the sound of that a whole hell of a lot.

"I'll use my fingers this time," I informed her. Then, I went on to promise, "You'll like it."

And she would, I'd make sure of it.

"Okay," she whispered and I grinned down at her.

She lay on her back on my bed with her head now aimed towards the foot of it as I hovered over her. The upper half of her body now only covered in a red lacey bra that exposed the top half of her pale breasts that were moving up and down with each heavy breath she took.

My eyes skimmed over her, taking in the circular burn scars littered across her collarbones and the upper parts of her arms. I took in her heaving breasts and her flat stomach that had a little more meat to it than it two weeks ago, thank fuck.

She was incredibly beautiful, scars and all.

I dipped my head down to hers and kissed her, my tongue moving right in and taking over. She whimpered and I lowered my body down beside hers so I was pressed up against her side, feeling a good deal of her skin against mine for the first time.

It burned in the best kind of way and I shivered uncontrollably as I deepened the kiss.

Her arms came up and she latched on to my shoulders, her fingers digging in painfully as she held on to me.

I broke the kiss, my own chest heaving now as heavily as hers was and I dipped my head down towards her tits. My mouth met with creamy skin as my hand hit her pants and I moved it down her bell and right in.

She sucked in a sharp, surprised breath as my tongue moved along the lacey edge of her bra and I cupped her mound with my palm.

"Tyson," she breathed out and my mouth curved up and I smiled against her skin.

Not fucking around and not giving her a chance to back out or change her mind, I slid my fingers through her wet heat until I hit my target and her body jerked violently. I

didn't start her off slow, she was already so wet and ready for it that I immediately rubbed circles around her clit as I pulled the edge of her bra down with my teeth.

I raised my hand, the one not busy feeling up sweet pussy, and I dragged down the cup of her bra. I palmed her tit and pushed up as my mouth moved her nipple. Her hips bucked as she rode my hand and her body began to tremble. I sucked her nipple into my mouth and she moaned sweetly and her hands moved to my hair. She buried her fingers into the hair at the top back of my head and she tugged roughly, urgently against my hair.

My scalp stung and I didn't mind in the slightest as my mouth moved against her nipple, my tongue tasting every piece of her skin it came into contact with as my finger moved against her clit.

"Ty," she whimpered and I heard it in her voice. She was close. Her first time getting off not by her own hand wasn't going to take her long at all and I could not fucking wait to see it.

I moved my mouth off her tit, replacing my tongue with my thumb and moved up her body until my lips were a hairsbreadth away from her own.

I snaked my tongue across her bottom lip as one of her hands left my hair and dropped down to my wrist. She wrapped her hand around my wrist and held on tight, not stopping me, just holding on for the ride. Her hips bucked one last time as I watched her eyes screw up tight from up close and my name was whimpered out past her lips.

Her nails dug into my skin as she came on my fingers while I watched pure beauty wash across her face, given to her for the first time by someone else, by fuckingme.

Yeah.

Fuck yeah.

I loved Ariel Kimber more than anything else in this whole goddamned world because she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

Chapter Thirteen

Something essential to life settled in my chest

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I ran my fingers through the soft strands of her light hair. When the strands fell through my fingers I picked up another thick chunk and repeated the process.

"What are you doing, Ty?" She asked in a lazy voice.

Instead of answering her, I asked, "Will you go somewhere and do something with me?" I licked my dry lips, nervous she might turn me down and crush my fucking soul.

"Where are we going, Ty?" she asked in response and I closed my eyes tightly in relief. I should have known better than to ever question or doubt in her.

"It's a surprise," I told her on a grin.

She blinked slowly as her eyes zeroed in on my mouth.

"Don't," I said in warning.

She blinked, this time not slowly and looked shocked. "Don't what, Ty?" She asked hesitantly.

"Don't look at my fucking mouth like that right now, like you want my tongue again." I warned her seriously. "Or I am going to give it to you and, I know you missed it earlier because you were crying your eyes out, but Uncle Quint has already walked in here once to check on you. If we're holed up in here for much longer, there's a good chance he'll bust in again and I really don't think you want him to do that when I've got my mouth on you."

"Shit," she muttered, sounding horrified and I couldn't keep the grin off of my face.

I shook my head as I tried hard to suppress the laughter. The twins were so fucking delusional it almost wasn't even funny.

"It wasn't..." she trailed off and waved her hand vaguely in the direction of the door. "While we were, um... busy?"

Busy?

My eyebrows raised.

"Is that what the kids are calling it these days?" I asked, teasing her. Her lips flattened into a tight line and, before she could chastise me, I rushed to assure her. "No, he didn't come in here while we were busy, and, even if he had, I wouldn't have noticed because I was all about you. He came in while you were crying, shook his head at us and left the way he'd come, quietly."

She pressed her hand into my stomach, low, just below my bellybutton as she muttered, "Weird, and not like him at all."

She had that right, it was incredibly weird but that was just my Uncle. There was no explanation for half the shit he did and I wouldn't even begin to try. It'd be wasted breath.

I untangled one hand from her hair and lowered it to my stomach where I placed it atop hers.

"You should get dressed before someone else busts in here on us," I advised.

She grinned at me, big and happy and I felt my breath catch in my throat at the sight

of it. Her smiles were a rare gift I'd never ever grow tired of her granting me.

"I'll get dressed, Ty," she told me sweetly. "But, only because I want to see this surprise of yours, not because I care about someone walking in on me in here with you."

I frowned at her. This was not the shy, prudish girl I'd grown to love. This girl was bold and made me look like the prudish one of the two of us.

Good grief.

"I care," I told her honestly. "But I would appreciate you getting dressed so we can get out of here."

She smiled, put slight pressure on my stomach as she leaned into me and kissed me on the lips before moving back away from me and sliding off the bed.

