



Indulgent

An Eternal Pleasure Novel

CATHRYN FOX

HEAT



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To Mark, for helping me fulfill dreams.
I love you.

Chapter One

Fifteenth century

Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. Even at six years old, Lily was old enough to realize that her entire coven was in danger, and it had something to do with her.

With her eyes stinging from the blinding smoke darkening the afternoon sky, Lily blinked rapidly and glanced up at her mother, who was hurrying her along the damp, weed-choked path and up the side of Brighton Mountain. Lily had never been up the mountain before. It was too dangerous. Her mother had told her so. But today her mother was weaving her around the tall trees and dashing with her to the top to shield her from the raging fires below. Fires that were ignited by the group of angry masked men who'd invaded her colony.

Her mother squeezed Lily's hand hard, and Lily bit back a cry. She did not want to upset her mother any more than she already was doing. Striving to be a big girl, she rushed her steps, working extra hard not to slip on the rain-soaked ground while she kept up with her mommy's fast pace, but the higher up the steep mountain they climbed, the harder and harder it became for Lily to draw in air.

White, chalky powder that resembled the winter's first snow fell from the treetops and sprinkled the muddy soil, but Lily pinched her lips tight, not daring to open her mouth to catch the flakes as she normally would, because it was summer and she was smart enough to know that it never snowed in summer. She guessed that whatever was in the sky had something to do with those scary men, and that made it

dangerous.

As frightened screams pierced the air, she stole a quick glance behind her and realized that even with all their climbing, they were still dangerously close to the bottom and still had a long way to go. She squinted to see through the thin haze of smoke, then off in the distance spotted her aunt Nelly fall to the ground. Others scurried around her, their shrieks of fear going unanswered.

Lily began to sweat, and the stickiness made her light dress cling to her body. Scared and feeling helpless, she darted glances at the landscape below and counted the men gathered near the bonfire. She could hear them chanting, but from her distance couldn't make out the words, nor could she identify the men's features, not with the dark hoods hiding their faces. One of the five men stepped forward, and when he threw something onto the blaze, flames shot to the sky and spread out on the ground, chasing Lily and her mother farther up the mountain. Lily shivered despite the warmth of the air.

As her mother dragged her along, Lily twisted her head and turned her attention back to her aunt, who was on the ground, digging her nails into the grass as she tried to crawl away. A man dropped to his knees beside her, wrapped a rope around her wrists, and then roughly hauled her to her feet. Nelly released an anguished cry, and Lily's whole body tightened in response.

Why was he hurting Aunt Nelly?

Lily let loose a thread of magick, then clutched her stomach, feeling her aunt's pain and fear as if it were her own. Being able to "feel" other people was a gift, her mother had told her, but right now it really didn't make Lily feel so special—it made her feel so very sick. As her mother watched her double over, she bent down with her, and placed both palms over Lily's stomach to soothe the ache, but the strange, strangled noise coming from her throat worried Lily terribly.

"Mommy?" Lily reached out to wipe away the tears running down

her mother's mud-caked face. Her mother rapidly flashed dark lashes over her violet eyes, and Lily watched the way the black circles in the center grew larger, eating up almost all the purple. "Are you hurt?"

Her mother shook her head, but Lily didn't believe her. Lily drew another small thread of magick, and touched her mother's mind, but what she found there made her teeth chatter. Panic seized her hard as she read her mother's chilling thoughts. Then Lily's own eyes widened, and she suddenly had the strangest sensation that someone was sneaking up behind her.

"Come on, Lily. We need to move," her mother warned, and caught hold of her hand again. She gave a quick tug to force her to focus on the winding path up ahead.

Lily tried to concentrate, but her tummy hurt and she could no longer hold back the tears, not after seeing the moisture in her mommy's eyes. As her vision blurred, she blinked, confused about what was going on, why those men were building fires and hurting her family.

She pinched her burning nose and coughed, but the sound was drowned out by the screams below. Lily stopped running as dry, blistering heat rushed over her body, like her skin had just been lit on fire.

"No . . ." she cried out, and tried to turn around, to run back and help her coven.

"Lily," her mother urged.

Lily licked the salty tears from the corners of her mouth and cried, "But, Mommy—"

"No buts, Lily," her mother said in that same low voice she used only when she was angry. "Now, be a big girl for me, and hurry along."

Mud clung to Lily's legs, and branches snapped beneath her bare feet. The sharp twigs dug into her soles and lodged between her toes, but she ignored the discomfort. She sniffled softly and wondered what

she'd done to make everyone so angry with her.

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

"Oh, Lily." Her mother dropped to her knees and pulled Lily into her warm embrace. Lily buried her face in her mother's dress and tried to breathe in her pretty perfume because it always made her feel cozy and safe, but her nose was too wet and runny from crying to be able to smell anything. "Lily, honey, I'm not angry with you. I just need you to hurry."

Lily wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand and made a face. "Why are those men hurting everyone?"

When a deep male voice called out to them, the sound vibrating off the mountainside, Lily craned her neck to see, but her mother placed her hands on either side of her head to stop her from turning.

Lily frowned. "Do they want to hurt me too?"

Her mother didn't answer her. Instead, she inched back and brushed a soft kiss over Lily's forehead. Then her mommy blinked the water from her pretty purple eyes and Lily could tell she was scared, but trying so hard to be brave for Lily's sake. Lily didn't like seeing her mommy so afraid. It frightened her.

"Oh, little one, you really are my special gifted child, aren't you?"

Lily tried to grin; she liked when her mother called her that. But the smile fell from her mouth when off in the distance something exploded and her mother's face turned as white as the falling flakes.

Lily's mouth went dry and she shifted from one foot to the other as her heart crashed against her chest. "Mommy, I'm scared."

"I know, baby. I know. Come on."

A sweaty palm closed over Lily's hand, and they ran and ran until Lily couldn't run anymore. She took deep, gasping breaths, but gagged on the yucky-tasting, make-believe winter snowflakes.

"We're here," her mother said breathlessly, stopping to roll a heavy rock away from a small opening. She cast a quick glance past Lily's

shoulder before crawling inside and dragging Lily in with her.

Not knowing where she was, Lily touched the cold rock walls with the tips of her fingers and snuggled in closer to her mother. It was hard to breathe in the dark cave, but Lily didn't want to complain.

Her mother unclasped her amulet and put it around Lily's neck. She found Lily's arm, then placed Lily's palm on the warm charm. "Lily," she whispered, and closed both of her hands over Lily's to secure the amulet beneath. "Keep this, Lily. As long as you have this, I'll always be with you."

"Mommy . . ." she whined, fearful of what her mother was going to do next.

"I have to go. I have no choice," her mother explained, her voice soft and low, almost musical. "You'll be safer here without me." Lily quickly touched her mother's mind and in that instant understood why her mother was leaving. To lead the men away from the cave.

Lily choked on her tears. "No, Mommy. Don't go." Lily gripped her mommy's wet, muddy dress as panic welled up inside her. She didn't want those men to hurt her mommy.

Her mother's fingers dug into Lily's shoulder and held her tight, but her voice changed when she asked, "Lilith, sweetheart, do you remember what I taught you about blocking your thoughts?"

Lily nodded and wiped her runny nose, trying so hard to be a big girl like her mommy wanted.

"Good. I want you to do that for me. I want you to shield your mind, and no matter what you see or hear, stay in here, okay?" She gave a wobbly smile, tapped Lily on the nose, and added, "No flying, little birdie."

Lily understood just how important it was for her to stay hidden. Her mommy had called her Lilith, and she only ever did that when she was serious.

"I love you, baby girl. Now, be brave, and do what I told you to."

Lily made a fist around the amulet and squeezed until it hurt her hand. "I love you too, Mommy."

"I have to go now, Lily. But we'll see each other again. I promise." Her mommy gave her one last look, slipped out of the small cave, and pushed the heavy rock back into place. Lily shuddered as blackness closed in on her, the only light coming from the rays of sunlight that peered in from the lengthy gap between the big boulder and the edges of her tiny shelter.

Lily tucked her knees into her chest and rocked back and forth as she waited for her mommy to come back. But soon day turned to night, and as fear completely overtook her, she could feel the pull of her raven. A long time ago her mother had explained to her that she was a shifter—her mommy's special, gifted child. She also explained that her feathers could show when she dreamed, or when she experienced strong feelings, like now. But her mother also warned her to keep her raven grounded, and never to show her wings to anyone, especially to any of the Darkland clan.

Lily sucked in a breath. Could it be the Darkland men down there looking for her? Had they found out she was special? Would they hurt her mommy if they captured her and she didn't tell them where Lily was?

Her mommy said no flying, but as her bellyache got worse, Lily had a hard time fighting off the change. She didn't want to go against her mommy's rules, she really didn't, but the pull of the raven was too strong and Lily didn't think she could hold it back anymore. With both panic and desperation overcoming her, Lily closed her eyes and drew a deep, soothing breath like her mommy had taught her. Her head flopped forward as she felt herself fall into a dreamlike state, her spirit leaving her mortal body, shifting into raven form, and becoming solid. Her raven stretched her wings and momentarily floated over her slumped figure in the damp cave as her one being took two forms.

From her raven's eyes she memorized her surroundings, then exited her hiding place, squeezing her small frame through the gap. Her raven took to the sky, mimicking the loud shrills she'd heard on the ground hours earlier. She soared above the blazing fires, still burning brightly, then dipped down low for a better view. When she caught her mother's scent with her heightened raven senses, her heart raced faster, and she followed the distinct aroma until she came upon her only parent.

