



Second Chance by Fate (Fated Apex Mates #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I should hate the three Apex Alphas who exiled me. Instead, I'm back to save their lives.

Three years ago, they branded me a traitor and cast me out. Now I'm racing against time to protect them from a threat they can't even see. But with a curse sealing my lips, earning their trust seems impossible.

Enzo, Jax, and Steele look at me like I'm the enemy. Yet every time I'm near, I see the struggle in their eyes—their beasts calling to claim me even as their suspicion holds them back.

Their diminished powers should be proof of my betrayal, but they don't know the truth.

In a game where nothing is what it seems, I'm forced to choose between my need for vengeance and protecting the three males who still own my heart.

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Chapter 1

Violet

This is such a bad idea.

The same words play over and over in my head as my hands tighten around the steering wheel, the urge to whip the sports car into a U-turn overwhelming me. My eyes dart back and forth between the gleaming purple sparkle of my nails to the road ahead, trying not to get distracted by the idea of going back and forgetting this quest that has consumed me for the past year.

It's almost becoming a song now, with a beat put to music.

Such a bad idea, such a bad idea. Violet is making such a terrible choice.

It's catchy and should steer me away, but it doesn't. I'm too cocky for my own good.

On either side of me, flashes of the Arizona desert dart by as my foot lays heavier on the gas, my final destination tangible at long last.

Vultures spin in an ominous dance in the twilight sky to my right, undoubtedly eying some poor, dying animal. It's another sign to get the hell out of there, to return to Miami, where I've been serving the past three years in exile. I don't need the coven or a reading to spell this out for me. Bitsy's shrill warnings keep playing out in my head and have been all the way from home. All the signs are yelling in my face.

Turn around.

But I keep surging forward. I have to. I can't let this go with good conscience.

They won't be happy to see me, and I gave the Alphas no warning I intended to come back. Of course not. I can hear Enzo now, scolding me for disobeying his direct order. At least he's overriding my best friend's incessant nagging.

But is that all he'll do? An exile isn't something to be taken lightly. The Apex Alphas didn't send me away on a whim. They didn't trust me then, and they won't appreciate me showing up like this now, especially without a reason.

I shudder slightly and shrug off the premonition of danger, leaning forward to adjust the settings on the radio. My hand brushes against the protective crystals dangling from the rearview mirror, a glint of light catching in the reflection as I turn up the song to distract my troubled mind. Music hasn't worked over the past two days of driving, but it's all I have for now.

My breath catches when I recognize the motorcycles closing in behind me. For a millisecond, I forget where I am and appreciate the beauty of the bikes zooming up around me. Then reality settles.

Shit. I'm already detected. How are they onto me so fast?

I'm in Apex territory now—but that's stupid. Everything is Apex territory in one form or another. They can't possibly know I'm here already... can they?

My mind races with the possibilities. Maybe it's just a coincidence. Maybe I can talk my way out of it. Maybe I should have just turned around when I had the chance.

On all sides of my car, sleek, black bikes pull along, their leather Apex jackets giving

them away even before I look at their faces peering out from behind their helmets. Some of the shifters carry their mates on the back, but most ride alone. I recognize their posture and their stances. I've ridden with them on the back of Enzo's bike, but that feels like an eternity ago. In some ways, it was an eternity ago. That was a different life, a life when the Apex Alphas liked and respected me.

Maybe they won't recognize me, I think with childish optimism. Right. As if I had changed so much in three years. I still bear the same purple streaks in my hair. I suddenly wish I had the foresight to make some changes to my appearance.

But I remind myself that I'm not here to fool anyone. I'm not hiding out. I'm here to help—whether they like it or not.

One rider makes a gesture for me to pull over, and for half a second, I consider speeding up, but that wouldn't be smart. Even with all my magic, I can't outrun the half dozen Apex shifters on motorcycles. And I can't keep my presence in Sedona hidden forever—even if they are catching me off guard before I'm ready to present myself again. No. I have to follow orders, to play by their rules, stupid as they are.

Stifling a sigh, I do as I'm silently instructed, turning down the music, and quietly enshrouding a layer of protection around me. Although, I doubt I'm in any real danger. They'll sooner bring me to the Alphas and have them sort me out for breaching the exile. Nothing happens in Apex territory without going through the Alphas first, particularly when my exile was under Alpha order.

All the same, I don't want to be at the whim of some trigger-happy newbie trying to make a good impression. A shroud of protection never hurt anyone.

Dust flies as we all come to a stop on the side of the darkening highway, and I roll down my window. Instantly, I recognize the wolf shifter peering back at me, my stomach dropping slightly. There's no way to smooth talk my way out of this one, but

simultaneously, I'm relieved. He's not going to harm me. I'm certain of that.

Baylor peers at me in shock after doing a double take.

"It really is you!" he mutters, stepping back to shake his head in disbelief.

"You don't look happy to see me, Bay," I quip lightly.

"Aren't you banished?"

I force a smile and shrug. "Nothing lasts forever, kid. How are you? How's the family?"

He looks to the rest of his waiting pack nervously.

"Do the Alphas know you're back, Violet?" he demands, regaining his composure and drawing back toward the car again, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

His gloved hands close into fists, and my heart drops more. He's onto me for sure. He signals for another one of the pack members to approach the vehicle, and I sit up straighter as they look inside my fully loaded car.

"It looks like you're just getting in. Are you moving back?"

His rapid-fire questions annoy me.

"It's a free country, Bay," I retort with more sharpness than I intend.

"You're in Apex territory, Violet," he fires back.

"Everywhere in Arizona is technically your Apex Alpha's territory," I snap, my

temper flaring.

“Tell it to the Alphas,” he grunts, and I smother another groan as he reaches for his phone. “I don’t need to tell you how things work around here.”

“Stop!” I beg him, extending my hand in panic. “I... I’ll call them myself.”

He hesitates again, and I can tell he doesn’t want to be the messenger, but he also has a duty to report this, especially with so many witnesses.

“You’re putting me in a really awkward position,” he growls. “You know I can’t go against my orders, against Apex Alpha orders. I have to report that you’re here.”

Beguilingly, I grin at him, even though my heart is racing. “I just wanted to get settled in town first. Give a girl a break, Bay.”

“You’re not supposed to be in town,” he reminds me coldly. “Unless I get authority saying otherwise, I need to see you out of here.”

Biting on my lower lip, I lean over the window. “I’ll call them as soon as I find a place to unpack. But I had to come back now. It’s a matter of life and death.”

His brow furrows, and he waves everyone back. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I’ve already said more than I should, and I try to lighten the mood by maintaining my smile. “I mean... well, it’s really something I need to talk with the Alphas about. Won’t you let me do that myself?”

“Are you threatening them?” he asks angrily, and I scoff, rolling my eyes.

“Of course not. Do I look like an idiot?”

And if I were threatening them, do you think I’d announce it in front of half the Apex pack? Geez, where do they find these shifters?

That’s a dumb question. The Apexes are the best of the best. Only the best and strongest can hope to be a part of any state Apex pack. But sometimes I wonder...

Baylor hesitates again, and I can see him considering it.

“You’re jamming me up,” he complains again.

“You’re the one who stopped me,” I rib him gently. “You could have let me keep going and been none the wiser.”

Baylor scoffs. “Right. And when the Alphas get wind of that? It would be my ass on the line.”

He brings up a good point.

“What are you so worried about?” I insist. “I’m just a girl going through town.”

“No,” he corrects me. “You’re a powerful witch who’s too close to Dusty Woods for my liking. That town is off limits to you.”

I snort again. “Come on, seriously?”

“You think the Alphas’ security is a joke? You know exactly where their town is.”

“And I also know I can’t get to them unless they invite me in. What’s the danger?”

“You’re a witch. Who the hell knows what you can or can’t do. I still don’t know why you got banished. For all I know, that’s exactly why you’re not allowed in Arizona—because you’re able to access Dusty Woods.”

I give him another weary smile, but my pulse is racing, and I’m sure he can hear it. They aren’t Apex shifters for nothing. Their senses are far superior to normal shifters.

“It has nothing to do with that,” I reassure him. “I can’t access Dusty Woods without their invitation. And I will tell them I’m here when I’m settled. Just give me a night, will you? You can even put a team with me if you think I’m that dangerous.”

Warily, Baylor steps back from the car and waves everyone back to their bikes, but I don’t believe the matter is resolved.

He’s going to call Enzo the second I drive off. It’s his duty. I won’t have time to prepare at all. Shit. I’m in trouble now. All this planning for nothing. So much for keeping a low profile.

“Fine,” he concedes. “Where are you staying?”

I hesitate, unsure I want to tell him that much, but he’s not giving me much of a choice in the matter.

“I was going to stop up ahead at the Super Tree Motel,” I confess, sensing that the truth is my only recourse here.

“You’ll stay there tonight,” Baylor instructs me, and I exhale, relieved he’s letting me go.

“Okay.” Rolling up the window, I half salute the shifter and pull back out, my mind whirling in double time now.

So much for a discreet assist from the sidelines. I'm fully in it now.

I barely make it to the city without my phone lighting up. The peaceful evening I had planned for myself suddenly looks a lot more hectic when Bitsy gives me an earful through the Bluetooth speaker.

"Are you out of your mind?" my best friend yells. "You went back to Arizona? How many times have you said you weren't ever stepping foot back there? Is this because of what happened last year?"

Cringing, I steer the car into the Super Tree Motel off the highway and park near the entrance, allowing Bitsy's voice to fill the interior of the car. Bad news really does travel fast.

"How the hell did you hear about that so quickly?" I ask, more out of curiosity than anger. It doesn't surprise me that she has friends in the Apex pack in Arizona, but that was record time, even for her. She must be amazing at her public relations job.

"Never mind. You need to get back here before you get yourself killed," she moans, the worry thick in her tone. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Probably," I say. "But I'm not coming back. At least not yet. I can't just sit idly by?—"

"Violet—"

"I can't, Bits. They need me." My statement is oddly flat, and she picks up on it right away.

She laughs mirthlessly. "After the way they treated you, who cares? They exiled you! Screw them and what they need. What about what you need? You're going to end up

cursed—and they won't do anything to help you if that happens, I promise you that!"

I purse my lips, catching sight of my golden-brown eyes in the rearview. I'm exhausted from driving, the usual passion fizzled from their depth. Lowering my lashes, I fix my gaze on the dashboard, the temptation to hit the red button and disconnect the call gigantic.

Bitsy means well, but I'm not in the mood right now. She's not telling me anything I haven't agonized over repeatedly for more than a year.

"Or is that what this is about?" Bitsy demands when I don't respond.

"What?" I ask dumbly. "What are you going on about now?"

"Screwing them. Was the sex that good?"

Mildly offended by her bluntness, I tense. "I don't expect you to understand. But they do need me."

"If they needed you, they would have reached out to you once in the past three years. Has one of them even tried to call you? A text?"

I'm done with this conversation. Every word she speaks drives home more pain.

"I'm in Sedona now, Bitsy. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Just come home. Nothing good will come of this, Violet. They banished you and didn't lift that ban. You're asking for trouble."

"Love you. Bye," I sing, giving into the temptation and disconnecting the call. I grab my purse and head inside to book a room, turning off my phone before anyone else

can call to harass me about my poor life choices.

To my surprise, the human receptionist is alert and nervous, his eyes darting around as soon as I enter. I've never walked into a motel lobby and seen such a wide-awake receptionist before. I'm too exhausted to take real note of it.

"Hey... need a room?" he asks, twitching slightly.

I arch an eyebrow and nod, my senses heightened as I look around. We seem to be alone, but I get the feeling he's expecting someone.

Maybe his dealer, I muse, gaging by the way he's acting.

Without asking me for a credit card or ID, he slaps a key on the counter. "Room 202."

Suspiciously, I eye him. "Don't you want to be paid?"

"Pay on the way out," he mutters, waving me away like I'm contagious.

My nerves tingle with the unsettling sense that something's wrong. A part of me wants to argue, but I wisely keep my mouth shut, the sense of danger rising all around me.

Really, how many more signs do I need? It's a freaking carnival of red flags all over the place.

But I've already attracted too much attention today, and I assume he's worried I'm going to cross paths with some kind of shady business deal.

"Okay..." I slide the key off the counter and retreat to my car. My razor-sharp witch

senses look for other vehicles in the lot, but nothing stands out to me. Even so, I can't shake the feeling that I'm being watched.

Are they following me? Do they know I've come to warn the Alphas?

I shudder again, the consequences of my actions hitting me in full force now that I'm back in Sedona and in the middle of it. It's not too late to turn back. I haven't seen the Alphas, and they haven't seen me, even if they have probably caught wind of my presence. I could take Bitsy's advice and go back to Florida.

But then they'll never be okay, and I could never live with myself, even after the way they treated me. Even if they kind of deserve it.

No. No one deserves this. Once upon a time, I cared for these jerks, and however their lives turn out, it doesn't need to be like this. I just need to tread carefully and not expose myself.

Again, I take inventory of my surroundings, looking for one of the motorcycles from Baylor's crew. But I still do not see anything out of place.

Gnawing on the insides of my cheeks, I grab my duffel bag from the trunk of my car and make my way up the rusted iron steps to the second floor. Another shiver of apprehension rushes through me at the threshold, and I almost turn to flee again.

Something isn't right.

Pressing my ear to the door, I listen for movement inside, closing my eyes and honing my inner powers, but there's nothing.

