



SHAY CABE

ALIVE AND
HEXING

HEXES & HAZARDS

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HEXES & HAZARDS SERIES BOOK ONE

SHAY CABE



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To the girls who pushed me through the dark times, you know who you are!

NOTE TO READER

This is a slow burn, Young Adult Urban/Paranormal Fantasy with Reverse Harem Themes.

I hope you like going down the yellow brick road fast, cos Dorothy fell out of the car three miles back.

Alive & Hexing



Shay Cobe

CHAPTER ONE

LIFE HAS a way of making you into a cynic without even trying hard.

Something it did to me before my age even hit double digits.

I stare at the front of the house with every bit of trepidation I've felt since Dad told me we were moving back to Singe. But the house in front of me doesn't have the same peeling white paint and discolored, patchy roof. There aren't broken concrete stairs that lead to an overgrown side-yard, brightly decorated with scattered wildflowers that grew from seeds that a little girl carelessly threw when she was sad. The front gate isn't hanging by a single hinge with a stick figure teddy bear painted on it in faded yellow paint.

This isn't the same house, but this house—no matter how new, is in the same town. The town that I've tried so hard to forget, but can't. This place and what happened here haunts me. It's where my life changed forever.

This is where I lost mom.

"Nora, I know this is hard on you," begins my father. Of course, it's hard on me, but that never stops him from doing anything different. Like normal, I hold the words back and let him continue uninterrupted. "At least we're in a nicer house. We can make new memories here," he says, coming up to put his hand on my shoulder. The touch, no matter how simple, is nothing but awkward and when I remain tense beside him, he drops his hand to his side.

He doesn't actually care, and we both know the words coming out of his mouth are as hollow as the emotion behind them. His true feelings are that we should move on with our lives, move past mom's death—forget that she ever existed. He has and expects me to

do the same as easily as him. I know this because he told me and that entire conversation was made worse when he went on to say that he prepared for her death the minute he met her. I walked off and he hasn't brought it up since.

I think that would require him caring enough to know.

Both of my parents are magic gifted, mom way more than my Dad. He thinks he's a real wizard, like that famous Harry guy, but he's only handy with old things and tools in a slightly more than normal sense. Mom is—was so much more, and something of a seer on top of it. She was *the* coven leader when she was alive, and a good one.

Late one sleepless night, we were both snuggled up on the couch watching movies when she told me she had a feeling she would not see me graduate high school. Months later she was dead, and to this day, the small flash of sadness in her eyes, is still as clear in my memory as if it happened yesterday.

Dad overheard us that night, and they got into this huge fight about her being sad.

When she was sad he always seemed to get angry about it. I never understood it, but she used to say that it was him being upset because he felt helpless.

I'm not so sure about that.

Mom was—I always forget the was part—one of the sweetest, most accepting people I have ever met. It took a special person like her to care about someone like my Dad—cold, selfish creature that he is. They were ill suited as a couple and I can't remember a single instance of them ever being affectionate and happy together.

Sticking that out for whatever reasons she did, makes her a much stronger person than I'll ever be. The minute I get the chance to leave him, I'm gone—and I'm never looking back.

Almost like he senses the negative thoughts about him circling in my mind, he gives me a dark look and then plasters on his 'politician' smile. Without a word, he heads towards the movers and I'm dismissed from his thoughts. He doesn't like to face me when I think about things like this. Not that what I think is bothersome to him—he doesn't give two shits about my opinions. It's more that he doesn't want other people to know what I think. Regrettably, he's a social climber and the only opinions he cares about are of those people who can help him gain status.

Something I have no interest in. Most of them are snobbish idiots who only have power because they have money or they were born with a name that carries weight. None of those people matter to me, so their opinions don't either.

Dad takes keeping up appearances to a whole new level. When we still lived in the city, he made a new 'friend' that was an assistant to one of the council members. That afternoon he bought new furniture for the living and dining room. All to impress a guest that stayed maybe fifteen minutes.

Yet, he doesn't buy food or clothes for me—or pay any of the bills. That falls on my shoulders and has since mom died. I'm positive that she paid all the bills before me. These purely selfish traits of his have always gotten to me, even as a kid. Mom always told me to be more patient with him and sometimes I hear her voice in my head when I'm about to lose my temper with him.

I'm trying Mom, I swear, but I think I'll end up failing more often than not.

Dad wasn't even there the day that she died. He was off doing some mysterious job for his unknown company that he never talks about. He didn't see her face... didn't look into the glee filled eyes of the man who took her life. Shivering, I absently rub one of the quarter-sized scars on my forearm—one of twelve sets to be exact. That's how many times that murderous bastard bit me.

Twelve.

Those thoughts lead me down the path to others, that then lead me to the day it all happened. I fought back hard and somehow miraculously drove him off, but I was badly hurt and she was still dead; the only thing that saved me that day was the Hazard boys. They showed up and found me before death had its claws in too deep.

Those four foster boys are my friends from a lifetime ago—at least, it feels that way—we were as close as family and always together. Ms. Hazard, the best foster mom on the planet adopted all of them. But because I'm a bad friend, I haven't spoken to or seen them since my Dad and I left here five years ago.

It was her and the boys' faces I woke up to that awful day—not Dad's. I fight the dirty look I want to give him for something he should've been there for, but because of his supposed job—wasn't. It was days later that he took me away from the hospital in the middle

of the night and we've been moving all over the country ever since then until now.

To say he and I don't get along is an understatement. Yes, I guess he loves me—I mean—he's my Dad, but our personalities clash all the time, hard. He pretends like none of it happened. Ignoring me mostly, he spends all his time piddling with his rich friends and his artifacts. He's constantly gone on trips all over the world while I raise myself in whatever craphole he's moved us into.

Until two weeks ago when he barged into my room and said, 'We're moving back to Singe,' and promptly left on a weeklong trip leaving me to pack everything.

I was so angry I spoke to a lawyer about leaving but was told I can't. There's no such thing as emancipation anymore, not even in the witch community where they expect us to act like grownups even at my age. It sucks, hard because I don't turn eighteen for two years, so I'm stuck staying with him.

It's the last place I want to be.

Most of it stems from the fact that I resent him and I'm mature enough to admit it. He emotionally abandoned me when I needed him the most because he refused to face what happened. Instead, he claims he was off on a once in a lifetime opportunity to learn new magic, something he sucks at on any level, and he didn't learn a damn thing from his 'special' trip.

The only things that matter to him are his status and his junk. As far back as I can remember he's always obsessed over old magical items that no one else wants, and rubbing elbows with anyone with prestige at their coven parties, or the failure ones he sits up.

Those are the only things in his life that have ever seemed important to him.

My overpriced therapist, Rhonda, helped me figure out the resentment part out, then she slept with my Dad and I fired her. She's one in a long line of many. Women flock to him like flies to a big, old pile of poop. Something that has never made sense to me; he isn't exactly charismatic or good-looking. His light brown hair is typically drenched in hair gel, his clothes—although expensive, rarely match correctly or fit right. Plus, he has total dad-bod. Which doesn't stop him from wearing too those tight shirts that pooch out when he moves a certain way. And his brown eyes are always bloodshot like he's had one too many sleepless nights.

Not to mention the evidence of his multiple plastic surgeries. I think he got those because he's rather vain about himself. The last one had his eyebrows stuck up in surprise for a month. If it isn't obvious yet, he also loves spending money. He filled most of our old places with expensive crap that reminded me of something you'd find in an old antique store. I guess it was to impress but to me it looked trashy.

The only reason his wasteful spending habits stopped were because his share of mom's money ran out and he can't touch mine. This is a recent event and one that pisses him off daily. He can't make me give him money and he lets me know how ungrateful a daughter I am at least once a month.

My thoughts move onto more pressing concerns. The Hazard boys.

None of the crap that's happened in the last five years explains or excuses why I didn't keep my promise and keep in contact with them. That was all me playing my avoidance game to keep from dealing with what had happened. Some of it was me being... ashamed.

I worked through that some of that too. Rhonda was a great therapist, just a terrible person. Still even with her advice, I didn't try to contact them in any way.

That shame I felt—feel, didn't stop me from missing them horribly for the last five years. Too many times to count, I started an email or a letter, but then deleted it or threw it away. After what happened I couldn't face them. Not then. I'm not even sure I can do it now. Even though a big—bigger than I'd like to admit—part of me really wants to see them. Has always wanted to see them.

My tangled emotions always get in the way.

In two days, I won't have a choice about it anymore. I have to go to school and there's only one school here. Since I'm only a sophomore, that leaves the rest of this year and two more after. There's no way I'm dropping out and ruining my one shot at going to college and getting away from this cage of guilt and resentment that my Dad calls home. Mom's life insurance policy ensures all my expenses are covered and my tuition will be paid. College is my getaway plan, and in two years it'll be a reality. Honestly, I'm not even sure my absence will be noticed, just my bank account.

I guess it sounds awful when I think about it that way, but it's nothing less than the truth.

The slutty therapist insisted on how much my father loves me; that he just can't look at me because of his own guilt. I don't feel like that's good enough and probably not the total truth; he's the adult in this situation, the parent. A parent should get beyond those things for their child.

Especially a traumatized child.

With a sigh, I walk towards the front door, ready to get busy unpacking and maybe be able to pull myself out of the emotions knotting my stomach. I will work through them. I won't let this town or the memories that come with it beat me. This is a temporary place for me, a rest stop in the life journey I have planned for myself. The day I graduate, I'm leaving, but I refuse to be miserable while I'm here.

Dad isn't entirely wrong. I can make better memories here to overwrite the bad ones, or make do with softening the ones that already exist.

Holding my breath, I step through the door and then feel silly for doing it. What do I expect to happen? A lightning bolt to strike me down or a choir of heavenly voices to announce my entrance? The vice in my chest eases. It's just a house, in a stupid little town. It doesn't even look the same as our other one. I shove the pain down, way down and even stomp on it a few times.

I refuse to cower to brick and mortar; looking around me, I amend my thought—or plywood and cheap drywall.

With more confidence, mostly stemming from the fact that I need to pee, I head upstairs. This house is bigger, with a more open and inviting floor plan. I can't help but appreciate the space. We've lived mostly in cramped apartments since we left Singe. This is everything but. The bedroom Dad had the movers shove all my stuff in is enormous, probably the biggest bedroom I've ever had. From what he told me in the car, as he talked *at* me instead of *to* me, he had the walls between two smaller bedrooms torn down to make it one big room. Doing a one eighty in the center of my new room, I find the brightness of it pleasantly surprising. Purple walls surround me, stunning in their brilliance. A beautiful, vivid purple that almost makes me cry, in a good way.

The therapist was right, something I hate admitting considering what she ultimately did to me. He *does* listens to me. Purple is my favorite color, this specific shade in fact. As a child, I asked him several times to paint my rooms that color; I wanted everything to be purple.

It'd be nice if he listened to more important things than paint colors, though.

Spotting the attached bathroom, I check for the necessities and quickly take care of the bravery bolster that drove me up here. When I come back out into the room, I freeze in my tracks. Dad is standing in the doorway looking at the walls with annoyance on his face. When he turns to me the confident, fake smile replaces it.

"Hope you don't mind the color, Nora. When Maggie suggested I let the boys do the remodel, I couldn't turn it down. They did it for free." Disappointment leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. So, he didn't listen and paint the walls my favorite color. I can't believe I was dumb enough to even entertain the idea. Without another word he turns and walks out of the room, whistling.

Ignoring the small, but sharp sting of hurt, I shove it aside. The desire to be busy and not think too hard draws me to the boxes. The movers already brought everything up, so I can unpack it all in one go. Reluctantly, I look around me at the lovely bright color taunting me and realize that I'll need to thank the ones who had been thinking of my favorite color. Maggie is Ms. Hazard and the 'boys' are the... Hazard boys.

Eventually, I'll get around to it.

I'm not sure they will know what to do with me. I don't know what to do with me half the time. I'm not the devoted little girl who followed them around mildly hero worshipping them. Not even close. I'm not like everyone else my age anymore and I know it. A fact that I've accepted about myself and the complications it brings into my life every single time it involves other people.

Relationships aren't my forte.

I blow a breath out to move the hair that's sticking to my face. Monday, I start school, and I'm determined that this will all be done before then. Plugging in the stereo sitting against the wall, I sigh and put my phone on the dock attached to it. Music is a must have for me and when it starts to play, some stress melts away.

I love music. I think sometimes it's one reason I remain sane.

As the bass of the song playing sinks into my skin, my foot taps on the floor, the flip-flop rhythm of it makes an echoey smacking sound on the wood beneath it. More energized, with a reluctant smile on my face, I tear open the first box.

Time to get to work. With a solid plan in mind, I get to it, sort of. Despite my attempt at self-distraction, I think of the boys a dozen times or more over the next few hours.

My will power is *phenomenal*.

Being a relatively organized person who's adept at packing, I placed things in a tidy manner that's easy to unpack. The task takes me less time than I expected, leaving me a little disappointed. Busy hands give me an excuse to try to not think about how much I'm dreading starting school while simultaneously looking forward to seeing the boys.

I'm nervous about it too and not a lot makes me nervous.

After I break down the last box and toss it on the stack with the others, I stare out the window while wiping a forearm across my sweaty face. With my hand on my hip, I study the backyard. Someone has taken good care of it, the flowers lining the property are in full bloom, even though it's fall. The grass is green, thick and looks like it will be soft on my bare feet. I plan on discovering if it's true. The night is beckoning me out to it, and I need some fresh air.

As I walk by Dad's office, I ignore the low murmur of his voice. He's on one of his many daily video calls. He gets ten or more of them a day. I used to try to snoop in on them, but he's got a diffuser he keeps nearby that makes it all sound garbled while protecting the identity of whoever is on the screen. A spell that I can't break without getting caught.

He's the type that folds his gold threaded socks, so I doubt it's anything cool.

So far it has been less painful than I expected, being here in this town. Maybe it's like my therapist said, I've mostly healed; which is true. Don't get me wrong it still hurts inside. Just not as much, or possibly I'm dealing with it better. Or maybe—just maybe, it's because it feels like I have finally come home.

That's the most disturbing part of this entire reverie.

With a sigh, I lean my head back and look up. The moon is bright in the sky, almost full. In its milky light I can see the magic that saturates and protects this town. A blue hazy dome rests above the town,

thick enough to be seen by the naked eye in the air by those inclined to magic. Humans can't come here to Singe, so they never see the unique beauty of this place.

While looking at the sky as a kid, I used to think I could reach up and pluck a star down to hide in my hand. A token to make me smile in my darkest days. I never could but it didn't stop me from wishing for it every night. The stars are shining bright and the urge to sing Twinkle-Twinkle makes me giggle at my utterly dorky thought. In the process, relieving the tension I've been carrying around since we got here.

I climb into a patio chair and recline to continue looking at the sky. It's so quiet here in Singe compared to the last place we were living. In Chicago, there's so much noise and light pollution that you can't see the stars. In most of the city, it wasn't safe to go out in your yard at night to strain to see them through the haze of pollution in the air. That never stopped me from doing it—the smarter thieves avoided me and the dumb ones eventually learned.

I hate to say it, but I missed the tranquility of night time here in this surreal place of peace that's existed for me since birth. That's exactly what I need too. Peace in my mind, my life, my... soul. Strange that the place that planted the darkness in me, might be the place to fix it.

Absently, I look at the tattoo going up my right arm. It's technically four separate ones that merge but Dad thinks it's one. After I bribed him with a thousand dollars, he signed the permission forms and went with me to get them. Even witch tattoo artists have to abide by human law in such establishments.

The initial reason to get it was to cover some of my more noticeable scars. Then something spurred me to talk to the artist about the dream I had, still have. Personally—despite the reasons I got it—I love the artwork. It looks like pure imagination painted my skin.

Just below my shoulder, the tangled forms of four beasts dominate the tattoo with splashes of vivid blues, deep purples, fiery reds and greens of leaves in spring. A snake, a black lion, a white wolf, and a red hyena look almost as if they will leap out at you. The illustration starts with them together, then the animals disappear into swirls of color leaving only their footprints to track down to the tips of my fingers.

Despite not writing, calling or emailing them, I never forgot the Hazards; this tattoo is a testament to that. I was too big a chicken to do anything but hide in my bubble of trauma because I was too messed up in my head to try to deal with the complexities of that part of my life. I don't have any social media presence of any kind and I mostly use my phone to read with. So there was no keeping up with things happening in Singe—including them.

Honestly, I've been too lost to find my way out of my head. With resolve, I trace each animal on my arm with the tip of my finger.

I'm not lost anymore.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN I TURNED the anticlimactic sweet sixteen, dad—with persuasion—took me car shopping. He then used my money to buy me the blue Jeep I wanted. The fun kind, a Wrangler, with removable doors and zip up windows. I do not understand why I picked it out of all the cars we looked at, but it called to me. Maybe it was the freedom it represents or maybe it's because I love the color blue almost as much as purple.

Somehow, it suits me more than any compact car could. The dark windows are proving to be a perk, especially since I'm still a member of the poultry family and too chicken to get out of it and go into the school. I even got here early, and still, I sit, watching everyone arrive and laugh and talk and go inside. While I'm parked here, hunched down like a turd, I look at my phone and sigh; ten minutes until the bell rings and I still have to pick up my schedule.

The class schedule is a total mystery too. Dad was supposed to forward them my curriculum from the other school. The school wouldn't let me do it because of my age. Human schools are way more strict about those types of things, and after going to a multitude of them, I have to say I'm not a fan.

Quit being a chickenshit, Nora.

Growling at my cowardice, I hop out before I can change my mind and grab my red backpack. Slinging it over my shoulder, I lock the doors and make myself turn, it's harder than it should be, then head into the school.

Why am I so freaking nervous?

Oh yeah, I have four specific reasons.

Without looking too long at the cluster of people milling around me I step inside the front doors and stop. I search for a sign, or a map—some way of figuring out where I'm supposed to go. Where the hell is the office?

Eventually, a small sign up near the ceiling that says 'Office' points me in the right direction and I speed walk to it. Avoiding eye contact with everyone, I keep my eyes in front of me—because looking at people in a setting like this, sets you up for stupid shit to happen. The normal high school experience, bullies, cliques, dumb guys. It's bad enough that I can feel their stares and their curiosity. That's nothing more than I was expecting. This is a small town, and I'm an unknown face in a selective group of people.

Ms. Hazard home-schooled us as kids, so we didn't socialize daily with most of the kids our age. She and mom insisted upon it, but it's Singe, and ultimately the gossip will catch up to me. Especially when they discover that I'm the daughter of a relatively famous witch who was chewed up by a bear shifter.

Gritting my teeth, I keep walking.

Thankfully, the office is a lot less occupied, and when I open the door, the secretary looks up and gives me a bright, welcoming smile. A small piece of me relaxes a little. The office staff will already know who I am. After all, it's not every day that you get the murdered coven leader's daughter at your school. Mom had been royalty to this community, and some people still hold a fondness for her memory.

"Evanora Hex?" she asks and I cringe. I hate my name. It's so freaking cheesy. Mom loved the Wizard of Oz, and our last name is the epitome of being a witch. Somehow she decided that the two of them sounded perfect together.

I nod, and the secretary shuffles through some papers on her desk. Holding a few out towards me she says, "Here is your schedule. We managed to get you in the classes that were requested. Do you need someone to escort you around?" I probably do, but I shake my head no. It's a small school, I'll figure it out. "All right, your first class is out the door and to the right." Her eyes darken with sadness, here it comes. "I knew your mother; we were friends in school. She was a wonderful witch." She folds her hands together and sits them on her desk. "You look like her." That wasn't as bad as I was expecting.

I don't think I look like my her really, I've seen pictures of her when she was a child. She was beautiful and ethereal while I'm just... plain. Not that I look like my Dad either, thank you gods of creation. This lady is just saying that to be nice. I study the secretary, noting there's a look of knowing in her eyes that makes me have to bite my tongue to keep from asking questions. She's a bit old to have gone to school with mom, but in witch-land, you never know. Witches tend to guard their ages like dragons guard gold. I'm not entirely sure mom was the actual age she claimed to be. In our world you grow up fast and life can be incredibly hard.

Magic is a mean business.

Picturing these two as friends makes me have to fight even harder not to say anything. My mom was all business suits and power, while this woman reminds me of a sweet aunt who bakes you pies to cheer you up. She even has a soft pink, hand-knitted sweater laying across her shoulders with only the top button fastened at her throat. Her black hair, peppered with streaks of gray, is in one of those neat as a pin mom-cuts where the ends curl up towards her face. A bob I think it's called? The small golden nameplate sitting on her desk says Ms. Maple, and that is the icing on the cake of the image she's presenting to the world.

While my mom's outer image hid the sweet, gooey person she was inside. I think Ms. Maple's is hiding something completely different. Blinking, I let my other senses work for me. A particular, secret, talent of mine is sensing another's skill level. She's not coming off as a powerful witch, but she's also hiding a dampening charm somewhere on her person. One that can hide the specific kind of witch she is and potentially how potent.

All witches have an affinity with certain types of magic. Human lore nailed that on the head. Some are elementals, who deal with weather and natural disasters, while others do more mundane blue-collar work—like metalists who have the ability to turn raw ore into metal and shape them into awesome things. You also have your green thumbs or growers, as they're sometimes called. They deal with food, gardens, etc. That's only the tip-top of the iceberg. There are way too many to list, and no one knows precisely how many kinds there are.

Ms. Maple is a mystery. I can smell the multitude of charms on her that protect her from prying eyes or in this case, nose. That skill

is compliments of the bite marks on my body. Mr. Psycho-Bear left me with a few abilities that I shouldn't have as a witch.

Her graying eyebrows shoot up in surprise. For a moment I worry that she knows what I'm doing, then she says, "Oh goodness, I almost forgot. Here's your locker information. They're downstairs and to the left, next to the outside lunch area." Of course, it's the opposite direction from my first class.

"Thanks," I mumble, take the papers from her and leave the office.

I skip the locker until I have more time and go in search of the class. Finding it is incredibly easy, so there's no excuse for me standing outside the door and not going in. Deep breath in, deep breath out. My hand lifts and touches the door; biting my lip hard enough to make it sting, I push it open and go straight to the teacher's desk. Mr. Nelson—at least that's what it says on his nameplate, looks up with a sour expression on his sweaty face, and waves vaguely towards the desks facing him. I head to the empty seat closest to the door.

Just in case.

Thankfully, he doesn't make me introduce myself, so I dig a notebook and pen out of my backpack and tuck it behind my feet.

"Evanora," I cringe a little at being called by my first name for the second time today. "I'll have to order you a textbook, so for now you need to share with someone." Shit. "Any volunteers?" he asks the room.

"I'll share with her." Thank the sticks, it's a girl's voice. Soft-spoken and shy, I can hear the quiver in it. I feel kind of bad for her. I wouldn't want to be stuck with me. I look over to my left, a dark-haired girl with black glasses is scooting her desk closer to mine. With a shy smile, she opens her book and puts it on the space where the desks touch. I smile back, sort of, and focus on the lesson.

I'm bad with people, I always have been. Except with the Hazards, somehow, I did fine with them. Anyone else though and I'm Awkward Annie with a big mouth.

"Did you live here before?" she whispers, ruining the small hope that she will decide not to talk. Without looking up, I nod and keep taking notes.

"Her mom was the former coven leader who was eaten by a bear shifter." My head jerks up to meet the dull blue eyes of what I'm

guessing to be one of the popular girls.

Really, she's going to go all mean-girls on me in my first five minutes here?

I fight down the words that want to come out of my mouth, the ones that will activate a spell I tailored specifically for people like her. Instead, I opt to be the bigger person and ignore her. For now. My moments of turning the other cheek are limited.

Mean girls are so unoriginal. The movies are right, they exist, but are still a total cliché. I'm not worried about dealing with them, it's expected. My skin is thick enough that it doesn't hurt anymore, but my temper has gotten shorter. If she pursues it, that's her problem.

"Ignore her she's on her period or something." The girl next to me says. "I'm Ruby." She introduces herself. I turn to my temporary partner and raise an eyebrow. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say here, the teacher told everyone my name when he was talking to me. "Evanora, right? Like the witch from the movie?" I nod again, at least we can get this part of the conversation over with. Thankfully, after I turn back to my work, she stops trying to talk to me. I'm not in the mood to try to make friends with people. I only want to make it through the day without turning no one into a dog turd.

When the bell rings I'm the first one out the door. Luckily, the next three classes pass quickly, and I don't have to share anymore books. Sure, there are more comments, but I ignore them too.

I don't care what these people think of me.



LUNCH PERIOD ROLLS AROUND, and I realize one glaring issue, I forgot to pack one. Standing just outside of the double doors, I give the lunch line a baleful look. The line of students wraps around the outside of the room, going out the door past me. By the time I get through it, lunch will be over. Annoyed with myself, I dig around in my backpack; I have a granola bar in here somewhere. It's better than nothing, and if I try to get a hot lunch, that's exactly what I'll get, nothing.

Deciding to avoid the claustrophobic cafeteria I head to the outside lunch area. It's packed too, but there's more room and fresh air; that's better than the alternative.

Enjoying the light breeze on my overheated skin, I pull out my phone to skim over an eBook. Reading is one of my favorite pastimes and I go through at least fifteen books a week. I munch on my granola bar while feeling relatively proud of myself for having the forethought to pack it. A sixth sense, the kind I pay attention to, persuaded me to drop it in at the last minute as I walked through the kitchen to leave.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up as the awareness of being stared at brings me out of my book. This feeling it gives me differs from the others. I lift my head and look around for the source. This is more than some gossipy people watching the new kid. The intensity alone is enough to cause concern. It's giving me goosebumps and sending my fight-or-flight reflex straight to fight.

Interesting. Creepy too, but interesting. I can't help but be curious. Which will soon be sated, it's coming closer.

"You left us." The deep voice comes from behind me, right where I expected it to be. That knowledge doesn't stop me from startling, so hard I drop my phone and in total shame, squeak. The deep voice is familiar in an unfamiliar way... I've heard it before, dreamed about it, but it wasn't that deep. As my mind spins and whirls with my heartbeat pounding in my ears, I slowly turn.

I'm surprised I don't hear an eighties song playing in the background as the world slows down around me. I'm not surprised that there are four tall, grown-up looking boys standing there staring at me. All with varying degrees of anger simmering in their eyes. Hazards. Holy shit.

The owner of the voice—that scared years off my life—has hair so black it looks blue in the sunlight. Staring at it closer, I question it, maybe it is blue? The sides above his ears are shaved, with the long locks on the top gently blowing over to one side in the wind. Ultra bright blue eyes meet mine, and I can clearly see the white star spanning out from the pupils. I know those eyes; how could I ever forget them? Oz.

He has definitely grown into his name. With a face that puts Johnny Depp to shame he studies me with a ferocity that I give him right back. There's no denying Oz's Samoan heritage, not anymore. He has grown into it well.

He was always the shy one out of the group, skinny and gangly. Something the other boys used to pick on him about it. I don't think

that's an issue anymore. He's got to be over six-feet tall, and although he's still lean, I can see the definition of what he's packing underneath his white shirt.

Teenage boys shouldn't look that way.

Each one of his forearms is also sporting tattoos. I can't fully see them, not with the way he has his arms crossed, but I can tell they match, and they look an awful lot like swords. His bronze skin is clear and almost glowing from being kissed by the sun. That's the kind of tan women pay hundreds of dollars for, but never quite achieve. Some weird feeling in me wants to stand up, and poke the dimple on his right cheek, the one that appears when he suddenly smiles at me. The butthead likes that I'm staring at him.

Because I absolutely am.

Jerking my eyes away, to break that charged stare off, I end up locking onto to the next. Eyes so green they glow, pin me to the spot. Phoenix is living up to his namesake. For a few seconds my eyes meet his and before I can pull my gaze away to study his face like I did Oz's. Phoenix has always been the one who was damn near too pretty to be a boy. He was the thoughtful one, the puzzle solver. As a child, his facial features were elfin and delicate. That's not the case anymore; I don't think there's a delicate bone in his body, but his face is still pretty.

He's also proudly displaying the vivid red hair that he used to hide as a kid. The sides are short, leaving the top to come together in a fohawk. He used to get teased about it quite a lot and hated the attention it garnered him. His hair is a real red, like fire engine kind of red, and it's one-hundred percent natural.

One day, after a rather rough playground spat, I dragged him to the clothing store in town and bought him the only knit-hat they had. It was an ugly camo green and too big for him then. It often fell over his eyes, and he'd have to constantly push it up, but he wore it every single day. I don't think he cares much for hiding anything anymore. Standing next to Oz, I see that he's a smidge shorter than him, but those muscles of his, which are defined even through the shirt, are just a fuzz bigger.

The tattoos are similar though, daggers up and down both arms.

Knowing that those tattoos aren't mundane any more than mine are, gives me a little insight. Weapons are a part of our lives in this life. There are things you're expected to learn if you're a witch or a

shifter. I, personally, made sure to have double that training with the best, most expensive ones I could find. Because I don't want to be like everyone else, at least, not in that way.

Phoenix smiles and pulls me out of my thoughts, his eyes flicker in amusement. Perfectly white teeth, that hold a few extra sharp edges, flash behind lips that belong on one of Da Vinci's statues.

What the hell? Da Vinci's statues? Oh my god, I've gone completely derp girl.

A snort jerks my eyes to the next one in line. Hezekiah. His hair, still so blonde it's white, is close shaven, with a little bit of length on the top, messy and spiky. The face of an angel, the teachers used to say. They're not wrong. He has the face of an angel. But the soul of a devil.

Hez is built like a linebacker and not afraid to show it off. His shirt is tight across the shoulders and leaves nothing of his upper body to the imagination.

Those amber eyes, that used to be so soulful and sweet, capture mine. Needing to pull myself from that trap I look away and my mouth falls open in shock. There's a small silver ball, right below his bottom lip peeking out as they spread into a smile. Needing to look elsewhere the flash of metal in his ears catches my attention. Both of them are pierced with what looks like little silver skulls. For some reason, I think there's a good chance he has a piercing in his tongue and... other places. I have no idea where that thought comes from, and I squash it as quickly as it forms. My brain is too overloaded to think about the hotness of that possibility.

And more tattoos. Christ. The feathered ends of arrows start at his elbow and trace down his arms to end in a point at his wrist. Like his brothers, the colors are bright. I swear it looks so realistic that I find myself wanting to touch it to see. I squash that thought too. I'm pretty sure he's even taller than Oz.

Finally, my eyes determined to throw me off the cliff, seek out the last Hazard boy. Eyes so dark they're black, meet mine, and with genuine effort, I look away from them to study the man they belong to. Barrett.

It's obvious he has Native American blood in him, but I never asked him how much or what tribe. Seems rude to ask such things. But I can totally see the gifts of his heritage now because it's evident in his lightly tanned skin and lean, but tight build. If I were to reach

for a fancy word, I'd use the word, sinewy. Mostly because it's the first time I've ever seen someone who pulls it off. His black hair is shoulder length, with a slight curl to the ends of it. It's thick and soft looking and the urge to slide my fingers in it is almost enough to make me stand. And like his brothers, there are tattoos on his forearms. A whip, that has a strong resemblance to a snake, starts on each wrist and trails up to wrap around his elbows.

Once again, what the hell?

My eyes zip back and forth between all four of them. Seeing them brings back so many memories. Laughter. Innocence. Affection.

Love.

It also adds to it. The thought repeats itself, teenage boys shouldn't look like them, but they're not human or even witches.

Forcefully, I break the spell and reach down to pick up my phone off the ground. When I straighten back up, I almost squeak again in surprise. They're all sitting at my table staring at me with nearly identical smirks on their faces.

"Well, Nora, what do you have to say for yourself?" Hezekiah asks, stealing the last bite of my granola bar from the wrapper on the table. Thankfully, my stomach is too busy flipping around to notice its loss.

For courage I stare at my—thank the sticks—not broken phone.

"I have a doctor's note," I blurt out, hoping that the wobble in my voice isn't as noticeable as I think it is. For a second there's this awful, tension filled, silence then all four of them break out into laughter.

