



Watch Me Burn (Sanctuary #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Did you know magic was real?

Because I sure as hell didn't until the day I lost my temper and fire shot out of my hands.

Literally.

At first, I thought I was a walking-talking stereotype. Fiery redhead, you get it? But tell that to the smoke billowing around me as a second shadow, and the flames that nearly burnt the creep following me around to a crisp.

Turns out that he's a witch hunter, and he was sensing something about me that I had no clue about. His goal was to, well, hunt me—but if it's a shock to learn that witches exist, that's nothing compared to finding out my best friend is a vampire.

With Elise's help, the two of us are shipped off to Dyea, Alaska, a former ghost town that is full of every type of supernatural creature you can think of. It's hidden and quiet, and most of all, a retreat for supes who need to hide out a little. Plus, it has something I need, and I'll do anything to get it.

Knowing that witch hunters are now searching for a rare fire witch, I resolve to keep my temper calm. In Dyea, I'm only here because Elise is. I'm her human blood donor, officially, and completely disregarded by the rest of the villagers... except for one.

Conall is gorgeous, but something about him has my palms heating up. Used to living in the Alaskan wild, he's gruff and grumpy, and I'm convinced he's a witch-hunter in disguise.

Nope.

He's actually a lone wolf—and my fated mate...

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PROLOGUE

I swear, it should not be this difficult to find a place to rent in a city with this many hulking skyscrapers.

My fault. That's what I get for impulsively choosing to settle down in a city I never heard of before instead of sticking around New York like I have my whole life. Then again, why would I? After Aunt Maureen eloped with that dashing silver fox she met at her Tuesday pottery class, I finally decided there wasn't anything holding me back at home. Hey. I'm twenty-eight. My amazing aunt—who raised me after I lost my parents as a toddler—is finally putting herself first for once. My friends are all busy with their jobs and their families and their lives. They're all living it up.

Why shouldn't I do the same thing?

I've been searching for clarity my whole life. Meaning. Purpose . I live for my art, and I'm lucky that I'm successful enough at it to turn it into a living. As a digital artist who works on commission, I'm not tied down to any one place. Giving up my cramped apartment in Queens, I packed my car with everything I owned, then drove until I took a wrong turn and ended up in a city called Clarity.

Literally. I literally found Clarity, and with my smartass nature and sense of humor, I knew I had to make this place my new home.

It's a walkable city, too, which is great because I prefer the exercise, my wallet prefers not having to pay for gas, and my poor beater of a car is definitely on its way out. There are plenty of restaurants and take-outs for when I don't want to cook, and

the hotel I've been staying at these last two weeks is surprisingly affordable.

Housing, though? It's almost non-existent.

Okay. That's not entirely true. Believe me. I've spent those two weeks searching my computer, trying to find an apartment or a condo in my budget. There are hundreds of them—with or without roommates—and I've lost track of how many I've applied to, or the amount of rooms I've gone to tour in person.

And, yet, I get the feeling that, every time I do, they've already made up their mind about keeping me out of their properties.

What the hell? Do they have a thing against redheads or something? It sure seems like it, and as affordable as the hotel is, I'm still burning through the money I have set aside for my first and last month's rent. I need to find a lease or a sublet or, at this point, even a closet to shove me and my stuff inside. So long as it has an electric socket so that I can charge my drawing pad, I'm good.

I'm good—or maybe I'm just that desperate.

On my list today, I have three new apartment buildings to stop by. Each one claims it has a handful of openings, and since I'm ahead on my latest commission, I figure I should check them out while my odds are better of meeting with any on-site managers.

That's another thing about Clarity. As populated as it is, it has this almost cozy, small town vibe to it. Most shops close before it gets dark. Even the desk clerk who runs the hotel at night—a portly man in his early fifties with kind brown eyes and good recommendations for the local food joints—insists that it's better that I return to my room before the sun goes down.

It's not a crime thing. So spooked after he made the suggestion the first time, I looked it up online. With such a unique name, it wasn't hard to find, and everything I read said that Clarity's super safe. Not a single recorded homicide or reported sexual assault in the last five years.

Of course, that doesn't mean they don't happen, but it's not like I'm looking to move to a crime hotspot. And I'd like to blame that knowledge for how reckless I am... but let's be honest. Bridget Hayes has always acted on instinct, going with her gut, whether that means choosing to relocate to a strange city she's never heard of—or getting involved when she witnesses a man pestering a woman on the street.

It's barely noon. After stopping by the first two apartment buildings on my list—and mentally crossing them off when one manager refused to even accept my application, and the other smiled a thin-lipped smile before promising to get in touch should an opening come up—I was following my phone to the Sanguine Apartments when I glanced up and saw the altercation happening right in front of the entrance.

The man is about my age, maybe a little older. His dark hair is cut short, his back broad, and the vein in his neck bulging. He's not shouting, though his hands are animated as he talks intently at the woman he's looming over.

She's a petite thing. I can't make out many of her features since the man is blocking her with his bulk, but I catch a flash of deep, ruby-red hair that makes mine seem almost orange in comparison as she shakes her head before she turns away from him.

He reaches out, lashing a hand around her upper arm, twisting her around so that she's forced to look up at him again.

Oh, hell no.

My reaction is instinctive. Shoving my phone into my back pocket, freeing my hands,

I stalk over to them, feeling my temperature rise with every forceful step against the sidewalk.

You see, I have a teeny, tiny bit of a temper, especially when I see an obvious power imbalance. I know what people think about me, too. Feisty redhead who can't keep her damn mouth shut. It's a stereotype, but I'm living proof that stereotypes are stereotypes because sometimes they just fit.

I fist my hands as I get within reach of them. "Hey, you," I call out, aiming the venom in my voice at his back. "If the lady isn't interested, that isn't the sign to keep on pushing her, hoping she'll budge. No means no, asshole."

His head snaps over his shoulder.

He doesn't look angry, though. He looks lost. Heartbroken, even. His dark eyes are wide, almost frantic, and as though my glare is full of fire that burns, he immediately releases his hold on the woman.

"I didn't mean it," he says, his voice gruff as he looks back to address her. "Elise... I'm so sorry. But you have to listen to me?—"

I snort. "No. She doesn't," I say pointedly, before glancing at Elise, checking to see if she's alright. I nearly swallow my tongue when I do, and only just manage to choke out, "You okay, hon?"

She nods slowly, and the man starts babbling his apologies to her again while she rubs the fingerprint marks he left behind on her skin.

I glare at him some more just to reinforce how much he screwed up.

So. There's something else you need to know about Clarity. If I thought living in

New York meant I was surrounded by celebrities and supermodels, that's nothing compared to this city. Seems like, on nearly every corner, you run into someone who belongs on the cover of GQ or Vogue.

This woman is no exception.

She has an ageless beauty that makes it hard to guess how old she is. If pressed, I'd say twenty-two, maybe twenty-three just based on her flawless pale complexion and the way she fills out the silky blood-red blouse she's wearing on top of her slim black slacks. But then I look into her pale green eyes, and I wonder if she's older and has either been blessed by genetics or a fabulous surgeon because she's seen some shit.

No wonder the man seemed so desperate to cling to her. I'm into guys, and if this woman told me to follow her, I just might.

But that doesn't change what I said. No means no, and if she doesn't want anything to do with him, he needs to take a hint. If not, I'm more than happy to give it to him myself.

He's a big guy, though, and I have no idea exactly what I walked in on—even if I can guess—so pushing him when he seems like he's close to the edge? Probably not the smartest idea. This guy looks like he's about to snap, and I'd rather not see Bridget Hayes be the first murder victim in Clarity in the last half-decade.

So I do what any nosy bystander who just realized her only weapon for defense is the phone in her pocket would do. I tug it out, showing it off to the man as I tell him, "If you don't leave her alone, I'm calling the cops."

I'm bluffing. Call the police? What will they do? Come to think of it, I'm not even sure I've seen a cop car in Clarity since I accidentally stumbled upon this city at the end of the bumpy, dusty narrow road I couldn't turn my car around on. Who knows if

they'll even arrive in time to save either of us if this guy does snap?

Luckily, the c-word seems to catch his attention.

He frowns. "The cops?"

"The Cadre," murmurs Elise.

He takes a step away from her as though that'll erase the way he grabbed her before.

"We have an arrangement. There's no reason to bring Thorn into it."

"We had an arrangement, Peter." What kind of accent is that, I wonder. Her voice is soft, musical, with a hint of an accent I can't quite place as she goes on to add, "But you chose another. I understand. Delilah can give you something I can't."

His hand flies up to his chest, patting the front of his hooded sweatshirt. "It's just a fang."

It's just a what ?

Ah, jeez. Not for the first time, I definitely found myself butting my nose in where it doesn't belong. I have no idea what he means by 'fang', but the rest of their exchange? It's pretty obvious now what's going on. These two had a thing, now they don't, and it's not for a lack of trying on Peter's part.

That doesn't mean he gets to grab Elise to persuade her to give him another chance. And though the red marks on her arm have faded, I saw them before. They were there which tells me he was rougher than he needed to be when she tried to walk away.

Flicking my phone app open as obviously as I can, I press my thumb against the home button, showing off the screen.

Peter drops his hand. Eyes sliding over toward the woman with the ruby-red hair, he firms his jaw. “We’ll talk later, Elise. Tonight.”

“Go to Delilah,” she says softly—but not so softly that my cocked ears don’t pick up on it. “Goodbye, Peter.”

He glances at me again. I tighten my grip on my phone just in case he gets any ideas. He exhales roughly and, shoving his suddenly trembling hands into the front pocket of his hooded sweatshirt, he moves around Elise before heading down the street.

I wait until he’s turned the corner, disappearing out of sight, before I put the phone back in my pocket again.

Elise shifts so that she’s facing me. “Thank you...”

“Bridget, “ I supply.

“Thank you, Bridget. I’m Elise van Duren. If there’s some way I can repay you for your kindness...”

Elise Van Duren. Fancy, but it suits her. “Nice to meet you, Elise. And don’t mention it. I’ve met a couple of entitled guys in my life. Wished I had someone to stand up for me a time or two, so if I can, I will.”

“All the same, I appreciate it. Peter is usually harmless, but tonight I saw a different side of him.” Her nose wrinkles slightly, but not enough to mar her perfect features. “I didn’t care for it.”

“Ex not taking the break-up well?” I ask, hoping my question comes out more sympathetic than curious.

She purses her lips slightly. “Something like that.”

“Well, hopefully he’ll leave you alone now. If not, you know to call the authorities on him.” Cops. Cadre. Whatever. “You take care.”

Elise murmurs something softly, probably another ‘thank you’ or a pleasant ‘goodbye’, but as I reach for the door handle that will lead me inside of the Sanguine building, she raises her voice.

“Are you going in?”

I pause, glancing over my shoulder. “Uh. Yeah. I saw online that this place might have a studio apartment to rent. Thought I’d check it out.”

Her pale eyes seem to glitter in the afternoon sunlight. “You’re new to the city?”

“Just arrived a couple of weeks ago. Been staying at the Clarity Inn ever since, but I’m hoping to find something a little more permanent.”

“And you’re...” She nods. “Yes. I see.”

“See what?”

Elise grins. It’s a breathtaking smile, turning her from gorgeous to stunning, even if I do notice that the points of her canine teeth play peekaboo with me as her eyes light up. “How I can repay you after all.”

CHAPTER 1

FIRE

SIX MONTHS LATER

My entire life as I knew it changed forever because I broke my nail.

If it was my pinky nail, I could've dealt with it. One on my left hand? It wouldn't have been such an emergency. But the pointer finger? On my dominant hand? When the inch-long tip snapped as I was popping the top on my can of orange soda, breaking all the way down to the quick, I knew that I couldn't wait until morning to get that sucker fixed.

It's not even just a vanity thing, though I'd be lying if I said that I didn't use my nails as another outlet for my creativity. Visiting my manicurist at Shadow Nails once every three weeks is my favorite form of self-care. Angie does my fingers and my toes, and for the two hours I'm there, I can put my pencil down and let someone else do the designing. I was only just there a couple of days ago, but I know me. It's going to drive me bonkers to have one jagged nail until my next appointment.

And considering the nail appointment is one of my only splurges, I'm not about to cut off the rest of them to match. No. The only solution was to go and see if I could get it repaired, and since Shadow Nails is open until seven and it was only six when I snapped the nail, I figured there was enough time for me to head over, get it fixed, and be back before Elise came home from her dinner date.

That way she would never know I had to leave the apartment after dark on my own...

Considering how we met, you'd think I'd be more concerned over her safety. And I definitely am. It's been about six months since I interrupted her and Peter outside of the Sanguine... six months since she told me she was actually looking for a roommate to share her two bedroom apartment inside the building... and I've caught him sneaking around the front entrance, waiting to ambush Elise to 'talk' at least ten times since then. She's moved on, having a dinner date with another casual fling every few days, but Peter just can't get it through his thick skull that whatever they had, it's over.

Elise is too nice to report him for stalking. If it were up to me, I'd go right to the cops, but my first impression that they don't really have a big presence in Clarity was spot on. Despite being a decent-sized city, the people in Clarity don't seem to answer to law enforcement. Instead, we have the Cadre to protect us, and to make sure that no one starts any shit in the city.

The Cadre is made up of a group of powerful businessmen who rule Clarity with an iron fistful of cash. They have their base of operations in one of the downtown skyscrapers known as Homequarters. With their fingers in nearly every organization, business, and school in the city, it didn't take me long to realize that I'd much prefer to have a run-in with the ineffective police force than the man who is the face of the Cadre.

Thorn Wilkins owns Clarity. I've seen his face on watchful billboards, have gotten used to his smirk on television. Handsome yet ruthless in his drive to keep Clarity safe, I understand now why Peter balked at the idea that Thorn would find out he was harassing Elise.

Especially since Elise works as a data compiler down at Homequarters and actually has met with Thorn in person.

From what I've learned in my time in Clarity, you don't want to do that. Thorn has the power to kick you right out of 'his' city, and not even the puppet figurehead that is the elected mayor would stop him from exercising that power. Piss him off, go against the Cadre, and you're gone.

My rent is affordable. My roommate is a sweetheart who I get along so well with, I consider her my best friend. I haven't started dating myself yet, but if Elise's love life is anything to go by, once I decide to put myself out there, I should be okay.

Then again, she's a fucking knockout with a gentle personality and a kind heart so maybe I might have to work a bit harder. That's alright. One of these days, I'll settle down. For now, I'm just focusing on growing my career and enjoying the last year of my twenties.

I turned twenty-nine in January. It's February now, and I'm feeling my age creeping closer and closer to the big three-oh. Especially since, to my absolute shock, I discovered that the fresh-faced, youthful-looking Elise is actually thirty-four instead of in her early twenties like I thought.

All her dates made a little more sense when I found that out. She's looking for her own forever—that she adorably refers to as her future 'beloved'—and doesn't seem to want to wait much longer. Me? It's been a while since I've had a relationship of my own, but with Aunt Maureen finding a second chance at romance late in life, and Elise keeping her chin up about the whole Peter situation, I'm starting to think about it for myself.

Too bad it's not so easy when I work from home and rarely leave the apartment. There's not really a bar or club scene in the city, and when I do go out, I'm usually with Elise.

And Elise... well, she's Elise. I love her, but if I guy has his choice between her and

me, I'm not shocked that he'll hit on her first. There's just something about that woman that is hypnotic, and it took me almost my whole first month as her roommate to get over it. Shoot, there are some times when she walks into the common area of the apartment when I'm drawing on my tablet, I get a glimpse of her flawless skin and pale green eyes, her supermodel body and her kind smile, and I'm still a little tongue-tied.

But though I'm worried about her from time to time, the reason why Elise thought it would be a great idea if I became her roommate was because she was worried about me .

You see, Clarity has these really weird, super outdated rules. The stats weren't kidding when they said it was a pretty crime-free community, but that's because most of the citizens know about these unspoken 'suggestions'. Like how all of the shops, food places, and non-essential places of businesses all close down early—or how it's not a good idea for anyone to be out by themselves after dark.

You're not going to get in trouble trouble if you walk around alone. It's just accepted that, if we leave the apartment after the sun goes down, we go in pairs. Whether that's me and Elise hitting one of the few restaurants that stay open late, or Elise's dinner dates accompanying her back to the Sanguine, when it comes to how women are treated in Clarity, it's a throwback to a different time.

Of course it's only women who are expected to do that. If I hadn't seen what Thorn Wilkins looked like myself, I'd think he was some ancient man who thinks he's stuck in another age. Nope. Thorn is barely forty, but as the head of the Cadre, if he thinks it's safer for us to be each others' chaperone, whatever.

Especially since that's not going to stop me when I have to head out on a quick errand or two.

Like I said. We don't get in trouble. It's more like the people on the street give us a strange, speculating look as we pass them by. That's why I usually hop in my car if necessary, but Shadow Nails is only ten blocks away. I can handle the dirty looks for ten blocks.

Though, as I grab my phone, my hoodie, my keys, and my debit card before locking up the apartment, I only hope that I make it home before Elise does. I can handle the dirty looks from disapproving strangers. But when I disappoint Elise by flaunting the rules she's spent her whole life following as a Clarity native?

That sucks, and it's the only reason I try my best to play along.

Because, yup, Thorn isn't the only leader of the Cadre who enforced these admittedly misogynistic rules. His predecessor must've done the same, and though Elise's parents have moved back to Holland where her father was from, she grew up here and, to Elise, following the Cadre's mandates isn't weird. It's just what you do in Clarity.

I'm from Queens. It takes a lot more to get me to abide by some archaic rules I don't necessarily agree with. My nail broke, I want it fixed, and that's exactly what I'm going to do.

During this time of year, it's dark by five-thirty. It's past six now, but it looks like it could be the dead of night out here. I almost head back in, figuring I can suck it up and head to the salon in the morning. Then I shake my head, chiding myself for being a weenie. Pulling my hood up, thinking that I can pass for a dude under the thick sweatshirt, I step out onto the sidewalk.

I'm not wearing a coat. For as long as I can remember, the cold's never really bothered me; when Frozen came out, I used to sing along with Elsa like 'Let It Go' was my own personal theme song. I love the snow. Love the chill in the air. I guess

I've always just run at a higher internal temp because I barely notice it.

Though, when I was a kid, it was easy faking a sick day because I've never seen a thermometer give me a reading below one hundred. That's normal for me. I don't get fevers, and I don't feel the cold. In the summer? I'm in my element, too, almost like I'm a lizard who lives to roast in the heat. It's another reason why I don't mind walking everywhere. No matter the weather, I'm comfortable.

Across the street from the Sanguine, there's a man all bundled up. At least, I think it's a man. He has on a dark, heavy coat, dark denim jeans, and a scarf that covers up most of his face. He's standing beneath the awning of the enclosure that marks the bus stop.

His head shoots up as I move away from the entrance to the apartment building.

For a second, I think Peter's back. I haven't seen him lurking around since the holidays, but then I notice this man—and it has to be a man—is taller and broader than Peter. Plus, his hair is a lighter color. Closer to a straw-colored blond than a deep brown, I'm pretty sure I know who he is.

I rarely leave the apartment, but by that I mean that I rarely leave the block. When I get frustrated with my latest commission, or I feel a little too cooped up inside, I throw on my shoes and head outdoors for some fresh air.

And for the last week or two, anytime I've done that, I've inevitably seen this one guy waiting at the bus stop, staring over at the Sanguine.

It's weird, but then again, I'm a creature of habit, too. Maybe I take my usual breaks at the same time without realizing it and it just so happens to be when the bus schedule makes this stop along the route. That's most often mid-afternoon, and it's after six now, but this bus travels all over Clarity. He might just be heading out for

the night after a day at work.

There's no reason for me to take the bus when I can make it to Shadow Nails so much faster on foot. So, glancing away from the stranger at the bus stop, I feed my keys through the gaps between my fingers, a makeshift weapon in case I need one.

Then, pretending like I'm Wolverine, I duck my head and start down the street.

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CHAPTER 2

CHASE

Angie is a life saver.

I made it to Shadow Nails with forty minutes to go before closing. She'd just finished up with her last customer, and though she was ready to head out with Sam, the two of them were kind enough to stick around the fifteen minutes it took for Angie to make it look like I never snapped my nail. She did it free of charge as a kindness, I threw her twenty bucks to say thanks, then passed on her offer to walk with them until our paths split up.

Looks like Angie and Sam follow the same rules as Elise, but since I knew she's only two blocks down, then a cross street in the opposite direction from the Sanguine, it's pointless for me to join them.

Of course, Angie insisted. Feeling bad about being so hardheaded about it, I joined them for the first two blocks, then said goodbye as the two of them went down Fifth Street. I promised I'd get home quickly. I made it another three blocks when my phone buzzed, and I paused on the corner to see that Elise has sent me a text.

How do you feel about shrimp linguine?

I exhale roughly.

On the one hand, Elise is very thoughtful. Nearly every time she goes out to dinner

with a new date, she brings me home take-out. She claims it's her leftovers, but I know what a restaurant portion looks like. If she ate any of it before she boxed it up for me, I'd be surprised.

Now, she has money. From what I understand, her parents are loaded. She works because she enjoys her job, and she has a roommate because she was lonely and looking for a friend. For some reason, she picked me. If she enjoys spending her money, buying me take-out sometimes, I'm not going to complain.

On the other hand, I never see Elise eat. Like never. She says it's because she has a very unique diet, but while she's never without her steel stumbler, sipping on the metal straw, the only time I'm sure she's actually eating more than snacks like popcorn and crackers is when she goes out to dinner.

If they're her leftovers, she's not eating there. If she's paying for me, I have to think about her spending money on me that she doesn't need to. Either way, I don't want to confront her about it just yet.

Soon, I tell myself. Elise is like Mary freaking Poppins. Practically perfect in every way, except possibly hiding an ED. If I care about her, I'll have to help her, but when she's also the perfect picture of health, how do I accuse her of starving herself?

Lately, I've been dishing the leftovers out onto two plates and insisting she split it with me. And while she does more playing with it than eating it, at least I know she's getting some of it down.

With that in mind, I tap out a response.

You know how much I love shrimp. If that's on the menu tonight, thanks so much. We can share it later.

I already have it bagged up for you and Dorian is dropping me off now. Maybe we can finish our show if you don't have any other plans?

What?

No.

Crap.

Not the show part. When I discovered that Elise has a fondness for binging television shows before going to bed, we've taken turns picking one and watching it together. Lately, on her suggestion, we've been going through *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. She claims to love it, though she spends more time snorting and shaking her head during certain parts than anything else.

But if she's already on the way home...

I was hoping she was just sitting down to dinner, picking out something she'll order for me to bring home. If it was an early dinner, maybe she was paying the check and getting the leftovers together. But if her date is already bringing her back to the apartment now, no way will I beat her there.

Which means she'll know I broke the stupid rules. And while I don't see why it's such a big deal, Elise cares—and I care about Elise.

My thumb hovers over my keyboard. I sigh, then I tap out a quick message.

Sounds great. I'm actually on my way back to the apartment too. When I get home, we can start where we left out.

I wince when I see the three grey dots pop up that mean she's replying. Knowing

Elise, I can predict her answer—and I'm right.

Where are you? I can meet you there instead and we'll walk home together.

I'm guessing her date with Dorian being over so quickly means he's not 'the one'. But that also doesn't mean she needs to ask him to drop her off by the nail salon so that she can babysit me on the way back. I appreciate the thought, but...

Don't worry about that. I've got five blocks left and I'll be fine.

Enjoy the rest of your date.

Get the remote ready. We're starting season four tonight.

Then, before Elise can try to convince me, I shove my phone into the back pocket of my jeans and start walking again.

I haven't taken more than a couple of steps before my gut suddenly goes tight, and it's not from the slight anxiety that comes with upsetting another person; as much as I love Aunt Maureen to death, she was the queen of the guilt trip so I'm used to it.

It's something else, though. Something I don't like.

My palms tingle. My heart rate kicks up. My mouth is dry.

What the hell ?

Something's definitely not right. I can't explain it, only that I have the urge to bolt, and that doesn't make any sense. A shiver creeps down my spine, my whole body involuntarily shuddering. It's like I've got the weight of someone's eyes on me, and when I look behind me, I realize that I do .

He's at the end of the block and moving at a quick clip, right at me. He has his head ducked enough to hide his features, though the same black scarf he was wearing before would've concealed them anyway. So, yeah, I know him. The shape... the coat... the fair hair...

That's the guy that's been standing by the bus stop.

Is he following me?

Only one way to tell. Acting like I don't notice him coming down the street, I swallow the lump in my throat and look left, look right, see that no one is coming down the road in their car, and hightail it across the street.

Moving from one block to the next, I turn my head just enough to peek behind me.

Shit.

He crossed, too.

Maybe he's decided to head back to the Sanguine on foot. We could be heading in the same direction coincidentally, but doesn't he know better than to spook a woman walking out on her own? He should've stayed on the other side of the street, but he didn't, and I really don't like that.

I have my keys in my hand. The metal feels almost scalding hot against my fingers, like they've been left out in the sun instead of my sweatshirt pocket. I don't care. I clutch them tighter, removing them from my pocket so I have better access to them, and the sensation fades.

The feeling that he's right on my ass doesn't .

Up ahead is another cross street. It'll take me a good five minutes out of the way, but if that will help me shake him, that's fine. Besides, maybe I can get enough distance between us so that I can call Elise, see if her and Dorian can swing this way after all.

I turn the corner quickly, keeping my slight lead.

There are far fewer lights down this street. It was already dark out, but unless I'm imagining it, it's gotten impossibly darker. Even weirder, it seems like it's around me. Like a black cloud or... or a mess of shadows is tracking my every panicked step. Following me? Or part of me?

Smoke, I think, a touch hysterically. I think it might be smoke.

On the heels of that thought, something smells like it's burning. I sniff, blowing the air out of my nose when the stink of singed hair fills my nostrils.

I pause, searching for the telltale orange glow of a nearby fire, listening for a crackle and a sizzle, and finding none.

That was a mistake. I'd hoped that he would pass by the cross street, going on his merry way. Nope. While I was distracted, the stranger turned the corner.

How do I know? Because, all of a sudden, he has my wrist in his grasp.

It's the hand holding my keys. I hear a jangle, but it's not my car key rustling against the apartment key that makes the noise. Oh, no. It's the sound of handcuffs being unleashed before the metal scrapes against metal as he gets it around my right hand.

Did I think I was panicked before? That's nothing compared to the realization that this stranger just cuffed me. I shriek, spinning around on him. I can't gouge his eyes out with my keys. He disarmed me too well for that.

But I have another hand, and tearing it out of my sweatshirt pocket, I thrust it at the stranger.

The move was an instinctive one. Like I just wanted to shove him away from me any way I could so that I don't become the first crime statistic in Clarity over the last half-decade after all.

If only that's what happened.

You know what does happen?

Fire.

I shoot fucking fire out of my palm.

It streams out like a jet, hitting him right in the chest. His scarf catches first, then his thick coat, and the shock of being set ablaze has him letting go of the other half of the handcuff.

I don't run. I can't run. I just watch in horror as he backs away from the fire that's enclosing my entire right hand.

It tickles. Tickles . There's no heat, and if it wasn't for the renewed stink of something burning and the warmth pouring off of the stranger, I'd think I was imagining it.

But I'm not.

Not even a little.

He screams.

I scream.

The fire roars .

It rages, too, and all I can think is that the fire is coming out of me before my brain shuts down, everything goes dark, and I start to fall while he just stands there, burning.

Even as I lose consciousness, the man's howls of agony chase after me.

I've never been a vivid dreamer. When I wake up after having one, it's more vibes than anything. The child therapist Aunt Maureen had me seeing for a while thought it had to do with me losing my parents so young. That part of my psyche was damaged when they died in a car crash, leaving three-year-old Bridget behind.

She was a quack, that one.

As I come to again, the echoes of an agonized scream bouncing around my skull, I hope like hell that maybe she was onto something, and it just took until I was twenty-nine to figure it out.

Because that had to be a dream right? I didn't really get handcuffed by a stranger only to set him on fire ... forget dream. It had to have been a nightmare .

I'm on my belly. Something warns me against trying to wake up right now, almost as though I could fall asleep again and completely forget my bad dream. So I shift, ready to roll onto my side and snuggle into my pillow... and that's when I sense the cool metal on both of my wrists, biting into my skin, keeping my achy arms tied behind my back.

Handcuffs. I'm still wearing handcuffs. Not just one, either, but a pair.

I'm caught. I'm alive, but I'm caught, and whatever that stranger with the scarf wanted with me, this isn't my bed. I should've known that right away. The flat pillow beneath my nose smells clinical and musty, with a hint of an unfamiliar tang. The sheets are scratchy.

The cuffs weigh heavily on my hands.

He got me.

Fuck .

In my renewed sense of panic, I don't just roll onto my side in a foolish bid to escape the damn cuffs. I keep turning and discover that the bed I'm on isn't quite a bed. It's a narrow cot that's barely wider than I am. I rock and I roll right off of it.

I land with a grunt on my back, the metal digging painfully into my wrists. My arms feel like they're about to twist right out of my sockets, too.

Through it all, I keep my eyes screwed shut because I'm really still holding onto the hope that this is one very vivid, very awful dream.

“Bridget!”

There goes that. At the familiar voice—and my name—my eyes spring open. I immediately clamp them shut again when the bright white light overhead sears my retinas, but at least I know now that I haven't been thrown into some dank dungeon somewhere to rot.

I'm not alone, either.

CHAPTER 3

VAMPIRE

“E lise? Is that you?”

It takes a second to blink away the dark spots flashing in front of my vision. Keeping my eyes narrowed to slits, I lift my head, searching for her. I’d know her voice anywhere, even if I have no idea how she got mixed up in this mess, and I try to ignore the ache in my shoulders and my wrists as I try to push myself into a seated position.

“I’m right here. Let me help you.”

Elise is at my side before I can get my full vision back. Crouching down in her stiletto heels, she hooks her hand under my armpit. For a petite thing, she hefts me easily so that I’m standing on my feet again right next to her.

Shifting her hold to my bicep, she guides me back to the narrow cot. “Take a seat, Bridge. It’s probably better if you’re sitting now that you’re finally awake.”

Once she lets go of me, I shift my shoulder. “My hands are cuffed behind my back,” I tell her, as if she doesn’t already know.

Obviously, she does.

“I’m sorry. I argued against it when they let me down here, but they assured me that

the silver wouldn't hurt you. At the same time, they didn't want to risk you having use of your hands just yet."

Right. Because I can create fire in my palms.

How does Elise know? Why isn't she freaking out? What's going on? What is she doing here?

What am I doing here?

"Where am I?" I ask. It's the first question that blurts out, but now that I can finally see clearly again, I realize how pointless it is.

The room is about ten by ten, and much smaller than the bedroom in the apartment I rent with Elise. The only thing inside of it is the narrow cot with the cream-colored sheets and squashed pillow. The floor is cement. The walls are cinderblock.

And the door? Gleaming silver bars.

Where am I?

I'm in jail.

I'm in jail because I killed a guy.

Realization slams into me. No matter how I did it, I set that man on fire. I collapsed while he was burning. He must've died, and now I'm in jail because I incinerated him.

"Holy shit." My chest seizes as the unholy screams he let out while he burned fill my head again. "Holy shit ! That guy... he died . I killed him."

Elise sinks down on the cot next to me. Her hand lands on my thigh. “He’s not dead, Bridge.”

“He was on fire ?—”

I want her to tell me that I’m wrong.

“Yes. And after Thorn and Jasper finish interrogating him, he’ll probably beg for death before they grant it. But, for now, he’s been sedated, tucked away in a secluded ward in the human hospital so he doesn’t die before the Cadre want him to.”

Human. Over the screaming in my head, I hear the way Elise says ‘human’ like that.

Like she’s not.

Like I might not be, either.

What kind of human shoots fire out of their hands like that?

My tongue darts out. I swipe it along my bottom lip, trying not to heave. My breath is shaky and raw. “He was on fire.”

“You were just defending yourself,” soothes Elise.

No denying that.

“I did it.” It’s a whisper, as though I’m sure someone is listening in but I just want Elise to hear my confession. “I don’t know how. It just... it just happened . I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s okay.”

It's not. "And you're sure I didn't kill him?"

