



*Lick of*  
**FROST**

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Amira Press

# *Lick of Frost*

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Amira Press  
Baltimore, MD 21216  
[www.amirapress.com](http://www.amirapress.com)

ISBN: 978-1-935348-74-0

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## *Dedication*

Mom, this one's for you.

## Prologue

*Charleston, South Carolina, 1860*

Alexander Clarisse remained still as a servant applied pressure to the thin wound across his chest, swiping at the death blow caused by a cursed blade inflicted by the woman kneeling before him. She waited quietly, her chin held high and steely grey eyes unrepentant. Glorious strands of blue-black wound down the length of her back in large, bouncy curls, the color stark against her smooth porcelain skin. She didn't fidget or squirm, her small, muscular body clad in leather completely motionless amid the chaos behind her.

His coven, whispering and speculating quietly, waited for his decree. Some demanded that she be killed for her betrayal, while others called for the lives of her entire Covenant as penance. It would serve her right to see the fall of her brothers and sisters by way of her hands.

A worthy punishment she would endure for an eternity.

But he knew one pain burned deeper than the loss of those loved and cherished, a bitter sting he'd become accustomed to shortly after falling in love with the breathtakingly beautiful Onyx Blackthorn.

That agony was called abnegation.

He pined for her, wove spells and contracts in order to claim her as a protector of his coven. It was an attraction that had become an obsession, initiated the very first moment he beheld her at sixteen.

His goal was simple—to win her as his own.

Once they made love, Onyx would be bound to him irrevocably. It was the law and way of the Covenant—those born to protect magic-wielders such as him. Once committed by body to your liege, thus is your heart. But she had rejected his advances, rebuking him time and again under the pretense of finding true love of her own. He had tried to woo her, determined he could make her care for him. But when she had screamed her denial and disinterest, he lost control and attempted to force that which was never intended to be upon her.

Then, and only then, had she struck with a cursed dagger that never failed to poison and destroy its intended target.

He studied her exquisite face, as he had so often in the last months, and felt a shard of sympathy. Because of his foray into the madness that is love, she had been forced to kill him. And he, the very man who once sought to love and cherish her, would be the one to determine her fate.

“What would you have me to do, beloved?” he queried quietly, motioning his servant away and peering down. “How would you punish your actions if given the opportunity?”

“A life for a life is the just penalty,” she answered in a voice that matched her expression, without emotion.

“You’re right, of course.” He nodded. “But I’m not sure if dying is an equal punishment to what I’ve endured for you, Onyx.”

Those large grey eyes flashed silver, and her full lips thinned. “You tried to force yourself upon me, my lord.”

“Nay.” He rebuked her harshly, bitter and angry. “I only wished to love you.”

“You don’t love me.” Her voice was tense, syllables tight. “You only want what you can’t have.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. The moment you struck me down, you became mine. Your people will be appalled to learn you attacked your very own foresworn. You have broken your vows, and because of it, they will not intercede on your behalf. That’s a fact you’d do best to remember.”

The rebellious fire lingered in her eyes, but she remained silent, studying him as she awaited her sentence. Holy Freya, but she was beautiful—a mere girl of nineteen who had yet to achieve the immortality that would arrive at any given time—with her long and graceful neck, pale alabaster skin, eyes that went from dove grey to mirror silver, and her perfectly formed heart-shaped face with ruby red lips.

His very own ice princess . . .

The punishment for her crime came with that simple thought. What better way to trap and torment this enchantress than to bestow the very same treatment she had shown him time and again?

“My wand,” he ordered. The servant at his side scrambled away to do his bidding, and he gazed at the beauty at his feet. “You would prefer death, then?”

She averted her gaze, nodding. “Yes.”

“I don’t think death suits you, beloved,” he murmured, shaking his head. “I believe something else is in order.”

Her eyes jerked to attention, and she frowned, eyes darting from side to side in confusion. He extended his arm for the wand and clenched the solid wood within his fingers when it met his palm. The golden orb at the end shined as he called upon the magic within to enhance and shape the spell he sought to weave.

“My coven, heed me. From this moment forward, none shall touch, comfort, or love the woman kneeling at my feet. She will remain as your loyal servant, protecting us as intended by the gods, but nothing more.”

“Sire,” his second, Terrence, interrupted, “you cannot allow her to stay among us. She is a danger to the coven.”

“Silence!” he ordered, facing his congregation. “You will listen and heed my decree! I am not dead yet, and this is my order to make.”

He returned his gaze to the sublime creature at his feet and pointed his wand, standing above her and evoking the spell as he revealed her punishment. The blood trailed down his bare chest, the thin ribbons of black-tinged death marring the perfection of his smooth, fair skin.

“Onyx Blackthorn, blessed chosen of the Covenant, as punishment for your crime you will wallow in the innocence you’ve remained so determined to maintain. You will never again know the comfort or love of another. From this moment, you will look but never touch. You will smell but never taste. And you will witness but never know what it means to take refuge and love from another.”

The energy blasted from the orb and dissipated in a brilliant white cloud around her. She gasped and fell to the floor, writhing in agony as the magic took root and latched onto her body. The muffled cries from her lips were pitiful, the stunted gasps coming in short spurts. Thick, dark curls swiped the floor, her delicate hands forming contorted fists. She thrashed and writhed uncontrollably, screaming as if on fire.

Then suddenly, she went still.

It was done.

“Dedrick.” He called his servant to him and watched as Onyx struggled to her knees. “Assist her.”

The young man rushed to do his bidding and grasped Onyx by the leathered arm before taking her hand in his own. A loud cry of pain sounded from him, and he shoved her away, sending them both barreling to the floor. Dedrick landed at his feet as Onyx crumbled to the ground near the coven, coming to a stop at the foot of the stairs.

She lifted her head, perplexed eyes finding his through a veil of raven black.

She was exquisite, even in dishevelment, and that beauty would become her prison.

“Your hand, Dedrick,” he ordered. “Display it.”

Trembling, the youth lifted his frostbitten hand and displayed it to the coven. Several fingers were blackened, the skin surrounding the wounds blistered and red.

Alexander pointed the wand once more at Onyx and warned, “None will ever touch her. To do so will mean nothing but pain and ultimately death. Her skin is as her heart, as devious and chilling as a lick of frost.”

He returned to his place at the top of the stairs and listened to the disbelieving whispers while accepting the hollow comfort of his soon-to-be passed-down throne.

“My brethren, my most trusted brothers and sisters,” he announced, waving his hand at the crumbled body at the foot of the stairs. “Behold the Ice Princess.”

## Chapter One

*New Orleans, Present day*

“Contact Sheriff McAvoy with your problem. If he can’t help, *then* you can call me back.”

The line went dead and Luke Trevlian snapped his cell closed, slid it into his leather jacket and cursed his Alpha while scanning the room. Wolfe’s time away with his mate couldn’t have come at a shittier time. New Orleans was a deadly place for immortals around Halloween, especially when unexpected visitors arrived in the city.

He studied the group crowding the corner of Greyson’s Pub, covered in flowing robes and reeking of sulfur and amber. The coven of wizards and witches was not unexpected. Magic-wielders made a killing in the Quarter by offering readings and prophesying the future. But these folks were new to the area. Since it was that time of year again, his gut told him something was off.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” Greyson asked from just behind him on the opposite side of the bar.

“Sure am.” He nodded and turned, facing the elder Lycae and noting a new spattering of grey at his darkened temples.

“I’ve never seen them before, and I never forget a face,” Greyson muttered, swiping the counter with the rag clenched in his hand. “You should have Wolfe get his ass back here.”

He shrugged and snagged a peanut from one of the bowls along the bar. “Wolfe wants me to contact the Sheriff.”

“Then I suggest you do it.”

Luke turned from Greyson and popped the kernel into his mouth, allowing the shell to drift from his fingers to the littered floor below. There were over a dozen of them, a mixture of male and female. Their voices were soft and their demeanor nonthreatening. Perhaps they were in town to mix with another coven, performing a ritual of some kind.

He retrieved the RAZR from his jacket, searched through the numbers, located Trevor McAvoy’s, and pressed the small green button. He shifted his weight back, reclining on the counter as the signal clicked over and started to ring.

“What do you want?” the Warlock barked when he answered.

“We have visitors.”

“And that’s my problem how?”

“An unknown coven has just shown up in your city, Sheriff. Need I say more?”

“Damn it, I doona go by that title anymore!” the Warlock snapped. “And let them come. Who gives a rip-roaring fuck? No’ me. I can tell you that!”

“Have you marked your calendar recently?”

“Why do you ask, Luke? Are you throwing a costume party and want tae invite me?”

“Stop being a smart-ass,” Luke growled. “I need you down here, pronto.”

“Well, tough shit. I’ve just settled in with a kettle of corn and a six pack of Tennent’s Super. I have a date with the *Married with Children* marathon that I canna miss.”

“I suppose I should just call Arden, then,” Luke offered amiably. “She was really excited about time alone with Wolfe, but they can call the trip short. It won’t be the first time.”

“You’re an evil fucking shit, do you know that?”

“Sure do. How soon can you get to Greyson’s?”

A heavy sigh sounded from the phone. “I’ll be there in ten.”

“See you then.”

Luke returned the phone to his jacket, rotating his torso around and plucking another peanut from the bowl. He knew it was cruel, using Arden as blackmail. But she was the only reason Trevor agreed to assist the Lycae in the first place. The Warlock loved his Alpha’s mate like a sister.

Thank God.

The transition from Alpha to Beta had been a remarkably easy one thanks to Wolfe’s mate. Luke’s wolf wasn’t ready to lead a pack, and he knew it. He was the youngest of the Trevlian legacy at a mere quarter-of-a-millennium old and needed time to grow and mature. But things wouldn’t have occurred so smoothly if Trevor hadn’t helped them destroy the vampyren that threatened to destroy everything. In the aftermath, they had formed a tentative agreement with the Warlock. Trevor would lend a hand with Lycae dealings so long as Arden remained protected among the pack.

A server walked to the table with a tray laden with drinks. Bodies parted, shifting away. Hoods rippled as faces were revealed. The men all kept with the wizard fashion—super short hair trimmed neatly and faces cleanly shaven. The women kept their hair short as well, the pixie cuts markedly longer and shaggier.

People conversed among one another while he popped peanuts into his mouth and swigged the thick Smithwick’s Irish ale. In less than twenty-four hours, Halloween would come and go, and he could breathe easy. No more prowling the city, keeping the peace.

Movement from the left got his attention. Helen Tex, one of the longtime witches from the Quarter, decided to mosey on over with her Chimera escort. It wasn’t unusual to find Chimeras hired as servants to witches or wizards. The big bastards were as deadly as the Lycae and more than



proficient when it came to killing. The male's tight black leather pants and skin-hugging turtleneck revealed all of his brawn, which was generally enough to keep the undesirables away.

They stopped at the end of the table, the witch appearing impossibly tiny next to her bodyguard. Their voices remained too hushed to understand, and he realized they used magic to shade themselves.

"That can't be good," Greyson muttered as he came around the side and stood next to him.

"Nope," Luke agreed.

The face of the wizard seated in the center became angry, a red stain creeping onto his cheeks. Although he was obviously yelling at Helen as his mouth widened and his throat strained, the sound was muted. He grasped the mug of ale before him and threw the contents at her, coating the front of her dress in dark amber. The Chimera lurched forward, his massive arm extending across the table.

"Fucking hell." Greyson cursed, readying to move, but the Chimera's hand never made it to his intended destination.

A female appeared, snagging the male by the very wrist hovering over the table. Her leathered hands flipped the arm over and then under, forcing the appendage into an awkward and painful position against his lower back. Though markedly smaller, she managed to bury his face into the table with a loud crash, sending glasses scattering. Long, dark hair hung to her lower back in thick, rounded curls, the strands emitting a blue-black shine in the dim lighting. Voices emerged from the group, and he knew the spell used to shield their voices was lifted.

"Are you going to behave," the female demanded into the Chimera's ear, her voice featherlight, "or am I going to have to carry you out of here?"

"Let me go, bitch," the Chimera thundered. "Before I eat your sweet ass."

A soft chuckle, then. "Wrong answer."

She kept the arm locked at his back but snagged a handful of the Chimera's long blond hair at the nape and forced him up and away. It should have been impossible. She was too small to have that much strength. She whipped them around, and Luke's heart slammed into his throat.

Gorgeous didn't even begin to describe her. Her large silver eyes were offset by long, dark lashes and black brushstroke eyebrows that arched ever so slightly. Her nose was small and slightly upturned, accentuating much fuller red-hued lips. She glanced at him only so long as it took to pass, forcing the Chimera to the door.

He found himself rushing ahead to block her path. "Let me help you."

She cocked one of those dainty eyebrows and asked, "And why would you want to do that?"

“Because he’s a Chimera and will rip your head off when you let him loose,” he answered automatically.

“Ah,” she said and smiled lightly, plush lips curving at the corners.

He nearly groaned at the sight, his cock surging to life and pressing against his slacks. He inhaled deeply, scenting the air. Beneath the stench of amber and fire, he smelled fresh rose petal and a touch of lavender. He tried to replace the leathered hand locked onto the Chimera’s wrist with his own, eager to make some kind of contact with her, but was thwarted when she started forward, moving the asshole along without him.

“I appreciate the offer, but I don’t need your help.”

Luke started to argue when a hand on his shoulder stopped him. He frowned down at the wizard who caused the earlier disturbance and growled softly.

“Heed her, Lycae,” the wizard said quietly, releasing him and stepping back. “She needs no assistance from you or any other in this establishment. If the Chimera attacks her, she will end him.”

“She’s just a girl.”

“No, she isn’t.”

The wizard walked away, returned to the group at the table, and slid back into his place at the center of the booth. When the door opened, Luke turned, eager to set eyes on the breathtaking female once more. Instead he was graced with the passable face of a very unhappy and disgruntled Warlock.

“This had better be good,” Trevor grumbled and strode past him, sidling up to the bar. He flagged down a waitress. “Give me a Guinness on tap.”

His long mahogany hair hung to his collar, the strands slightly ruffled. The goatee he wore was neatly trimmed, cheeks shadowed by newly grown stubble. Although a magic-caster, he was built like a Mack truck, tall, broad, and sturdy. It was to be expected. Scottish Warlock Judges were a rarity and were forced to rely on brute force equally as often as magic.

Trevor spun around when he had the icy mug in hand, asking as he brought it to his lips, “Is it that group you’re worried about?”

“Yep.” Luke bobbed his head and then glanced at the door.

“You expecting someone else?”

“What?” He returned his attention to the bar.