Hez, always the spokesman for the group, continues, "We should ignore you like you aren't here but we all talked about it, and we get why you hid like a chicken-shit." My eyes snap up, a touch of anger flaring inside of me, chasing away the nervousness. "However," he says, with softness and understanding in his tone, "we voted, you're not allowed to disappear again, and there will be some kind of retribution."

"That's not your decision to make," I argue, biting my lip to keep from getting mad at them in the first few minutes we're together after so long. I hate being told what to do. If you want to piss me off, that's the quickest way to do it.

"It's not just yours either," he whispers as he stands, but before I can head him off, he pulls me off the seat and into his arms for a

hug.

Standing there, with my arms pointing out like weird toothpicks, I'm frozen in shock. The feel of his warm arms wrapped around me, of the smell that has always been his—a mix of wild grass and blooming flowers, teasing me with its comfort makes me gradually relax. Slowly, I slide my arms around his waist and bury my head against his chest. Taking a deep breath of his essence, I hug the hell out of him.

When he releases me, in a way that feels reluctant, another strong set of arms pull me into them. Barrett, the scent of rain forest and dark places curls around me. Then he's gone too. Another set, as strong and warm, pulls me in even tighter. The smell of a hickory campfire and warm sand tickles my nose, and I know that it's Phoenix. Warm lips brush my forehead, and then a new set of arms take his place. The smell of hot, dark nights in the desert captures me as his arms pull me in tighter. Oz.

"We can put the puzzle together now," he whispers into my hair. The heat of his breath teases the top of my ear. The tears I can't fight anymore find their way down my face and onto his shirt. For several minutes, he stands there holding me while I wrestle with the emotional overload, then somehow knowing I'm coming out of the weepy stage, he sets me back from him and guides me back to my seat.

Taking a tissue that appears in front of me, I mop at my snotty face. I'm so glad I don't have makeup on today.

"Mom had us bring you some tuna sandwiches and homemade chips," Hez says with a smile on his face, setting a brown paper bag on the table. I almost start crying again. I'm more emotional today than I have been in a long time and it feels strange to me. My stomach saves me by growling loud enough to incite a few chuckles.

I used to love Ms. Hazard's sandwiches.

Opening the bag, I stare at its contents in awe. Just as I remember, the bread is fresh baked and the smell of it wafts up through the opening. Closing my eyes, I breathe it in and remember holidays spent at her house with the smell of freshly baked bread permeating the air. The plates of fresh cookies on the kitchen island, the laughter while we have contests to see who could sneak one without getting caught. Those were some of the happiest moments of my life, and the smell of bread let me relive them.

Opening my eyes, my mouth waters while I stare into the bag.

The contents of everything she makes are homegrown or witch style organic. Any meat is bought at a witch run butcher shop, that doesn't believe in selling meat from mistreated animals. There's no comparing a store-bought sandwich to one of hers.

Happily, I dig through the bag of goodies. At the bottom, I discover a treasure hiding under the small plastic bag of fresh potato chips, two fresh-baked cookies: peanut butter, my favorite. A perfect, almost forgotten dessert.

Pulling the sandwich out and unwrapping it with reverence I take the first big bite, and with my mouth full, rudely ask, "So, how did you talk her into letting you get tattoos?"

After they stop laughing, Hez leans towards me and says, "We'll tell you when we take you to see Mom after school."

Before I can even begin to process this, "What's this, Nora?" Barrett's question, and soft touch on my hand pulls my eyes to him and where he's touching. The animal prints on my fingers. My hands are full of yummy sandwich so I can't hide my hand in a pocket or under my arm. I refuse to set down my food. Apprehensive, but still chewing, I watch as he pushes my sleeve up, aching slow, to my elbow.

The feeling of all four sets of eyes are like ants on my skin. It doesn't take a genius to get the reference, and all the Hazard boys are smart enough to get it—especially since it's related to them.

"Hez, are you and the guys still coming to the party this weekend?" Cringing at the familiar voice, I'm pulled from the weird moment and look up at the girl standing next to our table. She's the one from first period who made a comment about my Mom.

My attention shifts to Hezekiah. I wonder if he still hates people calling him Hez. I started doing it specifically to annoy him, but he never corrected me on it. He even bitched at his brothers for it. Secretly, I always felt a little special that he let me get away with it. Years have passed, so it's entirely possible that's changed.

For all I know, this is his girlfriend. Now, why does that thought make me want to kick him in the shin?

Instead of paying attention to the girl, he's still looking at my tattoo, completely ignoring her. Yeah, not his girlfriend, but I have a feeling she wants to be.

Not your business, Nora.

"We'll come if Nora is invited," he draws, lifting his gaze to mine. Damn, his pretty eyes are doing funky things to me. I blink and break the spell, turning to look at the girl who intruded upon a sandwich-work-of-art. If looks could kill, I'd be dead as rotary phones, but this girl isn't a witch or a threat. Taking the last bite of the sandwich, I try to determine what kind of shifter she is, because she's not human. My nose is too saturated with tuna and the guys to get a good scent of her.

Prey animal, that much I know. Possibly a deer of some kind. She has that doe-eyed look to her and a perky nose. Herbivores like her bluff well, but run away quickly when you call them out for it. Unfortunately, ones with mean spirits like hers will stab you in the back too. The predator sleeping inside of me stretches and lazily looks out from my eyes.

This girl is most definitely *not* a threat. Seeing that, it curls back up and once again goes to sleep. Swallowing, I grab the water that's on the table in front of me and chug half of it in one go. Turning to the guys, who are all staring at me with their mouths hanging open, I ask, "What?"

Phoenix chuckles and leans forward to wipe something off my face. The skin on his thumb is slightly calloused, something I'll have to ask him about. Natural born shifters don't scar, and a callous is a scar. I can't help but be curious why he kept it.

"Yeah, I'm good," I say, breaking the stand off between Bambi and Hez. Well, her stand-off, he's blatantly ignoring her. "Honestly, I don't want to go to a party. Booze and the bad decisions made because of it, have never been my idea of fun-time. I think I'd rather go fishing."

Hezekiah says nothing as his eyes go back to the tattoo with a strange smile playing about his mouth. He's not the only one still staring at it either. I wonder what that's about?

"Sorry guys, all full," the intruder says, with the fake confidence that the decision of me not going is all hers. Grabbing my composure, that the guys keep stealing from me, I pretend to look at my phone while studying them through my lashes.

They're healthy, supernaturally attractive guys. Nowadays, no male, as good looking as all of them are—remain virgins. I wouldn't be too surprised if her confidence in approaching him stems from a physical encounter. Girls like her are egotistical outwardly, but I

watch TV, and I Google—it's usually a sham. True confidence comes from knowledge, and the way she's staring at Hez—she has knowledge in it.

"Have fun at your party. We're doing something else," Hezekiah finally answers without looking up at her.

"How do you even know them?" she sneers at me which I answer with a shrug. That's not her concern. After standing there for several seconds, glaring at me hatefully, she walks away, her little gaggle of friends in tow. I'm only a little surprised when I see the girl, Ruby, standing towards the outskirts of their little group. I don't miss the look of apology she shoots me either.

Some folks will do whatever it takes to belong.

As far as Hez goes, it's none of my business what he's done—or who, but it's not nice of him to ignore her. Narrowing my eyes, I look at him and tilt my head to the side. Letting him see my thoughts in them. Smell them coming from me. He shrugs, and his cheeks turn a little pink.

"I was drunk, she crawled into bed with me naked and I passed out on her," he says while his cheeks turn an even darker shade of pink. The confession makes his brothers laugh. My lips twitch, but I manage to hold the laugh back. Probably because underlying the amusement is a little annoyance. I'm not judging him for the act if there was one, but it still doesn't excuse him treating her like a castoff.

I say as much.

His cheeks turn an even darker shade and he looks sheepish, as he says, "She won't leave me alone. She follows me around school, shows up at the house, leaves notes on my car and locker. I've had to change my phone number twice, because in one day she called me over a hundred times." His eyes narrow and the blush completely fades. I can taste his frustration with her because he feels it so potently. "I've tried talking to her, and it got me nowhere," he finishes, absently playing with a leaf that fell on the table.

Oh, that's slightly different. No means no, doesn't matter whether it's towards a guy or a girl. I hope he had more sense than most guys his age and told her the flat out truth and didn't play the nice game.

There's another solution. "Get a new girlfriend, that might get rid of her," I suggest without thinking about it. The smile he gives me

now is all teeth and promises. Oh, no, what did he just twist that into?

"We were best friends as kids, still are. Right, Nora?" Hez asks. The transparent plot to use me to be his fake girlfriend, to chase off his stalker, is swirling in his eyes.

My brain has already latched onto something else. Did he say still? My heart flutters around like a trapped butterfly in my chest.

I clear my dry throat, nervous, but still somehow excited. "Yes," I manage to say, hoping that I'm the only one that catches the breathy tone in it. I'm not used to being nervous and being around them is making me run the emotional gauntlet. I'm sure there's a better way to handle it but I haven't figured it out yet.

Something in me settles hearing they still think of me as their friend. Part of the reason I didn't contact them was that I was afraid—another emotion I'm not proud of feeling. How can they care about someone like me? Scarred and a freak of nature. Something that feels like small splinters scraping against the walls of my soul fades away, and for the first time in years, I let a little of that self doubt go. Shoving a handful of chips in my mouth and loudly chewing is the only thing keeping me from crying again.

Stupid tears. Stupid girl feelings. Stupid Hazard boys getting me right in the feels.

"I bet you're calling everything stupid in your head, aren't you?" Barrett leans forward and whispers. I choke on the mouthful of pasty chewed chips and chug more water. After so long, how does he know that?

Breathing heavily, I say, "Of course not. Why would I do that?" His dark eyes dance with laughter.

"Jerk." But I don't mean it, mostly.

Oz, breaking his silent study of me asks, "Do you remember when you duct taped fake hair on Phoenix's head?" The round of chuckles makes me smile again. I do indeed remember it. Ms. Hazard had gotten his hair cut, and I was mad because I felt that it was too pretty to cut. Figuring that the best solution—in my infinite child wisdom—was to buy a doll with red hair, cut off all the hair and tape it to his head. So, I persuaded him to let me do it.

There wasn't much the boys denied me back then.

"It was too pretty to cut off," I defend a bit sheepishly, picturing the bright pink duct tape I used to stick it on his head. It kept falling

off, so I had the brilliant idea of wrapping the tape all the way around his head. It took them two days to get it all off, and in the process ripped out more of his already short hair.

I cried the entire time.

"You guys will miss the biggest party of the year to hang out with this clout chaser?" Looking over at yet another girl insulting me for no reason, I sigh. This one is a brunette who was a member of the group of girls hanging out with the stalker gal, I don't have to talk to her to dismiss her. Instead, I choose to focus on the last treat in the bag. Cookies. It's not my place to answer that question from one of their many adoring fans, it wasn't me who was asked. Although, it gives me some awesome insight on the dynamics in this place.

The guys are incredibly popular with the girls. My eyes flit over the four of them, *shocker*.

I wonder when Ms. Hazard sent the boys to public school? When I left she was firmly against them attending public school. When I left we were all still in it and because of that, I didn't meet many of the other kids in town. Which means I'll get the lovely pleasure of meeting them now. Awkwardly and probably riddled with insults. That's how the first half day has gone so far.

Another dark thought creeps into my already crowded bubble of emotional turmoil. The guys are strangers too, in a lot of ways and I need to remember that.

"Sorry, I forgot about it already. Yeah, we're going to skip it to do better things," Hezekiah answers, stealing one of my cookies. He takes a bite and holds it up for me to take one. I don't hesitate before taking the entire cookie from him with my mouth. I got Hezekiah cooties a long time ago. Ha.

Laughing, I smile at him and she clears her throat, realizing we're all ignoring her. Honestly, I feel a little sorry for her and her dissed friend. It's as obvious as the nose on my face that Hez isn't interested in them or their party. At least, right now. The harder they try to make him notice, the worse it looks.

"For your sake, I hope that whatever shifter ate your mom doesn't come back for you," she says snidely, crossing her arms over her chest and giving me hate looks.

There goes my sympathy, for any of them—four sets of eyes narrow on her. Watching the blood leave her face as she pales is one of

the most entertaining things I've seen in a long time. I laugh, I can't help it.

If I'm guessing right, and I am, she thought I'd start bawling and dramatically run away to hide in the bathroom, lamenting the horrible life I have; all while she and her gal pals laugh, point and walk off into the sunset on the arms of the guys—predictably stupid behavior.

Raising her chin, she smirks and gives me a look of pure triumph. When I smile at her this time, she takes a step back, and that smile falls off her face.

She forgets herself; she really does. A piece of my hair tickles my cheek as magical winds stir around me. How dare she think I'll be her prey. I'm the daughter of the former coven leader of *all* the witches in the United States. My Mom was the head of the Hex family and one of the strongest witches to ever exist. Witchcraft has been in my family's bloodline since creation, and as her daughter, I exhibited powers before I could talk and broke every record of magic this town holds. I have the ability to turn her into a slug and squish her into the concrete like the nasty little goopy booger she is.

Things I'll never say out loud but are true just the same. Bitches like this don't deserve my sympathy.

With a smile still on my face, a drop of my magic alive in my eyes I ask, "Do you do this to people often?" She frowns at me and I continue, "You know... when you fail at being a fluffer for your friend over there." When her frown deepens, I realize she has no idea what I'm saying. Pretty doesn't equal smart. "Honestly, y'all just seem a bit thirsty to me." The frown changes to anger, at least she understands the insulting part. I've never understood the way the herbivores are always attracted to the predators. For aesthetic reasons, I can see why... survival? Not so much.

My first day in school and I've already got an entire group of girls looking at me like I'm the new victim. They're wrong. Most people are under the assumption that because I don't talk a lot, I'm shy and easy to push around. A dangerous error on their part, equating quietness with shyness. I'm merely selective and never afraid to speak my mind—or turn people into slugs. The guys laugh again and turn their attention back to me, something I almost regret. Their attention is very concentrated and doesn't leave me a lot of wiggle room.

Not having anything else to say to the girl, I turn back to my food. If she wants to stand there and throw a tantrum over something that has nothing to do with me—technically—more power to her. I'm perfectly capable of ignoring her.

Perhaps sensing that she's not going to get anywhere, she wisely stomps off. I made an enemy of that entire group of grass eaters and mediocre witches, but I'm sure that happened the minute the lead-goat looked at me—silly girls. This isn't an after school special, and I'm not the type of person to target. Ruby might have joined to save herself but I don't need a gaggle of idiots to feel special.

Attempting to push me around won't get them far; because of what happened to my mother, I train, and I train hard. I'll never, ever be a victim again.

"So," Oz says, drawing the O out, another reminder I teased him about his name and any word that had a long O in it. "What's your next class?" he asks, sitting back against the chair, his arms crossed over his chest.

I can't help but look a little, his hair is, in fact, midnight blue and, surprising me, he has his ears pierced. Small diamond studs in the shape of a wolf, look incredibly familiar. It takes me a few minutes of sitting there staring at them, but the memory eventually surfaces.

Those were mine. Dad bought them for me for my sixth birthday—three weeks after the fact. But I was mad at him for forgetting—a constant thing in our relationship—and threw them at Oz, proclaiming that I'd never wear them, ever. I screamed at Oz to throw them in the garbage.

Instead, he kept them.

"Art two," I say swallowing the emotions that try to rise in me. Yeah, there's that annoying breathy thing again in my voice.

All four smile at the same time, and for two heartbeats I forget to breathe. Holy baby Jesus. Yeah, I loved them as a child; they were my Hazard boys. Now when I look at them, it's not with the eyes of a dumb little girl anymore.

I'm so screwed.

"Imagine that, we all have the same class," Phoenix says, running a finger down the hyena tracks on my tattoo. Which is coincidentally, what he is.

"You never forgot us," he muses, sounding a bit surprised. Wait until he sees the rest of my tattoo. Then he might lump me into a dif-

ferent type of person entirely.

Unsure of what to say, I say nothing.

When we were little, I'd ask them about their animal halves. I'm a witch, we don't get to shape shift like they so awesomely do. At that time in our lives they hadn't shifted yet, so looking back I'm not sure that we were old enough for the boys to discover their forms back then, but one night a few years ago—I had a visceral dream about them and their animal forms. A dream I know as truth.

All of them are witch-born shifters. Which roughly means their ancestors were shifters that were twisted by spells into changing into a magically enhanced species. The spell was inherently flawed and killed as many as it changed and it left the witch-born needing to bond with witches to keep their animals under control. Nothing is ever easy when people choose to mess with nature like that.

I wonder what witch they bonded with? It's the only way that they're sitting here right now, a bond. I refuse to acknowledge how the thought of that makes me feel. Instead, I focus on studying the changes in them and what I know about their animal halves.

Oz is a Black Lion. Twice the size of a wild lion—or even a normal shifter one, his midnight black mane is tipped with blue, and his eyes are ethereal in the darkness of his face. He's silent, deadly and a walking weapon. Black Lions feed on negative emotions and were created to cut through an army once their defenses had been breached. The more afraid you are, the stronger they get.

Berserkers, some call them. They're so rare that the fur of one can sell for millions of dollars; as awful as that sounds, it has been done.

Hezekiah is a White Dredge Wolf. Thick, white fur, as strong as steel, encases him in supernatural armor. Dredge wolves look nothing like their modern-day counterparts. He has teeth for days and paws the size of my torso. He's all muscle and fur and danger. His amber eyes shine like a beacon to me. A predator who can blend in with the snow and wait for the unwary victim. They are designed for protection. Possessing fur that hardens and get stronger with every hit they receive, makes them able to take more damage than any other shifter in existence. When they're defending, they feel no pain.

There are stories about how some witches still enslave them to guard their family conclaves. It's outlawed, but laws don't stop everyone.

Phoenix is a Blood Hyena. They are the ultimate siege weapons. Immune to most types of magic, they also possess the ability to break wards and spells by simply walking into them. The only creature in existence that can do that. They're strong, large—easily topping three-hundred pounds—and they have the most dangerous bite in existence. It's called the Rot and will slowly, but inevitably kill their victims. There is no cure. Their cackle is also a weapon and has its own magic, inciting absolute fear in those that hear it.

Phoenix is rare amongst the rarest. Only one at a time can exist in the world. Magic keeping the balance in check. Blood Hyenas are one of the most deadly and one of the most hunted of the witch-born.

Barrett, the only reptilian of the four, is a Butcher Boa. His species is true to its name and his ancestors are long extinct. They were designed to infiltrate and assassinate and in some cases control. Silent, strong and able to kill without the use of physical weapons, they could once control entire kingdoms for their witch masters. A Boa's special ability is Growth. They can grow until they tap their power limit. The more powerful they are, the larger they are. I've read about ones the size of houses.

Their strength and ability to enthrall make them one of the most sought out witch-born. They're scales are used in most forms of persuasive magic and the only way to get their scales is to kill them.

Those kinds of witches are bitches and typically end up in prison or dead. If they get caught.

Other than a few rough sketches I couldn't find any actual images of their animal forms to see if they matched my dream. So I winged it. If not for the unique artist I commissioned to draw the tattoos, they wouldn't be true to that dream. Thankfully, he wasn't human. In fact, he was a blind seer, and purely by touching me saw them as I did. Now, I have to wonder if they think I'm super strange for getting it. For knowing what I do about them.

"Why stay gone?" Oz asks, and since his voice is barely above a whisper, I don't think he means to say it out loud.

I'm many things, good and bad, but I'm not a liar. "I was just..." My voice trails off as I search for the right words. "I was in pain and trying to hide from the world that hurt me, Ozzy." My nickname for him, from childhood, slips off my tongue before I can catch it. The dimples peek out of his cheeks when he smiles, a sweet, sad one that

makes me want to hug him, and hit my face on the table a couple of times.

I know then, whether it's ever admitted, that I hurt them. I want to say I'm sorry, but it won't do any good because part of me won't mean it. I needed that time, hurting them wasn't an intentional part of it. Maybe I should've been more honest about it but I wasn't in a good place for a long time.

I almost tell them I think of them every single day, then stop and only say, "I was a coward."

"I don't think there's a cowardly bone in your body, Nora," he muses after staring at me thoughtfully. I don't say anything, I'm stuck sitting there mute and wondering if I should get up and walk away. "Your eyes aren't the same color anymore," he observes, changing the subject. Maybe for me, maybe for him; I'm thankful either way.

My eyes are a source of bother to me. True golden they stand out and get me way more attention than I want. Other than when using magic, witch's eyes look human. Before the attack, my eyes were a nice light, plain brown. My mom used to call them teddy-bear brown. After the attack, they changed to this ridiculous gold color that won't let me hide them with contacts or spells. The contacts burn out and the spells refuse to stick. It sucks.

To my trepidation, it wasn't just my eyes that changed. Everything did.

The thoughtful look is back on his face and mirrored with the other three. Yeah, the subject change is to ease the emotionally charged tension, but I'm a fool to think it'll be dropped. Looking around at their serious faces, I realize none of them will. I laugh. If anyone in the world can get me to do something I don't want to, it's this squad of heathens.

"I sat in my Jeep for twenty-minutes before I had the courage to come in the school," I blurt out. Feeling the annoying need to prove my cowardice.

"Doesn't make you a coward," he counters stealing the last piece of cookie.

"Hey!" I try to snatch it back, but he pops it into his mouth and chews it with a smirk. The next ten minutes I spend smiling and realize that I honestly have missed these boys. Men... boys, whatever. They will always be the Hazard Boys to me.

Another missing piece of me falls into place.

CHAPTER THREE

ART CLASS REMINDS me of one thing, I can't draw. I'm good with colors—great with shading, but I can't draw to save my life, or anyone else's. Looking around, my eyes fall on the sketch beside mine.

Hez still can, though.

The one he's currently working on is a sketch of what looks like a fox—perhaps even a kitsune, one of my favorite creatures. Fascinated, I watch the way the pencil dances around on the page. A master at work, creating something so beautiful it moves you. While watching him put on the finishing touches, I try to think of a way to ask him for it. A glance at his face shows him chewing on his bottom lip, his amber eyes full of concentration, holding that faraway look he always gets when he draws.

The others at the table fared no better than me, but Hez has talent. True talent.

Drawn back to the image on the cream-colored paper, I gasp in surprise when my brain registers the eyes of the unfinished sketch. There aren't many defining facial features yet, mostly a mass of hair floating around those two eyes, but those I know more than anyone else's. They're mine. The oddly shaped starburst around the pupils, the small scar above my left eye that crosses my eyebrow. Even the way my lashes tend to stick straight out instead of curve. The me—that isn't me—looks all magical and mysterious, and my real eyes are drawn to his face as the pencil stops moving.

Is this how he sees me?

When our gazes meet, he blushes and turns the page on his sketchpad. Another image of me, on a lawn chair with the moon in

the background. My eyes are closed, and there's a look of bliss on my face. He was spying on me, that's the only way he saw me in the backyard. This time he shuts the book entirely.

Feeling eyes on me, I look around, coming back to reality from the cloud of wonder I'm on. All four of them are looking at me now. The pressure of all four of their gazes is real, which makes me focus on Hez.

"You creeper," I tease, feeling put on the spot and a little conflicted about him spying on me. Smiling wanly, I tilt my head to the side to stare at him. I won't ask the things I want to ask, not yet.

Just like he isn't asking the things he wants to yet, none of them are.

"It's nice to have you home," Phoenix says breaking the small stand off. Smirking, he turns back to his stick figure drawing. Oz chuckles and throws a wadded up sketch sheet at Barrett. This, of course, starts a paper battle.

Thankfully, there are only eight students in the class, and the teacher, who's the laid back sort, laughs and lets us continue. When the bell rings, I find myself reluctant to leave this temporary sanctuary. Reality will set in when the school day ends; the humor that's masking the turbulence, I can see in each of their eyes, will fade and I'll have to face those banked emotions.

Phoenix snatches my schedule and grabs my hand, dragging me from the classroom out into the hallway packed full of students, who all stop to stare at us.

"Oh, look Calculus. I have that class too," he says, slinging his arm over my shoulders. "I'm pretty sure we all do," he whispers in my ear. Admitting that my suspicion about them having the same classes as me is right.

They never did do anything halfway.

Laughing, I let him push me along, deciding to let it slide that they all mysteriously got the same classes as me in the second month of school no less. Instead of getting super serious, I decide to enjoy this moment with them as it is. You never know how long simple moments like this will last.

Phoenix is still a shit stirrer, as he shows while we walk. He's giving me steady commentary on the students and teachers as we pass them. Those opinions are colorful and at times completely outra-

geous. It's his nature to be that colorful person you meet once in a lifetime.

He's also incredibly accurate at figuring people out, most of his observations are dead on.

"Shit," he mutters under his breath, the humor leaving him as his arm on my shoulder tenses. Frowning, I look over at him. Has reality crashed in on my head already?

"What?" Instead of answering me he pulls me tighter against him.

I smell trouble coming and groan under my breath. I already know this trouble has boobs.

"Play along—eh, Nora? I have some baggage to get rid of." I sigh. Nodding my head in agreement even though my common sense is telling me to run... far away.

Of course, he's got stalker girls too. I know, before I look up, it's going to be another Bitch-Face girl who hates me on sight. And it is. Tall, blonde and pretty enough to have her own featured page in a magazine.

If you overlook the evil glare, she's giving me.

"Girlfriend?" I whisper.

Once again ignored, he nuzzles his face into my hair, and I shiver. Oh hell. That's a reaction I can't hide. I feel him smile against the suddenly super sensitive skin behind my ear. I freeze like a dork because I have no idea how to deal with something like that.

I'm sixteen. Hormones are something that I'm used to having go nutso on me, but for the Hazards? That's something I don't expect.

What the hell is going on?

Warm breath teases my ear as he whispers, "Na. We hooked up at a party last summer and ever since then she has been... persistent," he says, annoyance bleeding into his tone.

"You know, it's your own fault. Should've kept it in your pants," I fiercely whisper back just as she steps close enough to hear me potentially. Fun, fun.

Two out of four, and this one looks meaner than the other one. Great.

"Who is this?" Bitch-Face number two demands. Phoenix ignores her and tries to steer us around her, but she steps in front of us, blocking our path.

"This is my girl, Nora." I roll my eyes at his claim.

Way to give her my name, you ass. Knowing the chaos that will ensue because of it. He tossed me under the bus.

"You hooked up with a guy on your first day of school?" Her voice is shrill, like the hurt your ears kind of shrill. I sigh, sensing a meltdown incoming. Maybe two, if we're counting the one I'll probably have later.

Because you see, I can't just leave it be.

With a smile, I say, "Four of them, actually." I squeeze Phoenix to me. "It's been a busy day." Phoenix snorts and wraps his other arm around me. I can feel him shaking with laughter, hear the guys around me trying to keep theirs under control.

"Four?" she asks stupidly.

"Yeah, all four of the Hazards—at the same time. We used to do it all the time as kids too." She stands there with her mouth opening and closing, a myriad of emotions chasing themselves across her face. Among them, envy. "If you'll excuse us." I drag Phoenix around her, make sure the other three are following, and keep walking.

"You know by the end of the day the rumors will be saying all kinds of shit, Nora," Phoenix says, but he doesn't sound upset about it. He sounds rather pleased about it. He lives for messing with people.

"Wasn't that the point? Keeps the stalkers off you and the bottom feeders off me. Works out for all of us, that way. Cos, I have a feeling there are going to be a lot of harpies flapping around you four man-whores." He throws his head back and laughs, a full on belly laugh that echoes in the hallway.

Exasperated with him, and the fact that I like his arm where it is, I try to extricate myself from it. It only causes him to grip me tighter. I refuse to admit that there's a secret part of me that's glad.



THE NEXT CLASS I'm handed off like a football. No kidding, Phoenix spins away from me and blows a loud kiss, while I find myself with another muscular arm tossed carelessly over my shoulders. Hez, this time. We're all still in the same class, but it's like they're each taking turns hanging on me.

Maybe fueling the gossip?

It's after P.E. class when Oz practically full-body rubs me that the real reason sinks in. I feel stupid for not realizing it sooner. Shifters are all about smells and touch, it's more their language than anything spoken. Touching me in public shows a connection, touching me in the way they're doing it—shows a deep one.

Rubbing themselves on me is something else entirely. The asshats are scent marking me.

How am I so dense that I didn't pick up on that sooner? They used to do it when we were kids, to tell the other shifters to stay away from their 'little witch'. Making a subtle claim before I understood what they were doing. We aren't little kids anymore and scent marking me now, especially in such a touchy-feely way, sends a different message entirely.

We're all in on the game now.

Hez gets so carried away with it after P.E. that he takes me into the boy's locker room. It's educational at least; boys scream like girls when caught naked, especially when the one screaming the loudest is wearing a charcoal face mask. Laughing, I manage to wiggle away from the laughing ass and head towards the correct room. I instantly regret it, not only is Bitch-Face one in there, so is number two and their respective little groups.

Two things I see instantly, they're all dressed, and my locker is hanging open, noticeably empty. Really? This looks like that set up where they're going to do the steal-the-clothes trick. First, it starts with my street clothes and then when I get in the shower, they'll take my gym clothes. Their ultimate goal is for me to end up walking naked through the school, trying to use a trash can lid to awkwardly hide my nudity. In their incredibly flawed plan, I'd be ashamed and terrified. Crying big, salty tears of humiliation as I run home never to return.

They watch too much TV. No one freaking does that. In real life, they bully people online or trash their cars. They lie and steal and sleep with their boyfriends. They take innocent pictures and turn them into something sick and twisted.

Singe really is dated when it comes to how the real world works. Some of them are witches, they can do any of these things easily to me, or worse. Their ideas are predictable and incredibly boring. Maybe I'm too jaded for this crap anymore? The old me might have

cared or cried or been bothered by their opinions of me. By their intentions for me.

She's been gone a long time.

"Tabitha tells me you're whoring with all of them," number one demands, snapping me out of my thoughts. She's awful mouthy for someone who eats hay.

Are the popular girls ever more interesting than this? And why is there a little sting in my soul because this doesn't bother me at all?

"Sure. They gave me a proper welcome back party." Number one's hand shoots out to slap me. I catch it before it connects. From habit, I turn her wrist back until she cries out in pain. I ease off her hand but continue holding it.

Training, remember?

I'll be damned if I will let a high school Bambi-bully slap me, this isn't an after school special, and I'm definitely not the weak one in this scenario. I lean towards her, putting my face close to hers. Letting my otherness scent her out, she's on the bottom of the shifter spectrum. No physical magic, and no protections. Lightning fast I turn to number two, 'Tabitha,' and look at what she is inside.

She's a witch and mid-range in ability, but not strong enough. Basically, she's a Tadpole and in our world means she's still a novice with her magic.

"Never touch me," I say to number one, releasing her, then shoulder past two whose face is as white as the towels on the floor beside her. "I'm going to shower. If my clothes aren't back in my locker—intact—when I'm finished, I will turn you both into something slimy and feed you to a bird," I warn over my shoulder.

It's a promise too. They might not be sure of their abilities, but I am.

At least there are clean towels and washing stuff. As rich as most of the people of this town are, shampoo is the least they can provide. Showering quickly, I keep half an ear out to make sure they don't do something stupid like attacking me in the shower.

That won't work out well for them.

People tried to bully me at other schools too. Some magical, some not. There were even a few who hurt me a bit, in the beginning. When I was still fresh in the hell of my mother's death, I was their victim, but then something inside of me changed. I let the anger out. I don't play well with others, anymore. The bullies kept coming, but

I stopped laying down and letting them walk all over me. That doesn't mean that I'll always win, it means that I'm not a dog for them anymore.

Wrapping myself in a towel, I slip on the provided flip-flops and go back to the locker. Honestly, I expect my clothes to be torn to shreds or have something gross poured all over them. Instead, they're folded neatly and put back where I left them. Maybe they're not complete idiots. I'm not big on making idle threats and will do exactly what I said.

