



Wished Upon a Cursed Moon (Cursed Moon Academy #1)

Author: *Jessica Sorensen*

Category: YA&Teen

Description: For as long as I can remember, I've been cursed with dangerous magical powers that I've struggled to keep under control. I believed I was the only one of my kind, but then Wylder, Phoenix, Kaiden, and Nico show up out of nowhere and tell me I'm a witch who should be attending Cursed Moon Academy. I also discover I'm the heart of their coven and that I'm bound to each of them. I've never been in love, and now I'm supposed to be the center of their world. That concept seems impossible.

That's not even my biggest problem. Even though I've found my coven, I'm still not safe. I'm being hunted by a monster who wants to use my powers to do awful things. And he's getting closer to finding me.

Total Pages (Source): 27

1

EMBERLYNN

At this point in my life, I've concluded that my existence is a curse. I'm not being overdramatic or metaphorical or anything like that. I genuinely believe I'm a walking curse—that what I can do is a curse. Maybe that's why my life is shit. Perhaps that's why every damn day I have to walk into this mundane world and get mocked, shoved, laughed at—bullied, basically.

It's gotten to where I don't speak to anyone. I just pop in a set of earbuds, crank up my music, and exist inside the lyrics and beats until I go to school and class starts. Then, when class ends, I repeat the cycle—day in and day out, over and over again, like a scratched record. Only, I'm more than scratched. I'm warped and chipped, and I can't even play music.

I am broken .

People have tried to fix me. Well, my head, anyway. They believe that I'm a soon-to-be eighteen-year-old suffering from depression due to being abandoned by my parents when I was only five years old. And maybe that's true. But those aren't the only reasons why I wake up every day, throw on as many layers as I can, tuck my head underneath a hoodie, slip on some sunglasses, and let the screaming lyrics make my eardrums bleed.

That level of depression stems from the years after my parents decided they didn't want me anymore when he had a hold of me and made me his prisoner. I don't know

his name, but when I was younger, I referred to him as Shadow Man, mostly because darkness always surrounded him. What knowledge I have of him is that he's a total and complete sadist, wealthy, and inhuman. But his physical characteristics resemble a human. The things he can do, though ...

I shove those thoughts out of my mind as my stomach burns with the idea of remembering things I don't want to.

I collect my backpack, slip on my shoes, grab my phone, put on my sunglasses, and head downstairs to grab some breakfast before making the short walk to school.

When I enter the kitchen and see Eva, my foster mother for the past three months, and her son, Liam, I crank down the volume on my music.

Liam is a year younger than me, and he's a real piece of work. At school, he's the guy who slaps girls' asses, shoves smaller kids into lockers, and struts around like he thinks he's some sort of king. But he's simply a creep and a bully who's pissed off at the world because his dad bailed on him and his mom a couple of years ago. I knew it when I walked into this house and saw his aura.

Typically, auras vary between forest green and brown. I've learned that these colors usually mean the person is greedy, self-absorbed, jealous, and cruel.

I've been able to see auras for as long as I can remember, but it took me a while to figure out what the illuminated colors of light around people meant. Shadow Man wasn't aware I could see them, and I've always felt glad that I at least have one part of me that he's never been able to get his murderous hands on. But he's aware of all my other "gifts."

I use the term "gifts" lightly because they are part of why I call myself a walking curse.

Right now, some of those gifts are whispering in my chest, begging to be brought out as Liam glances at me and a smirk plays on his lips.

“Nice choice of clothes,” he sneers as he prepares a protein shake in a blender. He drinks one every morning, making the house stink of kale and beets. “Did you steal them from that homeless woman who hangs out near the school?”

I bite down on my tongue to avoid saying anything to him. It’s how I exist because speaking usually leads to something disastrous happening, like me getting hurt. Or worse—I’ve even hurt people.

Eva doesn’t even remove her gaze from the mixture of batter she’s stirring. “Liam, be nice.”

This is her normal reaction, as if she wants to pretend to play the role of a foster mother but doesn’t desire to be one. She probably does it for the extra money she gets for putting a roof over my head. This is pretty common for some parents. Not that all of them are bad. I’ve had a few who were okay. I’ve also had more than a few worse than Eva and Liam.

I grab a few granola bars from the pantry. Liam watches me the entire time, his aura flickering from brown to green to brown to green, back and forth, like he’s having an internal battle with how mean he wants to be. I think part of it stems from my living with him. I once overheard him talking to someone on the phone about how much he hated sharing his house with a loser who looks like she belongs in a trash can. Yeah, he’s really clever with his cruel remarks, let me tell you.

I pity the people at my school because Liam will be in complete asshole form today. The crappy part is that he’s good-looking, and he knows it, with blond hair, blue eyes. He’s tall, lean, a football star, and despite his assholery, he has a ton of friends and a different girlfriend each week.

I do my best to avoid his obsessive gaze as I stuff a granola bar in the pocket of my plaid jacket then unwrap another one before heading toward the doorway to leave.

“Don’t you want any pancakes, Emberlynn?” Eva calls out after me.

“No, thank you,” I tell her, my stomach grumbling in protest.

For a moment, I consider changing my mind, but she says, “That’s probably a good thing since I only made enough for Liam and me. ”

I walk away and out the front door to start the short mile walk to school. It’s raining, but only a drizzle, and I’m already wearing a hoodie, so it’s no big deal.

I trot down the front porch and onto the sidewalk, my clunky boots splashing in the puddles. Then I crank up the music and get lost in the lyrics as much as possible. It’s better this way—my solitude and isolation from others. If I don’t do this, people can get hurt.

I also want to avoid revealing my powers to anyone, not only because I could end up in some sort of government experiment but also because I worry that Shadow Man will find me.

The thought of him makes magical heat swelter inside my veins.

“Shit,” I mumble as raindrops splatter against my cheeks. “Stop thinking about him, Emberlynn. Just stop.”

I focus on that—making the heat go away because if I unleash it, it’ll be bad. Gradually, my body cools down, and I release a breath.

“Thank god,” I mutter.

I'm starting to relax when smack ; something hits me in the chest with so much force it knocks the wind out of me. Gasping for air, I glance down. A layer of chunky green liquid is covering the front of my jacket, and a mug is lying in a puddle near my feet.

Liam's protein shake?

I look up and spot him hanging out of the passenger side window of his best friend's Jeep, and he has a shirt-eating smirk on his face.

"Freak!" he shouts loud enough that I can hear him over the music. "Why don't you do everyone a favor and just end yourself already? Only, this time, do a better job, loser!" With that, the Jeep peels away, the tires spinning against the asphalt.

Tears burn my eyes as I self-consciously touch my wrist, where my scars are hidden beneath my long-sleeved shirt. I put them there when I was fifteen and felt like I couldn't take another heavy breath. I failed, though, and now I'm marked with the agony I carry inside.

I almost always cover the scars up. One time, though, when it was hot during the summer, I made the mistake of rolling up my sleeves. I didn't think anyone was home and had left my bedroom to go to the bathroom but, apparently, Liam had returned home without me realizing it, and I crossed paths with him in the hallway.

When he saw the scars on my wrist, he laughed and said, "Seems about right." Then he walked off.

As my gaze descends to the green protein shake on my clothes, any amount of control I had over the heat inside my chest dissolves. It's been years since it overtook me, and when it happened, I vowed never to use it again. And for good reasons.

But right now, I can't remember what those reasons are.

As the blazing sensation builds inside me, I almost surrender to what it craves and release it. But right at the brink, when I can feel it prickle at my fingertips, I rein it back.

I manage to get most of it tucked away, but some of the raging energy slips out. Then, as the ground starts to vibrate, panic sets in, and I run forward as the ground splits open.

Page 2

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2

WYLDER

“Turn the music up a little!” a guy with fiery orange hair shouts as he dances around the living room. “I love this song!”

“Shut the fuck up,” Phoenix, one of my best friends, yells.

He’s a cranky bastard, but no one ever calls him out on it, mostly because he’s a death whisper, so everyone is terrified of him.

A death whisper is basically what it sounds like—someone who can send death on anyone, if they want to.

My power is a healer, so the opposite of what Phoenix can do. But I think that might be why I’m okay with being his friend. Where he can hurt, I can heal.

We’ve been friends our entire lives, but we were destined to become friends even before that. We weren’t aware of that until we turned twelve and it was announced that we’d be in the same coven. It’s a rite of passage for all witches and warlocks.

A year before we reach our teens, we attend tegere electionem cermonia , a fancy way of saying a Coven Selection Ceremony. The ceremonies are creepy as hell, all rituals and magic, but in the end, the gods and goddesses of mates arrive from the smoke and ash scattered across the land and declare who will become the new covens. It’s supposed to be a darkly wonderful time, and it might have been, if things

hadn't gone down the way they did. I mean, it started okay, with them selecting my three best friends, Phoenix, Kaiden, and Nico, and me into the same coven. All we had to do was cross our fingers that our fifth and final member would be someone amazing.

Covens contain five members, either four girls and a guy or four guys and a girl, so we knew that the next step was for the gods and goddesses of mates to select a girl to be part of ours. This would be our heart . Except our heart was dead.

It took the council a while to realize this after the name Emberlynn Fairfield was announced, and no witch or warlock knew who she was. Confusion fell over the crowd as Phoenix, Kaiden, Nico and I sat in the circle of candles, flower petals, ash, smoke, and blood, dressed in our hooded cloaks, waiting to see who this girl was.

A day later, Addison, a council member who oversees all laws and rules in our world, showed up at my house and informed us of the bad news.

“After some digging around,” she said as she sat on the sofa across from my mother, “we’ve discovered that Emberlynn Fairfield died when she was five years old. We’re not sure how she passed away or how her family managed to become an unknown presence in the Wiccan world, but I assure you, we’re looking into it.”

My mother burst into sobs, and Addison patted her hand. “This has never happened before, but we’ll figure out why it did. I can promise you that ... And maybe it’s just a mistake.”

My heart felt like it had been ripped in two. It was probably the most painful time in my life, and the first time I never healed myself, for reasons I didn’t understand at the time.

But, eventually, I moved on. Or, well, as much as I can under these circumstances. If

I pay attention to my body for long enough, I can feel this hollow sensation in my chest that I'm certain is connected to the fact that the heart of our coven—our heart—is dead.

No one has ever given us any real answers as to why this happened for the first time in witch and warlock history, so we've been left to accept that we'll never be a complete coven. Sure, we're still a coven, just unmated and not as powerful. Well, we are still powerful. Phoenix, Kaiden, Nico, and I come from extremely prevailing bloodlines, so we're still an above-average coven, even without our heart. But we were supposed to be more than this broken mess we are right now.

Take Phoenix, for instance. We're currently at a party, and he should be having fun, getting drunk and high, and maybe even hooking up with another creature. Instead, he's glaring at everyone, and I can see in his eyes that he's seeking a fight. While he was always kind of an asshole before the coven ceremony, after it, he's spent most of his time being pissed off at the world.

"Dude, get that look off your face," I tell him then take a long swallow of my mystic punch.

He and I are sitting at a long table in the center of a massive kitchen that belongs to Haley Pretterford, the girl throwing this little shindig. Witches, warlocks, vampires, werewolves, and faeries are scattered around this room and the adjacent living room. They're close to our age and are hanging out, dancing, drinking, making out—having fun. Someone has cast an illuminating spell, so streams of colorful, glittering magic spill through the air, and music plays from the stereo.

"I don't know why I let you drag me here." Phoenix grimaces, the scowl on his face like a tattoo at this point. "I hate parties. And being around people. And music."

I set the cup on the table. "So, all things fun."

He blasts me with a glare, and I smirk; the two of us like night and day.

“This party is lame,” Nico announces as he approaches the table. He pulls out a chair and plops down in it. “We should’ve gone to the party at Willows Bay.”

“You just want to go there because Mia’s there.” Phoenix rolls his eyes, reaching for the shot of werewolf whiskey he poured earlier .

Nico shrugs. “So? There’s nothing wrong with wanting to get laid. You should try it. Maybe you can fuck your anger out.” He smirks at Phoenix.

Phoenix flips him the middle finger, downs his drink, and shoves back from the table. “I’m out of here.”

“No getting into fights tonight,” Kaiden warns as he steps up to the table.

I don’t know where he was. My best guess is the library, as that’s where he typically goes.

Out of all of us, he’s the most responsible. Just like Phoenix is extremely angry and Nico is the biggest flirt. And me? I’m the one who tries to keep everyone calm. Although it gets exhausting, someone has to do it, or we’ll all end up drowning in the pain we pretend doesn’t exist. Just like we’re all pretending that Phoenix isn’t going to get as drunk and high as a faerie on Moonlight Night. Then he’ll go down to Deadman & Shadows Alley to participate in fights until he’s so worn out and bloody he can’t focus on anything else. And Nico will find Mia, or some other creature, and lose himself in meaningless sex until morning rolls around. Then he’ll wake up hungover and feeling like shit. Kaiden will go back to his place and focus on reading books that he secretly hopes will give us answers as to why the gods and goddesses chose a dead witch for our heart , something he doesn’t think we know he does, but we all do.

And me? I'll return to my place, fall asleep, then wake up and smile until the corners of my mouth ache because what else am I supposed to do? If I lose control over my emotions for even one second, I'll break. I know because it happened when I was fifteen. It was the day I almost died.

The day I almost took my own life.

But I failed, and now I'm here, and I promised my mother and the guys I'd never do it again, so that's what keeps me going—a damn promise.

“Whatever,” Phoenix grumbles then storms off, shoving people out of his way.

“You know he's going to the fights, right?” I tell Kaiden as he sinks into a chair.

Kaiden massages his temples. “I know, but I had to try. I'll probably send Star to keep an eye on him.”

Star is Kaiden's brownie, which is a tiny, faerie-like creature he inherited from his father. Brownies are loyal and obey their owners. That can be a problem, though, if the owner is cruel. But Kaiden is a nice guy, unlike his father.

“Good idea.” I finish my drink then stand up. “I'm going home so I can get some rest.”

Nico is scanning the room. “I wonder if Kassandra is here.”

I roll my eyes, and Kaiden shakes his head.

“You don't have to screw every creature we know,” Kaiden tells him as he reclines back in the chair. “It's making our time at the academy a pain in the ass.”

“Good thing we graduate in just a few months, right?” Nico retorts with an impish grin.

It fits him since he’s part faerie. It’s really uncommon in the witch world to come from two different types of creatures’ blood. It usually means that someone in the coven had an affair, or all the members of the coven except for one died. Nico is a product of the first and, because of that, his home life has been far from pleasant.

Kaiden responds to Nico’s comment with his eyes narrowing, his lips parting. But I don’t hear a word that leaves his mouth because this horrible, agonizing sensation pierces my chest, and I cry out.

Kaiden’s brows fleetingly knit, but then he’s hunching over and groaning in pain as he clutches at the edge of the table until the wood splinters apart. Nico starts quivering as he squeezes his eyes shut. I don’t see Phoenix anymore, but I wonder if he can feel it, too.

Can everyone in the room?

I concentrate on my surroundings enough to peer around. No one else is buckling over, and everyone is gaping at us.

As quickly as the pain emerges, it fades into a dull throb.

“What the hell was that?” Nico breathes out with his hand pressed to his chest.

“I have no idea,” I mutter, struggling to catch my breath as I stand upright.

I look to Kaiden for an answer, but he says nothing, glancing around at the attention we’ve drawn instead. Then, with his jaw set tight, he rises to his feet. “Let’s go somewhere else and talk.”

I nod, and Nico and I follow him.

Everyone continues to gawk at us as we make our way out of the house .

When we step out onto the porch, Phoenix is standing at the bottom, looking as pale as the moonlight. “Something happened,” he tells us while massaging his chest.

“I know.” Kaiden starts down the stairs. “We felt it, too.”

Phoenix keeps rubbing his chest. “What the hell was it?”

“I have no idea,” Kaiden says. “Maybe?—”

All of our phones go off.

“Could this night get any weirder?” Nico mutters as we dig our phones from our pockets.

“Mine is from the council,” I say as I read the text. “They’re requesting I come in right now. I’m guessing you guys’ messages are the same.”

They all nod, so we put our phones away and leave the property, heading toward the road leading to the main section of town, where the council building is located.

Our town is small, with quaint shops and stores lining the main road. At the edge of town, where the streets fade into rolling hills, the academy sits perched on the highest peak, the high, arched roof and towers shadows against the nighttime sky. This is where we go to school during the day with all sorts of creatures our age.

“What the hell do you think they want?” Phoenix asks, scuffing his boots against the dirt.

“I have no idea.” A hint of worry transpires in Kaiden’s eyes.

Worrying isn’t a regular occurrence for him, so seeing it on his face makes me uneasy

“I guess we’ll find out soon,” I chime in, raking my fingers through my hair as my gaze strays to the sky.

It’s clear tonight, the silver and lavender stars twinkling to their full potential. It’s a beautiful sight and makes me wish I had stayed home and drawn instead of going out. But then I’d end up spending the night worrying about Phoenix picking a fight with the wrong warlock or Nico pissing off some witch’s boyfriend.

None of us speak as we finish the hike to the massive, gothic-like, two-story building that has black columns bordering it and a wide staircase that rises up to a stained-glass door entrance.

We hesitate before entering. We’re all a bit apprehensive about this.

When we enter the domed ceiling foyer, the receptionist greets us then ushers us into one of the small, private rooms with a table and chairs.

Nico drums his fingers against the table as we wait for someone to come in and tell us what the hell is going on. “This is making me uneasy,” he says as he slumps back in the chair.

“There’s no need to be uneasy.” Addison, the councilwoman who told us our heart was dead, whisks into the room with a folder in her hand. She’s wearing the council members’ standard uniform—a maroon cloak, the shade matching her hair.

“Hey, Addison,” Nico greets her with a charming smile.

I resist an eye roll when Addison reciprocates. But then, as if Nico suddenly remembers what happened tonight, his smile falters.

Addison's smile evaporates, as well, as she takes a seat and drops the folder on the table. Then she looks at us, annoyingly dragging out the silence before she says, "I'm sure you're all wondering why you're here." She overlaps her fingers. "Before I get into it, I want to make sure you're all prepared for some startling news."

"More startling than finding out your heart was dead before you ever met her." Phoenix leans in, rests his arms on the table, and gives Addison a hard look. "Get over the dramatics, Addison, and spit it out. None of us need to prepare ourselves for what won't be the worst news we've ever heard."

"Fair enough." She moves her fingers between the split in the folder. "As you all know, we never stopped looking into your circumstances. The problem is that the gods and goddesses have never selected a deceased heart before. And because of that, we haven't had much luck finding anything out. However, a few days ago, an incident happened in a small town just outside of New York. The humans are referring to it as a sinkhole, but a witch who lives in the neighborhood and reported it to us assured us that it was definitely caused by magic. So, we started looking into it, assuming that a rogue witch or warlock did it. However"—sucking in a breath, she opens the folder—"we discovered that it wasn't. It was a witch who's living in foster care. She goes by the name of ... Emberlynn Fairfield. We don't know why she's there, how she went undiscovered for so long, or if she's even aware that she's a witch. What we do know is that she's the witch who was selected to be your coven's heart."

My heart is beating so loudly that it's all I can hear. I can't move. Can't think. Can't breathe. I think I'm in shock. Phoenix and Nico are in the same state, but Kaiden manages to keep his composure, on the outside, anyway.

“Let me see the file,” he tells Addison after clearing his throat.

She slides it across the table to him, and he just stares at it.

Eventually, I snap out of my trance, get up, and walk over to stand behind his chair to better look at the file. Nico and Phoenix follow suit, and we all crowd around Kaiden.

Inside the folder is a piece of paper with some information, but not much. Attached to the paper is a photo of our heart , but we can't see much of her due to the excessive clothing she's wearing. She also has the hood of her jacket drawn over her head, and she's wearing sunglasses.

“She looks sad,” I state, my chest tightening.

“Yeah, she does,” Nico utters as he brushes his fingers across the photo.

Silence skips, and then Kaiden says, “It doesn't say what her gifts are.”

“Because we don't know yet,” Addison explains. “Hopefully, we can get more answers when we bring her here.”

Kaiden tears his gaze off the paper and fixes it on Addison. “ Who's bringing her in?”

“One of the reaper teams,” she replies with a hint of reluctance. “I know those are used to drag in rogues, but since we don't know what she can do, we think it'll be best if the team that went and got her is equipped to handle difficult situations. You know, just in case.”

“Do you seriously think I'm going to allow you to send the reapers to get our heart ?” Kaiden's tone is calm in a scary as fuck sort of way. While most witches and warlocks wouldn't dare speak to a council member this way, Kaiden can get away

with it because his family is one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in the wiccan world. “You can call off your team. We’ll go get her.” He stands up then strides for the doorway with the folder tucked under his arm.

Nico, Phoenix, and I all trade a look, and then we hurry after him.

“Kaiden,” Addison calls out.

He ignores her, exiting the room.

She doesn’t follow us, and no one utters a word until we’re outside and off the land that surrounds the building. The town is empty tonight, except for a few open bars, and music is trickling through the air.

“How is this possible?” Nico breaks the silence as we near the path that weaves through the forest. About a half mile down, it’ll veer right and lead to the mansion Kaiden lives in. “Do you think she’s intentionally kept herself hidden?”

Kaiden clutches the folder. “I don’t know. This stupid folder has hardly any information. But I’m not surprised. The council is useless, even though no one seems to realize that. ”

“Some do,” Nico argues as we arrive at the border of the land that encases Kaiden’s property. He stuffs his hands into his pockets. “Maybe one day they’ll be enough that we can overthrow them.”

Great. We’ve gone from finding our heart to discussing mutiny.

“Why does this even matter right now?” I ask with more bite in my tone than usual. “We should just be focusing on getting her out of there. I mean, did you hear anything Addison said? She’s been in foster care this entire time.”

The Wiccan world has a foster care system, and while I don't know much about the human world, our foster care has a dreadful reputation.

We halt in front of the brick entryway that domes above the double front doors of Kaiden's three-story home. The lantern light casts across the yawn, creating eerie shadows amongst the trees.

"He's right," Kaiden says as he reaches for the doorknob. "We need to put all our energy into getting our heart and bringing her home. We can worry about revolting later." He shoves open the door and enters the house.

"What are we going to do?" Nico asks as we wander into the foyer that's lit up by a gothic-like chandelier. "Just show up and grab her? Because that seems like a terrible idea."

Kaiden shucks his jacket off. "I know that. We need to be cautious. If she is aware of her powers, she might attack us. And if she doesn't know about them, we might scare her, and she could try to take off." He tosses his jacket onto a nearby bench. "I don't want to frighten her. I want to make things as easy as possible."

Nico rolls up his shirt sleeves. "Agreed."

"What if she knows about us and doesn't care?" Phoenix asks as he crosses his arms. "Are we just supposed to forgive her?"

"Why do you always have to be a pessimist?" Nico shakes his head at Phoenix. "I doubt she knows she's a witch and just chooses to live with humans."

Kaiden doesn't appear convinced. "Despite what the situation is, we need to remain composed. Not only because of what could happen with her, but this entire situation reeks of something darker."

That gets all of our attentions.

“What do you mean?” I ask, facing him.

Kaiden pats the folder. “Don’t you find it odd that the council couldn’t find any info on her, and then, suddenly, minutes after we all feel this agony in our chest, we get called down to headquarters so they can inform us they’ve found our heart , who was supposed to be dead but somehow isn’t?”

“Are you saying you don’t think that woman in the folder is our heart ?” Nico asks, pointing at the folder.

“No, I think she is. And I think what we felt tonight was a connection to her.” Kaiden starts toward the broad stairway. “But I’m suspicious that perhaps the council may have known that she was alive all along, and that connection we felt tonight spooked them enough that they decided to tell us. It’s something I’ve wondered for a while—that maybe they’ve been lying all this time. Why they’ve kept her from us, I don’t know, but I’m making it my mission to find out.” He pauses at the bottom of the stairs and glances at us. “After we save her.”

His choice of words causes my stomach to drop. Save her?

Save her from what exactly?

I guess we’re about to find out.

EMBERLYNN

The news is blaming the crack I put in the street as a sinkhole. It resembles one, except for the lavender residue that was left on the broken pieces of asphalt. But everyone is pretending that's normal. I'm just grateful I regained control of my ability before something worse happened. I almost fell into the crack, but I jumped far enough away at the last second.

Needless to say, I spent the next few days drained of energy.

That's not too strange. What is a little bizarre, though, is three days later, I'm woken up by a stabbing sensation in my chest that's so painful I wonder if my powers have decided to melt my insides. But as rapidly as the pain arose, it fizzled, and I suddenly felt okay again.

Like more than okay, actually.

Like I kind of feel lighter and, dare I say, calm.

But Liam, being Liam, ruins that for me.

"Hey, freak," he sneers as I trot downstairs to leave for school. He's perched on a bench in the foyer and is putting on his sneakers, but he pauses to smirk at me. "Nice outfit. Did you buy it from a secondhand store?"

I ignore him, reaching into my pocket to turn up the music, but not before hearing him say, “Too bad that sinkhole didn’t swallow you?—”

The music smothers the sound of his voice.

I veer away from him and enter the kitchen to grab a bagel. By the time I return to the foyer, he’s gone. Relief washes over me, and I walk outside into the cool air, closing the door behind me.

Once I arrive at the sideway, I turn right and start walking to school. The sky is cloudy but rain-free, and the air is crisp. On my way, I have to pass by the crack in the ground, but I do my best to avoid looking at it, not wanting to be reminded of what happened.

Of what I did.

Of what Liam did to me with the mug.

I have a bruise on my chest from where it hit me.

I hate him for it, but if I focus on that too much, warmth will spill through my veins. So, I don’t allow myself to think at all. Instead, I let the song lyrics drown my mind in the angst. It’s all I try to think about, and I’m doing a decent job of it until the Jeep rolls up beside the curb .

It’s déjà vu all over again.

I tense, preparing to reel around and sprint in the other direction—take the long way to school—but then the passenger window rolls down.

Liam sticks his head out, and his lips move, but I can’t hear him over the music.

Worried, I turn all the way around and start power walking in the opposite direction.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot the Jeep following me up the street. Liam still has his head out the window and his aura darkens to an alarming shade of green. Then the Jeep slams to an abrupt stop, and the passenger door flies open. Liam jumps out and storms toward me.

Panic courses through me, and I start to run, but he catches me by the arms and jerks me to a stop so violently that one of my earbuds falls out.

“You little freak. You think you can ignore me when you leach off my family?” He digs his fingers so deeply into my arm that I’m sure I’ll have bruises. “My father leaves, and my mother tries to replace him with your disgusting face so that we can earn some money. And all you do is taint our house with your ugly presence. Well, you know what? Fuck you. It’s time to pay your debt, trash can.” He yanks me with him as he ducks down a path that weaves between two houses.

I dig my heels into the ground and attempt to jerk away from him, but he tightens his grip and wrenches me hard enough that my shoulder pops. My hoodie falls off my head, and so do my sunglasses. Even though it’s just a sliver of fabric, I feel so exposed.

A sneer curls at his lips. “Huh? Who would’ve thought that exists underneath all those ugly clothes. Lucky me.”

“Let me go,” I warn, my voice hoarse from the limited time I spend using it.

I jerk my arm while planting my feet against the ground, but it’s useless—he keeps tugging me forward. I try to hit him, but he dodges it then swings me around in front of him, yanks my back against his body, and pins me against him.

“Let me go?—”

He slaps his hand over my mouth. Then he releases a chilling laugh as we reach the alleyway. On the other side, just behind the subdivision, is a thick tree line that bleeds into a forest.

“So, she does know how to speak,” he taunts as he drags me across the street and toward the woods, and I kick and fight the entire way. “Good. I’m glad your mouth works, because I’m about to abuse the hell out of it.”

I continue to fight like hell and stab my fingernails into his hands as we reach the forest’s edge.

He winces but only tightens his grasp on me. I know what will happen if we get into the seclusion of the trees and, for the first time in my life, I consider intentionally using my ability. But that could lead to so much worse than hurting him, so I bite down on his hand.

“Dammit!” he shouts, his hold on me loosening.

“Help me!” I scream then bash my foot into his shin .

He stumbles back, cursing in pain. When I reel around, his aura is bloodred and bleeding across everything. His nostrils flare, his lips curl as he straightens, and then he smacks me upside the head.

My ears ring as the world spins like a cracked-out merry-go-round. I stumble as heat swells through my body. I can feel it biting—my powers are begging to come out.

I’m going to lose control again, and this time, I’m unsure if I’ll be able to pull back.

The most terrifying part is that I'm not sure if I want to.

"Let her go—now—before I cut your throat," a voice slices through my internal struggle and engulfs me like a summer breeze.

The voice is deep, masculine, and rippling with so much rage that I know their aura will be blazing red when I turn around.

Liam snickers as he peers over my shoulder down the alleyway. "Who the hell do you think you are? I don't have to listen to you, bro." He balls his hands into fists. "Do yourself a favor and turn around and pretend you didn't see any of this."

Reclaiming my balance, I peer over my shoulder while clutching my cheek. My surroundings are still blurry, so I blink a few times. Gradually, my vision focuses.

Standing across the street is a guy around my age. He's dressed in black pants and a short-sleeve gray shirt. He has an eyebrow piercing, and wisps of his dark hair hang in his stormy gray eyes that are locked on Liam. While it's startling how gorgeous he is, what's even more shocking is the color of his aura. It's silver. I've never seen that color before. And even stranger is that a shadow is woven around it.

What the hell?

"You want to know who I think I am?" the guy says, his tone chillingly cold. "I'm the guy who's gonna make you bleed out all over the street if you don't get away from her right now."

"You think so, huh?" Liam calls out to him, acting tough, but his voice carries a wobble to it. "And how the hell are you planning on doing that? It's one-to-one, man, and I'm captain of my wrestling team, and I took State."

The guy cocks his head to the side. “I literally have no clue what the hell you’re talking about, but it means nothing to me either way.” He steps forward. “And I promise you’re going to regret ever touching her.”

Liam busts up laughing while clutching his stomach. “You’re seriously about to throw down for her ? Trust me; she’s not worth getting your ass kicked, so do yourself a favor and walk away from this while you still can.” He unexpectedly grabs the sleeve of my jacket and tugs me toward him.

I trip over my feet but reclaim my balance and move to fling his hand off my arm. His fingers delve painfully into my flesh, and I wince, gritting my teeth. Then I lift my foot to kick him again, this time in the balls.

The guy across the street storms toward us, his aura so vivid it’s nearly blinding. “I’m going to kill you.” Rage pours off of him like a violent rainstorm.

“Now, Phoenix, what have I told you about committing murder in the middle of a street?” Another voice appears out of nowhere, startling both me and Liam.

A tall, lean guy around the same age as me is strolling out of the woods.

His blond hair is shorter on the sides and longer on the top, and his eyes are an alarmingly beautiful shade of teal. He’s wearing a long-sleeved black shirt with the sleeves shoved up and a pair of jeans and sneakers. I’m confused for many reasons, one being: why in the heck was he just standing around in the woods?

To make things even more puzzling, his aura is silver, as well, but his is hazier than the other guy’s.

“Right. The woods are a way better spot to kill him,” the first guy, whose name is apparently Phoenix, grins darkly at Liam. “It eliminates the risk of any witnesses.”

Liam squirms, shifting his weight. “Fuck you both. You think you’re tough?” he scoffs. “I can kick your asses with one hand tied behind my back.”

The guy with blond hair’s eyes widen, and then he cackles with laughter. “Oh my gods, did this guy seriously just say that?”

“He did,” Phoenix tells him, his hawk-like gaze fastened on Liam. “We should tie up his hand and let him try.”

I’m so beyond lost.

My confusion doubles when another guy hikes out of the woods. He has short brown hair and the darkest eyes I’ve ever seen. He’s sporting black pants, a matching shirt, and a pinstriped jacket. And like the other two, his aura is silver, but his has an intensity reverberating off it that the others don’t, as if it’s trying to burst out of a barrier and he’s fighting not to allow it.

“We’re not going to let him try anything.” This guy’s voice is as frigid as the breeze encompassing us. “Drag him into the woods now before someone drives by and spots us.”

“Screw you,” Liam snaps, releasing me and shoving me to the side. Then he spits onto the ground and spreads his arms out as he backs up. “I’ll take you all on.”

Phoenix’s nostrils flare as he strides across the street toward Liam with his fists balled to his side, fury storming off him.

Liam stumbles back like he wasn’t expecting any of them to actually go after him. Then, as he tries to bail, he slips in the dirt and falls to the ground. But he jumps back up and spins around, ready to take off in the only open direction. That’s when a fourth guy joins the party, rushing out of the wall of tree branches and blocking

Liam's last way of escape.

All the guys are gorgeous, but this one is the prettiest guy I've ever seen. Full lips, eyes the color of lavender, and blond hair that hangs to his chin. He has on jeans and a green shirt that makes his eye color pop. He also has a hoodie and sneakers on. Again, his aura is silver, but it carries a shimmer to it unlike anything I've seen before.

He strolls right up to Liam and whispers, "Sleep."

Liam's eyes roll into the back of his head, and he teeters to the side before slumping to the ground with a thump .

"Dammit, Wylder, I thought we said no magic," the other blond guy groans. "You couldn't even make it ten seconds."

"Sorry," Wylder mutters. "It was just instinct." His gaze lingers on Liam for a moment before landing on me.

I may have reached a state of shock since I almost forgot I existed. But that changes as his gaze collides with mine. That's when I realize the severity of the situation. That I'm surrounded by four guys, and one of them just used some sort of magic to make Liam pass out ... I think he's passed out, anyway. With all that discussion of murder, Liam could be dead for all I knew.

His chest is moving. I'm unsure if I'm relieved by that or not. I mean, I hate him, and he's an awful person, but I've been around death too much in my life.

When I glance at Wylder, he hesitates before taking a cautious step toward me. He attentively eyes me over and asks, "Are you okay?" as he inches closer to me.

I don't answer, not because I'm terrified—okay, well, I sort of am—but I'm also not used to conversing with people. Silence has been ingrained into me like the need to breathe.

A frown forms on his lips. He opens his mouth, but then his attention strays to my cheek. Anger flickers in his eyes. "Did he hit you?"

I touch my cheek then wince. Shit, I almost forgot Liam smacked me before these guys interrupted.

I swallow hard as the thought of what Liam was going to do crashes over me. However, I doubt it would've turned out that way since, more than likely, I would've ended up unleashing my powers on him.

Wylder starts to reach for me, and I stumble back.

"What are you doing?" I whisper, my barely used voice cracking.

His frown becomes more prominent. "I was just ..." He rubs his lips together as he lowers his hand. "I want to help you, okay? You're safe now."

"Good gods, Wylder, you're probably scaring the pixies out of her right now," one of the guys says. "Back off and give her some time to process this."

What the hell is this even?

And wait ... Did he just pixies?

"I'll take care of the asshole," Phoenix mutters as he steps up to where Liam is lying on the ground. He cocks his head to the side. Then, looking as though it takes no effort, he bends down and throws Liam over his shoulder before stalking off toward

the trees. Right before he vanishes into the shadows, he casts a glance my way. His expression is unreadable, but the shadow around his silver aura fleetingly shrinks before he disappears into the woods.

“Is he going to kill him?” I contemplate what to do next. I should run, right? This is beyond weird. And yet, I’m more comfortable with weird than normal.

“Nah.” The other guy with blond hair steps up beside me. “He’ll just torture him a little.” His eyes glint as he assesses me intently. “Freaking faeries, your eyes are gorgeous. ”

I shrink back at that.

My eyes are rainbow-colored and have been called freaky, gross, and weird. Never gorgeous.

Wylder groans. “Dammit, Nico. Can you go two minutes without hitting on someone?”

The blond guy’s—Nico’s—expression falters as he glares at Wylder. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously.” Wylder stares him down. “You told me to back off, and now I’m going to give you some advice—stop hitting on her.”

Sparks of glimmering light hiss off Nico’s fingertip, and my panic skyrockets. Shadow Man used to do the same thing whenever he’d get upset with me.

My chest is heating up again as my magic melts to the surface.

I take off, walking backward and hurrying toward the road. That captures Wylder’s and Nico’s attention, and the other guy’s name I still don’t know.

“Um ... Thanks for saving me,” I sputter as I misstep but manage not to fall down. “But I need to get to school.” Then I spin around and start jogging down the road with my heart racing while terrifying thoughts creep into my mind.

I knew I wasn’t the only one living in the world with magical abilities. But the only other person I’ve crossed paths with who possessed any sort of magical gifts was Shadow Man.

Crap, what if they work for him?

“Kaiden,” Nico hisses as I increase my speed to run .

“Go help Phoenix out,” Kaiden commands. “Wylder, come with me.”

I don’t wait to see what happens next. I run like my life depends on it—and it just might.

I keep slipping in the gravel, but no matter what, I don’t stop as I barrel up the side of the road.

“I’ll find you, little aura,” Shadow Man told me. “If you ever escape, I’ll always find you.”

As memories pierce my brain, heat courses through my veins. The ground vibrates. I attempt to shove all my emotions deep inside that metaphorical box I keep locked in my chest. It works enough that I can reach the corner of the street. Then, I glance behind me to see where the guys are.

I stop, my brows pulling together because the road is empty. “Where the heck did they go?”

I give myself little time to think about it and whirl back around, preparing to run to the school?—

Wylder materializes in front of me, and I stop short of slamming into him.

“I’m n-not going back,” I stammer, backing away from him. “I’ll kill myself before I do.”

Shock flashes across his face, and then he holds up his hands in front of him. “I swear we’re not here to hurt you. We just want to help you.”

“I don’t need help with anything.” Wrapping my arms around myself, I widen the space between us while frantically peering around .

Where are the other guys? Are they planning to jump me? Can I take all of them on?

“And I know you’re lying,” I add. “I know you have to be working for him .”

A crease forms between his brows. “I promise we don’t work for anyone—I swear.”

“Liar,” I snap, then spin around to hightail it away from him.

Kaiden is standing a few feet behind me, so I have no choice but to come to a stop. I consider my options. Either try to run across the street or say screw it and unleash hell on these guys and this entire neighborhood because that’s what will happen. I have hardly any control over my abilities, which means chaos will rain from the skies if I let even a drop of my powers go.

“Who do you think we work for?” Kaiden asks me calmly.

“You tell me,” I throw back at him, my mind soaring and causing that heat to build.