“Are you looking for the wee lass that bumped into me on the way out? If so, she’s busy introducing the Chimera tae the cement just outside the door there.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Now, why would I want tae do something like that?”

The door swung open, allowing autumn air to drift inside. The girl shook herself once, then again, and peered around. She glanced at Luke and Trevor before averting her face and returning to the coven in the booth.

“Beautiful, is she no?” Trevor mused and took a sip of his ale.

Luke knew he was gawking but didn’t give a shit. “I’ve never seen anything like her.”

“No, I doona imagine you have. Nor has anyone else. You’ve just set your sights upon a female you canna have, Lycae. Best tae walk away now.”

He studied the female closely, staring directly at her. If she felt his gaze, she didn’t let it show. She walked to the corner behind the group and relaxed against the wall, eyes forward. The black leather covering her body reminded him of the gear used by the Thymeria vampire human faction, intended to keep the body warm and unencumbered. She was thin but muscular, the definition in her shoulders obvious through the giving material.

“Oh no,” Trevor said as he comprehended the interest.

“How do you know the coven?” he asked, intentionally redirecting the conversation.

Trevor, seeming bored, relaxed as he’d hoped. “Everyone knows of them. They’ve been stealing the souls of the damned for centuries, banishing them tae the ever after in an attempt tae appease the gods and beg favor. They are not a threat tae you or the city. I imagine they’ve found a tainted soul wandering about and want to lay claim tae it. Samhain is the only night in the year that the damned can be enraptured. Doona worry. They’ll leave as soon as the sun rises. They are nomads by nature.”

“Why do they want to appease the gods?”

“They want tae resurrect their long-lost leader,” Trevor mumbled.

“And her?” Trevor asked, indicating the beautiful girl.

“What about her?”

“Who is she?”

Trevor’s bored expression changed to one of warning. “Someone you best leave be. I’m no’ pulling your leash either, Lycae. You canna have that one.”

Determined to learn more with or without the Warlock’s help, he shoved clear of the bar, fully intending to walk across the room and introduce himself personally.

Trevor snagged him by the arm and said quietly, "They call her the Ice Princess, and there's a damn good reason for it. You canna go near her, Luke. Do you hear me? She's cursed. You add tae her suffering by showing interest. Do no' remind the poor woman of what she will never have."

"Start explaining," he demanded in a hushed growl.

"Take a seat, and I will."

Trevor released him and nodded when the waitress returned, indicating he wanted another mug. Luke sat down on the stool beside him and turned so that he could study her across the way as he listened.

"Her name is Onyx Blackthorn, and she was born of what was once referred tae as the Covenant. Have you heard of them?" When he shook his head, Trevor said, "They were a class of warriors that traveled here from London, trained tae protect the magically inclined races from harm. The Civil War all but wiped them out, and as soon it was over, they returned home and the Covenant dispersed. Most believe they lost their strength after they fled like cowards. True warriors don't run, you see."

Luke frowned. "But she's here. Why?"

"She has nowhere else tae go. Her curse will remain so long as the one she deceived remains in limbo. He's the only one that can remove the damned thing."

"Who did she deceive?" he interrupted before Trevor could finish.

Trevor's purple-blue irises flashed opaque and his lids thinned along with his mouth. He waited until Luke glanced at him before he said, "If you'd shut your gob long enough for me tae speak, I'll tell you."

"Sorry." He looked away, returning his eyes to the girl that had yet to move. "Go ahead."

"She killed the leader of the coven two centuries ago. The rumor is that he was smitten with her and tried tae force her tae bind herself tae him. When he did, she poisoned him with the dagger intended for his enemies. Those from the Covenant become intertwined with the one person they choose tae lay with, and she would have been bound tae him forever. Once done, it canna be undone."

"And she was punished for this?" Luke demanded, turning from her and glaring at Trevor. "For protecting herself?"

"She swore a vow tae protect him, no' kill him. She was aware that her life was forfeit the moment she pierced his skin."

Luke swiveled his head around and caught the direct stare of Onyx Blackthorn. A female who would gladly die before she gave herself to someone she didn't choose. Her face remained smooth, devoid of expression, but her eyes sparkled in the lighting. The silver orbs reminded him of moonbeams reflecting off quiet water.

“As you can probably imagine, she wants the same thing the coven wants,” Trevor continued, “tae see him returned tae life.”

“Reincarnation?”

“No’ exactly. Alexander Clarisse weaved a spell before he passed, scattering his body tae the elements. If the gods will it, the pieces will merge and become whole once more. But magic such as this is granted rarely. I’ve only seen one soul returned tae human form after such a hex, and that was a fae princess who sacrificed herself tae save her kinsman. It’s no’ a gift the gods take lightly.”

The group at the booth stood and began gathering themselves, preparing to leave. Luke stood straight, unwilling to let the female go, desperate for the opportunity to touch her. One brush of his skin upon hers would tell him if what he felt was real or imagined.

He started to move, and Trevor stopped him again, grasping his wrist. “What are you doing, Luke?”

“I need just a moment with her,” he answered evasively, yanking his arm free.

Trevor didn’t try to restrain him but rose from the stool and barred his path. “And what will you do when you have that moment?”

“I have to know if she’s mine, Sheriff. That means I have to touch her.”

Trevor smiled, but the expression accompanying it was anything but jovial. He shook his head and lowered his eyes, clasp Luke’s shoulder with a loose hand. When he let go, he lifted his head, and the smile was long gone.

“Don’t you want tae know what her curse is?”

He shrugged impatiently. “She turns into a frog at midnight?”

“She canna be touched. Do you hear me? *No’ ever.*” Trevor emphasized the last two words, gaining Luke’s attention. “She rejected the advances of one that wanted her above all others, and he made sure she would yearn for the one thing she refused him. Tae touch her skin is tae touch the ice trapped within. That is why she is called the Ice Princess.”

The Warlock made sure their eyes met before he finished.

“Onyx Blackthorn is nothing more than a beautiful object doomed tae an eternity of being coveted from afar.”

## Chapter Two

Onyx moved away from the wall as the coven prepared to depart and waited patiently while they gathered knapsacks and hooded capes. None of them spoke to her, passing by as if she didn't exist. She was accustomed to it. To them, she was little more than a ghost. A residual of what they lost.

When the last person stepped away from the booth, she glanced at the large man across the way, catching him staring at her yet again. For a moment, she allowed their eyes to meet. It was a luxury she didn't permit often. The eyes were the windows to the soul, and the pain of isolation was so much worse when reminded of what she would never have.

He was stunning, a superb specimen of what a man should be. His massive frame stood several inches over six feet, and his broad shoulders were as wide as the entranceway to the pub. The dark hair gracing his head was thick and wavy, and the jeweled set of hunter green eyes peering out of his masculine face were as brilliant as the dew basking in the first rays of dawn.

His brows came together, and he frowned, as if he could sense her suffering. She quickly averted her eyes, retrieved her black leather jacket from the back of the booth, and rushed to keep pace with the last stragglers of the coven as they escaped the confines of the pub.

"Onyx." Terrence, waiting outside of one of the many cars rented for the trip, ordered her over. He passed a satchel to her and instructed, "Go to Lafayette Cemetery and place the stones around the perimeter. They must be in place before we perform the ceremony."

She slipped the black strap around her neck, draping the satchel across her chest and clutching it at her right side. "Do you require anything more, my lord?"

"No."

He turned from her and slid into the seat of the Mercedes, closing the door. The assembly line took off, in the direction of the Quarter.

She sighed and adjusted the strap, following behind on foot. It was a damned good thing she'd Googled maps of the area before their arrival. Otherwise, she'd be completely lost.

Not that the coven would care.

She had learned a very long time ago that she needed them, not the other way around. Though her promise of protection was welcome, her presence was not.

Lifting her head, she peered up at the waning crescent and experienced a profound surge of hope. After all these years, the opportunity to restore Alexander was at hand. All of the required sacraments had been merged, and the fundamental elements necessary to twine the magic were in order. Now the coven needed to procure the souls of the dead and ask their assistance in guiding the way back to the mortal realm by the darkness of the new moon—the symbol of new beginnings.

Even as hope found life in her chest, it was quickly smothered. As much as she longed for the curse to end, she feared the return of her former master. She knew the price he would expect to put an end to her misery.

But was it worth the sacrifice?

She could remain as she was, unable to love, kept apart from everyone and everything around her. Or she could submit and allow Alexander to lay claim, giving in to her miserable need for contact and comfort.

Even if it meant the touch came from a man she would never crave.

The dreams she suffered were bad enough. Alexander always appeared at some point, brushing his fingers and hands against every inch of her. Even in sleep, she yearned for touch, turning to him as her heart rebelled against the very act itself.

The buildings blurred and became passing shadows as she contemplated her future, and she resolved herself to one irrefutable point of fact. Whatever she decided, Alexander would return as a man of flesh and blood, and when he did, he would pick up where he'd left off.

When she arrived at the cemetery, the gate was closed. She didn't bother entering the perimeter. Instead she shoved her hand into the bag and removed several of the dark objects within. She brushed her gloved thumb over the smooth black surface and welcomed the anger that arose when she realized the stone was the very one her name was derived from.

The coven had chosen to remind her of her betrayal. They wanted her job tonight to signify something.

Biting back a curse, she started tossing the small onyx stones onto the ground, directly inside the cemetery. She kept them spaced far enough apart that the magic would stretch if need be, walking around the edge of the fence and dropping each blackened orb to the shorn grass below.

When finished, she adjusted the empty satchel and started making the long trek to the French Quarter. Terrence didn't divulge where he would lodge for the evening, but she imagined it would be somewhere posh and extravagant. The coven came from old money passed down through generations. Sound financial planning and investment had ensured they would live comfortably.

She rounded the corner and froze, standing tall and alert while cursing the chaotic thoughts that blocked out the world and allowed her to be followed. The Chimera from the pub was back, and he'd brought friends. The half-men, half-lion creatures circled her, fanged incisors lengthening. Her heart sank when she noted the gloves covering their hands to the wrist, which meant they knew who and what she was.

She went for the holstered daggers beneath her arms when the strap across her chest tangled in her fingers, prohibiting access, and they attacked simultaneously.

She managed to survive the first volley by blocking punches and stepping out of the way, but the second time they fought smarter, coming at her one at a time. The man from the pub delivered a

punch that sent her barreling to the right, into the waiting fist of another Chimera who had predicted where she would go. Stars speckled her vision, miniature lights floating behind her eyelids. The third approached, and she closed her eyes, spinning on her heel and rotating her body. She delivered a roundhouse to his face that sent him directly to his ass and hoped like hell it bought her some time.

As she backed away from the two advancing, she tugged at the gloves covering her hands, desperately trying to rid herself of the obstruction. Her curse, as wretched as it was, could also be used as a weapon.

Something smashing into the base of her skull created a blunt pain that seared from the top of her spine to the tips of her toes and sent her headfirst into the harsh arms of concrete. She couldn't cry out, unable to breathe as the air left her lungs on impact. The world threatened to go black, the cool pavement beneath her face going blurry. She winced when a hand wound in her hair and dragged her away from the ground. A horrible-sounding growl pervaded the air, sending shivers down her spine, and the hand in her hair vanished.

Her face kissed the harsh surface of the asphalt, creating more brilliant stars and glimmering lights. She didn't move, struggling to stay conscious. A thin line of warm blood seeped past her cheek, winding around her chin and soaking into the ground.

The sounds of a violent scuffle echoed through the night—furious howls, angry roars, and the sickening crunch of bones being rent in two. It seemed to go on forever, but she knew by the small pool of blood that remained wet against her cheek that it was over in a matter of moments.

When the area went quiet, she fought against the ever-consuming dizziness and lethargy that sapped her strength. Any moment now, she would close her eyes. After that, they may or may not ever open again. It wasn't fair. In less than twenty-four hours, she would be able to plead for her freedom. Only now she was being robbed of the very life she had suffered in silent misery for nearly two centuries.

A gentle hand grasped her jacket and turned her onto her back. She couldn't make out the muffled curse as she gazed up at the starry sky, her ears identifying syllables but little more. A dark shadow blocked out the night, blending with the blackness that rose to claim her.

The last things she perceived before she lost consciousness were soft whisperings of reassurance and twin pools of liquid emerald, stark and vivid against the dark, staring down at her.



### Chapter Three

“You have to help me, Sheriff,” Luke said and then bit back a yelp of pain when the bright light of the casting wand glowed and pulsed.

“I am helping you,” Trevor snapped, wrapping a hand around his forearm.

He shifted his hips, breathing through unfiltered agony. “You know what I mean.”

“I doona have tae do anything except help you keep those fingers. Now, hold still.”

Edgy and tense, he did as he requested, keeping his arms extended as Trevor worked his magic and closed the agonizing wounds. His hands had turned black by the time he’d made it to the Bacchus pack compound with the female he’d managed to rescue in tow, the skin cracked and leaking blood. It was as if he’d touched ice that burned and consumed, the horrific prickles spreading and killing as they ate away at the skin.

But the misery, though absolutely wretched, had been worth it. He knew his instinct was guiding him now, just as he had suspected inside Greyson’s.

Onyx was indeed his.

She was damned lucky he had decided to follow her and that Trevor had tagged along for shits and giggles. Those Chimeras would have torn her limb from limb for embarrassing one of their own. They weren’t a very forgiving race, eager to both start and finish a fight. And when they arrived upon the scuffle, the cowards outnumbered her four to one.

Thankfully, the majority of the pack was still out patrolling the city when he arrived home carrying the unconscious female. He didn’t have the time or patience to explain, not now. He had to find a way to claim her, to ensure she would never feel alone again. It was his responsibility and privilege as her mate.

*Her mate.*

The knowledge that he had discovered his other half created a sensation unlike any other. Before, he had been aimless and off-centered, existing each day but nothing more. Now, he had a purpose, a reason to greet each day.

He lifted his eyes toward the ceiling and his nose flared as he searched for her scent, reassuring himself that she remained safely upstairs in his room.

*In his bed.*

His cock hammered, coming to life at the thought. That brief touch to access the damage at the back of her head was too short, too fucking brief. He wanted more—*needed* more.

“You’re a damned fool,” Trevor grumbled, intent on his task. “I told you tae stay away from her.”

He hissed as a large portion of separated skin connected and then sealed closed. “I couldn’t stay away from her, even if I wanted to.”

“A whole lot of good it’s going tae do you.”

Trevor finished and plopped the wand onto the table. Then he slapped his hands on either side of the aged wood, bending at the waist and glowering at him.

“What do you plan tae do when it’s time tae mate her? Did you think of that, Lycae? The moon will force you tae take her, even as your dick freezes and rots from frostbite. And that’s an injury no amount of magic in this world will heal.”