Dressing quickly, I leave off the pullover I've been wearing all day. The shower heated me up and I don't want to get all sweaty again. I'm wearing a purple short-sleeve shirt underneath it. The sleeves are shorter than I like, but they'll work for now. Both Bitch-Faces are outside of the locker room, staring at the two guys smiling at me.

Oz and Hezekiah both have wet hair and matching white t-shirts on. Smiling, I lift a hand in greeting, and in tandem they both look at the tattoo that I momentarily forgot about. Uh-oh.

"There's more to it? I didn't realize it went all the way up your arm." Hezekiah says, crossing the distance between us in two steps. Without breaking his momentum, he traces his finger from wrist to shoulder. A shiver chases his touch on my skin.

Wtf is up with these guys and my shivering? This is a reaction that I've never experienced before. I have no idea what to do with it.

"Go big or go home," I respond, not feeling like explaining—too many emotions wrapped around it. He rolls his eyes at me. "So, what are we doing?" I ask.

"We're going to play some dodgeball." Huh? "We get to vote on after-school activities once a week, dodgeball is this week's winner." Hez laughs as he answers my unspoken question. Following them outside, I question taking a shower when I'm going to end up all sweaty again.

"Hezekiah, you're team captain for blue side." The coach calls across the field the minute we step onto it. I raise my eyebrows at Hez. He must be good to be chosen that quickly.

"Dodgeball gangsta, huh?" I tease.

"I own this shit," he pokes me in the upper arm as his face grows solemn. Then he replies, "Are you sure you're up to the challenge? You look a little weak in the muscles department."

Studying his face, I try to gauge if he's serious or not. I'm fully aware that I have muscle tone there, more than enough to prove anything to him. Is he asking about my magic? That's the only thing I can guess. Out of habit, I keep it locked down. It prevents people from snooping and keeps attention off me. Strength equals attention that I don't want.

Looking around the field at the faces of our competitors—because Hez better pick me for his team—I see a mix of dislike and curiosity, there's even some pity in there. It's also not hard to pick out the Bitch-Faces' groups either. There's only two that catch my interest. They look like older copies of one and two. Relatives for sure and they're both strong enough to do a bit of damage to the average person.

"I'm guessing that anyone can play dodgeball?" I ask Hez.

"Yeah, it encourages families to take part. You must have really pissed them off for them to bring in their sisters."

I cut him a dirty look, it's his fault, and I tell him so.

"They hate me because y'all want to pretend like I'm your new hole. So, I can blame you guys for this entire mess."

He chuckles and pulls me in for a hug before I can smack him. Kissing my cheek, he whispers, "I think you're getting off easy, for leaving us. You're going to work for it, and you will hurt a little." He kisses my forehead again then makes a show of hugging me and staring deeply into my eyes.

The world feels like it's closing in on me as I truly understand the retribution comment. This is part of my penance. Sonofabitch. I knew they would not let me slide into their lives so easily. This also means it'll get worse before it gets better. There are four of them and right now, only two Bitch-Faces. Turning he jogs to the center of the field, leaving me with Oz.

Oz laughs, a rough sound that doesn't have any of the softness of his earlier ones. I know he has been listening to our conversation, and I can see the truth of it when he leans down to look into my eyes. They're swirling with anger, hurt and darkness. But all an outsider will see is the facade of 'deep and meaningful'.

He says, "Not a letter, not an email. Not even a text." When Hez calls his name, he plants a soft kiss on my frowning forehead and runs over to him.

My stomach rumbles with nausea. Yeah, I don't know these guys anymore, because this is cruel, and they were never cruel to me before. I can see trying to dissuade the other girls, maybe get some heat off them or fix the annoyance factor their ex's represent. But to set me up to deal with this shit as some kind of payback isn't something the old Hazard boys would've done.

I'm not sure how it makes me feel. The fog of happiness that I've floated in all day is gone, and I feel like an idiot for being optimistic enough to fall for their open armed welcome.

When Hez calls my name, I ignore him. My biggest worry about coming back here, is them. The only thing that matters about this place, is them. And although they're going to make it hard and hurtful, they want me back in their lives. Every touch, every soft look—despite the anger that's simmering underneath it like a boiling pot—has been real.

They're not saints. They want their pound of flesh because in their eyes I already have mine. At some point I'm sure, they'll consider payment made. That somehow, we're even for the hurt I have caused them. Eventually, probably the minute they have me alone, they're all going to ask questions. Today's behavior explains a lot and warns me about things too. Everything comes with conditions, especially with the Hazard boys. They're not simple, shallow people. Not in the least.

And this is one of their conditions.

"Nora!" Hez yells my name this time. I meet his eyes and calmly raise my middle finger. They're not the only ones who has changed. Yeah, I might play their emotional warfare, to allow them to feel vindicated about things, we'll see, but I'm not going to do it with some idiotic smile on my face.

Turning, I head straight for the parking lot. It's easy to ignore my name being called. It's easy to throw up a Do Not Disturb-Field too. The bubble of quivering red energy locks around me and protects me from view. They can't see me or smell me anymore.

Testified to when I walk by Barrett who looks around like he senses something, but then turns and heads towards the football field. Flat out running now, I get to my Jeep and yank open my backpack, tearing it in the process. Finding the keys with the large fox keychain on them, I grip them tightly, so I don't drop them. With a

trembling hand, I push the button to unlock the door and climb into the driver's seat.

A loud thump on my window jerks my attention around and also the hammer I have on the passenger seat. I hold it beside the window, poised to bust through it if I need to. Phoenix stares into the window, right at me. The DND-Field is still up, so I shouldn't be visible to him—but then I remember what he can do that the others can't. Those fathomless eyes of his are contemplating me with thoughts I can't read in them.

"I told him it was a bad idea," he says, flattening his palm against the window. "But I can't completely disagree with him, Nora. You were all we had, and you left us here with these people who don't understand us."

Anger hits me so hard I gasp.

"Sorry for hurting your feelings, fuck-head!" I yell, unshed tears burning my eyes and making the world distorted. My Mom was murdered in front of me... I was almost killed with her. Staying here wasn't an option.

"Every day we're in pain without you. It felt like glass cutting my insides and you had no idea what you were causing us because witches don't feel that part of the bond. Every single day, Nora. That kind of pain gets to someone after a while." He clears his throat and rests his forehead against the window. "Don't you get it, Nora? You're not the only one who had something shitty happen to them as a kid."

I sob and stare at his face, oh my creator—I'm their bonded witch.

"You didn't even say goodbye," this is said in a whisper, his breath fogs the window, and I can feel his energy licking at my shield.

"I had to leave, Phoenix... he infected me, and if I'd have stayed, they'd have put me in prison." The truth of why my Dad stole me out of the hospital while I was still unconscious. It wasn't just me running. "I didn't know about the bond."

The staying away? That's a different story entirely.

A witch infected with a shifter virus—they're called bitten—is considered an abomination. It's against the law for a child to be infected and they hide away any that are. Witches aren't supposed to

survive it, less than two percent do, and the results are usually catastrophic.

They go mad.

The ones who fall into madness crave the flesh of witches and once they eat it, there's no turning back. They become a vile, fully evil creature that can never be cured, never be saved and the only peace they'll ever find is death.

I guess I've got good luck hitting those statistics because I didn't even touch madness and I survived without the flesh craving pieces. The look of shock on his face is genuine. He had no idea. I watch his clenching jaw as he digests it, watch the moment his eyes light up with the realization of what I'm saying.

If a bitten survives the change, they can become part of a pack, legitimately. Something denied to a normal witch.

"You realize you won't be able to get rid of us this time, right?" he breathes. "But you still have to pay the piper, Nora."

Lifting my hand, I mirror it against his. I drop my shield and his eyes drill into mine. Without a word, I turn and start the car, putting it into gear I drive away without looking back.

CHAPTER FOUR

DAD ISN'T HOME when I get there. He's probably on some trip to an artifact site. This time, like many other times before—I'm glad he isn't her. I head straight to my room; the tears started in the Jeep and they didn't stop until I got to my driveway and sat there for twenty minutes. Now my face feels all puffy and gross. I want a warm bath and my bed. I don't even care about food right now.

They'll forgive me, eventually. I'm just not sure if I want to play their game. A howl startles the hell out of me, and I've already got a fireball in my hand when I turn to the bed. A big, shaggy, black wolf stares at me with her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth.

Dropping the backpack, I practically leap the distance between us to wrap my arms around her neck in jubilation. The tears start again, except this time they're happy ones. Burying my face in the thick fur at her neck, I let the smell of warm cookies and Christmas soothe the sick feeling of grief inside of me.

I thought she was lost to me forever. When I was infected, it cut me off from my magic for a time—a time when I was still bonding with my new familiar. Cookie, so eloquently named by a child, is that familiar. When she didn't manifest after we left, I thought for sure I'd lost her.

And you only get one familiar.

"Are you mine to keep now, Cookie?"

A growl is my answer, and as her head turns to rest on my shoulder, the bond that was so tentative and new as a child cements into place. For the first time in years, I'm starting to feel whole again, and it hinged on coming back to this town.

Now I have to figure out whether I want to jump through the hoops of the Hazards' forgiveness game or punch them in their super-hot faces. At this point, it can go either way and I'm more than happy to do the latter. Repeatedly.

As I sit there hugging Cookie like the lifeline she is, I think over my options. Their game is childish, but I honestly get it. It's the use of the word pain that keeps getting stuck. Why would they feel physical pain? Emotional, I get. We were super tight, but the physical part has me stumped.

Sitting back on my heels I snap my fingers. An old tome appears on the bed next to me.

"Well, Cookie, lets see if I can figure this stupid situation out. I'm not sure I want to let my guilt lead and play their game... at least, not the way they expect it to play out." She huffs and lays down to watch me flip through the pages.

Towards the end I find what I'm looking for. 'Witch-born'.

Skimming through the facts I already know I stop when I find the first mention of physical pain. "Shit."

Once bonded to their witch soul any long distance separation can cause great pain to the witch-born. Sometimes the separation can cause madness and death. It is the responsibility of the witch soul to ensure their witch-born are always within a comfortable distance. The stronger the bond, the worse the pain.

I read the rest of it with half my attention. When did they bond with me? I had no idea a magical one existed between the five of us. Why didn't anyone tell me? I could've done something different.

Wait. No. I couldn't have. Leaving was the only thing that kept me safe and possibly even sane. Maybe they could've gone with us at least? I don't effing know. Chewing my lip I absently pet Cookie, who's snoring softly.

How do feel about the bond? I mean, it explains a few things but do I want this? Climbing off the bed I cross to the window and stare out at the woods behind the house. My gear is in waterproof crates in the backyard. I need to think and I do that best when I'm doing something physical.

I miss them, even now, but they want revenge and considering what I know now—I can see their point of view. Then again, it's unfair. I suffered too, a lot.

Deciding that outside is a good option, I change into my workout clothes and head downstairs. Unpacking is easy because I cheat and use magic but I'll make up for it in the workout. Sitting on an exercise ball, I wrap my feet and wave my hand to hang the punching bag.

Standing, I put my hair in a ponytail and start doing warm-ups. The moves are second nature and I push myself to go through them. I used to do this ten times a day, trying to burn out that anger, but all I managed to do was tame it under a cover of thin control.

I'm always angry, I just manage it carefully. I also try to look at the good side of things as often as possible but am usually as cynical as it gets. Another leftover lesson from the slutty therapist. Looking at the bright side does in fact trick you into being more positive. Often enough to keep practicing it. Nothing is ever one hundred percent. The rest of the time I beat something up and feel better. Normally, it's the punching bag but once in a while it's a jerk or two.

I'm not entirely sure what kind of person that makes me but it keeps me moving forward instead of being locked inside my head. I never hurt someone who doesn't deserve it, but I also don't feel bad for hurting them either.

The hair on my arms raise and a knife is sailing through the air before I turn to face the intruder. Seeing Ms. Hazard standing there with a smile on her face stops the knife a few inches from her. It quivers there before returning to the table it was sitting on before.

"Well, I see that you've changed quite a bit my dear. The boys weren't exaggerating," she muses, walking closer to me with only a small look at the table full of weapons against the fence.

"Hello, Ms. Hazard," I greet a bit nervously. I can't believe I almost stabbed their mom in the face. If I could facepalm and not look as stupid as I feel, I would.

"Your father called me," she says, giving me a pitying look. This won't be good news.

"Okay," I say lamely, stripping off the small gloves on my hands.

"He will be out of town for an undetermined amount of time and I insisted that you to come stay with us."

Oh, hell no.

"I'm fine here," I answer turning away to try to look busy while working through the shock. The last thing in the world I want to do

right now is to go and stay with the Hazard boys. I haven't even decided how I will play their game yet.

"There's no other option, I'm afraid. The council won't allow you to remain here alone and neither will I."

I scoff, I can't help it, no one else has cared much about me being alone before. I have no idea why he called her, because he's never had a problem leaving me on my own, even for months at a time. More importantly, why did she insist I come stay with her when she has to have some inkling of what the guys are up to.

"It'll give us some time to catch up and the boys have missed you."

Yeah, so much so they want to bring me pain. Instead I say, "He's been gone plenty of times and left me on my own, I'm used to it."

"This time I'm here and I simply can't allow it, Nora. You've gone without any structure and parenting long enough."

This brings me around to face her. "What do you mean?"

She shrugs and says, "Let's just say I have a feeling about it."

Ms. Hazard's feelings aren't to be ignored. She's a seer, a good one and as far as I know has only been wrong once. She told my mom I'd die with her. Grabbing a towel, I wipe the sweat off my face. I'm totally stalling and from the knowing look she's giving me, she's fully aware.

The only thing keeping my mouth shut is the fact that Ms. Hazard is a doll baby and being rude to her is like kicking kittens. Otherwise I'd tell her exactly how I feel about needing parenting.

"Is something going on between you and the boys?" she asks suspiciously. I shake my head and she purses her lips then continues, "I figured you might be excited to come and stay after being gone so long."

"Dunno yet. You should probably ask them." I have no intention of telling her they're being assholes. I'm pretty sure she already knows.

"Ah, I see." And she probably does. "Things like this work themselves out in time. Now," she waves towards the house, "go grab yourself enough things for a few weeks, including your arsenal. We can load them in the truck and get home in time to get dinner going."

The surety that telling her no again won't matter pushes me to give in without a word and head upstairs. Oh yeah, I'm a total

badass who gives in to a tiny blonde woman that's four inches shorter than I am and looks like a Barbie doll. Dragging my feet, I pack my stuff and take a quick shower. It's the second one today but I need that few minutes to think without having her eyes on me.

It's time to make my plan. I'm going to play their game but with my rules.

I smile while I'm drying off and catch the reflection of my face in the mirror. My eyes are glowing and the smile is a little on the feral side with a bit of sharp teeth peeking out. Yeah, my rules.

In the end I don't think they'll enjoy playing games with me anymore.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN WE WALK into the house all four of them are sitting on the large sectional couch in the sunken living room. They're also all staring at me with their mouths hanging open. The smile on my face is full of amusement, even if it has an edge to it.

"Boys, go unload Nora's things from the truck into the basement. I'm going to get her settled in." The tone of her voice leaves no room for argument; it's the magic mom voice.

I'm pretty sure I hear a few 'yes ma'am's' in all the grumbling they're doing under their breath, I smile bigger. I follow her up the curved stairway to the second floor. Pictures line the stairway. A lot of them have me in them with the boys. I stop at the top and stare at the one with my mom and Ms. Hazard in it. The burn in my chest is enough to make me turn away but her face still lingers in my mind.

I guess Ms. Maple was right, I do look a little like her.

"She'd be proud of you," Ms. Hazard says, opening the door to the familiar bedroom I've stayed in many times before. It looks identical except for the toys I played with as a kid being gone. I say nothing about her comment. With Mom's face fresh in my mind and the sadness that always comes with it, I'm not sure I won't start bawling like the little kid that stood in this house all those years ago.

Cookie appears on the bed and she flops down like she owns the place.

"Ah, I see your familiar has returned. I'm not surprised." I am. I expected her to protest along with me. She sighs with contentment and closes her eyes, it looks like I'm the only one who doesn't want to be here. "Nora, everything will work out in the end," Ms. Hazard

says softly, gently squeezing my shoulder. For some reason this makes me want to cry again but I swallow the tears down.

"Sure," I say while meaning the complete opposite.

"Someone took a lot of the sunshine out of you, Nora but that's okay... in its place is strength and you have it in spades." Her words sound hollow and I know that they're not normal words. Her eyes have a slight blue sheen to them which means she's seeing something. "Now, I need to figure out dinner while you settle in." She squeezes my shoulder again and then heads down the stairs.

Looking around me to make sure there were no Hazard boys around I duck into my temporary room and shut the door as I'm flooded with memories of my childhood here. Mostly good memories. I shake them off.

There are other things I need to think about now. Mainly, what in creation is going on with my Dad? Why did he call her and say he was leaving? He never does that. I pull my laptop out and check all of my emails, even the one only he and I use. Nothing. Even at his worst parenting moments he leaves me some notice of him leaving. I didn't see any post its on my door back at the house, either. This concerns me.

Is he in trouble?

Ms. Hazard didn't seem upset, but she never does. I can't recall seeing her angry more than once in my life. I also think asking her questions will get me nowhere either but I think she knows something is going on. Potentially something bad.

I sit down on the floor and lean back against the cool wall. I can't stand my dad most of the time, but I can't lose him too.

As if fate herself has pity on me my phone beeps. I look at it and feel the cloud of worry starting to weigh on me lessens. It's a text message from my him.

See you in a few weeks, don't forget to pay my credit cards. Dad

I text him back, annoyed it worried me even a little. *Pay your own cards.*

The screen shows him typing, but it starts and stops several times before I get his reply. *I should've let the council have you.*

It hurts and I hate that it does but not nearly as much as it used to. I toss my phone onto the bed; what an asshole. He's probably found a new girlfriend. He acts worse when he meets someone and then drags her home and spends crap tons of money and then tries

to get me to spend mine. Which I don't. So far there have been a long list of women who think he has money and sniff around hoping to get their hands on it.

The problem for them is the money is all mine.

A light knock on the door makes me sigh in defeat. There's something more going on but adults tend to think it's best to not tell the kids about it. That concept is dumb, the minute they start pushing us into combat magic or something similar—the kid part ends. Some parents even push people my age into marriage.

Ms. Hazard will see soon enough that I'm sixteen, not five, and perfectly capable of taking care of myself. More so than my Dad ever has, but per human laws, I'm still not legally able to make most decisions for myself. That doesn't mean anyone gets the right to treat me like a child. And the laws are only a temporary stop measure.

I'll eventually find a way around it.

"Nora, why don't you come down and wash up for dinner. I ordered pizza," Ms. Hazard's muffled voice floats through the door. Climbing to my feet I put my backpack on the bed, pet Cookie's head and cross to the door to open it. The hallway is empty but I see her moving down the stairs.

This is the last place I want to be but I'll make do. Besides, it gives me a chance to study my opponents. The ones who foolishly think I'm going to go along with their game like a nice little herbivore. I force a smile on my face and jog down the stairs. Oh, I will play it. My way. Girls aren't made of spice and everything nice, girls like me are made of mean.



THE BOYS ARE SITTING around the giant dining room table when I enter the room. All of their heads lift in tandem as they stare at me. The mix of reactions on them is enough to make me smile for real. Hez, the ringleader of this entire stupid game has a mix of happy and annoyance on his face while Barrett, sitting beside of him with a piece of pizza half way raised to his mouth, is smiling and contemplative.

"Help yourself, Nora. I got you one with banana peppers on it, I hope you still like it that way," Ms. Hazard says, ushering me into the chair at the head of the table. She puts a paper plate in front of

me and points to the unopened pizza box. Smiling at each of the guys I open it and grab a piece.

Taking a big bite I chew, knowing there's a big smear of sauce on my chin. Wiping it off with a napkin I keep eating happily. I haven't had Old Time's pizza in years and it's always been my favorite. Witch made pizza always tastes better than normal food.

"So Nora, the boys tell me they share the same classes as you. Are those the ones you wanted? If not, I can call up and talk to the principal and get them switched around," Ms. Hazard offers, taking a delicate bite of her own veggie pizza.

"Hey, she got the classes she wants," Hez protests.

The twinkle in Ms. Hazard's eyes tells me she knows exactly what she's doing. Sneaky woman. I decide to play along. "Yeah, maybe I should some of them. I don't really need art class—"

"You need art credits for college," Phoenix says from the other end of the table. I look at him and find him sitting there with his empty hands clasped on the table before him. His eyes are boring into me and I smile. He knows the little game that's being played. He was always the quickest one to catch on.

"I took art in summer school my freshman year. I don't need the credit." Which is nothing but the truth. I took it here because I figured at least one of the guys would be in it, like an idiot. I don't plan on changing my classes but it's nice to know that the idea of it bothers them.

Phoenix chews on his bottom lip as he contemplates me. It's only a little bit of a surprise when he grabs the butter knife off the table beside him and hurls it at me, I catch it before it hits my face and flip it around my hand then hold my hand out flat with it resting on my palm. I take another bite of my pizza as every piece of silverware on the table, including the knife in my hand, lifts in the air and points at him. His eyes widen in surprise.

"Children, not at the dinner table," Ms. Hazard scolds. I let the silverware gently float back to their places on the table and keep eating.

"Sorry, Ms. H. I think the guys are too used to playing with Tadpoles," I say wiping my mouth and standing up. "I'm going to go unpack my stuff."

"I don't know what kind of game you four are playing but I don't think you're going to get the outcome you expect," Ms. Hazard's

voice follows me up the stairs. I laugh and know that they hear me.

The rest of the night, I'm left in relative peace. I can hear the guys arguing down the hallway, I even hear one of them walk to my door and stand outside of it for several minutes. Maybe more than one of them, but none of them knock or try to talk to me. They just stand there and make me hyper aware that they are. Hopefully, the little demonstration at the table makes them rethink their revenge plot, but I doubt it. If anything else it made them love the game even more.

As I fall asleep with the warm, furry presence of Cookie beside me I think of my game plan for the next day trying to avoid that sting in my heart that I have to play one at all.

CHAPTER SIX

THE NEXT MORNING I get up an hour early so I can beat everyone out the door and avoid the morning jumble with the guys. To give them credit, they still manage to beat me to school. All four of them are leaning against the hood of Hez's car watching me park. I grab my backpack and flip them off as I head towards the school. They need to get used to it because they're going to see my middle finger a lot.

My prediction proves true. I'm sure I used it every class, in between every class and as I'm heading out the door after school. How are they liking their petty game now? I changed the rules on them.

Sure, they were letting the Bitch-faces practically dry hump them in the hallway and Hez even had one on his lap at lunch but I ignored it. I know why they're doing it and I can't let them see it affect me, that's their big game plan. The assholes knew we were bonded before I did.

Something I'm still reeling from discovering and have carefully avoided delving into too deeply.

The last bell rings and I head straight for my car. Maybe if I leave now, I can beat them home and get some work out time before the octopi girls let them out of their grasps. The two girls from the dodgeball game standing in front of my Jeep completely derail my plans. I stop in front of them and put my backpack on the ground. It's time to nip this shit in the bud.

"If you want to throw down, that's cool, but this only going to end one way. I'm not like you or your friends. I won't stop cos you cry—I'll keep going until you're bleeding and on your way to the hospital." I open my hands at my side and the Jeep behind them lifts

several inches off the ground. They jump away from it and I let it fall to the ground, loudly. "Keep coming at me over this stupid shit and I'll show you exactly how much I like to hurt people like you."

One of them clearly wants to get away from me but the other squares her shoulders and opens her mouth, "You think you're a badass because your dead mommy was the coven leader?"

"Does this normally work at making people afraid? You ganging up on them because none of you know how to deal with your problems on your own?" I step forward as I talk, getting right in her face. "I won't be your victim, but if you keep fucking with me you *will* be mine." I say the last part low enough that only she hears me. Her brown eyes widen and I see the moment she truly accepts that I'll carry through with what I'm saying. She steps back from me.

"Don't get in the way, they're already claimed," she says but the confidence in her voice is wobbly.

"No one claims the Hazard boys, they claim you." True words.

"Who the hell are you?" she demands.

For a full two-seconds I consider answering her with something stupid then change my mind and say, "A pissed off girl with dead mommy issues." I turn my back to her and unlock my car door. She can throw curses all day long but none of hers are strong enough to do anything to me and she knows it.

I hear the sounds of them walking away and let out the breath I'm holding. Yes, I can truly and thoroughly kick her ass but I don't want to. I'd rather just go about my day and deal with everything else going on versus the whole cheesy bully thing. The fact that it still happens speaks volumes about human evolution.

"What'd you say to her to make her so afraid of you, Nora? I could smell it across the parking lot," Hez's voice startles me and I bitch at myself for letting him—they, the other three are right there with him—sneak up on me.

At first I consider ignoring them and leaving anyway, they're being dicks and I don't want to deal with it. Instead, against my better judgement, I turn to look at them.

"The truth," I answer and turn back around.

"Nora," I know from the tone of his voice he's not talking about the mean-girl anymore. "It's only fair." Hez started this little war and now he's looking for justification, maybe even understanding. I'm not going to give either to him.

"No, no, it's not. I didn't leave to punish you, no matter what your stupid egos would like you to believe. I didn't have a choice, ask Phoenix."

"Wait, what? What the hell do you know bro?" Hez demands of his brother. Apparently, Phoenix didn't share that tidbit of information.

"She's different, Hez."

"No shit, I know that but that's not what she's saying." It's almost laughable listening to them bicker and for a second takes me back to better times.

"Nora, explain what that means?" Hez demands.

"The only thing I'm going to tell you is to fuck off, Hez." If they hadn't played the whole nice-nice game when I first got back, I'd be more forgiving but they tricked me. They lured me in and made me believe that everything was okay, that I was wanted.

Then threw it in my face.

When I look over my shoulder, Hez puts his headphones on and stomps away.

"Evanora," Oz says my name with the same tone that used to make me smile. I look at him and raise my middle finger as a long claw pushes out of the tip of it. I'm in the Jeep and am pulling out of the space before any of them can react, even Phoenix who had an idea looks shocked.

Serves them right.

Barrett comes from nowhere and jumps in my path. Instead of swerving or stopping I step on the gas, forcing him to leap out of the way at the last minute. Why he thought that would work, I don't know. He can survive getting hit by a car at fifteen miles an hour mostly intact. Shifters like them heal fast; even before they shifted for the first time, they healed fast.

And I'd only feel a little bad for it. Maybe.

Turning up the radio I roll the window down and take a drive, there's no reason for me to go straight to Ms. Hazard's house. I text her at the stoplight just to be sure, no reason to worry her or get grounded—because she can do that now.

There's a place I haven't visited in years and I need some fresh air.



WHEN I WAS LITTLE, my mom used to take me to the only lake in town. Decades ago it was just this big hole left over from a magical mine that was once brimming with minerals and precious gems for spells. This land was enriched with magic and produced gobs of it but everything has its limits. When the mine ran dry they left this empty hole in the middle of the forest that some witch decided would make a good lake.

Greta Green Lake was born. Named for the witch who created it, Greta Green—totally original, right? Parking the Jeep at the crest of the largest hill overlooking it, I get out and walk to the edge to look down at the supernaturally blue water. All types of magically created creatures swim in its depths. Each one is beautiful in their own unique ways and found only in this lake. To a witch or a shifter, they're harmless but a human wouldn't be safe in these waters.

I spent many of my childhood days here with my mom and the boys. Picnicking, swimming and on cooler nights we'd sometimes build a fire and kick back on the beach to watch the stars above us. The lights of the moon crabs in the water below giving it an ambience that made a kid like me dream of bigger things.

Dreams I no longer have.

Sitting down, I let my feet dangle over the cliff with those memories fresh in my mind, enjoying them despite the tinge of sadness they always carry. Below me, the occasional ripple on the otherwise calm surface gives away the curiosity of the polka-dot bass that are abundant in these waters. They live up to their name. A witch decided during the 1960s that the bass needed to be bigger and smarter and obviously, more colorful. They also have these two antennae coming out of their head that are used to light up the waters in search of food.

Since it was the sixties, I'm guessing there were some drugs involved because they have legs and arms and human like lips. They're notoriously curious and tend to get caught easier because they want to know what's going on in the world above them. Their creator didn't clearly think things through.

I think they're sweet.

Cookie pops in beside me and rests her head on my lap.

"Must be nice to come and go anywhere, right?" She huffs at my question and her ears flick back and forth. "You know, I've spent so much time alone that I forgot how nice it is to have someone around, but it also makes me realize how lonely I've been." I sigh and continue, "I missed them so much that I didn't realize how empty my life was without them and when they were so nice and welcoming it felt like coming home. It was all bullshit, of course but the feeling was nice for as long as it lasted. Which way do you think they really feel, Cookie? Are they glad to see me or happy that they get to try to pull their stupid revenge scheme?"

Cookie lifts her head and looks at me but because she's a familiar, can't answer me with words. Instead, she licks my face to comfort me. Familiars are always animals and unlike most movies and books, don't talk. They're a manifestation of your magic and only exist because you do. They're not a true separate being. It's almost like having a piece of yourself looking back at you. I can't help but wonder what piece of me she is.

Their specific purpose is to hold stores of magic for you to use or to even cast through and maybe to give a witch the occasional comfort. The downside is, if you do not bond with your familiar, they cease to exist—which is what I thought had happened.

Glad that she's here, I hug her big neck and lean against her. I stay that way even when I feel a familiar presence slink up behind me.

"You always used to come up here to hide. I told them that, but they went to look elsewhere." Phoenix's voice cuts through the brief peace this place was giving me but I'm not mad about it. Despite the crappy game they're playing I love being around them again. It soothes a good bit of the restlessness that's plagued me since the moment I left here.

"Why bother looking for me?" I think it's a valid question. He sits down beside me and I lift my head from Cookie's soft fur and look over at him.

"You're a lot different from what you were before," he says instead. "I think I was expecting the girl who laughed at everything and tripped over air."

"That was dumb."

He scoffs and says, "What else is different about you, Nora?" The first word that pops into my head is 'everything' but I don't say that.

Instead, I shrug. "I don't think I'm going to follow the plan anymore," he adds after a few moments of silently staring at me.

That's interesting, I didn't expect any of them to give up already.

"I have a new plan now," he says it with a smile that gives me goosebumps.

Uh-oh.

"What, you gonna pull my hair and call me names?" I say trying to lighten the heavy feeling in my stomach.

"Na," he says not giving me any sign of what exactly he's up to now. "That knife thing you did was cool. What else can you do?"

Phoenix is the king of the subject change, he was always hard to get answers out of. He's the reason the word enigmatic exists. It's annoying.

Well, since he wants to know what's changed with me, I'll give him a taste. My hair stirs and his butt leaves the ground. He floats out over the water; I hold him there with a smile on my face.

"Nora."

"What's your new plan, Phoenix?" I ask moving him farther away from the cliff.

"You'll find out soon enough," Another avoidance. I raise an eyebrow and climb to my feet.

"I've never been good at waiting, you should know that," I say and let him fall. His smile is big, and he has the audacity to wave at me before he tucks his arms and hits the water feet first. When his head breaks the surface seconds later he paddles around in a circle looking up at me with that smile still on his face.

Cookie growls as a chill skitters up my spine. Looks like the others have joined the party. My hair raises as my hands do and the other three brothers yell as they're lifted into the air.

"What the hell, Nora?" Hez yells right before I throw all three of them over the cliff into the water. They're not as chill about it as Phoenix who's laughing at them as they all surface sputtering. His laugh echoes up at me. I sit back down and watch all four of them. Oz is staring at me with a smile twitching his lips, Barrett is beside Phoenix, smiling. That leaves Hez who is glaring at me but also fighting a smile.

"You looked like you needed a bath after that workout you had earlier," I yell down at them.

"What workout?" Oz asks.

Phoenix pops him on the back of the head and says, "She's talking about the girls, idiot."

"Are you jealous?" Oz turns to me and yells a satisfied smile on his smug face.

"Nope. I just don't like the smell of cheap," I shout down and watch his smile dim. Serves him right for being so cocky. Standing, I walk back towards the Jeep. It'll take them a while to swim across the lake to a place they can get out.