I need to calm the hell down.

“Wylder’s telling the truth—we work for no one. But if you don’t believe me.” He sticks out his hand with his palm up. “Feel the truth for yourself.”

Normally, if I wanted to, I could get a vibe on if he’s lying. That is, if I took the time to decipher the splashes of color mixed in with his aura. But I haven’t done that in a long time. And besides, none of these guys have typical auras.

“Why would touching your hand show me if you were lying?” I skeptically glance from his outstretched hand to his dark eyes.

He watches my reaction closely, asking, “Do you believe in magic?”

Do I believe in magic? What a crazy question. Even crazier is, after everything I’ve experienced, I want to say no.

I’ve known magic has existed my entire life, but I haven’t seen it since my time with Shadow Man and the few times when my grasp on my own abilities got the best of me.

My life has been so exhausting, filled with the crushing agony of brokenness and terror that’s stretched out over every damn day.

Bottling down an uneven breath, I step toward him. “If you try to hurt me, I’ll unleash my power on you, and you won’t survive,” I warn.

It’s the first time I’ve used my ability as a threat.

He nods. “All right, I’ll consider myself warned.”

I touch my fingers to his palm. His skin is basking with warmth, and a soft hum buzzes off it. Looking closely, I can see thin black lines occasionally weaving across his flesh. Those are the first details I noticed about him.

I'm uncertain how to describe what occurs next. It's not like flashes of images of his truth blind me or anything major like that. His aura remains sliver and glittering against the sunlight creeping through the swirls of clouds above us. No magic spills through my veins and causes every part of me to believe him. And yet, I somehow just ... know. Know he's not working for Shadow Man, that he has powers like me, and that he'll never hurt me.

I withdraw my hand. "Okay, fine, I believe you."

He neither stiffens nor relaxes as he lowers his hand to the side. He's a complicated motherfucker to read, but many people have said that about me.

Tingles are kissing at my fingertips from where my skin grazed his. When I open and flex my hand, the sensation dims.

"Can I go now?" I ask, adjusting the strap of my backpack. "Or are you planning on dragging me into the woods, too?" It's a dumb question to ask after I felt that Kaiden won't hurt me, but I'm unsure what to expect.

"We'd never do that." Wylder moves closer to me, strands of his blond hair dancing in the wind. "Ever. We're here to protect you."

My brows knit. "Protect me from what? Liam? Because ..." I'm about to tell them I could've handled it if I wanted to, but I don't know if that's true.

If it had come down to that, would I have done it? Or would I have surrendered like I have for the last decade?

“Because what?” Kaiden hedges, his gaze never wavering from me.

I lift a shoulder, shake my head, and hug my arms around myself. “I don’t know what I was going to say. I’m really confused right now.”

Kaiden’s expression softens, and it’s the first time I’ve seen his stoic demeanor change. “That’s understandable.” He gives a short, considering pause. “However, we can explain things to you. There’s a diner around the corner.” He nods his head toward it. “We can walk over to it, get something to eat, and answer your questions. It’ll take some time anyway for Niki and Phoenix to take care of the human.”

Yeah, I’ve lived with weird living inside me for years. I’ve seen things no person has ever seen. I’ve experienced the unordinary to the extreme. Even so, hearing him say human like that is weird as hell.

Still, I nod, agreeing to go to the diner to get some answers, starting with: what the heck are they? And what are they going to do to Liam?

EMBERLYNN

Once I agree to go to the diner, the three of us cross the road and start the short walk toward it. At first, neither of them speaks, but they keep sneaking glances in my direction. I'm so lost as to why they seem so interested in me, other than perhaps because of my magical powers.

Maybe I never should've told them that I had them. In my defense, it was by accident, partly because I got caught up in the moment and partly because I felt this strange sense of ... I guess I'd call it relief when I saw Wylder use magic on Liam to put him to sleep. But I'm regretting my confessional mishap big time. Sure, these guys have magical abilities, but that doesn't mean I should trust them. Considering my past, I should know better than to trust everyone who possesses magic.

Apparently, I'm an idiot .

The longer the two of them slide quizzical glances at me, the more my self-consciousness grows. Unable to endure it further, I fix my attention on the sidewalk.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Wylder finally asks, breaking the silence.

I'm not used to people speaking directly to me, so I elevate my gaze to check that he is. His lavender eyes are right on me, as if he's giving me his undivided attention, which, again, is so abnormal that it takes me a moment to answer.

“Yeah.” I have to clear my throat a few times. “I mean, I’m confused, but ...” I shrug, reaching up to itch my cheek.

As my fingers brush the skin, pain radiates through my face. I wince. Dammit, I forgot Liam hit me.

Wylder’s nostrils flare as he stares at my cheek, which I’m sure is blooming with a welt. He sinks his teeth into his bottom lip then stops.

Confused, I look at Kaiden, who’s slowing down, too. He’s also looking at Wylder. I do the same, my puzzlement weaving an even bigger web when the two of them share an intense look. Then Kaiden gives a nod and both of them focus on me.

“Can I ...?” Wylder starts then stuffs his hands in his pockets. “Will you let me heal your cheek?”

I furrow my brows. “You want to get me some painkillers or something?”

Shaking his head, he removes his hands from his pockets, and then, as if I’m made of fragile glass, he vigilantly reaches for my face but pauses before his fingers greet my cheek. “With my magic,” he explains. “It’ll be painless and quick. I promise.”

“You can heal with ...?” I glance at a couple walking along the other side of the road. Even though there’s no way they can hear me, I still lower my voice. “Magic?”

A trace of a smile touches Wylder’s lips, and it’s seriously the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen. “Not everyone can do it, but I have a special gift.”

“Of being able to heal people?” I double-check. It’s so unbelievable. All I’ve ever seen magic do is cause destruction and pain.

He nods with his gaze fastened on me.

I almost say no. Magic has never been kind to me, so why should I trust it now? Or these guys? I don't know them at all, and yet, in the middle of my chest, I feel this strange tug toward them, like a magnet inside me and wants to connect with one inside his chest.

“Okay,” I say quietly.

He visibly relaxes, and then, with a deliberate breath, he settles his hand against my cheek. Besides what happened with Liam, I'm not positive of the last time someone has touched me. It's been so long that I've nearly forgotten how warm skin-to-skin contact is. It startles me so badly that I jolt.

“Are my hands too cold?” Wylder asks worriedly.

I shake my head, feeling like a freak. “No, I'm fine.” It's a total lie, but I don't know him well enough to confess what's going on in my messed-up mind .

I don't think I've known anyone well enough to do that.

Skepticism masks his features, but he doesn't comment. He intently stares at me, his eyes twinkling, and then undiluted warmth pours through my veins. His magic, I'm assuming. And he didn't lie—it doesn't hurt at all.

It feels so wonderful, like I want it to exist inside me forever.

And then he's lowering his hand, taking the warmth with him.

“Better?” he checks, reaching forward again and brushing his thumb across my cheekbone.

I nod, my heart a frazzled mess.

Thankfully, when I speak, my tone is as feeble as it typically is. “I think so.” I place my fingers against my cheek as he removes his hand. “How did you do that exactly? Like, with a spell?”

Wylder cracks a smile, his lips parting, but Kaiden intervenes.

“Come on; let’s finish the walk to the diner, and we’ll explain when we get there.” He nods for us to follow as he starts forward.

Wylder doesn’t immediately follow, his gaze remaining glued to me. His eyes are no longer flashing, but energy is radiating from him.

“I ...” he begins but then bites down on his tongue. “Nothing. Never mind. We should get into the diner, like Kaiden said.”

I nod, feeling weirdly light, as if, for an instant, all of my pain has been erased.

“Do we just seat ourselves?” Wylder wonders as we enter the dimly lit diner lined with outdated leather booths.

The black-and-white checkerboard floor is scuffed up, the countertop is an awful shade of orange—although, I think it used to be red but faded over the years—and the black-and-silver stools look new. Neon signs hang from the windows, and only a few people occupy the tables, so the place is relatively quiet.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I’ve never eaten here before.” I spot the sign by the register: Please seat yourself. “Yep, we seat ourselves.” I point at the sign then walk farther in, totally out of my element as some people glance at me.

I know what I look like: long, ratty hair; worn, baggy clothes; freaky rainbow eyes.

It takes a lot of effort, but I resist the urge to bail and run away. I want to—badly—but I also want to hear what these guys have to say.

“Let’s sit in the farthest booth,” Kaiden suggests then signals for us to follow him.

I’m already noticing that he has a leadership attitude. He seems to always take charge and expect everyone to follow.

“It’ll minimize the risk of anyone overhearing what we’re discussing.”

“We can always erase their minds before we leave,” Wylder reminds him as we weave around some empty tables. He’s been quiet since he healed me, tension flowing from his body, but that faded by the time we reached the diner’s parking lot.

I glance at him, waiting for a smile to appear and for him to announce he’s joking. Because he has to be, right?

“I’d rather not,” Kaiden replies as he stops at a booth, raking his fingers through his dark hair and glancing around. “We were supposed to leave as few magical footprints as possible, and we’ve already left more than I’ve wanted.” He flicks an annoyed look at Wylder.

Wylder responds with a grimace. “I know, but again, what was I supposed to do? The dude was about to go all crazy.”

“Knock him out. Choke him out.” Kaiden shrugs as he slides into the booth. “Anything else but use your magic.”

“Whatever. I’m sorry,” Wylder mumbles, his tone not matching his words.

With my lips pressed together, I scoot into the seat opposite of where Kaiden is sitting. His gaze tracks my movement, and I feel oddly squirmy under his attention.

“What’s a magical footprint?” I ask, my curiosity getting the best of me.

I expect Wylder to sit by Kaiden, but he scoots beside me. I blink at him, but Wylder doesn’t notice as he stares at a menu board on the wall.

Kaiden rests his arms on the table. “Every time magic is used in the human world, residue is left behind,” he answers me in a low tone. “We refer to this as a magical footprint. ”

I recall the lavender residue left behind when I accidentally used my magic the other day.

“Have you ever seen anything like that before?” Kaiden asks, but his question carries an underlying meaning. What he’s really asking is if I’ve used my magic before.

I could lie, but I get the inkling he already knows the answer.

“A few times,” I confess, fiddling with a saltshaker to busy my fidgetiness. “The other day, I put this crack in the road, and lavender dust was left on everything. But I didn’t know what it was.”

Kaiden’s gaze skates to Wylder. I look at him, too, and find that he’s smiling at me.

“What?” I ask in an almost defensive tone. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“If lavender dust is left behind, it means you tried to heal something with your magic,” he explains. “Each color represents a different power, and not everyone can use every power, so that means you’ll be able to heal things eventually.”

“Oh ... But I wasn’t trying to heal anything. I kind of panicked and tried to regain my power, but I failed. Obviously, since there’s a giant hole in the middle of the road now.” I waver, rotating the saltshaker in my hand. “Did you guys already know I did that? Is that why you’re here?” I stiffen as a thought occurs to me. “Am I in trouble?”

Kaiden promptly shakes his head. “We knew you did it, but that’s not why we’re here. And you’re not in trouble at all, Emberlynn.”

Fear pulsates through me. “How do you know my name? Because I’m pretty sure Liam never said it. And I know I haven’t told you.”

Kaiden and Wylder trade a glance that magnifies my uneasiness.

Kaiden looks at me again. “We knew your name before we ever arrived here because we came here to get you.”

As discreetly as possible, I search for a way out of here that doesn’t involve shoving Wylder out of the booth. I could always launch myself over the back of it.

“You said I wasn’t in trouble.” I glance at the door, trying to calculate how fast I can get there. But what if they stop me with magic? I have no clue what they can do, other than heal and put people to sleep. Maybe they have super speed or something.

“Hey, you’re not.” Wylder leans over and catches my gaze. Something about his eyes sends a calmness through me. “At all. I promise.” He stretches his arm along the seat behind me. “You’re safe with us.”

I’m dubious at best. Safe isn’t a word I understand in its full context.

“Why did you come to get me then?”

Wylder's eyes sparkle even in the inadequate light—he almost looks excited. “To take you to your home.”

I frown confusedly. “I don't have a home. I live in foster care, so I have a temporary home. But that changes in a few weeks when I turn eighteen.” I'm unsure why I confess all of this. It's not like me to be so open.

I blame it on Wylder's pretty eyes. He's too pretty, and it gives the illusion that he's safe.

And saying my fear aloud only makes my anxiety spike. I've been trying to avoid thinking about my impending future of homelessness. It's something that's haunted me for years—that when I turn eighteen, I'll have nowhere to go and have no one, not even shitty foster families.

Wylder slants closer, and the smell of his cologne wafts around me like spun sugar. “The human world isn't your home, Emberlynn. Moonlight Crest is. And we've come to take you there.”

My frown deepens. I'm still not sure if I believe him. “What is that ...? Moonlight Crest? Is it a town? Because I've never heard of it before.”

“That's because you've been living with humans,” Kaiden says, opening and flexing his hands. “And they don't know of our town's existence.”

“You keep saying humans ...” I trail off, terrified to ask the question but knowing I must. I have to discover what I am, where I come from, who I am, and why I can do the things I can do. I've wondered about it for years but believed I'd never get answers. Finally, though, here is my chance. “Which implies that you're not, so ... So, what are you?”

They share another glance, and then Wylder scoots even closer to me while chewing on his bottom lip.

“We’re warlocks,” he tells me, “and you’re a witch.”

EMBERLYNN

A reply doesn't even come to me. Witches and warlocks? That was not what I was expecting. When I still lived with my parents, and even for the few years I was Shadow Man's prisoner, no one mentioned any sort of title to what I was. Shadow Man spoke about tormenting me and using me as a weapon, but that was it.

He didn't seem like these guys, either. He reeked of darkness and evil, and I saw him kill a few times with a snap of his fingers. His eyes always looked hollow, except in the moments when he ended lives. Then he looked alive.

It was terrifying—I was terrified, just like I am now.

Okay, I'm not necessarily afraid, so much as shocked.

But I'm a witch? A freaking witch?

Our waitress shows up before I can wrap my head around it .

“Hey,” she greets us with a pen and notebook in her hand.

She's around twenty years old, has dark hair pulled up into a bun, and is wearing jeans and a blue T-shirt with an apron over it. And pinned to the front of that is a nametag that reads, “ Leah .” It's immediately apparent that she thinks Kaiden and Wylder are gorgeous, since she gets a little flustered as she poises her pen to the

notepad.

“Are you guys ready to order?” she asks, her blue eyes shifting between Wylder and Kaiden. “Or do you need a few more minutes?”

“We need a few more,” Kaiden replies without glancing at her. He’s staring at me as if attempting to measure my reaction to what they just told me.

I’m a witch.

Witch.

Witch.

And they’re warlocks.

I’m not alone anymore.

That thought hits me like a punch to the throat.

Wylder offers Leah a friendly smile. “Can you give us a few minutes? Sorry we’re taking so long.”

She smiles at him, and the oddest sensation bites the inside of my chest, like clawing rage. But as quickly as it rises, the feeling dwindles, leaving me to wonder what it was.

When the waitress nods and walks off, Wylder turns to Kaiden. “You didn’t need to be rude about it,” he tells him. “She was just doing her job.”

“I wasn’t rude. She asked a question, and I answered.” Kaiden reclines back in the

booth and thrums his fingers against the table. “She didn’t leave any menus.”

“They’re right here,” I tell him as I grab some menus from a tray that’s beside the salt and pepper shakers. Then I point at the menu on the wall. “That’s probably their specials.” I slide a menu to him then hand one to Wylder, who offers me a smile as he takes it.

He smiles a lot, and while it might be the prettiest smile I’ve ever seen, I’m not used to having such lightness directed at me. It’s weird.

All of this is.

Silence settles over the table as the two of them study their menus. I don’t. I look out the window where the woods are visible in the distance. What are Phoenix and Nico doing to Liam at this moment? Are they really not killing him? Or was that a lie? Do I care? Not as much as I should. What does that say about me?

“Emberlynn.” Wylder’s voice tugs me from my thoughts.

Turning my head, I realize Leah has returned to take our orders.

I blink at Wylder. “Huh?”

A drop of concern cascades across his features. “Do you know what you want?”

“Oh, I’m fine. I already ate breakfast.” Or, well, I ate half a bagel before Liam showed up, and then I accidentally dropped it along with my sunglasses and earbuds.

Even though I might be hungry, I don’t have any money. I rarely do since holding down a job when constantly battling a force inside me is complicated. Not to mention my home address changes every handful of months.

Wylder eyes me then twists back around and tells the waitress, “Can we get another coffee and some pancakes?”

Leah nods as she jots that down, her attention drifting in my direction. “Sure thing.” She flashes Wylder a smile before sauntering off toward the kitchen.

I envy her ease of smiling and talking. How would it be to be like that?

I’ll probably never know.

We fall silent again as Kaiden and Wylder stare at me. I think they might be waiting for me to say something, but I’m unsure of what to say.

“Warlocks and witches,” I finally mumble. “That sounds crazy.”

Kaiden arches his brows. “Does it? Because you don’t sound that shocked.”

I quietly sigh. “I’m not super shocked, but mostly because it explains everything that’s happened to me over the years. But I’m confused about how witches and warlocks exist. Sure, I’ve read about them in books, but that’s supposed to be fiction.”

Kaiden’s attention never wavers from me. “Do you read a lot?”

I nod. “Sometimes to pass the time, but I also tried to figure out what I am through older books since searching about powers and magical abilities online leads to a lot of crazy rabbit holes. I’ve never found anything, though. ”

“Have you ...?” Wylder hesitates. “What about your parents? Have you always been in foster care?”

I smash my lips together as warmth swells in my chest. Then I take a measured breath before I reply, “I lived with my parents until I was five, and they acknowledged my powers but never told me what I was. Or what they were.” I decide to keep my lips zipped about my time with Shadow Man until I’m certain I can trust them. “Then they left me and ...” I shrug, leaving it at that.

Wylder unexpectedly brushes his fingers through my hair, startling me so severely that my shoulder jolts upward. But then gentle calmness washes over me.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “That had to be hard to go through.”

“It was,” I mumble, too puzzled by the calmness in my body to focus on what I’m saying. “What is that?”

Wylder’s forehead creases. “What is what?”

“That calming sensation.” I assess him. “Are you doing that?”

Kaiden looks at Wylder then lifts a brow.

Wylder clears his throat and moves back from me. “Sorry. I didn’t even mean to do that. It just sort of slipped out. It’s one of my abilities.” He fiddles with a fork that the waitress left. “I’m a healer warlock, which means I can heal, calm, and soothe. Stuff like that.”

I study him, his full lips and then his eyes, the lavender now swirling with pools of gray. He can heal, calm, and soothe. That’s kind of amazing .

He meets my gaze. “I won’t use it on you anymore unless I ask you if I can first. Or you can ask me to do it.”

Does that mean we're going to be around each other more? Why?

I give a curious glance at Kaiden. "What can you do?"

His silver aura stretches outward, as if attempting to expand suddenly but shrinks inward again. He flexes his fingers, and black lines snake across his flesh.

Wylder's back stiffens. "How about we get to that question a little later?" he suggests to Kaiden and me.

I may have disagreed, but the waitress returns with three cups of coffee.

"Here you go." She sets one in front of Wylder then Kaiden before sliding one over to me. "And I'll be right back with your food."

Wylder reaches for the packets of sugar while Kaiden grabs the creamer. I look down at the steaming cup of coffee in front of me, wondering why it's there.

"Did you order this?" I ask to no one in particular.

Wylder is the one to answer. "I can tell you're hungry." He shakes the packet of sugar a few times before tearing it open. "It's part of my gift. Sort of." He dumps the sugar into the coffee while trading a discreet look with Kaiden. "All of us have that one."

"Of being able to tell when I'm hungry?" I question perplexedly.

He nods. "Yeah." He offers no further explanation.

My confusion deepens. "You're being vague, but I don't know you, so maybe that's your thing." I scratch my arm. I hate constantly feeling like a charity case. "I ... I can't pay for this. I'm broke. That's why I didn't order anything."

“It’s on us,” Wylder tells me as he dumps more sugar in his coffee. “We brought you here, so breakfast is on us.”

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, feeling so pathetic I can barely stand it. “I’m not a charity case. I know I probably look like one, but ... I don’t need a pity breakfast.”

Wylder sets the empty sugar packet down, his attention snapping to me. “That’s not what this is.” He grazes his fingertips along my jawline, and again, I jolt. He quickly withdraws his hand, collects a spoon, and stirs the coffee. “Besides, we have a long drive back home, and while we’ll probably stop to get something to eat, we won’t make as many stops as we should because Phoenix is a little bitch and rushes us whenever we’re traveling.”

As lovely as it sounds to get out of my current living situation ... “Um ... I can’t just leave. I’ll be reported as a runaway.”

Kaiden raises the brim of the coffee mug to his lips, takes a sip, then places the cup down. “No, you won’t because we’re removing you from the human system.” He shifts, leaning forward and placing his elbows on the table. “You never should’ve been part of it to begin with.”

I internally sigh. “I appreciate the offer and everything, but I don’t have anywhere to go. And I already told you I don’t have any money, so I can’t just get my own place in this Moonlight Crest town.”

Wylder and Kaiden look at each other again—I swear they’re speaking to each other telepathically—then Wylder smiles at me. “You can stay with me. My mom has already agreed to it, and Lila, my sister, is excited about it. Just a warning, though, she might be a lot.”

“More than him,” Kaiden adds, giving a pressing look at Wylder.

Wylder returns it with a dirty look, but a smile creeps onto his face.

Me? I'm stirring in a sea of what the fuck.

"I can't just live with you. I don't even know you," I say, gaping at him.

"You don't know your foster families when you go to live with them," Wylder points out, lifting the coffee mug to take a sip.

He has a point, but still ... "It's weird." I absentmindedly collect the coffee mug and take a sip before setting it back down. "Why would your mom not care if I lived with you? For all you know, I could be a serial killer."

Wylder snorts a laugh, and the sound is better than my favorite song. "You're not a serial killer. We know you're not."

"How can you be so sure?" I question, elevating my brows.

The truth is, I'm not a serial killer, but I have been responsible for deaths. And I hate myself for it.

"Because we just know." He angles his body toward mine. "Like when you touched Kaiden's hand and knew he was telling the truth, we know you're not evil. "

I skim my fingers along my palm. "You never touched my hand, so how can you know?"

"Kaiden did when you touched his," he reminds me. "So, stop trying to freak us out and come live with me. My mom is overbearingly nice, and my sister is annoying but kind. And you can attend Cursed Moon Academy with us, where you can learn all about magic and warlocks and witches. You can learn about who you should've been

all this time.”

I swallow hard. “How did I even end up in human foster care if I’m a witch?”

A beat of silence skips by.

“We’re not sure,” Kaiden finally says. “We were wondering if you had the answer to that ... You said something about him sending us to get you. Can you tell us who he is?”

I smash my lips together. “I’m not sure who he is exactly. He never told me his name. But I was with him for three years before”—I swallow down the heat scorching my throat— “before I was put into the foster system.” Closing my eyes, I turn my head toward the window. “I don’t want to talk about him anymore.” I can barely breathe past the fiery heat blazing through my veins.

“You don’t have to right now,” Wylder tells me, slipping his fingers through mine. “Do you want me to calm you down?”

My eyes snap open, and I blink a few times before looking at him. “I’m fine,” I say quietly as my powers simmer to a soft lullaby.

He smooths his fingertips across the backs of my knuckles before pulling away. “We can talk about other things for a bit, if you want.”

I nod. “Yes, please.”

A sad smile touches his lips, and it’s perplexing. It’s like he’s grieving over something, but what?

The waitress returns then, and after giving the guys what they ordered, she sets a

plate of pancakes in front of me.

I stare down at it, unsure if I'm annoyed or relieved that they bought me food, too.

"Eat," Kaiden tells me as he collects a fork and dives into his pancakes. "Wylder's right. We won't stop much on our way home." He stuffs a bite full into his mouth.

Why is he so convinced I'll go with him? Wylder seems so, too. I never said I would. And it'd be weird to live with his family. But I'll admit part of me wants to.

Heavy conflict weighs inside me and fills up my mind enough that I pour syrup onto the pancakes and take a bite. Then I release an unexpected moan. But holy hell, it's been a while since I've eaten anything other than processed food.

Wylder's and Kaiden's attention darts to me.

"Sorry." I cover my mouth. "I just haven't had pancakes for a while. I forgot how good they were."

Again, that grieving look crosses Wylder's expression. "We can get you more."

"No, I'm fine. This is way more than enough." I cut another slice. "Thank you for buying them for me."

He's in the middle of getting ready to bite into his own pancakes but pauses. "You don't need to thank me for anything—ever." He says the words so intensely my heart skips a beat.

I have to collect myself before taking another bite of my pancake, and my fingers tremble.

“Let’s take a break from the heavy,” Kaiden suggests as he butters his pancakes. It’s like he’s reading my mind. Maybe he can ...

That thought is alarming.

Wylder nods, and then they start discussing school, classes, and tournaments.

I sit quietly as I eat my pancakes, feeling strangely calm as I listen to their voices. It’s a bit daunting to take it all in—all this talk about magic. By the time we’re finished eating, I’m overwhelmingly confused and have barely uttered more than a few words. But my stomach feels full for once, so that’s a plus.

“You look so lost,” Wylder remarks as Kaiden digs his wallet out of his pocket.

“That’s because I have no idea what you guys spent the last ten minutes talking about,” I tell him as I finish off the last of my coffee.

“You’ll catch on—we’ll make sure of that.” He smiles at me. “That’s why we exist.”

I tip my head to the side. “You exist to make sure I understand everything about witches and warlocks?”

“Yeah, sort of,” he replies vaguely as he slides to the edge of the booth and rises to his feet .

“That’s weird,” I tell him as I scoot over to get up.

“It isn’t in our world,” Wylder says as Kaiden drops a hundred-dollar bill onto the table then stuffs his wallet into his pocket.

My eyes nearly bulge out of my head. A hundred freaking dollars?

Wylder notes my shock and smiles musingly. “Kaiden doesn’t fully understand the concept of human money. Or money in general.”

Kaiden targets an annoyed glare at him as we start toward the door. “I understand it. I just only have hundreds on me.”

Wylder shakes his head and rests his hand on the small of my back as we exit the diner. I’m unsure how to react to his touch; part of me longing for it, the other fearing it.

Kaiden heaves a frustrated breath but gets distracted as he spots Nico and Phoenix hiking across the parking lot toward us.

My first instinct is to see if they have any blood on their hands or clothes, but they look clean—too clean to be digging a grave in the woods. Unless they used magic.

“You didn’t get us any food?” Nico whines as he approaches us. His attention shifts between Kaiden and Wylder, and then he juts out his lip, pouting. “What the hell? I’m starving, and we all know Phoenix will be a bitch about making stops.”

“Fuck off,” Phoenix snaps at him, his face lined harshly with annoyance, but that dissipates when his gaze travels to me. When he notes that I’ve noticed he’s looking at me, he turns away.

“If you want something, go order it,” Kaiden tells Nico while checking his watch. “Just make it quick.”

“A little warning, though. The diner’s weird.” Wylder is standing beside me with his hand still on my back. “The menus are on the tables. I’m not sure why.”

I go over that remark in my head. Where the heck do diners in their world keep

menus?

“Your confusion’s so cute.” Nico smiles at me, his blond hair dancing in the light breeze.

For some reason, I can feel this odd vibe coming off of him, one I can’t fully comprehend. It feels like he’s a bit different from the other three; I just don’t know why.

“Nico,” Kaiden warns with a stern look.

“What?” Nico roguishly grins. “Look at her face and tell me she’s not cute.”

“I’m not cute,” I say, startling them all. I wrap my arms around myself and stare down at the asphalt. “I don’t know why you guys keep saying that when it’s total bullshit, so please stop.”

I’ve never been called cute before, but I have been told several times that I’m good-looking. Those comments were never followed by anything good, and I learned quickly that any remark about my looks meant I should flee. It’s also part of why I stopped putting effort into my appearance, hoping to make it all stop.

“I’m sorry,” Nico utters softly .

I don’t look up at him. I do what I do best and try to blend into nothingness, keeping my lips cinched.

Quietness drifts by. Who knows what they’re thinking, but they probably want to retract their offer to take me home with them.

“Go get some food. Just hurry,” Kaiden suddenly says. When I glance up, he’s

digging some keys out of his pocket. Then he twirls the keychain around his finger while glancing at the stormy sky. "I want to make it halfway home before nighttime."

It's weird they're driving when they have magical powers, yet I'm more focused on the fact that I'm still not positive if I should go with them. Sure, they've told me what they are and what I am, but they never explained why they showed up to take me to some magical town after I spent years living with humans.

"Do you need to go get your stuff?" Kaiden asks, glancing at me.

I hesitate. "I'm not sure if I should go with you." Why do they even want me to when I'm acting like such a freakshow right now?

Nico's brows spring toward his hairline, Phoenix's aura darkens, matching the graying sky, Wylder appears hurt, but Kaiden shows zero emotion.

"You'd rather stay here?" Phoenix questions slowly, like he thinks I'm insane. And maybe I am. "In this pathetic town?"

"No ... I don't know." I fiddle with the sleeve of my jacket, sliding my finger along the scar there, a reminder of how bad things have gotten for me. "I just ... I'm just confused about a lot of stuff." I sigh. "Why did you guys suddenly show up to get me and take me back to this town when I've lived here for years?"

The four of them exchange a subtle look, and I detect a shift in their postures.

"It's a long story, but the short version is the council sent us to get you," Kaiden explains as the wind picks up. "No one knew about your existence until a few days ago, but we left to get you the moment we found out. And if we'd known you were here, we would've gotten you a long time ago."

I process what he said, but it only causes more questions to pop into my mind. “What council?”

“They’re lawmakers in our world,” Nico answers while scuffing the tip of his sneaker against the ground. “They’re annoying as hell, but they keep the order and peace amongst witches and warlocks. You know, so no one goes around trying to melt someone’s brain just because they got bumped into.” Nico glances at Phoenix, who glares at him in response.

My eyes are huge. “You can melt someone’s brain?”

“Goddammit, Nico. You didn’t need to bring that up,” Wylder curses, glaring at him. Then his expression softens when he looks at me. “Nothing like that will ever happen to you. And Phoenix didn’t melt anyone’s brain.”

“Okay.” I have no idea how to respond, my eyes remaining wide with shock .

Kaiden scrubs his hand over his forehead. “Why do you guys have to test my patience every day?”

“Why do you think you’re the boss every day?” Nico counters with an eye roll.

“Someone has to make sure you all don’t go off the deep end,” Kaiden retorts, his voice conveying indifference, but his stance is stiff.

Silent rigidness nips between them.

“Maybe we should talk about our dysfunction later.” Wylder blows out an exasperated breath then turns toward me. “I get that this all sounds crazy. And at this point, we probably do, but once everything has settled, we’ll chill out.”

“I’m chill,” Kaiden protests.

Wylder rolls his eyes but never looks away from me. “I know I’m asking a lot from you, especially when you barely know me. But I’m hoping you’ll trust me enough to believe when I say things will get better if you come with us because you do belong with us. I know it might not feel that way right now, but you’ll understand later.”

They all wait for me to respond, and I’ll admit, when he’s looking at me like this, it’s difficult not to simply agree,

“Why are you guys driving, anyway?” I dodge answering him as my mind bounces back and forth between what to do. “If you have all these powers, can’t you just magically transport yourselves to this Moonlight Crest place?”

“We used to be able to,” Wylder says with his arms folded, his jaw set tight. “Until about twenty years ago, when a group of warlocks and witches decided it was a great idea to abuse their power.”

That opens a whole new door of questions. Before I can ask, though, Kaiden mumbles, “Let’s leave the evil discussions until after we get in the car.” He gives a pressing glance at an older couple making their way to their car parked close to where we’re standing. “That is ... if you’re coming with us?” He directs the question to me.

Nico opens his mouth, but Phoenix smacks him in the chest, silencing whatever he is about to say. Wylder offers me a hopeful look, while Kaiden waits patiently.

In the back of my mind, I question what they’d do if I declined. Would they leave me here? Or would they force me to go?

I never find out the answers because the truth is I have absolutely zero desire to stay here anymore. It’s a feeling I’ve carried with me every day for as long as I can

remember.

“All right,” I tell them. “I’ll go with you.”

PHOENIX

I've eternally been known as the frightening one in our coven, darkness—death. It makes sense, considering what I can do. Normally, I try to avoid embracing my powers, for obvious reasons. But when Nico and I dragged that fucker into the woods, I lost my shit and control over my powers.

“If you keep letting it seep through him, you'll kill him,” Nico said as we meandered deeper into the shadows of the trees.

“Would you care?” I asked as I repositioned the weight of the dumbass that was slung over my shoulder.

“No, but his death would haunt you, and I care about that.” Nico stepped up beside me and met my gaze. “And do you really want to be in that headspace right after we're united with our heart?” Grass and twigs crunched under our shoes as we hiked further into the trees. “She ... I think she needs us to have clear heads ... She seems like she's been through a lot.”

I smashed my lips together, recalling the instance I first laid eyes on her. It was right after this fucker, who's across my shoulders, smacked her across the face.

Kill, my powers screamed. Kill, kill, kill him.

I might have if it weren't for her. I didn't want to scare her—she'd already looked so

terrified. But in the fear, a spark of fierceness had resided.

She's been through a lot—I could see it on her face. I can see it now as we make our way to the SUV so we can drive to the house she's staying at and get her stuff. It makes me okay with my decision not to kill the human who hurt her. Although he'll suffer a lifetime without the ability to remember anything, even his name, because Nico wiped his mind clean.

And I may have permanently paralyzed his hands, which wasn't part of the plan, but I figure that way he won't ever be able to hurt anyone again.

She's quiet as we walk to the SUV, and she keeps her eyes on the ground. The wind is blowing through her long, wavy locks that are various shades of brown, reminding me of autumn leaves.

And don't even get me started on her eyes. Gods, I've never seen anything more beautiful in my life. Every single color is in them, and light seems to absorb into colors, not reflect, as if her eyes are rainbows absorbing the sunlight.

Just then, those eyes I'm obsessing over lift to mine. I'm a bit uneasy about being caught staring at her, but I'm not the only one. Wylder and Nico are eyeing her just as intensely. Wylder looks a bit apologetic when she notices him studying her. Nico being himself, though, offers her a smile and a wink. I mentally roll my eyes while Wylder sighs. And Emberlynn? She gets this adorable quizzical look on her face, like she doesn't quite know what to do with Nico. No one really does.

“Here we are,” Nico announces as we reach our SUV.

It's a beastly vehicle with a lift, massive tires, and tinted windows, and the glass is made of faerie crystal, which protects against magic from getting in. Usually, we don't drive around in this massive thing, but it's the safest vehicle we have. And

considering why we drove here, we're going all out on safety.

"Your chariot, my lady," Nico says to Emberlynn as he opens the back door and bows at her like a weirdo.

As ridiculous as he is, Emberlynn cracks a smile that she hastily stifles, as if she didn't mean to do it. Then she moves past him and quickly climbs into the vehicle.

"I got her to smile," Nico whispers while beaming from ear-to-ear.

Usually, I'd have some smartass comment to toss back at him, but he did get her to smile, so I bite it back.

I kind of regret my decision when I climb into the back seat with Emberlynn and hear Nico laugh then whisper to Wylder, "Dude, he didn't even chew me out. I think I won that one." Then he starts to hop into the back seat, but I put my hand on the spot he's about to sit down on and shake my head.

"Your giggling ass can sit up front."

Nico's eyes narrow, but a smile tugs at his lips. "I didn't giggle. I chuckled."

"It sounded like a giggle to me," I tell him, refusing to move my hand.

He remains standing outside the car and rests his arms on top of the SUV as he dips his head and levels his gaze with Emberlynn. "How about we let Emberlynn decide?"

When I glance over my shoulder, I find she's observing this entire exchange. With how quiet she's been, I don't expect her to say much of anything.

Her gaze travels from me to Nico, and she gets this spark in her eyes. "It sounded like

a giggle to me.”

Nico deflates a bit. Wylder, who’s standing outside behind Nico, drags his hand across his mouth to conceal a smile. I have to bite back one, too, which doesn’t happen often—I’m not a smiley sort of guy.

“I see how it is,” Nico says to Emberlynn, his smile returning. “But you know what? I think you’re right. It was kind of a giggle.” With that, he moves back, gestures for Wylder to get in, then climbs into the passenger seat. Kaiden is already in the driver’s seat and has the engine running as Wylder gets in and closes the door.

The moment he does, the scent of her floods the cab. She smells like everything that’s wonderful, all sugar, and warmth, and sunlight, and I discreetly breathe it in .

“Do you need my address?” she asks, directing the question to Kaiden.

He shakes his head as he shifts into drive. “We have it in the file we have on you.”

“Oh.” A crease forms between her brows. “What else is in that file?”

“Not much,” Kaiden says as he drives forward.

She wavers. “Can I see it? The file, I mean.”

Kaiden nods then signals for Nico to retrieve it in the console. Once he gets it out, he hands it to Emberlynn.

She’s sitting close enough to me that our legs touch as she slants forward, and when she reclines back, she doesn’t move it away as she sets the folder onto her lap.

When she flips it open, she frowns at the photo of herself. “Where the heck did this

photo come from?" She crinkles her nose before glancing up at me.

"The council probably had the witch who reported you take it," I explain, partly paying attention to the conversation and partly fixated on how her knee is still touching mine.

"She reported me?" Emberlynn questions uneasily. "Why?"

"Because you set off your magic. Don't worry. You're not in trouble or anything," Wylder tells her. He's leaning forward so he can look at her. "It's actually good that you did. It helped us find you."

The corners of her pretty lips dip downward. "Using my magic is never good. It's why I didn't use it on Liam."

"Who's Liam?" I wonder, noting how much she seems to hate her magic. It reminds me of how I feel about mine sometimes and makes me wonder what she can do.

"The guy that you allegedly didn't kill in the woods," she says, returning her gaze to the folder.

"We didn't kill him," I insist. "We just made it so he'll never be able to hurt anyone again."

Her gaze flits to me again. "And how did you do that?"

"By wiping his mind," Nico answers, rotating in the seat to look at her. He lets out a soft laugh. "And then Phoenix?—"

"Helped dump him in the woods," I cut Nico off, glaring at him, warning him to keep his mouth shut.