Go home, Violet. You're exhausted . I need a hot shower and a meal after my trip. I'm seeing shadows everywhere now. If I keep expecting trouble, I'm sure to find it.

Sighing, I step back and put my key in the lock, pushing open the door to the musky-smelling room.

Instantly, I realize my mistake and step back over the threshold as three figures rise in the darkness toward me, but it's too late.

“Hello, Violet,” one growls, his voice instantly recognizable. “It's been a while.”

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Chapter 2

Enzo

Seeing her hurts me.

Getting the call from Baylor, I felt a dozen things, but pain was not one of them.

Anger, betrayal, slight arousal. Now, however, I'm overcome by pain, and it catches me off guard. I don't expect it, but Violet's golden-green gaze, widening with fear as she locks eyes with me, burns my soul.

She's afraid of us, of me?!

It's insulting. If anything, she turned our lives upside down. She has no right to look at me like that.

"Guys..." she sputters, backing out of the motel room, her back falling against the railing with her hands extended as if we're about to attack her. For half a second, I think she's going to sprint back down the steps the way she came until Jax emerges from the darkness with his hand extended.

"Hi, Violet," my youngest brother says warmly. "It's good to see you."

Her eyes dart between us, taking in my furious expression and Jax's unabashed half-smile.

“Come inside,” Jax urges her. “Let’s talk.”

Reluctantly, and visibly swallowing, she shuffles forward, readjusting the bag on her shoulder, and I step back to let her inside. Steele flips on a lamp from where he’s sprawled on the bed, rocking his crossed ankles casually, but he says nothing as our former lover ambles inside the modestly furnished room, his silver eyes shooting daggers in her direction.

Carefully, Violet sets her bag down on the table as I slam the door behind her.

“Did you really think you were going to come back undetected?” I bark. “What part of ‘exile’ did you fail to understand?”

“That wasn’t my intention?—”

“Save your bullshit, Violet,” Steele interjects, immediately picking up where I left off. Our youngest brother gives us both a reproving look.

“Steele,” Jax sighs. “Let her speak. She obviously came back for a reason. We should let her tell us what it is.”

“Yeah. To fuck with our powers more.” Steele sits upright, his scowl deepening. “When we banished you, we meant permanently. That doesn’t mean you can come back into town when you feel like it, when you think you’ve done your time.”

Anger colors Violet’s face, the corners of her lips tucking inward. She casts me a sidelong look, but to her credit, she keeps her infamous temper in check.

“I didn’t mean to blindside you by coming back,” she says. “But your patrol caught me off guard.”

“You’re in Apex territory,” I remind her.

“Yes, I’ve already been told,” she fires back.

A rush of affection toward her fills me in spite of myself. I forgot how feisty she can be, but this isn’t the time to show my appreciation for her attitude.

Nothing good can come of her being here. I know it, and so do my brothers, despite Jax’s kindness toward her.

“What are you doing here, Violet?” I demand, stalking toward her and casing around her slowly.

Her scent instantly overcomes me, the vanilla and sage that I still dream about but would never admit to anyone. I hate how easily she brings me back to those lazy summer days at our estate in Dusty Woods, romping around in bed. I try to shrug it off, but it’s hard—in more ways than one.

“Arizona is my home,” she reminds me.

“And you just randomly came back today?” Steele scoffs. “I don’t buy it. You have to have a reason. Something made you feel brave enough.”

I glance at my skeptical brother, but I can tell he’s looking her over with the same interest as Jax and me, even if he’s hiding it better. How can he not? Violet looks amazing. The Florida sun has done her good. She’s glowing and as beautiful as she’s ever been.

“I won’t bother you,” Violet promises. “Just let me live my life, and I’ll stay out of your way.”

Steele isn't convinced.

"You think we're just going to let you run rampant around Sedona?" He looks at me as if waiting for me to demand another banishment, but I can't bring myself to say the words again.

I hate to admit it, but I'm glad she's back. I regretted sending her away.

"He's right," Jax agrees unexpectedly. "You shouldn't be allowed to run around Sedona unattended."

Smugly, Steele crosses his arms over his chest and nods, but my eyebrows raise. That's odd for Jax to say.

"We'll bring you back to Dusty Woods with us."

In unison, all three of us protest Jax's suggestion.

"Hell no!" Steele cries out.

"That's not a good idea," Violet counters worriedly.

"No way," I grumble.

"It's a good way to keep an eye on her," Jax insists. "She's already here, and let's face it, guys, it's not like our powers have gotten any better since she's been banished. That was the reason we sent her away, wasn't it?"

"In part!" I blurt out. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Violet tense, hurt cross over her face. My eyes narrow, and I whip my head toward her. "Do you know anything about that? Is that why you're here? Because you're trying to mess with our

powers more?”

“I want to help you,” she says coldly. “But not if you’re going to keep fighting me at every turn. I tried to tell you that I had nothing to do with your weakening powers before you cast me out.” She pauses. “And while I can’t do anything to help you find your fated mate, I’m not keeping her away by being here. I assume your Luna hasn’t appeared since I’ve been gone, either, has she?”

Embarrassed, I look away, but none of us answer her question.

“Right.” Steele scoffs again. “Our powers must have been affected by the other witch we had in our bed.” His words drip with sarcasm. “You know you’re at least partially responsible for the bullshit that happened.”

Violet grits her teeth. “Look, I came back because I want to be here and help you figure this out, but if it’s going to be a battle like always?—”

“Get your stuff,” I interject. “We’ll bring you back to Dusty Woods and talk about it there. I don’t like discussing this out here in the open. It’s not secure.”

“I don’t?—”

“It’s not safe out here where anyone can be listening in,” I repeat. “Dusty Woods is protected. Get your things.”

Grunting in dismay, Violet spins around to obey, and I nod at Jax to follow her.

“She’s your responsibility now because this was your bright idea,” I warn him. “If things get worse for us, it will be your ass.”

Jax eyes me. “You really still believe that she’s the cause of all our troubles? Even

after all this time?”

I purse my lips as he shakes his head and follows Violet back out to her car to collect the rest of her belongings, leaving me alone with Steele.

“She’s powerful enough that she could have been wreaking havoc from Miami,” Steele says. “And she was mad as hell when we banished her.”

“You know we had eyes on her in Miami,” I growl in a low voice. “If she was trying to fuck us over from Florida, she did a damn good job of hiding it.”

Both of my brothers make valid points, and I don’t know what to believe. All I know for sure is that I’m glad she’s back, even for all the trouble I’m sure her presence is bound to cause, particularly with Steele.

But I haven’t stopped thinking about Violet once in three years, and whether Steele wants to admit it, I know he missed her, too.

We don’t exchange a word all the way back to Dusty Woods, but I carefully study Violet’s profile in the back of the magically armored SUV. She really has not changed much since I last saw her, except for the healthy bronze glow of her skin.

Dark strands of hair laced with purple curl around her angular chin as she watches the blackened landscape slip by. Her delicate hand presses to the tinted glass, full lips murmuring as if she were casting a spell, but I know she isn’t because her eyes aren’t glowing.

Who the hell is she talking to? Herself?

A pang of guilt overcomes me as I realize she must have been lonely in Miami. She was forced to leave behind all her friends, and as an orphan, she treasured the bonds

she made with others.

That's not my fault. She brought this on herself, I tell myself.

I catch Jax also watching her from across the car, a soft grin toying on the edges of his lips.

Stop that, I warn him, and his head jerks up. Warm amber eyes meet mine, but he doesn't lose his smile. He's too enamored with the idea of having Violet back to care about my annoyance.

He's right. Stop grinning like an idiot, Steele confirms telepathically, his scowl cratering his face so deeply, the dimple on his left cheek becomes evident.

Jax doesn't respond to either of our silent messages, but he's nonplused by our commands.

As if she can sense us thinking about her, Violet's head swivels around to peer at us in the darkness, but before she can utter a word, the sign for Dusty Woods emerges in the unstable night in a halo of eerie light.

Her full mouth parts in awe, as if she's seeing our guarded secret haven for the first time. I don't blame her. It's always a sight to behold, even for me, and I've lived here my whole life.

In a fog, the town appears, shimmering against the desert night. The calligraphy sign welcoming visitors is painted in black and white, declaring a population of just over four hundred.

"I see it hasn't grown much," Violet comments dryly. The SUV sweeps through the guard posts, our security bowing respectfully as we pass through the gates, which are

unnecessary, but Steele insisted upon them when we took over the reign of the pack.

“The town is by invite-only,” I reminded him when he ordered the gate erected. “No one is getting through with or without the gates and guards.”

“Better safe than sorry,” my brother replied. His distrust of the outside world only escalated in the untimely wake of our parents’ deaths.

The gates remain, and visitors are checked in and out at the booth, regardless of who they come to see. Of course, we’re immediately waved through, the guards recognizing our cars and faces. They don’t even look in the back to see if we have someone with us, which I find mildly ironic, but I make no comment, silent or otherwise. There’s no need to antagonize Steele when Violet’s arrival clearly has him on edge, particularly when Jax seems so tickled by her presence. I make an executive decision to put Jax in charge of seeing her to a suite and say as much aloud as the SUV steers toward the sprawling estate.

Our house is set slightly apart from the charming little village known as Dusty Woods, the town equipped with everything we need in case of an outside emergency. Years ago, someone in their infinite wisdom sought to protect the Apex Alphas and created independent towns, magically guarded and only seen through the eyes of the allowed beholders. Every Apex Alpha group in every state lives in their own town, all across the country.

I can tell that Violet doesn’t want to keep looking outside, as if she doesn’t want to be plagued by memories of better times. But her head inadvertently swivels back toward the window to peer back out at the passing town, her full lips parting in nostalgia.

“Don’t even think about putting a spell on any of this,” Steele grumbles, and she eyes him through her peripheral vision.

“Why would I do that, Steele?” she sighs, sounding defeated. “How does that benefit me?”

“I have no idea. Why did you do it last time?” he replies, leaning forward in his seat to glower at her. “I don’t know what makes you tick.”

“Hang on,” I interject, cutting off the fight before it can start.

A grimace forms on Violet’s mouth, but she doesn’t speak. She sits back, folding her arms over her chest to glare at the three of us, her eyes softening when she searches Jax’s face. Jax offers her a sheepish grin, and I’m torn between wanting him to toughen up and relieved that he’s showing her some kindness.

Violet has barely been back an hour, and I already have a migraine. It’s not going to get any easier from here.

Her pretty eyes brighten when the colonial-style house appears in front of us, the double flanking columns supporting the second-floor balcony to the library. She smiles, and it’s clear that she has fond memories of our home, regardless of how everything went down.

The car pulls up to our house, and Steele is the first one out, shaking his head and muttering under his breath. He moves far and fast, as though he needs to put distance between himself and our former lover.

“Take her to one of the guest suites and make sure a guard stays with her,” I order Jax, relieved that Steele isn’t around to complain. I was sure he was going to have more to say on the matter.

“I can do that.” Jax nods at one of the house servants to bring her bags up.

Shock fuses through the staff when Violet emerges from the vehicle, most of them recognizing the witch, but they wisely hold their comments. She bows her head, ignoring them, and I try to determine if she's ashamed or feeling guilty.

"Come on, Violet. I'll show you to one of the suites," Jax offers pleasantly.

Before my brother can take her out of my sight, I turn to her. "If you are up to something nefarious, Violet, we won't be so nice this time. Exile will be the least of your worries. Don't mistake my kindness for weakness."

"What are you going to do, Enzo?" she retorts defiantly, thrusting her chin at me as the driver closes the car door behind her. Her arms fold under her chest, and I find myself unable to stop checking her out, her beauty and power drawing me in as much as ever. "Are you going to kill me?"

"If I have to," I say coldly, spinning away, but my pulse is racing in my ears. It makes me physically ill to say that aloud, but she needs to understand that we're not the same pushovers she left behind. Like Steele, I need to put some space between us before I can be seduced by her magnetism again.

This was a bad idea, letting her come back. What the hell was I thinking agreeing to this? It's completely within my control to send her away, but I don't.

Because if I am being honest with myself, I want her here. Even with all the trouble she caused, or at least we think she caused.

"Get her out of my sight," I growl.

Maybe when she's out of sight, I'll be able to think more clearly. But for now, I just need her out of my purview.

“Gladly,” Jax chirps, sounding pleased by the task. “Come on, Violet.”

He leads her through the front doors as I stalk around the side of the house, but once I’m out of view, I stop and collect myself. My breaths are shaky and uneven. Her presence has affected me so much more than I ever expected it could.

What the hell are we going to do with her now?

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Chapter 3

Jax

I continue to steal looks at Violet as we mount the dual staircase toward the guest suite. Her hazel eyes show no indication of magic, but I can plainly see she's lost in thought. I don't claim to know exactly what she's thinking, but I can guess.

"You caught everyone off guard by coming back," I offer when she doesn't say anything. "You can't really blame them for being upset when Enzo gave you a direct order to stay away."

She stops halfway up the winding staircase and looks at me, her lips curling upward defiantly. "I wouldn't have come if?—"

Abruptly, she stops and shakes her head, pivoting to finish climbing. She moves faster now, as if to outrun her last words to me.

"If what?" I press, hurrying to keep stride with her.

"Never mind. It's like I told you—I was going to call and let you know I was back. You're making it out to be some underhanded plan, but it wasn't that way at all."

I shrug. I'm not bothered by her return, not like my brothers are, but I am curious why she's chosen now to return and why she's being so evasive about the details.