I watched her as she moved around my bedroom in her bra and pants as she searched for her top and hoodie. She still wore a smile, but it was slightly smaller than it had been before, but it was still there and I couldn't help but find it endearing.

I shook myself out of it as she picked her shirt up from the floor and shook it out.

I sighed as I tore my eyes off of her and reached a hand out to my phone on my nightstand.

My fingers slid across the cracked screen as I activated it, bringing my phone to life. I pulled up the group chat I had with the rest of the guys. I scanned through the texts, noticing none of them were mine even though more than a few had been addressed to me. I really had been pushing them all away and I was a serious asshole.

I did what I should have done weeks ago and I sent them all a text message.

An hour had passed since Ariel and I had left my house. We'd stopped at a diner that was open around the clock and, even though she claimed to not be hungry, I forced her to order something to eat anyways. She was putting on some much needed weight but it wouldn't stick if she forgot to eat and skipped meals. I'd do my bit to make sure she continued to put on the pounds until she looked healthy like I'd never seen her look before.

Even though she'd claimed she hadn't been hungry, she still ate the food I had forced her to order and, the entire time, she acted like it had been her idea to order the shit in the first place.

We'd left the diner hand in hand after I paid for our meals and I escorted her to my Audi and opened the passenger door to let her in. She'd held my hand in hers sweetly as I drove us to my new shop. She remained quiet on the drive as she watched the scenery change out the window as we drove by. I had expected her to ask questions, to demand to know where I was taking us. It wasn't like her to be so quiet, so complacent. I took that as the rare gift it was as well and decided not to poke at it.

I parked on the street behind the twin's giant black beast of a truck and got out. Ariel wasn't far behind me. She didn't look at the building but her eyes were instead glued to the vehicles lined up on the street.

Uncle Quint's sedan was in front of the truck, a black Camaro in front of the sedan and a big sliver SUV in front of the Camaro. They were all here and I assumed since they weren't all standing out on the sidewalk that Uncle Quint had unlocked the shop

and let them inside. I hoped he'd gotten the tour out of the way as well because, even though renovations had started on the apartment upstairs, nothing had been done to that damn ritual room in the basement. I couldn't hire normal people, non-magical people into the basement to clean that shit up. Rain had offered, but I wasn't comfortable with having that freak down there when he seemed so fucking excited about it.

The man scared the shit out of me. I did not want to know what the hell kind of chaos he'd cook up down there and what the hell it'd mean for me or my newly acquired building.

"What's going on here?" Ariel asked as I took her hand, laced her fingers through mine and herded her towards the front door.

I didn't answer her and she remained quiet as the bell rang above our heads as we entered the shop.

"What is this place?" Ariel asked in quiet awe as she looked around with big eyes. I found myself looking around the space the same way, in awe.

It looked different when filled with my family and the people I loved. When I was last here, the space had seemed dark, gloomy and dusty, and I wasn't sure I'd really had any desire to return.

The twins were seated at the round table covered in black cloth and they were across from each other. Abel held the old blind broads' beautiful deck of tarot cards in between his hands as he shuffled through them carefully.

Both their heads turned our way when the bell rang out above us. They smiled playfully at me, openly, before turning their eyes on Ariel where they lit up joyously. Abel said something quietly to his brother and Addison nodded his head before pushing his chair back and coming up to his feet. Without hesitation, he moved right

towards Ariel. When he stood in front of her, his eyes skirted to the side and he stared at me in question.

My lips tipped up in a small smile as I nodded and let go of her hand.

Addison's hand replaced mine in hers and he gave a gentle tug on it.

She looked back at me questioningly and I grinned at her before patting her on the ass. She scowled at me before being dragged off behind Addison and her fake, angry gaze was lost to me.

I didn't mind losing her to my brother, though; she was in good hands.

I looked around the room, taking everything in. And, what I saw had warmth, which I hadn't felt in fucking months, bloom and grown inside my chest like a fragile thing.

I was lucky to have been born into the family I had. My mother and my father having been extraordinarily beautiful, loving people who'd been the best parents any kid could have asked for.

Then they were dead and I was lucky to have the family left that I'd been raised in, then smart enough to choose for myself.

Lately, I'd been so busy beating myself down, that I'd forgotten and lost sight of all the good things I'd also been blessed with in my life.

Right now, as I stood inside the piece of shit building I'd stupidly bought out of guilt, I took in the immense beauty that was my family.

Julian and Uncle Quint were at the back wall, standing in front of the many bookshelves. Their heads were pressed close together and bent over an open book Uncle Quint held aloft in his hands. His lips moved but the words were so quietly

spoken that they didn't drift far enough my way for my ears to hear.

Something essential to life settled in my chest as Uncle Quint looked up at me, smirked, then tipped his head back down to his book.

I placed my hand to my chest with my palm over my heart as my eyes moved away from my Uncle and his best friend.

Dash was behind the front counter with Damien. He had his ass up on a wooden stool in front of the register, his feet on the bottom rung. He watched Damien move his hands around dramatically with a glimpse of amusement with patient eyes. Dash looked settled and like a man who was resigned to his fate, a few he was amused by but was going to pretend to be annoyed by.

I smiled as I looked away from them and my gaze moved to where it had started out, on the twins. The twins and now Ariel.

Ariel sat on Addison's lap with his arms wrapped around her middle. She was cuddled up to him, her head on his shoulder and her lovely green eyes aimed across the table at Abel who was cutting the tarot deck in half.

She was happy and about to get something she'd wanted for a very long time. And Abel was going to give it to her.

My eyes burned as I dropped my head down to stare at my boots, overcome with emotions. It had been what felt like forever since we'd all been together. And I couldn't remember ever having been so happy.

My family, my crazy fucking coven, were all kinds of awesome.