Or not.

"Where are you going?" Oz demands right before he grabs me. Smiling, I go limp and twist as I fall in his suddenly loose grasp. Landing on my back I look up into his surprised face and roll backwards coming to my feet. Holding my hand out in front of me I send him flying backwards over the cliff and back into the water. Turning, I start to get into my car and at the last second change my mind.

Fuck it.

Running I head for the cliff and leap at the last second with Cookie at my side. I can enjoy this moment, they might be few and far between.

Wrapping my arms around my knees I yell, "Cannonball!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

PHOENIX IS WAITING for me outside of my door. For the third time I thank Ms. Hazard in my mind for giving me a room with a bathroom. These guys like to wait outside of doors and creep around and stand in front of them. There are some things they don't need to hear with their super hearing.

Standing there looking at him I wait for him to say something. Instead, he smiles that big adorably cute smile of his and grabs my hand. Dragging me downstairs he sits me down at the table and puts a plate of french toast in front of me with a flourish.

I love french toast, it's my favorite breakfast, and Phoenix remembers.

"Thank you," I say, genuinely meaning it and grab the syrup. He sits down beside me with his own plate of food and we sit in companionable silence as we stuff our faces. Occasionally I smile at him—for whatever unknown reason—and he smiles at me.

We look kind of derp but that's okay.

When I'm finished, I rinse my plate off and head towards the door so I can go to the bedroom to grab my backpack and brush my teeth. Phoenix is leaning against the counter watching me and I notice the distinct absence of the other guys for the first time.

"I'm riding with you to school... if that's okay?" I stop and blink at him a few times. Did he ask permission?

I shrug. "Sure, I guess? But I'm leaving in less than ten minutes," I duck out of the kitchen and almost trip over the other three Hazards sitting on the bottom of the stairs looking like someone peed in

their cheerios. I get varying frowns and a grunt or two as I move around them up the stairs.

Why were they sitting there instead of coming to eat breakfast?

I'll never completely understand guys.

After I get my things and brush my teeth I head back downstairs, I almost expect the guys to still be sitting there giving me dirty looks but they're gone. Shaking my head, I go outside and find Phoenix leaning against the passenger side of the Jeep. I press the unlock button on the key dongle and get in.

"All I ask is that you don't kill me. I'm too young and pretty to die," Phoenix says as he buckles his seatbelt. The laugh comes out of me reluctantly but genuine. Damn him for being funny. He made me breakfast, too.

"This all part of your new plan, Phoenix?" I ask with a smile still on my face.

"Oh babe, I haven't even started yet," he says sounding so smug that I chance a look at him while pulling out of the driveway.

"What sounds good for lunch?" he asks after a few minutes of silence broken only by the noise of the radio.

"Shit, I forgot my lunch." I almost turn back around but we're cutting too close till first bell to do that.

"That's okay, my treat today. We're allowed to leave the school at lunchtime now and they have this restaurant in town that has the best cheeseburgers. Lots of big, greasy meat in your mouth." The last part pulls my attention back to him. Meat in my mouth? Oh, my god.

"I bet you love having a full mouth of meat," I counter. The smile on his face dims and then he frowns when he realizes what I'm implying. That's what he gets for making a dick joke.

His smile returns full blast and he says, "If it's a mouthful of you, yeah."

The blush on my face surprises me and I turn away. Give me weapons and I'll fight all day long with a smile on my face. Have someone flirt with me and I'm an idiot in two-seconds. Especially when it's a Hazard.

I'm not one to give up though.

"A mouthful of my foot maybe," I say and his chuckle is evidence that I surprised him. Good.

I pull into an empty spot and put the car in park and shut it off. I expect Phoenix to get out right away but he doesn't. Uncomfortable question inbound.

"What do you change into, Nora?"

I sigh and look over at him. Lying won't get me anywhere. "I don't know. So far all I can change is my nails and teeth." I grip the steering wheel and continue, "I can feel it inside of me, watching or sleeping. I know it's a predator—whatever it is. But that's all I know." Telling him the truth isn't a bad thing. He might even have answers for me that no one else would have. Him or his brothers.

"It's almost like when we were kids. We got those basic traits first. A natural shifter can't change individual parts like that until they're adults. Only witch-born shifters can do those things. Which means whatever you are is like us."

I suspected as much but now that I'm being told by someone who understands the shifter anatomy in ways I don't, getting answers makes it more real. As if it knows I'm talking about it the creature inside of me stretches. For the last five years I've thought of it as a separate entity and in some ways it is, but since it involves magic, you can never be sure either way.

So I ask, "Does yours have its own personality?"

"Kinda, but only in the beginning. Once you accept it into yourself then no. But," I hate when someone adds a 'but' to an answer. "You need to get to that stage and I don't think you're there. Until then you'll have what feels like a second person in your head."

"How do I get to the accept it part?"

He shrugs and says, "When you're ready."

"That's not helpful," I grumble and open the car door. The rest of it was though, and that makes me stop and turn back to him. He's standing outside of the car staring at me with a weird look on his face. "Thanks though." I say and head towards the school. I appreciate the answers but I don't trust his motives. Yet.

I get that he's done playing the revenge game but how do I know it's not some other stupid game? I can't just let my guard down again and get my feelings hurt, again. Because that's what happened. I felt accepted and welcomed and happy and it was all some asinine game. I stop and look over my shoulder at Phoenix who is dawdling behind me with a frown on his face.

He's picking up on my emotions. Scent is something that you have a hard time hiding, but there are ways. Mumbling a few words under my breath the smell of lavender fills the air. Now, I smell like a flower shop but it'll also keep his sensitive nose from snooping.

"Nora," he protests. I say nothing as I duck inside the door, but I do smile a little.



THROUGH THE MORNING classes I ignore the guys, mostly. Phoenix is being super attentive and charming—which can wear anyone down, he's good at being charming. The other three are mostly silent and wearing their angry, pouty faces. It's hard not to stick my tongue out and say, neener-neener. Phoenix will have his own mess to deal with if the angry looks Hez is giving him is any sign, I'd rather not add to it. Despite the fact that I'm a little bit tempted to.

Right before lunch I hear my name come across the loudspeaker. With a heavy feeling in my empty stomach I head to the office. Getting called to the office here is never a good thing. When I open the door a woman I've never seen before is standing there, wearing an ill-fitting skirt suit that's this eye watering, vivid, peach color glaring at Ms. Maple like she wants her to combust in her cushioned chair.

Ms. Maple is as calm as a cucumber and doesn't have a single hair out of place. The woman is immovable in my opinion.

"Nora, thank you for coming. This... woman is a member of the local children's services. She's supposedly investigating your living arrangements because of your father's absence." Children services my ass. She has witch council written all over her and Ms. Maple isn't fooled anymore than I am.

How did they know he was gone?

Dad is selfish and vain but he wouldn't get on the bad side of the council. He enjoys being important to them too much. So that leaves the question, what does this woman actually want?

"Evanora, darling, I'm sorry to pull you out of these mundane studies but our office had a report that you were living alone with no adult supervision. By law—"

"Ms. Hazard is my acting guardian. I'm sure Ms. Maple can call her for you," I interrupt.

The saccharine smile on her face vanishes and cold anger takes its place. The smell of annoyance is bitter in the air and the static of magic is thick enough to raise the hairs on my arms.

"Did you say Ms. Hazard?" she asks with a bit of hesitance. Yeah, Ms. Hazard has that effect on many people. Something I'll never understand, she's more southern sweet than Ms. Maple.

"I did yes. I'm sure the paperwork is in order," I respond.

Her eyes dart around the room. "Since Ms. Hazard isn't here, then I will have to demand that you go with me."

The smell of honeysuckle and home baked bread wafts in as the door opens. "I don't think so, ma'am. Here are the guardianship papers, the travel itinerary for her father and also, my attorney's number if you'd like to call him to verify everything," Ms. Hazard says breezily, waving a stack of official-looking papers in the woman's face.

The smile is genuine on Ms. Hazard's face but the look in her eyes is anything but happy. There's an unspoken threat there in that witchy glow. Whoa, Ms. Hazard is a badass in disguise.

The woman shuffles through the papers and looks displeased that they exist. I'm rather happy they do, I have no idea what kind of bullshit this is, but it doesn't bode well for me. Anything the council is involved in doesn't bode well for anyone. Mom fought the corruption of it and lost her life.

It's the main reason I hate the council in its entirety.

My mom was a powerhouse, there's no doubt about that but she was too nice and wanted to always do the right thing. Her biggest mistake was that she had faith in others feeling the same way. It was a fatal one, and it's why my faith in people is practically zero.

Although I do have my fair share of morality and often attempt to do the right thing—most of the time, I also believe that sometimes you need to do the wrong thing to achieve the right result. Hypocritical sure, but it works for me. I don't think most people are good; I think only some of them are.

When it comes down to it, I've had the same plan for years. It kept me moving forward in my darkest moments. The desire for revenge pushed me to be stronger, fight harder. Unlike my mother, when I find the people who sent a shifter to murder her, I don't have any mercy to give them.

"Do you have an estimation on his return?" the pretend children services woman asks, looking a lot like she sucked on a super sour lemon. Ms. Hazard turns up the potency of her smile and snatches the papers out of her hand.

"No, but as you can see everything is taken care of. Please, feel free to contact my attorney with any other questions. As someone in your field knows, it's not good to interrupt a child's school day for such frivolous things." *Mic drop.* Ms. Hazard is already cool in my mind—now she's notched up to completely awesome.

It's almost enough for me to forgive her for dragging me to live with the guys knowing what they're up to.

"Well, ahem," she clears her throat, "thank you for your time," she says none too happily, adjusting her too tight blouse. With a look full of her desire for retribution she turns and walks out the door. The whoosh of magic follows her. She's packed full of charms and dormant spells and the one she tapped, to make her grand exit, is a transport spell.

Those are costly and there's always a danger involved in their use. The possibility of your legs ending up a different place than the rest of you is entirely, probable. They only work around seventy-five percent of the time. Her using one for such a wasteful thing, shows how mad she is about not getting her way. Either that or stupid.

Am I wrong about what my father is up to? It seems strange that they came looking for me when he's their gopher. I turn a questioning gaze to Ms. Hazard, I'm positive she knows more than she's letting on.

"We'll talk about it after school," she reassures me, lightly squeezing my upper arm. That's her subtle version of a hug. It's also her telling me there's more to the story and I'm probably not going to like it.

Freaking fantastic. The drama is like an endless sandpit sucking me in.

Without a word, I turn and head to the lunchroom. Why not take me aside now and tell me? Why do they always put it off until later and then come up with an excuse to not tell you then either? Is it like some super secret adult rule? Either way, it's a stupid one. I'm sixteen going on a hundred, I think I can handle whatever is going on without having an emotional breakdown in the secretary's office.

"Nora, wait," Ms. Hazard's voice stops me in my tracks. I turn to face her and cross my arms.

"I forget what it's like to be a teenager sometimes. Boys differ from girls and are easier to put off," she says in complete honesty. "Your father has no intentions of returning. He says it's protecting you." I don't miss the flash of doubt in her eyes. She doesn't believe him anymore than I do.

The fact that he's not coming back doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would. There's a little sadness there and maybe a small ache because he's abandoning me... but not what it should be. "Are you sure you're talking about my dad?" I ask, thinking there's more to it. I've never known him to do anything that didn't involve some form of self interest. Not in my entire life. Even taking me from here to 'protect' me was just as much to protect him.

"There are a lot of things about this that doesn't sit right but fate always has a hand in things." She's speaking of fate like she knows even more stuff that I don't. Her sight was always a pain in the ass, that hasn't changed.

"That's the status quo with you adults," I say after staring at her for a few seconds. I have a helluva lot more faith in her than my dad, but that's still not the fountain of faith most have in their parental figures.

"I'm not saying I won't tell you, now is not the time. I'll see you at home for dinner. I'll be out until then," she says leaning forward to hug me for real this time.

That brief few seconds of being encased in her scent reminds me of mom and I sigh with the good memories it evokes. She pulls away and waves as she heads towards the front door. With a distracted smile on her face she steps around the guy standing at the top of the three stairs that lead to the exit.

The first time my eyes flick over him the second time, they get stuck. Other than the Hazard boys he's one of the prettiest guys I've ever seen. Thick black hair, tousled in that way that magazine cover models can only pull off. Light green eyes stand out from his pale face. He's dressed down a bit, a button up light blue shirt and a pair of dark skinny jeans but I can tell by looking at him he comes from money.

Considering he's here at this school, it's old money.

The skin on the back of my neck tenses as I feel a presence come up beside me. "My brother knows how to make an entrance, doesn't he?" I keep my eyes on the candy in the doorway but know the witch-boy at my side isn't a threat.

I have to admit, his brother is hot. Denying that would be a lie but I've already got four hot guys to deal with, the last thing in the world I need to do is add another.

"I guess," I finally say, shrugging and turning to walk back towards the lunch room. I've pretty much missed it but I'm hungry and will deal with being late to the next class.

"Whoa, you're seriously not going to go all slut-spastic on him?" I stop and look at my slightly unwanted companion. I give him a critical look over. He's immaculately dressed, his hair is styled perfectly. Even his white shoes are spotless. I'm pretty sure he and his brother are fraternal twins.

"Nope. Sorry to disappoint you."

"I'm not disappointed at all. It means we can be friends," he says it with a smile on his face and laughter in his green eyes.

"I'm guessing everyone goes gaga over him?" I ask. He nods and loops his arm around my shoulders. I step back out of his grasp, it's a bit too early for the whole invasion of personal space. "I'd think they'd do the same over you too, considering you're twins."

"Sure, some try but don't worry, I'm not a boob guy. You could say I'm more of an ass guy," he says winking but keeps his distance. The realization of what he's implying, thankfully, hits me quickly.

He's gay.

He wiggles his eyebrows at me and I can't help but respond to the playful and slightly hopeful smile on his face. He's got one of those open ones that are infectious and annoyingly pretty. I like him, I might keep him around. We'll see, I've never been good at making friends and I tend to say awkward stuff that makes the ones who do brave in their attempts to get close to me, run away.

"Let's grab some cold, probably bad food and be late for our next class," I say, heading towards the lunchroom. He follows me.

"Aren't you worried about the competition?" he teases.

"Nope, my testosterone headaches are boob guys."

"Guys? Do tell," he says, lowering his voice for dramatic effect.

"Gossip whore, eh?" I ask rolling my eyes but thoroughly amused.

"Isn't everyone?" he counters. He's not wrong. I might not spread gossip, but I love hearing it. It's nice to be reassured that other people do stupid stuff just like me. Makes me feel more human and only a little guilty. Not guilty enough to stop listening to it when it comes my way, though.

"Some childhood friends that want to be pains in my ass, is all," I explain vaguely. My instincts tell me he's genuine and probably a good friend to have but we met like five minutes ago and I've never been fast at forming relationships with people. This guy is the third-base friend in five minutes while I'm the first base type six-months in.

"No tales of... orgies?" He wiggles his eyebrows again and lightly shoulder bumps me.

"We haven't even made it to first base yet, perv." He laughs and opens the door for me to the lunchroom. I feel Phoenix before I see him and slightly cringe because I know he'll say something.

And of course he does.

"Yet," Phoenix says stepping into our path. He was on the other side of the door eavesdropping, apparently. Why he waited when I can see that the lunchroom is empty, I don't know but it's safe to assume he waited for me. I'll carefully ignore the fact that I'm slightly pleased by this.

"Never," I say breezing past him.

"Who's your new friend?" Phoenix asks eyeing—whatever his name is—up and down.

"I'm Teddy, my parents call me Theodore and I hate it but they won't let me change my name to Esmerelda." Ah, so that's his name. I thought my mom was bad at picking names. I'd have never pegged him as a 'Teddy'. "You must be one of the testosterone headaches."

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. Yeah, Teddy and I will get along. Maybe this friend I can keep because whether I want to admit it to myself or anyone else, I need a friend.

"You gotta love Nora's pet names. It shows you how much she likes us." No one can miss the emphasis he put on 'us'. Trying to stake his nonexistent claim. I wonder how dumb he's going to feel when he realizes it's absolutely necessary.

"I'm surprised you didn't whip it out and pee on her," Teddy muses joining me at the lunch counter. This time the laugh escapes me.

I look over my shoulder at Phoenix when he doesn't come back with another sarcastic comment and see him staring at Teddy in contemplation. The minute he realizes he isn't a threat the tenseness of his shoulders ease and he turns to me with a smile of triumph. Phoenix has figured it out already, somehow, and doesn't look like he feels dumb at all.

Why do I feel like I gave him something I shouldn't have?

His eyes hold mine steadily and the humor in them softens to something deeper that makes me feel like giving him a hug. I don't, obviously—he's still partially on my shit list but the urge still exists.

"I'll see you after school, Nora," he says, blowing me a kiss and walking away.

"That's one sweet piece of—"

"Teddy!" I exclaim.

"What? He is. You lucky minx you. What do the other ones look like?"

"I'm sure if you hang around me long enough, you'll see."

"How come there's so much tension there, and not the good kind either?" He seems genuinely curious so I answer him.

"They've got a lot of ho baggage." It's mostly a lie and tastes bitter in my mouth. The bond is a living, breathing thing and now that I know what it is, I can't deny it anymore.

I'm just as much theirs.

"Four guys that look like him? That's incredible and the subject of a dream or two I've had."

I laugh again and it's one of the many I share with him throughout the day.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“TEDDY, if you stopped staring at his ass you might be able to get out the door,” I tease, poking him lightly in the ribs. Teddy laughs and winks and grabs my hand to drag me out the door. I’m still a little uncomfortable with the level of touchy-feeling Teddy has but I’m adapting and not willing to alienate him by pushing him away every single time. Although, despite that thought, I still do at times.

“I can’t help it, I’m a butt connoisseur.” I roll my eyes and laugh.

“If by that you mean you have to look at them all, then sure.”

“Every butt deserves a look, especially the soccer team.”

He pulls my arm through the bend of his elbow and pulls me closer; I let him because I know nothing will come of it and it doesn’t feel as uncomfortable as it did. He’s wearing me down. Teddy is a walking, talking erect penis, but he’s sweet and thoughtful. He’s also great at getting me to laugh and laughter is something I’ve been short on lately.

I like it.

We pull up short and Teddy tenses. Frowning, I look up and discover his brother standing a short distance ahead of us. Teddy admitted earlier that they’re fraternal twins but that lately they weren’t close anymore. Abraham—I think his parents had a thing for presidential names—is hyper focused on his witch studies and Teddy is afraid it’s of an even darker nature than their parents. He also said his brother abruptly changed over the summer after going to a camp for witches that only invited Abraham and was arranged by their parents.

Apparently, he only recently discovered that his family are dark practitioners and is pretty positive his brother is following in their footsteps. Something that worries him. Practicing dark magic isn't forbidden but some more powerful spells are because of what they require to fuel them.

Sacrifice.

Teddy is the complete opposite. He's a naturist which means he's all about plants and animals. Witches with those abilities are always fun loving and sweet. It's literally programmed into their DNA.

He didn't share what his brother's specialty is, and I didn't ask. He asked mine, and I hedged around it. How do I explain that I'm a mix of several? That's rare enough as it is and will garner attention even though my mother was the same way. I have more traits than her, technically more power. Then you toss in the other ones. Yeah, I'm totally not going to tell him about those.

Teddy and I are definitely becoming friends, he's the kind of person that I need in my life and I'm stupid enough to pass it up—but we're not at the die-for-each-other stage, we're more at the play-pranks-and-hope-for-forgiveness stage. Maybe one day I can trust him with something like that, but not right away, not even close.

"You're expected home before dinner," Abraham says, breaking the telling silence between the two of them.

"Yep," Teddy says pulling me the other direction. Instead of towards the parking lot he pulls me to the park beside the school. We sit on the swings next to each other and I keep my mouth shut and let him process whatever is going through his mind. The look on his face is pensive and occasionally a flicker of worry makes him frown.

Finally, he turns to me and says, "He's fucking weird, right?" I reluctantly laugh but it's a short, small one. This is him venting and I'm the kind of friend that will let him do just that, whether it's talking or sitting here watching the cars drive by. With a deep sigh he starts to swing back and forth and I join him.

After a while he stops and spins in place, his eyes full of sadness and thoughts that I can't read, not even in his scent. The slightly burnt smell of anxiety is covering everything else up.

"He used to be different, I mean... don't get me wrong, he's always had a bit of a dark edge to him but he used to laugh and smile. Now he's always a grouchy asshole and I feel like our parents are

the one who made him this way," he says with sadness thick in his voice.

Hesitantly, I reach over and rub his arm. This is painful for him and I can't imagine being in his position. I'm not fortunate enough to have siblings.

"I'm guessing you two were close before?"

"Yeah, we did everything together. Then he went to that camp and now he's always going off on strange trips or locking me out of his room." That does sound strange, actually. Twins are typically close and witch twins even more so. However, things that happen in life can change a person completely; they changed me.

"Maybe he's going through some," I struggle for the right word and then settle on the first one that pops into my head, "hormonal thing and will share when he's worked through it," I say as comfortably as I can.

"Maybe. All I know is that I lost my brother to that bullshit." He rubs a hand down his face and looks up at me, his smile back in place. "Oh em gee, our first day as friends and I'm in depression-mode. How about some ice cream?" He really is my kind of friend. I love ice cream.

"There's a witch run place in town called Calling Cone that has the best ice cream in the world," I offer. I haven't had it for years but I saw that it was still open when I drove around town.

"Uh, do you have some wheels?"

"Well, yeah. Let's go, I'll even treat you," Smiling at my offer, he stands and grabs my hand and once again I'm getting dragged behind him. I have a feeling this will be a relatively common thing and I discover that I'm okay with that. I pull him to a stop and say, "Aren't you supposed to go straight home though?"

He shrugs and I let him start pulling me along again.

Unsurprisingly, he goes to the wrong car, I can understand though. It's a cute little feminine looking car with pink dice hanging on the rear-view mirror. An almost duplicate copy of ninety percent of the other female drivers that go to this school. However, it's not mine and I pull him towards mine with a headshake.

"One thing you'll learn about me, Teddy, is that I don't wear labels well."

"Nice whip!" he compliments letting go of my hand to walk around it with looks of appreciation. "It's tight, that's true. Can I

drive it?" he asks looking like a hopeful puppy.

I'm about to ruin his momentary dream. "No." I unlock it and climb in the driver's seat. He looks disappointed for all of five-seconds before jogging around to climb in. "Seatbelt."

"But we're witches."

"Yep. We also bleed like everyone else and I don't want that shit on my seats."

We talk about other places he's lived and coincidentally he's moved as much as I have. It's another point we relate on. By the time I pull into Calling Cone I know a lot more about him, even what he isn't saying out loud. Teddy doesn't have it easy. He's dealt with prejudice from all sides and now feels persecuted by his own family. He also feels like he's lost his best friend, Abraham. He's lonely.

"Okay, foods you hate?" I ask the fiftieth question. We've been taking turns fact-checking each other the entire trip.

"Sausage," he smiles like a well-fed cat as he says it.

"There are a lot of different directions I can take that right now..." The fact is twenty different dick jokes popped into my head at the same time but we're not quite there yet. Getting there. "But, since I hate sausage too, I'll roll with it."

"I bet there are four guys who'd be disappointed to know that."

Oh my god, he totally went there.

"I live to disappoint." I say instead of admitting that, oh by the way, I'm a virgin who only knows about sex from a clinical perspective and one embarrassing porno that involved a woman and some kind of tentacle. I fell down the internet rabbit hole and haven't gone back down it since. It's scary there.

"You're a virgin!" he says as I open my door. Of course the middle-aged woman pulling two red faced crying children hears it. The utter look of disapproval on her face is enough to make me sigh and shut the door on his continuing teasing. I walk towards the shop and ignore him laughing behind me.

There's no shame in being a virgin.

"I'm sorry, Nora. I'm teasing. I've still got my v-card too." I stop and look at him and simply shake my head. That *is* a surprise but not one I want to talk about in front of all the soccer mom's in Singe. Everyone tends to believe the stereotypes that all teens are humping like happy hamsters twenty-four-seven. While it's true that some are, there are just as many that choose to wait.

I hate stereotypes almost as much as I hate knowing some of them are true.

CHAPTER NINE

I HAVE to admit that Teddy's house is super creepy. Not even in the cool way. There's this aura of sinister power about it that gives me a bad feeling. They're doing something there, calling something they shouldn't be. Looking at it without knowing about magic, it looks like a normal two-story, white house with green shutters and two massive columns holding up a porch that looks like it's covered in gold.

Honestly, I'd think they were just wealthy people trying to look wealthy. The grounds are perfectly manicured with shrubs in the shape of various animals dotting the long driveway to the house. A driveway that has a brick road instead of concrete and a large imposing gate at the front with a guard in a stand.

Teddy is right about bad stuff happening here. I'm not even sure he realizes how bad.

"See? Told you," he says before getting out of the car. "I'll see you at school tomorrow." With a small wave he shuts the door and goes into the house. I get a glimpse of a woman in a classic black and white maid uniform at the door and then it shuts with a solid thump.

I genuinely feel like this is the beginning of a made for TV horror movie.

With one last look at the house I head back up the long winding driveway to leave. Halfway there I see someone standing off to the side in the shade of the trees, watching. I can tell that it's Abraham by the way he holds himself. I don't wave, neither does he and I focus back on driving out of the horror house lane. I fight the urge to

look back, I can feel him still watching but I don't. No way am I feeding that weirdness.

The desire to shake the chills has me turning the music up and smiling when Cookie pops in the passenger seat.

"I wish you could talk," I say rolling the window down for her to stick her face out like a typical canine. She does so with her tongue lolling and turns slightly to look at me. The wind catches her mouth and stretches her lips out exposing her large, white teeth. She looks like *that* alien from the movie.

Laughing, I head towards Ms. Hazard's house and hope that the guys are busy with other things. I also have to admit that despite everything if I had stayed at home alone I'd be in whatever hole the council sent that lady to throw me in. I also realize that as much as she can sometimes be intimidating, she's also one of the best people I know.

However, Ms. Hazard and I need to talk.



SHE'S in the kitchen when I get to the house. The guys are doing their sports stuff and it's a perfect chance for me to talk to her and maybe get an incognito workout before they all get back. Instead of doing anything I stand there in the doorway and watch her.

She's got her back to me, dancing to the country music playing in the background. As she works, she's humming along with it as her talented baking hands shape pie crusts. She's even wearing a white apron with bright red strawberries on it. The sun is highlighting her blonde hair that's put up in a perfect bun on her head. In my memory I've seen this a dozen times except back then my mom was beside her.

"Is there something I can help you with, Nora?" she says without turning around or pausing in what she's doing.

I lean against the doorframe and cross my arms. "You going to tell me the truth about what's going on?" No reason not to get right to the point. I love Ms. Hazard and I respect the crap out of her but I hate how I'm being left in the dark. Not knowing leaves me ill prepared if they decide to send someone to kill me like they did with my mom.

This time though, I'm prepared.

"I've found something linking the council to your mother's death," she says after a few minutes of silence broken only by the sound of the rolling pin flattening the dough.

I genuinely didn't expect her to give me a truthful answer; I didn't expect it to be that she was still looking for my mom's killer either.

"Your dad has been the council's lackey most of his life and while looking into what he's been up to, I discovered a link to your mom. After that, I called my attorney and your dad. I told him it would be best if you stayed here because he's so busy with his work." She turns to me, wiping her hands on her apron and leans against the counter. Her smile is somewhat sad with an edge of sympathy to it.

"Did his job for the council cause my mom's death?" She sighs.

"Inadvertently, probably, but your mom knew the risks when she married him." She chews on her bottom lip and then says, "Your mother was a target from the beginning. She was powerful, independent and stubbornly refused to obey the archaic rules the council insists upon. She couldn't be bribed or threatened and it's what made them kill her. Your dad is just an idiot who opened his mouth at the wrong time, to the right person."

"You blame him too, don't you?" She was Mom's best friend.

"Of course. I asked him to leave you here with me after the attack but he refused. I know what's going on with you, have known since you survived the attack. Only a handful of people know it bit you. Everyone else believes you were merely struck several times and scarred."

I keep my silence—this is the first time I'm getting the actual truth and I don't want to ruin it. The things she's saying about dad I've always suspected and those suspicions have already shaped my opinion of him, so hearing them doesn't change the way I feel at all.

"I want to tell you he loves you, in his own way, but I think it'd be a lie and you deserve the truth in that. I don't feel like he ever loved your mom either, but she would never listen to me." She sighs again. "You would've done better here with me and the boys instead of living half a life with a man who's more concerned with his own." The anger in her voice surprises me although it shouldn't. Ms. Hazard keeps her cool under pressure but she was mom's best friend, they were as close as sisters.

She's probably right about my staying with her too. I'd have had someone who understood guiding me, loving me. I'd probably be happier and driving the girl car Teddy went to in the parking lot. But I'm not.

"I look at you now and I see her in you but I see something more too. I see something she wasn't, a warrior. She was a lover—badass in her own way, but she always wanted to do the right thing, even though it cost her life. A life that was precious and all because she tried to walk the moral high ground and stayed with that idiot who helped create you." Her eyes water as she speaks and her voice lowers, deepening with the dislike that's evident for my father.

"You really dislike my dad, huh?" She laughs and wipes at her eyes.

"Yeah, you can say that, but I don't want my opinion to color yours. He's your father."

"I love him, I guess," Although sometimes I'm not so sure and I keep that to myself, "but only because of that. Him and I aren't close and never will be. I see him for what he is and never try to convince myself of anything different." I stopped doing that a long time ago.

"You sound so old for a sixteen-year-old girl. I wish that I could tell you not to grow up too soon. That you should enjoy your childhood and be free of the darkness tainting the memories of your mother, but," she crosses the room to me and pulls me into a hug. "You and I both know that that girl wouldn't be as strong as you are now and I'm so sorry that things are this way, Nora," she says into my hair.

I let the tears fall into the thick material of her shirt and say nothing about the ones I feel soak into my own shirt. Both of us stand there and let ourselves have that moment of sadness for what was, what is and what will be.

CHAPTER TEN

TO SAY the Hazard's house is nice, is an understatement. There are two pools, three or four guest houses, and that's not counting all the surrounding property. I have no idea where Ms. Hazard works—if she works—but I know she has money. I've always assumed it was family money. Mom had some too, old witch families like the Hexes and Hazards typically have deep pockets.

I'm not entirely sure of the exact amount left to me. A lawyer has always taken care of it, but I know it's enough to keep me comfortable for the rest of my life. We never lived like this though; Mom was a bit of a penny pincher, she used her money for other people. If I were like her, I would too. Dad could've had something to do with that too, he had no idea how much money mom had. Otherwise it would all be gone. His share he received from her death was spent in a matter of weeks.

I finish my walk and head straight towards the workout room. Maybe beating the sandbag up will help me work through this hot mess inside my head. I peek inside the door and find the light off, the room empty. Creeping inside I hurriedly strip down to the shorts and sports bra I was wearing underneath and tape my hands and bare feet. The bags hanging in the center of the room beckon me.

As I walk towards them I look around, I haven't been here since we were kids and back then we weren't allowed to mess with anything. The ceiling is scarred from where the bags have been knocked or ripped down. There are repaired areas all over the walls and on the floor next to the brand new set of mats are four long lines of claw marks.

Without giving much thought to it I kneel down and trace them with my fingertips. There's plenty of guilt inside of me for them going through pain, especially now that I know we're bound. Yet, they seem to lack the ability to understand how afraid I was, how much I was going through too. It's what stops me from playing their game.

I had no idea we were bound, there was no intent of pain from me. They—minus Phoenix now—want to purposely cause me pain. I guess I'll never see that as right. It doesn't mean I don't want to mend the wound between us, though, it just means I won't be doing it on their terms.

I'll even accept if they meet me halfway. Well, three quarters of the way.

Then you have the mess with dad. That thought has me straightening up and turning to kick the bag with a solid hit that I feel in my hips. Another jars me and makes me change my stance. This becomes a steady staccato of muted thumps as I take out all the misery inside of me on the bag.

