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TORMENT

Michele Zurlo



Daughters of Circe 1

Torment

Magic has always been part of Torrey's life, but without a mentor, her mastery of nature is decidedly inept. When a werewolf kidnaps her sister and demands payment for mystical medications, Torrey's life takes a turn for the worse. She doesn't have the money, and the medication did more harm than good.

At her most desperate moment, a mysterious stranger appears. He presses a piece of paper bearing an address in her hand. When Torrey arrives, she finds another werewolf.

Shade is convinced Torrey is the reincarnation of the witch he loved—the witch his twin brother murdered all those years ago in a ritualistic sacrifice designed to steal her powers. Torrey doesn't remember. She wants Shade to find her sister and let her handle the issue.

Can Shade convince Torrey of who and what she really is in time to stop her from offering her powers and her life to his brother again?

Genre: Paranormal, Vampires/Werewolves

Length: 60,624 words

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

TORMENT

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DEDICATION

For Suzy. Always

TORMENT

Daughters of Circe 1

MICHELE ZURLO

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Chapter 1

The sky was cloudless, revealing the complete absence of the moon. A gentle October breeze, unseasonably warm, rustled the sparse and monochromatic treetops. By day, they were a riot of flaming color. Now, they blended in, merely a shadow against the dark sky outside the window. But Torrey Quinn was oblivious to the weather and to any other wonders of nature.

A werewolf in human form, fair-haired and ruthlessly handsome, had her unconscious sister slung over his shoulder. He was large even by wolf standards, towering a good foot over Torrey's five-foot-ten figure. By anyone's standards, he was one of the most striking men ever created. He would be a majestic wolf.

"Seth, you don't want to do this." Torrey's voice held steady, though her heart beat a million times per minute. She wasn't sure Seth could smell her fear and hear the mad thumping in her chest. He claimed to be the leader of his pack, but that didn't necessarily mean he was powerful enough to have senses attuned that finely. After all, there was no moon tonight.

Raising his arm slowly, he pointed a long, thick finger at Torrey from across the room. "Witch, you will pay me."

Torrey raised her hands, palms out, in a defensive gesture. "I'll get the money, Seth. I swear I will. Just leave Riley alone. She doesn't

know anything about this. She's innocent. And human." The last part, she added for good measure. A human was nothing to a werewolf except for an occasional meal. Seth's robust form attested to the fact he did not lack sufficient sustenance.

Seth laughed. "If I take you, then how will you get the money to pay me? No, I think your little sister is much better collateral."

Palms still out, Torrey tried a brief incantation. She was a powerful witch, but untrained and untried. On her best day, any spell more difficult than a simple scrying was a crapshoot. If this worked, Seth would pass out and have total amnesia of the incident. The odds were against her. Werewolves were immune to all but the most potent of spells, the kind that took time, practice, and ingredients.

Physically, he was much more powerful than Torrey. The chances of him just standing there watching as she gathered ingredients and studied some books was nil.

She repeated the incantation, but nothing happened.

Amusement lightened Seth's handsome features. "Your magic will not work on me, Witch. I am too powerful."

Planting her hands on her hips in a show of defiance, Torrey scowled at him and changed tactics. "You told me that medicine would cure my mother! You lied! I don't see why I should pay you for something that didn't work."

Seth shook his head, his mane of blond hair swaying with the movement. "I told you it would prevent her death. She isn't dead, now, is she?"

Torrey's face purpled with rage. "She's in a coma, you asshole, being fed through a tube."

"Her pain is gone."

"Evidence of her pain is gone. Her pain is still there."

Seth scowled. "If there is no evidence, how do you know it's still there?"

Through gritted teeth, Torrey answered, "Because I can feel her pain when I touch her. It's one of the perks of being a witch. It's how I knew she was sick in the first place. I can feel her pain."

He growled. "None of that is of any consequence. I told you I could prevent her death, not cure her. I never promised she would be as she was before. If you read into my words, then that is your problem."

In a flash, he was crouched on the windowsill with Riley under his arm. Her head lolled to the side, giving Torrey one last glimpse of her younger sister's flawless face.

Seth threw an unreadable glance over his shoulder at Torrey. "You have two weeks. When the moon is full, my pack will celebrate the beginning of a new era. If you have not paid by then, your sister's blood will fuel our ritual. It isn't as good as a true Daughter's blood, but it is close enough to boost my power."

Then he was gone.

Torrey ran to the window, but she knew there was no hope of finding them. As a wolf, Seth could move at speeds undetectable to the human eye. Torrey might not be a human, but she did possess a human's limited eyesight.

Six floors below, the streets were empty. She pounded her fists on the bare windowsill in frustration. It was all her fault. Everything was her fault. Her mother's coma was her fault. The fact her sister's life was in danger was her fault.

Seth hadn't seemed that bad when she met him. The remarkably attractive, strapping man with blond hair and pale blue eyes wasn't her type. Or rather, she wasn't his type. Men as handsome as Seth didn't look twice at someone as plain as Torrey. With straight brown hair and round brown eyes peeking out from her nondescript oval face, Torrey had never labored under the delusion she was beautiful. "Cute" was the word most often used to describe her.

Riley was the one with the looks and the personality. On Riley, the straight brown hair was alive with caramel and auburn highlights.

Her round brown eyes were luminous. When used in tandem with her bright, friendly smile, people flocked to Riley. By rights, Torrey should have been jealous of her sister, but she wasn't. Riley was her best friend. Though they hadn't lived together since Torrey had gone away to school at eighteen, not a day went by when they didn't talk to each other.

That was the reason Riley had come to Torrey's apartment. With her uncanny ability to sense when something was wrong, she picked up on Torrey's additional worry and resolved to comfort her older sister. The stress of their mother's failing health took more of a toll on Torrey than it did on Riley. Their mother was all Torrey had. As soon as she fell into the coma, their father placed the blame squarely on Torrey's shoulders, which didn't surprise Torrey in the least. She didn't defend herself because she knew it was where the blame belonged.

From the day she was born, her father shrank from her in fear and revulsion. Perhaps he had known what lay ahead for Torrey. His powers were insignificant, limited to vague scrying and the occasional flash of precognition. He should have been her guide, her mentor. He had the knowledge but lacked the means to use it for himself.

Seth had arrived not long after Riley, demanding his payment from Torrey. Twenty-seven and a part-time librarian, Torrey barely made her rent. She'd been hoping for a full recovery for her mother. Hillary Quinn would have given her daughter the funds in a heartbeat. Now, she had no choice. Riley's life was at stake. Torrey had to see Francis Quinn. He couldn't refuse to help.

Torrey made the too-familiar drive to the hospital on autopilot. Frank would be at his wife's bedside. Nurses and technicians greeted Torrey as she walked through the meandering halls to her mother's room, sympathy emanating from them in waves so powerful they nearly knocked her down. She wasn't empathic, but she could feel strong emotion from others if it was directed her way. It was how she'd always known Frank hated her, even when she was too young to

understand the feeling. He put on a good front around other people, and he ignored her when it was just the two of them. Still, it wasn't until Hillary fell into a coma that his façade cracked.

The door to her mother's room was open. Torrey paused just outside, gathering her courage. Even if Frank hadn't been in the room, entering it would have still been daunting. Tubes and wires ran from her mother to a ventilator, a heart monitor, and an IV. There were several other machines she couldn't identify, but they added their voice to the chorus of beeps and blips filling the room.

Frank sat in a chair by the window, his head bowed in prayer. When Hillary first became sick, the two of them had turned to religion for solace. Torrey knew what magic was present where people gathered to celebrate or revere anything, so she did not begrudge her parents their sudden devotion, though it brought her no relief.

Torrey waited, not wanting to interrupt as she watched her father's fingers move down each bead of his rosary, his lips moving with each prayer's words. Prayers were not different from her incantations. Humans lacked the necessary power to make them work. That's why they gathered in large groups, congregations. It sometimes lent their incantations potency.

Except for the periodic beep of the machines and the hushed, sibilant swish of Frank's lips, the room was silent.

Then Frank's eyes opened, and he looked up at Torrey, tired and wary, yet full of derision. "What are you doing here?"

Used to his callous treatment of her, she ignored his tone. "I came to see you."

"I don't want to hear your apologies, Torment."

She winced at his use of her original name. Hillary had been livid when she saw her daughter's birth certificate and realized Frank had filled in the wrong name when she wasn't looking. Her mother legally changed the name, but Frank didn't concede the issue. He used that name whenever they were alone together. In company, he shortened it to "Tor."

For a witch, the first name given held all the power. Hillary wasn't from a magic family. She didn't understand that her action meant nothing beyond the symbolic.

"I didn't come to apologize, Francis." It was a small consolation that he flinched when she used his given name. Taking a deep breath, she said, "I need your help."

Shock and disbelief crossed Frank's features. At fifty-six, he remained a passably handsome man, the kind to which people were invariably drawn. Riley inherited the vivaciousness of her looks from him and the shapes of her features from their mother. Torrey inherited the plainest combination imaginable of her parents' features. She wasn't ugly, but being the plain one in a family of attractive people wore on one's self-esteem.

"You can't be serious."

She hadn't disclosed to Frank the extent to which her mother's condition was her fault. Even though he blamed her, he did so for a different reason. Conveniently forgetting his refusal to train her, he felt she should be able to cure Hillary's cancer. He never missed an opportunity to throw it in her face.

There was no easy way to say it, but there were ways that would save her a repeat of the verbal lashing she was giving to herself. "Riley is being held for ransom. I need twenty thousand dollars. I know Mom has the money." She had the remaining five thousand in her savings account. She had been saving for a car. Her Tempo was over twenty years old, and it wasn't going to last the coming winter.

Frank's jaw dropped. He stared incredulously at Torrey. His venomous whisper penetrated her defenses. "What did you do now?"

"He said he could stop Mom's cancer." Frank had to strain to hear her.

"Who?"

"A werewolf. He gave his name as Seth, but I doubt it's his real name." Names were power for werewolves as well. Her magic would be much more potent if she could use his given name.

Slowly, Frank rose to his feet and closed the distance between them. His hand rose, flying through the air before Torrey guessed his intent. In twenty-seven years, he had never touched her, not in anger, not in love, not for any reason. He slapped her as hard as he could, but she held her ground.

Shocked, Torrey froze, ignoring the stinging on her cheek. She locked her eyes to Frank's.

"I named you well. You have brought nothing but torment to this family from the day you were conceived. It's not enough that you ruined my life and now your mother's. You had to do this to Riley. Of us all, she is the only innocent person."

Two tears escaped despite her best efforts to hold them back. "I wouldn't ask you for the money if there was another way."

"The wolf will not release Riley. A blue moon is thirteen days away. He will use her blood to boost his influence. She may not be what you are, but she does have some extraordinary, if understated, powers." He shook his head at her, moving back to slump in his chair. "All these years, wasted. I should have abandoned you. I should have killed you. A lifetime spent in prison would have been worth it to keep Hillary and Riley safe from you."

Fury coursed through Torrey's veins, icing them over. "Don't start, Francis. We don't have time. I need the money."

"You haven't heard a word I've said. The money doesn't matter. I'm willing to bet he knows who you are, that he's known all along. He wants your blood."

Of course the wolf knew. *She* should have known. She would have known if Frank had bothered to teach her the basics, or if she had ever been able to confide in him. Torrey kept her voice even, a feat when facing her father. "I plan to trade myself for Riley, but I know he won't do it without the full payment."

"He's going to have to," Frank said quietly. "Our savings are drained. The house is mortgaged to the hilt. We reached our health care cap months ago. There is nothing left to give you."

Torrey gasped. She hadn't expected him to turn her down, not when Riley's life was at stake. She could see him refusing to pay her ransom, but not Riley's.

"You've taken everything from me, Torment. Everything. What did I ever do to deserve being stuck with you?"

The words stung much more than they should. Because she was extra sensitive to others' emotions, Frank couldn't hide his dislike of her. Her breathing was ragged with a million kinds of pain. "What did you do to be stuck with me? You conceived me, you bastard. I didn't ask to be born, and I didn't ask to be your daughter. I don't know why you've always hated me so much. I've never done anything but try to do right by you, but somehow, nothing was ever good enough. Nothing will ever be good enough, will it?"

"I didn't conceive you! I had nothing to do with that!" Frank shouted his reply, years of rancor spewing from his mouth.

A great weight should have lifted from Torrey's shoulders. For her entire life, when she wasn't wishing Frank would like her, she wished she wasn't his daughter. Now that he was saying the words, she didn't know if she could believe him, or if she just wanted to believe him. Either way, the idea left her numb. "If you're not my father, who is?"

A spiteful light illuminated Frank's features. "Caiden something. You won't find him anywhere, so don't bother looking. He was there for Hillary when we had a fight, but he left her as soon as he found out about you. When she came back to me, it was too late to terminate the pregnancy. You see? Nobody wanted you."

Torrey stood proud and tall. Words flew from her. She didn't know if they were true, but she knew her aim was perfect. "Mom wanted me. That's what is killing you, isn't it? That she wanted me, a little piece of him that would never leave. Something to constantly remind you of all the mistakes you've made. Well, here's another. If you had put aside your hatred of him and of me long enough to teach

me how to use my powers, then I probably could have healed Mom. I wouldn't have had to rely on the promises of a greedy werewolf."

"Don't put this on me," he snarled. "I didn't do this."

"But you did," she said sadly. "Because you are weak and petty, Mom will never recover. I won't rest until I save Riley, but that has nothing to do with you." Without waiting for a reply, she turned and walked out. He was of no use to her.

Chapter 2

Restless and alone, Shade surveyed the mess that was his home from the second floor balcony. It was an exceptionally nice house. He had built it with his own two hands, cutting the timber from his land to fashion the crude log cabin that, over the years, morphed into something truly elegant.

Something worthy of Hope.

The front end of the house, over which the balcony looked, contained an open-style kitchen and living room. The ceiling rose above him, vaulting gracefully to meet the second-story roof and echoing the pattern of the hand-cut hardwood floor. Cupboards covered the far wall where the majority of the kitchen appliances were located. The counters were a pale marble that added light and energy to a room that could have been dark and foreboding. Extending to the living room like the ceiling and the floor, recessed and dropped lighting completed the open plan.

The front half of the kitchen was given over to a massive dining table that would comfortably seat at least eight, though no more than two had ever attended it. The front and side walls in both rooms were broken by large, curtainless windows. Living in such a remote area, Shade didn't see that curtains served a purpose other than to keep out the light, which didn't bother him.

The back half, where he stood, was home to six rooms, three upper and three lower. The balcony led to his master suite, a second bathroom, and Hope's room. She was gone now, nothing but a memory, but he couldn't part with any of her things. She would need them when she found him again. He had no doubt she would find him

again. Destiny had a way of working those things out, even if it took a hundred years.

The lower floor had an extra bedroom he hoped would one day be a nursery for his offspring. It was full of junk now, but he would clean it out when the time was right. His compulsion wouldn't countenance a room where everything was put away.

His compulsion had been a source of irritation for Hope. It would be for any woman. Hope had grown so tired of it that she placed a charm on him. It hadn't worked.

When he had lived at his parents' home, a maid had been employed for the express purpose of picking up after him. Not many people were aware of this peculiar habit of his. Now, years later, he didn't have the heart to pick up after himself. His things were clean, just not put away. The clutter would drive any visitor away. Fortunately, he didn't get visitors. Ever.

Throwing a change of clothes in the passenger seat of his pickup truck, Shade headed toward his brother's place. Soren lived in the monstrosity of a home where they grew up, having inherited it when their father passed away. Though he was older by seven minutes, Shade did not begrudge Soren the home or the responsibilities that came with it. He visited often, keeping abreast of the news and of people's lives, but he never accepted the open invitation to move back home.

Even if Soren hadn't killed Hope on the sacred altar in the clearing near that house, Shade knew the small, hidden village of Lyton would never again be his home. His kin, his brethren, would never accept a witch as his mate, no matter what the Shadow Man attributed to destiny. They hadn't accepted Hope, and they wouldn't accept her when she was reborn.

The drive took nearly an hour. Shade didn't own a phone, cell or otherwise, and he knew he was taking a chance Soren might not be home. It didn't matter too much. Friends were always around.

Eventually, the trees parted to reveal the quaint town set into an Appalachian hillside. The town wasn't on any maps. Overhead satellites weren't able to locate it. Even the turnoff for the road to town was hidden. If a person didn't know exactly where he wanted to go, he would never find his way. No stranger had ever set foot on their land, not in over two hundred years, unless he counted Hope.

Hands rose in greeting as Shade drove through the narrow streets of the town. He found out before he had gone a quarter mile that Soren was away on business, though no one knew what that business might be. Some speculated it might be a special woman, a theory others rejected outright. If Soren were going to find a mate, it would be one of his own kind. He would not disgrace the town or his family by marrying an outsider, and there were plenty of willing women in town to satisfy his baser needs. Half-breeds were not welcome.

Shade met the gossip with silent judgment. None of them understood why he chose to live so far away. They knew it wasn't because Soren had won control of the house, the inheritance, and the town. The fight, though vicious and instigated by demons, had been fair. Both brothers sustained damage, but nothing permanent. Shade didn't harbor resentment against Soren, just as Soren wouldn't have resented Shade if the outcome had been the other way.

He might have killed him, but he wouldn't have resented him.

Besides, that was decades before he ever met Hope. He wouldn't have met her if not for the fight that drove him from Lyton.

The only problem most wolves had with an outsider was they tended to be human. Humans didn't live long enough to make a relationship with them anything other than temporary. Besides, most humans weren't built to sustain anything long term with a werewolf. They were far too frail to survive the multiple births and the hard life of the Appalachians. Triplets were as common among werewolf offspring as single births were to humans. Like males, female wolves were larger and heartier than their human counterparts, and they could easily handle having twins or triplets or more.

Turning a human was rarely an option, as most of them did not survive the process. Besides, prejudice against half-breeds was enough to send most decent people running the other way. Life for a half-breed was difficult for many reasons, not the least of which was the lack of a clear mentor or master. Left to their own devices, half-breeds typically did something to call attention to the fact that werewolves were not fiction. Then it was up to the pack to deal with the leak. It never ended well for the half-breed.

Soren was Shade's closest friend and his biggest enemy. Headstrong and unbending, Soren provided the necessary leadership for the tiny village. However, Soren's compulsion couldn't help but come between them. His demons craved power. Hope had begged Shade to forgive Soren. She promised to return. Shade had done the best he could by his brother, but he still waited for Hope.

At any rate, Soren would be home by daybreak. He was most likely roaming the countryside in wolf form. Without the light of the moon, he would stay that way until daybreak. Shade parked his truck in the middle of the driveway that led from the break in the high stone fence surrounding Soren's estate to the massive house. It would annoy Soren, but that was one of the perks of having a brother.

Opening the unlocked door, Shade headed directly to the kitchen. The staff would have the night off, so he expected an empty house. However, he smelled her the minute he walked in. Tiffany. They had been friends, lovers, and more.

"Does Soren know you're in his house?" he called, his great voice booming through the cavernous halls.

Within moments, she appeared in the foyer, clad in a minimal amount of clothing. Shade surveyed her offering with cool detachment until she blushed and stammered. "I-I-I was hoping to surprise him."

He lifted his thick black brows. "He'll be surprised, but I'm not. It took you longer than I thought to switch your tactics." Turning away from her, he continued his path into the kitchen.

She found him digging in the refrigerator for leftovers. Alethea, the housekeeper who had been there longer than the boys, was very good about leaving copious amounts of prepared food for both men.

Tall even for a female werewolf, Tiffany stood proud at six-seven. With her large blue eyes and pouty lips, she was more beautiful than any wolf Shade had encountered, and she knew it. Her honey-blond hair fell thickly to her waist. Like most women in their pack, she never cut it. Though human cuts and hairstyles never impacted her appearance as a wolf, Tiffany was a traditionalist. She wanted her life to unfold to reveal the exact fairy tales with which she had been raised, and marrying a prince was part of her plan. If that prince couldn't be Shade, then she would settle for Soren.

After all, they weren't so very different. Each man had height nearing seven feet and the proportionally thick muscles to carry it off. Both were exceptionally handsome, though in different ways. Shade was dark, all planes and shadows. His black hair fell in shaggy waves to his collar. Black brows winged thickly lashed, midnight blue eyes. His oval face hid secrets that made more than one woman want to dig deeper, and his lips were full and lush enough to entice them, even when his manner was aloof. His skin was tanned, but not darkly so.

Soren was light everywhere Shade was dark. Light blond locks covered his head, and sunlight glinted from the coarseness of the beard he periodically grew, then shaved away. His warm, friendly eyes were teal, standing out in startling contrast from his bronzed skin, inviting strangers close and friends closer. Where Shade was relentlessly serious, Soren always had a ready laugh.

Tiffany had initially been attracted to Shade's intensity. Not long after she established a relationship with him, she found herself attracted more to Soren's joviality.

"It isn't what you think," she said to Shade's back. "Soren and I are..."

He set a covered plate of something that smelled like steak on the counter. “Fucking?” he finished for her. “You have to know you aren’t the only one.”

“No,” she conceded, “but I will be.”

“Soren has yet to meet a woman who can hold his interest for more than a few weeks,” Shade said in his characteristically serious way. “And he has no interest in being a stepfather to your dozen children. Don’t get your hopes up.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve decided to move home?” she asked. She sounded like she hoped the answer was in the negative. “You left me, Shade. You can’t expect me to wait for you forever.”

Shade popped the plate in the microwave and ignored her tone. “I don’t expect you to wait at all, Tiff. I’m not coming back, not now, not ever. We’ve both made our decisions. I do not begrudge you a shot at becoming Soren’s mate. I’m only warning you that he isn’t looking for one.”

“Thanks,” she said in a way that wasn’t thankful. “He’ll change his mind, and I’ll be here when he does.”

Tiffany’s compulsion was to have children. She liked being pregnant, and she liked being a mother. Her youngest child was a full-grown adult, so she had successfully fought her compulsion for more than twenty years. Shade was about to advise her against holding her breath in waiting for his brother, but he stopped suddenly, scenting Soren’s presence.

Soren entered the kitchen from the back door and surveyed the scene before him. With a wide grin, he said, “Don’t tell me the two of you have decided to reconcile? Moving to the middle of nowhere, Tiffany?”

Face flaming, Tiffany glared and spun on her heel. The brothers shared a laugh at the slamming of the front door indicating Tiffany’s departure. In public, neither would be flippant with her. She was Captain of the Guard, and they afforded her that respect. But in

private, she was the power-hungry woman who had seduced them both.

Soren looked over Shade's shoulder at the plate of food he lowered from the microwave. "That's my dinner."

"There's more in the fridge," Shade said. "Did you have to be so mean to her?"

Rolling his eyes, Soren snorted and went to the refrigerator for his dinner. "She offered, I took. I can't help it if she thinks there was more to it or that I would ever choose her for a mate. I did make myself clear."

Sitting at the table with his meal and a large mug of home-brewed ale, Shade eyed Soren thoughtfully. "She's beautiful."

"She dumped you, big brother. I wouldn't even have sampled her if I thought you'd mind." Three high-pitched beeps punctuated his words, and the motor of the microwave kicked into gear. "Alethea would kill us if she knew we were nuking this dinner."

"I have no intention of telling her," Shade assured his brother. "She will make a good wife and mother."

Soren knew Shade wasn't talking about his elderly housekeeper with grandchildren their age. "For you, maybe, but not me. I keep telling her to visit you. You have to be lonely as all hell out there. None of the gossip in town has you in anybody's bed, Shaden. I'm concerned about you."

"Don't be," Shade growled. He wasn't upset that Soren had used his full name. Now that their parents were gone, his brother was the only one who ever used it. "I manage."

A wrinkle of distaste marred Soren's smooth face. "You aren't consorting with humans, are you?"

While he did occasionally, Shade had no intention of admitting it to his brother or anyone else. Besides, Soren didn't give voice to his real question, which was whether or not Shade had found where Hope had been reborn. Both brothers knew it was better for Shade to hide that information. Soren's compulsion had forced him to take Hope's

life. It would force him to do it again and again and again, no matter how much it devastated Shade.

Shade changed the subject. "Where did you go tonight? It's not like you to visit the human settlements."

Soren joined Shade at the table. "As you have previously indicated, human settlements in the region are no longer small or sparse. They reproduce at an alarming rate. I can see why our ancestors culled nearby cities and drove humans far, far away."

"You haven't done anything stupid, have you?" Shade asked. Soren could be impulsive.

"They're also taller than they used to be," Soren continued, ignoring his brother. "I think we could blend in if we chose to live among them. Witches do it."

"Witches have always done it. They procreate with humans. It's a blended culture."

"Which makes the offspring iffy," Soren said. "Their powers are so diluted that some witches lack training or even an awareness of who they are. Wolves can procreate with humans, though, thank goodness, not with witches. Well, unless you make them into wolves. Can you imagine the nightmare that would produce?" With a disgusted sneer, Soren crammed a large cut of steak into his mouth.

Shade didn't answer. He knew Soren was baiting him, but he did not know why. The offspring of a witch and a wolf would be incredibly powerful. Able to control the elements and shape-shift, the being would be unstoppable. It was the reason ancient wolf councils around the globe had unilaterally banned the turning of witches.

Shade's thoughts turned inward. He wanted a wife and a litter of children. He had every intention of finding Hope, turning her into a witch/wolf hybrid, and having lots and lots of children with her. He didn't know what she looked like now, but she couldn't help but be beautiful. Her inner beauty and goodness assured it.

He missed her with a loneliness that was crushing, a loneliness that Soren, though he had caused it, had no way of understanding.

Chapter 3

Torrey went to the tiny park near her apartment. On a night like this, it was the only place she could hope to meditate close to nature. If she went back to her apartment, the three useless books she had on witchcraft would mock her from the high shelf where she stowed them all those years ago.

Human tomes on witches and their magic were of no use to her. They were largely theoretical, and even the ones that contained a spell or two lacked fundamental aspects that made all the difference. Frank had unwittingly taught her how to scry when she was a teenager. To this day, he wasn't aware of the extent to which she spied on him, hoping for some clue as to how to use her powers.

Through meditation, she had learned some basic control over some of the elements. She could summon a gust of wind or a brief rainstorm.

The park wasn't far from her apartment. A jogging path meandered through a half acre of green carved from the surrounding concrete and asphalt. Trees dotted the landscape, benches dotted the path, and, thanks to the city council's shrinking budget, weeds dotted the lawn and flower beds. It had once been a nice park, but now it was on a downward spiral.

Settling next to a puddle of rainwater between two trees, Torrey searched for Riley. After a long, long time, the water clouded over, and then it cleared to reveal her little sister. The picture was tiny, large enough to show her that Riley was still unconscious but not big enough to see much more. The fabric under her head looked like a car seat. Unable to widen the lens of the picture, the only information she

could glean was that Riley was alive and in a vehicle with black leather seats.

A tear of frustration dispelled the image. Leaning back against the nearest tree, Torrey closed her eyes. Sometimes understanding came to her while meditating. The worst that could happen would be that she learned nothing new.

Firmly grounded, Torrey reached out to nature, pulling the spirit of the grass and trees into her. Digging deeper, she connected with the soil and the rocks, with the water vapor in the air and the droplets on the sidewalk. Her jeans were cold and soaked with rainwater, but she ignored the small discomfort. The world fell away.

She zoomed through the atmosphere to find a Jeep speeding away from the city, toward a desolate-looking mountainous area. It was the perfect setting for a wolf pack. People kept to themselves in the rural mountains. Nobody would ask questions about beings that lived for hundreds of years.

Torrey wanted to follow the Jeep, but she had reached her limit. Actually, she had pushed her abilities far beyond anything she'd ever done before. Desperate, she tried to hang on, but blackness closed in, obscuring her view.

"It's a charm."

The voice came out of nowhere. Startled, Torrey opened her eyes to find herself back in the park. A man stood over her, blocking the dim light that managed to filter through the trees from the nearest streetlight. He was average height and had an average build, but his features were hidden in the gloom.

"Pardon?"

"It's a charm," he repeated. His voice was rough, as if he didn't use it often. "You can't follow him because he's placed a charm to keep you and any other witches away from his territory. It's common practice for a wolf community."

Torrey swallowed. This man was not a witch. How had he known what she was doing? On a whim, she asked, "How can I get around the charm?"

The man smiled, which was odd because Torrey couldn't see his face, yet she had no doubt he was smiling. "You can't, not yet."

"Can you?"

A low, rusty laugh drifted down to her. "That's a more complicated question than you can fathom." He held out a hand to help Torrey to her feet.

She dusted her backside as well as she could. Fall debris and sharply cold water stained her clothing, making her attempt pointless. "Do you know where he's taking her?" Careful to test him, she left out names.

The man shook his head. Now that she was standing, she should have been able to make out his features, but he remained as vague and indistinct as he had been from her unfavorable vantage point on the ground. "There is much I cannot tell you and much I do not know. I can tell you who is best suited to help you with this quest."

Torrey regarded him with quiet wonder. "How do I know I can trust you? How do I know you're not in league with Seth, trying to throw me off his track?"

He made a movement that might have been a shrug. "How do you know when anyone is telling the truth? Was this *Seth* telling the truth when he promised that your mother would not die of cancer? Is death not the inevitable result of the drug he gave you?"

She understood his implication. The literal truth was not always the whole truth. Truth was subjective. Intent was everything. Impatiently, Torrey pushed her hair out of her face. "Why are you willing to help me?"

A smile flashed, more in her mind than on his face. "That is a good question. Would you like this man's name and location?"

"I'd like you to answer my question." Though she wasn't used to pushing her will on anyone, the steel in Torrey's voice was authentic.

“I cannot, not to your satisfaction. I can only tell you that while I regret the events in your life that have led you here, your arrival was inevitable. Trust your instincts, Torrey. They will not steer you wrong.” He reached out, capturing her cold hand in his warm one. “A warm shower and a good night’s sleep are what you need. Begin your quest tomorrow.”

Torrey looked down at her hand as he released it. Her fingers were curled around a folded slip of paper. She shot a questioning look at the man, but he was gone. The paper was her only evidence she hadn’t imagined the entire surreal encounter. As she stared at it, the air took on the consistency of water.

* * * *

Afternoon dawned bright and chilly. Torrey sat up slowly, shaking away the last vestiges of her deep slumber. She looked around her room, blinking it into focus. The queen-sized bed was the same. The laundry basket in the corner overflowed as it had ever since her mother fell ill. A paperback novel was on the floor, right where she’d dropped it when it failed to hold her interest. Everything was where she left it, so why did she have the nagging suspicion something wasn’t right?

Riley. Frank. The shadowy man in the park. Throwing back the covers, Torrey looked down to find she was in her pajamas. Judging by the rat’s nest state of her hair, she had showered before falling asleep. She had no memory of taking a warm shower or of falling asleep or of leaving the park, but she felt clean and refreshed, more alert and alive than she had felt in a long, long time. The man’s suggestion had taken on the air of a command, then of a spell. Was he a witch? He was easily the most powerful being she’d ever encountered. He didn’t trip her witch-sensing switch.

Most witches could sense each other, but she couldn’t sense anything about the mystery man. She had no idea who or what he

was, but she knew she was going in search of the name on the card. Two lines, printed in precise block letters, spanned the width of the paper.

Shade. Rick's on Route 2, West Virginia.

The directions were imprecise to say the least. Thank goodness for Google. She had slept until after two in the afternoon, and a quick search informed her that the drive would take several hours. Torrey threw some clothes on, tamed her hair into a ponytail, and hit the road.

The sun dipped low in the sky by the time she pulled into a gravel parking lot that lacked in any kind of organization or lighting. Her Tempo had an aversion to any speed above forty-five. The dim red neon sign identifying the squat, square building in this desolate place as "Rick's" only cast its glow so far.

The bar was the hole into which society poured its dregs. She wanted to turn back, to complete a half-moon in the densely packed lot and leave, but she couldn't. Riley's life would be forfeited if she chickened out. Screwing in her courage, she got out of the car and made her way gingerly toward the door, trying to notice the people loitering outside the dingy building as little as possible.

The inside was worse than the outside. The stench of spilled beer was underlined by something more acrid. To her left, billiards tables, smoke, and sweaty men filled the space. The bar was to her right, populated by the same smoke and different sweaty men. A jukebox blasted angry, twangy music from the back. Nothing about this place or its patrons was inviting or friendly.

Pulling her jacket closer around her, Torrey surveyed the men openly staring and rethought her choice of clothing. The jeans and plain shirt were low-key. She hadn't thought the neckline evocative when she threw it on that afternoon. Now, she thought maybe the cut of her shirt was too suggestive and her jeans a tad too tight.

Then she noticed she was the only woman in the place. Torrey had to convince herself not to turn and run. She summoned Riley's image in her mind.

Swallowing her trepidation and pasting a solemn expression on her face, she headed toward the bar. The sea of flannel-shirted men parted to make way for her. Barely. Bodies brushed against hers, and groping hands stole brief squeezes of anything they could reach.

The sparsely toothed bartender surveyed her with sheer bafflement. "Whaddaya want?"

Torrey knew he wasn't asking for her drink order. She was indisputably out of place in the bar, and not only because of her gender. "I'm looking for Mr. Shade."

Recognition flashed in his eyes for a fraction of a second before he turned away, completely ignoring her existence, as were most of the patrons who were so interested in her a minute ago. She wasn't sure what to do.

"Excuse me?" she called to the bartender. "Do you know where he is or don't you?"

The old man's eyes took a curious path to hers, wandering around the immediate vicinity. He leaned in close and spoke as quietly as he could. "I have a granddaughter about your age, young lady, and I'm going to tell you the same thing I would tell her. This is no place for you to be, and that is no man for you to mess with." His head jerked curtly toward the door, and he turned away from her again.

"You don't understand," she said. "I need to hire him to find somebody for me."

The bartender continued to ignore her, but the burly man to her left looked nervously from her to a man at the opposite end of the bar, where it curved outward and dead-ended into another wall. Torrey followed his gaze to the person seated there.