From her position near the ground, she caught her mother's eyes. She gave Lily a feeble smile before a man tied her to the post and set the kindling beneath her on fire, the flames licking at the muddy hem of her dress.

"Mommy . . . no . . ." she cried out, but the sound came out garbled in her raven's throat. In that instant, fear stole the breath from her lungs and her heart beat quicker than her wings. Shaky and light-headed, she began falling to the ground, her wings suddenly immobile, useless.

Somewhere behind her a man yelled, and tossed fire into the night sky at her. The burning piece of lumber skimmed her beak and snapped her awake. A moment later something exploded nearby and flames singed her feathers.

As pain erupted inside Lily's head—her mother's pain—and smoke choked her airway, her vision went fuzzy. Instinctively, her raven flew higher, to suck in a fresh breath before diving to the ground below. With fear and anger closing in on her, she aimed for the man who'd captured her mommy. The man swung a burning piece of wood at her, barely missing her wings. As his offensive scent of greed and sweat reached her nostrils, she gagged and instantly knew she'd never forget that vile smell. Fueled by rage, she dove again, and gripped his hood with her talons. She let loose a wail and ripped it clear off his head.

The man tipped his chin to see her, and the dark eyes that stared

back made her feel very sick and shook her to her soul. She immediately recognized the man grinning up at her. He was the leader of the Darkland clan, their neighboring community.

"I'm coming for you, Lily," he announced. "You can run, but you can't hide." She drew her magick and touched his thoughts, but when she did, he dropped to the ground, appearing disoriented. He held his head between his palms and yelled out at her, his words jumbled, as if her brush had somehow dazed him, hurt him.

Lily turned her attention back to her mother. As she hovered over her, her parting words erupted inside her head. *"I have to go now, Lily. We'll see each other again. I promise."*

With terror striking from all angles, tears poured from her eyes and dripped over her mother's burning dress, but it wasn't near enough water to put out the flames. Lily tried to think, but was unable to gather her thoughts or do anything to help while in her primal form.

She had to get back to her body. It was the only way to save her mommy. Her raven flew back to the cave, and Lily awoke with a gasp. Climbing to her feet, she pushed on the rock with all her might, but she was too little, and the rock too heavy. Big hiccuping sobs echoed around her as she pounded on the boulder until her knuckles bled.

Hours later, exhausted and battered, she clasped her amulet and fell to the ground, where she stayed for a long time, until all the cries from her burned village subsided and the smoke cleared from the mountain.

Lily had no idea how long she hid in that cave, reciting her mother's parting words over and over again. She was hungry and thirsty, but none of that mattered.

Day turned to night, back to day again, and after what felt like a week to Lily, she heard movement outside the cave. Not knowing if it was one of the bad men, she covered her mouth to keep herself quiet. When the rock slid to the side, Lily shaded the blinding sunlight from

her eyes to take in the silhouette of the woman before her.

“Mommy?” she asked, her heart racing with hope.

Chapter Two

Serene: Present Day April 15, Full Moon. Midnight.

With dry, brittle twigs beneath his body, Jaret Darkland silently crawled over the dank ground and inched his way toward the security gate looming some hundred feet away. Night-vision goggles in place, he moved with careful precision and sniffed the cool air, pulling the musky scents of the forest into his lungs. Years of special-ops training had taught him to decipher each and every smell, each and every nuance in the night wind, until he narrowed in on the one he was hunting.

As a heady mixture of pheromones came to him on the breeze, he drew the offensive stink of wet dog into his lungs. With a flick of his head, he made a silent gesture to Toby, his cousin and fellow Paranormal Task Force officer. Toby nodded and, understanding his partner's intent, circled backward, following Jaret's unspoken instructions and covering him from behind.

High overhead rays from the full moon weaved through the threadbare trees and lit the snow-dusted ground below, providing the agents with sufficient light to see the pack of animals crouched down on all fours, tracking along the ground on their bellies. Crimson blood painted dark shadows on their elongated muzzles, a sign that they were in full hunt mode and at their most dangerous. In an instinctive, reassuring move, Jaret touched the .40-caliber pistol secured to his hip, silver bullets primed and ready to go.

Drawing on years of experience, he pulled off his goggles and stilled

his heartbeat. Beads of moisture touched his forehead and dripped down his cheek. The damp stickiness wasn't from fear; it was from the thrill of the hunt and the ultimate satisfaction of knowing he was about to expose and kill every creature that inhabited the picturesque town slumbering just beyond those impenetrable bars.

After months of investigation, and painstakingly following every clue, the two cousins had tracked their former fellow task force officer Kane Reynolds (a man neither Jaret nor Toby played well with) to Serene, New Hampshire, the quaint village hidden among the towering trees and skyscraping mountains. The perfect hiding spot for a pack of debauched monsters to veil their activity.

Going rogue might be against Jaret and Toby's task force policy, but with Kane involved and the explosive tension between the cousins and the former officer, it made for a personal mission that neither could resist. And if they'd just hit the jackpot, and uncovered the den of the alpha that had turned Kane—and they could only deduce they had—then they were well on their way to assuming the coveted position of Paranormal Task Force captain, like so many of the Darkland men before them. And to cap it off, they'd be ridding the world of a few more parasitic monsters, who, despite task force efforts, were growing at an alarming rate.

Jaret resisted the urge to rub his hands together. After all, this was the kill of a lifetime, and the reason he and Toby had made the trek from Colorado to the Chicago headquarters and finally an unsanctioned trip to rural New England.

Trained in all things paranormal, they were brought in to help with the sudden influx of lycans. But they had secretly tasked themselves with the job of hunting and killing the female rogue, Sunray, who had lured fellow officer Kane away from headquarters to the hidden community of Serene to cohabit with her and the rest of her brethren.

Taking out the powerful bitch, along with her entire kin, fit right

into the vow they'd made some twenty years ago after watching their grandmother get torn to shreds by one of the many creatures that prowled the dangerous streets. Now working with the task force and ridding the earth of everything that went bump in the night wasn't just their job; it was their calling.

Naturally, with their special skills, if they weren't *with* the branch, they were deemed *against* it. There wasn't a trained officer who would think twice about putting a bullet between their eyes—lumping them in with the likes of Vall (the now deceased lycan who'd been terrorizing Chicago) and the rest of the monsters that preyed on the innocent. After all, every single PTF agent was trained to hunt and kill anything perceived as different, and with Jaret and Toby's unique empath abilities—the talents of reading others' thoughts, feeling others' feelings, and communicating with family members telepathically—they were definitely classified as different.

To this day there were still a few officers who feared the Darkland family's unique empath abilities, but after their ancestors had proved themselves trustworthy to the force, their special skill giving them an edge in terminating the unfavorable, not to mention the numerous PTF officers they'd saved in the line of duty, management had always found a spot for them on the team.

"How many?" Toby asked him telepathically as he took up position behind him.

"I'm not sure. I have to get closer."

Needing to do a tally, to know exactly what they were up against, he silently slid along the ground with the ease of a serpent, and shut his mind to the cacophony of night noise around him. With fierce concentration, he worked to pinpoint the exact location of the rogue PTF officer, intent on pumping him with silver, as per PTF regulations, then terminating every other member of his new pack.

Peering through the dark, he zeroed in on the large,

chocolate-colored wolf in the center of the small group. *Kane*. Every instinct he possessed told him so, and his instincts had never let him down before. Even though there were only a handful of wolves sidling up to Kane, the chilling howls in the distance clearly indicated that more mongrels were about to join their family.

Jaret focused and tried to tap into Kane's thoughts, but his efforts proved futile. Stifling a frustrated growl, he turned his attention to the small chestnut-colored female loitering some five feet away from the pack. Surely she wouldn't possess the skills to block her thoughts too. Jaret channeled his energy, but failed to read her. It didn't make sense that he couldn't tap into her thoughts either. It was as if someone or something was using magick to shield the entire town.

Interesting ...

As Jaret turned his attention to the tawny-colored wolf by Kane's side—*Sunray*, he presumed—a strange new scent wafted before his nostrils, and momentarily caught him off guard. There was something startlingly familiar about that smell as it fragranced the air, yet it was completely foreign to him just the same. He searched through the database in the recesses of his mind, but still couldn't identify that peculiar aroma, or put a mark to which species it belonged to. Behind him, Toby breathed in deeply and it pulled his focus. He twisted to face his cousin and spoke telepathically.

"Toby?"

"Yeah, I got it too."

"What the hell is it?"

"Damned if I know."

Striving to maintain composure as that peculiar scent weaved some mysterious alchemy on his senses, he turned back in time to see a dozen or so other wolves join the pack. As a chorus of low growls rent the air, Jaret's stomach sank, his earlier bliss exploding like fireworks and leaving an angry hole in his gut.

Sadly, no kills would be made tonight.

Toby read his thoughts. *"Let's get back to the truck. We'll come back when we have a plan."* With a nod he gestured toward the pack. *"They're not going anywhere."*

Jaret hated to wait, to put off the war against the wolves for one more second. For months now he'd been itching to find and terminate this particular pack, but he and Toby were completely outnumbered and he damn well knew it. Years of specialized training, as well as the demise of a few fellow officers, had taught them better than to go in guns blazing, especially on shift night. They'd need another plan, one that would catch the pack with their defenses down. But what? How?

As he considered his limited options, the fine hairs on his nape began to tingle, the way they always did when he felt he was being watched. Imaginary insects crawled over his skin in warning, but he didn't dare break his focus, or show any kind of reaction for fear of giving away his location.

High above the tree line, a loud squawking noise pierced the quiet, even drawing the attention of the restless lycans. Jaret glanced heavenward to take in the full moon and the mosaic of stars canvassing the night sky, but was unable to pinpoint the source of the shrill. Behind him, Toby stilled, having heard it too.