In fact, I reached out to Violet twice since her exile, even if she ignored both

correspondences. I land on the second floor at her side, the servants behind us. I wait for them to leave Violet's bags at the door to the suite before waving them off.

"You act like I cut you off completely. You know that's not true," I chide her gently.

My confession is met with a blank look. "What?"

Her confusion is genuine. I know her well enough to see that, and I glance over my shoulder to ensure none of the staff is eavesdropping on Enzo's or Steele's behalf. It wouldn't surprise me.

With a worried frown, I usher her into the luxurious guest quarters. After locking the door, I press my ear against it, my enhanced bear shifter senses alert for any suspicious sounds.

"What do you mean you tried to reach me?" Violet presses, but I hold up a hand, suddenly not trusting my brothers. If she didn't receive my messages, did one of them block the contact?

I can't see them doing that without confronting me about it first, but things were... strange where Violet was involved. We clearly didn't see eye-to-eye. She rouses emotions in us we didn't share with other lovers. None of us could deny that.

"Jax!"

Content that no one is spying, I turn to look at her, standing in the middle of the sitting room, and my chest tightens to take her in.

As an Apex Alpha, I could always have my pick of partners, and we have enjoyed many nights with various females in our beds. But no one has ever had the effect on me that Violet did.

And that's one reason we had to let her go. I know that. She wasn't our fated mate, and we could never find our future mate with this bewitching woman distracting us. As much as we lusted after her and cared about her, she could never be with us, not truly. But that was the least of Enzo's and Steele's concerns. They would have happily kept her here if our strength had not diminished so incredibly.

"Are you lying to make me hate you less?" she asks.

The question stings.

"Hate me?" I echo, and she drops her gaze.

"Make me less angry," she corrects herself. "I... I don't hate you... even though I should."

I think about her perspective.

If she truly did nothing wrong, she would have every right to hate us.

I let the comment go.

"I texted and emailed," I say, ambling closer to her. "I wanted to make sure you landed on your feet. I was worried about you, believe it or not."

She smirks lightly, tilting her head back up to look at me. I forgot how I tower over her five-foot-five frame, my sense of protectiveness overcoming me next to her smallness. The urge to wrap her in my arms and consume her in my bear form is almost insurmountable, but I hold back. She's not powerless, despite her stature. I can't forget that.

"Well, your brothers probably blocked it," Violet says, her brilliant hazel eyes

locking onto mine.

A familiar shiver of arousal washes through me as she bites on her lower lip, but I don't look away.

"I don't think so," I say. "Maybe your coven?"

"Less likely than your brothers," she snaps, spinning away. "Assuming you really tried to reach out at all."

I grab her arm and pull her back toward me, relishing the look of surprise on her face, but ready to release her if she protests. "Are you really accusing me of lying to you?"

She doesn't pull away, staring up at me. Her heartbeat roars in my ear, her breath inches from my face. "What do you want from me, Jax?"

"Why did you come back, Violet?" I ask huskily. "I'm listening."

I don't release her, but she doesn't pull away, her gaze again locking on me. "Your powers haven't stabilized, have they? Even though you got rid of me?"

I shake my head.

"So you know I'm not the reason everything went to hell around here?"

My eyes narrow slightly. "Unless you put a curse on us."

Hurt colors her face, but it's gone as quickly as it came on.

"Even if that were true," she growls. "I wouldn't need to come back to see it through."

I read between the lines. “Are you saying there is some kind of curse on us?”

Her amber-green irises register fear, but again, she hides her true feelings.

“I’m not saying anything,” she mutters, and my mind whirls with what she’s holding back.

“Let me be blunt, Violet; did you put a curse on us?” I demand. “I’ll believe whatever you tell me.”

Her scowl is so deep, I think she’s going to strike me for a second.

“I can’t believe you’re actually asking me that.” She finally pulls away.

Disappointment wells inside me, my opportunity to kiss her lips evading me.

“Of course I didn’t curse you, even though you probably all deserve it. Maybe I should now, just for good measure.”

She stalks toward the bedroom and flops down on the king bed, avoiding my stare.

“But there is a curse on us,” I press.

“I’m really tired,” she tells me, turning away, and I realize I’ve hit the nail on the head. It’s not something we haven’t already considered.

“Who? Why?” I perch next to her, grabbing her upper arm and forcing her to look at me. “You can’t just waltz in here and?—”

Without warning, her lips crush on mine, ending my sentence midway. I have no illusions that she’s trying to shut me up with my litany of questions, but somehow

that doesn't matter. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't hoped for this from the second I closed the door behind us. No, longer. From the minute we got the phone call that she was back in Arizona.

Her hands cup my face, drawing me closer, and through the narrow slits of her eyes, I see the familiar violet glow of magic radiating from her irises. Instantly, I'm swept away in that headiness that only Violet can bring me. It's so unfair she's not our mate when she drives us all so crazy. I can't imagine anyone else in the world coming close to doing what Violet can.

I pin her down, throwing my weight on top of her as I pull my head back and growl, "This conversation isn't over."

"It is for now," she demurs playfully, licking her lips. "Unless you don't want to show me how much you missed me."

Groaning, I press my mouth back to hers, my hands ripping away at the buttons of her jeans, their resistance fueling my passion. Her hands close around my neck, drawing me closer, but she pulls back slightly.

"Aren't you worried about Enzo and Steele?" she whispers.

I respond to her concerns with another deep kiss, finally freeing her of her pants and underwear. My animal form threatens to break free, the pent-up emotions locked away after all this time too close to the surface, but I keep myself in check, moving my lips slowly across the ridge of Violet's chin and neck, yanking away the dusty tank top to discard beside the bed.

Re-exploring her is magic, her scents, that subtle vanilla and sage, her delicate lines. She's exactly how I remember, but different in some ways, too. More guarded, jumpier, as if she doesn't trust me like she used to. The realization breaks me a bit as

I work my way across the flatness of her stomach, inhaling her soft skin.

“Gods, I missed you,” I murmur, the truth of my words overwhelming me as they meet the air.

I didn’t realize how much I missed her, the smell, the taste, the feeling of her until that moment. Did I block it all out, knowing that it was really over?

Her hands curl into the thick of my hair and push me down lower, urging my lips along the tenderness of her flesh. I grow harder, power surging through me as I fight off the desire to shift into my bear form, the room vibrating around us as more items of clothing strip away from Violet’s body and land on the ground.

A soft moan falls from her lips, her body arching upward, and the tremors increase around the bed.

I raise my head to look at her. “Are you doing that?”

Violet props herself up on her elbows to look at me, shaking her head, our eyes locking with concern.

“No...” she murmurs worriedly, but I’m too aroused to stop now.

Earthquake or not, I continue the path between the soft patch between her thighs, draping her smooth legs over my shoulders, and she cries out as my tongue dips in her crevice. My eyes close, and I lose myself inside her.

“Oh, Jax, I missed you, too.”

My mouth works feverishly, tongue lapping relentlessly as she bucks upward, her shoulders falling back, hands reclaiming her spot in my hair to pull me down. She

tenses, a low cry escaping to flood the room as she reaches her climax, but I don't stop licking, bringing her higher.

"Oh, Jax!" Her ankles lock around my neck and drive me deeper, my hardness peaking as I ready myself to take her after three long years.

Suddenly, plaster falls from the ceiling, raining down over the bed to spray around us and pulling me away from her. Violet chokes and rolls away as I drop protectively over her, the house shaking wildly around us.

"What the hell is going on?" Violet yells.

Framed artworks crash to the floor, and I drape my arms over her naked form.

I have no answer for her, but I have a feeling my brothers will have plenty of theories.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:43 am

Chapter 4

Steele

I thought the first few tremors were my imagination, but now I realize we are in the midst of something more serious. Instinctively, I shift into my panther body as the ground under my feet shakes, danger swelling around me.

“Steele!” Enzo yells from somewhere down the hall, but I’m already pouncing forward, my sleek black paws catching air as the chandelier in the foyer trembles overhead. One crystal crashes to the ground and shatters into a million pieces.

My eyes burn. I land on the stairs, tongue lolling out, panther nose raised toward Violet’s room.

I knew it! She’s trouble!

As if sensing my suspicion, the witch and my brother emerge. The house is still vibrating as Jax throws on his shirt and Violet pulls on her jeans. Dumbfounded, I gape at them for a moment, understanding what transpired.

You idiot! I curse Jax, but before I can ream him out more, Enzo flies around the corner in his wolf form, gray fur flying everywhere. The four of us stare at one another, the house settles, and the servants come into view.

“Was that an earthquake?” one maid squeaks.

Enzo shifts back into his human body, and I reluctantly do the same, my glare still fixed on Jax and Violet. She hangs her head and retreats to her room to finish dressing, but I shoot up the stairs to confront them, disgusted.

“Stop!” Jax steps in front of me to keep me from entering the suite, but I push past him, throwing his hands off me.

“Me?” I bark. “What about you?” I whirl around to confront Violet. “You don’t waste any time, do you?” I snarl, throwing open the door to her room with such force, it smashes against the wall.

Violet tips her head back, unperturbed by my outburst. I’m almost impressed by her coolness. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t? It’s just a coincidence that the second you arrive here, the house goes crazy?” I retort. “I’m onto you. I won’t let you terrorize us again?—”

“Oh, please,” Violet cuts me off. “You can blame me for everything that’s going wrong around here, but you know full well that it’s going on, with or without me.”

“Funny how it’s so much worse with you, isn’t it?”

“Steele, shut up, man,” Enzo interrupts, stalking in behind me.

Jax follows him through the doorway, and he gestures for Violet to sit down and stop pacing, but she refuses.

“I don’t want to stay here,” she growls. “If you’re just going to accuse me of everything going wrong all the time?—”

“No one’s accusing you,” Enzo says.

“I am,” I counter, and he gives me a wary look.

“But you have to admit, this is suspicious. As soon as you get back here, weird stuff happens?” Enzo continues like I haven’t spoken.

“You’re acting like everything has been fine since I’ve been gone, and we all know that isn’t true!” she cries. “But I’m not going to stand here and justify every move I make to the three of you. I’m a grown woman, not a child. Stop treating me like one.”

Jax holds up his hands in mock surrender.

“You don’t have to justify anything to me,” he replies with a grin, and I almost hiss.

“You’re a disgrace to our Alphahood!” I snarl, advancing on the two of them. “Our parents would be ashamed of you.”

My youngest brother stands between Violet and me, but I’m annoyed. It’s not as if I would actually attack her. I can’t deny that I still have feelings for this treacherous witch, despite everything she’s done to us. How can I not? She shared our bed for years.

Enzo puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Look,” he says. “Why don’t we get some rest and talk about this tomorrow? Maybe you shouldn’t stay here after all, Violet, but you’re here now, and it’s late. We’ll figure it out in the morning, okay? In the meantime, try not to cast any more spells.”

“It wasn’t me!” Violet snaps. “I’m not messing with the power balance! How many times do I have to tell you guys that?”

“Yeah, right.” I roll my eyes and storm out of the suite, shaking with anger.

Enzo is on my heels, but so is Jax this time.

“You have to cut her some slack, Steele,” Jax pleads. “I don’t think she’s lying?—”

“Did you determine that before or after you let her seduce you?” I bark. “Gods, you’re so easily manipulated, Jax! Especially by her!”

Jax’s jaw stiffens. “I’m not. I just listen and use my common sense. This is Violet we’re talking about, not some random person on the street.”

I laugh bitterly, glancing at Enzo and thrusting a thumb toward Jax. “Are you hearing him? His common sense. Don’t you remember why we cast her out in the first place?”

“I was here,” Jax growls. “I remember.”

“Did we imagine when our powers started diminishing?” I demand. “Did we imagine it when other territories started moving in on us because they thought us easy targets?”

“No,” Jax admits. “But who’s to say any of that is Violet’s fault?”

“What other witches did we let into our lives? Are you being serious right now? You’re acting like we didn’t talk this through before we banished her! You’re talking like it was some kind of executive decision on our part. You agreed to it, too!”

Jax lowers his eyes.

“Oh, now you remember?” I ask sarcastically. “I was starting to think you had memory loss.”

“And it didn’t fucking work, Steele! We’re still not as strong as we were! Our powers are not as strong as they should be, and we still have to fend off outside attacks!” Jax hisses back with uncharacteristic fury.

“Okay, that’s enough!” Enzo steps between us, holding up his hands. “Both of you are right. She’s here now, so we need a new plan. Either we exile her again...”

He trails off, and I gape at him. “Or what? Of course we have to!”

“No,” Jax insists. “We could keep her here. She obviously came back for a reason, even if she won’t say why. I think she came to help us.”

I scoff loudly. “More likely she’s come to put the final nails in our coffins. She’s here to finish the job. She got tired of waiting!”

“Steele—”

“You two are both blind. You’re too smitten by her beauty to see what’s really going on here. I don’t want any part of this. If you keep her here, Enzo, keep me out of it.”

I push past them to head into my wing of the estate, both my brothers calling after me, but I ignore them. I hate that I want them to be right, but the fact is, I just don’t trust Violet. If she’s not responsible for our downfall, who else could it be?

Sleep doesn’t come, and pacing around makes me more anxious. Instead, I decide to head out for a hunt in my panther form. I run into Enzo in the hall, and I realize he’s having the same issue as me, now that Violet is under the same roof.

“Seriously,” I growl again. “Why did you let her back?”