The man was large, his bent head easily standing out above the rest of the patrons' heads. His back was to Torrey. Shaggy black hair

draped just past the collar of the plain black cotton shirt that strained to cover his broad shoulders.

She couldn't determine his exact height because he was sitting, but she could tell he would fit in with the tallest members of an NFL team. The stool next to him was conveniently vacant.

He was easily the most dangerous being in the room, and not because of his don't-mess-with-me, badass attitude. A man that size had to be a werewolf. The shadowy man had sent her to a wolf to help her track a wolf. The basic sense of the idea was negated by the fact that wolves stuck together and never mixed with witches. She sensed nothing from this distance, but that was to be expected. Her senses were nowhere as developed as his.

Maybe if she was careful and didn't use her magic...

Throwing her shoulders back to appear more confident than she felt, Torrey made her way to the other end of the bar and settled on the empty stool. The torn vinyl scratched against the denim of her jeans, catching and releasing the fabric until she stopped moving.

From the side, he was foreboding. His brooding features warning anyone and everyone away. Torrey mustered all the nerve she had. "Mr. Shade?"

He tipped his beer bottle up and signaled the bartender for another, giving no sign he saw or heard her. The bartender brought it immediately, shooting a warning look at Torrey, but she was busy studying the man who was supposed to help her find Riley.

Dark stubble stained his chin and cheeks, creeping down his neck. Though menacing, his profile was striking, his features perfect. Full, sensual lips. Dark-lashed, almond-shaped eyes whose color was indeterminable in the sparse light. Tanned skin that could be the result of the sun or of ethnicity. One smile and women would fall at his feet.

Ignoring the silently sinister warnings emanating from him, Torrey soldiered on. A strand of wheat-colored hair had fallen from her ponytail. She shoved it behind her ear. His eyes flickered once to

the side, a movement so quick she thought she imagined it. “Mr. Shade, I need your help.”

He finished his beer and exchanged it for the full one the bartender left. “Go home, little witch. It’s a mistake for your kind to get mixed up with mine.” He turned then, piercing her with his dark eyes.

She was taken aback by the heat seeded deep inside and, more so, by her body’s unexpected reaction to him. A sane person would have been unnerved. Instead, she felt a stirring coming from the same depth as his anger. Chagrined, she squelched the tingling between her thighs.

“Go home, little witch.” His voice was low and scratchy and strangely hypnotic.

Torrey met his icy gaze with nerves of tempered steel. “Mr. Shade, you don’t seem surprised to see me, so you must have known I was coming. It’s probable you know what I want. If you weren’t willing to help me, then why did you come here tonight?”

Shade dismissed her again, before she even finished speaking. The bottle tipped up. Without looking her way, he drained it, rose from his seat, and set a twenty on the counter under the empty bottle. “Curiosity kills witches and cats.”

If she hadn’t seen his lips move, she wouldn’t have known he said anything at all. It was an oddly phrased death threat. He moved past her, a large shadow obscuring the room before disappearing through the door.

Torrey blinked. He’d moved quickly enough. Scrambling from the stool, she ran after him, emerging from the building in time to see him disappear around the corner.

“Mr. Shade,” she shouted as she ran. The slim alley contained a Dumpster and a black F-150. Dim light from the streetlamps dotting the narrow highway lane cast long shadows, making Shade appear taller and deadlier. As if he needed the effect.

He froze a few feet from his truck.

Instinct made Torrey position herself between his body and the door to his truck. "Please, Mr. Shade. I need your help, and I think you need me, too."

His brows rose slightly at her bold statement. "I need you? For what?" Eyes flicked over her body, lingering on the curves of her breasts and hips.

Torrey shrugged, feigning nonchalance. A mixture of anxiousness and attraction broiled her insides. "I don't see why that man would have set up this meeting if it wasn't going to be mutually beneficial. I can't pay you, Mr. Shade, but I must have something you need."

He leaned close, sending her insides into downright upheaval. Torrey remained still as his face closed in on her neck. She doubted he would rip her to shreds, but that wasn't something one could ever be sure about when dealing with a wolf.

Shade's mouth hovered inches from her pulse, a threat and a promise. He grasped her shoulders with a surprising gentleness and inhaled deeply.

The five seconds his action took were far too long for Torrey. The hitch in her breath revealed her inadvisable attraction to this wolf. She hoped to hell he interpreted it as fear. For some reason, she didn't find him scary. He could kill her easily, but she didn't feel unsafe.

She didn't feel safe, either. "Mr. Shade, please."

Shifting his focus, Shade sniffed at the other side of her neck, at her face. With a bend to his knees, he lowered his face to inhale whatever fragrance he found between her breasts.

Torrey wanted him to press closer. She wanted to feel the scratch of his cheeks against the sensitive skin of her breasts. She wanted to feel his lips and the heat of his mouth on her pebbled nipples. But that wasn't why she was there. Throwing caution to the wind, she buried her fingers in his thick, dark hair and yanked his attention back to her face. "Mr. Shade."

Eyes penetrating hers, he interrupted whatever she had been about to say. "Are you stupid, or do you have a death wish?"

"I'm desperate," she said. "A wolf has kidnapped my sister, but he really wants me. I don't know why he didn't just take me in the first place and leave her alone. I need you to track him so I can negotiate an exchange. When that is done, I need you to see Riley safely home."

He studied her silently. Strength emanated from his body, inches from hers, and something silvered his midnight-blue eyes, rendering him half-feral. Belatedly, Torrey released her hold on his hair. The apprehension shivering through her was a primal response to the way he looked at her.

The hands on her shoulders held her immobile. Her own hands dropped to his shoulders, flexing on the muscles there subconsciously.

"He wants your power," Shade muttered in the tone of a condemned man. "Are you unaware he cannot take it from you, that you have to give it willingly?"

Torrey bit her lip hard. That was something Frank should have taught her. Seth wasn't after the money, that much she now knew. His irrational actions began to make sense. He wanted Torrey to offer herself in exchange for Riley. He had her there. She would do anything to save her sister.

"I don't have much power," she said, her volume impossibly low, but she knew his advanced senses would hear her anyway. "I can only scry a little bit."

Those black brows drew together sharply. "You are powerful, little witch. I can smell it on you. I smelled it the second you walked into that bar."

Torrey looked away. "I can't control it. I've tried, but..." She shrugged, illustrating the futility of her attempts. "Please help me, Mr. Shade." She met his eyes honestly. "I have an insurance policy. It's only fifty thousand, but I can name you beneficiary. I'll give you anything I have. Name your price."

Taking one step, Shade pressed her between the door of his truck and the hard wall of his body. He lifted his hands, pressing them to the glass on either side of her face. "If I want you?"

Now it was her turn to raise her brows in shock. She found him attractive, but men like him didn't usually return the sentiment, wolf or not. He caged her with his body, but he wasn't aroused. The way he pressed against her, that wasn't something she would miss. Moisture tickled between her legs, an itch demanding attention, but that feeling was one-sided. "You don't want me."

Something flickered there, some kind of war she didn't understand. "I want your power." Dropping his arms, he stepped back, releasing her suddenly and completely. "When the time comes, bequeath it to me, not to the man who stole your sister."

The disappointment that tore through Torrey had everything to do with the loss of his body next to hers. Jerkily, she nodded. "Find my sister, Mr. Shade. Exchange me for her, and I will honor your request."

"It's just Shade," he said.

"Shade, then. Thank you. You can't know what this means."

His lips were on her before she finished speaking. They were unexpectedly hard for something that looked so lush and soft. He demanded, took, stole, and Torrey yielded completely. Her hands found their way back into his hair to hold him close. Sensations rippled through her body, finding a primal need that went far beyond the simple fact of him and her.

She moaned, giving him that evidence of her desire. One hand slid down to grip his neck. Heat emanated from his skin, scorching her fingers and instilling a need to have the rest of his flesh pressed against her nakedness.

Shade gripped her hips, lifting her and pulling her into him. His lips released her temporarily as they slid across her jaw and down her neck to the place where her pulse rapidly beat. He nipped her lightly and licked away the small sting with his hot tongue.

Though he moaned something that sounded like “hope,” Torrey was on fire. She wanted him to throw her into his truck and rip away her clothes so he could do that to the rest of her body. The outside world fell away. Gasps and moans escaped as she writhed in his arms, trying to close the scant space between them.

After far too long, Shade granted the request she made with her straining body. He pushed aside her jacket. His heat penetrated the cotton of her shirt, setting tremors racing from everywhere his body touched hers. Torrey wanted the fabric gone, but he didn’t leave enough space between them to allow her room to maneuver.

She whimpered as his knee nudged her thighs apart. He pressed his powerful leg against her core, his heat rising through the denim of their jeans. She ground her pussy against it, wanting even more than the friction he offered.

One large palm grasped her head, holding her still as he stole her breath with another searing kiss. The other traced a light caress down her side and along her hip. She felt both treasured and consumed, mastered by this stranger who seemed more familiar than anyone she’d ever known.

Shade’s growl rumbled against her breasts. “Did you come for a show, old man?”

Startled by his words and by his unexpected release of her body, Torrey blinked into the darkness. It took her a moment to realize a third person had joined them.

“Miss, are you all right?” The shadow wore the bartender’s concerned voice.

“I’m fine,” Torrey said. Her voice came out extra-throaty, so she tried again. “Thank you for your concern, but he’s quite harmless.” She didn’t need to turn her head to see the amusement on Shade’s face. Likely, no one had ever referred to him as harmless.

Reaching behind her, Shade opened the door to his truck. The cab light threw a soft glow on them all. He nudged her hip with a quick tap. “Get in.”

“Where are you taking me?” Torrey made no move to follow his order.

A grin curled his lips. “You sound worried. I’m harmless. Remember?”

Her head bobbed up and down slowly. “Harmless. Right.” She raised a hand to the bartender in a farewell gesture and climbed into Shade’s truck.

He wasn’t far behind, helping her to the passenger side with a proprietary hand on her ass.

The weathered bartender disappeared from the side-view mirror as the truck exited the parking lot and merged onto the two-lane mountain highway. Torrey studied Shade with undisguised curiosity.

Finally, she broke the silence. “So where are you taking me?”

“It’s where you’re taking me,” he corrected. “You said a wolf took your sister. I want to see the place where this happened.”

The road on which they drove headed straight into the mountains and the middle of nowhere. “Then you’re going to have to turn around. My apartment is about four hours in the other direction.”

Shade started, glancing sharply at Torrey. “It’s unusual for wolves to be found in the Midwest, little witch.”

“Torrey,” she supplied. “My name is Torrey.”

He slowed, pulling to the shoulder to execute a U-turn. “Likely story, little witch.”

No witch voluntarily shared her birth name. Often, only one member of the family knew the true name. That person was usually the witch from whom the child inherited the gene. “Still, I answer to it.”

Settling back for the ride, Torrey related the entire story to Shade, beginning when she first met Seth in the waiting room at the hospital and ending when she met the shadowy man. Shade listened without interrupting. Though she watched him in the pale green glow of the dashboard lights and the occasional headlights of an oncoming car, she was unable to discern anything he might have been thinking.

When she finished, he frowned. "I don't know anyone named Seth."

Torrey laughed. "I wasn't under the impression all wolves knew each other. Besides, he wouldn't have told me his true name, not yet."

Shade nodded. "With his birth name, you could fashion a spell to stop him or to find him."

She stared out the window, but there was nothing to see. "I don't know how to do any of that stuff. You said I was powerful. I can feel the power, but I don't know how to use it."

"Surely one of your parents was your mentor? Witches guard their powers and their offspring, zealously."

The shake of her head was silent, but she knew he heard it anyway. "I never met my father. He left before I was born. Riley's dad is my stepfather. He has some powers, but nothing significant."

"He didn't mentor you," Shade guessed. "He resented what you represent."

Torrey's laugh lacked mirth. "My mother's infidelity."

"I don't know about that," he said after a short silence. "You are more powerful than him. You represent what he isn't. He's jealous of you. It's likely Seth's actions stem from jealousy as well."

Jealousy. Torrey crossed her arms over her chest protectively and rubbed her hands up and down her arms to comfort herself. Was Frank Quinn jealous of Torrey? Did it matter anymore? Her voice was small when she resumed the conversation, and her eyes remained fixed on the part of the road illuminated by the headlights. "Can you really smell my power?"

Shade grunted. "You reek with it. In almost two hundred years, I can remember only ever encountering one witch with as much power as you. What you have is a rare gift, and you will spend the rest of your life dealing with others who want your power."

Torrey nodded absently. "And you want my power."

Another grunt. "I have some power of my own. I'm surprised you can't sense it."

She felt little sparks jumping from him to her, but she chalked that up to attraction. While she had met men who were more handsome, she had never met one with quite Shade's combination of looks and attitude. It made for an inherent sexiness that far exceeded words that labeled physical appearance.

Silence marked the next hundred miles. Torrey pondered the ramifications of jealousy and the question of whether she was misinterpreting the signals emanating from Shade. The rhythm of the road lulled her into a semiconscious state. The darkness and the pavement disappeared.

Visions swam before her eyes. She saw Seth bringing dinner to Riley and trying to cheer her up. She saw him sharing a laugh with Shade. Nothing registered anywhere except in her subconscious.

As she drifted along the stream of semiconsciousness, she met her father. He wasn't very father-like. Absent the grey and wrinkles of someone his age and floating along in a sea of clouds, he didn't appear to be much older than she. He was handsome. His brown hair and eyes and the shape of his face were the same as hers, but more vibrant and alive. At that moment, she realized he wasn't alive.

"Daughter of Circe, you are finally awakened." His lips didn't move, but she heard the words in her head. His voice was familiar, but she couldn't place it.

"You're Caiden." Her voice was silent as well. She had only to think the words, and they were fact.

"Yes." He smiled without smiling.

"I'm dreaming."

"Sort of," he said, coming closer. He floated instead of walking. "You're unaware of how you're using your powers. Your beast has awakened you, but he hasn't shown you control. When you use them now, it is accidental. Even you are unaware of the extent to which you affect other beings. You have yet to discover who you are, what you were meant to be."

“Caiden”—she didn’t feel comfortable calling him “Father,” but she wanted to say his name—“I have no guide, no mentor, nobody to show me how to use my powers.”

“The beast will help you, Torrey. You must trust him. This is predestined.”

“He’s a wolf. He knows little of magic.” The image on the edge of her subconscious moved dead center. Shade laughing companionably with Seth. “Shade knows the man who took Riley.”

The mist and clouds faded, and Caiden with them.

Torrey jerked awake, blinking into the darkness, simultaneously alert and disoriented. How could Shade both know Seth and help her? Wouldn’t the association compromise his loyalties?

“Disturbing vision?”

Stiff-spined, she turned toward him. Why would he use that term? “Vision?”

“The smell of magic coming from you spiked,” he said. “I assumed you were having a vision or whatever it is you witches do in lieu of sleep.”

“I sleep,” she said. It was an effort to divert his attention.

“If the vision had to do with Riley, you need to share it with me.” He was firm, unapologetic.

Boldly, she dropped her bomb. “You know the wolf who took Riley.”

A light chuckle greeted her not-so-subtle challenge. “It’s likely,” he said. “I know most wolves who live east of the Mississippi and many who don’t.”

He found this amusing! Torrey’s fists clenched with fury and futility. She was at his mercy. He knew the wolf who took Riley. Other than the promise of her power, what was there to keep him honest? How could she trust him? What if she bequeathed her power to him while on her deathbed, and then he turned around and killed Riley anyway?

She needed to alter the plan. She couldn't release her powers until Riley was safe. Shade would help her out of greed. He wanted her power. He had to be loyal to her until he got it.

Caiden said she should trust the beast, and he meant Shade. But she didn't know Caiden. Swallowing her trepidation, which settled somewhere south of her stomach, she said, "He said I should trust you. He said you would help me, but I didn't get the feeling he was talking about finding Riley."

"He?"

She wasn't going to tell him more. "We're almost to my apartment. Will you be able to catch Seth's scent after all this time? It's been more than a day since he was there."

The look he gave her was the stoic equivalent of an eye-roll. "Was the Shadow Man in your vision, Torrey?"

It didn't escape her notice that he used her name. It sent a shot of warmth through her body that headed straight for her core. She didn't know what to make of his kiss or of the feelings he engendered in her, and she didn't want to analyze it. There was no time for her to fall for anyone, much less a werewolf.

She shuddered against a sudden wave of grief. "No." It had been her father in the vision, but not quite her father. What was a daughter of Circe? Wasn't she the witch who charmed Odysseus and turned all his men to pigs, or so Homer claimed?

Her apartment was on the sixth floor of a nondescript eight-story brown building that rose from the grey pavement in the heart of the city. Shade parked on the street.

Midnight hadn't yet come. People loitered on the sidewalk, and loud bursts came as doors to cafés and restaurants opened. Shade joined her on the pavement. He waited while she tried to fit her key into the slot on the door. Her hands shook so much, he took the key from her to do the deed himself. It clicked, and he held the door open.

She led him through the hallway maze to the rickety elevator in the back of the building. Her flat was small. The front door opened

into a living room that ran the width of the rectangle that made up her apartment. A single open doorway led to a narrow kitchenette. The short hallway opposite led to a moderate-sized bedroom with a micro closet and a small bathroom.

Torrey watched Shade. She was sure he caught the scent immediately. His massive frame filled the space in her apartment every bit as much as Seth's had. This was a man who needed the high ceilings and wide-open spaces not offered by her apartment.

Shade's attention moved through the living room, settling on the window from which Seth had escaped. He crossed the room and reached out a hand to touch the painted woodwork framing the open window.

"Do you always leave your windows open?" His question reverberated through the silent room, filling the space.

The old hot-water radiator either emitted too much heat or not enough. An open window kept her apartment from becoming stuffy. Torrey nodded. "He came and left through there. The fire escape isn't on that side of the building."

Shade leaned out the screenless window. "You aren't that far from the ground. A powerful wolf could leap the distance or climb the building."

A powerful wolf. Torrey's heart sank at the way Shade said the phrase. If the wolf was more powerful than Shade, then it was likely he'd never leave enough of a trail to follow.

Before she could blink, Shade was gone. Torrey ran to the window, crossing the short distance in five long strides. Hanging her head outside, she saw Shade disappear around the corner of a building several blocks away. At least he wasted no time getting to work.

Chapter 4

Shade wandered through the deserted streets. The name of the small Ohio city escaped his memory. It didn't matter anyway. It was unlikely he would ever return. It was unlikely Torrey would return, either.

Procrastination wasn't a pastime in which Shade often engaged. He didn't relish returning to Torrey's tiny apartment to reveal information he knew the moment he walked in that front door. Her wolf's name wasn't Seth, though she knew that already. What the hell was Soren thinking, kidnapping a human like that?

Closing his eyes, Shade faced the answer. Soren wanted Torrey's power, just as he had wanted Hope's. Somehow, somewhere, Torrey had crossed his path. Most wolves would have eased away from the witch, avoiding revealing their presence as much as possible.

Not Soren.

Shade's compulsion was to make a mess. If he wanted to find an item, he couldn't control the way he went into a trance and emptied every drawer and cabinet until he found the item he needed. Even if he knew where it was stored, the compulsion to empty everything was irresistible.

It was a testimony to Shade's strength that he had a compulsion at all.

As bad as a messy living space could be, Shade's compulsion was merely annoying when compared with Soren's. His little brother craved power. It was what caused the fight when their parents passed away. It was the reason Shade conceded the castle-like house and control of the pack and the village to his brother.

Soren would have killed for those things, but not because he wanted to. He would do it because he *had* to. It was the reason Shade could still stand the sight of Soren. It was the reason he would keep Torrey away from Soren at all costs.

Once she crossed Soren's radar, Torrey hadn't stood a chance. Shade ran a hand through his shaggy mane. Torrey hadn't been lying when she said she didn't know how to use her powers, and she had more now than she had as Hope.

A witch with her power should have been able to stop Soren. It wouldn't have been easy. Neither of them would have escaped without scratches, but Torrey had enough power to prevent his brother from taking Riley.

When Torrey walked into that dive on Route 2, Shade hadn't just scented her power. He had scented *her*. She wasn't the first witch he'd encountered. Some of his powers—Soren's, too—were from encounters with witches.

The first encounter happened before Soren's compulsion kicked in. A witch had captured Shade when he was still a juvenile whose strength and power hadn't fully manifested. His shape-shifting abilities had only begun to present. The witch who captured Shade also captured a female. The plan was to mate the pair and sell werewolves on the black market.

Soren accompanied their parents on the mission to retrieve Shade. During the rescue, Shade killed his captor. In doing so, he inadvertently took some of the witch's power. A willing witch could give it all. His captor hadn't been willing.

He learned basic scrying and the casting of light charms from books.

Another time, Soren and Shade had taken a trip to see a human settlement. They attracted the notice of a witch who decided to hunt them. Within two hours, Soren had acquired the ability to cast potent charms. The skill proved handy when humans began using radar, and

then later when they launched satellites and developed GPS. Soren fashioned charms to keep their village hidden and undetectable.

The government wasn't an issue. It was easy to manipulate. Tourists were to be avoided at all costs. Most wolves had only stopped eating humans in the last two or three hundred years. Though their flavor had fallen out of favor, they were considered lesser beings, annoying and unwelcome.

All of these memories and facts zinged through Shade's mind to crash into one truth that would not go away. Torrey was Hope. She didn't know it, which he found completely baffling. The Daughters of Circe were not only reborn, but they retained memories of their previous incarnations. Torrey should have recognized him, but she hadn't. She should have known how to use her powers without the aid of a mentor, but she didn't.

He needed to get into his truck and drive away. He needed to hide Torrey away where Soren wouldn't find her. He wanted to bury himself in her and never emerge. He wanted Torrey. He'd waited almost fifty years for her, and the wolf in him would not let her go.

Granting her request didn't present too much of a challenge. Soren's lust for power would make for an easy negotiation. All he would have to do would be to deliver Torrey to Soren, exchange her for Riley, and see Riley safely home. He could accomplish it in a day.

Shade's problem was the tightness in his chest at the thought of standing by helplessly as Soren killed the woman he loved yet again. Even if she didn't know him, something deep inside Torrey's soul had to recognize him. Yet, he knew her resolve, too. That was the same. She had forced him to let go last time. She had used her powers to stop him from killing Soren.

Closed eyes failed to block the pain that had never quite abated.

How could he then turn her over to his brother for a ritualistic sacrifice? A witch couldn't give up their power until the moment of death. He wasn't okay with Soren performing this ritual in the first place. He had no plans to attend, but he had no plans to try to stop

Soren. This wasn't something his brother *wanted* to do; it was something he *had* to do.

This wasn't going to be simple. Torrey was courageous and intelligent. She needed to learn to use her powers. He hoped she was a quick study in this incarnation.

The return trip to her apartment didn't take long. The sun peeked over the horizon, shedding a weak pink glow over the grey concrete.

Her building was tall and nondescript, blending in with the myriad buildings in the area. One street corner looked much like the others. Differences lay in the street accessories—newspaper boxes, mailboxes, and the occasional tree.

Standing on the sidewalk, he looked up. She had left the window wide open. With a quick glance up and down the street to make sure he wasn't being watched, Shade leapt, easily scaling the wall with the help of a couple of window ledges.

Torrey lay, sprawled across the couch on her stomach, sleeping. Though Shade entered the room silently, her eyes opened. She lifted her head, staring expectantly.

"You found her?"

He hated dashing the hope in her voice, but it had to be done. Eventually, he would be able to give her an affirmative answer. This morning, he could not. Shade shook his head.

Her face fell. Those light brown eyes darkened with disappointment. She pushed a strand of hair away from her face. It was similar to the movement in the bar that nearly broke his resistance. He knew she hadn't meant it to be alluring, but it was. That simple act, a mannerism so like something Hope would have done, tugged at his heart.

She bit her bottom lip, and it took all of Shade's willpower to not refresh his memory of her taste. Finally, she looked up at him again. "But you know where she is? You know who took her?"

That was a question he didn't want to answer, not yet. He changed the subject somewhat. "I've changed my mind. I don't want your

powers.” That proposition was when he had been willing to let Soren have her. If she bequeathed the bulk of her powers to him, she would be beneath Soren’s notice when she was reborn. He might have to wait another fifty or hundred years to be with her again, but at least she would be safe from Soren.

Her lips parted, and her breath sped up. He wanted to cause that reaction, but not this way. “I’m not asking you to fight him. If he’s too strong, that shouldn’t matter. I just want you to find him and broker the trade.”

Shade shook his head. “I’ll retrieve your sister, but my terms have changed.”

Torrey was on her feet, her head shaking in disbelief. “I have nothing else to give you, Shade. I’ve completed the paperwork to name you beneficiary of everything I have, and I’m willing to bequeath all of my powers to you. I don’t know what else of mine you could want.”

Shade held up a hand. He didn’t want to make her cry, and he didn’t want to hear her beg. “I don’t want your money or your powers. I want you.”

She blinked once sharply, rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, frowned, and disappeared into the kitchen. The sound of running water was followed by the hissing of that same water as it made its way through hot coils. The scent of coffee laced with vanilla and cinnamon filled the apartment.

Two steps put him inside her kitchen. Her rigid back was to him as she watched the steaming liquid pour from the little hole above the pot.

He ducked under the header to the doorway and paused, his eyes on her. “Torrey?”

Startled, she jumped and turned. Brown eyes regarded him warily. “I am awake.” It was more of a question.

Recognizing her uncertainty, Shade grinned and came closer. The husky sound of her sleep-roughened voice beckoned to him almost as

much as her heady scent. He remembered the feel of her lips against his and the pliancy of her body as it pressed closer during their one kiss. "You are, indeed."

Torrey shook her head. "I don't understand. You want my life insurance, my powers, and my body?"

Shade parked his hands on her hips, caressing the rounded curves through the stiff denim of her jeans. Her soft heat warmed his palms and the aroma of her arousal nearly sapped his control. "I just want you, nothing else."

The pink tongue that darted out to lick at her bottom lip tipped him into the abyss. Shade lowered his head and closed his mouth over hers, pleased when her body again softened into his and her mouth opened to let him deeper. Something in her remembered him.

Her hands traveled a slow path up his chest to rest on his shoulders, fingertips digging into the muscle there sharply, reflexively. He liked the way she touched him, and the wild part of him wanted nothing between them, not even the thin cotton of his shirt that muted the power of her caress.

Chapter 5

She was kissing a wolf. A day earlier, she had cursed the existence of the entire species, and now she was about to invite one into her bed.

The only thing she had really ever heard about wolves was that they were a bad lot, mostly murderers and kidnappers. They were feral and untamable. Judging from the fire ripping through her, Torrey wasn't sure that was a bad description. Shade's passion was barely restrained, and it beckoned to something similar deep inside Torrey.

Behind her, the percolator hissed and spat the last drops into the glass pot below. Cinnamon and vanilla filled the air, but she was aware of only Shade's scent and taste. He filled her senses.

Her feet were no longer on the ground. Like he had in the parking lot of the bar, Shade lifted her against him, grinding his pelvis into hers. The bulge there was thick, and the pressure of it against her center was more than she was prepared to resist.

Shade's lips left hers to trail down her neck. He found the pulse point that drew his interest earlier. Teeth scraped gently, nipping the sensitive skin in a preliminary display of dominance. Quivers raced down Torrey's arms and chest. She shivered in his arms.

His wolf senses knew her response meant desire, not fear. The pressure increased until she cried out, a moan that sounded a lot like his name. Her fingers wove into his thick black hair to hold him in place.

Lightly, gently, lips skimmed along her neck to stop just below her ear. His long fingers squeezed her ass before letting her slide down his body. A protest mewed in the back of her throat.

“Agree to my terms, Torrey. Take me to your bed.”

Desire-glazed eyes slowly cleared. Was this the right thing to do at this moment? She wanted him. She needed him in a way she had never before needed anyone. Yet, she didn't know the consequences. Was this a betrayal of her sister? Torrey looked up into eyes so dark blue, they appeared black. “You know where Riley is?”

He shook his head slowly, regretfully. “No, but I have a pretty good idea of the general area where she's being held.”

Torrey's breath caught. Her vision had been accurate. “You know who took her, don't you?”

This time, Shade nodded. “He won't hurt her. I know it's hard for you to believe right now, but he's not a bad person. He isn't doing this because he wants to do it.”

She looked away, not because she didn't believe him. She hadn't sensed malevolence from Seth. That was one thing that made his act so shocking and unexpected. Sucking at her top lip, she bit it while she thought. “Your kind and my kind aren't supposed to mix.” She didn't quite know where that idea had come from, but it was there, a fact in her head.

Shade shrugged. “I could give a damn about ancient rules, Torrey. I want you. I need to be inside you.”

She wasn't swayed by his words, though if he kissed her again and took her into the bedroom, she wouldn't stop him. “Isn't something bad supposed to happen if a witch and a wolf become involved like this?”

He released her completely, moving across the tiny space to stand at the mouth of the hall to her bedroom. “You want me to give you to a man who wants to kill you in such a way as to take all of your powers. What worse things could possibly happen?” Holding out a hand, he invited her closer. “I'm a good lover, Torrey. You won't be disappointed.”

It was her decision. Somehow, she knew he would find Riley even if she refused him now. The Shadow Man had been right about Shade.

Sparks simmered between them, thrown by the insistent need exuding from him in waves that crashed into her rhythmically and a submissive response inside that Torrey hadn't been aware she possessed. She lifted her hand and let his hot fingers close around her palm to pull her close.

His kiss was hard and demanding. The coverlet on her bed was soft against her back. Torrey had no idea how they had moved from the hall to her bed so quickly. He tore her shirt, ripping the seams to unwrap her body. His hands caressed the skin there, heating it with the fire that seemed to emanate from his skin.

Vague facts flitted through her head. Wolves were fire creatures. It was their element. It made sense he would be so warm. Closing her eyes focused the energy and made it seem like actual flames licked against her.

The mouth scorching a path between her breasts and down her stomach banished those thoughts. Torrey was only aware of sensations. Heat as he licked and nipped at her skin. The jumble of desire snaking its way through her body. The hard muscles she desperately wanted to touch beneath his shirt.

Tugging at his shirt, Torrey managed to move it mostly out of the way. Shade didn't seem inclined to take his hands or his mouth from her long enough to remove it, and she wasn't strong enough to rip it the way he had ripped hers. Changing tactics, she pushed him away.

That got his attention. Pulling back, he gazed down at her. Animal passion mingled with confusion. His eyes were silver. "What?"

"I want your shirt off."

Half of a nod and it was gone, along with her bra. "You have great breasts," he said, taking possession of them as he pushed her back onto the bed and covered her body with his.

Hot hands palmed her breasts, rolling back and forth to toy with the nipples. His tongue explored the texture and taste of the valley between before supplanting a hand. Torrey gasped and pressed his face closer, urging him to suck more and deeper. He did.

His hands were everywhere, and her clothes were gone. He was gentler with her jeans and panties, peeling them from her body with a movement as quick as their journey from the hall to the bedroom.

Large hands wrapped around her ankles and slid up her legs, parting them along the way. Torrey trembled, her senses flooded with pleasure and her body alive with feeling. She knew a large part of Shade's attraction to her was based in scent. Human males determined their mates based on visual appeal. Wolves were all about the smell.

The man didn't know the meaning of hesitation, and he didn't let anticipation build. He didn't tease. He took and demanded. When his thumbs parted her lips and his searing tongue lapped at her juices, there was nothing tentative or exploratory about his movements.

Levels of pleasure grew, piling one atop the other. She thrust against the tongue he fucked into her hole, using the feet she planted against the mattress as leverage until he hooked his hands under her knees and pushed her legs up. This position opened her to him completely and robbed her of any say in the matter.

She climaxed, and his tongue moved even faster, lapping at the flood of cream brought by her pulsating pussy. Wet sounds of pleasure mingled with the growls of greedy satisfaction rumbling from his throat.

Torrey wanted to touch him, to kiss him, to do something to make him pause in his pursuits long enough for her to recover, but he held her in place. Powerlessness was new to her. Being tall and athletically built, she had never before been overpowered by a lover. Shade was far larger and far stronger than any man she had ever known. The helplessness brought a curious feeling with it, a permission to acquiesce, to give in and submit completely to this man.

As if he felt the moment of her surrender, he hooked one of her knees over his shoulder. His newly freed hand joined his lips and tongue in their quest to tease and torment. One thick finger slid into her sopping channel. Torrey tightened around it until his growl of warning stopped her.

She wasn't used to being growled at or reprimanded in bed. The shock made her forget her quest, and she relaxed her vaginal muscles. A second finger entered. She barely had time to gasp at the fullness those two digits created when he inserted a third finger. The walls of her pussy stretched impossibly wide, and pleasure exploded inside before he could slide them out.

Torrey cried out, arching her back to prolong the pleasure because he didn't allow her to move any other way.

Animal sounds of pleasure escaped, vibrating against the sensitive tissues of her pussy as he removed his fingers and lapped at the liquid evidence of her orgasm.

Another small orgasm was close when that strong tongue withdrew. Torrey whimpered at the loss. Leaning up on one elbow, she watched as Shade licked his fingers clean. The long tongue that brought her so much pleasure wrapped around each long, thick digit as he took it in his mouth and sucked. When he finished, he lifted his eyes to hers and she saw that they were silver. The round pupil was nothing more than an elongated slit. Her pussy, so recently sated, quivered in anticipation of experiencing the promised wildness. Shade tugged off his black boots and shed his jeans.

He didn't allow her much of an opportunity to study his body. She barely caught a glimpse before he pushed her back on the bed, positioning himself between her legs. One hand slid across her thigh to find and circle her clit. Two fingers explored her opening, pushing deep inside. Her eyes closed, focusing on that ecstasy. Torrey arched, opening her legs even wider, but he withdrew his fingers. Shade knew exactly what he wanted, and Torrey knew she was in no position to demand anything. Still, she couldn't stop a small protest from escaping.