Seconds turned to minutes as they waited, and the lycans, as if sensing the impending danger, fled from the perimeter and concealed themselves among the dense foliage. As Jaret stalled his withdrawal, the cold ground seeped through his clothing and penetrated his bones, and even though he ignored the physical discomfort, he knew it was well past time to move. He couldn't risk hypothermia slowing him down. Not now. Not when he was so close to obliterating a town full of monsters, and had a truck equipped with a round of C4 if it came to that. Silver bullets did the trick, but blowing their heads clear off their bodies worked wonders too. There wasn't a lycan on the face

of the earth coming back from an attack like that.

He inched backward until the forest closed around him and camouflaged his body. Moments before he was about to stand, a black, winged creature took to the air and briefly darkened the moon as it cut across the wide expanse of sky. As the swish of wings stirred the wind and reached his ears, Jaret tuned his mind to the creature above and caught fleeting images of a young girl's chilling thoughts.

Smoke. Fire. Running. Pain.

So much pain.

Then someone or something was inside his head, brushing his mind and massaging his dark thoughts from their dusty corners, the light caress shockingly intimate. He scanned the area, and caught glimpses of deer, raccoon, and porcupines, but it wasn't their thoughts he was picking up on, nor were they reading him. Before he had time to put up a mental mind shield, chaos erupted inside his head. Both he and Toby clasped their temples, as blinding pain skewed their empath abilities and rattled their hard-fought focus.

Unstable, Jaret went up on his knees and took deep gulping breaths, struggling to draw in air. Toby's strangled voice sounded behind him, and Jaret swiveled, the action taking its toll on his already rattled brain. Nausea welled up inside him, and he put a placating hand on his younger cousin's shoulder. To this day Jaret still felt responsible for Toby's well-being, possibly because he was older by a few months, or possibly because it was just in his nature. Regardless, Toby had proved time and time again that he could take care of himself—and of Jaret—when the situation arose. But Toby was his family, closer than any brother, two men cut from the same cloth who shared everything, from their mission, their single-minded determination, their hardened exterior, to the women they bedded.

Toby crouched low, then went back on his heels, his eyes widening. Unease moved through Jaret when he caught the perplexed look on

his cousin's face.

"Toby?"

"Look." He gestured with a nod and Jaret followed the direction of his gaze.

The winged creature—a raven—dipped low to see them. Its violet eyes locked on Jaret's before it turned and flew over the locked gate, and into the village. One minute it was soaring above the town hall; the next it was gone, having disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. And instantly, the debilitating pain inside his head dissipated, swallowed by the night, right along with the violet-eyed raven.

What the fuck?

Jaret turned his gaze back to the sky and scanned it, searching for clues, as he climbed to his feet and hauled Toby up with him. Since when did ravens brandish violet eyes and empath skills? He blinked his mind back into focus as it raced, and rolled his tongue around a suddenly dry mouth while he tried to sort through this unexpected turn of events.

"Witchcraft?" Toby supplied.

Jaret clenched his jaw hard enough to grind bone. Christ, Toby had to be right. What other explanation could there be? Witchcraft would certainly account for the magick he sensed shielding the town. As he considered the raven's powerful empath abilities, he tossed that idea around for a bit longer. Jaret was smart, smart enough to come to the astounding conclusion that this was no ordinary witch, and she wasn't using ordinary magick. She'd sent her raven out into the night, likely while she remained safe behind closed doors, and attempted to read his thoughts. He gave a slow shake of his head, the man in him fascinated by the discovery, the officer in him wishing it weren't true.

"A spiritual shifter," Jaret acknowledged.

Toby gave a low whistle, his eyes wide, and Jaret understood his cousin's astonished reaction. Rumors had circulated for years that

such spiritual shifters existed, although a PTF sighting had yet to be documented. Academy training had taught them never to discount their presence and never to underestimate the power that such a creature could wield. Directive insisted they shoot first and ask questions later if they stumbled across such a being. As he contemplated their spectacular discovery, an ominous, almost foreboding tremble worked its way down his spine and elicited a shiver from deep within.

Sure, he and Toby hunted monsters that terrorized the streets, fed on humans, and tossed them away like they were yesterday's garbage, but they'd never come up against a shape-shifting witch before, especially one with such powers. Nor could he deny that it scared the shit out of him.

Many centuries ago, his ancestors had all their divine magick stolen by the Brighton coven of witches—evil beings who fed off the energy of others—which left them with only empathy abilities. His family knew firsthand the harm a wicked witch could inflict. And honestly, as far as he was concerned, all witches were wicked. Out on the streets, he'd yet to come up against one who wasn't.

If there was one thing the cousins had been taught, it was that, unlike the Darkland clan, who were born pure, bred to be honorable, and taught to use their empath abilities only for the betterment of mankind, all other creatures of the night were inherently evil and would turn against you at the slightest chance. Of course, the city streets they prowled had yet to prove otherwise. Not to mention the evil that took place in their own backyard when the Brightons stole their magick for their own heinous purposes. It was that incident that first led his ancestors into law enforcement, where, because of their exceptional skills, they were brought into the elite Paranormal Task Force.

"A spiritual shifter . . ." Toby echoed as he chewed on that

fascinating new tidbit for a while. *“Well, I’ll be damned.”*

“A spiritual shifter, indeed,” Jaret confirmed as he fought off the fine sliver of fear working its way through his bloodstream.

But how could that be? Witches and wolves living together? Surely to God, they had to be mistaken, because in all his years of hunting, he’d never seen anything quite so incomprehensible, and he’d seen some pretty crazy shit in his time.

Toby read the direction his thoughts had taken him and asked, *“What do you think is going on in there?”*

Jaret shook his head. *“I have no idea, but we’re sure as hell going to stick around to find out.”*

Chapter Three

The cool night air streamlined her raven's sleek body as she took to the sky, circling higher and higher and enjoying the freedom of flight. As she silently glided through the moonlit night, a slight movement beneath the leafless trees caught her attention. Wings flapping, and the moisture from her mouth turning to fog in the frigid breeze, her raven scanned the ground below, searching for any predators that might happen to lie in waiting.

Within her home's protective fence she spotted a pack of lycans howling unhindered beneath the full moon, their low-pitched sounds a soothing, familiar harmony in an eerily strange night. These lycans—her friends and protectors—all lived harmoniously with Serene's other inhabitants: witches, vampires, demons, and panthers, in a secret town, way off the beaten path, disguised as nothing more than a small gated society to any outsiders who happened to come upon them. And the townsfolk who resided there would do whatever was necessary to keep it that way.

A handful of wolves were running about and frolicking playfully, while others were enjoying the wind in their faces as they hunted the deer and other wildlife that managed to find their way over or under the guarded fence. Her raven did a quick perusal of the streets, but all was quiet, as the townsfolk knew better than to venture out on shift night.

So if all was well, why had her raven taken to the sky after all these centuries? Was there some unknown danger lurking about? After the atrocities she'd witnessed as a child centuries ago, and knowing the Darkland men could still be searching for her, Lily had suppressed her magick, and kept her raven grounded, lying dormant, until

now—because someone or something had suddenly ruffled her feathers, and brought her out of hiding.

The only other people who knew about her raven were Serene's overseers and Harmony, the Earth witch who'd rescued her from the cave and eventually brought her to Serene to protect her from the outside world—and, after the incident in Wellington, Iowa, to protect the outside world from Lily.

After the Salem witch trials in 1692, the five species known as lycans, vampires, shifters, witches, and demons were forced to put aside their hatred and prejudice for one another and forge a truce. Covert communities were set up around the globe, and each species in each town had an overseer. These five overseers all worked together to keep their brethren in line and maintain order among their kind while keeping their existence a secret from the rest of the world.

Despite the deep-seated ache of loneliness that resided inside her heart after losing her family, a gaping hole that could never be filled, Lily had finally found peace in Serene, and felt protected from any and all outside threats. Lessons learned long ago had proved that each species had many outside threats. Besides the rogues contaminating the city streets, they had other natural predators. Namely, Paranormal Task Force officers. Founded close to one hundred years ago, the branch recruited the smartest, the strongest, the deadliest. The officers were the elite of the elite, trained by the best, and always eager to hunt and kill anything perceived as different. Just ask Kane Reynolds, former PTF officer, and new mate to alpha wolf Sunray (who'd taken over after she killed her alpha, Vall). Kane knew all about the force's policies. Shoot first, ask questions later. Kane, along with Sunray, also had the coven overseer Harmony removed from council a few months back, and Lily was of two minds about that.

She loved and respected the opinions of the two wolves, but she owed everything to Harmony. Her loyalty to the coven elder made it

most difficult to step into the overseer position upon her dethroning. Lily might not have been a fan of the overbearing alpha wolf Vall, but she didn't believe for one minute that the coven guide had resurrected him for her own selfish purposes. Deep in her soul she believed Harmony was a woman of greatness, a woman who gave rebirth to the lycan guide only out of love and her desire to nurture all earth's creatures.

As her raven soared through the sky, she scanned the ground below, trying to figure out what had roused her from her centuries-long slumber. She was unnerved by this unexpected development, and equal mixtures of confusion and anxiety overcame her. She let loose a shrill, the noise mingling with the sounds of the wolves, as she strove to understand what had frightened her raven enough that she would take to the sky during a full moon, the lycans' mandatory run night. A night all were forbidden to leave their quarters.