“There has to be something you can do.” Luke narrowed his eyes in turn, unwilling to back down. “Warlocks are more powerful than wizards or witches. And you’re a Judge, for Christ’s sake.”

“Do no’ stroke my goat, Luke. Save that for the ladies. You are in the shit up tae your neck with this one.”

Luke met the Warlock’s eyes, needing to know. “Does that mean there’s nothing you can do for her?”

Trevor broke the stare as his head drooped between his shoulders. He drew in a deep breath, staring at the table, and then sighed loudly. “Her crux canna be broken by another. When Alexander scattered his soul, he ensured a portion of himself remained. Curses can only be severed when the caster responsible has passed over or his power is given tae another.”

Shamelessly, Luke entered Trevor’s mind, listening to his chaotic thoughts. He wasn’t lying. The fact that he couldn’t intervene both infuriated and intrigued him. As a Judge, he was excited by the challenge of confronting other magic-casters, especially when the odds were not in his favor. They were the strongest of the magically inclined, weaker only to the demons they once destroyed. It wasn’t about being the strongest or most powerful—it was about being the best and the smartest.

“I’m sure that’s how they’ve kept her all these years. They knew just how clever their leader is. What a witty fucking bastard.” He glanced at Trevor’s pensive face through his lashes. “Maybe I should go see Louisa Marx. I hear voodoo magic is more powerful than that earth, wind, and fire garbage.”

“Voodoo?” Trevor nailed him with an eat-shit-and-die glare. “Doona even go there with me, pup. Those that lack magic within practice voodoo. It’s a sacrificial religion, but nothing more.”

He shook his head and then shrugged. “Something is better than nothing.”

“Doona try tae goad me. It willna work.”

“I’m not trying to do shit,” he growled and rose, inspecting the slightly pink but totally healed flesh of his hand. “But I won’t let her return to that asshole or the minions that worship him. She’s so tired, Trevor. She’s been alone for so long she’s forgotten what it means to hope. If you can’t help, I’ll have to find someone that can.”

“Damn you.” Trevor spoke sharply, snatching his wand from the table. “Your pack does no’ pay me enough for this bullshit! I could kill Cricket for falling in love with that Alpha of yours. If it were no’ for her, I’d say tae hell with it. You mongrels are like a batch of fleas latched tae my ass and sucking out my fucking soul! And I never said I did no’ want tae help her. Some things are quite simply beyond my power.”

Luke watched quietly as Trevor retrieved his coat from the kitchen counter and slung it over his arm before turning around. He didn’t have to read the Warlock’s mind to know he was positively seething. Referring to the Sheriff as a practitioner less powerful than someone who borrowed magic instead of creating it pissed him off more than Luke ever could have hoped for. The desire to prove him wrong was overriding the Warlock’s judgment, urging him to take a calculated risk just to prove a point.

“Stop reading my mind, Lycae.” Trevor’s voice was scathing, his Scottish brogue heavy. “That’s one thing you doona want tae do with me. If I want you tae know what I’m thinking, I’ll bloody well tell you.”

“I’ll make you a deal.” Luke folded his arms over his chest. “Tell me what you’re planning, and I won’t listen in to what you obviously don’t want me to hear.”

“I’m going tae see Helen Tex.” Trevor sighed, slapping the wand on the counter and shrugging into his coat. “The altercation at Greyson’s tells me she knows why they are here. Perhaps there is more tae the trip than a little soul collecting.”

“And then?”

Trevor grasped the wand and turned. “I doona know. For the time being, we need tae worry about the more pressing issue. I canna trust you not tae touch that female upstairs. I’m well aware of how you behave when you’ve mated. Replacing a door is one thing. Repairing your body is something else altogether.” He motioned, entreating Luke closer with his wand. “Come here, Lycae. I doona know why I’m willing tae give you something like this. It will drain me more than cloaking that pack of yours did, and I have a feeling I’ll need all the magic I can get.”

The white orb pulsed once, then again, and a blinding light covered the room. Luke staggered to his knees as he felt as if his body erupted from the inside, his large palms against the cool tile holding him aloft. The pain was gone in the instant it arrived, leaving him shaken. He lifted his head and noted the beads of sweat marring Trevor’s forehead, his eyes bright and slightly dazed. He was breathing hard, panting as he wobbled on his feet.

“The gift won’t last.” Trevor’s voice was shaky, and when he lowered the wand, his hand trembled. “But it will buy you time, Luke. And I suggest you put it tae damned good use while you’re able. By the time the sun comes up, the magic will begin to wane. God willing, I’ll be back before then.”

He stared down at his hands, opening and clenching his fists.

He felt exactly the same.

Uncertain, he peered up. “What have you done, Sheriff?”

“It’s the same magic we bestowed upon the innocent in the days of old, something intended tae protect the fragile from physical harm.”

Luke cocked an eyebrow and asked, “And why do I need that?”

Trevor’s caustic answer rocked his entire body, sending blood pounding in his ears and pure need radiating throughout his entire frame.

“Tae mate her tae you, you bloody idiot.”

## Chapter Four

As always in her dreams, Onyx yearned for touch. Be it from a billowy soft kitten her mind conjured, a wiry-coated hound from days long past, or the light tingles of the legs of a butterfly perched on the end of her finger. Her limited nineteen-year knowledge was distant and impossible to grasp while awake, but in sleep, she remembered every tiny detail.

But more often than not, a person invaded the sanctuary of her dreams. It was a part of her punishment. A way for her to remember what she so heedlessly cast away.

When the first brush of heat against her forehead came, she turned to it, desperate for more. Unwilling to mar the sensation by opening her eyes and facing Alexander's exuberant face, she kept her eyes firmly closed and allowed the contact but detached herself emotionally from the implications of it.

He was not meant for her, and never would be. No matter how much he wished it or tried to influence fate. But in dreams, he was always happy to remind her that she would never know the comfort of another, teasing and tormenting her with the only touch she might ever experience.

His.

And even as she tried to convince herself that anything was better than the shadow of isolation she always wore, she inwardly hated and detested herself for the weakness that drew her to him. Just as he knew it would.

*Damn him.*

The fingers traveled from her face to her hair and then burrowed inside the strands, massaging her scalp. Her hair separated and parted, and she shivered in bliss. She groaned at the unbelievable pleasure, shocked as Alexander only chose to touch and caress her in sexual ways. The erogenous zones were his favorite places to torment. He constantly fondled her breasts, pinched her nipples, or cupped her bottom. Though she detested and despised him, she allowed it.

Any kind of touch—painful or pleasurable—was preferable to none.

A throaty growl of fury nearly disrupted the dream, but it quickly faded as a warm body pressed against her, another hand coming up her spine to cradle and palm her head. Her face met the smoothness of hard flesh, the muscles pronounced against her cheek. She pressed against the skin, turning her nose from side to side and brushing the tip against the flesh, breathing in the distinct smells of woods, earth, and fresh rain.

She frowned.

*Something's not right.*

Alexander stank of sulfur and amber from demon conjuring. Not the arms of the earth.

The hands in her hair continued to massage and scrape gently, the soothing pads of confident fingers causing her to tremble. Plush lips came down, hovering just over her mouth, and when warm breath caressed her lips, her eyes flew open.

Hunter green stared back at her, trapped inside the face of the captivating man at the bar. The events outside of the cemetery returned, as did the image of his concerned face as he peered down at her, his husky voice deep and calming.

The shock of seeing him was nullified by the fact he was not only holding her, but he was *touching* her.

She tried to scramble away, to keep from harming him with the deadly taint of her skin. She arched her back to sever his hold and used gloved hands to force him away.

“Shh,” he said in a soothing timbre. “It’s all right.”

“Let me go,” she gasped, struggling to get free. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” he murmured, holding her closer. He gently probed the skin at the back of her head, searching for and finding what was obviously a healing wound. “How do you feel?”

Disbelief kept her silent while arousal stilled her frantic thrashing. He was even better up close, even more breathtakingly male. The elder warriors she trained with as a girl looked like him, with broad shoulders, taut muscles, and an impressive build. There were none of the mages’ gangly limbs and thin torsos she had grown accustomed to. The tanned skin of his chest was smooth, with a thin speckling of hair across the center. She wondered what he would taste like, if he would be salty or sweet.

“Keep thinking like that, and I won’t be able to control myself, darlin’,” he murmured, lowering his eyes and staring at her lips.

Puzzled, she asked, “Thinking like what?”

“About how good I taste.”

“What are you?” she whispered, awestruck and captivated.

“Haven’t you seen a Lycae before?” he asked playfully, lifting those glorious emerald irises to study her.

*A Lycae.*

She figured as much.

Wolfkind were known for their sexual prowess and unbelievably good looks, but if she had ever encountered one, she never would have known it. She was intended for one reason and one reason alone—to protect the coven until released from her service. She tangled with hired thugs and thieves

without home or obligation. Pack creatures were too close-knit for mercenary work. That meant no time to explore or learn about the world.

“You’re a *loup-garou*?”

He nodded and pulled his fingers from her hair, cupping her chin and brushing his thumb across her jaw. Her eyes slid shut, and she sighed, lips trembling.

It felt incredible to be petted.

“How are you . . . How can you . . .”

“Touch you?” he finished, smiling when she opened her eyes and intentionally massaging her scalp.

She wasn’t imagining or dreaming.

*He could touch her.*

A pool of heat coated her sex, her newly enraptured heart increasing in tempo. Need, want, and desire came together, a heady mixture destined to change her life forever. For a brief moment, she reminded herself of the penalty for what she was about to do. Her first partner would be her only partner—forever. It was the way of the Covenant, a safeguard to protect from bad decisions or rash impulses. Her kind were only destined to feel an intense attraction to those meant for them.

But if she chose this path, she would never be free of the ice locked inside her. Only Alexander had the power to remove the curse, and he would never dream of doing such a thing unless she agreed to give herself over to him.

She met those shifting green eyes, mesmerized.

The Lycae could touch her. Who cared if the curse was never lifted?

She frowned when another, less appealing thought surfaced.

What if this wasn’t the same for him? He wouldn’t want to be saddled with a clingy lover from the past when he discovered his mate. He would send her on her way even as she begged to stay.

Then where would she be, and what would she do?

*Doomed to an eternity alone.*

She didn’t even know his name . . .

“My name is Luke Trevlian. I’m the Beta of the Bacchus pack of New Orleans,” he answered before she could speak and then dipped his head down to brush his lips lightly across hers, sending pure fire raging through her bloodstream. “And you can put that mind of yours at ease. There is no other for me. You’re mine, darlin’.”

He flipped her onto her back in a seamless motion, and she realized he was completely naked when he came over her and settled his weight between her legs. His lips crushed hers, and his tongue slid past, pillaging and tasting the softness of her mouth. She moaned into his lips, writhing against him as she raked her leather gloves into the contorting muscles in his back.

She froze, going still as the reality hit.

If he could touch her, she could also touch him.

She wanted to cry at the realization.

Her hands trembled violently as she struggled to remove the gloves covering shaking fingers, desperate to make contact against skin willingly for the first time in centuries.

Luke lifted his head. Those green orbs were sparkling brilliantly, and his incisors were tipped. He helped her remove the leather gloves and then placed her hands directly on his chest, over the strong beating of his heart. She closed her eyes as weighted tears of gratitude slid free, her entire body quaking at the first contact with another person in two centuries.

She was no longer alone. Not anymore.

“You’ll never be alone again, Onyx.” Luke’s voice was throaty and deep. He nuzzled her nose, kissing away the crystalline tears winding down her face. When he rose above her and met her eyes, he promised hoarsely, “Now that I’ve found you, I’ll never let you go.”



## Chapter Five

Trevor grumbled to himself as he strode down the darkened alleys, cursing Arden and the luck that placed her with a Lycae mate. The Dhampir girl had weaseled her way into his heart shortly after she saved his life, holding him in the palm of her hand and melting his Kevlar shell like a ripe M&M. Now the wolves slobbered up the leftovers, keeping him on his toes.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

He was due some kind of peace, all things considered. He rescinded the title of Sheriff and Judge after his family and kin died, releasing their souls from the abyss created by the demon that plagued them all. He had earned the right to retire. Too much destruction came from the magic of which he was capable. Though intended to protect, his magic had the power to harm and destroy and was especially dangerous to those he cared for most.

*Sarah.*

The thought of his lost fiancée sent tremors of outrage soaring through him.

Her death was foolish, something that never should have happened. All of the power in the world hadn't done shit to circumvent her fate.

The woman he intended to love for an eternity.

Now, he was back in the shit. Weaving spells and lending magic to furry critters that offered a level of protection for the girl he viewed as family. Keeping Arden safe from all the creatures she'd managed to piss off in the past didn't come cheap, especially as the Lycae pack that claimed her managed to wipe out a majority of the vampyren population in the process of Wolfe's ascension to Alpha.

"Fucking mongrels," he muttered, dodging a homeless man snoring in a heap to the left of the alley.

"What did you call me?" the old fart demanded, now fully awake.

"I was no' talking to you," he snapped without turning around.

Excited voices carried from a few streets over, yet another Halloween extravaganza taking place. The disturbing booming from subwoofers combined with piercing shrieks of drunken females was offset by the eager hoots and hollers of men hoping for a piece of ass.

He shook his head, thinking and growling, "Bloody idiots."

Halloween always brought out the oddness in mortals.

"Should just call Cricket and tell her I willna do this any longer," he mumbled.

Helen Tex's very neglected colonial home looked as gloomy as he was sure the former priestess intended. Old Spanish moss covered the wrought-iron porch and balcony overhead, a few pieces

latched onto the window shutters. The once pink stone was now faded to a girly tan. A large wooden sign hung from the balcony, swaying slightly.

Helen's Charms and Fortune Telling.

Glancing at the sign, he scowled and repressed the sudden desire to upchuck. Helen was once a powerful witch who creatures in the Quarter didn't fuck with. Then she had fallen out of favor with the coven in the area and reduced herself to this. If it were him, he would have moved and said to hell with it. Nothing was worse than cynics who didn't believe in real magic but wanted to know what the future held.

He didn't bother opening the gate, grasping the railing in one hand and vaulting over. His trench coat rippled around him, worn brown leather crackling. Each footstep brought him closer to the cracked door and the laughable sounds of soothing yet creepy mood-altering music.

When he neared the porch, the sound vanished, and the door opened wide. Helen was waiting, dressed in a long black velvet robe. Her strawberry blonde hair was pulled back, and her chocolate brown eyes were darkly kohled. She was dressed for a séance or a decent fucking, but he wasn't going to ask for clarification.

Now was not the time for distraction.