For too long, nothing happened. She opened her eyes to find him studying her with a grim expression. His pupils were again round and his eyes were the exact hue of midnight blue that only came with a full moon. "Is something wrong?"

He breathed deeply, inhaling her scent. His nostrils flared and shades of bliss washed over his features. "You're very tight, Torrey. I don't want to hurt you."

She liked the way he said her name, as both a caress and a demand at the same time.

His body was pressed against hers, so looking down revealed nothing. However, it didn't take her long to realize that what she thought was part of his leg pressing against her thigh was actually his erection. Reaching down, she grasped it in her hand, but she was unable to close her fingers completely around it.

It made sense that his arousal would be as long and thick as the rest of his body. Meeting his gaze, Torrey moistened her lips. She didn't want him to stop. With every fiber of her being, she needed to know the feel of him stretching her as he claimed her, the last lover she would ever have. "Go slow."

"I will, Torrey, but you need to know that I can't stop. I *have* to have you." His last words were uttered in a vehement whisper, leaving Torrey no doubt that instinct drove his actions.

Yet he still asked her permission. She shifted beneath him and positioned him at her entrance. A shudder ran through him and a thrill ran through Torrey. His eyes returned to silver; a bit of his wolf was back in control. "Slow, Shade. Just go slow."

The silver in his eyes diminished, transforming back to midnight blue. He pushed, rocking his hips as he worked his way into her. The sensations he set to riot coiled flames low in her core. Moans and sharp cries fell from her lips. Sweat beaded his brow as he fought the instinct to plunge inside and take her quickly.

The motion and the pressure combined to drive Torrey over the edge. With a cry, she came, arching into him before rational thought could warn her against the action. It was enough to help the head of his cock gain entrance. He stretched her vaginal walls as they contracted, intensifying her orgasm.

Torrey's body relaxed, pliant in his arms, as she came down.

Shade continued to rock inside her, withdrawing ever so slightly before pushing deeper. It felt good, but Torrey was too relaxed to react. When he was completely buried, he stopped to let her body acclimate to his significant size.

The stillness drew Torrey's attention. Opening her eyes, she saw the effort it took for him to hold back. He had gone slow, and he had given her nothing but pleasure. The feel of him inside was like nothing she had ever experienced. He filled her. He possessed her. No lover had claimed her so completely without claiming her at all.

Lifting a hand from his shoulder, she caressed his stubble-roughened cheek. "It's all right, Shade."

That was all the urging he needed. Immediately, his eyes returned to silver. Withdrawing almost completely, he plunged deep. Torrey arched, meeting the frantic rhythm he set. The waning orgasm returned, burning with a heat that matched the feel of his body against hers.

Her legs tingled and trembled, useless for leverage, and dropped away. Shade's pupils elongated, a slit instead of a circle. The sight, a potent reminder his wolf was in charge, momentarily shocked Torrey. His arms, which he had been using to keep his weight off her, snaked down to hook under her knees and throw her legs over his shoulders. He sank deeper into her.

Torrey's eyes rolled backward into her head. Her fingers latched onto the edge of the mattress above her head, and she forgot all about his eyes as every muscle in her body contracted with the force of the most powerful orgasm she had ever experienced.

Above her, Shade increased his pace. Torrey bucked and writhed, the sensations bordering on overload. She pulsated around him, milking his cock and urging his seed. With a roar that was more of a howl, he came and collapsed, rolling to the side to withdraw abruptly.

He mumbled something in a language she didn't understand. Torrey wasn't sure she wanted to know what he said. She knew he had enjoyed her body and he wasn't finished with it. After four

orgasms, she was fairly tired, but she had no intention of refusing him anything he wanted from her.

And it had nothing to do with his pledge to find Riley. It had everything to do with a nagging bit of her subconscious trying to surface, to tell her something important about Shade. Torrey ignored it because she already knew there was something fated between them. Unfortunately, she wasn't going to have much more than a day or two to experience this transcendental journey with him.

One hand traced a path up her thigh. Searing heat flared in its wake. He splayed his hand over the rounded part of her stomach. The move set alarm bells ringing in Torrey's head. Did he hope to impregnate her? It would serve no purpose. She would be dead in less than two weeks.

She didn't have to wonder for too long because his hand moved again, stopping only to cup her breast. He pinched her nipple. The sharp sting stirred her from the languorous haze of pleasure that stole her energy, and it banished all thoughts from her head. She squeaked, but she didn't smack his hand away. A flood of desire pooled low in her abdomen. She wanted more of his touch.

As if he knew his effect on her—likely his advanced sense of smell informed him of the chemical changes in her body brought about by the pleasure he gave her through his rough touch—he rolled so that his torso covered half of her body. Torrey wanted to look at him, but Shade had other things on his agenda.

His head dipped and he took the nipple he had just abused into his hot mouth. She purred, a kittenish sound that didn't make it much further than the back of her throat, and her hands came up automatically to grip him hard and hold him close.

His silky locks brushed between her fingers and curled around to tickle the back of her hand. She arched into him, but her moan turned into a squeak as he ripped her hands away from his head. One hand wrapped around both of her wrists and held them prisoner above his head.

“Shade,” she protested. She wanted to touch him so badly.

A warning growl was his only answer. He sucked her nipple harder. The sweet edge of pain made her buck against him. She didn’t want him to stop, but there was no way she could stay still for this exquisite kind of torture.

But his growl reminded her of another hard fact. He was a werewolf, every bit as powerful as Seth had been. Shade was an alpha male, and he had claimed her as his female. The temporary nature of their relationship wouldn’t matter where sex was concerned. Torrey relaxed. She trusted him. She understood that he needed her to submit to him.

Shade released her wrists. With his newly freed hand, he plumped the globe of her breast as his mouth sucked and stretched her nipple and his teeth grazed and bit the tip.

Torrey’s hands came down, too. Wary of doing something he wouldn’t like, she avoided holding his head in place. She traced a caress across his broad shoulders and down his back. His skin was smooth and his body was hard everywhere.

The tip of his growing erection nudged her thigh and he growled again. This time, he released her breast to turn the heat of his gaze on her face. “Torrey, I’m trying to go slow. I’m trying to be gentle. When you touch me, it drives me wild.”

She swallowed. This was gentle? Make no mistake, she liked the way he touched her, but she would never have called him gentle. “I want to touch you, Shade. I want to know your true name.”

She shouldn’t have asked that last question, but she couldn’t stop herself. She would need to know it in order to bequeath her powers to him when she died, but she didn’t need it now.

Keeping his eyes locked to hers, Shade felt for the remnants of her shirt. With quick, deft hands, he fashioned slipknots and secured them around her wrists. “The more you pull, the tighter they’ll get.” He reached up and tied the other ends to a spindle on the headboard.

Angling her head to look up at the bindings, she realized they weren't very secure. She could reach the knots. It would be easy to loosen them and slip free. He hadn't done this to keep her from moving. She would have help remembering not to touch him, but staying bound or going free was to be her choice.

He pressed a hard kiss to her lips. "Shaden. Nobody except my brother calls me that anymore."

Torrey nodded, accepting in that moment that Shade trusted her. His name gave her power over him. She wasn't sure how to use that power, but he didn't quite believe she was as ignorant as she claimed.

He kissed her again, plundering her mouth with his tongue so that she had no choice but to submit to his passion. The desire simmering inside her was no less fierce, but she lacked the necessary physical strength to counter him. This was the first time Torrey had ever been overpowered by a lover and she was finding it a heady experience.

She closed her eyes and relaxed. If he wanted to pamper her by doing all the work, she was going to let him.

His lips moved down her throat. He nipped and licked at her pulse points, setting small fires everywhere he touched. Torrey moaned and turned her head to give him better access.

One hand squeezed her breast. He teased her nipple back to a peak and pinched it until she gasped and arched. She thought his mouth would replace his fingers when his head moved down, but Shade had other ideas. He kissed, nipped, and licked the skin over her ribs. She hadn't known how sensitive she was there until that moment. While he never abandoned her breasts, his free hand moved over her, exploring and claiming every square inch of her body.

So many sensations bombarded her that she moaned in protest when he nudged her legs apart and shifted his body to lie between them. She was on fire for him, but she wanted more of his expert foreplay before he had her again.

He made a soothing sound in the back of his throat that sounded like a cross between a purr and a growl. His fingers found her clit. He

played with it, pinching and caressing the same way he manipulated her nipple. Torrey writhed, wanting so badly to hold onto him, to dig her nails into his muscles and to feel his muscles moving beneath his hot skin.

The orgasm came suddenly, washing over her and sapping her energy. She didn't know how much more she could take, and she had no doubt he wasn't close to being finished with her.

She cried out and her hips lifted from the bed, trying to get closer to him and to move his fingers down to her hole.

Thankfully, he got the message. One finger slid into her dripping channel and came right back out. Two fingers slid inside and the next thrust brought three. Then they were gone. His caress moved down until, without warning, his cream-coated finger plunged into her ass.

Nobody had ever attempted to touch Torrey this way. She hadn't expected it from Shade. Caught off-guard, she bucked and screeched in protest.

"Shhhh." He whispered soothing words in her ear. She didn't understand a word he said and she hoped it wasn't a spell.

"Shade!"

"You're mine, Torrey. Every part of you belongs to me. Calm down for a minute and just concentrate on the way it feels."

It felt weird. It felt foreign. It felt surprisingly good. His thick finger stretched her tight muscle, but it didn't pinch or burn like she thought it would.

Then it was gone.

His face hovered over her. The early morning light filtered through her cheap blinds and fell across them in long, thin bars. "Tell me, Torrey. You liked it, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Yes, I—"

Two fingers plunged into her ass. She arched, shooting into the air, trying to escape. It was a reflexive movement.

"Relax. I would never hurt you, Torrey."

Relaxing was easier said than done. What he was doing felt good. Shards of pleasure spiked through her body, and cream gushed from her pussy. However, she wasn't used to this feeling. She had no experience with it. She had no idea where it would lead.

Slowly, she coaxed her body back into a compliant position. He withdrew his fingers, but this time she was ready when he added another finger as he pushed his way back into her ass.

The hand on her breast abandoned its position. He reached up and freed her hands.

"Hang on to me."

She did as he commanded. Her fingernails dug in as Shade wasted no time. Positioning himself at her entrance, he plunged deep. His large cock stretched her pussy wide. The fingers in her ass only added to the feeling of being possessed and filled by him.

He alternated the thrusts of his cock into her pussy with the thrusts of his fingers in her ass. Torrey didn't know which rhythm to follow. The sensations overwhelmed her and she came, screaming his name.

The orgasm went on and on, the pulsing of her pussy lingering even after he pulled out of her completely. Before she had a chance to ask why he hadn't come, he pressed her knees as high and wide as they would go. She felt the tip of his cock at her back entrance. Her eyes opened so wide she thought her eyeballs might fall out.

"Shade."

"Mine, Torrey. All mine." He captured her mouth in a searing kiss and pushed against the tight sphincter guarding her ass. He used her own cream as a lubricant. After the way he had stimulated her, plenty was there.

She made a concerted effort to relax that muscle. As soon as she did, she felt it stretch wider than it had when he fucked her there with three thick fingers. With a pop and a release, his head gained entrance. There was a little bit of pain. Torrey whimpered even as pleasure made her eyes roll back into her head.

The act of subduing her accomplished, he released his hold on her legs and pushed himself completely into her.

Sounds ripped from Torrey, animalistic, feral noises over which she had no control. Shade grunted and she knew it cost him much effort to not fuck her fast and hard. She also knew he wouldn't be so gentle next time.

He set a slow pace. Because he faced her and because her legs were so splayed, his body brushed against her clit with every thrust. The combined sensations drove her past the point of her previous climax. Bright white light glowed on the periphery of her vision. For a second, she thought it was coming from her, but the orgasm stole her sight too quickly for her to process what was happening.

Shade's shouts mingled with hers as his hot semen filled her ass. He withdrew, sliding out hastily as he shifted his weight and collapsed on the bed next to her.

Torrey lay in silence, her hand over her heart as the organ's beat pounded in time to the orgasm still throbbing through her body. As it subsided, blackness closed in briefly before giving way to a soft light. She was no longer in her bed.

Caiden Quinn stood before her, an amused smile on his face as he looked at her. Torrey looked down to see what he found so entertaining. She was naked. Of course. If her mind was going to have a vision while her body was naked, why would it think to bring clothes?

Embarrassed, Torrey crossed an arm over her chest and positioned the other over the thatch of hair hiding her pussy.

He threw a robe to her. It was coarse, thick, and black, and it rubbed against her skin, but she had it on with a quick flourish. Somehow, it fit perfectly.

"Did I catch you at a bad time? It's easiest for me to call you when you're relaxed." Caiden's knowing smile revealed he already knew the answer.

“Call me?” Torrey looked around at the vast nothingness lit by the hazy glow. “You’re doing this?”

“I assure you, Daughter of Circe, you do not yet have the skill to do something like this. Soon.” He came closer and lifted a hand. Gentle fingers tilted her face to his. “I chose well. You are every bit as beautiful as your mother. How is Hillary?”

Torrey was blunt. “She’s dying. She has cancer.”

Caiden’s grief was genuine, but he wasn’t surprised. “I sensed the sickness in her long ago. There was nothing I could do to save her, Torrey. There is nothing you could have done. I gave you as many years with her as I could.”

If there had been a chair nearby, Torrey would have sunk into it. Caiden knew. He knew everything. “How?” She had no need to elaborate on her question because *he knew*.

This time, Caiden’s smile was poignant. “Because you require me to know.”

She tilted her head to the side, wondering what that could possibly mean. Caiden didn’t seem inclined to enlighten her. He seemed to enjoy her state of ignorance.

“What is this ‘Daughter of Circe’ thing?” She opted not to mention she planned to be the main attraction at a werewolf ritualistic sacrifice. Likely Caiden already knew.

He shook his head. “We’ll save that for later, after your wolf helps unleash your powers.”

There were so many questions she wanted to ask, but she somehow knew her time with Caiden was short. “Why did you call me?”

“Remove the medicine from your mother’s body, Torrey. It’s time to let her go.” His brown eyes were soft and sad. “Then go with your wolf. He will teach you, Torrey. You are his Hope.”

Remove the medicine? How? Torrey opened her mouth to ask, to protest the directive, but Caiden was gone. She was home, lying on

her bed next to Shade. The black garment Caiden gave her still enveloped her body.

Shade's legs were tangled in hers, and he was sound asleep. He slept facing her, on top of the covers, where he crashed after having sex, completely naked. Trapped in the urgency of his need, he hadn't given her a chance to study his body.

The black cotton shirt and the light denim jeans he'd been wearing hid nothing of his physique. Naked, he was just as long and just as powerfully built. Only the textures were different. Torrey knew the firmness of his hands on her body, and she knew the softness of his cock in her hand. She knew the strong male texture of his shoulders and chest, but that was all. He hadn't allowed her time to explore his body.

Though he had given her many orgasms, what he did was all about filling his needs. He had fucked her, purely and simply. Torrey wanted to return the favor, to touch him, to taste him, to ride him until they both passed out.

Unfortunately, she only had twenty minutes to make it downtown to her job at the main branch of the Emerson Library.

He didn't move when she extricated her legs, and nothing in him flickered as she moved around the room, dressing for work. Not knowing what to do with the unexpected robe, she shoved it in her backpack and took it with her.

She was only ten minutes late, and that was because her car was still in Rick's parking lot, four hours away, forcing her to take the bus. Nobody noticed. Her shift was a short one, only three hours, too short to be allotted a break. With her mind preoccupied on how she might remove the medicine Seth gave her from her mother's body, the time flew.

Afterward, she walked to the hospital. Frank wasn't in the room with her mother when she arrived. Hillary Quinn was alone with the beeps and the blips and the antiseptic odor that never quite smelled clean or fresh.

She both liked and hated arriving to find her mother alone. Part of her didn't want her mother to ever be alone, to be afraid. A more selfish part of Torrey wanted Frank gone so she could have her mother to herself. The square plastic cushion on the plastic-covered chair had been forced into a curved shape to fit the rounded back support. Dropping down on the uncomfortable furniture next to her mother, Torrey wrapped her hand around Hillary's pale one.

Their hands were the same size. They both had long fingers that managed to appear both strong and delicate. Torrey's height and athletic build came from her mother. Though she had now met Caiden, she wasn't sure what she inherited from him, other than her powers. The surreal quality of their encounters made it impossible to measure his height or his build. The shapeless robe he wore didn't help, either.

"Hi, Mom," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Deep down, Torrey knew her mother couldn't hear her no matter the volume of her words. "I really messed up."

A glance to Hillary's face showed nothing had changed. She was pale. Her mouth was slack around the profusion of tubes taped in place, distorting and camouflaging her tremendous beauty.

Suddenly, Torrey knew why she was certain her mother couldn't hear her. Hillary wasn't there. The body in the bed was nothing but a shell. A single tear tracked down Torrey's cheek, followed by dozens more. Sobs squeezed her chest painfully, and she fought for breath.

The arms that closed around her were strange and familiar at the same time. She accepted the solace offered without looking up. She cried until nothing more would come out. Numb, she let Shade hold her.

Somehow, he was sitting in her chair, cradling her on his lap. She couldn't recall when he arrived, or when he switched their positions, but her cheek rested against his chest, and she took comfort from his strength and nearness.

“How did you know I was here?” she asked. She hadn’t left a note. She meant to, but it slipped her mind.

Lazy fingers caressed her hair, drawing it away from her tear-stained face. “Your scent was easy to follow.”

She’d taken a bus. “You tracked me?”

He nodded, never pausing the soothing strokes through her hair. “You were gone when I woke up. I wanted you again.”

A reluctant chuckle escaped. He was so black and white. Wolves were simple, driven mostly by instinct.

“I packed your things,” he continued. “I was going to bring you home with me. The man who took Riley lives closer to my house.” He watched her mother’s chest rise and fall to the rhythm of the machines pumping air into her lungs. “But I think it would tear you to leave your mother. I didn’t realize...”

Torrey shifted, sitting up to peer closer at Hillary. “She’s not in there.” Her voice was gravelly and raw from crying. “The machines are keeping her body going, but she’s dead. Frank just doesn’t want to face it. Neither do I.”

Shade’s hand played up and down her spine. “When my parents died, I avoided going into the room where their bodies were being prepared for burial. I was going to skip the funeral. A part of me thought that if I could just avoid seeing them dead, then somehow, they wouldn’t be dead. They’d walk through the door and Mom would yell at Soren and me for a dozen different things. Dad would stand behind her and roll his eyes, then kick our asses if we didn’t move fast enough to make Mom happy.”

She didn’t understand why he was trying to make her feel better. He had no responsibility to see to her emotions. Still, she appreciated the odd sort of semi-friendship he offered. “Soren?”

“My brother.”

“Older or younger?”

Shade grimaced. “Younger, by about seven minutes.”

Torrey’s brow lifted. “You’re a twin?”

The grimace turned to a sort-of smile. "Twins are common among my people, triplets, too." He turned, taking his eyes from Hillary to focus on Torrey. "Your turn. Who is Frank?"

It was Torrey's turn to grimace. "Riley's father. My mom met my dad when she and Frank broke up one time. It didn't last very long, and she went back to Frank. I know you said he was jealous, and maybe that's true, but it's also true that he hates me."

Shade said nothing, and Torrey appreciated that. He didn't try to explain the ways in which she might be mistaken, and he didn't try to defend Frank's behavior. He accepted her statement without offering sympathy or judgment.

Standing, she looked down at Shade. "I'll go home with you, Shade, but I need you to help me with one thing first."

His expression didn't change as he waited for her request.

"Seth gave me some medicine to give to my mom. I have to remove it from her body, but I don't know how." She watched him expectantly, hoping he understood she was asking for help with her magic.

His hands rested on his legs, fingers spread to span his powerful thighs. Strong hands on rugged jeans never failed to captivate Torrey. "Did you have another vision?"

She wasn't sure they were visions so much as visitations. "Yes."

Shade stood, his eyes roaming Hillary's still form. "I can tell you what to do, Torrey, but I can't help you do it."

"That's all I need," she said. "He said you would show me."

Shade glanced at her sharply. "The Shadow Man?"

"No," she said, declining to elaborate. For some reason, she didn't want to share Caiden's name with anyone, not yet. "Tell me, Shade. Tell me how to free my mother."

Moving to stand behind her, Shade lifted her arms until they were extended in front of her, hands open, palms facing upward. "Witches are of the earth and of the water. You command those elements. A

human body is mostly water. Command the water to give up the poison.”

Torrey concentrated, willing the poison—the medicine—to leave her mother’s body. Amazingly, she felt a tingling deep inside herself, and that tingling was reflected in her mother’s body. That small taste of success gave her hope, and hope gave her focus. She tried. Time passed. Nothing happened.

Her hands dropped, rotating downward. Immediately, Shade grabbed her wrists and forced her palms skyward. “Hands up and open means you’re calling, commanding. Hands facing down means you’re forcing, pushing. Hands with the palms open and facing away from you is purely defensive. You can’t force this, and you can’t fight it. You have to command it.”

She noticed he was careful to keep his body behind her. Did her power not work in that direction? Shaking away peripheral and distracting thoughts, Torrey seized on what he said. Command. She would have to command the poison to leave.

No. She didn’t have control of the poison. She had control of water. Renewing her efforts, she reached out to the water inside Hillary’s body and commanded it to push the poison out. She felt the substance being forced through permeable membranes, heading toward the kidneys. In minutes, her mother’s body was clear.

The effort drained Torrey, and she collapsed backward, falling against Shade. His arms came around her, once again offering support without being asked.

The beeps ran together, turning into a high-pitched scream as the mystical drug that kept Hillary’s heart beating flushed from her cells, and she flat-lined. Nurses and doctors rushed in, pushing a crash cart into the tiny room. Torrey and Shade were shuffled to the hall to await the results of the futile efforts to revive Hillary.

Shade deposited Torrey on a low bench across the hall and moved to lean against the wall next to her. She sagged forward, resting her

elbows on her knees and her head in her hands. Energy began to slowly return.

The keening of the machines was an ominous background to demands for “One more milligram, STAT!” and “Clear!” Then the noise of the medical staff ceased. From the open doorway, the softer command to “Call it” drifted out.

“What the hell have you done?”

Torrey’s head jerked up to find Frank, all six feet, two inches of him, bearing down on her. She didn’t answer, but she didn’t need to. Her guilt was written plainly on her face.

His hand shot out to slap her. Now that he had denied all ties to her, now that Hillary wasn’t there to stand between them, he had no reservations about acting on his violent impulses toward her.

The hand never connected. Shade’s iron grip prevented Frank’s arm from moving. His face was dark and foreboding. Additional threats and warnings were unnecessary.

Frank stared at Shade, noticing him for the first time. His resistance relaxed, and Shade released Frank’s arm.

Torrey stood, automatically moving closer to Shade’s protection. “It was her time to go, Frank. You know she wasn’t in there. That’s why you left her alone. That’s why you keep leaving her alone.” Despite the way he treated Torrey, she knew Frank had loved Hillary, and he wouldn’t have left her alone if he believed any part of her was still trapped inside her body.

“Bitch. That wasn’t your decision to make.”

“I know,” she said. “That’s why I took back the potion I gave her.”

Frank stared incredulously. Torrey was learning to use her powers despite his best effort to deny her training. Glancing to Shade, his lip curled in disgust. “It was wise of you to bring your dog, Torment. He’ll do the dirty work for me. He’ll kill you when he’s finished with you and take all that power you don’t deserve to have. I won’t have to lift a finger.”

Shade spoke at last. "Grief makes your words foolish. No one will harm Torrey while I'm around."

Frank's disgust turned to a genuine smile. "But you can't help it, can you? You've already killed witches, haven't you? Wolves don't come by power over the elements naturally. It's only a matter of time. The animal part of your nature can't resist. You will kill her, and you will take her powers."

Shade's glower returned.

With a chuckle bordering on the maniacal, Frank regarded Torrey. "You've hired a wolf to track a wolf. Brilliant. Did you promise him your power in exchange for her safe return? He'll take it one way or another."

Throwing back her shoulders and affecting a confidence she did not feel, Torrey's eyes glittered hard. "He doesn't want my power. He's already helped me to use it."

Frank's eyes raked up and down her body. "Ahhh. Good to see you finally found a skilled trade." He shrugged. "He's still going to kill you, Torment. The man in him will use your body, and the hound in him will take your life and steal your power."

Torrey didn't care that he called her a whore. She was tired, and grief constricted her chest. She wanted Frank to stop tormenting her, to take his vitriol far away. With all of her willpower, she pushed at the grief, trying to dislodge it, to take a breath. Frank flew backward, crashing into the opposite wall.

The surprise on Frank's face was mirrored in Torrey's. She didn't know exactly what she had done or how, but she knew she had done it.

"Looks like you do know how to use your powers." Shade's low-toned observation was filled with amusement.

"I-I-I didn't mean..."

The medical staff exited the room. Nurses streamed away from the grieving family, each pair of eyes avoiding direct contact, as if the emotion was contagious. The doctor on call was one Torrey knew

well but whose name was elusive. The woman's sympathy pressed against Torrey before a single word was spoken.

"I'm sorry," she said, taking in both Frank and Torrey with the sweep of her eyes. "We did everything we could."

Frank and Torrey stared in stunned silence. Both of them knew Hillary was gone, but neither was prepared to actually hear the words. Shade slid his arm around Torrey's waist, a gesture of comfort and possession. "Thank you, Doctor."

He spoke with the doctor for another minute. The conversation was lost on Torrey. Ridding her mother's body of Seth's potion and shoving Frank across the hall had drained her energy far beyond anything she'd ever experienced.

"Let's get you outside." Shade's voice sounded close to her ear.

Torrey looked up at him, but he didn't make sense. He had two deep blue eyes and midnight hair and broad shoulders and full lips that spoke words. The hallway was a shade of white closer to ecru, and a crash cart was being wheeled from the room where her mother's cold body lay.

Nothing was real. Nothing made sense.

Pressure on her lower back urged her legs forward, but they didn't move. She had forgotten how to make them move.

Sympathy filled those blue eyes, making them both darker and lighter. How was that possible? He scooped her up in his arms, grabbed her backpack, and carried her out of the hospital.

Hope. The word floated to her from Shade's subconscious and from somewhere intangible. What had Caiden meant when he said she was Shade's hope?

But she was tired. She couldn't grasp a single thought for more than a few seconds, and that wasn't enough time to do anything with it.

Chapter 6

The burst of energy coming from Torrey when she blasted her stepfather across the hall had taken Shade by surprise. Given how much effort it took for Torrey to command water, he didn't think she would be able to do anything more. She had been tired before the use of her powers sapped her energy.

She was light in his arms. Her body was large by human standards, but to him, she was small. Her eyes were open, but unfocused. When he first acquired a witch's power, he had run into a similar problem when trying to figure out how to use it. She had pushed herself too hard. She needed to replenish her strength.

Food would do nothing for her. She needed the elements. She needed to touch water and earth.

The city was too full of pavement. The magic had been drained by human litter. He needed to get her out of there. The moisture in the air outside the hospital revived Torrey a little bit, though she made no move to indicate she wanted to be put down. Securing her into the passenger seat of his truck, he drove, heading toward his precious Appalachian Mountains. She was asleep in minutes.

This entire job was becoming more than he anticipated. When the Shadow Man visited him the first time all those years ago, Shade had dismissed the man as nothing more than a delusional lunatic. But then those little demons appeared to Soren, and Shade watched his brother surrender to his compulsion.

The Shadow Man had wanted Shade to go on a quest, to take the steps that would ensure the demons never got close enough to Soren to influence him. Shade's self-imposed exile was part of his

punishment. If he had only listened to the Shadow Man, his home would be in the town where he had grown up. He would be close to his family and friends. Soren would know a moment's peace.

And Hope would be alive.

When the Shadow Man appeared again, Shade listened. The task seemed straightforward. Wait at that dive on Route Two for a message.

He'd known the second Torrey walked in that she was the reason he was there. Beautiful and brave, she shone with an inner strength that had nothing to do with the waves of power rolling from her direction. He'd wanted to make love to her in the parking lot.

After walking the streets to clear his head, he'd planned to return to Torrey's apartment, bury himself in her, and then head to Soren's place to talk him out of his plan to exchange Riley for Torrey. He didn't want Torrey anywhere near Soren.

Yet, when he'd woken alone in Torrey's bed, with only the faint scent of their passion for company, he'd been crippled by how much he missed her. He needed to touch her, to hear her voice, to sleep with her again.

He thought he would have the courage to leave her alone, to thwart Soren's imminent power grab and avert Torrey's sacrifice.

Instead, he'd followed her scent to a library. She'd walked through the entire damn thing, not settling on one particular area for very long. Finally, he tracked her through a service entrance and to the hospital. He knew her mother was seriously ill. He hadn't known he would be there to witness her death, or that he would have a hand in helping Torrey cause it.

The border between Ohio and West Virginia disappeared under the wheels of his truck. The Ohio River was beautiful, and it provided a powerful water source, but it was a little too public for what Torrey needed. A quick glance visually confirmed what he already knew. Mentally, spiritually, and physically, she was exhausted. She was still asleep; her head slumped against the window.

Her neck was going to be sore. Pushing on the backpack, he determined there was something soft inside. With one hand, he unzipped it and pulled out a large black blanket. His long reach made it possible for him to position the blanket under her head, supporting her neck, without having to stop the truck.

Two hours passed. Now that he was so near his house, trepidation joined the fear in his stomach. What would she think of his house—the house he built with his own two hands? A house that, though he had remodeled it for her, not even Hope had seen.

Would she be angry with him for packing up all her clothes and personal items, throwing them in the back of his truck, and driving her all the way to the middle of nowhere? She didn't seem to remember anything about Hope or their previous time together. It was a presumptuous move, but destiny had put them together again. He wasn't going to let her go.

Somehow, he would convince her to stay. He would convince her this was part of the bargain to which she had agreed. He wouldn't tell her that his help was assured, no matter what decision she made. As he taught her to control her powers, awareness of who she was, and what she was to him, would return.

Next to him, Torrey stirred. She stretched and yawned before sitting up and blinking into the fading light of the fall evening.

"Where are we?"

She wasn't refreshed. Some of her energy had returned, but she needed some serious time with nature to completely recover. Pulling to the shoulder of the deserted road, he stopped the truck. To one side, the mountain continued upward, the sheer face attesting to the violence with which the road had been carved.

On the other side, a small stream ran alongside thick trees. Shade pushed the release on her seat belt. Without waiting for Torrey's permission, he lifted her across the front seat and into his lap.

The position was momentary. Seconds later, he placed her on the ground next to the stream. His ability to move faster than her too-

human eyes could perceive didn't seem to disconcert her. He was glad. It had taken Hope some time to become accustomed to his speed.

She shivered. "Shade, what are you doing?"

"Relax," he cautioned. The last thing he needed was for her to accidentally use her powers. She didn't have enough energy for something like that to be safe. He sat behind her, positioning her between his legs so he could wrap his body around hers. Witches might control water and earth, but wolves owned fire. Their bodies burned with it all the time. It was the agent of transformation that allowed them to shape-shift. It would be the agent providing body heat for her just now.

"The ground is cold." Her protest died as energy from that cold ground poured into her. The dampness of water in the air touched her skin, which absorbed energy that way as well.

He removed her shoes and peeled off her stockings. The skirt she wore fell to her knees. He pushed that up and out of the way.

"Shade," she protested.

"You need direct contact with the Earth. If it wasn't so damn frosty out, I'd stick your foot in the water." How was it possible for her to be so powerful, yet so ignorant of the basics of the natural world?

He angled her body so that they both faced west. The stream continued for as far as they could see, forming a break in the trees that let them watch the sun slip lower and lower in the sky.

She shivered again.

"Cold?" He rubbed her shoulders. On the small, two-lane road behind them, not a single car had passed.

"Freezing. I think I'm turning into an icicle." Shifting so she could see him and remain in his arms, Torrey gazed up at him somberly. "I understand why you did this. When I feel tired or upset, I kick off my shoes and walk around barefoot in the park. It rejuvenates me. I didn't know that was part of this witch thing. Riley likes to do it, too."

This new position put her legs in easy reach. Shade ran his hands over her cold flesh, warming it the best he could. Touching her was addictive. “It is likely Riley has some power, just not as much as you. Frank might be weak, but he does have power.”

“You made it seem easy,” she said. Her voice was quiet. Her body might be replenished, but her grief was still potent. “I’ve tried for so long. I’ve read books and meditated, but I’ve never been able to do what I did today with you.”

Shade didn’t reply. He didn’t want her gratitude. Training her, the little he had done, had been simple. She could have been a great healer, revered by her people, if only someone had begun her training years earlier.

But Shade had learned long ago that regret was a useless emotion. He rested his fingers lightly on her cheek, turning her face to his to capture her lips. He’d wanted to kiss her since he first saw her in the hospital, holding vigil over her mother’s body, tears sliding silently down her soft, silky cheeks.

Her body melted into his, drawn by his heat and by the passion sparking between them. He eased her lips apart with the gentle press of his fingertips on her jaw. She opened to him, her hand creeping up his chest and over his shoulder to tangle in his hair. The fire inside him, always at a slow burn, leapt. Flames rocketed through his body, unfurling lower and lower.

Her tongue darted out as she came to her knees and took control of the kiss. Both of her hands fisted in his hair, holding him where she wanted him, and she was not gentle. She pressed closer, rubbing her chest tantalizingly across his. The scent of her arousal penetrated his senses. The wolf in him went wild.

He had to have her.

His hands explored her body, running up and down her back, reaching lower to squeeze that luscious ass before forcing his way between their bodies and under her shirt to knead her soft breasts.

Her fists squeezed rhythmically in his hair, then moved jerkily to caress his cheeks and jaw. She whimpered, and it was his undoing.

Reaching under her skirt, he ripped away the thin scrap of fabric barring her from his touch. She moaned when he thrust his fingers deep inside her wetness, searching for her core, for that place that would make her scream.

He wanted to hear his name ripped from her depths.