The scent of raccoon hit her and she dipped lower, but when she did, another smell wafted before her sensitive nose. It was earthy, musky, and . . . *enticing*. As shock rocketed through her, her entire body grew warm and wanting, and the sudden animalistic urge to mate, breed, and procreate—an inconceivable notion, indeed—began pulling at her hard. Her mouth watered, and she extended and retracted her long talons as she flapped her wings furiously. As her heart pumped and a strange new need gathered in her stomach, she shook her head to clear it.

What was going on?

Why was her raven acting so primitive? It wasn't as if she'd stumbled across a male from her own bloodline. As the last Brighton of her kind, she knew there was no chance of finding and mating with someone from her lineage. Since witches only ever mated among their own lines, she'd long ago come to accept that she would spend her

entire existence alone. Which made the sudden primal urge to mate all the more extraordinary, and confusing.

She dove lower, her raven reaching out to touch the thoughts of the creatures running through the forest, surfing through their minds, feeling the excitement of predator and the fright of prey, and massaging the memories from their darkest mental corners. That was when she felt it: Someone was reaching out to her—someone very powerful from outside the protective gates was attempting to read her thoughts.

Shock stilled her movements, and she immediately put up a mind shield, berating herself that she hadn't taken precautionary measures and blocked her thoughts before taking to the sky in the first place. But her magick was rusty, and frankly, her raven's unexpected presence had taken her by surprise.

She didn't dare move, let alone breathe, for if whoever was down there had managed to tap into her thoughts, he or she could discover and expose the secret community through her. As the newest overseer, she was trying to prove herself to a town who questioned her role as protector, especially since she appeared to have no powers to defend them. But it wasn't that she had no powers, only that she was afraid to use them.

Minutes passed as her raven hovered near the treetops, trying to get a better glimpse of the person who'd reached out to her.

When something on the ground below shifted, she focused and caught the silhouette of two large men, silver strands of moonlight reflecting off the weapons secured to their hips. She sniffed and the acrid scent of silver and sulfur filled her nostrils. Immediately, fight-or-flight instincts kicked in, and she knew she needed to get back to her body, to warn the other overseers. And needless to say, venturing outside the walls in her raven form left her far too vulnerable to a deadly attack.

Cutting through the air, she sailed toward the town hall, gliding to her home, a quaint two-story house that rested just beyond the one main road. She dropped down from the sky and slipped in through her open window. Her raven whispered into her ear moments before she reentered her body, which lay asleep on her warm, comfy four-poster bed.

“Lily, wake up. . . .”

Lily awoke with a gasp, her raven pulling her awake. Except it wasn't her raven's voice she heard calling out to her; it was her mother's. Her ears rang as the faint fluttery sounds of her mother's melodic voice fell around her like a silken ribbon. She sat up straight in her bed, beads of moisture dripping from her body and soaking her flannel sheets. Breathing hard, she glanced around, half expecting to see her mother hovering over her, whispering words of warning in her ear, and half expecting to see the men from the woods closing in on her, guns aimed and ready to kill.

Lily fisted her hands around the amulet she always wore, while her mother's horrible death and parting words from so long ago quickly rose to the forefront of her mind. Although she wore the charm as a constant reminder of what she'd lost, that night was too painful to think about in any detail. So why, all of a sudden, was she thinking about it now?

Lily pinched her eyes shut, hoping it really was nothing more than a bad dream but intuitively knowing it wasn't. Lord and Lady, she'd found peace in Serene. Why now, after all this time, was she thinking about the massacre, recalling all the atrocities her family had to endure before their untimely deaths?

Because something was happening, an inner voice warned.

Someone was coming. For her.

Every instinct she possessed told her so.

Who were those dangerous hunters, and how had they discovered

her town? And why did a mere breath of their scent rouse the animal in her and have her thinking about mating, family, and bloodlines?

A wave of panic burst through her and she instantly bit it down, striving to keep her thoughts focused and her mind clear so she could formulate a plan of action.

Lily climbed from her bed, put on her slippers, and hurried to her open window. Slightly claustrophobic, Lily always kept it inched open. Perhaps the phobia stemmed from her time in the cave, or perhaps it was from the restlessness her raven felt at having its wings clipped for hundreds of years. Ravens were meant to fly, not to lie dormant, and she couldn't deny how much she enjoyed spreading her wings, how amazing the freedom of flight felt.

She reached out a shaky hand and the wooden ledge felt cool to the touch. A night breeze seeped inside and curled around her scantily clad body. As the cool wind raced up her nightie, it ruffled the lace lining her cleavage and stimulated her nipples. Her body thrummed in response, her buds hardening, and she arched her back and moaned without censorship. Then suddenly, as if realizing where she was and what she was doing, she glanced around to see if anyone outside her bedroom walls had heard her. She blew a relieved breath when she met with empty sidewalks and silent streets.

Now, what on earth had her stepping out of character and acting so carnal at a time like this? She'd never displayed such eroticism before, especially in front of her window—and to do it when danger lurked so close by. Thankfully the town was on lockdown and no one had heard her. And fortunately, she'd always kept her mind shield in place so no one could read her innermost thoughts.

At night when most of the townsfolk slept, save the vampires, leaving them in a vulnerable state for mind probing, the coven put a magick curtain around the village, shielding the minds of every single inhabitant from any outside threat. Despite the curtain, Harmony had

long ago warned Lily never to lower her guard, even in sleep, because for some inexplicable reason the charm never seemed to work on her, and when she dreamed, she opened her thoughts to those with the ability to read them. But tonight when she'd taken on her raven form, shocked and maybe even a little exhilarated to find herself in her spiritual state, she'd forgotten to take precautionary measures and block her thoughts. It scared her to think that she'd almost been read by those hunters.

As she thought more about the reason her raven had surfaced, she began wringing her damp hands together and decided her next course of action was to call a council meeting and figure out what they were going to do with these intruders. But she also knew that such an action would have to wait until tomorrow night.

Kane and Sunray were running with their pack, and everyone else was on lockdown. Lily inched her curtain open and scanned the black streets. Once again the enticing scent of the hunters reached her nostrils. It permeated her skin and whispered through her blood like wildfire. She drew the earthy aroma deep into her lungs and her entire body reacted with a needy tremor. What the heck was going on?

Lady, if these men were hunters, here to harm her community, then she should be fearful, not reacting with primitive urges. Angry with herself for her inappropriate responses, and not really understanding what was happening to her, physically or emotionally, Lily stepped back from the window and let the sheer curtain fall from her fingertips.

As a myriad of strange new sensations gathered in her stomach and traveled onward and outward, igniting her blood along the way, she moved farther into the moon-soaked room and decided a sleepless night was most definitely upon her. She began to pace restlessly, aware that sunrise was still hours away.

With her body warm and tingly, and her blood stirring from the

strange new sexual awakening taking place inside her, she made her way down the stairs and into her kitchen. She plugged in her kettle, then circled back to her bathroom. After glancing at her tired violet eyes, tangled mess of dark curly hair, and rather pale skin in the vanity mirror, she plunked herself down on the edge of her tub and turned on the water. Not only would a shower help pass the time; it would help cleanse her thoughts, rinse the passion from her libidinous body, and get her head back on straight. While she waited for the kettle to whistle, she stripped down, switched the water from tub filler to showerhead, and climbed into the soothing steam.

As the refreshing needlelike spray washed over her naked body, she let the tension drain from her neck and shoulders, but she couldn't deny that she was still feeling oddly aroused, and the warm water did little to detract her thoughts from hot, salacious bodies—warm, wet, and writhing between the sheets. In fact, the hot steam seemed to stir her desires even more.

Goodness . . .

What was happening to her?

Looking for a distraction, Lily grabbed her aromatherapy body wash, a luxury Sunray had brought back with her from her favorite bath and body store, and poured a generous amount of the scented soap into her hands. Much to her dismay, as she rubbed, and the sweet, sugary vanilla fragrance filled the shower, her traitorous thoughts took her in an erotic direction.

“Mmm,” she moaned without regard, and moisturized her flesh, until every inch of her skin was lathered, bubbly, and . . . *stimulated*. As the aroma curled around her, Lily tilted her face to the water. The hard beads splashed against her nipples and traveled downward, creating a tapered river to her pussy. As moisture gathered in her nether region, Lily widened her legs. The hot water brushed roughly over her clit and aroused her to the point of distraction. She

swallowed, hard, unable to believe the sexual impulses, this new explosion of need inside her body. Soon her tangy aroma mingled with the fragranced steam, and filled the bathroom with an erotic scent.

Then suddenly, without conscious thought, her hands went to her breasts and lightly brushed her engorged nipples. She let loose a low cry and arched her back, her low sex drive instantly kicking up a few notches. Working solo wasn't normally her style, but tonight she couldn't seem to help herself, couldn't seem to keep her wandering hands off her suddenly lascivious body.

Honestly, up until now her sex life had been pretty nonexistent; most times she could take it or leave it. And as of late she preferred to choose the latter, despite the tremendous efforts the men in her coven put forth. Perhaps it was because no man had ever really been able to do it for her, and those brief, nonorgasmic encounters always left her feeling restless and lonely, forcing her to finish herself off with her own hands. Or perhaps it was because she'd yet to meet the one and only man destined for her. She'd always heard that sex with the person you were meant to be with was a truly fulfilling and orgasmic experience. It also made one feel stronger, bolder, empowering one from deep within. Sunray, alpha wolf, and Lily's close friend, had recently confirmed that theory after reuniting with her reincarnated lover, Kane.