Elise doesn't answer me right away. For a second, I'm sure that I did and that she only told me I didn't to spare me before, but then she purses her lips. "Thorn said I could stay with you until you woke up. I'm supposed to let him know when you do so he can get your side of what happened on Coronet Ave."

"Thorn." Oh, no. "You mean Thorn Wilkins? The head honcho of Clarity?"

She nods. "And my boss."

That's right. Technically, Elise works for the Cadre. I don't know exactly what it is that she does, and when I would ask, she'd just tell me it was a boring pencil-pusher gig, but her office is on one of the lower floors of Homequarters.

"That's why I'm here," she continues. "Simon and Gilda were the ones who found you. They work for the Cadre, too. That... that man ... was screaming, rolling on the sidewalk, trying to put out the fire when Simon caught him. Gilda was there, too. She found you in a heap on the ground, wearing one shackle on your wrist."

Hang on...

"Gilda?" I furrow my brow, trying to remember. "Blonde curls, super blue eyes, dent in her chin? That Gilda? Your co-worker?"

"She got promoted to soldier status, but yes. She recognized you as mine." Elise clears her throat. "My roommate, that is. My friend. After reporting to Thorn, he gave permission for her to contact me. I came right over to HQ. I've been sitting with you ever since."

Soldier status? The way the Cadre rules over Clarity, it seems like Thorn is the

general of his own contained army. Maybe I wasn't too far off when I thought that.

So that explains why Elise is here. She has an in with the Cadre, and even if she's my bestie and not a lawyer, I much prefer having her here for moral support right now.

"I didn't kill him, but I'm still in jail."

"That's because Thorn ordered you detained until his soldiers could piece together what happened and decide what happens next." Her voice gentles. "You conjured in a Fang City, Bridget. I had no idea you were a witch, but this isn't a coven. Thorn won't allow it on his territory." She pauses. "There are cameras down here, too, Bridge. Just so you know. Thorn's gotta know you're awake now."

That's the least of my worries at the moment. Elise was just talking in code. Who the fuck knows? Maybe she's a soldier, too, because none of what she's saying is making sense. Territory? Coven? Fang City?

Witch ?

She's serious, though. As serious as a freaking heart attack, and if anything, she just looks disappointed that I kept my being a witch a secret from her.

No. It's impossible.

"Witch? I'm not a witch. Witches aren't real."

"But your magic?—"

"Magic isn't real, either," I say, cutting her off. "I don't know what happened with that fireball. That guy scared the shit out of me, and it already smelled like something was burning before he was. It had to have been a freak accident. It wasn't me. It

couldn't be me.”

It had to be me.

She tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear, peering at me closely. “You didn’t know.”

“Know what? That I’m a witch? I’m not. I told you, Elise. They’re not real .”

“They are. You are.”

“Elise—”

“Supes are real, Bridge.” Giving my thigh a squeeze, Elise lets go of me before getting back to her feet. She moves until she’s standing directly in front of me, her pale green eyes as hypnotizing as ever. “Witches. Shifters.” Her eyes flash. “Vampires.”

I snort. “Did I bang my head when I collapsed? There’s no way you expect me to believe that vampires are real.”

They say seeing is believing. That always made sense to me. If you can’t trust your eyes, what can you trust? But I saw my body covered in smoke before fire exploded out of me, and I can’t believe that.

And when Elise parts her lips, opening her mouth just big enough that I can see her top teeth in particular... I can hardly believe it when her canines begin to grow and grow until they’re at least an inch long.

She uses her thumb to prick the sharp point of one of the fangs. A bead of blood as deep a red as her hair color wells up on the tip. She laps it with her tongue all while I

gape wide-eyed up at her.

“Vampire,” I strangle out when I find my voice. “You’re really a vampire.”

“I am. And I would’ve told you sooner, but I didn’t know you were one of us.”

I’m not .

“I’ve seen you out in the sun.” I narrow my gaze on Elise. “Aren’t vampires supposed to incinerate during the daytime?”

“SPF-5000,” is her prim response. “I told you that I never go anywhere without sunscreen on.”

She did. When I asked her how she got such a youthful glow to her skin, Elise gave all the credit to her daily routine, plus a fondness for anti-sun protection. Being one of the immortal undead probably helps?—

“So I guess you’re not thirty-four like you said. How old are you really? And don’t give me that BS about it being rude to ask a lady her age,” I cut in when her nose wrinkles in distaste. “I want to know. You dropped the bomb on me that you’re a vampire. Least you can do is help me make sense of all this.”

“Seventy-two,” she admits. “I’m not even a century yet. To my kind, I’m barely a mature female. But my parents want me to find my beloved otherwise they’ll arrange one for me.” She waves her hand. “That’s not important. What’s important is that you’re a witch?—”

“I’m not .”

Maybe if I say it enough times, one of us will believe me.

Elise raises her eyebrows at me, then lays her unnaturally cool hand on mine—and how have I never noticed how chilly she was before? “Bridge, sweetie. I’m gonna hold your hand when I say this, but you shot fire out of one of them and nearly incinerated a man where he stood.”

I know.

I know .

It’s impossible. Unbelievable. But I did it... and she’s holding my hand anyway.

Trying to sound like I’m not about to lose my shit completely, I teasingly say, “Aren’t you afraid I might burn you?”

“Of course not. I know you. If that’s really the first time that happened, there’s a reason it took this long for your powers to manifest.”

“Yeah. That dickhead was following me,” I admit, remembering my frightened reaction when he picked up the pace and crossed the street. “He got a handcuff of me.”

Elise squeezes the top of my hand. “I know. He was trying to get your hands behind you back so that?—”

I snort, cutting her off. “I couldn’t do what I did?”

“Something like that. And I know this all so incredible. That it’s going to take time to really come to terms with this new reality. But it did happen, Bridget. Simon was on patrol nearby. He caught the... that man stalking you. He tried to stop you, but he was too fast. And then...”

Her voice trails off, as though realizing that the further explanations have only made me keep quiet—and isn't that a feat in and of itself.

She removes her hand. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

This is Elise. Apart from learning she's older than I thought, and her diet is definitely not what I was expecting, she's the same.

I can be the same Bridget, too.

Am I a witch ? It would be so easy to use that as an explanation, but twenty-nine years as a regular old human myself insists that witches aren't real. Magic isn't real.

I peek up at Elise, gaze drawn to the points of her fangs.

Vampires aren't supposed to be real, either.

You know what's funny? I find it so much easier to say, yup, Elise is a bloodsucker. After all, I could tell she had a secret. A huge one. But I thought she was, like, hidden royalty or something. Her accent sealed it for me, and so did the strange way she talks sometimes, almost like she's as fancy as her name suggests. The way she spoke of her family, and details of a long lineage that she would mention, then dismiss just as quickly.

Then there was my suspicion that she had an eating disorder. In a way, I was right. Elise doesn't eat because, if this is all true, she drinks blood instead.

Because she's a vampire .

I guess I'm still kind of hung up on the food thing. Sue me, but when faced with something else that seems impossible, I cling to what I know. Elise doesn't eat,

though she's always sipping something through that damn metal straw of hers—blood, my mind screams, it's blood—and when she goes out to eat, she brings home plenty of leftovers. She rarely sees the same man twice after how much Peter got attached to her... but that doesn't stop her from going out multiple times a week.

“What about all those dinner dates?” I ask. “If you're a vampire, don't you drink blood?”

“Someone was having dinner,” murmurs Elise. “And, yes. I need blood to survive, but I can nibble here or there. The males get dinner on me. They let me drink after.”

“So, what? You pick up a guy, go on a date, then eat him for dessert?”

She exhales, and I'm not sure if vampires need to breathe or if it's the short of reaction I get just by being me. “Is that really what you want to know about my kind first?”

It's either that or ask if she's been drinking me since she clearly kept her secret the entire time I've known her. And I get it—if I'm a witch, I'm not telling anyone that—but what if her claim to be lonely and looking for a roommate she can trust was BS? Maybe she wanted easy access to food...

“It's considered uncouth for a female vampire to repeatedly feed on a male if she isn't going to sleep with him. So I choose donors instead. They get my company and a free meal. I sip their blood after and leave them almost as satisfied as if we had actual intercourse.”

It doesn't hurt to double-check. “And you only drink dudes?”

A tiny twitch to her lips, though her fangs are still on display. “It usually is a precursor to sex, so yes. But after Peter...” Her voice trails off for a moment.

“Vampires don’t need to drink from the vein much. Blood bags do the most to control the thirst, but it does take a drop to tell if a male is a good fit to be my beloved mate. You’re my dearest friend, Bridget. I would never sip from you without permission.”

I believe her. Her voice rings with truth and, well, this is Elise .

That doesn’t mean I can’t be a little hurt. “No. But you sure kept this big ass secret from me.”

Her small grin becomes a frown. “Cadre decree. Only those who need to know the truth about Clarity are allowed to learn that we’re a Fang City.”

Fang City. She said that before... I blink. “Wait. Fang City. Are you telling me that this whole place is full of vampires?”

“Yes, and now you understand why I insisted that I accompany you whenever you left the apartment, especially at night when most of us get thirsty. In Clarity, nearly forty percent of the population is a vamp. You could become any vampire’s donor with just a smile, but if I was there, they knew you were claimed already.”

Is that what happened? I was out on my own tonight, that guy dressed in black was really a vampire who saw easy prey, and he followed me home for his own dinner? If so, what was the deal with the handcuffs? If Elise is proof of how their kind ‘hunt’, a vampire’s beauty is enough to lure a human donor close enough to bite; considering how many people in this city are supermodels, that part at least makes a little sense. Why stalk me like that?

And why would another vampire be patrolling around Clarity, prepared to stop him, if all they need is a couple of seeps to be satisfied? Unless...

Oh.

Humans can be greedy and gorge. What about vampires?

Yeah... since I really don't want to think about being sucked dry by a vampire, I focus on the handcuffs instead.

He tried to cuff me. Why would he do that unless he was trying to get my hands behind my back like the Cadre did? To keep me from using this supposed magic of mine?

I didn't know I was a witch. I'm still struggling to accept that that's the logical excuse behind my fireworks. I had no idea I could do anything like that.

Did he ?

I want to ask about him. Elise mentioned he's in a human hospital. Sedated. That's what she said. He's sedated until Thorn and some other Cadre dude get to talk to him, but if she jumped to the conclusion that I'm a witch, and her friend was there to see the aftermath of what happened on the empty street, she might know more about my attacker.

Too bad I never get the chance to ask before we're interrupted by a solemn, stone-faced man appearing on the other side of the jail bars.

My first impression is that, despite his expression, he's gorgeous. High cheek bones. Lush lips. Caramel-colored eyes and golden blond hair styled on a side part. He has on a pricey black suit and is carrying a small box.

Oh, and he has a monstrous pair of fangs on display, overhanging his bottom lip as if showing them off on purpose.

He nods at Elise.

She gives him a nervous grin. “Hello, Jasper.”

Oh. Jasper. Isn’t that the other Cadre dude she brought up before? Ah, jeez. Is he, like, Thorn’s right-hand vamp or something?

Considering the way he turns his piercing gaze on me before saying, “Thorn is ready to meet with the witch,” I’m guessing that he is.

Just like I have to accept that they all think I’m something I’m not.

CHAPTER 4

WITCH HUNTER

The blond vampire pulled on a pair of thick leather gloves in order to open the cell door. Once inside, he removed my handcuffs. As soon as he had, he disappeared them into a lined box that he tucked under his arm before gripping the cell bar with the same gloved hand and pushing the door outward.

“Follow me,” he orders.

Glancing at Elise, she bobs her head in assurance. She doesn’t seem worried that her boss wants to see me, and considering she already told me about the cameras in the cell, she was probably expecting this to happen sooner or later.

I want to stay behind the bars. At least it’s safe in the tiny cell. I’ve heard too many whispers about Thorn Wilkins in the six months that I’ve lived here—ranging from how hot he is, how he’s the city’s most eligible bachelor to rumors that he’s not just the head of the Cadre, but a murderous gangster... which is probably closer to the truth, now that I think about it—that I was hesitant to run into him when I thought he was human.

When I believed I was human...

I’m stubborn. No one can tell me I’m a witch. How would that be possible anyway? Wouldn’t one of my parents have to have been a witch? And, sure, they’re both gone now so it’s not like I can ask them, but if one of them was? Shouldn’t they have been

able to use magic to stop the car from hydroplaning off the road and smashing past the guardrail?

I'll explain to the head vamp he's got the wrong girl. I'm still working hard to figure out the whole fire thing, but given enough time, I'm sure I can.

If only I had more than the handful of minutes it takes to go from the lower level of the Homequarters building up to Thorn's office on the penthouse floor...

I can't help myself. Elise moves right at my side as we follow Jasper like he told me to. The blond vampire didn't say anything when she left the cell as I did, and I figure that her 'claim' to me means it's okay if she tags along. Glad she's there even as I peer nosily into the row of cells attached to mine, I say, "You guys got a ton of empty cells down here. Expect a lot of trouble from us humans?"

"Vampires are a ruthless lot," grates out our guide, "but we are fair. Seek sanctuary in our city, abide by our rules, and the Cadre will protect you."

"And if you don't?"

"You die," is his flat response as he uses his pointer finger to summon the elevator.

He took off my handcuffs. He's bringing me up to meet the guy—sorry, vampire—who runs this town. I had hoped that meant I wasn't in trouble anymore, but I'm guessing that's not the case.

Well, that explains why the cells in the basement are empty. If anyone who breaks the laws bad enough to catch the Cadre's attention ends up as worm food—or vampire food, I guess—there's no reason to waste time, dicking around by putting them in a cell first. Vampire justice must be swift, and I can only imagine how the Cadre metes it out.

“Is that what’s going to happen to that man?” I ask Elise, a couple of steps back from Jasper, while we wait for the elevator door to open. “I didn’t kill him, but the vampires will?”

Elise’s gaze flickers ahead of us at Jasper. When he doesn’t react as if he heard my question—though I’d put fifty bucks down that he did—she bites the corner of her bottom lip. Her fangs are so much daintier than Jasper’s, and it’s hard for me to look at my friend and think vampire . But she is, and if she can be a vampire, can I really be a?—

“It depends on what Thorn decides.” She adjusts the skirt of her silky black dress. “Remember how you seemed so amazed that there’s never any trouble in Clarity?”

I did. Up until the moment I was attacked, I thought it was very weird that such a big city had a cozy, small town vibe. “Yeah.”

“That’s because of the Cadre. Because of Thorn, and his soldiers, like Gilda and Jasper, too.”

“The Cadre,” cuts in Jasper without even turning around to look at us, “is judge, jury, and executioner. Abide by our rules or perish. Take no blood but that is offered to you. Do no harm. Keep the peace and keep the wolves out. That male attacked a citizen of Clarity. Whatever happens to you, witch, doesn’t change that fact. He will pay for his crime.”

Ruthless. Right. I’ll have to remember that.

“And me? Elise said I was defending myself. I totally was. Does that count for anything here?”

Ding .

The elevator door opens. Instead of answering me, Jaspers walks in first. Holding the door, he waits for me and Elise to join him.

The ride up is silent, my heart racing the damn elevator.

This building has thirty floors. Thorn's located on the top one, and I try to swallow my nervousness as we get closer. I don't do the best job of that. My blood is rushing through my veins, and all I can think about is that I'm flanked by two vampires who probably can tell.

Jasper's reflection in the mirrored walls looks bored. Elise takes my fingers in hers, gives them squeeze, then lets go right as the elevator doors open a second time.

The basement was sterile. Empty. Bright. Everything was shades of grey, cream, and white, with the silver a shiny accent.

The hallway we step out into is cozier. Expensive, too. The carpet beneath my sneakers is lush. The walls are papered in a brown and gold design that matches the gold sconces holding unlit candles. A pair of burgundy stuffed chairs wait outside the closed door, each one on the other side of a small mahogany table stacked high with a pile of modern magazines that seem weirdly out of place.

It smells nice, at least. Like lemons, I think. That's much better than blood.

"Should I wait outside, Jasper?" asks Elise.

He shakes his head. "If Thorn didn't want you to witness this meeting, he would've sent you home, Elise. Come. He's waiting for us."

After rapping neatly on the door, Jasper turns the doorknob, pushing the dark brown door inward. He steps aside so that I can go first, followed by Elise. He brings up the

rear, closing the door behind him before he takes his post next to it.

It was cozy out in the hall. Inside Thorn Wilkin's office? It's understated elegance everywhere I look, including the man— vampire —himself sitting at his large desk, leaning casually into his even larger black leather chair.

In front of his desk, he has two dark metal egg-shaped seats. Each one has a blood-red cushion and back to it. With a wave of his hand, he gestures for me and Elise to sit down.

I do, and I get my first look at Thorn Wilkins in the flesh.

The cameras don't do him justice. Up close, he's even more attractive than he is on television or the billboards around Clarity. He's almost too handsome, if that's a thing, and I find myself getting uncomfortable under his stare.

He lays his hand flat on the glass top to his desk, shifting slightly in his seat so that all of his attention is on me.

"I'm glad to see that the fire didn't scorch you, Ms. Hayes."

I glance down. It didn't dawn on me until his observation that there should be some sign that I was covered in flames myself if it was a freak accident out on the street. Like, if I wasn't responsible for the fire, shouldn't my hand be burned? My sleeve turned to ash?

But if I was responsible... if I somehow was a witch who could make fire appear out of nowhere... well, it wouldn't burn me, right?

I smile nervously at him. "I guess I was lucky."

“Mm.” He leans back in his chair. “Do you know who I am?”

“Um. Yes. You’re Thorn Wilkins. Head of the Cadre.” I hesitate for a second before I add in a slightly questioning tone, “Head of the vampires.”

In response, he flashes a quick smile that nearly has me swooning in my seat until I notice his fangs are as impressive as Jasper’s.

Yup.

Head of the vampires, all right.

“That’s correct. Now, I pride myself in keeping the citizens of Clarity safe and sound. There are enough humans who know the truth about the Cadre and our people to keep us fed, and in return, my soldiers do everything they can to keep trouble out of our territory. You, Ms. Hayes, are trouble.”

A lump lodges in my throat. I swallow it nervously.

“I’ve spoken to Elise. She was unaware that you’re a witch?—”

“ I had no idea that I’m supposed to be some kind of witch,” I blurt out.

“Yes. I believe that to be so. But that doesn’t change the facts as they stand now. We are a Fang City. Vampires rule Clarity. We keep shifters out, and until now, we’ve never had a witch living inside of our borders. I’ve led the Cadre here for one hundred and thirteen years. This is a first for me.”

My jaw drops. One hundred and thirteen years. One hundred and thirteen years . And that’s how long he’s been in charge. If Elise is only seventy-two, how old is Thorn?

I know better than to ask him. Doesn't mean I'm not looking at him, seeing a gorgeous man in his late thirties, and wondering if eternal youth might be a perk to whatever the hell I'm supposed to be...

A witch. He thinks I'm a witch, too.

"How do you even know that I am?" I ask. So I'm in denial. "I'm pretty sure I'm just an ordinary human, no magic required."

Thorn glances at Elise. "You didn't tell her?"

Oh, I don't like the way he said that.

"I didn't have a chance before Jasper came down to get us," Elise replies. "I would've, but I needed to admit to Bridge that vampires exist before I mentioned witch hunters."

Hang on?—

"Witch hunters? What do you mean, witch hunters?"

If it's bad enough that I don't want to be a witch, that's nothing compared to how much I don't want anything to do with something called a witch hunter.

Thorn pulls open one of his desk drawers. Using a piece of fabric to protect him against the object he has tucked inside, he pulls out a silver-looking knife with a matching tang and hilt. It looks like a mini-sword, about eight inches long, and he holds it so that I can't miss it.

"Do you know what this is?" he asks me.

“A knife.”

“It’s a witch hunter’s blade. You can’t see it, but there is an emblem on the hilt. Pure silver, a weapon like that can eliminate all kinds of supernaturals. Vampires, for one,” he says, almost conversationally as though we’re not talking about killing a creature I would’ve thought immortal. “Shifters, of course. Silver is the only mineral that can weaken and kill one of those beasts. As for witches... you can die from pretty much anything, but when a hunter comes after you with one of these, it’s a sign that they won’t stop until you are deceased—and that they believe they have the right to do so.”

I blink, stunned. “What? The right to kill me because they think I’m a witch ? They can’t do that.”

“That’s not going to stop them. And that’s why we have a problem, Ms. Hayes.” He drops the knife into this drawer, closing it. “Simon brought me that knife tonight. He took it off of the witch hunter who tried to capture you in my city. The witch hunter you set ablaze.” A small smile tugs on his lips. “Now, tell me again that you’re not a witch.”

I don’t even know what to say to that.

Am I?

“Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that you are. He believed you were. That’s why he went after you. Pity that he was in no state to explain himself when Simon found him, but I’ll have my chance to... mm... talk to him later, I assure you. For now, the question is what to do with you. You see, we’ve never had a witch in Clarity during my tenure, and we’ve certainly never been infiltrated by witch hunters... until now.”

That he knows of.

Are there other witches like me? Those who were born with magic, but didn't use any until their back was against the wall—or their hand was caught in a handcuff by some creep? If I accept that all of this is true, it seems like my magic was only triggered because it was a life-or-death situation.

Let's say I'm a witch. Where did the magic come from? I doubt it was my dad's side of the family since that means Aunt Maureen would've had powers, too. But my mom...

I don't know anything about my maternal family. Aunt Maureen told me when I was a kid that my mom was abandoned at birth, brought up in foster care, and only found a family when she met and married my dad. They had five short years together before the car crash that stole them from me. I don't know if she could shoot fireballs or even if she knew she might be magic, but the impact was so hard, death so instantaneous, she never would've had the chance to save them before they perished.

I honestly thought that, when he grabbed me, it was him or me. I made that subconscious decision, and though lighting him up like that wasn't what I had in mind, now that I know he was a witch hunter... he would've done worse to me.

And that's even if he knew I was a witch. Is there a way to tell? I'm beginning to think he might've known something if he tried to handcuff my hands behind my back the same way Thorn instructed his soldiers to do when they brought me to the cell, but was he prepared for me to go all 'flame on' on him?

How could anyone?

Don't feel guilty, Bridge, I tell myself. He was a witch hunter. You're supposedly a witch now.

It was either him or me in the end, and I will always choose me.

“I also understand that, having kept our secret, Elise hasn’t given you a fang yet,” Thorn says. “Is that true?”

Fang . Out of nowhere, a sudden memory pops into my brain. All those months ago, when I was newly living in Clarity and I first met Elise. I know more about her relationship with Peter and how it all went south now, and it had everything to do with Peter cheating on her with one of her co-workers.

That’s not what he called it. It’s how Elise understood it, and she’s spent the last six months ignoring any of his attempts to win her back. But I remember how he told her it was just a ‘fang’.

A vampire fang?

He must’ve been one of the privileged humans in the know. But that still doesn’t explain what he meant then—or Thorn means now—when they talk about giving out fangs .

Before I can ask, Elise takes pity on me and explains. Using her pointer fingernail, she taps one of her still-extended canines. “One of these, Bridget. If a vampire snaps it out of their mouth and offers it to someone, it’s a mark of their affection or protection. For you, it would be both.” At my look of obvious horror, she shrugs and drops her hand back to her side. “They grow back, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Actually, I was , but that’s not all. “I appreciate the offer, but... um... why would I need one of your fangs for protection?”

“Because, in Clarity, humans are our food,” Thorn says bluntly. “They sustain us, and we provide them a city where any trouble is quickly put to rest. We protect them, but a fang only works in Fang Cities. And I can’t imagine any will harbor a witch.”

Something in the way he says that...

“Wait. Are you kicking me out?” I came up here, torn between expecting him to, like, kill me or throw me back in the cell downstairs because I almost killed someone else. Elise made me think everything was going to be okay... were we wrong?

Instead of answering me, Thorn asks, “What do you know about witch hunters?”

He’s joking, right? I doubt it, but I didn’t have any idea that witches were real until today. I don’t know shit about witch hunters beyond what he’s told me so far and I tell him so now.

“Right. I probably should’ve mentioned that they’re fanatics. Human fanatics who believe that witches exist to bring about the end of the world.”

So. Nutcases. Got it.

“They think they have some divine right to hunt and massacre witches, and they’ve been doing it for centuries. For the last few, they’ve gotten better at hiding, but their MO rarely changes. They hunt. Torture. Kill. Always working in pairs, never doubting their ‘mission’, witch hunters are a plague, Ms. Hayes. And you brought them to my city. I understand you defending yourself. But staying...” He steeples his fingers in front of him. “Get up, please.”

Um. Okay.

“Jasper,” Thorn calls out. “Please go find Celeste and invite her in.”

The silent blond vampire nods, then slips out of the office.

Once he’s gone, Thorn jerks his chin in my direction. “Stand in front of my desk.

Elise, go stand by the door where Jasper was.”

Though the defiant nature that pushed all of Aunt Maureen’s buttons almost wants me to tell him ‘no’, I see how quick Elise is to obey her boss. And he’s not just her boss, is he? He’s the head vamp in this place.

I move in front of him.

He nods. “Good. Now use your magic on me.”

CHAPTER 5

MAGIC

I had to have heard him wrong.

“I’m sorry?”

The powerful juts his chin in my direction even while leaning back in his seat, arms spread wide, an open target. “Your magic. I want you to use it on me. Light me on fire.”

Is this a test? It has to be a test. Since I woke up, a prisoner of the Cadre masquerading as a ‘guest’, I’ve been told I’m a witch. Even Thorn admitted that I blasted the witch hunter who tried to, well, hunt me.

And now he wants me to use magic that I only just found out I have?

“I can’t.”

His eyes glitter beneath the fluorescent lights. “I insist.”

He can insist all he wants. That doesn’t change the fact that I have no idea how I did it in the first place.

I shake my head.

He sighs. “Very well. I had hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but I have all of Clarity to think about.” Rising up from his seat, Thorns says, “Fire at me, or I will drain you and put an end to this now.”

My heart skips a beat, my palms tingle, and as a wave of panic crests over me, my fingers spark.

It’s like rubbing two pieces of metal together. Not enough to create a flame, though it’s possible.

Thorn frowns. “Not good enough. You don’t believe me. Very well. I hate to do this because she’s been loyal to the Cadre, but I’m not above sacrificing one for the good of many.” His expression turns hard. “Conjure fire or I will drain Elise instead.”

She goes still.

My heart stops.

“You won’t do that.”

His eyes flash. “If there’s one thing you should learn as you enter the supe world, it’s that those of us who lead? We don’t bluff. To survive, we need to be willing to do what we threaten.”

Thorn shows me his extended fangs. Before I can do anything but yip, he moves. Fuck, he’s fast. In between one blink and the next, he’s gone from his post behind his desk to where Elise was waiting by the door. Carrying her easily—my best friend too wrapped up in his sudden embrace to even try to fight against the male vampire—Thorn brings her closer to me.

Only five or so feet separate the three of us. Purposely positioning her so that her

back is to him, her frightened face to me, Thorn angles his head so that the points of his fangs are mere centimeters from the pale column of her throat.

Holy shit. He's going to do it. If I don't light 'em up, he's going to kill Elise.

No .

Just like what happened down that empty cross street, a rush of fury slams into me, chased by a hint of fear that I'm about to die. Only it's Elise he's threatening, and though she's another vampire, I've already learned that while she can probably live a super long time—especially since she's in her seventies and looks like she's in her twenties —she's not unkillable. She can die.

I can't let that happen.

Suddenly, and without any conscious effort, my hands are engulfed in flames. They look like a pair of twin fireballs, ready to be launched. The room feels warmer than it did, and the lemon scent has been replaced by the choking stink of smoke, but I wouldn't know that my hands were burning if I didn't see it happen with my own two eyes.

No time to marvel at that. Raising my hands, prepared to throw the fire at Thorn if I have to—and hoping I miss Elise—I glare at the vampire. “Get away from her. Now .”

I almost expect him to dare me to do it. Hey, he's the one who told me to use my magic on him, right? And if Elise wasn't frozen in his embrace, almost waiting for his bite, I might've.

But then he releases her. She immediately straightens, tottering away on her stilettos, trying to put some distance between her neck and Thorn's teeth.

He smiles. It's the sort of smile you'd expect from a toothpaste commercial, the type that has a computer-generated sparkle added to it. "Just what I thought. Did I make you frightened? Did I make you angry?"

Through gritted teeth, I snap, "You locked me in your dungeon. You threatened Elise. Of course I'm pissed off."

And frightened? I thought he was going to drain her on the spot. Hell yeah I was scared.

"Remember that."

Trust me, I don't think I can forget.

He nods over my head at something behind me. Only when I follow the gesture and notice that Jasper is back, and that he's brought someone with him, do I realize that we've had an audience for the Cadre leader's little performance.

I have no doubt in my mind that, if he felt he needed to, he would've bit Elise. He wanted a reaction out of me, and he showed his ruthless side by proving how far he'd go to get it. And I think I understand. I'm a threat. If I can walk around Clarity, setting fires and incinerating people at will, I'm a danger to the safety that Thorn promises to all of us.

At least now I know what sets it off. Control my temper, keep out of life-or-death situations, and I should be fine.

And I allow myself that delusion for about two seconds until I notice the look of surprise mingled with horror on the new arrival's face.

I don't even want to try to guess her age. Even if I did, I'd probably be wrong. Her

hair is a mix between dark brown and pure white strands woven through the top. She wears it pulled back into a short, low ponytail with a few thick braids beginning near her brow mixed in. Her face has that ageless sort of beauty; she could be thirty or sixty or anywhere in between.

Wearing a long black dress covered with a matching trench coat, she's nothing like what I expected when I hear 'witch'. Then again, neither am I.

She's staring at me. It takes me a second to remember that both of my fists have flickering flames surrounding them.

Whoops.

How to get rid of them? Now that Elise is safe, they should be gone. I don't need the fire anymore, and I give each hand a small shake, hoping that the flames will get the hint and snuff out instead of growing.

Yes! It works!

Then, because she's still focusing on my hands, I shove them into the front pocket of my hooded sweatshirt.

Her fingers inch up until she's pressing the tip against her lips. Speaking around them, she says, "You said she was a witch."

Thorn nods. "I think that's been established."

No shit.

The woman—the witch —sucks in a breath. "When you called the coven, you reported that you had one of mine in your city. That she used magic to protect herself

against a witch hunter. You didn't say it was fire."

Thorn raises his dark eyebrows at her. "Would you have come if I had?" When the witch doesn't answer, he gentles his voice. "My line goes back to Southern Germany. I know the history, and why witches are uneasy around a flame."

"The witch hunts," she murmurs, speaking more to herself than to the rest of us. "A dark time, especially when so few of the victims were true witches. It gave the witch hunters the idea that they had a divine mandate to hunt us. Five hundred years later and here we are. They're still hunting us." A sigh, and she finally meets my eyes. "Hello, there. My name is Celeste Montvale."

"Bridget Hayes," I supply.

"It's good to meet a fellow witch, Bridget."

I don't even try to deny it. After what just happened... I can do at least one trick. If that counts, I guess I really am a witch.

She gestures to her chest. "I am the head witch of the Ravenhill coven."

"Ravenhill is the nearest coven to Clarity," explains Thorn. "I'm sure you understand by now that I can't allow you to stay in my city. But Ravenhill might do well for a fledgling witch who needs guidance when it comes to her powers."

"Yes. But the fire..." Celeste has dark brown eyes that seem to turn black as she gazes at me. Tall and slender, she cuts an imposing figure in her floor-length coat. Unlike Elise, she doesn't wear high heels. She has on a pair of boots that go well with her dress and coat, and she moves soundlessly as she approaches me.

Only when she's standing right before me does her worried expression turn curious.

She offers me her hands, palms facing down. “Take my hands.”

I hesitate.

Her smile warms. “I won’t harm you. And I’m sure you won’t harm me. After all, you have no reason to use your fire against me. I just want to help.”

“Help me?” I ask. “How?”

“As a witch, I can sense things. It works best with skin-to-skin contact. If you allow me to get a read on you, I’ll have a better understanding about your witch skill. Your personal brand of magic.”

Elise clears her throat. “Isn’t it fire?”

“There are those who conjure fire. Then there are those witches who are fire. And that’s not the only element, either. Depending on her magic, it might not be as simple as relocating Bridget from Clarity to Ravenhill.”