Torrey wrenched her lips from his. Arching back, she ground against the palm of his hand, forcing his fingers even deeper. Her hips moved. Her head fell backward, and the delicate pulse of her artery was so close to his mouth. It wasn't her blood he wanted to taste. But he did need access to her bloodstream in order to make her truly his mate. As much as that urge pressed against him, Shade wouldn't give in, not until Torrey consented.

The first stirrings of his change were upon him. If he didn't have her soon, he would turn completely, and he would have to stay that way until the morning light helped him change back. There wouldn't be a moon tonight to reflect the sun's rays to him so that he could use that energy to shift back to human form.

Withdrawing his fingers from Torrey's warmth, he licked away her cream while she watched. He knew his eyes were silver instead of blue. He knew his pupils were slits and not round. His teeth were changing shape, and his fingers were elongating. He needed to have her now. A flick and a shove, and his jeans were low enough so that Torrey could pull his erection from his shorts.

She moved, repositioning and spreading her legs so they were on the outside of his. She situated him at her entrance and sank down, taking him into her faster than he had penetrated her that morning.

Part of him wondered if she was sore. While he was concerned, he couldn't stop. Having her was necessary, and she didn't seem to be in any discomfort.

She rocked on him, thrusting her hips to fuck him fast and hard. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders and arms. Skin ripped, but he

didn't care. She was wild on top of him, her breathing irregular and her moans sounding low in her throat, and it was the most erotic thing he'd ever seen.

With a long, loud cry, she came. Startled birds flew from the treetops. Her entire body went stiff as she convulsed around him, and he came with a loud, howl-like cry of his own.

Chapter 7

Torrey had no idea what came over her. One kiss from Shade and she couldn't stop passion from taking over and controlling her every move. He hadn't specified whether his terms meant he wanted her once, or he wanted her continually until he found Riley.

She supposed she should have found the way his eyes changed color and shape disconcerting, but she did not. His wildness spoke to a need deep inside her that she hadn't known was there. She had always enjoyed sex and the attention of men, but Shade was different. He seemed to be as consumed by his desire for her as she was enslaved by her desire for him.

Standing on shaky legs, she slipped her feet into her shoes, grateful she had selected flats that morning. Shade rose next to her, his clothes already fixed.

"It's getting late," he said. "I need to get started."

Jerkily, Torrey nodded her head. The tremendous heat that had warmed her entire body when she touched Shade was gone now. The sun was nothing more than a remnant of pink streak in the sky, and the evening air was cold. She headed toward the truck parked at the side of the road. The black vehicle was a dim silhouette, though it couldn't have been more than fifteen feet away. "Drop me at my apartment."

She meant to say more, but she broke off, staring into the bed of his truck. Familiar suitcases and plastic bins neatly labeled with black marker on white tape filled the space there. She blinked at them in the gloaming light, wondering if her eyes were playing tricks on her. "Those are mine."

“Yes,” he said, opening the door to his truck. The dome light cast enough of a glow to make her certain.

“Why are my things in your truck?”

He motioned to the open door, inviting her inside. “I thought you would want them.”

“Of course I want them,” she said. Confusion was written on her face. “It’s my stuff.”

“Get in,” he said. Impatience edged his voice. If she wasn’t mistaken, nervousness, too. “We have another hour and a half of driving, and you need to eat dinner.”

Ignoring the door he held open, she rounded the truck to the passenger side and climbed in. She clicked her seat belt in place and stared through the windshield. Remnants of their conversation in the hospital came back to her, imbued with the fuzziness of the entire surreal ordeal. “You’re not taking me back to my apartment, are you?”

“No,” he said. “I’m not.” He turned the key, and the engine purred to life. “I want you close to me.”

Gravel crunched under the tires as the truck transitioned to the blacktop. “You want me to continue sleeping with you.”

He spared her a quick glance. “That isn’t the only reason, Torrey. Your apartment isn’t safe. Besides Soren, you now have to worry about Frank. He tried to hit you. I wouldn’t put it past him to try to hurt you again.”

She wouldn’t put it past him, either. “Soren?”

“Seth,” he amended. “His name is Soren. You’ll be safe at my house. I’ve cast charms around it, so no one will be able to harm you there.”

She stared at him. He cast charms to keep her safe before he ever met her? What was that niggling bit of warning at the back of her head trying to tell her? “That was nice of you.”

That wolf hearing caught her wary undercurrent. He glanced at her again. “I didn’t do it for you. I dislike violence. It’s a general charm. Anyone in my house is protected from harm.”

They rode in silence. Torrey processed that annoying little feeling that told her if she went to Shade’s house, she would never leave it. She argued the pros and cons inside her head. She was definitely going to lose her job and her apartment. Her job was already hanging by a thread. They started out being understanding about her sick mother, but that got old after a while.

Did any of it truly matter? Once Shade found Riley and brokered the trade, she wasn’t going back to her apartment anyway. While she had no intention of giving Soren her powers, she had to make him think she would. Otherwise, he wouldn’t release Riley. In the end, he would steal some of her power, but he wouldn’t get it all.

Even if Shade didn’t want her powers, she would rather give them to him than to Soren. His cold blue-green eyes floated in front of her face, teasing her with their superiority. Some piece of a puzzle floated there, too, just out of reach.

Shade broke the silence, shattering her thoughts. “Soren lives nearer to me than to you. It will be simpler to use my place as a base of operations. If you don’t want to be at my house, I will take you home tomorrow.”

Torrey shook her head. “I don’t mind staying with you until you find Riley. There’s nothing for me to go back to, anyway.” She was surprised when he reached over and wrapped his hand around hers. Enveloped in the darkness, she held onto him.

In the distance, neon lights cast a garish glare on the road. Shade pulled into the parking lot of a greasy spoon. He squeezed her hand. “I’m starving. I can’t imagine how hungry you must be. I remember the first time I cast a charm—that’s all I can do, by the way—I ate an entire deer. This isn’t the best food, but it’s the only thing around here.”

Torrey nodded her head. The part about the deer didn't gross her out. Venison wasn't her favorite meat, but she knew people who liked it a lot. Wolves were serious carnivores. She would rather hear about him eating a deer than a human. The slight flush in her cheeks was embarrassment. She didn't know what a charm was.

People turned to stare when they entered. Torrey was tall for a woman, but most people didn't usually stare for too long. These people were different. Glancing to Shade, she caught their reflection in the mirror behind the cash register. Shade followed her stare, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

Even in the convex glass of the primitive security system, they made a striking couple. Both of them were tall and athletic, and each of them exuded danger. Torrey didn't know when she had picked up that air, but she liked the way she wore it.

Shade smiled into the reflection at her, and she returned his sentiment.

The sign at the door invited patrons to seat themselves. At least three waitresses breathed sighs of relief when they sat down in a booth that wasn't theirs. Shade's long legs bumped hers under the table until each marked their territories.

Torrey grabbed a menu from the table. It was stained with the greasy fingerprints of a thousand people before her. The lettering of standard fare littered the paper behind the stains. A burger and fries it was.

A tiny waitress approached warily and set down tall glasses of water. Her face was lined with evidence of a hard life. Torrey couldn't have guessed the woman's age if she tried.

"Thanks," Torrey said with a friendly smile. She gulped down three-quarters of the water.

"I'll bring more," the woman assured her, eyeing Shade distrustfully.

They ordered, and the waitress left. The general noise level in the place was unnaturally muted.

“Do you always get this kind of reaction?” Torrey asked. She pitched her voice low, knowing his exceptional hearing could pick up her words.

He shrugged. “Depends. I don’t usually look like I’ve been rolling around on a riverbank with a beautiful woman.”

The heat rising in Torrey’s cheeks reminded her of another question she wanted to ask. “What’s a charm?”

“Charm?” he repeated. The grin on his face was pure wolf. “It’s when people find you irresistible. They like your looks and your personality. Soren has charm.”

She remembered Soren’s charm all too well. “It’s more than that. People liking you isn’t going to keep them from being violent in your house.”

Their burgers didn’t take long. Shade, predictably, had ordered his rare. The waitress set the plates and fresh water glasses on the table, interrupting anything Shade might have said by way of explanation.

He popped a home fry in his mouth and grinned up at the waitress. Then he winked and patted her on the ass. “Why, thanks, darlin’. This hungry man appreciates this fine meal.”

Torrey stared at him as if he’d lost his mind, but the waitress just smiled. “You want anything else, you just give me a holler.”

When she left, Torrey leaned as far forward as the table would allow. “I cannot believe you just did that.”

He stole a fry from her plate. “I was showing you a charm.”

“That wasn’t charm,” Torrey argued. She slapped his hand when he went for another fry. “That was a gross display of chauvinism and completely disrespectful to her and to me.”

His grin didn’t fade. “You charmed her, Torrey. With one smile, you melted her entire attitude toward you. I did the same thing, only I took it one step further to show you exactly what you did.”

She exhaled sharply and took a bite of her burger. She was hungry, and she wasn’t sure she could say anything that would make

him see why she wasn't pleased with his behavior. It wasn't until she was nearly finished with her meal that she understood what he meant.

The waitress' attitude toward Torrey hadn't changed because she smiled and thanked the woman for water. Torrey had unwittingly used magic to put her at ease. Shade had used the same kind of magic to remove the woman's objection to being pawed and treated like chattel.

It was small magic, something that didn't take effort on her part, though Shade had put more effort into his magic than she had.

Still, her original objection held. She looked up to find Shade watching her. His plate was empty, and he'd ordered two burgers. "Are you going to apologize?"

"For what?" He looked honestly perplexed.

Torrey pressed her lips together. "You called her 'sweetheart' and touched her inappropriately."

That smile returned. Torrey wondered why she had ever thought he might be brooding or forbidding. "Are you jealous?"

A little, but she wasn't going to tell him that. "You can't run around treating people like that."

"She's human," he said, as if that explained everything. When Torrey's disapproving expression didn't change, he continued. "I can't eat her, and she's far too frail to become a wolf."

Torrey's brows drew sharply together. "My mother is human. My sister is human. I'm half human. Just because someone is human isn't a license to treat them badly. Shade, if you and I are going to be spending any amount of time together, you need to get over yourself."

Pushing his plate out of the way, he leaned so far across the table his face was inches from hers. "If you wanted it badly enough, Torrey, if you used your eyes and your smile, you could make me do all of that. I wouldn't have a choice in the matter. *That's* a charm."

The thought was disturbing on many levels. The idea of forcing someone to do or think or say what she wanted didn't sit well with her conscience. Yet, if she could master that skill, maybe she could force

Soren to let her sister go and forget about sacrificing her in his upcoming ritual.

She remembered the first time she met Soren. She had thought him charming. Realization dawned. He was charming. He charmed her into taking the medication from him, and he charmed her into agreeing to his terms.

“Soren did that to me.” Her eyes filled with a quiet pain. The charm he put on her had influenced so many of her decisions. Almost nothing she had done since then was inside the realm of her normal behavior.

She had expelled Soren’s potion from her mother’s body, and now she was dead. She had sex with Shade on the bank of a stream where anyone could have driven by and seen that intimate act. She turned anguished eyes on Shade. “Have you done it to me, too?”

He had leaned back against the seat cushion to watch the wheels spinning in her head. He sat up now, startled at the direction her thoughts had taken. “If I was going to charm you, I would have done it when we first met. I would have charmed you into leaving that bar and going home and pretending you never met me.”

It was reassuring to know his attitude toward her hadn’t changed. Despite his help with her mother and the way he held her while she cried, he still would rather not have her in his life. He behaved as if he cared, and she had become too complacent in thinking she meant something to him.

With firm resolve, she peered deep into his dark blue eyes. “You haven’t answered my question. Tell me the truth, Shade. Be honest.”

“Honestly?” He ran a hand through his black hair. “Honestly, you’re not strong enough for your charms to work on me. Humans are weak and open to suggestion. They’re easy. I’m not easy, and neither are you. It would take time and energy to charm you, Torrey. I may have taken advantage of your attraction to me, but that is all I’m guilty of doing, and I don’t see that you have a problem with it. I only meant to kiss you at the stream. You took things further.”

Torrey stared at her plate. Two bites of burger and half her fries remained. Shade snagged a few fries. She didn't stop him. Her thoughts were elsewhere. If she wasn't strong enough to charm Shade, how could she hope to best Soren?

Bitterness twisted her words. "So, if I'm a strong witch and I can't charm you, a werewolf, then why are wolves so afraid of witches? Why do you hunt and kill us if we're not much of a threat?"

Shade stood, threw money on the table, and pulled Torrey to her feet. "Let's get out of here."

She followed him, only because she wanted real answers, the kind he didn't want to give in front of an audience of eavesdroppers.

Once they were safely on the road, she repeated her question.

Shade's answer was impatient, to say the least. "You can't charm me today, but who knows what you'll be able to do tomorrow? Yesterday, you couldn't force the water in a human's body to push out poison, and you couldn't throw your stepfather across the hall with the force of your anger."

She conceded the point.

"Besides," he added, "charms are weak spells compared to what you could do with some practice."

Tearing her eyes from the endless track of dark road, she watched the dark figure driving her into the thick forests of the mountains. "Are you going to teach me how to use my powers, Shade?"

"I already have," he said quietly. He was hiding something.

"That's all you know?"

He snapped. "Look, among my people, just being this close to a witch is enough reason to kill you. Witches have done nothing but hunt my kind since the beginning of time. You've used us as dogs, and you've repeatedly tried to steal the one element that belongs to us. Teaching you as much as I have is considered treason. I'll protect you, Torrey. You have my word on that."

Fire belonged to wolves. It was ironic she knew that, but she didn't know which element belonged to witches. Thinking back, Shade had made her touch the ground. "Earth belongs to witches?"

"And water. Wolves were given fire. It's all we have, and we will protect it with our dying breaths."

Torrey pondered the fact witches were given control of two elements while wolves only had one. Reaching out, she rested a tentative hand on his arm. Heat emanated from his skin, burning through his sleeve. "I'm sorry, Shade. I don't want fire. I only want to bring Riley back home safely."

He said nothing for the longest time. Her hand dropped away from his arm. The truck slowed as he pulled into Rick's parking lot.

Torrey blinked, surprised he would stop there. She was about to question his actions when he spoke first.

"Which car is yours?"

Hesitantly, she pointed to a white '89 Tempo with a Semper Fi decal on the back window. He parked next to it and hopped out of his truck.

Torrey came around from the passenger side. He meant for her to follow him back to his house. Relief flowed through her. While he was off finding Riley, she wouldn't be trapped in the middle of nowhere. She would have her own car. "If you give me general directions, I can follow you back."

Shade studied the car. The amused expression on his face looked out of place. "This car is more than twenty years old. It looks like shit, Torrey. Who the hell is letting you drive this death trap?"

She squared her shoulders and narrowed her eyes. Being as tall as she was, Torrey wasn't used to being treated as small and helpless. She didn't like it. "I'm an adult, Shade. Nobody gets a say in what kind of car I drive."

That car was the only thing she owned outright. Maybe it sometimes didn't start, especially in the winter, and maybe it

overheated occasionally, especially in the summer, but it was *hers*, damn it.

“I get a say,” Shade said. His tone implied she had no right to argue with him.

He was in for a rude awakening. “No, you don’t. I hired you to find my sister. Just because I’m also sleeping with you doesn’t mean I’m going to put up with your high-handed, old-fashioned notion that you’re the boss just because you have a penis.”

Those luscious lips pressed together. “Fine. Follow me. Stay close; it’s easy to get lost.”

Immediately, Torrey missed the comfortable upholstery of Shade’s brand-new F-150. The cushioning in her seats had been squashed before she bought it. Springs poked through, and they would skewer her bottom if she wasn’t careful. The pillow she kept on the seat helped a little bit, but it was also old and thin.

She popped a cassette tape in the player and hummed along to the ’80s mix that had belonged to her mother. Within three miles, smoke began to billow from under her hood. Torrey stared in disbelief. It was too damn cold out for it to overheat!

Easing to the side of the road, she pulled the lever to release the hood. Shade beat her to the front of the car. He must have been watching from his rearview mirror. The smoke wouldn’t have been clearly visible in the glare of her headlights.

When he lifted the hood with his bare hands, Torrey was reminded that wolves had mastered fire. She stared at him, realization dawning. “You did this.”

Shade shook his head, but not in denial. “It’s a piece of crap, Torrey. I’m amazed it started.”

She didn’t believe him. “You used a charm. You caused it to overheat. It only overheats in the summer when it’s really freaking hot out.”

His neutral expression didn’t change. “Fine. I used a charm to make your car overheat because I think it’s not safe for you to drive

around in it. If you want to fix your car, you need to reverse the charm.”

When Caiden told her that Shade would train her, Torrey pictured a much earthier setting, like the woods or a meadow. She didn’t expect romance, but he had shown such patience and understanding in the hospital. Standing before a smoking engine on a moonless night and being completely pissed off at him was a scenario that never entered her thoughts.

She glared at him. “You’re a jerk. You know that, right?”

“I’m a cunning opportunist,” he said unapologetically. “Get used to it.”

She wondered if she had enough strength to punch him in the stomach and make it hurt. Likely, he would use those preternatural reflexes to stop her before her fist made contact. As she glared at him and fantasized, he doubled over, coughing and struggling for breath.

Her eyes widened. For a second, she thought she had done that to him, but she shook the thought away. When she used her powers before, she felt a tingling in her whole body, and it left her noticeably tired afterward. This time, she had felt nothing but an insanely strong urge to hit him.

She put a hand on his shoulder and studied him with wide eyes. “Shade? What’s wrong?”

Straightening, he took a moment to recover and gazed at her in disbelief. “You’re not serious.”

Her brows drew together. “Just because you’re being an imperious jerk doesn’t mean I want to see you hurt.” Not really hurt. Fantasizing about it was something else entirely, or it should have been.

His brows drew together, too, but his expression was cynical, not confused. “Then maybe you shouldn’t sucker-punch me like that.” Then he shrugged. “Though, you are progressing much faster than I thought you would. I didn’t even feel you building up for an attack.”

"I didn't..." she began a denial, but stopped. She had pictured punching him. She had wanted to release her frustrated aggression. Maybe she had done it after all?

"You lack control," he said, swatting at moths drawn to the headlights. "We'll work on that."

Torrey studied him for a minute. "I'm sorry. I didn't really mean to do that. I was angry at you for putting a charm on my car."

Shade sighed. "I didn't put a charm on your car." He looked down at the engine. "But I can't pretend to be upset that you won't be driving this thing again. I'll call for a tow truck, but I'm sending it to the junkyard."

"You have no right," she protested. "It isn't your car."

His blue eyes darkened to black. "You'll fix it now with a charm or it's gone forever. I won't have you driving around in this thing, not if I can help it."

"You want me trapped at your house in the woods in the middle of nowhere!" She flung the accusation and something else at him. It was too strong and too deeply rooted in her emotions to be a charm. Yet it wasn't a spell, either. She had said no incantation, and she had offered nothing to the elements in thanks.

Shade's body flew through the air to land on the sharp slope of rocky land dropping away from the road behind him. He put up a hand to stop the untutored use of her powers on him. He was outside the circle of light cast by both their cars. They were both lucky that stretch of road wasn't on a cliff that dropped sheer from the narrow shoulder. She could have killed him.

But Torrey was both angry and not in control of herself. Grief and fear and fatigue made her unreasonable. If it were a normal day, she would have just yelled at him. But this wasn't a normal day; it was the day her powers emerged. They were tired of being inaccessible and dormant.

Advancing down the rocky slope, she raised her hands and let her powers charge. He wanted to keep her, helpless, at his house, at his

beck and call. She would sit around all day while he was gone, and she would have nothing to do but eat and worry about Riley. She couldn't let that happen.

Just as she was about to strike, a growl issued from deep in Shade's throat. His silvered eyes caught the scant light from the headlights, reflecting it back to her. He wasn't aroused; he was angry. "Don't start something, little witch, that you cannot hope to finish. I have more power than you realize. You can't beat me yet."

His words were not a deterrent. She struck, and missed. In less than the blink of an eye, Shade changed from a tall, darkly handsome man, to his wolf form. He leapt, avoiding her strike and knocking her to the ground.

She landed hard, the breath knocked clear out of her. Gasping, she looked up into the face of a large black wolf. His paws were on her shoulders, pinning her to the ground, but his claws were sheathed.

He was large, but that was to be expected. That massive human body indicated a massive wolf. He might have changed shape, but his mass had the same volume.

Torrey froze, fighting for calm. Everything she knew about wolves came from Frank. The stories he told her had all ended horribly for the witch. Even if the stories were untrue, they were rooted deep in her psyche. And Shade had definitely killed witches before. Wolves didn't happen by magic honestly. They stole it from the witches they killed. She was terrified.

He lowered his muzzle to stare straight into her eyes. Torrey recognized those silver eyes. They had gazed at her with passion only an hour earlier. Now they held a distinct warning.

She didn't know how long they stayed like that before he backed away to sit next to her. His tail swished as she sat up slowly.

She didn't want to make any sudden moves that might cause him to attack. More than anything else, she wanted to get into her car and drive in the opposite direction. He might be able to run fast in his

current form, but he couldn't do fifty, and her car could. Just barely, but it would work.

As if he sensed her intention to run, he put a paw on her leg. She wasn't going anywhere. Her car might be able to outpace him, but her legs had no chance. The cotton skirt under his paw had been through a lot, and it showed worse for the wear. She stopped breathing.

His muzzle came closer, and his mouth was open. She didn't expect the tongue that darted out to lick her face from chin to temple. Relief flowed through her. When he leaned in to lick her again, she shoved his face away and got to her feet.

"You shouldn't have eaten the onions." She didn't know if he understood what she was saying, but his ears were at attention. They twitched at her pronouncement.

He returned to where his clothes lay and pawed through them for something. Torrey joined him. There was no moon to help her see his clothes, but she didn't need her sense of sight to know they were shredded. The sudden change had ripped his jeans and his shirt at the seams.

Something heavy fell, landing on her feet. From the jingling noise they made, she knew they were keys. Shade snagged them and dropped them into her outstretched hand. Standing on four legs, his head came to her shoulder. He was tall, even for a wolf. Nudging her hip, he herded her up the embankment toward his waiting truck.

Torrey looked from his truck to her car to him. The absence of the moon meant there was no way he could change back until morning. The sun was fire, and he needed that energy to shift his shape for the second time. She had no idea how she knew that.

"This is awfully convenient for you, isn't it?" She would have to leave her car there overnight. She couldn't leave her things that he had so arrogantly packed alone all night in the back of his truck. Reluctantly, she fished her backpack from her still-smoking Tempo and locked the car.

She put a note on the windshield, assuring the county sheriff she had every intention of returning for the vehicle in the morning. Hopefully, they wouldn't tow it.

She opened the passenger door for Shade. He leapt into the seat with one graceful motion. For a second, the image of him running at top speed flashed through her head. He would look magnificent.

Chapter 8

Finding Shade's house was frustratingly difficult. As they disappeared into the mountains, the road became rougher, dwindling until it was nothing more than a suggestion. In the winter, it was the type of road that would be closed until Mother Nature decided to open it again.

Shade, for his part, tried his best to direct her. She learned that his paw on her leg meant she needed to slow down. He nudged her with his muzzle, and then he looked in the direction he wanted her to turn. Several times, she stopped the truck completely because he indicated an opening that didn't look like a road.

At last, he curled up in the seat next to her and fell asleep. Because he was so damn long, his head, shoulders, and one leg ended up across her lap. She hoped the road dead-ended at his house because she had no clue where they were or where they were going. And she was tired. The clock on the dashboard showed it was well past midnight.

At last the trees opened and the road improved. It ended at a stunningly beautiful log cabin. The sweep of headlights couldn't do it justice, but what she saw was incredible. On her lap, Shade's eyes blinked open. He yawned and stretched before sitting up. When she opened the door, he leapt over her to land lightly on the grass.

He sniffed the ground and disappeared into the blackness of the night.

Torrey aimed the truck at the house and turned on the headlights. Wolves might have wonderful night vision, but she wasn't a wolf and the porch light wasn't lit.

His key ring featured several keys, but none of them fit the front door. Frustrated and tired, she tried the handle. Unlocked, it turned easily.

She hit the light switch next to the door. It had been her intention to go immediately back to the truck and kill the headlights, but the sight of his house stopped her cold.

Someone had broken in and ransacked the place. Her jaw dropped. Soren. It had to be. This was her fault. She brought this upon him by insisting he help find Riley. He said helping a witch was considered treason by his people. Was this a warning?

She stood frozen with her hand pressed to her chest. Shade came in after her. His cold nose pressed into the small of her back, urging her toward the stairs. She had no choice but to comply.

He seemed to not notice the mess.

At the bottom of the steps, she turned to him. "I have to turn off the truck lights." On autopilot, she did exactly that. Calling the police was out of the question. The best she could do would be to clean up the mess. She hoped nothing had been stolen.

This time, she closed the front door behind her and locked it tight. Shade waited at the foot of the stairs. Torrey stopped in the middle of the mess and looked around. The house was beautiful. Cathedral ceilings stretched along the entire front of the house, making the kitchen and living rooms one massive room.

The stairs at the back of the living room were an incredible example of talented workmanship. All the wood in the house featured the same excellence in skill and attention to detail.

The things that littered every surface in the room were unbroken and clean. Upon closer inspection, it appeared they had been purposely placed there.

She didn't have much of a chance to frown. An impatient head pushed her toward the stairs. She looked down at him and took his face in her hands. His fur was as soft and silky as his hair. "I'll help

you clean it in the morning. I'm so sorry this happened, Shade. I didn't mean for anyone to break into your house."

He guided her toward a room at the end of the upstairs hall. It was large and clean. A bed with a brass frame was positioned against the back wall. A dresser and a bureau stood opposite the bed. On the other side of the room, under a bank of windows that would have a breathtaking view during the day, two upholstered chairs, a bench, and a coffee table invited a quiet evening sipping hot chocolate and reading romance novels.

Paintings in frames decorated the cream-colored walls. The entire room was tasteful and inviting.

Torrey ignored Shade's attempts to push her into the room. "This isn't your bedroom." It was obviously a guest room.

He might not have been able to talk, but his glare was definitely working. He wanted her to go to sleep.

She was tired, and she was dirty. Wordlessly, Torrey disappeared into the bathroom. The shower called to her. Shade waited outside the door for her to finish, standing guard in his more powerful form.

As the water sluiced down her body, Torrey thought about what she might say to him in the morning. She needed to apologize for attacking him in the first place. She had no idea what came over her, or why she thought it was all right to treat him that way.

If he hadn't put a charm on her car, which was entirely possible, then he had been honest with her when he expressed his lack of regret for her automotive troubles. He had encouraged her, albeit aggressively and rudely, to try to fix it using her powers. Could she have fixed it with a charm? Wouldn't that mean it would run on her energy, draining her of strength she needed?

Shade was curled up on her bed when she returned to the room with only a towel covering her naked body. The clothes she discarded were too dirty to wear. She wasn't entirely sure they could be saved.

Opening and closing drawers in the room produced nothing. Each drawer was empty. Finally, she disappeared into the other bedroom she glimpsed when he herded her up the stairs.

The room was in as much disarray as the rest of the house. It seemed only her room had escaped that kind of treatment. She found his laundry neatly stacked on top of his dresser. The organization of the mess gave her pause.

Why would someone leave clothes in neatly folded piles if they were so intent on disrespecting someone's home and property? Why was nothing broken or stolen?

Leaving those questions for later, she snagged a black shirt from a stack and pulled it over her head. It fell to her knees.

She climbed in bed next to his still form. Curled up like he was, Shade managed to take up three-quarters of the bed, and it was only a queen size. She turned off the lamp and settled in for the night. He moved so his long body was pressed against hers. His heat seeped through the comforter, warming her pleasantly.

Despite her unease, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

She woke to a warm hand kneading her breast. Sometime after sunrise, Shade had shifted back to his human form and slipped beneath the covers with her. His naked body was twined with hers.

Seeing her awake, he grinned and kissed her. Before he blocked her field of vision, she glimpsed his eyes. Though his body was human, the wolf was still in control. Silver eyes glittered in the early morning light streaming in through the curtainless windows.

He didn't give her a chance to speak or to ask questions. The pressure of his hand at the base of her jaw opened her mouth to his plundering tongue. Given the hardness resting against her leg and the wildness in him, Torrey knew there would be no speaking for quite a while.

Her body responded to his roughness and insistence. She kissed him back, but it was nothing like it had been on the edge of that stream. Then, he had let her explore him. He had let her do as she

pleased. Now, he tolerated her foray for a short time, and then his mouth was gone, trailing hot kisses across her jaw and down her neck.

The hand on her breast moved to her waist, scooting her to the center of the bed. His mouth closed around one nipple. She had no idea what happened to the T-shirt she wore to bed, and she didn't care. Arching, she urged him to take more of her breast into his mouth. He did, greedily sucking that soft globe.

Torrey tangled her hands in his silky black hair, moaning at the inferno racing along her neural pathways, originating from where his mouth touched her. That mouth moved lower and lower. He wrenched her legs apart and feasted on her pussy.

He licked long strokes from her hole to her clit. As he lapped at her, each pass of his tongue explored more and more until he lifted her to lick at the tight muscle surrounding her back entrance. It brought an unexpectedly gentle sort of pleasure. She felt exposed and secure at the same time. He made his way back to her clit and sucked it in a slow rhythm.

She grabbed the pillows, fisting them in her hands as she screamed her first orgasm. She came in his mouth, but he just sucked harder. His long tongue filled her opening and his teeth scraped against her clit.

He was hot, so hot everywhere. She burned inside where he licked her. The flames fed her climax, pushing her even higher. Her hips lifted from the mattress, ripping his face from her pussy.

She didn't have time to mourn the loss. With amazing quickness, he flipped her over and positioned her on hands and knees. One tremendous roar, and he buried himself deep inside her. His hips thrust, slamming into her with such force that his balls slapped against her clit. The effect was stunning. Her vagina contracted around him and he only pumped faster.

She screamed. Her muscles went weak, and her elbows gave out. Her face slammed into the pillow. If he hadn't been holding her hips in place, her legs would have given way as well.

Finally, he came, calling her name, parsing it on ragged breaths.

He collapsed on top of her.

“Christ, you’re heavy.” Muffled words forced themselves from her mouth directly into her pillow.

His acute hearing picked them up without difficulty. He shifted his weight, rolling them both to their sides. His body cradled hers. She enjoyed the feel of his chest against her back.

Torrey breathed deeply to restore her oxygen-starved cells.

Shade’s hand lazily caressed her bare flesh. “We’ll work on your pillow talk after we work on controlling your powers.”

“Later,” she said as she closed her eyes. “I’m going back to sleep.”

“Not yet,” he said, trailing his hand from her knee to her shoulder. “I haven’t had enough.”

Against her butt, she felt his cock already lengthening for another round. She was flattered, but the previous day had been exhausting and she hadn’t recovered. “My God, are you always this randy?”

“It’s been sixty—” He broke off, biting his lower lip. The silver in his eyes dimmed to a fathomless dark blue. “Yes. You’ll get used to it. But I’ll—I’ll leave you alone for now.”

The sudden vulnerability was unexpected. It wasn’t as if she didn’t enjoy his attentions or the unexplained intimacy between them that she both welcomed and feared. She hadn’t meant to hurt him. He turned away, and she dove, stretching across the bed to catch him before he could leave.

“Wait. Shade, I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just that you’re so intense. I don’t know where you get the energy.”

He stared at her for several silent, tense seconds. Torrey tried to read his expression, but she could only find affection and desire. A fading sadness underlined it all.

When her nerves were stretched nearly to breaking, he raised his hands to cradle her face. His tender feelings intensified, and he kissed her. His lips brushed softly against hers, and Torrey was lost, caught

in a maelstrom of emotions she didn't understand. She didn't know where the deep emotions inside her came from, and she didn't want to think about it.

Just when she thought she would collapse from the way she trembled in his embrace, he broke the kiss, lifted her, and threw her over his shoulder.

She squirmed in protest as he headed out of the room. "Put me down! Where are you taking me? For goodness sake, at least let me get some clothes on."

A sharp sting on the cheek of her ass halted the flow of her objection. Warmth rushed from her butt to her pussy. The bass of his response rumbled through his chest and back, tickling her legs and breasts. "I'm calling the shots this time, woman."

Oh, she was going to have to set him straight. He was obviously much older than he appeared. Had he missed the entire feminism movement? Wait. What he said didn't entirely make sense.

"This time?"

The hiss of the shower spray was her only answer.

"Shade?"

"The water will give you energy, Torrey. I'm not yet satisfied."

He set her down inside the bathtub. Cool water sluiced over her skin. She shivered and turned up the hot water. Energy had already begun flowing through her.

"You won't need that." A wide grin split his face as he stepped in next to her and tugged the curtain closed. "I'll keep you warm."

He did have a point. More heat emanated from his body than from the warm water hitting her arm and back. Torrey's body instinctively moved closer to Shade.

He brushed a thumb over her nipple. It was already pebbled from the cold, and now it tightened even further in response to his gentle touch. "I like this body. It's taller, curvy, sexy. I'm not afraid of hurting you every time I touch you."

She drew her brows together in confusion. The female part of her was pleased that he liked her body. The logical part of her wondered at his tone and the implication of his statement.

Shade slanted his mouth over hers, halting anything she might have said. He didn't bother with foreplay this time. Wrapping his hands around her waist, he lifted her. One knee guided her legs apart. She braced her hands on his shoulders, digging in with her fingernails as he brought her down over his erection. His thick cock filled her once again.

She sighed into his mouth and wrapped her legs around him. She wanted to be in control, to ride him as she had done on the riverbank the night before, but this position put her at a distinct disadvantage. The cool tile against her back and the hot wolf against her chest prohibited movement. He thrust into her and she could only hang on to him and accept the pleasure he offered.