"Expecting me?" he asked and started climbing the stairs.

"Didn't you see the sign? I see all." She laughed and stepped aside, holding the door open.

The laughter told him something was wrong. Helen was a bitch, not a hostess. After being tossed aside and left to fend for herself, she had been forced to live and learn the hard way. He didn't blame her. All creatures—magically inclined or no—did what was necessary to survive.

He waited until he was safely inside and the door was closed before he asked, "Is your home soundproofed?"

Those brown eyes flashed amber. "Of course it is, Warlock. What do you take me for, a novice?"

"Of course no'. But what I have tae say is to remain between us. Do you understand?"

"Don't you mean what *I* have to say?" she countered, turning on heel and walking into the adjoining room. "Really, I thought you were smarter, Sheriff."

"Damn it!" he snarled, stomping behind her. "I doona go by that title anymore! How many times do I have tae say it?"

"The moment you called on the souls of your lost Judges to help Wolfe Trevlian save his mate, you assumed the mantle of a Sheriff once more. You don't have to go by the title, of course. But anyone with a touch of magic can feel and smell the power you emit. The lingering traces of the cloak you twined are still wreaking havoc on the fae down at the dock."

“Let’s just get tae it, shall we?” He walked to a vacant chair and slumped into the musty cushions, exhaling loudly. The fatigue was worse now and would only increase as Luke continued absorbing the energy necessary to shield himself through the connection he’d opened between them.

“Certainly.” She took a seat across from him, pushing aside the velvet robe to reveal a killer pair of legs adorned with black patent leather high heels.

When she didn’t speak, he asked, “What was that business in the pub about?”

“You don’t want to know about that. You want to know about Onyx Blackthorn and Luke Trevlian.” She laughed at his shocked expression. “Sheriff, you have no idea of how much my ability to see has grown and flourished. Leaving the coven was the best thing that ever happened to me. Without their powers to muddle my propensity for divination, I am capable of so much more than I ever imagined.”

“Then tell me what I want tae know, witch. If you can see all, you know time is short.”

“Ah, yes.” She sighed wistfully. “Halloween is always a dangerous time, especially when a coven plans to perform a reformation of the body and soul.”

“They’ve done it, then?” His heart spiked, and adrenaline coursed through his system. “Alexander Clarisse has gained the favor necessary tae return to flesh and blood?”

“Trevor, haven’t you noticed what moon we are currently under? Tomorrow, Samhain will arrive, and that moon will still remain. A new moon, symbolizing new beginnings.”

“I know that,” he snapped. “I just did no’ think they’d managed tae achieve so much in two-hundred years. I figured they were here tae wrangle with a misgotten soul or two.”

“They’ve homed all their resources and magic into returning Alexander to flesh. He’s got a bone to pick with the girl who snubbed him, and make no mistake, his new life will consist of nothing more than the need to make her suffer for the years he was forced to wander the mortal realm aimlessly.”

“She does no’ love him and is now mated tae Luke. He’ll have tae suck it up and get the fuck over it.”

“Mated to Luke . . .” Her voice trailed, and comprehension dawned in her eyes. “You gave him a physical shield. That’s why you’re so exhausted.”

He didn’t bother denying it. “I did, and I’d do it again. That girl has suffered for centuries because of a wizard’s inflated ego, and it’s high time he let it go. Once Luke mates her, she will become twined tae him through the vow of the Covenant and the bonds of a Lycae. Nothing can stand between a bond like that.”

“Now, Sheriff, when did you go and become a bleeding heart?”

“Doona fuck with me, Helen. No’ tonight.” He brought a hand up and squeezed the bridge of his nose. “I’ve got enough on my plate without a henpecking.”

“Don’t worry, Trevor,” she said, eyes narrowing and lips going thin. “I want this just as much as you do.”

“And why is that?” he inquired casually.

“When my coven cast me aside, I thought others would be willing to open their arms and accept me elsewhere. I didn’t mean any harm when I summoned the rage demon. I was still young and impulsive, lured by the prospect of danger. But one mistake was all it took to earn me a place outside the inner sanctum. The opportunity to return the favor is too good to pass up. I’ve waited decades for this.”

He lowered his hand and sighed. “No better time than the present tae get even, is that it?”

“Exactly.” She nodded, pursing her glossy red lips. “So, what do you plan to do about that nasty curse? Do you intend to loan Luke your power during the full moon when the mating heat falls upon them each month? Or have you got something better in mind? Even someone as powerful as you can’t afford to share that much energy regularly.”

He shook his head. “I’m going tae force the bastard tae absolve the hex. I just have no’ figured out the details yet.” He peered up at her. “I doona suppose you have any ideas you’d like tae share.”

“Maybe one or two.” She stood and walked to a curio against the wall, whispering quietly and evoking a spell. The double doors swung wide, revealing rows of potions and ingredients.

## Chapter Six

Her trembling fingers against his skin broke his heart, as did those beautiful silver eyes brimming with tears. Luke continued raining gentle kisses onto her face, whispering soothing nothings in Lycae to calm her. He fought back the guilt at not being truthful, knowing she believed that he was special in some way and that was why he could touch her.

*Must claim her so nothing can take her away.*

The need grew stronger, his body pulsating in a way he'd never known. His brother and cousin had told him how it would be when he mated, a hunger so intense he wouldn't be able to deny himself. The need to mate and claim would only build until he finally lost himself in the welcoming heat of her body.

He had thought Adam and Wolfe were exaggerating.

They weren't.

He waited for resistance when he brought his hands to the waist of her leather pants, his mind listening intently to her thoughts and reactions. He worried she might stop him as each time he touched her, traces of Alexander's visits to her dreams came rushing back. The guilt she experienced at allowing him such intimacy both infuriated and shamed her, and Luke wanted to tear the wizard apart for torturing her all those years.

"I want to touch every inch of you." He darted his tongue out, tasting the sensitive skin of her throat. "Would you like that?"

"Y-Yes," she stammered and wriggled beneath him.

He tugged the hem of her turtleneck free of her pants, and she arched her back, assisting him in removing the material from her torso. Dark curls surrounded her shoulders in a cascade of rippling silk when she relaxed into the pillows and studied him with eyes that held excitement and eagerness, but no fear. Creamy breasts pressed against the black lace bra, her rounded pink nipples visible through the thin material.

Guilt hit him like a punch to the gut.

He should be honest with his mate. She had the right to know that when the sun crested the sky, his body would no longer be able to bear the bitter contact of her skin.

"Is something wrong?" She frowned, and when he slid into her mind, he knew she worried she wasn't beautiful or tempting enough.

As if such a thing were possible.

"Only that you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life."

She went soft beneath him, smiling shyly, and he lowered his head to lick and nip at her navel. Her soft gasp of pleasure nearly broke him, and he shifted his hips against the mattress to ease the growing pressure in his cock and the heaviness in his sack.

Her tender fingers skimmed over the skin along his back and shoulders, sharp fingernails scraping lightly. Groaning and whimpering, Onyx arched her back with each lap of his tongue. He worked the button at her pants free and spanned the softness between her hips with his hand, envisioning the child that would grow there in the future—their child.

*The curse.*

If it weren't lifted, would he ever touch her again?

He forced the thought aside, tugging at the sides of the leather at her waist and bringing it down. His own hands trembled when he cast aside her boots and clothing and left her pale body covered in scraps of black lace.

Again, remembrances of Alexander came to her mind, marring the rightness of their mating, and he chose to replace them with new images of his own. He sent erotic flashes to her mind, of him sucking her nipples, tasting her sex with his tongue, and claiming her from behind. She groaned and her eyes slid closed, her perfectly rounded hips lifting and pressing against him.

"Which would you like me to do first?" he asked huskily, returning to her body and urging her legs apart with his knee before placing his weight between her thighs.

"Touch my breasts," she answered without hesitation, lifting her back to reach around for the clasps of her bra. The thin lace went slack, and she slid her arms free before tossing the scrap of black to the floor.

Slowly, he made his way from her belly button to her breasts. She trembled beneath him, and the hands on his shoulders squeezed and then relaxed. He bathed the sweetness of her flesh with his tongue while inhaling her scent into his lungs. The combined fragrance of lavender and rose petal assailed him, making his already erect cock diamond hard.

He brought both hands to her chest to cup the small globes, using his thumbs to create light circles around the soft pink areola. Her gasp of pleasure made him growl contentedly, and he encouraged her by claiming one of the hardened peaks between his lips.

"Oh, god." She whimpered, releasing his shoulders and cradling his head. Her fingers twined into his hair, tugging and caressing ever so softly.

He released the taut nipple and moved for the other. "Your skin tastes as good as it smells, sweet and silky as honey."

"And your mouth feels amazing," she moaned, pulling him closer. "It's so hot and wet."

Each flick of his tongue increased her arousal, until he was mad with the desire to taste that slick heat between her legs. He released the pebbled nipple from his mouth and pressed a kiss against it

before making his way back down, toward the scent that compelled him. He cupped the wet mound between her thighs before his lips passed her navel, and she gasped, muscles going tight.

“Easy.” He breathed the word. “I’m going to taste the rest of you.”

Sharing another image of him licking her sex was all it took. Her mirror-tinted eyes went wide, and her lips parted.

“Y-You really want to do that?”

“You have no idea,” he growled thickly, lowering his head and brushing his nose against her silken belly. “Smelling you without tasting you would be nothing short of torment. You don’t want to torment me, Onyx. Do you?” Swallowing loudly, she shook her head, and he smiled. “Then lie back, sweetheart. You’ll enjoy it as much as I do. I promise you.”

As he pulled the underwear from her hips, she began to wriggle and squirm. Her hands darted out several times as she sought to touch him, but found empty air as he moved lower. A soft groan of frustration slipped past her lips before she placed her hands on either side of her body, knuckles going white as she clenched the sheets.

“Enjoy it. Let it wash over you,” he instructed, peeling the lace from her thighs. “Rushing something this special only spoils how good it can be.”

The tiny black triangle of hair between her thighs matched the strands on her head, and he groaned when he saw the glistening folds of her sex just beneath. Her scent was stronger and lured him to sample what belonged to him and him alone. A heavy growl remained trapped in his chest as he struggled not to lose control and frighten her.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, meeting her eyes.

Her breath caught, and her bottom lip quivered.

The temptation to claim her lips was overwhelming, so much so that he quickly averted his eyes and slid his large, tanned hands beneath her ass, cupping gently as he guided her down the bed until he rested on his knees on the floor. When she was braced against the end of the mattress, he placed her legs over his shoulders, opening her deliciously pink core to his hungry gaze.

Reverently, he ran his palms along her inner thighs, taking pleasure in the way the muscles beneath corded. She was in incredible shape, almost too lean, but he was sure good food and the company of ever-ravenous Lycae would see an end to that.

“Please,” she pleaded, writhing once more.

“Tell me what you need, darlin’,” he said, bringing his hands within inches of her sex.

“I don’t know, something more.”

“This?” He leaned forward and flicked his tongue across the enlarged clit protruding from the soft hood above the pink folds below.

Her answer was a high-pitched cry of want, her frantic little mewls and pleas impossible to decipher. Shamelessly, he turned to her thoughts, finding what it was she wanted, and reacted. She needed to know this was real, to feel grounded.

Grasping a rounded cheek in each hand, he swiped his tongue along the slit along the center, tasting and savoring her response. Gentleness was replaced with the desire to please her, to give her anything and everything she wanted and needed, and right now, that was his entire presence. She wanted to be consumed, to believe this was real.

He squeezed her soft ass roughly as a reminder that the skin on his palms held and touched her, short fingernails barely digging into the surface of the skin. He lapped and devoured her with his tongue, each swipe intentional and every taste deliberate.

Fear swamped her as she approached orgasm, and she fought the desire sending fire raging throughout her body. He continued, unable to think about anything less than the bliss she would experience when she came to climax.

“Come for me,” he stopped long enough to order before returning to his task.

Her thighs quivered and shook violently as she fought the need to come, as if she were afraid to let go. Determined, he slid a finger up and worked it into her sex, marveling at the tight sleekness that surrounded his finger and clenched.

“Luke!”

His name on her lips made his pulsating erection jerk and swell. He bumped the engorged head of his cock against the comforter, shuddering in agony and pleasure. Tasting his mate was everything he thought it would be and more.

*Can't wait to be inside her.*

Her breathing was stunted, inhales of oxygen no more than ragged pants and groans. He worked another finger alongside the first, thrusting in and out in smooth motions. When he felt her try to stave her orgasm, he latched onto her clit and bit down gently.

The scream that escaped when she climaxed was a garbled wail of disbelief, ecstasy, and wonder, as if she feared she would never return from those glorious arms that carried her. He stilled his fingers as she came down, panting loudly.

“That . . . you . . . that was . . .”

“Delicious?” he answered and carefully removed his fingers. He met her cloudy eyes as he brought his drenched fingers to his mouth and licked her cream clean.

Her cheeks flushed, and he thought it suited her perfectly.



For a moment, he considered rising above her, but he quickly decided against it. He knew from listening to her thoughts that this was entirely new to her, that she was a virgin who had saved this moment for the one person intended for her.

Even at the cost of her freedom years before.

The Lycae bristled proudly at her sacrifice and strength of will. She may not have known it at the time, but she had saved herself for him. No male could have ever been so fortunate or honored.

He felt the weight of her stare and glanced up. She was studying him as if he were an anomaly, something she had seen before but didn't understand. Knowing she wanted to touch him, he lifted onto his knees, climbing over her while keeping his erection temporarily hidden.

"How do you seem to know what I'm thinking?" She grasped his shoulders, clutching him as if he might vanish.

"Because I can," he answered honestly.

"You can read my mind?"

He nodded. "I know it's considered rude to listen in, but I can't help it. It's the way of mates. After we make love, you'll be able to hear me in your mind as well."

"I will?"

She sounded breathless, and he perceived her excitement. "Yes." He moved up until his mouth was at the vulnerable hollow of her throat. "You will."

"How can you be so sure I'm your mate?"

"How can you be so sure that I'm yours?" he asked, teasing the skin at her nape. "It's ingrained in each of us, sweetheart. An attraction to one another that cannot be explained or denied. For Lycae, the knowledge comes from a simple touch."

Her fingers swept away from his arms and went lower, then lower. The pads of her fingers followed the indentions along his stomach and stilled when she found the hair that started below his belly button.

"Can I see you?" she whispered, gazing up at him with big doelike eyes and a curious expression.

"I don't want to frighten you."

She smiled shyly. "I've seen the men in the coven nude. They do the moonlit vows for the New Year unclothed."

"Sweetheart, in case you haven't noticed, I'm not made like the men in the coven."