Right. Because Thorn is totally kicking me out of the vampire city.

I guess it’s better than him using his judge, jury, and executioner status to off the firestarting witch. Then there’s the whole ordeal with the witch hunter. No witch in Clarity means that the witch hunters won’t come back. As much as I don’t like the idea of leaving the city, I get why Thorn arranged this meeting with Celeste the way he did.

Whatever. I take her hands, pressing my fingers against her palm, laying my thumb lightly over the top of my hand.

She jolts. For a second, I think I might’ve accidentally burned her, that’s how quickly

she takes my hands, then releases them.

Oh, yeah. Celeste totally just sensed something about me right now.

What? No clue since, as soon as she lets go of my hands, she turns so that she's facing the desk. "Thorn. A word in private please?"

The head vampire nods at his witchy counterpart. Then, turning to his right-hand vamp, he says, "Jasper? Please bring Ms. Hayes down to the basement level," and I fight back the urge to scream in frustration.

Looks like I'm still a prisoner. But no matter how hard it is, I swallow my temper before the fire returns. I already spooked the head witch with my so-called magic.

And no way do I want to test Thorn's fangs again. Not on me, and not on Elise.

So I nod and, without any smart ass remarks, keep my mouth shut—and my palms flame-free—as I shuffle over to Jasper.

What else can I do? Outrun a vampire?

I saw how fast Thorn moved. I haven't ran since I graduated high school more than a decade ago.

I glance up at the stone-faced blond vampire. "I'm ready when you are."

Elise stays behind to speak with Thorn after he's done with Celeste while I'm escorted back to the same cell I was in before.

I didn't like that. What if he blamed Elise for letting a witch roam around Clarity unchecked all these months? What if he decided that, by protecting me as best she

could—as human, or a witch—she broke his stupid laws? If she didn’t want to join me in the basement... and I don’t blame her... why couldn’t she go home where it’s safe?

I don’t know, but my worries were in vain because she appears on the other side of the cell bars barely ten minutes after Jasper instructed me to sit down until Thorn gives him any other orders.

Now that I know silver seems to have an effect on vampires, I kind of understand why he pulls on those gloves of his everytime he opens or closes the cell bars. He does that now, letting Elise in, before moving a few cells down to give us some semblance of privacy.

She smiles at me, a tight-lipped smile that conceals her vampire fangs. “I know that had to be a lot upstairs. How are you doing?”

“As good as can be expected when my whole world’s been flipped upside down. But, hey.” I wiggle my fingers at Elise, and no matter how long I live, I’ll love her forever because she doesn’t flinch even a little. “At least they didn’t put the handcuffs back on me.”

She frowns. “You’re not a prisoner, Bridge.”

Seriously? “I’m literally behind bars right now,” I remind her.

“It’s a safety precaution,” she assures me.

“My safety or everyone else’s?”

“Yours,” Elise says firmly. “You heard Madame Montvale. Witch hunters work in pairs. We have one sedated. But the other...”

I blink. “Wait. Are you telling me that there’s at least one more witch hunter who’s out there, looking to get me? To kill me?”

“It’s another reason why Thorn thinks it’s best if you leave Clarity. The vampires and humans who live in the Fang City will be safe, but if we move you somewhere that the witch hunters can’t find you, you’ll be safe, too.”

Put like that, how can I be pissed that I’m getting the boot?

Well, to be fair, very easily. But I’m not going to argue about that. Elise has lived in Clarity for more than seventy years. She’s known she was a vampire all that time, I’m guessing. Things that seem super freaking weird to me as a newcomer to the supe world won’t have the same impact on Elise.

Including—

“Forget that for now.” And, boy, do I wish I could. “Do vampires actually eat other vampires?”

Sue me. I want to know. I’m curious about a lot of things right now, but I haven’t forgotten how Thorn had the points of his fangs inches away from Elise’s throat. The Cadre leader said humans were a vampire’s preferred meal, but I could tell he wasn’t bluffing. If I didn’t figure out a way to trigger my magic, he would’ve bit her. To prove a point, he would’ve drained her.

Jasper was right. Vampires are ruthless.

Elise doesn’t even seem to notice how her boss used her as a pawn like that. She just frowns, then says, “Are you asking how different mating is for my kind and yours?”

Mating? Wait a second... does she mean sex? Oh, jeez. She thinks I’m being dirty-

minded, and while I'm definitely one to crack a joke just like that...

"What? No. I mean, like, actual food, Elise. Thorn looked like he was going to eat you for lunch before I became a human sparkler."

"Oh. You mean drinking."

This is so weird . "Um. Yeah. If that's what you wanna call it."

"In that case, yes. When there isn't a human donor available we make do with each other, but Thorn wouldn't have bitten me. I know it seemed like he would have, but he's too powerful to risk a mate bond by accidentally beginning a blood exchange with someone he doesn't recognize as his beloved."

And... she's lost me again. To be fair, I'm not sure she's found me, but if she came back down here to check on me and is willing to explain all this insanity to me, I'm going to distract myself by asking as many questions as possible.

"See, now, you have to remember that all of this supernatural stuff... it's new to me. What the hell do you mean by mate bond? And blood exchange? Really? Like, instead of swapping spit, vampires swap blood?"

Elise bends her knees, sinking gracefully down so that we're on the same level. Her hand settles on my knee again, her tone turning apologetic. "I wanted to tell you, Bridge, but Thorn prefers we keep Clarity a secret. When a human is as blissfully unaware of the vampires living around them as you were, he'd rather them stay that way. I mean it. If I had any idea you were one of us?—"

"I'm not a vampire," I tell her. Of that , I'm fucking sure.

"No, but you are a supe. Vampires... shifters... witches... we're all supernaturals."

“Wait.” My head feels like it’s going to explode with all of this information. “Shifters?” I thought I heard Jasper say something about wolves before... “Like werewolves? Are you telling me they’re real, too?”

She nods. “Us vampires stay away from the beastly supes. So yes, they exist, though I’ve never met one before... and they’re not the only other creatures out there.”

Somewhere over my head, a witch and a vampire ruler are debating what to do with me. As a kid, I loved all things paranormal and fantastical. Twelve-year-old Bridget would be geeking out to know that humans aren’t the only species living on Earth. Twenty-nine-year-old Bridget? She’s just hoping that there’s some way to make this all disappear?—

“What about ghosts?” I ask. Don’t think about fire, Bridge. Don’t think about burning . “Mummies? The freaking chupacabra? How about unicorns? Ooh... mermaids. Those could be cool.”

“They’re called sirens,” Elise says gently, “and they would drown you and eat you for supper if given half the chance, sweetie.”

I close my eyes for a moment. “Okay. Yeah. I’m done. I supposedly have all this magic, right? Where is that witch lady? She’s gotta know a way to go back in time until before I knew any of this shit was real.”

Before I turned a witch hunter into barbecue.

Elise takes her hand back, tucking it into the skirt of her dress. “Bridget...”

“No. I mean it, Elise. I don’t want to be a witch. I’m an artist. I do magic with my tablet. I create. Fire... it only destroys. I can’t do this. I can’t walk around, shooting fire out of my hands. I’ll do anything to go back to normal.”

“Do you mean it?”

CHAPTER 6

SANCTUARY

The cell door is open. There's no sign of Jasper, but Celeste stands in the entrance, a curious look on her narrow face.

She steps further in. "When you said that you'd do anything... do you mean it?"

It's not even a question. "Yes."

"I'm glad to hear it. In that case, this won't be as uncomfortable a conversation as I thought it might be. May I come in?"

After the way she said 'uncomfortable' like that, I'm thinking twice about agreeing, but what else can I do? It's not like I can really refuse.

"Sure."

"Thank you."

Celeste sweeps in, and I wait for Jasper to appear to close her in with us. That doesn't happen. I'm not sure if it's because, as the head witch, Celeste has more status or if I'm really not a prisoner like Elise claims. Either way, I feel a tiny bit of hope when the cell remains open.

And then Celeste starts the uncomfortable conversation by saying, "As you must've

already guessed, Thorn is firm in his refusal to allow you to stay in Clarity, “ and that sliver of hope dies an instant death.

I curse under my breath. “So that’s it. I’m being kicked out.”

“I’m sorry, but we’ve decided that it’s too dangerous for you to remain in Clarity. For the same reason, I don’t feel comfortable moving you to Ravenhill.”

Wow. Two for two. It’s a good thing that Aunt Maureen and Antonio have finished their six-month trek throughout Europe, settling down in Queens once more. At least I know that she won’t turn me away and make me homeless.

“But,” Celeste continues, and that hope resurrects just enough to be noticeable, “there’s a third option.”

I’m all ears. “Okay.”

“Sanctuary,” murmurs Elise.

Celeste looks at my best friend in approval. “That’s right. Thorn and I believe that, under the circumstances, the best place for a witch with abilities like Briget’s will be a supernatural sanctuary.”

Do I even want to know what one of those are?

Before I can ask, Celeste does her best to explain. Supe sanctuaries are small towns hidden all around the world where creatures like witches, shifters, vampires, and more can band together and form their own little communities apart from the human world. Unlike a Fang City which is vamp-only, a sanctuary welcomes those in need.

I’m a rare fire witch. If it gets out that my powers are active, I’ll have the whole witch

hunter congregation coming after my ass.

She says it a lot more diplomatically than that. The gist is still that, with my rogue magic, I'm too much of a dangerous threat for Clarity. For Ravenhill.

For Queens.

Fuck.

I can't go home. What if Aunt Maureen is a witch? I'd never forgive myself if I brought witch hunters to her door. What if I lost my temper? I'm a New Yorker. It happens. I'll snap, light someone up, and blow my cover. The rest of the world will know that witches exist, and it'll be all my fault.

No.

Sanctuary. I'm going to have to accept their offer, aren't I?"

"Do I get to at least pick where I'm being shipped off to?"

Instead of answering me, Celeste moves until she's standing directly in front of me. She holds out her hands the same way as she did before: palms down, fingers outstretched.

This time I know what she wants. I slip my hands into hers, completing the collection.

I wonder what she's going to see this time.

Celeste closes her eyes. I have no idea how to control my magic, and I imagine it's like a fart I have to hold in. Like, I could let it go, but everyone in the room will know

that I did. Same with my fire. If I lose control now that I know that it's possible, I'll burn the hands of the witch willing to help me. Like unwanted toots, I have to keep it in, no matter what.

Finally, after what seems like an eternity, Celeste intones in a deep voice, "You'll find what you seek there."

There? Where?

And, more importantly?—

"What am I looking for?"

Right now, all I want is for this to be a nightmare. For witches not to exist, and for magic not to be real. Since that's probably not going to happen, the least I can hope for is a little help before they boot me out the door.

In response to my question, Celeste's eyes snap open. As I stare at her, her irises turn white. Pure, glowing, terrifying white. "You shall know when you find it."

Okay, then. 'Cause that helps.

It's over almost immediately. Her eyes darken again, the black pupil surrounded by her deep brown iris. As she removes her hands from mine, she says two words: "Fire opal."

"Fire opal?" Maybe that's what I'm supposed to be looking for... "What's that?"

"A crystal that's usually mined in Mexico. It's closely associated with passion and creativity, but there is a mystical vein that's hidden underground... including up north. It takes a fire witch to find it, but if you possess some of the crystal, you won't

have to worry about your magic controlling you anymore.”

My lips part.

Fire opal. If I get my hands on a chunk of the stuff, the fire shooting out of my hands will stop. No more magic. No more witch.

I can go back to being normal.

“And it has to be this mystical kind?” I ask. “I can’t, like, go online and see if I can get any old fire opal?”

She shakes her head.

I didn’t think it would be that easy.

“Right now, your newly unleashed magic is a beacon for witch hunters. One found you, my dear, and his partner won’t be far behind.”

As if I need the reminder. “So, what? This is like witness protection for witches?”

“For supernaturals,” Celeste corrects. “There are twenty-five sanctuaries in the US. But only one of them is cold enough to conceal a fire witch. If you accept our offer to hide you from the witch hunters, you’ll be heading out to Alaska as soon as possible.”

“Wait. Where ?” I blink. “Did you just say Alaska?”

She nods. “Yes.”

“And I’m going with you.”

For the first time since Celeste entered the cell, Elise speaks up.

I glance over at her. She's sitting next to me, her hands tucked in her lap, a defiant expression on her face. It's as though she expects me to immediately refuse, and while that is my first instinct—just because I'm getting kicked out, doesn't mean she has to leave her home for a woman she's only known for six months out of seventy-two years—I keep my trap closed for a moment as I take in her body language.

Her expression is defiant. The hands in her lap tells me she's nervous.

What's going on here?

Celeste clears her throat. "I'll leave you two to discuss matters. Between Thorn and I, we'll arrange it so that you'll both be welcome in the sanctuary city. When you're done, feel free to join us in his office so we can pass on the details to you both."

It seems as though the head witch thinks that I'll take Elise up on her offer to join me. That's interesting.

I wait for her to stride out of the cell. It's annoying that Jasper closes the cell door after she goes, but since the blond vampire disappears out of sight after he does, I figure this is only another temporary imprisonment. Once we're done here, he'll let me out and I'll be halfway on my way to freaking Alaska.

Alaska .

I turn to Elise. "You don't have to go."

"I want to."

A lump lodges in my throat. "Elise. You've already done so much for me. It's fine.

The last thing I want is for you to get mixed up in this mess because of me.”

What if the witch hunters do come after me? I don’t want to see Aunt Maureen hurt, but I feel the same about Elise.

I don’t want anyone getting caught in the crosshairs all because of what I am...

“Bridge—”

“I mean it. You should stay here. And who knows? They’ve gotta have cell service up there. Or... or internet. We can keep in touch?—”

She worries her bottom lip with her fang while I bubble before blurting out, “I requested sanctuary, too.”

What?

“You did? Why?”

Elise exhales. “It’s Peter.”

My hands fist at my side. “What about him?”

“Same old story, I’m afraid. Remember how I had to end our arrangement because of Delilah?”

I remember that she explained to me how Peter started seeing another woman while they had an exclusive ‘arrangement’. All along, I thought it meant that he started sleeping around when Elise wanted a monogamous relationship with him. And maybe that’s true, since she did admit that feeding is usually a precursor to sex, but now that I know she’s a vampire, there’s got to be more to it.

There is.

“Delilah is another vampire. In order for our kind to create a mate bond with our beloveds, there must be a blood exchange. I take a male’s blood inside of me. If I want to pledge myself to him for the rest of my nearly immortal existence, I give him mine. We mate?—”

“Fuck?” I ask, just making sure I’m on the same page.

She nods. “Yes. We had intercourse, and then an unbreakable, supernatural bond is created between us. Peter wants that bond with me. He’s given me his blood enough that he feels like he’s owed my affection. There was a time, too, when I thought he might be a worthy enough forever mate. But when I wouldn’t give him my fang, showing all of Clarity I considered him to be mine , he accepted Delilah’s. He was trying to make me jealous.”

I knew that part. “Yeah, and all he did was make it so that you dumped his sorry ass.”

“I had to. He wore another vampire’s fang on a gold chain around his neck. In our world, that’s like getting her name tattooed to his forehead for all of the Fang City to see.”

I wince. “Ouch. It’s that blatant?”

She nods. “There was no way I could accept him as my beloved again after that. My donor, either. But he refuses to accept that even now. He’s convinced himself that he’s my beloved, no matter how often or how firmly he’s forced me to reject him. He won’t stop, Bridge. I thought he would, and I kept it to myself because I know how you feel about him, but Peter... he’s ambushed my last three dinner dates. At this rate, I won’t have any willing donors left in Clarity. So why should I even stay? And if I can help you, too... I’m going. Please don’t try to stop me.”

How could I? When she just told me how Peter keeps fucking with her even after she told him to leave her the hell alone?

If I got my hands on him now...

Elise's brow furrows as she sniffs. "Do you smell smoke?"

Fuck .

The cell is getting a little hazy. It's not black smoke, not like when the witch hunter was stalking me and some part of me recognized that he was a danger to me, but there's no denying that the room we're in is slowly filling up with hazy, grey smoke—and all because I got furious when I heard about how Peter is still harassing Elise.

Thorn was right. My temper is definitely a trigger.

I can't stay here, either. And I don't just mean the cell. Clarity. I have to go.

And if Elise wants to come with me...

"Do you really want to go to Alaska, though? It's winter. Isn't it, like, super dark there and really, really cold and snowy? You could probably find a better sanctuary."

I'm a fire witch. Celeste thinks that Alaska is the only place for me to go, and now that she's sure I'll find what I'm looking for there—whether it's the fire opal or not—I'm going.

But Elise... who knows? Maybe there's a sanctuary town in California or something.

"I spoke about it with Thorn before I came down here. It makes sense if I go with

you. If the point of going to one of the sanctuary towns is to keep you hidden from the witch hunters, the first step should be to go back to hiding the fact that you are a witch, Bridge. I can help with that. If I claim sanctuary because of Peter, I can take you with me. Pretend you're my human donor. We can both hide out, and no one will be able to chase after us. What do you think?"

What do I think?

I throw my arm around Elise's shoulder, giving her a sideways hug before resting my head against hers. "I think that, if I have to hide out in Alaska and go searching in caves for some mystical crystal that may or may not get rid of my witchy side, there isn't anyone I'd rather go through it all with than you."

CHAPTER 7

ALASKA

A laska.

I'm moving to Alaska .

Glancing at the travel itinerary on my phone while we wait for the first leg of the trip to begin, I already get a strange pit in my gut when I look at the last stop.

“Dyea?” I pronounce it like ‘die-ee-uh’.

“Dyea,” corrects Elise.

She says it like ‘die-ee’. I guess the ‘a’ is silent, but when she emphasizes the ‘die’ part, the second syllable doesn’t really seem to matter much.

Die. I’m going to a hidden town in Alaska full of vampires, shifters, and who knows what else, and it’s called Die . If that’s not an omen for how this is going to go, I don’t know what is.

I don’t have a choice. Fire witches are rare. Either their magic is too tamped down for them to even know they have any—like me—or they’re hiding out, but Celeste admitted she didn’t know of any currently practicing in the US right now. I get why they would hide out, too. When everyone looks at like you as though you’re going to point at them and they’ll blow up on the spot, it gets old.

Well, not everyone. Elise doesn't seem to care. Thorn wasn't worried. And Jasper... I don't think anything fazes that vampire.

Celeste was nervous, though. I think her tip to find the fire opal was to get rid of the threat that I pose by being an untrained witch with a devastating power. Same thing with shipping me off to Alaska. It's as far from her East Coast coven as I can get. And, sure, I know she suggested this hidden sanctuary because the cold temperatures would also help me conceal my fiery side until I mined some of the fire opal. Doesn't change the fact that, as soon as I gave in and agreed to go with Elise, she jumped headfirst into making the arrangements.

Thorn threw all of Clarity's resources behind us, too. He tried to make it seem like he was rewarding Elise for all of her decades in service to the Cadre, but while she beamed over at him, I know better. Like Celeste, he wanted me as far away from his people as possible.

He would've sacrificed Elise to get me to trigger my magic. In a way, he's doing the same thing. Throwing one of his most loyal vampires at Alaska to get rid of me.

Oh, well. Good riddance to him.

I'm glad she's coming with me. Now that I know that Peter's been a bigger headache than I thought, no way could I leave her behind. She's coming with me where I can keep an eye on her, and barely twenty-four hours after that witch hunter tried to jump me, we have all of our essentials packed up, our luggage checked, as we wait for our flight to Seattle to take off.

That's the first leg of our journey. From Seattle, we have to take a second flight to Skagway, Alaska. It's the nearest airport to where the sanctuary is hidden in the old ghost town known as Dyea, and though it had its heyday during the gold rush in the 1890s, it's vacant enough now to conceal a small village made up of about fifty

relocated supernaturals.

After we land in Skagway, we need to find the Dyea Express to take us the rest of the way to our new home.

The Dyea Express is a small shuttle that is owned by the local witch coven. All sanctuary cities have a connection to the covens since their magic keeps it hidden, and their members act as mediaries between the villages and the rest of the outside world of humans.

Sanctuaries are supe-run towns. I'm going as a human but only because I'm considered part of Elise's luggage. Seriously. As a vampire searching for a place to hide out from a rejected mate, she was granted sanctuary and given permission to bring her own personal human to snack on since there aren't many others who could feed her. Shifters would refuse on principle, and vampires don't really share. Not their own blood or their food sources.

In the whirlwind of packing up and getting ready to go before the second witch hunter could find me, I did stop to ask Elise what she was going to do about drinking. With an impish shrug, she told me it would work out. Between packing a cooler full of blood bags that Thorn would find a courier to bring to Alaska and heading out into the local towns, she swears she'll be fine.

And if she's not? I offered her to drink my blood, and the fact that she didn't politely refuse right away tells me that she's secretly as worried about her diet as I am.

For the moment, though, she's sipping on the to-go cup full of A positive she brought with her to the airport. Normally, the TSA would've gone through it and flagged her for drinking freaking blood, but not Elise. She batted her eyes, flashes her pale green eyes, and the guy manning the X-ray machine winked and told her to go on through with the cup.

Our trip is mostly uneventful.

That's a good thing. When everyone staring at us makes me think that we've been spotted, and that they're a witch hunter in disguise, I realize that it's a good thing I left Clarity after all. I'm jumpy as fuck, and I can't wait to be hidden away even if I was against this whole thing in the first place.

But I'm traveling with Elise van Duren. No matter where we go, she's the center of attention even though she doesn't want to be, and it really tests my resolve not to lose my temper when the fifth guy stops on his way to the bathroom to proposition her to join him and become the latest members of the mile-high club.

Poor Elise. She might be seventy-two years old, but I think there's some truth to how she said that, as a vampire, she's considered barely legal. Either that or she's been sheltered all of those years because she honestly didn't know what the first guy was implying until I barked at him to leave her alone and made an unpleasant comment about Elise and I being a couple.

If there was ever a moment I wished I could control my fire, it was as the smarmy, cocky businessman stormed away from us. A flame directed right at his ass might not make him less of a homophobe or bigot, but I'd feel better that he would yelp in pain any time he had to take a shit.

The other guys weren't as big of jerks, but it got old. I finally told Elise to rest her head on my shoulder and go to sleep, and at least then she didn't have to hear what some of those pigs had to say about her.

That was the first leg. The eight hours dragged—and I ended up napping with Elise for half of our redeye flight—but luckily there was only an hour gap between one flight and the next. I got breakfast, Elise choked down a half of a donut, and off we went to Alaska.

The Dyea Express only runs when the sanctuary knows it's getting a new arrival to the hidden village. I'm not really an anxious person, but I spent most of the two-and-a-half hour flight hoping that we wouldn't be stranded in Alaska when he landed. Especially since there was snow in the forecast, and as much as I love the white stuff, I'd rather not have to trudge out into the Alaskan woods that make up most of Dyea if I can.

Thankfully, after the forty-minute wait to claim all of our luggage, we go out to wear all of the shuttles come and go to pick up passengers and discover that there's only one waiting there: the Dyea Express.

I should've expected as much. The Skagway airport is a regional airport that's mainly used to ferry cruise ship passengers up to Alaska before they head out to port. It only had two runways, and I nearly swallowed my tongue a little on the less than smooth landing.

There's a bite to the air. It's about the same temperature as it was back in Clarity—around thirty degrees Fahrenheit—so it's cold to regular humans, but not that I know I'm a fire witch, I finally understand how I can wear a basic sweatshirt and jeans in below freezing weather and be perfectly comfortable.

Elise, as usual, is wearing one of her form-fitting dresses and a pair of high heels that make her closer to my height. Then, because she might be small, but her vampire strength isn't, she's carrying four pieces of luggage to my two without any trouble at all.

A friendly-faced woman with light brown hair curling around her face before tumbling past her shoulders is wearing a thick coat, a pair of gloves, and an expectant expression as we approach her.

“Hi. Ride out to Dyea? I'm here to pick up two passengers.”

“That’s us,” I tell her.

“Great. Name’s Linda. Linda Greene. Here. Let me help you put your luggage into the back of the shuttle. Ride out to Dyea isn’t bad, barely a half an hour, but it can be bumpy at times. Better you have all your belongings secured.”

It’s not even ten o’clock in the morning yet. We’ve been up since we got to the airport last night, except for a couple of hours down while we were flying. Add in the four hour time zone adjustment and jet lag is kicking my newly witchy ass right about now.

And what kind of witch did the coven send to transport us from the airport to the village?

A morning person .

Luckily, I have Elise. Who might be a vampire, but if there’s one thing I learned, it’s that pop culture got a lot of things way wrong. She doesn’t stay up all night and sleep all day, she definitely doesn’t sleep in a coffin, and though she doesn’t eat much, I know she can have garlic without any issues.

So, yeah. She’s a morning person who actually doesn’t need all that much sleep, and she chatters with Linda, asking her about what it’s like to live in Alaska, while I lean my head up against the shuttle window and doze the entire ride away from the airport.

Before I know it, the voices quiet and the shuttle comes to a slowing stop. Elise reaches over to nudge my shoulder, and I wake up in time to see that we’ve stopped in the middle of freaking nowhere.

Seriously.

All I see are trees. The road is empty, and I'm not even sure I want to call it a road. It's, like, a stretch of gravel trying to find its way through the thicket of overgrown bushes, rocks, and trees surrounding us.

Linda whips her head around, curls bouncing happily as she says, "Here we go, ladies. Welcome to Dyea."

I peer through the frosted window; it's easy since the heat from my cheek kept that part of the glass from fogging up. "We're here?"

"Sure are. Come on. I'll help you get your luggage out of the back."

Elise goes first. It takes me a second to come completely back to the land of the fully conscious.

However, before I can get off of the shuttle, Linda stops me.

She points at my chest. "You're Bridget, right?"

I'm not surprised she can guess which of us is the 'human' and which one of us is the vampire. Elise gracefully disembarked the bus to retrieve our luggage while I just bumped into the front seat, lost my footing, and nearly fell down the steps leading outside.

Plus, you know, there's how I look like a normal person while Elise should be on a movie set somewhere instead of being dropped off outside of a former ghost town.

"Yeah." I fluff my hair. It's a smushed mess from my quick cat nap against the window pane. "That's me."

"Great. Hang tight a second, will ya? I've got something for you."

She does? “Me?”

“Yup. I almost forgot. Madame Montvale told me to give this to you.” Linda grabs something from the dashboard. She passes over an envelope. “It’s a map to the underground cave system. If you’re not familiar with the area, you’d get lost without it. She said you’ll need it to find what you’re looking for.”

Everyone else seems to refer to Celeste as Madame Montvale except for Thorn and me. Probably because, as the leader of the Cadre, they’re on the same level. As for me, I’m just learning about where certain supes rank in their various hierarchies. She’s the head of the largest coven of the East Coast. For all I know, she’s like the witches’ governor and deserves the title.

But she was introduced to me as Celeste, and I have a hard time thinking about her as anything else. Still, I know who Linda means—and I know exactly what she’s talking about when she says that it might help me find what I’m looking for.

Fire opal grows in the caves. If I want to get rid of my powers, I need fire opal.

And now I have a map.

Well, to the caves, at least.

But how do we find the sanctuary?

CHAPTER 8

DYEA

The answer is with a bit of magic.

I hate that that's how I have to explain it. After we were all set, Linda pointed us in the direction of the woods. Since the sanctuary knew we were coming, all we had to do was start walking and, if we were granted sanctuary by the land itself, we would find it.

When ten minutes go by and neither me or Elise have any clue what we're doing, I'm just about ready to suggest heading back to the airport when, suddenly, I see a structure in the distance. Hoping that it's not one of the buildings abandoned more than a century ago when the boomtown went bust, I point it out to Elise and we head there together.

One structure becomes two, and over the crunching of our shoes on the old layer of icy snow, I begin to hear sounds. Talking. Laughter. Sounds of a living community, and I really, really hope that they are alive and that we haven't stumbled upon an actual ghost town.

We didn't. As we walk past the back of two obviously lived-in homes—each a narrow, two-story cottage with large windows and wooden porch steps—we emerge into a small village that's about the length of five city blocks at most, with one large building at each end, and a scattering of homes creating an elongated oval inside of the trees.

I get the feeling that the magic brought us right where we needed to go, just like Linda said, because as soon as we appear, we catch the attention of two very different men who give the appearance that they'd been waiting for us.

One of them waves. He's the smaller of the two, with a stout body, a beaming smile on his face, and a head of thick black hair that has a white stripe running right down the center of it.

Together, we head over to him—only to pause when the most rank stench seems to slam right into our nostrils.

It's bad. Like, really bad. A combination of burnt garlic, rotten eggs, and death with the strangest orange overtones to make it really godawful.

It takes everything in me not to clamp my hand over my nose, and the only reason I don't do that is because it hits me a second later that the scene is coming from the smiling man with the black-and-white hair.

He hustles over to us. "Hi, there. I'm Mayor Lou. Mayor because I'm the mayor of the village. Lou because that's my name. Mayor Lou. Nice to meet you."

I tap my chest, trying not to make a face, but my god , does the poor man stink. "Bridget."

Elise gives him a small smile. "And I'm Elise."

"Yes, we were expecting you. Welcome! And, please, don't mind the smell. If it gets too overpowering, I can replace this," he chirps, lifting up the piece of orange cardboard hanging around his neck.

Holy crap. Is that a car air freshener?

It is. It totally is. I wasn't really paying attention to it since the eye-watering stench caught my attention first, but now that I'm looking at it, I can see the words 'mandarin orange' in white block print in the center of the orange rectangle hanging over his jacket. A piece of elastic string is looped through the hole punched near the top, making it big enough to fit over his head.

"What smell?" asks Elise. The picture of diplomacy, the sweet vampire pretends she doesn't notice even as her nose wrinkles adorably.

Me? I do everything I can not to gag. I don't want to be rude, and I'm hoping that I'll get used to it in time if I'm sticking around Dyea, so I just give him a tight-lipped smile and nod while breathing shallowly through my nose.

He chuckles warmly. "Aren't you two very kind. It's alright. I know how strong it can be for newcomers. Another reason why I was one of the first villagers to relocate to the sanctuary when the witches opened it up to prey shifters. At least, in Dyea, everyone understands why I smell the way I do." And then, when it's obvious that we don't, he chuckles again. "I'm a skunk shifter."

Oh.

When they said this was a place for certain supernaturals who couldn't quite pass as human in the real world, I don't know what I was thinking. But a man with black and white hair wearing an air freshener that does nothing to cover up the pungent odor of his skunk smell?

Yeah. He'd stick out like a sore thumb.

What about his henchman? What is he?

At first glance, he looks like any regular old lumberjack you'd see on the cover of a

romance novel. At least a head taller than Mayor Lou, he has this rugged masculinity to him that would be attractive if he didn't look like he wanted to be anywhere but where he is. He has on a faded flannel shirt, buttoned all the way to the top, though that does little to hide his muscular build. His sandy brown hair is shaggy, in need of a haircut, and his eyes...

His eyes are the weirdest shade of gold I've ever seen. You can't even pretend they're hazel. That's liquid gold, and he's creeping me out by not blinking them.

He's standing a few steps away from the mayor, clearly downwind from the two warring stinks clinging to him, but when his nostrils flare and his scowl deepens, I'm pretty sure it's not the eau de skunk that's affecting him right now.

I resist the urge to lift my arm and sniff my pits. Sure, we've been traveling all night and we're probably less than fresh—and who am I kidding, Elise probably smells like blood and roses—but no way are we as bad as that .

He's glaring at me. I can't help but give him a stink face back, and it honestly has nothing to do with the poor skunk mayor.

"Don't mind Conall," says Mayor Lou brightly. "He's our head of security here, but no one will ever mistake him for the welcoming committee."

"More villagers just means more idiots I have to keep secure," Conall grumbles.

His gaze returns to me after a moment where the mayor got his grumpy glare, and as soon as it does, my hands begin to tingle in the familiar warning that they're about to spark and blow. Why am I the idiot? Because I'm the supposed human accompanying the vampire they granted sanctuary to?

Or is it something different? Is he different?

Shit. Can he tell that I 'm different?

Witch hunters. I haven't been able to forget about them since that first hunter tried to grab me in Clarity. I came all the way up to Alaska because it's the only place in the States that might be able to hide a fire witch. And I have to hide because they hunt in pairs.