Slow, measured strokes devolved into a frenzy. His hands supported her weight while they cupped her ass and held her still. He squeezed her ass and parted her cheeks. Torrey knew he was going to touch her there. It was a new erogenous zone for her, one she had never before considered, and now she fervently wished for him to take her there, too.

Tension built inside, and she came just as the tip of his finger circled the tight rosette back there. Her convulsing pussy milked a climax from him. He cried out as he thrust into her one final time. His semen spurted into her, pulsing in time to her orgasm.

When he finally set her back on her feet, she was glad he kept his arm around her waist for support. Her thighs and knees were liquid. The whisper of water covered the sounds of their heavy breathing as they both recovered.

Streams of cool water poured over the half of her body facing the spray. Shade's body kept her pressed to the warmed tiles, and the heat rolling from him kept her warm all over. Torrey smiled against his shoulder. "You weren't bragging."

"I never brag." He pulled back a little to look down at her. "What did you think I was bragging about?"

"You said you were a good lover. You said it with such confidence and conviction. At the time, I thought it was a boast, a way to get me into bed."

His grin brimmed with male pride and his chest swelled. "I know how to please my woman."

She laughed at his machismo. "No man would admit to not being a good lover, Shade."

"A man who can't please a woman has no business being with that woman."

His quiet conviction caught her attention. All amusement fell away. She traced a light caress along his freshly shaven jaw. When had he shaved? "You please me."

He nodded, a jerky movement so at odds with his usual gracefulness. "I will please you yet again this morning."

Torrey didn't know how much more she could take. He was a demanding lover and he had a very large cock. She was already feeling the effects of more physical activity than she was used to. Still, cream flowed to her pussy at his promise. Her body already knew that Shade meant what he said.

But Torrey wasn't about to let Shade have his way again. She pushed against him, reversing their positions so that he leaned against the wall. She was well aware he allowed her this control, and it made her all the more determined to wrest that permission away from him. She wanted him to know what it was like to be powerless in the face of a lover's passion. She had enjoyed the experience multiple times. She wanted to give that feeling back to him.

She kissed a path down his neck, exploring his body with her hands and her mouth. He quivered and trembled. His muscles jumped wherever she concentrated her attention.

He moaned as she moved lower to cross his abdomen, relaxing his shoulders to lean against the wall as he truly ceded control to Torrey.

One hand twined in her hair, but it rested there. It didn't insist or guide her trajectory. The other rested on her shoulder as she knelt before him.

She liked his body, too. He was hard and defined in all the right places. The erection she stroked testified to the fact that he desired her. She licked the underside and swirled her tongue around the ridge surrounding the slanted head.

He gasped and mumbled something she didn't understand when she closed her mouth around him. She took him as deep as she could, and she used both hands to grasp what wouldn't fit.

His hips moved, thrusting in time to the pace she set. Sounds of pleasure floated down to her, urging her to keep doing what she was doing. Heady with power, Torrey let one hand wander. She fondled his sac, caressing it with a soft touch before she reached back farther. Knowing how much she liked it when he touched her ass, she didn't think twice before inserting her finger into his puckered hole.

With a roar, he ripped her away and lifted her from the floor. Torrey barely had time to register the silvered eyes and the elongated teeth before he turned her to face the wall and imprisoned her hands above her head.

She tried to turn her head, but the brush of his teeth against the artery pulsing on her neck stopped all movement.

"Little witch, you are mine."

Her heart pounded, but she wasn't afraid. She didn't, not for one second, think he would hurt her. She did, however, wonder what the hell she had done to set him off.

"Shade."

"Say it."

Torrey swallowed. Those teeth grazed her skin with every word he said. She wasn't afraid, but she was extraordinarily turned on. Her emotions puzzled her. "I'm yours, Shade."

He shifted to hold her wrists with one hand. Torrey felt his fingers probing her ass, stretching her opening. He rubbed some kind of gel

into her. She had no idea what it was or where he found it. Sparks of pleasure ripped through her body. She shuddered in anticipation.

The tip of his erection pressed against her rosette, the steady pressure forcing the muscle to widen. Torrey relaxed, breathing deeply to allow him the access he wanted. He pushed his way into her, not stopping to let her acclimate to the feel of him.

He had warned her he wouldn't be gentle the next time. Neither was he rough. He held her still as he fucked her with long, steady strokes. Each thrust was a testament to how deeply he claimed her.

Torrey tried to writhe. She tried to buck against him. The pleasure building inside was intense, so different from the way he stimulated her when he was inside her pussy. It forced her to surrender in a way nothing else could.

So close to orgasm, she cried out his name. He must have understood her desperation and her fear. Releasing her hands, he slowed the pace of his thrusts.

"It's all right, Torrey. I've got you."

One hand gripped her hip and the other slid between her body and the wall. He found her clit. His fingertip swirled around it. She braced her hands against the wall. A long, keening cry wound its way out from deep inside, and she came. Her pussy pulsed so violently that every muscle in her body clenched.

Shade's shout matched her own as he climaxed. He caught her as she collapsed.

Torrey watched through half-closed eyelids as he washed them both. He ran the washcloth gently over her sensitized skin. She trembled more with every inch it moved, unable to escape its caress and too tired to turn it into something more.

By the time he set her on the counter to dry her, she was nearly asleep. His frown roused her a bit.

"Are you angry with me?"

"No."

His silence didn't explain away the frown.

“Shade, if you didn’t like the way I touched you...”

He cut her off, answering with clipped syllables. “I like the way you touch me.”

Now it was Torrey’s turn to frown. “Then why did you go all alpha male on me?”

He smiled and looked at her, finally meeting her eyes. “I am an alpha male, Torrey. I can’t help it.”

“You didn’t have a problem last night.”

He shrugged and tugged at her hands until she stood. He wrapped the large, soft towel around her torso. “Maybe I’ll tolerate it better tonight. You’ll have to try again and see.”

“Shade, you don’t look very happy right now.”

“I left a hickey on your shoulder. Maybe I’m worried you’ll be pissed about it.”

She snorted in disbelief. “I doubt something like that would worry you.”

Instead of responding, he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed. “Get some rest, Torrey. I’m still not satisfied.” He took the towel and tucked the covers around her body.

“I’m beginning to wonder what it takes to do that.”

He kissed her on the forehead and smoothed back her hair. His low, throaty chuckle was the last thing she heard as she drifted off.

When she woke again, she was alone. The covers were cold next to her, meaning Shade had not come back to bed. She sat up slowly, sore from her activities of the past thirty-six hours. Shade hadn’t thrown her to the ground gently the night before, and he hadn’t fucked her gently that morning.

She stretched her shoulders, rotating the abused muscles there to work out the kinks. Looking around for any sign of Shade, she saw her suitcases stacked in a corner. She eased from bed and crossed gingerly to the serviceable black cases. Opening up the top one, she saw that it was empty.

Straightening was difficult. Every muscle was sore. She desperately hoped he had something in his medicine cabinet she could take. Frowning at the empty cases, she glanced toward the drawers.

He wouldn't have unpacked her things, would he?

The top bureau drawer contained her underclothes. Each item was neatly folded. The next drawer contained shirts. Opening and closing the drawers of the dresser, she saw that he had completely unpacked for her. Every article of clothing was there, placed in exactly the same spot she had put it at home.

The order of the things in the drawers was exactly the same. Under her shirts were jeans. Under that were socks. The bottom drawer contained miscellaneous junk she'd collected over the years. The only difference was he had refolded her things more neatly than she had.

She didn't know whether to be more disconcerted by the fact he had obviously gone through all of her things or by the fact he remembered exactly where she placed everything. That was some kind of attention to detail.

After selecting clothes for the day, she staggered into the bathroom. A glance in the mirror revealed wild hair. On her shoulders, she found faint bruises where his paws held her down the night before. On her neck, the dark contrast of the purpled hickey stood out against her pale skin.

She wondered if Shade would have bruises from the rough landing she dealt him. Likely he did, but he wouldn't make a big deal out of it. There had been nothing vindictive in his early-morning passion. He had been rough and wild, but he hadn't been upset or angry.

A hot shower helped loosen some of her muscles. Torrey took her time, pampering herself with her own things. Shade had moved everything of hers in the bathroom as well. If anyone went into her apartment, they would think she had moved, abandoning only the

dishes and the furniture. He'd even brought her scrapbooks, stowing them neatly on a shelf in the bedroom.

Halfway downstairs, the shock of memory hit her. From her vantage point, his place looked like a hurricane had hit.

"Shade?" she called out, but she knew he was gone. The house had that empty feel to it.

A growl sounded from deep in her stomach. The burger he bought her had been so long ago. She headed to the kitchen, reasoning she could set his place to rights easier on a full stomach.

He had left a note taped to the refrigerator. She was to help herself to anything she wanted. He would be gone all day and well into the evening, searching for Riley. She wasn't to wait up for him.

Deflated, Torrey wondered how in the world he expected her to sleep when news of Riley's whereabouts could be forthcoming at any moment. Was he insane?

The day went by faster than she expected. He had no television, no phone, and no radio. He didn't even have a shelf unit to play CDs. She went in search of a cassette player, an eight-track player, or anything older. She wasn't used to the absence of technology. Even a Victrola would have been appreciated. Despite being cut off from technology, Torrey kept herself occupied. She cleaned up his house.

Whoever ransacked his place had been a thoughtful trespasser. Everything was neat and clean. All she had to do was to stow it back in various drawers and cupboards.

After she finished with the kitchen and living room, she discovered another room that hadn't been touched. Behind the kitchen was a library. The room was large and airy, yet cozy and inviting.

Thousands of books were organized on shelves. Many of them were bound with leather. They bore evidence of having been handled often.

Not a speck of dust could be found anywhere. Torrey perused the shelves to find the books arranged alphabetically by topic. Two thick volumes labeled simply "Witches" drew her attention. Forgetting her

intention to clean Shade's room next, she settled on an oversized chair whose comfortable cushion allowed her to sink deep.

These weren't the kind of books found in most libraries. Nothing like this would ever make it to a printing press. The first book was handwritten on paper so old it was nearly transparent. She ran her hand over it gently, reverently. This was the kind of rare volume of which librarians dreamed.

Torrey had to read it under a bright lamp just to make out the words, and the fancy script made for slow reading. She'd never seen vellum before, but she was sure this was it.

The second book was more recent. The blocky handwriting was easier to read, the paper was modern, and the ink wasn't very faded.

Both books were more like diaries. The first belonged to a male witch, and the second belonged to a female. Neither of them had names on them. It made sense that a witch wouldn't record their name on something this important. It could give an enemy all the ammunition they needed to use against a witch.

As far as she could tell, the male witch lived in the mid-eighteen hundreds. Many of the early entries mentioned slaves. It didn't take Torrey long to determine that the male witch was sadistic. He practiced his spells on his slaves, using them in horrific experiments that involved lightning and spells forcing the slaves to do things that turned Torrey's stomach.

No wonder Shade was prejudiced against witches. The accounts made Torrey want to kill the man herself, though he had to be long dead. She stopped reading it.

The second began in the normal manner. The witch had been given what she titled a "Book of Shadows" for her twelfth birthday. The early entries were childish. The girl cast charms on boys she liked and on various other school friends. It seemed her goal had been to be popular.

Torrey skimmed and skipped pages. She found such an abuse of power distasteful. However, she did learn the difference between a

charm and a spell. One relied solely on will, the other on ingredients and incantations. Several incantations were recorded in the pages, but Torrey had no desire to make anyone fall in love with her. Shade was a phenomenal lover, but she was little more than a job to him. When he found Riley, he would trade Torrey for her sister, and Torrey would go to her death.

Unless...Was there something in one of those volumes that could help her against Soren?

Toward the end of the diary, the entries began to get interesting. It seemed the girl, now a young woman, had her first encounter with a werewolf. She found him attractive, and she tried using a charm on him. From the physical description, the wolf sounded an awful lot like Shade. The charm failed.

But the wolf seemed to find her effort amusing. Though he lived far away, he began showing up on the campus of the university she attended. She would find him leaning casually against a wall when she emerged from class. She ran into him at parties. Though her mother, who was her mentor, warned her away from wolves, the young woman found herself hopelessly enamored of Shade.

He brought flowers singly instead of in bunches, a habit she found endearing. He took her to see movies, and he escorted her everywhere. She let him know, in no uncertain terms, that she was not in college for her "M.R.S." She wanted a real degree, and she had no plans to marry until after she started her career as a doctor.

Shade had no problem with her aspirations. He encouraged her. He helped her learn how to use her magic for healing purposes.

Flashes of Shade came to Torrey as she read. In the hospital with her mother hadn't been the first time he guided a witch in healing a human. Torrey wondered how Shade could have such an unconcerned attitude toward humans, yet he not only helped Torrey expel poison from her mother, he routinely helped this witch apply her skills to humans.

The entries weren't graphic, but Torrey had no trouble reading between the lines. Shade had loved this witch. The woman wrote of marriage and children, something both of them desired. They planned a future together. Torrey wondered what had happened to this woman. The diary had been written fifty-seven years earlier. Had Shade married her? Stayed with her until she died? Or had he abandoned her as she aged and he did not?

Time between entries lengthened as she began her residency. The last entry was a letter.

My Darling Shaden,

I know you don't understand my decision, and my actions will break both our hearts, but I feel I have no choice. Soren will not stop hunting me until I give him what he wants and my life is ended. He cannot help but crave my power. I've searched and searched, but I cannot find a way to rid him of his compulsion. (Or else I would have gotten rid of your compulsion as well. I know you secretly crave an apartment where everything is put away as much as I crave an apartment where my things stay in the drawers.)

As a Daughter of Circe, I will be reborn. It will take some time for my energies to align, and for the moon to be right, but I will return to you. On this point, my dearest, you have my solemn oath. I will not be exactly the same. My looks and my name will be different, but I will be me, and I will find you. We will be together.

Please don't hold this against Soren; he hates what he does as much as we do. He is in pain. His Torment is great. If you hate him, the Torment will consume him, and he will kill himself (demons permitting). You are truly the only thing that matters to him. The two of you are connected in so many ways. You will also need one another to survive the coming battles, and there will be many.

Take time to mourn, but rest assured, my love, I will return to you.

Eternally yours, Hope

Chapter 9

Shade left Torrey's side as soon as she fell back asleep. He wanted to make it to Soren's house before his brother had a chance to get out of bed. Once Soren was up and about, he could be frustratingly difficult to find.

The drive to Lyton wasn't so very long, but doubt had time to cloud Shade's mind. Torrey responded to his touch. She looked at him the same way Hope had when he first began courting her.

That first, disastrous attempt to place a charm on him had only whetted Shade's interest. Their courtship had stretched longer than he wanted due to her burning desire to become a healer. He couldn't begrudge her that. Turning her into a wolf-witch was supposed to have been a wedding gift.

A longer, healthier life for her to fill with healing.

He had been certain Torrey was Hope, but when she approached him at that bar, she hadn't remembered him. Daughters of Circe kept their memories from one life to the next. It's one thing that helped them become such powerful witches. A mentor's job was to provide training to jog their memories. By adulthood, everything was supposed to be intact. Torrey's mentor hadn't done a damn thing to help her access those memories. He had gone out of his way to keep knowledge of magic from her, to stunt her powers.

She responded to his kisses, to his caress. She had been an active participant in their lovemaking. On some level, she had to remember him. Right?

Shade hoped to hell she was beginning to remember.

If she didn't regain her memory, he was going to have to court her all over again. She was still the same woman, and so he didn't mind. Part of him mourned her loss all over again. He wanted her to remember their first kiss, their first date, the first time they made love. Torrey was just as independent and just as driven to protect those she loved as she had always been. It destroyed her last time. He wasn't about to let her do it again.

He would return Riley to her. He would kill Soren if his brother got in the way. He couldn't live a life where he sacrificed the woman he loved over and over.

Soren wasn't at home. The massive stone house was empty and still. Shade prowled the grounds, covering every inch in search of Soren's or Riley's scent. It was just as likely for Soren to keep Riley near to him as it was for him to keep her in a cave somewhere in the mountains.

Next, he returned to the house. There had to be evidence of Soren's whereabouts somewhere. His demon was a fan of making solid plans. Shade let his guard relax. At times like this, his compulsion was an asset. He would search every nook in the house. The search would be fast and efficient, as well as messy.

He started in Soren's room. Beginning at Soren's desk, Shade emptied it. Every item was automatically catalogued in his head, though comprehension wouldn't come until later, after the compulsion passed.

Since he didn't know what he was looking for, the entire house would have to be ransacked before he would be able to stop.

Four hours later, the place was a disaster. At Shade's own home, he didn't bother to put things in drawers or cupboards. He left everything out in the open in neat piles so that he could find things without his compulsion kicking in. When he cleaned out a drawer at Soren's house, he threw the items over his shoulder after a brief look.

Looking around with his hands on his hips, Shade felt the compulsion lose its grip on him. It came upon him suddenly, and it left just as quickly.

Nothing. There was nothing that made any sense. No drawings or schematics or lists. The only thing he knew for certain was his brother did not have Riley in the village. If he was keeping her in the caves, they could be anywhere. The damn things dotted the countryside and went on forever.

Closing his eyes, he ran a hand over his face. How could he return to face Torrey having found out nothing?

What was the point of staying there when Alethea hadn't left dinner? It meant Soren didn't plan to return that day, and the housekeeper hadn't expected Shade to appear.

The drive back to his place was long and depressing. At least he would be able to spend some time with Torrey, to help her hone her magic.

His house was silent, but it was filled with her scent. She had discovered the library. He smiled. Hope had loved to read as much as he had. Some of the books in there, like the medical tomes and those historical novels, had belonged to her. He hoped Torrey found enjoyment in them. He wondered if any of them would help her remember him, and what he was to her.

He entered the house on stealthy feet and stopped cold. Scanning right to left, he exhaled sharply. She had cleaned the house. Hope had started out that way, too. After one of his fits, she would set to work cleaning up. Eventually, she stacked all of his things neatly against the walls and directed him to stay out of her drawers. She thought banning him from her private areas would keep her things safe, and she was right. Mostly. If he wanted something he knew was in one of her drawers, nothing could stop him from emptying each and every one of them.

That was the primary reason he had given Torrey her own room. And it was her room. He had furnished it for her decades ago. He

would have filled it with her things, but Hope's family claimed everything of hers from their shared apartment. Because they hadn't been married, the human's law hadn't been on his side.

All he had left was her journal, some of her books, and a few pieces of jewelry. He would give them all to Torrey as soon as her memory of their time together returned.

Shaking away guilt over the time she wasted cleaning those rooms, he made his way to the library. Lights blazed, though the fall sun filtered mightily through the trees, and Torrey slept.

He watched her for the longest time. She was beautiful. Her goodness shone from the inside, rendering her so much lovelier than was physically possible. He thought it would be odd to love Hope in a body different from the one he knew so well. She had been smaller than Torrey, though average size for a human. Her features had been tinier and more delicate. She had also been very fair.

He found it odd he could find such differing physical characteristics equally breathtaking. It wasn't that Torrey's body was the opposite of Hope's, because it wasn't. She was just different.

Even in repose, Torrey exuded strength. Yet the shadow of her lashes on her cheeks lent her such a delicate air. He wanted to wake her with kisses, but he refrained. She didn't know him. She didn't understand he wanted to lock her in a room and make love to her until the end of time. She thought he merely wanted the use of her body. He was going to have to prove her wrong.

His eyes fell to the book pressed to her stomach. The title was hidden by her hand, but it was a volume he knew well. He had spent many, many nights reading and rereading Hope's diary. Her voice played in his mind as he read her words. He liked reliving her first impressions of him, especially when she first realized he was a wolf. She hadn't been at all afraid, though her mother repeatedly warned her against Shade and anything having to do with wolves. She had been intrigued.

Burning in his chest kept him from shaking her awake to find out if reading the journal had helped return her memory. He didn't want to get his hopes up just to be disappointed. After waiting almost six decades for her to reappear, he found he could wait a few hours more. He sat in the matching wing chair and watched her sleep.

After a few minutes, she murmured, shifted, and groaned. He didn't know how long she had been asleep in the chair, but he was willing to help her work out any kinks she developed in that position.

Her eyes fluttered open and focused on him, almost as if she knew he was there. "I thought you would be gone for longer. I was going to have dinner waiting for you."

The corners of Shade's mouth twitched. Hope's cooking hadn't been all that good. "It's a little early for dinner." He indicated the sudden low growling of her stomach with the nod of his head. "Did you skip lunch?"

"I had a late breakfast," she said. Now that she was more alert, she sat up and leaned toward him. "Did you find Riley? Did you talk to Soren?"

The way she said Soren's name was different, softer. Though Soren had hunted Hope ruthlessly, she never hated him. He heard the same sympathy in Torrey's voice now. Regretfully, Shade shook his head. "I'm going to head back over tonight. Soren keeps odd hours."

Torrey studied him silently. He would give anything to know what she was thinking. Was she wondering if he could, or would, help her? Was she remembering? Her next words dashed that hope. "I read Hope's journal. I hope you're not upset, Shade. It's just that she knew so much. I wish I had a mentor like hers. I know her mother got on her nerves, but at least she cared. She encouraged her, and she supported her dreams."

The notes of apology and pleading in her voice meant she didn't take a proprietary interest in the journal.

"Nothing here is off limits to you. This is your home." *Our home. I built this for you.*

She brushed a strand of hair away from her eyes. That simple gesture never failed to arouse him.

"I wanted to apologize for last night."

He shook his head, refusing the apology. "Nobody broke in. The mess is my doing. You're safe here."

A smile curved her lips. She tried to hide it, but she was unsuccessful. "Yes, I read about your compulsion in Hope's journal. I meant I'm sorry I attacked you. I don't know what got into me."

Torrey's life had been turned upside down. Her sister was missing, and her mother died. A self-sufficient person, she was suddenly powerless to stop the forces creating upheaval in her life. She took it out on him a little. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I can take it."

"That's not the point."

"Of course it isn't." Leaning across the small table between them, he took her hand. "I'm not upset with you, Torrey."

The scent of her arousal invaded his nose. Had this simple contact whetted her need? He felt his predatory instincts kick in. He couldn't resist her if she was in heat. She shifted uncomfortably, but she didn't try to remove her hand from his grasp.

"Will you undress for me?"

The question caught her unaware. She blinked at him. "What?"

He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes to focus that little bit of heaven. "You want me. I can smell it."

She wrinkled her nose. "That's gross, Shade. If you're looking for a little action, there are better things to say."

"It's not gross, Torrey. Nothing arouses me more than your scent. The moisture between your legs is the purest distillation of your scent. I want to taste you. I want to make you mine."

Her tongue darted out, licking at her lips. His jeans tightened painfully. Her hand slipped from between his and she looked away, this time biting at that lower lip. It swelled under the force of her

abuse. He wanted his turn to lick and bite at her lips, to slide his tongue between them and taste her sweet mouth.

“Torrey, if you keep that up, I’m not going to be able to hold back.”

Her uncertainty vanished under the strength of his assurance. He didn’t understand why she was unaware of exactly how sexy she was. Rising to her feet, she crossed her arms over her torso to grasp the hem of her shirt with her fingers.

“Are you sure about this, Shade?”

There was something in her voice, but he couldn’t think just then. His eyes were glued to the place where a slice of her midriff peeked out at him. He nodded. “Undress for me, Torrey. Show me what is mine.”

She threw her shirt into the chair she had just vacated. The rest of her clothes followed suit in short order. She didn’t tease him by disrobing slowly or by touching her body with slow strokes. He swallowed his question, knowing the answer lay in the fact she didn’t fully trust him. She didn’t know he loved her, and she wouldn’t believe him if he told her.

Standing before him, her body bared for his inspection, she unleashed protective and possessive instincts that ran far deeper than anything he’d felt before. If it was the last thing he did, if she never remembered their past, he would convince her she meant the world to him. Telling her she was Hope would ruin her faith in him. She had to know his feelings were for her, for the woman standing before him, shyly offering her body to him.

He held a hand out to her, pulling her to his lap when she took it. Sliding splayed fingers into her hair, he brought her lips to his. “You’re so incredibly lovely, Torrey.” The words fanned across her lips, as he intended, and she trembled in his arms.

The kiss he brushed across her lips was gentle, restrained. He didn’t want to rush this. She had to know how she affected him.

Shifting her, he repositioned her so that she straddled his legs. “Touch yourself, Torrey. Let me watch.”

Heat rose to her skin, staining it a delicate pink. She closed those beautiful chocolate eyes.

Shade lifted a hand to take her chin, tilting her face to his. “Don’t hide from me, Torrey. There is no part of you I don’t love. Give me this.”

She stared at him forever. He didn’t know what she saw, and he didn’t know he’d been holding his breath, but he exhaled for a long time when her hand came up to cup a breast.

Her palm grazed the nipple, pebbling that deep rose peak. Her heart beat faster, something his wolf sense had no problem hearing. He folded his hands over his stomach to keep them from reaching for her, from helping her out.

She watched him as she gave her other breast the same treatment. He didn’t attempt to hide his reaction from her. He knew the slits in his eyes were narrowing as the bulge in his pants grew.

Her breathing rate increased again, and a new wave of moisture pooled between her legs, making her scent that much stronger. He wanted to lift her until she knelt on his shoulders and lick away every drop of cream until she screamed his name.

But first, he wanted to see her make herself come.

A hand slid down her stomach, covering her mound. She shifted, spreading her legs wider and tilting her body back to reveal her most intimate folds. The taste of them tingled on his tongue, a remembrance from the early dawn hours when he had first transformed back and a powerful need for her had been the first thing to slam into him.

One finger flicked across the tip of her clitoris. A hiss issued from between her teeth. The point of the nub disappeared beneath its hood, hiding from stimulation. She chased it, pressing to the side, rubbing around it to coax it back into the open.

Her hand dipped lower, tracing a path between her clit and her hole. The blush on her chest returned, and her hips moved in time to the rhythm of her fingers.

Shade loosened his pants. He was going to rip them if he didn't, and the pain was becoming unbearable.

The motion caught Torrey's attention. The forgotten hand that still gripped her breast snaked forward. She wrapped it around his shaft. He closed his hand over hers to stop her movement.

"Not yet, honey. I want to watch you first."

"I want to touch you." The breathy confession did much to undermine his resolve.

"We'll get to that," he promised. "If you don't take your hand away, we'll get to that sooner rather than later."

Her smile was downright salacious. "I want to feel you inside me."

"Come for me first." How he managed to keep his voice firm and steady was beyond him.

The reluctant easing of her grip brought him a measure of relief. The fingers exploring her labia moved with frenzied motions. Moans escaped from between her lips. Her hips rocked harder and faster.

The sight nearly sent him over the edge. A hand clamped onto his leg just above the knee as she leaned back and came. Thank goodness. His ability to hold out for much longer was seriously in doubt. Now he didn't need to use that restraint anymore.

She didn't tense or startle when he lifted her. Deep down, she trusted him. Her body accepted his touch, and her subconscious accepted his decisions. He settled himself on the long sofa and set her over his face. He had to taste her again.

He didn't wait for her pulsing vagina to stop pushing out her cream. Plunging his tongue deep, he drank her essence. Her scent and her flavor filled his senses, and he was lost. The insistent throbbing in his dick forgotten, he fucked her with his tongue and fingers. He teased her with his teeth and tongue. He couldn't get enough of this.

He lost track of how many times her juices flooded his mouth, and she shouted her release.

It wasn't until his wolf threatened to take over that he gave up his position. Flipping her to lie on the sofa beneath him, he plunged into her body. Her tight warmth welcomed him. That delicate sheath stretched to accommodate his larger size, squeezing and pulsing around him.

One hand slipped beneath her ass and held her to him. The other pressed against the cushion to keep the bulk of his weight from crushing her. Her arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him down to crash his lips against hers. She opened him, licking and sucking her flavor from his mouth.

The mews and squeaks she made as she pulsed around him, pulling him deeper to cradle him against her womb, pushed him over the edge. They came together.

He rolled as he fell, taking her with him so that she lay on top of him. She clung to him as her body cooled, trembling in the aftermath of their lovemaking. He caressed her lightly, holding her close and pressing occasional kisses to her temple.

Her stomach growled, echoing in the silence.

She buried her face in his neck, but he only chuckled. "I'm going to start dinner. Is there anything special you want? Steak? Medium?"

Torrey smiled and shifted, pushing to her feet. "I'll help," she said, crossing the room to retrieve her clothes. "I don't want you pawing through the cupboards and throwing around all the stuff I just put away."

"That's probably the best idea," he agreed. "Unless you want everything to look even worse than it did last night."

Torrey peppered him with questions as she scurried around the kitchen to find the ingredients and items he requested. He liked that she was more relaxed around him now. He wanted her to be comfortable.

“Why don’t you use glass-fronted cabinets? If you could see everything, would you still feel a need to take them out?” She placed a blocky cutting board on the granite countertop.

“It wouldn’t make a difference,” he said, neatly slicing a cucumber for the salad. Hope had loved salad. After she was gone, Shade found he had picked up a taste for it as well, though he liked it better topped with ham or sausage. “The compulsion is to empty the cupboard, or the drawer. It’s with me all the time. I lose the fight when I want a particular item and I have to actually go into a container for it. The compulsion disappears completely once everything is emptied out.”

She thought about that for a minute. “What about open cupboards? You don’t seem to have a problem with shelves. And you could put in a larger closet and hang up your clothes.”

It went on like that, with Torrey offering suggestions. Shade took her inquiries in the spirit she intended. Hope had tried to help him conquer his compulsion as well. At the very least, she attempted to help find ways to mitigate the urges. Finally, Shade pulled Torrey into his arms. The move was designed equally to bring her body close and to stop her questions.

“Torrey, I’m one hundred and sixty-three years old. There is literally nothing that hasn’t been tried. When my compulsion first set in, my parents did everything they could to find a way around it. My compulsion was especially bad because my father’s compulsion made him need to clean up the mess.” He laughed at the memory. It had been a pain for his father, and Shade had used his compulsion to annoy his father on more than one occasion. “They hired a servant to pick up after me. It didn’t stop me, but it did free up a lot of my father’s time.”

She blinked up at him. Then her eyes dropped to where her hands had come to rest on his chest. She blushed and picked at imaginary lint. “Why didn’t you just tell me I was being annoying?”

With one finger on her chin, Shade lifted her gaze to meet his. “You aren’t annoying, Torrey. I like that you care.” Before she could say more, he lowered his lips to hers.

The pressure of his kiss was light, but the meaning behind it was heavy. Torrey responded to the affection of his touch, leaning closer to absorb the warmth and comfort of his body. When he ended the simple act, she stared up at him, a little dazed and a little confused.

One delicate hand drifted up to press against her lips, but she said nothing.

Shade lifted the corners of his mouth in a sad smile. “After dinner, I’ll take you outside so you can practice your magic.”

She was quiet while they ate, and Shade almost regretted kissing her the way he had. He hadn’t meant to shut her up. It wasn’t until he led her away from the house that she voiced the question that must have been whirling through her brain.

“Was it a charm?”

She had fallen behind him. He adjusted his long stride to match her shorter one. Looking back at his cabin, he said, “The charm on the house only prevents physical and magical violence. That’s why we have to go into the woods to practice. You would need to break the charm in order to cast any spell.”

Torrey looked away from him, her gaze peering around the tall trunks of naked trees. Fall had come and stripped the leaves away. The setting sun rendered the few bright colors on the ground a dull brown. “I meant when you kissed me.”

He stumbled, something he hadn’t done out of clumsiness since he was very, very young. “Why would you think that?”

She still avoided looking at him. “Because I...” Her cheeks burned crimson. “Never mind.”

He stopped her then, with a firm hand on her shoulder, and turned her to face him. “Torrey, you can say anything to me.”

Her eyes stared at the detritus material creeping up around her shoes. “I’m paying you to find my sister.”

“You’re not paying me,” he said.

The smile was small and sad. “Not in money,” she said, “but I’m definitely paying you.” Now she raised her brown eyes to meet his. They were large with regret. “I agreed to your bargain, Shade. You wanted me. I’m here.”

Tense with trepidation, he waited, knowing there was more.

“I knew what I was agreeing to do when I said I would come here with you.” She swallowed and worried her bottom lip with her teeth. “I knew what you wanted from me. You were very clear about that. You don’t have to pretend to feel something you don’t, and you don’t have to try to fool me into thinking I feel something I don’t feel. I prefer honesty.”

The words hit Shade like a fist in the gut. He reeled from the force of what she implied. When he told her he wanted her, he never meant to coerce her into thinking she had no choice but to barter her body for her sister’s safe return. He had simply wanted her.

“I didn’t mean...” Oxygen wasn’t obeying his attempts to breathe it in. He took a deep breath and tried again. “I never meant for you to think you had to sleep with me in order for me to find Riley. If you had refused me, we would still be here, Torrey. I would still be searching for Riley and I would still teach you magic. You’d likely spend time fending off my attempts to seduce you, but I...”

He ran a hand through his shaggy black mane of hair. There was no good way out of this bind. “Damn. I’m sorry.”

She stared at him for a full minute without changing expression. The sun rose and set in that time. Finally, she shook her head. “Then why are you helping me?”

How could he answer that and retain his credibility? How could he tell her she was the woman he loved and lost when she didn’t remember a single thing? He struggled to find an answer for too long. She turned away from him, heading deeper into the woods. Night had fallen too completely for her human eyes to be able to see where she was going, though Shade could see with perfect clarity.

In less than a second, he caught her, caging her in his arms. He pressed her back to his chest and dropped his head to her shoulder to hold her close. "Please don't be angry with me."

Something in his tone grabbed her attention. Maybe it was desperation. "Is it because of Hope?" she asked. "Is it because I remind you of her, or is it because she was sort of a sister of mine?"

Shade inhaled deeply, memorizing her scent. It wasn't the same as Hope's. That was something he would never have the occasion to smell again. Torrey was the future. She asked for honesty. He wasn't sure she could handle complete honesty, so he settled for something in the middle.