I ignore the tears rolling down my face. The turmoil in my heart. I hit and hit and hit until my body aches and continue hitting the bag until with one last hit I stumble back until I feel the coolness of the wall against my skin. Leaning my head against it, contemplate the ceiling above me.

There are plenty of moments in life where being right makes you feel justified in your beliefs. You feel vindicated for knowing the truth of things. There are also moments where facing the truth you knew or suspected crumbles any last hope you had about not being right.

I'm facing a moment like that and it hurts and I hate it and since it's already done, there's nothing I can do about it except ride out the tidal wave of fuckery. I've always known what he's like, I've always known that he'd never change. I guess it hurts because I stupidly held onto some small hope that one day he'd be a real parent.

No one likes to face those kinds of demons.

"You've had some training, tossing my ass around up at the lake showed me that," Oz's voice chases away the last vestiges of sadness and I straighten to look at him. Wiping off my face I give him a semi-dirty look. Not in the mood to debate or even talk to another person I walk towards my clothes. I can carry them upstairs and shower in my bathroom. Wash my regrets down the drain.

"Other than those few tricks are you actually any good?" he asks, walking close behind me.

Knowing he won't give up until I respond, I say, "Nope." I feel the intent and move my head to the left as his fist sails by it and keep walking.

"Wanna spar?"

"Nope," I reply again. He drops quickly, trying to sweep my feet out from under me. I hop over his leg and keep walking.

"Come on Nora. You know I'll just keep at you until you give in."

"Nope," I repeat for the third time. He's starting to piss me off. I lean forward and grab my clothes. He comes at my back again, I dodge and turn, the crunch of my fist connecting with his throat gives me a small sliver of satisfaction. He drops to the floor wheezing. It won't kill him, not as he is. A normal person, probably.

I head towards the door.

"No one can say..." He coughs then continues, "That you hit like a girl." The door closes on anything else he has to say and I head straight towards my room, avoiding the other three brothers in the process. It takes more effort than I expected it would and makes me want to punch the other three in the throat too.

Doesn't anyone understand personal space anymore?

Cookie is lounging on my bed when I get there and I give her a dirty look as I walk into the bathroom. Great guardian skills there, sleeping while I'm playing peekaboo with four asshats.

I should've kept hitting the bag. Cookie doesn't deserve my pissy attitude.

I turn the shower on and climb in. It's one of those luxury showers that has four shower heads and is big enough to hold five people. I love this shower and that's why I stand there under the hot spray and let it beat the last of the sadness right out of me.

I can't even follow my plans anymore. Being bound to those four changes everything. Me turning into whatever I will one day, changes it too. The neat, every-detail-laid-out-carefully plan I had for myself unravels. Regardless of the current status of my relationship with them, I know I can't leave them behind again. And until the three who are still sticking to their own stupid revenge plan decide to either get over it or feel satisfied they've gotten their pound of flesh, I'm stuck playing along.

Although I've already decided to play it my way.

When I jumped in the water the other day, for a while we floated around dunking each other and generally having a good time, until I saw the smile fall off Hez's face. That was the end of fun time. Other than Phoenix they all responded in a similar way, and I was frozen out once again.

I simply climbed up the cliff and left. Oz isn't the only one with claws. Phoenix tried to follow me but Hez said something sarcastic and the two of them started arguing. I left before I saw what came of it.

I rest my forehead on the smooth tile of the shower and let the hot water run down my back. I do get why Hez is upset, why they all were but they're holding me accountable for a decision that I didn't know I was making. I had no idea at that age we were bound. No one told me anything. Obviously, they knew. All I knew was that my mother was murdered, I was in agony and dad told me the council couldn't find out I was bitten.

We moved around every few months.

It is my fault I didn't write or call, it's not like calling is a physically hard thing to do but I was afraid. Maybe I was afraid of dealing with everything that happened before or maybe I was ashamed of failing to protect my mom? I don't know there could be a million different reasons I told myself—once I was old enough to give it any real thought—to keep from contacting them.

To hold that against me when I was ignorant of the bond... feels wrong. Maybe that's why any sympathy I had in the beginning is mostly drained. Maybe the manipulative way they were that first day killed it, I don't know. All I do know is continuing to try to mess with my head isn't right.

I don't care whether they feel justified or not.

I lift my head and finish rinsing off.

Anger swirls around in my stomach like a pissed off butterfly. How dare they think to punish me when I've been punished enough.



WHEN PHOENIX KNOCKS on the bedroom door to tell me dinner is ready, I ignore him. I'm hungry and it's probably childish to not go eat but I don't want to deal with them right now. I want to sit here

and read my book and not give a crap about the outside world for a few hours.

When my stomach growls, I turn my back to the door and Phoenix's persistent knocking and try to get into the book again. The words make absolutely no sense and I put the book down in frustration. Cookie raises her head and looks at me as if to say, 'You're only punishing yourself' and then lays back down with a snort.

I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling. I can smell the food and it makes my mouth water. Roast with thick gravy, potatoes I know will be cooked perfectly, baby carrots that will practically melt in your mouth. Homemade yeast rolls that are my all-time favorite and I'm pretty sure I smell that apple pie that she was making earlier.

"I get it, ya know," he mumbles, his voice close to the door. My imagination paints him leaning his forehead against the door wearing a look of frustration. I say nothing, I'm not sure what to say. His sigh is closely followed by, "We thought you knew about the bond and we didn't know about everything... else. I tried telling him you didn't know, but he's stubborn and doesn't want to admit that maybe his plan is dumb."

This draws words out of my mouth. "I was eleven years old, Phoenix. My mother was murdered, I almost died... isn't it safe to assume that I've already been 'paid back' enough?" The words are spoken softly but I know he hears me.

"For me it was a trust thing and I think that's probably what it is with the others too. Now that you're back I can see I was wrong to think what I did, it'll take them a little longer."

I scoff, "Trust? Are you serious?" I climb off the bed and pull the door open. "I get that you were all in pain, I do, and I'm totally sorry for it. But this game won't play out like Hez hopes. If there's any desire for reconciliation then he needs to get his head out of his ass or this bond will suck a lot more than it already has. I have bigger things to worry about than ego trips and I won't be pushed down by a meaningless vendetta for circumstances were out of my control! If it'll make you all happy I'll find a way to break the bond and free you from the misery of being connected to me!"

"No! Don't break the bond!" Barrett practically yells, stepping around the corner of the hallway into sight. Oz is right beside him and I can see Hez lurking farther back.

"Then suck it up!" I yell, slamming the door in Phoenix's face. As I lean against the door, I check my eyes to make sure I wasn't undignified enough to cry in front of them, again. They're dry but my cheeks are hot and I know my eyes are glowing with magic. I check my fingertips to make sure the claws didn't poke out, it took me a few years to get upset in any way without them making themselves known. I couldn't risk the wrong person seeing them.

I slide down to the floor and rest my arms on my bent knees.

"Nora, it's only—" Hez starts to say and is interrupted by Oz who whispers for him to shut the eff up. I wonder if they realize I can hear them whispering?

"She's right, dickhead," Phoenix whispers.

"How do you figure?" Hez demands.

"Do you have any idea what she's gone through?" Phoenix whispers more fiercely now, I can hear the anger in his voice.

"Not a lot, no—but it doesn't matter. I'm right to think—"

"You're not right to think anything!" Oz breaks into the conversation. "Did you not pay attention when Phoenix told us she's bitten? Did you not see the changes, smell them? Where is your fucking brain, bro?"

"What?" Hez sounds so surprised I have to cover my mouth to keep from laughing.

"You had your headphones on when you stomped off like a toddler, didn't you?" Phoenix demands.

"She's bitten?" Hez continues on like Phoenix hadn't spoken.

"Yes, but she hasn't changed yet." Oz answers for him.

"You really heard none of that shit, bro? Phoenix broke the entire story down for us and explained everything. It's why I said eff this shit and wanted to call it quits." Barrett says breaking his silence.

"No, I didn't hear any of it. Tell me again." If it weren't about my childhood tragedies, this entire situation would be laughable. I know they're all sitting on the floor outside of my door, probably leaning towards each other like they did when we were kids. I bet Hez has a frown on his face and Phoenix is looking at him like he wants to kick his ass. Oz is probably rolling his eyes and Barrett has his arms crossed and is stoic.

I could be wrong too, but I doubt it. Some things don't change no matter how old you get.

I sit there listening to Phoenix patiently explain—with more compassion than I expected, why I left. Silence fills the void left behind after his words. A silence that's so loud it makes my head hurt. The question I'm expecting comes next.

"Does anyone else know?" Hez asks.

"Her dad, mom and us. And it needs to stay that way." Phoenix says then continues with, "A witch who survives being bitten is always dangerous. Right now we have no idea what she is, I keep hoping it's a honey badger—god knows she's as mean as one." This makes me smile. I have no idea what's inside of me waiting for its big moment to come out but I'm pretty sure it's not a honey badger.

"Na, she's too mean even for that. It's probably a skunk so she can pee all over the place when people piss her off," Oz teases. I facepalm.

"Peeing on people is not my jam, Oz. Ew," I can't help but say.

"Uh, you heard all that?" Hez asks, brave of him too.

"Honey badger don't give a shit," I say. The silence creeps back and then there's a snicker, followed by another until all four of them are full on laughing.

"Hezekiah Hazard! You get your ass down here and get her a plate of food!" Ms. Hazard yells from downstairs. The laughter cuts off instantly.

"Do you think mom heard?" he asks his brothers.

"Probably, she has the ears of a freaking bat," Phoenix whispers back.

"Be right back," Hez says and I hear the soft scuff of his feet on the carpet as he heads downstairs.

"Nora," Oz calls softly.

"What?"

"I'm sorry," I already apologized so I won't do it again, but I accept his because he means it.

"It's cool."

"Me too, Nora. We're done with this dumb shit now, okay?" Barrett says it like he's talking to a little kid, all hesitant and slow. Tells me he doesn't apologize for much of anything ever.

Some things really never change.

And then there was one. The most stubborn of the four of them. He's the quickest to anger and the eldest; self-proclaimed leader of his brothers. Hezekiah Jacob Hazard. As kids he was always the last

one to admit anything, he would hang onto his grudges the longest and if he felt it necessary, would always find a way to pay that person back.

I'm not sure how he is now but so far he's proven to be similar. It was his idea to do the payback Nora gag. A failure no matter how it's looked at. I'm not willing to play by his rules. If he thinks that, he can just keep on being mad. Eventually he'll get over it. That might be when we go to college but it's a chance I'm willing to take.

I realize what that last thought contains. We.

The light knock on the door brings me out of the seriousness of that and I stand and open it to find Hez standing there, looking more contrite than I expected him to, holding a large plate full of steaming roast. I take it, thank him and shut the door in his face.

"Nora," he says a few minutes later.

With my mouth full I say, "What? I said, 'Thank you.'"

"Are you going to open the door and talk?"

"We were doing fine through the door." I swallow my food and say, "I'm not playing into whatever scheme you have, Hez."

"No scheme, I—we—want to talk." He sounds genuine and I contemplate the intelligence of opening the door while I clean my plate. When I'm finished, I set it aside and watch the door. I know they're out there, I can hear them whispering back and forth. But because I'm on the bed instead of right next to the door, I can't hear everything as clearly. They're making an effort to be quiet this time. What I can make out is easy enough to piece together.

Hez is arguing his point, the other three are vehemently arguing against him. This is all a surprise to me, I expected things to drag on until I got sick of them and stopped trying. For three of them to concede this fast means that they weren't super committed. Now it's time to see how committed Hez is.

Bracing myself I cross to the door and put my hand on the knob. I pull it open and four faces full of surprise look up at me from the floor.

"Come in," I say and walk back to the bed, leaving the door open for them. I climb to the head of the bed with my back to the wall and let Cookie put her head on my lap. "Well?" I prompt.

All at the same time, they get on their feet and try to fit through the door at once, even Hez. I chew the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing as they shoulder bump each other, curse and push to

try to be the first one in. At one point Hez and Phoenix are stuck together neither one giving an inch. Both wearing looks of determination and staring at each other like two toddlers fighting over the same toy.

This does make me laugh.

"Oh my god guys, just get in the freaking door already," I say with laughter in my voice. They stop jostling each other and Phoenix smiles as Hez blushes a little and clears his throat. Phoenix steps back and waves Hez forward.

This is something about them that hasn't changed.

Phoenix is the second oldest and him and Hez were always super competitive. Looking back on it I think there's a chance that Phoenix does it just to piss Hez off. Which was never hard, Hez has a hair-trigger temper.

"Have you changed?" Hez asks as he comes to stand at the end of the bed. Phoenix bypasses him and crawls onto the bed to come and sit beside me. I give him a look but don't ask him to move. He, at least, has moved on from their revenge game and even though I won't admit it to any of them, I like being close to them.

"No, not yet. Just my fingertips and eyes," I say holding a hand up to demonstrate. His eyes widen and he takes a step forward to grab my hand. I see it coming and I allow it. With a shaking hand he lightly touches the tip of the claw on my thumb.

There's a look of fascination on his face as he traces another claw. "Do you know what this means?" he asks. I do but I shrug in response. "You can be pack." I shrug again. He looks at each of his brothers. "Why didn't you make sure my dumb ass was paying attention?"

All three of them shrug at the same time. He releases my hand and steps back. I tuck my hand back onto my lap and pet Cookie as he paces back and forth. Oz crawls onto the bed and then Barrett comes onto the other side. I wonder if Hez realizes they left him room at the bottom to join us.

Being like this—all together—is part of the nicer memories I have. The kind I used to fuel myself through everything. Phoenix moves closer to me, close enough it seals his arm and hip against mine.

He leans towards me and says, "Game over."

"Yeah, I'm sorry, Nora. I... I..." as he sputters, he waves his hands around, "I had no idea that this had happened," Hez finally apologizes and I'm caught completely off guard. This is something I didn't expect, especially not so soon. My eyes narrow in suspicion.

Is this another game?

"Really, I'm sorry," he puts his knee on the edge of the bed and then another. "I thought you knew about everything, the bond, the pain, all of it. While apparently, you knew none of it."

I tense up because I'm not sure how genuine this is.

Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me.

"I didn't try to contact you either, there were a few times mom told us where you were but I was determined to wait for you to contact us," he continues to explain.

"There's no way this is that easy," I mutter.

"I was wrong to want payback, I've learned to admit when I'm wrong, Nora. It just takes me awhile." He smiles a little showing the small dimple in his cheek. Eyes that are the color of sunsets light up with something soft and sweet and my heart aches a little. If he's playing me again I swear to god, I'll cut his dick off.

"He was in therapy for his anger, they taught him how not to be an asshole all the time," Phoenix adds and when I expect Hez to turn his attention to his brother and say something sarcastic, I'm disappointed. His attention stays on me.

"No shame in my game, bro," he says towards his brother and then kneels at my bent knees. "Don't break the bond, Nora... please."

"I have no idea what to say right now," I say, forcing myself to relax. I don't feel like he's a threat to me, at least right now. None of them feel that way. Plus, the anger that swirled in his eyes before, even when he first saw me—isn't there anymore.

Part of me sighs in relief, the part that thought I was going to have to play this long drawn out game and beat their asses one way or another. While another part of me is on full alert, suspicious and looking for any indication of bullshit.

"Truce?" he asks, his hands up in supplication his eyes soft and full of apology.

"I fell for that once, Hez. I'm not sure if I can trust it."

"I totes get that, Nora. Just let me prove it?"

"Fyi bro, she doesn't hit like a girl," Oz pipes up for the first time. Hez looks away from me with an eyebrow raised. "She throat punched me," he says it with a smile.

"Are you serious?" Barrett asks, laughing at his brother.

"Yeah, knocked me on my ass."

"What did you do to her?" Phoenix asks his green eyes alight with a bit of menace.

"I tried to punch her in the back of the head," Oz says proudly. Cookie and I move to the floor right as the other three brothers launch themselves at him. Growls and laughter fill the room as they roll around on my bed that gives way and hits the floor with a loud bang. They all laugh at once.

I don't understand guys at all.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I KICKED the guys out after they fixed my bed. Ms. Hazard wasn't happy they destroyed my bed and had a lot of questions as to how it happened. I have an uncomfortable feeling she was suspicious of other things at first. I told her exactly what happened, reassuring her multiple times they were only wrestling. She hugged me and said she was so glad that we made up.

On that I'm not so sure. I'm still leery.

Sleeping came much later than I liked, eventually I broke down and spelled myself into a light sleep. When my alarm went off I didn't want to get out of bed and almost didn't. One missed day wouldn't make a difference, right? I ended up getting up when a super cheery Ms. Hazard dragged the blanket off me.

Now I'm sitting at the breakfast table poking a spoon into my mostly cold oatmeal, giving side eyes to the guys as they laugh and eat their food. How any of them are so perky this morning is beyond me, I heard several of them prowling around the house last night up until I went to sleep myself.

My eyes feel like sawdust is in them and I have a slight headache. My mood isn't nearly on the same level as everyone else's in the room. Phoenix has picked up on it, he keeps looking at me and stealing bites of my oatmeal. Hez even has the happy disease, and I don't get it at all.

It's seven-thirty a.m. Who can possibly be happy this early in the morning?

"Aw, put a smile on that face, Nora. I'll send your favorite lunch with you today," Ms. Hazard says, snagging my bowl and spoon be-

fore I can protest, not that I will. She sits a bright purple, zipper lunch bag down in its place and I don't miss my name written in foam cut outs that resemble witchy stuff. The letter A in Nora is a pointy hat.

This makes me smile and I almost dislike myself for it. Almost.

This is why the guys are happy in the mornings, their mom. Her mood is contagious and I swear she's using magic but I don't feel it or smell it in the air. I think this is what a houseful of love feels like. I'm envious really. When my mom was alive, and around—she was busy a lot, but still made as much time as she could for me—life was great. She would read to me or play with me, explain life to me. With dad, there was none of that. I was lucky to have more than an occasional one sided conversation with him—him doing all the talking of course.

Despite where the Hazard boys came from they were fortunate in where they ended up, and I hope they always remember that. Watching them talk with their mom and the affectionate banter between them makes my eyes burn. I blink and look away. Grabbing my lunch bag and backpack from beside the door I head out to my car, only to stop dead at what's sitting on the hood.

There's a dead, gutted deer laying across it. Its glassy eyes are wide in fear and the morbidity of its tongue lolling out, almost like it was crying out to be saved in the last moments of its life, hits me in the gut.

"What the f—" One of the guys says from behind me. I drop my backpack and lunch bag to the ground and cross to my jeep.

"Did one of you do this?" I turn and ask angrily.

"Nope, wasn't me," Hez immediately says. Followed by similar protests from his brothers. I turn back to the poor deer.

Killing something for survival is completely different from what happened to this animal. Someone enjoyed killing it, the claw marks on its back and legs that serve no purpose other than to cause pain speak to that. She ran hard but was stalked and tortured because her killer enjoyed themselves.

People like that make me sick; and we all know it was at least something resembling a person. This is the work of a shifter.

"Oz go put that thing in the woods, I'm sure our local wolves will make use of her," Ms. Hazard orders from behind us. "Barrett

get the hose so we can rinse off her car." I hear her walk up to stand beside me. "Such a waste of life."

Over the years I've studied everything about shifters that I could find. Lore, written history, anything I could get my hands on, and because of that I know exactly what this is.

A courting gift.

"I can't smell what it is, the scent is wrong... somehow," Oz says as he picks the deer up easily and slings it over his shoulders. He jogs towards the back of the house.

I ignore the conversation behind me and focus on what I can smell and see. There's the burnt smell of tainted magic and the lingering smell of musk—Oz was right about that, but it's not the same kind of smell the guys have. Shifters can't use magic, not even the guys, other than the special abilities they have. Only a witch turned shifter can use magic like this person did. I run my finger through the rune drawn on the hood of my car that was previously hidden under the deer. The spell snaps with a small puff of smoke and dissolves. My safeguards protecting me from it.

"It's because it's like me," I say breaking the sudden silence. Shifters who were witches first are incredibly rare. The ones who survive the mesh of physical change magic—which is what shifters have—and energy magic, usually don't survive the change or are killed by the council. That's not the only problem. Half of the ones who do survive go mad. It's why the council passed the law to have them put down.

I'm fortunate, I'm edgier than I was, easier to anger in some cases—definitely stronger, but I'm not cray-cray. This one, because it's def a he, smells of madness and soiled magic. He's dark and dangerous. Now the biggest question of all is, why the hell is he leaving me courting gifts?

"You're telling me there's another that escaped the council?" Ms. Hazard asks wrapping her arm around my shoulders.

"Yes, I'm sure of it. But this one is... dark."

"I know that you and the boys are still working your shit out but you're *not* going anywhere alone. Don't even try it young lady, I'll slap a wall spell on your ass so fast your head will spin," she says worriedly and with a seam of steel underlying her words.

I don't tell her I can probably break her wall spell, but because she's older than me and knows more stuff, she'd whammy me with

something I can't break. Besides, I don't mind being around the guys, I just don't want to play anymore stupid head games.

"We told her we were sorry, Mom," Hez says coming to stand to her right.

"Do you honestly think saying you're sorry is enough to make up for being an asshole, Hez?" she demands. I bite my lip to keep from smiling. She's smarter than all of us combined.

"Well, I thought—" he begins.

"No, you didn't think, and that's why you made a mess. It'll take more than words, Hezekiah." She sighs and says, "I'm not even sure you should go to school, if there's a bitten roaming around then someone is hiding them."

"Day off?" I ask, hopefully.

"There's no exams today and no practice," Barrett says breaking his silence.

"Fine, go inside. I'll deal with the wards and look up what we can do to stop this from happening again." I turn and look at her. Courting gifts aren't uncommon with shifters, but when you have one that's clearly off their rocker that changes things. There's only one way to deal with a bitten that's yeeted off the cliff of sanity.

You gotta kill them.



THE FIRST THING I did was hide in my room and crawl into bed. I'm tired, a nap will do me good. If only my brain felt like cooperating, instead of playing everything over and overlooking for the holes in everything. The dead deer, the guys, the lady from 'children's services', dad skipping town.

Okay brain, you win. The dead deer is rather simple, for the moment. Some crazy bitten is wandering around town and decided to kill something and put it on my car to tell me I'm pretty. Unfortunately, with them being a witch it means they can also hide their identity; I do. We need to find out who it is. I'm not entirely sure where or how to start so I'll wait and see if there's another poor dead thing left for me.

I don't mind being bait.

Then there's the mess with the guys, or former mess, depending on how you want to look at it. They took me in that first day, made me feel welcomed and cared about and then bam hit me with their stupid ego trips. Then Phoenix decides he's done, he finds out about the whole bitten thing because I lost my cool and got girl cray on him. Story comes out, they do a one-eight and want to start back where the good stuff left off. I'm hesitant, for obvious reasons, but against my better judgement I'm also hopeful. They were a huge part of my life and will be as long as I breathe. I don't want conflict and petty crap getting in the way of that.

Well, they'll have to be patient with me, but I'll get there.

Dad has stumbled into something bad, again. The first time it cost mom her life because he ran his mouth. I've always suspected but now I know for sure. Being truthful about who he is, I don't know if he did it on purpose with some kind of malicious intent towards my mother but I do think he ran like a coward when he suspected they would come after her. He was strangely absent. Just like he ran with me claiming it was for my protection. I'm not sure how I feel about him truly, but I have at least a certain affection for him in that way all kids have for their parents, even the bad ones. I don't like him much, especially after the confirmation of doubts I've had about him my entire life. I know I'm never going to live with him again. But I don't want to hurt him or seek some type of stupid revenge against him. There's no point to it and hurting him won't make me feel better.

I think this time I'll let him figure out his own way. No help from me. I'll talk to Ms. Hazard tomorrow about it.

The council is a major problem and one I've been working out for the last few years. I know things about them that I've gleaned over this time and I'll continue to gather any and all information on them until I'm in a place to actually act on it. The ones who hurt my mother will have their day to be judged and I can train twenty-four hours a day, every day, but I'm not ready to face that kind of power.

Not yet.

Taking a step back I see things I need to change in my plans. It's not me alone anymore. I have a bond with four incredibly powerful witch-born, possibly the strongest in existence. This is something I need to eventually discuss with them, when I feel like they're trust-

worthy. I won't drag them into something without them knowing what it is. That's not fair to do to anyone.

Feeling like I've worked some things out I roll over and stare at the wall. My eyes grow heavier and I blink slowly, relaxing so sleep can have me.

The last thought that's clear in my mind is the most important one.

I'm not alone anymore.

CHAPTER TWELVE

INSTEAD OF ONLY SNOOZING FOR a few hours, I end up sleeping until around nine-thirty p.m. Crawling out of bed, I wash my face and dress in my workout clothes before sneaking down to the training room. I know the guys are sleeping because I checked at each of their doors. I discovered that Barrett snores in the process. Cookie appears beside me as I open the door and after giving her a cursory look, I get right into warming up. It feels good to stretch my muscles out and feel the good burn of not holding back.

Cookie woofs at me and I stop to look at her.

"You wanna practice with me?" She woofs again and I shrug. Part of the training can be adapted for a canine companion. I only need to put my own twist on it. So we start ducking and weaving, attacking our invisible enemies and the dummies set up around the room. Cookie gets a little happy with one and rips the arm off. I laugh and sit on the floor chugging my water. I pour some in my hand for her to drink a couple of times and then laugh when she flops down with a big sigh.

"I had no idea you were so talented Cookie, we'll have to keep practicing that," I tell her patting her back.

I smell her before I see her. Ms. Hazard quietly opens the door and steps inside. She smiles at me when I turn to her.

"Did you have a nice all day nap?" she asks coming to sit next to me on the mat.

"Yeah, kinda wasted the day away."

"I managed to keep them out to leave you in peace. Since they've dropped their big plan, they want to be near you. It's something

you'll have to get accustomed to and also get them used to your own personal boundaries. Unfortunately, they don't quite understand how to respect them."

"I don't mind actually," I say speaking the truth.

"They missed you. The last five years have been rough on them and I imagine you too. If you were less of a person they'd walk all over you but I have faith that you'll keep them in line." After that we fall into a brief companionable silence. Most people don't respect those and it's nice to know that she's okay with them. That's also what prompts me to ask what I'm thinking.

"Do you think it'd be okay if I stayed here with you until I graduate?"

She studies me before answering, "If that's what you want, yes. I'm guessing some of this has to do with our conversation yesterday?"

I shrug. "Somewhat. To be honest, I've been looking for an escape from my dad for a long time. I care about him and I don't want anything bad to happen to him but I don't feel like it's safe or good for me to stay with him." Those words are harder to say than I expected them to be. Leaves my throat a bit tight with emotion but I manage to not become a leaky faucet because of them.

"God, you're an old soul. I'll never understand how he helped make you," she says smiling. "I'll call the lawyer tomorrow and get the paperwork started. He's not going to be happy about it, it'll completely cut him off from you financially."

I shrug again. "He should've spent his money more wisely. I want to sell the house too, I bought it and it's in my name." I don't ever want to go back there, even though it's not the same house it has the same kind of atmosphere. Something that could be because of dad or not but either way, I want it gone.

"You know you'll have to follow my rules," she cautions.

"That's fine, it's not like you're a jailer." I give her a small smile. "I think that maybe I can have some semblance of normalcy living here. Especially with this thing the guys and I have."

"A rare thing, being bonded to witch-born. Once upon a time it was considered a high honor, and the recipients were treated like royalty. Now the council calls them threats and tries to annihilate them." She sighs and says, "Life won't be easy for you, but I think you already know that."

"Yeah, I never thought it would be." I ask her something I've never asked another living soul. "Did they catch the shifter who killed her?"

She's shaking her head as she says, "No, someone with a lot of power hid the trail. I couldn't find it even with his blood." A tracking spell using blood is the most powerful way to track or find someone, the fact that she couldn't tell me the council protected him. "I called in every favor, spent thousands of dollars and still no one would talk. The only lead I got was at a dive bar in town and when I got there, the informant was dead. Suicide they claimed. He was in the parking lot with his throat ripped out which makes me doubt their determination."

"How many of them are corrupt, Ms. Hazard?"

"You need to start calling me Maggie, Nora. Ms. Hazard makes me feel old."

"I'll work on it but no promises. Lifetime habit and all."

She laughs and leans back on her hands her face turning serious. "There's a group of witches and shifters who stand against the council but they won't let you near them until you're older."

I want to ask her if she's part of this group but instead I say, "Sounds like my kinda peeps."

"Maybe. Worry about getting stronger and working with the boys. You'll need their help when the time comes." Which can mean she saw something or it could simply be sound advice.

"I don't want to drag them into a mess, Ms. Haz—Maggie."

"Psh, you won't drag them into anything they won't willingly follow you into. But as a team you all have quite a bit of work to do. With your skills and your relationships."

I blithely ignore the talk of relationships and focus on the part I'm more comfortable with. "What kind of training have they had?"

"I've tried to keep life as normal as possible for as long as possible—something I'm starting to think was a mistake but I can't say I didn't enjoy experiencing that freedom with them. Still, I knew that one day their childhood would get cut short, so I couldn't have no training for them at all. To date, their training has mostly been judo and karate. They started weapons training this last year."

"Good."

"From what your dad said, you've taken every bit of training you could get. Don Gregory was your weapons trainer too... so I heard."

Ms. Hazard—Maggie—has been keeping tabs on me. I'm okay with it. "He thought it was a waste of your time but I don't think it was. How far in his program did you go?"

I wipe the sweat off my face and look over at her. "I graduated."

"Sticks, Nora. No one has ever graduated from his program, how did you pull that off?"

"I did what he told me to do."

"He used to train the witch-born once upon a time. The rumors when I was in school was that he was incredibly selective and only chose students he thought would be the best."

I don't say that it took me sitting outside of his house for three days in the rain without moving that made him accept me as a student. The training was hard, and I finished it up only just before we moved here. Don is not a gentle teacher or a patient one; I have the scars to prove it.

"It's a miracle that you pulled that off, it's not something I'd share with many either. Jealousy is a wicked creature."

"He's a complete asshole, but he's good."

"What were his requirements to graduate?"

"You have to beat him." I don't add anything else to it. It was one of the hardest moments of my life and I could only see out of one eye and had the use of only my right arm when I finally managed to bust his face. We sparred for over two hours and exhaustion was making me sloppy but I pulled on that thing lurking inside of me and somehow got that last hit in.

It was the only time he ever gave me praise or what resembles it. He simply said, 'Good, you're still standing'. After that he said I was done and he couldn't teach me anything else, told me not to die and left. I haven't seen or heard from him since. He did punch my dad when he first met him and called him a pussy. It's what made me almost like the guy.

"I think maybe we should get better trainers for the boys," is all she says.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SOMEHOW I MANAGE to get back to sleep around two in the morning. I even managed to read a good, happily sappy novel about vampires. It was quiet and lovely and lulled me into a restful sleep. I'm not even sure I dreamed. When my alarm went off I woke up, wide awake and for the first time in a while, not ready to rip anyone's head off.

After getting dressed in my normal jeans and T-shirt, I head downstairs for breakfast. Bacon and french toast, I can smell it cooking as I walk down the stairs. My favorite breakfast twice in one week, Ms.—Maggie is awesome. When I go through the swinging door into the kitchen, I freeze in my tracks. Hez is manning the stove, rather expertly if the way he's flipped the sausage patties around is any indication. Oz is cooking the french toast and both of them are wearing aprons with comic book characters on them.

Standing there staring, I force myself to move towards the table but I keep looking at the two guys who are in turn looking at me.

"You know how to cook?" I blurt out.

"That's a sexist statement. Assuming men can't cook because they're not women," Phoenix teases from his chair beside mine. I was so shocked by the guys cooking I didn't pay attention to where I sat.

Too late to move now.

"My bad," I grumble forcing my gaze to the empty plate in front of me. "And I wasn't being sexist. I was surprised is all," I defend myself. When we were kids, those two were the biggest anti-kitchen

anythings of all of us. In fact, Hez would throw a tantrum if his mom asked him to help with dishes.