Before we left Clarity, Jasper told Elise that despite the best care that the human hospital could give him, the first witch hunter died before Thorn could find out who his partner was and how much they knew about me. I had another panic attack when I declared that I was a murder, but Elise was quick to calm me down. Turns out that it wasn't the burns that killed him. Nope. As though he realized that he'd been caught by vampires and wasn't making it out alive, he woke up from his sedation with enough time to use the supplies in his hotel room to kill himself.

So one day. But what about the other one?

Now, I'm not saying that Conall is that prick's partner. If Conall has lived in the sanctuary town long enough to be head of security under Mayor Lou, I doubt he was lurking around Clarity with his partner, trying to snag any unsuspecting witches they came across.

Does that mean he isn't a witch hunter? Probably, but that doesn't mean he's not a threat. In my very limited experience as a witch, whenever someone makes my palms tingle like this, they're a threat.

Plus he definitely looks like a lurker...

Then there's the reality that while witch hunters hunt in pairs, they're part of an interconnected network of human fanatics. If he somehow figured out I was a witch before I even knew, did he only tell his partner? Maybe every damn hunter in the

world knows that Bridget Hayes is a witch. My saving grace is hoping that they don't know I'm a rare fire witch, but after the way I left scorch marks on Coronet Ave, I wouldn't be surprised if the partner does know.

I promised that I'd keep my identity—and my temper—underwraps in Dyea. Something tells me that'll be harder than I thought, and I'm looking at that 'something' as he glares down at me.

“Follow the rules and we won't have any trouble.”

What is it with supes and rules? I thought the one perk to being kicked out of the Fang City would be that I could hide out in this hidden supe town and do what I wanted because the population is so small and the witch hunters wouldn't know where to find me.

I should've known better. A teeny tiny population means more eyes on me—including his .

“The sanctuary rules are put in place to keep us all protected,” the mayor says in an apologetic tone. “No fighting between villagers, and if you want to challenge someone, we ask that you leave Dyea first. Of course, neither of you are shifters, so I don't expect that to happen.”

“You don't expect it to happen anyway.” Conall snorts. “Prey shifters don't challenge, Lou. You know that. And vampires don't bother. They just kill each other and step over the drained corpse to head to the canteen.”

Mayor Lou frowns. “That was a vampire dispute. Joaquin knew better than to steal blood from Mercy's donor because he decided to leave the village. He could've recruited a new one, but he didn't. His final death was deserved.”

Conall doesn't argue, though the expression that turns his broody expression skeptical does it for him.

The mayor ignores his head of security. "Anyway, since you brought your own donor, Ms. Van Duren, I'm sure you won't have a problem following the rules set out for vampires here."

Elise agrees. "Of course."

"Perfect. Now, Madame Montvale told us that you wouldn't mind sharing a house?—"

"No need for that," cuts in Conall gruffly. "We have more than enough. I thought the vampire would take this one," he adds, gesturing toward the narrow, two-floor cottage near where we are. "The other one can take the empty house down that way."

Mayor Lou reaches up, scratching the back of his head. "I thought you didn't want anyone taking that place? When Felicity arrived last summer, you made her take the cottage near the river."

"Because she's a selkie, Lou."

"Oh. I thought it was because you didn't want anyone taking the territory near your den."

Conall's glower becomes impressively more pissed off. "You thought wrong."

A fresh plume of stink fills the air. "Right. Sorry. Well, if Conall thinks that those placements work for our new villagers, he's never been wrong before. I think?—"

I think that Mayor Lou has the title, but this Conall wants to run the show.

No, thanks.

“I’ll stay with Elise.” I take a couple of steps closer to the cottage assigned to her. “It’s got two floors. We’ll fit.”

Before he can argue, Elise adds, “We have to stay together. She’s my donor.”

Unless it’s my imagination, the big, gruff lumberjack sniffs. And, you know, good on him because the skunk spray mingled with orange is making my stomach turn, but instead of gagging, he just narrows his gaze on Elise. “You bite her?”

What business is it of his if she does or not? Our cover story is that she does, and that’s all that counts. Besides, I promised Elise that she could. What’s a little blood between best friends, after all? Especially when she uprooted her entire life to be my supe guide up here in the wilds of Alaska.

I cross my arms over my chest. “We stay together.”

I expect him to argue. To put down one of his massive boots and tell me that I’ll stay where he put me, thank you very much.

To my surprise, he doesn’t. He swallows back what I’m sure would’ve been a lovely retort, scowls again, then turns to the mayor. “Are you done with me? I was just about to head out on a run when they arrived. I’d like to get back to that now unless you need me to help move them into here.”

Look at that. I guess I won that little stand-off.

Mayor Lou nods, and I get a fresh wave of spoiled citrus.

Conall shifts on his heel, already jogging away before it hits me that the grump didn’t

even say goodbye. He just left without a backward glance.

He must really want to get back to that run.

The mayor waited until he's out of earshot before he grins up at Elise and me. "Come with me. I'll show you around your new house."

CHAPTER 9

BLOOD

I didn't know much about Alaska before I got shipped off here with Elise. It doesn't take long for me to realize that all the research in the world wouldn't have prepared me for Dyea.

It started with Mayor Lou. If I thought a skunk shifter—like, he's a man sometimes, and then he turns into a skunk —was the weirdest thing I'd find in the village, I couldn't have been more wrong. In fact, once I got used to the smell... well, kinda... I understood why he was picked to be in charge in the first place. He's friendly and welcoming, from showing us our assigned house and helping us unpack to giving us a tour our first day, introducing us to everyone who came out to say hi to the new arrivals.

Then we met Jenny, who seemed nice enough until Elise flashed her fangs in her smile, the young brunette yelped, then keeled over. One second she was on her feet, the next she was on her side, arms and legs outstretched, visibly dead.

Only she wasn't dead. Jenny is an opossum shifter, and when something spooks her, she plays 'dead'. Facing an unfamiliar vampire was enough to set her off, and when she woke up again twenty minutes later, she sheepishly tracked us down to apologize and welcome Elise to Dyea.

There was also Kevin, who is a hedgehog shifter, and Haley, who turns into a bunny and has the white hair and pink eyes in her human form to prove it. Oh, and I can't

forget the ornery Gertie, who is a porcupine who shoots quills out of her hands if anyone comes too close to her cabin.

Turns out, Dyea is a sanctuary for a certain type of shifter: prey animals who don't fit in anywhere else. There are still some predators, too. At least seven vampires who call the sanctuary home, though they keep to themselves mostly; themselves, and their respective human donors. No other witches, though Mayor Lou makes reference to other supes who don't really interact with the rest of the community. Supposedly there is a centaur living in the woods nearby, and a yeti that prefers his space further into the wilds.

And then there's Conall.

Freaking Conall.

We've been in Dyea for a week. For the most part, I've done what I came up here to do. I didn't want to test the rules too soon, so I haven't gone searching for the underground caves or the fire opal yet, but I've held onto my temper. It's not that difficult. As Elise's human, I'm practically invisible. The villagers all have been told the same story: Elise is hiding out from a male insistent that he is her beloved. I'm here to feed her. Since that seems to be my only purpose, all of the other villagers act like I'm not here.

All of them—except Conall, who acts like my presence is an insult to him.

I don't know who he is. What he is. The more I catch him following me around the village, the more I can't shake that he knows I'm hiding something. Worse, if there is a witch hunter hiding somewhere near Dyea, I wouldn't be surprised if it was him.

Or maybe that's just wishful thinking because, if he was, I could at least explain why I seem to annoy him as much as I do.

Especially since the feeling? Totally mutual.

With a little more force than necessary, I set the two bottles I'm carrying down on the coffee table in our living room. Elise is curled up under a blanket, reading a book she borrowed from the village library. As the bottles hit the wood, she glances up, an amused smile tugging on her lips.

“Have a nice trip to the commissary, sweetie?”

I huff, and Elise laughs.

I point at her. “It's not funny.”

Her eyes dancing in amusement, telling me just how funny she does think it is, Elise uses her finger as a bookmark. “What did he do today?”

That's the problem. Conall doesn't do anything. Not really. As the head of security, he takes it upon himself to patrol around the village borders, making sure no one is starting any trouble or sneaking out. It's just that, whenever I leave our shared cottage without Elise, he's there. Like he's my shadow.

Has he said a word to me? No. But unlike the others, who look right past me, I know he's watching me. I know he sees me. Always with this slightly puzzled, slightly pissed expression on his face, and just when I want to flip him off and tell him to leave me alone, he does something inexplicably nice.

Like today. In the village, there is a commissary, where prepared food and some goods are imported from the human world at a huge mark-up. Then there's the canteen, a small kitchen where the village chefs serve daily meals for cheap. We have a small grocery for fresh food that's even more expensive than the commissary, stocked with food from Gladys, another witch who—wither her grandson,

Charles—is our point person to get in touch with the covens.

I went to the commissary because I needed shampoo. I grabbed a bottle, muttered when I saw that they didn't have any conditioner, and went to the counter to pay. I saw Conall slip into the small store after I did, did my best to ignore him while I was shopping, and left as soon as I was done.

I hadn't made it three houses away from the commissary before he was catching up to me, his long legs eating up the snowy ground before I could get away. Without a word, he tapped me on my shoulder, shoving a matching bottle of conditioner in my face.

So startled, I didn't even ask where he got it from, or how he found conditioner in the store when I couldn't.

Instead, I blurt out, "Did you steal this?"

Obviously Conall didn't steal it. He bought it for me, and looked almost insulted when I tried to pay him back for the bottle.

When I'm done telling Elise about how he stalked off, leaving me holding the shampoo and conditioner while resisting the temptation to bean him in the back of his skull with one, all she says is, "That was nice of him."

"Nice?" I echo. "He's fucking with me, that's what he's doing."

"He's a supe, Bridge. That's what most males do."

I'm not so sure about that. I've met vampires and shifters, and none of them have acted like Conall has. As for his being a supe... I don't know what kind he is. Unlike the others, it's not obvious, and that only adds to my suspicions that he's something

completely different.

So long as he isn't a witch hunter...

"I don't care. Doesn't he know what happened to the last guy who was skulking around me? Following me around?"

He doesn't. Of course he doesn't. We've gone to great trouble to hide that from my new neighbors, and no matter how much he annoys me, he hasn't done anything to deserve being barbecued.

Not yet.

Elise sobers a little. "How's the fire?"

"I'm good," I promise. "No temper. No fire. I've been on my best behavior."

"I hope you're going to stay that way."

I want to tell her that I'm not going to start any shit. I can't. The truth is that I have been waiting until our arrival doesn't feel so fresh to the others to start my search for the underground caves. The more I've noticed that I'm invisible here, the more I don't see any reason to continue waiting.

Then Conall does something like today, reminding me that he is watching, almost as though he expects me to leave the borders of Dyea as soon as I can.

It's those stupid rules. Mayor Lou allows Conall to dictate what us villagers in the sanctuary can do, and leaving the protection of the hidden community is a no-no. I don't see why it matters. So long as the magic lets me back in, I should be okay. It's not like I plan on wandering around the woods. I need to find the caves, then explore

underground for the fire opal.

I'm just gonna have to go. Maybe wait until Conall is busy doing something else for the mayor, then sneak out. It's not like he goes house to house, checking on every resident. I have to hope I can sneak back in, but I'm not worried about that.

I can't let one guy stop me from getting my hands on that crystal.

And as much as I love Elise, I can't allow her to keep me from going, either.

I asked her if she wanted to join me. She vehemently shook her head, apologizing profusely while adamantly refusing to go in search of the caves. Her reaction was so unexpected, I decided to drop the subject our first night in Dyea, and we've been tiptoeing around it ever since.

Elise agrees that I need the fire opal. She just can't bring herself to go with me, though she did offer to make a distraction to allow me to sneak in and out if necessary.

I've been thinking a lot about it these last few days. And since I don't want to think about Conall anymore, I ask her something that's been bugging me for just as long.

"Is that how you died?"

I surprised her. I don't think she expected me to ask that. To be fair, I didn't intend to. But now that I have, I legitimately want to know.

"What?"

I've only known that Elise is a vampire for a little over a week now. I've been dying to delve into her past and ask her about it since she admitted she's seventy-two, but I

got the vibe that I was pushing the bounds of what was appropriate in the supe community by asking her age. Probing the topic of her death? What made her into a blood-drinking supe? That definitely seems like one of those things that you just don't do.

But fuck it. I'm surrounded by supes now. Other vampires. Shifters. And unless my gut instinct is off, a witch hunter in disguise. Not only that, but I was ready to sign on to become Elise's breakfast and dinner. Sure, unless she wants to scald her tongue, my blood is obviously out, but the offer should count for something, right?

"The cave," I tell her. "You seemed pretty spooked when I mentioned exploring the caves together. Is that where... you know... it happened? Or was it just really dark before you came back like this?"

"Like this?" she echoes, sitting up against the couch, her book forgotten. Her brow furrows, but her features are as flawless as ever, and the wrinkles are barely there even if expression gaze is clearly confused.

"Yeah. A vampire. One of the undead."

"Oh, no, sweetie. I didn't die to become a vampire."

Really? "So you've always been like this?"

"Since birth. My parents were both turned vampires, but after they were bonded mates, they had me. But you're right... it's silly."

"It's not, Elise. Go ahead."

She blows out a rush of air. "I had a nanny when I was very young. She was a human woman who knew she worked for vampires. She thought she was helping... and she

put me to bed in a coffin she bought for me while my parents were away.”

I already know that vamps sleep in regular beds, not caskets. “Oh, no.”

She nods. “The lid fell. It got stuck. I was three-years-old and trapped in the dark. I didn’t die... it takes a lot more than that to end a vampire... but it took two days before she got me out. I know it’s been years, but the dark...” She grabs the blanket covering her, worrying it with her fingers. “I want to help you, Bridge, and I will. But I can’t go down there.”

Humans, witches, or vampires, we all have our trauma, don’t we?

“I’m not going to ask you to do that.” Due to my own issues, I hate driving in the rain. The dark? Like the cold, it doesn’t bother me. “Keeping Mr. Grump from noticing I’m gone is good enough. That’ll definitely help me.”

“Mr. Grump?”

I shrug. “Fits him, doesn’t it?”

“Just make sure he doesn’t hear you say that. A male like Conall... he might think you’re flirting with him,” teases Elise.

“He wishes.”

The look Elise gives me tells me that she doesn’t think I’m wrong, but the humor written on her face disappears as quickly as it came suddenly when she sucks in her cheeks. For a second, she looks like she’s in pain, and I frown.

“Elise? You okay?”

“Um. Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just... did you find out about the blood?”

Oh. Right.

Crap.

“I asked, hon.” Shaking my head, I tell her, “They don’t sell blood bags at the commissary.”

Elise’s smile tightens as she shrugs. “It was a long shot. I didn’t think they would, but I thought it wouldn’t hurt to ask.”

Shortly after arriving in Dyea, we realized that there are quite a few luxuries we’re going to have to go without. And while it’s worth it for the security that comes with the hidden town, the biggest sacrifice is Elise’s.

Simply put: she has no access to blood.

We knew that going in. All of the other human donors are claimed, but I didn’t think it would be a problem since Thorn was mailing her a cooler full of blood bags. Then they didn’t show, and we didn’t know how to ask about the delivery system without admitting she was expecting blood.

After all, that’s why I’m here, right? To feed Elise?

Sinking down on the couch next to her, I cock my head just enough to show her my throat. I tap the vein. “Go on. Have a sip.”

“Bridget?”

“What? So I’m a witch. I’ve still got blood, and you haven’t had any in, like, a week.

I'd be snapping people's heads off if I went hungry for half that time. I've got blood. Take some."

She licks the point of one of her fangs. "If I could ask anyone else..."

But she can't, and we both know it. "Don't worry about it. Now... just to make sure. You can bite me and it's not gonna start any kind of blood exchange, right?"

A hint of a tease touches the corner of her mouth. "Afraid you might make Conall jealous?"

CHAPTER 10

BURN

I roll my eyes. “Funny, Elise.”

“Sorry, Bridge. I couldn’t resist. But you’ll be fine. It won’t hurt, and I’ll only take a few sips. Just enough to get rid of the worst of the thirst. As long as you don’t bite me, there isn’t any blood exchange.”

It’s a good thing that I have no intention to find out what a vampire tastes like.

Elise is an amazing teacher. Though she obviously knows the most about vampires, and witches are some of the rarer types of supes so she doesn’t have firsthand knowledge about my kind, she’s been giving me a crash course on supes ever since I stopped pretending I was one.

And so far I’ve realized that the two most important things I need to know are that silver can incapacitate any powerful supernatural creature, and that one bonus to being most supes, is that they’re owed a fated mate.

Again, because witches have to be difficult, I don’t get one of those. On the plus side, that means I can screw around with whoever I want and Fate won’t get all pissy about it, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the idea that there was one guy out there meant specifically for me.

Unless it’s someone like Conall, that is. In that case, no thanks.

When it comes to vampires, their bonding ritual is fairly straightforward. There needs to be a blood exchange, so each part of the couple has to take a nip from their prospective mate, and then they seal it with sex.

Because I'm curious—and, to be honest, a bit horny since I haven't gotten laid in, like, forever—I ask her about shifters. Of all the types of supes out there, vampires and shifters are the most common, and I wanted to know how the more beastly supes claimed their mates.

Claim, of course, being the right word for it. Not being a shifter herself, she only knew the basics. How a shifter has to make their mate, receive a mark in return, and then, like vamps, bang it out. The only difference is that while blood usually is drawn during the marking—whether it's a bite or a scratch—there's no drinking required. Instead, shifters usually leave a visible silvery scar somewhere on their mate's body to prove that they're taken.

Makes sense. In Dyea, we have a handful of mated couples that sought sanctuary together. Though none of the shifters here are predators, seems like all shifter are predatory when they have their mate under them.

Elise can take my blood. I'm just feeding a friend, and if the memory of Conall's sneer as he asked Elise if she bites me runs through my mind at the moment, I quickly shove it aside as I shift a little closer to her.

“So how do we do this? Neck? Wrist? Forearm?”

“You're right-handed. In case witches don't heal as quickly as other supes, let's go with your left wrist so it doesn't interfere with your drawing hand. If that's alright.”

In answer, I fist my hand to get the vein bulging a little, then offer her my left wrist.

Elise hesitates for only a few seconds, but the thirst must've been worst than she was letting on because, like a rattlesnake, she strikes. Her fangs sink right into my skin, and the piercing sensation only lasts a second before she takes a pull on my vein.

One sip. Elise manages one sip before she's yanking her fangs out of my hand, hissing.

Uh oh.

"Elise?"

Her eyes had darkened, going from pale green to a vibrant red as she starts panting now that she's no longer hissing. Her lips are painted with my blood, but her tongue is... blistered?

Holy shit.

"Did I burn you?"

I think I burned her.

"What can I do? How can I help?"

She shakes her head, her ruby-red hair falling forward into her face. A few seconds later, she shoves it away, and her eyes are back to the same pale green shade I know.

Her tongue looks better, too, but that doesn't change what I saw.

Elise swallows, obviously testing her mouth out. Vampires, she's taught me, do heal quickly so I'm not too surprised when she nods. "I'm better."

“What happened?”

“I’m not sure,” admits Elise. “Only that I’ve never experienced anything like it. I was burned, and I think... I think it might be because your blood itself, it might be fire.”

You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.

“I can’t feed you, can I?”

Elise looks more pained now than she did a moment ago as she says, “Not if you’re a fire witch.”

Well, that seals it, doesn’t it? I need the fire opal to get rid of my magic—and I need it as soon as possible.

As much as I want to, I don’t go in search of the caves tonight.

Since it’s going to be dark no matter what, I figure it doesn’t matter when I take the trip underground. If Conall is snooping around, it’s probably better if I leave the village at night when he should be sleeping.

But it didn’t feel right, running out on Elise after I burned her tongue like that. So she healed quicker than I did. It took hours before her bite marks were gone, while Elise’s tongue was back to normal in minutes. Doesn’t matter. Finding out just how much the fier is pervasive inside of me freaked me out. Discovering that her only chance at blood isn’t going to work made it worse.

So we sprawled out on the couch together, watching television until Elise decided she was ready to head to bed. Only then did I go into the kitchen and make me a sandwich. I scarfed it down, chased it with some water, then decided to turn in myself.

I'm tired. I don't ask how the magic works here, but so long as I have enough Wi-Fi to work on my commissions, contact my clients, and continue our Supernatural marathon, I don't care. Tonight we watched seven episodes, and I'm ready to change into my sleep clothes and pass out.

Instead of turning on my light, I feel my way through my room so that I won't have to get up and turn it off again after changing. And maybe it's because my eyes are used to the dark, but when I move past the window, pausing to yank the shade down, I notice that there's someone out there.

My stomach sinks—and my hands spark.

What the...

I can't see who it is. Their back is to me, legs braced apart, their shadowy form standing out against the glitter of another snowfall. It stopped snowing earlier tonight which makes it easier to see someone is out there, at the back of the house.

It's dark. In Dyea, the sun's complete down by four-thirty. By eleven, it seems like it'll never be light out again.

Who is that?

What are they doing?

And, more importantly, why do I care?

This is a sanctuary. You have to be granted entry.

It can't be a witch hunter.

Right?

Yellow snow.

I'm looking at yellow snow.

Did Conall piss out here? I see boot prints, too, and I'm pretty sure those tracks belong to a man. It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to put two and two together about what I saw out of my window last night.

It wasn't a witch hunter standing out here. It was Mr. Grump, stopping to take a leak outdoors. Did he know that this was mine and Elise's house? Duh. Stupid question. Of course he does. He's the one who got ticked off when I insisted on sharing a house with her in the first place, and even if he forgot about that, he's the head of security. I'd bet he knows where everyone lives.

He's not out here now. In fact, I haven't seen him all morning. Elise and I went to get breakfast at the canteen—where I ate toast and eggs and she sipped coffee while looking wistful for blood—and there was no sign of Conall there. Same when we went back to the house.

Maybe he slept in. He doesn't seem the type, but if he was skulking around the sanctuary as late as I caught him last night, it's possible.

Figuring that this was as good a time as any to start my search for the fire opal, I grabbed the envelope holding the map that bus driving witch gave to me, said goodbye to Elise, and slipped out the back door.

The house that belongs to Elise and me while we live in Dyea is backed up against the woods. Most of the wooden cottages are. Such a small community, our front doors face each other from opposite sides of the long oval. The back doors come with

heavy duty locks in case someone manages to break into the sanctuary—or if one of the wild creatures that live in the woods do.

It isn't often that happens. I ran into Mayor Lou the other day on my way to the canteen, and after I got past the worst of his renewed odor—black cherry air refresher on top of skunk—I noticed he looked nervous. He tried to downplay any concerns, but I can be pushy when I want to be. I nudged a little until he confessed that, on one of his patrols, Conall got sight of unfamiliar footprints near enough to Dyea to be a worry.

My first paranoid instinct was that the witch hunters found me. It must've shown on my face because the kind mayor patted me on the shoulder, assuring me that it looks like one of the wild Alaskan wolves might've got curious and padded near our village.

The magic keeps out people. People and supes, I guess, but since this land belongs to the animal and other creatures who are native to the land, the coven's spell doesn't affect them. Instead, it's the markings from the shifters who live in Dyea that warn away some of the more curious predators.

I get it. If an actual wolf caught the scents of a skunk, an opossum, a hedgehog, even a freaking porcupine all in one community, it must think: smorgasboard. It doesn't have any clue that, in Dyea, our prey animals turn into humans. Their scents are just different enough to make the wild predators hesitant, and with enough territorial markings, they'll stay away.

Which is good. This is Alaska. It didn't really dawn on me that I'm living out in the woods, basically neighbors with Alaskan wolves and grizzly bears, until my chat with Mayor Lou.

As I tuck the envelope under my arm, using my winter boot to erase the last of the

yellow snow by kicking some of the fresh powder over it, the idea that this might've been a territorial marking pops into my brain.

But why would Conall piss outside my house? I still don't know what kind of supe he is, though I've brainstormed with Elise when my ability to keep from bringing up the grumpy head of security fails for another night. We agree that he's obviously not a vamp—as a vamp herself, Elise would instinctively recognize her own kind—and she's pretty sure based on his movements and how he's acted since our arrival that he's a shifter.

What kind? No clue. It would be hysterical if he was, like, a hamster shifter or something. A teeny tiny prey animal when he shifts, it would make sense why he's constantly scowling when he's standing in front of me, a six foot lumberjack with melted gold eyes and a frown that irks me all the way to my bones...

Another kick and the yellow snow is covered. If that was his way of warding off a moose or a caribou or whatever else they have here, that's on me. I don't even really know that it was Conall. Just because the shadowy figure seemed to have his shape and size, and none of the other supes I've met in Dyea are as strapping and broad-shouldered as he is, doesn't mean it was him. Elise keeps teasing me that I've had it out for him since his less-than-enthusiastic welcome. Maybe I have. Right now? I have something to do, and now that the snow's covered, I'm ready to go.

I'm not too worried about heading out of the sanctuary. Sure, there are wild animals out there, but Dyea really is a ghost town. The trees have reclaimed the land over the last century, and any human residents live on the outskirts of it. I'd have to be super unlucky to run into another person out in the woods, and if it turns out to be a witch hunter?

Light 'em up.

I've been practicing. When Elise's thirst gets to be a little too difficult for her to ignore, she heads to her room. I don't want to bug her when she's already having a harder time of it than either of us expected, and I end up going upstairs to my assigned space.

With the window shades drawn and my door closed, I work with my fire. The way I see it, if I find the fire opal, it should help me get rid of my magic. What if I don't? I have to look to the future. For the moment at least, I'm a fire witch. What good is being a fire witch if my magic is unpredictable and uncontrollable?

I'm playing at being a human. My secret's safe so far, but the last thing I need is to get jumpy and accidentally shoot fire at one of the supes in the village. That means I need to learn how to wield it. It helps that I know what my trigger is, but I'd rather be able to call on the fire when I need it instead of it bursting free of me.

So if I need to protect myself in the woods or in the caves? I'm confident enough that I can.

It's a good thing, too, because I start getting the all-too-familiar tingle in my fingers about ten minutes into my trek.

The map that the bus driver gave me was folded in half, with a drawing on each side of the page. One part illustrated where the entrance to the underground cave system is in comparison to Dyea. The other is a guide through the connected caves, with two separate ones marked with a star. The stars mark the caves that Celeste believed might be the best spots to find the fire opal.

One problem: I'm shit when it comes to reading maps.

I'm okay with the dark. I'm good with enclosed spaces. None of that bothers me, but it's frustrating how the endless amounts of trees make it difficult to navigate my way

to the entrance. Add that to how I'm pretty sure the magic surrounding the sanctuary is working against me, trying to keep me inside its borders, and I'm paying more attention to where I'm going than what might be creeping up on me.

That was my mistake.

CHAPTER 11

CONALL

By the time the tingles start, followed by the shiver coursing up and down my spine, my sixth-sense that there's someone behind me is too late.

It's not a someone. It's a some thing .

It's a wolf!

Fuck. That's a monstrous-looking wolf. I know Alaska has them, but that fucker is huge . With thick white-and-grey fur, a sleek muzzle pulled away to show off its bared teeth, its ears arched back as it races toward me, it's closer to a horse than a dog.

Oh, hell no.

Life or death. Fight or flight. An adrenaline spike is more than enough to get my palms a-blazing, and I only just remember to drop the paper map to the snow-covered ground before it incinerates in my grip before my entire hand is encased in flickering flames.

Folding my fingers together, using my pointer fingers together to aim, I let the fire fly.

The wolf sees it streaming right toward it and, mid-stride, twists its body as though

desperate to avoid the fire catching its fur. One second, it's coming at me. The next? It's retreating.

Or it tries to.

Once I see that the wolf is trying to get away, I instinctively stop pouring all of my panic and fright into my magic. The force of the fire dies almost instantly, though it was still strong enough to ignite the wolf's tail.

My fire doesn't hurt me. As soon as it catches fire on the tip of the beast's tail, it yelps, turning in a quick circle as though, if it can get the tail between its jaws, it can get rid of the fire.

I can't stop it. I almost feel like I should be able to. Like, that's my fire, and if I could shoot it at the wolf, it should be as simple to call it back. I can't, though, and I watch with a guilty pit in my stomach as the wolf stops running and drops back on its haunches, smacking the fiery tail against the snow to tamp out the flames.

It's distracted. This is my chance.

Can I outrun an injured wolf? Doubt it, but I'm going to try anyway.

At least, that was the plan. It all goes to hell in a handbasket when the wolf pushes up off of the earth, almost like it's trying to stand. A blink of an eye later, he is standing—and it's a he because what was a wolf a split second ago is a man.

He whirls around on me, and now I'm distracted.

Conall. The wolf is Conall .

His gold-colored eyes blaze as vividly as my flames as he stalks toward me. "Did you

just light my tail on fire?”

It’s the tone. The accusatory tone, coupled with the fury etched in every line of his rugged face as he bears down on me. My back immediately goes up, and instead of being shocked that Conall was a wolf, I give him a quick up and down to show him that I’m not impressed with him at this very moment.

Mistake number two. I don’t know how I didn’t notice it straight off, but as he crosses the distance between us, I realize something I wondered about shifters, though I never had a chance to ask.

As their beasts, shifters are naked, right? You don’t see Mayor Lou as a skunk wearing his normal uniform of a jacket and khakis, though I wouldn’t be surprised if he had a tiny version of his air freshener to wear when he waddles around Dyea in his animal form.

That wolf was all fur. And now, directly after his shift back to human, Conall is all skin.

“Naked,” I yip. “You’re naked. You’re a guy, and you’re naked.”

And he’s annoyingly gorgeous .

Why couldn’t he have a hairy belly and a mushroom for a cock? Oh, no. Despite being a shifter, he doesn’t have any hair anywhere but near his junk, and considering it’s a good six inches soft, I’d hate to see what monster he’s packing when he’s hard.

And, oh, am I lying.

Conall doesn’t seem to give a shit that he’s completely nude—or that I’m definitely noticing that the Alaska cold doesn’t affect him at all, either.

“I’m not a guy. I’m a shifter whose ass has a burn on it because some human just lit my Alpha damn tail on fire,” he growls. He turns sideways, dick flopping as he moves. “Look at it.”

Don’t look, Bridge, don’t look ?—

“Your ass looks fine to me.” There’s a tiny pink patch, almost ironically in the shape of a heart, that might, might be a burn mark. If that. Who knows? Maybe he was born with it. “I doubt you’ll even scar.”

His expression becomes a dare even as he says, “I’m a shifter. We heal quick.”

“So why the hell are you giving me shit, Mr. Grump?”

“Because you lit my tail on fire!”

That again.

“You were running at me. As a wolf . Sorry, but if a wolf comes after me, I’m not going to stand there and let it eat me.”

A muscle tics in his jaw. “I wasn’t doing anything like that. I was following behind you to make sure you didn’t get into any trouble. It’s not safe for humans to leave the safety of the sanctuary.” His chest heaves, and it takes everything in me not to lower my gaze any further than that. “But you’re not a human, are you?”

What was his first clue?

“Well, neither are you.”

“Yes, but everyone in Dyea knows that I’m a wolf shifter. I don’t hide it. Can’t say

the same about you, can I? A fire witch in Dyea. I knew there was something... I could sense it. I just never thought you were a witch. Does anyone else know?"

Translation: who else has been keeping this intel from him?

Though I don't see how it's his business, if I want him to keep my secret, I have to at least try not to piss him off any further. I'm probably shit out of luck already due to the whole 'lighting his tail on fire' thing, but I try anyway.

"Elise," I admit. "Just Elise. And she's really a vampire?—"

He snorts. "Oh. Trust me. I know ."

"Yeah. She needed sanctuary. I needed sanctuary. So I came here, pretending she needed me to be her human donor. But I'm not, okay? You got me. I'm a witch."

"So she doesn't bite you? You don't feed her?"

I don't know why he would care, and deciding that tiny sip shouldn't count since I burned her tongue, I say, "No."

He nods. "I can only imagine why a vampire needs sanctuary. But what about you, Red? Why are you in Dyea?"

I could tell him it's not his business. I'm sure he'll just scoff and tell me—in detail—how wrong I am. Since all of this is just wasting time... and, damn it, he's having this conversation with his dick hanging out in the breeze... I figure I might as well get it over with.