“I know.” Her voice went alluring and deep, her fingers becoming bolder. “You are built like the elder warriors I trained with—large and strong—but you’re far taller. I don’t believe I’ve seen anything aside from an ogre or Chimera that equals your height.”

“I’m shorter than Adam and Wolfe.”

Her fingers stilled when she asked curiously, “Adam and Wolfe?”

“My brother and cousin.”

“Oh.”

Her fingers resumed their tentative trek, but he felt her sadness. Her own family was long gone, killed at some point during the Civil War. Many preternatural creatures were lost during that time, including his own. The difference was she never even had the opportunity to say good-bye, saddled with the responsibility of caring for Alexander’s coven.

“How could they let you go to him?” he couldn’t help but ask, furious at her family for betraying her so easily. “You were only a child.”

Her eyes flashed silver as she defended her lost relatives. “They didn’t have a choice. I became an active member of the Covenant when I turned eighteen. I was fortunate to have a year of freedom before I was contracted.”

“And how long would you have been expected to remain as such?”

She shrugged and looked away. “Until I met the one intended for me. That is more powerful than any servitude. Promising yourself to another in both body and soul is a greater bond than the one instigated by a blood contract. When we, after we”—she peered up at him and stammered, blushing—“make love, I will no longer be obligated to them.” Lowering her eyes, she whispered, “All of me will belong to you.”

“Do you really want to see me, darlin?” he asked, eager to claim her entirely.

Her hesitant nod was all he needed. A swift and effortless motion saw her safely in his arms. He carried her to the head of the bed and climbed atop the mattress with her nestled against his chest. When his back was flush against the headboard, he released her and used his free hands to help her straddle his waist.

The plush cheeks of her ass brushed his cock, the skin silky smooth. Her plump breasts taunted him, and it took all of his control not to lean across and snatch one of the rosy nipples in his mouth. Groaning, he took her hands and placed them on his chest. Then, he released her and placed his palms on either of her outspread thighs.

“I’m all yours.”

## Chapter Seven

The brazenness she exuded evaporated, leaving insecurity and doubt. She knew nothing of men, save what she learned from Alexander.

“Stop doing that, darlin’,” Luke growled, and when she lifted her anxious gaze to his, she noted his glorious green irises were glowing. She could sense his anger, could see it inside those livid eyes. “Make new memories with me. Right here, right now. Don’t bring him into our bed.”

Immediately, she lowered her head. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” His tone softened. “Just focus on me, on us. Don’t allow him to ruin this for you.”

“I don’t know what to do.” She sounded pitiful, even to her own ears.

He clasped her hands and moved her fingers along his chest and shoulders, guiding her in circular motions. He stopped at the tanned nipples and rubbed her palms against them.

“Did you like it when I kissed you here?” At her nod, he said, “So do I, darlin’. It’s the exact same thing. I want that sexy little mouth of yours to taste every inch of me.”

She blushed, embarrassed but aroused. His frank manner of speech was the ultimate aphrodisiac, removing any and all sense of propriety.

“There is no such thing as propriety between mates, sweetheart. And thinking about your sweet lips all over my body is nothing compared to what I’m struggling not to tell you.”

She grinned impishly, stirred once more by his stark honesty. “It’s not fair that you can read my mind and I can’t read yours.”

“When the instinct hits, you’ll hear me.”

“The instinct?”

He released her hands to grasp her arms and bring her closer. Her eyes widened, and he waited until his breath caressed her lips to whisper, “Kiss me, and I’ll show you.”

This time, his full lips parted in invitation. She tilted her head to the right and brought her mouth closer, until her tongue teased the small opening provided. He groaned but remained still, allowing her to set the pace and explore. His taste was sweet but totally male, a mingling of earth, fog, and rain. As nervousness faded, her tongue delved deeper, extending into the welcoming warmth of his mouth.

“You taste so good,” she murmured against his lips as she came up for air.

“So do you.” His smile was utterly masculine and breathtaking, much the same as the man himself.

She quickly kissed his lips and then created a path from his stubbled cheek to his jaw, following the square line to his neck. The skin tasted salty against her tongue, and she swallowed between featherlight strokes, savoring his flavor as she worked her way down his body.

Her lips brushed against one of his nipples, and she mirrored the same treatment bestowed by him earlier, bringing her lips over the softness of his skin and darting her tongue along the edge. He shifted his hips beneath her, hissing and cursing in a language she didn't understand when she captured the tiny nub between her teeth and flicked her tongue back and forth across the surface.

"That's right, sweetheart," he groaned. "Jesus, just like that. You're going to be the death of me."

Encouraged by his reaction, she brought her hands up, allowing her fingers to trail over the sides of his chiseled chest. The hands placed upon her arms followed suit, and she felt Luke's fingers dip lower, and then lower still.

The first stroke of his fingers between her legs shocked more than frightened her.

He leaned forward and stole a quick kiss. "I just want to touch you."

Immediately, she relaxed, stifling a moan when his fingers slid along the wet folds. The ache inside was worse now, a hollowness that refused to abate. She wasn't sexually experienced, but she knew what it would take to alleviate the problem and bring relief.

Luke didn't frown when she moved away from his clever fingers, but then, he probably knew what it was she intended. He steadied her with arms at her elbows when she lifted onto her knees and moved back to straddle his thighs just behind his straining erection.

"Oh my," she whispered, eyes wide.

He wasn't lying when he had said that he wasn't built like the mages of the coven. That magnificent part of him jutted proudly from a dark scattering of hair, the rounded plum-shaped head purple and painfully engorged. He wasn't only long. He was also impossibly thick.

She swallowed loudly, experiencing her first pang of apprehension.

The width alone was wider than her wrist.

"Onyx." He said her name firmly. "Look at me."

She tore her eyes away from that daunting part of him and met his understanding eyes.

"Don't be afraid. I'll be gentle."

"But, you're so big," she blurted out, blushing profusely the second the words escaped.

"There will be pain, but it will be fleeting." He lifted a hand and twined it into the hair at her nape. "I can make this incredible for you, if you'll allow it. Trust me."

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she reached for him. The skin seemed so unyielding and hard, as if it would rend her in two. She wound her fingers around the top portion and closed them, breath hitching at what she discovered.

“It’s so soft,” she murmured, rubbing her thumb along the tip and staring at the shimmering, diamond like bead that appeared at the thin slit in the center. “Hard yet soft as satin.”

“Why don’t you taste me?” he asked and rolled his hips. “See if you enjoy me as much as I enjoy you.”

Before she could say she didn’t know how, images flashed in her mind of taking him between her lips. Something else came along with them, an inner voice that encouraged her to let go and feel. She frowned, wanting to ask where the voice came from, when Luke answered the question.

“That’s the instinct. It wants you to let go and trust me to take care of you.”

Allowing something foreign and strange to guide her was difficult, but she did so nonetheless. Luke reclined against the headboard and pillows as she moved between legs for better access. Nervousness was replaced with curiosity and temptation, the compulsion to take him between her lips growing stronger. His large body quivered, and she perceived the immense shift in power. The crystalline drop drew her attention, and she lowered her head until her mouth hovered just over the bulbous tip. She licked the thin slit slowly, her body going still when he gasped as if in pain.

“Your tongue feels incredible,” he said in a gravelly voice. “Don’t stop.”

She slid her tongue around the head, noting the bitter flavor of his seed and the saltiness of his skin. Each lick brought more of the impulses from within, a need to lure and tempt her mate. Wantonly, she parted her lips, took the tip into his mouth, and sucked gently.

“Yes, just like that.” His hands wound into her hair, fingers tangling in the strands.

More of his essence coated her tongue, fueling the lust within. More erotic images flashed in her mind, causing her to moan around the flesh in her mouth. Luke’s fingers tightened in her hair, and his hips moved upward, timed to meet her lips. He was far too long and thick to take completely, but she tried, relaxing her jaw as she went down his length and sucking hungrily as she returned to the head.

“Christ, Onyx,” he growled, pumping his hips. “Your scent is driving me mad.”

The hand in her hair vanished, he shifted beneath her, and then his fingers brushed the lips of her sex, the slightly callused flesh rough but gentle. She pressed against them and rotated her hips. The ache in her abdomen increased, a terrible cramping sensation arriving each time her womb clenched empty.

“Fuck,” he rasped. The rounded tip in her mouth widened and expanded, and Luke used his free hand to palm her face and pull her away. “Stop, darlin’, before I come inside that hot little mouth of yours.”

She let the smooth flesh slide free, but she didn't look away, mesmerized by the smooth thumb-sized extension of skin just beneath the head that slowly receded.

"It's called a barb. It will lock into place when I spend myself inside your body."

"Will it hurt?"

"No, sweetheart. Just the opposite."

"Do all men have those?"

He smiled, shook his head, and reached for her. His arms wound around her back and pulled her against him. Deftly, he rotated them until she rested in the pillows. The kiss he placed on her lips was fleeting. His mouth chose to mark each portion of her body—her neck, her shoulders, her collarbone and breasts.

Parting her thighs with his broad shoulders, he returned to her sex. She relaxed and allowed the unbelievable sensations and images to take her, basking in the rightness of being with this male.

"*Yours,*" a voice whispered to her.

This time, as he lapped greedily at her, she allowed the climax to approach. She reached for it, let the pleasure build and build until the dam burst free and she was screaming his name. The world shattered and crumbled, dissipating in blinding rays of white. Her body became weightless, and she soared as high as the orgasm allowed.

When the room came into a blurry focus, she saw Luke's face and felt something smooth and large pressing against the sensitive entrance of her sex.

"I need you to trust me," he whispered in a strained voice.

"I do," she murmured, placing her hands on his shoulders.

He kissed her deeply and shifted his hips. She felt her body stretching, attempting to widen to allow him entry. Her legs parted without instruction to give him more room. Luke's hand brushed against her thigh as he slid the tip between her folds several times, the velvety head made slick by her arousal. When he pressed forward this time, he worked the head inside. She bit her lip while trying to remain still and soft beneath him.

The pressure was incredible. There was nowhere inside his body didn't touch. She whimpered when he continued forward, the fullness becoming a painful and continuous burn.

"Easy, sweetheart." Luke released his flesh and lifted his head to study her face.

He rocked his hips carefully, sliding out of her body before pressing back in. Slowly, the burn dimmed, becoming something different. The newfound pleasure made her tremble and quake, until she was rising up to meet the shallow thrusts.

“Good girl. That’s it.”

Luke kissed her again as he rocked his pelvis. She groaned mindlessly into his lips, grasping and clawing at his back.

She needed more.

“Hold on to me,” he instructed thickly.

His hands clasped her hips, fingers biting into her skin. He pulled himself from her body, retreating slowly. His lips seared hers as he plunged back inside, burying himself so deeply she felt him bump her cervix. The cry of pain, swallowed by his mouth, was taken in the same instant he claimed her. An overwhelming sense of belonging and fulfillment twined and buried itself inside her heart, spindles of happiness sufficing her body and lifting her above the misery.

*Bound to him.*

Lycae mated. Those of the Covenant bonded. Each was similar, but vastly different. Whereas the wolf was possessive and territorial, the bonds of her people were based solely on pure love and joy.

Luke lifted his head, releasing her lips. “You feel so good, Onyx.”

She relinquished the death grip on his back and went limp against the pillows. She knew he would hear the invitation in her mind, her willingness to allow him to claim her as his own. His green irises flashed peridot, and he was moving, thrusting inside of her. There was no more pain, only pleasure.

Her moans spurred him on, driving him in and out of her with brutal strokes. He rose above her, grasping her bottom in his hands. Her eyes remained riveted to the sight of his body entering and departing her sex. A pained expression marred the beauty of his face, and he stopped, gasping for breath.

At her puzzled expression, he said, “I wanted to make this last, but looking at you and feeling you all around me . . . I can’t hold off. I have to come inside you.”

Slowly, he pulled free. His hands encouraged her to flip onto her belly. Then he brought her onto her knees, placing several of the pillows beneath her stomach. She blushed when she realized his intent.

This was how animals mated.

He leaned forward and whispered into her ear, “I *am* half wolf, darlin’.”

She groaned when she felt the head of his erection slide against her flesh before he pressed inside. The fullness was better like this, bordering on painful. When he was completely seated within her, she could feel the fullness of his cock pulsating and throbbing. Lowering her head into the pillows, she arched her back and wriggled her hips.

He pulled free, until only the broad tip remained within her, and growled, “Be careful what you ask for, *mate*.”

The sharp slap of skin meeting skin was muffled by her cry of bliss. Luke wasn’t easy or gentle now, and she didn’t want him to be. She could hear him now, his voice steady, echoing clearly in her mind. Each of his thoughts concerned her—only her. She knew he wanted to make this good for her, to bring her to consummate pleasure.

His skilled fingers found her clitoris, massaging and pinching, bringing her to an unexpected climax. She thrashed and ground her torso into the softness of the pillows, screaming her release into the billowy cushion of feather and expensive cotton.

“That’s it. Take all of me. Take everything I have to give you,” Luke demanded.

His lips brushed against her shoulder, and then she felt his teeth. The fullness became more, as if he were growing inside her. The barb engaged, and she felt Luke’s hot semen explode inside her as he bit down, sending her into another mind-blowing climax before the first had the opportunity to pass. She didn’t have the energy or the air necessary to scream, left only to writhe and groan as her limbs contorted and she shook violently.

She swallowed between spastic pants, struggling to breathe. He released her shoulder and lapped at the ravaged skin gently. Wanting to face him, she started to shift around, and he wrapped his arms around her waist to keep her in place.

“Not yet, darlin’.” His voice was a raspy purr of contentment. “We’re not finished.”

“But—”

Without warning, his cock jerked, and she felt another wave of heat coat her womb. She cried out as he did when another orgasm took them, this one stronger and longer. When it passed, she sagged, unable to lift her head or control her limbs.

“You’re incredible, Onyx.” Luke’s gentle hands against the sweat-slicked skin along her back were meant to soothe and comfort.

“So are you,” she groaned into the pillow.

“Keep complimenting me like that and I’ll keep you chained to the bed.”

She would have chuckled if she’d had the energy. “Haven’t you had enough?”

“Of you?” he asked, and she felt his nose nuzzling her spine. “Never.”

His body went tight, and she wanted to shout when he climaxed yet again. Her body and vocal cords were too weak to do much more than accept what he gave, and she rode out the waves of pleasure each time he spent himself inside her until sleepiness made everything fuzzy.



Eventually, she felt the knot buried deep inside recede and knew the barb was no longer latched in place. “There we go,” Luke whispered and sighed.