"You are like Hope in some ways, but you're different in more ways than you're alike." Lifting his head, he turned her to face him. "At first, I agreed to help you because of her, because she would have wanted me to help you, but that's not why I'm helping you now. That's not why I'm going to teach you how to fight a werewolf. That's not why I refuse to give you to Soren."

Hope, fear, and more fear flashed through her eyes. "You can't refuse."

"I will kill him before I let him harm you."

She stared at him. "But he's your brother."

It would kill Shade slowly from the inside, eating at him until there was nothing left, but he couldn't let Soren take her from him. Not again.

Shade's nod was brief, and he didn't feel the need to explain himself. He knew she understood his conflict but not his decision.

Turning her toward the east, he bade her raise her arms, palms up. "Call the power of nature to you, little witch. Let it build up inside."

She struggled for a few moments, and he knew it was because she was debating whether to pursue her line of questioning or to give in to his directive. The dormant magic that sputtered and sparked the previous evening roared to life. He watched as her aura turned from a glow to a blaze.

“You used force against me last night,” he said, careful to keep his voice a whisper. Interrupting a novice witch’s concentration wasn’t a wise move. “Do you remember the position of your hands?”

Torrey’s eyes focused on her hands. Energy streamed to them, concentrating there. “Palms facing out,” she said with a brief nod. “I pushed you.”

Shade jerked his head in the direction of a large white pine twenty feet away. The circumference of the trunk was about four feet. Branches full of needles ringed the top near the forest canopy. “Push it over.”

He felt her hesitation. Destroying nature went against a witch’s nature. “I’ll help you restore it when we’re finished.”

With a brief rotation of her wrists, Torrey changed from peace to force. The tree lifted from the ground, ripped from the roots to hover in the air. Slowly, gently, it fell to the ground with a minimal disturbance of the surrounding trees.

Torrey’s arms dropped to her sides. “I’ve never done anything like that before. The feeling, the power... It was incredible.”

The skill she displayed after only a day left Shade speechless. He wondered if Daughters of Circe became more powerful with each pass through life. It might explain why Hope was willing to die. Perhaps she knew she would come back stronger.

Pushing away thoughts of the past, Shade nodded in the direction of the tree. “Replant it.”

Concentration showed in the strain on her face. She turned her palms skyward to draw more power. The massive tree trembled, and so did Torrey. He wanted to reach out, to lend his strength, but he held back. After all, there was nothing he could do to increase her power.

He watched, silently urging her on.

Chapter 10

Torrey felt like rubber. The ligaments and muscles holding her knees in locked position gave way. She collapsed to the ground. Shade made no move to catch her.

At first, his inaction irritated her. How could he have shown such affection and care for her all afternoon as he prepared dinner and talked her through the basics of spell casting?

Then she realized she needed contact with the Earth. If Shade had kept her from touching the ground, energy wouldn't be flowing through her, replenishing what she used to rip the tree free without damaging the roots and lay it down gently.

The spell itself was nothing she hadn't already known. Showing her how to call forth the power to accomplish the feat had been the key to activating her powers. Shade had done all of that, just as Caiden assured he would.

Heat invaded her body, beginning with her shoulders. Shade's large hands rested on each one. He rubbed her tired muscles.

"How are you feeling, little witch?"

From the beginning, he'd used it as a term of endearment. After reading Hope's diary, Torrey knew it was his term for her. She wondered what Hope had looked like, and she wondered if she reminded him of Hope. Did that explain why he was helping her? Did he mean her to be Hope's replacement?

"Torrey?" Concern edged his question.

Turning to him, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm okay. That was draining. I don't think I'll be able to put it back tonight." She stared over her shoulder at the fallen tree. Closing her

eyes, she reached out to it. Tingles rushed through her system, carrying messages from her senses to her brain and assuring her the tree would survive while she recharged. "It will be alright until tomorrow."

Shade followed her line of reasoning. "It might take a few days for you to recharge, little witch. What you did tonight was spectacular and it took much from you. There is no shame in needing to rest after expending so much energy."

Something shimmered on the other side of where the tree had been. Its width had blocked the sight before. Pointing to the reflection, she tugged on Shade's shirt until he looked where she wanted. "What's that?"

A cocky half-grin lifted one corner of his mouth. "That, little witch, is a spring-fed pond. Would you like to swim? The water would do you much good."

Though his arms were around her, and his heat flowed into her, Torrey shivered. "It's the end of October. A little cold for swimming."

Shade shook his head as he released her. "Trust me, Torrey. I'll keep you warm."

She took the hand he offered. It enveloped hers with searing warmth. The temperature in the mountains, under the canopy of the trees that blocked the earth from absorbing heat during the day, was decidedly cooler than it had been next to that little stream they watched the night before. Now that the sun was gone, so was the ground's feeble attempt to radiate heat energy.

She wanted to curl up in his heat and not think about who he imagined he was touching. The crunch of dead leaves under their feet silenced the chittering of the small critters whose hiding holes they passed.

The trees cleared abruptly, revealing a small body of water completely surrounded by forest. It was hidden, a secret unknown to man and not meant to be discovered. Torrey stood at the edge of the

water and took it in, using all of her senses to feel the sacredness of the area.

Eyes closed and face turned to the inky sky, Torrey breathed deeply. "It's beautiful, Shade. Completely lovely."

"Yes," he said. "Completely."

Something in his voice betrayed the drift of Shade's thoughts. He wasn't looking anywhere but at Torrey.

Opening her eyes, she saw her guess had been correct. He wasn't her first lover. He wasn't the first man who made her feel sexy and alive. But he was the most intense. Something behind his eyes made his attentions seem much more significant than anything Torrey had ever experienced. She liked feeling as if she were the only woman in the world who mattered to this incredibly handsome, untamed man.

His blue eyes matched the night sky where the stars showed. Feeling every inch the femme fatale, Torrey stepped away from Shade and let her sultriest smile play over her lips. He was frozen in time. Even his breathing seemed to have stalled, waiting for her next move.

She hadn't tried to be enticing before, but she did so now. Kicking off her shoes, she peeled away her socks. The shirt was next. She lifted it slowly, inching upward to reveal smooth flesh. Her body was long and lithe. He drank in every millimeter. Torrey felt as if the bright light of day revealed her flesh, not the moonless night. She dropped the shirt to the ground.

"Lovely," he said. His whisper carried on the breeze.

Her jeans followed. She wasn't sure how to take them off in a way that was sexy, so she settled for quick instead. Straightening, she stood before Shade and let him look at her. Heat blazed from somewhere deep. Torrey knew she was playing with an element she couldn't master no matter how hard she tried.

Part of her liked the danger. It thrilled her to know he would be wild in her arms no matter what she did. Fleeting, she wondered if it was wise to tease him like she was doing.

The distance between them vanished. She thought Shade might plunder her mouth, rip away her underclothes, and throw her to the ground.

But he didn't kiss her.

He barely touched her.

Those hot hands brought their heat to her waist. She sighed and shuddered.

"Cold?"

She wished he was breathing the word into her collarbone, fanning her skin with his moist heat. Her nod was brief.

His hands smoothed over her stomach and around to the small of her back. Circles widened, both under and over her skin. Panties and bra fell away, and his hands were there, too. "I want to know your body, Torrey. I want to know just how to touch you to make you quiver and tremble for me."

She was on fire and he had yet to kiss her. One hand slipped between her legs. Intrepid fingers parted moist lips. Torrey gasped. Until now, she had refrained from touching him, from crossing the line he seemed to have drawn between them. Now her fingers dug into his arms, breaking all the rules.

Shade's arm came around her waist. The coarse denim of his jeans chaffed against her inner thigh. His fingers swirled around and rubbed across her clit. Knots coiled low in her abdomen. She bit into his shoulder to muffle her moans.

The arm around her waist came up, and his hand threaded through her hair to pull her face away from his chest. Surprised, Torrey stared up at him.

"I want to hear you, little witch. I want to hear your sighs and moans and screams. I want to hear you say my name, and I want to see the way your eyes glow when you come." His voice was low, hypnotic, and demanding. Silver with desire.

The pressure of his fingers on her clit increased. She thrust her hips against his hand, riding the heat and absorbing the sparks he

generated. She controlled the pace. Faster and harder, she ground into him until the frenzy stripped away all control.

Head thrown back, she came, and her cries rent the silent night. Before she could recover her breath, Shade's mouth was on hers, demanding and taking. One kiss only, and he was naked. Torrey marveled at the speed of his movements.

Taking her in his arms, he pressed his length against her. Heat flowed between them, igniting more sparks. "Hold your breath, Torrey."

She barely had time to comply when their bodies hit the water. Cold, murky water closed over her head, but Torrey wasn't afraid. Water had always been her friend, and Shade was with her. Energy flowed into her. She felt as if she could fly. Just when she thought her lungs might burst, their heads broke the surface.

Beneath the water, his body still pressed against hers. Torrey shivered with excitement. "I think they were jealous," she murmured.

Shade paused with his lips against hers. "Who?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck, glad the buoyancy of the water kept them at roughly the same level. "Whoever said witches and wolves shouldn't be together."

Shade's tongue slipped along the edge of her lower lip. She felt the grin he couldn't stop, even as his thoughts turned away from the momentary distraction of her words. The kiss was slow and deep. The languor of her last orgasm receded as a fresh wave of desire fanned to a blaze.

While Shade worked her mouth, Torrey shimmied up his body. Slipping a hand between them, she positioned him at her entrance and released her grip on him. The water slowed her descent, letting her glide down his length unhurriedly.

"Torrey, oh, Torrey." He murmured her name over and over. Grasping her hips in his hands, he held her in place as he thrust in and out, his powerful legs giving him leverage. "My little witch."

Torrey held onto Shade and let his wild side take over. Her head fell back, trailing strands of hair through the water. Heat burned her from the inside out, an inferno of pleasure she wasn't sure she could survive.

In the midst of her heightening euphoria, Torrey imagined the tree she yanked from the ground replanted. All damaged roots were repaired, and the earth around it was firmly packed. Any evidence of her tampering was gone. Even the leaves she displaced were returned to their original positions.

Ragged moans, belonging to both of them, brought her back to the present. Opening her eyes, she intended to peer through the darkness to feast her eyes on the handsome man between her legs. But she didn't have to squint. Soft light reflected from the surface of the pond, bathing them in its glow.

Instinctively, Torrey knew this was something they were doing together. Fire and water combined. It shouldn't have been possible. The two elements canceled out one another. Yet the warmth of the water and the way it illuminated the night could not be denied.

Shade's gaze hadn't wandered from her face. Silver eyes with elongated slits for pupils were fixed on her. His jaw was set with determination, and his hips moved faster and faster. Torrey surrendered completely. Her body stiffened with orgasm, and she cried out, censoring her volume not at all.

Her vaginal walls clenched around his cock, and he came, pulsing inside her powerfully and setting off a new wave of convulsions inside her pussy.

He held her until her legs were steady. Playing one hand up and down her spine, he seemed reluctant to let her go. "Want to swim?"

The heat they generated was fading. Torrey shivered. "Maybe another time?"

He dropped a light kiss on her lips. "How about I build a fire and make love to you on my bearskin rug before I head back out?"

Torrey waded to the edge of the pond. She wanted to consent, but guilt intruded. What right did she have to spend the evening with an incredible man when her sister was probably quaking in terror at the blond giant who kidnapped her? “Do you have time?”

As if he sensed her hesitation, Shade followed her out of the water and pulled her into his arms. “Soren won’t be home until later tonight. I searched his place, and I found nothing, Torrey. No sign or clue as to where he might be holding Riley. I have a few hours.”

She struggled into her clothes. Forcing jeans over wet flesh wasn’t the easiest thing to do. Her panties took forever to untwist, and her bra was so uncooperative, she shoved it into her pocket.

Shade grinned at her dilemma. “I’m just going to take it off again anyway.”

Yeah, but he didn’t have to worry about cold, shriveled, pointy nipples. Torrey bit back a retort when Shade moved suddenly, thrusting her behind him and assuming a defensive stance. In the distance, the distinct sound of a growl echoed through the trees.

“What is it?” she whispered.

Shade didn’t answer, but his head turned from side to side as he honed in on the source of the scent and sounds he heard.

“Well, well, well. What have we here?”

The tall, sultry woman sauntering through the break in the tree line made straight for them. Her hair was pulled into a tight ponytail, but it flowed over her shoulder, reaching nearly to her waist. The glow Torrey had created with Shade earlier in the pond had faded too much for her to make out the color. However, there was no mistaking the woman’s beauty, or the fact she was a werewolf.

“Tiffany.” The word was both a greeting and a warning.

She came closer, and that’s when Torrey saw she wasn’t alone. Three male wolves trailed behind her. Each was tall, not quite as tall as Shade in wolf form, but still much larger than the average wolf. The tension in Shade’s body kept Torrey from doing anything. She barely breathed.

“What is this affinity you seem to have for witches?” Tiffany said. “It isn’t natural.”

“Don’t do anything stupid, Tiff.” Shade’s warning seemed nonchalant.

“Stupid like you?” Her tone could have scratched glass. “So much power is coming from this area that I came myself to make sure you were alright.” She gestured to Torrey. “I see you’re up to your old tricks. If Soren gets wind of this, Shaden, even you won’t be able to stop him. You couldn’t last time. What makes you think this’ll be any different?”

Shade relaxed a nearly imperceptible amount. He was still on guard. “Where is Soren hanging out these days?”

Tiffany shrugged. “I haven’t seen him since you two assholes pissed me off. He can go fuck a human for all I care.”

Gathering her courage, Torrey stepped around Shade to address Tiffany. “Soren has my sister. I need to know where he’s keeping her.”

One brow arched on Tiffany’s classically beautiful face. “Just because I’m not happy with Soren right now doesn’t mean I’ll betray my people.” She threw a disgusted sneer at Shade. “Not all of us find treason acceptable.”

Tiffany went to turn away, but Torrey ran, closing the distance between them. It was a stupid move, considering the woman was a werewolf and she came with three wolves to back her up. The look of disgust morphed to shock as the woman stared at the hand on her arm.

Strong hands ripped her away. Shade threw her over his shoulder and backed away from the mini wolf pack.

“Please,” Torrey begged as Shade turned, his long strides taking them back toward his house. “I just want to get my sister and take her home. I don’t want to cause trouble.”

Tiffany’s growling laugh rumbled through the increasing distance between them. “You’ve already caused trouble.”

Chapter 11

Torrey kicked at Shade, squirming in his arms, but the action was pointless. He was far stronger than she. “Shade, damn it!” She beat on his back, breaking off her protests suddenly when she caught sight of the tree she uprooted.

It stood tall and proud, larger than life. Ethereal. It glowed with strength and purpose. Somewhere deep inside, Torrey knew she had done that. She had done more than replant the tree. Somehow, she had imbued it with something extra. She had no idea what she had done, and she had every intention of returning to find out.

Wisely, she kept quiet. If Shade failed to notice the tree, then he must not have been able to see it. Just in case it was a vision or a sign, she watched it until the denseness of the surrounding trees blocked the sight.

She felt the moment they entered the charmed area around his house. The change in her perceptions would have given her a moment of pride if she wasn’t so angry with Shade for tossing her over his shoulder like a forty-pound bag of softener salt and carrying her off like some kind of primitive mountain man.

Wiggling anew achieved her goal. Shade set her on the ground and faced her glare with one of his own.

“Do you know nothing about wolves, Torrey? You could have been killed!” In the soft glow of his porch light, Shade’s eyes were the deep color of storm clouds at midnight.

Torrey straightened her spine and squared her shoulders. This was the first time in their short acquaintance his anger was directed toward

her. It was daunting, but she wasn't going to let that dampen her fury. "She knows where Soren is, Shade. She was lying."

"I'm aware," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. "She wasn't going to say anything, not with an audience."

That gave Torrey pause. That sounded more like a human reaction to humiliation than a wolf reaction to pack mentality. She peered at Shade with a wary expression. "What did you do to her?"

He shook his head, a gesture of disbelief. "You assume it was me?"

"She came to check on you, so she must care for you." The hurt in Tiffany's expression that she tried so valiantly to hide said everything else. "Did you dump her for Hope?"

He blinked at her in surprise for a full five seconds. "My relationship with Tiffany ended years before I met Hope, not that either topic is any of your business. The important lesson tonight is never piss off a werewolf who also happens to be in charge of the village militia, especially when she has three of her best lieutenants at her side."

Torrey shrugged. "You could have taken them."

He grabbed her roughly and shook her hard. "Those are my people, my pack, my friends. I don't want to fight them, Torrey."

Tears wet her cheeks, and she used magic to break his grip. Gathering the force of a deep hurt that had nothing to do with the bruises she was going to have on her upper arms where his fingers bit into her flesh, she pushed him away. He flew through the air to land on his ass ten feet away. The charm dampened the force of her blow.

He might have closed the distance with one leap, but he didn't move. He stayed where he landed, looking up at Torrey with a mixture of amazement and regret written over his handsome, harsh features.

"Riley is the only family I have left, Shade. If you can't, or won't, get her back, then I'll do it myself. You've awakened my powers. Maybe I haven't mastered them fully, but I feel it flowing through my

body. They call to some instinct inside me that knows exactly how to use them.”

Turning on her heel, she headed into the house. There had to be something in there that would give her a clue as to where she might find Soren. She would offer herself to Soren in exchange for Riley. When Riley was safely away, she would kill Soren. She might die, too, but Soren would no longer be a threat to the Daughters of Circe.

Caiden. She needed to see Caiden. She headed to her room to change into dry clothes. Rifling through drawers she now knew had belonged to Hope, Torrey searched for her sweatshirt. It wasn't a type of clothing she wore often, and she only had one, but that was all she needed. Where the hell was the damn thing?

The door opened behind her. Shade's energies filled the room. Had it always been like this? Was she only able to see it because she was so in touch with a witch's elements? Except to slam drawers a bit more forcefully, she ignored him.

“Torrey...” He exhaled, gathering his courage or expressing frustration. Maybe both. His boots moved closer, thumping on the hardwood floor with the same force her heart thumped against her chest. “Don't leave, Torrey. I said I would free Riley, and I will.”

She said nothing and her actions didn't pause. Where the hell was that damn Buckeyes sweatshirt?

Grasping her firmly by the shoulders, he turned her to face him. “Torrey, I will find Riley. I will bring her home safely.”

Torrey shook her head, the gesture short and generated by her subconscious. “You said you would take me home. You said, if I wanted, you would take me home.” She raised her eyes to meet his. They were dark blue. All silver was gone. “I want to go home.”

His mouth opened and closed in shock, and his hands slid from her shoulders to drop at his sides. “You're upset. I understand that, Torrey, but don't do something stupid. If I take you home, Soren will find you. I can't let him find you.”

She stepped away from Shade. His nearness was too distracting. A large part of her wanted to throw herself in his arms and let his assurances soothe her fears. She took a shaky breath. "I want him to find me. You can't seem to find him, Shade. If I go home, he will come to me. He'll take me to Riley. I should have stayed at home in the first place. I should never have done what the Shadow Man told me to do."

He had given her hope. She saw that now. Hope that Riley would be found. Hope that she wouldn't have to sacrifice her life. Hope was futile.

"Give me another chance, Torrey. Give me tonight." As if he recognized her fragile state, he maintained the distance she put between them. "If I fail tonight, then I will take you home tomorrow."

The energies surrounding him changed. Torrey's mouth dropped open. "You're lying. You have no intention of taking me home."

His temper snapped. The emotion slammed into Torrey with palpable force, knocking her backward into a chair. "I won't use you as bait! I won't give you to him! I won't lose you again! Why are you so hell-bent on dying for Soren's compulsion?"

Finally, she understood. Shifting in the chair so she was sitting up, she leaned forward. "I'm not Hope, Shade. You aren't in love with me. You barely know me."

"I know you." He crossed the room in two strides and bent to hover over her. "My wolf knows your scent, Torrey. You're in my system. No matter who you are or aren't, you are in my system. You were meant to be my mate."

Torrey couldn't breathe. The way he looked at her left no doubt he had no intention of letting her go, ever. Deep down, she responded to him. She wanted to be wanted like this. She wanted to be vital to someone, to Shade. Her breasts followed her lungs by tightening in response to his nearness. "This is about sex?" Her question came out on a breathy whisper.

“No,” he said. “This is about destiny. You were meant to be mine, Torrey. You were meant to be my wife and bear my children.”

She shook her head. This was too much. She wasn’t so sure she didn’t want the life he described, but she knew she couldn’t admit to wanting it, not yet.

Shade didn’t have the patience to wait anymore. Jerking her from the chair, he lifted her against him and kissed her hard. His fingers fisted in her still-damp hair, holding her in place. Delicious heat ran rampant through Torrey’s veins. He was in her system, too. She burrowed her fingers in his hair and kissed him back.

When he broke the kiss, Shade dropped her back into the chair. “Stay here, Torrey. Don’t leave the house. I will return in the morning, and I will have Riley with me.” He was gone before she could respond.

With absent fingers, she traced the places on her lips that throbbed from his show of possession. Outside, an engine roared to life, and the only vehicle for miles left the area. It looked like she was staying, at least until morning. She knew Shade would return without Riley. She knew it as sure as she knew anything.

He had to be tired. He would return in the morning and fall into bed. She would take his keys and leave. It would give her time to cut a deal with Soren.

Kneeling on the floor in front of the dresser, she continued rifling through her drawers for that sweatshirt. Eventually, she found it. Sliding into a fresh pair of underwear and jeans, she threw the OSU shirt on and dug in the closet for her hiking boots. It was thoughtful of Shade to pack everything that wasn’t nailed down.

At the last minute, she withdrew the black blanket from her backpack. If she was going to find Caiden, then it made sense to have something he’d given her. She wrapped it around her shoulders, surprised to find it fit like a cloak.

The tree called to her. The bright glow beckoned in the distance, giving her enough light on this final moonless night to see her way

clear of branches and fallen logs. There was a slight clearing, as if other trees moved away from the majesty of this one white pine.

Caiden sat on the ground beneath the spreading boughs of the lowest branches. He glanced up with a smile on his face and patted the ground next to him. "I see you followed my advice and let the wolf teach you."

"He had a book," Torrey said. "The book told me much more than he did."

"But he showed you how to put the words into practice. I knew he would." Caiden's smile was sad.

Torrey pulled the cloak tighter around her body and sat, cross-legged, on the ground next to him. Immediately, energy flowed into her. The blanket was definitely charmed.

Now that she was close to him and fully awake, Torrey was able to get a much better look at him. He was tall. His muscles were lean and long, and his eyes were intelligent. Everything about his face matched hers. He was handsome without being overly attractive. He could blend into a crowd, lose himself in the masses. Perhaps there was an evolutionary genius to their looks after all. Female birds were brown to blend in, protect them from predatory attack. Perhaps powerful witches were plain for the same reason. It truly didn't matter to Torrey anymore.

"He won't be able to bring Riley back. Soren will only trade her for me, and Shade won't barter me."

Caiden shook his head sadly. "He's in love with you."

She snorted at that. "He thinks I'm the reincarnation of someone he loved. Hope. Maybe you knew her?"

That soft smile was back. His nod was full of sadness. "I knew Hope."

"Then you know I'm not her?" The anticipation she harbored, that she somehow was Hope and didn't remember, faded. "It's driving his actions. If he could accept that I'm just Torrey, then he could make the trade. He could deal with Soren."

Caiden's hand connected with hers. She jumped. Even though she knew she was awake, a large part of her consciousness refused to accept that Caiden might have a physical body. "There is no Torment without Hope. I'm sorry, my lady. Your name was no accident. Francis might have been a horrible father to you, but he named you according to my instructions. Hillary wouldn't listen to me. She hated the name."

There was more, she felt it in her bones. "Why?" She knew there was no need to elaborate. It was obvious why her mother hated the name.

"Because that is what you are. That is your power. Hope brought hope to those she met. You bring torment." Caiden's hand tightened on hers. "That's a powerful thing, Torrey."

She ripped her hand away from his. "That's a terrible thing, Caiden, and you know it. I don't want to bring pain and misery to anyone, especially people I love."

"Riley isn't happy right now, and neither are Shade and Soren. You did that."

Torrey rose to her feet and stood on shaky legs. "No, you did this, Caiden. You made me. You chose to inflict me on the world. You want people to be miserable and in pain."

Caiden rose with her. He towered over her by several inches. "No, Torrey. I was a vessel for creating you, it is true, but you are necessary. You aren't Fury. Yes, those are Daughters of Circe, too. Hope, Bliss, and Desire are as well. You can't have one without the other. They're two halves of a whole."

She stared at him, willing him and the whole conversation far, far away. This was too much. Not only did her long-lost father confirm her given name, he chose what she was, what she represented, what she controlled. Caiden disappeared, and the light from the tree dimmed. Torrey blinked, wondering if she had done that.

"Powerful stuff, witch. I see now why Soren wants you so much."

Torrey pivoted to find Tiffany standing several feet away. In the dim glow of her white pine, Tiffany's beauty hit ethereal proportions. Luminous blue eyes dominated a face featuring smooth skin and lush lips. A long mane of blond hair fell to her waist. Though she was clad in pants and a vest that appeared military in style, her fine figure wasn't hidden.

Exactly what had Tiffany seen? Was her arrival the reason Caiden disappeared?

"Are you going to take me to him?" Torrey hoped the answer was in the affirmative. She really wanted a face-to-face with Soren. With her newly found powers, the dynamics of their relationship were definitely different.

Tiffany shook her head. "Soren is already powerful. I fear what will happen if he is able to take your powers from you. I want you gone, witch. I want you far, far from here. Or dead."

The threat did curiously little to instill fear in Torrey. "But you're not going to kill me. If Soren finds out, he'll kill you. Or if Shade finds out, you'll lose your chance with him."

Her smile was the only thing crooked about her. Even that didn't mar Tiffany's perfection. "I lost my chance with Shade a century ago. That's ancient history, especially to someone with a life span as short as yours." She came closer. "I will deliver these two warnings. First, when you use your power, it lights up the senses of any wolf within ten miles. Second, if Soren commands me to kill you, I will do so without hesitation."

Torrey threw caution to the wind. "I want my sister. As soon as I have Riley, I'll leave, and I'll never return."

Tiffany's ears perked up. Her head turned to one side, then the other, looking for all the world like the she-wolf she was. "There is magic all around us, but you are not the source."

It was Caiden. Torrey had no doubt on that front. "Forces out there don't want me hurt, not yet."

Wide blue eyes rounded on her. "If I find your human sister and give her to you, then you will go? I have your word on that, witch? I have your bond?"

"Yes."

"What if Shade cannot let you go?" Tiffany's head moved, fear making her seek out the source of the power Torrey could feel as well. "What if he wishes to take you for his mate? He is drawn to your kind. He always has been."

When he finally figured out she wasn't Hope, he would let her go. "I will deal with Shade. You free Riley, and we'll both disappear from here."

Tiffany nodded once. Extending her hand, she sealed the pact with a handshake. "We have an accord, witch. I must go."

Torrey watched her new ally flee on fleet feet. Wolf visual senses were definitely an asset, as were their senses of hearing and smell. Too bad heavy magic spooked them so badly.

"That was effective," she said.

"That was you," Caiden said, appearing by her side. "You know she cannot see magic? She can only sense it. Your essence is inside this tree, Daughter. Wolves will avoid this area for as long as you live."

She turned to him, gathering her courage. "You're not my father, are you?"

"Not in the way you want," he said. Sympathy softened his face and his words. "I have many Daughters, Torrey, but they command me. I am their servant. I assist when they need a rebirth, and when they need guidance. But no, I am no one's father."

His arms slipped around her, and he held her in the most paternal hug she'd ever received. "Have faith in yourself, Torment. You are only a force of evil if you wish it to be so."

Chapter 12

Shade cursed the day Soren was born, even though it was his day as well. Why did he have to be paired with a brother whose compulsion made their lives a living hell?

He found his brother in the living room. Soren looked up when Shade entered. A wary smile twisted his mouth and clouded his turquoise eyes. "You could have left a note. It's easier to read and far easier to clean up."

"You could have told me you kidnapped a human to hold for a witch's ransom." Shade's fist clenched, an aggressive indicator Soren didn't miss.

"I know how much you love to love witches," Soren said. His head cocked to one side, listening to something Shade couldn't see.

But Shade didn't need to see the demon to know it held Soren captive. "Fight it, Soren. Don't do this. You hate yourself when you do this. Give Riley to me."

"I haven't hurt her," he said. Frustration strangled his words. He had fought it. He was fighting it. He was losing the battle. "I don't want to hurt her. I don't want to hurt either of them."

"Then give her to me. I've already hidden the witch where you can't find her. Let me hide Riley as well." He wanted to mention Torrey as little as possible. Soren might be distracted by his demons, but those little devils didn't miss much. They'd make sure he made connections Shade hoped were missed.

Soren sniffed the air, and then he knelt to finish cleaning up the living room. "Hiding her at your house isn't protection, Shade. And the least you could do is help put everything back. I know you don't

have a compulsion against cleaning or Mom would have coddled you that way, too.”

Apparently, the fact that Alethea had originally been hired to pick up after Shade didn’t qualify as coddling. “I’ll pass. What makes you think the witch is at my house?”

Soren’s grin was ironic. “I smell her all over you, and not just her power. You’ve had her in your bed. That’s a pretty impressive feat considering how much she hates wolves right about now.”

“Just tell me where she is, Soren. She’s innocent, and she’s human. She has no power, nothing for you to covet.” Shade made no move to help Soren. Shoving a pile of books off the sofa, he sat to watch his brother clean. It was a small penance.

“Have you seen her?” Soren asked. The question didn’t require an answer. “She has the face of an angel and the body of a Siren.”

“You’ve used that line before,” Shade said. “It wasn’t original then, either.”

Soren looked up sharply, his brows drawn together as he listened to his demons. “But I mean it this time. Do you think she’ll have me after I kill her sister?”

Shade shook his head. “I think the odds are against you. This is another reason to give her up, Soren.”

A vase flew across the room, shattering against the far wall. Shade stared after it, unimpressed.

“Do you think I want to do this, Shaden? I found her by accident. You said go to the human cities. You said to see how they were different. I found cell phones and computers that are portable, and I found a witch.” Soren fisted his hands in his hair, pulling at the shoulder-length blond strands as if it would quiet his tormentors. “Not just any witch, but a Daughter of Circe.”

Shade was across the room in one stride, his hand to his brother’s throat. “You knew what you found, and you said nothing to me. You gave me no chance to help you, to help *her*.”

Soren made no move to remove his brother's hand. The misery in his light green eyes was undisguised. "I made sure she wasn't Hope. I used that name first, when I tried to extract her power. It didn't work."

"Did you honestly think she would come back with the same name?" Shade dropped his brother. He didn't have it in himself to kill Soren, not yet.

"No," Soren said, straightening his shirt. "But I figured she'd know me." His eyes widened with uncertainty. "She isn't Hope, Shade. She can't be Hope. I can't do this to you twice. I can't do this to her twice."

Hope surged in Shade, but he kept it hidden. "Then give Riley to me. Fight your compulsion long enough to let me take her away from here. I promise, you'll never find either of them again."

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Shade's head jerked in that direction. He hadn't scented anyone else in the house. How was that possible?

"I cast a charm to cover her scent," Soren explained as an auburn-haired beauty with the face of an angel stepped into the room. "I didn't want to leave her in a cave somewhere. She might catch cold."

"I've cleaned up the kitchen," she said, stepping into Soren's embrace and planting a kiss on his cheek. "What did you want for dinner?"

Shade stared at them both, incredulity straining at the lips he pressed tightly together. Why lock a captive away in a room when it was so much easier just to cast a charm on them to make them think being there was voluntary?

"Hi," she said, throwing a welcoming smile in Shade's direction. "You must be Shade. I'm Riley. I hope you'll stay for dinner."

Shade stared deeply into Riley's brown eyes. They were so like Torrey's. "Steak sounds great. Rare, if you don't mind."

Riley's eyes glazed over, and she instantly obeyed Shade's command.

When she was gone, Shade turned on Soren. “That’s low, even for you. Does she think she’s in love with you? That’s rape, you know.”

Soren’s nose wrinkled in disgust. “I haven’t slept with her. She thinks we’re dating, though, so I can’t put her off much longer. She’s creative when she wants to be persuasive. And don’t get all high and mighty on me. You just put a charm of your own on her. Riley hates steak. She’s a vegetarian.”

“Another way you’re not compatible,” Shade said. Scooping a handful of clutter from the floor, he set about helping Soren put the room to rights. He needed to get Riley alone in order to remove Soren’s charms. “Did you take away her memory? Does she remember her dying mother or her sister at all?”

Soren shook his head. “She thinks her parents are off on vacation, and Torrey is at home, working and generally making a mess of her life as usual.”

“What about you?” Shade asked. With the two of them working together, the room was coming along quickly. “Does she know you’re a wolf?”

“Nah,” he said. “She doesn’t know Torrey’s a witch. She thinks it’s some kind of free-spirit, I-love-the-Earth, religious kind of thing. Why scare her?”

As they moved to their father’s study, a room that used to be off-limits to them when they were little, Shade made his pronouncement. “That’s not right, Soren. How long do you plan to keep this up? Torrey is worried out of her skull.”

Soren replaced books on a shelf. “I have another ten days until the full moon. I think I can hold out until then. Having Riley here helps. She calms me.”

“You’re lying to her, and you’re planning to sacrifice her sister. She’s going to hate you when she finds out the truth.” Shade filled the desk drawers with the hundreds of pens scattered on the floor. How many pens did a person need? His father’s compulsion led him to be excessively neat. There was no explanation for the pens.

“She won’t find out from you,” Soren said. “That’s for sure.”

Shade recognized a threat when it was aimed his way.

Most of the house was cleaned by the time Riley called them both for dinner. Two large steaks, barely cooked, sat at either end of the long dining room table neither of the men had used since their mother was alive. Near the plates sat bowls of salad and little plates with baked potatoes on them.

Shade sat at one end and studied Riley, who seated herself in the middle of the brothers. Her plate featured a salad to go with her baked potato. He knew better than to judge her. Hope had been a vegetarian as well. He had been relieved to see Torrey scarf down a hamburger. Meat was a staple of a werewolf’s diet. It was how they were built.