"Okay. So I'm a witch. Obviously. I might've had a run-in with a witch hunter before I came here, but that was before I even knew I was a witch." At his look of disbelief,

I add, “Really. I only just figured it out, like, a week ago. But that’s the problem. I don’t know anything about supes. They tell me witch hunters hunt in pairs. That I’m in danger. That I can go with Elise... who, I’ll point out, I discovered was a vampire the sane tie I found out I was a witch... to Alaska and hide out. So here I am, and here you are, and unless you’re a wolf shifter who’s somehow also a witch hunter, I’d really, really appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone else the real reason I’m here.”

Is batting my eyelashes too much? I want Conall to understand I’m being completely honest with him right now, but the way his face went blank the longer I talked, the more I’m beginning to think that he might be the first non-human witch hunter out there.

Then he shows me his teeth, and they’re as impressive as his wolf’s fangs. “You should’ve told me. I might be a lone wolf, but that just means I don’t have a wolf pack to call my own. I’m still an alpha wolf who will do anything to protect what’s his.”

That took a weird turn.

I raise my eyebrows. “And I’m yours?”

He chokes, then glares at me some more. “Everyone who accepts sanctuary is mine .”

That’s what he thinks.

Me? I don’t know who he thinks he is, but?—

“Wait a sec... you weren’t just peeing outside ‘cause you couldn’t hold it, were you?” When he doesn’t deny that he’s responsible for the yellow snow outside of my house, I fist my hands on my hips. “And now you’re stalking me as a wolf. What the hell? ‘Cause I’ll tell you something. I didn’t know you were a wolf shifter.”

“You’re changing the subject, Red. Turning it on me.” He breathes in deep. “I still scent my singed fur.”

He deserved it. “You were following me,” I remind him. “And my name’s not ‘Red’. It’s Bridget.”

The way he looks down his nose tells me that he certainly knows what my name is, and that if he wants to call me ‘Red’, I’m ‘Red’ regardless.

“That’s my job. I patrol the sanctuary. I keep it safe. For humans, and for reactive fire witches.”

I ignore that part.

“And the pissing?”

I’m not about to forget the pissing.

He tilts his chin up. “Wolf shifters mark their territory.”

“Their territory,” I sputter. “That house is mine!”

“I thought it was the vampire’s,” Conall rumbles. “Just like I thought you were supposed to be a human. But you’re not. I knew there was something about you. I couldn’t put my claw on it, but there was something ? — ”

I snort. “Is that why you’ve been such a grumpy ass since I arrived in Alaska?”

“Hate to disappoint, Red, but that’s just who I am. Comes with being a lone wolf.”

Whatever. “Now you know what I am. I really hope we can keep this between us, but

I understand if you can't. Just know I'm trying to stop from having... incidents?—"

"Burning my ass."

"Incidents," I repeat with a little more emphasis, "so, if all goes to plan, I won't be a"—what did he call me?—"a 'reactive fire witch' that much longer."

I'll give Conall credit. He puts two and two together, getting four pretty quickly.

"Where were you going?"

Crap. Good one, Bridge. I'm trying to get rid of my magic, right? That's what I said? And now I left the sanctuary... it doesn't take a genius to realize that those two things go together.

Just in case, though, I try to put an end to the conversation—and what's surely to be a continued interrogation while he's freaking naked. "For a walk."

"You're lying."

That's not technically a lie. I am walking... to the caves. "No, I'm not."

"You are," he insists. His nostrils flare. "You stink of it."

"Are you telling me you can smell it when I'm being dishonest?"

"It took me a minute. But you have a certain scent when you're being honest. Like now, when you admitted to being a witch. It changed when you got defensive and shut me down by saying you just went for a walk. One compared to the other... you weren't being honest."

He's not wrong. But since I don't want to admit that—or be dishonest again—I deflect and change the subject. “My scent? What do I smell like?”

Conall's brows draw together. I get the sense he knows what I'm doing, but he's going to allow it.

Gee. Thanks.

He sucks in a breath, exhaling after a long moment. “You smell like heat. Like coals burning. I've never come across anything like that before, and I barely get a whiff of it... but I scented it leaving the village right before I tracked you out of it.”

He moves into me, and it takes everything I have not to lower my gaze again as the naked shifter prowls even closer.

“Your friend is a corpse. She smells like rotten meat. That's not a knock, either,” he adds when I start to argue indignantly on behalf of Elise. “She's a vampire. They all smell like ice and meat to my wolf. You're always around her. She overpowered your scent so I could only get teasers of it. If she didn't, Mayor Lou's stink did. But it was enough.”

“Enough?” I echo. “Enough for what?”

His golden eyes flash. “To catch my attention.”

“Well,” I say sweetly, “keep it. I don't want it.”

Conall grits his teeth. “Too late.”

I tilt my chin up, matching his dare. “That's what you think.”

His gaze roves over my face. His lips part.

Uh.

Is Conall about to kiss me?

Okay. I know all about opposites attract. Hate sex? It can be a ton of fun. But just because he's naked and I'm overheated—because of my fire, damn it—that doesn't mean that he can make a statement like that and kiss me.

Though, now that I'm thinking about it...

His eyes dart to the left. Moving too fast for me to do anything but clamp my own jaw shut, Conall lunges down, grabbing something from the snow.

He holds it up, looking at it.

Shit. The map!

CHAPTER 12

DANGEROUS

I hold out my hand. “That’s mine.”

He glances up at me. “What is it?”

He’ll know if I’m lying. Besides, it’s not like it isn’t obvious already... “A map.”

“Yes,” he says, his rough voice wry. “I can see that. This side shows you where the caves are.” He flips the map. “And this has gotta be the cave system. Or an older version of it, at any rate. What I should have said is what are you doing with this?”

Damn it. This would be so much easier if I could lie to him and he wouldn’t be able to know.

And, sure, I’ve technically been lying to him all along, letting him think I’m a human when I’m obviously not. But that was more about protecting my ass, and while he might’ve guessed something was off, he didn’t know for sure.

He knows now. That might be a good thing, though. I kinda like the idea that at least one other person inside of the sanctuary is aware that the witch hunters might be coming after me. Conall wants to protect us all?

Fine.

“Okay. You want the truth? Here goes. The reason I’m here, besides needing sanctuary, is because there’s supposed to be this crystal down in the caves. Fire opal. Bright orange and really powerful.”

“I’ve don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like that down there,” interjects Conall.

“You’ve been in the caves?” He nods, and I say, “Oh. Well, you wouldn’t see it anyway. It’s a witch thing. That’s why I have

“Why isn’t the corpse helping you?”

I give him a look. “Her name is Elise, and like I said, it’s a witch thing. Why should she? It’s not like she can navigate the caves, either. It’s fine. I can do it.”

“She hasn’t been in the caves before. I have. I’ll come with you. I’ll help you find the opal you need.”

And be in close proximity with a man—a shifter—who makes my palms tingle?

“What? No. You don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t have to. I’m still gonna.”

Nope. Reaching out, I snatch the map from him. I only got it because he let me—I have no illusions otherwise—but it’s in my grasp now as I give him a tight smile. “I can take care of myself.”

“I don’t doubt that. You’re pretty dangerous, Red.”

I lift up my hand, pretending to blow out the tip of my finger even though my fire has been conspicuously missing since I realized the wolf was Conall. “And now you

know better than to follow me around, Mr. Grump.”

His brow furrows. “Why do you keep calling me that? ‘Mr. Grump’?”

Seriously?

“Do you really have to ask?” I wonder. “I thought it was obvious.”

Considering he doesn’t ask again, maybe it is.

“I wouldn’t have had to follow you if you stayed at the sanctuary in the first place. Come on. Let’s go back. We’ll get supplies.”

I can’t help myself. “Clothes?”

He jerks his head. Yes. “We’ll make a plan. Tell the mayor where we’ll be. We can head out to the caves later.”

I brace my winter boots in the snow. “No.”

“Bridget.”

See? He does know my name. “If I go back, who says I’ll get the chance to go at all?”

“I do.”

“Mm.”

There’s that scowl again. “You don’t trust me.”

He actually sounds a little hurt at the revelation. Because of that, I try not to be rude

when I remind him, “I barely know you.”

For a moment, I get the feeling he’s going to just huff, say ‘fuck it’, and pick me up before throwing me over his shoulder. He’s big enough. Probably strong enough, too. Considering how quickly shifters seem to heal, I can burn his back and he’d probably just shake it off if it meant he could carry me back to Dyea.

No wonder Thorn didn’t seem worried about me using my magic on him. Either I couldn’t, or I did and the flames barely affected him. It’s not silver, after all. Decapitation is the only true way to kill a vampire—and a shifter, too, I’m guessing—but if they’re incapacitated with silver first, it’s a whole lot easier to go for their head.

Fire? I can incinerate a human. If I kept the flames burning long enough to combat a super’s regenerative property, I might be able to separate their head from their necks eventually. But since I don’t want to kill Conall for the sole crime of annoying me, I do everything I can to contain my fire magic even as he eyes me with a speculative look.

And then he does the last thing I expect him to do: he sighs.

“Fine. But wait for me.”

“What?”

“You heard me. If you’re heading down to the caves, I’m coming with you.”

“Conall—”

“Don’t go anywhere,” he growls. “I’ll be right back.”

Before I can tell him not to bother, Conall turns around, giving me a good look at his sculpted back and a tight ass—that I'm only checking out because of the burn, of course—before he launches forward, shifting back to his wolf in a snap.

He disappears into the woods, leaving me standing there, clutching my map in my hand.

My map...

I wait until I'm sure he's far enough not to wheel back around and stop me from doing what I want. Then, wiggling the fingers on my free hand, testing for that weird tingle that warns me a threat is around, I decide I'm good.

Wait for him?

No, thanks.

I have a mystical crystal to find.

I can admit when I'm wrong. It isn't often, but when I screw up, I can say so.

I'm doing that right now.

I have the map. I should've realized that, considering how long it took me to find the entrance to the caves in the first place, it might not be all that easy to maneuver through the caves. On the plus side, I conjured some fire around my hand to act like a flashlight on the first try, no fear or anger necessary. I just wanted fire, it was there, and I thought my success was a good omen for finding the fire opal.

If only.

So I have no clue what I'm doing. The caves are cold, much colder than I expect, and the darkness is consuming wherever my fire doesn't touch. It's dank. Musty. I start wondering what kind of critters and creepy crawlies might be hiding out underground with me, and I'm glad that I can't really see more than a few feet in front of me.

It's quiet, too. So quiet, it's almost stifling. I have this urge to yell out just to hear a sound, but then I remember the critters and the creepy crawlies and I keep my trap shut.

One hand holds the fire. The other keeps the map up by my face. I should've brought a pen or something to help mark my path, but I didn't, and I'm lost almost immediately.

I'm not too worried about that. This cave system is small compared to the biggest ones in the world. Instead of a couple of hundred miles long, the one hidden beneath Dyea is maybe two or three miles, max. It's why no one except for the witches and the locals even know it's here, and since it's near enough to the sanctuary's borders, I don't think any of the nearby humans are aware it exists.

I'll find my way back out. If I don't, at least two people know where I've gone: Conall and Elise. Elise will never leave me in the dark to rot, and if I've learned anything about the wolf shifter, it's that he'd come after me himself if only to lecture me for not doing what he was told.

It's an observation based on everything I've learned about him since we met, and I probably should've given myself more credit for how perfectly I got a read on him because it isn't twenty minutes after I accepted I was lost that the air shifts, and someone grabs me near my waist.

Damn wolf moved like a cat. I never heard him coming, never even knew he was in the same cave that I just wormed my way into until he grabs me, I shriek, my fire

goes out, plunging us into darkness, and he says, “Hey, Red. Calm down. It’s me.”

Conall .

What the hell happened to my warning signal? For the past week, any time Conall was around, he made my palms tingle. Now, after one civil conversation, I don;t think he’s a threat anymore because he’s a wolf shifter and not a witch hunter?

Come on, Bridge, that should make him more of a threat.

“How did you find me?” I demand, trying to break out of his hold.

Conall’s fingers dig into my sides, keeping me where he wants me as he ducks his head, his nose against my throat. “I could smell you.”

I slap the first fingers I can reach. What the hell is he doing? “Well, stop it.”

He immediately lets me go. Patting my sides, he releases me from his death grip, then backs up so that there are at least two feet between us in this cramped cove. “The fire gave you away, too,” he admits. “The light, plus I could smell the burning, too, before it vanished.”

Of course he can.

I lift my right hand. I’m still frightened enough that it’s a cinch to hold it palm up as a tennis ball-sized orb of super hot fire burns roughly a couple inches over it.

He shields his eyes, but other than that, he doesn’t move away or react to the fireball.

He does, however, give me that trademark glower of his. There’s something a little different about it, too. Almost like there’s a hint of relief tucked inside of it. “I told

you to wait for me.”

“Right,” I agree. “And I decided not to listen.”

The big wolf shifter grumbles deep in his chest. “It’s dangerous down here, Red.”

“I’m fine.”

“You sure? I could’ve sworn you muttered something about being lost. Tell the truth. You don’t even know where you’re going.”

“Of course I don’t,” I answer flippantly. “That’s why I have my fire and a map and a way forward.” Then, to prove what I mean, I take a couple of purposeful steps ahead of me—and away from Conall. “I told you. I’m fi— ahh !”

I’m not fine. I’m so not fine.

I don’t know what happened. The rocky ground gives out from under me, and as I start to drop, my flame winks out again as my hands flail, searching for something to grab onto.

The rocky walls of the narrow column I’m plunging down are craggy and rough. I can’t get a grip, and I shriek one more time as the rocks scratch the shit out of my leg.

Just when I’m sure that this is it, that I’m falling to the middle of the earth where even the lava might be too much for my fire, something strong and sure and possessive snatches my wrist. There’s a small bounce as gravity fights against Conall’s grip, but the wolf shifter wins. Using only one hand, he hauls me out of the hole, tugging me against his chest.

His arms wrap around me.

I cling to the shifter as my life flashes before my eyes.

Shit. I'm not even thirty yet. I've got a whole lot more life to go, and I might actually get to live it now thanks to?—

Conall shifts his hand, cupping the back of my head, his fingers weaving through my hair. I can feel the way his heart pounds inside of his chest against mine, even through the flannel shirt he has on now.

I let him hold me. Right now, I'd let anyone offer me comfort.

I keep waiting for his 'I told you so' even as he does. When the most he does is shudder against me, as though he actually would give a crap if I plunged into the darkness, I slither out of his hold.

He doesn't stop me.

I take a deep breath, calming myself. Once I have, I lift my hand. Another fireball hovers over my palm, allowing me to get a good look at Conall.

“Watch your step next time, Red. Okay?”

Did I honestly expect anything else from him?

I offer him a thin-lipped grin. “Will do. But thanks. I appreciate the save. And I guess, if you're cool with staying down here, helping me search, I don't mind.”

He opens his mouth. I'm betting he's about to say something along the lines that there's no way he's going to let me head any further into the cave system, but then his nostrils flare.

Conall's eyes flash, so brightly I swear they outshine the flames. "Why do I smell blood?"

Blood? I glance down, trying to get a look at my leg. "It's probably my leg. I'm pretty sure I scraped the hell out of it."

"Are you okay?"

"It barely stings. It can't be that much blood, and I'll clean the cut out when I'm done."

I mean it. Who knows what kind of germs are down here? But I haven't come all this way to head back now, and I'm ready to argue with Mr. Grump when he inevitably commands that I return to Dyea with him.

Once again, he surprises me.

There's a long pause, and then he grates, "Which cave were you searching for first? Let me see your map. I'll lead you there, then we'll get back faster to take care of that."

"You're still going to help me? Even after I left without you?"

Really?

"My job is to keep everyone in Dyea safe. Something tells me that I'll either be spending my time doing everything I can to stop you from leaving the village so I won't be any help there. Or I can help you find whatever it is you're looking for as soon as possible, you won't have any reason to go outside of the sanctuary, and you'll be safe with the other villagers."

He has a point. If his wolf is convinced that he needs all of us where he can make sure we're not in trouble—or trouble ourselves—then either way, Conall will be focused on me. He might as well help me find the fire opal quickly, then go back to his normal duties.

“And Mayor Lou won't mind?”

In my firelight, Conall's wolf shifter eyes glitter almost wickedly. “I'm not sure if you've noticed, but the mayor tends to spray more when I'm nearby. He can't help it. It's an instinctive reaction. He's prey. I'm a predator. Even if he's the mayor, his skunk knows better than to piss off a lone wolf. He won't have a problem if I take some time away from the village.”

I peer at him through the fire. “Are you terrorizing that nice mayor?”

“Not at all. I don't try to scare him. It happens. And I stopped huffing and snapping my teeth at him whenever he gets some of his stink in my fur. I'm an Alpha damn saint to Lou, and he understands that someone in Dyea needs to be fierce enough to keep the vampires in line. Otherwise they might form their own Cadre and take over.”

“Not Elise,” I say loyally. “She'd never do that.”

Conall's expression turns unreadable, even with the fire reflecting off of his pupils. “That's what you think, Red. Can't say the same about the other corpses. If I had my way, none of the bloodsuckers would've been granted sanctuary.”

I put my free hand over my heart and gasp.

His brow furrows, ducking his head to search my face. “You okay?”

I drop my hand. “Yup. Just a heart attack at how shocking that revelation was. Two

big, bad predators not getting along? Wow. Alert the news.”

Conall shakes his head when he realizes I’m fucking with him. “They’re dangerous.”

“Funny. You said I was dangerous.”

“You are, Red.”

“Is that it, then? Is that why you keep acting like you want me gone? Am I another one of those people you think shouldn’t have been allowed to come stay here?”

CHAPTER 13

FITTING

Suddenly, I'm very interested in his answer.

I swear, if ever there was a king of mixed signals, it's Conall. One moment, he seems way too interested in my safety. Then there was how he spent the last week following me around the village whenever I left my house, and I haven't forgotten what happened with the conditioner.

But since I arrived, I got the feeling he was counting down to the moment he would be seeing the back of me.

I wait.

"You're here. That's all that matters. Now, this thing of yours... what exactly does it look like?"

Way to bring the subject right back to where it was before. Oh, no. You're not avoiding my question. You're just trying to get this excursion over with so you can go back to the village and, I don't know, pee outside of my house some more.

Then again, I need the fire opal. If only to get rid of the fire in my veins so that Elise can have something to drink without burning her tongue, I need it.

Okay.

“Orange,” is my answer. “It’s an orange crystal. Shiny, I think. Do you know where it is?”

“There are plenty of crystals down here. I’ve been exploring these caves since I was a pup, and I’ve seen all colors. We’ll find it, Red. Don’t worry.”

Is it that obvious?

To keep from saying something that would undeniably be an untruth, I look at Conall through the fire. Like everything else in the cave, he looks orange, too, but I peer at him, trying to imagine him as a pup. As a boy.

He was probably super cute.

The man standing in front of me now is definitely attractive. Even when he was unwittingly aggravating the crap out of me, I had to recognize that he was ruggedly handsome. Now that he’s stopped glaring at me?

He’s pretty freaking good-looking.

Damn it.

“How old are you?” I ask.

Let him be, like, two hundred. Give me something to shatter this sudden and inexplicable pull I’m feeling toward him.

“Thirty-three.”

Damn it!

“Shifters are long-lived like witches,” he continues, as though guessing why I asked—and only part way right, “but we’re not immortal like vampires. We should both reach hundred, hundred-fifty easily, but the corpse... sorry, Elise. She’ll live forever if she chooses to.”

Wow. That’s a pretty heady realization. All of it.

I don’t know what comes over me. Whether it’s knowing, one day, I’ll be dead and gone and Elise will still look like she’s in her twenties, or that I should have a similar lifespan as Conall, I can’t tell. But when I suddenly change the subject, you wouldn’t believe what pops out of my mouth.

Shit. I said it, and I can’t believe it.

“That’s one way that vamps and shifters seem to be different. What about when it comes to mating?”

I’m still holding up my firelight, illuminating Conall’s face. That’s the only reason why I can see his stunned expression as he chokes.

I should let it go. Too bad I can’t.

“You know,” I say, pushing the topic. “Vampires have their blood exchanges. What do you do when you have a mate?”

He clears his throat. “I’ve never had one.”

Never had... wait. He’s not a virgin, is he?

No. No way. A thirty-three-year-old man that looks like Conall? No way. He must mean that he’s never bonded a woman—wait, female, supes have this weird thing

going where they refer to each other as ‘male’ and ‘female’—to him before. It’s the equivalent of being married in the supernatural world. He just doesn’t have a shifter wife, but plenty of single males sow their oats before they settle down.

Chicks do, too. I’m proof of that, even if it’s been way too long since I’ve gotten laid... and here in Alaska, I don’t see that changing anytime soon.

And, yet, I don’t drop the subject. Instead, I ask Conall, “Shifters have mating rituals, too, don’t they?”

“You mean when we bond?” At my shrug, Conall explains, “Of course. Us wolves revere the Luna. Our moon goddess. She guides us to find our mates. Alphas are gifted the name of their mate when they lead a pack. I’m a lone wolf. I don’t have a pack.”

“So how will you find your mate?” I ask, way more curious than I should be.

And, no, that’s not suspicious at all...

“I’ll know it in here,” he says, gesturing at his nose. Snout? He’s human now so I’ll go with nose. Dropping his hand, he lays the flat of his palm against his chest. “And here.”

“Your pec?”

Conall gives me a look of disbelief. “My heart, Red. When I’m looking at my mate, I’ll know it in my heart. After that, I’ll just have to wait until my mate eventually recognizes that we’re fated to be together.”

“What happens then?”

His eyes glimmer in the firelight. “We will mate. When the Luna is high, I’ll mark my mate as mine as I claim her body. We’ll be bonded then, and it’s a bond that will never break.”

Holy shit. Where did the butterflies flapping away in my belly come from?

Jeez, Bridge. I already knew my taste in guys is questionable. Always has been. But don’t tell me that after convincing myself that Conall was a witch hunter on the low, all it takes is him actually offering to help me search for the fire opal for me to start liking him a little.

He’s a shifter. Worse, he’s a wolf shifter. His kind—like most supes—mates for life, and he only gets one. Of course he’s holding out for the one woman meant for him.

And there’s no point in even entertaining that strange pull toward him because no way is it me .

“In that case, good luck to you and the future Mrs. Grump.”

“Hunt,” he grumbles.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s my name. Hunt. Conall Hunt.”

I snort. “Fitting.”

I really wish I could say that we found the crystal. That there was, like, some blinking neon sign in one of the abandoned, musty caves that told us we found the right one.

Yeah, right.

It's one thing to look at a map and be like: I need to get there. In reality, certain caves are blocked, either by rocks or because there never really was a path from one to another in the first place. Conall might insist he knows how to read a map—and, I'll admit, he's doing a better job than if I had to do it myself—but when we make it to one of the starred caves, it doesn't look any different than the others that we squeezed our way through.

We were probably down here for about two hours before Conall mentioned we should probably be heading back to the entrance. Assuming it would take at least half that long to reach the entrance, I reluctantly agreed.

I felt like I failed. Conall only has my description of what I'm supposed to be looking for to go on so I can't blame him when we leave the caves empty-handed. I'm the witch. Celeste told me, as a fire witch, I'd be able to find it.

I didn't.

What I did find, though?

The tiniest bit of grudging respect for Conall.

Okay. So I misjudged him. I got one look at his scowl, let it color my first impression of him, and decided that he had a problem with me from then on. Never mind the fact that he's the only one in Dyea besides Elise and Mayor Lou who actually paid attention to me. I got the wrong idea, and after spending the afternoon with him, I'm willing to admit that I did.

He's not as bad as I thought. Easy on the eyes, definitely, and his shifter talents came in handy. He doesn't need the fire to see down in the caves because his vision is that impressive, and his nose is such a good sniffer, he could follow our tracks back to the entrance. Even if he didn't know the caves as well as he does, his wolf would make it

so that we didn't get stuck underground.

There are so many more caves to explore. Seeing how disappointed I was that we didn't find the fire opal, he promised to help me search until we do. The only concession I had to make was agreeing not to go down there when he can't. If he's too busy with the village, or Mayor Lou needs him for something, he asked—asked, not demanded, which is one of the only reasons I say okay—if I would wait for him.

I don't want to get trapped down in the caves. If it takes a little longer because my guide might be occupied, that's fine. When the alternative is me plunging through another hole because the rocks gave way and I didn't have his shifter's sense to tell the difference between solid floor and the freaking entrance to hell, I can be a witch a little longer.

We walked back to Dyea together, making tentative plans to head out again tomorrow.

Conall waves once the sanctuary welcomes us 'home', jogging off in the direction of his house at the end of the oval while I head toward the back of mine and Elise's.

There's more yellow snow out there, I notice. I snort, then let it go. If that's the only retaliation I got for pissing off Mr. Grump, I can deal with it, especially if he honestly believes he's protecting our house by spraying wolf piss all over the place.

Letting myself into the house, my plan is to head upstairs where the shower is. I'm dusty, covered in I don't know what, and I desperately need to get clean. However, when I call out for Elise and she doesn't answer, that makes me curious.

Where is she?

I search the downstairs. No Elise. She's not in the small kitchen, the living room with

the television, or the bedroom she keeps on the bottom floor. Frowning, I jog up the stairs. No Elise in the bathroom or my bedroom.

Weird.

Instead of heading to the bathroom, I go back downstairs and plop down on the couch, hoping I don't transfer too much of the cave muck onto the fabric.

I don't have long to wait. About ten minutes after I made it back, Elise slips in through the front door.

She has more color in her cheeks than she did this morning which is one small plus. Her hair is pulled out of her face, tied back in a low bun, showing off her sharp cheekbones; already so small, she's lost more weight than she could afford to since she hasn't been able to drink.

Her fingers are tapping nervously against her upper thigh. She's visibly distracted, not even noticing that I'm sitting in the room until I greet her.

She blinks, and while I could've sworn her eyes were red a second ago, they're back to their usual pale green color when she glances over at me.

"Bridge. Hi. I didn't expect you back so soon."

I figured.

"Hey. Yeah. I finished up earlier than I thought."

"Any good news?" she asks hopefully. "Did you find the fire opal?"

If I find the fire opal and it nullifies my fire magic, the witch hunters won't come

after me. I can leave Dyea. Elise can, too, and I can help her deal with Peter so that she can return to Clarity again.

She can go back to having easy access to blood again.

But until I have the fire opal, I can't leave. And Elise?

She won't .

I shake my head, feeling even worse than before. "Not yet, but maybe tomorrow." Then, changing the subject to her, I ask, "Where did you go? I was surprised when I came back and you were gone."

Surprised and more than a little worried—and Elise knows it.

"Just for a walk." A small smile. "I needed a little fresh air."

That's usually my excuse. Elise? Since our arrival, she's rarely left the cottage. Mainly because she's holding out hope that Thorn will get the replacement cooler of blood to her that seemingly disappeared, and until she does, she knows better than to trust herself around someone she can't drink.

The humans are taken. The other vampires won't allow it. I'm off the menu. And the shifters... yeah. That's not gonna happen, either.

But Elise... I know her. I've gotten to know her very well over the six months we've lived together, and though you could argue that I didn't—since I had no freaking clue she was a vampire—I'd picked up on all of her quirks. I just couldn't explain them since jumping to the supernatural wasn't something I ever did.

And Elise is lying .

I don't know where she went. I don't know why she left the cottage. Maybe she did need to go for a walk, but even if that's true, she's hiding something else from me.

I don't want to call her out. She's clearly struggling, and when I remember that she's doing this for me, I owe her a little grace. So, rather than demand she tell me what's really going on, I mention almost off-handedly, "Did you know that wolf shifters can smell it when someone lies?"

The little bit of color in her cheeks disappears. As if I needed proof that she's hiding something, I get it then and there.

Oh, Elise.

She doesn't spill, though. Moving further into the room, slipping off her heels, she asks, "How do you know that?"

"Conall told me."

Elise purses her lips, hiding her fangs for a moment. "Conall?"

"Mr. Grump himself."

"You were talking to Conall about wolf shifters and their sense of smell?"

Right. That sounds weird if she doesn't know the whole story. After all, when I last saw Elise, I was bitching to her that I saw Conall—because I guess I just subconsciously knew it was him—lurking outside of the back of the cottage. She doesn't even know about the yellow snow, or how he followed me out of the sanctuary.

Or that he offered to help me explore the caves.

So I tell her, and I thought she was going to apologize again for not coming with me, but the only thing she seemed to get out of my entire story is that Conall is a wolf shifter.

“There’s a wolf in Dyea? I mean, I thought ... but, no. There are only supposed to be prey shifters here. It’s why it seemed like the perfect sanctuary for me. I didn’t have to worry about other predators being a danger to the two of us.”

She still doesn’t. “Conall’s definitely a wolf, but I don’t think he’s a danger .”

Oh, no. He calls me dangerous.

Elise sinks down gracefully onto the couch cushion next to mine. “Maybe not to you. Probably not to me, either. But if he’s a wolf and I didn’t realize it... I should’ve.”

“Why? Why does it matter?”

“Because vampires and wolf shifters are ancient enemies,” Elise tells me. “Our kinds have been at war for so long, we don’t even distinguish between the different skirmishes. It’s just known as the Claws and Fangs war. He must hate vampires.”

Well, he doesn’t seem like the world’s biggest fan, but I get the strange feeling it’s not vampires that bother him, but maybe one in particular...

No. No . I’m wrong.

And so is Elise.

“He doesn’t have a problem with you. It’s just me he can’t stand.”

Elise raises her eyebrows so high, they nearly disappear into the hairline of her ruby-

red waves. “You sure, sweetie?”

Yes?

No.

I don’t know...

“Did you just tell me that he’s been helping you in the caves? That he knows you’re a witch, but he promised not to tell anyone else? I don’t know, Bridge... I’m beginning to think he might be more fond of you than we both thought.”

We nothing. I never thought Conall thought of me as anything other than the human who walked into the sanctuary and immediately defied him.

I’m pretty sure a couple of hours in the caves haven’t changed everything.

And to prove it to Elise, I bump my shoulder against hers and confess, “I burned his tail.”

I’ll say one thing. The way my sheepish admission has her laughing for the first time in days makes up for all of the disappointment that came with knowing I’ll have to go back down to the caves.

With Conall Hunt.

And as I join in with Elise’s tinkling laughter, I can’t help but look forward to it.

CHAPTER 14

DEAD BUNNY

I t's been two weeks already. Maybe even a couple of days more than that. I don't know. I'm not really keeping count, and I left my calendar back in Clarity.

In some ways, they've been pretty eventful. In others—like how our trips to the cave still have us coming up empty-handed—they haven't.

I'm getting used to living in the sanctuary. It's not that bad, really. We even had a movie night, organized by Mayor Lou and Beatrice, the sweet mink that runs the canteen, the other day.

In Dyea, there are very few children. In fact, I think there are only about three, all of them shifters, belonging to two of the mated couples. We let Kimmy, a three-year-old hedgehog, pick the movie.

To my absolute delight—and Elise's fixation on watching anything that has to do with vampires—Kimmy picked *Twilight* . Just knowing that audience-watching would be more entertaining than watching the film itself, I invited Conall to join us.

The movie was shown on a large screen via a projector that Gertie smuggled in with her when she came to Dyea ten years ago. She also brought her DVD player and movie collection, and I found it hysterical that the ornery porcupine loved all things romance.

I didn't think Conall would come. I arrived with Elise, and I saved the chair on the other side of me just in case. Right as Bella was going to Forks, I heard a slight disturbance in the canteen as Conall entered, dropping himself down into the seat next to me.

The audience was whispering when he showed up, but Gertie threatening to throw quills around if they didn't knock it off got them to cool it pretty quickly.

I'd made a joking bet with him when I invited him that there wouldn't be a single vampire left in the room by the time it was done—except for Elise, who I know for a fact loves to hate-watch the sparkling vampires in *Twilight* ... only now I know why—and it amused me even more when Conall begrudgingly passed me a twenty after the credits started to roll without saying a single word to me or anyone other than Mayor Lou.

After that, the villagers started to pay a little more attention to me. Instead of being just Elise's pet human, I'm the newcomer who managed to pull Conall Hunt off of his perennial patrol. Even if for only two hours or so, he stopped being the gruff head of security, and that caught people's attention all because he sat next to me.