But tonight, even though no such man existed—one who was meant for her and her alone, one who could pull reactions from her body like no other, and one who empowered her and gave her strength—she desperately needed to release the mounting pressure inside her. It baffled her, really. Maybe it had something to do with freeing her raven after so many years. Or maybe it had something to do with those men, she thought soberly, quickly dispelling those dangerous thoughts in favor of more pleasant ones, like the ache

between her legs. After all, it was ludicrous to think those hunters had something to do with her newly stimulated libido. Wasn't it?

As she touched her body, she consoled herself, understanding there was nothing more she could do tonight, and her town wasn't in immediate danger. Those hunters couldn't penetrate the electric fence, and it would be most foolish to try, especially on run night. She was also certain that tomorrow the council would come up with a plan to eliminate the threat they posed.

Tonight, however, tonight was meant for pleasure, and she feared that if she didn't soon touch herself, she'd combust from need, and come morning they'd find nothing but a wet ball of black feathers on her shower floor.

Deciding to just let her mind go and allow her body to lead her actions, she slipped her hand between her legs and gave her clit a light stroke. Her entire body trembled, her muscles tightening in carnal anticipation. She closed her eyes against the flood of heat and continued to brush her fingers over her clit, picking up the pace ever so slightly. Her breasts felt swollen, hot, and her body ached in a way it had never ached before.

"Oh my." She sagged against the shower door as she basked in her sexual awakening. Boldly, and in desperate need to assuage the dark desire swirling through her, she pushed harder against her swollen sex, giving herself the stimulation she craved. As she toyed with her clit, and pressed her index inside her tight channel, her knees wobbled slightly. Lily drew a steadying breath, her sex clenching hard around her index and aching to be filled with more than just her slim finger.

As Lily parted her mouth and let the warm water spill over her chin, blistering heat exploded inside her. Feeling suddenly feverish, she removed the showerhead from its cradle, adjusted the setting from spray to pulse, and aimed it between her legs.

Her breathing became labored, erratic, as she played out a few erotic fantasies in her mind, fantasies she'd never known she had until now.

"So good," she murmured as she centered the forceful stream directly over her clit. As fire leapt at her thighs, and her brain stopped functioning properly, she pitched her hips forward and felt that first sweet clench of fulfillment. She was so engrossed in the pleasure, her eyes fluttered shut and she concentrated all her focus on each and every pulse, riding out the sensations and prolonging the ecstasy for as long as possible.

As the tension eased from her body, she unconsciously lowered her guard. Her head fell forward, and in that instant, as she felt herself floating on some level between sleep and consciousness, her entire body spasmed with unabashed pleasure.

The cooling water snapped her back to reality, her body inching its way back down to earth, and that was when she realized that she'd been so lost in the haze of pleasure, mindlessly drunk with orgasmic euphoria, that she'd carelessly dropped her shield. She could sense the men from the forest, sense them inside her. They were feeling her every thought and partaking in her every pleasure. Trembling, she clutched her chest and gasped as a wave of anxiety moved through her, but what frightened her most was that it was she who'd reached out to them.

Chapter Four

Stretched out in the front seat of his 4x4 Raptor, Jaret shifted restlessly, suddenly pulled awake by erotic visions of a beautiful violet-eyed girl in the midst of pleasuring herself. He turned his head to see his cousin in the cab behind him, twisting fitfully on the leather seat, his blanket haphazardly draped over his fidgeting limbs. Although Toby was still lost in a haze of sleep, it was clear by his movements that those same arousing images were calling out to him as well.

As a whirlpool of emotions overcame Jaret—her emotions—he sat up straighter and adjusted his cock inside his pants. His raging erection was pressing hard against his jeans and causing him a shitload of pain. He gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white, and looked through the windshield. Carefully scanning the dark, dense forest, he sent out a mind probe and searched for the source of his distress, attempting to pinpoint the mystery woman's exact location.

He looked past the secure gate and zeroed in on the towering town hall, to the spot where he'd watched the raven disappear hours earlier. As a wave of heat moved through his bloodstream, he instantly knew he'd narrowed in on her location. Shutting out the din of the wildlife around him, and the troubled sounds coming from the backseat, he channeled his focus and weaved his way into her mind. He stiffened as he tapped into the woman's lascivious thoughts, left uncensored as she concentrated on the intense points of pleasure deep between her legs. He delved further into her psyche and what he discovered bombarded his body with need and desire. A savage wave of lust stole the breath from his lungs. *Holy fuck.* Unbidden, she was caressing

herself, lightly brushing her fingers along the slick opening between her legs, stroking her engorged clit, and moaning in bliss as she chased an orgasm.

Jesus Christ ...

Instantly consumed with lust, his dick throbbed, and his mouth watered—he wanted to replace her fingers with his throbbing cock, but first ached to bury his mouth in her sweet cunt and give her the relief she was seeking. He licked his lips, dying to indulge in her honeyed nectar, to pull her clit into his hungry mouth and tongue fuck her until she creamed for him. Fascinated by the show, he breathed deep, and through her senses he could smell her tangy scent as she stretched herself wider, inserting two fingers inside her pretty pink pussy.

The officer in him tried to concentrate, to push past the lust and examine her thoughts further. It was his job to discover her identity, the true extent of her powers, and the odd chemistry between them. But the man in him, oh hell, the man in him was quickly losing control, lust overruling all rational thought. Cravings like he'd never before experienced whipped through his blood as his cock grew another inch.

Ignoring the disciplined side of himself—something he'd never done before—and giving in to impulse, Jaret ripped his button open and hastily pulled down his zipper to release his raging hard-on before it ripped a hole in his jeans. Or worse yet, did permanent damage to him somehow.

Want zinged through his body and parked in his groin, and that was when he began to sweat. Beads of moisture pooled on his forehead despite the cold temperature outside. Sweet fuck, he needed this in the most unfathomable way. And that was what frightened him the most. It wasn't just a want; it was a *need*, a need so fucking powerful and strong there was no part of him that had the strength to

walk away from it.

Attuned with her mind, he could feel her mounting desire as he gripped his cock and began to run his hand over the length. Christ, he was so aware of her, her every thought, her every emotion, her every dark desire. Sure, he could read others, but this connection was so goddamn strong, flowing without obstruction across the wide expanse of forest, that it needed to be examined further. Because the fact was, he'd only ever connected with other family members, those from his own bloodline, in such an effortless manner.

Sweet Jesus, who was this woman who called out to him like a beacon in the night? And why did she have the ability to rattle his hard-earned control?

He wanted those answers, and goddammit, he was hell-bent on getting them, but right now he was too far gone to consider them further because as he watched her pleasure herself, he fisted his cock harder and pumped his hand in a smooth, steady motion. His head darkened and swelled beneath his palm, and rivulets of precum dripped from his slit.

As this mysterious woman continued to play havoc with his senses, behind him Toby moaned low and deep in his sleep and Jaret knew he was taking pleasure in the intimate slide show and reveling in the eroticism too.

Jaret's tension mounted as her heated desire burst through him. Shaken to the core, he moaned and writhed on the leather seat as her hot achy breasts called out to him, clamoring for his mouth, his tongue, his hands. Jaret snaked his tongue out and made a slow pass over his bottom lip as her fantasies ran through his mind. When she took one breast into her palm and gave a gentle squeeze, all Jaret could think about was taking that sweet cherry nipple into his mouth and spending an eternity sucking on it. His hand skated over his shaft faster, and he dipped into his come to lubricate his palm. Unhinged,

he felt his muscles ripple in preparation, but he wasn't ready to come just yet. He wanted to savor the show and watch her climax before he toppled over the edge.

"What the fuck . . . ?"

His tension must have roused his cousin, but he was too far gone to apologize for waking Toby, or for letting his lust get the better of him.

He listened to the hiss of Toby's zipper as he released his raging hard-on.

"Jesus, Jaret, she's killing me."

Jaret sucked in air, and it took effort to speak, even telepathically. *"Yeah, I'm right there with you, pal."*

"Fuck. Those nipples. They're so goddamn red and hard." Toby let loose a ragged groan.

All Jaret managed to get out was, *"Yeah. Red. Hard."*

"What I'd do to pull one in my mouth and suck long and hard."

Jaret's fingers itched and saliva pooled on his tongue. *"Damn, just look at that sweet little cunt."*

Toby drew a slow, sharp breath and groaned. *"Fuck, I've never smelled anything sweeter."* He pulled another breath, and as it filled his lungs, he began to decipher each and every fragrance. *"Vanilla. Oh Jesus, she smells like sugary vanilla."*

As the warm scent of sweet candied vanilla mingled with the delectable aroma of her beautiful pussy, Jaret stroked harder.

"Jesus, that mouth. Ah Christ, I'd kill to have that wrapped around my cock."

"Where I want my cock is inside her pussy."

He moaned low. *"Yeah, and look at that sweet ass."* Jaret listened to the soft rustle of clothes as Toby ripped his pants completely off and tossed them to the floor. *"You think she'll let us, Cousin? You think she'll let us spread her body wide-open and let us feast on her?"*

Jaret's body grew so needy it was all he could do to keep himself from exploding. He surfed through the bewitching woman's mind and let her every thought, her every desire, rush over his body like a tsunami wave. A low hiss sounded in his throat and there was nothing he could do to stifle it.

Oh yeah, he was pretty fucking sure she'd let them. It was written all over her face, her body, and was documented in her every telltale movement.

"So what do you think?" Toby probed again. *"Think she'll let us?"*

As this mystery woman took great pleasure in working her clit with the shower nozzle, Jaret's hand pumped harder over his throbbing dick, and his heart crashed against his chest as he assessed her needs. He drew a deep breath and concentrated.