He pulled free of her body, plopped down beside her, and pulled her into his arm in a spoon position. His mouth returned to the place he marked on her shoulder, his tongue soothing the wounds that pulsed slightly. There were things she wanted to say, questions she wanted to ask. But her body and mind were too exhausted. She yawned and relaxed into Luke’s sheltering embrace, closing her eyes.

“You can trust me, Onyx,” Luke murmured. “Go to sleep.”

Unable to do anything else, she did.

## Chapter Eight

“Hello, beloved.”

Onyx trembled at the sound of the voice, keeping her eyes tightly closed. It was only a dream, she reminded herself. If she didn’t give in, she would wake and he would be gone.

“You cannot escape me, Onyx.”

Cool fingers tickled the edge of her thigh and traveled up the length of her body. She tried not to shiver, forced herself to remain still, until a featherlight stroke against her breast turned into a terrible, burning pain as he pinched the nipple painfully, twisting the rounded peak as she opened her eyes and cried out.

“Excellent.” Alexander’s beaming face stared back at her. She didn’t have to look past his bare shoulders to know his body, like hers, was completely naked.

*Wake up!* She raged inwardly, even knowing it would prove futile. These sorts of dreams ended when he allowed it. Not before.

“What’s wrong? Don’t I touch you as well as your lover?”

She leaped from the mattress, heedless of her naked state, and faced him with arms crossed over her chest.

“I have never welcomed your touch.”

“Continuing to delude yourself, I see.” He smiled and lounged across the bright white comforter, his casual tone infuriating her all the more. “I’m not surprised. You were always the most willful creature. I suppose that’s what gained my notice in the first place. Do you remember that day, beloved? I know I do. That fool of a boy didn’t stand a chance with you, but then, neither does anyone else. Do you know why that is, Onyx? Do you know why you can’t stand the thought of another? Because you belong to me. Everything that has happened has directed you into my path.”

“Everything you’ve constructed, you mean,” she snapped. “I am not, nor will I ever be, yours.”

“Oh, but you are.” The smile vanished, replaced by anger. “Mating that beast of a man doesn’t change anything. Oddly enough, it only increases my desire to claim you. I can absolve the bond you’ve made with him given time, or I can kill him outright. You will submit to me, do not doubt that. There is nothing I cannot do, *nothing*.”

“Except make me love you,” she whispered, meeting his livid blue eyes.

“Oh, you’ll love me,” he snarled, striding around the bed.

She didn’t move, openly defying him. Making love to Luke had changed her, bringing her to life. The fear she normally experienced was replaced with purpose and strength. Alexander couldn’t harm her any longer.

“Don’t be so sure about that.” He wound his fingers into the hair at her nape, twisting until she went onto her toes. “There are so many ways I can torture you, and I’ll enjoy every minute of it.”

“You have no power over me, not anymore.” She spat into his face, catching him in the eye and coating the strands of blond hair that framed his temple.

“You willful little bitch. You honestly think you’ve found a safe haven.” The fingers near her scalp turned, and she winced as several strands ripped free. “It’s laughable, really—that you can be so naïve. But again, you always were nothing more than a child.”

No longer willing to bear his callous treatment, she planted her feet, grasped his shoulders, and sent her knee directly into his crotch. She knew that it wouldn’t have the effect she truly desired, but it did send his body into a multitude of sparkling particles, as if he were a glittering portion of the air itself.

His body solidified across the room, on the other side of the bed. This time, he was clothed in his ceremonial robe, his blond hair neat once more.

“I’m ending my contract with the coven, Alexander. After giving my body freely and without compulsion to another, my allegiance belongs entirely to him. It’s the way of the Covenant, and absolves me of any responsibility to you or yours.”

“You are so innocent, beloved.”

“You have no right to refer to me as such. You do not damn those you love.”

He smiled again. “But it’s acceptable to deceive them, is that it?”

“I never deceived you.”

“I’m not talking about you. I’m referring to the wolf you allowed to fuck and mark you. For your sake, I hope it was worth it. When I return to flesh this eve, you’d better be ready to beg for my forgiveness. I might grant it after I kill him.”

Anger made her bold. “I won’t let you touch him.”

“Why not?” Studying her, he arched a brown brow. “Because he’s mated you? Because of the tie formed when he took your maidenhead and came into your heart?”

“I belong to him. I am his mate.”

Alexander smiled wistfully. “You’ve been horribly betrayed, beloved—wretchedly so. He has taken what you refused me with nothing more than a lie and a bit of fairy magic. I can’t be sure of the source, as I lack the nose to smell. But I’ve seen the spell twined before, in a time when Judges patrolled and protected the realms.”

Insecurity made her doubt Luke. What if the Lycae had tricked her? He said she was his mate, and if he had the ability to touch her, she had reasoned that he had to be. The way she felt with him was unlike anything she'd ever known. As if she'd been missing a portion of herself that she only perceived when his presence brought the emptiness to the surface.

"You're trying to trick me." She narrowed her eyes, denying the possibility.

"I have no reason to lie to you, Onyx. In all our time together, have I ever lied to you?"

Her heart missed a beat, and she felt her blood run cold. Alexander never lied. He told her of his intention to claim her within a week of her contract. Through those times, even up to the sunny afternoon she struck him down in his chamber, he had never told her a false truth.

"That's my beautiful girl." He smiled. "It's so much better when you don't fight and permit me to love and protect you."

"How did he lie?" she asked numbly.

"Did you honestly believe the reason he could touch you was due to a whimsy of the gods? Why would they grant a creature of the earth such a gift? What could he have possibly done to deserve such a thing?"

"Magic." She breathed the word, lowering her eyes when tears burned the surface.

"Yes."

Kind hands wound around her arms, and she knew Alexander stood before her once more.

"Foolish girl," he chided. "You've waited so long for something that was instigated by the very thing that has trapped you in this life you abhor. The question is, what will you do about it?"

The floor fell away, and she was flying, soaring through layers of black. Slowly, she shifted and recognized the warmth of the sheets surrounding her. Opening her eyes, she turned and peered at the empty pillow beside her. The outline of his head was still visible against the burgundy cushion, the heavy comforter tucked up as if he'd arranged it around her before he slipped silently from the bed.

She thrust aside the sheets and blankets and crawled out of the heavenly warm cocoon quietly, gathering her clothing and attempting to calm herself and prepare her body and mind for the confrontation yet to take place.

Who was lying? Luke, Alexander, or both?

As she dressed, she felt the devastating weight of grief for the first time.

Because deep down, she already knew the answer.

## Chapter Nine

“Twenty-five thousand dollars?” Luke sighed, lifted his head, and stared at the ceiling. The sun had risen hours ago, and now, he couldn’t touch the mate who rested in his bed. “What in the holy hell did you have to buy, Trevor?”

“The skin of a golden rhino. It’s no’ a bad deal, Lycae. Consider yourself lucky that I managed tae locate someone tae purchase before I returned. No’ that I expect you tae be grateful. That would be asking for too much.”

“I’ll have to go to the bank to retrieve the money. I don’t keep that kind of cash on hand.”

The Warlock dismissed the words with a wave of his hand. “Doona worry. I know you’re good for it, and it does no’ matter anyway. I promised the merchant payment by the end of the week. He owes me for banishing a gargoyle from his home.”

“So what do we have to do?”

“I have tae make a circle tae twine the magic.” Trevor glanced up at him. “Unless you’re willing tae come with me tae my apartment.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I want to be able to touch her when she wakes. We’ll do it here.”

Trevor’s eyes narrowed angrily. “Tell me you explained the magic was only temporary, Luke.”

“I didn’t tell her anything at all.”

“You deceitful fucking bastard,” Trevor snapped. “How could you mate her tae you without being honest?”

“Perform the spell, and she doesn’t have to know. Once the hex is absolved, it won’t matter.”

“You’d better hope the stoneskin curse sticks around for a long bloody while, Lycae. Hex or no, when your female gets wind of what you’ve done, she’ll have your hide.”

Luke grunted in agreement, walked to the table, and moved it out of the way so the Warlock had room to twine the magic. Helen and Trevor had devised a plan for the evening, a chance to end the hex that plagued Onyx. But until then, he needed to be able to touch her.

“Will my skin feel like stone?” he asked, snagging chairs to move as well.

“No. It makes your flesh as solid and unyielding as stone, but it’s only a barrier over the body, keeping it impervious to harm. Of course, it weakens as you use it, so you’ll be lucky if it holds through the month.”

“We have to hurry. She’ll be awake soon.”

“I’m already awake.”

He and Trevor froze at Onyx's cold voice, eyes going wide when they discovered the scorned female standing in the entranceway. She didn't give them time to think. One moment, she was standing imposingly, the next she was across the room, grasping Luke's arm. He didn't pull away, even as the frostbite spread from her fingers and killed away the healthy tissue beneath.

She released him, brought back her fist, and punched him squarely in the mouth, splitting his lip. The area her knuckles touched burned white-hot, and he knew it matched the hand imprinted on his arm.

"You fucking bastard," she snarled. "You lied to me."

He knew arguing would do no good. He could hear the betrayal screaming in her skull, damning her for a fool. He wanted to reach out to her, to touch her, but her hands were bare and she'd taken one of his black wifebeaters from the closet, ensuring as much of her lethal skin was visible as possible.

He spit blood onto the floor. "I never lied to you."

"No, of course you didn't. Omission allows you the absolution of guilt, doesn't it? I hope you're happy. Now, I'm completely bound to you." She laughed bitterly. "It must make you ecstatic to know the Ice Princess will always yearn for you, will always appear whenever you are in danger. You've just gotten yourself a free twenty-four hour protection service. Too bad you can't take advantage of the free piece of ass that comes with it. But then, I'm sure you don't have a problem luring unsuspecting women into your bed."

"Don't push me, Onyx." He bristled in anger. "I'm trying to explain, but I won't allow you to demean yourself like—"

"Like what, a whore? If the shoe fits."

"Stop it," he snarled, wanting to shake sense into her. "You are not a slut. What happened was meant—"

"Let me guess," she interrupted again. "Meant to happen, right? Whether I want it to or not? Where have I heard that before?"

The misery in her voice kept him from losing his temper and reminding her that he was nothing like Alexander. She had every right to feel betrayed. He knew she mistakenly believed he could touch her, and at the time, he chose not to clarify. He forced himself to remember that.

"I didn't know how to tell you last night, but if you'll listen—"

"That's the problem, Luke. I listened to that sugary sweet tongue of yours, hanging onto ever saccharine word until I would've given you the clothes off my back. Then, I couldn't help myself. I had to see if that sinful mouth felt just as good on my body as it did to my ears."

She turned to leave, and Trevor blocked her path.

“Doona allow your pride tae make you blind, lass. Listen tae the man.”

“Fuck off, Scottie,” she barked and walked around him.

Her hurt was his, a terrible agony in his chest that refused to lessen. “Onyx, wait,” he called out, following as she scampered around looking for a door.

She continued cursing herself in her mind, struggling to find some inner calm that did not exist. The turmoil came from their bond to one another, a link made all the stronger by the attachment she felt in giving herself freely to him. The part of her that took comfort in the instinct to trust him had become a scathing resentment.

“We are mated, darlin’. Your instincts were right.”

“Don’t do that.” She retrieved her coat from a couch before spinning around and facing him furiously. “Alexander invades the sanctuary of my dreams. Don’t do the same by listening to my private thoughts.”

He struggled to do as she asked, knowing what she thought even as he tried not to listen. She rushed to the large front door, snagged the handle, and yanked it open without worrying if it cracked the plaster or slid free of the hinge.

When he moved to stop her, Trevor’s arm clasped his shoulder, keeping him confined inside the house as she raced down the stairs.

“Give her space, Lycae. We have a spell tae weave, and she needs tae cool off. You can go tae her when the dust settles.”

## Chapter Ten

“Stupid, stupid, stupid!” Onyx muttered and slid her arms into the worn leather jacket.

Trusting a man was the most idiotic thing she had ever done, but the ultimate betrayal came from knowing Alexander had been honest with her while Luke had chosen not to be. She rebelled against the weakness that brought about her failure, raged at the need for comfort. Ultimately, this was her fault. No one else was to blame for the fate she willingly walked into.

The sun had barely risen, meaning the morning cleansing would be taking place. She was lucky she’d woken when she did. The coven was strict about clearing both the body and the mind prior to an important ceremony, and this, without a doubt, was the most important of all.

She sighed, tired though she’d had plenty of rest. Escaping the ritual was something she hoped to avoid. Alexander would home in on her specifically, and because of that, the coven offered her body as the vessel necessary for the bloodletting and sacrifice. He was the one they hoped to channel, and her pain and suffering was the outlet.

Locating the coven was easy. She simply wandered the Quarter until she came across the row of black Mercedes parked along the street. She didn’t bother asking for assistance at the desk, following the faint smell of amber, fire, and salt. The cleansing was well underway, and as she climbed the stairs of the fire escape and felt the heaviness in the air that identified a heady spell, she knew the entire building would be magically protected from prying mortal eyes.

She entered the floor and paused, gazing from left to right. She noticed the black bag leaning against a door and knew it was the room intended for her. The coven didn’t usually extend the courtesy, but then again, she had to be as physically clean as she was mentally. That meant a hot shower.

Snagging the bag, she pressed the silver knob inward and stepped inside the small space. A white tiled bathroom was to her left, the beds against the wall just around the corner. She stepped just inside the bathroom before placing the bag onto a short wall-length counter. Removing the soaps and oils came first, and she situated each in the proper order along the mirror. Afterward, she removed the long white dress, leaving the plastic around the material. She took the hanger and turned the rounded hook before placing it over the top of the door.

Steam crowded the room as she turned and adjusted the water temperature to the highest degree she could bear before she stood naked in front of the mirror.

Luke’s bite left the skin slightly bruised, the punctures small but obvious. The coven members would see the mark, but she hoped they would treat the wound with as much indifference as they did each broken bone or injury she suffered over the years.

Turning, she climbed into the shower and stood quietly as the heavy currents of water splashed over her head and shoulders. Each hot stream washed Luke’s scent away, taking the sweat and seed left behind and carrying it down the drain. The thought bothered her, but she didn’t dwell on it long. Tonight, if everything went according to plan, she would vie for her freedom.



She used the bar of soap inside the bag to wash both her hair and her body, knowing the ingredients were meant to cleanse away all impurity. The scent wasn't unpleasant, a combination of honey and milk. The honey signified the hard work of the nest, the milk the birth of new life.

When she climbed out and reached for the oils, she hesitated. Her scent would be eradicated the moment she used them and would be replaced with magic. Luke wouldn't be able to locate her, not by smell, and if she remained in the building, not by telepathy.