Well, why not? I've lost track of how long we've spent exploring the caves together. At first, Conall seemed to prefer quiet while we're down there. His wolf uses all of its senses to navigate the darkness with only the flame hovering over my palm to guide our way. He needs his nose to make sure it's safe, and his ears to hear the nearly inaudible sounds of rocks shifting before I start falling again.

With Conall as my guide, there hasn't been another close call as bad as that. But, hell, I'm not a quiet chick. I like to talk, and I like to have someone to talk to. Elise isn't down here, but Mr. Grump is, and no matter how I try to follow his lead, I inevitably strike up a conversation.

To my surprise, as long as he isn't clearing a cave, he's willing to chat.

Elise is still my go-to when it comes to asking about supes. Like how I've pestered her with questions about mate bonds—including a vampire's blood exchange—as well as how a shifter might recognize his fated mate. Conall, though, is a treasure trove of expertise involving the different kinds of shifters out there.

There are predators, like Conall's wolf, large cats, and bears. Then there are weaker, less dominant prey shifter; basically all the other residents in Dyea. Lizard shifters. Water shifters, including dolphins and sharks. Basically, if it's an animal, someone out there can shift into it.

But mating? For some reason, whenever I try to get more details about fated mates, he's quick to change the subject. I don't push it. He couldn't make it any clearer that, as a wolf, he'll wait as long as it takes for his Luna-given mate, the one female born to tame his lone wolf.

He's not cruel about it. And if his super sniffer has picked up signs that I'm becoming a little more attracted to him after all the time we spent together, he doesn't rub it in my face that I'm not his type. He just kind of awkwardly asks me a question about myself, and though I can't see why he would actually give a shit about my favorite flower, when my birthday is, what my dream vacation would be like, and my favorite meal, I go along with it anyway.

He even asks me whether or not I like to cook. I admit that I do, and I often cooked at home when Elise wasn't bringing some take-out home for me, but that it's a lot easier to just eat at the canteen since it's not like we have an actual grocery store in Dyea.

Why would we? All of the fresh food is either imported into the sanctuary for the commissary or—more likely—foraged from the wild. I stopped asking what the meat of the day is after Beatrice brightly told me it was moose once, and if there are a lot

of berries served at breakfast, at least it's affordable and sustainable.

Conall was thoughtfully quiet after my answer, and I didn't think anything of it.

Until now.

Elise's supernatural senses are as impressive as Conall's, even if they're different. Once I knew the truth about her being a vampire, I learned that she can smell a drop of blood from across the room. Whenever I was on my period, she could tell, and it's the reason she would pick up extra chocolate to leave out in the kitchen for me. I just thought we were on the same cycle. Not quite. As a born vampire, she only gets her period once a year, and it's the only fertile period she'll have with her eventual beloved. Other than that, no bleeding, no cramps, and no pregnancy scares ever.

Lucky.

She also can sense things I can't. Now that she doesn't have to mask what she is around me anymore, we could just be sitting on the couch only for her head to snap toward the door as though she knows instinctively seconds before we have a guest.

Sometimes it's Mayor Lou checking on us. Other times it's one of the other vampires in Dyea using their human donors to pass along a message to Elise.

Tonight?

It's Conall.

It's my turn to pick a new show. I'm leaning toward streaming Supernatural just so I can get a crash course in a different version of supe lore, but there's also this funny cartoon about a family living in Alaska that might be fun. However, before I can decide, Elise does that weird head-snapping thing, her eyes flashing from pale green

to blood-red for a moment as she hones in on the front door.

I've begun to recognize that as a sign that someone's out there. I'm already out of my seat, walking toward the door so that I can answer it as soon as they knock.

Only they don't, and isn't that weird? I don't doubt Elise's instincts at all. Someone is out there, but maybe they got distracted. I don't know. I just shrug and pull the door inward.

"Conall? What are you doing?"

He's crouched down, but at my questioning tone, he hurriedly rises. "Oh. Hey, Red. I was just leaving this for you. Didn't want to disturb you, though."

"You didn't. What do you have? I'll take it."

No, I won't.

I was looking at the flush rising high on his cheeks when I said that. It caught my attention because I've never seen Conall look so frazzled before. Besides, he's a wolf shifter. With his built-in fur coat, the cold doesn't touch him. His cheeks are red because he's cold.

Is he embarrassed?

Or nervous ?

I don't know, but he lifts his hand, offering me something, and as soon as I see what he's holding in his grip, I gag.

He frowns. "Red? You okay?"

No.

It's a bunny. A big bunny. Kind of like the ones you get from the pet store around easter but way larger, it's not just a bunny.

It's a dead bunny.

Conall has his own monster-sized hand wrapped around the bunny's neck. I don't see any blood on it, though the way it dangles makes it undeniable that he... what? Hunted it?

He's a wolf, Bridge. That's what they do.

But why is he bringing it to me ?

My stomach tries to escape through my open mouth. Clamping my mouth shut, struggling to keep the bile down, I glance at the dead bunny hanging from his grip again and now I've gotta be turning green.

Now, I'm not a vegetarian. I eat meat, but as hypocritical as it may sound, I'd rather not look at freshly killed.

Is that why he brought me the dead bunny? Am I supposed to eat it?

My hand flies up. Conall makes to give it to me. Nope. I need my hand to cover my mouth before I hurl all over his boots.

Elise reaches around me. "I'll take that."

I goggle over at my best friend. Then, speaking through my fingers, I ask, "You eat bunny? I thought the only meat you'll eat is chicken and shrimp."

“I know, but someone has to get rid of it and you’re gagging. Conall, if you would.”

She extends her hand.

Conall frown deepens, but he passes the bunny over to Elise.

“Thanks. I’ll take care of it.”

I don’t even want to know what she means by that. Unlike me, Elise does not cook. Makes sense now that I know she’s a vampire, but if she’s not going to cook it, then?—

Nope. Still feeling queasy here.

Elise vanishes into the kitchen. Me? I stand on the porch, not sure what I’m supposed to say as Conall just stands there with me.

He clears his throat. “It’s not a bunny. It’s a snowshoe hare.”

Whatever he wants to call it. That dead thing had white fluffy fur, long ears, and big back feet. It looked like a bunny to me, and I have no idea why Conall thinks that I would ever have skinned and cooked and?—

My stomach twists again.

Conall starts to reach for me, but thinks better of it before the same hand that was holding the bunny lands on my shoulder. Instead, he moves it behind him, scratching his thick neck.

“I thought you liked ‘em,” he says after a moment. “That’s the third one I’ve left this week and they keep disappearing. If you’d like, I could hunt you up some caribou,

but that might be too much meat for you, Red. I figured your friend wouldn't want any."

I'm not so sure about that.

Three bunnies? What the hell is Elise doing with these bunnies?

On second thought, I don't want to know. Though I wouldn't mind understanding just why Conall's bringing me dead animals...

"I don't want to hurt your feelings, Conall... and, uh, I appreciate the gesture... but I like meat when it's prepackaged at the grocery store. Not when it was hopping around the woods right before you gave it to me."

His expression falls. If I wasn't looking at him, I don't think I would've noticed it before he resumes another of his flat expressions, but I did and, whoa, what was that about? I said I didn't want to hurt his feelings!

I didn't want to, but I think I did .

"Conall—"

"So you weren't accepting my food?"

Look at that. I get the return of Mr. Grump

"Is that what this is about? You're trying to feed me?"

Instead of answering me, he tightens his jaw.

Oh, good lord. He's serious. For whatever reason, he's decided to take it upon

himself to provide me with food.

Why? No idea. I'm not Elise. I'm not the one who is struggling to keep up with what my body demands of me. There's more than enough to go around at the canteen, but he's clearly been hunting down some of the wild animals who live in the woods to feed me—and, I swear, he almost looked crushed when he realized that I haven't been eating the bunnies.

Hell, I didn't even know about the bunnies.

But now I feel bad. And while it just might be the most impulsive thing I've done in a minute, I look up at Conall and say, "Come on. We're leaving."

"Where? The caves?"

I shake my head. "It's my turn. I'm going to feed you."

His eyes flash. "What? You are?"

"Don't get your hopes up too high. I'm still not eating that bunny, but I will buy you dinner at the canteen. You coming?"

His jaw relaxes. "If you don't mind the company."

I use the back of my hand to slap his bicep lightly. "If I did, I wouldn't have offered. Now let me just see if Elise wants to go, and we'll head on over."

No surprise that Elise stays behind at the cottage.

There still hasn't been any sign of her missing blood delivery. That makes two in nearly three weeks, and though I offered to give her drinking my burning blood

another try, she swears that she's doing okay.

I don't want to say she's lying to me. I'm sure that Elise believes that she is. After all, this isn't the first time she's had to go this long without blood. Before she started trading dinner dates for blood, it wasn't as easy to find a willing donor who didn't want more than she could offer.

I mean, look at Peter. His obsessive nature was proof of that .

The bunny—sorry, snowshoe hare—was gone by the time I popped my head into the kitchen. I don't know what she did with it, and if Elise had a little more color in her cheeks when I asked her to join us, I pretend not to notice.

So it's just Conall and me.

This was my idea. I told him I would buy him dinner, but based on everything I've learned about him these last few weeks, I should've known he'd stubbornly insist.

He did, but I won that battle. That's why, when I realized I forgot to grab a drink and Conall instantly rises to grab it for me, I don't argue.

Then again, how could I when he was halfway across the canteen before I had the chance?

I'm not alone for long. The second he left the table, I'm joined by two other supes: Jenny and Ann.

Jenny is an opossum shifter. At least once a week, something spooks her enough that she can be found in the most strangest of places, looking so realistically 'dead', it freaked me out when I saw it happen the first time. Now, like the rest of Dyea, I just hope I'm not the one who finds her and has to stand watch over her until she comes to

again.

I don't know what Ann turns into. In the sanctuary, if it isn't obvious, there's usually another reason why they live here. I think Conall might be the only exception. He lives in Dyea because he's an Alaskan wolf shifter, and his pack always claimed this territory. Eventually, they moved on, he left, and he joined Dyea when he realized that the sanctuary probably wouldn't make it their first winter without him.

I wouldn't be surprised if Ann came up here because she's hiding out from trouble, just like me and Elise. She gives me total mean girl vibes, and as she leads Jenny over to stand at my table, the smirk on her face has my fingers sparking beneath it.

"Looks like the rumors are true," she says, hiding her obvious dislike for me behind a giggle. "You've got Conall Hunt wrapped around one of your human fingers."

If she saw those sparks, she would know I'm not a human. Not anymore.

If this is how I have to deal with the other villagers now, I'd rather go back to them pretending I was just Elise's shadow. But since she's not here, and I don't want to let these two ruin my dinner, I shrug. "He's helping me with something. He's a good guy."

"He's a predator," Ann retorts.

And?

Her lilac-colored eyes flickers over to where Conall grabbed me a bottle of orange soda. I didn't tell him I wanted that one, but either he noticed it was my preferred drink out of the options available, or he remembered when I mentioned I liked it during one his questioning sessions.

“Be careful,” she tells me, never taking her gaze off of Conall. “He’s not the kind of wolf to toy around with. Let him feed you and, next thing you know, he’ll have you underneath him.”

“Ann!” Jenny says, keeping her voice low even as her pitch is high.

“What?” is Ann’s ‘innocent’ retort. “You know it’s true. You’re a shifter like the best of us. Humans might not get it, but when a shifter starts providing for a female... feeding her, being her servant... he does it because he wants one thing out of her.”

Oh, I really don’t like Ann. “If you think that about Conall, you don’t know him at all.”

She lifts one eyebrow. “And you do?”

Another shrug. “I know him well enough to know he’s waiting for his mate.”

It’s Jenny’s turn to giggle. “You sure it ain’t you, Bridget?”

Yeah. I’m sure.

He starts heading back over, wagging the soda can as if showing it to me. When he sees that he has my attention, Mr. Grump smiles.

He fucking smiles .

My heart skips a beat, and now the two shifters are giggling together as they make their quick escape. I can only imagine what they think is going on, but I’m not Conall’s mate. So he brings me bunnies. So he fetched me an orange soda. They might not think a predator can be a decent guy, but maybe I do know him better.

And now that I do... I kinda wish I was his mate.

CHAPTER 15

MATE

Can a wolf shifter get PMS?

That's what I'm thinking as I storm into the cottage just now. Because if they can? Conall is totally PMS-ing.

Hey. He has a cycle, right? Wolf shifters do everything by the moon. Who knows? It would definitely would explain why he's gone back to being Mr. Grump on freaking steroids on the heels of me thinking that maybe, just maybe, we might be friends even if I can't be his mate.

This return to the snappish, glaring wolf I first met a couple of weeks started a couple of days ago. And I wish I could blame Conall completely for his shitty attitude, but that's not fair. It's just mostly his fault.

Since the stars on the map proved utterly useless, we've given up following the guide that the bus driver passed off to me. We use Conall's nose and his wolf's sense of direction to search as many as we can for some sign of the fire opal without any luck so far.

That's where I accept some of the blame for pissing him off. I didn't mean to, but I did, and I can't change it now. It's just... I'm so frustrated that I don't know what the hell I'm doing, or that I might've walked right by it without knowing I did. I keep thinking that I'll stumble upon some shiny orange rocks, but now that it's been two

weeks of looking, I have to accept it's not gonna be that easy.

And that's assuming Celeste Montvale was right in the first place and there even is fire opal in the underground caves...

So, yeah. I'm frustrated. I try not to take it out on my wolfy guide because I do honestly appreciate everything he's done for me. The other shifters might've thought they were funny, implying that Conall might actually be treating me as a prospective mate all because we ate dinner together, but I don't get that vibe at all. He's just doing his duty as the protector for his own cobbled-together pack of supernatural misfits.

But when I innocently ask if there's a chance he might be accidentally leading me toward caves where he knew we wouldn't find anything... not accusing him, but only asking out of frustration... I see the return of good ol' Mr. Grump.

It doesn't help that the sporadic snowfalls led to a fierce blizzard earlier this week. Dyea got sixteen inches over two days, and if I ever wanted to blow my cover and use my fire magic in front of the other supes in the village, it was then. Due to the weather, Conall put his big wolf paw down, refusing to even entertain the idea of heading toward the caves. I hated how much he wasn't even a little wrong, and holed up in the cottage with Elise, barely paying attention to the latest show we started.

Like Buffy, True Blood is about vampires, and it's another one of Elise's choice. She seems to prefer it. Me? When I pick Alcide as my favorite character all because he's a werewolf, I know I'm in trouble.

I didn't see Conall for those two days, though when the snow finally stopped, there were quite a few boot tracks going from our cottage down toward his, plus a frozen snow hare he must've hunted that I passed over to Elise without a word.

He tried to feed me again, even without us being able to hit the canteen. What the hell did that mean?

I don't know, and maybe if I didn't offend him earlier today—the first time we've been back at the caves since the snowstorm—I could've asked.

Instead, Conall cut our exploration short. I was annoyed, but when my hand started sparking every time he rumbled something else at me, it was probably a good idea that we headed back to Dyea.

Surprise, surprise: Elise is gone. Based on how I caught her staring out the back door during the snowstorm, staring wistfully out into the woods, I'm starting to think that I'm not the only one who is pushing the borders of the sanctuary town. Only when I left, Conall chased after me; as always, he's the protector. But Elise? I'm pretty sure she's sneaking out when I'm in the caves with Conall because he's not here to stop her.

Where is she going? I still don't know, but if Elise needs something to do while I'm busy underground, who am I to poke my nose into her business? If she wants me to know, she'll tell me. I have to remember that Elise is seventy-freaking-two. She might have a babyface. She's still more than twice my age, and I have to trust her to take care of herself.

And who the hell am I kidding? Maybe Conall and I have more in common than I thought because I have a bit of a protector streak, too. Which is why, once I notice that Elise is missing from the cottage again, I decide to take a walk around Dyea in case I run into her.

I don't know why. All of my instincts tell me she's out in the woods somewhere, but if I go searching for her there, I can't shake the feeling that I'll turn around and a big grey-and-white wolf will be right behind me.

Is that crazy? I feel like it's crazy.

Conall Hunt makes me crazy.

I don't know where he took off to after we walked in silence back to the settlement. Mumbling that he needed to run, I went in search of Elise—and I'm still looking for her.

And, okay, maybe I wouldn't be opposed to bumping into Conall and...

And what? Apologize? Make him apologize?

Kiss him?

Wait— kiss him? Where the hell did that idea come from?

I shake my head. Shoving my hands in the back of my jeans pocket, I bite down and walk toward the commissary.

I don't make it. Halfway to the store, I get flagged down by one of the shifters I've met at the canteen. James. I know two things about him: he turns into a rat, and he works as the dishwasher at the canteen.

I've talked to him a couple of times, usually when I was eating alone. Since I've been sitting with Conall for my meals, the notably skittish James stays on the other side of the canteen.

He's tall and willowy. I'd even say he might have an inch or two on Conall, though James's seems so much smaller when I compare him to Conall's broad shoulders and toned body. Like Conall, James has a lighter shade of brown hair, though his eyes are kinda beady and black instead of Conall's pretty gold... and, there you go again,

Bridge, comparing everyone you see with Conall.

I have got to stop doing that.

Is that why I don't pretend that I didn't see James's wave? It's possible, just like it's possible I might've glanced around real quick, checking to see if I can pick out a scowling wolf shifter watching me from a distance... but when I don't notice Conall anywhere in sight, I sigh, then work up a smile to offer to James.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Nothing really," he says, and if I imagine it sounds like a squeak, I'm not being fair. "I just saw you walking by, though I'd say 'hi'."

Okay, then. "Well, hi."

"Hi."

Shoot me.

He grins down at me. It's a lot more genuine than that one I gave him, and that makes me feel worse.

I rock back on my boots. "So, um, I guess I'll see you around."

"Yeah, yeah. Of course. It's just... I was thinking..."

I wait.

He lifts his hand, ruffling the back of his hair. "Y'know, I was just thinking, if you'd like to maybe eat with me tonight, that would be nice. Everyone knows your vampire

doesn't go down to the canteen. I'll feed you, Bridget. So, y'know, you can feed her."

I guess that's a nice gesture. Weird, but nice. "Maybe," I say. It's the best I can do. I might be annoyed with Conall right now, but it would be a fucked up thing to do, ditching him at mealtimes just because we butt heads earlier today.

"Maybe. Yeah, yeah. Maybe's good." James lowers his hand, but instead of letting it hang at his side, he hesitates for a moment before letting it settle on my shoulder.

It's another nice gesture. Also weird, but he's being friendly.

So why do I want to burn his hand so that he stops touching me?

"Get away from my mate!" snarls a very familiar, very angry voice.

Conall .

I don't know where he came from, but there he is. He's changed. Though he always wears flannel, this one has green and blue in the design while the one he had on earlier was blue and orange... and, holy shit, I am paying way too much attention to the wolf.

The new flannel tells me that he must've stripped down to shift, gone for his run as his wolf, and changed when he came back to... to...

Confront one of his fellow shifters with such a ferocious expression, I'm not surprised when the rat shifter hurriedly snatches his hand away from me.

Even if I'm not sure why. I mean, it's not like I'm Conall's mate...

Even so, James's beady eyes go impossibly wide. A pair of whiskers sprout out of his

face, and I don't mean whiskers like a mustache or a beard. They're legitimate whiskers like you'd find on a cat or a mouse.

Or, you know, a rat.

Duh.

He holds up his hands, warding Conall off. "I didn't know. She's not marked, and I thought..."

"You thought you might proposition Bridget to choose you. But you can't. Because she's mine."

Hang on. Is that what James was doing? I thought he was just being friendly, that he saw Conall treating me like a valuable member of the community and decided not to ignore another one of the 'humans' anymore.

Of course not. Why would he when he was trying to get laid instead?

Men. Whether they're human guys or shifter males, they're all the same. And maybe that's partly my fault since I've spent so much time searching for the fire opal instead of integrating into the supernatural sanctuary, I still don't know all of the nuances of shifter and vampire cultures. Just like how I thought Conall helping me and trying to feed me was his way of making up for his earlier dickish attitude. Then Paola explained what it really meant—and Elise confirmed it for me—but it's not like Conall's made a move or anything like that on me since then.

Until now.

I've never seen him look so furious. If he was in his wolf form, I'd think he'd need a muzzle. From the way he's baring his teeth at the smaller shifter to how his body's

gone tight as though he's only just managing to hold himself back from attacking James, Conall is pissed—and he's pissed at the other male.

Because of me?

Is this reaction because of me ?

Considering James slants his eyes toward me before bolstering his nerve, it just might be.

“But,” and poor James's voice is closer to a high-pitched chitter even as he is brave enough not to back down before Conall's more dominant wolf, “she doesn't have your bite on her.”

“Doesn't matter,” is his flat response.

“It does,” insists the rat shifter. “Until she's been marked and mated, she can choose any male to bond with.”

“No she can't,” and that time, Conall snarls again. “She can't because she's not just my prospective mate, Jim. She's my fated mate.”

What ?

CHAPTER 16

RED

L ike roaches after the light's been turned back on, those two loaded words— fated mate —have the power to make our audience scatter.

I didn't realize how many villagers slipped out of their cottages to catch the entertainment until Conall's snarl sent the prey shifters scurrying back inside. With my quick glimpse, I don't think I saw any vampires or their donors, though that makes sense. In Dyea, the vampires keep themselves separate from both each other and the rest of us. It's the prey shifters who make up their own pack, and though Conall seems to think he's a lone wolf, he's definitely the Alpha for the rest of the sanctuary.

Take James. He fought a good fight. He must've really been desperate to have any kind of his mate in order to go up against Conall as long as he did. Makes sense. It's gotta be lonely in Dyea where there are so few options. As far as I know, there are only a couple of mates pairs in the village, and they sought sanctuary together. I don't think anyone has found their mate with one of the others who were already here.

Has that changed?

Fated mate.

Fated. Mate.

I know what that means. I remember the conversation we had during our first trip through the caves pretty freaking vividly. Conall explained that wolf shifters in particular get one mate. They can choose to wait for their fated partner as long as it takes, or they can choose another partner and bond that partner to them for life.

He made it clear he wouldn't settle for any less than his fated mate. The more and more I started to fall for him, the more I had to remind myself that it was useless. Wanting a guy like Conall was like falling for a celebrity. You could fantasize over him, but then reality sets in and you know it's never, ever gonna happen.

How could it? He told me he would know his fated mate the moment they met. His nose would recognize her scent, and his heart would just know that she was meant for him.

It can't be me. It can't . Because if it was? Why the fuck has he kept it a secret from me these last couple of weeks?

I remember how I blew it off when Paola made her comments at the canteen. How I thought it was weird that Conall pissed outside of my house, or suggested I take the one closer to his if I needed some space from Elise... Jesus, Elise . How often has he shown that he was jealous of her, only to start changing his long-held grudges against vampires because my best friend is one?

He tried to feed me. He stalked me all over the village, as though eager to keep me safe. Me. Not the rest of the sanctuary, but me .

Because he meant it when he said that he would know it when he found his fated mate.

And then?—

I'll just have to wait until my mate eventually recognizes that we're fated to be together.

Oh my God. Is that what he's been doing? Waiting for me to figure it the hell out?

Well, guess what, Conall? I think I just did.

Luckily for my wolf, I'm a very decisive witch. When I want something, I go for it. To me, Conall was off-limits because he sent out the signal that I couldn't be his mate.

Now that he's publicly claimed me? Either he's lying his tail off to James in some misguided way of cockblocking me, or he's been keeping something pretty freaking huge from me. Whatever it is, we need to talk.

Reaching out, I snag his hand. For a shifter with immaculate reflexes, he seems stunned when I do, and too slow to stop me. He must've let me do it, just like he doesn't resist at all as I tug on his hand, pulling him away from the center of the village.

The cottage I share with Elise is closer than Conall's. I don't go inside in case Elise returned while I was distracted. Instead, I keep on pulling Conall's hand until we're standing in the gap between the back of the cottage and the woods behind us.

There's a large rock back there. I keep marching until we reach it, then finally release his hand.

His fingers flex as though he wants to reach for mine again. He doesn't, though, and that just confuses me even more.

That confusion turns my tone sharp as I point at Conall's chest and say, "Explain."

“Bridget—”

Oh, boy. Whenever he uses my name instead of calling me ‘Red’, I know he’s serious.

I cut him off just in case he’s about to say something I don’t want to hear. “Okay. Maybe I need to clarify what I mean. I was talking to James. You lost your shit. In front of everyone, you told me that I’m your fated mate. Is that true?”

He sucks in a breath.

“Conall. Before you say anything, remember that I can’t tell when you’re lying,” I remind him.

His eyes flash. “I would never lie to you.”

I’m glad to hear it.

In that case, I wait.

There’s that muscle ticking in his jaw again. Sometimes on our way back out of the caves, I make it my mission to see how often I can make him do that. Without even trying, I just did.

“Yes,” he says at last. “It’s true. But this isn’t how I wanted you to find out.”

Obviously.

“Why?” I ask. “Why didn’t you just tell me yourself already?”

“Because you don’t want to be here, Red. In Alaska. In Dyea. With me.”

I should be glad he slipped back into using his nickname for me. But when I think about what else he said... “What? Why do you think that?”

Conall blows a rush of air out through his nose. “From the moment I first saw you, I knew. But I also believed you were human, and that I would scare you out of Dyea if you knew you were fated to be mine. I tried my best to court you the only way I knew how.”

“The conditioner,” I murmur.

He nods. “And meat. I’m a provider. My wolf was insisting that I needed to feed you. To protect you. And when you snuck out of the village the first time, I had to follow you.

“Of course, that’s when I learned that you’re not a human. Not really. You’re a witch, and you gave me the perfect chance to get close to you. You needed a guide in the caves. I was desperate to keep you safe. I would’ve followed you anywhere, Red, and I still will. But you... you want the crystal to find a way back to your old life.” His cheeks hollow, showing off the stubble on his jaw. “And I wasn’t a part of your old life.”

No. He wasn’t. But he’s part of it now, and no matter what happens... if I find the fire opal... if I give up my magic... if the witch hunters find me... I feel better knowing that Conall is in my life.

However, before I can tell him that, he tells me, “I understand that. You don’t trust me. Like you said, you don’t really know me. But I’m a wolf shifter. My instincts are to protect my mate and give her everything she wants, no matter if it means she’ll leave me instead of bonding to me.”

Conall glances away. “I’ve been exploring the caves at night. After everyone is

asleep and I've reinforced my territorial markings, I've searched different caverns. You think I'm not doing what I can to find that crystal. If it made you smile, Red, I'd dig until my claws were fucking bloody to mine it for you."

My heart feels like it's being squeezed. "Conall?—"

He's not done.

"I love you. With the beginning of the mate bond forming as soon as I knew you were mine, it was easy. You're stubborn. Reckless. You talk a lot, but your voice makes me happy, even when you call me 'Mr. Grump'. Your scent lights my soul on fire. Your loyalty to your friend is impressive, and I only wish I could earn it for myself. I thought I could, but then James thought he could claim you, and I couldn't... Red, I just couldn't. You're mine. Even if you never agree, I need you to know it."

Oh. I think I do.

He opens his mouth again. I'm not sure what else there is to say, but there's only one way to stop him now that my grumpy wolf is on a roll. Going up on my tiptoes, I cup his jaw with my hands so that I can keep him still. Then, before he can jerk out of my light grip, I press my lips to his.

I'm not an idiot. Like how I tugged his hand only because he let me, if Conall didn't want my kiss, he could easily break free of me. When he doesn't, I take that as permission to deepen the kiss.

His hands settle on the small of my back, tugging me close. Our chests bump together as I cling to his cheeks, kissing him until I'm breathless.

He wants more. I can sense the heat between us, and if I was secretly worried that now that my fire magic is active, I'd burn him with my kiss, I'm not anymore. After I

break the first kiss, he dives back in for the second, and it's my turn to enjoy the sensation of Conall plundering my mouth with his tongue.

When he pulls away, I search his face.

One second, his expression is full of heat and hope. The next? He goes completely guarded.

His eyebrows draw together. "What was that for?"

"For loving me," I say simply. "For caring about me. No one... no one's ever really cared that much about me to go to so much trouble to make me happy. I mean, Aunt Maureen, yeah. And Elise, too. But they're family. None of my exes would ever do anything like that."

When Conall's canine fangs elongate right in front of my eyes, a growl rumbling deep in the chest I was just pressed up against, I know I fucked up.

I've never seen him act as possessive as he did when he claimed me in front of James, but that's nothing compared to the way that he looks at me right now.

I gulp. "Conall?"

"Fated mates are made for each other. The bond forms, and then we have forever to learn each other. I want to know everything about you. About your aunt, and the pottery class where she met her mate. About what it was like in that Fang City with Elise. Your puphood in New York. I want to know it all... but if you care about me at all, you will never mention any of your previous mates in front of me again."

He sounds so desperate for me to agree that I have no choice. "Okay. But only if you don't tell me about any of your other girlfriends."

“That’ll be easy. I told you, Red. I’ve never had one.”

Oh. So he is a virgin...

“So, uh, this mate thing...”

“We don’t have to do anything about it now,” he grates. “We can just forget it.”

Oof.

Really? After everything he just said, he wants me to forget it?

“Can you?” I ask.

His laugh is surprisingly hollow. “Of course not. You’re all I think about. If I’m not in the caves, I’m curled up on the rock outside your house, watching over you. Fuck, I’d scratch at the door like a puppy if I thought you’d answer for me.”

My mouth falls open. It’s one thing to hear that I’m supposed to be his fated mate. To hear him call out the things about me that frustrate him, and those he likes... those he loves. But for Conall freaking Hunt to be this vulnerable?

“I... never guessed,” I admit softly.

He sighs. “I know, and it’s because I know that I’m fooling myself. I can’t have you. As much as I’ll do anything to have you, it’s your choice... and you won’t choose me. Not yet, at least. And that’s okay.”

“Is it?”

It was a simple question, but Conall reacts as if I kicked him in the nuts. He lets out a

frustrated howl, storming away from me, eating up the ground as he stalks toward the woods, his hands fisted at his side before he whirls around again.

“You drive me crazy, Red. Do you know that?”

I’m glad it’s not just me.

I shrug. “I have that effect on a lot of people.”

Relaxing his hands, he runs his fingers through his hair. “Your scent... your voice. All of it. It drives me absolutely insane .” His eyes turn molten. “I’m trying to be good. I’m trying to not to let me alpha wolf dominate you. But it’s so Alpha damn hard when all I want to do is touch you. Taste you. A kiss will never be enough. I want it all. I want everything. ”

He’s fast. Like, fucking fast . His shifter speed has him near the woods, then suddenly in front of me before I can blink.

I don’t think I realized how big Conall is until right this very moment when he has me boxed in. I stumble backward, the back of my legs hitting the big rock behind me. I fall, landing on my ass.

He stalks closer until he can throw out his hands, bracing one on each side of my hips.

He bows his head over mine, our foreheads touching. “I want to be the only one.”

Can I promise him that?

Is that what he wants from me?

Fated mates mate for life. Wolves mate for life.

Can I give him forever?

I'm into him. There. I've admitted it. I like Conall, and if I'm finally being honest with myself, I've been dying to kiss him since the day his grumpy ass followed me out of the commissary, carrying the bottle of conditioner he bought specifically for me because I didn't see it on the shelves, and his shifter ears overheard me griping to myself about it.

Now that's I've had a taste myself, I'm a sure fucking thing. If Conall was a guy I met in Queens or in Clarity, and there wasn't the whole idea of promising him forever after a booty call, I'd be dragging him up to my bedroom right now and deflowering my growling virgin.

Shit. I'm digging the idea of being the only one for him way more than I should, but there's one problem: Conall can tell when I'm lying. If I'm anything less than one hundred percent certain that I can give him what he's asking for, I can't say 'yes'.

He doesn't expect me to.

"You don't have to say anything now. It's why I kept it to myself. I'm a wolf shifter, Red. I've always known that my goddess would guide me to the one female meant for me. But you're not a shifter. Luna, you spent most of your life as a human. You don't understand the power of a mate bond. That ain't a knock against you, either. There are plenty of human mates. But if I wanted to keep you... I needed you to choose me. Not because a goddess told you, too, but because you saw me as a worthy male."