"Look at her, Toby, and feel what she's feeling. It's what she wants. The spray is on her clit and her fingers are inside her, but it's not enough. She's calling out to us. I don't know how and I don't know why, but she is. She wants to be filled with our cocks, not her fingers."

With that, Toby moaned louder and began to abuse his cock with the same feverish need as Jaret. And it occurred to Jaret that, like his, Toby's primal needs had overshadowed his sensibility. Both were disregarding policy—the man overruling the officer—and that was unprecedented. Whoever this woman was and whatever kind of grip she had over them was very powerful indeed.

Everything inside Jaret urged him to climb from the truck, find a way to scale the charged fence, and go searching for her. To fuck her senseless first, then ask questions later. And by Christ, he had a shitload of questions, because he was intelligent enough to know that this woman, the one who was tearing them up inside, and the raven who'd skewed their empath abilities were one and the same. His gut also told him she was somehow important to him and Toby, important to his entire clan, in fact. Damned if he wasn't determined

to find out why.

Ignoring those thoughts for the time being, he turned his attention back to the vixen toying with his libido and shredding his control. Jaret soon began to shake from sexual frustration and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. As a riot of emotions moved through him, he could feel her cunt pulse and clench as she gave herself over to her orgasm. Every lush inch of her body vibrated in heavenly bliss from the dual assault: water pounding against her clit, fingers working inside her. Her thoughts went haywire, erratic, and it became more and more difficult for Jaret to breathe as her body shuddered in total surrender and she gave herself over to the intense pleasure. Her liquid heat singed her fingers and she closed her eyes, her mind drifting as she soared to the moon and back.

As she came, Jaret shivered violently, feeling her every deep need, and her every clench of fulfillment. But even though she'd just climaxed, she was far from sated. He sensed her ache, her deep-seated loneliness, her need for something far more intimate. He could feel her searching, seeking, reaching out to him in the most confusing ways.

As her emotions mingled with his, he cupped his balls and milked his rock-hard shaft until his entire body trembled. He lifted his coat and, unable to take another moment of the sweet agony, let loose a groan and shot off onto his stomach. He drew deep breaths and listened to Toby pound his cock harder until he finished himself off.

Jaret blinked, and in the span of a moment, the connection between him and the mystery woman was shattered, ripped apart like a tattered sheet in a summer windstorm. Jaret jerked back as reality jostled his thoughts back to the present.

He took a deep controlled breath and worked to pull himself together. "*Jesus . . .*"

"*Yeah, that about sums it up,*" Toby responded. A moment later he

leaned over the seat, reached into the glove box, and grabbed a fistful of napkins that were given to them at the drive-through window of their favorite fast-food restaurant. He tossed a few Jaret's way, then sat back and began to wipe down his stomach.

Feeling drained, and completely disturbed by the intensity of the connection, Jaret just sat there, trying to make sense of what had just happened. He zipped up his jeans and attempted to shake the buzz from his head. A moment later a yawn pulled at him. In a desperate need to think, he stifled the wave of exhaustion that had come over him. He climbed from the truck and finished buttoning his pants, the cool evening air renewing his fading energy. After getting dressed, Toby came up beside him and leaned against the truck, his breath turning to fog in the cold night. Jaret stared out at the forest and the guarded community that lay just beyond their reach, ever determined to get to the bottom of this evolving mystery.

Exercising caution, Toby spoke, using whispered words instead of communicating telepathically. They weren't going to risk anyone tapping into their conversation. "What the hell is going on?"

Jaret lowered his voice to match Toby's and asked the most logical question. "Is she a Darkland?"

A frown marred Toby's features, and the fine lines fringing his dark eyes deepened as he ran his hands through his black shoulder-length hair. Toby preferred an easy laid-back style, and judging by the amount of women who vied for his undivided attention, the look worked just fine. Jaret, on the other hand, preferred the clean-cut military image.

"Do you really think it's possible?" Toby asked.

Mimicking his cousin's actions, Jaret smoothed his hair back, and inclined his head, perplexed. "I really don't know how it could be," Jaret responded. "Every Darkland has been accounted for since the beginning of our existence. I've seen the records myself and there is

no mention of a rogue.”

“Should we contact Maddox?”

Jaret frowned. For the time being, he preferred to keep their grandfather out of it until after they gathered more information. “Let’s wait and see what tomorrow brings.”

Toby pushed off the truck and took a step toward the protected town. “Kane is never going to let us through that gate.”

“I think you might be surprised, Toby. He has a whole lot of reasons for letting us in.” Jaret moved in beside his cousin, brushed his hand over his day’s growth, and widened his stance. Oh yeah, they were getting in, all right. Not only to discover exactly what was going on behind that fence before they obliterated every last creature residing in the town, but also to unravel this mystery and discover who this violet-eyed spiritual shifter was, and what kind of hold she had over the Darkland cousins.

After her erotic escapades in the shower, and barely able to believe her unorthodox behavior, Lily dressed in a pair of faded jeans and a heavy blue knit sweater. Taking the utmost care to keep her mind shield in place, she tied her long wet hair back into a ponytail, and made her way to the kitchen to fix a cup of tea. The automatic kettle had shut itself off and the water had cooled, so she turned it back on and piddled about while waiting for it to return to a boil.

She tried her damndest to feel her old self again by focusing on the little things around her, the pictures on her walls, the place mats on her small wooden table, and the antique teapot she’d picked up years ago. But even after her self-pleasuring session, she still couldn’t seem to quiet her newly stimulated libido and concentrate on anything but her hormones. Now that she’d opened the floodgates, so to speak, all she wanted to do was bask in her new awakening and indulge in her every budding desire.

Honestly she had no idea what was happening to her or why she was reaching out to those hunters who posed a threat to her gated community. But truth be told, allowing them into her mind was as exciting as it was frightening.

Just knowing they'd watched her masturbate still brought color to her cheeks. In all her hundreds of years on earth she'd never done anything quite so scandalous. But it gave her some measure of comfort to know that she'd never have to set eyes on them. No way would security let them through the gate. And if those two men did somehow manage to manipulate their way in, they would be dealt with promptly and swiftly. A council meeting would be called, and their futures would be determined.

Exposure to the real world was a never-ending threat, which meant that outsiders weren't welcome, for fear that they'd unveil their secret community. Since the townsfolk went out of their way to make a visitor's stay most unpleasant, one rarely stayed long in Serene. And those who insisted on making their stay permanent quickly understood the repercussions behind that rash decision, because eventually straws were drawn, and species were made.

The unsuspecting humans would soon find themselves going head-to-head with one of the five species—whoever drew the shorter straw. With primal instincts governing the actions of the chosen breed, the human would inevitably be turned into an immortal being in one of five ways: through a lycan's bite, a vampire's blood transfer, a witch's spell, a demon's slaying, or a panther's mating. Fortunately, once a being was turned, pack mentality ruled, and former humans became loyal to their new family, the previous threat of exposure no longer an issue.

After making her tea, she sipped it slowly and stared outside. When the first rays of morning light poured through her kitchen window, Lily pulled open her front door and breathed in deep. A smile touched

her mouth and she was thankful that the spring air was fragrant only with burgeoning flowers and new plant growth. No lingering scents from the hunters remained. All around her the town was coming alive and people were leaving their homes to tend to their many chores. It was a typical day, like the thousands they'd had before.

Inside Serene they all had their daily duties to fulfill and everyone needed to pull together if they wanted to keep the town running smoothly. The panthers were in charge of security; the demons took care of discipline. The vamps, having been on the earth the longest, and having seen just about everything, were in charge of education. The coven took care of medicine, healing, and all things pertaining to nature. The lycans oversaw training of all species, keeping the town prepared should an attack from a rogue or a government agency take place. Other responsibilities, from managing the stores and manning the front gate, to keeping a fresh supply of food and blood on hand and taking away the garbage, were delegated among the species on a rotating basis.

Besides being a council member, Lily also ran the neighborhood café. Other council members had their own "hobbies" as well. Lily considered their daily tasks nothing more than hobbies because inside the town of Serene, they exchanged money for show only. Thanks to smart investments, the vamps alone were worth billions. Even though they were isolated, it was a good life, a safe life, where they'd all found peace and happiness.

Maintaining normalcy, Lily greeted her neighbors and walked the short distance to the café, which was centered on Main Street. Other buildings that dotted the street were the fire department, the candy store, the department store, the school-house, and Vibes, the nightclub. Lily gave a friendly greeting to her friends as they went to work in their various businesses. The last thing she wanted to do was

let the townsfolk know she'd encountered hunters and cause widespread pandemonium. No, what she needed to do was maintain the status quo until tonight, when a meeting could be called. Since the vamps couldn't come out in the day and the lycans would be sleeping off their run, Lily had to keep up with her regular routine until sunset.

On the plus side it was April, and much to Lily's delight, darkness still came early. The sooner the overseers could convene around the oaken table at the town hall, the sooner they could figure out what to do with the outsiders.

Lily unlocked the café door, and as the fresh scent of coffee wafted before her nostrils, it occurred to her that Harmony must have come in early and put on the brew. Normally Lily didn't turn to caffeine for a stimulant. She preferred to use her friend Sophie's homegrown natural herbs and spices. But after last night, she figured she could use a cup or two of fresh java. She walked across the polished white-and-black checker floor and made her way around the long counter to the back of the shop, to where Harmony was fussing about and prepping for the breakfast crew. Lily paused to look at her friend and mentor, taking note of the dark circles under her eyes.

Lily lightly touched her friend's shoulder to pull her focus. "Harmony, are you feeling okay?"

Harmony met her glance and narrowed her violet eyes. Lily shifted uncomfortably under her scrutinizing gaze. Did Harmony know what had happened last night? Was she aware of the hunters? Or of Lily's strange connection to them?