*What do you care?*

*He lied.*

Angry once more, she unscrewed the lid and poured the contents in her hands. Then she rubbed the minty stuff all over her body, starting at her neck and working her way down. When finished, she patted the remainder off with a towel. Sliding into the dress was difficult unless her skin was smooth and not wet.

She went through the motions after that—drying her hair, pulling it into a twist on top of her head, and then donning the ceremonial dress. The cut was modest in the front but revealing in the back, baring her all the way to the indentions on either side of her spine. Dual slits along each side allowed free movement of her legs and displayed an indecent portion of skin. The white was beautiful, pristine to represent purity. But that illusion would be shattered shortly. Soon, splatters of red would mar the thin cotton and then turn into muddled brown stains.

Perched at the edge of the bed closest to the door, she waited for the knock and cringed slightly when it came. She rose, leaving her things behind. The two mages at the door guided her down the hallway to a large suite located at the far end. The door was open, and the smell of incense lined her nose.

“Here.” Terrence didn't look at her as he indicated the spot in the center of a circle surrounding a star.

She went to him, kneeled, and stared directly ahead as he removed a chicken from a cage and brought it over. A quick motion saw clawed legs thrashing, and she watched in a hazy detachment as the head of the bird fell upon the floor. A circle of the sacrificial blood was made around her, and then Terrence swiped the warm wetness across her forehead, creating a macabre cross. He handed her the silver chalice given over by a random coven mage, and she drank, gulping down the brew that would force her to heal slowly in two heaping swallows.

“Do you offer yourself in service to your coven?” Terrence asked formally.

She wanted to tell him to go fuck himself. “I do.”

“Then bare yourself and display your worthiness to be chosen for this honor.”

*Honor my ass.*

The flowing bell-bottom sleeves slid away from her arms, leaving her naked from the waist up. She pressed her torso to her knees and brought her arms beneath, placing her hands palms down on the floor.

“Are you ready to repent and cleanse the souls of your coven?”

*Fuck you.*

“Yes.”

“Do you willingly offer your body as a vessel?”

She wanted to smash his face into the nearest wall and watch *him* bleed, but it wouldn’t do any good. This was necessary, something she couldn’t deny them.

*Get it over with already.*

“Yes.”

Showing emotion was for the weak, but she was glad her face was shielded from view. The sound of the bullwhip unraveling was bad, but she knew from experience that the bite it provided was much worse.

She braced herself, cursing the impulsiveness that slew Alexander two hundred years before, the recklessness that allowed her to bond with a deceitful Lycae, and most importantly, the misguided hope that she had finally managed to escape the hell that had become her existence.

Terrance ordered, “Count.”

The first bite of the lash as he parted skin and found muscle was always the worst because it was the easiest she was bound to receive. The skin broken and ripped apart by leather was virginal, ripe, and unafraid of the soon-to-be-endured agony. The remaining seven blows, as a result of remembrance, would be unfiltered agony. Each torn piece of flesh would be stretched and tested, until she was forced to bite her lip to remain silent.

Eight was the magic number, signifying new beginnings.

Grinding her teeth together, she spat, “One.”

\* \* \* \*

“Where the fuck is she?” Luke thundered, pacing around the living room.

The sun was long gone, replaced by the darkened night. Hoots and hollers sounded from far away, excited children squealing as they donned costumes to celebrate the holiday.

He wanted to rip out his hair, shift into his wolf form, and devour half the city population. Hours had passed, and he was no closer to finding Onyx. Her scent took him as far as the Louisville Suite Hotel, but he lost it the minute he entered the lobby.

“She’ll be at the gathering in the cemetery, Luke,” Trevor reminded him again, tossing an annoyed look in his direction. “You have tae keep that head of yours on straight. If we want tae pull this off, you have tae help the pack settle. It’s bad enough that you’ve caught them off guard with news of your mate. Wolfe will no’ be pleased when he returns.”

“Wolfe won’t know until after the dust has settled,” Luke snarled, throwing Trevor’s earlier words back at him. His cousin wasn’t reachable on the phone, which meant he was probably enjoying time alone with his mate.

Not that he blamed him.

“Touché.”

Closing his eyes, he tried again. The mental bond between them was strong enough to use, but she’d somehow managed to sever it. It both concerned and terrified him. Common sense said that if something bad happened to her, he’d feel it all the way to the depths of his soul.

“Calm down,” Trevor ordered. “Your emotions are all over the place, and they are goddamned distracting. I canna focus as I need tae, and if *you’d* focus, you’d see your pack looks ready to tear the city apart.”

Luke peered over his shoulder and grimaced when he saw the grim expressions and glittering eyes of his pack mates. It wasn’t easy accommodating over two dozen of them inside the too-small living room, but he didn’t have much of a choice. Trevor warned him there were bound to be hired protectors all around the perimeter as insurance, and he needed all the muscle he could get.

He forced his wolf to settle, calling on the calm the pack offered. Once, he led them, even though the beast within him wasn’t ready for the responsibility. If he could offer them anything, it was strength and a level head.

“When will the witch be here?” he asked in an amazingly steady tone.

A knock sounded at the door, and he rushed to answer it. His shoulders sagged in relief when he saw Helen waiting outside. She had a large tote of some kind over her shoulder and a large picnic basket cradled under one arm.

“In here, Helen,” Trevor called from the kitchen.

She didn’t wait for an invitation and slid past him, striding toward the sound of Trevor’s voice.

“So.” She walked to the table and placed her burden on top of the wooden surface. “Are you ready for some fun?”

“I donna know if I’d classify it as fun. I’m the one taking the risk. Summoning Judges is damned dangerous, even if you’re related tae them.”

“It’ll be cherry, Sheriff. If the wolves take care of the hired thugs, it will be like stealing candy from a baby.”

“Now that everyone’s here, do you mind telling us what the fuck is going on?” Luke interrupted.

“The coven will attempt to guide Alexander back to his body. It’s magic that requires certain elements coming together.”

He frowned and said, “I thought you said they were here for souls.”

“In a manner of speaking, they are.” Helen removed vials from the basket.” It’s taken them years to accumulate the power necessary to return their fearless leader to flesh and blood. They had to make a blood offering of some kind to lost souls, gaining their assistance to piece him back together. Tonight, they’ll summon all of those restless spirits, and under the light of a new moon, they will restore him to life.”

Luke crossed his arms and asked, “How do you know that?”

“Divination. When my coven shunned me, I developed the gift. I can see different versions of the future, impacted by the decisions that change them.”

“Sounds confusing.”

“Try maddening. There are so many variants, so many winding paths to take. You can go insane if you try to zero in on any one of them at a time.”

The impatience he worked so hard to control began to wane, and he turned to Trevor. “What do you need us to do?”

“I need you and the pack tae hold off whatever they’ve got waiting, and I should warn you, it’s going tae be ugly. They have no’ waited this long tae fail.”

“That won’t be a problem.”

“We have tae let them complete the ceremony. They will summon the spirits of the dead tae bring Alexander tae human form. We canna do anything until that happens. If you want the curse broken, I must have something tae bargain with.”

“What about Onyx? What if I can’t speak to her telepathically because they’ve harmed her? I can’t stand by and allow that.”

“You will wait until they’ve summoned the spirits.” Trevor narrowed his eyes in warning. “I mean it, Luke. You risk everything if you doona listen tae me. Do you understand?”

A portion of him rebelled at the notion of allowing Alexander Clarisse to return to human form. The temptation to kill the bastard would be too good to pass by. But the image of Onyx's wounded face when she learned he wasn't honest with her served to remind him that petty revenge was the least of his concerns.

He dipped his chin. "I understand."

Then, he turned away from the magic-casters and went to his pack.

## Chapter Eleven

Onyx remained on her knees inside the circle, unable to do more than stare blankly at the neat rows of smooth black stones surrounding her. It was dark, the cemetery eerily quiet. She grimaced and closed her eyes as she shifted her weight. The cool cement slab wasn't made any softer by the bloodstained dress, and the burning in her back was now a steady throb, each deep cut beating with its own unique pulse.

That was the curse of being one of the Covenant—pain was felt more deeply.

Her mother had said it was meant as compensation for immortality and the enhanced strength and speed granted to them. But through the years, she'd garnered her own theories, including the one at the top of her list—servitude was ultimately about suffering.

"We offer that which stole you, Alexander." Terrence's voice cut through the silence. "The cursed blade of Anubis."

Lifting her eyes, she watched as the blade that was once given to her in good faith was placed inside the circle. The hilt made of gold was encrusted with expensive jewels. The silver edge was still stained with brown—Alexander's blood left behind.

One by one, the artifacts collected of the souls that would guide him back were placed around her, each a marker that would lead the spirits through the realm of heaven and hell, of life and death.

The coven moved into position around the circle when all twelve were in place, chanting in Latin. The last time they sequestered a spirit, the routine was much the same—the circle was the power source, and she was the tether—only this time, she could feel the malevolent energy building within the magical space. The air turned heavier, the smell of sulfur nearly overwhelming.

Thoughts of Luke eased the feeling of suffocation and entrapment, her lungs laboring as the quality of air in the circle lessened and she struggled to breathe. She pretended the wispy fingers that touched her shoulders were strands of his hair and not the caresses of the dead, that laps of ghostly tongues against her savaged skin were those of healing affection and not hunger.

Souls were drawn to what they remembered best, and there was nothing more sweet and warm than fresh blood directly from the flesh. The circle allowed them to partake in the offering of the coven, each lash mark oozing freely as they reopened the just-sealed wounds, and she felt the hot trickle of her life's blood as it dripped down the indentation of her spine.

*Damn him.*

She'd had decades to prepare for this. Hours spent chasing that demon called the future while knowing Alexander would return and claim her as he swore he would. Now, that foundation was cracked, torn down the center.

Hope did that to creatures, mortal and immortal.

The mess that was her back protested in misery as the circle expanded and drew on the power wrought from her willfully given blood. The magic had to breach the entire perimeter of the cemetery to allow the souls to lead the way home, but that required an immortal's strength and vitality.

*Hers.*

Muffled whispers of excitement fell upon deaf ears. Her mind was intent on the goal, focusing on the means to an end. Physical agony was nothing compared to mental isolation. The scars on a body were generally forgotten like regretted tattoos, but those of the mind always remained.

"Yes, that's it!" Terrence exclaimed, his enthusiastic voice breaking through her shoddy concentration.

She lifted her head and watched as the ghosts surrounding her moved away, toward the outside of the neatly crafted circle of onyx stones. All along the perimeter, spirits appeared. Some she recognized, others she didn't. Halloween was the key, the element that brought it all together. The spirits were drawn to the magic, compelled to venture to this place offering blood and power.

A lingering stroke of fingers started at her bared nape and traveled the column in the middle of her back. It was one of familiarity, of possession.

"Sire," the coven chimed in unison.

His body wasn't entirely whole, almost as if he were particles that formed and held a holographic image. He flickered as he attempted to find solidity, his touch vanishing and then returning.

A chorus of loud growls and furious roars echoed through the graves and headstones, and the hand at her back evaporated.

"No!" Terrence screeched, ordering, "We must return him to flesh now! Hurry!"

The misery she stifled erupted from her lips when fingers ripped at the flayed skin on her back. Blood no longer trickled. It pooled into the back of the dress, warm and sticky. The ground trembled, as if a stampede was nearly upon her, and a pair of arms snagged her beneath her knees and arms.

She was lifted before she could conceive it, carried from the confines of the circle. The motion caused her to whimper, and she was shifted, brought around until she was held like a child with a leg on either side of lean hips. A soothing hand touched the burning in her back, gentle fingers going stock-still when they touched the bloody mess left behind following the cleansing.

"What have they done to you?" Luke demanded, voice quivering with rage.

"Put me down." She tried to make it an order, but it escaped as a laughable plea.

"Never, do you hear me?" His syllables were tight, and his voice cracked. "You only run from me if you want to be caught. And I will catch you, *mate*."

“You lied to me, something Alexander never did. I can’t trust you.”

The arms holding her went tight. “I wasn’t honest with you, but I never lied. Mates don’t lie to one another. It’s not our way.”

She stopped arguing when she noticed several of the coven clouding her peripheral vision, advancing on them with gleaming ceremonial swords raised.

“Put me down, Luke,” she ordered, voice steady this time. “We have company.”

Those strong arms brought her closer, trapping her against his chest. “No.”

“I command you tae halt!” A voice thundered, silencing all but the sounds of violence in the distance.

Luke turned, allowing her to see the Scottish friend she’d cursed earlier. His long brown duster was gone, revealing a body that was sinewy and impressive in its own right. He wasn’t as tall as the Lycac holding her, or as wide, but he was damned close.

“What business have you here, Judge?” Terrence demanded. “You have violated the rights of magic-wielders by tainting our hex. Something we can demand recompense for.”

“Doona worry, pissant. I have no’ come tae put a damper on your proceedings.”

“Then why have you come?”

“Tae have a word with Alexander Clarisse.”

The magic shifted once more, brushing painfully against her skin. The ghosts returned, bodies shimmering brightly inside her abandoned circle, and directly in the center was the man she loathed as much as she needed. His body was covered in the same clothing he wore the night he died—trousers and nothing more. His blue eyes narrowed when he saw her in Luke’s arms, and he started to step forward.

“Oh no you don’t,” the Scot said, shaking his head. He lifted his wand and thundered, “Lost brethren, I summon you tae assist me!”

A dozen bodies appeared behind him, these wholly flesh. Their eyes were white and cloudy, and their clothing of the old fashion. Tunics and breeches replaced modern T-shirts and jeans, and each of the men had neatly trimmed beards.

“What are you doing?” Terrence’s voice trembled with outrage. “He is all but flesh. Allow him to exit the circle and become whole.”

“No, I doona believe I will.” The Scot stared at Alexander. “You are no’ an idiot. I assume you know why I’ve come.”



“You cannot have her,” Alexander sneered. “I will cross the threshold and claim her as I should have done long ago.”

Luke’s steady growl vibrated against her ear, and his arms gripped her painfully.

“No, you willna. You will absolve her of the curse and bid her fare thee well.”

“And if I don’t?”

“My brothers will take your arse back tae the other side, and”—he motioned just behind him, at a witch she recognized from the bar—“Helen will release the contents of the binding spell to ensure you stay there.”

Alexander stared directly at her, his narrowed eyes of luminous blue sparkling evilly. “I will sever your contract, Onyx. You know what happens then.”

“I do,” she acknowledged quietly and tried not to shiver when Luke stroked her head possessively. “And the prospect no longer frightens me.”

“You would forsake immortality for him?” Alexander raged.

Luke’s hand went still, and she knew then that he didn’t know of all the implications of severing her ties with the covenant.