He sighs heavily. “What are my options here? Let her go where we can’t keep an eye

on her or keep her here?”

“Where she causes more destruction?” I finish for him. “Look at what’s happening already.”

Enzo’s steely-gray eyes harden. “I know you were hurt by her betrayal?—”

I bristle at the characterization and turn away. “I wasn’t hurt. I should have expected it from a witch. We should have known better than to let her into our bed in the first place.”

“But we did,” Enzo continues. “And the damage is done. We learned to care for her—whether you want to admit it or not.”

“Speak for yourself,” I huff. “And whatever I might have felt for her before doesn’t apply anymore. She needs to go.”

Enzo ponders the dilemma. “I mean... I guess we could let her go now and stick a team on her.”

Unexpectedly, a jab of worry slices through me at the idea, and my older brother catches it.

“That’s why I said we should table this until morning,” he reminds me. “Let’s talk about it tomorrow. We’re all too riled up right now to discuss this rationally.”

I nod curtly and head out the front doors. There’s no sense in rehashing this over and over. We’re getting nowhere.

“Where are you going?” he demands, watching me leave.

“On a hunt.”

“Want me to join you?”

I consider his offer for a minute. It’s been a while since we’ve gone out together, but I shake my head. “No. I want to be alone.”

Enzo stifles a sigh. “Suit yourself. But leave Violet alone, Steele, please. We’ll regroup tomorrow.”

I promise nothing and head into the night, shifting into my cat form.

There’s not much to hunt in Dusty Woods, and my mind isn’t on a kill, anyway. I’m more out for a late-night run than anything, to clear my head and figure out what to do with this newfound problem. I have to admit that things haven’t gotten any better in Violet’s absence, and while I would never say it to my brothers or anyone else, I have missed her.

No one has ever gotten me as excited as Violet in the bedroom or anywhere else. As much as I’ve tried to move on with other lovers, I always compare them to Violet, and they’re never invited back for a second night. But that doesn’t change the fact that she’s no good for us. Unlike Jax, who claims to use common sense, I really do use my head to make decisions.

My paws pound faster over the sidewalks, leading toward the obscure areas of town. The few shifters outside bow and duck out of my way, leaving a clear path for me toward my free run, and I begin to sprint as if escaping my own thoughts.

Blood rushes through my ears, and I relish the feeling of power surging through me in the pseudo hunt of the Arizona forest.

Losing track of time, I let my senses guide me, the darkness blanketing me as I dart through the familiar landscape. Violet's presence under this roof is torture—her very nearness reminds me of what we had, stirring desires I've fought so hard to bury. I hate that she's here, but the idea of letting her go is just as offensive to me.

Why the hell did she have to come back? It would have been so much better if she just stayed out of sight and out of mind... kind of.

By the time I circle back to the estate, I'm in no better mental state than I was before, and I realize I'm not going to sleep a wink. So much for being in a clearer headspace in the morning.

On a whim, I pad toward the side of the house, peering up at the second-floor balcony where Violet's suite sits. To my surprise, the lights in her room are still on.

Jax probably went back there, that treacherous jerk, I muse with annoyance, but I wonder if I'm not jealous of his brazenness. He had no shame hooking up with her, even though we don't trust her. He put aside all our previous wariness and let his desires take control. Just like I desperately want to do, too.

But I won't. I can't. Yet I can't help myself from checking in on them now to see if my suspicions are right and if my brother ignored Enzo's order to leave Violet alone.

Scaling the side of the trellis, I stealthily make it to the balcony and land on the second floor, pushing open the door with my nose. To my surprise, I find Violet alone in her bedroom, sitting on the center of the bed. Feeling ashamed of myself, I fall back on my haunches, ready to leave, when I hear her speak.

"I won't say anything," she moans. "Please, don't hurt them."

Blinking, I pause, cocking my head as I sniff the air around her. I sense no one else in

the room, but she's clearly communicating with someone.

Violet's hazel eyes glow, and I realize she's using magic to communicate. But with who?

"I haven't said a word," she swears. "I know what's at stake."

I stalk forward to make my presence known, but in the distance, I hear Enzo's howl to action. The hairs on the back of my neck rise, the panic in my brother's war cry familiar and deadly.

I can't confront Violet about what I've seen now. We're under attack.

Lurching off the balcony, I land on the ground gracefully and take off through the gardens, but when I look back over my shoulder, I catch a glimpse of Violet watching me from the railing of her room, her mouth agape.

She knows I'm onto her. Good. She better be worried.

I find Enzo in his office, pacing with his earbuds in. Jax leans against the wall, eying me nervously as I enter and shift back into my human form.

"What's going on?" I demand, looking from one brother to the other.

On cue to my question, the lights explode, shattering glass everywhere in the room. The three of us raise our arms to shield our faces, and Violet races inside, gasping in horror. Glass crunches under her bare feet, and Jax instantly rushes to move her away.

"Oh, my gods!"

“Get her out of here!” I shout. “She’s doing this!”

“Shut up!” Enzo hollers at us, pointing at his ear. “I’m on the phone.”

Gritting my teeth, I lower my arms, backing away. Violet rushes to Jax to tend to his cuts, and I realize I’m bleeding from my arms.

“Where?” Enzo barks as I pick shards of glass out of my forearm.

“Let me see,” Violet urges, grabbing my hand.

I try to pull away, but she’s stronger than she looks with her tiny stature, and she waves her free hand over me. Warmth rushes through me, and the tiny cuts close under the heat of Violet’s warm eyes.

“Stop being so damn stubborn,” she mutters, releasing me. “I’m not trying to hurt you.”

“Oh, no?” I scoff. “This is all some big coincidence, is it? I heard you in your room. Just now. I heard you talking to your coven.”

She pales at my accusation and looks back at Jax, but he’s fixated on Enzo’s conversation.

“I don’t know what you thought you heard?—”

“Just save it, Violet. You’re trouble.”

“No, Steele. You’re in trouble,” she counters, spinning away.

Enzo turns to us worriedly, disconnecting his call. “The west side just got viciously

attacked.”

I stare at him blankly. “By who? New Mexico again?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

Now we’re all gaping at him.

“You don’t know?” I repeat. “What does that mean?”

“It means that there is a trail of dead shifters, and no one is taking responsibility for it. I have no idea what’s going on, but we need to get over there.”

He stalks toward the door without waiting to see if we’ll follow. Jax is on his heels, but I remain in place, trying to understand what’s happening. I know that Violet can’t be responsible for a massacre, not only because she has been here, but because she’s Violet. For all the distrust I have for her, I know she is not someone capable of such extreme violence.

But if not her, then who? And why does this coincide with her arrival?

A warm hand slips into mine, shaking me out of my reverie.

“Steele, we have to go,” Violet urges me.

I pull away from her, scowling.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I tell her furiously. “You’re likely responsible for all this.”

Sadness touches her face, but she’s not deterred by my order. “I’m coming because

I'm not staying here without one of you. It's clearly not safe around here."

I almost laugh at her reasoning, but Jax circles back to bark at us. "Are you two coming or what?"

Violet doesn't wait for me this time and heads out of the study after Jax, leaving me no choice but to head into the night with my brothers and the witch, who is once again wreaking havoc on our household.

But why? Why would she do this? And what did she mean when she said, "Don't hurt them"?

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Chapter 5

Violet

They're all looking at me strangely now, even Jax, and I can't blame them. If the roles were reversed, I'd be looking at me weird, too. Nothing I can tell them will put their minds at ease, not without endangering all of us more. But they deserve answers, especially after Steele was spying on me.

I eye my former lover, wondering how it went so wrong with us. Once upon a time, I was the only woman he trusted. Now, he looks at me like I'm his enemy.

The SUV pulls up to the edge of the territory, and my heart sinks. The smell of death already permeates the air before we stop. Something else lingers beneath the surface, though, something evil that gives me shivers.

"Oh, my gods..." Jax mutters, jumping out before the vehicle comes to a complete stop.

The massacre in the pack house was clearly a surprise—the victims had been caught unaware, still in their chairs and unable to defend themselves before they were attacked.

Several Apex shifters wander around collecting evidence, but they're shaken and pale by the violence. For all their training, they are not used to such a sight. I want to hide myself away in the car. Suddenly, I wish I'd taken Steele's advice and stayed at the estate alone, but the truth is, I don't feel comfortable there, not anymore.

“Any indication of who did this?” Enzo asks the lead investigator.

“N-no,” he stutters, looking as if he might vomit.

I don’t blame him at all. This is outrageous. Someone is trying to make a distinct point, and they’ve done it.

“Someone will want to take credit for this!” Enzo rages, fury coloring his sooty eyes.

Pity for him floods me as I catch his pack members eying him. It doesn’t take me long to understand the look they’re giving him.

They’re questioning his leadership. They’ve been questioning his leadership for a long time, even before I left.

I reach out to touch Enzo’s arm, expecting him to shake me off, but he doesn’t. Instead, he offers me a helpless look, and I steer him away from the horrible scene, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“You should let them do their job and collect evidence,” I suggest. “You’re too close to all this to see clearly.”

“And they aren’t?” he scoffs.

“Maybe they are, too,” I agree. “But someone has to collect what they can, and you’re far too mad about it.”

He studies me suspiciously. “Do you know something about this? About who did this?”

Lowering my eyes, I shake my head. It’s partially true. I can’t be sure, but I have my

list of suspects rolling around in the back of my head. “No. I don’t.”

“Another Apex group looking to infringe would want to stake their claim,” Steele growls, interrupting. I tense at his nearness, but I have to agree with his assessment. I cast him a sidelong look. He always was the best at deducing what was going on. “This is the work of something else, isn’t it, Violet?”

I don’t meet his eyes. He doesn’t understand, but I can’t tell him anything. If I do, we’re all screwed.

“Violet!”

“I don’t know for sure!” I yell. “I don’t!”

“Leave her alone,” Jax growls, pulling me away from his brothers. “This isn’t helping.” He half-drags me back toward the car and plops me down in the backseat. “You know you’re only antagonizing them both by being here and not saying anything if you know something.”

I drop my head back against the seat and stare up at the roof. “I can’t tell you what I don’t know, Jax. I wasn’t here, and I don’t know the kinds of issues you have with the packs under your control and the packs from other states.”

“You know full well that our powers have been suffering for years. Maybe I don’t believe you’re directly involved, but I do believe you know more than you’re letting on.”

I press my lips together so hard, I’m sure they’re going to bruise.

“You know why!” Jax barks.

“You’re cursed!” I blurt out. Instantly, blood drains out of my face, and my head whips around, as if I expect lightning to strike me dead.

“What?”

“Never mind,” I mutter, pushing him out of the car. “Go and deal with this. I... I don’t know anything about it.”

“No!” Jax hisses, climbing in behind me and closing the door. “What do you mean, we’re cursed? You cursed us?!”

“No! Not me! I would never—you know me better than that!”

“I thought I did.” He glances out the window, his golden eyes darkening as his brothers stalk by the SUV, their upset palpable. “But we’re dealing with a war here, Violet, one that only seems to get worse when you’re around.”

“I didn’t do anything to you, and I’m getting a little tired of defending myself.”

“Then how do you know we’re cursed?” he presses.

I hang my head. “I’ve already said more than I should, Jax, and I will end up cursed, too, if I say any more than I have.”

He scowls, his anger matching Steele’s. “That sounds like a copout to me.”

“You have to trust that I’m here to help you,” I plead as he reaches for the door, but he doesn’t look at me.

“I don’t,” he retorts. “I’m starting to understand why my brothers see you as a problem.”

The door slams, and I gulp back, the stone forming in my throat.

That was really close and really stupid, Violet, I chide myself. I'm not sure if I didn't already say too much. I guess I'll find out soon enough.

No one speaks to me all the way back to the estate. All three of the brothers deliberately avoid eye contact, and I'm sure they're talking about me telepathically. Dawn creeps over the horizon by the time we arrive back in Dusty Woods, spraying brilliant sunlight over the charming little town, but there will be no peace for me this morning.

When we arrive, Enzo puts a hand out to stop me from heading upstairs, confirming what I already suspected. They had a full conversation about me in the car. Turning my eyes on them, I wait for the other shoe to drop.

"You're going back to Sedona."

My heart sinks, and I look desperately at Jax, who ignores my stare.

"Really?" I spit. "You could have saved me the hassle and left me there in the first place, like I intended."

No one acknowledges my annoyances.

"You'll have a team on you at all times," Enzo intones. "But if I were you, Violet, I'd get out of town."

Tears of frustration well in my eyes, but I blink them away.

"Fine," I reply coldly. "It wasn't my idea to come here in the first place."

I spin around to head toward the gate, and Jax calls out to me. “Where are you going?”

“To Sedona.”

“We’ll get you a ride!”

“I don’t want one!” I shout back.

“She is such a pain in the ass,” Steele mutters.

Footsteps crunch behind me, and a strong hand curls around my forearm, spinning me around.

Steele’s hard, silver eyes bore into me. “Stop being such a drama queen and get in the car. I’m taking you to the city.”

“No,” I growl. “I don’t want to go with you. You’ll probably end up leaving me in a ditch somewhere.”

He snorts in disbelief. “We’re not the ones who hurt you. Stop making it out like we started this.”

My lips part to argue with him, but Enzo interjects.

“I’ll take her,” he grumbles, seizing my other arm.

They march me back toward the car.

“What about my stuff?” I protest.

“We’ll have it brought to you. Get in.”