"I could ask the same about you," Harmony responded.

"I'm fine," Lily lied, and put on a cheery face. Sheer embarrassment from her actions the previous night kept her from broaching the subject. That, and it went against council directive to discuss security matters with the townsfolk before the overseers convened and put a plan into motion. Even though Harmony was a former overseer, after

her demotion she was now classified as one of the many townsfolk, which meant Lily was forbidden to discuss the issue with her.

Harmony continued to stare at Lily, which forced her to blurt out, “I don’t always sleep well on run night. The howls keep me awake.” Despite her best efforts not to, Lily flinched. She quickly tried to cover it up by grabbing the pot of coffee and pouring herself a cup, but she knew her actions hadn’t gone unnoticed by the coven elder.

After a long moment, the bell above the door jangled, and Lily was thankful for the distraction. Harmony dropped the matter for the time being and turned her attention back to her task. Lily slipped into the back, changed into her pretty pink retro waitress uniform, tied her black apron to her waist, and made her way out to the front counter. She actually enjoyed dressing the part. Not only was the uniform dainty and attractive, but it made her feel like a down-home waitress in a small, quaint community. It gave her some sense of normalcy in a town that was anything but.

She smoothed her apron, adjusted the clips in her hair, and stepped out into the restaurant area to check on her first customer. In no time at all the café filled with people, keeping her busy and her mind off the hunters. On the bright side, the morning passed without incident, and just as Lily was cleaning up after the lunch crowd, Sunray and Kane came in and took their usual seats.

Lily studied them and could tell by their body language that they already knew about the hunters. Lady, just thinking about them now rattled her. She grabbed the pot of coffee, along with two mugs, and made her way to their table. She placed the mugs down and tried to keep her hands from shaking as she poured.

“Good morning, Lily,” Sunray said, her silver eyes flashing as she held her hand up to stop her from filling her mug. “I’ll just have orange juice.”

Lily smiled, and couldn’t believe she’d forgotten about Sunray’s

condition. After all this time it was still so strange to see the sexy and flamboyant Sunray all settled down and pregnant, no less.

“Right. I’m on it.” Lily made a move to turn, but Kane’s hand on her arm stopped her.

“Lily, we need to meet.”

Lily exhaled sharply. “I know.”

Kane’s head came back with a start. “You do?”

She nodded. “I saw them last night.”

“You *saw* them?” Kane asked.

“Lily,” Sunray whispered, “are you saying . . . ?”

Lily nodded. “Yes, something woke my raven,” she said, deciding to keep to herself how exhilarating and freeing it felt to fly after all this time.

“My God, Lily,” Sunray said. Her silver eyes widened in shock.

“That *was* you we saw in the sky.”

Kane cursed under his breath. “Shit, this is bad. If your raven showed, it must feel threatened, and must have sensed the danger.” He turned to Sunray. “These two will stop at nothing. . . .”

Did Kane know them? Did he know why she felt a connection to them? She furrowed her brow and was about to ask. “These men . . .”

Just then the doorbell jangled and Kane held his hand up. “Let’s not talk about it anymore here. Tonight. Town hall. Sunset. I’ll inform the others.”

Lily nodded and hastily made her way to the back to grab Sunray’s juice. When she entered the back room, Harmony was giving her an odd look, her glance going from Lily to Sunray and Kane, back to Lily again. Lily struggled to ignore the questions burning in Harmony’s eyes as she pulled the juice container from the fridge. Clearly, Harmony sensed the disturbance. How could she not? The air rippled with it. It pained Lily to keep secrets from the woman who’d saved her so many years ago, but she was under strict council orders and had

sworn to abide by them.

The rest of the day passed far too slowly for her liking, and just before nighttime fell, her replacement came and Lily rushed into the back. Making haste, she slipped out of her uniform, and tossed it into the washing machine before heading home. She took a quick shower and changed out of her jeans and into her black silk dress. After securing her amulet around her neck, she stepped out into the night and hurried down Main Street toward the town hall. As she approached the old wooden structure at the juncture of Main Street and Mulburry Lane, she took note of the fluorescent light pouring from the window and lighting a long pale column on the dark sidewalk. The others were already inside. Waiting.

Collecting herself, Lily opened the door, and secured it behind herself. Her skirt billowed around her ankles and the old floorboards creaked as she made her way down the hall to the circular table. Lily pulled her chair out, took her seat, and gave a curt nod to the other five members who closed the circle. For hundreds of years they'd only ever had five overseers, one for each species, but now that Kane ruled with Sunray, six members currently closed the powerful circle.

All eyes turned to Kane, who was in charge of chairing tonight's meeting as per their schedule. "So it seems our town is in jeopardy of being exposed."

The overseers all sat up straighter in their seats. Their silence encouraged Kane to continue.

Once he had their full attention, he continued. "Sunray and I spotted them last night. They were outside the fence watching us." He paused to look every member in the eye before saying, "These men are a serious threat. Enough that it roused Lily's raven after all these centuries."

All eyes turned on Lily and she grasped her amulet, an instinctive reaction. "I saw their guns, and smelled the silver," she said, not quite

ready to share *all* the events from last night.

“Where are they now?” Drake, the panther guide—head of security and owner of Vibes—asked.

Lily gave a light shrug. “I’m not sure. I don’t sense them anymore.” She glanced around the table, hopeful. “Maybe they just left.”

“Doubtful.” The rich amber in Devon’s eyes grew deeper as the demon snarled and added, “Probably strategizing their way in.”

Kane spoke quietly, and with conviction. “And we’ll let them in.”

Lily gasped. “You’ll let them in? Are you crazy? Kane, you can’t—” Silver eyes narrowed on her. “We don’t have a choice.”

“Of course we do,” she countered.

“If we turn them away, it will simply raise their suspicions. If we do that, they’ll come back with reinforcements. I know these men.”

She watched Devon, Drake, and Quinn (the vampire guide, who’d remained unreadable until now) all tighten as they ran through the options.

“You . . . know them?” Lily asked.

“Paranormal Task Force officers,” he supplied. “Cousins who recently transferred in from the West.”

“They’re PTF officers?” She could feel her cheeks pale. Why on earth would she feel such a strong connection with two PTF officers?

“That’s right, and they’re my former partners. They’re ruthless, dedicated, and swift. Those two will stop at nothing, and using any means possible, they’ll attempt to obliterate this town without even blinking.” Kane lowered his head, and Lily didn’t have to use magick to sense the overwhelming guilt eating him up inside.

Lily frowned, her heart going out to him. She knew all about guilt. Not only did she carry guilt for not being able to save her coven, but she also held guilt for endangering the people in the small town of Wellington, Iowa, a rural community where Harmony had first taken her before they settled in Serene. Eventually Lily’s presence and use

of magick drew suspicion. Soon the streets were filled with armed Darkland men, putting the entire town in danger. After escaping and finding sanctuary in Serene, Lily swore never to use her magick again. Those thoughts made her frown deepen. If she didn't trust in her abilities, then how were Serene's townsfolk supposed to trust in her? She didn't know, but what she did know was that she'd do whatever it took to protect them.

"They must have tracked me here," Kane said, his voice pulling her back.

Sunray, who'd been rubbing her stomach, stopped and closed her hand over his. "Kane, it's not your fault."

"Then we'll change them right away. Just like we do with any other human who infiltrates and refuses to leave," Lily rushed out, panicked at the thoughts of having to face these men—these hunters—head-on.

Kane gave a brisk shake of his head. "It won't work."

"Of course—"

"They're not normal humans, Lily. Jaret and Toby are soldiers and a special breed of empaths. Their powers run deep. Surely you sensed that."

So those were their names, Jaret and Toby. She took a moment to roll their names around in her head, and wondered who was who.

A moment of silence and then Kane questioned, "Lily, are you following me?"

She nodded, and as she pulled herself back, she understood what he was saying. "Any kind of attack on them would be difficult. They'll know it's coming."

"And we're not going to risk one of us"—he stopped to look at his wife, and her ever-expanding stomach, before continuing—"getting injured or, worse yet, killed. Obviously they're not going to come in guns blazing. They're smarter than that. Which means we need to be smarter than them. We also need to be proactive, not reactive, and we

need to change them before they expose us. But first we need a well-thought-out plan. One that can be carried through with careful precision and poses minimum risk to our community.”

Kane turned to Lily. “Can you read them, Lily? Can you tell us their plans, or what they know?”

Oh, she could read them, all right. Not only could she read them; she could invite them into her mind, to enjoy and partake in her sexcapades. Lily wasn’t normally one to keep secrets, but something deep inside prevented her from telling them of her connection. And she wasn’t certain it was entirely due to embarrassment.

“I can try,” she said, then remembered their painful reactions when she attempted to read them. “But I haven’t practiced—”

“I can do it,” Quinn piped in. “I can manipulate their thoughts.”

“I’m not so sure you’re powerful enough, Quinn.” He looked around the table. “I’m not sure any of us can. Not without catching them with their guard down. They’re trained by the best, and are aware of any attempts at probing. I also suspect they’ll want to catch us off guard, and when they make their move, it will be during daylight hours.” Kane gestured toward Quinn. “And you can’t go out until nightfall.” Quinn was a master vamp who could tolerate short periods outdoors in the day, providing he remained in the shadows. A broad-daylight attack made the vamps very vulnerable.

Sunray turned to Lily. “Lily, we’re counting on you for this. You’re going to have to nurture your powers to their fullest potential, and try to get close to them. You need to use magick to slip into their thoughts undetected, and you don’t have a lot of time to do it.”