She lit candles down the center of the table. In lieu of flowers, she had found evergreen branches to lend color and gaiety to the setting.

“This looks great,” Shade said. “Thanks, Riley.”

“It’s lovely, darling,” Soren said, reaching out to stroke the side of her face. She smiled and turned her cheek into the caress.

The affection was real, and that fact startled Shade. Both of them actually liked one another. This was going to be more difficult than he realized. Soren’s charm would be that much more powerful because Riley wanted to believe the fantasies he planted in her head. Great. Torrey was going to be pissed.

Riley asked polite questions as the meal began. She wanted to know where Shade lived, and what he did for a living. She mentioned the weather, and then she broke off sharply.

“I forgot the drinks.”

As she rose to get them, Soren waved her back down. “You’ve done enough, honey. Shade will get the wine.” To Shade, he said, “Choose something festive. Let’s break out the good stuff.”

Shade headed downstairs, to the part of the house that had been carved from the solid limestone rock that ran in large veins through the entire area. With no great care, he grabbed a bottle of wine and

headed upstairs. If Soren really wanted to impress his guest, then he needed to remove the charms and do it honestly.

The rest of the meal progressed well. Shade said little. Every thought floating through his head centered around Torrey. He felt sorry for Riley. Her mother was dead, and she didn't even know it. Telling her would set off Soren's demons. Despite his words to Torrey, he wanted to settle this peacefully. He didn't want to kill Soren unless there was no other alternative. There were still ten days until the first full moon.

After they ate, Riley served coffee. He knew it wasn't poisoned because they all drank from the same pot. However, he felt the ill effects of something. Numbness permeated his mouth and chest. His thoughts were fuddled, and time began to bend.

Staggering to his feet, he knew he had to leave before Soren locked him in one of those stone rooms for the next eleven days. He had to get to Torrey. He had to protect her.

A strong hand closed around his elbow. Looking down, he saw it matched his own hands. Except for their coloring, he and Soren were remarkably the same.

"Hey there. You look like you've had a little too much wine."

Shade faced Soren squarely. "This wasn't the wine. You did this." His brief absence from the table flashed through his head. The trip to the wine cellar should have been an obvious omen. Wolves were susceptible to so few herbs, all of them well known to Soren. "You did something to my food."

"Why don't you come and lie down?" Soren said. "I kept your room exactly the same for you."

With a feral growl, Shade ripped his arm from Soren's grip. Silver stained his eyes, and his teeth elongated. He needed to get himself under control. If he turned into a wolf tonight, he would head straight for Torrey. In his drugged state, he might resort to instinct and hurt her.

He didn't remember leaving Lyton, and he didn't remember how he got home. His only coherent memory was the fright in Torrey's eyes when he fell through the front door and into her arms.

Chapter 13

She dropped him. Not because she wanted to drop him, but because he was too heavy. It was either that, or they would both crash to the floor.

She crouched beside him to search his body for wounds. She found nothing. His skin, always warm to the touch, burned, and his breathing was labored. She pressed her wrist to his forehead. His lids opened and he stared, glassy-eyed, at her.

“Bastard drugged me. I got away before he could lock me up.” The words were slurred and mumbled, but Torrey made them out.

“What kind of drug, Shade? Maybe I can help.”

His grip on her arm was weak, and the little bit of coherence he managed disappeared as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Raising her arms as she had in the hospital, she commanded the water in his body. She visualized it flowing through membranes, pushing the poison out of his body. Nothing happened.

It took some pushing and shoving and more face-slapping than she liked, but Torrey got Shade up the stairs and into his bed. They both dripped with perspiration. Shade’s was from the fever; hers was from the physical exertion.

For her entire life, Torrey had been as tall as or taller than the majority of people she met. This was the first time she ever empathized with what life must be like for short people. Shade was a big man. Everything from his build to his attitude made him seem invincible. As she took a minute to catch her breath, she watched him labor to breathe, and she realized just how fragile life really was.

She disappeared into the bathroom to wet some towels. She stripped him down and sponged his skin with cool cloths.

“You’re going to get through this, Shade. You’re going to be alright. Soren wouldn’t do anything that would kill you.” As she worked to cool him down, she prayed her words were true. In that moment, when losing him suddenly became a very real possibility, she admitted to herself she loved him, that something deep inside her had always loved him.

She cleared off a chair and pushed it closer to the bed. Sleep came in fits and spurts that first night. Every move Shade made, every moan, jerked Torrey fully awake. She would search him for some sign, some clue, something to indicate he had turned a corner.

Morning found her awake and exhausted. She managed to get him to swallow some water, but that was all. Toward mid-morning, he slipped into a deep sleep.

Torrey climbed in bed next to him and slept fitfully before exhaustion claimed her. When she woke, it was evening. Her neglected stomach growled. Next to her, Shade hadn’t moved. He was no longer sweating, but she wasn’t sure that was a good thing. At least if he was sweating, then maybe the poison was being worked out.

She made broth, but she couldn’t rouse him to eat. For three days, he neither moved nor drank anything. She needed to get the poison out of his body. He needed to wake up to drink something, or he would die of dehydration long before the poison killed him. She combed his library, but she came up empty. Desperation drove her to the slave owner’s journal and his disgusting rituals.

Skimming the beginning, she skipped all the parts about the witch’s obsession with finding werewolves and vampires. He gave up on vampires, declaring them objects of fiction and delusion. But he managed to capture a werewolf.

May 16

The female is monstrously big. No proper human woman would so much as consider growing to such an unnatural size. It is rumored to give birth in litters, which is also an evil and unnatural occurrence, fit only for animals. This proves my theory that werewolves are animals, not human, and therefore should not be accorded rights and privileges of a human. They are soul-less beings, useful only for purposes of study.

Being shape-shifters, they are also creatures of magic. I postulate that it is possible for a powerful witch, such as myself, to transfer the magical abilities of these creatures to another magical being. Logic tells me that, in the hands of a sentient, soul-bearing being, the shape-shifting abilities will not be limited to the wolf form.

It is my opinion that ancient stories of witches and their familiars are tales of witches who have taken magic from the shape-shifters. I shall attempt to replicate the same feat here.

I cannot risk my only sample. I must capture a male. In the natural course of time, they will mate and produce offspring. It is from these progeny that I will successfully complete my experiments.

A sickening presentiment clenched Torrey's stomach. Except for the part where the witch planned to force the wolf to reproduce, this was exactly what Soren planned to do to her. Only it wasn't an experiment. Soren knew exactly what to do. Had wolves discovered how to steal power before witches?

Both Shade and Soren had abilities that were not native to werewolves. They could cast charms, which were primitive spells. Torrey knew of no witches who could shape-shift.

She flipped ahead, skipping the witch's accounts of his hunting forays. At last, she found where he captured a male.

September 22

The male is even larger than the female, which was to be expected. It is the reason I cast so many charms in my trap. I've

knocked him senseless and done the necessary examination to make sure this specimen is male. If I had captured another female, it would have been prudent to keep both. Males of all species like variety. It is the natural order of things.

He is magnificent, even if he is evil and unnatural. Where the female is a dull brown, the male is a multitude of colors, mostly silver, white, and black. I have reason to believe this is but a juvenile. This bodes well for my purposes. Juveniles of all species are eager to procreate. I, myself, have sired several offspring, mostly before the age of twenty. Of course, they are not suitable progeny and are better left to their fate.

The sick feeling returned. Torrey had no doubt the witch had captured Shade. The inevitable conclusion would be the death of the witch. She couldn't imagine Shade calmly walking away from this horrible experience. Skimming over accounts of more experiments on slaves, Torrey found where he began discussing Shade and his companion in bondage.

September 30

The male is definitely a juvenile. In his humanoid form, he defers to the older female, treating her as an aunt or a grandmother. In human form, the female is attractive. She appears to be around twenty-five years old, but the ages of wolves are deceiving. The male, a strapping specimen that has even attracted the notice of several female slaves, appears to be around sixteen. I hope this does not mean he lacks sexual maturity. I cannot wait much longer. I have directed them to mate, but they have thus far refused.

The male challenges my authority. He growls and prowls his cage. If the charms ever fail, I have no doubt he will kill me.

Yasmine, one of my more exotic purchases, informs me that a scratch or a bite from a werewolf will infect me with the disease. She

imparted this information during a beating, and in the form of a threat, but I think the theory bears further inquiry.

More experiments with slaves. This time, Torrey did not skip them because they involved Shade and the woman whose name wasn't disclosed.

October 12

I have forced a transformation. It appears moonlight is a necessary component of change for this species. I was able to induce the transformation only under its unholy light. By tossing slaves toward the cages and into the area of the charm, I was able to expose them to injury. I had to provoke both wolves, and it has taken several days for them to calm down, but it was worth the effort.

Sixteen slaves were infected. Three have died from their injuries. The fever is upon the rest of them. Yasmine practices her voodoo, thinking she is casting spells of protection around herself, but she has no power. It is nothing more than a futile wish. I did not expose her, as I may need her knowledge later. Additionally, she is an attractive filly, and she no longer fights me.

October 19

I watch the slaves, but a week has passed and nothing has happened. The moon approaches fullness. I am hopeful that the full moon will bring my plan to fruition. I have chained the slaves and cast charms around the cabin where I keep them, just in case.

Yasmine begs me to call the poison from their bodies. She recognizes and fears my power, yet she has the temerity to suggest I put an end to my experiments. Even if I was predisposed to be sympathetic to these creatures, I would not waste my strength and talent healing them. That kind of Calling is simple, yet draining. It would kill me to heal all of these heathens.

October 23

Disaster has struck. Howling drew me to the cabin late last night. Each of the thirteen slaves were in the midst of transformation. The process was fascinating to watch. First, the eyes turned silver. Teeth elongated, and claws formed, both on the hands and the feet. Bone shapes changed. Muscles contracted or elongated.

The transformation, which did not produce signs of pain in the werewolves, appeared exceedingly painful. The howling was a modified screaming; the vocal cords were among the first organs to change. At least I no longer had to listen to the begging.

Then the unthinkable happened. As the slaves changed to a wolf form, most of them fell to the floor, completely dead. Of the original thirteen, only two survived this process. If I choose to make more wolves this way, the experiment will be very costly, indeed. The smaller slaves were the first to die. Only the largest and healthiest survived.

Yasmine, upon seeing the carnage, obtained a kitchen knife and killed herself. I am upset. I purchased her from Egypt. She was expensive, the cost easily twice that of a normal slave, as I had to have her smuggled into the country. It will be awhile before I do that again. Though, she did point my research in a new direction. I guess the monetary loss was worth it to gain this new knowledge.

I will begin my experiments tonight.

The entries stopped after that. Torrey blinked at the empty yellow pages that followed. Shade had escaped. Had his companion? What happened to the two slaves who were changed to werewolves?

In the quiet light of the afternoon, she watched Shade and let tears flow down her cheeks. He was so pale. His pasty white skin stood out in sharp contrast to his black hair and brows. The stubble covering his cheeks and neck hadn't grown since he'd been sick. The skin there took on a deathly grey pallor.

The man she loved was at death's door.

In a daze, Torrey dragged herself to the kitchen for a meal and forced herself to shower. Traditional methods of caring for the sick were ineffective in this case. Torrey realized she needed to get her strength up so she could attempt a Calling spell. The witch had said they were simple, but that they required much strength.

She climbed into bed with Shade, curled her body against his much warmer one, and willed herself to sleep.

She needed her strength.

Chapter 14

His eyes were open when she woke. Their blue was lighter than she'd ever seen them, but they were nowhere close to turning silver. He smiled at her. The first light of dawn streaked through the windows.

"I love watching you sleep. You're so beautiful." His fingertips traced a path over her cheek, caressing her jawline. Heat burned into her, branding his touch into her skin. "So incredibly lovely. I love you. I know we haven't known each other for very long, but I feel this to my very soul. I knew it from the moment I first saw you."

Torrey's breath caught. She was dreaming. She had to be dreaming, yet his fingers were rough on her skin, and he was so very pale.

"Shade." It was a whisper, a prayer, and a plea. "You're awake."

"Of course I'm awake." His smile was lazy and sleepy. The hand that trailed down her arm and over her hip was wide awake. "I want to make love to you." When he kissed her, his lips were firm and knowing. He lit a desperate fire. "Let me make love to you, sweetheart. Let me show you how much I love you."

She wanted that. Torrey had been in love once before, but even that had been nothing like what she felt for Shade. She was connected to him in a way she had never been connected to another soul. He knew her in a way nobody else could, and she knew him the same way. She kissed him back and let her hand roam his wide, chiseled chest.

He was already naked. After she had stripped his clothes away that first night, she had no energy left to wrestle him into clothes.

Plus, it was easier to give him sponge baths this way. In seconds, his adept hands maneuvered the long T-shirt from her body. He pushed back the covers to caress her with his eyes and his hands.

“Beautiful, sweetheart. You’re so beautiful. I can’t stop looking at you. When I close my eyes, I see you, smiling up at me.” One hand slid from her thigh, over her hip, and up to cup her cheek. His gaze penetrated her very being. “I want to be with you always. Tell me you want that, too.”

Torrey lifted a hand to his beard-roughened cheek. “I want that, Shade. I love you, and I want to be with you always.”

He touched her body, caressing her with his hands and his mouth. Words of love flowed from him. Torrey let him take the lead, knowing he needed to do this. He needed to love her like this, and she wanted to be loved like this, by him.

She arched into his hands as they kneaded her breasts. She moaned as he kissed the sensitive place where her legs met her hips, and she writhed when his tongue delved into her folds.

He didn’t lick her for long. Drawing himself up, he leaned over her, resting his weight on his elbows. “I can’t wait, sweetheart. I need to be inside you.”

Thrusting her throbbing pussy against the long, hard cock he positioned at her entrance, she said, “Don’t wait, Shade. I want you inside me.”

He penetrated her slowly, thrusting with careful strokes, claiming her by inches. When he was completely in, he lowered his lips to hers. She opened under the feathery caress, meeting his tongue with hers.

Without breaking the kiss, he withdrew almost completely and thrust into her, faster and faster. Torrey fisted one hand in his thick mane of black hair and dug into his shoulder with the other. She wrapped her legs around his hips, wholly opening herself to him. Fantastic heat built inside, exploding in a sea of colors. Torrey’s body stiffened. She couldn’t move, not even to scream the largest, sweetest climax she’d ever had.

He came, flooding her womb with his seed, and collapsed on top of her.

She clung to him, her heart hammering against his, and decided there had to be another way to save Riley and deal with Soren. She couldn't leave Shade. She couldn't give up a life with him, not when it was so clear he was her soul mate. She could live a thousand lifetimes and not find this. Deep inside, in a place she couldn't quite access, she knew she was meant to be with Shade.

He rolled to the side, taking her with him, and wrapped her in his arms. He kissed her forehead. "I love you, Hope. Always."

Pain. Soul-searing pain. Torrey lifted her head from the comfortable place on his shoulder to look at him. Morning had arrived while they made love. In the soft, clear light, she saw the fever in his eyes. The light blue wasn't love; it was delirium.

He stared at her expectantly. Licking her suddenly dry lips, she calmed the tremors running through her body. "I love you, too, Shade. Always."

She was telling the truth, and it hurt. He wasn't in love with her. He wasn't even with *her*. He thought she was Hope. He had made love to Hope.

He fell asleep with a serene smile on his lips.

Torrey slid from beneath the covers and retrieved her clothes. She hid her tears under the spray of the shower.

The water brought a connection to the earth. Energy flowed through her, a drug whose pull she couldn't resist. Since she had begun using her powers, thanks to Shade's teachings, her connection to earth and water had increased exponentially. Slipping into the euphoria, she let herself be swept away from this world and the mess that was her life.

Caiden knelt in front of a fire, feeding it a steady diet of kindling. The fire provided the only light. Dank smells permeated the tight space. Torrey could feel the closeness of the walls nearby. The damp air and the smoke from the fire made it difficult to breathe.

In the light from the fire, she made out a blocky table covered with jars and littered with pieces of plant life.

Torrey drew her black cloak tightly around her body, protecting herself from the toxins in the air. They were in a cave. “Caiden, that fire is going to smother us. There’s no ventilation for the smoke.”

He chuckled lightly. “I am not mortal. Nothing can kill me except you. And you, my dear Daughter, are in a shower far from here. Your spirit cannot suffocate.”

Turning away from the fire, he stood and held a hand to Torrey. She took it, letting his spirit sink into hers. “Shade is dying.”

They settled on the floor in front of the fire. He kept her hand in his.

Caiden’s head cocked to the side. “You need to save him.”

“I love him.” The simple statement summed up her problem so well. She loved Shade. She loved Riley. How could she do right by both of them?

He nodded knowingly. “You were meant to love him.”

Spurred by a breaking heart and more than a little desperation, she snapped at Caiden. “I’m not Hope. He loves Hope. How can you sit there and say something like that? I want to know what you know, Caiden. Tell me how to save him. Tell me how to make this right.”

His eyes softened. “I’m sorry, Torment, but I only know what you know. You created me. You charged me with my tasks. I love you. I love all of my Daughters without condition and without reserve. I would do anything for you, but I only know what you know.”

She blinked at him. The convoluted logic was beginning to make sense to her. At one point, all of the Daughters of Circe must have been together. She must have worked with her sisters to create the cycle of rebirth that kept her coming back from the dead. Somewhere along the line, they must have created Caiden.

Then she caught the incongruity. “But if you only know what I know, then how did you know about the Daughters of Circe and all

that stuff, but I didn't?" She studied his dark brown eyes closely, peering into him in a way she hadn't known possible.

"There is a blankness in you," he said.

The moment he voiced the thought, she knew with her whole heart and soul, it was true. There was something inside her that had blocked her powers and her innate knowledge of who and what she was. Shade had unlocked that door, but it was up to her to explore the cavern.

"It's magical," he said. "Somebody did this to you."

Now she understood what he meant about knowing only what she knew. He spoke thoughts surfacing in her mind. Frank. Frank did this to her. He probably cast this spell on her when she was a defenseless infant. He hated Caiden. He hated Torrey.

"My mom didn't fight with Frank, did she?" she asked. There was no need to clarify. Caiden was part of her consciousness, part of her very being.

Caiden grinned. "A trick of the light. It was necessary."

"A charm." Torrey smiled regretfully. Frank spent his entire adult life thinking Hillary had loved another man. It was a cruel trick, and Torrey was as responsible for it as Caiden. Now she saw the harm of simple charms. She saw the responsibility that all Daughters of Circe carried.

Caiden stood. "You must work to erase the blankness, Torrey. What you don't know can kill you."

Sensing her time with him was done, Torrey stood. "I have to save Shade."

Caiden's smile was tragic. "Yes. You do."

Cold, sharp shards of water pummeled her skin. Hastily, she shut off the tap and snatched a towel from the rack. She checked on Shade before she went down to have breakfast.

She knew what she needed to do. A Calling spell was required. She was going to rip apart his library and meditate under her tree until

she found the knowledge she needed. One way or another, she was going to save Shade, and Soren was going to pay for this with his life.

Chapter 15

A thorough search of Shade's library revealed nothing. She ransacked every room in his house, throwing it into more disarray than it had been when she arrived. The day melted away. Exhausted, she killed the lights downstairs and went to inspect Shade's room. In a box under a mountain of neatly folded clothes, she stumbled upon something familiar.

It was a beaded necklace. Each of the large wooden beads came from a different variety of tree. With little doubt, Torrey was able to identify each kind of wood—oak, mahogany, maple, white pine, and redwood. She counted thirteen in all.

The pattern echoed with smaller beads on each side, completing the circle. Fine lines were etched into the highly polished wood, too small to see with her human eyes. Lightly, she caressed the etchings on the white pine. This was her tree. This was her necklace.

How did Shade come to have something so closely tied to her essence?

On the bed, he stirred, throwing a restless arm over his head. His mouth twisted with pain. Drifting closer, Torrey drew her hand over his forehead. If his body temperature rose any more, he was going to burst into flame. She didn't care if fire was his element or not, immolation wasn't survivable.

In her hand, the bead glowed, illuminating the details of the picture with startling clarity.

Some of the blankness disappeared. Power surged through Torrey. Shade's fire fed her. Spreading her palm over his sweaty forehead, she called the poison from his body. He writhed, dislodging the sheet

covering his body and her hand from his head. A deep, disturbing moan issued from his chest.

She waited for him to calm before trying again.

This time, she reached for his shoulder. Words popped into her head, revealing themselves in the vast void with which Frank had cursed her. She said them, unaware of the syllables falling from her tongue. She concentrated on the meaning, on the feelings flowing through her body, and on the man who owned her heart.

He thrashed violently, smacking her away with one swipe of his powerful hand.

Shocked, Torrey snatched her hand back. Didn't he know she was trying to help him? Her hand encircled her wrist, rubbing where he had hit her. The skin was red and swollen. Blood rushed to the surface, pooling purple under her skin. It was going to be a nasty bruise.

She refused to give up. What did one little bruise mean when his life was at stake? He had calmed again. She leaned down to press a kiss against his forehead. "Let me do this, Shade. Let me heal you. Let me give you this one thing."

Not surprisingly, he didn't respond. She smoothed his black hair away from his face, craving that moment when color returned to his skin and he no longer resembled the undead.

Throwing back her shoulders, she moved down, away from his arms. His feet were tangled in the sheet that no longer covered his magnificent, long body. She chose to rest her hand on his thigh. She calculated minimal damage should he lash out at her again, which she now expected.

She took a deep breath and let energy flow from her to him. The words came automatically. The poison moved. Wolf bane. How could his own brother do this to him? If he wasn't such a powerful werewolf, Shade would be dead by now.

He thrashed, but she managed to hang on. The poison flowed, but only from the place where she touched him. He kicked at her, but she moved out of the way, neatly avoiding those powerful appendages.

Hairs sprouted on his chest. He arched, lifting his body from the bed. Torrey concentrated frantically, desperately hating that she had to hurt him this way. His teeth elongated, as did his hands. She chanted the words faster and faster. If he changed now, he would kill her. In his feverish state, instinct would take over and the wolf would kill the witch, his natural enemy.

She moved her hand up his thigh, concentrating on the portion of his body underneath. White-hot pain seared her side. Something knocked into the back of her head, and everything went black.

When Torrey woke, bright sunlight streamed into the room. She felt as if she'd been in a car accident. Every single molecule of her body screamed with pain.

It took several minutes to orient herself to her situation. She was on the floor across the room from Shade's bed. The oak planks beneath her body were cool and hard. Groaning, she planted her palms against the floor and pushed her torso up to lean against the dresser at her back.

Breathing was painful. Her entire left side was on fire. Looking down, she saw blood soaking through the tatters of cloth that were stuck to her skin. He'd scratched her with his claws. Torrey bit her lip. There was no time to worry about whether he'd sentenced her to a slow death or whether he'd just given her some nasty scars. Even she knew witches couldn't become wolves.

Gathering what was left of her strength, she forced her body to rise. She stumbled to the bathroom, using the walls to support her weight.

Water would restore her. Water would give her the strength she needed. It might even take her to Caiden. Maybe more answers would show up in her brain.

She didn't bother stripping naked to shower. Her shirt needed to be wet, or else it would rip away her skin. As the warm water flowed over her body, she waited for strength to return, for Caiden to appear.

Except that she got wet, nothing happened.

Torrey sank down to sit in the tub, rested her forehead on her knees, and cried. She was too weak to try again. The water made her aware of every inch of her body. The egg-sized swelling on the back of her skull was from hitting the corner of the dresser. It was the injury that knocked her unconscious for an entire night. This was definitely a concussion. She hoped her skull wasn't fractured as well.

Her wrist was a mottled mass of purples and blues. As she finally gathered the courage to peel away her wet clothes, she saw the deep gashes marring her left side just below the ribs.

Gingerly, she tested the bones that shielded her heart. They were bruised, but not broken.

When the water turned cold, she reluctantly gave up. She was exhausted. The water hadn't done a thing except to clean her wound.

Using the mirror, she assessed the damage. Bruised wrist. Bruised ribs. One ugly shiner on her right cheekbone from where she'd hit the floor. A large swelling on the back of her head. Various lighter bruises on her back and on her right side.

All of that paled in comparison to the four parallel gashes on her left side. She needed stitches and some replacement skin. Torrey wasn't sure she had enough skin there to knit together.

Rummaging through Shade's bathroom cabinets produced gauze and tape. A wolf wouldn't need antiseptic. They were impervious to most infections, and they would heal much too quickly to invest in bandages.

She did the best she could, dragged herself to her bed, and passed out.

* * * *

Time passed. Whenever she woke, she forced herself to go to the kitchen and eat something. She brought water and broth to Shade, but he never regained consciousness.

A nearly full moon floated on clouds in the sky. Torrey sat under her tree, clutching the black cloak from Caiden around her shoulders. It was a magical item. She wore the beads around her neck, and she leaned carefully against the trunk of her white pine.

She had never been a quick healer. Though her head felt better and she hadn't passed out in two days, she battled nausea that would rise from nowhere to torment her.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated her energy on the white pine. After several moments she could feel the pith. Nutrients whizzed past cells. She reached out to grab something, but it wasn't the right kind of sustenance. She followed the flow to the roots, checking to see if the damage she caused was repairing.

A low growl jerked her from her trance. If she had the energy, she might have leapt to her feet or at least leaned forward. Slowly, her eyelids rose. Tiffany stood before her, the blond goddess with her three faithful lieutenants.

"I warned you, witch."

Torrey's eyes shifted to peer behind the foursome. "You came alone."

She shifted, tossing her long mane of hair over her shoulder. "Soren is fully aware you are staying with Shade. When he wants you, he will come for you."

Torrey didn't have time to play games with Tiffany. At another time, she might have loved some verbal sparring. Besides that, the she-wolf hadn't followed through on her promise to bring Riley. "He poisoned Shade with wolf bane. I tried to heal him, but I couldn't. I need your help. That's why I'm here. I didn't know how else to find you."

"Wolf bane?" Tiffany's jaw dropped. Behind her, two of her three men gasped. "This is a serious charge."

“I need you to bring him here,” Torrey said. “I can’t lift him.”

One of the lieutenants stepped forward. With their bronze skin, dark hair, and dark eyes, the trio so closely resembled one another that they must have been brothers. “Why would we bring him to you? Why should we trust you not to kill him?”

Torrey’s eyes narrowed in derision. “I love Shade. I would never hurt him.”

Tiffany motioned him back. “If what you say is true, then you’ve had over a week to finish him off.”

Lumbering to her feet, Torrey swayed before stabilizing. They had to be able to smell her wound. It hadn’t stopped oozing blood and pus. “I’m in no condition to be a threat to you. Go to his house. He is in his bed. Bring him here. If I kill him, then you have my permission to kill me. I will not fight you.”

Tiffany waved her hand at the man who had questioned Torrey. “Marius, you stay here with the witch. If she makes one wrong move, kill her.” With one last, distrustful glare, she turned on heel. The other two werewolves followed her.

Torrey sank back to the ground and rested her back against her white pine. Marius stared at her, watching silently. Tiffany returned not more than fifteen minutes later. Her men carried an unconscious Shade wrapped in his sheet.

Again, she struggled to stand. “Lose the sheet. I need him to be touching the ground.”

Despite the frigid air temperature and the colder ground temperature, Tiffany didn’t argue. Perhaps she recognized Torrey’s anguish. “Do as she says.”

Marius cleared the area of rocks and sticks. The other two gently lowered Shade to the bare earth. His fevered, naked skin glistened in the moonlight, drawing strength from that orb that belonged exclusively to a werewolf.

“Light a fire.” Torrey pointed to a spot not far away. The warmth of the flames would reach them. Shade needed this element.

Marius rushed to obey. Torrey deduced he must be the lowest-ranking wolf in the pack. Being a fire creature had perks. Marius had a nice blaze going in no time.

“I need you to hold him down.”

Again, Marius followed the order. “At the shoulders?”

“Everywhere,” she said. “Shoulders, arms, legs, head, everything. He fights this.”

Tiffany and the others bent to do as she directed. “It is the nature of a wolf to fight a witch.”

“It wasn’t always so.” Torrey knew this without a shred of doubt. Or proof. Like magic and the Daughter of Circe thing, the knowledge simply appeared.

Opening her blanket caused a bit of a gasp from her onlookers. Torrey wore no clothes under the heavy garment. She knew she could only heal him where she touched him. This would guarantee maximum coverage.

“What happened to you?” This was from one of the lieutenants whose name she didn’t know. He didn’t bother to hide his shock.

Torrey didn’t bother looking down. “I told you he fought me.”

If they noted the wide, weeping bandage and wondered at its significance, they didn’t voice anything.

She arranged her body on top of his, spreading her arms and legs to rest on top of his. “Hold him tightly.”

With four powerful wolves holding Shade, keeping her perch on top of him still proved challenging. The second she began her magic, he fought with everything he had. His body writhed and bucked. Marius slipped an arm between them and used his awesome strength to hold down Shade’s midsection.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated the magic. Soon, she sensed the poison. Just like before, the words came to her tongue and fell out, whispered magic. The beads burned where they touched her neck.

The poison left his liver and heart and lungs to soak into the loamy soil underneath them both. She worked to heal the cells in his arms and legs.

“What is this travesty?”

Soren’s voice sounded from a distance, but it had never gone far, not really. It haunted her nightmares. Fire shot through her skull as he lifted her by the hair, ripping her from Shade’s body. She hung, limp in his grasp, unable to summon the strength to move her feet to where her weight would rest on them.

“My magic is almost gone.” The hate in her eyes pierced him, though he didn’t seem to notice. “Shade will live.”

He bared his teeth at her, the growl transforming his handsome face to something menacing. “But you will not.”

“No,” she agreed. “But you’ll get nothing from me. What I didn’t give to Shade, he took from me. I will die before the moon is full.”

At that, she ripped away the makeshift bandage covering her side. The four weeping gashes stood out in vivid contrast to her pale, sickly skin.

“We thwarted you, Soren. You can kill me again and again and again, and we will make sure you get nothing from me each time.”

The fever must have stolen her sanity. For a moment, she believed with her whole heart and soul that she was Hope, reincarnated.

The edges of her vision grayed, then faded altogether as she lost her battle with consciousness.

Chapter 16

Sunlight streamed through the window, beating like little hammers inside his skull. Before he even opened his eyes, Shade knew he was in his old room. Given the state of his head, he had no doubt enjoyed too much moonshine with Soren the night before. This was one hell of a hangover.

His bare feet thumped softly against the dark cherry flooring his mother insisted be installed throughout the house over a hundred years before. As the sheet fell away, he noted his naked state. Where were his clothes?

The frown hurt too much, so he settled for thinking grouchy thoughts as he lumbered into the bathroom. The jets sprayed warm water over his body. He found the water soothing, but the hiss of the water as it poured out of the showerhead hurt almost as bad as sunlight had.

A hair of the dog, that's what he needed. With nothing more than a towel around his waist, he headed to Soren's room. If that bastard had taken Shade's clothes, he had no grounds on which to object to sharing his own.

Soren wasn't in his room, but that didn't surprise Shade. Because he was in charge of the entire village, Soren was often called upon to mediate disputes or perform ceremonies. Today was Saturday. Right?

Shade grabbed a pair of boxers from a stack of clean laundry on Soren's dresser and slipped them on. He did the same with jeans and a flannel shirt. Digging for socks took a little longer. Soren didn't have those lying in the open, so Shade was forced to surrender to his compulsion.

It served Soren right. Who took a man's clothes when he was sleeping?

He would have thundered down the stairs, but sounds made his head pound. He crept to the kitchen, heading straight for the cupboard where Soren kept the good stuff. Regular alcohol didn't have a real effect on a wolf. Moonshine, which hillbilly farmers adapted for their own ends, was the only thing that could make a werewolf drunk.

Smells assaulted him, halting him before he made it more than a step into the kitchen. Eggs. Bacon. Sausage. Human female.

A pretty one, with hair the color of sun-kissed straw. She turned to look at him, her smile originating in friendly round eyes the color of walnuts. She was beautiful. Shade felt a pull toward her, but not because he found her attractive. She was familiar.

"Hi," he said.

She waved toward the table. "Sit. Soren said you would be up eventually. I heard the shower and decided to make breakfast for you."

"I... Thank you." He did as he was told. "Have we met?"

She laughed, an innocuous sound that invited him to laugh with her. "Soren said you might not remember much." Lifting the skillet, she poured food onto a plate. "I'm Riley. I'm staying here with Soren for a little while."

The aroma of freshly cooked sausage links was impossible to resist. Shade inhaled his food. He felt like he hadn't eaten in a week. As he ate, his headache faded.

Riley watched, amusement twinkling in her eyes. "There's some steak in the refrigerator. Leftovers from last night. I could heat some up for you."

Shade nodded. "I have no idea why I'm so hungry." He pressed a hand to his forehead. "What day is today?"

That laugh sounded again. "Thursday, you goof." She set a plate in the microwave.

"Don't let Alethea see you do that," he warned.

Riley turned, her eyes wide, and her hand clamped over her mouth. She moved it to stage-whisper in his direction. "Don't tell Soren I made breakfast for you. He said to stay away, to not let you see me. You're not nearly the ogre he makes you out to be."

The image in front of him blurred. A memory surfaced. "Riley Quinn."

A smile brightened her face. "You do remember me."

Color drained from his face. "Torrey hired me to find you." Memories rushed at him, assaulting his senses. Her scent. Her taste. The fear behind her beautiful brown eyes as she struggled to help him up the stairs.

His memory was clear up until the point where he passed out in his own bed. How had he come to be at Soren's house? Where was Torrey? Even if she knew how, she wouldn't have contacted Soren. Soren was the one who poisoned him. Wolf bane.

"Why would she do that?" Riley's head tilted to the side. She was honestly perplexed. "I told her I was going on vacation for a few weeks."