Reluctantly, I look at the estate, my heart sinking more. I realize how badly I don’t want to go and almost say as much, but their distrust overrides my desire to stay. Moreover, I can feel this heaviness weighing on the estate, something that hasn’t been there before.

They’re doing me a favor. Why am I kicking and screaming?

I never wanted to be here, anyway, I try to convince myself.

“Get in!” Enzo barks again. “It was a mistake bringing you here.”

Stifling a sigh, I do as I’m told and enter the SUV with Enzo following behind me. On a whim, Steele jumps in, too. I stiffen as Enzo eyes him.

“I told you I’d take her,” he reminds his brother, but he doesn’t order him out of the vehicle.

“It’s okay. I want to hear what she has to say, too,” Steele says, slamming the door shut. “And I want to make sure she’s really out of Dusty Woods for good.”

I slump back in the seat, shaking my head. “I have nothing to say that I haven’t already said. You guys seem to have your mind made up about me.”

“I heard you,” Steele growls as the car starts to move again.

My eyes trail toward Jax, and I catch the wistful look in his honey-colored gaze.

“You heard what?” I counter sharply.

“I heard you communicating with whomever in your room last night!”

Enzo’s dark eyebrows arch upward. “Who were you talking to?”

“Myself,” I answer quickly. “I was meditating.”

“You’re lying! And then the attack happened, and the house?—”

“Calm down, Steele,” Enzo cuts him off as the SUV slips out of Dusty Woods’ city limits again and down the lonely highway leading to Sedona.

“I won’t calm down!” Steele snaps. “You brought her here.”

“And now we’re taking her back,” Enzo says calmly. “Unless you can give us a good reason not to.”

They stare at me expectantly, and I wish I could tell them everything about the events that have led us all to this place. But I literally cannot, as much as I want to. My lips are sealed.

Suddenly, Steele is in my face, his hot breath exciting me despite his anger. As I did with Jax, I suddenly have the desire to shut up his accusations with a rain of kisses, to bring him back into my fold with the tenderness he once showed me. He’s so close, his skin so touchable...

“One way or another, we’ll figure out what’s going on here. And if you have any hand in it?—”

From the front seat, the driver releases a grunt, and the vehicle swerves abruptly, crashing Steele into me. I fall against Enzo, and his arms instinctively grab to protect me. Steele covers my head to save me from the splintering glass when the SUV hits

the guardrail and flips once, twice, spinning in midair.

I gasp, my eyes popping, time slowing as the final moments of my life play out around me. All I can think about are the times I've spent with the Alphas.

Is this really it?

And then there's nothing but blackness around me as metal crunches and the car lands at the bottom of the dune, rendering me unconscious. I never had a chance to come clean and tell them how much I care for them all.

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Chapter 6

Enzo

Low growls ricochet around me. It takes me several seconds to realize it's my brother making the sounds. He's on top of the car, and pools of blood spill from his injuries.

I open my mouth to call out his name, but I've also shifted into my wolf body in the wake of the trauma, and a howl of pain emanates from my lips when I try to speak.

"Don't!" a weak voice rasps. "Don't move. Neither of you."

Blinking through the haze of agony, I see Violet crawling through the wreckage, attempting to help. I moan again when I see her beautiful face, bloodied and scratched from the accident. I'm overcome with protectiveness.

"Alphas?" the driver yells out for us from somewhere outside the mangled SUV.

My mind whirls. How did he manage to get out?

Between Violet's battered body and the driver's voice, I find my motivation to move.

We have to get out of here, Steele. This car could blow at any minute, I speak to my brother through our telepathic connection.

"Alphas!" the driver hollers again. "Are you in there?"

“Help us!” Violet calls back, her words slightly stronger than before. “We’re trapped.”

I push the glass and rebar off me, kicking the mangled door open with my hind legs. Pain shoots up my spine, but I ignore it, feeling the creak with the effort.

Do you hear me, Steele?

I hear you, my brother responds. I’m coming.

Relief overcomes me, and together, we work to escape, my teeth catching on the edge of Violet’s jeans. She yelps at the suddenness of the motion, but she doesn’t fight as I pull her to safety, my second kick creating a space for us to exit the vehicle, my brother on our trail.

We collapse on the desert floor and morph back into our human forms, panting and sweating, blood seeping into the beige sand beneath us.

“Alphas!” The driver rushes toward us. “Thank all the gods!”

“What the hell happened?” I snap, pulling Violet a safe distance from the smoldering car. Breathing heavily, Steele sidles along the other side of Violet, embracing her trembling body.

“I... I don’t know!” the driver cries, wringing his hands as we stare up at him skeptically.

Something about his demeanor sits oddly with me. He’s avoiding eye contact, staring at his hands. On closer inspection, he doesn’t have a scratch on him. He keeps a safe distance, and I smell the deceit all over him.

Suddenly, I'm on my feet, advancing, my teeth baring. "What happened?"

He backs away, his hands held up, and trips over a rock, falling to the ground.

"Something came onto the road," he yips. "A turtle?—"

"A fucking turtle?" Steele is at my side now, and we surround him. "You almost killed us over a turtle?"

"He's a warlock," Violet wheezes from behind us.

My head whips back toward her, my eyes narrowing. "Come again?"

She stands shakily and approaches, her steps uneven.

"He's a warlock, and I can smell the dark magic on him." At first, the driver shakes his head in denial, but Violet meets his eyes defiantly. "You are. Don't lie."

He immediately loses his facade, sneering at us, but before we can confront him, he laughs maniacally.

"We'll get you next time, Alphas," he drawls. "And you..." He wags a finger at Violet. "Shame on you for betraying your own kind."

In a plume of black smoke, he vanishes, leaving us dumbfounded and speechless for a moment.

"What the hell was that?" Steele rages, glowering at me. "Where did you get that guy?"

"Me?" I snap. "He's your hire!"

“Not mine!” he denies. “Jax must have brought him on!”

Violet collapses to the ground, and our bickering is put on hold as we rush to her side with concern.

“Hey,” I growl reluctantly. “Are you all right?”

She tries to smile. “I’m okay.”

“We need to get her back to the estate,” I tell Steele, and he nods.

“And we need to do a full inventory of our staff. Immediately.”

Every step is agony, but I don’t let my brother or Violet see how much damage the accident caused me. My real concerns lie with them. If I’m in this much pain, how bad off are they?

Steele calls for Jax to pick us up, and it feels like he takes forever to find us, but when he finally does show up, he has an expression I’ve seen before. It’s the same look he had when I told him our parents died.

“What the hell happened?”

Steele gives him a quick recap. We pile into his crimson sports car, but as we head back to the estate, Violet weakly makes a suggestion that forces him to pull over.

“Maybe the estate isn’t the best place for you right now.”

Jax looks at her in the rearview mirror, and I signal for him to pull over from the passenger side, immediately understanding her concerns.

“She’s right. There could be more spies there. We shouldn’t go back.”

“Dammit, who hired that guy? Why wasn’t a proper background check done on him? What the hell has been happening to us these past few years?”

“No one hired him. He was planted, and no one thought to check,” Steele seethes.

“How? How can anyone get into Dusty Woods uninvited?” I insist. I look at Violet helplessly, and she purses her lips.

“Dark magic works by a unique set of rules. You may have let one of them in by invitation, and they allowed others,” she offers. “I really don’t know how it happened. But it clearly did, and I’d bet there’s more of them. I doubt he’s working alone.”

“Until we can go through every single staff member, Violet is right. We can’t go back there,” I concede, my heart sinking. I can’t believe things have gotten so out of control under our watch, and we’ve allowed it to happen.

Steele eyes Violet, and she looks away, her cheeks flushing as she waits for another reprimand from him. Instead, his words shock everyone. He hangs his head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so hard on you.”

Startled, my chin jerks up. I don’t think I’ve ever heard Steele apologize to anyone for anything in my life.

“It’s okay,” Violet mumbles through a grimace. “I know why you thought it was me. I would have thought it was me, too. The timing... Although they probably planned it that way, too.”

“She needs a doctor,” Jax says urgently. “You all do.”

“No,” Violet breathes. “I just... We need to get somewhere safe, and I need some of my supplies. I can fix us. Let’s just find a safe house.”

Jax glances at me, and I nod.

“Go to the east end pack house,” I tell him. “There should be some supplies there, too. Whatever she doesn’t have, we can get.”

Jax steers the car back onto the road and heads toward the east end Apex pack house, but I’m not sure we’ll be safe there. As much as I don’t want to press Violet for details when she’s injured, I feel like I don’t have much of a choice at this point.

“You said you smelled dark magic on him,” I tell her. “What does that mean?”

Fear floods her eyes, and she starts to shake her head.

Protectively, Steele jumps in. “Do we have to do this now?”

“Yes!” I interject. “We do. Whatever this is, it’s been happening for years. And now they know we’re onto them. So, unfortunately, we have to do this now.”

Violet exhales. “I don’t know what to tell you. He was clearly a warlock. I don’t know him personally, but I could sense the darkness around him.”

“What does that mean?” Jax wants to know. “I thought that was all a myth, the practice of dark magic.”

Violet grimaces again and holds her side, sinking deeper into the seat, her lovely eyes half-closing.

“Stay with us,” Steele murmurs. “Are you all right?”

“I’ll be fine,” she mutters back. “And I don’t know much about the coven of dark witches and warlocks, guys. For the most part, I thought they were a myth, too. But here we are.”

Silence ensues as we finish the drive to the east end pack house, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Who did this is becoming more apparent, but why they did this still doesn’t make sense.

What does this dark coven want with us? And how are we going to get them off our backs?

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Chapter 7

Jax

There are several cars at the pack house when we arrive, and Enzo orders me to get rid of the shifters hanging out before we enter.

“Make sure you tell them that they never saw us here,” he adds, but that’s unnecessary. I know we need to keep a low profile until we devise a plan.

The group leaves, casting curious looks at my car, but no one asks questions.

“Make a list of what you need, and I’ll see if we have it here,” I tell Violet when the coast is clear, and we head inside. “Whatever we don’t have, I’ll go get.”

“I think we should stay together,” she mumbles, flopping back on the sofa. Her pale complexion worries me, and I say as much aloud.

“You guys all look like shit,” I hiss through gritted teeth. “Maybe I should call a doctor.”

“No!” All three of them speak in unison, and I hold up my hands, seeing that I’m outnumbered.

“Fine, but we need to fix you guys up.”

“I can do some healing,” Violet mumbles, sitting forward to look at the gash on

Steele's stomach. "I'm still capable of healing."

She says it, but she doesn't look good. I want to protest more, but when her hand touches Steele's skin and their eyes lock, an unspoken truce forms between them, and I stop myself. A sense of relief overcomes me as I realize that he's trusting her again, if only a little bit. Maybe the circumstances aren't the best, but at least we're getting somewhere.

"I don't understand what they want from us," Enzo grumbles, pacing the living room. He pauses at the window to peer out into the vast desert landscape as the morning sun shines overhead. His cuts still ooze, and I try to look him over, but he waves me off. "Don't."

Frowning, I fall back, but I'm not happy about it. We need to work together if we want to get to the bottom of what's going on. But to do that, I need to come up with solutions, not play a blame game like Enzo.

"We'll need to form an alliance of shifters we can trust to go through the estate and root out the danger," I offer logically. "If we don't go back there, they'll come looking for us."

All eyes are on me, and I glance from one to the next as a plan forms in my mind. I have their attention, and I intend to keep it. Steele's face is already regaining its normal color, and I exhale as Violet stands, shuffling toward Enzo to work on his injuries.

"What do you need from me?" I ask her. "Did you make a list?"

"Can you find me some willow and white sage? I need to do a cleansing."

Enzo eyes me. "Do you think we have that here?"

“I think so.”

Hurrying toward the second-floor bathroom, my mind turns toward the staff at the estate. Most of them have been with us for years, but there are a couple who could have been planted. It still boggles my head that they’ve gained entrance to Dusty Woods without our permission.

Digging through the medicine cabinet behind the mirror, I find the herbs Violet needs and return to the living room where a full-blown argument has broken out.

“You’re not going back there!” Steele growls. “Are you out of your mind?”

“I’m one of them,” Violet says patiently. “They won’t hurt me as easily as they’ll hurt you.”

“You’re a dark witch?” Steele hisses. “You just said?—”

“I’m a witch,” she corrects him. “And they’re less likely to hurt me than they are a shifter. They care less about your lives than they do mine.”

“They almost killed you in that car, too,” Enzo reminds her. “I don’t think they have any regard for you, either.”

Violet falters over the observation, but she doesn’t relent. “I need my stuff, and if there are dark witches or warlocks at the estate, my presence probably brought them out of hiding. You’re right about one thing. That’s why things got worse when I got back. Don’t you want to see who’s behind this?”

Silence falls through the living room as Violet reaches for the sage and willow out of my hands. She smiles at me, but I can’t return her expression. The idea of her returning to the estate alone stresses me out too much. “You want to go back to the

estate and antagonize the witches?”

She shakes her head. “No. I want them to think I’m on their side. I think that’s the only way to get them.”

Her lips press together, and I remember what she told me in the car at the massacre. I decide to air it, even though I know she won’t like it. “And your curse?”

“Jax!” she cries, hurt flooding her face. “I told you that in confidence.”

“What curse?” Enzo demands.

“I can’t?—”

“You have to tell us,” I insist.

“I literally can’t,” she moans, swirling her finger around. Another silence falls over the room.

“Oh, gods. You’re already cursed,” I whisper, and she hangs her head.