"We all have kitchen duty now, mom said that none of us should have expectations of having a second mother take care of us," he says, poking me lightly with his elbow in the ribs.

"That's some true wisdom there." Especially considering what woman will be in all four of their lives daily. Me. I ain't their mama. This thought path makes me go even farther into future wonderland. How far will our relationship go? Witch-bound means a lot of things and one of them can be romantic involvement, but not always. This makes me look at all four of them in an appraising way.

Without digging deep down, I know that I'm physically attracted to them, anyone would be. And their behavior towards me, at least that first day when they rubbed on me like a happy pig getting a back scratch, makes me think they feel the same.

Ugh, yeah, I'm game for that. How effing annoying of me. The bigger question is, are they?

Feeling attention on me I look over at Phoenix who is blatantly trying to look down my shirt. One of them is, anyhow. I don't have much experience in that area, a little to none actually but the internet and TV are good sources of information. Plus, I've been reading books since I was five. Most of which were romances. I have enough sense to weed out the unrealistic stuff—I mean; it is fiction. Expecting relationships to work like a romance novel is setting yourself up for guaranteed failure. But there are touches of real life in all romance novels. A thread of emotional truth with bits and sprinkles of reality in those journeys to the end of the book, if you know how to look for them.

I hope that if—big if, there's no guarantees—this five-way relationship goes into that territory, I can have some inkling how to handle everything. I'm a bit of a control freak and an awkward virgin. My focus hasn't been dating or falling in love. I focused on how many ways to stab someone in five-seconds. The first day when I thought all things were happy-go-lucky, they were rubbing on me like a happy pig getting a good scratch. Marking me as their territory. Shifters do that, even with family.

Maybe they see me as a possession versus a partner? The thought of them feeling like they own me ratchets up the annoyance. No one owns me, ever.

Stop trying to over analyze everything, Nora. Sometimes things have to take their course. My former therapist's words pop into my head.

Do I want to be more than a friend or 'little sister'? Relationships are hard, I've watched them destroy stronger people than I am. I suck at them. Given the track history I've seen with these four, they do too. God, what kind of mess have I gotten myself into?

Being witch-bound doesn't mean we have to get married and have a bazillion babies. It means that there will always be a bond between us and we need to remain close. That's the thoughts I need to hold on to. The rest of it gives me a headache.

"What are you thinking about so hard?" Oz asks. I look to my right and he's standing there, in that silly apron, holding a plate full of food.

I almost blurt out exactly what I'm thinking but at the last second ask, "Syrup?" He frowns a little at me but doesn't push it. Instead, he scoops some food on my plate and sits beside me. With a pointed look he puts the syrup pitcher in front of me and digs into his own food.

"You were thinking about the bond," Barrett says quietly, I choke on the half-chewed french toast in my mouth and grab the glass of milk in front of me to try to wash it down.

Eyes watering I look over at him and as calmly as I can and say, "What makes you ask that?"

He shrugs and answers, "I felt it."

"We all did," the others chorus.

Gathering my composure, I take another long drink of milk and adopt a relaxed pose that mirrors his. Magic doesn't understand personal space anymore than these guys do.

"I was trying to figure out how things will work, is all." There's a bit of a wobble to my voice, a hint of nervousness. I hate it, showing that weakness but I can't help it either.

"That's simple," Hez begins and takes a big bite out of his food. I wait for him to continue but the jerk takes forever to chew and swallow before finishing. "We're the five musketeers." That is not the profound statement I was expecting and if the astounded looks from his brothers are any sign, they weren't expecting that either. His smile fades as he looks around and he clears his throat. With a deeper voice he says, "We do everything together, Nora." I'm not the only one who wants to sound cooler than I am.

"Everything, huh?" Phoenix asks with his usual aplomb.

"Everything," Oz pipes in with a smile of pure mischief on his face. I don't have to be a super genius to figure out what he means by that.

"Not necessarily, I figure we can stay close together and be with whoever we want," I'm partially serious and the looks on their faces makes it worth it. All four of them look at me like I've grown an extra head.

"Are you dating someone?" Phoenix demands.

"Who?" Hez adds.

"That guy from school? The new kid?" Oz asks.

Barrett remains silent but I see the animal shine through his eyes. Are they jealous?

"Oh, look at the time. See you guys at school," I say jumping to my feet and hurrying out of the room. I manage to get to grab my stuff and get to my jeep before any of them make it outside to stop me. I wear the smile on my face all the way to school.



TEDDY IS WAITING for me on the steps. He's standing there dressed in a pair of blue skinny jeans and a white button-up shirt. He looks like he stepped off the pages of a fashion magazine and I envy his ability to pull it off so well. His dark hair is perfect, his smile—although I can tell its fake, is all white teeth and charm. There's a group of girls standing off to the side, whispering and pointing at him.

Every time he looks that direction his eyes carefully skips them. My attention is grabbed by the blonde guy standing in the overhang's shade near the entrance. He's looking at Teddy with longing. Teddy's eyes meet mine through the windshield and I flick my eyes towards the blonde and back again.

Effortlessly, he turns just enough to get a look at the blonde without being obvious. Turning back to me his eyebrows raise and he mouths the word 'hot'. I think Teddy won't be single much longer and I'm happy for him. He's such a sweet guy.

I climb out of my jeep and he comes down the stairs to meet me. This time when he loops his arm around mine I let him, Teddy isn't a threat to me. He's like me in some ways, different and mostly alone.

He doesn't trust easily, or he'd have a group surrounding him already. He's also got darkness in his life and if anything it makes me like him more because of the strength he's shown concerning it.

Him and I are totally soul-bros.

"My god, he's delicious. You think he's into me?" he whispers, pulling me closer so we aren't overheard.

"Did you not see how he was looking at you?" I ask laughing.

"Shh, I still need to hear it." He smiles with that twinkle of teasing in his eyes that helps ease some of the stress strangling me. Yeah, I'm keeping Teddy.

"You were naked to him, let's put it that way." Teddy laughs at my attempt to be 'hip' and drags me along with him to my first period class.

"Where are these four Hazards I need to meet? I saw one... and he was hot enough to scorch the ground, girl. I can't wait to see the..." his voice trails off. I sigh, I already know why. I look over my shoulder and see all four of them standing there looking at us. Phoenix has a smirk on his face because he's already in the know. The other three not so much.

Teddy leans closer to me, his mouth a breath from my ear and whispers, "If looks could kill I'd be a dead man. Wanna make it worse?" Before I can say yes or no he kisses me, open-mouthed on the ear, there's even some tongue involved. The one that responds the quickest surprises me. Barrett. He's already halfway to us when Phoenix heads him off, whispering fiercely to him with a look directed at Teddy.

Barrett gives me a puzzled look and then knowledge takes its place. They head back towards their brothers but neither one of them say anything to the other two who look mad enough to bite someone in half.

Those sneaky shits.

"This will be fun while it lasts, Nora. A bit scary too but def a riot." He leans close again, intimately and traces his fingers down the tattoo on my wrist. I raise my arm to block the fist heading towards him and turn to Hez, his arm still in my grasp.

"Bad dog," I chide, releasing his arm. Phoenix bends over laughing behind him while Hez looks at me in frustration.

"Is this the guy? The one you're hiding from us?"

I sigh and Phoenix laughs harder. Barrett stops beside me and does something surprising, he kisses my cheek and heads into class. Hez looks at Teddy then at the doorway then back at Teddy.

He instantly relaxes.

"Who are you?" he asks Teddy, but the anger he was full of seconds before is gone. He's guarded but being friendly. What the hell?

"Teddy, Nora's new bestie. Which one are you?" Teddy doesn't get intimidated easily and for this I'm thankful.

"Hezekiah. Nice to meet you Teddy," he says holding his hand out to shake Teddy's. While I'm standing there baffled. How did he figure it out?

"He caught me looking at the other guy's ass, Nora," Teddy mock whispers.

Facepalming, I walk away from the lot of them. God save me from horny teenage boys.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

EVERYWHERE I TURN the Hazards are there. Teddy gets a right kick out of it and teases me mercilessly and also teases them any chance he gets. Unfortunately, where the Hazards go their fan club of bitch-faces follow. I've already stopped at least three curses from hitting me. They designed one to make all my hair fall out and turn my skin blue. Creative but weak and it slid off me like water. The other two were little ones that would give someone warts and crossed eyes. I give them a D- for creativity and an F- for power.

The shifter girls attempted to scare me by showing me her blunt teeth. Sooo scary. Luckily for her I didn't give into the desire to growl at her. It was strong and turning it down was hard. Whatever creature is inside of me wanted to scare the crap out of them. In the process, it kind of scared the crap out of me. My control almost slipping had me having a mini-panic attack in the bathroom.

When I walk out of the bathroom and there's a small crowd of girls waiting on me, I sigh. They need to find other ways to make their point, this shit is lame. They should've also learned their lessons from the locker room.

"Hi, you guys need a tampon? I have some in my backpack." I don't but something needed to be said and period talk is always a good way to break the ice with would-be bullies.

"We warned you about being around the Hazards," says the deer shifter. Her witch friend is behind her with a glow to her brown eyes. Cookie chooses that moment to appear and stands in between me and the girls. A small ferret appears at her feet and when Cookie growls at it, it squeaks in alarm and poofs out of existence.

"You guys aren't going to drop this are you?" The witch steps forward, braver than her friends. She lifts her hands and the only thing that happens is my backpack flap moves. She's breathing heavy from exertion and looking at me, eyes widened in shock.

Mom didn't birth a fool. I always have protection charms on me somewhere. Some of which are inlaid in my clothes. I don't like taking chances.

"Ya done?" I ask. She looks around at her group of friends nervously. I wiggle the fingers on my right hand, muttering long memorized words under my breath in preparation of a spell if I need it. If they keep it up, they will discover that girls who play with fire get burned.

"Why can't you just go away?" the deer girl demands, looking like she's going to cry.

"That wouldn't change anything and you know it. Being tenacious when someone doesn't want to be with you isn't cool, yo. It makes you look desperate and desperate doesn't go well with those Coach bags you're carrying." I can be honest and a little insulting without feeling guilty. They keep trying to curse me and jump me all the time over guys who only want to get rid of them.

"Everything was fine before—"

I interrupt her, "No it wasn't and you know it."

"If you went away, he'd want me again," she says with a genuine pout in her voice. This is ridiculous.

"None of this shit has anything to do with me. Ask them! And leave me the fuck alone!" I stomp my foot and they all fall backwards from the power that little tantrum of mine throws out. I'm tired of dealing with stupid people, this is my limit. "Don't speak to me again, ladies. Go talk to the reasons you're acting like tools. It ain't me."

Without another word I turn and walk off. I continue out the front doors of the school until I'm sitting in my jeep with Cookie on the passenger seat. I'm genuinely bothered by this crap. The depth of control I had to have to keep from hurting them tore at me. This... thing inside of me wanted to. The magic inside of me wanted to.

Mom was right in picking my name. I'm definitely not the good witch.

The knock on the window startles me. It's rare that someone can sneak up on me but I was so lost in my head I ignored the warning

signs. That's a mistake I can't repeat. I look over at Hez who's looking at me with a bit of concern. Oh right, the bond. They probably felt me use magic.

I turn the key and roll the window down part way. "What?" I ask in irritation.

"What happened?"

"Your pep squad cornered me outside the bathroom."

He frowns and anger fills his eyes, "Did they hurt you?"

"You need to tell your clingers it's over—if that's the case. Don't avoid them, don't be nice. Effing tell them there's nothing there. Otherwise I will spend the next two years picking up pieces of those girls and stuffing them in your lockers." I start the car and roll my window up. Without another look I head towards home, my real home. I need to pack the rest of my stuff and now's the time to do it. I text Maggie and ask her to excuse me from school, tell her where I'm going—I'm not a complete idiot, and turn the music on.

The gist of it is, I'm not mad at anyone. I'm mad at the circumstances. Essentially, the guys were leading them along, not intentionally I see now, but because they didn't set solid boundaries, the girls have hope. I know that Phoenix said he told her he wasn't interested but I imagine it wasn't clear and precise. Knowing him it was, hey, don't want to hang out right now, maybe later. Stringing anyone along isn't a nice thing to do and sometimes it makes people do stupid things to try to get attention from their love interest.

Dangerous things like picking on someone who can kill them.

I pull into the driveway and almost pull right back out. There's a morbid assortment of dead animals on the front porch. I see raccoons and squirrels and rabbits. I'm pretty sure there's a skunk in there too. I can smell it.

My mystery stalker is bringing them here? I grit my teeth and climb out; it doesn't smell pretty. The air is thick with that cloying smell of decay that's almost sugar sweet but makes your stomach want to empty your lunch on your shoes. It's been warm so several of the bodies are bloated and there's a swarm of flies buzzing around them loud enough to sound like a small chainsaw. The pile of carnage becomes even more disturbing when I spot the wilted red rose on top of the pile.

This weirdo has to go.

Bypassing the porch I use my key to unlock the garage and gather the things I'll need to get rid of the problem. Shovel, face mask, gloves and big garbage bags. It takes me two hours to clean it all up, bury the animals in the backwoods, and scrub the porch with bleach and a power washer. Tired, I sit on the stairs inside the house and contemplate the emptiness.

No one's been here since I left. The house smells stale and other than the lingering smell of death from outside, there's nothing else. Finished with my glass of water I take it to the kitchen, rinse it and make sure there's no old food in the fridge. There's not, it's empty—I'm the one who always does the grocery shopping, and I hadn't been since we got here. Heading upstairs I pack all my stuff including my stereo and take one last, long look at the pretty purple walls of my bedroom.

I know with one hundred percent surety, I'm never coming back here to live and I'm okay with that.

It takes me four trips to load all my things into the car. I also snag some of my mom's pictures that dad has lying around gathering dust and I lock the door with a sense of finality. Climbing into the car I take one last look at my almost home and back out of the driveway.

My Dad is on his own, and part of me hates that I'm looking at it that way, but he's the grown up. He made this mess; he has to fix it. Other things take priority now, like finding out who my wildlife murdering Romeo is.



MAGGIE IS WAITING for me on the large screened-in porch of the house with a pitcher of lemonade. There are times like this that she reminds me of the cliché southern mom so hard that I almost tease her about it, but that might land lemonade on my head. It's fresh squeezed and tastes delicious, I'd rather drink it.

I sit in the chair beside her, pick up the sweaty glass of cold lemonade and down it in a few swallows. The tartness of it mixes with the sugar and I smile in appreciation. She makes damn good lemonade for a cliché.

"What happened?" she asks, rocking back and forth in the pristine white rocking chair, her eyes on the trees lining the driveway.

I opt to tell her the truth. "The guys have some gal stalkers."

She chuckles and says, "They're too chicken to tell them to buzz off. Those girls have been nothing but a pain in the ass since last year. I even tried talking to their mamas about it but it got me nowhere."

"They seem to think that getting rid of me will fix the problem."

"It's sad that they haven't realized they *are* the problem. Did you get on the boys?"

"Yeah, I was a bit... mad."

She chuckles again and looks at the jeep. "I see you packed the rest of your stuff. I spoke to the lawyer today, he filed for custody and pulled in a few favors. The judge approved it and the papers will be sent to the address your dad provided. I doubt he'll contest it but just in case I have backups ready. I tried to get him on the phone but he's not answering."

The relief is instant and the guilt fleeting. "Did you have the lawyer contact the firm for the estate?"

"Yes, everything is being transferred and you'll have access to anything you need within forty-eight hours. I've also arranged for movers to take out his things and place them in a storage facility and the house will be put up for sale by the end of the month."

"Wow, Maggie—you're fast. Thank you for taking care of all that."

"I'm raising four teenage boys, I have to be and you know that I don't mind doing that at all. I'm rather good at those types of things." She sips her lemonade and then looks at me for the first time. A warning that I'm not going to like the subject change. "How much do you know about the bond?"

"Mom's grimoire is sketchy on it and only gave some basic information. I know it's rare and that it lasts a lifetime but that's all, really." I know the rumors but I don't bother mentioning those.

"Did you know that witch-born are always the same age as the witch they're bound to?" I shake my head. "They're born within a few months of each other and to date the largest collective was only three." She sips her lemonade again and continues rocking. "The bond forms when the witch takes their first breath. They don't even have to be near each other for it to happen."

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" The boys obviously knew, but no one told me anything and it's annoying and unfair.

"You were young and incredibly strong for a witch your age. Your mom was concerned that telling you would change you somehow, that it would affect your relationship with them."

"Sometimes you grown-ups don't know everything you think you do," I comment and pour another glass of drink.

"When I saw you the first time, minutes after you were born, I had a vision. In it, I saw you hovering over a field stained with blood, below you were four beasts and in that vision you were so angry that it scared me enough to tell your mother. I think that was my first mistake." This grabs my complete attention.

"You thought I'd gone dark in it," I state the obvious.

"Actually, no, but your mother took it that way and no matter how much I argued against it she wouldn't budge. She lived with that misplaced fear and every time you grew in power she got more paranoid about it. It was a bone of contention between the two of us. I argued that as the seer it was my job to interpret it, not hers but your mom was idealistic and powerful and—"

"Too stubborn to listen to anyone. I vaguely remember."

"At times, yes. I had to convince her to even let you around the boys. Their bonding with you had already begun and when they went extended amounts of time without being near you, they got sick. When your father took you away... it was hard on them... but instead of seeing why you left they focused on what it did to them." She sips her drink and sits it down. "I hope you'll be patient with them, because whatever is in your future you have to face it together."

"Does a witch bond have to be romantic?"

She laughs a little and the tense frown between her eyes relaxes. "No, but they often are. I would rather the five of you wait a bit on the more physical aspects of it." Ah, there's mama coming out to play.

"I won't be forced into anything by magic and I won't let them be either. I control my own destiny, no one else—not even them." My statement encompasses all the aspects.

"Don't mistake the bond, Nora. All it does is give you a supernatural attachment to them, not an emotional one. Anything past that is your own doing. There's no spell in the world that can make you love someone."

Inside I relax a little, that's good. Great, in fact. It'll be on my terms not some fate crap that I don't care about.

"They aren't forced either. To be connected to you, yes, but loving you is their own choice."

Snorting I say, "Ha, they love me like a toothache, Maggie."

"So you say." She smiles at me. "What made you stop by and get your things from the house?"

I decide to tell her about the dead animals too. This brings her frown back.

"It's unusual for a shifter to continue that behavior. Typically, it's one large gift. A deer or other prey animal of similar size. A bunch of small ones make no sense to me. Was there anything else?"

"A rose." I slump back in my chair and stare out at the open yard in front of the house that's surrounded by trees. Birds are digging around for worms or whatever bugs they eat. A fat groundhog pops up to look at us before continuing to eat his field salad. The picture is idyllic and calming until I see the two cars coming down the road.

"I'm pretty sure they're bitten, like me. There's this feeling of taint to him... a wrongness I can't figure out and my instincts tell me they're dangerous." But as I watch the four guys climb out of the cars and prowl towards us I realize that the danger is right in front of me, because my damn heart rate picks up. My cheeks heat with a blush and butterflies while absent in the field are alive and well in my traitorous stomach.

"Any idea who it is?" she asks me.

"No, it could be anyone honestly. With them being a witch first it changes the game. Even a weaker powered witch is capable of hiding themselves from us with enough experience, especially if they have a group of helping them. Something this guy does have."

"You sound more educated than most senior witches I know. Who taught you?"

"I did. Mom left me all of her books." It took years for me to go through all of them and I keep them all in a spelled hidden box that's the size of a jewelry box. My Mom made it and as far as I know, it's unique in its creation. I don't say any of this out loud, some things should remain secret.

"She had quite the collection, if I recall. I have my own, in the library. Feel free to read them anytime you wish. I'll give the grimoire permission for you to search through it." I thank her and then my

attention is grabbed by the group of trouble heading towards me. I hold my glass in front of me like a shield while the guys walk up the sidewalk in a slow mo tandem movie walk. I wonder if they do that shit on purpose?

"Hey Nora," Phoenix says, sitting on the top step with his back against the side of the porch so he can turn to look at me. I nod at him but that's all I do. I might have goofed off with them at the lake, I may be friendly with them a good bit of the time—some of the time, but I don't trust their motives. Not yet.

"Why'd you ghost?" Oz asks, sitting beside of Phoenix in a similar pose.

"I left you to deal with your groupies before it becomes my problem to deal with," I say after staring at Hez who looks away.

"Say what?" Barrett asks, propping one foot on the bottom step and crossing his arms. His eyes go automatically to Hez and Phoenix.

"The clingy girls who think I'm in the way of their happily ever after. They keep coming at me as if getting rid of me will make you propose and ride off into their insane sunset," I explain, adding more sarcasm than I probably need to.

"You mean Hez and Phoenix, right?"

I shrug. "I mean all of you. I'm sure you and Oz have your own set of clingers."

Maggie laughs under her breath and gets up and goes into the house. Giving us the privacy that I don't want but probably need to have to say what I need to say.

"I told her—" Phoenix begins.

I cut him off before he can feed me the same crappy line from before. "You didn't tell her enough. Deal with it. I don't care if you date them, sleep with them or only let them sit on your laps at lunch time—make them not my problem," I point at them as I speak.

"You want us to date other girls?" Phoenix asks softly, all humor gone from his face.

"I want you to do what you want to do. I don't control your lives. We'll find a way to deal with this bond stuff but don't let it stop you from being free to make your own choices about things."

"We have made our choice," Hez says standing and moving past me to go into the house. The screen door shuts with a bang.

"We'll make sure they don't bother you anymore, Nora—but..." Phoenix says climbing to his feet. "You need to accept that we're part of your life forever."

"So you can play more head games with me, Phoenix? No thanks."

"Until I saw you again, I thought that we were angry but you're raging, Nora. I guess that leaves us to prove to you that it's genuine—that we're taking this serious. But you gotta give us a chance to do that." I want to believe him, I do. His green eyes pierce me right in the heart with the sincerity in them.

"I moved in here, what's that say?" All three brothers look at me in surprise.

"For real?" Barrett asks moving up a few steps.

"Yeah, so I guess we'll figure something out but keep in mind, if you try to mess with my head again I'll kick your asses and there'll be no forgiveness." This time I stand and go into the cool dimness of the house. Hez is sitting on the stairs and I walk around him without saying anything.

Phoenix is right, I'm angry. So much so at times that I worry about myself but I'm still squishy underneath it all and they cut me to the core. Saying 'I'm sorry' doesn't fix it. They have to work harder than that. If that makes me a bitch so be it. I've spent most of my life being let down or betrayed by some of the closest people to me, I will not spend the rest of my life being walked all over.

I deserve better.

"Are you saying you forgive us for before?" Phoenix asks softly, halfway up the stairs behind me. I pause at the top and search myself for it. I can't hide the fact that I missed them, I love them—always have. I can't hide the fact that being around them again feels right, it feels good.

I also can't hide the fact that their attempt to manipulate me because they wanted payback hurt because they made me feel something other than the need for revenge that's burning a hole inside of my heart. Then they took it away, yanked it out from under me like a rug and went, ha. I don't even feel bad anymore for not contacting them.

Nothing was on purpose. Especially watching my mother be murdered.

"Earn it," I answer, gritting my teeth to keep from saying anything grouchy and unneeded.

"We can do that." It's barely loud enough for me to hear, but I do. Instead of saying anything else I finish the walk to my room and shut the door. Leaning against it I slide down to the floor as Cookie appears and leans against me. For the fiftieth time in a couple of weeks, I cry silently into Cookies fur.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHEN MAGGIE CALLS me down to dinner, I almost don't go, but all this hiding in my room I've been doing is uncommon for me. I like being outside and moving, not hiding on my bed like a five-year-old with a broken heart. Or in my case a sixteen-year-old. I came to this conclusion after a few hours of staring at the ceiling and listening to Cookie snore.

They made me hope and open myself up and then essentially took a shit on me to put a band-aid on an old wound that needed to be talked about, worked out. Yes, I didn't contact them but they didn't contact me either. Yes, I missed them and I'm pretty sure they missed me too. Yes, I didn't know about the bond and that caused them pain, but they did and didn't tell me.

Something I was feeling bad about until their little crappy play. I would never cause them pain on purpose—a memory of punching Oz in the throat springs into my mind. Okay, I would never cause them emotional pain on purpose because saying I won't punch another one in the throat or worse would be a lie.

After dinner, I'm taking a walk. I haven't been exercising regularly and the last thing in the world I want to do is to lose all the work I put into being in fighting condition. Plus walking alone, in the dark, has another benefit. Slowly, I walk down the stairs, unsure of what's waiting on me. When I push open the kitchen door a crack, I discover the guys and Maggie sitting at the table talking companionably. I also see the place setting for me.

I watch Phoenix pluck a roll off the plate that's piled high with them and sit one on my empty plate. He knows I love them. Oz

grabs a salad bowl and fills it with salad and extra cheese, just like I like it. He sits it beside the plate. Barrett gets up and walks to the fridge to fill an empty glass with sweet tea and bring it back to the table. He also sits it beside of my plate.

Hez, who I didn't expect to do anything stands up and puts the spaghetti sauce down first and then puts the noodles on—the weird way I eat it. He adjusts the folded napkin and then returns to his own seat.

How incredibly sweet of all of them and... sly. They did it when they thought I wouldn't see. How do I thank someone who's being sweet sneakily? It also makes me wonder if I was giving Maggie all the credit when there's a chance they've been doing things like this all along. There was a rhythm to it that only happens from practice.

"You going to join us, Nora?" Maggie asks without lifting her eyes from her plate. With a small huff I fully open the door and go to my place at the table. All the guys watch every move I make. Hesitantly, I smile and start eating. There's a pause, like the one before a big storm before they all start talking again.

"I have a game tomorrow, it's going to be hard not to hurt someone. We're playing a full zoo team and they play dirty," Hez says, glancing at me. I fight the urge to smile. A zoo team is a full shifter team, no witches. They do play dirty and hard. There are always serious injuries after this kind of game.

"Better guard your ass bro, their defense has a hard on for you," Oz teases.

"Me? The last time we played them the entire team chased you around the school grounds for over an hour," Hez counters.

"He should've guarded his girl better," Oz says then seems to remember I'm in the room; his eyes shoot straight to me. I raise an eyebrow and keep eating my spaghetti. Why would I care if he was doing some dude's girl?

I can't promise I won't care if he's doing it now, no matter what I say about them dating or being with other people. Not that I'll tell any of them about it. I'm not their girlfriend, I have absolutely no say about who they're banging. I try to ignore the fact it makes me chew my food so hard I can hear my teeth grinding.

"Isn't that the one that tried to give you a love potion and instead it gave you pink dots on your face?" Barrett asks, popping a piece of roll into his mouth with a satisfied smile.

Thank you, Mr. Moodlightener.

"You sure that's all she gave you?" I tease. The silence of the room makes me regret speaking up. Then they're all laughing at once, even Maggie. That insecure part of me that's going to be weird for a little while around them, relaxes just a little. Fluffy-sarcasm is my go to in most situations. The poke without the sting.

"Better be, Oz," Maggie warns smiling but with total Mom eyes.

"Uh, never laid a finger on her mom," Oz says with his mouth but the twinkle in his eye says something different.

Planting a smile on my face I chew slower so I don't break a tooth.



AFTER DINNER I duck out the front door before any of the guys notice I'm leaving. I'm sure they will soon enough and I'm counting on it. My plan is to lure out the stalker. I didn't tell Maggie because she'd be upset with me but I think that me walking alone, with it being dark will potentially make him want to say hi. That's how it works in the movies and for once I'm willing to give it a try. No shame in playing the ditzy bait girl.

Plus, I know the guys can track me, which will mean they can track him since I'm hoping that he'll show himself.

I'm about halfway through town, almost to the park which is mostly wooded and secluded when I feel the first stirrings of someone following me. My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out to look at it.

This is Phoenix, Oz and Barrett are behind you, trying to get a location on whoever is following you.

Good, they did what I thought. The phone vibrates again.

I get that you're a badass but this guy might be too, it's stupid to try to deal with it alone.

I type a rather rude answer and then backspace. I can't admit that I knew they'd follow, because it might hurt their pride. I did this because I honestly don't think the guy wants to hurt me, yet. I think he wants me to know he's 'interested'. Isn't that the result of him leaving all of those dead animals?

Stay back and don't scare him off. I got this.

His answer is immediate. *Nora, we're not going to let you confront him alone.*

No dip, but stay back until I actually need help.

The little bubble that shows that he's typing pops up and then stops and then pops up again and one word finally comes through. *Fine.*

Smirking to myself I put the phone back in my pocket and start humming to myself.

"Your friends are close behind me. Did you tell them to follow you?" The voice that comes out of the darkness behind me is distorted with magic. I pause and then keep walking. He'll follow, I'm confident about that.

"They tend to do whatever they want." I keep my voice light, adding a little quiver to it as if I'm startled. "Why are *you* following me?"

"Did you get my presents?" I put my hand in my jeans pocket and lightly move my fingers in the shape of a casting rune. When the spell leaves me and heads slowly towards him, it's stopped dead in its tracks by a stronger spell. A much stronger spell. The protections on this guy are off the charts and definitely not from just him. This spell required a lot of power behind it. Spells like that can't be done by one person and it's a spell fueled by sacrifice. The taint of it makes my magic recoil like it touched something nasty.

Sacrifices aren't all about killing things. A sacrifice spell is all about the importance of the item offered to whatever bad dude on the other side is offering power. It has to be something or someone precious to you, something irreplaceable. Laughter, happiness the first smile of your newborn child. A person you love the most.

Nasty business, sacrificial magic. My mom hated the stuff and forbade me asking questions about it. After she died, I had a mini-rebellion and read everything I could about it. My dive into the dark was incredibly short lived. The things I read made me sick to my stomach. How could people offer up such precious things for an inkling of power that has an expiration date? Not to mention there is always a catch.

Always. Much like what the humans think demons do. Except that's not quite how it goes down, most demons couldn't give two shits about humans. Never trust something you have to call to this world with a sacrifice, ever.

I'm not like my mom, but I'm not a sadist either.

I stop walking and turn towards the general area of where the voice is coming from. I don't look around or try to figure out where he's hiding in the shadows, instead I look up at the moon peeking through the trees.

"Not really no, my freezer isn't big enough," I answer after waiting for the tension to wind more.

"You have a dark sense of humor, I knew you were different," he says then chuckles. I'm almost positive he's coming from my left and I'm not the only one who thinks so. I feel one of the guys over there—Barrett I think, the quiet one. He's close but not close enough. Barrett is the best at sneaking up on anything, including cray-cray bitten witches.

"Who are you?"

"An admirer who knows what you are," he says, his voice sounding a bit farther away. He knows they're there so I imagine he has a plan to get away from them, I only have these few minutes to remember everything I can about him. If I can lull him enough to relax a little, which isn't looking likely, he might give something away.

"How can I thank you properly if I don't know who you are," I make sure to look to the right, where he's trying to project his voice. If I only had human hearing I'd be fooled; since he claims to know what I am, he should know he can't fool me this way.

"You're like me, stuck in between two worlds. They want me to tell them everything but I won't tell them this."

Apparently there's no keeping him on track, he's already off in effing left field.

If I ask who 'them' is, I don't think he'll answer. I try a different tactic.

"Can I have a hint at least? We can call it our little game."

There's a pause which I hope is him contemplating answering me. I know he hasn't left yet, I can still feel him close by; his eyes make my skin feel dirty.

"I like how they pick on you," his voice is even fainter now, and heading away.

Damnit. I stand there until I know he's completely gone and then turn in the direction that I feel all four of the Hazards. Oz slinks into the moonlight and I can't help but admire him in this form. He's about twice the size of a normal lion—where he gets the mass, no

one knows; magic is mysterious. His mane nearly glows blue as he comes towards me in full on stalk mode.

His eyes are so light they look eerie in all the darkness of his fur, and they're lasered on me.

"If you bitch at me, I'll shave your head while you sleep, Oz," I warn, meaning every single word.

"What you did was dangerous, you could've told us and let us help," Hez says coming to stand even with his brother.