But it's already too late.

"What did you do?" Kaiden asks, his eyes colliding with mine in the rearview mirror.

He's pissed, and while I'm not afraid of him or anything, he's annoying to deal with when he gets like this.

I carry his gaze. "I just added an extra precautionary measure to make sure he never puts his hands on anyone else again."

Kaiden's eyes narrow, and he continues to stare at me in the rearview mirror, even as he drives down the road. He says nothing. Neither do I.

Emberlynn's gaze dances between the two of us. She no longer appears to be afraid, just curious.

I exhale in exasperation. "Fine, I paralyzed his hands."

Emberlynn's eyes widen, and she mouths, "What the fuck ? "

"It's not as bad as it sounds," I defend as I sink back into the seat and cross my arms. "And he deserved it."

"I don't give a shit if the guy can't use his hands anymore." Kaiden steers onto a road that leads into a neighborhood where all the houses are similar two-story brick structures. In the magical world, all buildings and homes have unique qualities to them, so seeing this world, the world where my heart has lived most of her life, is depressing. "But we were supposed to be limiting our use of magic, something I've stressed multiple times ..." He trails off as he slows to a stop in front of a massive hole in the middle of the road.

Emberlynn scratches her cheek. “Yeah, that was my fault.” She pulls a whoopsie face that is seriously the cutest damn thing I’ve ever seen.

Nico’s eyes glitter in delight. “That’s impressive.”

“Not really.” She frowns. “Someone could’ve gotten hurt. And I didn’t mean to do it. Liam threw this shake at me, and when it hit me in the chest, it threw off my concentration enough that I let some of my magic spill out.” She flings her hand in the direction of the hole in the road. “And that’s what happened. Thankfully, I managed to rein it in before the entire neighborhood became a giant hole.”

“We can help you learn to control that,” I tell her at the same time Nico and Wylder both say, “He threw a shake at you?”

She glances at the three of us before her gaze lands on me. “Control it like I won’t have to worry about it twenty-four seven?”

I nod. “Yeah. I mean, if your emotions get too intense, like if you get pissed off, it’s a little bit harder. But, for the most part, with some training, your magic can coexist with you.”

I don’t mention an exception exists for this, like with certain abilities some witches have. Kaiden and I are in this category, but she doesn’t show any signs of that yet, so I’m not going to worry her unless it’s necessary.

Relief washes over her pretty features. “Good.” She directs her concentration back to the folder while Kaiden drives around the hole in the road.

“Did the shake hit you?” Wylder asks.

Anger crackles under my flesh at the reminder. I should’ve just killed him.

She tenses but keeps her focus on the file as she reads over the limited info on her. “It’s not a big deal. The worst part of it was that I lost control of my magic.”

“Okay, but did it hurt you when it hit you?” Wylder queries, swapping a look with Nico and me.

He’s thinking the same thing as I am—that she doesn’t care that much about herself. It hurts deep in the cavity of my chest to think about what she’s been through that’s caused her to feel that way.

She quietly sighs. “It hit me in the chest and left a small bruise, but?—”

A wave of darkness ripples across my skin. Her gaze snaps from my arms to my face, her eyes huge.

“Sorry,” I grit through my teeth as I take a few measured inhales and exhales .

I worry she’ll slide away from me, but she remains put.

“Is that what happens when you have too much emotion?”

“More or less,” I reply, the shadows of my magic absorbing back into my skin.

“Oh.” She considers this before looking back at the folder.

Kaiden parks in front of a—surprise, surprise—two-story brick house. The gloomy clouds shadow across the trees and landscape. A few neighbors are standing in their yards, watering plants and mundane stuff like that.

Wylder shoves the door open and hops out. I follow suit, and Emberlynn follows, leaving the folder on the seat. The moment she’s out of the SUV, Wylder stands in

front of her.

“Let me heal your bruise,” he pleads, his eyes begging her to let him.

He can’t help it. Healer witches’ natural instinct is to heal, but the urge is more severe with Emberlynn because she’s his heart and his sole purpose is to take care of her—it’s the same for all of us.

She tugs her jacket tighter around herself. “It’s not a big deal. It’s a few days old, so I barely notice it anymore.”

“You should let him, anyway,” Nico tells her as he bumps the door shut. “It’ll make him happy.”

Her brows knit. “To heal me?”

Nico nods, stuffing his hands into the back pockets of his jeans as he steps up onto the curb beside her. “It’s a healer witch thing ... sort of. ”

She fleetingly falters before glancing back at Wylder. “Okay, if you really want to.”

He nods, inching close to her. Wylder is tall—we all are—and while he has a few inches on Emberlynn, it makes me realize she’s on the taller side, as well, all legs that I hope one day I can have wrapped around my waist.

“It’ll be just like last time,” he explains while holding her gaze. “I just need to place my hand on the injury.”

Biting her bottom lip, she nods. “Okay.”

“Can you put my hand on where the bruise is?” he asks, being careful with her.

She continues biting her lip as she nods. Then she takes Wylder's hand so his palm is lined right over where her heart is. It's the same place where I felt that agonizing pain right before we found out about her existence. It makes me wonder if that's what the pain stemmed from—her pain. It breaks my heart.

Her breathing increases as Wylder begins to heal her, and her eyes momentarily lower as if she's basking in the sensation. I've been healed by a healer before, and it didn't feel that great, but I've heard that it's a different sort of experience for a healer witch's heart .

She lets out this pleased little gasp that sends warmth pulsating through my body. I'm not the only one affected by it, either. Nico's eyes flash with desire, and even Kaiden, who's rounding the front of the SUV, missteps when he hears the noise. And Wylder looks utterly at peace as he moves his hand away, but only to brush his fingers along her jawline.

Her eyelashes flutter open, the rainbow shade shining brighter. "Thanks. I didn't realize how much it hurt until it was gone."

Wylder caresses her jawline. "Anytime."

She offers him a small smile before turning away and facing the house. Wylder's smile fades, his shoulders slumping. I know why—he doesn't like that she was in pain at all. It's the same thing we're all thinking.

I make a silent vow right then and there to do everything in my power to make sure she never has to hurt again.

EMBERLYNN

I can tell they're all weirded out by the house I live in. Nico makes a comment about the blandness of it and that has me questioning what their homes look like. I guess I'm about to find out, because I'm packed and ready to go.

"That's all your stuff?" Nico asks with a frown as he looks at the worn duffel bag that contains all of my belongings.

Wylder and Phoenix are in the room with me, looking around at the books and other items lining the shelves in the room. Kaiden was in here earlier, but then he received a phone call and went outside to answer it.

Nodding, I sling the handle of the bag over my shoulder. "It's hard to have a lot of things when you're in foster care. I'm usually only at a house for a few months before I'm sent to the next one. It makes it really complicated to get a job. And most foster parents don't have a lot of money to spend on the kids they're fostering. It's not a big deal. I don't need a lot of stuff."

"Well, we're getting you more stuff," Nico insists as he fiddles with a snow globe on the dresser. He ends up breaking the winder off and hurriedly sets it back down.

I shake my head. "No way. That's weird."

His brows elevate. "What? Why?"

“Because ...” I shift my weight as I adjust the handle on my bag. “It’s not your guys’ job to take care of me.”

He doesn’t remark but presses his lips together as he glances at Phoenix, who’s moved up beside me.

“Here. Let me carry that out for you.” He slides the handle of my bag off my shoulder and slings it over his.

“You don’t have to do that,” I insist, but seriously, what’s these guys’ deal with helping me? I’m not accustomed to it, and it feels like there might be strings attached—there always is when it comes to people being nice to me.

“I know, but I want to.” He crosses the bedroom and moves past Wylder as he steps through the doorway, heading for the SUV, I’m assuming.

Wylder pushes away from the doorframe and steps toward me, his lavender eyes fused to mine. “Are you sure you got everything?”

I nod, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “Like I said, I don’t have a lot of stuff. And if I forget something, it’s not a big deal. ”

He reaches out and lightly sweeps his hand across my cheek. “Are you okay to go then?”

I’ll admit, it’s difficult not to become a bit flustered by his intense stare and soft touch. He’s just so freakin’ pretty that it briefly spazzes out my brain. I should probably tell him to stop touching me—normally, I would—but for some bizarre reason, the more he does it, the more comfortable I get with it.

“Are you sure I won’t get in trouble for leaving?” I ask as Wylder’s arm drops to his

side.

“Yep.” Nico is the one to answer as he steps up next to me. “You belong to the witches now. And trust me; that’s a hell of a lot better than this.” He gives a disgusted look at the bedroom. “Blah, this place makes me want to cry and then eat a gallon of ice cream.”

I snort a laugh then slap my hand over my mouth. I’m so not used to laughing, but this guy is amusing, for sure.

Delight glistens in Nico’s eyes. “Aw, she likes my jokes,” he tells Wylder.

Wylder sighs. “Give her time. Eventually, she’ll grow tired of it.”

“Do you really want that after just hearing her laugh?” Nico questions with a haughty arch of his brow.

Wylder hesitates. “No.”

“Okay then.” He smirks at him before draping his arm around my shoulders. “Come on; let’s get out of this place before I start raiding the freezer. I’m really trying to watch my figure right now.”

I laugh. I can’t even help it this time. And it totally fuels his cocky smile—seriously, this guy is like a faerie on crack. But it’s not entirely bad. Like I said, I haven’t smiled in a long time.

By the time Nico, Wylder, and I are exiting the house, my cheeks ache from grinning. Kaiden is on the other side of the SUV, and he might still be on the phone. Phoenix is leaning against the SUV with his arms crossed. When he spots us, his forehead creases.

“What’s with all the smiling?” His gaze lingers on me.

“Nico’s doing a one-man show,” Wylder replies as we hike across the drying grass of the front yard and toward the SUV.

“Great, is that what we’re going to have to deal with the entire drive home?” Phoenix grimaces as he shoves away from the SUV.

“Emberlynn likes it,” Wylder explains as he halts beside Phoenix.

“So, we’re really going to have to deal with it then.” Phoenix’s lips sink into a frown. “I’m glad I brought my headphones.”

“Hey, I’m not that bad,” Nico protests dramatically. His arm is still around my shoulders, and he’s close enough to me that I can smell the scent of earthy tones flowing off of him. “Besides, being funny is my nature.”

“If you say so,” Wylder mumbles while Phoenix merely raises his brows, like okay .

Their dynamic is interesting, in the way that they argue, almost like they’re brothers. But I know Wylder doesn’t live in the same home as them.

“What are you guys exactly?” I ask as Wylder starts to get into the back seat of the SUV. When they look at me confusedly, I add, “I know you’re warlocks, but like ... how are you related? Because you kind of act like brothers, but I don’t think you are.”

Wylder pauses from getting in and faces me, the dry leaves under his shoes crunching as he does.

“We’re in a coven together,” he explains, scratching his arm. “All witches and warlocks are in covens. Usually, there are about four or five members in a coven, but

there have been cases of there being covens as small as two members and as large as eight.”

I know what a coven is and everything, but ... “How did you guys end up in one together?”

“There’s a selection ceremony that happens when a witch or warlock turns twelve,” Wylder tells me, strands of his blond hair flapping in the wind. “The four of us lucked out when we ended up together because we were already good friends.”

My stomach ravel into knots at the idea that I may be put into a coven with witches and warlocks whom I don’t know. Or maybe I won’t since I’m almost eighteen. “What about me? Will I get put in one?”

Again, the three of them trade a look.

“You’re actually in our coven,” Wylder answers, watching my reaction closely .

“Oh.” I try to process the idea of this. “How did that happen if I wasn’t there?”

“That’s an answer we don’t have yet.” Wylder lowers his hands to his sides. “We can tell you more on the drive home. It’s kind of a long story, and we really should get on the road.” He looks up at the sky then at the houses lining the street.

Some of the neighbors are still outside, and they’ve started to stare, probably because of the massive, tinted-windows SUV the guys drive.

Nodding, I move to get into the car, but then I skid to a halt as the middle-aged woman who lives next-door comes running toward us.

“Yoo-hoo.” She waves her hand in the air.

“Who the hell is this?” Nico mutters under his breath while eyeing her cagily.

She’s donning a floral dress with boots, and her hair is in a bun. Nothing too out of the ordinary, yet something feels different about her.

She confirms this when she reaches us and, a little out of breath, says, “I’m Maryfell. I’m the witch who made the report of the use of illegal magic by this girl.” The scolding look she gives me throws me off. “You should be ashamed of yourself, young lady, for using magic in the open like that.”

Nico draws me back from her while Phoenix steps in front of me. “You need to back the fuck off.”

“Excuse me?” she replies. “How dare you speak to me like that? I’m an elder witch.”

“And I’m Kaiden Everson,” Kaiden intervenes as he rounds the SUV and joins us. His dark, cold gaze is fixed firmly on the witch. “What did you say your name was again?”

“Oh, don’t mind me.” Maryfell laughs nervously. “I don’t even know why I came over here.”

“Huh?” The word tumbles out of my mouth totally unintentionally, but her sudden nervous politeness because of Kaiden’s presence is strange, to say the least.

“Kaiden’s family has an extremely high status in the wiccan world,” Nico whispers in my ear. “And that, among other things, makes many witches and warlocks afraid of them.”

I look at him. “Should I be afraid of him?”

He shakes his head with zero hesitation. “Not at all.”

I point at Maryfell. “Should she be?”

He dithers, raking his teeth along his bottom lip. “How about we get in the car and let these silly kids hash this out?”

He’s ridiculous, but again, a stupid smile pulls at my lips. He grins at me, and I roll my eyes, but my smile remains.

We slide into the back seat then, him scooting in first, which belatedly makes me aware that I’ll be sitting between him and another one of the guys. While this makes me uneasy, I resist the urge to ask for a new seating arrangement.

Suck it the hell up, Emberlynn. They saved you. You’re fine. Nothing bad will happen.

But it’s burned into my instincts to be a bit paranoid. I even have literal burn marks on my body that remind me of why I need to be that way, despite how much of a pain in the ass it can be.

As I sit in the backseat, I subtly brush my fingers along the spot above my knee, where the burn marks are. The memory of how the scars got there are brand on my brain.

“Are you okay?” Nico’s voice is gentle, but he still startles me.

I nod, my pulse thrumming like a cracked-out hummingbird in my chest. “Yeah, I’m fine. I was just thinking about some stuff.”

A contemplative look crosses his features as he rubs his lips together. “Are you

nervous about going to Moonlight Crest?”

My thoughts weren't on that, but now that he's mentioned it ... “A little bit,” I admit. “I've never been anywhere really, so traveling is foreign to me. And I'm not even traveling to like a normal town, but a magical one. And what even lives there? Just witches and warlocks? Or are there other kinds of magical creatures?”

He stretches his arm along the back of the seat, his lips set into a soft smile. “You don't need to be nervous. Being in a coven means we protect each other, and you'll always be protected.” He wavers. “As for other creatures, there are a lot more that live in Moonlight Crest than witches and warlocks. But it's a safe town with rules and laws that make sure it stays a safe place.”

“What kind of other creatures?” I'm nervous despite his reassurance .

He drags out a pause of hesitancy. “I'll tell you, but again, remember what I said about you being safe. Kaiden, Phoenix, Wylder, and I all come from powerful families, and we all have powerful gifts so, like I said, you'll be safe and protected at all times.”

“You know, your hesitancy is making me more nervous,” I state. “I'm more of a rip-the-Band-Aid-off kind of girl.”

“Noted.” A trace of a smile returns to his lips but promptly recedes. “The majority of creatures that live in Moonlight Crest are witches and warlocks, werewolves, vampires, and there are some fey, as well.” A funny expression flitters across his face then dims. “There are also a few rarer creatures, like pixies, sirens, and we have shapeshifters.”

At this point, I've reached the peak of Shocked Mountain, and I'm clueless as to how to get down.

Nico's glittering eyes search mine. "You're freaking out, aren't you?"

"A little bit." Total understatement of the year. "I just didn't realize all of that existed. Vampires and werewolves ... faeries? I mean, aren't those supposed to be super tricky creatures that like glamour anything into an illusion? Unless all the stuff in the books I've read is incorrect?" I wait, partly hoping he'll tell me that all the books I've read have been wrong. Because that would mean anything could be a lie in this world I'm about to enter.

But his face says it all; the corners of his lips are tugged downward, and wariness reflects in his eyes. "Most of them aren't too terrible, at least the ones who live in Moonlight Crest. If you go to where the wild ones live, it's an entirely different story."

Wild ones?

"Oh." I grapple to wrap my head around what he told me. I keep visualizing a bunch of winged, glittery creatures dancing around me, begging me to dance with them. If I do, I'd dance until I died. At least, that was the case in the last book I read. "Do they have wings?"

"The faeries?" he asks, and I nod. "They do, but they don't walk around with them on display. They usually only let them be visible during special occasions ... and also when they're around their mate." Again, a strange look crosses his features.

My eyebrows lift as I widen my eyes. "Mate ? That's a thing for faeries?"

"For all creatures," he explains with a hint of reluctance.

My lips form an O , but no sound leaves my lips. A moment passes by while I grapple to process not only this information but the entirety of everything.

“I can tell you’re freaking out, but I promise you, you don’t need to worry about any of this right now,” Nico tells me cautiously. “You can take everything in small steps. Nothing major needs to happen at this moment except for getting you to Moonlight Crest and getting you acquainted with the magical world.”

When I went from living with Shadow Man to suddenly being thrown into the human world, it was a shock to my system. I struggled to learn how to exist outside of a cage and in a world where magic and powers weren’t a thing. I had no one to teach me, and many of my foster parents grew highly impatient with me. I was yelled at, punished, and smacked around because of mistakes I made.

It sucked, and that’s putting it mildly.

I cringe at the loudness of my shaky exhale. “Thank you.”

He tilts his head, strands of his blond hair falling across his forehead. “For what?”

I shrug, picking at my fingernails. “For being patient with me. It has to be frustrating to be around someone who doesn’t know anything, and you have to explain everything to them.”

He fixes his finger under my chin and turns my head so I’m meeting his gaze. “It’s not frustrating at all. Please don’t ever think that. And trust me when I say this. All of us are absolutely grateful that we get to teach you everything about our world. Do we like the fact that we have to because you were lost in the human world? Absolutely not. But that isn’t your fault.”

I nod but wonder if he’d think that if he knew the truth about where I was prior to the human world and what I did. But I so do not want to discuss that at the moment. Instead, I inquire, “What other legends are true about creatures? I mean, do vampires drink blood? Can they possess minds? Do werewolves have to turn every full moon?”

“They can actually change whenever they want.” Wylder ducks his head as he climbs into the SUV, taking a seat beside me. “As for vampires, they’re a complicated species. I think it might be best to keep your distance from them until you get more comfortable with the magical world.”

“Agreed,” Nico scoots closer to me. “You’ll be able to scope them out relatively easily. Just look for the fanged creatures that dress in mostly black and have no freckles at all.”

“No freckles?” I question. “That’s weird.”

“Freckles, moles, scars—any sort of marks or flaws were erased when they became undead and immortal,” Nico elaborates. “Their eyes also turn red when they’re bloodthirsty, but there are laws that forbid them from drinking from other creatures, unless they have permission.”

“I guess that’s kind of reassuring,” I mutter, overwhelmed. “Can they walk in the sunlight?”

“They can, but they don’t prefer to because it weakens their powers,” Wylder answers, drawing my attention back to him. “More than likely, you won’t have much interaction with them. They tend to hang out with their own kind. Most immortals do.”

“Are we immortal?” I inquire curiously.

Wylder shakes his head. “We live longer than humans, though. Werewolves are the same.”

I’m highly aware that both of their legs are resting against mine. “What about faeries?”

Wylder's lavender gaze glides to Nico. "Fey aren't immortal, but their lifespan is much longer than witches and warlocks. "

I rub my forehead, my mind spinning, and I start to doubt that I'll ever reach the peak of Shocked Mountain. Honestly, I wonder if I'm barely a step onto it.

"Hey, don't worry," Wylder assures me, brushing his fingers through my hair. "Like Nico said, there's no rush to learn all of this. And we'll help you with everything, okay?"

"Okay." I attempt to aim for a more relaxed demeanor, but the truth is, I'm a mess of confusion floating in a sea of madness. And I can't swim, so yeah, that's scary.

My worry only escalates when a cry ripples through the air. My head snaps toward the back of the SUV where, through the window, I can see Maryfell is stumbling back from Kaiden.

She's flinging her hands in the air and yelling, "Get the shadow, buzzing bees away from me! I won't let you do this! You monstrosity—" She abruptly quiets, her hands falling to her sides.

Kaiden stands in front of her with his back turned toward me. His posture is rigid, and I swear the faintest wisps of shadows are swirling around him. Phoenix is standing close by with his arms crossed and his black, hollow gaze locked on Maryfell ...

Wait ... black hollow gaze ...

"Oh my God," I breathe out—he looks possessed.

"It's okay," Wylder assures me quickly when he notices the direction of my gaze. "They're just using their powers to make Maryfell forget about all of this."

I stare at Phoenix for another heart-slamming moment before tearing my gaze off him and fixing it on Wylder. “About you guys being here?”

He nods. “And about ever seeing you.”

My puzzlement magnifies. “What? Why?”

“Because ...” Wylder dithers, his head wavering from side to side.

Nico finally offers me a full explanation. “Because, usually, when a witch or warlock lives undetected in the human world, they’ve gone rogue, which is what we refer to them as. While we know you’re not a rogue, Maryfell is suspicious of it, so it’s better if she just forgets about you altogether, so she doesn’t end up causing problems for us later on.”

I frown. “I’m guessing it’s a bad thing to be a rogue.”

“It is. Because, usually, they’ve done something corrupt. Or at least been accused of doing so.” Nico sweeps his hand through his hair. “Although, false accusations do happen.”

My thoughts travel to Shadow Man and how he fits the description of a rogue. Well, kind of. He lived in the human world, but not like humans. And his castle-like home was up on a mountain, away from civilization.

Nico’s eyes rove over me, and questions fill his eyes. “Are you okay?—”

He’s cut off by Phoenix hopping into the passenger seat.

I’m grateful for the interruption since I’m pretty positive he was about to inquire where my mind was.

A moment later, Kaiden climbs into the car, as well. “Now that that’s taken care of, let’s get the hell out of here,” he mumbles as he starts up the engine.

Phoenix slumps back in the seat. “Agreed. No offense, Emberlynn, but the human world kind of sucks.” He glances at me from over his shoulder, and relief washes over me that his eyes have returned to their standard gray color.

“No offense taken. I’ve never liked it here.” Though I’ve never lived anywhere else either, as far as I can remember.

Maybe when I was a baby and my parents still wanted me, we lived in a pretty town with sparkling magic, but who the hell knows, since I can’t remember much of my time with them. However, I do wonder if I’ll like Moonlight Crest. I could merely be the kind of person who doesn’t feel content anywhere. Perhaps this gloomy cloud will always hover over me. Or maybe it’s not as magical of a place as these guys are portraying it to be. I barely know them, and a small part of me questions my comfort around them. They have magical powers, and from what I saw them do to Maryfell, they could manipulate my emotions. It’s a concern that skyrockets when, as we’re driving away, I peer over my shoulder and find Maryfell happily waving at us.

I twist back around in the seat, unsure what to make of it. I make a promise to myself, though, to be on the cautious side, to remember all the times during the years I spent with Shadow Man. So many moments surround those memories where I was tricked into believing I was safe, and then he would rip it all away from me.

Over and over again .

It got so bad that I constantly felt like I was freefalling into an abyss where I may never land at the bottom. Eventually I did, and that bottom became years of being passed around in the human world.

No, I can't trust these guys yet. Not until I get more answers about them, about myself and, most important, what the hell their powers are.

8

EMBERLYNN

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

The sound of the continuous dripping has become almost as familiar as the sound of my breathing. The noise is always there, except for during a few moments in which screams fill the air. But it may still exist. Perhaps the screaming is just louder.

I'm lying on the cement bed with the cage bars filling up my vision. On the other side is a dining hall with a long table that takes up most of the space. Twelve chairs surround it, and from the ceiling above, a cluster of thorn-like vines dangle that illuminate whenever Shadow Man feasts on the blood of the people he kills.

I'm not even sure how he convinces them to come to this eerie place that is made of stone and coldness, the air smelling of rotting death. And yet, on the seventh day of the third month, different people attend his feasts. During this time, they smile at me through the bars. Their smiles aren't kind; they send chills down my spine. The sad reality, though, is that they should fear me . They catch on to this eventually but belatedly.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Footsteps of thick-soled shoes hit the cement floor and echo against the domed ceiling. I sit up and push back against the bars behind me as he enters the room. His face is always a blurry shadow to me, but he does it on purpose. I've heard the people who come here talk about how he looks—his dark hair and what some of the women refer to as sexy eyes. Why he appears to me in a shadow form is a mystery, but I hate it. It makes him resemble a demon. He could be a demon, but I think he's some sort of magical creature, like me. I don't know what I am, though.

All I know is that my magic is horrible, and Shadow Man uses it to do all sorts of horrible things. It makes me hate myself. It makes me think that, even though I can't stand it here, maybe this is where I belong.

"Hey, little pet," he greets me as he stops in front of my cage. "We have a party tonight, but things are going to work a bit differently." He steps closer, and his shadowy fingers wrap around a bar. "If you're a good girl, I'm going to let you out of the cage. But you have to be extremely good, okay? I'm going to ask more from you tonight. I want you to try to use all of your powers. I want you to let go of that control you grasp onto." He leans in, and his blank, featureless face is terrifying. "I want you to feast with me."

I frantically shake my head as I scoot away. "No, I won't do it. I'm not like you."

"Oh, little dove, but you are," he assures me in a darkly sinister tone. "And the less you fight it, the easier it'll be. But don't worry. I don't mind a challenge." With that, he spins around, and shadows reach out of him. They swirl around me, burning my flesh. My eyes burn with tears, and pain pierces through me.

I open my mouth and let out a scream ? —

My eyes fly open, and I gasp for oxygen as I frenetically peer around, unable to grasp my bearings, a haziness consuming my brain.

“Emberlynn, breathe.” A delicate voice caresses me through the panic.

Lavender eyes suddenly come into my line of vision, then blond hair and the prettiest face I’ve ever seen. A slam of a heartbeat later, all the events of today wash over me.

I’m not in the cage.

I’m not in a foster home.

I’m in the back seat of an SUV with four warlocks who rescued me from getting assaulted by Liam. Because I’m a witch. Because I’m part of their coven.

Wylder is sitting beside me, and his palms are molded to my cheeks, concern creasing every inch of his face. From the passenger seat, Phoenix’s gray gaze dissects me with alarm, and while I can’t see him, I can feel Nico’s gaze boring into me from my other side. Kaiden is also out of my line of vision, hopefully focused on driving.

“I’m fine,” I sputter, feeling like an idiot.

I fall asleep for a handful of minutes and spazz out. Seriously, nice one, Emberlynn.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize for probably giving them all heart attacks.

Wylder’s forehead scrunches. “You don’t have to apologize for having what I’m guessing was a nightmare.”

“It was.” Sighing, I slump back against the seat, causing his hands to fall into his lap. I rub my tired eyes with the heels of my hand then blink a few times, aware they’re staring at me.

“Do you have nightmares a lot?” Wylder treads cautiously

I lift a shoulder. “Sometimes, but never in front of anyone. It’s kind of embarrassing.”

Nico hooks his finger under my chin and levels his gaze with mine. It’s the second time he’s done this, and I wonder if it’ll become a habit with him.

“We don’t give a shit that you spazzed out. We just want to know you’re okay.” He’s more intense than he has been, a wave of seriousness rolling off him.

“I’m fine.” It’s the partial truth. While I’m unsure I’ll ever totally be okay, a part of me is glad I woke up here and not in an unfamiliar bed that’s in a house where the unwelcomed pollutes the air so heavily I can’t breathe.

Nico’s wary about my answer, his gaze dissecting me. “Are you hungry?”

My stomach is actually burning with hunger, but I don’t want them paying for my food again. “No, not really.” Like a little dirty traitor, my stomach lets out this loud grumble .

Nico crooks a brow. “You sure about that, rainbow eyes?”

“Okay, maybe I am a little bit, but I’m fine.” I’m used to being hungry.

Nico looks away from me as he slides forward in the seat and crosses his arms on the middle console. “How far away are we from the nearest food place?”

“He doesn’t need to do that,” I quickly tell Wylder. “I’m not that hungry. My stomach just growled because of my nerves. This day has been a lot.”

“I know it has, but it’s fine, Emberlynn. I’m ready for a stop, anyway. And Nico is probably hungry, hence his persistence.” Kaiden’s smile is all sunshine and warmth.

I want to protest further, but Kaiden steers the SUV off an exit offramp that leads to a handful of small chain restaurants, along with a gas station and a grocery store.

Nico reclines back in the seat. “So, what’s your favorite food?”

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

Nico’s forehead creases. “You don’t know?”

“Not really. When you live in the foster system, you just eat whatever’s given to you,” I explain. “And because a lot of the families are pretty poor, I never really went to a lot of restaurants.”

“But you’ve been to some?” Nico checks.

I nod. “Yeah, on a couple of occasions.”

He rotates toward me, his arm returning to the back of the seat. “So, out of all the places you’ve eaten, what’s been your favorite? ”

Wylder’s right. Nico is persistent.

“Um ...” I waver. “I like burgers and fries.”

“And ice cream.” Nico’s eyes light up. “Kaiden, go to that burger place right there.”

He points to this retro diner-like place where the waitresses roll up to the cars on roller skates to take orders. “I want to get a strawberry shake.”

“Nico has a sweet tooth,” Wylder tells me, eyeing me closely. “Are you sure you want burgers? You can have anything you want.”

I think he means it, and I’m not sure why. Sure, I’m part of their coven, but why are they catering to me so much?

“A burger sounds fine.” I feel nervous as we park in front of the marquee. I really don’t want to order and have them pay for my food. I’ve spent years being a burden to the people taking care of me, and I’m tired of it.

They all begin examining the menu when an idea occurs to me on how to get out of this. “Can I get out? I need to use the restroom.” I unfasten my seat belt.

“Of course.” Wylder shoves open the door and hops out.

I follow, climbing out and stretching my arms above my head. “How long have we been driving?”

“A few hours.” Wylder closes the door.

“A few hours? Jesus, how long was I asleep?” I mumble with my nose scrunched.

“Almost a few hours.” Wylder offers me a smile. “It’s okay if you want to sleep. Like you said, it’s been a long day.”

“It really has.” My gaze drifts to the sky where the sunlight is beginning to slip away as the night slowly awakens from its slumber. “I’ll be right back.” I start for the entrance to the café to find the restrooms.

Wylder follows me. "I'll go with you," he explains as we reach the entrance door, and he holds it open for me. "It's better to be on the safe side."

I flick him a quizzical look as I step inside. "Is it not safe here?"

He hesitates as the door closes behind us. "For the most part, it is. But there are certain types of creatures that we do have to be careful of, even in the human realm." My eyes widen, causing him to let out a confused chuckle. "You look surprised by something, but I'm not sure what."

"You just said realm ." I lower my voice as a group of people walk past us. "That's weird."

He chuckles again. "You'll get used to it. I promise." He places a hand on the small of my back and ushers me toward an arched doorway that has a restroom sign above it.

"I'll meet you back out here when you're done," he says as I open the door to the women's restroom.

Nodding, I step inside. Then I take my sweet time, using the bathroom, washing my hands, and splashing some water on my face. While I did need to use the bathroom, I'm also avoiding being in the SUV while the waitress is there, taking orders. That way, the guys don't have to pay for my food again. I'm hungry, but I can manage for a bit. I also need to make sure to find a job once we get to this magical town so I can pay for my own stuff. It's something I've wanted to be able to do for a long time. Having people pay for my stuff means being in debt to them and typically strings are attached.

Once I finish up with all of that, I glance at my reflection in the mirror that's above the sink. I look surprisingly rested, my eyes less bloodshot, and the dark circles that

frequently reside under my eyes are less prominent.

Perhaps because I took a long-ass nap?

Logically, that makes sense. But Wylder did heal me. Could that have something to do with it?

Hopefully, I'll have more answers the more I learn about this magical world.

I turn away from my reflection and head out of the bathroom. Wylder is waiting by the doorway, just like he said. He's leaning against the wall and is staring out at the dining room area. Wisps of his blond hair hangs in his lavender eyes, his full lips are tugged downward into a frown, and one of his boot-clad feet is propped against the wall. Again, I note how pretty he is. Like so pretty he almost doesn't seem real.

I'm checking him out idiotically when his attention shifts to me. That's when I notice the tension in his posture and jawline.

He instantly seeks my hand. "We need to go."

The urgency in his voice makes me place my hand in his with zero hesitation.

"What's wrong?" I ask as he strides across the diner with me in tow.

"I'll explain later," he mutters as we near the front door.

I start to peer over my shoulder to see if anything appears out of the ordinary, but he tows me out of the diner before I even get a chance.

"Just keep walking," he utters as we dash toward the SUV.

When we reach it, he yanks open the door, and while I'm climbing in, he glances back at the diner, his aura humming with electric energy.

"The waitress already left"—Nico gripes as I slide across the leather seat toward him— "so we ordered for you ...". His smile fizzles as Wylder climbs in and slams the door. "What the hell are you slamming doors for, bro?"

"There are three rogues inside the diner," Wylder says in a rush. "And they definitely were paying attention to Emberlynn."

"Should I be worried they were paying attention to me?" I wonder nervously.

"How do you know they were staring at Emberlynn?" Phoenix asks, his gaze on the diner.

"I didn't until we were leaving. But trust me, they were." Wylder restlessly taps his foot against the floor as he surveys the diner. "This is bad, right? I mean, it can't be a coincidence." He looks at Kaiden.

Kaiden studies the diner contemplatively. "There is a chance it could be a coincidence." His gaze slides to me. "I'd ask if you've ever met a rogue before, but I'm guessing you wouldn't know."

I wrap my arms around myself. "Not that I know of, but ... How do you even tell if a witch or warlock is a rogue?"

"They have a mark." Kaiden traces his finger along his temple. "A bleeding moon right there."

"Oh." Thump, thump. Thump, thump. Thump, thump.

There's no need for me to ask him to elaborate what a bleeding moon mark looks like—I've seen one before.

On Shadow Man.

Kaiden's eyes narrow. "Have you seen the mark before?"

I shake my head, but the lie is thick in my throat. Even worse, he's on to my bullshit, but for some reason, lets it drop.

"We need to leave. If rogues are around, we don't want to be anywhere near here." Kaiden rotates in the seat and shifts the SUV into reverse.

"Man, there goes my double bacon cheeseburger," Nico complains, letting his head bob back and smack against the back of the seat.

"We'll check into a hotel in about an hour or two, and you can order room service," Kaiden tells him in a tolerant tone as he peels away from the diner with the tires squealing.

I slouch back in the seat. My mind is racing a million miles a minute, attempting to process what I learned.

Shadow Man is a rogue.

Shadow Man is a warlock.

Shadow Man is an evil man who made me do bad things. And he'll do it again if he captures me. Could those rogues work for him?

"I'll always find you, my little dove," he told me. "No matter what happens, you and

I are bonded together forever through blood and death. ”

“If these rogues are after me, I should just go,” I suggest over the echoes of my heart palpitations filling my eardrums. “You can pull over and let me out. I can hitchhike back to town.”

Phoenix’s head whips in my direction. “What? No.”

“But—”

Wylder brushes his fingertips under my chin, causing my words to misstep.

With another graze of his fingers, he angles my head so our gazes are welded. “We’re a coven, so whatever this is—if it is even anything—we’re in this together.”

“I don’t want you guys getting hurt because of me,” I stress, struggling to maintain even breathing. I’m veering toward a panic attack. If I have one, I could lose control of my powers.

The corners of Wylder’s lips turn downward as his fingers travel from my jawline to my neck. “Your heart’s beating so fast.” He presses his fingertips against where my pulse is fluttering like a hummingbird on crack. “You’re anxious.” It’s not a question.

“A little. It happens sometimes,” I admit with a bit of shame. “I need to calm down or I might lose control of my powers.”

His fingers fold around the side of my neck. “I can help you, if you want.”

I urgently nod as my power zaps at my fingertips. “Yes, please.”

He releases a breath. “Just try to relax, okay?” he instructs as he splays his fingers

across my cheek.

I nod but am doubtful that'll happen.

I try to take slow breaths and focus on my heartrate settling down. Like at the diner, when Wylder uses his power on me, the sparkling sensation of it is like basking in sunshine on a calm summer day while walking in the middle of a field of daisies. Peace—that's what I feel, I think. And I don't think I've ever experienced that before except for maybe the one time I got high. It was during the only time I ever had friends. They were stoners but welcomed me into their group. I drank with them sometimes and got high once. But within a few weeks, I was moved to another foster family that lived across town and in a different school district.

“Better?” he asks as his power fades from my body.

I take a mental calculation of how steady my heartbeat is and the even breaths I'm taking. “Yeah, thanks.”

The incandescent smile he gives me is almost too pretty to look at. “Anytime.”

I nod, and he withdraws his hand.

The cab falls silent for a few minutes, other than the quiet murmur of the engine as Kaiden drives back onto the freeway. My mind attempts to force me back to the memories of my time with Shadow Man, but the calmness Wylder instilled in my body is more powerful than that.

It's nice.

Too nice .

Sometimes it's really difficult to trust nice when it's so foreign.

As Kaiden and Phoenix begin discussing the possible scenarios of why rogues were at the diner, I hunker down in the seat and attempt to find a comfortable position.

Nico shifts then ducks his head to whisper in my ear, "Are you good?" Mild amusement glitters in his voice. When I bob my head up and down, he chuckles. "Yeah, Wylder's magic can give you a wicked high, depending on what he's trying to heal. I once broke all the bones in my leg, and he had to use so much of his magic on me that I thought I was living with the stars for three days."

My head lulls toward him, and when I meet his gaze, he's smiling. "How did you break your leg that badly?" I ask.

"I jumped out a three-story window because I thought I could fly." His smile broadens. "In my defense, I was drunk."

"I once broke three of my toes," I mumble lazily. Nico was right. Wylder's magic is making me high. "Because I kicked a kid in the shin."

"Really? How old were you?"

"Around seven."