“Are you?” Steele snarls. “Give us some damn answers, Violet!”

“I can’t!” she yells, the frustration on her face tangible. “Don’t you think I want to?!”

Silence falls between us, and she exhales slowly, like she’s trying to compose herself.

“Look,” she sighs, reclaiming her spot on the sofa and rubbing her eyes. “Let me go back to the house and see if I can draw them out, see what they want from you exactly.”

“Why us?” Enzo complains. “Of all the Apex Alphas.”

“Exactly. I’m in the rare position to figure all that out if you let me,” she coaxes us.

“It’s too dangerous,” Steele repeats.

“Not if we go with her,” Enzo declares slowly, sitting beside her. “We stay out of sight, but we follow her back?—”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Violet interjects. “They’ll sense you there.”

“You’re not going alone,” I cut in. “What if something goes wrong?”

Violet stares up at me with pleading eyes. “Things are much more likely to go wrong if you guys end up coming, particularly if we’re up against dark witches. You know that as well as I do.”

I drop in front of her, taking her hands in mine. “No. I don’t. I have no idea what we’re up against or why they’re targeting us.”

She sighs deeply. “That’s what I’m trying to find out. But you have to trust that I will.”

“It’s not a matter of trust,” Steele argues, sliding beside her on the other side. “It’s a matter of safety. We can’t send you back to the estate alone.”

“Then it’s a moot point. It’s too dangerous if you go.”

I gesture for my brothers to follow me, and they reluctantly do while Violet fusses with the herbs on the table. She’s pretending not to strain and listen, but I call them too far out of her range for her to overhear. She doesn’t have the benefit of shifter

hearing, and I have to make absolutely sure she's not listening in.

"Maybe this isn't such a bad idea," I mutter in a low voice.

"Are you out of your mind?" Enzo snaps. "We can't send her to the house by herself."

My gaze darts toward the witch, and she casts me a sidelong look, as if she suspects my intentions. Waving them further out of the room, I quieten my voice even more.

"What if we make her think she's going alone and follow her?" I suggest.

Both my brothers eye me balefully.

Steele groans. "She won't like that."

"She might not have to know if nothing happens," I respond thoughtfully. "But if something happens, she'll have the backup she needs, and she'll be grateful for it."

My brothers stare at me for a moment, considering the suggestion.

"She's not going to agree any other way, and we won't catch them otherwise," I press. "This is our only shot. Our estate has been infiltrated, and we need to root out the cause. One of us let in the first dark witch somehow, and that witch clearly let in the others. Violet had nothing to do with that—she couldn't have. We've been living with the enemy for years, and we blamed her for it all along. It's time to make things right, guys."

"I don't like the idea of using her as bait," Enzo mutters.

"She's going whether we want her to or not," I remind him, and again, they realize I

have a point.

Enzo exhales. “Fine. But we have to be careful—no one can know what we’re up to.”

“Super careful,” I agree. “And you all need to heal first. We need to regain our full strength. No half-assing this. We’ll take a day.”

We retreat to the pack house where Violet is cleansing the property with white sage, her mouth moving in a protective chant. Patiently, we wait for her to finish before announcing our decision.

“We changed our minds,” I tell her. “You can go back to the estate and collect your stuff.”

Her suspicious gaze trails toward me and then to my brothers. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch except you need to take a day to heal. You can’t go in there weakened.”

“You won’t interfere?” she asks nervously, narrowing her eyes at me. “If you do, Jax, the results could be catastrophic. I don’t just mean for me?—”

“Don’t worry about us,” Steele grunts.

“You just get in and out. You can take my car,” I tell her. I don’t like withholding our plan from her, but it’s the only way. She parts her lips as if she’s about to question us more, but I swiftly change the conversation. “I’ll see about food. There’s not much in the fridge and pantry here to eat. I’ll be back.”

“I’ll come with you,” Violet offers.

“You should stay,” I prompt her. “And finish working on Enzo and Steele. They still

need healing.”

“We’re better,” my brothers chorus, clearly not wanting to be left alone to answer the question.

No one wants to lie to Violet.

Grunting softly, I force a smile and allow her to follow me back out to the car.

“What’s really going on, Jax?” she demands the minute we’re out of their earshot. I realize she’s following me because she thinks I’m the one who’s most likely to give it to her straight. “Why the sudden one-eighty on letting me return to the estate?” she asks.

“You need your supplies. You’re stronger with your stuff, and one of us needs to go back there eventually,” I answer honestly, unlocking the car.

“My stuff is replaceable,” she says flatly.

“That’s not how you were making it sound a few minutes ago.”

She rolls her eyes. “Come on, Jax...”

“Anyway, someone should see what’s happening there without us, and if you think you can draw out the coven?—”

“You’re not going to do anything stupid, are you?”

Slipping into the driver’s seat, I give her a look as she climbs in, too. “Letting you go is pretty stupid, don’t you think?”

Violet smirks. “Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing that for the past three years, remember?”

My chest tightens, and I swallow a sigh. I wish we had taken better care of her. Maybe none of us would be in this position if we had.

“What do you know about the dark witches?” I ask, pulling away from the pack house. “What would they want with us?”

“I honestly have no idea. If I knew, I would tell you.” I believe her, the exasperation in her voice palpable.

“You said we were cursed.”

“That’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“But what kind of curse is it, Violet?” I press, steering the car toward the highway. Instantly, my hands tighten, my senses on high alert, as if I expect someone to be following us.

“I don’t know,” she moans. “I know I sound like a broken record, Jax, but I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

My mind flicks back to my parents and the brief entanglement they had with the witches before they passed. Could this be some kind of revenge?

A cold sweat forms on my brow, and I gnaw on my lower lip. Suddenly, I don’t want to let Violet out of my sight. We can’t use her as bait, even if we are following her, but she’s going to go, with or without our approval.

Her hand reaches across the console and curls into mine gently. “You’re stressed.”

“I don’t like the idea of you going there alone.”

“I’ll be careful. I won’t antagonize them if they surface. It will probably be uneventful. We’re probably worried about nothing. The whole thing will be anticlimactic.”

My gaze focuses on the road in front of me.

And if they don’t surface? Then what? I suppose that’s a bridge we’ll have to cross when we get to it.

“Do you promise you’re telling me everything?” Violet asks after a moment of silence.

“Are you?” I reply.

She turns her head to look out the window, and I don’t feel so bad about withholding our plan from her now. Neither one of us is being one hundred percent forthcoming. Let’s just hope this doesn’t end up to our detriment.

Either way, she’s back with us. We won’t let anything happen to her. That’s for sure.

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Chapter 8

Steele

A cry wakes me in the middle of the night. Bolting upright, I throw the covers aside and leap out of bed, rushing toward Violet's room. No one else is in the hallway of the pack house, and neither of my brothers seems to have heard her.

My senses are on high alert, and I peer through the darkness, searching for signs of an intruder. But I don't see, hear, or smell anyone.

When I open her door, I find her tossing and turning in bed. My chest tightens to see her writhing in such agony, the dream overtaking her.

"Violet," I rasp, sliding in beside her. Instantly, her warmth overtakes me, and blood rushes through my entire body. "Wake up. You're having a nightmare."

She gasps, her eyes fluttering as she wakes, blinking rapidly. "Steele."

I brush her black tresses away from her pale cheeks in the inky darkness. Her lower lip quivers, and my eyes rake searchingly over her face. Unable to resist, I brush my lips against hers, and she sighs, releasing the last of the dream in a whoosh of breath.

"You're all right now," I murmur tenderly, stroking her face. "What is it? A premonition?"

She swallows visibly. "I-I don't know. Maybe."

My arm encircles her, and I pull her against my chest, relishing the feel of her skin against mine, all my previous suspicions about her melting away. “We’re going to figure this out.”

“I don’t know if we will,” she whispers. “It’s been too long in the making.”

Pulling away, I stare at her with narrowed eyes. “What does that mean?”

Biting on her lower lip, she looks away. “I’m not sure...”

“You have your suspicions,” I press. “What are they?”

“I... I think this started with your parents,” she explains, sitting up. “One of your fathers brought this on you guys.”

My eyes narrow. “Which one? How do you know?”

The thought of any of my fathers—the three brothers who made up our previous ruling Apex triad—leaving behind an unresolved conflict makes my skin prickle.

She shakes her head. “My dream... it’s already fading...”

Her head drops back against my chest, and she’s asleep again. I realize that she’s been chattering in her sleep the whole time. She won’t even remember this conversation in the morning.

Frustration floods me, and I want to wake her up, but I don’t. Violet needs to heal, and I need to process what she just said.

We stay at the pack house all day. Enzo sent word to the pack that the east end house isn’t to be used, and we’re on guard for any suspicious activity around us, but the

unusual acts of magic haven't followed us outside the estate. Here, the house doesn't shake, and there are no random flashes of light. I wait for my suspicions to kick back in, for my wary mind to suggest that maybe Violet is just on her best behavior now that she knows she's being watched, but I can't reconcile the idea that the driver tried to kill her, too. If she were truly working with them, they would want her alive.

I curl up with Violet on the couch in the living room with my brothers, a movie playing on the mounted television, but we're discussing the plan for tomorrow, so none of us are paying attention.

"You go in and get out," Jax repeats. He's said this so many times by now, I'm getting annoyed.

"I know, Jax," Violet sighs in exasperation. "I'm not looking for trouble."

"I didn't say you were, but you're also not going to avoid it if it finds you, are you?"

She sneers at him. "I know you mean well, babe, but honestly, it's a little hard for me to forget that you threw me out of here three years ago without ever worrying about my well-being."

"That's not true," Jax growls. "We did worry about you! I told you that I tried to contact you." He looks at us accusingly. "Did you put a blocker on my emails or texts?"

"No." I frown at Enzo, but he appears just as confused.

"No," he answers with just as much perplexity. We look to one another. "Could the dark witches do that?"

"They didn't stop us from reaching out to the Florida Apex Alphas about her," I blurt

out.

“What?” she scoffs, surprised. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I glance at Enzo, but he doesn’t meet my eyes.

“We reached out to the Florida Apexes to keep an eye on you,” I admit. “They knew you were in their territory.”

Her eyes pop in dismay, and she pushes my arms away from her slender form. “You were spying on me, even from here?! What the hell was the point of exile if you were just going to keep spying on me?!”

“No!” Jax grumbles. “It wasn’t spying. We wanted to make sure you were safe.”

“You banished me! If you were so worried about my safety, you wouldn’t have kicked me out of Arizona in the first place!”

“You know why we had to do that,” Enzo sighs. “Come on, Violet. There’s nothing we can do to change the past now. We did what we thought was best for the territory at the time.”

She sits upright on the sofa and looks at me. “I’m not trying to change the past. I’m trying to change the future... for all of us.”

Drawing in a deep breath, she looks at us imploringly. To my relief, she settles back into my arms, and my hold tightens around her.

“You have to think,” she urges. “Why would this happen? What would your father have done to them? This level of hatred...”

“Nothing!” I snap, defensive, but Jax and Enzo are less insistent.

“She’s right. This doesn’t come from nowhere. Someone must have triggered this,” Jax agrees.

“Whose side are you on?” I grumble irritably.

“I’m on the side of getting this curse lifted,” Jax fires back, jumping up to pace around the room. “But to do that, we need to understand it.”

“And it can’t just be that they’re evil and want our power for themselves?” I counter. “A usurping has been known to happen.”

“It has... but not by witches. If this were the work of other shifters, maybe,” Enzo draws. “Shifters aren’t just going to roll over and accept rule by a coven now. They can’t just walk in and take over the territory.”

We ponder their motives and drive more, but the answers are much harder to come by.

“It might not be so simple as getting in and out tomorrow,” Violet says quietly. “Not if we really want this to be over for good.”

“Violet—”

“Hear me out,” she insists. “I might be your only shot to do this.”

We lean in to listen, but the more the details of her plan unfold, the less I like it, my eyes darting toward my brothers. It’s obvious that feelings are irrelevant in this matter already. I’m outnumbered.

Violet is going to do what she wants to do, and there's nothing I can do to stop her.

When I wake, Violet is already gone, and I panic slightly. I intended to spend the night with her, but I fell asleep on the sofa, and she left before I woke.

"Where is she?" I demand, rousing my brothers from their slumber.

Jax and Enzo bounce out of bed without hesitation, blinking wildly. They race through the pack house to look for her, but it's too late. I've already gone that route.

She's undoubtedly gone.

"You didn't hear her leave?" Jax demands, throwing open the curtains in the living room. "You were right here!"

We inhale collectively. His car is gone.

"She did that on purpose," I mutter, shaking my head.

She was onto our plan.

"She left without telling us!"

I try her phone, but she doesn't respond, and I send her a text, not hiding my annoyance.

Me: I hope you haven't gone to the estate already. Call me right away!

"We need to go after her," I say.

"She could have gone for coffee," Jax suggests weakly, but I can tell he doesn't

believe that in the least.

“Let’s give her half an hour,” Enzo agrees, and I fume about it. “The last thing we want is to go back to Dusty Woods without her.”

“Right. Because she’s the bait,” I grouch coldly.

“That’s the plan, whether you like it or not,” Enzo retorts. “We need to see this through and end this. How many more years are we going to go on like this? I don’t know about you, but I’m sick of being the weakest Apex Alphas in the country.”

Unsurprisingly, Violet doesn’t return in the allotted time, and I’m the first one out the door when my oldest brother declares the time up.