"Your help scared him off, Hez." I know I shouldn't be upset they followed, I wanted them to, but I hoped they'd have enough sense to figure out what I was doing. I grab onto my anger and push it down, it's pointless and will simply cause more problems between us.

"You did it on purpose, didn't you?" Phoenix the most observant out of the four says. I look over at him and smile.

"Maybe," I answer and start heading home. My stalker is long gone, but he gave me a bigger clue than he realizes. Whether he did it on purpose, I'm not sure but it's a good one.

He's watching me at school.

The guys fall into step with me. Oz is now wearing a pair of loose basketball shorts and nothing else, while Barrett is wearing a pair of jeans. Only a pair of jeans. Is it terrible that I checked them all out? I mean, guys their age shouldn't have abs like that. Shows how inhuman they really are.

"Nora, did you get anything useful at least?" Phoenix asks. I start to look over at him and then look back to the front. I'll stare like an idiot if I look at him—and not at his face.

Ugh, I'm no better than a horny teenage boy.

"Yes, he's got someone in our school or he goes there." I see no reason not to share that. Five sets of eyes are better than one and these four have other senses that I don't. Yet.

"Teddy?" At his question, I stop and turn to Phoenix.

"No, it's not him. He looks at your ass way more than mine, so I doubt he'd waste his time stalking me. Instead, he'd be stalking one of you," Phoenix smirks and I start walking again.

"He's gay?" Hez asks in surprise. Everyone starts laughing, including me.

"It could be anyone, to be honest. Being bitten and surviving gives a witch an edge a regular shifter doesn't have. Think of how well you four hide it, he's probably better at it."

"Like you?"

"Yeah, he's like me. I don't think his witch side is super powerful, but he has help, that's the only way he's hiding. I'm trying to decide who's the bigger threat, the 'them' that he mentioned or him. We won't know until I can get him to show himself again."

"You've put a lot of thought into this," Hez says coming up to my right side.

"What do you think I do all day? Think about eyeshadow palettes?"

"Well, you *are* a girl," he defends. He doesn't need to know that I do in fact think of things like makeup and clothes. I like them both I simply don't fool much with them. Having nice makeup won't save my ass when I find the shifter who killed my mom.

"Didn't you have practice tonight?" I ask Hez.

He shrugs and says, "I only play sports to make mom happy, none of us are really into them." That's news and I file it away for later. "Plus, it lets me hit people and not get in trouble for it." Ah, the real reason. Maybe I should take up a sport.

"Do they have any girl sports where we get to hit people?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"No, unless you count cheerleading. There's always a catfight after a game between the cheerleaders," Phoenix says with a smile.

"Nothing against cheerleading but it's not my jam."

"Is it the short skirts?" Phoenix teases.

"No, it's the fact that I can't hit anyone for points." They all laugh and we keep walking.

"You know, most people in your situation would be more scared," Barrett muses from behind me.

"At least, you didn't say girls," I tease.

"No reason to, I know a lot of guys who'd be freaked out too."

"I don't think many things freak Nora out, bro. Plus, she hits like a fucking truck." I can't help but smile at that, Oz found out the hard way. They laugh again and Oz gets a bit of teasing from his brothers.

Feeling the need to defend him a little I say, "Any of you are welcome to spar with me and find out."

"You're on!" Phoenix says, sounding way happier than he should.

Oz looks at him and says, "Dude, she's gonna beat your ass. I totally gotta see this."

"I have forty pounds on her and shifter speed," Phoenix boasts.

"You'll see. Can I video it?" Oz asks hopefully.

I laugh and shake my head. "I'll go easy on you boys."

We spend the rest of the trip home teasing each other about ass whoopin' and them teasing me about how they're the ones going to go easy on me. They think. I'm looking forward to showing them what I mean by easy.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE GUYS GOT WORKED up enough that we all end up in the workout room. I changed into something more suited to fighting four super strong shifters and I also sneak a taser in my pocket. It's a small one that will only send enough juice to sting them, potentially quite a bit but they do have some advantages over me.

Whatever animal I'm going to become is fast, has claws and sharp teeth but I don't have the strength the guys do. Especially when it comes to slippery Barrett. I plan on making them work for it and winning.

I stretch to warm up and watch them laying about or leaning against the wall. They need more training and Maggie knows it; she said as much. I'm going to see how much training they need and if I have to elect myself to teach them until they need someone better than me.

I'm not being egotistical, only honest. When I say it'll take a while, I mean it.

I stand and turn my left shoulder towards them. "Who's first?"

An hour later, three of them are laying on the ground groaning and cussing while a fourth one, Oz is leaning against the wall laughing. He chose to stay out of this exploration into how to temper their egos.

"How the—who—where did you learn that?" Hez finally manages to spit out. He rolls onto his side and I watch the purple bruise covering the side of his mouth and chin start to fade. He was running his mouth until I kicked him in it. Twice.

Not that I'm completely unscathed, they got lucky a few times but only because they all ganged up on me. Their stances are sloppy, they have no discipline whatsoever and whoever has been teaching them is a shit teacher. My instructor would've shredded them and their egos in two-minutes flat.

Now I have to figure out how to either get him to train them or find someone who can. After this little bout I know I won't be able to, our feelings for each other will always get in the way. None of them came at me full-on, not even when I pissed them off.

"I'm going to call my former trainer tomorrow and see if he's willing to take you on. You guys suck, do you even practice?" I ask them sitting down on the floor to take a long drink of water.

"We don't suck!" Phoenix protests but doesn't get up from the floor.

"One girl beat all three of you, at the same time, bro. We all suck," Oz says with quite a bit of satisfaction in his voice. I think probably because he has company now for his I-suck-team.

"Who was your trainer?" Barrett asks, he's the fastest of the four and gave me a bit of a fight mostly because he's good at dodging. Phoenix put up the best fight, he's designed to siege. Hez took the most hits but I know his weaknesses too.

"Don Gregory," I answer taking another drink of water. Their silence is answer enough. "Because you're witch born he might take you on, we'll see. If he does, then you'll discover what real training is and then you'll have a chance to truly kick my ass."

They might actually pull it off, eventually. It depends on how serious they take everything and how hard they're willing to work for it. I know that it'll take them a good bit of time. It won't happen overnight and Don won't be gentle on them.

"I'm game," Phoenix says laying his head back on the floor.

"You say that now. I'm going to go shower and leave him a voice-mail." I climb to my feet and dodge a few hands trying to trip me up. Laughing, I walk out the door and to my room. I find my phone on my bed and grab it as I head into the bathroom. Beating them wasn't easy in the literal sense of the word, but I consider it easy because of what they are.

I dial a number I memorized a long time ago and wait for it to ring four times, then I hang up. Don is paranoid with a capital P. I call back and the line picks up—no one says hello, but they never do.

"It's Nora, I have some witch-born who can't fight their way out of a wet paper bag. I'm in Singe at Maggie Hazard's house," I say then hang up. I sit the phone on the sink and start stripping to get into the shower.

The shower is quick but satisfying, I'm sore and I'll definitely have some bruises tomorrow but it feels nice to stretch my training muscles. It feels good to fight again. Wrong or right I love a good fight so more often than not I have to try to solve something without a physical confrontation because I can get a little... carried away. Don used to tell me that violence should always be used carefully, intelligently. He said anyone who gets ignorant when they're angry becomes a danger to more than their opponent; they become one to themselves.

I climb onto my bed, my eyes on my phone and the messages the guys have sent me since I was in the shower, and reach over to pet the dark lump that's Cookie when I feel something wet. That's unusual; a familiar spends most of the time incorporeal so smells and liquids won't stick to them. I look over and jump backwards off the bed in horror.

The animal on my bed isn't Cookie, it's a large black dog that resembles her enough to have fooled me with a cursory look. Obviously, it's dead and has been for at least a few hours but that's not the truly concerning part. No, that belongs to the fact that someone put a dead dog on my bed while I was in the shower in a house surrounded by wards. One inhabited by four witch-born, me and a witch who was powerful enough to rival my mother in some ways.

"Maggie!" I yell, hesitant to leave the room. There's foreign magic here, it's making my skin itch and whatever it is, is active and wasn't until I touched the dog. I can't believe I was that stupid. Before I came here and had the lid ripped off of my emotional soup pot, I would've checked the house, room, shower, food—everything.

I've gotten sloppy.

Whoever he is has also seen my familiar, which means he's been following me more than I realized. Hidden in a way I didn't feel. That's concerning too.

"Nora!" Maggie exclaims from the other side of the door, she's stopped because she can feel the spell. "There's a spell here, a nasty one."

“What’s it do?” Without being able to get closer to it, I can’t feel anything more than some malevolence. I’m afraid to move because I’m pretty sure there’s more than one spell.

How the hell did he place these spells in fifteen minutes with no one knowing? I let my senses expand seeking out the rest of the spells. There’s exactly four of them and that can’t be a coincidence.

He’s targeting the guys.

One of which pushes the door open with enough force to make it break its hinges and bounce off the wall behind it. Phoenix stands there, eyes glowing—untouched by the spell that’s now dissipating back out into the world.

Romeo doesn’t know their special abilities, which means he doesn’t know they’re mostly immune to spells cast by anyone but me—as morbid as it is, I’m the only witch in existence who can use magic against them. He also doesn’t know that with a bond to me, they’re even stronger and their already natural immunities are enhanced.

His eyes meet mine. “How many?”

“Three left, you’ll need to walk all around the room and deal with the one on the bed,” I say, remaining in place. The guys might be immune but I’m not. I’m not entirely sure they’ll do anything to me but I’m not taking the chance either.

“That’s the neighbors’ dog, I’ll get it taken care of,” Oz says from the doorway.

After Phoenix, thoroughly walks around the room and deals with the one on my bed, he and his brother wrap the dog in the sheets and carry it outside. I walk to the window, that’s now open. I’m guessing this was his entry point and I’m guessing that he wasn’t alone. This feeling of violation doesn’t make me want to hide.

It makes me angry.

I look outside at the endless woods behind the house and the crawling feeling on my skin makes me think he’s out there, watching. I smile, a not so nice smile and lift up my hand.

My middle finger raises as I yell, “I’m going to shove my foot up your ass, Romeo!” Hez and Barrett come up behind me to look over my shoulders at the woods. “And theirs!” I add.

“Is he out there?” Hez asks quietly, his eyes searching the tree line.

"Somewhere. I don't think this is all just a romance game, there's more to it but I'm not sure what yet." If it were only about courting he'd have never placed spells that could hurt me, it doesn't fit the whole profile thing. This is something more than a shifter courting me.

"Do you think it has anything to do with the mess your father has landed in?" Maggie asks, squeezing in between the boys to stand at the window with me.

"Maybe, but I'm not sure... this guy knows what I am, or thinks he does, but he doesn't know what the boys truly are. Especially what they are to me." I sigh and cross my arms. The presence is moving away, quickly and with its absence the night goes back to normal. Why can I feel him—them—whatever, at times but not at school or other times?

None of this is making sense.

"He's insane, Nora. I can smell it when he's close—when I try to follow him the scent is erased, but they made a mistake this time. You're right, he's not alone... there's a whole fucking pack of bitten," Phoenix says coming up behind me. I turn to him and he's covered in dirt and sweaty from what I'm assuming is him running through the woods after our unwanted guests.

One bitten is dangerous, an entire pack of them is an apocalypse. It explains the strength of the spells, the multiple spells and being able to keep tabs on me without me feeling them. I can feel him because he lets me.

"Any idea how many?"

"A lot, Nora," he answers.

"We need a new type of wards," Maggie says and pulls away from the window. The murmur of her voice as she calls someone is the only noise in the silent room.

How are we going to be strong enough to fight an army of bitten when we're a mess? They're essentially untrained, our bond isn't fulfilled and we're barely getting along.

As if fate herself is listening, the doorbell rings.



AS ODD AS IT IS, I know it's Don Gregory. I feel him down there now, he's letting me know he's here. Alpha males are a pain in the ass and not only is he one but the four standing behind me on the stairs are too.

I open the door and he grunts at me and walks past me without a word, heading straight for the guys. He stops at the foot of the stairs and looks at each of them for several seconds before turning back to me.

"You're right, they need a lot of work." He turns back to them. "Training starts at four a.m. in three days. Any mundane activities need to be pushed back and you'll do exactly as I say when I say."

"Can you train us well enough to beat her?" Phoenix asks in a teasing voice. Honestly, I think part of him is serious.

Don barks a laugh and says, "No. Your training will mirror hers so you can work as a unit but none of you will ever be able to beat her."

I watch the various emotions chase themselves across all four of the guy's faces.

"Why not?" Hez asks, the first to cave to his own ego.

Don watches him like a hawk does a fat little mouse then says, "It is not your destiny to beat her, it is your destiny to have her back. One day, if you stop measuring the size of your dick compared to hers, you might be equal—but never better."

That is the most I've ever heard Don talk at once and I'm so floored by it that I don't comment on what he actually said.

He walks to Maggie, bows and when he straightens very politely says, "I'll need accommodations and the contract signed. I'll charge double my normal fee for three of them but regular wages for the hyena—he has the most potential and will be the easiest to train."

Way to go, Phoenix.

Maggie is smiling and has a bit of a twinkle in her eye; it takes me a minute to realize why but when I do; I facepalm. Maggie thinks he's cute.

"Right this way, I have a room that I think you'll like." She motions to the stairs and he follows her past the boys and out of sight.

"Did he just say Phoenix is the only one of us who doesn't completely suck?" Hez asks no one in particular. Everyone laughs cos yeah, that's exactly what he said.

"None of us took it serious but Phoenix, not even me," Barrett says his eyes still on the space at the top of the stairs where his Mom and Don disappeared from view. I'm a little surprised about that, Barrett is the more serious one of the four. He's also the physically strongest. I can see how that might make him a fuzz lazy about training. If you think you can simply punch your way—or squeeze in his case—through all of your opponents it might give you the confidence to think you don't need to learn anything else.

Plus, we're all sixteen.

If my life hadn't taken the turn it did, I know I'd be different. My biggest concerns would be what to wear to the fall dance and the latest fashion trends. I'd be naïve, a typical sixteen-year-old witch. I'm a little surprised to discover there's no pang of longing for that. Not one twitch.

There's nothing typical about the life I have or the people in it and I'm okay with that. My eyes land on Phoenix who's staring hard at me and also not wearing a shirt. They should really thank the mystics that they were blessed as supernatural creatures. When my eyes raise to his again he winks.

Yeah, I'm really okay with it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SOMEHOW THEY TALK me into going to their football game. I'm pretty sure it'll be the last one that Don lets them attend. I don't really want to go but they want my support and I like hotdogs. Phoenix and Barrett insist I ride up with them, Barrett driving after Phoenix loses at arm wrestling. I end up in the front seat with Phoenix leaning in the space between the seats, only a few inches from me.

There's a tension there that exists between me and all of them. I'm not sure exactly what kind of tension—I have my suspicions—but it's good, whatever it is. I know eventually it'll hit the point where it becomes obvious in a way I can understand it. When I—no, we—allow it to.

Whether that happens I don't know, I can't see the future like Maggie can but I do know that underneath it all, I'm looking forward to being close with them again. It's a feeling that can't be replicated or substituted. Being close with the Hazard boys is like wrapping myself in a warm, comforting blanket of love and closeness that I didn't realize how much I truly missed until right this second.

Damn it all.

"Nora, you ever gonna answer or you know, close your mouth? I think you're drooling a bit," Phoenix teases, wiping at the invisible drool on my chin. I play smack at his hand and roll my eyes at him.

"Answer what?" I ask.

"Told you she wasn't paying attention," Barrett comments giving me a quick glance before turning his gaze back to the road.

"I asked if you had a date for the fall dance yet."

"Uh, no." I hadn't put that much thought into it. When I saw the flyer I figured that going stag was the way to go, I'm not about to ask one of the Hazard boys and risk looking like an idiot because they have a line of dates.

"Cool, we'll take you," Phoenix says with a smug smile on his face.

"We'll?" I ask in surprise.

"Yes, the four of us," he says slowly, like I'm a simpleton.

"Does this mean I get four boxes of candy?" Isn't that something guys give their dates? I'm not really sure, dating hasn't been high on my priority list, but I love candy so if they do that'll earn them major brownie points.

"If you want candy, sure."

Okay, so that's not a thing. I already know I'll be googling how to date later being the loser I am when it comes to these things. That's if he means an actual date versus doing the whole friend thing. I don't know for sure and it makes me feel dumb.

"Why are you making that face?" Phoenix asks.

"What face?"

"The one you get right before you hit something."

There's one way to find out for sure. "Would this be a real date or like some friend pity date?"

Phoenix purses his lips fighting back a smile. "A real date, Nora."

"With all four of you?" He nods. "And all of you are cool with that?" He nods again. "Only me?" He nods a third time and his smile breaks free. So do the butterflies in my stomach. "Are you sure about that?" This time instead of nodding he puts his face close to mine.

"Oh, definitely," he whispers. His breath brushes my lips and I look away. That's intense, whatever it is. Way intense.

The idea of going on a date with all four of them doesn't bother me at all. It probably should but I've never been good at conforming or expecting my life to be what everyone considers normal. After fighting and working hard to become who I am, I don't ever want to have a 'normal' life.

If this circus does end up being a relationship, with *four* guys—I'll deal with it then. Now I have to work on trusting them again and them, me. We have to fix our friendship and then I'll worry about it becoming anything else.

"Are you over thinking everything again, Nora?" Phoenix asks softly.

"No," I immediately deny.

Of course I am, I always do.

I pull away from Phoenix and lean against the car door. Yes, I like him being that close, but it also freaks me out a little. I'm so paranoid about them playing a game with me again that the thought of allowing myself... eff it.

"Are you guys playing another fucking mind game with me?" I demand turning to look at him and Barrett.

Phoenix's eyes are wide and Barrett swerves a bit because he's staring at me. He gets his eyes back on the road so I focus on Phoenix. His mouth is opening and closing and there's a small frown between his eyes.

"No... has this been what's going through your head all the time?" he asks softly.

"Yes." And no but I'm keeping that to myself.

"Nora..." he starts then stops. He pulls his phone out and dials a number. I hear Hez's voice on the other end. "You better fix this shit bro, she thinks all we want to do is play head games and I'm not going to risk losing her—" his voice cuts off and I hear Hez on the other end.

"Put her on the phone."

Phoenix hands me the phone but I can't move my eyes from him. I'm not going to risk losing her. That part keeps playing through my mind, that doesn't sound like he wants to play head games anymore. When he said it, he sounded genuinely bothered by it.

"Nora?" Hez asks, his voice loud in the stillness of the car. I shake my head a little and look at the phone. With a sigh, I put it up to my ear.

"What's up?"

"Do you remember when your dad had the friend come over?" I know exactly what he's talking about. Dad brought home a pedo. He didn't know the guy was a pedo, and he was rich so dad wanted him to hang around. The boys and I were playing in the backyard when this guy—Arnold—asked me to come inside and see something.

He took me to our garage and was trying to explain to me that sitting on his lap was okay when the boys all busted in. Hez jumped

on him and even though the guy was huge compared to him, those boys still saved me. How that has any relevance right now I don't know, so I ask.

"What's that got to do with now?"

"I told your dad what the guy did... or was trying to do that day." I blink several times absorbing this information. The feeling of betrayal is sharp in my heart, so sharp in fact that my eyes sting. My dad brought Arnold back after that and even encouraged me to spend time with him. I didn't but... what the fuck.

"I still," I clear my throat, "don't understand what this has to do with this particular situation, Hez."

"When I said I was going to tell your mom, he threatened to keep you away from us and then he used that threat to get us to do things for him—"

"WHAT?!" I yell, my rage instant. If my father... no, no, that MAN who pretends to be a father hurt these guys I'll rip his...

"Nora, babe not those kinds of things." The rage simmers down to a slow burn but it's still there, waiting. I'm like that big green man, I'm always angry. "He had us steal a few things but eventually I told mom because I got tired of doing it." They also were always with me after that. Sometimes even slept in the woods behind the house.

"Do you remember when I ended up in the hospital?" he asks quietly. I'm assuming it now has to do with something Dad had them do, which I'll deal with another time. Dad and I need to have a talk anyhow.

"Yeah, you were so pissed off... I remember that it cost me an entire box of cookies and my favorite stuffed unicorn to get you to stay in the bed." He was wide eyed and looked half beat to death. I wanted to take him home and cuddle him on the couch until he got better, but everyone kept telling me no.

The relevance of this weird conversation now starts to make sense.

"I still sleep with that unicorn," he said then hangs up.

I stare at the phone for a while before finally handing it back to Phoenix. My mind is stuck on the fact that he still sleeps with that unicorn. The significance of that is enough to make me sigh and let the insecurity completely go. Games greeted my return but that same guy still sleeps with the unicorn I gave him years ago.

Knowing this takes the wind right out of my vengeance-is-mine-sails.

Boys suck.



WHEN WE ARRIVE at the game, Phoenix and Barrett steer me towards seats in the front. I bitch under my breath but give in. We're here to show support for Oz and Hez, and in their opinion the front is the best place to sit, where everyone can see us—I don't agree with this theory but I didn't want to stand there arguing with them either. When I tried to climb higher, Barrett lifted me off my feet and carried me back down the bleachers. I let him because it made me laugh.

Next time though, I'm kicking him in the balls.

We're sitting at ground level and when I look forward all I can see are butts. Although, some of them are really nice butts. Two in particular. As if he senses I'm thinking about his butt, Oz turns around and blows me a kiss over his shoulder. Hez also looks and gives me a killer smile as puts his helmet on.

Someone blows a whistle loud enough that it hurts my ears, and the game is on. In a human football game there's order and rules. In our kinda football games there's strength and speed and sometimes magical abilities. You get the ball to your goal no matter who you have to go through.

Even with my natural attraction to certain kinds of violence, I'm still not a fan of the sport. I cheer when the guys cheer but my attention is pulled to the people in the bleachers. This is the perfect chance to see if I can find the stalker dude.

So far I've felt nothing from him specifically, but my instincts say someone is watching me. The little hairs on the back of my neck keep standing and my fight-or-flight instincts are pushing for me to pull a knife and start stabbing people with it. I avoid the temptation to use my magic, I'm strong but magic can be blocked or tricked. Especially when you're up against multiple casters. I know the limits of my own abilities and one on one I can take most people, but powerful magic like this I can't fight alone.

I need the guys.

However, I can try to discover the identity of the stalker and his crew. One on one I can take him, bitten or not. He's already changed, unlike me but I'm pretty sure it wasn't the natural order of things. Someone helped him or turned him with a specific purpose in mind and unfortunately I think it has to do with me. Why else play his game?

Teddy hasn't answered my texts for a couple days, which concerns me but he's also got a new boyfriend and I know how that can be. The last text I got from him was, *OMG he kisses like a dream*. They were on their first date and Teddy was nervous but really excited.

That was two days ago.

With him on my mind I pull my phone out and send a quick what's up text. I watch in the hope that there will be a reply and amazingly there is.

Sorry caught a cold from the hot boy. Out of school for a week or so.

Aww I'm sorry, want me to bring you some soup and a healing potion?

No... I'll be fine. Just need sleep. You at the game with the guys?

This makes me pause, how would he know this? I hadn't mentioned it or told him the guys even played football.

Teddy are you or your brother killing animals and stalking me? I see no reason not to straight up ask him. My biggest suspects, friend or not are him and his brother. They're new, his brother is creepy and dabbling in dark things—makes perfect sense to me.

It's not me. Is the response I get after several minutes followed by, *Abraham is into some dark things but it isn't him either.*

Strangely enough, I believe him but I also think there's more to it. I think he knows something.

What aren't you telling me?

One word. Oath.

Oaths are nasty things. Blood sworn oaths can cause you all sorts of damage if you break it. They also prevent you from speaking about the contents of it but you can say you're under one.

Are you in danger, Teddy?

Bear. Is his response. My body goes cold and my heart rate sky-rockets. I try to send another message but it keeps saying undeliverable.

I grab Phoenix's arm and say, "We gotta go check on Teddy. Now." He looks at me in concern.

"What's going on Nora?"

"He's in danger." I stand and start heading towards the car. Hez catches my eye as I jog along the field. He's standing still in the middle of a maelstrom of bodies and side steps to avoid a tackle. He makes the time out sign to his coach and runs to me followed by Oz.

"Nora, what's going on?"

"Teddy is in danger, we gotta go to him." To my amazement he jogs over to his coach and after a quick but heated exchange shoves his helmet at him and runs back to me. Oz tosses his helmet towards the coach and joins us. Barrett and Phoenix are there as well.

"What are you waiting on? Let's go," Hez says and starts walking.

They don't argue or try to avoid doing it, hell they ditched their game because I asked them to. Any lingering reservations I had about anything to do with them vanish and I hurry to catch up to the four of them.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DURING THE DRIVE I gave a brief explanation on why I thought, no—know, Teddy is in danger. I also admitted to straight up asking him if he was either the stalker or if his brother was.

“Why do you believe him?” Phoenix asks from beside me. I’m squished in between him and Oz who’s stripped off his football pads and is wearing only a wife beater.

“Instinct.” Nothing but the truth. Surprisingly, Phoenix simply nods his head.

As we pulled into the long, winding driveway they all look around and comment on the creepiness of the place. At least it wasn’t only me that got the heebie jeebies.

“Mr. Sunshine lives here?” Oz says, his eyes on the house ahead of us.

“Yeah, surprised me too,” I add, pushing him to get out when we roll to a stop. Walking right up to the door I push the doorbell, that I hear an echo in the house and wait. There’s movement inside but no one answers the door.

Me, being me, says, “If you don’t answer, I’ll knock it down.”

Feet scuffle on the other side and then the door slowly opens. Abraham is looking at me with irritation in his pale green eyes. I fight the desire to take a step back and instead step forward trying to look around him.

“What do you want?”

“Where’s Teddy?” I demand, pushing a little on the door.

“He’s in bed with a cold,” he says trying to shut the door on me. Barrett steps forward and puts a restraining hand on the door and it

stops dead. Abraham pushes on it several times but it won't budge.

"I want to see him, now."

Abraham studies me and then the guys behind me with a sigh he opens the door and I walk past him towards the stairs.

"Which room is his?"

"First door on the right." Without another word I climb the stairs two at a time and fling open the indicated door.

Teddy is laying on the bed with a group of people surrounding him. The magic that's building in the room makes me nauseous and unable to step further in. Phoenix and Oz have no problem gently moving me out of the way and walking straight towards them. Phoenix breaks the spell into pieces with his presence.

The group of people turn towards us with shouts of anger and thrown magic. I block most of it and the other two Hazard boys slip around me to stand ahead of me in a united front.

Secure in the fact I know they can watch my back I move towards the bed to see Teddy. He's ashen looking and his lips are a pale blue. If it weren't for the shallow breaths, I can see him taking, I'd think he was dead. What are they doing to him?

"Teddy?" I call, touching my hand to his clammy forehead. His eyes open and I can see the residual magic slither around his pupils like oil. The reality of what they're trying to do hits me. "Jesus christ you're trying to turn him into a witch-born." Raising my hands I use a spell I never thought I'd use but memorized just the same. The magic will take everything I have, potentially knocking me out but it should keep him from being turned.

Under my breath I say the words, pushing against the magic that still has ahold of him. When it begins to fight in earnest I push harder and when warm fur brushes my arm I know Cookie stands with me feeding me more energy.

With a sound that resembles a snapping rubber band the spell breaks and I fall to my knees. Teddy's color immediately starts to return, and he looks at me with confusion in his eyes.

"You'll be all right now, but you're coming to stay with us," I whisper, fighting the black edging my vision. The only reason I was able to use the spell is because instead of having him bitten they were trying to use tainted blood in a spell to change him.

I turn to the people who were supposed to love him and his brother who is standing in the doorway. "You turned witches and

they've gone dark... you created monsters that will one day turn on you." I swallow the vomit that threatens to come out. Bitten who've gone insane, crave the flesh of witches and cannot be controlled for any length of time. One day their Frankenstein monsters will come and eat them.

I look at the woman who I assume is his mother. She's standing the closest to Abraham and has the same dark hair and pale green eyes. "You're a shitty mom and you will pay for it. But I won't let you make Teddy suffer with you."

"He's coming for you girl, he tasted your mother's flesh and now he wants yours," she says with a smile of pure malice on her face. She waves her hand and I don't have enough juice left to stop her. They all disappear except for Teddy.

I already know who she's talking about and if I hadn't Teddy clarified it for me.

The psycho bear.



MAGGIE IS pretty chill about us bringing Teddy to the house, especially after I tell her what's going on. After fussing over him for a few hours she put him to sleep and is now holed up in her library looking for a way to break the oath because she says we need to know what he knows. Especially, about the bear bitten.

He's potentially the one stalking me except this time he brought friends.

I'm sitting outside, surrounded by Hazard boys who are watching me with mixed emotions. All of which contain concern.

Witches age slowly once we hit adulthood. We don't live for hundreds of years looking youthful—naturally, anyhow—but we can pass for twenty until we're fifty. Or in this case a teenager. I still think whoever this guy is, is hiding in plain sight at the school.

He could be anyone.

I know his eyes but only the ones I saw as he transformed into that horrible mash up of bear and man. His face was animalistic, so that's a no go too but I know he had blonde hair and if I saw his eyes unmasked by magic, I'd know him. Another thing that can be easily hidden with a spell. I have no idea how to fight this guy now. If it

isn't Teddy, and it isn't his brother that leaves hundreds of potential people it could be.

I remember his smell—burnt meat and oranges—but that's yet another thing that magic can hide, unless I fully change.

I yawn and cross my arms. I passed out right after Teddy's family used a transportation spell, and I know that Phoenix held me the entire time I slept. I woke up with my face smooshed against his chest. Just as I know they brought Teddy here and treated him like a friend. Something I genuinely appreciate.

There's one thing we can do, however. I know they say the quickest way to kill a snake is to cut the head off but you can also do damage by cutting off its tail too.

"We're going to find his pack and take them out one at a time. If they've not chewed on a witch yet, I'll try to free them of the dark magic but if they have..." I leave it unsaid, there's only one way to take care of a bitten then.

"We spoke with Don, at least as much as he was willing to listen to. He's going to start training us tomorrow," Hez says, resting his hand on my knee. I let him, touch is reassuring to them, it's why they're all touching me in one way or another.

"Mom is having a defensive team come in and do up the wards. Even he won't be able to get through them. Bitten do not have the same immunities that we do, no matter who's giving him magic to use," Phoenix says his eyes on me.

"I need to send him a message," I say staring into the woods.

"What's that?" Oz asks, his foot pushing against mine gently.

I smile and look at them all. Time to open the piggy bank.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TWO DAYS LATER...

WITH A SMILE of satisfaction on my face I look at the billboard at the edge of town. It's one that can be seen from the school and used to have an advertisement for the ice cream parlor on it. Now it has one sentence.

It's bear season, love Nora.

It's not the wittiest of statements but it'll get the point across. Oz comes up and slings his arm around my shoulder. Pressing me against his side he absently kisses the side of my head. The touching thing is something they've been sneaking in any chance they can. I'm getting used to it because honestly, I like it.

Not that I'll tell them that, yet.

Last night when I couldn't sleep the five of us sat around a fire outside and talked, like in depth about everything kinda talk. We hashed it all out. I told them everything that happened the day mom died; I told them about the pain, and the dreams, about all the moving. I told them what I think my dad's part was in all of it.

I avoid talking about the tattoo. It's still warm so they see me without sleeves quite often and every one of them has taken a turn studying it. So far none of them asked a lot about it. I'm betting that's a talk we'll have in the future. I'm not quite sure how I'll explain the dream, or what was happening in the dream. I try not to think about it too awful much. Probably because I'm not ready to face it yet. Totally not sure when I will be.

"We missed the dance," he says offhandedly.

"Yeah, I know." I don't think it's a big deal, although I was looking forward to the chocolate.

"You don't seem disappointed."

"I imagine you four would've had more fun than me, ya know getting chased around by your groupies."

He makes a face and flicks my ear. I bump the back of his knee and he catches himself on my shoulder.