It was right when I was put into foster care. I was struggling with existing in the human world after living with what I'm now assuming is a rogue for a few years. Going from one extreme to another was a confusing shock to the system. I learned then that I was an anomaly. At least, that's what I believed until these guys showed up .

"I don't kick people anymore," I say. "Although, I did kick Liam a few times."

The muscle in Nico's jaw twitches. "He deserved it. He deserved more."

"But you guys took care of that," I remind him, watching his reaction closely.

His eyes narrow. "Why do I get the feeling you still think we killed him?"

I scratch the corner of my eye. "I don't."

His head tilts to the side, the corners of his lips quirking. "Liar. And now I know your tell." He tugs a strand of my hair. "It's cute, though."

I crinkle my nose. "I'm not cute." In fact, I kind of smell.

Eva only allowed me to take a shower three times a week, and tonight was supposed to be one of my shower days. During the incident with Liam, my anxiety had risen so much that I started to sweat. So, yeah, saying I need a shower is like saying the sky is blue. Hopefully, when we get to the hotel room, I can take one.

What will the sleeping arrangement be? Most hotel rooms usually have two beds. If that's the case, I'll sleep on the floor. It's not the first time I've had to do that. And I used to sleep in a cage when I was with Shadow Man, so anything's better than that.

Wylder merely dazzles me with a smile before rotating forward. He joins the conversation then.

I decide to observe them and figure out as much as I can. It's a protective mechanism I picked up pretty early on in life. Studying people helped me navigate through some toxic households.

I'm not picking up many toxic traits from these guys, though. Wylder is quiet and sweet. Nico is the biggest jokester of the four. Phoenix has got that whole brooding

bad boy thing about him. And Kaiden? My guess would be that some people would see his guarded and controlled mannerisms as borderline psychotic, but I believe there's more to it than that. That he's this way due to some messed-up trauma he suffered. I've seen it before in some of my foster siblings. Hell, I've acted that way myself.

Hopefully, I'm right about this, because if I'm not, the guys are scary as fuck.

"What the hell is this place?" I mumble, eyeing the lavish, ivy column entrance that canopies a spinning glass door.

We're in a town about an hour away from where we attempted to stop and get food. When we first drove in, a series of older motels lined the road. I thought we'd stop at one, but nope. Kaiden drove to the heart of the town where fancy shops bordered the brick sidewalks. After driving for a few more minutes, he pulled up to this place and parked in front of the entrance.

"A hotel." Nico unbuckles his seat belt, takes one look at my face, and snorts a laugh. "Kaiden has rich-boy taste."

"Staying in a nice place doesn't mean I have rich-boy taste," Kaiden argues as he shuts off the engine. "And you're one to talk. You grew up in a castle."

My eyes go huge. "What?"

Nico rolls his eyes. "It's not a castle. It's just a really large stone building with towers."

Another blink from me, because who the hell grows up in a castle? "Are you all wealthy?"

Wylder shakes his head as he reaches to unfasten his seat belt. “My family is considered lower class. Phoenix’s is normal.”

What does normal class mean in the warlock world? And why are there even different wealth classes?

“How does that even work?” I ask as Nico pushes open the door and hops out. “I mean, you’re magical or whatever; can’t you just cast a spell to make your own money?”

“As lovely as that sounds, it’s illegal to do so.” Nico offers me his hand like some Victorian romance novel gentleman.

I take it. “Yeah, but how would anyone know if you did it?”

“The council can restrict our magic, and about a century ago, they decided to restrict that power.” Nico helps me out of the vehicle, laces our fingers together, and steers me around to the wide stairway that leads to the entrance doors. “They said it was so that there would be an incentive for us to work and earn money, but really, it’s just about powerful people wanting to remain powerful.”

“Careful, Nico,” Wylder warns as he steps up beside us. “Even though we’re in the human world, the council could still overhear you.”

“Good,” Nico mutters but stops talking about it, anyway.

The three of us head in while Kaiden and Phoenix stay behind to grab our bags and give the key fob to the valet.

The interior of the building is equally as exquisite as the exterior, with domed glass ceilings, marble floors, and a coffee shop tucked into a corner.

Nico and I head over to it while Wylder checks in.

“I need a caffeine jolt,” Nico tells me as we arrive at the counter. “All this human-like traveling is making me exhausted.”

“How do you normally travel?” I wonder, keeping my voice low as the barista approaches us.

We pause the conversation as Nico orders five coffees, and I already know one is for me. I’d argue, but I’m too tired at the moment.

Once the barista goes to make our coffee—but not without openly checking out Nico—he picks up the conversation right where we left off. “There are portals you can use to get where you want, except to the human world. You can also get a pass to create your own portal. If it’s approved, of course.” He sighs. “Just another way the council tries to control us.”

I worry my lip between my teeth. “Is it really that bad?”

He rests his arm on the counter. “I mean, it is and it isn’t. It’s way better than this human world, but there is stuff that needs to be changed. But that’s with all places, I’m sure.” He straightens. “You, however, don’t have to worry about that, because you’ll have your own form of power with our covenant.”

Puzzlement webs through me. “What do you mean?”

“You’re our heart ; therefore, you get power over us.”

I’m beyond taken aback. “Isn’t Kaiden your guys’ boss?”

A beat skips by, and then he busts up laughing.

“He really does act like it, doesn’t he?” he says through his laughter. “But he’s not.”

“Oh.” A frown pulls at my lips as his words spin around in my head.

His laughter fades, perplexity replacing it. “What’s with the pretty frown, pretty eyes?”

There he goes again with that pretty nonsense.

“It’s just an average frown,” I stress, and he gives me a sarcastic if-you-say-so look. “And I was just thinking about how you said I’m going to have power over this coven, but how the hell is that supposed to work when I don’t even know how to control my own magic?”

“You’ll get there,” he assures me.

The barista returns then with a cupholder full of four coffees and one in her hand. Nico takes them from her and hands me the spare one, totally ignoring her when the barista gives Nico fuck-me eyes.

He seems like a flirty sort of guy—warlock—so his blasé attitude toward her is a tad bit puzzling. Maybe he’s dating someone?

We’re walking away from the coffee shop when he notes my expression. “What? ”

“Nothing.” I fiddle with the sleeve of the coffee cup.

“No, it’s something,” he insists. “Come on; just tell me.”

Great. Why can’t I have more control over my expression? I wonder if there’s a spell for that.

“It really is nothing,” I promise as we near the lounge area where leather sofas are positioned in front of a fireplace. “That barista was just completely trying to get you to flirt with her, and you ignored her, but you kind of seem like a flirty sort of guy, so I was wondering if you were dating someone, or if my ability to read people has gone to shit. Or maybe I just can read warlocks.”

When he rubs his lips together in an apprehensive sort of manner, I want to kick my own ass.

“Sorry. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“No, you’re fine.” He switches the coffee holder into his other hand. “You can ask any question you want, Emberlynn. I just got a little weird because you read me correctly, but I don’t want to be that way anymore.”

“Flirty?” I check, unsure why. I’d love to have his light and friendly personality.

He unevenly nods. “Or, well, I do want to be flirty, but only with my soul mate.”

“Do soul mates exist?” I inquire, and he nods. “Is it like a magical thing?”

“Sort of.” He shifts his weight, seeming twitchy again. “This is kind of a complicated question that could take a while to answer. And right now, we should probably go get situated in our room so we can eat, because I’m starving.” He smiles.

It’s totally fake.

And totally confusing.

But since I have zero clue why, I put a pin in it for now. Besides, why would I know what his smiles mean? I’ve known him for what? Like a day.

And yet, I'm more comfortable around him than I have been with anyone else in my life. That might not mean much, since most people who floated in and out of my life weren't that great. And the one warlock in my life was the worst of all. Or perhaps that was my parents. After all, they're the ones who gave me to him.

EMBERLYNN

Any memories of my parents are hazy at best, to the point where they don't make sense. I can't recall their faces, if they smiled at me, if they ever hugged me. If I am to believe the memories I can make sense of, it seems as if they were afraid of me and my magic. Will these guys, who are in my coven, become that way, too, when they learn about all of my powers and the destruction they cause and have caused? Probably. It's why it's best to keep as much as possible tucked away inside me.

Shadow Man used to tell me that he was the only one who would accept me for who I am.

"Which is why we'll never tell anyone about what you can do," he once said as he trailed his fingers along the bars of my cage.

He may have been a total lunatic, but he was right about that. My powers are dark and frightening when unleashed, which is why I've spent years fighting to keep them in.

The last time I let them out, lots of people died.

"Are you okay?" Wylder asks, drawing me from my thoughts.

We've just entered the hotel room. It's a spacious place that resembles more of an apartment than a hotel. And a high-end one at that, with splashes of ivory and gold on

the trim, the chandeliers, and a high-arched ceiling made up of most skylights. Through the glass, the sky is darkening as the stars and moon begin to awaken from their slumber.

“I’m fine,” I tell Wylder as I tentatively walk farther into the hotel room, stopping beside a table and chairs.

To my right is a kitchen area with marble countertops, and in front of me is a sitting room with a fireplace, a massive TV, and a large sectional.

“Are you sure?” Wylder checks as Nico places the coffees on the kitchen counter. “You seem ... I don’t know, tense.”

“I think I just feel a bit out of place in such a nice place.” Not a total lie.

“I get that. I grew up pretty poor and always feel a bit out of place in Kaiden’s world.” He gives my hand a squeeze. “It gets easier.”

“I hope so because, right now, I don’t even want to touch anything,” I say, standing near the table, unsure of what to do next. I want to take a shower, but I’m not even sure where the beds are .

The front door opens then, and Kaiden and Phoenix walk in, wheeling in our suitcases with them.

“No bellhop?” Nico asks as he hoists himself up onto the counter, sitting on the edge.

Kaiden kicks the door shut. “The less people who know we’re here, the better.” He tosses a handful of keycards onto an end table while Phoenix drops a bag onto the floor beside the other suitcases.

“Good idea.” Nico scratches his brow as he swings his legs back and forth. “What’s the plan? I mean, do we sleep through the night and then make the drive as quickly as we can? Are we not worried about something happening while we’re all asleep?”

“You think those rogues are going to show up here?” I grip the coffee tighter. Sure, they said not to worry about it, but I hate the idea of being chased. I’ve spent years constantly looking over my shoulder, waiting for him to find me. What if these rogues know him? What if he sent them?

“Probably not, but we do need to be on the safe side,” Kaiden responds as he empties out his pockets and dumps the contents onto the table, as well. His gaze slides to me, and he eyes me over. “You should pick what room you want and get ready for bed. I’m sure you’re exhausted.”

“Um ... Okay.” I’m not quite certain how to take what he said, if he means he wants me to leave the room or if he simply thinks I need some rest. “Where’s my bag ...?” I trail off as I spot it draped over Phoenix’s shoulder .

He approaches me, and I stick out my hand to take it from him.

“I’ll carry it to your room,” he offers.

I keep my hand outstretched. “I can carry it.”

“You have your coffee,” he points out, breezing by me. “Come on; let’s go figure out where the rooms are in this place.”

Resisting a protest, I follow after him. But for reals, what’s the deal with these guys trying to do everything for me? It’s something I’m not used to, and I’m unsure I want to get used to it.

We find the rooms in a hallway to the right of the living room, along with a bathroom. The largest of the rooms also has a private bathroom.

“You should stay in here,” Phoenix suggests when we both note the private bathroom.

“No way,” I decline. “If anyone should stay here, it’s Kaiden. He paid for the hotel.”

“He’d want you to stay in this room.” He places my bag on the foot of the king-sized four-poster bed. “Trust me.”

Discomfort spins a nasty, sticky web inside my gut. “It doesn’t make sense for me to stay in this one. It has the bathroom, the biggest bed, and the best view.” I motion at the windows, at the view of the silhouette of the mountains. “Honestly, I’d be fine with sleeping on the couch. There’re only four beds, anyway, so someone has to.”

He scratches his brow. “We’re probably going to take shifts tonight to keep an eye on things, so whoever’s turn it is will do that.”

So, they are worried about the rogues showing up.

“Okay, well, I’ll take the smaller room then.”

“Just take this one.”

“No.”

“Are you always this stubborn?”

“I ...” I trail off. “I don’t know.”

A divot forms between his brows. “You don’t know?”

I shrug, fiddling with the sleeve of the coffee cup. “Honestly, I’ve spent most of my life living with strangers and trying to remain as invisible as possible. Being stubborn wasn’t an option, but not from choice, so I don’t really know if that’s me.”

Now he’s looking at me like I just declared I have a unicorn horn growing out of my ass.

“That probably sounds weird, huh?”

He wets his lips with his tongue. “No, it makes sense. It’s just ...” He rakes his fingers through the dark locks of his hair. “I’m sorry that’s how it’s been for you.”

I shrug. “Everyone has their own shit.”

“Yeah, I guess.” His darkly stormy gaze dissects me. “It’s fine if you want to be stubborn, but trust me; Kaiden is twenty times worse, but if he wants you to take this room—which he will—you might as well just enjoy the fancy bathroom and what I’m certain is a really comfy bed.”

I consider what he said. “Fine.” I grimace. “But this doesn’t mean I’m going to cave every time. I’m just tired. ”

He almost smiles. “Fair enough.” He momentarily stands in the same place, his lips briefly parting, as if he’s about to speak. Then he cinches his lips shut and exits the room without saying anything further.

Releasing a breath, I unzip my bag and dig out my one and only pair of pajama bottom shorts along with the tank top I usually sleep in, even when it’s in the middle of winter.

When nightmares tiptoe through my mind as I sleep, I tend to wake up overheated with magic that wants to burst from my body. Being able to cool down quickly helps calm down my magic quicker.

I also grab a hoodie in case I have to go out with the guys for a bit. I normally don't get dressed in my pajamas until right before I'm climbing into bed, so wearing only shorts and a tank top feels like too little clothing.

After gathering my pajamas, underwear, soap, and brush, I head into the bathroom to take a shower. The water runs warm the entire time, and I stay under it until my fingers start to prune. By the time I get out, I'm so relaxed I feel like I could climb into bed and go straight to sleep. I'm hungry, but I've gone to sleep hungry more times than I haven't. During those times, starving was the least of my problems.

I'm drying off when my gaze descends to a reminder of how bad things got for me, a scar marking my wrist, a memory I want to forget but never can. I was in the bathroom when it happened ...

I was bleeding ...

And everything hurt ...

Inside and out ...

I tear myself from those memories and cover up the scar with the leather band bracelet I only take off when I'm showering. Then I get dressed, towel-dry my hair, and step back into the room, about ready to get into bed.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

My gaze darts to the door. "Yeah?"

“It’s Wylder,” he says in his sweetly soft voice. “Is it okay if I come in?”

I bite down on my lip as I glance down at the shirt and shorts. I don’t even have a bra on.

“Yeah, hold on.” I tug my hoodie on, flipping my damp hair out from the collar. Then I pad over to the door and open it.

He’s wearing a pair of plaid pajama bottoms and a gray T-shirt that makes his eyes look even more purple.

God, he’s so pretty.

“You took a shower,” he says as he notes my damp hair, his gaze briefly lowering to my bare legs.

I nod, self-consciously tugging on the hem of the hoodie. “I was about to go to sleep.”

“You should eat first.” He extends his hand to me. “We ordered room service and got you a burger and fries. Nico also ordered every flavor of milkshake because he didn’t know what you liked, so there’s like ten milkshakes out there.”

“What the crap? How the heck are we going to drink that many milkshakes? ”

“Whatever we eat, Nico will. The dude has got a super sweet tooth.”

“Really? He doesn’t look like it.” He looks lean and fit.

“Yeah, he has some weird eating habits that come with his particular magic abilities.” He wavers. “But that’s probably something he should tell you about.”

“Okay.” I step out of the room, and we head down the hallway.

He’s quiet for a beat before he says, “A little bit of a warning: Kaiden’s probably going to ask you a few questions about your past. If you don’t want to answer them, just tell him that. You don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to.”

I fidget with the leather band on my wrist. “What kind of questions?”

He massages the back of his neck. “He—we all want to get to the bottom of why the system believed you were dead. We also want to know a little bit about your magic.” He briefly pauses. “And you. We just really want to know about you.”

“Fine, but I’m not that interesting,” I tell him as we exit the hallway, and the living room area comes into my view.

Kaiden, Nico, and Phoenix have all changed into their pajamas and are sitting on the sofas, chatting about the disappointing quality of human pizza.

“The cheese is just super weird.” Nico picks a glob of cheese on a pizza slice. “And look at all the grease in the box.” He slants forward to peer inside a pizza box that’s on the coffee table. Beside it are ten cups that I’m assuming are milkshakes, along with a few plates of burgers and fries.

“You have to eat it.” Phoenix plucks a fry up from off a plate. “You’re the one that wanted the pizza.”

Nico’s lips twitch, then he tosses a chunk of cheese at Phoenix’s face.

“What the fuck?” Phoenix swipes at his cheek. Then he chucks a fry at Nico, and it hits him between the eyes.

Kaiden, who's reading through what appears to be my file, sighs. "Knock it off, you two."

I press my lips together, fighting back a laugh as Nico picks up a piece of cheese and acts like he's about to throw it at Kaiden.

Wylder clears his throat before he can, and everyone's attention snaps to me, their eyes sweeping up and down my body.

As my self-consciousness grows, I resist the urge to hide behind Wylder.

"We got you a burger." Nico's gaze strays to my legs again. Then, biting his lip, he gestures at the cups. "And all the flavors of the shakes because we didn't know what kind you liked."

"Thanks." I pad over and sink down onto the floor in front of the coffee table.

Nico eyes me curiously. "You're sitting on the floor?"

"Sure. Why not?" That way, I can use the table as an extra way to cover up.

"Let her be," Kaiden says, returning his focus to the file.

Wylder sits down beside me and pushes a plate in front of me. He smiles at me before grabbing a cup and taking a sip. His face twists in disgust. "Yuck, it's cookies and cream."

"Hey, that's my favor," Nico whines, as if deeply offended.

"Mine, too." I collect a few fries.

“Sweet.” He sticks out his fist. “Fist bump for being milkshake besties.”

I laugh as I bump my fist against his. Nico dazzles me with a smile while Phoenix tosses him a dirty look.

“Then I guess this is yours.” Wylder hands me the milkshake.

I take a swallow, trying not to think about how his pretty lips touched the straw my lips are currently wrapped around, but it’s all I think about.

Nico leans forward to grab another slice of pizza. “So, what’s up with this human cheese thing?” he asks me.

I collect my burger. “Some pizza is just greasy. It really depends on what kind it is.”

“But why is it so globby?” he wonders as he plucks a pepperoni off the slice.

“How so?” I ask then bite into a burger. As the greasy goodness floods my tastebuds, I let out a moan.

Wylder freezes beside me, and Nico bites down on his lip so hard the skin around his mouth turns white. Phoenix lets out a cough while Kaiden glances at me.

I lick a drizzle of grease off my lip. “What?”

Nico scratches the corner of his eye. “It’s nothing.” He pops a pepperoni into his mouth. “So, when I say the cheese is globby, I mean the cheese I’m used to is super gooey. This”—he holds up the pizza slice— “I don’t get it. Why isn’t the cheese running off of it?”

I stare puzzledly at him. “Why does it sound like you usually eat nacho cheese on

your pizza?”

His eyes glitter with intrigue. “What’s nacho cheese?”

I reach for a napkin. “Cheese that goes on nachos.”

The stupefied look remains on his face. “What are nachos?”

My gaze glides across all of their equally perplexed expressions. “Um ... What do you guys normally eat?”

“Not these noochoes thing you speak of,” Nico tells me. “But if their cheese is gooey, I’m down to try them.”

I cover my mouth to stifle a laugh. I give myself a beat before lowering my hand. “They’re called nachos.”

“Nachos,” he pronounces it weird, and I damn near laugh again.

“We eat a lot of food that’s similar to what humans eat,” Kaiden explains as he collects a cup off the table. “But we do eat different foods, as well. And personally, I think our food is much better.” He pulls a face after he tastes whatever is in the cup. He sets it down and drops the folder on the table. “I want to ask you a few questions if you’re okay with that.”

I chew on my bottom lip. “You can ask, and I’ll answer if I can.”

He nods. “This file doesn’t have much information about you. Not even a birthday.”

“I don’t know my actual birthday.” I set the burger down on my plate and wipe off my fingers with a napkin. “When I was found and put in the foster system, there

wasn't a lot of information about me, so most of it was a guess. For all I know, I could be like thirty."

"I doubt that, since you don't look like it." Nico tips his head back to toss a fry into his mouth. "Unless you're part vampire."

I rest my elbows on the table. "Are vampires mean?"

All of his elation evaporates. "They're complicated creatures." He reaches over to tug on a strand of my damp hair. "Let's not worry about that, though. We'll explain the order of things once you're at the academy." He smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"I think we'll also perform a historia legere when we get back," Kaiden adds as he sets the folder on the floor.

I pluck a fry from my plate and dunk it in a cup of ranch. "What's that?"

His gaze melds to mine, and again I think about how most people who meet him probably think he's a psychopath with how controlled his expression is. "It's a spell that should tell us some of your history, like when you were born, who your parents were. Unless you know that answer?"

A lump wells in my throat at the reminder of how they gave me up. "I barely remember them."

"Okay, then," he says, as if it's that simple.

But it's not.

And I'm terrified of what this spell will reveal .

That I'm broken.

That I'm a murderer.

What will happen if they find out?

Will they lock me away in a cage, just like him ?

No, I won't allow that to happen. I need to find a way to keep that part of me a secret.

Keep the darkness that lives inside me hidden.

10

KAIDEN

I can feel that she's unnerved when I mention doing the spell to read her history. I'm unsure why, though. While our bond allows me to sense what she's feeling, my lack of ability to read emotions complicates me figuring out the why.

Soon after I bring it up, she excuses herself to go to bed. She leaves with a halfhearted wave before hurrying out of the room.

"She's worried about something," Wylder states the obvious as he pushes up off the floor and flops down on the sofa.

"She doesn't want her history read." Nico rises and collects his plate. He also grabs Emberlynn's, her half-eaten burger still on it.

"When Kaiden and I were with her in the diner, she acted uncomfortable when we asked her about her past." Wylder bounces his knee up and down, his bare foot tapping against the floor. "Something bad happened to her."

"That's obvious," Phoenix says around a mouthful of pizza. "The fact that she's been living with humans most of her life is evidence of that."

"It's more than that." Wylder slips his finger underneath the leather band on his wrist and skims his finger along the scar concealed underneath it. "I don't want to push her to talk about it."

“Me neither, but we do need to find out the basics about her.” I cross my arms on the table. “It’s necessary.”

Nico rolls his eyes as he walks by me, carrying the plates. “Everything with you is necessary, even when it shouldn’t be.”

“Let’s not fight,” Wylder pleads. “We have too much stuff to worry about.”

“I’m not fighting.” Nico strolls into the kitchen and places the plates in the sink. “I can just see where Kaiden is heading with this. He’s going to turn her into a project, like he does with everything else.”

“I do not.” It’s a lie. I like projects. Order. Stuff to preoccupy the darkness that plagues my mind. It’s part of my powers—darkness. It’s a family trait, and it made the household that I grew up in a living hell. I don’t want to be like my father—empty, cold, cruel. But sometimes it’s difficult to fight my natural instincts.

Nico elevates his brows but doesn’t comment as he winds around the kitchen island. Then he returns to the living room but doesn’t sit down, his gaze traveling to the skylights above. “A storm is rolling in,” he mutters, the glow of lightning illuminating across his face, his eyes glowing against it. “Which is strange since there were no signs of a storm.”

“Maybe human weather works like that,” Wylder offers an explanation but doubt weighs on all of us.

“Do you think she’s doing it?” Nico yanks his focus off the skylights right as raindrops begin to splatter against the glass.

I roll up the sleeves of my shirt, ignoring the mark on my wrist, the one that brands me for what I am.

Darkness.

Death.

Fear.

“She could be.” I thrum my fingers against the table. “She did put a large hole in the ground, so maybe her powers center around nature.”

“Yeah, but she also has healing power in her.” The bouncing of Wylder’s foot increases. “What if she’s?—”

“No, there’s no way,” Nico cuts him off with a sharp look.

“If she has multiples, she could be.” Wylder looks at me for conformation, his body flowing with tension.

His nervousness is valid, because Emberlynn could be one of them.

A witch who possesses every power in the wiccan world.

We refer to them as the insania , which means madness. Because there’s only been a few witches and warlocks who’ve had that power. And they’ve all gone mad—every single one .

“She’s not,” I say the words aloud and with meaning.

But the sound of the rain cascading down on the skylights is a reminder that we really don’t know anything about our heart .

We all settle into silence, lost in our own thoughts.

“I don’t like that she knows hardly anything about our world,” Nico breaks the silence, kicking his feet up onto the table. “It makes her vulnerable.”

“We’ll catch her up—I’ll make sure of that.” I pause. “Although, I think with some stuff, we might have to tell her more gently and with time.”

“You mean, about the bond?” Wylder reads my mind.

With reluctance, I nod, knowing Nico and Phoenix will get upset.

“You want us to lie to her?” Phoenix glares at me. “No way.”

“Agreed,” Nico says. “Which might be a first for Phoenix and me.”

Phoenix rolls his eyes. “Whatever. I just don’t like the idea of lying to her when her life already seems so ... messed up.”

“Because she’s spent most of her life with humans.” I straighten in the chair and keep my voice low to avoid Emberlynn hearing me. “Think about it. Human relationships, mates, bonding, this doesn’t exist in her world. And she’s barely learned what she is. Do you really want to pile on the responsibility of her learning she’s destined to be with all of us? ”

“It’s not a bad thing,” Nico says, squirming, probably from the guilt he feels oversleeping around.

It’s not his fault, though. We thought Emberlynn was dead.

“I know that,” I stress. “But it’ll be a lot for her. And I worry if we overwhelm her with everything, she might not be able to transition into this new life easily. And, as her coven, we’re supposed to make that happen.”

“He’s right.” Phoenix sighs, scratching his brow. “I hate it, but what he’s saying makes sense. She barely wants to accept food from us, let alone bond with us.”

“And how are we supposed to stop her from finding out?” Nico scoffs. “Someone will mention it to her.”

“The only real risk is Wylder’s sister or mother saying something,” I reply. “Other than that ... It's not like everyone we go to school with walks around talking about bonds and mating. It’s just part of our world. Everyone will assume she knows.”

“I’ll talk to my mom and sister.” Wylder retrieves his phone.

Nico shakes his head. “Whatever. But I have a feeling this will eventually come back to bite us in the ass.”

EMBERLYNN

“Y ou’re going to kill them for me,” he whispers as his bony fingers wrap around the bars of my cage.

I shake my head as I hug my knees to my chest. “No, I won’t do it.”

Lightning blazes across the ceiling—I’m not sure if it’s him or me doing it.

Sometimes I can’t tell what powers mine are and which ones are his. They sometimes mix, and chaos ensues whenever that occurs.

“You will, my little pet,” he warns, “or your parents will suffer.”

“They’re not even here,” I mutter as tears fall from my eyes.

“You don’t think I can’t hurt them even if they’re not close.” He leans forward, his shadowy face like haunting tendrils of fog rising from a lake. “I can hurt whoever I want whenever I want. ”

“Then why do you need me?” I lift my chin, being defiant. I do that on occasion when I’m too tired to be afraid of him.

A punishment is coming, but I can’t find the will to care.

His hollow laugh slithers up my spine. “I guess we’re doing this the hard way then.”

My cage door opens, and he reaches for me, pain searing through my body.

I let out a scream as a hand touches my face ? —

“Emberlynn, wake up. It’s just a dream.”

My eyelids fly open, and I gasp for air. “Where am I?” I sputter, completely disoriented as I take in the bed I’m lying in and the dark blue walls surrounding me.

The next thing my gaze centers on is the beautiful guy with lavender eyes leaning over me. His hand is on my cheek, and worry is emitting from him in potent waves. He’s sitting on the edge of the bed with his body angled toward me.

“Okay my God, I forgot where I was,” I breathe out. I stare up at the ceiling, counting my breaths.

Sure, Wylder has calmed me down with his magic, but I’ve had to do it for myself most of my life. Counting my breaths helps. Not as much as his power, though.

He cautiously watches as I drag my fingers through my hair. “You were having another nightmare?”

I bob my head up and down, swallowing audibly. “I have them every night ... usually.”

His lips thin as he presses them together. “Can I ask what they’re about? ”

I shake my head from side to side. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.” He easily lets the subject drop, and it makes me like him more.

I probably shouldn’t get too attached, since after they do this spell to read my history, they’ll realize what I’ve done and probably kick me out of their coven.

I push up on my elbows. “What time is it?” I ask, noticing he’s dressed in a pair of jeans and a gray shirt.

“It’s seven o’clock in the morning.” He observes me, as if he’s trying to see into the cracks where I keep my lies. His aura is a bit dull, too, which is odd. “We’re actually getting ready to take off soon. I came in here to wake you up, and you were moaning in your sleep ... like you were in pain.” He pauses, as if waiting for me to tell him what was haunting my nightmares.

I offer no answer as I sit up and rub my eyes with the heels of my hands. “I take it no rogues showed here then?”

He shakes his head. “It was pretty quiet last night.”

“You guys really should’ve let me take a turn keeping an eye on things,” I say as I note the dark circles under his eyes.

“It was nice of you to offer, but until we train you to use your powers, I think we should limit the risk of you having to fight a rogue.”

“Good point.” I throw the covers off of me. “I’ll go get dressed and pack up my stuff.”

Nodding, he stands up, his gaze quickly sweeping up and down me as I get out of bed. I took my hoodie off when I went to bed last night, so I’m more exposed than I have been in front of him. I’m also not wearing a bra, and, for a fleeting moment, his

attention goes straight to my chest. I start to cross my arms, but a flush spreads across his cheeks and he turns away.

“I’ll let you get dressed then.” He hurries out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

What the actual hell just happened?

My gaze drops to my chest, and I feel my own cheeks warm. Oh my god, my nipples are totally visible through the shirt. No wonder he ran out of here like that.

To be honest, it doesn’t make that much sense. Wylder is a gorgeous, sweet guy. He has to be experienced, right? With the way he acted, though, it kind of feels like maybe not.

How is that even possible? And why am I suddenly obsessing over this?

Yanking my head from Wylder Land, I quickly get changed into a pair of baggy jeans, a black T-shirt, and tug on a hoodie over it. Normally, I’d pull the hood over my head and put on sunglasses, but that was to hide my abnormal eyes. I don’t feel the need to do that anymore, though I do feel sort of naked as I wander out of my room with my bag slung over my shoulder.

Nico and Kaiden are in the living room when I wander in, feeling like a zombie thanks to my crappy sleep cycle. Kaiden is texting on his phone and doesn’t seem to notice when I enter. Nico is sitting at the table, staring off into space. He’s dressed in black pants and a green shirt that goes well with his eyes. His hair is styled perfectly, and he has a bored expression on his face. However, when his gaze finds me, a smile lights up his face.

“Hey, pretty eyes, how did you sleep?” He gracefully stands and approaches me.

While I'm tall, he's taller, and I have to angle my head up to look at him. The instant he sees me up close, a frown forms on his lips. "You look tired."

"I just didn't sleep very well." I slide the handle of my bag higher onto my shoulder. "Where's Phoenix and Wylder?"

"They went to grab breakfast." He slips his fingers underneath the handle of my bag. "We're supposed to meet them at the car." He takes the bag off my shoulder.

"I can get my bag." I reach out to take it back from him.

He steps back, shaking his head and hitching the bag over his shoulder. "I've got it."

All this helping me out is making me uncomfortable, which yes, I know that makes me sound crazy, but when you're not used to having help, and then you suddenly have it, it's freaking weird.

"Kai, you ready to roll?" Nico calls out as he turns and grabs the handle of a luggage bag.

"Yep." Kaiden pushes to his feet, stuffs his phone into the pocket of his black pants, and faces us, his gaze discreetly roving over me before he directs his attention to Nico. "You got the bags?"

Nico nods, salutes him, then saunters toward the door, dragging the suitcase behind him.

I follow with Kaiden right behind me, his close presence making the temperature of the air slightly colder, but not in a bad way.

A few minutes later, the three of us are on the elevator. Kaiden pushes the button to

the main floor then leans back against the metal wall and rolls up one of the sleeves of his button-down gray shirt.

“So, how long of a drive do you think we have before we make it home?” Nico asks, glancing down at his watch.

“Probably another few hours.” He rolls up the other sleeve of his shirt then says something else, but I can’t make out what over the sound of a loud humming that abruptly fills the elevator.

At first, I think it’s because my eardrums are pressurized. I try to pop them, but the sound only builds, growing louder and louder until it’s screaming in my brain.

I hunch over, crying out.

“ Where are you, my little pet ?” Shadow Man’s voice fills my head. “ I can feel you again. It’s been a long time. I started to wonder if perhaps you were dead, but I should’ve known better. You’re too strong. And you’re mine .”

“No,” I moan out as I collapse to the floor.

I can feel hands on my arms, but my vision is too spotted over for me to see, and I can’t hear past his voice. It’s all a hear.

“ Yes, you are. You’ll always be mine. ” His laughter scratches against my skull. “ It’s just a matter of time before I find you again. ”

“Kaiden, make it stop!” Nico’s voice fleeting cuts through Shadow Man’s laughter. “Get in there!”

“And what if it’s not?” Kaiden snaps in a panic. “It’ll make it worse.”

“Look at her.” Nico’s voice is low and quivering. “Look at her eyes. That’s dark magic, so stop being you, get into her head, and get it out of there. We have no other choice.”

“ You’re not alone? ” Shadow Man sounds both confused and intrigued. “ Who else is with you, my little pet. ”

I whimper. “Stop. Go away.”

“Shh ... It’ll be over soon.” A voice says as a sparkly sensation spills over me, and then fingers press gently against my temples.

“ Don’t you dare let someone else in ,” Shadow Man warns. “ I’ll ruin them, too, if you do ... ”

His voice fades away as the sparkling sensation magnifies. It’s not warm, but cold, and yet it feels so wonderful, like rain on a hot day, or like feeling crisp snowflakes fall over me while I lay in powdery snow.

The sensation is so prominent that I can visualize laying in the snow, staring up at the clouds as snowflakes tumble down on me and melt against my skin. Then wisps of darkness begin to dance around me. But they’re not like Shadow Man. No, these wisps are more like ribbons tinted with hues of purple, like a raven’s feather. And somehow, the understanding resides deep inside me that they won’t bring me any harm. They’re here to help me .

“Pretty,” I whisper as I grab one of them and clutch it in my hand.

Delicious warmth expands through my body then, and sleepiness pulls me under, like a soft blanket tucking me in against the snow-kissed slumber of night.

And I let it.

Because I just know that nothing will hurt me here.

Not even Shadow Man.

12

KAIDEN

I remove my fingers from Emberlynn's temples, my hands noticeably trembling. "Whatever it is, it's gone now," I tell Nico while keeping my attention on Emberlynn.

She's lying on the elevator floor, her dark, wavy locks spread out like a halo around her head.

Nico is crouched beside us, holding her hand. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive." Not a drop of doubt is in me that whatever dark entity was inside her mind is gone now, because I felt it when it appeared and the coldness it swept in the air is no longer present. "We should get off the elevator and take the stairs."

We had pushed the emergency button when Emberlynn had first collapsed to avoid any humans getting on. If they'd seen what was happening, we would've had to have erased their minds, and we've already used too much magic on this journey as it is.

"Good idea." Nico begins to slip his arms underneath her to scoop her up.

"I can get her," I insist and, surprisingly, he easily allows me.

Maybe he can sense the hitch in my voice connected to the fear over the fact that I had to use my darkness on our heart. The voice that was inside her head was darkness, and in order to get rid of it, I needed to match it.

I loathe using my powers. One wrong move, and I could've sent Emberlynn's mind into a nightmare she couldn't get out of. Or worse—I could've ruined her soul. But letting the entity consume her mind would've been worse. Darkness is the best way to fight darkness. Still, I don't ever want to do it again.

“We need to figure out what that was,” I say as I gently pick up Emberlynn. My chest constricts as she curls against me, as if I'm the safest thing in the world.

I'm not.

Not even close.

But I want to be for her.

Still, closeness, the warmth of another, isn't something I'm used to, and I feel unnervingly out of my element as I carry her out of the elevator. We're on the sixth floor, so it takes us a few minutes to walk downstairs. If we were back home, we'd use magic to teleport.

I really don't understand how humans live without magic. Everything is so complicated, and it makes me wonder how exhausting my heart's life has been for the last seventeen years or so.

Nico texted Wylder and Phoenix while we headed down to tell them to pull the SUV up to the stairway entrance. I assume they're panicking, and my assumption is confirmed when we push out of the metal doors and step into the icy breeze plaguing the outdoors. Leaves are fluttering through the air like birds, and gray clouds billow around the sky.

“What the hell happened?” Phoenix shouts as he jogs toward us.

Wylder is hopping out of the driver's side of the SUV, and his eyes widen in horror as he takes sight of Emberlynn, passed out in my arms.

"I'll explain in the car." I swing around Phoenix and stride toward our vehicle, wanting to get the hell out of here.

"Is she doing this?" Nico calls out over the howling wind as he chases after me.

"I think so," I say as Wylder opens the back door for me. I maneuver her inside and lay her down in the back seat. Then I turn to Wylder. "Use your power to comfort her and maybe lull her mind to sleep a bit"—my gaze strays to the sky as lights swirl with the clouds— "before the storm gets out of hand."

Nodding, he jumps into the back seat and carefully lifts Emberlynn's head so he can rest it on his lap. Once he's situated, he smooths his fingers across her forehead and whispers something. And just like that, the wind fizzles down, the sun peeks out from the clouds and leaves flutter to the ground.

The four of us trade a look, all our expressions revealing the same worry. Our heart is powerful. More powerful than she might even realize. I worry I may be right about her being an insania . It could put her in danger if the wrong witch or warlock finds out. They could use it to make her do awful things.

It makes me question if perhaps that's why we were told she was dead.

Maybe someone was trying to make it so she wouldn't be found.

EMBERLYNN

I 'm dancing in a field of lavender flowers, laughing and spinning in the sunshine. A beautiful guy is with me, his laughter weaving with mine.

“Your smile’s so pretty,” he tells me as he plucks a lavender flower from the grass. It’s the same shade as his pretty eyes that glimmer against the sunlight. He tucks the flower behind my ear, staring into my eyes.