“We might already be too late,” I warn them, but I don’t wait for either of them to respond before I shift into my panther form and bolt off down the road.

Through my peripheral vision, I see them both shift into their animal forms, and I’m relieved they’re not fighting me on the course of action.

Silently, we stalk off in the daylight through the Sedona back roads toward Dusty Woods, and I ponder again how the dark witches infiltrated the town and estate. We weren’t careful enough in our weakened state. Sending Violet away was our first mistake. If she had been here, she would have noticed this a long time ago.

Shame propels me further faster, worry for her adding speed to my paws.

Arriving at the gate, Enzo stops to talk to the guards, asking if Violet went through. They confirm she got in earlier, and the dread on their faces is evident.

“Was she not allowed? There was no resistance to her entry,” one squeaks. “It seems

like she had permission to be here.”

“She’s fine,” Enzo growls. “Was anyone with her?”

“No, Alpha.”

“How long ago did she arrive?” I ask impatiently.

“Over an hour.”

I look to my right at Enzo.

Should we enlist these guards as backups? I ask my brother.

Enzo shakes his head and answers me through our mind connection. No. We don’t know who we can trust. For all we know, he’s one of them.

Jax nods in agreement, and I smother a sigh of discontent. We’re truly on our own.

Come on. Let’s do this.

Morphing back into our animal forms, we bolt forward and clear the rest of the way toward the estate.

Jax’s car is parked in the front, to my fusion of relief and concern. As I cautiously pad around it, keeping out of view of the windows, I notice nothing has been packed inside.

What’s the plan here? Jax demands. We need to stay out of sight.

We need to get inside, I counter. See what’s happening.

Turning to Enzo, we wait for him to tie-break the decision, and he gestures with his chin for us to follow him around the back of the estate.

We'll split up, he decides. Jax takes the main floor. I'll stay outside. You take the second floor, Steele.

It makes the most sense. I can scale walls best in my cat form, but I think we should stay together.

I wish Violet hadn't left without telling us.

It's too late to do more than follow this makeshift scheme now, and I nod curtly, bounding toward the trellis around the back of the house.

We part ways, and my pulse races. I immediately sense danger, and I scale the wall.

My ears hone toward the interior of the house, nose raised to sniff for others. The familiar scents of our staff reach my nose, and my guard peaks, but I have no handle on Violet.

“—odd for them all to be out all night. I wonder if it has anything to do with what happened last night,” one servant comments to another as they clean the main bedroom.

I land silently on the balcony, away from their view.

“The witch is here. I saw her,” the other maid replies.

The original maid perks up, and my eyes narrow at her interest. “Is she?”

“Yeah. In her suite. I think she's collecting some of her things.”

“I thought she left yesterday,” she purrs.

My senses go haywire.

“I guess she’s back.” Shrugging, the second servant continues to clean, but the first one sets down her supplies and discreetly leaves the room.

Violet is in her suite. And I think I found another one of the dark witches. She’s heading to her now, I silently message my brothers.

There’s no answer from either of them, their range too far, apparently. I have no choice but to climb higher if I don’t want to be seen. From my vantage point on the roof, I peer down, hoping to catch a glimpse of either Violet or my brothers, but there’s no one around. Still, I can feel the danger intensifying. My ears hone around me, and I slide over the roof toward the other side of the house where Violet’s suite sits.

We should call this off right now. There’s not enough planning. Something could go wrong.

But it’s too late. We’re in it, and we agreed to this already. Even if Violet doesn’t know we’re here, she needs our backup.

I slink back down over her balcony and hear the voice clearly through the open door.

“—be in here!” Violet accuses the servant. “Get out!”

“I just wanted to see if you need any help, miss,” the maid coos.

I peer around the corner and see the blackened glow of the maid’s eyes, my pulse quickening. Her head whips up as if she detects me here, and I fall back against the

wall. I know what we're up against now.

How did we not see it before? Were our powers that diminished? Have we become that complacent?

"I don't," Violet answers. "If I needed help, I would have called for you."

Light footsteps fill my ears, and I realize the maid does not take her cue to leave.

"I told you to get out!" Violet growls.

"Don't you feel like a traitor, sleeping with the enemy like this?" the servant asks coldly.

Silence ensues for a moment.

"Don't you feel a little out of line, speaking to a guest of the Alphas like this?" Violet fires back, but I hear the waver in her voice. "They are the ones who sign your paycheck, after all."

A whoosh of air startles me, and I whip my head around as Enzo lands stealthily on the opposite side of the balcony, his steely eyes boring into mine.

Marianne? he asks. I stare at him blankly. The servant. Her name is Marianne. She's a dark witch?

I have no answer for him. My teeth bare slightly, and he turns his attention toward the room.

"You're not a guest. You're an exile who forced herself back in. What were you hoping to achieve here, Violet? Haven't they humiliated you enough?"

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Violet mutters.

“I know you were warned. And now you’ll pay the price, won’t you?”

“Get out of my room.”

“It’s not your room. It’s our room. This entire estate is ours—or it will be once we find your Alphas.”

“How?” Violet snaps. “The packs will never respect a coven! This is insanity!”

“They will with enough magic,” Marianne chuckles. “They’ll succumb if we make them. Tell me, where are your Alphas hiding now? Let’s put them out of their misery once and for all.”

Violet gasps. “I... I won’t tell you anything!”

Marianne shakes her head and ambles closer. The instinct to jump in overwhelms me, but Enzo’s voice rings out in my head.

Don’t! Don’t move.

“Weren’t you warned about what would happen if you interfered? Look how little they care about you, little witch. Sending you here on your own, even though they know their lives are in danger.”

Marianne advances on Violet with a laugh, but as she draws near, Violet throws up her hands, a shimmering golden shield protectively falling around her.

“I haven’t interfered. I came home,” she retorts. “You are the ones interfering with Apex business, and you’ll pay for this. Are you out of your minds? You can’t come

after Apex Alphas! You'll have the wrath of an entire country of shifters on you!"

Grimacing, Marianne stands back, folding her arms over her chest as she studies the shield around Violet.

"That shroud of protection won't last forever," she hisses. "And I've got all day, since your Alphas are too cowardly to show themselves. Once it falls, I will enact that curse we promised you, and you'll feel the brunt of betraying your kind."

The door to the bedroom opens, and three more servants appear with grins on their collective faces, the driver among them. My stomach drops as Enzo's voice fills my head.

Oh, gods. There's more of them.

Violet is less bothered by their numbers, even though she appears to recognize one of the maids who just entered.

"I did warn you," the newcomer servant sings. "You just couldn't stay away, could you?"

"Is that all you've got?" Violet shoots out casually. "Four of you?"

"Dark magic doesn't need numbers," Marianne snaps, her facade fading under Violet's mocking.

I thought she wasn't going to antagonize them, I grumble to Enzo, but he doesn't look at me. He's just as worried as I am, I can smell it all over him.

"I'm giving you one more chance here," the leader of the dark witches tells Violet, circling her like a vulture.

“Oh, yeah?”

“We’re taking Dusty Woods,” Marianne informs Violet, her ebony eyes shimmering with malice. “And you can join us or die—after enjoying a long, hurtful curse.”

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Chapter 9

Enzo

L ike my brother, I want to charge through the balcony doors and take on the small coven of dark witches, but I can't, not until I fully understand what we're up against... and why.

Violet hangs her head from behind her protective shield, her eyes darting around the room as if seeking a weapon, but she's on her own.

"I don't understand any of this," she complains. "You've had years to do this. Why now?"

"You're forcing our hand, Violet. If you'd been a good girl and stayed away, no one would be the wiser, would they?" Marianne grumbles. "Your idiot Alphas would still think you're the one responsible for their problems, and they wouldn't be looking for other alternatives. Now, you've given us no choice but to react and take over, even before we're ready. If not for your nosing around?—"

"I'll leave again!" Violet protests, and my heart sinks at the prospect.

She's only telling them what they want to hear, I remind Steele.

"It's too late. And it's time. You're right. It has been years. We're owed this territory. Their fathers were cruel, disgusting beasts. They treated the witches and warlocks like animals?—"

“These Alphas aren’t like that!” Violet interjects. “They work with us, with you!”

Marianne laughs hollowly. “Right. Like when they exiled you without letting you plead your case? No. They’re just like their fathers, and they deserve every bit of pain they have coming.”

“Then why wait?” Violet yells, her frustration overtaking her desire to stay calm. She sucks in air. “I don’t understand why you waited so long to act if you really believed this.”

Marianne giggles. “It was fun watching them chase their own tails, blame others, and lose respect among their packs and other Apexes. Their humiliation is just as good as taking their land, don’t you think?”

She turns to her little coven, and they nod in agreement.

Violet’s lovely eyes well with tears, but she doesn’t allow them to fall. “You don’t know them. They’re noble and kind. They will do anything to protect those they care about. Maybe their fathers were like that, but these guys?—”

“They only care about finding their fated mate. You really think they care about you, Violet? If their mate showed up today, they’d kick you right back out again.” She stares intently at Violet, a small smirk toying on her lips. “You know I’m right, too, don’t you?”

Violet looks down, and my heart cracks as I realize she believes it.

“Stay with us. We won’t send you away. We don’t need you to be mated to us to care about you. We wouldn’t exile you without any proof of wrongdoing,” the dark witch tries to convince her.

Oh, Violet, I'm sorry...

I glance at my brother, and his shame is just as evident as mine. Suddenly, I wouldn't blame Violet if she did turn on us.

"You practice dark magic!" Violet scoffs, whipping her head back up. "I would never join forces with you! You've created nothing but havoc and chaos since you arrived in Dusty Woods!"

"Rightfully so," Marianne replies smugly. She's unapologetic. "And if you aren't with us, you're against us. That's why we never trusted you." She plops onto the bed and sprawls out. "But that's okay. We'll wait until that shield comes down." Nodding toward one of the other servants, her smile widens. "Call Alpha Enzo and inform him that there's an emergency here with his little house guest. If they want to see her alive again, they better get their asses back here. It's time to end this and claim what's ours. And with the curse we put on them, they are no match for us."

I turn my head back toward my brother, but before either of us can communicate or move, an intense burst of wind rushes through us, knocking us both back.

Jax lunges through the door in tandem with the whirlwind of magic, surprising the witches. The mini-tornado whips through the room in a black vacuum. I barely know which way to look, but I know we need to seize the opportunity while the witches are caught off-guard.

Unable to wait another second, Steele and I rush forward, joining the chaos before our brother can be attacked, even though I'm not sure what's happening.

"Bitsy, be careful!" Violet shouts, extending her hands. Bolts of lightning flash from Violet's palms toward the shocked dark coven, and their bodies are collectively driven back against the wall.

Another body materializes through the cloud of smoke, her magic flashing incessantly, lashing out at the dark witches while my brothers and I jump in for the attack. It doesn't take long to understand that the whipping wind tunnel is on our side.

Jax leaps for Marianne's throat, the witch howling in distress as Steele and I take on the driver.

"You won't get away with—" Marianne tries to shriek, but she's unable to finish her sentence.

Jax's teeth sink into her jugular as I take on one of the other servants attempting to flee. A swirl of black magic hangs over us, the clash of dark and bright light smashing around the room and destroying the walls, plaster crumbling around us.

Fur flies as I lose sight of where my brothers stand, my need to protect Violet and for vengeance overriding all else in my primal state. Through my peripheral view, I notice the golden glow of her protective shield fading away, the shroud losing its power, but the worst of the danger is under control.

More screams echo through the room until suddenly, blissfully, there is silence.

Breathing heavily, I stand back, my brothers flanking either side of me in their animal forms as we take in the scene before us. My head swivels around to look desperately for Violet, and I exhale with relief to find her unharmed, still enshrouded partially behind her shield of golden protection.

Shifting into my human form, I rush to her side.

"Are you all right?" I ask, my heart thudding wildly as I touch her.

Beads of sweat pop along my hairline, my pulse racing like I've never felt it before.

Our eyes lock, and abruptly, I realize it has nothing to do with the exhilaration of the fight. Her gaze fixes on me, her lips parting and her eyes glowing like she's spell casting.

As if they're possessed, my brothers join my side, morphing back into their human bodies, too, their collective heartbeats roaring in my ears.

"Hi! I'm Bitsy," the newcomer calls out. I can't tear my eyes away from Violet's face as the sky outside rumbles. Bitsy inhales sharply. "Oh."

Comets streak the sky, their tails painting the daylight oddly, but I'm still captivated by Violet's face, like I'm seeing it for the first time. The dull throb in my chest intensifies as I reach out through the shield to stroke her cheek, the effort easy. Electric sparks fly from my fingertips, the tightness around my ribs closing to squeeze at the pulsating glow around my heart. Blood rushes through my ears.

"It's you!" I cry. "You're our mate!"

A rumble of distant thunder seems to confirm my determination as Jax and Steele step to either side of her. There's a rhythmic thump of tribal drumming from somewhere, but I can't tell if it's inside me or around me, a headiness overwhelming me as everything but Violet dissipates.

"Er... we'll do intros later," Bitsy decides. "I'll see myself out. You're welcome, by the way."

Violet shakes her head in disbelief, biting on her lower lip.

"I-I can't believe it," she says, cocking her head toward me.

I catch her lips on mine, unable to keep myself away from her now, the pull

astronomical.