“I would forsake immortality to be free of you.”

The answer enraged him. “Foolish and impulsive girl, so be it! You will age, wither, and die. The beauty that captivates will be no more, and when you reflect upon the poor decisions you have made, you will do so alone.”

“No, she won’t. She will always have a home among us.”

This voice was unfamiliar, yet it gained the attention of all the Lycas standing over the bodies of Chimeras and demons hired to stop them. One by one, they took a knee, eyes downcast. He looked very much like Luke, with dark black hair, a massive build, and vibrant green eyes. The girl walking beside him reminded her of an angel. Her eyes were large and blue, and her white-blond hair seemed to glow in the darkness. He stopped several feet away, and guns, both locked and loaded, appeared in each hand of the girl.

“Doona go and do something stupid, Cricket,” the Scot grumbled, glancing at the sidearms.

“Who, me?” She shook her head and smiled, flashing slightly tipped fangs.

“I’m happy to see you’ve kept things in line while I’ve been away, cousin. It’s a good thing Arden insisted we return home early. I wouldn’t have wanted to miss this.”

“Next time, come the first time I call,” Luke retorted.

Alexander started to move from the circle, and the Scot lifted the heavy casting wand.

“No’ yet. Rescind the curse.”

“No.”

Terrence stepped forward. “Sire, if you don’t release her, I will.”

The outrage on the wizard’s face distorted his once-beautiful features. “You most certainly will not! She is mine to command.”

“You are not yet whole, sire. Until you are, the curses you’ve maintained are mine to absolve.”

“Enough!” The wand flashed as the Warlock lost his composure. “Sever the curse or I will have my brothers escort you tae the place you should have gone the first time, you arrogant piece of shit!” The orb pulsed as he turned to Terrence and barked, “Do it now!”

Terrence turned from his superior even as he brayed in fury, reaching into his robe to produce a thin wand. “Onyx Blackthorn, daughter of Lilith and Mercrial Blackthorn, you are hereby released from your contract.”

Releasing the curse was as painful as enduring it. If it weren’t for Luke’s arms, she would have collapsed onto the earth and writhed. As it was, her limbs and torso convulsed and thrashed, her entire body trembling violently. She felt the strength of the Covenant leave her, as it did when a contract was met.

Immortality was intended for those who served. Not those who lived.

The moment the curse lifted and she became mortal, she screamed in misery. The wounds in her back were unbearable, made all the worse by the potion that slowed the ability to heal. Darkness beckoned, promising shelter and relief.

She went willingly into those shaded arms, knowing that when she woke, she would finally be free.

## Epilogue

*Colby, Tennessee. Two weeks later*

Onyx breathed in, dragging the brisk winter air into her lungs. The last rays of the sun were nearly gone, orange rays barely visible over the ridge of the mountain in the distance. Soon, the full moon would rise to take its place.

*Luke.*

She knew he would be coming for her, just as he warned when she left his home in New Orleans. That was one of the many reasons she had accepted Wolfe and Arden's generous offer of staying at their private cabin while she took the time to ground herself and come to terms with what was now her life. Alexander was gone, she was free, and everything was as she'd always hoped. But while the wounds on her back were nearly healed, the ones in her heart ached miserably.

A quiet mew gained her attention. She smiled and bent over to scoop up the kitten she'd adopted on her way out of the city. The softness of fur still amazed her, so silky and perfect. Burying her face into the fuzzy neck, she wound her fingers around until she could rub her fingers just behind his ears.

"Toby," she crooned. "You can't be hungry. I just fed you."

She stepped away from the porch, carried the feline into the kitchen, and placed his fragile body on top of the table. His tiny paws swatted at the placemats while sharp claws snagged the cloth as she retrieved kitty nibbles from the counter. The play stopped when he smelled the fishy aroma of food, and he waited while she placed several of the Hershey's Kisses-sized drops on the table.

"There you go." She smiled and patted the top of his head, turning on her heel to return to the porch.

She came up short, frozen in place.

An enormous beast with eyes like emeralds stood inside the entranceway, its broad shoulders brushing the sides of the frame.

There was no hesitation on her part, no need to stop what she had accepted and yearned for. Time alone told her what she already knew—that life without this male would be a fate equally unbearable as the curse she bore. The weeks without him had passed like decades, minutes stretched beyond capacity. She dreamed of him, ached for him, cried for him.

She wouldn't go back to that.

She couldn't.

She kneeled and extended her hand, perfectly still as he crossed the threshold and approached. Opening her mind, she allowed him to hear her wishes, to know her absolute acceptance. Once

done, there was no going back. She would be as he was. She would live as he did. And love as he loved.

*"My mate."* His voice echoed in her head.

He struck the fleshy portion of her palm, burying his teeth in the mound of Venus. Almost instantly, he was licking the wound and soothing the sting. His body started to shift, hair receding and skin forming. Within seconds, his hands rose to cradle her wrist as he nursed at her skin with his tongue.

"I love you," she whispered to his bowed head, raising her uninjured hand to stroke his hair.

His large body shuddered at the admission, and he lifted his head, meeting her eyes. The relief in those green orbs was evident, as well as something more.

"Tell me again."

She smiled and did as he asked. "I love you, Luke."

"It's about damned time." He pressed his nose against hers until his face blurred. "I love you so much it fucking hurts."

They met in the middle, eager tongues and desperate fingers exploring and marking. Whereas Luke was gentle before, he was violent now. His hands were rough, his fingers raking into the softness of her skin. She mirrored his madness, clawing at his back with sharp fingernails, growling wildly into his mouth.

His strong arms surrounded her waist, lifting her feet from the floor. Luke carried her up the set of stairs beside the kitchen, to the loft directly above. He placed her feet on the bed and began tearing her clothes from her, heedless of the destruction caused. Her jeans ripped, her sweater tore, and her underwear was obliterated.

When he finished, they were both panting, chests heaving. Something inside her demanded to be unleashed, a newer, feral portion taking life inside her body.

Knowing what he wanted, she dropped to hands and knees and took his fully engorged length between her lips. His husky groan enflamed her desire, causing her sex to clench and release. A wet heat formed between her legs, her clitoris throbbing painfully. He grasped handfuls of her hair, pumping his hips in time with the bobbing of her head.

The anger in him was drowned out by the lust and need for his female. She felt it, knew it, and embraced it. Those weeks spent apart had been agony for him—torture. Lycæ did not separate from their mates. He had suffered for her, had battled the wolf when it fought to go to her side, wanting to give her the space she asked of him.

*"I always wanted you,"* she thought, wanting him to know.

"And you ached for this moment as much as I did, didn't you?" His voice was as heady as his taste, totally dominant, utterly male. "Have you spent nights thinking about this, Onyx? Have you

dreamed about me taking you and marking you? Because that's exactly what I'm going to do, darlin'. I'm going to taste that sweetness between your legs, and then I'm going to fuck you so hard you'll never think of leaving me again."

She moaned around his flesh, tasting the salt of his seed as it trickled against her tongue. Suddenly, those fingers and hands were painful, forcing her to remain still. He bucked his hips, forcing the head of his cock against the back of her throat.

"I'm going to claim all of you tonight, Onyx. So you'll never forget where your place is. And I'm going to start with that beautiful mouth of yours."

Accepting the brutality of his domination brought an eerie sort of calm, and as if Luke sensed it, his hands went lax, and the thrusts of his hips gentled.

"I'll never hurt you, darlin'," he grated, hissing as his shaft escaped the heat of her mouth and then returned. "But you won't ever leave me again. I won't let you."

Tears came to her eyes, but they weren't from pain. As the creature taking root inside her body developed, so did her ability to feel and hear Luke's thoughts. A portion of him still believed she would flee, that she continued to damn him as being no better than the man who had forsaken her. He wanted to punish her as much as he needed to punish himself, feeling he had failed her.

Tenderly, she found and caressed his thighs and arched her back slightly. As she did so, she repeated her love for him inside her mind, knowing he would hear. In turn, his touches and motions became loving, and images of what was to come flashed in her mind. She blushed even as the wolf inside quivered in excitement.

The barb extended, and Luke, driving into her lips, didn't pull away. She met his shallow plunges, cradling the extension with her tongue. Her jaw ached as she was forced to widen her mouth to the point of pain, her throat protesting the angle placed upon it. He cried out as he released inside her mouth and she swallowed his thick, salty fluid, taking care not to use her teeth as she struggled to keep her mouth open.

A tug of her hair broke the seal of her lips, and she was suddenly flat on her back. Luke placed her legs over each of his arms and lowered his torso. He dipped his head between her thighs, and his hot, wet tongue darted against her sex. He wasn't easy or teasing, tonguing her until she writhed and groaned. Within seconds, two fingers worked themselves inside her, thrusting roughly against her trembling flesh.

"Come for me," he ordered and then latched onto her clitoris with his lips, sucking roughly.

Her body detonated like a grenade, exploding from the inside out. She shouted as she came, screaming Luke's name. Before she had time to process the orgasm, Luke was sliding into her, claiming her in a smooth thrust.

Her legs dangled over his arms, her feet flopping as he pounded into her. Like this, he went in deeply, bouncing against her womb. She gasped at the sensation it wrought, a pleasure bordering on pain. She arched her back, unable to do anything more.

“You’re so goddamned beautiful.”

His eyes were bright when she peered up at him helplessly, his expression pained.

“Please,” she begged, nearing climax again.

Luke’s fingers were gentle when they found the swollen nub and pinched.

Everything seemed to shatter—her body, the bedroom, Luke. Nothing but raw feeling existed. The orgasm seemed to last forever, going on and on. As the feelings ebbed, she felt Luke scoop her up and climb onto the bed. He had her straddle him, her knees on either side of his hips.

“I want you to take me this time. Show me how much you want me.”

He urged her onto her knees and guided the head of his cock to the swollen lips of her sex. She spread her legs to allow him to slide easily inside and then lowered herself. He eradicated her emptiness, inch by slow inch, until she felt the warmth of his sac against her bottom.

“Yours,” she told him, rising onto her knees and lifting away from his claim.

“Mine,” he moaned, closing his eyes.

She took her time, riding him in sultry movements, arching her back. She saw how she looked to him as he shared the image, her breasts full, her pink nipples hard and erect. Uncertain if it would work, she tried to do the same, gazing at his slitted eyes and parted lips.

“I don’t get excited by seeing myself, darlin’. That comes entirely from you.”

His large palms cradled her bottom, urging her up and down, slow and then fast. A bead of sweat weaved between her breasts, and Luke leaned forward, claiming the crystalline drop with the tip of his tongue. His face remained there, lips, teeth, and tongue alternating between her breasts, torturing the nipples.

Another orgasm neared, and she ground her hips, rotating when she found the spot that would send her over. Luke’s fingers raked into her skin, clenching as he brought her down to meet his firm thrusts.

“Look at me,” he rasped, breathing hard.

Her eyes remained open until a debilitating climax rolled through her. She braced herself against Luke’s chest, palms limp against his straining torso, until she felt him engage deep within. The molten searing of his seed bathing her womb was accompanied by his hoarse moan. As she sagged against him, his hands came up to caress her back. Each time he found a scar, he traced the indentation lightly, as if it pained him to maintain the contact.

“It doesn’t matter,” she murmured and rubbed her lips against his chest. “It’s over now.”

“I should have killed them.” There was finality to his voice, an acceptance, but also a deep-seated anger.

“And created more problems for your pack in the process? You were thinking smart, not stupid. A moment’s release isn’t worth a lifetime of reimbursement.”

The telltale tightening of his arms and throbbing of his cock arrived just before he came again, sending her into another orgasm of her own. Instead of resisting, she allowed herself to be overtaken. Her body was too exhausted to put up a fight.

“It won’t be so hard on you next time,” Luke promised in a husky voice after the pleasure passed. “Once the change is complete, you’ll wear me ragged.”

She didn’t attempt to stem the fear that came with the changes. Her sight was notably crisper, her ears able to distinguish Toby’s purring downstairs.

“You won’t go through it alone.” Luke began stroking her back, this time with confident touches. “Wolfe is more than capable of taking care of things at home for a few weeks. We’ll get through this, darlin’. You and me. As long as you need. Nothing else matters.”

“Promise?”

“I fucking vow it, sweetheart.”

They clung to one another as the next climax tore through them in an orgasmic firebrand, sweaty limbs and chests pressing together. When the barb retracted, she slid from his arms and groaned as her head hit the pillow and she rested on her stomach. Luke waited until she was comfortable before he settled against her, his enormous body wrapping over hers, one of his large legs intentionally placed atop her own.

His lips pressed against her neck. “Rest up, darlin’. I have other things in store for you.”

She grinned into the softness of the pillow. “Like what?”

As he allowed her to see what he had in mind through his eyes, her body warmed and her face burned.

“I said I would claim you everywhere, Onyx. Though you have doubted it in the past, I *am* a man of my word.”

She thought she knew about sex, when in reality, she had absolutely no idea. Just thinking of him claiming her *there* made her both terrified and exhilarated.

“Oh, you’ll like it,” he promised. “Go to sleep while you still can. The call of the moon has already started. It only goes downhill from here.”

“Luke?”

“Hmm?”

She recalled the moment she barged in on a demon and a human female mistakenly, believing the sounds from the chamber were ones of pain and fear. The haunted mansion was supposed to house the soul they wanted to collect. Instead they discovered two creatures in the deepest throes of lust. The demon had the girl shackled at the wrists with black leather cuffs that were attached to the bed, and he was pumping into her as she shrieked and begged.

She thought it was torture or possibly rape, but knowing what she did, combined with the images he gave her . . .

Would he want to do that as well?

“Damn it,” he snapped playfully. “I tried to warn you.”

Luke’s weight vanished, and she was unceremoniously flopped onto her back. Without warning, his solid erection slid past the folds of her flesh and invaded her completely, until he was buried completely inside her sex. She gasped, arching her back, welcoming him into her tender body.

At her shocked expression, he chuckled. “You should have taken me up on that offer, darlin’. I’m going to love you until you can’t move or think, until all you think, see, smell, and touch is me.”

Fatigue evaporated, replaced by pure need.

She met his eyes, raked her nails into his back, and challenged. “Prove it.”

The End



## *About the Author*

Jaime Saare is a normal gal with a taste for the macabre. She started writing on the down low when she was in high school, keeping her work a carefully hidden secret—until now. In her spare, she can be found enjoying the simple pleasures in life, including: shooting a game of pool (straight eight if you please), listening to her favorite band (NIN), or spending time relaxing with her husband and rambunctious brood. You can visit her on her homepage: [www.jasaare.com](http://www.jasaare.com).