I can’t stop smiling. Everything feels so wonderful.

“So’s yours.” I feel bold—daring. Unlike myself. But it feels better. I loop my arms around the back of his neck and, standing on my tiptoes, I kiss him.

He kisses me right back, his tongue parting my lips as his hands mold around my waist. “You taste so good,” he murmurs between kisses.

I moan in response, my hands traveling down his back and around to his stomach. I slip them under the hem of his shirt and trace my fingertips along his lean muscles.

He groans, biting my bottom lip, his fingers sneaking underneath my shirt and grazing my belly.

My body floods with need.

I jerk back, preparing to rip his clothes off and meld our bodies together ? —

My eyes open.

The first thing I notice is how hot my body is. The second is that my head is resting in someone's lap. I glance up to meet Wylder's eyes, the same eyes I was staring into when I kissed the guy in my dream. The instant I note his expression, a horrifying feeling overcomes me that he has some sort of insight into my dream.

Call it a hunch, but his cheeks are flushed, and his aura is super bright. I've seen lust auras before, and his definitely fits the category.

"Hey," he greets me as I sit up.

Phoenix is on my other side, and Nico is in the passenger seat while Kaiden is driving. All of them except Kaiden are staring at me in a way that makes me wonder if they all could sense I was having a sex dream about Wylder.

But how would they?

Then again, Wylder told me they could sense when I was hungry. Maybe they can sense when I'm horny, too.

I do my best to disregard the warmth spreading across my face. "Where are we?" I peer outside at the trees bordering the road. "And how did I even get in the car? "

Nico's head cocks to the side as he crosses his arms on top of the middle console. "You don't remember?"

I start to shake my head when it all comes rushing over me.

Shadow Man's voice filled my head. Did they hear it?

"Something dark entered your mind," Nico tells me, "and Kaiden had to get it out. Your magic went a bit wild, so Wylder lulled you to sleep."

So, they don't know that Shadow Man was in my head. Just that a dark presence was taunting me.

"How did Kaiden get it out?"

Nico wavers. "It's one of his gifts."

Kaiden's grip on the wheel tightens as he mumbles, "Gift?" in a sarcastic way.

Nico rolls his eyes but then focuses on me. "Are you okay?"

I nod. "Yeah, I feel great." And that comes out way too eagerly. I glance at Wylder, whose cheeks are still pink. "I mean, I feel well rested." Oh God, I sound like an idiot.

"Good. That's good," Wylder says, stretching his arm on the back of the seat beside me. "We're almost home. You'll be much safer there. The human world has too many cracks that allow darkness to roam around too freely."

I nod as if I understand, yet none of this makes any sense. Why was Shadow Man suddenly able to telepathically speak to me? And why did the abrupt onset of this happen after these guys picked me up? I doubt it has to do with them, but I question if my reconnection with the magical world allowed him to detect me. From what he whispered in my mind, he hasn't actually found me.

Deep down, I know I need to warn these guys. But I'm terrified to tell them.

“See, there’s the entrance.” Wylder points in front of us with the hand that’s near my shoulder, causing his arm to be entirely wrapped around me.

Again, I feel safe and don’t know what to do about it.

Thankfully, I have something else to focus on because, one second, nothing but trees and grassy fields surround the road, and the next, houses are dotted everywhere. It’s like a veil was lifted, and a magical kingdom was hidden behind it.

The place is surreal, with massive trees that tower, covered with leaves of every color. Flowers bloom from the grass, and a lake glistens in the distance, the alarmingly blue water matching the sky. The houses look straight out of a fairy tale, and perched on top of the highest hillside is a gothic-like castle with towers and an iron fence that trims around the land.

I pinch myself then wince.

“Did you just pinch yourself?” Nico asks with his brow arched.

“Yeah.” I rub the spot. “I just wanted to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.”

He chuckles, his eyes crinkling around the corners. “So cute.” He then twists back around in the seat .

I spend the rest of the short drive quietly taking everything in, from the bizarrely titled stores and shops that line the cobblestone road to the mismatched houses that make me glad to be far away from suburbia hell.

The house that Kaiden parks in front of is the most unique one in the area. Partially attached to a tree, the single-story structure has shudders, a quaint front porch, and a back deck that’s made of branches.

“Whoa, cool,” I say as Kaiden quiets the engine.

“This is my house,” Wylder clarifies as he unfastens his seat belt. “This is where you’ll be staying for a while.”

I nod, nervousness webbing in my gut like a nasty little bitch at the reality that I’m about to meet his family. I may have spent a lot of time being passed around through households, but that doesn’t mean I possess amazing people skills. In fact, I generally come off as awkward. But these aren’t people. These are witches and warlocks. Maybe it won’t be as bad.

Of course, when I move to climb out of the car and end up tripping over my own feet like a dumbass right at the precise moment a woman wanders out of the house, my hope gets squashed by my own toes.

Wylder catches me, but embarrassment is already whisking through me and worsens as the woman sputters, “Oh my gods, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I step back from Wylder, letting my hair veil my face and conceal my mortification.

I don’t do well with adults. The only ones I’ve known haven’t been great. Even a few of my foster parents, who weren’t completely awful, still made me uneasy for whatever reason.

As the woman hikes down the gravel path toward us, the lavender shade of her eyes and aura become visible, along with her blonde hair. She’s wearing wide-legged silk pants and a peach tank top that matches her shoes, and her aura is a comforting shade of pale blue. She’s beautiful, and I’m fairly certain she’s Wylder’s mom.

“Oh my goodness.” Her face lights up as she reaches. “Look at those eyes. They’re

gorgeous.”

I self-consciously rub my eye. “Thanks.”

Her smile is as warm as the sunlight basking down on us. “You must be so exhausted from driving. I’ve heard it’s very tedious driving in the human world.”

“This is my mom,” Wylder explains, as if the fact that they look similar doesn’t make it obvious.

“Yeah, I gathered,” I tell him, fiddling with the drawstring on my hoodie.

Behind me, the rest of the guys pile out of the car.

Wylder’s lips part, but a squeal of joy stifles whatever he’s about to say.

“Finally! You guys took forever .” A girl close to my age bursts out the front door. She has long, blonde hair, emerald-green eyes, is wearing a blue dress and sandals, and her aura is as crystal-blue as the sea. The happiness flowing off her is alarming, almost as much as the brightness of her aura.

Wylder’s mother’s is bright, too, making me wonder if that’s merely a witch and warlock trait. The only auras I’m used to are human ones, except with the stipulation of Shadow Man’s. But his was dull and shadowy to the point where it was hard to see at times.

“I’m so excited to finally have another girl in the house.” The girl beams at me as she reaches us.

Sighing, Wylder shakes his head. “Lila, you act like you live in a house full of brothers, when you don’t. It’s just you, me, and Mom, which makes me the one

who's outnumbered."

His father doesn't live with him?

She dismisses him with a flick of her wrist, a charm bracelet catching in the light. "But your coven is always here. And then I have my coven, which is all guys, so that's a lot of guys." She grins. "Don't get me wrong. I don't mind being around a lot of guys most of the time, but sometimes a witch needs a break from all the guy drama. Seriously, you guys whine more than a whiny willow."

"What's a whining willow?" I wonder, although a bundle of other questions are tickling at the tip of my tongue.

"Right. You've been living with humans." Intrigue sparkles in her eyes. "What are humans like, anyway? Are they super weird?"

"No, they're pretty normal," I tell her. "In a very dull way."

Her elation goes poof. "Bummer."

"Lila, give her some breathing room," Phoenix's voice sails over my shoulder. "She's not used to the magical world. "

"Hey, she can speak for herself." She rolls her eyes. "Fair warning about this one." She points her finger at Phoenix as he steps up beside me. "He's got alpha male potential written all over him. So does Kaiden. It's not my thing, but if it's yours, cool. Just giving you a heads-up."

"Oh my gods, Lila," Wylder groans while Phoenix glares at her and mumbles, "What is wrong with you?"

The most Cheshire cat-like grin rises across Lila's face. She's so getting off on torturing them, and it's entertaining to watch.

"You'll have to excuse my sister. She doesn't come with a filter." Wylder offers me an apologetic look.

"Hey, that's so rude." She playfully shoves her brother. "I'm pure honesty. That's a good thing."

"I kind of like it," I admit. I've never met anyone so straightforward. Usually, I have to decipher people by their auras. Lila's like a talking one.

"See, she likes me." She captures hold of my hand. "Come on; I'll show you to your room."

"Mom, make her settle down." Wylder presses his mother with a pleading look.

"She's fine." His mother disregards his begging look. "Let Lila show her around while we get her stuff out of the car."

I cast a look over my shoulder as Lila drags me up the path. All the guys are watching me, but Wylder's mother shoos them toward the back of the SUV where our bags are.

I twist around right as we enter the home, catching a glimpse of Kaiden as I do. His aura is alarmingly bright, his expression stiff, and his jaw set tight as he stares at me. I have no time to decipher the intense look, though, as Lila yanks me into her house.

The entrance opens up to a living room with comfy sofas and a television.

"You guys watch TV?" I aim a finger at the television.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t we?” Lila lets go of my hand.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I guess I just assumed because there’s magic here that you wouldn’t.”

She laughs. “Well, we do. We have a lot of good drama TV series, too.” She whisks into the attached kitchen, which is a small space filled with splashes of blue and hints of floral patterns. “I’m guessing since you know what a TV is, that they exist in the human world, too?”

I nod. “Yeah, they watch it a lot. Sometimes hours upon hours.”

She folds her arms on top of the tile countertop. “That sounds awfully dull. Do they do anything else?”

“Yeah, but honestly, most of it is dull.” I linger near the sofa area. “I don’t know what it’s like in this world, so perhaps I’m just the dull one.”

“I doubt that.” She pushes away from the counter. “I’m really good at reading witches and warlocks, and I’m getting an adventurous vibe off of you.” She points a finger at me like she has me all figured out when I don’t even know myself well.

I spent my earlier years in captivity, and then the rest roaming through different families’ lives, focusing mainly on surviving and not releasing my powers on anyone. Maybe I finally get the chance to figure that out now that I’m around my own kind. Or perhaps I’ll get banished from this world once they learn about my past.

“I also know we’re going to be good friends,” Lila adds as she spins around and motions for me to follow her down a narrow hallway.

“How can you tell that?” I ask as I trail behind her, taking in the family photos

hanging on the way.

Some are of Lila by herself, some are of Wylder, and some are of them together with their mom. But their father isn't present in any of them. I wonder what happened to him.

“Because I'm really good at reading energy.” Lila shoves a door open. “And mine and yours match really well.”

Doubtful. She's all sunshine and flowers, while I'm as gloomy as a storm cloud that can't rain. I keep that to myself, because those are the kind of comments that get reciprocated with wounded looks, and Lila is too friendly for me to want to do that.

“This is your room.” She gestures at the doorway then points her finger at the door across the hallway from it. “That's my room.” She nods at the door beside my room. “That's Wylder's room. And my mom's is down there. Unfortunately, since the guys are all nineteen, they're going to move out soon, so we don't get to be roommate besties for too long.” She pouts. “But honestly, most witches and warlocks move out when they're seventeen, so it's kind of long past due.”

“They're all nineteen?”

“Yeah. Why? How old are you?”

“I ... I don't know. No one really knows much about me, so when I was found, the people that found me guessed. From what I know, I'm almost eighteen, but that's a guess.”

“Interesting.” She taps her finger against her lips. “You're probably closer to nineteen because the gods and goddesses usually pick the heart of a coven that's close to the age of her mat?—”

“Lila.” The appearance of Wylder startles the ever-loving daisies out of Lila and me. And I use the term daisies because Lila startles so badly that she sets off a spell that sends daisies soaring out of her hand.

I duck to avoid them hitting me, and then Wylder lets out a string of curses.

When I turn around, he’s dusting flower petals off his face. “Really? Throwing daisies at me is your go-to protection spell?” Wylder asks flatly.

“You have allergies, so yeah.” She snottily smirks at him.

Wylder sneezes. “Fuck.” He rubs his nose as his eyes water.

And me? My lips are parted in shock.

I’ve known power existed for my entire life, but I’ve never seen it used so openly like this. And so funnily.

“That’ll teach you to sneak up on me,” Lila tells Wylder haughtily with her hand on her hip. “But anyway, I have to get to class.” She directs this to me. “But you and I get to go shopping tomorrow, and we get to do it on Kaiden’s credit card.” She smiles and taps her fingers together, like she’s a blonde devil plotting a shopping scheme. “It’s going to be fun.” She waves at me before walking back down the hallway. When she passes by Wylder, she tells him snidely, “You still have a ton of petals in your hair.”

Wylder lets out an exasperated sigh as he plucks the petals from his hair while Lila disappears back into the kitchen.

“I love my sister to death, but she can be a real pain in the ass.” He drops a few petals onto the floor, and they evaporate into sparkling dust as they touch the carpet.

“She’s nice, though. And funny.” I grab a petal from his hair and throw it on the floor.

He smiles. “That’s good. I was hoping you guys would be friends. She’s a year younger than me, so depending on how old you are, you might end up in some of her classes.”

“How am I even supposed to go to class when I know nothing about magic?”

“Kaiden is a magical encyclopedia. He’ll be able to get you caught up pretty quickly.”

“Unless I’m magically stupid.”

“I doubt that.” He brushes his finger along my cheekbone. “I’m going to apologize in advance for how overwhelming things will be for the next handful of days. Today, we’ll let you get settled in, but tomorrow, we need to do the *historia legere*. Then you’ll be shopping with Lila to get some new clothes. The next day will be tours of the school and tutorials on the laws. It’s going to be a lot.”

“It’s fine. I had to relearn rules every time I went to a new home.” I fight the urge to swallow hard against the flutter kissing my flesh in response to the graze of his fingers.

Every time he touches me, his magic makes me want to kiss him, which is the dumbest thing I could ever do.

I tried to kiss a guy once, and it was the most humiliating experience that I vowed never to repeat. I was fourteen and had been invited to a party. I was excited because I’d never been invited to one. And a cute boy had asked me to go. He was my lab partner, and I thought he was nice. What I learned that night was that he’d been kind

to me so he could lure me to a party, get me to try to kiss him, then laugh as he rejected me. A girl was recording it, and it spread all over social media. I spent the next three weeks living in hell, getting mocked, getting stuff thrown at me. Thankfully, I had to move to a new home not too long after the incident.

“Are you okay?” Wylder asks worriedly, his fingers lingering on my cheek.

I nod. “I’m just thinking about some stuff.” I shove the depressing memories from my mind. “Do I really need to go shopping? I know Lila seems excited about it, but I’m not much of a shopper.” I don’t think so, anyway. I’ve never actually had much of a chance to do it, most of my clothes being donated to me.

He withdraws his hand and dithers, biting his bottom lip. “I don’t ever want to make you do anything you don’t want to, but I do think it might be nice for you to get a fresh start here. A new home, new clothes, some insight to who you are.” A faint smile materializes on his lips. “Besides, it’ll bring Kaiden great happiness to spoil you. Trust me.”

I consider what he said. “He doesn’t really seem like a happy sort of guy.”

He dismissively shakes his head. “That’s just how he wants to be seen.”

“I figured as much.”

Surprise reflects in his eyes. “Can you read him at all? Usually, he keeps that pretty hidden.”

I lift a shoulder. “I can kind of sense some things from him. I can also see it in his aura sometimes.”

His brows spring upward. “You can see auras?”

I press my hand to my bubbling stomach as I nod. “Is that not normal?”

He shakes his head from side to side, his shock still evident. “Only a few witches and warlocks throughout history have possessed that power.”

“Great. I’m an anomaly in the magical world, too.” I don’t mean to say the words aloud.

“That’s not a bad thing.” He does that thing again where he sketches his fingers along my cheekbone. “We’ll get more answers tomorrow. Right now, let’s just get you settled into your new home.”

I nod and force a smile. I’ve heard the term before: get settled into your new home.

It never lasts .

While this is a different situation, I have an unnerving feeling that the outcome will remain the same. Call it reluctance to accept change. Call it intuition. Call it the fact that, hours ago, Shadow Man made a grand appearance inside my mind.

Whatever the reason, darkness is dooming in my future.

EMBERLYNN

I spend the rest of the day getting settled in. I like my room with its purple walls and comfortable bed. It's not huge, but it's cozy and feels more like home than any other place I've been.

Stella, Wylder's mother, is the kindest woman I've ever met. Her aura stays shiny the entire time I'm around her and makes me feel at ease as we eat dinner. Wylder spends a bit of time showing me the property that surrounds his house, but by the time we're finished, nightfall has arrived.

I learn the stars and moon are different here, the silver and purple shade unlike any I've seen in the human world. It's pretty—everything about this place is—but I can't shake the feeling it won't last. Needless to say, my sleep consists of a lot of tossing and turning. Fortunately, I don't wake up screaming, but my skin is drenched in sweat, and my heart palpitations threaten to allow my heart to burst from my chest.

I need to calm down and also take a shower.

The house is quiet as I tiptoe out of my bedroom and into the bathroom, making me assume everyone is still asleep. I take a longer shower than I'm used to, another effect of always being a guest in a home. I was often told to shower quickly to avoid taking all the hot water. Here, that feeling isn't visible, and by the time I'm showered and dressed, my heart has returned to being at a peaceful beat.

I exit the shower with a trail of steam following me out into the hallway. The house isn't as soundless anymore—soft traces of voices flutter through the air. I toss my dirty pajamas into the hamper in my room, then track the voices to the kitchen.

“This separate house thing isn't going to work.” Phoenix is sitting at the table across from Wylder with his hand propped up, his fingers wiggling in the direction of the stove where a pan of eggs is cooking, a spatula stirring them seemingly on their own. “I barely got any sleep last night. Same with Nico.”

“I get it, but we also need to take this slow ...” The words fade from Wylder's tongue as the floorboards creak under my weight. His gaze darts to me, and his expression brightens. “You're done with your shower?”

I nod as Phoenix revolves around in the seat, relief cascading over his features.

“Why are the eggs cooking themselves?” I wonder .

Wylder chuckles as he pushes the chair back from the table and stands up. “In the warlock and witch world, we can be lazy when it comes to doing mundane things, like cooking.” He approaches me with his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. “How did you sleep?”

I pop my knuckles against the sides of my legs. “I was kind of restless, but I don't usually sleep well.”

His lips divot downward. “Because you have nightmares?”

“That and it just comes with never really having a place to call your own. It's like when you stay in a hotel room, and you never quite get comfortable.” I face the kitchen, not wanting to talk about my sleep patterns anymore. “So, you guys can just use magic now?”

“Yeah, the restricted use just applies to when we’re in the human world.” His eyes bore into me. “Have you ever used yours just for fun?”

I swiftly shake my head. “No. And trust me; you don’t want me to.”

“Once you learn to control your powers, you won’t fear it as much.” He hitches a finger under my chin. “And the quicker you let it be a part of you, the sooner you’ll be able to do that.”

I rub my lips together. “You’ve never feared yours before?”

“No, but Phoenix and Kaiden have.” He turns his head toward Phoenix.

I do the same.

He’s scrubbing his hand across his mouth but lowers it. “Kaiden and I have different kinds of powers than Nico and Wylder. None of ours are the same, but Nico’s and Wylder’s are lighter and have more positive qualities, while mine and Kaiden’s are more ...” He wavers.

“It’s like the difference between the moon and the sun,” Wylder chimes in. “Neither are bad and both have a purpose. They’re just different.”

Because one is light, and one is darkness. I would like to know which category I fall into.

Probably the latter.

“We’ll get to learn more about yours today after you go shopping.” Wylder snaps his fingers at the oven, causing the spatula to stop moving and the oven to turn off. “But just remember, whatever happens, you don’t need to be afraid.” He drags his tongue

along his bottom lip. “Are you hungry?”

I could say no. I should. But I also need to eat. And him cooking for me doesn’t make me feel as bad as when they were buying me food.

I nod, breathing in the scent of eggs and bacon. “A little bit.”

“Go sit down. and I’ll make you a plate.” Wylder nudges me toward the table.

“I can get my own,” I start to protest, but he presses a finger to my lips.

“I’ve got it.” Grinning, he snaps his fingers, causing a cupboard door to open and plates to glide out. Then the spatula begins piling eggs and bacon onto the plates.

Okay, then .

With wide eyes, I pull out a chair and drop down in the seat.

Phoenix studies me with his head tilted to the side. “It’s fun watching you see magic.”

“Why? Because I look stupidly clueless?” I joke.

He shakes his head. “Not at all. It’s cute.”

I shift in the chair. While Nico has called me pretty at least a dozen times, Phoenix is much more intense. I have a feeling he’s made many women swoon with that look on his face.

Luckily, for the sake of not melting into a puddle of swooniness, a plate lands in front of me and offers a distraction.

“I’d eat quickly,” Wylder warns as he glances at a clock on the wall. “The moment Lila wakes up, she’s going to want to go shopping.”

Right on cue, a door opens up from down the hallway, and a moment later, Lila comes bursting into the kitchen in her pajamas with an excited gleam in her eyes.

“Get ready for the best shopping trip of your life, bestie,” she singsongs before whirling around and skipping back down the hallway.

Phoenix snorts a laugh. “Dude, you should see your face,” he tells me. “It looks like you just saw a ghost.”

“I just don’t like shopping.” I scoop up a forkful of eggs but pause. “Do ghosts exist?”

“Of course. But you won’t see them unless you go to the cemetery,” Wylder replies matter-of-factly .

“Well, that one time that werewolf ghost snuck into the academy, but technically, it’s forbidden,” Phoenix adds before stuffing a forkful of eggs into his mouth. “You probably won’t see many.”

I pause mid-bite, shock whipping through me. Whatever face I’m pulling elicits laughter from both of them.

“Yeah, definitely cute,” Wylder says as he takes a seat in the chair beside mine.

Between talk of ghosts, watching magic happen, and all the cute and pretty remarks being thrown my way, I feel so out of place that I don’t know what to say or do. So, I focus on eating since that’s normal no matter what world I’m in.

Shopping ends up not being as terrible as I expected. Lila is fun and easy to talk to and picking out clothes isn't too horrible. The only problem I have is spending Kaiden's money, an issue I verbalize to Lila as we wander down the sidewalk with bags in our hands. The sun is out, and the air is kissed with an autumn warmth and smells like cinnamon.

"Dude, that's just how it works in a coven," Lila explains as she peers into the store window at a display of lavish diamond jewelry. "Everything is shared. It's completely normal. And besides, Kaiden's family is the wealthiest in the wiccan world. What we've spent today is nothing to them." She sighs longingly at a ruby-encrusted tiara before walking again .

"It still feels uncomfortable to me. Money was a huge issue in the human world. Families let me stay with them because they got paid to."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Well, I mean, it makes sense. They had to feed me and stuff. And food costs money. So does putting a roof over my head. I'm sure that's all a burden."

She scrunches up her freckled nose. "Did people tell you that?"

I nod. "Sometimes, but it's true, so ..."

She processes this with a frown. "Well, you're not here." She goes right back into cheerful mode. "Kaiden is probably ecstatic that he gets to buy you stuff."

"I'm sure he's not ecstatic."

"Oh, he definitely is."

She falls quiet as we stop at the street corner. “Look, the guys told me not to tell you everything at once because they don’t want to overwhelm you or whatever.” She dramatically rolls her eyes. “But I’m going to tell you this, because I think you should know. The heart —that’s you—is the center of your coven’s universe. It’s how it works for all covens. And it starts from the moment we’re selected by the gods and goddesses. Since Kaiden, Nico, Phoenix, and my brother didn’t have a heart because everyone thought you were dead, they’ve all been walking around half-dead. They were like zombies of themselves, and it totally sucked. It was so bad I felt like I lost my brother the day of the ceremony. Yesterday and today is the first time in a long time I’ve seen him genuinely smile. And I’m so damn glad, even if he’s as annoying as a goddamn elf.” She grabs my arm then leads me across the street. “Now, come on. No more depressing talk. Not when we’re about to shop for shoes.”

I’d argue with her, but her speech has me cinching my lips.

I’ve never been important. It’s strange to consider I’m the heart of four guys’ existence. How does that even work? Like, what happens when they find the woman they want to marry? Won’t they get jealous? I guess if covens and heart s are a normal thing, maybe jealousy doesn’t exist.

I don’t know. All of this is so complicated.

And I learn just how complicated things can get while I’m trying on a kick-ass pair of boots. The shop door dings as a group of guys and girls walk in. They’re bustling with energy, and all of their auras are bloodred. Red usually means rage, but theirs feels different, like the edges are bleeding, as if wanting to burst out more array of colors but can’t.

“Great,” Lila mutters as she fastens the strap to a high-heeled shoe she’s trying on.

Her gaze is focused on the group when one of them, a guy with chin-length black hair

and bright blue eyes, glances in our direction. A curious smile creeps across his face. He says something to one of the other guys then swings around the display case and makes his way over to us.

“Go away, Holden,” Lila says without glancing at him. She stands up and admires the shoes on her feet.

“Oh, come on, Lila; you know everyone’s curious.” His gaze is fastened on me. “So, you’re the missing heart of the wiccan world.” He smiles, revealing a set of pointy fangs.

Fuck, is he a vampire?

I try to stifle my panic by getting up and pretending to look at myself in the mirror. His gaze tracks me like a hawk. Or, I guess a vampire.

Lila moves between us. “Leave her alone,” she warns then flicks her wrist at him. “Go back to your little friends. Run along. Shoo.”

Did she seriously just shoo a vampire?

His lips spasm, aggravation heavy on his face. “And what are you going to do if I don’t? Call your big brother to come down here and protect you?” he mocks her.

She props her hand on her hip. “Yeah, I will. I have no shame calling them for help. Just remember, though, if I tell Wylder, Kaiden will hear about it.” Her lips curl into a smirk as Holden’s already pale face somehow pales more.

“Whatever. I’ll see her at school, anyway.” He glares daggers at me before whisking back to his friends.

She spins back toward me. “Vampires are so annoying.”

I gulp. “So, he was a vampire?”

She nods, flipping her hair as she approaches the mirror again and turns from left to right to check out her reflection. “Don’t worry. If anyone picks on you, just tell them you’ll send Kaiden after them. It’ll make almost any creature back off.”

I mull over what she said. “Why?”

“Because of his powers.” She picks up a bag from a nearby display shelf and drapes it over her arm before walking back in front of the mirror. “Again, though, the guys want to tell you everything in pieces so, for now, I think we should leave a lid on that one. It’s probably better if Kaiden tells you since it’s his thing.”

I nod like I understand, but I don’t.

I try to concentrate on shoe shopping, but it’s difficult when the vampire remains in the store, leering at me. I get the impression that if it weren’t for Lila scaring him off with the Kaiden remark, he would’ve eaten me alive.

No pun intended.

I’d be afraid, but the truth is, while I can’t control my powers, I can still use them, and vampire or not, he’ll more than likely get hurt.

What I truly want to know, though, is why he’s so fixated on me. At first, I think it’s in my head, but Lila starts to get a bit twitchy.

“We should go,” she finally says after noting that vampire guy sitting in the corner, openly staring at us. “It’s never good when a vampire gets too fixated with you. It’s

how stalker obsessions start. And then they want to turn you. Or worse—eat you.”
She lets out a nervous laugh.

Okay then, Emberlynn, I guess we’re not in the human world anymore.

15

EMBERLYNN

By the time we return to the house, we have so many bags that my arms are aching from having to carry them. As we enter the living room, I groan as a few fall from my hands.

Nico, Kaiden, Wylder, and Phoenix are lounging on the sofas, eating chips and drinking some sort of glittery gold liquid. When the bags hit the floor, the thud captures all of their attention.

Nico is the first on his feet. “You look exhausted,” he notes.

“Shopping is exhausting.” I flop down into a chair and drape my arms over the armrests. “The bag handles were digging into my fingers and cutting off the circulation.”

“She’s an amateur,” Lila tells them as she dumps the bags she’s carrying onto the counter. She flashes me a grin to let me know she’s kidding but then grows solemn. “You should also know that we ran into Holden in the shoe store, and he took way too much interest in her.”

“How much interest?” Wylder asks, frowning.

“He talked to her and then spent like twenty minutes staring at her from the corner of the store.” She tosses her purse onto the counter. “The only reason he left us alone is

that I threatened to call Kaiden.”

Kaiden’s fingers wrap around a glass that’s on the coffee table. “I’ll take care of the problem.”

I dubiously eye him over as he takes a drink then returns the cup to the coaster. Then he licks a droplet of the liquid off his lips.

“How are you going to do that?” I ask.

His fingers curl around the armrests as he props his boot-clad foot onto his knee. “Talk to him.”

Nico snorts as he attempts to restrain a laugh. “Talk to him. That’s funny.”

What else would he do?

My gaze roams across the four of them as I attempt to decipher what “talk to him,” in Kaiden code means. Wylder’s brows are arched toward his hairline, his gaze fixed on the bowl of chips as he grabs a handful. Phoenix is staring at the carpet, dazing off to who knows where, and Nico’s staring at me.

I squirm under his gaze, “What?”

“Nothing. It’s just amusing trying to watch you decipher what we’re all thinking.” He stretches his arms above his head, causing his shirt to ride up and revealing that his stomach is carved with lean muscle. A trace of ink is visible on his side, but I can’t see all of the tattoos.

I wonder how far up it goes ...

His arms lower and coverup my view. When I elevate my gaze to his face, the painful awareness that he busted my gawking washes over me in a white-hot wave of embarrassment.

The look on his face can only be described as half-amusement and half-cockiness. I'm not surprised he likes the attention, but I loathe that he knows I was checking out his abs.

I brace myself for some teasing remark, but it never comes. Instead, he wanders past me and heads toward the bags I dropped on the floor.

"So, what did you get?" He squats down and begins peering into the bags. "Anything good?"

I lean over the armrest to watch him. "Just clothes, and shoes, and stuff."

He fishes out a leather jacket. "Nice."

"Lila thought I needed that," I say. "I've never had a leather jacket before."

"She seems like a leather jacket sort of girl," Lila chimes in from the kitchen as she opens the fridge.

"Yeah, you said that in the store, but I still don't get why you think that," I tell her as she bumps the fridge door shut.

She sets a bottle of the same glittery golden liquid down on the counter. "Phoenix almost always wears a leather jacket. Kaiden sometimes does. They're both brooding and kind of emo, and—please don't take this the wrong way— but you kind of are, too." She unscrews the cap of the bottle.

That's how she sees me? I have zero clue how to take this.

"She can only meet Kaiden's and Phoenix's brooding, emo level if she's punched someone in the face," Nico comments as he reaches into a pink bag that has the bras and panties I purchased. "Which she has."

I nearly topple out of my chair to stop him. "Not that one." I snatch the bag from him.

"Sorry." The suppressed laughter in his tone makes me question if he saw what was in it.

Shaking my head, I place the bag far aside from the others.

He straightens, standing upright. "Have you ever punched someone in the face?"

"Um ..." I pretend to have a deep fascination with my fingernails that are chipped and not painted. "Just once."

"Seriously?" he asks, and I nod. "Dude, I really didn't think you were going to say yes. That's pretty badass."

"It wasn't badass," I assure him as I sit down on the sofa and try to slip off my shoes without leaning over to untie them. "I broke my hand when I did it." I stare down at the hand. "I had to wear a cast for like six weeks."

"Does it still hurt?" Wylder asks as he collects a glass of glittery gold liquid from off the table.

"Only when it rains." I work on slipping my shoes off, to no avail. I could lean over and untie them, but I'm tired and being lazy .

“I could fix that for you,” Wylder offers after he’s taken a sip of his drink. The remnants of the liquid make his full lips look all shimmery.

“It’s really not that bad, but if you want to, you can.” I open and flex my hand.

“I want to,” he promises intensely.

Lila snickers. “I’m sure you do.”

Wylder pierces her a simmering look, and Lila smooshes her lips together.

Nico drops down on the floor in front of me and grabs my foot.

I gape at him. “What’re you doing?”

“Taking off your shoes.” He undoes the lace of one of my sneakers. “I can tell you’re struggling to get them off, and you’re too tired to lean over and unlace them.”

Is this normal warlock behavior?

I glance at Lila for some sort of confirmation. She simply smiles, scoops up another bottle of glittery gold liquid, and turns for the hallway. “Have fun with this lot, bestie. When they start to smother you too much, come find me, and I’ll help you make your escape.” She waggles her fingers at me before ambling down the hallway.

Wylder pinches the brim of his nose. “She’s on one today.”

“I heard Trystan isn’t coming back for a few months.” Nico slips off my shoe then moves to the other one. “She’s probably struggling with that.”

“Who’s Trystan?” I ask, hoping my feet don’t stink .

“A warlock in her coven,” Wylder explains. “He got sent out on a mission and has been gone for months.”

“Oh.” I’m still so confused about how these covens work. “Do witches and warlocks in covens have to remain close or else they get grumpy?”

Wylder sneaks a glance at Kaiden. “More or less.”

“Or more,” Phoenix mumbles under his breath, his gaze traveling to me.

I recall what Lila told me about how broken the guys were when they believed I was dead.

“I feel really confused right,” I divulge as Nico removes my other shoe. “About all of this.”

“We’ll get you caught up.” Nico pushes to his feet and extends his hand to me. “And we’ll start right now by figuring out a little more about you and your powers.”

I grimace but place my palm in his. “Are we doing that historia legere thing?”

He nods, effortlessly pulling me to my feet. “You don’t need to worry. It won’t hurt at all.”

I’m not worried about it hurting. I worry what they’ll learn about me.

Should I run away right now and save them the trouble of kicking me out? Where would I go, though? I have nothing and no one in my life.

That thought sends me to Depression Land.

Maybe Lila was right about me. I may be a leather jacket kind of girl.

Once Nico has me to my feet, he steers me around the coffee table and has me take a seat on the sofa between Wylder and Phoenix. The space is small, and I end up pressed against both of them, their scents engulfing my nostrils. Wylder has a sugary-sweet smell to him, like cotton candy and apples. Phoenix smells like rain and forests. It's an oddly lovely combination.

Nico drops down on the coffee table in front of me, so I'm stuck in like the Bermuda Triangle of hot guys.

"What exactly do we have to do to do this?" I ask, attempting not to squirm.

"You just need to sit there." Nico picks up one of the glasses and hands it to me. "And drink this. Kaiden will do the rest."

I take the glass from him and stare at the glittery golden liquid. "What is this?"

"This is called Liquid Lull." Nico taps the glass with his fingertip. "It'll help you relax."

I don't take a sip. "It sounds like I'm about to get high. And since you guys have all been drinking this, doesn't it mean you all are?"

Nico shakes his head while biting his lip. "So damn cute," he utters before reaching out to run his fingers through a lock of my hair framing my face. "You need to be extremely relaxed while Kaiden does this, but I promise you, nothing bad will happen."

"You'll always be safe with us," Wylder adds, stretching his arm behind me. "That's the one thing you can trust."

Trust? Do I even know how to do that ?

I'm about to take a sip when Kaiden does this strange wrist flick thing and about fifty or so lit candles materialize out of thin air. Orbs of light illuminate the room and cast an eerie glow across everyone's faces.

I clutch the glass. "Okay, now it feels like we're doing an exorcism."

Nico angles his head to the side. "What's an exorcism?"

"It's ... never mind." I raise the glass to my mouth. "Bottoms up, I guess." I tip my head back and glug down as much as I can.

I'm unsure what I was anticipating, but something pretty vile tasting. But nope. I was so wrong. It's wonderful, like warmth and honey and sugar.

"Mm ..." I murmur, licking my lips. "That lully stuff tastes good."

A bit of soft laughter then Nico takes the glass from my hand. "Lean back, pretty eyes."

I do as instructed and tip my head back, leaning against the crook of Wylder's arm. Kaiden comes to stand behind the sofa right behind me, so his face is right in my line of sight. Against the candlelight, his aura emits a hint of cascading glimmer.

"Your auras are all glimmery." In the back of my mind, I know I'm stone and rambling. But I don't care. I reach out and touch it, causing Kaiden to jolt.

Smashing his lips together, he summons a breath before saying, "We'll talk about the aura thing later. Right now, I just need you to focus on relaxing. "

I lazily bob my head up and down. “Okay. I’ll try to put myself in sleep mode, like a computer.”

He misses a beat. “Sounds good.”

I think he might be trying not to laugh at me. People used to laugh at me all the time. It was never a good thing. But when these guys laugh at me, it doesn’t feel like they’re mocking me.

He leans closer, all dark eyes and shadows. He’s so pretty . “I’m going to touch your head now, okay?” he asks, and I nod. “And I’ll try to see some of your past that’s maybe locked away in your mind.”

I exhale. “What if you see stuff you don’t like? Like bad things I’ve done?”

He doesn’t even pause when he tells me, “Emberlynn, no one here will ever judge you. I promise.”

Another sleepy sigh from me—this lull drink is making me tired. “I hope so, but it’s really hard to believe when, all my life, everyone has always just seen bad ...”

It’s the last thought I have before Kaiden touches my head and my mind is swept away.

16

NICO

I 'm already transfixed by Emberlynn, and I've only known her for a few days. I've never felt this way toward anyone. I've spent the last handful of years sleeping around and drowning out the pain of not only believing my heart was dead but the agony of mere existence.

My life hasn't been easy. And I used sex to cover that up, to drown the pain. It's what I was taught to do by my faerie father at too young of an age. And now I'm left with the regret of my choices.

The heart of the coven is supposed to be the soul mate of each member. Typically, that's how it works, although some members stray and are unfaithful. I'm a product of that when my mother cheated. The members of her coven didn't leave her, but growing up, I was a reminder of what she did. My home life in the witch world was—and still is—awful. But I prefer it over the time I have to spend in the Fey Kingdom with my father, who just so happens to be the Winter Fey King. His wife, the queen, treats me like a bastard, which with how much I see my father, technically, I am.

“How long do you think this will take?” Phoenix whispers as he watches Kaiden dig around in Emberlynn's mind.

She looks peaceful with her head tipped back and her eyes closed.

I love seeing her eyes. They're an otherworldly kind of pretty. I could seriously stare at them all day.

Kaiden doesn't respond, too lost in performing the *historia legere*. He looks creepy as fuck with his eyes completely white.

"It might take a while, depending on if she has blocks on her mind," Wylder replies, gazing at our heart like she's the most precious thing in the world.