Conall is nothing if not worthy. So he's got a bit of a temper. So do I, and it's probably worse than his. So he snarls and he growls and he's overprotective. It's better than being treated as if I was disposable.

That's happened to me more times than I want to admit.

I stay quiet, thinking. Taking my silence as an answer only he understands, Conall pulls back again.

“Nothing has to change. We'll find the fire opal, if that's what you want.”

That's the problem.

Suddenly, I don't know what I want.

CHAPTER 17

REJECTION

Open communication between potential romantic partners is a beautiful thing. I don't have that much experience with it, granted, but things seemed to change for the better after Conall admitted what it seems like the whole stinking village knew: I'm his fated mate.

Even Elise admitted with a sheepish shrug that she figured as much. It was because of the way he couldn't keep himself from following me around like a lovesick puppy dog, and how he had been leaving animal carcasses on our porch almost immediately after we came to stay.

She knew he was doing it. Just like I've figured out she's getting as much blood out of the dead animals as she can to keep from getting too thirsty. I'm not sure why she's keeping that a secret—and I'm guessing that she's going hunting in the woods whenever I can't find her in the village—but I do understand why she couldn't tell me about her suspicions about Conall and me.

It's a supe thing. Mates are precious, and they're private. Until Conall made his move, she accepted it wasn't her business. She did her best, teasing me if only to help me realize how I've been inexplicably drawn to the wolf from the stars, but other than that, it was up to the mates to work it out for themselves.

Which I would have no problem doing... if it wasn't for the fact that, ever since I discovered I'm his mate, Conall has been avoiding me like I'm the plague.

No breakfasts at the canteen. No boot prints outside the back of the house as if he was out there, watching over me at night. He might be sneaking down to the cave without me, but we haven't taken a trip out of Dyea together in days.

Trying not to look too eager, I stroll around the village, perfectly aware that the rest of the supes are wondering what's going on with the 'human' and the leader of the pack—oh, I'm sorry. Security. I don't see Conall anywhere, and I'm not so desperate that I bang on his door and demand for him to talk to me.

At least not at first.

On the third day of this nonsense, I bumped into Mayor Lou. The fact that I didn't even notice his stink—blueberry today on top of skunk—is proof about how much the wolf has messed with my head, and before I think better of it, I asked the mayor if he borrowed Conall for something.

Conall told me that, whenever the village needed something from Skagway or one of the other local towns, he was the one who went on the trips; mainly because he's the predator shifter, and the other shifters are too skittish to leave the town. That would make sense if he was busy doing his other duties—especially since I've been monopolizing most of his time for weeks now—but Mayor Lou just gave a quick glance toward the darkening sky, then apologized to me before admitting that Conall's home sick.

Can shifters even get sick?

The mayor seems to think so. And though he tells me that Conall should be better by morning, that I should keep my distance until then, I've never been the type of chick to do what I'm told.

Which is why I'm standing outside of Conall's house right now, holding some kind

of mystery meat sandwich I bought at the canteen, waiting for him to answer me.

I don't care how sick he is. The Conall I know would crawl to the door if only to find out what I'm doing on his territory.

He's in there. I don't know why I know for sure that he is, but I do, and I knock on the door again.

This is me making an effort, Mr. Grump. This is showing you that I can be a good mate, too.

Damn it. Open the door.

I rap my knuckles again, grateful that I don't singe the wood by accidentally losing my control on my fire.

"Conall? It's me." Those butterflies in my belly make a giddy return as I call out his nickname for me. "It's Red."

Still no answer.

I really thought there would be. If just because he seems to get his kicks whenever I'd bristle a little about being 'Red' instead of 'Bridget' in the beginning, I figured that would get him to open the door.

Beyond it, I swear I hear something. Or maybe I'm just imagining it because two minutes after I showed up at his house, he's still pretending not to be home.

The butterflies are instantly replaced by dueling emotions: embarrassment and hurt. I've never taken rejection well, and if there was one thing I really dug about the idea of being a shifter's one true mate, it's that I wouldn't have to worry about being

rejected by Conall. I'm it for him. Why would he push me away when I'm supposed to be the mate he's waited so long for?

I don't know, but that's exactly what he's doing.

I'm hurt—and I'm pissed .

Fine. Is that how he wants play it? Fine . I'll feel terrible if it turns out he has, like, severe diarrhea going on in there, but even if he is so sick he can't answer the door, how does that explain the way he's been avoiding me for days now?

I can take a hint.

Leaving the sandwich on the ledge, I storm down his porch steps.

And I think to myself: what do I want?

I thought it was getting rid of my magic. That was back when I had no idea how to use it. How to control it. How to make it work for me. I was so afraid it would consume me that the only alternative seemed to be finding the crystal and hoping it was enough to siphon my magic out of me.

I've gotten much better at wielding my fire. But I've come this far in my search for the opal, and if Conall doesn't want to help me anymore, that's fine.

I can do it on my own.

I'm taking a break in one of the larger caves when the air erupts in an explosive sound that has me using my free hand to cover my head instinctively.

The first time you have a loose rock drop on your head in a gloomy cave because you

don't have protection, the last time you have a loose rock drop on your head without protection. And while Conall teasingly offered to mold me some kind of hardhat with his two paws, I refused. If he wasn't using one, I wouldn't either, but I got real good at covering my head with my hands.

Luckily, the cave I'm in now is one of the larger ones. It's cool, but not as damp as some of the others since I'm farther in, and I found a cove to sit down and angrily snack on the overpriced granola bar I picked up at the commissary. Nothing falls on my head, but when the sound continues to echo its way through the system, I increase the glow on my firelight, looking away in panic—and a teeny, tiny bit of hope.

Because I know what that sound was. That was a howl .

Wolf. It's a wolf.

Conall .

He's the only wolf shifter in Dyea. Unless one of the wild Alaskan wolves are hunting me through the caves, it has to be him.

But why ? And the howl... what was up with the howl?

In all the times that we've spent down here together in the caves, I've never heard a sound that wasn't one of us or the creaks and skittering of the loose rocks sliding. Even when Conall snuck up behind me, grabbing me, I never knew he was there until his hands were on my waist

This is the first time he's alerted me to his presence before he just appeared, scaring the shit out of me in the process. Who knows? Maybe I'm more in tune to the grump...

No.

It was the howl echoing through the cave system, vibrating the loose rocks under my boots with the force of it as I scramble to my feet.

I don't know what I should do. The warning howl gives me a few seconds to decide, and thought part of me was hoping that he'd come searching for me eventually if I stayed down in the caves after dark, but now that he's here...

I can't escape him. I don't even know if I want to. After how he's ignored me ever since our kiss, there's a better chance that I lured him down here on purpose.

We need to hash out this—whatever this is—for once and for all.

Does that mean I'm going to give him any advantage. Hell, no. So though I don't try to outrun him, taking off deeper into the caves, I decide to hold my ground in a cage large enough to confront Conall.

And then, tapping into my temper and my hurt, I summon a ring of fire around me just in time for Conall to pop out from the small tunnel leading from the previous cave into this one. It's easy since he's his wolf, but the second the beast sees me beyond the flames, he shifts.

And there he is.

Conall Hunt.

He's naked.

He's naked, and he's hard.

He's naked, and he's huge.

I figured as much. I mean, I already saw him when we was soft, but as he walks with a predatory gait toward me, eyes flashing, clawed fingers flexing, Adam's apple bobbing in time to the slight bounce of his massive erection... if I wasn't so mad at him, I might actually whistle in appreciation.

He wouldn't care, other than to be proud that I'm almost instantly turned on by his body. Nudity isn't a big deal around shifters. I figured that out shortly after I watched Conall go from wolf to man out in the woods. It didn't bother him at all that he was standing out in the Alaska cold, free-balling it. Since then, I've lost count of how many times I've gone out into the village, only to see one of the other shifters who live there walking around with their tits or their ass out.

Clothes don't survive the shift. When I asked Conall during one of our long treks back, that's how he explained it. If you're dressed and have to suddenly let your beast out, your clothes go poof . Most shifters don't bother getting dressed if they know they're going to shift, and if they need to turn back to human, they do, barely even noticing that they're naked.

The only time it counts is when there is attraction involved. He wants to prove himself to be a prospective mate for me so he's kept his clothes on when I'm around. The only exception was when he followed me out of the sanctuary as his wolf, so worried I'd get in trouble, he shifted from his fur to skin just to tell me off.

He must've done the same thing now. Relying on his wolf to get him through the woods, then the caves faster, it was his beast that howled when it caught my scent. It found me, ceding control back to the man since I obviously can't communicate with his wolf, and here we are.

Conall is naked, and he is the most glorious sight I've seen in a long, long time.

Good thing I have the fire wall surrounding me. It's a reminder that I'm pissed at him, and that as beautiful as my rugged wolf is, I can't just fall into his arms because he's here and the relief that he found me is palpable.

"Stay over there," I warn him.

"I won't hurt you, Bridget."

I didn't think he would.

"I know. But that's not the point. I don't know what you're doing here?—"

"It's Lou's fault," Conall says, his voice harsh and raspy, almost like how I'd imagine his wolf would sound if it had a voice. "I told him during the last full moon that predator shifters can only be contained by silver chains. He got iron chains from the local mill instead. They could hold a prey shifter. Maybe even a delta wolf. But I'm an alpha. They didn't do shit to keep me in my den once the Luna was out."

I think I understand about half off that. The most important part, though?

"Chains?" I squeak out. "Mayor Lou put you in chains?"

I'm suddenly thrown back to when I woke up in Homequarters, a pair of handcuffs twisting my arms behind me. That sucked. I hate the idea that someone would do that to Conall.

And Mayor Lou? I thought he was a good guy!

"I asked him to," says Conall.

Oh. He is a good guy.

And Conall is...

“Have you lost your mind? Why would you do that?”

“Because it was the only way I could think of to keep my wolf from going after you.”

Ouch. Got it, Mr. Grump. You’re a wolf shifter. Your other half thinks I’m the fated mate it’s waited thirty-three years for, but rather than admit that I might work your human half, too, you’d rather lock yourself in chains like a prisoner.

Okay. Maybe open communication is for the freaking birds.

“Stay over there,” I say again, firmer this time.

He shakes his head roughly. “I can’t.”

“Then good luck with the fire.”

“You won’t burn me.”

“I already did, hotshot.”

“That was different,” insists Conall.

Really? “How?”

“You didn’t have feelings for me then.” For a shifter who seemed so quick to put up walls around us, telling me that I’m his mate with one breath, then assuring me we don’t actually have to act on it in another... he seems pretty fucking sure about that.

I wish I could tell him he’s full of himself. That he’s wrong. It would be a lie, though,

and Conall would know the truth the second my scent changed.

He promised he wouldn't lie to me. I pointed out how it wasn't fair that he could lie to me all he wanted, but if I tried, his sniffer would pick up on it. In a solemn tone that fit him pretty damn well, he swore that he wouldn't lie because I was right: it wasn't fair.

He wanted me to trust him. I remember the slight furrow to his brow when he realized I didn't after I, you know, lit his tail on fire. He thought I just would, and if I'm supposed to be his forever mate, I guess that's a pretty fair assumption to make for a shifter.

But I'm not a shifter. I'm Bridget Hayes, and I did start to trust him. I needed to. When one wrong step down here could lead to my death, I had to rely on Conall.

So I did, and sometime over the last month, I did develop feelings for him.

Is it because of the mate bond? Is it because of fate? Did some part of me recognize that his soul was perfect for mine? We're like two puzzle pieces, different shapes, different personalities, different everything, but we seem to fit in a way that never made any sense to me.

Maybe it's not supposed to be. Maybe true love is a leap of faith, and instead of fighting it—instead of fighting Conall—I'm supposed to jump.

Fuck it. With a snap of my fingers, I make the ring of fire higher.

Conall isn't the only one putting up walls. And, sure, mine are more literal compared to his figurative ones, but he hurt me. He made me think he cared, then basically rejected me. King of mixed signals, right? And I'm just so damn tired of it.

The flames highlight the sharp planes of his face as he sucks in a breath. “That doesn’t change anything, Red. I love you. You care for me. You’re my mate—and I’ve come for you.”

“Gotta get through my fire first,” I dare.

Talk about a metaphor come to life. My whole life, I never really let people in. Probably because my first serious boyfriend was a sleaze ball who cheated on me, but not before he shared my nudes with the whole football team. I got a lot of attention the summer before senior year of high school because of it, and I was never lacking for a guy to have a good time with, but I learned my lesson. Guys come and go. So do friends. I haven’t spoken to any of my old friends or my roommates from New York since I left.

That’s why my friendship with Elise was such a revelation. She took the time to get to know me. She never judged me. We shared an affinity for the same silly shoes, the same silly, addictive phone games, the same steamy romance books. She also seemed to need a protector—even though I know now that she can handle herself—and I’ve been the feisty redhead who cares way more for others than they care about her.

I told Conall that before we had our first kiss. That’s why I love Aunt Maureen and Elise so much. They care about me—and as much as I want to deny it, I know that Conall cares, too.

So he’s not the greatest with words. So he grunts and he growls, and right now he’s prowling outside of the fire, looking for a way in. Actions speak louder than words, and he’s never shied away for showing me his affection in the way a lone wolf who was raised in the wilds of Alaska could: by bringing me the carcasses of his hunts and spending fifteen dollars on a bottle of VO5 at the commissary.

“I broke through chains to get here,” he growls. “Burn me, Red, because that’s the

only way you'll be able to stop me."

It's not a threat. To my possessive shifter, going through something I can't quite understand since I'm not one, it's a vow .

"I'm not bluffing," I tell him.

His nostrils flare. Shit. Was that a lie?

It... might've been.

"I don't care. There isn't anything I won't do to get to you," is his ferocious reply before he presses his palm against the wall of fire.

The impact is too fleeting for any real damage. That's because I freak, immediately willing it away before his skin could sizzle.

The cave plunges into darkness that seems even more impenetrable for how sudden it is. The air crackles, pulsing with something intangible, yet undeniable. Flames flicker back to life behind me, providing illumination just in time for me to see Conall looming over me.

I gulp—one part nervous, one part super fucking aroused—as his gaze eats up mine.

He doesn't gloat. Though I want to believe that he only tested me because he knew that I would never willingly fry his hand like that, that's not Conall. He would've walked through fire to get to me, whether I left the wall flickering around me or not.

And that realization has me baring my throat just enough that he can't read that at anything other than my submission.

His eyes burn . “You care for me.”

It’s not a question. It’s a statement.

I shrug.

“You’re my fated mate.”

That’s what he told me.

Conall’s hand “You’re mine .”

My hands fly up between our bodies, bracing against against his hard, heaving chest. I can feel the rhythm of his racing heart against my palms—and the bulge in his jeans pushing against my lower belly.

I smirk up at him. “I’ve heard that before. But nothing changed.”

“That’s because you hadn’t fed me.”

What? “What are you talking about? I’ve bought you dinner at the canteen a bunch of times.”

“That’s right, Red. You bought me food, and while I appreciate it, I know better than to take that as a sign that you consider me your mate. But you brought food to my den. Don’t deny it. Your scent was all over the sandwich.”

“I didn’t make it by hand or anything,” I tell him a touch breathlessly, just in case he got the wrong idea. “I bought that from the canteen, too.”

“I know. But you brought it to me. You were trying to provide for your mate. And

that makes me your male. I'm your mate, whether we're bonded or not. And I'll wait for you as long as it takes for you to accept me. It's just... I know I needed to stay away from you tonight and I couldn't. I don't think I can ."

Fuck me. When Conall goes vulnerable like that, I'm putty in his freaking claws.

I slide my hands up, cupping his jaw. I have every intention of kissing him, but my head snaps up, searching his face. "You're on fire, Conall." I free one hand, using the back of it to feel his forehead. "You're burning up."

He shudders out a breath. "It's the moon fever," he admits. "It's why I needed to be chained up. When the Luna is out, a shifter needs his mate. Rubbing my cock raw only does so much when my instincts are pushing me to make you mine."

"Is that why you're here? Why you came after me?"

He doesn't answer me. Unless I'm wrong, he looks too ashamed to respond.

Oh, that's not gonna work.

"Conall. Please. I want to know. Remember, I'm new to being a supe. I barely know about any of this. You have to talk to me."

"It has to be your decision," is all he says. "Your choice."

I get that. But it takes two to tango—and, in this case, mate . He wants me; the erection trying desperately to nestle itself against my heat is proof of that. Whatever else is going on between us, I know I want him. But if he only feels this way because of a mythical entity only wolf shifters believe in...

"What about you? What do you want? And be honest with me."

“I always have,” he grumbles. “I always will.”

I wait.

He exhales, his warm breath fanning the tendrils of my hair surrounding my face. “Okay. What do I want, Red? I want to fuck you.” He snaps his teeth. “To bite you.” He swivels his hips, pushing his erection up against me. “To claim you.”

Conall’s head drops, sucking on my neck. I throw mine back, giving him full access to it as he slips his hand under my shirt. His hand finds my tit, and he squeezes it. “To keep you.”

I dig my fingers into the muscles covering his shoulder blades, clutching to me while tilting my chin up in both invitation and dare.

And then I say three words that change my life as I know it forever— again .

“Then do it.”

CHAPTER 18

CHALLENGE

Conall's eyes are the prettiest shade of gold. A hint of softness on an otherwise rugged wolf, they're one of my favorite parts of him. They're just so damn expressive, and like a freaking mood ring, I could usually tell what he's thinking by the way his eyes react.

Just now? They flash so brightly, they gleam through the darkness of the cave as he peers down at me.

He doesn't release his hold on me even as he goes suddenly still. "What was that?"

"You heard me."

"Bridget... did you just challenge me?"

Challenging a predator shifter... not the smartest idea, but you know what? I'm sick and tired of pretending that I don't want this man.

Male.

Conall .

I've done a lot of thinking. From when I first learned how a shifter reacts around his prospective mate, to realizing what all those poor dead bunnies were about, and then

his public claiming of me when his jealousy got to be too much for him.

I'm his mate. Earlier this afternoon, when I bought that sandwich, I was making a conscious decision. I went to Conall's house with the express intent to feed him.

Because if I'm his, then he's my mate, too. Fate put us together. Fate or the Luna or the moon or however he wants to explain it. I might not be a wolf, but I am a witch, and I've felt this bond we have almost since the beginning. Even when he made me so angry, I was drawn to him, and now I know why.

All along, I've been telling myself that I was looking for the fire opal. That that was what I was looking for.

Wrong.

I haven't find the fire opal yet. There's a chance I never will.

But I found Conall, and that means I found something even better.

I found a future. A hope. Love. I found family. I found someone who cares enough about me that those silly questions I blew off really were him getting to know me.

Because he loves me.

Because I'm meant to be his mate.

Because this bond between us will only grow strong in time... but only if we finalize it first.

And the only way to do that is...

“I want you to mate me.”

He shudders out a breath. “You don’t know what you’re saying. You still think like a human, Red. I won’t pretend you don’t mean it. Your body is crying out for me.” He inhales deeply. “I can smell how aroused you are right now. It’s the sweetest fucking scent I’ve ever had the honor of taking into my lungs. But if I mate you... if I fuck you... there isn’t anything that will stop me from claiming you for life. If it was any other night than the full moon, our bond wouldn’t finalize. But it is the full moon. I’m not strong enough to keep from biting you. Don’t ask me to because it’ll fucking kill me to disappoint you.”

My eyes are adjusted enough to the darkness to find the edge of his cheek. I cradle it. “I’m not asking you to keep from biting me, Conall. I want you to.”

He turns into my hand, brushing his lips against my palm. The points of his fangs prick me as though they’re ready to do just that.

I slide my other hand down until I can swipe my thumb over the head of his cock. He hisses when I find it, hips jerking in a mimicry of what he’ll do if I let him fuck me.

I’m ready. I’m so ready. But Conall...

He’s a wolf shifter. If my understanding of the predators is apt enough, there are two things he won’t be able to resist: a challenge, and his mate on all fours.

I issued the change.

Now?

I pull out of his embrace. The fact that he lets me go tells me that this is completely my choice. If I want him, I have to take him. Or, well, let him take me.

Alright.

Moving away from him, I go to the middle of the cave. I don't bother with any fireballs. It's pointless when I won't have a hand to wield one in a second, and if I need to figure out how to anchor fire somewhere else... hey. That's a lesson for later on.

Like tomorrow. Or the day after.

It's the full moon. I expect I'll be busy the rest of the night.

"Red? What are you..."

"You tell me," I purr, grabbing my leggings by the waistband and pulling them down.

I take my time. There's no rush, and I want this seduction to be something for Conall to remember. Thanks to his wolf, he can see everything I'm doing right now which is great.

This striptease is all for him.

When I bend over, kicking off my boots so I can remove my leggings, his renewed growl fills the cave. By the time my leggings are off, the growl is inside my heart.

Then I shuck my panties, and it conquers my soul.

Conall moves toward me. I can't see him, though I can sense him, and I purposely lower myself to the ground next.

I'm not the frightened one. I get the feeling that he thinks that I'll eventually wake up, realize he's a predator, and bolt. Yeah, right. Of the two of us, the witch with the

power to blast fire is probably a bigger problem.

Dangerous, right?

I'm dangerous.

I get on my hands and knees, presenting my ass to him. Then, with as much a dare to my voice as I can manage when my throat is thick with lust and anticipation, I ask him: "Tell me? Is the big, bad wolf brave enough to claim his witch?"

"Oh, Red... you don't know what you're doing."

I do. See? That's why I called him a big, bad wolf, too. I'm his Red, he's my wolf, and I'm not waiting a moment longer to make him mine.

Conall, it seems, has the same idea.

It's instinctive. I'm his mate and I'm waiting for him. He's naked, already hard when he arrived here, and the moon fever has taken hold of him.

Really, what else could he do but mount me?

I don't move as he positions the head of his cock where it belongs. I swallow my moans as he begins to push himself inside of me. But when he bottoms out?

I say his name like it's a benediction.

"Conall..."

"Tell me you're mine," he grunts.

“Only if you’re mine,” I tell him, arching my back to take him deeper.

His claws trail over the curve of my ass. He’s pounding my pussy like he can’t get enough of me, but he’s as gentle as ever with his caresses as he says, “I have been from the moment you flounce into

“Flounced? I didn’t flounce !”

“Sashayed?” he teases.

Oh, I’ll give him sashayed ...

I squeeze him. Putting as much of my core strength into it as I can, when he bottoms out inside of me again, I squeeze—and Conall howls.

Ha!

He doesn’t quite stop. As his howl reverberates around the cave, he moves his hands from my ass to my waist. Without pulling out of me completely, he shifts me so that he’s on his knees, I’m on his lap, and he’s staring right into my eyes as he fucks me.

His cheeks are hollowed as he grits out, “I’m about to come. The only way to finalize our the mate bond is to bite you when I do.”

I bare my throat to him. “What are you waiting for?”

“Nothing,” he grates. “I just wanted to look at my witch one last time before I make you my mate.”

Then, with a strike as precise as a rattlesnake, he sinks his fangs into the side of my throat.

Can witches howl? I didn't think so, but I give Conall a run for his money as every single nerve ending inside of me explodes .

And that's not all.

As my climax hits, I close my eyes as the fire bursts from behind my lids. Only... the air is suddenly heavy and dry. A strange wind whips through the cave, bouncing around us until slamming into the cave walls.

I wait until I stop spasming on his cock before I peek open one eye.

Conall's fangs are still buried in my neck, his cock gently thrusting in and out of me. He doesn't seem ready to break our connection yet, though I know he's already come once, and if he wants to keep me on his lap with his dick still stretching me out, I'm perfectly okay with that.

Even if I wince a little when I see exactly what happened when I came.

So... it looks like, when a fire witch finalizes a bond with her mate, the fire part wants to get in on the action. That's the only way I can explain it since I've had plenty of sex before and, uh, I've never casted a fire ring as large as the cave until now.

And I did. I totally did. That must've been what happened when the fire blazed behind my eyes, and the wind whipped around us. It wasn't wind. It was my magic protecting both Conall and I as the fire formed a circle around us.

Not really sure why, but since we're both okay...

Wait. With a gentle tug that sends aftershocks through me, he removes his fangs from my neck. I smile at him, ready to say... shit, I don't even know how to make words

with the way his bite just left me so frazzled... but he looks at me, then immediately his gaze darts away.

A flash of rejection rushes through me. Before I can figure out how to stop it, I'm pretty sure it skitters down our newly finalized bond.

He shakes his head, then points over mine. "No. I'm not regretting a damn thing that just happened. It's just... look."

Well, since he's so insistent...

It's hard to maneuver when I'm basically still impaled on his cock, but he told me to look so I do.

When the fire burst out of me, all I saw was orange. I thought it was the remnants of the fire that burst out of me. In a way, it is. But that's not all that.

My fire is contained. A few flames are flickering here or there, but the cave is still glowing a vibrant orange shade—and for one reason in particular.

I gasp. Then, patting his chest in silent apology, I climb off of Conall's lap. I nearly trip over my discarded leggings in my haste to reach the other side of the cave.

I run my hand over the wall. What was craggy and dark moments ago is smooth and bright and shining. It's orange, vivid orange, and it reflects my well-fucked expression as I stare in surprise at the wall of crystal.

Crystal...

"Is this fire opal?"

Conall rose up from the floor of the cave, padding over to me. “You found it, Red.”

Did I finally do it?

I... I think so.

But how ?

“It wasn’t here before, though. I mean, I picked this cave to hunker down in because, I don’t know, it called to me for some reason. But I had a ring of fire going before when I was pissed at you. I didn’t see any opal. Did you?”

My naked mate has the decency to look slightly abashed when I mentioned how mad his rejection earlier made me. And, sure, I know now that he ignored me at his door in a misguided bit to keep me from being rushed into mating him. Screw that. I made my decision. I own it. Hopefully, he will, too.

He comes up behind me, resting his hand possessively around the back of my throat. His thumb ghosts over his bite mark, caressing the skin around the bloody bite.

“I didn’t.”

“So where did it come from?”

“I can’t say for sure... I was a little busy, making you mine... but I’m pretty sure it happened when you screamed for me, and you shot all that fire out of you. You didn’t burn me this time?—”

“You didn’t deserve it this time,” I cut in.

“Thanks, Red. But it seems like the fire had to burn something. Looks like that was

this cave. And when it did... you've got your fire opal."

Honestly? Put like that, I should've expected something like that. Isn't that what Celeste said? That only a fire witch could find fire opal? I just thought that meant I would have, like, this sixth sense that told me if a rock was just a rock or if it was a crystal. But maybe only a fire wick could find it because only I could do that ?

And I did it because of Conall.

"Look at that. You fucked me so hard, we broke the cave," I tease.

He chuckles. "Not bad for my first time, huh?"

I blink for a moment. Holy shit. I completely forgot that he was a virgin. That he was saving himself for his mate, not for any other reason than that wolves mate for life, and when he claimed his, he wasn't letting her go.

I knew what I was getting into. I know what I agreed to. He offered forever, I took it, and then I let him take me.

But it never occurred to me that this was his first time during the actual act. He was so dominating, taking me on all fours at first, then shifting me so that he could fuck me face-to-face, seeing the honesty written in my eyes before he bit me.

Taking my hand away from the wall of opal, I turn into Conall, patting his chest. "You sure about that? Because, I'll tell ya something: that was amazing. I've been with guys who were the biggest players and I was just another number, and they didn't have half the raw magnetism and skill that you have."

My hand starts to vibrate. It takes a second for me to realize it's because he's growling softly, as though he doesn't want to scare me off.

How can he? Where will I go?

I'm his, and I'm gonna hold him to it.

So why is he growling after I complimented his prowess? I run the words through my head again, wincing when I realize exactly what it was that I said.

“Oof. Sorry. Don't talk about the past. Got it.”

Conall shakes his head. “No. I know you had a life before me. I'm not that ridiculous, Red. As long as you know that there won't be anyone else.”

I dig my fingers into his chest. “Never. Not for either of us.”

“Exactly. And if you could just tell me I'm better than them?—”

“Oh, hands down. Definitely. That's no problem, Conall. That was some of the best sex I've ever had. The only thing that would've made it better was if there was, like, a mattress or a cushion so that my knees didn't have to dig into the hard floor, but other than that? Told you. Amazing . And I'm only half-kidding about the damage you did to my knees so don't freak out or anything like you do every other time I've gotten cut down here. It was totally worth the new scrapes.”

“You're not lying,” he says in near disbelief. “Your scent... it didn't change. It smells like you, and it smells like me, but there's no deception.”

This time, I rap his chest. “It's because you're my mate.”

His voice goes thick. “Bridget...”

I'm not done.

“Before I came to Alaska, the head witch I met read me. I don’t know if she was seeing my future or what, but she told me I’d found what I was looking for. Well, I did.”

He nods. “The fire opal?”

Oh, you big idiot. “No, Mr. Grump. You .”

His lips twitch. “Me?”

“Well, yeah.” I mean, I kind of thought that was obvious when I got on all fours and let him mount me like that. “The fire opal was supposed to help me get rid of my powers so that I wasn’t a danger. But I learned control on my own these last couple of weeks. I could take it or leave it. You, though? I can’t leave you.”

“Of course not. I marked you, Red. There’s no escaping me now.”

“And you’re okay with that? If I go back to being human?” I tilt my chin up so that I can use the glow of the fire opal to get a better look at his face. “Would you still love me if I wasn’t a witch?”

In answer, Conall grabs me by the waist, hoisting me up so that he’s holding me. I wrap my legs around him as he buries his face against my chest.

He nuzzles my tit. My shirt and bra are pushed up high enough to bare both of my boobs to my wolf, and he seems fascinated by them. He nuzzles, his tongue lapping out to swipe the nearest nipple, and just when I think he’s distracted me so he doesn’t have to answer my question, he scrapes his fangs over the curve of my tit, then says, “I loved you when you were human. I love you as a witch. If something happens tomorrow and you wake up a corpse like Elise, I’ll love you as a bloodsucker. Fuck, I’ll even let you tap a vein if you need me, too. I love you , Red. No matter what.”

Damn. I just fucked him, but a heartfelt, genuine speech like that coming from my wolf? My pussy aches to have him fill me again, and not only because he's palming my other tit now, sending shocks of renewed pleasure through me.

I don't think I'll ever be able to get enough of Conall, and since I'm wearing his mark on my neck, I won't have to worry about that.

Shifters mate for life. Once there's a bond, there's no going back.

I'm his—and he's mine .

Lifting his head, he adds, "You know, I've been doing some research of my own. About the fire opal. On SupeNet."

Wait...

"Like, a supe internet? Are you serious?"

"If you know where to look." A hint of a tease tugs on his lip as he uses his free hand to take a strand of my hair, twirling it around his finger all the way to the tip of his wolfish claw. "What? You didn't ask Elise?"

I laugh softly. Mainly because this is the first time I haven't picked up on a slight bit of jealousy whenever he talks about Elise. And, looking back, I should really start to question my observational skills. Because it's obvious in hindsight that he was jealous of Elise. Sure, part of his attitude in regards to her and whether or not she was biting me had to do with wolf shifters and vampires being ancient enemies.

The other part has everything to do with me being his fated mate, and Conall being jealous of anyone I might like more than him.

But the fire opal...

“What about it?”

“When you first told me it could get rid of your powers, I didn’t understand. We’re supes, Red. We’re either born this way, like shifters and witches and some bloodsuckers. Then there are those that are made, like ghouls and corpses. But there’s nothing except final death that takes away our power. Silver can weaken us, sure, but a crystal that takes away a part of you? It didn’t make sense.”

“So, what? The fire opal can’t do that?”

“It might. But everything I read... I don’t think it’s supposed to make you less of a witch. I think it’s supposed to help you be the best witch you can.”

Maybe. Who the hell knows?

But right now?

I kiss him. “It’s too late for that. You’ve already got that job, hotshot.”

“For life,” he vows.

“You know it.”

It’s late. Well, Dyea late. According to Conall, it was nearly seven when the moon fever got so bad, he couldn’t keep himself contained anymore. It wasn’t the chains trapping him in his house. It was his own determined will, and as soon as he snapped them, he went after me.

Then he saw the sandwich, realized that my faded scent had me leaving his apartment

before heading out toward the woods. There was no stopping him. He shifted to his wolf and tore off into the woods in search of me.