"Anyone wanna go swimming?" Hez calls, holding the door of the jeep open. The last two days we've all been taking turns driving my car, it's amusing. Maggie has decided to pull us out of school—temporarily—against my wishes. I want to find the bitten, but she wants me safe. I was overruled and slightly blackmailed.

She threatened to make me join a sport. She insists it's more important for the boys to focus on their training and for the five of us to work on our relationship. Whatever it may be. She's right and I hate it, mostly. Okay, kinda. All right, I don't actually hate it but I'm annoyed that I'm being coerced into working on it.

I'm more of a do it when I'm done being stubborn kinda girl.

I let Oz steer me towards the jeep and tuck me in the back seat with Barrett and Phoenix. I can't help but laugh as he turns up the radio that's playing one of the new songs by Taylor—yeah that one—and manages to sing every single word of it. Halfway to the house I'm laughing continuously as all four of them belt out the words, in harmony even. While I secretly sing them under my breath.

When we stop in, Maggie gives us a cooler stuffed full of food and a few blankets, informing us we're taking the day off from all activities, including training. Oz packs a second cooler full of drinks and at some point everyone agrees to camp out for the night. With a very stern warning from Maggie to 'be good', we all know what she means by that. Packing up all the supplies into Maggie's SUV and the jeep goes easy, arguing over who gets the only empty seat in the jeep with me stalls us.

Teddy joined at some point, trunks on, an overnight bag packed. Without a word he climbs in the passenger side of my jeep and looks smugly at the arguing Hazard boys. When they see who took their contested prize, all four of them shut up and stare at him.

"What? I'm her best bitch, I get the seat," he says blithely. I laugh so hard I snort. His color has come back, and he's mostly back to the Teddy I know and love but there are shadows in his eyes that weren't there before. He doesn't talk about what they did to him and we still haven't broken the oath but the fear he had is fading.

It bothered me seeing him so afraid.

Grumbling the others climb into the SUV and follow close behind us. We blast the radio and sing our hearts out with the guys echoing the same song behind us. This is what it feels like to have friends and do something that doesn't involve forty ways to silently stab someone or who's the bad guy guessing game.

Pulling the hair tie out of my long, blonde hair I let it blow all around me, knowing it'll be a bitch to brush later and not caring. This is a taste of freedom I have never experienced. The freedom of youth that makes me want to experience it again, with all of them.

We get to the beach which is on the other side of the lake from the cliff I threw them off and immediately start to set up camp. No one wants to put tents up in the dark. It was decided early on that Teddy will room with me and the other four will take the larger tent.

Making the fire pit is easy, a little bit of magic and voila. After we swim for a bit and the guys have a competition on who can dive the deepest, we go hunting for firewood, the old-fashioned way. Waste of magic to keep a fire burning when there was plenty of dead trees littering the woods behind us. The sun is starting to set, and I'd like to get this finished so I can watch it over the lake, it's a beautiful sight.

"Teddy, do you think that I should cut my hair? I've kinda always wanted to but I'm—" I realize how quiet it is behind me. I turn and there's no Teddy. A chill of apprehension runs down my spine. Why isn't Teddy behind me? He was there three-seconds ago, chattering about his hair. Hence, me talking about mine.

"Teddy?" I call out softly. Then I smell it. Meat that's sat on the grill too long with a hint of oranges wafts towards me. I turn towards the source and instantly put the small saw I'm carrying up defensively in front of me. Anything can be a weapon.

"Hello, witchling," says a voice that I only hear in my nightmares. His body is wreathed in magical shadows that are moving and twisting around him, but those eyes of his... brown with threads of red in them are boring into me.

He's holding Teddy with his arm around his throat but so loosely I'm confused on why Teddy hasn't wiggled free. Teddy's eyes meet mine and he looks completely zonked out and then I see it, the bite mark on his shoulder. Oh, no. Please, no.

"You still hold back your beast, witchling. It's making you weak," he taunts, turning Teddy to keep him in between us when I take a step forward. That tells me two things. One, he's not as brave as he's making himself out to be. Two, his identity is super important enough to hide. Three, he isn't the same guy from before in the woods. This isn't my stalker.

Well, shit.

"You don't know anything about me," I say calmly, taking another step forward.

"I know everything about you, girl." For some reason my saying that didn't make him happy.

"Really? If that was the case, you'd know that when I get ahold of you—no matter how long it takes—I'll kill you." I'm not making the threat lightly, I will kill him.

"I'm too powerful for you to kill; instead, you'll join me."

I scoff, "I'm not real excited about hanging out with a guy who smells like the butcher shop and peeks in children's windows." His anger is instant and fills the small path with menace.

"I am not a pervert!" he roars.

"Hey, dude, I didn't say pervert you got to that conclusion on your own." As I talk, I take small steps forward, edging towards his right side. Because I'm a dumbass and was too relaxed and forgot to bring any weapons with me to find wood. They're all sitting back at camp, with the guys who have no idea what's going on.

Wrong again.

"This belong to you?" Phoenix says, dragging a woman into the clearing. No, not a woman, it's one of the bitch-faces. He brings her around to stand beside me but keeps his hand on her head in restraint.

"Let her go!" the psycho bear yells.

"Na, I think I'll make a small rug out of her. Man, you should've picked a different animal for her... do you realize you turned a deer?" Phoenix asks, toeing her a little.

"She is mine!" Psycho bear roars.

"I'll make you a deal, you let Mr. Sunshine go and you can have your girlfriend," Phoenix pokes me with his finger and I flick my eyes quickly down and back up. He's got a knife tucked in his sleeve, I manage to slip it into my own hand without the bear seeing me; he's too occupied with the girl.

Phoenix is now my hero of the day.

"He's bitten, I doubt he'll even survive it," psycho bear says and pushes Teddy forward. Reflexively, I step forward to catch him and when the bear grabs my arm and pulls me up against him I realize the stupidity of what I did.

This was his plan all along.

The feeling of his body pressing up against my back makes me want to throw up and stab him in the face at the same time. I'll settle for stabbing him in the face.

The decision I'm going to make will hurt him more than stabbing him in the face. And will probably haunt me for a long time.

"Phoenix, you know what I have to do," I say, slowly flipping the blade in my hand that's hanging at my side.

There's only one solution left for Tiffany or whatever her name is and it's sad that this girl is going to lose her life because she was seduced by the need for power and potentially her obsession with one of the boys—something I'll never let them blame themselves for, but now I truly see her, uncloaked from whatever spell hid her being bitten from me. The insanity lurking in her eyes is very real and tells me all I need to know.

She's eaten flesh. There's no going back now, no cure in existence can save her.

Oz steps out of the shadows and picks up Teddy. He gives a sad look to the girl but then his gaze hardens when it falls on the man holding me. Hez and Barrett are nowhere to be seen but I feel them, close, super close.

"How long has she been changed," I ask softly.

"Months ago she bargained herself to me so she could sniff after one of those delinquents of yours. Not that I'd let her, ultimately." The honest answer surprises me. When he continues, "Out of the four women I've bitten she's the only one to survive." The only reason I can think of him caring about her being female twists my stomach.

He wants to breed them, that's why he gives a shit at all.

"You idiot," I say to her. "You're nothing more than a womb to him and giving birth to his offspring will kill you."

"He promised me they'd love me!" she yells. Speaking for the first time.

"You can't make someone love you, no magic can. Now your life is over." I turn and fling the knife as hard as I can at the girl. Her mouth falls open in shock as she stares at me with her one good eye. The other has a knife buried to the hilt in it.

There's no reason that the guys should have to do this, not when I'm here and am completely accepting of it.

She falls over bonelessly and the bitten holding me yells in rage. I take the chance to slip from his grasp and turn, grabbing his face with one hand. I want to see his face. I want to know my enemy. Chanting, I force my magic to beat against his. From somewhere, strength pours into me and then I realize it's the guys. They're using the bond.

When the magic hiding him from me breaks, I release him and take several steps back in horror.

"Dad?" I whisper with tears choking my voice. He roars and shoves at me, and in my stupefied state I fall backwards. I don't even try to catch myself.

"There's so much more! She took from me... you were never mine!" he yells pacing back and forth in front of me. "You will be the vessel!" He steps towards me and I twist my hips, flipping to a crouch.

"You killed mom!" I say it quietly but with so much rage in my voice my magic makes the ground shake.

"She was weak, in flesh... weak. There was a cuckoo in my house!" With that he turns and flat out runs. The guys pursue but I know they won't catch him. I've been deceived my entire life. I could feel his power now, feel the other power intertwined with his. The evil filling him full of its cancerous poison. The absolute madness that has already consumed him. How the hell did he pretend to be normal for so long? How was I so fooled?

Breathing heavily, I stay on the ground. It feels like the life has been drained out of me. My father killed my Mom. My father... wait, cuckoo in his house? Where have I heard that phrase before?

"It means raising a child that isn't yours," Don Gregory says stepping onto the path. Slowly, I turn to look at him fighting tears... fighting the feeling of my heart wrenching. He crosses to me and kneels. "He's not your father, Evanora."

"How... how could you possibly know that?"

"Get up. Go home. We'll talk when I get there." I obey him before I realize what I'm doing. With legs that feel like jelly I walk back to the cars and stand there staring at the ground.

My dad is the psycho bear. My dad who *isn't* my dad.

"Nora. Come on, let's get in the car." Phoenix says pulling me against him and walking me towards the jeep. I'm aware that Oz and Barrett are loading Teddy into the SUV but I can't seem to look at him.

Hez opens the passenger door and helps Phoenix get me inside. Buckling me in he says, "Don't worry, he's still very much alive... Don poured some kind of potion in his mouth that put him to sleep. He said it'll delay the change long enough for us to get him home and have mom look at him," Hez clasps my hands and then steps back and shuts the door.

The drive home goes by in a blur but when my door opens once again I'm able to shake some of the fog of grief away.

"The girl?" I ask Phoenix as he tugs my hand to get me out of the car.

"Don is dealing with it." Regardless of what she did, who she killed, she deserves better than rotting out in the woods. Distantly, there's guilt for having to take her life but it's the type of guilt that I should feel. Taking a life should never be an easy thing to do.

Whether she realized it or not, death was a mercy. The psycho bear wouldn't be kind to her. And I have no idea how many she's killed or would've killed had she been left alive.

I'll keep telling myself these things until I believe them.

Phoenix pulls me toward the house and Maggie meets us on the stairs. Her scent wraps around me and for the first time I truly cry, a hard snotty kind of cry that leaves me spent and tired.

Someone gets me in a shower and then tucks me into bed. Four warm bodies pile on it with me, each giving me the comfort they can and I take it. I use it to bolster my aching heart and my messed up head. I hold on to them like they're my lifeline and I let myself feel the love they're sending me.

At some point the fog is completely gone and something else takes its place.

Anger. Rushing into that empty place so hard it takes my breath away.

"How's Teddy?"

"He's recovering, they were able to stop the transformation in its tracks. Apparently, Don has been working on a way to save the bitten but it only works when they're first infected." Phoenix supplies. "Teddy will sleep for a few days but after that he'll be back to his old self."

I'm actually kinda relieved because it means no one will try that cure on me. This creature inside of me has fought to survive and live right along with me and to make her disappear doesn't feel right.

"Any sign of da—psycho bear?" I take a deep breath and force my composure to remain. That man won't get any more tears shed for him. He made these choices.

"No, Don tracked him but he's got some powerful allies. Someone transported him out." Dangerous spells getting thrown left and right, this group likes to use them quite often. A lot like the council's gopher that pretended to be from children's services. There's a thread to connect the two. Now I need to find the whole spool.

"When is Don coming to talk to me?" I ask.

"Us actually. He said he wants the five of us here," Hez says.

"Okay. Any idea what other bombshells he's going to drop on our heads?" All four of them shrug.

"I taught you to adapt better," Don says breezing into the room. The door shuts behind him with a loud slam. I smell the magic seal it with a silence spell. No one can hear anything said in this room from outside.

"Well, kiss my ass."

He raises an eyebrow then sits on the chair at the end of the bed.

"Pay attention, I won't repeat this again." Everyone nods. "Eighteen years ago, Yasmine Hex was married to a man named, Ezra Blue—a witch-born whose species is still unknown despite the hell they put him through trying to discover it." Wait, Yasmine is my mom.

"The one who survived the first purge?" Phoenix asks, awestruck speaking up before I can blurt out something rude.

The purge was nasty business. A sect of witches went after groups of witch-born and killed any they could. This happened two hundred years ago, though.

"He's still alive?" I ask.

"He's the first," Don answers. "He hid himself among other shifters and met Yasmine during this time."

"Okay, that's great and all but what has it got to do with Nora?" Hez demands. Don gives him a dirty look, one that's quelled many before. Hez crosses his arms. For some reason this is funny to me and I pinch my lips to keep the smile off my face.

"When she got pregnant, the council came and took Ezra because a man named Darren turned him in—the one pretending to be your real father," Don continues.

All amusement in me dies a quick death. "I have a sibling?"

"No, Evanora... you're the child of that union. Somehow, the council bewitched your mother and placed Darren in her home as your father."

"I don't understand... Mom was strong. She wouldn't have fallen —"

He cuts me off. "The entire council working together overpowered her. She lived the lie they created for years before she died. Out-right killing her would've drawn suspicion from the community—she was well loved by many, and when she started looking into them, discovering their secrets... they finally had her killed."

"Dad—Darren has been that monster my entire life?"

"Yes, they were able to temper his other nature, hide it from everyone most of the time. But when the spells restraining him started to wane, they would send him away so you wouldn't discover the truth."

"This is... this is... what the fuck is this?!"

"Your real father, Ezra is in one of their prisons. They can't seem to kill him so they torture him and use parts of him for dark spells. He needs to be freed."

Suspicions begin to circle in my mind. "Who are you to him?"

"He's my brother," Don answers after contemplating me with those dead eyes of his for several minutes.

"None of this makes sense... you're telling me that idiot who I've known my entire life is really a psychopathic bitch who works for the council? That he's not my dad, and he murdered and ate my mother because she was finding out too much about a bunch of fat, greedy pricks that call themselves a council!" I realize I'm yelling and sit back against the wall, forcing my temper down.

"Yes," he answers.

"Since we're on this everyone wants something kick... what are you wanting, dear uncle?" I spit out, venom deepening my voice.

Claws prick the palms of my hands and I know my eyes are glowing and my teeth are sharper.

"I want you to help me save your father."

"No." At my answer he sits back with shock written all over his face. I've never seen Don display so much emotion in one look.

"What do you mean, no?" he demands.

"You're the all powerful, super elite beast trainer. You go save him."

"But he's your father," he yells.

"And I'm a sixteen-year-old girl who just found out that the man I thought was my father ate my mom!" I yell back. His mouth opens and closes and then opens again. He shuts it with a snap and then sits back glaring at me.

The Hazard boys are silent, watching the exchange with interest.

"Well, I know which side of the family she got her temper from," Hez muses. There's a snicker, followed by another one until all of us are laughing but Don. Nope, he's sitting there still trying to give me enough dirty looks to make me see his way.

He might have trained me, but I earned it too. I won't be guilted or bullied into doing anything by anyone. About time he learns. Besides, I kinda want to know about my biological donor. Whether I admit it or not.

"I trained you better."

"No, you trained me to be your attack dog, but guess what uncle dick, I choose—not you."

"When did you get so mouthy?" he asks in exasperation.

"I've always been this way, but you weren't paying attention to who I am as a person." I'm right and he knows it, that's why he says absolutely nothing to defend himself.

"You're really not going to help me save him?"

"The first thing I'm going to do is hunt down daddy dearest. While I'm doing that—you train them. Double time. While I'm bear hunting, I'll think about trying to help you get Ezra out of prison."

"You realize asking a bunch of kids to risk their lives and help you with a prison break is kinda fucked up, right?" Phoenix asks Don.

"None of you are normal kids, never have been. You're a small, powerful army."

"We're not your army... we're hers," Phoenix points at me.

"It's her father!" Don bellows, getting angry again.

"No, he's a stranger. I don't know him, have never even known about him but you want me to risk everything to save him."

"He went there to protect you." Wow, that's a thick ass stream of a guilt trip. I swim right through it.

"You don't really think that will work, do you?" He gnashes his teeth in frustration.

"What about loyalty?"

"You—a man claiming to be my uncle—let me get dragged around the world by the creature who killed my mom and tried to kill me. Now why the fuck would I have any loyalty to someone like that?" This wipes the anger right off his face.

"I didn't know," he speaks so quietly that I barely hear him.

"What was that?" I ask cupping my hand around my ear.

"I didn't know!"

"When did you find out?"

"The day before you called me."

There goes my righteous anger. "I'll think about it," I say finally, coming down off the rush of anger.

"You'll think about it?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I said. I don't know why you assumed that you could drop this bomb on my head and I'd skip out on my entire life to go 'try' and break a guy out of prison that you claim is my long lost dad."

"Morality. Loyalty. Honor," he bites out. "I taught you those things."

"Actually no. You taught me how to kill people. You taught me how to tolerate pain. You taught me how to dig myself out of a grave if that ever happened. None of those lessons had anything to do with morality, loyalty or honor."

He leans forward ready to go into another tangent and I hold up a hand.

"Save your breath, I won't be guilt tripped into anything. Let me eat something, talk to the guys and think on this and then I'll decide whether I want to help or not."

He takes a breath and loudly blows it out.

"Fine."

"Glad I have your permission," I snark and point at the door. Yeah, I realize that until recently he was my teacher, and I respected

him quite a bit but it all just went out the window. As he walks out the spell fades, and he slams the door even harder behind him the second time.

“Nora, are you okay?” Phoenix asks and they all crowd closer to me. None of them ask if I believe the bullshit Don was throwing at us. Their first concern is if I’m okay. I’m such an effing idiot sometimes.

I throw myself at them, my arms wide and pull them all to me. And as we all laugh and feel that one-second of peace I make a promise. I won’t only fight for me anymore, I’ll fight for them too.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I'M ONLY HALF SURPRISED to find Maggie waiting for me on the porch. When I disentangled myself from eight arms and the odd leg or two and managed to sneak downstairs without waking a single one of them, I thought I was home free.

Maggie likes to keep me on my toes.

"Don told me," she says quietly, rocking in her chair. She points at the chair beside her and I drop the backpack I hastily stuffed with things I need on the porch. Reluctantly, I sit down and accept that I probably wouldn't have made it far, regardless.

"You know, I feel stupid that I didn't suspect anything. Darren was such a strange choice, and he never seemed to fit but I didn't remember Ezra at all... not until Don broke the spell." Her eyes flick to me and are sad and filled with apology. "I've failed you so much. I should've fought harder to have you stay here. I had..." She chokes up and I hold my silence. I'll wait until she's said what she needs to say before I give her my opinion on it. "The most awful feeling about you leaving with him."

"And now that I remember everything, as terrible as it sounds, I'm glad she didn't know before she died... they raped our minds and put a piece of shit in her bed." She clears her throat. "She failed you too and I'm so mad at her for it. Yas always thought she was untouchable, it was the only part of her I didn't like. Her arrogance. She thought that she could overcome any obstacle they threw at her simply because she was a Hex." Her tears are freely falling now and still, I hold my silence.

"And I followed right along with her. I believed in her stupid cause and look what happened?" She blows her nose loudly and keeps crying quietly.

"I don't blame you for anything, or her. I blame the man who killed her and the men and women who told him to," I say, breaking my silence.

"Are you going to do try to get Ezra out?"

"I dunno. There's a part of me that wants to know him but, I'm still trying to figure everything out. Honestly, it's a lot to take in... and," I tell her the total truth, because it needs to be said, "I don't want to put the guys in danger. They're not ready for anything like that. Despite how tough they are or aren't... they're not prepared for a small war."

"Do you think you are?"

"Don really did turn me into a weapon, but even at my strongest I can't break into a prison alone. He knows this but I honestly think in his," I search for a word that isn't emotional, even though that's what he is, "*desperation* to free his brother, he's not thinking of things like that. He's thinking of his family being trapped in a prison and because Ezra's somehow miraculously my biological dad he thinks I should feel the same way—and I don't."

Yes, it's awful that this man is in prison but I don't know what kind of person he is and how do they expect me to take the word of a man who forgot about him for sixteen years?

"You are a phenomenal young woman, Nora. Absolutely phenomenal. If adults could logic their lives out in such a way and still carry the compassion and love that I know you have for people in your lives... the world would be a much better place."

"Ha, dude, I freaked out over a spider yesterday in the bathroom and managed to trip on the curtain and take it, and the rod to the floor with me." I also broke the toilet and put a hole in the wall, but I won't mention those things.

She laughs and says, "There's the girl hiding behind that old soul." She pats my leg and stares back out into the yard. "Are you going after him?"

I don't need to ask who him is, as far as I'm concerned there's only one 'him' that I want to go after more than anyone. "Oh yeah, I'm going to cover his severed head in pretty pink glitter and mail it to the council."

"That's so... morbid," she says but giggles anyhow.

"You don't wanna know where I'm mailing his dick."

"Nora!"

"What?"

"You're sixteen!"

"So? I'm allowed to fantasize about cutting dicks off."

She snorts loudly and then says, "Nora, that's not appropriate behavior for a lady."

"I only see one lady out here and it's Phoenix." His deep laughter from the shadows of the doorway makes me smile.

"Who else's dick were you fantasizing about cutting off?"

"Phoenix Hazard!"

"What mom? I'm curious!"

"What the hell am I going to do with all of you?" The words are practically yelled but have no heat in them whatsoever. I hold up my fingers and mime a pair of scissors closing. The three of us laugh again.

"I'm glad you feel like you can celebrate while my brother rots away in prison," Don says from just past the stairs.

Maggie sighs. "Don, you have my utmost sympathy but we've known about the man for five minutes, what exactly do you expect from us? Should we get the torches and horses and go lay siege to the castle?" He glares at her but says nothing. "That's what I thought, you don't even have a plan yet you're putting pressure on a child to come up with one for you. Get over yourself. If you want him out so bad, go get him out."

The clap is loud in the silence, so I do it again.

"Have you forgotten that these four need training, or that I need to reach my full potential?" He knows about my being bitten and is acting like it's not a big deal. "I'm not unfeeling, of course I want to get him out but I'm not stupid enough to rush in and die. Something you taught me and have somehow forgotten in the last... what? Four days? If they haven't killed him yet, I doubt they'll do it before we are at least half assed prepared to kill a bunch of people."

"So you're agreeing to go—"

"I'm not agreeing to anything. I'm trying to get you to see past all of that backed up emotional garbage you have going on there." I twirl my finger in the air towards him. "You beat it into my head, literally, to think before I act. To analyze and gather all the information

I need. You taught me to use my brain and not my heart to fight because my heart will get me killed. Remember?" For the very first time since he got on this dead horse he looks a bit ashamed.

"I understand. We'll begin their training at—"

"They get another day off, Don. No exceptions," Maggie interrupts.

"Er, uh the day after tomorrow, four a.m. sharp. I expect to see you there too."

"I thought you said you have nothing left to teach me?"

"I don't but they do. You need to learn how to be a witch-born too."

"Okay." He stares at me expectantly and when I don't say or do anything else he turns and walks off into the darkness. I turn to Maggie. "Is that an old man pout?"

She busts out laughing and then says, "Yes, I do believe it is."

"I wonder if he'll throw things like you do."

"Evanora!"

"What? You do!"



EVENTUALLY, I manage to get the guys to leave me alone long enough to take a nice hot bath and when I'm completely sure I'm alone; I exhale and let the wall I've been holding up for hours collapse.

Of course I want to try to save Ezra, but there are so many things in the way of that and I can't... no, won't risk the guys lives on a maybe. I don't care who's imprisoned. I wasn't lying when I told Don the guy is a stranger to me and finding out he's my bio dad doesn't make me automatically love him.

I cared about Darren, thought he was my freaking dad my entire life and look where that got me. He turned out to be a psychopath who eats people. I sigh and sink lower into the hot water. It's hard to accept the knowledge that I tricked myself into thinking he loved me. That he loved mom. I told myself that him being distant and selfish were personality quirks and that he loved me in his own way. I had a freaking psychiatrist tell me that.

The women wanting him makes sense to me now. Witch-born are always appealing to others, especially humans. Something about

them draws their victims in like a flower does a bee. I wonder what the slut-therapist would think if she found out she was banging a cannibal dude who turns into a bear?

I snort and get water up my nose. Laughing while coughing is not as easy as you'd think. I end up choking and resting my head against the rim of the tub.

I'm not sure I can do any of this. My confidence has taken a beating and every inch of my body feels like it has too. For one brief second I consider leaving. I cut it off with a thought. That's stupid.

"Cookie, I have no idea how I'm going to do this shit, I don't want to fail everyone."

"The only thing you fail at Nora are checkers." Hez says. I sit up so fast water sloshes all over the floor. All four of the guys are standing in the doorway, looking at me... while I'm naked.

"Dude you only won because she fell asleep and you cheated," Barrett calls Hez out.

The shock wears off and I stand up; the water sluicing down my body as I hold both hands up. All four of them are standing there with their mouths gaped open.

"You're acting like you've never seen boobs before, guys." No response to my joke. Fine. Their clothes rip off them, falling into pieces at their feet. I avoid the temptation to look and push them out the door, through the bedroom out into the hallway. Pushing a little harder I shut and lock all their bedroom doors and only open the front door.

They can run around naked for a little while.

"Nora!" All four of them yell as they slide down the stairs.

"Oh my god, where are your clothes? What did you do, boys?" Maggie yells. "Did you go peek at her like perverts? I'm going to kick your asses!" I smile and grab a towel.

This is what it feels like to be Alive and Hexing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THREE MONTHS LATER...

TONIGHT MARKS OUR FIRST 'MISSION' as a team. Even though we're still in training for it, Don felt we were ready to handle this situation. Honestly, I'd have probably come solo if he'd have said no.

Finding her was incredibly easy, all things considered. I guess I expected her to have super powerful protection spells and wards out the ass. Unfortunately for her, she's too arrogant to think anyone would come into her home at four in the morning and put a knife to her throat. There was only a handful of guards and lazy wards that a toddler could break through.

I look down at the knife blade, shining in the moonlight that's leaking through the large picture windows. The metal looks so dark against the pale skin of her throat. Her eyes are closed and her mouth is open in sleep. There's a spot of drool drying in the corner of her mouth, and evidence that some has leaked down her chin. Somehow, she's still wearing makeup, I'm guessing that she has at least two makeup charms on her at all times.

Pity none of them can protect her from anything other than getting a date.

I look around her rather glamorous bedroom. I've never seen quite so much silk in a room before. The curtains, rugs, and the sheets. The drapes around the four-poster canopy bed. They look pink in the dark so I can imagine how bright they are in the full light. They also allow someone to walk more silently than normal too.

She probably didn't think of something like that either.

I lean closer and rest my left hand beside her head and hover my face a scant inch from hers.

"Martha, it's time to wake up," I whisper in a sing-song voice. Her eyes fly open and instantly bulge out, filled with fear.

"Tsk tsk, I wouldn't move much, the blade is pretty sharp and I bet getting blood out of silk is a bitch." Her throat convulses and sweat pops out on her forehead.

"What do you want?" she croaks out.

"You will tell me everything about Darren, the council and my mom's death and or we're going to take a nice long drive." One she wouldn't be coming back from.

The window creaks open but I don't move, I know who it is. Oz climbs silently into the window, light on his feet like the cat he is.

"If I tell you anything they'll kill me," she protests.

"It's not them you have to worry about, Martha." I put a minuscule amount of pressure on the blade and it breaks the first few layers of the soft, flabby skin under her chin. She hisses in pain and tears begin to leak from her eyes.

"You don't understand... Darren will be sent to—eat me!"

"Aww, silly old bat, why do you think you'll remain a witch long enough to worry about Darren?"

"How can you get the answers you seek if you keep threatening me?" she argues. Stalling for time in hopes that her few guards will come running to save her. Going by the smell of blood coming off Oz, that's not going to happen.

It's then that she sees the truth in my eyes. There's no hope for her, she's not got a single bargaining chip. "Darren's location and the council members' names who were involved in my mom's death," I repeat.

"Why should I tell you anything if you're going to kill me either way?" Ah, there's some anger in her face now. My left hand moves too fast for her to see and I bury the small throwing knife in her right shoulder. She screams and I cover her mouth with my gloved hand.

When she stops screaming, I remove my hand.

"I'm not telling you anything!" she whisper-yells.

"We found her safe. It's got a biometric lock, we need her eyeball and right thumb," Oz says, breaking his silence.

"I'm not opening it, you'll just have to kill me."

"We don't need you intact, just your eye and thumb. Oz... hold her down."

She starts talking before I even touch her with the blade. Everything and then some. Darren is in Las Vegas, spending his reward money he got for 'scaring' me. And by the time she's done giving me names, that I record with my phone, she's listed every council member that holds a seat and some that are hidden.

As a bonus, she tells me where my bio dad is even without me asking. When she keeps blubbering, I keep recording. When her tale is done, I'm a hair's breadth away from slitting her throat and leaving her to rot in her silk palace.

My misguided mom only wanted equal rights for shifters. That's what she was fighting for. No power games, no magical sabotage. She picked her cause and was standing up for it. They killed her for something stupid.

Martha Levings comes from an old line of witches, almost as old as mine. Her family prides themselves on their power. They hate humans and shifters alike and feel like the mundane are beneath them. I brought the perfect punishment for Martha.

I pull my knife out of her shoulder, after giving it a little twist, and wipe it on her pillow. Tucking it and the one at her throat back into their hidden sheaths, I pull out a small potion bottle that I had tucked in my pocket. This spell is old, and I found it a long time ago. It's an illegal spell but a rather simple one. The main ingredient is the tears of a child wronged by a witch.

I grab her face and force her mouth open and dump the potion down her gaping mouth. She gags and coughs trying to fight it but I squeeze her nose until she swallows it all. It takes her a few seconds to realize what I gave her. Any witch can feel their power draining and I've heard that losing it permanently feels a lot like losing part of your soul.

I'm not sure that Martha has any soul left but I know that she realizes her magic is disappearing.

"Oh no, god no. Don't take my magic. They'll kick me out of the coven! Penniless!" Out of all the things she should mourn its money and power.

"At least you're not dead, right?" I snark and step back away from her.

"Oz, grab her, we're still getting in that safe." Oz grabs her by the arms and drags her to her feet. She doesn't protest, she's mewling like an old cat and bemoaning her missing magic.

Martha will spend the rest of her life suffering and frankly, she deserves it.

As we empty her safe she didn't want to open—took some persuasion—we find files on my mom, me and a bunch of other people. These files I'll give to Maggie because I suspect that the identities of the group she spoke on that fights against the council are all in these folders. Which means they're in danger. Maggie can deal with that; I tried to join their group and was refused because I was too young. Yet, I'm the one getting the information none of them could get.

Adults are so weird sometimes.

"What do we do with her now?" Phoenix asks, striding into the room wearing only a pair of boxer shorts. Considering the seriousness of the situation I try not to look, but ya know.

A fitting idea strikes me. "Go grab some cling wrap and a chair."

We leave her securely wrapped to the chair that sits at the head of her twenty foot long dining room table. I sprinkled pink glitter all over her and shaved her head. On her forehead, in vivid orange marker I write, "Mundane Twat".

Martha will be shunned from her family, her coven and will immediately lose her council seat. She'll tell them I'm coming and that's okay. Because I am and I won't stop until I get all of them. Some will die and some will join Martha on her senior's cruise because that's as magical as her life will be after today.

I smile as we walk back to the car parked a few blocks away.

Hez and Barrett are waiting patiently beside it. I didn't want to take everyone in and be left without backup. The guys are still in training.

There's a list now and I can eliminate one name at a time. They'll fight, they'll hide and they'll beg, but the truth is—I'm every inch my namesake.

"I'll get you my pretty and your little bear too," I whisper.

TO BE CONTINUED in book two, A Hex of a Chance

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to send out a personal thanks to all the folks who helped me get through such an awful time in my life and gave me the energy to finish this book. You're a godsend and I'll be forever grateful.

Lorie, thank you — Love your face.

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