I feel the same way. And she'll probably eventually feel the same way about Wylder. Even Phoenix and Kaiden. Me? When she learns about everything I've done, I'm unsure if even the bond of our souls will be enough to let her love me.

"You're completely unlovable," my mother is always telling me.

She's right. I really am. Half-warlock, half-fey, it's a brand in my bloodline that no one wants to deal with.

Without taking his eyes off her, Wylder whispers, "I worry something bad has happened in her past."

"I got that impression, too." For a moment, Phoenix becomes lost in looking at her.

He'll fight his emotions a bit more than Wylder and me. It's part of who he is, and his power makes it more difficult for him. And don't even get me started on Kaiden. I'm not even certain he knows how to process love. Kaiden's powers derive from dark magic, a rare form of power. We refer to witches and warlocks who possess that power as witches and warlocks of shadows. They're powerful and, at times, scary.

The most frightening power they possess is necromancy. It's never scared any of us, but the creatures we go to school with are terrified of him. Like Lila did today, we

use that to our benefit. Kaiden adds to the problem because his father trained him to be emotionally detached in order to keep his powers under control.

I've seen him lose his composure a few times, though, like right after we were told Emberlynn was dead, and let's say that graveyard keeper had his hands full with reburying bodies.

"What do you think it could be?" I wonder. "The bad stuff in her past? If she spent most of her time with humans, it has to be related to that, right?"

"Well, she wasn't always with humans," Wylder reminds me. "I think she said they found her when she was around seven."

"She never went into details about where she was found or what happened before that," Phoenix says, absentmindedly tracing his fingers across Emberlynn's palm. "But she remembers that part of her, right?"

"I think she remembers some of it." Wylder adjusts his arm that's tucked under Emberlynn's head. "When we first met her, she ran because she thought we were going to capture her. It's pretty clear someone is after her."

"Probably the same creature that made her pass out on the elevator." I shudder at the image of how horrified she looked as she lay on the elevator floor.

"She doesn't want to talk about it, though," Wylder adds as an afterthought.

"She might have to if it means she's in danger," Phoenix states with a shake of his head, "so we can protect her?—"

Emberlynn suddenly gasps, her eyelids opening. I'd think she's waking up, but with the way her eyes are rolling into the back of her head ...

Something terrible is happening inside her head.

And my suspicions are confirmed when Kaiden jerks back, looking more worried than I've ever seen him.

EMBERLYNN

I 'm walking around a field of dead trees. Crows are circling around me, along with wisps of smoke. The land beneath my bare feet is scattered with dirt and ashes. In the distance, fires blaze.

“What is this place?” I whisper as I turn in a circle.

“You don't know?”

Every single one of my muscles stiffens. “No, Kaiden kicked you out of my head.”

Shadow Man laughs. “Aw, it's cute you think your little lovestruck warlock can get rid of me.”

I curl my fingers inward until my fingernails pierce my palms. “He's not lovestruck. He barely knows me.”

His laughter echoes around me. “So na?ve about your own roots. But you were always such a stupid little girl. Although, you were less stupid when you were with me. Face it, my little pet, without me, you've been lost. ”

“No, I haven't been.” I cover my ears in a lame attempt to block out his voice. “I was glad the day I was taken away from you.”

Silence trickles by.

Did I get him out of my head?

“Taken,” he growls. “YOU LEFT ME! YOU SNUCK OUT, AND I WANT TO KNOW HOW! TELL ME NOW! TELL ME WHY I CAN’T FIND YOU!”

My shoulders lurch upward as the loudness of his voice scares the hell out of me. Birds scatter, fleeing away. I wish I was a bird right now. I wish I could fly away, too.

“I don’t know,” I whisper, loathing the quiver of my voice.

It’s the truth. I never could fully recollect how I got away from him. I assumed something had happened to him and then humans found me. But what he just said implies that isn’t accurate.

“Go away.” As my legs threaten to give out, I sink down onto the ground with my hands still over my ears.

His laughter mocks my eardrums. “Never, little pet. I’ll never let you go. You. Are. Mine.”

“Emberlynn,” a wonderfully sweet voice whispers through the noise. “Come back to me. Follow my voice out.” The wisps billowing above my head dive down and spin around me.

Out of pure instinct, I touch one. The tip of it slithers around my wrist and coils up my arm. No drop of fear is present in me, though, as the wisp pulls me to my feet then upward, toward the sky.

“Don’t you dare leave!” Shadow Man shouts after me.

But I’m already sailing away to a much better place .

Because anywhere is better than here with him.

When I wake up, it’s a lazy sort of awakening, like waking up after a night of drinking, still drunk, an incident that happened once after one of my foster mothers allowed me to drink with her. She slept a lot during the day and drank before she went to work at a “special” bar. Really, it was a strip club; she just didn’t want anyone to find out.

She wasn’t a bad parent—I’ve had a lot worse—but she definitely wasn’t great at setting a good example. She was nice to me, though, and that’s a rarity in the foster world.

As I open my eyes, feeling hazy with drunkenness, a ceiling is the first thing to come into my view. My gaze swings to the right, to a wall with a framed portrait of a willow tree. I recognize it from the photo in my room.

I’m in my bed. Or the bed that’s in the room I’m staying in at Wylder’s place. And when I turn my head the opposite way, I find Wylder.

He’s sitting in a chair beside my bed, with his head resting in his hands. His blond hair is sticking up in all sorts of directions, and he still has on the same jeans and T-shirt he did when Kaiden performed the *historia legere* on me.

“Did it work?” Part of me is hoping it didn’t, that Kaiden didn’t see all the darkness that maps my past.

Wylder’s head snaps up, panic possessing every inch of him. “Oh my gods, you’re

okay.” He moves from the chair to the edge of the bed.

“Was I not okay?” I start to sit up.

He places a hand on my arm. “Careful. Don’t move too quickly, okay?”

“Why? Am I going to break?” I joke in a raspy voice, sounding like I did a few days when I first started talking again.

He doesn’t even so much as crack a smile. “I’m mildly concerned about that.”

I rest against the headboard. “I take it everything didn’t go okay.”

Smashing his lips together, he shakes his head. “Kaiden was able to find some of your history, but then he lost you in your own mind. There were all these blocks and dead ends ...” His eyes search mine. “It’s like someone tried to erase your memories.”

Part of me is grateful Kaiden couldn’t find all of my memories, but part of me is worried that Shadow Man played a role in it.

“I’m guessing losing me in my own memories isn’t a good thing, since you look completely stressed out.” I touch the strands of his hair then withdraw as his delicate magic kisses my fingertips. “Sorry.”

A wrinkle touches the space between his brows. “For what?”

“For touching you.”

His eyes flash with something I don’t quite understand, but it’s definitely intense. “You don’t ever have to apologize for that. Or worry about it.” He briefly pauses.

“Do you need some of my magic right now to make you feel better?”

I want to say no—it’s obvious his magic could become addicting—but I nod, anyway.

He threads his fingers through mine and holds my hand, allowing a drop of his magic to spill through me. “Better?”

I dazedly nod. “Where is everyone, anyway? And what did Kaiden find out?” Nervousness attempts to weave through my veins, but Wylder’s magic is much more powerful.

“They’re out in the living room. We brought you here so you could lie down and rest.” He gently caresses the back of my hand with his thumb. “Kaiden has gone into full research mode, trying to figure out what blocked your memories. We were also worried you weren’t going to wake up, so he’s been looking into that.”

“What are Phoenix and Nico doing?”

“Researching, too. But Kaiden tends to take over.” His lips quirk as he says, “He’s very intense about researching. When we believed you were dead, he spent years looking into how that could’ve happened. I also think he was hoping to find some sort of evidence that it was wrong.”

“Well, it was.”

“I know. And I can’t even describe to you how glad we are that it was. But the fact that it’s never happened before, I think, at least for Kaiden, has him questioning if there’s more to it than just a mistake. And now with your memories being blocked ... he’s probably going to go mad trying to find answers.”

Could this all be because of Shadow Man?

It'd make sense except he sounded as if he had no clue why I was able to get away from him.

Who the hell am I?

"Can you walk?" Wylder asks. "We can go into the living room, and Kaiden can explain all of this. I can carry you if you need me to."

I scoot toward the edge of the bed. "I can walk." Despite my assurance, he steadies me by placing his hand on my elbow as I lower my feet to the floor and stand up.

The world tilts, and I latch onto his shoulder, pressing my chest against his side while my other hand lands on his abdomen.

His fingers curl around my waist. "Are you sure you don't want me to carry you?" he whispers, his breath dusting against my forehead.

Sucking in a breath, I nod. "I'm good. I'll just hold on to you."

We leave the room then and go into the living room. The place is in total disarray. The candles are gone and are replaced by stacks and stacks of books. Kaiden is pacing the little space that's left with a book and pen in his hand that he's chewing on the end of.

Nico is flipped back in the armchair with his legs stretched out and his head tipped back, his attention elsewhere other than the open book that's on his lap. Phoenix is standing over by the window with a book in his hand, the moonlight trickling in from the window and casting across his face as he reads.

Wylder clears his throat as we enter, causing Nico to bolt upright, Phoenix to whirl around, and Kaiden to drop his pen.

They gawk at me like they can't believe I'm here.

"Yeah, I'm alive," I joke then add a spooky laugh. When they all continue to stare at me without so much as cracking a smile, I add, "Sorry. Bad joke, I guess."

Nico springs to his feet and strides toward me. "Not a bad joke. We're just a little too stressed out to laugh, I guess." His gaze drinks me in, and then he starts to reach for me but pauses. "Can I hug you?"

"Sure?" I say more like a question.

He hugs me, anyway, his arms looping around me.

It might as well be the first hug I've ever received.

In the human world, the idea of being touched made me cringe. The way Liam acted toward me wasn't a rarity and, because of that, I developed the skills to avoid contact as much as possible. Not that it always worked.

This, though, the way he feels, all warm and strong ... the scent of mint and crisp winter snowflakes coming off of him ...

"Mm ..." A soft, little moan purrs from my lips as I curl into him.

He hums in response, grazing his lips across my forehead. "I'm glad you're okay. "

"Me, too," I agree, fighting the desire to pull him back to me as he steps away.

His smile is a ray of sunshine as he gazes down at me.

My heart flutters.

It's weird.

Is this connection all because we're in the same coven? Or am I finally just getting lusty over someone?

Nico drags his teeth along his bottom lip.

I want to kiss him ...

Wylder coughs.

Nico blinks. "Right."

And again, I'm perplexed. "What?"

"Nothing. Let's go sit down and talk, okay, pretty eyes?" He caresses my cheek with the back of his hand before spinning around and sauntering back to the living room.

The four of us sit down with me wedged between Phoenix and Wylder.

I'm beyond apprehensive about what they're about to tell me, especially with how twitchy they are. Then again, I'm not sensing they've discovered I'm a murderer yet, so I guess that's a plus.

"So, you're not seventeen," Kaiden tells me as he sets the book down on the table. Then he slants forward and rests his arms on his knees. "Your birthday is on October tenth, so in just a few months. But you won't be turning eighteen. You'll turn

nineteen, which makes sense since we're all nineteen, and members in covens are almost always close in age. ”

“Oh.” Any of my optimism dwindles into a puddle of pessimistic goo.

“I know it's a lot to feel like you've lost a year of your life, but it's kind of a good thing, because that means you'll get to graduate with us.” Nico attempts to bring my mood back up.

“Yeah, I guess so.” My frown remains. “Why do you guys go to school until you're nineteen? In the human world, you'd be in college.”

“All creatures attend the academy from the ages of sixteen until nineteen, then we're done with school.” Kaiden rubs his hand across his mouth, briefly lost in thought. “I couldn't see much of your earlier life, Emberlynn, so, unfortunately, I didn't get many answers like who your parents are. The earlier years of your mind were heavily blocked off.” He studies me. “That's where you got lost at. I don't know where you went, but I was lucky I was able to pull you out with my magic.”

“Those wisps were you magic?” I ask, remembering how safe I felt when they pulled me out of that land of ash and flames.

He nods, a wisp of his dark hair falling across his forehead. “I was also able to learn a bit about your magic.”

My frown deepens. “Great.” I despise my magic. It's dark and dangerous.

Did he see that?

Is he about to kick me out?

“You don’t need to be afraid,” Wylder offers me reassurance. “You’re safe with us, no matter what. ”

We’ll see if that vow stays when they learn about the blood on my hands.

“The thing is you don’t have a prominent power source.” Kaiden picks up the pen and starts twirling it around his fingers. “Every witch and warlock has a main source. Wylder’s is healing, Nico’s is sunlight, mine is ... shadows and darkness, and Phoenix’s is ... death whisper.”

“Death whisper?” I verbalize my confusion, glancing at him. It sounds spooky, but so is what I can do. “What’s that?”

He avoids my gaze. “Let’s worry about that later.”

As outlandish as it sounds, it brings me a drop of comfort that he’s secretive about his powers, like I am.

“Why don’t I have one?” This question, I direct at Kaiden. “A power source, I mean. And didn’t you say I was a healer like Wylder?”

“Just because you can heal, doesn’t mean that’s your power source. Your power source is your strongest,” Kaiden replies, continuing to twirl the pen. “But as far as I can tell, you don’t have a main one.”

“So, I’m just not powerful then.” I seal my lips together to hold my breath, hoping he confirms this.

He stops twirling the pen, his intensely powerful gaze melding with mine. “I think it’s quite the opposite. I think all of the power sources are your main power. I’ve wondered this for a bit.”

I swallow hard. “That’s a thing?”

A skip of a pause, and then he tosses the pen onto the table. “It’s very, very rare, and as far as I know, hasn’t appeared in any witch or warlock for a long time. But there are records of it.”

My heart is a warning pounding in my chest.

Maybe I should’ve run ...

Kaiden’s gaze is searing. “We will never, ever hurt or abandon you. Our job is to protect you. You need to understand that. But other than the four of us, no one can know about this. I’m working to find out if any of the council suspects this, because I’ve had a feeling that a few members might have intentionally kept your existence from us.”

“Why would they do that?” I whisper, still stuck on what he told me. “And then suddenly tell you?”

“Technically, they only told us after we felt you use your power,” Phoenix clarifies with his arms folded over his chest. “The day you cast that spell that put a hole in the ground, we all felt that.”

My lips form an O . “Does this mean I’m in danger?”

The muscles in his jaw pulsate. “Never. I’m going to figure out if anyone knows about you and take care of it. And as long as this stays between us, no one will ever have to find out.”

Does Shadow Man know?

Is that why he wants me so badly?

I pluck at a loose thread hanging from a hole in my jeans. “How do you take care of that exactly?” Really, there are probably only two options: kill them or erase their minds. I already know they can do the latter since they did it to Liam.

“He’ll erase their minds,” Nico tells me then shifts his focus to Kaiden. “You better be careful. If you get caught doing that, even your last name won’t be able to save you.”

Kaiden appears unperturbed as he states with undiluted confidence, “I’ll be fine.”

I wring my hands, restless and uneasy. “So, I shouldn’t use my magic.”

Kaiden gives a dismissive shake of his head as he retrieves a thick, worn book from off a stack beside his chair. “Not at all. I’m going to teach you how to harness it, so there’s no more accidental holes ripping open the ground.” A shadow of a smile haunts his lips.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was proud of what I did.

“He’s so getting off on her magic right now,” Nico says with a joking laugh.

Okay, maybe I did read Kaiden right.

Kaiden starts reading through the book but plucks a pillow and chucks it at Nico. Nico effortlessly ducks out of the way, laughing. But then Kaiden uses magic to launch another pillow at him, and it smacks Nico square in the face.

And as simply as it takes for someone to take a breath, the guys return to normalcy, chattering about class and what we’ll have for dinner. It’s like they have no worries

about my rare magical ability. As if they trust me.

They shouldn't.

I don't want to hurt them, but I also have hardly any control over my power .

And if Shadow Man gets a hold of me

No, I won't allow that to happen. If he finds me, I'll run. I won't let him use me as a tool to hurt anyone ever again, no matter what I have to do.

18

EMBERLYNN

Wylder was precisely on point with Kaiden's obsession with research. Even when Wylder's mom returns home and everyone helps get dinner ready, Kaiden lingers in the living room, rummaging around through books. Even when everyone else gathers around the kitchen table to eat. And everyone acts as if this is normal.

He only leaves when the moon is a massive orb of light in the hazy midnight blue sky and the clock tower located in the heart of the town chimes midnight. He returns the following day to pick up where he left off.

"Did you even sleep?" Wylder asks him as he leans against the edge of the counter.

He has on a pair of sweatpants and a shirt with the words "Witches Brewing no one wanted to sleep by me. Humans didn't like me very much."

"Well, they're stupid. You're perfect." Wylder reaches out to trace a path below my eye with his finger.

Is this guy for reals?

Real or not, he's making me a flustering mess.

I make a disagreeing noise in the back of my throat. "Trust me; I'm not perfect."

He scans my face, as if examining every detail, gently smiling as he moves his finger to my nose. “Even your freckles are cute.”

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

My erratic heartbeat is a desperate need of ... I’m not quite sure what it needs. For him to touch me again?

“You lived in a shelter?” Kaiden enters the kitchen, slamming the book closed.

“Sometimes, but only when I had no other place to go. Or, like I said, when the group home became too much.” I rotate to face him as he drops the book onto the countertop. “I would’ve preferred to stay in the shelter over the group home any day. But every time I ran away, they’d find me. People keep running away from it, because there’s like a seventy-five percent chance you’ll get stabbed at least once.”

“Did you get stabbed?” Kaiden inquires with a bite to his tone.

“No, but someone tried to. It’s why I punched someone before.” I prop my elbow on the counter and trace the golden engraving of the title on the book Kaiden set down a moment ago. “This guy crept up on me while I was sleeping and held a knife to my throat. He tried to ... well, basically, what Liam was trying to do to me that day you found me. It was the first time that I ever contemplated using my powers on purpose. But punching the guy in the face got him off me, and I ran, so I didn’t have to.”

I recline against the counter on my elbows, only then catching a glimpse of their appalled and horrified faces.

The tension-laced silence is deafening.

What the heck did I say?

“That’s how you lived in the human world?” Kaiden finally speaks, silvery sparks hissing from his fingertips.

“Not all the time,” I stress. “Mostly, just when I was in the group home.”

The floor gripes under Kaiden’s weight as he takes a calculated step toward me. “What about when you were staying in homes? Were the families like Liam?”

I push off the counter to step back and put some space between us. But it ends up being only an inch or so. “Not all the time. Some weren’t too bad. ”

The sparks crackle as he lifts his hand toward my face.

My muscles ravel in knots. Is he about to use his magic on me?

“Kai.” A warning catches Wylder’s tone. “Just breathe.”

His chest rises and crashes as he breathes in through his nose then gradually exhales. “I’m fine.” Another breath and the magic emitting from his fingers dissipates. He cautiously lifts his hand and places his fingers against my cheek.

I don’t fully grasp why, but the instinct to hold perfectly still consumes me.

His fingers move across my face, sketching my cheekbone, lips, then my jawline. All the while, his stormy gaze traces the movement. The moment is intensely intimate and intensifies when his gaze welds with mine. “No one will ever hurt you again. And if they try to, I’ll make sure my powers are the only life they feel again.”

Lila was right. He does have alpha male potential.

Also, since his powers are related to necromancy, does that mean he’ll kill whoever

tries to hurt me and then control them like a puppet?

Do I care if he does?

A part of me, one that I've only allowed to live in the shadows of the scars on my heart, hums with excitement about the idea. I think he sees the feeling reflecting in my eyes by the way one side of his mouth tilts up, as if the idea that it excites me makes him elated.

"All right, I brought the coffee and doughnuts, but I forgot Wylder's blueberry muffin." Nico waltzes through the front door.

Kaiden steps back, but Nico has already caught sight of how close he was to me.

He halts, his gaze bouncing between Kaiden and me. "Okay, what the heck did I miss?"

"Nothing." Kaiden's tone is clipped as he grabs the book, swings around the counter, and retreats to the living room.

"Are you okay?" Wylder checks, stepping toward me.

I nod. "I think so." A breath eases from my lips as I move away from the counter.

Wylder leans close to me and lowers his voice to whisper, "He may come off as intense, but it's a good thing with you, if that makes sense."

"It makes sense. And I promise I'm fine." My pulse is still throbbing, but from excitement.

I think my head is broken.

Nico sets a box of doughnuts and a tray of coffees down on the table before proceeding into the kitchen. “Okay, seriously, what really happened?” He studies me as he shucks off his hoodie. “Because our heart’s cheeks are super flushed, and I’m pretty sure I’ve never seen Kaiden stand that close to anyone before.”

“My cheeks aren’t flushed.” But I cover my cheeks with my hands, anyway.

“Okay,” Nico says sarcastically. “I guess you’re just sunburned then, pretty eyes. ”

I offer him a dry look, to which he responds with a snicker.

“Here, I brought you a special donut.” He flips open the lid of the box. “Consider it an apology for teasing you.” He presents me with the yummiest doughnut I’ve ever seen. It’s piled with whipped frosting and topped with strawberries and sprinkles.

I skeptically take the doughnut from him. “Why is it a special doughnut? Is it filled with poison?”

He dramatically presses his hand to his chest. “You think I’d poison my heart ?”

“Are we talking about your own heart or me?” I question with a cock of my brow.

He chuckles. “Funny.” He muses over something. “I guess if you don’t want the special doughnut, I’ll take it.” He reaches to steal it from me.

I lean away, shaking my head. “No way. I want it.”

“Good.” He dithers. “This kind, it’s too sugary for anyone else but me. Let’s see how you handle it, pretty eyes,” he dares me teasingly.

With a challenging lift of my brows, I take a huge bite of the doughnut. “Oh my God,

that is so sugary. But so, so good,” I moan, licking a dollop of frosting off my lips.

Both Wylder and Nico watch me eat with an odd stiffness in their bodies that increases every time I moan.

Finally, Wylder gives Nico’s shoulder a rough pat. “Great idea with the frosting doughnut.” He sounds as if he thinks the exact opposite .

“Sorry. Is it gross watching me eat this?” I ask as I stuff the rest of the doughnut into my mouth then lick some frosting off my fingers.

Nico slowly shakes his head from side to side. “Not at all. But here.” He drags the pad of his thumb along my bottom lip, swiping up some frosting I missed. Then he sucks it off his finger.

And I’m having heart palpitations again.

Once he’s cleaned off his thumb and nearly killed me from a heart attack without knowing it, he snatches up another doughnut, grabs my hand, and pulls me into the living room with him. He stuffs half the doughnut in his mouth before sitting down and pulling me down with him. Then he grabs two books from off the table and hands one to me. “And let the boring research begin.” He dramatically flips open the book.

“I’m still not even certain what I’m supposed to be looking for,” I tell him as I open the book he gave me.

“Me neither. But just pretend to be reading and, eventually, Kaiden will figure it out,” Nico mock whispers to me, sneaking me a smirk when Kaiden glares at him.

His expression softens when he looks at me, though. “We’re looking for anything that mentions multiple power sources in a witch or warlock.”

“Okay.” I glance down at the book. “Wait ... What language is this book in?” I wonder as I stare at the symbols inking the page, ones that aren’t even remotely related to the alphabet .

Nico slants over to look at it. “That’s the language of the fey.” He presses his finger to the title on the page. “ The History of the Wildlands.”

I glance at him. “You speak faerie?”

He begrudgingly nods. “Not by choice.”

His mood is plummeting, but I’m unsure why.

“Do you want another doughnut?” I suggest. “Those seem to make you happy.”

A smile spreads across his lips, but a droplet of sadness resides in his sea blue eyes, and the outline of his aura is blurry, like it’s weeping.

“I think that’s a great idea.” He starts to get up.

I place a hand on his leg, stopping him. “I can get it. I can’t read this book, anyway.” I toss the book on the cushion beside me and get up to get him a doughnut, glad to feel useful for once, even if it’s a small thing.

Wylder’s aura is buzzing as I pass him where he’s engulfed in the book he’s reading. Kaiden is near the window, and his aura is shimmering against the sunlight.

“I have a question,” I say as I endeavor into the kitchen. “Why can I see auras? And why are your guys’ so much different from everyone else’s? Is it because you guys are in my coven?” I grab the doughnut with the most frosting on it then put the lid back on the box.

“Seeing auras isn’t as uncommon as your power source,” Kaiden explains as I return to the living room. “And I’m sure the difference is because we’re in a coven. It’s nothing to be alarmed about. ”

“Good. I’m already enough of a freak.” I hand Nico the doughnut and plop down on the sofa beside him.

“You’re not a freak,” Wylder says, kicking his feet up onto the coffee table. “You’re per?—”

“Do not say perfect,” I warn, pointing a finger at him.

Wylder zips his lips while Nico declares, “She picks out perfect doughnuts, though. This one has a ton of frosting.”

Wylder tucks his arms behind his head. “Phoenix better hurry up and get here before you eat them all.”

“His loss if I do.” Nico wolfs down half the doughnut in one bite. “Where is he, anyway?”

Wylder lets his arms flop onto his lap. “He went down to Deadman & Shadows Alley.”

Kaiden sinks down onto the bench in front of the window. “He needs to stop doing that shit. Especially now.”

“You know his father makes him.” Wylder turns the page of the book. “But yeah, he does need to find a way to stop, now that our coven’s all together.”

I tuck my leg under my butt. “What happens on Deadman & Shadows Alley? Or do I

even want to know?”

“Street fighting.” Wylder grimaces, rubbing at his arm.

“Like punches and kicks, or zaps with magic spells?” I’m partly joking about the latter.

But Wylder tells me seriously, “Both. He’ll probably show up here with bruises and burns that he’ll want me to heal.”

“You shouldn’t,” Kaiden states without looking up from the book. “It might give him incentive to stop.”

“I get what you’re saying, but I’m going to try to convince him to stop because of her first.” Wylder nods in my direction then pauses and perks up. “You know what? I think I should teach you how to heal today,” he tells me.

“What ?” I frantically shake my head. “No way. I’ll mess it up.”

“You can’t really do much harm with healing magic, Emberlynn. The only thing that really could happen is nothing. It’ll be a good learning experience. Plus, it might help us convince Phoenix to stop going to fight.”

“Why would it do that?” I grumble, hating this idea.

Wylder shrugs. “Because you could ask him to stop while you’re healing him.”

Nico laughs darkly under his breath. “Aw, manipulation. It really is a fantastic idea. All she has to do is bat her pretty eyes at him while asking, and he’ll be a goner.”

I sigh, resting back on the sofa. “I don’t know why you keep saying my eyes are

pretty. The color creeped the hell out of humans. It's why I wore sunglasses all the time. The only reason I didn't have them on when you guys met me was because they fell off when Liam grabbed me."

Nico starts popping his knuckles. "I still don't think we punished that fucker enough."

"Agreed," Wylder chimes in, lowering his feet to the floor.

"As much as I wish we could've killed him, you know we can't. Not unless we wanted to end up in prison." Kaiden places the book down on the bench. "And as for your eye color," he says to me, "it didn't creep humans out because they didn't think it was pretty. The color is alluring in a way one finds staring at the rarest of rubies alluring. They were transfixed by your eyes in a way they couldn't understand and that creeped them out."

"Aw, look at Kaiden, trying to be a poet without knowing it," Nico cracks a joke, eliciting a glare from Kaiden. Nico dazzles him with an impish grin then turns to me. "He's probably right. The humans were weirded out about your eyes because they can't understand the beauty."

I rub my eyes, feeling squirrely from all the compliments. Eventually, I can't take it anymore and, groaning, I lower my head into my hands. "You guys are being too nice to me," I gripe. "I don't know how to handle it."

"You should handle it like a boss and own it," Nico insists. "You're beautiful, so just accept it, and also maybe manipulate Phoenix with it a little bit."

I turn my head and playfully glare at him.

The front door opens then, the hinges whining with the movement, and a gentle

breeze gusts through the living room.

“Speaking of the devil.” Nico glances in that direction and a frown pulls at his lips.

“Bro, you look like shit.”

I raise my head and frown at the splotchy bruises under Phoenix’s swollen eyes. He also has a dried cut on his lip and burn marks on his arms.

Wylder warily asks, “Did you fight a dragon last night?”

Phoenix kicks the door shut. “No, but the warlock possessed a fire element that he didn’t divulge prior to the fight.” He shucks off the backpack he’s wearing and props it against a coatrack by the door. “I need you to heal me.”

Wylder shakes his head and, with a blasé shrug, says, “Sorry, can’t, bro.”

“What? Why?” Phoenix’s gaze narrows at Kaiden. “Or did you put him up to this?”

“I suggested he shouldn’t,” Kaiden replies with indifference. “But Emberlynn is going to try.”

Phoenix’s brows arch upward. “What? Why are you acting like that is a punishment?”

“Who said it was?” Kaiden questions, staring Phoenix down.

Phoenix stares right back.

“Maybe I shouldn’t,” I say with a lack of confidence that’ll hopefully scare them.

“No, you definitely should.” Nico springs to his feet and yanks me up with him.

“Phoenix, you’re hurting our heart’s feelings.”

“No, he’s not?—”

I zip my lips when Nico sneaks me a look.

Right, I’m supposed to be playing along with this plan.

“It does kind of hurt my feelings.” I aim to sound hurt.

It must be a success since Phoenix caves relatively easily. “All right.” He lowers himself into a chair, and Wylder moves up beside him, crooking his finger at me.

I hesitantly comply and go over to him. “What am I even supposed to do?”

“Here. Give me our hand.” Wylder raises his hand with the palm facing me.

Again, I obey, aligning my palms against his. His magic instantly awakens and spins tingling sensations across my flesh.

He positions my hand on one of the splotchy bruises marking the flesh below Phoenix’s eye. “Now visualizing healing him.”

“How do you visualize healing?” I question suspiciously. “Because when you say that, I’m just thinking about sewing someone up.”

His face contorts in disgust. “That’s a gross visual, but we’re not going to stitch him up like a doll.”

Phoenix huffs an impatient breath. “She’s thinking about stitches, dumbass. Can we please get this over with? The burns are starting to hurt.”

“It’s your own fault,” Wylder chides him. “And we could always just not do this learning session.”

Phoenix’s face is also beginning to resemble a deformed potato. “No ... Just ... do it ... I’m sorry.”

Whether he’s looking at Wylder or me is a mystery since his eyes are nearly swollen shut at this point.

“It’s more about visualizing warmth and sunlight. Think of the brightest, warmest thing you’ve ever seen or felt and hold onto that image.” Wylder continues his tutorial, “You should start to feel warm and sparkly. Once you do, channel it into Phoenix.”

Inhale. Exhale .

Just breathe.

“Okay.” I close my eyes and picture the bright orb of sunlight beaming from a serene blue sky.

I feel the warmth on my cheeks—the soft, warm sand beneath my bare feet.

“ It’s going to be okay, sweetheart. ” A voice as fragile as a wilting rose petal caresses my ear. “ It’ll get better. But it’ll get worse before it does. ”

The familiarity of the warmth of her tone is so powerful it trumps anything else.

And then I realize why.

“Mom,” I whisper, reaching out through the light, seeking her nearness, her comfort,

her warmth.

But I can't find her.

Then the warmth crackles, freezing over with ice that glazes under me, over me, through me.

I gasp.

“Wylder!” Nico shouts. “Make it stop!”

My hand is wrenched back, and the coldness evaporates into the mildly warm temperature that exists in the living room of Wylder's house. My surroundings return to me—the sofa, books, the sunlight glistening through the window, and Phoenix, Wylder, Kaiden, Nico.

Phoenix's face is normal now, his gorgeous dark eyes and lips on full display.

“Pretty,” I murmur. Then I start to gasp as my throat abruptly tightens.

“What's going on—” Nico starts gasping, too, clutching at his throat.

I claw at mine, backing away as I struggle to get oxygen in my lungs.

“Kaiden,” Wylder says frantically, his face ghastly pale. “What the hell is going on?”

Phoenix is on his feet, and he reaches for me, catching me by the waist as my legs buckle out from underneath me. “Look at her skin. This has to be poison.”

I manage to catch sight of Nico and, to my horror, his skin is covered with black, vine-like lines, as if his veins are pushing out from underneath his flesh.

He collapses onto the sofa and foam froths from his mouth. Kaiden rushes to him, examining his pupils while Phoenix sits down on the floor, lying me down with my head on his lap. My vision is dotting over the longer I can't breathe.

"You can't die on me," Phoenix whispers as he smooths his hand over my head, his eyes watery. "I finally got a taste of what happiness is like. I can't go back. We need you."

It'll be okay , I want to say, this dying urge to comfort him even while I'm tasting death presses against my chest.

"It's the doughnuts," Kaiden suddenly says from somewhere close by. "They're laced with werewolf venom."

"Make the anecdote then!" Wylder yells at him in total disarray.

"Go get me some wild lilies from your mom's garden," Kaiden tells Wylder in a demanding tone. "And give me the key to her supply closet."

The room settles into an unearthly stillness then.

Phoenix continues to cradle me in his arms, his fingers contentiously brushing soothingly through my hair.

"Life was shit before we found you, which means we've had like five days of non-shitty lives." Phoenix Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard. "We were all pretending like, eventually, we'd be okay with not having a heart , but the reality was, we were never going to be okay. But now it can be okay. You need to be okay." He pleads with me. "You're so perfect for us. I can tell. And we'll all be perfect together, eventually."

Again, a desire to console him rises in my chest. Sucking in a few drops of air, I manage to whisper, “It’ll be okay.”

“Shh ... Don’t talk. Save your breath, okay? Kaiden’s going to save you.” He hugs me tighter against him. “He can save anything.”

He holds me for what feels like an eternity as my blood flow turns sluggish and my throat and chest constrict tighter. I have no idea what condition Nico is in, and that makes my eyes burn.

A tear falls down my eye. “I don’t want to die,” I whisper hoarsely. “I thought I did, but I don’t think I do anymore.”

“You won’t,” Phoenix vows so passionately that if it weren’t for the fact that I can no longer breathe, I’d wholeheartedly believe him.

“Thank the gods and goddesses,” he breathes in relief.

Kaiden appears beside us with a vial of bluish liquid in his hand. He kneels down and tucks his hand beneath my neck, guiding me upright to a sitting position. “Drink this,” he instructs as he lines the edge of the vial with my lips .

I open my mouth, and then he angles my head back and pours the liquid down the little space left in my throat. I start to cough as my throat opens up and dries out.

“Take her,” Kaiden tells Phoenix.

He waits for Phoenix to slip his arm under me then pushes to his feet and hurries toward where Nico is lying on the sofa.

My nonexistent breathing morphs into wheezing, and then the airflow fully

resurfaces.

“Holy shit.” My eyes are watering over, not from tears, but from the sheer relief of being able to get oxygen into my lungs again. “That was crazy.” I sit up on my own accord and wipe the tears off my cheeks.

Nico is sitting up on the sofa, too, and the inky lines that were on his flesh are gone and he’s breathing evenly.

Wylder is standing between the two of us with his arms curled around himself, and his eyes look painfully haunted with some ghost of a memory he wishes to forget.

As with Phoenix, the urge to soothe him whispers to me. I start to get up, but Phoenix stops me.

“I’ll be okay,” I promise. “I just need to make sure Wylder’s okay.”

A look of understanding transfers between us, and then he stands up and helps me up, as well. He keeps a hand on my elbow as I walk over to Wylder, only letting me go when I wrap my arms around him. His arms magnetize around me, and he envelopes me in a cascading wave of warmth .

“I can’t lose you,” he whispers tremulously as he anchors his body against mine.

I sketch my fingertips up and down his back. “I don’t know how I know, but I do know this.” My fingers reach the nape of his neck, and I comb them through his hair . So soft. “Is this a coven thing?”

“It is. But it’s also because you’re our heart .” His hands splay across my back, and I feel his lips brush the top of my head.

“As beautiful as this moment is,” Nico interrupts in a quiet tone, “we should probably try to figure out who the fuck tried to poison us. Because I, for one, would never like to go through that again. And considering they almost killed our heart, they need to die.”

“We can’t just go around killing creatures,” Phoenix says, though doesn’t sound like he means it. “It’s forbidden.”

Nico coughs a few times. “Only if you get caught.”

I start to step back, but Wylder draws me right back against him.

“I—” His voice cracks. “I don’t think I can let you go yet.”

I peer up at him. “You don’t have to, but can we go sit down? My legs are a bit wobbly.”

He nods, and we take a seat by Nico, who scoots closer the instant my ass hits the cushion.

“How are you feeling, pretty eyes?” he asks, brushing his fingers along my arm.

A shiver rolls through my body from his touch, but not necessarily in a bad way. “Okay. I’m more worried about you. You ate like two doughnuts.”

“Three actually,” he confesses. “I ate one on the way here.”

“You ate three doughnuts for breakfast?” I shake my head. “Never mind. Totally not relevant right now.”

“If it was werewolf venom, that means we need to talk to the wolves, right?” Phoenix

walks over to the counter where the box of doughnuts sits. “I mean, unless someone managed to convince a wolf to give them their venom.”

“The probability of that is low but still a possibility.” Kaiden collects his jacket from off the coatrack. “I’m going to talk to a few creatures and see what I can find out. I’ll be back in a bit.” He slips his jacket on then wrenches open the front door, briefly pausing to flit a glance at me. His expression is indecipherable, and without uttering another word, he’s out the door.

“Great. He’s going to become obsessed with figuring this out.” Nico slumps back on the sofa and laces his fingers with mine.

“This time, his obsessive behavior might not be a bad thing.” Wylder slants back and drapes his arm across his forehead. “They tried to kill our heart .”

“And Nico.” I consider something. “Or was this intended for me? I’m not sure if attempted murder is a common thing here.”

Their silence speaks volumes .

“They were trying to kill me.” The words are heavy on my tongue. “Why? I don’t even know anyone here.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Wylder ravel a strand of my hair around his finger. “Until then, we’ll be extra careful about what we eat, and that you’re with one of us at all times. But more than likely, Kaiden will be able to solve this quickly.”

“And then kill the creature who did it?” I turn and give an insinuating look at Wylder.

He dithers. “Would it be so bad if he did?”

“If he ends up in jail, then yeah,” I reply truthfully. “I don’t want anyone going to prison for me.”

“We’ll worry about punishment later.” He unravels my hair from his finger. “We should celebrate the success of your first healing spell.”