Soren's scent invaded the room. Shade stood. "This isn't a vacation. Soren kidnapped you. He's used a charm to make you think you want to be here."

"You need to get out more, Shade," Soren said. "You lack any sense of fun or adventure." His broad-shouldered frame rested casually against the side of the refrigerator. He pushed a lock of blond hair away from his eye and winked at Riley. "Hey, babe. Miss me?"

Riley looked from Shade to Soren, a frown marring her brow. She must have picked up on the tension between the brothers. "What's going on?"

Shade nailed Soren with a glare. "Where is Torrey? If you hurt her, I will kill you."

Soren shrugged and shoved his hands into his pockets. "I didn't need to hurt her. You took care of that all by yourself. If using all her

energy to heal you didn't kill her, the beating you gave her will do the trick. I doubt she'll last the day."

Pain, anguish like nothing he'd ever felt stabbed his heart. "I would never hurt her. I love her."

Looking down, Soren kicked a heel at the toe of his other boot. "And yet, you did." Soren's eyes rose to meet Shade's. Anguish was there, too. "She's asking for you. I figure I ought to let you say goodbye. I'm going to do the ritual this afternoon, get what I can from her."

"Bastard." The word morphed into a low growl as Shade launched himself at Soren. The brothers grappled on the ground. Shade found it difficult to hit his target.

Soren had him pinned in minutes. It was the most pathetic fight they'd ever had. Even friendly brawls ended with wounds for everyone.

Soren's green eyes penetrated Shade's tormented ones. "You're still weak from the wolf bane. She couldn't heal you completely. It's going to take some time until you're back up to full strength."

Riley beat on Soren's shoulders. She echoed Shade's words and worse. "You unbelievable bastard. You made me think I loved you. I almost slept with you!"

One look from Soren quelled the fight in Riley. She backed away, her face white with fear.

"Don't go outside, Riley. It isn't safe. Nobody will harm you in here, under my protection. Don't make the mistake of disobeying me again." His voice was calm. His warning was clear.

Shade dismissed Riley altogether. If something happened to Torrey, he didn't care what happened to anyone else. "Where is Torrey?"

"Where do you think she is?" Soren snorted. There was a place that had been carved out of the mountainside centuries ago. In the past, they had used it as a dungeon. The limestone walls dampened a witch's power.

The witch who had captured Shade all those years ago, when he was not yet fully grown, had been kept down there until he died from his wounds. It was a comfortable room, albeit cold.

Shade's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Take me to her."

Soren's eyes perked up, and his head cocked to the side. Shade recognized the signs of his demon whispering commands. Soren stood, backing away from Shade. "No. Let him have this time with her." His head shook from side to side. Finally, he pinned his teal-eyed gaze on Shade. "Your word that you will not try to stop me."

It was as close to a plea he was going to hear from Soren. The demon felt threatened by Shade's presence, as it frequently did. Shade's word was normally his bond. He nodded, making a promise he had no intention of honoring. "I promise. Take me to her. Let me have this time with her."

Over the years, Shade had found great benefit in parroting Soren's words back to him. It seemed to mollify the demon. The habit stood him in good stead this time as well. With a curt nod, Soren indicated he would follow Shade.

Shade raced down the three flights of stairs. Wooden steps were replaced with those carved from solid limestone. The air was cold and dank. Fear seized him. What if Soren had been telling the truth about what Torrey had been through? He had been out of his mind. He had no idea what happened after he arrived home, his body riddled with wolf bane.

The room wasn't locked. The door wasn't closed. Shade burst through the low, crude opening. The sight of Torrey's still form lying on the bed brought him up short.

In a hundred years, little in the room had changed. The rug covering the stone floor had rotted away, and the mattress on the ancient bed frame was new, but that was all.

Even the manacles were still there. They were locked around Torrey's wrists, which were raised above her head. A black blanket covered her body, but he knew her ankles were chained as well.

Her eyes were closed, and she did not move.

He approached the bed. Fevered heat rolled from her body. A purple bruise marred her right cheek. Someone had hit her. He bit back nausea. "Torrey?"

Now her lashes fluttered. She opened her eyes, but those brown irises took longer to focus. A tremulous smile briefly lifted the corners of her mouth. "You're alright."

"You're not looking too good." He attempted a light tone and failed.

"I never expected to survive this." Her gaze was suddenly intense. "Keep your promise, Shade. Take Riley out of here. Make sure she's safe."

"I'm not leaving without you." The words came from behind Shade. Riley shoved him aside to fall on her knees next to the low bed. "You wouldn't leave without me, Torrey. I won't leave without you." Tears glistened in Riley's eyes.

Shade turned to Soren, lingering in the doorway. "Are the manacles necessary? She's drained, Soren. She can barely stay awake. I don't think she's a flight risk."

Soren shrugged. "You should see what's under the blanket."

Dread clutched Shade's stomach. Part of him didn't want to see the rest of the damage. He could smell fresh blood.

Riley didn't hesitate. She ripped away the heavy blanket and gasped.

"You took a pretty good chunk out of her side," Soren said. "I think the rest of the bruises are from whatever you threw her into."

Wordlessly, Shade shook his head. He couldn't have done this, not to Torrey. He'd rather die than hurt her.

"She tried to heal you. It's a natural reaction to magic, given your history with witches." Soren came closer to peer over Shade's shoulder. "She had Tiffany, Flynn, Demetrius, and Marius holding you down so she could reverse the effects of the poison."

Torrey shivered. Riley covered her back up.

Shade's breath came in short pants. "You would have let me die."

Soren's nod was brief. "Maybe one day you'll kill me and put us all out of our misery." He headed for the door before Shade could answer. "The key is in here somewhere."

"Bastard," Shade mumbled under his breath. There was very little furniture in the room, but the walls were rough-hewn from porous limestone. Water had years to penetrate and widen the cracks. There were hundreds of crannies where it could have been shoved. His compulsion triggered, and he set to work.

Chapter 17

“What are you doing?”

Riley’s question was logical. She stared at him incredulously as he stuck his fingers into every single crack in the wall, even those into which he could clearly see.

“He can’t help it,” Torrey said. Her voice sounded much more weak and pathetic than it should have. “Soren can’t help it, either.”

Riley stared at her sister, turning those wide eyes on Torrey. “Don’t tell me you’re defending him? He kidnapped me, he tried to murder his brother, and he has every intention of sacrificing you tonight at some evil ritual. All he needs is an evil laugh and some lightning special effects, and you’ve got a classic villain.”

The compulsion was an unforeseeable side effect of a shape-shifter. When Circe made the first werewolf, it wasn’t something she thought out. It had been an act of desperation. She had been trying to protect her lover from something. The details weren’t clear, but that much Torrey knew.

She had no energy to explain it to Riley. “Move the bed,” she said. “I think the key is under one of the posts.”

Grunting and groaning, Riley put her shoulder into the task. The wooden frame was much heavier than it appeared. Each bump caused Torrey to grimace and groan. The gashes in her side burned. That burning had spread throughout her body. She knew she had a fever, and she knew the fever was a good thing.

This is what Circe wanted for her Daughters. The pain was a passing thing. She would barely remember it in the years and lifetimes to come. With the pain came knowledge and clarity. It

wasn't all there, but the blankness in her head was slowly shrinking. She knew without a doubt Shade had recognized her the moment he first saw her. She knew without a doubt she had been Hope.

Her time as Hope had been one in a series of lifetimes she spent searching for him. Sometimes she found him. Sometimes she did not. She was always a witch, and he was always a werewolf. Their bodies and names changed, but their souls remained the same, forever seeking one another.

By the time Shade finished searching every inch of every possible cranny in the walls, Riley had unlocked the manacles. His compulsion left as suddenly as it appeared. Turning to Torrey, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"It was under the post," Riley supplied. "We have to get her out of here. She needs a doctor."

Shade shook his head. "No doctor can cure her."

"I'm not sick," Torrey said. "I need the sun and the moon." She struggled to sit. The gashes twisted, ripping open the little bit of skin that had healed. Her breathing was labored, laced with evidence of pain.

"Lie down," Riley said, her brown eyes wide with fear and desperation. "You shouldn't move. Shade can carry you out of here."

Torrey bit the inside of her cheek to stop a moan from escaping. Silently, she exchanged words with Shade. He needed to follow her lead in this.

Understanding dawned, lighting his blue eyes the color of the summer sky. "I'll take you up to my room," he said. "I'll move the bed under the window. You should have sunlight for most of the day."

Riley moved aside to let Shade scoop Torrey up in his arms. Careful not to jar her too much, he tucked her blanket around her body and lifted her. Resting her head against his strong shoulder, she felt light and small and protected.

Shade took the stairs two at a time without jostling her in the least. Riley scurried behind him.

Soren met them where the three flights of stairs ended near the kitchen. "I can't let you take her from here."

"I'm not," Shade said. "I'm taking her to my room. She deserves to be comfortable. It's the least we can do for her."

Torrey let her eyes relax into the most pathetic expression she could muster and cast a charm over the four demons that flanked him. She couldn't see them before, when he tempted her in the hospital and when he kidnapped Riley, but they could no longer hide from her.

She knew Soren had never seen them, either. He moved as if he had no idea they were actual beings, not simply spirits who whispered in his ear. They were smaller than she expected a demon to be. Each one of them reached no more than four feet in height. They resembled childhood images of fairies.

It was funny how fairies had such a good reputation when they were really just diminutive demons.

Two of Soren's demons were male. The other two were female. All four of them had cute, pixie faces with overly large eyes, small noses, button mouths, and rosy cheeks. Pointy ears stuck out from beneath long hair. The males kept their hair short. The females let theirs grow to spill nearly to their knees.

To reach Soren's ears, they stood on one another's shoulders or climbed on tables, chairs, and counters.

They stared at her, greed glittering in their saucer-like irises. The bloodthirsty savages couldn't wait to see her cut open, bleeding power for them to grab. She wondered if Hope had seen them as clearly. There was no memory in her head that matched what she saw in front of her at that very moment.

Somehow, she doubted Hope saw anything. She knew the only reason she could see them now was because of the werewolf essence running through her veins, invading every cell of her body.

She wasn't fighting the transformation. She knew this was what Circe wanted. It was why she created her Daughters in the first place. The power to shape-shift had originally belonged to Circe. Torrey would be the first Daughter to reclaim that ability.

She took in the four interlopers, eyeing them without seeming to see them. Her innocuous appearance and the charm she effortlessly cast fooled the demons. Soren was disposed to let Shade help in any way he could.

With a brief nod, Soren moved out of the way. He let Shade and Torrey pass, but he grabbed Riley's arm. "Riley." The single word was filled with regret and pain.

She jerked free. "Don't touch me." The malevolence of her stare reverberated with a physical presence. They all felt it. "I hate you, Soren. I hate what you've done, and I hate what you're doing. You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I..."

The sharp echo of a slap rang in Torrey's ears. Riley flounced past Shade, heading up the stairs that would take her to his room.

Shade hesitated. He had neither sorrow nor sympathy for his brother. "You murdered the woman who was my soul. You are going to murder her again tonight. You don't deserve happiness, and you don't deserve to have a family."

The implication of Shade's words penetrated the layers of protection and charms his demons cast around him. All color drained from Soren's face. "Shaden..."

Shade shook his head. "We are through, you and I. You are no longer my brother. I renounce any blood, any bond we share." His gaze flickered down to Torrey and back. "I should have done this long ago. I should never have forgiven you for what you did to Hope."

Soren said nothing. There were a million things he could have said, but they were all excuses. At the core of it all, there was only Soren. The demons didn't hurt anyone. They had no real power in this world.

Torrey watched Shade's face as he carried her to his room. "He is your soul, too, Shade. I don't expect you to hate him on my behalf."

"I know," he said. "I shouldn't have listened to that letter you wrote. You might be able to forgive him for what he's done, but I can't. I've tried, Torrey. For years, I've tried to do what you asked, all that peace and love nonsense."

It sounded very sixties to Torrey. She remembered telling Shade to turn the other cheek. It amazed her how different her personality and ethics were in this lifetime. While she did think Shade should eventually reconcile with Soren, she didn't think he should do it until after Soren was free from his demons.

Riley peeled back the coverlet, and Shade set Torrey down gently. He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Don't ask me to try it again. I refuse, even for a deathbed promise."

Torrey laughed, a short foray because it hurt so much. "I'm not going to die."

"Torrey." Riley sobbed her sister's name. "This is my fault. If I hadn't been so gullible..."

Guilt and regret flashed over Shade's features. Torrey knew he never intended to let her get near Lyton, the werewolf village. If it came to it, he would have sacrificed Riley to save Torrey.

"Don't do that," Torrey said. "I'm not dying. I'm getting stronger. I'm going to soak up some energy from the sun. Tonight, I'm going to reconnect with earth and water, and I'm going to greet the sun's long-lost lover with the proper amount of respect and honor."

Shade stared at Torrey, assessing her with new eyes. He understood her oblique references. "It's not possible."

"Sure it is." Riley's eyes lit with excitement. "You scratched her. It's a classical werewolf thing. It has made its way into literature and movies. Now she'll be like you. Soren won't be able to sacrifice her because now she's just like you guys."

Shade shook his head slowly. "Myth is myth, and reality is reality. Witches cannot become werewolves. Even if they could, it wouldn't

stop Soren. Half-breeds aren't welcome in Lyton. If they didn't kill her, she would live the rest of her life as an outcast."

Torrey laughed. It hurt, but she couldn't help it. "I wouldn't stay here. There are lots of other places to live. The world is huge."

"And witches can obviously become werewolves," Riley continued, finishing Torrey's thought as she often did. She smoothed hair away from Torrey's forehead. "Does it hurt a lot?"

"It burns," Torrey said. "And it's going to get worse before it gets better." She pushed herself to sitting.

"Don't do that," Shade warned, reacting to her grimace. He slid in beside her and supported her back with his large, strong hand. "You need to conserve energy."

"Except for the burning, I feel fine," she said. "I played it up for Soren. He needs to think I'm on my last legs."

He stared at her. "You could have told me that."

"No, I couldn't." She grinned. "Remember that tiny apartment we had in Philadelphia? When my parents came to visit, all you had to do was pretend you lived next door, but you blew it with the first thing you said to my dad."

Shade's cheeks turned ruddy under his short black beard.

"You've never even been to Philadelphia." Riley's head tilted to the side. She studied her sister with that look people had when they were trying to figure out whether or not someone was sane.

"I've been everywhere." She answered Riley, but her smile was for Shade alone. "You knew. From the beginning, you knew."

"You are my soul," he said as he brushed his lips across hers. "Of course I knew."

"You tried to get rid of me." Her voice was soft, but her accusation was not. In that dive of a bar, he had known her immediately, and he still told her to go home.

His arm slid around her waist, holding her good side to pull her closer. "I knew Soren would come after you again. Even if it meant I couldn't be with you, I couldn't let him kill you again."

“He won’t,” she promised. “I need you tonight.” Including Riley in the sweep of her eyes, she added, “I need both of you tonight.”

Chapter 18

Riley objected to the plan, but she was overruled.

“How can you expect me to stay locked up in a room far away in the middle of nowhere while you two are out there risking your lives?”

Shade leapt up to clap a hand over her mouth so that the sound didn’t carry too far. The house was large and solidly built, but wolf hearing was exceptional. “You have no powers, Riley. You’re human. To many people out there, you’re nothing more than dinner.”

She turned to him in horror. “You mean werewolves really do eat people?”

“Some,” he said. “The older ones. It’s a practice that fell out of favor more than two centuries ago. Unfortunately, wolves tend to live for three or four centuries, which means there are wolves out there who remember the taste fondly.”

Torrey swung her legs to dangle over the side of the bed. She was stiff from her long illness and the outpouring of power required to cure Shade, and she didn’t want that to impede her later. The wound at her side wept. It would not heal until she shifted her shape, something she wouldn’t attempt until she had the power of the moon in the night sky above her.

“She has power,” she said. “That’s the problem.” Torrey pushed to her feet. Shade rushed to help her, but she waved him away. “That’s why people fall over themselves to do things for you, Riley. You charm them without even realizing what you’re doing. Your power is weak, but Soren recognizes it. If he can’t have me, he will go for you.”

Angry tears glittered in Riley's eyes. "How am I helping if I'm not even here?"

Limping to an old-fashioned, rolltop desk on the other side of the room, Torrey jotted some words on a scrap of paper. "Find my tree. Sit under it with this blanket draped around your shoulders. When the rain begins, chant the words."

She folded the paper and shoved it into Riley's fist, squeezing her sister's hand meaningfully.

"We will meet again, in this form and in this lifetime."

Riley threw her arms around Torrey, not checking the force of her hug to save her sister some pain. "Come with us. We can escape. We can be far, far away from here before Soren notices we've gone."

Torrey disengaged herself from Riley's hug to take her sister's face between her hands. "I need him to see you leave. I need him to know Shade is keeping his word to me to keep you safe. He won't trust Shade otherwise. His demons aren't the smartest, but Soren is. He will figure this out if the two of you linger here all day."

Turning to Shade, she gave him the same treatment. "Don't come back until the moon is high in the sky. Soren needs to be occupied with the ritual or he will have his guard do something to keep you away."

He leaned down and closed his lips over hers. It was a kiss filled with promise and reassurance and love. "I love you, Torrey."

Torrey smiled. He could have used any of her names. From his lips, the name didn't matter, only the sentiment. "I love you, too, Shade."

"I won't let you die this time," he said. "I want a life with you. I want a family."

She reached up to rest a hand on his rough cheek. "We'll have those things, Shade. I promise. Nothing will keep us apart anymore. Not in this lifetime and not in the next."

She didn't need to read his thoughts to know he was remembering the last time, when she'd tricked him into leaving her alone. She had

gone to Soren, and she had given herself to him. She knew she hadn't been strong enough to fight him, not then.

She had been a creature of hope, a creature of light searching for her one true love. She had forgotten the forces that tore them apart in the first place. She had forgotten the power of torment. Though she still didn't fully remember everything, she knew the demons haunting Soren were the same beings responsible for rending her soul from Shade's in the first place. He hadn't been called Shaden then. She couldn't remember his name, but she knew it wasn't that.

She had instructed Caiden to name her this way so that she would remember what she needed to do. It hadn't been a punishment from a father who was nothing to her. It had been a big, fat sticky note.

Shade kissed her again, this time in warning, and then he left with Riley. Torrey watched them leave. Her heart was heavy, and she was afraid. The urge to call out to them, to flee instead of staying to fight, was powerful. She fought it.

If she didn't stop this now, it might be centuries before she found Shade again. She couldn't wait that long.

Torrey spent the rest of the afternoon alternating between dozing under the shafts of sunlight playing over the bed and stretching her limbs. Soren knocked on the door as the sun was setting.

"Come in," she called. "It's not locked."

The handle turned, and the heavy wood structure creaked inward. Soren's blond head and the tip of one boot peeked into the room. The rest of him stayed behind the door, hidden from view. His demons were in the hall where she couldn't see them, but she could hear them clearly. They didn't like what he was about to do.

"Are you hungry? I don't know what you like, so I had Alethea make up a whole bunch of stuff."

Torrey strove for a sad, serene smile, all the while marveling at how quickly her innocence had disappeared. Living for thousands of years and hundreds of lifetimes jaded a soul. She needed to be with Shade. She needed to know it wasn't all pointless.

“My last meal?” She laughed a weak laugh, ending it with an undisguised grimace. The burning in her side had morphed from pain to an anticipatory tingle. Her body was nearly ready. “I’d love a big, juicy steak. Salad with Caesar dressing. A baked potato loaded with sour cream and butter. Oh, and chocolate cake. There’s no point in counting calories anymore.”

Guilt motivated Soren. He missed the energy she couldn’t quite disguise in her tone. With a brief nod, he disappeared. Minutes later, he reappeared. A tray, laden with more than the foods for which she had asked, was balanced in his hand.

In a feat of dexterity that dazzled Torrey, he lifted a heavy oak table half-filled with hand-carved, wooden statuettes of wolves and brought it over next to the bed without upsetting a single thing on it. He slid the tray onto the table and sat on the edge of the bed.

Torrey studied the blond hair curling to his collar, the strong, sexy body that was so similar to Shade’s, and the stunningly handsome face featuring teal-green eyes that would stop the hearts of millions of women. Riley had found him attractive. She had flirted with him before he threatened Torrey and kidnapped Riley.

The demons wandered the room, each keeping one eye on the waning daylight streaming through the window and the other on the pair on the bed, preparing to share a meal.

“I remember the first time we met,” Torrey said. Her head rested against the pillows behind her. She didn’t try to move her head or sit up. She couldn’t tip her hand before it was time. “Shade was so nervous about introducing me to you. He didn’t care what the rest of Lyton thought about me. He only cared that you accepted me as his mate.”

Soren busied himself with cutting the steak into bite-sized pieces. Torment twisted his features. “If I could find a way to stop doing this to you, I would. From the way Shade forgave me last time, I knew you would return. I tried to avoid human settlements. I did so well for so long.”

Torrey raised a weak hand to rest on his forearm, the closest part of him to her. "I forgive you, Soren."

His breathing became labored as he struggled, fighting his emotions. "You forgave me last time, too." He came around the other side of the bed to rearrange her pillows to hold her in a semi-upright position. "That doesn't mean I can forgive myself."

Sympathy surged inside her. She knew she should be angry. Shade was furious. She supposed she would have embraced that emotion if she actually believed this was the end, again. "You'll be free of them one day, Soren. I don't know when, and I don't know how, but I have to believe that one day you'll be master of your own destiny."

He speared a cube of steak and held it to her lips. "I wish I had your faith. I wish I had your hope."

Faith and Hope, two things she had tried before. They hadn't worked.

She opened her mouth to offer words of comfort once more, but he stuck the fork through the opening.

"Eat, Torrey. I can't do this again. I don't want you to make me feel better about sacrificing you and killing anything that remains of my brother's soul."

She let him have his torment and his anguish. Self-pity would keep his attention focused on himself and not the fact he was feeding the wolf growing inside her.

Given how much food he had brought, she didn't eat much. When he left, he didn't look back.

Chapter 19

The moon rose early. Soren returned to catch Torrey napping. The lamps in the room were on, disguising the moonlight in which she basked.

He lifted her carefully. The movement jarred her side. She whimpered, but didn't tense her body or open her eyes. The tea he had given her with dinner had been drugged. If she had been human or just a witch, she would have slept through most of the ceremony, waking just in time to give over her power and die.

However, she was not just a witch. Was there a name for the new breed Shade had created? A were-witch, perhaps?

The drug had no effect on her at all.

Soren whispered an apology in her ear. He added a plea that she stay far, far away from him in her next lifetime.

Sounds found their way into her ears. Soren descending the steps. The murmur of the villagers as he entered their sacred circle in the center of the village, not far from the manor house where Soren lived.

Weddings were performed there. Once upon a lifetime, Shade had wanted to marry her there. Instead, his brother had killed her on the altar where they would have spoken their vows.

He set her on the altar. She was glad he hadn't unwrapped her body. Riley had offered clothes, but Torrey refused them on practical grounds. First, they would bother her cuts and bruises. Second, they would only be shredded when she shifted her shape.

Somewhere in the back of the crowd, Shade waited. Torrey knew he was there, not by scent or sound, but through the ancient bond that had only grown stronger as her body transformed.

Soren stood above her and began the ritual. "Friends, we gather here tonight to right an ancient wrong, to pay a debt long owed."

Torrey opened her eyes, keeping them unfocused as if she were still medicated. She lay on a long stone table, polished smooth from years of weather and use. A bower of white pines interspersed with maples surrounded the sacred space. The opening was large enough for the majority of the townspeople to surround the raised platform and watch the ceremony. From the looks of it, many of them were in attendance.

Soren wore a long black cloak trimmed with red silk, something reserved for the leader of the pack. The table on which Torrey lay came to his waist, the perfect height for slicing and dicing. Behind Soren, a bonfire blazed, lighting the clearing with brilliant orange light.

He had thrown back the hood to address his audience.

The demons approached her body, hovering around the offering in anxious anticipation.

"Witches have long hunted werewolves. They have treated us as animals, chaining us and caging us like wild beasts, using us as their chattel. They cast charms over us to keep us docile." His words, laced with charm and weighted with mania, rang out over the crowd and were met with hostile cheers.

"Tonight, I exact revenge on one of the most powerful of their kind. Tonight, I will sacrifice a Daughter of Circe, our original enslaver."

The crowd cheered. Soren was forced to pause, to let them express their approval.

"Circe never enslaved us."

Torrey cringed. Her head turned, automatically seeking the sight of her lover. Shade wasn't supposed to reveal himself this soon. Or so completely. Having run through the forest from his cabin as a wolf, he was naked.

The crowd booed and hissed. Shade tried to approach the altar, but Tiffany and her three lieutenants grabbed at him. He growled. "This is between Soren and me. Stay out of it." He shook free of Tiffany, who signaled Flynn, Demetrius, and Marius to release him as well.

Soren's demons jumped onto the altar, shouting orders to kill Shade.

"She created us." Shade's voice boomed over the noise of the crowd. "She made us and this is how we repay her? We sacrifice her not once, but twice?"

Soren growled at the demons. "Don't. You ask too much already."

A gentle rain began, falling from the cloudless night sky. Torrey called on the power of the moon. Her bones stretched, pushing her mouth and nose into a new shape. Teeth elongated. Phalanges lengthened, and her fingers curved to form claws.

The change seemed to take forever. Torrey was hyperaware of each tiny alteration. White hairs sprouted from every follicle on her body, and there were a lot more of those now than there had been before. Shaving her legs was going to be hell.

Her fur was the color of pure moonlight. There was no pain. Even the fire that raged inside soothed her like a warm hearth in winter. Yet, in linear time, the transformation was instantaneous.

Without hesitating, she launched her attack. She had no formal fighting skill or training. Maybe it was instinct and maybe it was luck, but she locked her jaw around the neck of the nearest demon. As a witch, she could not touch the creatures that existed between two worlds. Now that she had the power of fire, she could melt the boundaries.

Fragile bones broke between her teeth. She pressed a large paw to the demon's back and tore the head from the body. With the flick of her neck, she flung the head into the flames. The words of a spell sounded in her head, allowing the fire to breach dimensions to incinerate the small sphere.

The three remaining demons squealed in fear. They screamed for Soren to kill Torrey. Stealing her power was no longer the objective. She was a threat and she needed to die.

Soren, lost in the fever of his compulsion, changed. Just as Torrey predicted, he was a stunning wolf. Unlike Shade's dark fur, Soren's was a swirl of colors. Browns and golds mixed with black in a subtle mingling of shades made brilliant by the fire's light.

He leapt for Torrey, whose trajectory had taken her to the second demon. Shade, a black mass rocketing from the shadows, caught his brother in midair. The two fell to the ground, a ball of snarls, claws, and teeth.

Torrey didn't spare them a thought. She knew Shade intended to fight to the death. If she could kill the demons, Soren would be free. They would all be free.

The second demon fought. He slashed at her eyes with his long, curving claws. Those pointed ears turned out to be bone, not cartilage. The two other demons joined the fray, using their natural weapons expertly.

A sharp jab sliced into her right rear thigh. Torrey wheeled around, grabbed the culprit in her mouth, and threw it into the fire. The magic words rushed through her mind without consciously being called forth. Fire burst from the specially built pit, showering sparks in all directions.

The last two demons tried to flee. Snarling, Torrey gave chase. Moving away from the fire took away her best disposal method. She didn't know how else to make sure they were truly destroyed.

The crowd parted. Villagers shifted shape as they jumped out of the way. Torrey appeared as a mad wolf. She tore at the air and chased nothing.

She was attacked from all sides. The witch who had managed to steal the power of a wolf would not be suffered to live. Because she was from human stock, she was smaller than even the most juvenile

wolves. Mass was mass. A large person formed a large wolf. A small person, relatively speaking, formed a small wolf.

Powerful jaws clamped around her front and rear legs. Teeth sank into her haunches. A frustrated howl sounded from deep inside. The pain was something she could bear. Failing in this mission wasn't.

She wheeled, snapping at the wolves that held her. When she was free from one set of jaws, another arrived to take its place. Just when it seemed she was fighting a losing battle, the tide turned. Wolves she successfully disengaged did not return to the fight. Torrey's flagging hope grew.

Then the last set of jaws was gone. The wolves she defeated surrounded her, watching with wary eyes. Hatred and distrust were palpable forces. They wanted her dead. They wanted her gone. Yet, they didn't attack.

In the distance, vicious snarling and growls indicated Soren and Shade still fought. Nobody seemed concerned. Nobody seemed to want to watch or interfere.

Pacing the interior perimeter of the circle around Torrey, Tiffany and two of her lieutenants kept the peace. The third lieutenant kept everyone away from Shade and Soren.

Messages communicated directly into Torrey's head. They were understandings, not words.

They did not understand why Torrey attacked them. Soren presented the more logical target. Torrey won the battle fairly, and she would not be challenged again. However, she was not welcome as a wolf or as a member of the village.

Flashes of brown caught the corner of Torrey's eye. The demons had purposely led her into the crowd, knowing Torrey's actions would be interpreted as a challenge. Before she moved, she did her best to communicate back to the crowd.

Images of the demons and Soren flashed through her mind. Lastly, she sent the image of the demons standing, watching from the other side of the crowd. Hoping they got the message, she crouched on her

powerful haunches, ignored the pain of the slashes and gashes from the villagers, and leapt.

The crowd parted, letting her go. The demons realized her intention too late. It appeared they only had the ability to communicate with Soren, just as he was the only one who could hear them. Otherwise, they would have known what she was doing.

One paw landed on the chest of each demon, pinning them both to the ground. The power of the moon and the earth and the falling rain surged through her. She called on the fire burning in each of her cells, the fire that allowed her to become a wolf.

Smoke poured from where she made contact with the fairylike creatures. Torrey channeled more power. Fire burst from her paws. The demons exploded in twin showers of sparks that singed her fur and burnt her nose and lips.

Wheeling, she projected the image toward the altar where Shade and Soren fought still. Shade was no longer weak from his illness. They were evenly matched, twins in so many ways. No true fight between them could be short or easy.

But she didn't want them to kill each other. Neither of them could live having done that to his brother.

As one, the black wolf and the tan wolf fell away from one another. The space between them increased. Shade backed up until he was next to Torrey. With a brief jerk of his head, he indicated she should follow him.

They set off, running through the woods. The town wasn't a safe place for either of them. Tiffany may have forced the werewolves of Lyton to fight fair, but even she couldn't hold them off forever.

No matter what she had done to free Soren of his demons, the fact remained that, in the eyes of the townspeople, she was a witch with a shape-shifter's power, and therefore unnatural.

Epilogue

Snow stung against the bottom of Torrey's feet. It amazed her how the cold white powder didn't faze her paws, but it killed her feet.

"Come on," Shade called. The bottom half of his body was submerged in the water. Muscles rippled across his shoulder and down his stomach as he raised his arm to urge her closer. Steam lifted from the surface, but not in response to Shade's sexiness. "The water is warm, Torrey."

Their new house was nearly completed. In another month, they would be able to move out of the crude cabin that had been on the land Shade purchased, site unseen, from a real estate agent in Utah. There were no drawers anywhere in the house. Torrey had insisted on an open-shelf design and walk-in closets for storage. It didn't solve the problem completely, but it alleviated the worst of Shade's compulsion.

So far, Torrey hadn't shown signs of one yet.

Shade had been out for a run when he discovered the hot spring. He had sprinted back to the house to drag Torrey there. The Rocky Mountains were new terrain for them both.

A brisk March wind blew across Torrey's naked backside. She kept planning to make backpacks they could easily carry in their lupine forms. It was exasperating to find places where they could enjoy a nice picnic, spots only accessible when they were wolves, only to find they lacked a way to transport clothes and picnic supplies.

With one hand on her rounded stomach, she carefully picked her way through the rocky shore to the deeper water where Shade waited.

He watched her, pride and possessiveness lighting his blue eyes.
“Are the babies okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. It had become habit to keep a hand there, to feel for movement. She could hear three heartbeats, thanks to the enhanced senses that came with her transformation. All three of her children were active. She often pictured a hamster wheel churning inside her with the three of them running wild around it instead of in it.

Indigestion was becoming a problem.

The water relieved much of the weight burden, and her back relaxed in relief. Changing forms was also helpful. Some nights, she shifted into her wolf form just so that she could be more comfortable. Those nights, Shade shifted form, too, and curled his body around hers.

By the time she reached him, the water was up to her breasts. Though she was now a werewolf, she was still only five-ten. Shade’s arms slid around her waist, lifting her against him as he waded into deeper water.

“Did you have a nice talk with Riley?”

Torrey smiled. Her sister had relocated as well. Torrey and Shade needed to get far away from Lyton. Tiffany had visited early the morning after the near-sacrifice as they packed up their belongings to inform them both she could only guarantee their safety if they never showed their faces on that side of the country again. Soren had disappeared, leaving Lyton in chaos. Tiffany assumed the role of leader of the pack.

Riley wanted to get far away from Soren. Besides trying to murder her sister, he had kidnapped her, lied to her, and prevented her from being at her mother’s funeral. Deep down, she had found him attractive. Part of her had actually liked him, which is why his charm had been so spectacularly effective. She nursed a broken heart for many reasons.

“She sounds happier than she has in a long time.”

Torrey didn't have to say more. His wolf hearing would pick up subtleties in speech that simple human hearing couldn't detect. She loved everything about being a wolf.

"Good," he said, feathering a kiss across her lips. "What about you?"

Torrey wrapped her legs around Shade's waist. Her stomach bumped into his. "I don't know. This isn't working out like I thought it would."

He laughed. "Lie back. Float in the water. I've always wanted to make love to a mermaid."

"I think that would be kinda hard," she said, lowering her body back to do what he suggested. "That fishy tail might get in the way of a good time."

One hand worked magic between her legs. "We can't let that happen."

Torrey gasped as he slid into her. "No, we can't."

THE END

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Michele spends her free time thinking up new plots and devising ways to get out of doing housework.

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