The shield falls away now that she's in no more danger, her hands reaching up to pull me closer, and I crush my mouth harder to hers, every atom of my body responding to her. She pulls back slightly to shake her head again. "The curse must have kept us?—"

I stop her with another kiss, this one longer, harder, more urgent. I'm ready for her, and she's ready for us, like always, but there is more need now, a desire to solidify our bond. Her nipples strain against my bare chest, hardening me more.

Steele's hand finds the flat of her stomach as I push myself closer, wanting to be inside her, a part of her in every way. I release her mouth long enough to yank her shirt up, and Jax wastes no time taking his kiss.

"Of course you're our mate," he mutters, kisses raining down her neck. "We should have seen it. That's why we found it so hard to let you go."

Goosebumps erupt over her soft skin, and I take the opposite side of her neck, hand curving over the sweetness of her breast. Together, we guide her toward the bed, a few steps to the left. More comets jut through the air outside, but it's the fireworks inside that have our full attention.

We take turns exploring her slender crevices, stripping away her clothing to make her as naked as us. One by one and together, we enjoy her as we have so many times before. But this time, it's different. This time, she's our fated mate, and we will all commit this experience to memory forever.

I center her on the bed, spreading her wide, and she splays her hand over my shoulder, nails digging softly into my skin as I bow my head lower to tend to her sweet-tasting center.

Steele props himself up, and she guides him into her mouth, the three of us falling into a natural rhythm, her mewls exciting me as she reaches her climax, clinging to me with one hand, my brother with her other.

I roll aside and allow Jax to take her first, my lips lingering at her rigid nipples, the celestial event outside reaching its peak with us.

“I have loved you all for so long,” Violet moans, her body arching upward as another release wracks through her body. Her spasms only arouse me more, and I take over from Jax as soon as he spends himself.

“You’re so beautiful, Luna,” I groan, and my brothers grunt in agreement, our rhythm increasing as we urge her into yet another climax. Her fingers tighten, and I clutch harder to her.

She pulls back from Steele’s cock, her slender neck straining as her entire body seizes with pleasure. In unison, we release, and I fall away, nodding toward Steele.

“She’s ready for you, Steele.”

Violet whimpers, beads of sweat dripping down her face, her body quivering with pleasure as my younger brother mounts her. Gently, I kiss her lips, staring deeply into her eyes.

“We’ve loved you, too,” I promise her. “And we’ll keep loving you always.”

Steele plunges into her swiftly, and Violet cries out as he digs his fingers into her hips, his thrusts hard and full. She arches her slim frame upward, and Steele groans once, biting on his lower lip.

A low, piercing cry fills the suite as Violet unleashes one final climax, and the

thunderous boom outside is so close, it shakes the room with her.

In a trembling heap, we fall onto the bed, panting and spent. I curl against Violet's sweaty form, ignoring the bodies on the floor, but Jax isn't as easily able to forget about them.

"I still don't understand why all this happened," he complains. "Grateful as I am that the curse is lifted." He kisses Violet's cheek gently. "And I really am glad. I literally feel like a weight has been lifted off of me."

"The sins of the father, I suppose," Steele comments angrily. "We have to make sure we rule better than them so our kids don't face this same kind of nonsense."

I nod slowly. "I agree. I wish I knew what they did and why this happened, though."

"If it's any consolation, dark magic witches don't always play with a full deck," Violet offers. "They dragged this out for years and pulled me into it, too. Sometimes dabbling in dark magic affects your rationality."

Steele props himself up on one arm and peers into her face.

"We'll spend our whole lives making up for the way we treated you," he murmurs. "I can't believe you came back, despite all that."

Jax frowns. "How did you know to come back?"

I want to know the same thing.

Embarrassed, Violet darts her hazel irises downward.

"About a year ago, I was visited by a dark witch in Miami—one of the servants here.

She was asking all kinds of questions about you three, and it raised some suspicions, even though I was still so angry with you.” She pauses as we wait expectantly. “So I started looking into how things were going over here.”

Scoffing, Steele sits up fully, a playful grin forming on his lips. “And you gave us grief for looking into you! You were spying on us, too.”

She shrugs. “You were the ones who threw me out. I never wanted to leave. Of course I wanted to know how you were doing.”

My arms tighten around her. “We’ll never let you go again,” I promise.

“But that doesn’t really explain why you came back now,” Jax points out.

Violet frowns slightly, a look of nervousness overtaking her.

“I started poking around and asking questions myself,” she admits. “I couldn’t understand why a coven, particularly a dark coven, had any interest in Apex shifters. I probably aroused attention because I wasn’t exactly being discreet. Suddenly, the same witch was back on my doorstep, threatening me. She told me if I didn’t leave it alone, I was going to end up with a curse on my head, too.”

“Too?” Jax echoes.

“Exactly. I started to understand all the stuff that was going wrong over here. I sat on it for a while, but I couldn’t in good conscience let you guys suffer...” She trails off. “But coming back put me at risk, too.”

“Oh, Violet.” I hug her closer, shame overcoming me.

“And this Bitsy?” Steele asks.

“Oh,” Violet laughs. “She’s my best friend. She warned me not to come back.”

“She sounds like a smart witch,” Jax sighs.

“I don’t like her,” Steele grunts.

“She just saved our asses. Come on. We should go tell her the coast is clear and thank her for coming all this way—also at a great risk to herself.”

I’m reluctant to let Violet go, but she’s right.

We untangle ourselves from one another and hastily dress, stepping over the bodies of the dark witches in our path. The servants cower as we emerge, and I order them all out of town.

“No one is allowed back on the estate until a proper background check has been conducted. If any of you have information you want to share about the dark witches in our midst, now’s the time to save yourselves. If we find out later that any of you were in cahoots with these terrorists...” I trail off, and they hang their heads. “Get out. All of you.”

They shuffle out, and Jax eyes me warily. “Don’t you think you were a little hard on them?”

“Or not hard enough,” I retort, stalking ahead to catch up with Steele and Violet. “Don’t tell me they didn’t know.”

“We didn’t know,” Jax reminds me.

A fusion of annoyance and guilt flames through me.

“We’re taking back our territory,” I tell him firmly. “We have a lot of work to do.”

I notice the rush of power instantly, and my brothers claim the same. Coupled with Violet’s matehood, I’ve never felt more in control of myself or the territory, and the next three months are fixated strictly on housecleaning.

“I’m sure we’re in good standing with all the Southern Apex packs now,” I tell the pack at our monthly meeting. “We won’t be met with any more rebellions.”

“And the dark coven?” one shifter asks brazenly. “Is that threat definitely eliminated?”

I scowl at his boldness, but Jax answers for me. “They were a handful of rogue witches and warlocks—even for a dark coven. When their coven learned what they were doing, they made reparations.”

Violet eyes me, sensing my discontent on the whole matter.

“Are you sure?” the same shifter calls out, and I bare my teeth at him.

Violet stands from her seat and nods at me.

“May I?” she asks sweetly.

I exhale. “Go ahead.”

“Do you remember last year when your brother broke into that convenience store and bit that human clerk?” she asks the shifter.

He balks and stammers. “Y-yeah, of course. He went to jail.”

“It’s kind of the same thing,” Violet continues calmly. “That wasn’t done with pack

sanctioned approval, was it?”

The shifter swallows visibly and sits back down as Violet stares him down. Jax snorts, covering his mouth to hide his expression as the rest of the Apexes chuckle.

“Sometimes beings go rogue. They get power hungry, or they get vindictive. They go crazy. It’s not the fault of the collective,” Violet explains, staring down the argumentative shifter. “That’s the case here. The matter is resolved, just like it was with your brother.”

He purses his lips and darts his eyes away.

“Any other questions?” Violet chirps.

“No, Luna,” the pack replies, and I adjourn the meeting.

They shuffle out of the pack house, leaving me alone with my brothers and Violet.

“You’re too good at handling them,” I tell her, shaking my head appreciatively. “I might just let you run the meetings from now on.”

“No, thanks!” Violet laughs, flopping back down on a chair. “I’ve already got a coven to run.” She stifles a yawn, and I realize how tired she looks.

Steele also comments on her exhaustion.

“I’m going to order takeout tonight and run you a hot bath,” he informs her.

“And I’m whipping out the massage oils,” Jax adds.

“That sounds heavenly,” she agrees with a warm smile, rubbing her eyes and sitting

forward. “Don’t blame me if I fall asleep halfway through, though.”

“You deserve it, Violet. You’ve been going nonstop,” I tell her warmly, kissing her cheek. “Come on. Let’s get you home.”

I offer her my hand, and she rises, stumbling slightly. “Oh!”

Concern fuses through me as I look at her, but Jax’s golden eyes brighten.

“Are you okay?” I demand worriedly.

“Just a little dizzy,” she confesses, allowing me to steady her.

Jax’s mouth opens, and Steele’s eyes pop. Understanding floods me as my brothers’ message hits me without either of them stating it directly.

“Have you been nauseous, too?”

Violet freezes, her eyebrows raising as she stares at us. “You don’t think...?”

I sniff the air around her and realize for the first time that her scent has changed. My brothers do the same, and excitement washes through us.

“You’re pregnant!” I breathe, sweeping her up in my arms. “Oh, my gods!”

Jax rains kisses over her, and we all embrace, relishing the thought of our future heir or heirs to the territory with awe and shock.

“I can’t believe it didn’t occur to me before,” she laughs, shaking her head. “I’m...” She pulls her head back and looks at us. “Are we ready for this?”

“Oh, yeah,” I promise. “We’re ready.”

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VIOLET

One Year Later

My eyes flutter open at the subtle twitter of a bird. Blinking, I take in the crow perched on the balcony through the open French doors, the bird cocking its head toward me.

“Hello,” I murmur, my voice thick with sleep. “Any messages today?”

As if on cue to my question, a wail bursts out through the baby monitor from the bedside table, and I roll over to answer it.

“I got it,” Jax mumbles, his eyes still closed as he stumbles automatically out of bed.

“No, darling, I’ll go,” I tell him, shooing him back into bed with the others. “I’m already awake.”

He yawns and looks at me. “Are you sure?”

I grin at him.

“Of course.” I slip out of the California king bed to tend to the crying infant in the next room.

Jax falls back onto the mattress, and I find my robe hanging behind the bedroom door before ambling into the nursery. The nanny leans over Kian’s crib when I enter. She

smiles at me.

“I’ve got him, Luna,” she offers, but I wave her back.

“It’s all right. If he’s awake, the other two will be up soon enough. I’ll take him for now.” I scoop up my wailing son, and he immediately relaxes in my arms, his vivid silver eyes unblinking as he stares back. “Good morning,” I coo. “Did you have sweet dreams?”

No sooner do I settle in the rocker to nurse than his middle brother begins to fuss, their youngest brother behind them. The nanny collects the other two babies, and soon, they are all settled and eating.

One by one, the Alphas saunter into the nursery, pausing in the doorway to take in the scene with affection.

Steele takes his son from the nanny, placing the boy on his chest as Enzo reaches for the youngest triplet.

“What should we do today?” Enzo asks the baby. “Should we learn about pack dynamics?”

I chuckle.

“Isn’t he the fun dad?” Jax jokes, extending his arms toward Kian for me to hand off the child. I give my son to him and take it all in with love.

“I don’t need to be fun,” Enzo reminds him. “I need to be present. That’s what these kids need, so they aren’t blindsided by our pasts when they grow up.”

My heart pangs as I realize he’s still affected by what happened with the dark coven, even though we don’t talk much about it.

“They are loved,” I promise him, rising from the chair to join his side. “And they know we are nothing if not unified always.”

I share a look with my Alphas, a heartbeat passing between us, the electric pulse of our matehood still palpable, as if the bond had only just been forged. It grows stronger every day, just like the love I have for my children.

The door to the nursery flies open, and Bitsy stands at the threshold, her face alight with excitement.

“Sorry to interrupt!” she gasps. “But you have to come and see this!”

My best friend leads the way down the hall, the hem of her nightgown swirling at her ankles as she races down the winding double staircase. In the sitting room, she waves us toward the open computer where she was clearly getting a jump on work already. She takes her PR position very seriously since we moved her here from Miami, even though I keep telling her she doesn’t need to work so hard.

“Look!”

I peer at the laptop as my mates look over the sofa behind her.

“Is that...?” Steele asks in disbelief.

“Yep!” Bitsy announces proudly. “The approval ratings of all the Apex Alphas in the country. And who is number one?”

I glance back at my partners, still holding our sons.

“I’m not surprised in the least,” I tell them. “You are the best.”

“Considering a year ago we had no respect in these parts at all, I’m stunned,” Enzo

blurts out, and I laugh.

“You’ve earned it.” I stand straighter as Kian begins to stir again, kicking in his father’s arms.

“We earned it,” Jax corrects me, brushing a kiss across my lips.

“We need to announce this at the full moon party tonight,” Bitsy declares, clapping her hands together. “Everyone in Arizona needs to know that they’re reigned by the most powerful Alphas in the country.”

In unison, the triplets wail, and we burst out laughing.

“Leave it to me,” my friend urges, shooing us away.

We retreat to the nursery to leave the babies with the nanny and head to our room to dress for the day.

“Jax is right,” Enzo tells me, sidling up behind me in the full-length mirror.

He brushes the hair away from my neck and kisses me gently.

“About what?” I ask.

“We couldn’t have done it without you. You’re the reason we’ve come so far, Violet.”

Steele and Jax appear on either side of me, and I stare at their handsome faces in the glass, my heart swelling with happiness. We join hands and turn to leave the room together, just as we belong.