“Yeah, maybe.” A memory tugs at my mind. “Wylder, I think I heard my mom’s voice while I was doing the spell. Well, it was either because of that or a hallucination because werewolf venom was trying to kill my body. And also, is werewolf venom deadly to all creatures? Or just witches and warlocks?”

A tinge of a smile emerges from his lips. “Your questions are cute.”

“Not everything I do is cute,” I gripe. “I’m just confused. You know, stupid. And that’s not cute.”

“You’re not stupid,” he stresses sincerely. “And yes, werewolf venom is deadly to all creatures except for werewolves. And as for hearing your mom ... do you remember her voice?”

“Not until just barely.” I sigh sleepily. “It made me sad because she sounded nice. And she can’t be nice, right? Not when she abandoned me.”

“Maybe she didn’t abandon you,” Phoenix suggests. “Maybe you were taken from her.”

Wylder’s gaze shifts to Phoenix. I’d lift my head to see what sort of silent exchange they’re having, but I’m too fatigued at the moment. Nico is on the same page as me, his light snores revealing he’s fallen asleep.

“Almost getting killed made me tired,” I murmur, letting my eyes fall closed. “I think

I need a nap.”

Wylder’s palm skims across my forehead. “Get some sleep, baby. We’ll make sure you’re okay.”

The fact that he called me baby barely registers in my brain before I’m transmitted away into a tranquil sleep of nothing but sunlight and warmth.

19

KAIDEN

My fingernails are stabbing so fiercely into my palms that the skin is splitting open. I don't care, though. I hardly feel the pain. I welcome pain usually. Right now, I want to unleash pain on someone else. I want to torture. Hurt. Make whoever tried to kill my heart pay. This is why I was trained to rein in on my emotions—because the shadows that live inside me are bloodthirsty for death.

I couldn't even calm down if I wanted to.

I bottled it down until I got out of Wylder's house because if any of them saw me like this, they'd stop me. And I don't want to be stopped.

I want to kill .

Bring death.

Taste it.

I storm into the Silver Fang bar, throwing open the door with so much force the wood cracks. Then I enter, allowing my magic to rise off my flesh, taunting every creature sitting in the barstools and at the table.

And it works, some of them bailing out the back door. A few remain, unbothered by the threat of actual death being in their dingy, windowless bar that reeks of wet dog.

Every creature in here is a werewolf. This is the place where they hang out and the place to go to seek answers about their kind. Or, in my guess, torture it out of them if necessary.

I stride toward the bar where the bartender is wiping down a glass. He's older, around fifty, with thick gray hair and a beard. He's about twice my size in weight but a few inches shorter than me.

"I need answers about an attempted werewolf venom poisoning," I growl out, my vision darkening.

"Sorry. Don't have a clue what you're referring to." He balances the glass on a shelf. "Maybe you should ask your council. Don't they have all the answers? At least they act like they do." He smirks, flashing me his yellow teeth.

I cock my head to the side and let my grayish wisps of magic snake out from my hands. "Do you have any clue what I am? Or what can I do?" I lean closer, more tendrils of smoke reaching out of me. "Or what an army of the undead can do?"

The flash of fear in his eyes gives me a twisted, sick sensation of gratification.

He backs away. "That's forbidden."

"Do I look like I care?" My vision is so dark that my surroundings are nothing more than shadows.

The ground begins to quake, a warning that the undead are about to rise from their graves. It's my signal to stop, but I don't.

The bartender gulps as glasses tumble from the shelves and shatter against the floor. "Look, kid. I don't know anything about an attempted werewolf venom poisoning. I

swear I don't. But I have heard rumors that a mysterious buyer recently bought a large quantity of it on the black market. I don't know anything else. If you want more answers, you have to speak to the werewolf society, and they're currently on a mission. They'll be back after the next full moon."

I study him, reading through any lies he might be showing. From what I can tell, he's being truthful.

Spinning on my heel, I turn and storm out of the bar. My magic is still out, creating madness in the streets as the entire town quakes. I need to regain control, but I can't. My willpower is slipping away as darkness creeps through the crevasses in my mind.

"Kaiden, stop," my father commands as he rounds the corner of a building across the street. He marches toward me, his thick boots stomping loudly against the cobblestone street. His dark hair and eyes are a mirror of mine but, unlike me, he has a semblance of control. "Stop, now." He smacks me across the face so hard my ears ring .

The world goes quiet as my magic skitters back inside my veins.

"You're coming with me," he hisses through his teeth as he steals a glance around at all the creatures gawking at me in horror.

I have no choice but to follow him across the street and to the woods that lead to our home. When we arrive, he'll lock me in the basement and torture me, just like he has every time I've lost control over my ability.

And I'll let him.

Because he's stronger than me

Right before we enter the house, though, I sneak my phone out to send a text to Wylder.

Me: Talk with the werewolf society when they return. I'll be MIA for at least a few days.

20

WYLDER

“What the hell is he talking about?” I mutter as I read the vague-as-a-ghost text Kaiden just sent me.

I’m in the kitchen, disposing of the poisoned doughnuts while Emberlynn and Nico sleep on the sofa. Phoenix paused his reading when an earthquake swept through, but now is back at it. The quake was mild and dispelled fairly hastily.

He glances up from the book. “What did it say?”

I read it to him while zapping a spell at the doughnuts, evaporating them into crumbs.

“You don’t think that earthquake was because of him, do you?” Phoenix deftly closes the book. “He may have walked out of here calmly, but he could’ve been putting on a front. You know how he can get.”

“Fuck. You’re probably right.” I’m so damn frustrated with myself. “One of us should’ve gone after him.”

“I think we were a bit distracted with other things.” He gives a pressing glance at Emberlynn.

“I know, but ...” I drag my fingers roughly through my hair. “You know this means his father probably has him.”

“I know.” Phoenix turns his head toward the window. “I hate his goddamn father.”

“Me, too.” Kaiden’s father is the worst, and I don’t even know the half of it—Kaiden keeps most of what goes in that coliseum of a home a secret. “We need to get him out of there.”

“What’re we going to do? Take on the great and powerful Oliver Everson?”

Oliver Everson, Kaiden’s father, is considered the most powerful necromancer ever to exist. He’s also a psychopath. He’s killed creatures. Tortured them. And tried to turn Kaiden into his emotionless zombie puppet.

The council lets him be because he’s wealthy, powerful, and they’re scared of him.

“Maybe one day.” My mind drifts to Emberlynn and the possibility that she might have all the power sources inside her. If that turns out to be true, there’s no stopping what she could do.

And maybe, just maybe, Kaiden could finally be free from the invisible chains that his father keeps locked around his wrists.

21

EMBERLYNN

I 've never slept as peacefully as I do the hours after I almost get murdered. What that says about me, I'm unsure. Probably not good things.

But as I wake up well-rested, I can't find the will to care.

I wake up in my bed, any aches in my body nonexistent. My mind is wired, and I sit up feeling so reenergized that I almost break out in song.

Almost, thank God. I'm not living in a cartoon.

My bubbly demeanor dims a bit when I climb out of bed and wander into the kitchen with my arms stretched above my head.

Wylder is awake and informs me that Kaiden had to go away for a few days when I ask him what happened after I fell asleep.

I frown, my arms falling to my side. "Did he get into trouble? "

Wylder is the portrait of reluctance. "Sort of." He scoops up an apple from a bowl, sniffs it, then tosses it to me. "That's not poisoned. You should eat it. It's from my mother's garden. The juices will help clear out any effects the werewolf venom may have left behind."

I skim my thumb along the shiny apple. “Did you just smell this for poison?”

He smiles, but it’s a ruse. “I did.”

“What does werewolf venom smell like?”

“Rot.”

“Ew. Why didn’t we smell it in the doughnuts?”

“The abundance of sugar masked it. The baker knows Nico and is aware of his particular taste for sugar, so he triples the quantity.”

I rotate the apple around in my hand. “Maybe he put even more in it because he was aware of the werewolf venom.”

Wylder freezes then jerks his fingers through his hair. “Fuck, why didn’t any of us think of that? I mean, I doubt James did it himself—he’s a sweet old man who’s never been in any sort of trouble—but the connection could be in that store. We’ll go there later today after Nico and Phoenix get here.” He beams with pride as he stares at me in wonderment. “You’re smart.”

“It was just one idea that came from being around humans that are obsessed with true crime podcasts. You’d be surprised how many people poison each other through food.” I bite into the apple, juice drizzling down my chin.

Wylder wanders around in the kitchen, doing odd things, like rummaging through the fridge without actually grabbing any items. He’s distracted by something else other than the potential attempt at murdering me.”.

“You’re acting weird,” I note as I sink my teeth into the apple again.

He closes the fridge with a weighted sigh then turns to me. “I’m just worried about everything else we need to figure out. What your powers are, why anyone would try to kill you, Kaiden being detained.”

I wipe up droplets off the apple’s juice off my chin as guilt gnaws in my gut. “All of this is my fault.”

Shaking his head, he walks to me and splays his fingers across my cheeks. “None of this is your fault. Don’t ever think that.”

“All of it happened because I’m here.”

“So? It doesn’t make it your fault. Kaiden’s been detained before. And the poisoning—” He grinds his teeth. “Bad things happen in this world, just like I’m sure it does in the human world. And just because it centers around you, doesn’t make it your fault. It’s the creature who chose to try to poison you. And Kaiden, while I get why he used his magic, he made the choice to do so.” The rough pad of his thumb flutters across my cheek. “And, as for your powers, they’re amazing and, one day, you’ll realize that.”

He’s so sweet for trying to convince me, but he isn’t aware of all the terrible things I’ve done.

“Kaiden got in trouble for using his magic? Is that a thing here? ”

“It can be, but Kaiden didn’t get in trouble with the council. He got in trouble with his father.” He bites out the last word.” It happens sometimes ... when he gets really pissed off and loses control. His father ... doesn’t like him losing control. Neither does Kaiden, and he believes he deserves to be punished.”

“I understand that feeling,” I whisper, clutching the apple. “Can we help him at all?”

“Not at the moment, but maybe one day.” He fleetingly becomes enthralled with my mouth before stepping back and lowering his hand from my face. “After we visit the baker, we need to focus on preparing you for classes tomorrow. I’m not sure how we’ll do that without Kaiden, but we’ll figure it out.”

Right. Classes. Through all the chaos, I somehow forgot I have to attend school.

“I’m nervous,” I disclose. “Going to school ... let’s just say that there were a lot of people like Liam loitering around the hallways.”

“It won’t be like that here.” He grabs a bottle of juice from out of the fridge and gives it to me, apparently determined to fill me up with fruity sweetness this morning.

“But aren’t there like a bunch of creatures roaming around?” I start counting off on my fingers. “So far, you’ve mentioned vampires, werewolves, faeries, pixies, ghosts, and I’m guessing there’s more.”

“There is, but witches and warlocks have covens that offer protection. And we have a connection to each other beyond just covens.” He places his hand on his chest, and then the other on mine right above my heart. “Ours has been broken for a while, but you can feel it now, right?”

I lick my lips as I nod. Flashing sparks of his magic hum across my body. I can’t breathe, but not because of poison. No, this is different. This is blissful.

“Your heart’s beating really fast,” he utters, his gaze searing into mine.

My chest lifts and falls against his hand in the desperate rhythm of my breathing.

“Emberlynn.” My name is sweeter than frosting coming off my tongue as he leans in toward me.

Is he going to kiss me?

Are we supposed to kiss?

I don't even know how to kiss.

Do I want him to kiss me?

Shit, I'm a real basket case.

My lack of mobility might have an answer hidden in it.

I stand motionless, gripping the apple, debating whether to allow him. I want to, but I'm terrified for so many reasons, one being I don't even know how to kiss.

"There's a goddamn glitter storm going on," Nico announces as he barrels in through the front door.

Wylder and I both jump away from each other, and, in a panic, I chuck the apple. It flies over to the living room, rolls across the floor, and smacks the toe of Nico's boot.

A pucker forms between Nico's brow as he glances from Wylder to me then at the apple. "Okay, what the hell did I miss?" He bends down to scoop up the apple. He examines it, turning it around in his hand as he squints at the red, waxy exterior.

"Don't read that," Wylder warns. "I swear to the gods, Nico ..."

A grin spreads across Nico's lips. "Too late."

"Wait, what?" Once again, I'm lost in a sea of I-so-don't-get-this. "Read what?"

Wylder fires a glower at Nico. “Nico can read memories on objects. At least ones that happened within a few minutes prior to when it touched it.”

“It doesn’t always work.” He tosses the apple in the air and catches it. “Like with the doughnuts—I couldn’t read anything on those. This, though.” He holds up the apple. “This one has a juicy little story on it.” He throws the apple at Wylder, and he catches it. “I’m guessing you might want to keep that as a souvenir.”

“Ew, don’t keep my half-eaten apple.” I make a barf face.

Wylder sets it by the sink, not throwing it away.

Nico saunters into the kitchen then, and as he steps underneath the lights, his skin begins to sparkle with hints of blue and silver.

“You have glitter all over your arms and clothes,” I state. “Why?”

“I told you when I came in, but I guess I can see why you don’t remember, seeing as you were a bit distracted.” His eyes zero in on my mouth. “With yummy things. ”

Wylder shoves him by the arm, and Nico blinks before scowling at Wylder.

“What the hell, dude?” he gripes, rubbing his arm.

Wylder ignores him, focusing on me. “There’s a glitter storm happening.”

My gaze darts to the window. “Holy freakin’ wow.” I hurry over and peer out at all of the blue and silver glitter showering from the cloudy sky. It’s covering the leafy trees, the muddy ground, and the peaked roofs of the houses. “It looks like a faerie threw up all over everything, but in like a cool way,” I say as I stare at the scene in awe.

A trickle of silence, and then Wylder and Nico howl with laughter.

I spin around. “What’s so funny?”

“Your description of a glitter storm.” Nico dabs the tears of laughter from his eyes. “I can assure you, pretty eyes, that faerie vomit doesn’t even remotely resemble glitter. It resembles vomit.”

“The worst kind of vomit,” Wylder tacks on with a shudder.

“What does the worst kind of vomit mean, anyway?” I throw my hands in the air. “All vomit is equally gross.”

They chuckle again. Apparently, I’m a regular comedian these days.

“Aren’t we supposed to be interrogating a baker?” I remind Wylder. “Not laughing at my lack of vomit knowledge.”

Every ounce of hilarity fades from his eyes. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“Huh?” Nico flicks him a quizzical glance.

“The baker who made the doughnuts,” Wylder explains. “Emberlynn came up with the idea.”

Like with Wylder, Nico grins at me with pride.

Between all the prideful smiles and the almost kisses aimed my way, I need a breather. So, I excuse myself to get dressed, worried I’m in over my head, not only with magic but with these guys.

About an hour later, Nico, Wylder, and I are hiking up a dirt path that will take us to town. We left after Phoenix called and informed Wylder that he couldn't make it this morning due to a family meeting. When I asked Wylder and Nico what the meeting could be about, Wylder explained that Phoenix's father was a hustler and part of a secret organization referred to as Underground Cursed Moon Society that dabbles in all sorts of sketchy activity, like smuggling illegal substances, creatures, and they also make creatures "disappear" for the right price, of course.

"Phoenix is into that sort of stuff?" I ask as we walk.

The glitter storm has settled down, leaving only remnants of glitter puddles on the ground that prettily glitter against the traces of sunlight escaping through the cracks of the thinning storm clouds. The air weirdly smells like cake and has a frosty nip to it.

Nico loops his arm through mine. "No, but his father forces him to participate while he lives under his roof. That's why we need to find our own place where we can all live." He tangles our fingers together and twirls me around, causing me to laugh.

"I don't think he's attending this meeting because he has to." Wylder stuffs his hands into the pocket of his button-down black jacket. "He was pretty vague on the phone, but from what he said ... I got the feeling he's suspicious that the werewolf venom may have been smuggled through the society and that it may have even been a hired hit. And he's trying to investigate that."

Nico's face falls. "He better be careful. The society will end him if they find out, even if he's the leader's son."

"I'm sure he will be." But the frown on Wylder's face suggests he's worried, too.

"He never is." Nico kicks his foot through a puddle of glitter, sending fragments

scattering through the air.

“He will with this,” Wylder says, confidently squaring his shoulders. “I know he will because it’s important.”

They both glance at me.

“I’m guessing I make it important.” Uncertainty fills me over how I feel about that and how they could even feel that way when they know only the part of me I’m allowing them to see.

Nico smiles then slips his arm through mine again, and we pick up the pace as the town comes into view. The breeze picks up as we near it, and dressed only in my baggy jeans, sneakers, and a gray crop top shirt, I’m a shivering mess.

Nico halts near a cluster of trees to remove his hoodie. Then he drapes it over my shoulders.

“I’m fine.” I move to hand it back.

He refuses to take it. “You have goosebumps all over your arms. You’re not fine.”

“It’s our job to take care of you,” Wylder adds, settling his hand on my lower back to steer me around a large glitter puddle.

I begrudgingly put on the jacket and zip it up, Nico’s earthy scent encompasses me just as warmly as the fabric of the jacket. He draws the hoodie over my head and smiles contently as he grazes his knuckles across my cheek.

While the dirt path was empty, the cobblestone sidewalks that weave through the brick shops and stores are crowded with creatures bustling around. It’s worse than

when Lila and I went shopping.

When I state this, Wylder explains that many creatures are probably shopping for the Moon Festival that's occurring this coming weekend when the moon will be bleeding into the stars.

"It's a huge party event," Nico twines our fingers together as we cross the street. "All witches and warlocks attend to eat, drink, dance, worship the moon and, of course, offer a sacrifice."

I misstep, scuffing the tip of my sneaker on a brick. "Sacrifice?"

Wylder fires a glare at Nico as he leads the way across the street. "He's teasing you about that part." As we arrive on the other side, he stops by a lamppost and retrieves a pocket watch from his pinstriped pants. He checks the time before stuffing it back into his pocket. "If we hurry, we can catch James on his lunchbreak."

The clock tower chimes then, announcing that noon has arrived. The ding of the bells sounds more boisterous, and it actually hurts my eardrums.

Nico swings our clasped hands as we hurry past stores and shops, unbothered by the noise. The farther we walk into the businesses, the more I start to notice an increasing number of curious stares being thrown my way.

I lower my head and tug the hood lower to partially shield my eyes. "Why is everyone staring? They weren't like this the last time, when I was here with Lila."

"They didn't know who you were then," Nico tells me, pausing to glance through the window at a display of lavish ballroom gowns. "You're with us now, so they recognize who you are."

“Great. Is this how it’ll be at school? I hate attention.” I pull the collar of the jacket over my mouth. “I’m going to have to go back to wearing my baggy clothes and sunglasses. And why are you looking at these?” I ask Nico, gesturing at the dresses. “Are you on the market for a ball gown?” I lower the collar of the jacket so he can see my joking grin .

“What if I was?” he plays along.

“Then I’d say go with the blue one. It’ll go great with the glitter smudged on your forehead.” I recover my mouth with the top of the jacket.

He rubs his forehead, glances at his thumb, then giggles at the smeared glitter on his skin. Like, actually giggles. “Come on, smartass. We’ve lost Wylder.” He drapes his arm around my shoulders and steers us up the sidewalk, maneuvering us through the throng. “And no more covering yourself up with clothes. If you want to wear baggy clothes and sunglasses all the time because you like that, then that’s another story. But if you’re doing it to conceal yourself, please don’t. You can be yourself now. You’re home now.”

Home? The word is about as foreign of a concept as who I am, what I like, what my interests are.

“I don’t even know who I am, not really,” I divulge drearily. “I feel like I’ve spent my entire life trying to blend in and hide. That complicates self-discovery.”

His blond hair flaps against the gentle breeze as he glances at me. “I guess we’ll help you figure that out then.”

“How will you do that?”

He leans in close enough that the speckles of gold in his baby blues are visible. Then

he brushes his fingertip down the brim of my nose. “By having fun.”

“And how do we do that?” I shove my free hand into the front pocket of the jacket. “As lame as this is going to sound, I don’t know how to have fun and definitely don’t know how witches and warlocks have fun.”

He hesitates before dropping his voice to a husky whisper. “There’s a lot of ways to have fun. It just depends on how adventurous you are, pretty eyes.” He winks at me before tugging me forward and quickening our pace.

I’m clueless about guys—that’s a given. So maybe I’m wrong, but I felt like he was suggesting we have sex or something.

That thought ping-pongs around in my mind like a sweaty ball of lust that continuously bangs against the side of my brain. And it causes concern that I’m going to get my perspiration on Nico’s jacket because my body is sweltering. By the time we catch up to Wylder, who’s stopped in front of a small, single-story shop, my internal temperature has warmed up beyond normal and then some.

Wylder has his hands cupped around his eyes, peering into a front window. “It doesn’t seem like this place ever opened today. That’s weird. James always opens the bakery, even during the Hollow Rest Day.”

“The guy’s crazy obsessed with making cupcakes and doughnuts.” Nico lets go of my hand to try the front door.

“He probably needs the money.” Wylder steps back, his arms falling to his sides, and he eyes Nico like he’s an idiot for jerking on the front door. “Do you not think I didn’t try that when I first got to the store?”

Nico gives a half-shrug. “Sometimes you can be a little dense.”

Wylder stares at him, unimpressed. He seems a bit moody suddenly .

My suspicion is confirmed when Nico asks him, “Are you okay? You seem like you’re about to crawl out of your skin.”

Wylder tightly shakes his head. “The energy feels off here. Like it’s heavy and dark. The last time I felt this kind of energy was when my father died.”

“Your father died?” God, this makes my heart hurt. “Wylder, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. It was a long time ago.” He attempts to bury it, but I can see the anguish in his aura, the way the shell weeps away from the color, dulling to mourning gray.

He extends his hand in my direction; I think needing me to hold his hand. I place my palm in his, and his fingers wrap around mine.

That’s when it crashes over me, the feeling he described that’s in the air.

“I feel it, too,” I whisper, facing the store and tilting my head to the side.

I’ve felt this before, this heavy emptiness haunting the store. Only once, but it’s a sensation one doesn’t easily forget.

“I think someone’s dead inside the store,” I whisper, my breath fogging out in front of my face.

Wylder’s fingers stiffen. “I do, too.”

Nico’s baby blues shift between the two of us before he spins around toward the store’s entrance door. “Shit.” He grabs the doorknob and, with a sneaky glance over his shoulder, he chants a spell, his breath clouding out in front of his face.

Sparks whisper from his finger as he traces the tips over the brass doorknob. The metal dissolves into liquid that drips down onto the brick below our feet.

“Look, the door’s unlocked.” Nico slowly pushes the door open.

A frigid breeze gusts out, sending leaves funneling across the ground. We hurry inside, closing the door behind us and locking out the wind.

The place is clean and tidy, but the display cases, where baked goods should be, are empty.

“He definitely never opened today.” Nico trails his fingers along the glass.

I sniff the air then frown. “I smell something rotting.”

Wylder sniffs then deflates. “She’s right.” He grasps my hand as the three of us make our way across the checkerboard floor, past the pink shelves that line blue walls, and toward the doorway of the kitchen.

Wylder releases his grip on my hand. “Stay here.”

“No.” Why I’m being defiant is beyond me. It’s not like I want to see what’s causing the rotting stench. But, for some reason, I also feel like I need to see it with my own eyes.

“Nico, a little help here,” Wylder says as he fiddles with a button on his jacket.

Nico shrugs. “I don’t want her to see whatever’s in there, but it’s her choice.” He glances at me. “Are you sure you don’t want to wait out here? Death isn’t pretty.”

“I know. I’ve seen it.” I bite down on my tongue.

They stare at me, questions flooding their eyes.

“We should probably go see what it’s in there before someone sees us in here and thinks we did it,” I point out, gesturing at the doorway.

Wylder curses. Then, summoning a breath, he steps through the door and into the kitchen with Nico and I following suit. But he abruptly slams to a halt, and I run right into his back.

“Sorry.” I step back, rubbing my head, but then I catch sight of what made him stop and freeze.

Time freezes.

Because this isn’t just death.

This is savagery at its worst. Because lying on the floor is a body without a head.

EMBERLYNN

I 've seen death before. I've seen dead bodies before. But even during my time as Shadow Man's prisoner, I never saw a body without a head.

"Who is that?" Nico whispers in horror. "Is that James?"

"I don't know." Wylder shuffles back, bumping into me again. "And why isn't there any blood?"

"Why isn't there a head?" Nico frantically rubs at his forehead, as if attempting to scrub the memory of this away. "We need to call the council."

"I know." Wylder's feet momentarily remain firmly planted to the floor before he snaps out of his shocked trance, snatches hold of my hand, and dashes toward the front door.

Nico runs after us, his boots thudding against the linoleum flooring. "Why are we running?"

"Because it just occurred to me that whatever did this could be lurking around inside the store." Wylder fumbles for his phone as we burst out of the building.

Nico comes up right behind me, so his chest is pressed to my back and circles his arms around my waist. "I need to get you home."

“Take her to my place and try to call Kaiden and Phoenix.” Wylder dials a number into his phone. “I know they might not answer, but maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“I hope so. We need Kaiden.” Nico strides forward, moving me with him.

“We can’t just leave Wylder by himself,” I protest as we hurry across the street.

“Wylder will be fine, pretty eyes.” He slants forward to look left then right before we duck down a path. “It’s you we need to worry about. First the doughnuts get poisoned, and then the baker dies, probably to cover up whoever did it.”

As we reach the center of the path where the thick shrubbery and towering trees conceal the view of town, Nico comes to a stop and swings around in front of me.

“I’m going to get us back to Wylder’s place quickly, but it’ll feel a bit strange, okay?”

I nod?—

Swoosh .

One second, we’re standing on the path amongst the swaying trees, and the next, we’re swishing like a fast-forwarding movie. When we stop, it’s jarring enough that I stumble and smack into the front door of Wylder’s home. It flies open, bangs against the wall, knocks down the coatrack, and Nico and I trip over it, falling onto the floor. I land on top of Nico, and he grunts as my knee bashes his abdomen.

“Oh my goodness!” Stella, Wylder’s mother, cries out as she hurries over to us. “What happened?”

I push off Nico. “He made us do superspeed, and I lost my balance when we stopped.

I'm so sorry."

"I teleported us," Nico clarifies as he sits up, rubbing his side. "She's never done that before."

"I'm sorry," I repeat as I stand the coatrack back up.

"You don't need to be sorry, hon. Accidents happen, especially when you're first learning." She offers me a kind smile that fades as Nico stands up. "Why did you teleport here? Weren't you just in town?"

"We found a body," Nico informs her, brushing a leaf out of his hair. "Of James, the baker who owns Witches Doughnuts, Bites, and Sparking Delights."

She gasps, covering her mouth with her hand. "No, not James. He was such a sweet old man." Her eyes well with tears. "Was it natural causes?"

Nico reluctantly shakes his head. "We think it was ... murder."

Tears fall from her eyes. "I need to go find Lila. She's at practice and doesn't have her phone." She drops the dishrag she was holding, pushes past us, and sprints out the front door, slamming it behind her.

"Why is she so frantic to find Lila?" I ask Wylder as he plucks a twig out of my hair.

"Wylder's father was murdered." He drops the twig on the floor. "That makes murder a touchy subject for the Averly family."

"I think it is for all families," I say as we take a seat on the sofa.

"Not for Kaiden's or Phoenix's," he replies ominously, his attention fastened on the

window. “I need to call them.” He raises his hips and removes his phone from his pocket. He calls Kaiden first, to no avail. The same goes for Phoenix.

“You know what? Fuck this. We need them.” He bounds to his feet and shoves open the window. Then he rips a piece of paper out of a notebook and grabs a pen.

“What’re you doing?” I ask as he poises the pen to the paper.

“Getting them a message.” He briefly contemplates before writing:

You need to come to Wylder’s now. There’s been a murder, and we need help. He picks up the paper, but I steal it from him.

“With what happened, they’ll think I’m the one who was murdered,” I point out as I read it.

“Right.” At the bottom, he scribbles :

The murdered creature isn’t Emberlynn.

“It’s blunt, but I guess it works.” My head is spinning with everything going on.

This is crazy. And scary. And I can’t shake the guilty feeling it’s all my fault.

“Blunt is best when it comes to Kaiden. Remember that.” He signs it with a crescent moon symbol and a star below it then crumbles up the paper.

“Why did you do that?” I start to ask, but he places the balled-up paper in his hand, lifts it to his lips, and blows on it.

The edges of the paper smolder with tiny teal flames, and the ball of paper flies away

toward the trees with a trail of wispy blue smoke following after it.

Astonished, I turn to Nico. “Why do you guys even use phones?”

He shrugs. “It makes things simpler sometimes. Just so you know, our phones run by magical waves. I’m not sure what humans use to do that.”

“Satellites.”

“What are those?”

“Nothing as awesome as magic.”

He faintly chuckles but then wearily sighs. “Come on; let’s sit down and wait for Kaiden and Phoenix to come. ”

“Will that letter really work?” I wonder as he closes the window and fastens the lock.

“Especially with Kaiden since he's in trouble.”

He nods, offering me his hand. “With this, he’ll find a way out.”

KAIDEN

My father's torture chamber is tucked away in the basement of the mansion, where he can pretend it doesn't exist when we have visitors. The cement space is cold, and water drips from the ceiling. The droplets splattering against the floor is the only noise that exists. I'm alone. Have been for a day now. He used to chain me up, but the older I got, the less I fought, so he started allowing me to roam the room freely.

He put a magic shield around the space, as well, that restrains my magic. It exists but is weak enough that I can't do any damage.

When I was fourteen, I started trying to claw my way through the walls. I scratched at the concrete until my fingers bled. My claw marks are still visible, along with my blood.

Usually, I handle this better, but with my heart out there and knowing some creature is attempting to kill her ... I can't stop pacing. My mind is spinning with all sorts of worst-case scenarios. Usually, when I get like this, I read and research to keep myself calm. This room is empty, though, and offers zero distractions?—

A sizzling noise appears over the dripping. I stop and, with my brows furrowed, stick my hand into my pocket. My fingers brush against a piece of paper, and I fumble to retrieve it. If Nico or Wylder sent me a message via magical mail, something is terribly wrong.

The magic used to transport these letters is mild and barely detectable, hence the reason it manages to get through my father's shield. When I read the letter, I know Nico wrote it due to the lack of details.

"I need to get the hell out of here," I mumble as worry pours through me.

I'm not used to this—this abundance of emotions that have awakened inside me ever since I laid eyes on my heart . It feels like I have too much blood in my veins, like my mind is overflowing with too many thoughts, like my magic will overpower me.

I need to get to her. And there's only one way out of this—the thing my father has wanted from me since the day I was born.

To control me.

He wants me to become his prodigy and take over the family name. I've fought it since the day I understood what that meant.

Darkness .

Evil.

Killing.

I've heard the whispers about my family. It's why the mention of my last name sends fear through anyone who hears it.

I loathe the idea of becoming my father. But the desire to protect my heart is far greater, so I call out for the guards to request a meeting with my father that may seal my fate with the stamp of darkness—an agreement that will eventually send me to my grave.

EMBERLYNN

Nico and I barely speak as we sit in the living room, waiting for everyone to return. Eventually, Nico decides we should focus on doing more research. He hands me a book, grabs one for himself, then rests back on the sofa and begins reading.

Our arms brush every time one of us turns a page, and while Nico seems unaffected by it, the connection sends tingles kissing across my flesh. I squirm every time it occurs, confused about my body's reaction.

Hours tick by, the moon awakening the night sky cut hazed with starlight.

“Should we be worried no one has come home?” I ask. “It’s so late.”

“It’s fine.” Concern seeps through his tone, though, despite his effort to wear a mask of composure.

My gaze travels to the moon. When I was younger and sat in my cage, I’d stare at the moon and make wishes. It was always the same—to be free from him. Sometimes I convinced myself that I was able to escape—because of my wish. The reality is that probably isn’t the reason. However, I make a silent wish anyway as I gaze out at the moon.

I wish for everyone to be okay.

And for us to get some answers.

Releasing a breath, I return to reading the book that contains details about the dark history of witches and warlocks.

One of the darkest times in history was when the warlock, Ashford Greywing, obtained the power of stars. The sky went black except for the moon and filled him with enough power to ruin the world. To this day, no one knows what happened to him, as after a decade of wreaking murder and chaos, he vanished into thin air. Some believe the power was too great for him and slowly started to kill him. Others believe another creature was responsible for his death and siphoned his powers from him.

While the reason remains a mystery, even almost two decades later, many still fear his return. His worshippers, who have gone into hiding, have been rumored to be plotting his return. But that's all speculation.

The council believes Ashford to be dead, but as a precaution, they advise anyone to keep a lookout for him. His picture is on the following page ...

I slip my finger underneath the edge of the page, and my heart leaps into my throat.

Because the photo on the page is of a man with hauntingly cold eyes that are familiar.

I think about the wish I made, more specifically the latter part about the answer. Maybe my wish was cursed. Perhaps the damned moon is cursed.

Whatever the reason, suddenly I can remember what he looked like—the face of the Shadow Man.

I blink a few times, willing the photo to morph into someone else. But it remains the same.

Ashford Greywing is Shadow Man. And he stole his power from the stars. However, during my time with him, he didn't have much power. That's why he needed me. He had ways of containing my magic, and he used devices to do bad things, me being one of them. He murdered in front of me many times. And made me kill for him.

"What's wrong, pretty eyes?" Nico fixes his finger on my chin and turns my head toward him. His brows furrow as he studies me. "Your breathing's shallow, and you're so pale, baby. What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," I choke out.

I don't want to tell him. I can't.

But Nico—all of the guys—have been so nice to me. They deserve to know. Because if I don't tell him, I'm the badness Shadow Man tried to mold me into.

"This." I tap the photo of Ashford Greywing.

Nico's gaze descends to it, and the fear that flickers in his eyes makes telling him the truth even more difficult. "Oh, yeah, Ashford was a horrible warlock. It's been almost twenty years and witches and warlocks still fear he's alive somewhere, plotting his next attack on our kind ... He actually killed Wylder's father. His mother was pregnant with him when it happened and then only a few weeks later Ashford disappeared."

Oh my God ...

No ...

I can't ...

“ Yes, keep all your thoughts a secret ,” he whispers through my mind. “ Keep me locked away and make me your dark secret. ”

It's that that draws the confession out of me.

“Before I was found by the humans, I ...” You can do this, Emberlynn. They need to know . “I was his prisoner.”

Nico didn't anticipate this at all. His reaction, at first, is frozen shock. Then that thaws into scorching anger.

“What?” he bites out in a razor-sharp tone.

I startle at the sharpness but push forward. “I don't know how I ended up with him. But I know I was with him from when I was about five to when I was almost seven. He kept me in a cage and made me ... use my power for him.” I swallow down the tremulous breath clawing at my throat. “It's part of why I loathe my powers so much.”

He sucks rapid breaths through his nose, gripping the book he's holding so tightly the pages tear.

“I'm sorry,” I sputter. “I know I should've said something before, but I didn't know who he was. And then I just got scared because sometimes I can hear him in my head. And he said he'd always find me. That's why I panicked when you guys showed up that day. I thought you worked for him. I'm so sorry. I didn't know he killed Wylder's father ... I'll go pack my stuff.” I slide the book off my lap and start to get up, but his fingers enclose around my arm.

“Why the heck do you think you need to pack your stuff?” he asks, gaping at me.

“Because I lied. Because I didn’t tell you. Because I let him use my power to do awful things. And because ... that’s just how it works. No one wants to live with someone that’s bad.”

He considers a complicated question, and I can see it on his face when he figures out the answer.

His hand leaves my arm, and he lifts it to cup my cheek. “I don’t know what your time in the human world was like, but from the little things you’ve mentioned, I’m assuming you’ve never had a sense of family before. But that’s what a coven is. We’re an unbreakable bond, pretty eyes. The five of us will be connected forever. And even despite that, we’d never kick you out over this. You were a child when he had you.” He lowers his head, leveling his gaze with mine. “Whatever he made you do, that wasn’t your fault. And you need to realize that so you can heal.”

I swallow thickly. “You said he killed Wylder’s dad. He won’t forgive me.”

“Forgive you for what? It’s not your fault.”

“But I’m connected to Ashford. I can still hear him in my head sometimes. It’s why I blacked out on the elevator. I was too afraid to tell you.”

“And that makes sense. You barely know us, and you’ve never been able to trust anyone. But you can. You can trust all of us.” He rests his forehead against mine. “But you need to tell them, okay? Because, if by some chance these deaths and murders have to do with him—his way of trying to get to you—we need to prepare for that.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “I’m scared to.”

“I know.” He laces our fingers together. “But you told me, and it feels a bit better,

doesn't it—to get that off your chest?”

With my eyes still closed, I nod. “It does a little.”

“Good.” He traces the folds of my fingers. “In return, I’m going to tell you something myself, something that’s hard to talk about, and I was waiting for the right time to tell you.” He summons a measured exhale. “My father is fey. My mother had an affair with him, and I am a product of that affair.”

My eyelids lift open, and I lean back to look at him. “Does that mean you have other powers besides warlock magic?”

“It means a lot of things. I can tell you more about it later.” He brings my knuckles to his mouth to kiss my hand. “Everything will be okay. You just have to trust us, okay?”

Before I can answer, the front door opens, and Wylder rushes in, his cheeks flushed from the chilly wind that gusts in with him. He hastily closes the door, ruffling his hair into place.

“It’s bad out there.” He kicks off his shoes and takes off his hoodie. “The weather’s acting up, and the entire town is in a panic over the murder of James, although the council hasn’t officially announced it’s a murder yet.”

“Well, it clearly was. The guy couldn’t have cut off his own head.” Nico winces at his own words.

“I know.” Wylder drapes his jacket on the coat rack then heads straight for me. “How are you doing with all of this?”

Fine seems like a dumb word—all the words do. So, I shrug.

Nico gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. “I sent a soaring letter to Kaiden and Phoenix,” Nico informs Wylder. “Hopefully, that’ll be their get-out-of-jail-free pass.”

Wylder drops down beside me. “I doubt it’ll be for free, but it was a good idea. We need them here. Especially Kaiden.”

“I know, particularly if shit gets back quickly.” Nico scoots books aside so he can move closer to me. “We figured out something while you were gone.” Nico trades an encouraging look with me. “Or Emberlynn did, anyway.”

Right. I guess that’s my signal to tell Wylder my dirty little secret.