I don't know how long we were together in the cave. Add the fact that we stopped halfway back to the entrance when Conall's need overwhelmed him so much, he practically begged me to let him mate me again.

A six foot tall, ripped shifter pleading with me to have sex with him? Yes, please. How could I refuse?

This time, he braced me against one of the cave walls. Though I could sense the raging desire in every taut muscle of his body, he was careful with his claws as he lowered my leggings again. He seemed to understand that I'm not about to walk through the woods naked, and he won't be able to bring himself to leave me alone long enough to retrieve a change of clothes for either of us.

Once he finished, he eased my leggings back up, humming with pride even though I made him pull out and finish on the floor of the cave. One thing I don't know about shifters is how fertile they are, and I figure that's something we can talk about before we initiate round three—hopefully in his bed this time.

However, Conall's good mood shifts as quickly as he can to his wolf the moment we reach the entrance to the underground caves. It's a steep incline back to the surface, and I had to vanish the fireball I was holding in order to allow Conall to grip my hand to help me.

In my other, I'm clutching a small hunk of the fire opal we discovered. Using his shifter strength, he punch a hole into the cavern wall, retrieving me a piece to take with me tonight. We'll come back for more when the full moon is over. For now, he wanted to give me a piece, both to commemorate our mating night and so that, when I'm ready to use it, I can see just how it'll affect me and my magic.

If he's right, it won't erase my powers. It'll work with them, turning me into an even more powerful witch. And maybe I totally misunderstand what Celeste was telling me—or her own research was just different than Conall's. I don't know, but I've spent so much time searching for the fire opal because I didn't want to worry about the witch hunters coming after me again.

Now? Between my powers and my ferocious wolf shifter mate, I'm not worried about the witch hunters anymore.

I should've been.

Just as we reach the top, Conall goes still. He sniffs, a growl forming in the back of his throat.

I squeeze his hand. "What's wrong?"

"I smell gasoline. Fire and gasoline."

What?

He tugs on my hand, pulling me the rest of the way out of the final cave, and when he does, I let out a cry when I understand what he means.

Because the woods surrounding Dyea are burning.

CHAPTER 19

SILVER

My stomach lurches. I feel like I'm going to hurl.

My legs go weak next. I stumble, and Conall's right there to support me before I drop to the icy snow beneath me.

"Bridget. Bridget . What's wrong?"

"Was that me? Conall... did it do that?"

"What? Baby, no. No ."

There goes my belly again. Instead of lurching, it flip-flops, and I know it's because of the way Conall just called me 'baby'. It's such a stupid, silly thing. He gave me a nickname almost right after we met. It wasn't the most creative, granted; though I'm no better with my mocking Mr. Grump. I've lost track of how many dudes called me 'Red' over the years because of my hair color. But 'baby'? I've never been anyone's 'baby' before.

Mainly because I usually shut that shit down. Even at seventeen, I thought I was too grown for that sort of pet name. I'm thirty next year. I'm a mature fucking woman.

And, yet, because it's Conall... grumpy, possessive Conall... I don't mind it.

In fact, it helps calm me down. Well, the name, and how absolutely certain he sounds when he tells me that I couldn't have caused this wildfire.

“How do you know?”

He taps his nose. “Gasoline. I smell it over the burn and the char. It's an accelerant. Someone made that fire on purpose. And they did it in between the entrance to the caves and the sanctuary on purpose.”

“To cut us off.”

Conall swallows roughly, then nods.

“Do you think the sanctuary is okay?”

How long has this fire been raging? It hadn't started before

Who started it?

I don't know, but I can't leave it like this, and though Conall admits he doesn't know, my wolf shifter is too protective of his territory to let it burn.

We have to do something?—

The fire opal!

I'm a fire witch. That's definitely a fire. What if... what if the fire opal is all I need to boost my magic? Instead of taking it away from me, it strengthens it?

Expands it?

Gives me the power to control fire instead of it controlling me?

It's worth a shot.

Turning to Conall, showing him the hunk of crystal he handed me, I tell him, "I can make fire. I can turn it off, too. I think I can get rid of this."

I know I made the best decision of my life by accepting Conall as my mate because, rather than tell me that I can't, or I shouldn't try, he nods his head. "Go, Red. I'll stay back here so I don't distract you. But if you need me, shout. I'll come running."

I don't doubt it.

Going up on my tiptoes, I grip his jaw, smack my lips against his, then take off running for the fire.

Conall's right. The closer I get, the more I can tell that it's nothing like my own flames. These ones are hungry. Cruel. They'll eat anything in their path... unless I stop them.

And I can. I don't know if it's because of the fire opal or if it's me, but I've been around fire before. I've never felt the connection that I do now, and I'm so fucking grateful for it as I take control of it.

As I do, I imagine the fire contracting.

A wind whips up. An unnatural one, full of warmth, smelling like the conditioner in my hair—raspberry and vanilla—and circling around the edge of the hungry flames. Only instead of pushing them out, it pulls them in, suffocating them.

No. That's not good enough.

I imagine the fire simply going out.

It's too powerful to wink away like my fireballs do. The fire opal makes me more confident in my abilities, but I've only been tapped into my magic for a month. In time, I could probably blink and the fire will be gone, but right now? I need a little help.

And I get it.

Rain. It's raining in Dyea, Alaska, with temp below freezing. The only precipitation I've seen in the last month has been snow, but it's raining.

Because I made it rain.

Between the wind, the rain, and me pulling the fire away from the trees, it's only a matter of a minute or more until all that's left is hazy, black smoke where the fire was.

The rain stops. The wind dies.

The fire is gone.

Peeking out of the smoke, there's a gap of hard dirt in front of me, a circle where the fire melted away the season's worth of snow. A couple of trees look torched where they rise out of the haze, but not all of them, and that's such a relief, I nearly sink to the ground.

"I did it." I marvel at my hands. Ever since I first shot fire out of my fingers, I've been worried it would happen at the worst moment. Nothing like a fireball to the brain because you innocently scratched your nose and lost control of your magic. I always expected anyone who knew the truth of my heritage to wince when I started to

gesture, and it was always a soothing balm to my worries when Conall and Elise didn't. But I'm more than just fire. I'm more than just destruction.

I made that man-made fire my bitch.

I laugh in amazement. "I did it."

"Yes, you did." Man-made... it's actually a woman's voice calling out to me from the echoes of the smoke in front of me. My head snaps in that direction. I can't quite make out a face, but there's no denying the venom dripping from her tone as she spits out, "Finally."

I summon a quick gust of wind, just enough to banish the last of the smoke, then frown when I see the woman standing on the edge of the dirt circle.

She looks familiar, and it takes me second to place her. That's right. She's the witch who drove the Dyea Express after me and Elise arrived at the Skagway Airport.

"Lori."

"Linda," she corrects with a glare.

Whatever. "What are you doing here?"

She gives me a look that tells me she thinks I'm an idiot. "Setting fires. Waiting for you, witch."

I guess it makes sense that she knows. Celeste said that our cover was set, kept secret between her, Thorn, Else and me, but maybe witches can recognize each other. I mean, I can't, but that's not my power.

I wonder what hers is, and why the fuck she decides to set the woods on fire.

But first?—

“Why do you have to say it so nasty like that? Witch . You’re a witch, too.”

Linda gets a stink face. “I’m not a witch. Please. I killed the witch who drove the bus out of the airport, then took her place. Unless the covens are sending more of you disgusting supernaturals to hide out, no one checks. It could be years before my cover’s blown. But I don’t need years to hunt you. I only needed a month to wait for you to stay in the caves long enough for it to be well after dark by the time the fire caught.

“Now, you’re probably wondering why I needed to wait until dark. Simple. Because my partner and I always worked best under the cover of night, and I knew the fire would attract you more if it happened at night. Of course, I needed you on this side of the sanctuary. Witch hunters aren’t supes, thank God, and I haven’t been able to find my way into your stupid, secret town. But the caves... I took the map from the other witch I killed. Sabotaged it a little so you didn’t find whatever one the head witch marked for you—that was just because it was fun to watch you waste time—and now here we are.”

To be fair, I was wondering how such a friendly-faced bus driver was really a witch hunter in disguise—because she’s obviously a witch hunter in disguise, and her latest comment confirms it—but I’ll listen to her explain that part, too.

Even if I can’t help myself from interjecting incredulously, “Hang on... are you monologuing ?”

“What? No. I just want you to know why you’re going to die before I kill you.”

Oh, this has gotta be good.

I could strike her down where she stands. With the fire opal in my pocket, I could be a precision flamethrower, and she knows it.

“Okay. And?”

“Because you’re a witch.”

Wow. I give her a slow clap.

“Supernaturals don’t belong in our world. It’s our mission to get rid of all of them, not just witches. But, I’ll admit, Stephen and I had a fondness for snatching witches off the street and having our fun with them.”

Stephen?

At my sudden look of confusion, her expression turns nasty. “You know Stephen. He’s the one who couldn’t wait to get the cuffs on you to bring you to me. But he should’ve waited for me to join him. Then I wouldn’t have had to follow you all the way to bumfuck Alaska to get my revenge. And I needed to. It wasn’t just a mission for me. I needed to watch you suffer, then watch you die.”

“Me? What did I do?”

Because, shit, that sounds personal. And I know that witch hunters work in pairs, but this is kind of excessive.

“You? You killed him!”

Technically, he killed himself, but I don’t think this is the right time to point that out.

“I loved him. He was my partner and my lover, and you killed him. That’s why I’m going to kill you, witch. And to make sure it really hurts, I’ll let this fire rage until all of Dyea is dead, too.”

Conall.

Elise.

Hell fucking no.

My hands spark. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Of course I would. You don’t need to be a fire witch to set a blaze,” Linda sneers. “A little gasoline, some kindling, and a match gets the job done. It lures out the witch,” she adds, “and the wolf.”

The what?

My head whips around. I probably shouldn’t have taken my eyes off of the witch hunter, but through the bond we just finalized, I know exactly what I’m going to find behind me.

It’s Conall. He’s back in his wolf form, and at first he was trotting toward me. He must’ve seen that the fire died out and waited for me to return to him. When I didn’t, he came padding through the woods toward me.

But I’m not alone. I’m facing off against Linda, and whether Conall knows she set the fire or not—if he knows whether she’s a witch hunter or not—it doesn’t matter. He instinctively recognizes her as a threat, pouring on the speed, baring his fangs as he races toward her.

Because Linda is a human, I underestimated her. I'm a witch. Conall's a shifter. We could take her on no problem if necessary once she was done yapping.

But she's not just a human. She's a human fanatic who's spent her whole life training to eliminate witches. Her hatred toward everything supe is clear. She wants to eliminate the entire sanctuary.

She starts with Conall.

It happens so fast, if it wasn't for the moon catching against the bright silver weapon in her hand, I don't know I would've seen Linda remove her witch hunter blade from wherever she kept it stored. She did, though, and without any hesitation at all, she takes a split second to sidestep and aim, then sends the dagger flying through the air.

It's a perfect fucking hit.

As Conall tore toward her, she angled her body so that the knife arrowed right at Conall's side. It finds its target in the bulk of his wolf's side, and though I wouldn't have thought the length of the blood would be long enough to actually reach through the fur and hurt him, I'm wrong.

The knife plunges into Conall and, between one step and the next, the wolf twists before he drops to the snow with an audible thud.

That's bad enough. But the soft whine he releases before his eyes close is a hundred times worse.

And then I remember the knife Thorn showed me back in Clarity. It was silver.

Silver.

The only thing powerful enough to take down an alpha wolf shifter.

No, no, no.

CHAPTER 20

STARS

I don't even stop to think, or remember that she's more dangerous than I would've thought. Only hoping that that was her only knife, I race over to Conall, dropping down to his side.

He's still. When I find where the silver got him, his white fur is already slicked down with blood.

I swallow my scream and my panic. Instead, careful not to jostle the stab wound, I pat his fur all over, checking for a pulse, a breath, anything , all while talking to him, hoping he can hear me.

"Oh, no, you don't. You don't get to die on me. Uh-uh. You just promised me forever, Conall. You don't get to take the easy way out now."

But maybe he is because apart from the slightest rise and fall of his chest, he isn't responding to me at all.

And that's when the witch hunter draws my attention back to her with a smarmy life that sounds like nails running down a chalkboard.

"That was for Stephen. Now one supe down," gloats Linda, shouting over the wind and the roar of fury in my skull. "One to go. And then the whole damn sanctuary is next."

Shit. I actually forgot about her for a second there.

This is my fault. All my fault. Not the fire, obviously, but if I'd just taken her out instead of letting her run her mouth, Conall wouldn't be motionless on the snow.

Fuck me. She was monologuing. I knew she was, but I was the cocky heroine who thought I could get all of the information from the reckless villain before I turned her in to the authorities.

What happened next? She tried to kill the authority.

She tried to kill my mate .

“Oh, shut up.” I flick my fingers. I don't even give her the satisfaction of seeing my face as I send the most powerful stream of fire I can produce dead at her chest.

I can see her out of the corner of my eye, though. Unlike her precious partner, she doesn't just catch on fire. No. The silhouette of Linda wrapped in my flames is an orange glow against the black of night for about two seconds before it winks out, and a pile of inky ash on the snow is all that's left of the witch hunter.

Vampires are ruthless, but so are fire witches, I guess.

Thorn executed the witch hunter who attacked me in Clarity. Whether there are more of them or his partner was the only one gunning for me, I don't care. Dyea is my home now. These people are mine.

Conall is mine .

He heals. Almost hysterically, I remind myself that I lit his tail on fire and he was healed almost immediately.

It's gotta be the silver. With that in him, he'll never heal. So, going against everything I've ever learned about what to do when you've been impaled or stabbed, I tug the knife out of his side, tossing it far away from me.

Blood pours out of the wound, staining his fur. It's much larger than it should be, and that freaks me out even more.

What if he bleeds out before he can heal?

No. I can... I can do something.

I can help .

Clutching the fire opal in my left fist, I concentrate on the pointer finger on my right hand. A little boost of magic and here's hoping I'm cauterizing his wound instead of giving him third degree burns.

The blood stops. That's the only different, and my heart aches as I remember that he wouldn't be like this if I hadn't been a target.

I was so worried about the damn witch hunters coming after me. They did, but what Linda did was even worse.

She went after Conall.

"Wake up," I plead, shoving my fingers past his fur, trying to bring his wolf around. "Conall, please. Come back to me."

Can he hear me? I think he might because, suddenly, I'm not clutching his wolf's muzzle. He's laying on his side, protecting his wound—which is now an ugly red burn scar from where I successfully cauterized it—while my hands grip his jaw.

It's a similar pose as we had earlier tonight, when I noticed he was burning up with moon fever. Is it bad that his skin feels cool and clammy to the touch now?

"Conall?"

His eyes flutter open, and he looks up at me blearily. "Red. You're okay."

"Mr. Grump," I say, relief bubbling up as a sob in my throat. My marked throat. "You're not."

He starts to push himself up on his elbows. I place my hand on his shoulder, pinning him in place.

He could throw me off super easily. He doesn't, though, and I squeeze his skin. "Stay. You were unconscious." You looked dead . "You need to rest."

"I'll be fine."

My face tells him I don't believe him at all.

"I will. Might take a minute, but I'll recover. Promise, baby." His lips twitch into that crooked smile that stole my heart back at the canteen. "You like it when I call you 'baby'. Your scent... your fire glazes inside of you. Makes you even more beautiful, and considering you're the most fucking gorgeous female I've ever seen before, that's impressive. You're still my 'Red', but, Bridget Hunt, you'll always be my 'baby'." His eyes shutter closed for a moment. "And my mate."

I might not be Bridget Hunt. Not yet. But I am his mate.

And I'm pretty sure Conall is dying.

He better not be fucking dying.

Keeping my tone light, hoping he can't pick up on my terror that his kind words are some kind of deathbed confession, I say, "Wow. That silver knife really did a number on you."

And if I could resurrect Linda from the ashes and incinerate her again, I would. To knock the grumpiness right out of Conall, leaving him weaker than I've ever seen the predator shifter... she'd deserve it.

His eyes peek open. Despite the large burn scar—hiding his knife wound—on his side, you would think he's just being playful with me the way his expression twists. "Nah. Well, yeah. It knocked the moon fever right out of me. I can see clearly now for the first time in days, and you know what?"

A lump lodges in my throat. "What?"

His golden eyes glitter in the moonlight. "You're my mate."

My heart swells. Stroking a strand of hair out of those pretty, pretty eyes, I tell him, "Sure am."

"You can control your fire."

"I kicked that fire's ass, baby."

His smile widens. "I like being your 'baby', too," he rumbles before lowering his back to the snow. Patting his stomach, careful to avoid his new burn, he says, "Okay. I probably shouldn't move too much while I'm regenerating the muscle and tissues the silver killed, but if you climb on top of me and do all the work, we can continue our mating night."

My mouth falls open. “Conall! You just got stabbed!”

That doesn’t seem to faze him one bit. “And my witch used fire to kill my attacker. You protected me, Red. You showed me you’re as much as possessive predator as I am. You don’t think that’ll make me fucking horny? Trust, everything about you makes me think of sex, but watching you burn her? Come on. Climb on top.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. Minutes ago, I thought I lost him. I thought he’d bleed out, and now he’s sprawled out on blood-covered snow, gesturing at his obvious erection while the caustic stench of Linda’s remains fills the air.

And I thought Mayor Lou was bad...

“I told you. That last time in the caves was because you looked so pathetic, begging me to fuck you. After that, I want a bed. Yours, mine, I don’t care. But I’m not riding you out here in the cold where anyone could see us.”

What if the others are trying to figure out what was going on with the fire—and where it went? They must come out her and get more than they bargained for?—

“I could beg again.”

Know what? It might work, too.

No.

No .

“You need to see a healer.” Thankfully, one of the vampires does a little supe healing on the side. I can only imagine what’ll cost us to deserve Hetty after dark, but for Conall, I’ll give her whatever she wants. And it’s blood... with the fire opal, maybe I

can still the fire in my blood long enough to feed her without burning her tongue.

Unless, of course, my possessive mate has something to say about that...

“Fair enough. But how about a kiss?”

I roll my eyes. Leaning down over him, I press a quick kiss to his lips.

“Thanks. Now what about Li'l Grump?”

I sputter. He didn't just... “Li'l Grump?”

Conall gestures down at his erection. “Does he get a kiss, too?”

I laugh. It explodes out of me, kind of like how the fire did after I climaxed.

My mate gives me a look of utmost satisfaction—even though poor Li'l Grump doesn't get that kiss... yet—as he sprawls out on the snow.

I lay down next to him. The fire raging through me is so consuming, I expect the snow to melt underneath me. Maybe it's because of the fire opal in my pocket keeping it contained. Maybe it's all my practice at learning control. Whatever it is, the snow cushions me, only the tiniest hint of a chill there to cool me off.

Conall lashes his hand out, grabbing my wrist. He doesn't pull me on top of him. I didn't expect him to. Despite how boldly he propositioned me after nearly getting gutted in the side, it's not about sex. Not really.

Instead, he tugs me until our sides are touching. I feel the heat of his naked body pouring off of him, and I've never felt hotter.

“I know what you’re doing,” I murmur to the stars above.

“What’s that?” he asks the night sky.

I lay my hand possessive on his thigh. “You know. And I appreciate it.”

Using humor to distract me? Covering up his own pain and overprotective tendencies? It seems like there’s a whole other side to Conall, and I’m just glad that we’ll have the rest of our lives for me to discover all of them.

We need to head back to Dyea. I need to reach out to Celeste and let her know that Linda was the witch hunter, and that she murdered a coven witch to take her place. I have to make sure Elise and the rest of the village is okay. My gauge of the fire tells me that it didn’t reach the sanctuary, and that’s assuming the spell protecting our borders would’ve even allowed the fire to gobble up the trees surrounding us.

Still, I don’t know how much the heat and the smoke and the orange glow made it to Dyea. Elsie will be worried, and the prey shifters will probably be shitting themselves without Conall there to act as their security.

Goodness knows the vampires in the town won’t do anything to help...

Conall needs a better patch job than what I did. He probably also needs a pair of pants because I don’t want anyone else getting a peek at what belongs to me now.

But all of that can wait. This is our mating night. With the moon hanging over our heads, shining down on us—happy, sated, and alive —Conall takes my hand in his. His claws tap the top of my hand gently before squeezing my palm, no fear at all that I’ll let loose the same fire that turned Linda to ash where she stood.

Of course not. Conall’s never been afraid of my fire, just like the only time my wolf

made me nervous was when I thought he was an honest-to-God Alaskan wolf coming to eat me.

Nope. It was just a wolf shifter who wants to eat me... but that can wait until later.

Everything can wait.

Because this moment right now?

It's ours , and I wouldn't want it any other way.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:41 am

SIX WEEKS LATER

The fireplace sold me.

Conall's house didn't have one before he met me. Despite the extreme Alaskan winters, he didn't need one. Wolf shifters run hot, too, and if his human form gets a little chilly, he has a built-in fur coat he can slip into when he shifts to his wolf.

But then I lit his tail on fire, and he realized his fated mate was a rare fire witch. Poor guy. Regardless of being born into the supe world, the only witches he's ever met before me were those who established Dyea, and none of them had magic like mine.

He figured he needed to get used to the heat. Believing that I had a fondness for flames, he built a masonry fireplace with his own two paws. It's pretty impressive, especially since he mainly used materials he found in the woods surrounding our village, and he made it to show that he accepted me .

Because even if I struggled with accepting that I was a fire witch, Conall never did.

Oh, no. My grumpy, former lone wolf mate just couldn't believe that I would ever choose him .

It's been six weeks since I did. Since the fateful full moon when he claimed me, and when I faced off against the fanatical witch hunter who was willing to burn down the entire sanctuary in order to smoke me out. Six weeks since Conall took a silver knife to the side to protect me. Six weeks since I flamed Linda, then discovered that I'm not just a fire witch.

I'm an elemental witch.

I don't just control the fire. I can conjure rain and, with a wave of my hand, summon wind. With the right focus, the ground beneath my feet does just what I want. I thought it was cool how I found the fire opal after I shot fire at the cave walls. That's nothing compared to how I've been able to use my powers to regrow the acres of fire that Linda's arson had damaged.

It's almost back to the way it was. No longer needing to explore the underground caves for fire opal, I've spent every day out in the woods fixing it. It's my way of showing my fellow villagers that having a fire witch in Dyea isn't a bad thing, now that there's no hiding what I am anymore.

The witch hunters will come back. I don't doubt it, but I'm not worried about it. I'll protect Dyea—I'll protect Elise and the other supes who live here—with every bit of magic I have.

And I can do that because I know that Conall will protect me .

I have his bite on my throat, claiming me as his forever mate. I have his ring on my finger, a nod to his understanding that, while I'm a witch, I spent the first twenty-nine years of my life convinced I was human.

Wolf shifters don't do divorce. Once they form a mate bond with their chosen partner, that's it for them. They're loyal, possessive, and devoted. Especially when they're a strong alpha like my Conall, a wolf shifter's love for their mate is all-consuming, like his has been for me since the moment he first recognized that I was his.

They don't do weddings, either, but for me, he's willing to go ahead with the human ceremony. As soon as the stab wound on his side healed up enough for him to take a run out of Dyea and into Skagway, he found me a gold ring so that humans and supes

alike will take one look at me and know that I couldn't be more taken.

And that's not all he bought from the local jeweler...

Silver is a no-no for supes. Like my engagement ring—that looks suspiciously like a wedding band—the chain I'm wearing around my neck is gold, with a shaped piece of fire opal hanging off of it so that I'm never without it.

All along, I thought that, if I found the crystal, it would be mystical enough to strip me of my powers. Turns out, I got that way wrong. When Celeste said that I wouldn't have to worry about my magic controlling me, it didn't mean I could get rid of it. It just meant that the fire opal made it so that I was in control.

I lift the smooth crystal, rubbing it between my thumb and pointer finger on my right hand. With my left, I waggle my other pointer finger at the fireplace.

It explodes into flames with a whoosh , and I grin.

Conall steps into my back, arms wrapping around my waist. He nuzzles the top of my hair with his chin.

“Impressive,” he rumbles.

“I know,” I say impishly. Releasing the fire opal, I reach up so that I can cup the edge of his stubbled jaw. “How was your run?”

Run. What my mate is really doing is shifting to his wolf so that he can patrol the entire border of our hidden sanctuary, keeping tabs on our villagers, and making sure that there aren't any signs of witch hunters lurking around.

My mate blames himself. No one could have guessed that Linda was a witch hunter until she blew her cover, but Conall is convinced that he should've known. He

should've been able to stop her before she struck that match—or before I had to use my fire magic to put her down after she attacked him with her knife.

It's not his fault. It's mine, but if he'll hold me close at night, telling me that it isn't, I'll do the same for him.

Conall is an alpha wolf shifter. So I'm still a complete newbie when it comes to all things supernatural. I've learned enough to know that—like how Elise can't help how mortals are drawn to her vampiric nature and beauty—Conall has this need to protect those he considers his. Me. Dyea. We're his pack, and as I come to terms with my magic, it's amazing, watching my Mr. Grump realize he's not as much of a lone wolf as he thought he was.

“Uneventful,” he says, turning so he can kiss my palm. Kiss it, then breathe in deeply, taking my scent into his lungs. It's a wolf thing, and though it freaked me out in the beginning, I'm getting used to it. “Jenny was playing dead again, but Clive was in charge of watching over her until she snapped out of it. Oh, and Mo is making a fish stew for dinner in the canteen if you want to eat with the others.”

Mo is a penguin shifter and a recent addition to Dyea. Left to his own devices, he'd make fish for every meal, including dessert, but he's so cute, when he offered to work as a canteen chef, no one could refuse him. And I like fish, too. But I like spending time with my mate more.

Fate's a funny thing. If you would've told me, back when I was a 'human', that I would be playing house with a guy I barely knew, I never would've believed it. Now look at me. Since the full moon that I let him claim me and our undeniable bond sprang into existence, we haven't spent a single night apart.

For the first couple of them—after the arson and the stabbing—he stayed with me and Elise. Watching him bleed like that freaked me the hell out, and if Conall had any doubts that I cared about him, they were long gone by the time he was all healed up.

That's when he asked me whether he should go ahead and move my stuff to his place, or if I would prefer him to just stay with me here.

Well, like I said, the fireplace sold me. That, and knowing we can bang to our hearts' content without scalding poor Elise's ears.

Hmm...

"We could do that. Or," I offer, using my thumbnail to scratch through his thick scruff, "we can stay in, find something in the kitchen, make s'mores, and fuck in front of the fireplace."

Hey. He built it because he thought I'd like it, and I do.

Like him, too.

Fate, huh? Looks like Conall's goddess got it right because I've never been so happy as when I decided to go all in with my mate.

Living with him isn't that big of an adjustment for me. I've lived with roommates my entire adult life, from the friends I roomed with in Queens, to Elise in Clarity, then in Dyea. Though Elise seemed a little wistful when I told her I was moving in with Conall, she didn't mind the idea of staying by herself.

I thought she'd head back to Clarity. The initial threat of the first witch hunter's partner coming after me is over with. Now that I'm Conall's mate, I'm not leaving Dyea, but Elise could have if she wanted to. The only thing keeping her here is me, and as the one vampire living in the village without a consistent blood source—except for the small prey non-shifter animals she snacks on—she'd probably be better off returning to the Fang City.

I don't want her to. To live in this supe sanctuary with my best friend and the

scowling wolf who snuck in and somehow stole my heart... that seems pretty perfect to me. So when she didn't make any move to leave Dyea in the last couple of weeks, I decided to keep my mouth shut and just enjoy life while I can.

If there's one thing I've learned, it's that it can change at any freaking moment.

Like now?—

Conall stiffens, and not in a good way. His body tightens behind me, though that's the only reaction I get to my proposition before our front door flies open.

Elise comes dashing into the house, shoving the door closed behind her. Her eyes are wide, her usually perfectly-styled hair a windblown mess as she whips her head around, searching for us.

"I'm not here," she gasps, and I've never heard her sound so frantic and nervous before. Her fang worrying her bottom lip, she shakes her head while holding up her hands. "I need to hide. Bridget, where can I hide? I know! Kitchen." She dashes across the room, pausing in the entryway that leads to the kitchen before repeating, "I'm not here," and disappearing into the other room.

I blink.

What the...

Ducking out of Conall's embrace, I turn so that I can dash after Elise.

"Go," he murmurs. "Your friend needs you."

He's trying. After our mating, I finally got him to stop referring to Elise as my 'dead' friend. This house is his personal territory, specifically for Conall and his mate, but there was a reason why he didn't actually say anything about Elise's approach until

she was running inside. If I live here, she's welcome to visit whenever she wants, and he had to get used to that.

I squeeze his upper arm in appreciation, then manage three steps before he growls.

The deep rumble stops me before I take the fourth. I glance back at him. "Conall?"

"Predator," growls my wolf.

"What? Where?"

"Heading right this way."

A predator? I thought Conall was the only predator in Dyea. Unless he means?—

"Another vampire?"

Now that I know about the beef between wolf shifters and vampires, and how Conall considered me his mate from the moment he first caught my scent, it makes sense why the other vamps in the village kept their distance from me and Elise. I honestly thought it was because they were just too snooty to welcome a vampire fresh out of her Fang City—and I haven't stopped thinking that considering Elise lives alone now and they still don't want anything to do with her—which makes me wonder why one of them would be chasing my best friend inside mine and Conall's home...

"No. It's not a vampire. Unless my nose is on the fritz, I think it's a bear."

Okay. Bear. It's Alaska. There are bears here. I haven't been unlucky enough to run into one yet, but Conall wasn't kidding when he told me the wilds were dangerous.

Well. So am I.

I flex my fingers, a pair of fireballs enclosing my hands. “Whoever it is, I’ll get rid of them. A little singed fur will get this bear to understand he doesn’t want to mess with us.” Switching directions, I march toward the front door before my mate can stop me as I tell him, “Watch my back.”

“I always will.”

I know.

Conall protects me.

And I protect Elise.

Watch me burn .

My mate has learned his lesson. Between his tail being lit up and Linda’s silver knife getting him in the side, he knows better than to try to challenge me. However, he’s still a possessive, protective male. He’s right behind me as I fling open the door, prepared to face one of the Alaskan grizzlies lumbering their way out of the woods and over to our place.

Only it’s not a bear. At least, not a real one.

It’s a man .

He’s big. Brawny. Tall . Close to six-and-a-half-feet without any shoes on, he’s wearing a pair of low-slung jeans and nothing else. He’s tanned all over, a head of shaggy dark hair falling forward into his honey-colored eyes as he searches over my head, swiveling his as he glares inside the house.

And that’s when I notice the two healed-over puncture wounds on the side of his neck and gape at him a little.

I know what those are. Those are mate marks. Conall has something similar-ish. Just like how he bit me to finalize our bond, he kept the echoes of the scar from when I burned his tail as a way to show that his mate marked him. As quick as shifters heal, they can actually choose not to. Conall wanted proof that I was his, even if it was a burn on his ass cheek.

This big fella obviously kept these as his mate marks. But they're more than that. They're also fang marks. Vampire fang marks.

Conall sniffs. Another growl. "This is my territory, bear. What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"What am I doing?" rumbles the big guy. "I'm here for my mate."

His what ?

My gaze returns to the silver points on the side of his tanned throat. I think of the possessive gleam in his honey-colored eyes, so similar to how Conall looks at me. The way Elise came rushing in here, hiding, as though afraid when the delicate vampire is never afraid...

I'm here for my mate .

He's here for Elise .

Oh, hell no. If I thought Peter stalking her in Clarity was bad, that's nothing compared to a predatory shifter male who is convinced you're his mate.

Trust me, I know. And while it worked out for me and Conall once I got past him pissing a territorial warning in my old backyard, I never ran away from him, hiding out in my best friend's kitchen.

I saved her from Peter when I was human.

As a witch? I can totally take on a bear.

With Conall at my side, I can do anything.

Glaring up at the bear shifter, I lift my hands.

I am Bridget Hayes.

I'm an elemental witch with a temper, a sexy mate who will challenge this intruder if I don't first, and a protective streak a mile wide who owes a lot to her vampire best friend.

My grin becomes a daring smirk.

Light 'em up.