“I found something while I was reading through a book”—I nervously open and flex my hand— “about Ashford Greywing.

Wylder’s entire face alters, his lavender eyes graying, his muscles constricting, his voice trembling as he asks, “What about him?”

I can only put my faith in Nico that what he said is true .

Mustering a deep breath, I tell Wylder what I told Nico about my time with Shadow Man, aka Ashford Greywing. Shivers are racking through my body by the time I’m finished.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I know this is probably hard, since he killed your father. And you’re sitting here with someone that’s connected to him.”

“You’re not connected to him,” he bites out in an eerily low tone. His hands are balled into fists, and so many emotions are flashing across his face that it’s hard to sort through them. But he’s definitely angry. “He may have stolen some of your years, but that doesn’t mean you’re connected to him.”

“But I can hear him in my head sometimes,” I remind him. “So, there is a connection.”

“Oh, we’re going to sever that,” he assures me, hysterically tapping his foot against the carpet. “As soon as Kaiden can perform the spell properly, which he’s going to completely focus on once he learns about this.”

“What if that doesn’t work?” I draw my knees to my chest. “I don’t even know why Ashford can suddenly get into my mind when he hasn’t since the humans found me.”

“Probably because you used your magic, and he can sense you now. It gives him a place to start. Although, from what you’ve told me, he clearly doesn’t know where you are.” Nico sweeps strands of my hair off of my shoulder. “Try to relax. We’ll get this figured out.”

Try to relax? How am I supposed to relax when Wylder’s foot tapping is shaking the entire sofa ?

“Wylder.” I place my hand on his knee. “I really am sorry you have to deal with this.”

He stops bouncing his leg and stares at my hand on his leg. I’m about to pull away when he lays his hand on mine then pulls on me until I’m sitting on his lap. The move is so sudden that I gasp.

“What’re you doing?” I stammer as I straddle his lap.

He cups the back of his neck, the imprints of his fingertips splashing magically warm kisses across my flesh. He catches my gaze as he passionately vows, “No human or creature is ever going to take you away from us again—ever, okay? I don’t want you worrying about that. Or apologizing for him . He stole you. He stole you from us. From years of happiness. And he’ll never do it again, even if we have to kill him.”

His eyes darken. “In fact, I hope we do.”

My stomach somersaults, swoops, then drops.

He massages the back of my neck. “I’m sorry if I’m frightening you. I don’t mean to. I just ... I don’t want to lose you.”

“I get it. Lila told me how bad it was when I wasn’t here.” I rest my hands on his shoulders. “I really am sorry, though ... about your father, I mean.”

“Thank you for saying that, but I promise, I’m fine.” He works to even out his inhales and exhales. “It happened a long time ago, and it’s not your fault.”

I still feel guilty and so sad for him. And Lila and his mom.

“Is your mom going to be okay with it?” I state my worries aloud. “And Lila?”

“Of course they’ll be okay,” he promises me. “None of this is your fault.”

I plunge into silence for a heartbeat of a second, preparing for what I say next. “He did make me do things ... He used my powers to do ... I don’t really want to talk about that yet, but they were awful things. And I was awful for doing them.”

“No, you’re not. You were a child.” Nico’s voice is uncharacteristically fierce for him. “You can’t be blamed for any of that.”

“But we won’t press you to talk about it until you’re ready,” Wylder adds, his hands gliding down my back to settle on my waist. “Kaiden will have some questions, but you don’t have to answer anything that you don’t want to.”

They’re being so nice.

Too nice.

This can't be real, can it?

"Where is he, anyway?" I shift in Wylder's lap, changing the subject. "I thought that letter was supposed to get him here?"

Wylder checks the time on his watch. "It's getting late, so I'm guessing he'll be here soon. And we should be hearing from the council about the murder."

Nico crosses his inked arms. "They'll probably put up a curfew until they solve this. And I'm assuming we need to tell them what we know."

"I wouldn't go that far yet." There is a tease of a kiss along my side from his finger as he stares out the window just over my shoulder. "We'll make the decision on what to do when everyone is here."

Nico crooks a brow. "But this is a murder we're talking about."

Wylder's shoulder elevates against my hand as he shrugs. "Kaiden was already skeptical of them after they acted as if Emberlynn appeared out of nowhere."

"True," he agrees with a bob of his head. "I don't like this. Everything feels wrong and unsteady, like our entire worlds are about to collapse out from underneath us."

"The council has been veering toward corruption for a while." Wylder's hands are on the move, slipping around to my back. "We've all known this. In fact, we were discussing mutiny just the other night."

It's like he can't stop touching me and, while my body is wildly igniting, my mind is lost in Confusion Land. I've spent my entire life never being touched, at least gently

like this. When the guys first showed up, any touches made me feel uncomfortable. But within days, I've warmed up to it, even sought it at times. Straddling Wylder, though, it feels so blissfully good. Yet, at the same time, my mind is racing on whether to climb off of him or curl inward.

The cluelessness of it bleeds even further into my brain. I question why he's so openly holding me like this. It has to be a coven thing, right? Because I'm their heart? It's still strange how intimate it feels. I need to ask about it. I need to ask a lot of questions. But right now, this doesn't feel like the appropriate moment.

Wylder tangles his fingers through my hair, playing with the strands. "A while ago, when my mother had too much to drink, she told me that when my father died, there were rumors floating around that some of the council members were secretly supporting Ashford. None of this was proven, and most of the members still have chair positions to this day, so perhaps it was simply rumors. But the way my mom told me, with so much fear and worry in her eyes"—a shudder convulses through his body—"I think there's more to it than what she said."

"We should talk to her about it," Nico advises. "Maybe once we tell her about Emberlynn, she'll have more to say about it, if she knows about the risk it poses to our beautiful heart." He smiles at me but worry ghosts his eyes.

"I'm still worried she'll be upset when she finds out." I lower my head against Wylder's shoulder as I blow out an uneven exhale. "I know you guys said everything is peachy, but I feel so guilty about all of this—the baker's death, the fact that Nico was poisoned, you losing your father. I think I might be cursed."

"You're not cursed. You've had a hard life. In ways I can't even imagine." Wylder presses against my back, urging me closer to him.

"Okay, well, I might not be cursed, but my powers are." I sit up, brushing my hair out

of my face. “I’m not trying to have a pity party. I accepted the fact a long time ago that what I can do is a curse. That’s just a fact, and it’s why I need to be careful using them. ”

“All powers can be dangerous, if the witch or warlock chooses to make them,” Nico tells me. “And some struggle more than others, depending on their power source.”

“You mean Kaiden?” I ask, and he nods.

“And Phoenix at times,” Wylder adds, “depending on the day. Honestly, Phoenix and Kaiden will probably be the best ones to help you learn how to control your powers.”

“Do you ever struggle with it?” I ask Wylder, hitching my arms around the back of his neck.

He hesitantly nods. “I struggled the worst with it right after the ceremony. Sometimes feeling emotions so potently can be dangerous, if it’s a darker emotion.”

“I’m sorry it was so hard for you.” I smooth my hand over his scruffy jawline.

He melts into my caress. “It’s okay. It’s much better now,” he murmurs, his eyelids lowering.

Nico’s smile is purely genuine as he stares at me. “Because we have you now, baby.”

“What is it with this baby thing?” I question. “That’s the second time you’ve called me that.”

“Hmm ... really?” He feigns dumb.

I roll my eyes. “You know you still have glitter on your face, right?”

“Hey, you said I got all of it off,” he says through his laughter.

“No, I never said that,” I deny. “I just told you that you had some on your face.”

He rubs at his forehead, and I snicker .

His eyes narrow to slits as an artful grin curls across his lips. “You know what? It’s my time to play with you for a bit.” He lunges at me and tickles my side.

I snort like a pig then squeal as I attempt to dive off Wylder’s lap. Wylder catches me, though, and jumps to his feet, hitching his arm under my butt. I latch my legs around his hips and hook my arms around the back of his neck as he skitters around to the other side of the coffee table.

“Traitor,” Nico says through his laughter.

“How does that make me a traitor when I like her better?” Wylder quips as he shuffles back toward the window.

I twist around in time to see Nico hurtling over the coffee table. Then he barrels at us.

Wylder skirts to the right, but Nico leaps forward, and his hands land on my sides. His fingers delve into my flesh as he tickles me.

“Stop!” I cry through my tears of laughter.

“Never,” he teases, tickling me harder as Wylder attempts to get us away.

I’m about to pee my pants. If I do that, I’ll pee on Wylder, which would be, hands down, the most embarrassing moment of my life.

“Please, stop,” I beg as I laugh so hard I can’t breathe. “I’ll do anything.”

“Oh, baby, don’t ever make that promise to a faerie,” he taunts, the warmth of his breath feathering the shell of my ear. “Even a half-faerie.”

“Why?” I start to ask when the front door flies open.

Within a millisecond, Nico is in front of me, and then Wylder has me on my feet and hidden behind the shield of his body. Magical embers illuminate from their hands and light up the room. Nico’s magic is an awe-striking shade of teal, and Wylder’s matches the lilacs that bloom from the trees outside of his house.

“It’s just us,” Phoenix says as he enters the house with Kaiden. “Where is she?”

Wylder sidesteps and tows me forward. “Relax. She’s right here.”

“Thank the gods.” The exhale that punches from Phoenix’s lips is crammed with relief. “When I heard the news, I thought ...” His throat bobs as he swallows. “I thought the worst. And Nico’s letter was so vague.”

“You should’ve read it before my addition,” I tell him as his gaze meticulously trails up and down my body. “He made it sound like one of us was murdered.”

Kaiden pushes the door shut then closes the curtains. “It’s chaos out there. Word has gotten out that James has died.” He cracks the curtain and peers out into the night. “Do you know who found his body?”

“It was us, actually.” Wylder rubs at his elbow. “All three of us.”

Kaiden’s attention darts to him. “Emberlynn was with you?”

Wylder opens his mouth. “Yes, but?—”

“Why in the hell demons would you take her there after what happened?” he hisses, turning around .

Nico throws his hands up in the air. “We can’t just lock her away, Kaiden. And we didn’t think James was going to be decapitated.”

The way Kaiden’s entire body goes as still as a corpse is enough to send a slithering chill up my spine.

“He was decapitated?” he asks in a darkly cold tone. “And she saw that?”

“I’ve seen worse,” I intervene. “And I’m glad they took me with them.” When his chilling gaze lands on me, I resist the instinct to squirm. “Not that I wanted to see a headless body, but I felt useful ... kind of. And I need that. I don’t ... I don’t want to be a burden. I’ve been that way too much in my life.”

Nico presses Kaiden with a look. “Now, are you going to get mad at that?”

My words chip away at Kaiden’s icy demeanor, and he backs off. “Tell me everything that happened while I was gone.”

It takes a while to recap all the events that occurred today. Nico makes hot chocolate while Wylder goes over the details of what happened. And then, ultimately, about Ashford Greywing and my unfortunate connection with him. I speak as minimally as possible, and my guard is up the entire time, searching for signs that this blasé demeanor they have about the fact that I was a horrible warlock’s magical tool is all a facade. Because it has to be. This level of kindness and understanding doesn’t exist.

And yet, like with Wylder and Nico, Kaiden’s and Phoenix’s reactions are one of

rage toward Ashford Greywing for keeping me prisoner for years. Phoenix is so upset that he excuses himself and bolts out the front door, slamming it behind him.

Wylder exhaustedly pushes up and chases after him. “Phoenix, don’t you dare try to find Ashford and kill him?—”

The front door closes, leaving me with Nico and Kaiden.

Nico collects a cup of hot chocolate from off the coffee table. “Glad we’re all keeping a level head about this.”

Kaiden is leaning forward in the chair across from where Nico and I are sitting. He’s hunched forward with his arms propped on his knees as he mulls over everything.

I cup my mug in my hand, watching the steam rise off the chocolatey liquid inside. “Is he really going to try to find Ashford?”

“Probably, but he won’t find him,” Nico says with indifference. “And eventually, Wylder will calm him down. He’s good at that.”

“Because he’s a healer?”

“That and he’s known Phoenix the longest.”

“Oh.” I take a sip of the drink. Yummy. “How long have you guys known each other, anyway?” I’m deflecting the subject elsewhere, but with the way Kaiden’s gaze is boring into me, it’s clear he wants to discuss my past further.

“For most of our lives.” Nico balances the mug on a coaster. “But Wylder and Phoenix have known each other since they were born. Stella and Phoenix’s mom used to be friends before Phoenix’s mom passed away.”

So much death. It's awful. I don't know how to process it, but my heart aches in ways I've never felt before.

"Is it like that here?" I switch hands with my mug. "Is there a lot of death? Because Wylder's father is dead, Phoenix's mother is, and I have no clue where my parents are, but they could be."

Reluctance masks Nico's features, and he offers me no response.

I frown. "There's more, isn't there?"

Nico flits a glance in Kaiden's direction. "Kaiden's brother died a while ago, and his mother."

"Oh ... I'm so sorry, Kaiden. I shouldn't have brought this up." I feel terrible. I need to keep my dumb mouth shut, like I used to.

Kaiden gives a dismissive shake of his head. "You're fine. It happened a while ago."

"It's good for you to learn about everything," Nico tells me. "And as for me, there's not been a lot of death, but many of my siblings and my father are fey, so they're immortal."

Right. I'd almost forgotten his confession about being part fey. "Are you?"

"Immortal?" he checks, and I nod. "I am, yes." He sounds so depressed about it.

"You don't want to live forever?" I wonder, raising the glass to my lips .

"I don't want to watch everyone I love die," he answers, reaching for the mug again.

"Immortality can be great as long as the people you love are, too."

“That makes sense.” I hold the mug in both of my hands, dazing off.

It’s strange to think that if I stay with these guys, at some point, I’ll be super old, and Nico will be as youthful as he is today.

“I have to ask you a question,” Kaiden interrupts my thoughts. “About your parents.”

I waver. “Okay.”

He reclines back with his chin in his hand. “Do you remember anything about them at all?”

I shake my head. “I don’t have a single memory of before I was with Ashford Greywing. But I do know I had parents. He used to taunt me all the time with the fact that they gave me to him.”

“He never said why?” Kaiden asks.

I shake my head again. “And even if he did, it was probably a lie. He used to lie to me all the time to mess with my mind.”

He lowers his hand to his lap. “You were five, though, when you can remember being with him?”

I nod. “Close to that, anyway. I didn’t know my real age until now.”

He rotates a ring on his finger. “What’s your first memory then?”

“Being in the cage he kept me in.” I take a huge gulp of my hot chocolate, hoping the warm, gooey goodness will alleviate the rising anxiety in me.

“Kaiden, maybe that’s enough for today,” Nico suggests, glancing at him. “This is probably a lot for her.”

“I know.” Kaiden deliberates. “I just have one more question ... When you think about your parents, can you feel their existence?”

I waveringly nod. “Yeah. Why?”

“Because I think some of your memories were erased,” he informs me with a dash of reluctance. “More than likely by Ashford Greywing. It’s possibly why you can’t remember them.”

“Trauma could’ve done that to her, too,” Nico points out, setting the mug down. “Trauma can be a real dirty little bitch.”

Kaiden drums his fingers against his knee. “Maybe, but Ashford Greywing was known for his ability to memory wipe. And since she was five when she became his prisoner, which seems old enough that she should have at least a few memories, he probably erased her mind. It’s why she can feel that she knew her parents but can’t see any proof of it.”

I press my fingertips to my forehead. Could he be right?

“We can get them back,” Kaiden tries to reassure me. “And I can get him out of there.”

I lower my hand. “You mean Ashford?”

He nods. “But it’ll take a bit. I need to ... practice with a specific power of mine before I attempt any of that. It comes with some risks that worsen if I haven’t practiced, which I haven’t done in a long time.”

Do I even want my memories back? I'm not so sure. What if they're awful?

I do, however, want Ashford out of my mind, so I nod for now, figuring I have some time to decide if I want my memories back.

Wylder and Phoenix return then, and Stella and Lila are with them. All of their cheeks look bitten with frostbite and ice is glazing over the window.

"This isn't good," Stella states as Wylder closes and locks the front door. "There are already whispers about who could've done it, and too many fingers are being pointed at too many different creatures. If the council doesn't step in, creatures will be divided, and the last time that happened ..." She visibly shudders as she unties her scarf from around her neck.

"I'm sure everything will be fine." Wylder attempts to convey confidence but miserably fails.

Lila flops down on the sofa on the other side of me. "How are you holding up with this, bestie? It has to be a lot to take in."

"You mean the murder?" I ask, and she bobs her head up and down as she steals my mug of hot chocolate. "The magical aspect of all this is a bit overwhelming, but murder exists in the human world. They did podcasts about it ... Do you know what that is?"

"Podcasts? Oh, yeah, we have so many of those here," she tells me. "There's this one done by this faerie named Pepper that centers on the gossip at the academy. It's not her real name. No one knows her true identity, but if you want to learn juicy details about everyone at school and their history, that's the place to go."

"How about we don't talk about gossipy podcasts?" Nico suggests stiffly, growing a

bit squirrely.

Lila bends forward to catch his gaze, her eyes glimmering with amusement. “What’s the matter, Nico? Does Pepper have dirt on you?”

Nico glares at her, and she cockily smirks.

“We should get to bed,” Wylder interrupts while peering out the curtain. “It’s late, and we should probably get up early to prepare Emberlynn for her first day of school.”

And suddenly, I feel sick for a different set of reasons.

Nico eyes me closely. “Why do you look more freaked out about that than when we found James?”

I rub my hands up and down my arms. “I’m not freaked out. I’m just nervous. I make terrible first impressions.”

“No, you don’t,” Nico disagrees. “You just think you do.”

“Agreed.” Lila raises her hand. “I, for one, liked you from the moment I met you.”

“That’s weird,” I tell her with a dry look.

She throws her head back and laughs. “See, that’s the kind of thing that makes me like you.”

I literally have no response to that.

“I’m assuming everyone is staying the night, with the lack of movement in this

room,” Stella says as she embarks into the kitchen.

The guys trade a look, then Wylder wanders away from the window. “Yeah, I think so. We can put up some protection spells before we go to sleep.”

“That’s a good idea.” Stella places the tea kettle Nico boiled water in into the sink without so much as lifting a finger. All she does is swish her hand and ta-dah ! “I’ll go get some extra blankets and pillows.” She leaves the room while the guys prepare to put up protection spells.

Lila snags my hand and yanks me with her as she walks toward the kitchen. “Let’s go pick out an outfit for you for tomorrow.” Without giving me time to protest, she drags me out of the room and into my bedroom.

She notices the bags I left on the floor and gapes at me. “You didn’t put any of the clothes away?”

“Sorry,” I apologize, reaching for one of the bags to do just that. “I got a little sidetracked with the whole doughnut thing. And then the murder.”

She swats my hand away. “I’m just teasing you.” With a grin, she waves her hand in the air.

Swoosh .

All of the clothes and shoes zip out from the bag and fly into the closet, onto the hangers and shelves. She takes one look at my agape mouth and cackles with laughter. “It’s so funny seeing the surprise on your face every time someone uses magic.” She strolls into the closet while pulling her hair up into a messy bun. “Now, let’s pick out an outfit that rocks.” She sifts through the hangers, and examines each shirt, dress, and pants. “I feel like I should warn you—if they guys haven’t,

anyway—that tomorrow is going to probably be intense.”

I drop down on the bed with a bounce. “Because of the murder?”

“Well, partly that, but you’re also the first heart that was believed to not be alive. That alone is going to make you a hot topic. But you’re also in a coven that is made of warlocks that come from extraordinarily powerful bloodlines from various different power sources.”

“Oh. I don’t know how to feel about that. I don’t like attention.”

“Sorry if I’m stressing you, but I feel like it’s better if you know.”

“It is.” I think so, anyway. “Is there anything else I should know?”

She dithers as she eyeballs a short, black velvet dress. “There’ll be some hate thrown at you from women who like Nico.”

Realizing I’m still wearing Nico’s hoodie, I wiggle my arms out of the sleeves and slip it off. “Why would they hate me?”

She pauses, mutters incoherently, then tells me, “He’ll be around you a lot. They’ll be a bit jealous of that, but don’t let them push you around. We’re technically not allowed to use magic on other students while we’re at the academy, but there are ways around it.” She sneaks me a mischievous grin from over her shoulder.

“I feel like standing up for myself will be the least of my problems.” I flop back on the bed and stare at the ceiling. “I don’t know how much you’ve been told about my powers, but I can barely control them, have only purposefully used them once with Wylder’s help and, up until a week ago, I didn’t even know witches and warlocks existed. I just thought I had a weird ability ... So, how am I supposed to ever catch up

with everyone else at the school when I know nothing?”

“Kaiden. He’ll have you caught up in no time. He’s super smart.”

“Everyone keeps saying that, but really, all of that is dependent on my learning ability.”

“You’re smarter than you think,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Thank you for saying that,” I tell her. “But you don’t really know me that well, so how can you know that?”

“Because you walked into a lot.” She grabs a dress off a hanger. “And you’ve handled that better than most witches or warlocks would. Besides, you’re not alone. You have your coven. You have me. And you have my mom.”

“Maybe.” I hope she’s correct about this.

But, in the end, I have my doubts when it comes to myself and my ability to pull this off.

By the time the guys finish putting up protection shields, Lila has gone to bed, and I’m attempting to fall asleep. But when Wylder pops his head into my room to check on me, I’m wide awake and the lamp is on.

“You’re still awake,” he notes as he opens the door all the way.

I push up on my elbows. “I can’t sleep. There’s too much going on in my head.”

“You’re worried about school.” It’s not a question.

I sit up all the way. “Amongst other things.”

“I don’t want you to have to worry about anything.” He enters the room and tentatively sits down at the foot of my bed. He has fragments of petals in his hair and a streak of dirt on his forehead “But I know that’s impossible.” He rests back on his hands. “We’re going to try to make your first day go as smoothly as possible.”

“What about the whole thing with the poisoned doughnut? What if someone tries to do something like that again?”

“They won’t. Now that we’re aware someone is targeting you, we can protect you better. We can put up protection spells. And one of us will be with you at all times.”

“That sounds exhausting for everyone.”

He extends his hand toward my chin. “We don’t find it exhausting. It’s what the coven was made to do ...” He tenderly outlines my jawline with his fingers before withdrawing. “Now, about the nightmares you’ve been having. I know Kaiden suggested it in a weird way, but it might help if you slept by me in my bed. ”

“I’ll be okay. I can deal with nightmares.” I reach out and sweep some of the flower petals out of his hair, running my fingers through the strands unnecessarily longer than I should. “I’m sure, at this point, you probably need a bit of a break from me.”

“Never.” His forehead creases quizzically as I brush my fingers through his hair again.

“You had flower petals in your hair,” I explain, flicking a few off the comforter. “And some dirt on your forehead.”

He scrubs the dirt away with the sleeve of his shirt. “I had to hike through the thick

branches that are around the house to get the protective shield put up all the way.”

“So, everyone’s just sleeping in the living room then?” I yawn, sleepiness tugging at my mind.

“Except for me.” He stands up. “I’ll let you get some rest. You have a big day tomorrow.” He leaves the room but pauses as he’s closing the door. “If you wake up from a nightmare and need me, just come into my room. I don’t care if you wake me up. It’s what I’m here for.”

“Okay, thanks.” I offer him a smile of gratitude even though the probability of me taking him up on his offer is marginally low.

Honestly, the possibility of me getting any sleep seems fairly low. How the hell am I supposed to go to sleep with new schools, murder, and magic looming over my head like a storm cloud?

Almost every time I started a new school, a disaster would happen, ranging from milder incidents like tripping in the hallway to a guy named Gary locking me in the janitor’s closet. It took the janitor four hours to find me in there, and I almost peed my pants waiting to be let out.

Maybe it won’t be so bad. And even if it is, I should be worried more about the concept that someone tried to poison me. I don’t know, though. Almost getting murdered might be as frightening as a first day at a school for paranormal creatures.

Then again, all of this should be a cakewalk, seeing as how I spent two years being the prisoner to the most dangerous warlock in history, according to what I found out tonight. And the reality is, that despite what anyone says, I can never erase the blood on my hands.

25

EMBERLYNN

As soon as Wylder leaves my room, I start to doze off.

Did he use a spell on me?

That's the last thought I have before I plummet into the darkness of my nightmares.

"Emberlynn," Shadow Man whispers. "I'm coming for you."

I spin in a circle, scanning the darkness swallowing my surroundings. My heart is thumping maddeningly, and soft gasps of panic flee my lips. I open my mouth to yell at him, but a hand covers my mouth.

"Shh ... He can't find you. He just wants you to think he can," my mother whispers.

I'm not sure how I recognize her voice, but it's her—I can feel it in my soul.

I breathe in and out, wanting to ask her so many questions but too worried that if I speak, he'll find me.

"Good. And remember that. He may say he can find you, but he can't," she tells me.

"Not yet. One day, he'll find you, though, so be ready ? —"

She lets out a blood-curdling scream.

“Mom!” I cry out, spinning in a circle, searching for her in the abyss I’m stuck in.

“Your mother is gone, my pet. She left you again,” he mocks me. “And those guys I’ve seen glimpses of in your thoughts, they’ll be gone, too.”

“No ... they won’t leave me.” My lack of confidence reveals the cracks in my facade.

“Leave? Who said anything about leaving?” he asks. “We both know you’ll end up killing them. It’s what you do, my deadly pet. You kill. Your powers are death.”

I vigorously shake my head as tears well in my eyes. “No, I’d never hurt them.”

“Tsk-tsk. Do you remember anything about what I taught you? Good girls don’t lie. Bad ones get punished.” A snap of laughter, and then he says, “Guess it’s time for me to show you your punishment.”

Bright images ignite through the darkness and pierce my vision. Images of Kaiden, Nico, Wylder, and Phoenix lifelessly laying on blood-soaked grass, the leaves on the trees dripping with blood, the flowers around are splattered with red, and even the sky bleeds. And I stand in the middle of it all, blood soaking my hands and smearing across my floor-length white dress and veil. My eyes are black and hollow, my skin snaking with blue wisps that coil and slither out from me, reaching into the air and around the guys’ necks, squeezing tightly, as if seeking more death, more pain, more madness ? —

I awake in a startle, jolting upright and gasping for air. I don’t allow myself to calm down. I jump out of bed, change into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, pack my bags, and crack the bedroom window open.

Shadow Man has shown me images before like that, ones of me bloody and covered

with the sin of murder. And it actually happened when he made me kill all of those people.

I won't let it happen again.

I won't hurt the only guys who have ever treated me like I was worth something.

I'll protect them by taking my cursed existence as far away from them as possible.

26

NICO

“ I call the sofa,” I announce after Stella brings us a stack of blankets and pillows.

She leaves the room shortly after to go to bed. Lila and Emberlynn are in their rooms, as well.

Wylder walks in at that precise moment, wearing pajama bottoms and a T-shirt.

I can't say I'm not a bit jealous that he gets to live with Emberlynn. Yeah, eventually, we will all live under the same roof once she becomes more adjusted to this world. And we tell her about that mating part of the covenant. I hope she won't freak out too badly when she learns about that, but I'm worried she might.

I also worry how she'll react when she learns about my history. Everyone at school knows I sleep around. She'll hear about it. What happens when she finds out about the bond? Will she reject me because of my mistakes?

Wylder returns to the living room. I'm lounging on the sofa, Kaiden has made a makeshift bed on the floor, and Phoenix is in a recliner with a blanket draped over him. He's dozing off already, his eyes shut. Weirdly, Kaiden is reading. He's staring up into nothingness, probably chasing some sort of thought that he hopes will lead him to a solution.

“She's in bed for now. And safe.” Wylder sinks down onto the armrest. “Is anyone

else worried about her starting school tomorrow with all this shit going on?”

“I for sure am.” I adjust the blanket, pulling it more over me. “But we also can’t just lock her up.” The concern that Kaiden might have crossed my mind. However, while he is intense, he’s shown that he values her opinion.

“I have this theory,” he suddenly says, “about the attempted murder of her.”

I sit up to look at him. “What is it?”

He sits up, too, drawing one of his legs up to rest his arm on his knee. “I’ve spent a lot of my time reading through countless books.”

Wylder and I trade a glance, a droplet of amusement gleaming in our eyes.

“We know that.” Wylder fixes his attention on Kaiden. “Where are you going with this?”

He momentarily dithers. “I’ve read some of Ashford Greywing, and while some believe that his followers lied about being possessed, there was evidence that he was able to brainwash a few warlocks and witches. He controlled them like puppets, to do his bidding, and then when he was done with them, the spell would end, and their heads would explode.”

“What?” Wylder and I say at the same time.

Phoenix, who must’ve been half-listening, cracks open his eyes. “That’s disgusting. Why are you telling us about this?”

“Because he thinks that James’s decapitation might be a sign of this.” Wylder catches on more quickly than Phoenix and me.

Kaiden nods. "I do. While the books I read about this brainwashing described it more like an explosion, it could've just been different wording. But if you really think about it, Emberlynn can hear him in her thoughts. Maybe he did the same to James and got him to try to kill Emberlynn."

"Why is he trying to kill her?" I point out. "Emberlynn made it sound like he wanted to capture her."

"I don't know the answer to that yet, except perhaps the target of his poisoned doughnuts wasn't intended for her, but for us. Or maybe she has an immunity to werewolf venom, and he knows that. She may have reacted to ingesting it, but we don't know for certain if it would've killed her."

"And we're not going to test that out," Phoenix says sharply.

Kaiden targets him with an annoyed look. "Obviously. But we need to get him out of her mind, because I do believe he's trying to get a hold of that, probably to get her to go to him. Because, for whatever reason, he can't find her." He wavers. "Just like we couldn't for a very long time."

"You think someone's put a shield on her or something?" Wylder states what we're all thinking.

"I do, but I think it might be breaking, and that's why we were able to connect to her again." Kaiden stretches out his leg. "And I think it'll continue to crack apart, so I need to get her mind protected."

"Do you think you can do that yet?" I ask cynically. "Because, earlier today, you said you needed to practice."

"Not at the moment. When it comes to my ability to access minds ... I don't even like

that I did that on her in the elevator. It was too risky, and I was lucky nothing bad happened. The only reason I did it is because there wasn't another option." He rolls his wrists. "I have another idea, though."

"What is it?" Wylder inquires.

I'm thinking the same thing.

"He wants me to make a Breath of Shadows potion," Phoenix answers with his gaze zeroed in on Kaiden. "Which is great in theory, but that also means we'd have to steal ingredients from my father because some of them are illegal."

"Great. That sounds easy." My tone is crammed with sarcasm.

"It'll be a pain in the ass, but right now might be the best time to break in and steal it," Phoenix says. "With this murder, everyone will be distracted."

"You're right." Kaiden sits up and kicks the blanket off him. "Let's go. "

Phoenix and him both get up and slip on their shoes and jackets.

"What does this stuff do?" Wylder asks. "I've never heard of it before."

"Because brewing it is illegal, too. Plus"—Phoenix motions at Wylder and me—"you two live more in the light side of the magic world. This is black magic shit."

That gets me to straighten. "Maybe you shouldn't do it then."

"Would you rather our heart be unprotected?" Kaiden questions as he slips his jacket on. "She needs Ashford out of her mind before something bad happens, like he convinces her to leave."

“Fuck,” I breathe out. “I didn’t even think about that.”

Kaiden zips up his jacket. “You two need to keep an eye on her while we’re gone. Don’t let anyone in the house, or out of it. And make sure she doesn’t wander off.” He starts for the door but pauses. “We can’t lose her again.” He yanks the door open and strides outside into the moonlit night with Phoenix right behind him.

He closes the door and silence sets in. The air is laced with a heavy anxiousness that buzzes electrically.

“Are your powers going a bit awry?” I ask Wylder as I lower my feet to the floor.

He tensely nods. “Sorry, I’m just worried about her.”

“Me, too.” I rub my hand across my mouth, thinking. “What if Kaiden’s right about this? What if she tries to leave us because Ashford makes her? ”

“She won’t.” He doesn’t sound so certain, though.

“You know as well as I do that mind control can make a witch or warlock do crazy things.”

The swallow he takes is loud and ridden with his nerves. “She won’t leave.” But he pushes to his feet and pads down the hallway toward Emberlynn’s room.

I move to the window to keep an eye on things. As I’m getting comfortable in the bench in front of the window, Wylder comes sprinting back into the room, his face as pale as the moon, his eyes overflowing with urgency.

“She’s gone,” he sputters as he drags both his hands through his hair. “Emberlynn is gone.”

KAIDEN

“N o one’s coming, right?” Phoenix asks me for at least the tenth time.

We’re in the secret basement of his house, the entrance tucked behind a massive bookshelf that we had to move with an elevation spell. We won’t be able to put it back until we’ve gotten the supplies and left the basement, so I’m standing guard in the entryway, making sure no one approaches the room.

As far as we can tell, the house is empty. This puzzled Phoenix since his family meeting was supposed to continue into the late hours of the night. We could chalk it up to the murder, but I have a disconcerting inkling his family’s absence has a more sinister motive.

Something isn’t right. I can feel it in every wisp of my magic begging to surface and come out to play. And if someone walks up on us, I’ll have to give my magic what it craves.

“You’re fine,” I assure Phoenix as I lean against the doorjamb with my arms crossed, my attention fixed on the library in front of me. The bookshelves are dusty, indicating the lack of use of this place. While I normally sift through books, I rarely come to Phoenix’s home since his family is almost equally as terrible as mine. My fingers itch to trail across the spines, though, to feel the roughness of the worn covers, to wipe away the dust.

“I don’t like this,” he says over the clinking of bottles. “It’s weird how my father bailed on his meeting. He never does that. And I know what you’re going to say—maybe he got called on a job. But, since the council will probably up security because of James’s murder, he’s going to be more careful with his transporting of goods. My bet is he’ll close it down for a while.”

I cast a quick glance over my shoulder at him. He’s near the farther wall of the small room, the brick walls lined with shelves containing various different vials of ingredients ranging from unicorn horn dust to vampire fangs, all of which are illegal to sell. Because of that, Phoenix’s father can charge high prices, and that’s why he can afford this mansion that’s almost as big as my father’s place. My father earned most of his money by inheritance.

I push away from the doorframe. “Would that be a bad thing?”

He shakes his head as he stuffs a small vial filled with silvery liquid into the pocket of his jeans. “No. In fact, I hope that happens ...” he trails off, stiffening at the sensation of energy creeping toward us. “We need to go. Someone’s coming.”

“Shit.”

Phoenix hurries out of the room, and we take off for the door.

Phoenix waves his hand as we do, sending the bookshelf gliding back in front of the hidden doorway. When we make it into the hallway, we slam on the brakes at the sound of voices drifting from the foyer at the end of it.

“I know. The rogues couldn’t get a hold of her, though. They veered off course.” The emotionless voice belongs to Phoenix’s father. “I know it’s bad that she made it here. I get that. And I’m working on a solution.”

Phoenix and I sidestep into the shadows of an alcove where the lantern light doesn’t

reach.

“Look, I know this is important. That’s why you hired me. I’m the best at taking care of complicated situations.” His footsteps grow louder as he walks down the hallway in our direction. “And I know how to cover my tracks.” He appears in our line of vision then.

He’s wearing a black shirt, and slacks, and his hair is slicked back. And he’s talking into thin air, which is bizarre, even for a warlock. Then I spot the trail of shadows creeping along the walls around him.

Fear isn’t an emotion I experience frequently. In fact, I’ve only felt it a few times, one being when Emberlynn’s mind was getting taken over. This, though—these shadows that move like a creature, as if it has its own soul—this is darker than black magic. It’s forbidden.

“The murder won’t come back to me,” Phoenix’s father says. “I’ve made sure of that ... Because I have allies.” His conversation grows faint as he wanders out of the hallway.

Phoenix and I make a run for it, quietly jogging for the front door. Only when we’re way beyond the outskirts of his father’s property do we finally speak again.

“My father is part of this,” Phoenix growls, his hands balled at his sides, his eyes as dark as the backdrop of the night sky. “He’s part of the murder, the rogues showing up when we were in the real world, and he probably tried to poison Emberlynn.”

“We don’t know that for sure.” It’s my lame attempt at trying to keep him composed.

It’s a lie, too, and he reads right through it.

“We do know that,” he bites out, reeling toward me. “This is so messed up. Why

would he do that?”

“I’m not sure, but we’ll figure it out.” My footsteps are heavy as I quicken my pace down the dirt path. “We also need to figure out who your father’s allies are. I have a feeling that some of them might be on the council.”

He chases after me. “If that’s the case, then we’re screwed.”

“No, we’re not. We just need to be careful about this. Maybe go undercover ... I don’t know ... I haven’t figured out all of the details yet?—”

Snap .

I spin to my right where the lofty trees are thick with willow branches. “Did you hear that?” I ask, my gaze scanning the darkness.

Phoenix inches forward as he observes the tree line. “I smell death.

“I do, too.” I hike off the path, my magic coiling around my wrists, begging to come out and play?—

A creature scampers out of the woods, hunkered down on all fours, its flesh rotting, its yellow eyes reflecting in the moonlight.

And suddenly, the stench of death in the air makes sense.

The undead.

Someone used necromancy on this creature.

It charges toward us, snapping its jaw and baring its yellow teeth.

I unleash my magic on it, the smoky wisps leaving my wrists and curling out across the darkness to wrap around the undead's neck. It gasps as I choke the magical life out of it until it's no longer moving.

As it slumps to the ground, I turn to Phoenix, the orb of the moon reflecting in his wide eyes.

"We need to get out of here," I tell him with urgency. "If the undead is running around, then someone's trying to pin something on me."

His attention zips to me. "What? Why would you think that? "

I start down the path again, taking long strides. "Because I'm one of the few who have the power of necromancy?—"

"Kaiden Everson." A group of cloaked figures emerge from the trees and close in on us.

They're all holding unlit torches when they first materialize but then the torches ignite, revealing the redness of their cloaks.

The council.

Charlotte steps forward, lowering her hood, the glow of the flames reflecting across her face, revealing that her eyes are fastened on me.

Something is wrong.

Really, really wrong.

For a faltering moment, remorse flashes across Charlotte's expression. But as promptly as it arose, it blends away with the night.

“Kaiden Everson,” she repeats, “you’re under arrest for the illegal use of necromancy that resulted in the murder of James Saintingford.”