Lily got quiet for a moment, and mulled over the way the two hunters had reacted when she entered their minds. She considered the way they’d dropped to the ground, as if her probing had somehow hurt them, or skewed their abilities. Was it because her powers were rusty and she pulled too much, or was it something else entirely?

Lily had never probed the thoughts of the townsfolk before, or any other members of council. Such probing was considered an invasion of privacy, and not to be practiced. Besides the coven, the vampires were the only group who could touch the minds of others.

She wondered....

Quinn blinked and turned to her. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," she rushed out rather too quickly.

"It's not nothing. You touched my mind, Lily."

Figuring nothing ventured, nothing gained, she asked, "Did it hurt?"

She didn't like the curious looks coming her way from the other overseers. "No. Why, should it?"

"Lily, is there anything you want to tell us?" Sunray asked.

"No, it's just that my magick is rusty, and, like you said, I should be practicing and nurturing my abilities to their fullest potential." It was a half-truth, but necessary. Lily wasn't ready to admit there was a connection between her and the hunters, not until she found out what it was herself.

"Well, practice on someone else. My thoughts are not for you, little one." He gave her a wicked grin. "Because you might not like what you see." His dark eyes raked over her body slowly, stopping to linger around her cleavage, and the amulet that rested there. "Then again, maybe you would."

"I'm not your little one," she shot back. It was a special name her mother and the rest of her coven had given her, and she didn't like anyone else using it. It somehow reduced it to commonplace, and that made it feel insignificant to her.

"Quinn, behave," Kane warned as Lily closed her hand over her amulet to block her cleavage from his vision.

Not quite ready to let it go, Quinn leaned in to her. "I am a master vamp, Lily. An immortal. There is nothing you can do to hurt me."

Was that why her probing had hurt the hunters? Because they weren't immortals? She knew so little of her powers, or of her magick in general. After the incident in Wellington, Harmony kept her in the dark for her own protection.

"Lily, these men are dangerous. Ruthless killers. If you know something, you need to tell us."

What was she supposed to say, that she let them in her mind so they could watch her masturbate? "I understand, Kane," was all she said.

Sunray touched Kane's arm and Kane let it drop, but Lily didn't miss the warning glare he cast her way before redirecting the conversation.

Kane summed things up. "Okay, so we let them in, but we never let them out."

"That's right," Sunray confirmed. "Once they're inside, we need Lily to gather as much intel as she can. We need to determine if anyone is keeping tabs on them before we strategize an attack. Warn your brethren, and even though the coven will keep a shield over the town, remind all to keep their thoughts blocked for precautionary measures."

"Once they step through that gate, it's not going to take them long to figure out what this place is, if they haven't already," Kane added. "And the next question they'll be asking themselves is if there are other covert communities set up worldwide. Let's just hope that they're oblivious and remain that way until we change them."

"They're empaths. Are you sure we can still change them to another species?" Lily asked, still learning how things worked.

"Yes," Quinn answered. "They only have empathy abilities—they're not purebred or immortal, like us. Not yet anyway," he added with a grin.

"We can never let them leave," Sunray reaffirmed.

“How do we know they haven’t already called for backup?” Devon asked.

Kane turned to Devon. “Because, one, they’re cocky, and not only do they work alone—they’ll want all the credit for the discovery and termination of an entire town. And two, I’m also pretty certain this excursion of theirs wasn’t sanctioned. Those two have a personal vendetta against me, and chances are they are acting without approval. I know how things work at headquarters, and the Chicago branch isn’t likely to send a member of their team to New Hampshire. They’d call in local PTF officers first. But still, we have to confirm all this.”

“And as you all know, once we change them, they’ll become loyal to their new brethren because that’s the way it is with animal instincts, and they will cut ties with outsiders,” Sunray added. “Right now we need to buy time until we figure out a plan to change them.”

“We need to catch them off guard,” Quinn supplied.

“And that’s the most difficult part.” Kane pushed back on his chair, balancing himself on the two rear legs as he regarded the others with weary eyes, a good indication that he hadn’t slept after run night. “This isn’t going to be easy. And whatever you do, don’t ever underestimate them. They’re skilled and will use any means possible to learn more about this place, and any others like it, before they try anything.”

After setting a plan into motion, the meeting came to a close. Lily left the town hall and disappeared into the dark as she made her way past the nightclub, Vibes. Taking her by surprise, the music called out to her, the rhythmic beat stirring her hormones and making her feel downright . . . *libidinous*. Lily wasn’t normally one to go dancing, not to mention walking around feeling so sexually aroused all the time, but tonight the music called out to her in the most erotic ways. Ways she couldn’t ignore.

She entered Vibes and took a seat at the bar, just as the panther overseer, Drake, wrapped a towel apron around his waist, stepping up to the counter to begin his shift after their confidential meeting. He turned his attention to her.

His green eyes narrowed, and without using her witchcraft abilities, she knew he sensed something was amiss, as she rarely frequented his bar. He raised his voice to speak over the pulsating music, and Lily caught a hint of mint on his breath.

“What can I get for you, Lily?” She smiled at him, grateful that he wasn’t about to pry or question her unusual appearance. She’d spent enough time under the microscope at the meeting as it was, and was certain she’d never get used to it.

Lily was new to the ways of the council, and wanted to do an exceptional job for the good people of Serene, but she’d questioned the council’s choice when they picked her. Sunray had insisted Lily was the perfect candidate for the job, that deep inside she had all the traits to be an effective, dynamic overseer, had a strong sense of right and wrong, and with the right nurturing would blossom into a powerful leader.

Sunray also believed that once Lily became more trusting of her abilities, she could be the most powerful overseer of all. Sunray believed that eventually that time would come, and since they’d always had so much time on their hands, they’d been in no hurry . . . until now.

Lily looked at the bottles behind the bar. She wasn’t much of a drinker, so she simply ordered an orange juice. As Drake went off to pour her drink, she twisted on her stool and looked out over the dance floor. Bodies gyrated sensually to the beat and Lily couldn’t deny that the erotic movements made her feel all weird and tingly inside. As baser instincts kicked in, her body thrummed. She zeroed in on one adventurous couple, both panthers, very libidinous animals by

nature, who were practically making love in the crowd. The only things separating their grinding private parts were the woman's thin skirt and the guy's faded jeans. Another cat moved in to join the party, sandwiching the woman between two lusty bodies. With a seductive smile on her face, she handed herself over to the men, and they began to touch her all over, paying no heed to the people around them. There was something undeniably primal and intimate about what Lily was watching, and she couldn't do anything to fight down the moan that rumbled in the depths of her throat.

Lily could feel heat color her cheeks and resisted the urge to purr. One tabby. Two toms. Her whole body shivered, and before she even realized what she was doing, she slid her hand between her legs. Never in her life had she been *that* adventurous, nor did she think she had it in her to indulge in such a wild encounter with two men.

Then again, as of late . . .

As her breath grew shallow, she closed her eyes and momentarily entertained the idea. The image of her on that dance floor, flanked by two powerful men as she gyrated against them under the multicolored strobe lights, filled her mind. Lily played out the delicious erotic fantasy, and she felt her nipples harden and her pussy moisten: two well-built men touching her intimately, pleasuring her body in the most decadent ways, as others watched on, pushing her over the edge until she creamed in her panties.

One tongue on her breast, one between her legs, licking and sucking and touching every inch of her hot, needy body. She imagined them taking her home, stripping her naked, and having their wicked way with her. She shimmied on the barstool, her wet panties sticking to her pussy. She felt ravenous—heat moved through her blood, and her sex muscles throbbed with excitement. Her traitorous body encouraged her to seek out two men of her own and give herself over to them completely, without limitations. And she knew exactly which

two men she wanted to give herself to.

Her fingers trailed up her thighs higher until she could feel the damp heat emanating from her sex. Completely caught up in the moment, she touched her panties, and her lashes fluttered. Without restriction, she gave a small whimper. Just then Drake's voice pulled her back as he slid her drink across the bar. Her lids flew open and she sucked in a breath. Goodness, she could barely believe the directions her lusty thoughts had taken her. She'd hardly ever shared such intimacies with one man, let alone two. Was it simply an erotic fantasy, or was it a psychic premonition of things to come?

Chapter Five

“It’s time,” Jaret announced.

As the early-morning light filtered through the towering trees and began to warm the cool ground below, Jaret climbed from his truck, feeling stiff after sleeping in the cab for two straight nights, zipped his parka, pulled his hood up against the wind, and turned to his cousin to gauge his preparedness. Since they were about to enter into lycan territory (and that of whatever else lived behind that fence) unarmed, they had to be both physically and mentally prepared for the unexpected.

Two days ago, after discovering a violet-eyed raven living among a pack of wolves, and witnessing the spiritual shifter’s sexual escapades, the cousins had felt their best course of action was to spend some time gathering information about the town and its inhabitants before attempting to infiltrate its walls. They’d spent the previous day some fifty miles away in the neighboring town of Silver Springs to do research. Unfortunately, little was known about Serene except that it gave most people the “heebiejeebies,” those antiquated words coming from a little old lady sipping tea at the neighborhood coffee shop. She was a sweet grandmotherly type who reminded Jaret of his own Nanna. She was also quick to tell them that the rest of the townsfolk avoided it like the plague. Of course, they didn’t know *why* the town frightened them, and Jaret could only think their ignorance was a good thing. The less they knew, the better.

He and Toby had returned to Serene’s border last evening after nightfall and taken the utmost care not to draw any attention from the inhabitants as they walked the perimeter of the fence that completely encompassed the town. There was only one way in and it was through

a manned gate. Deciding that am-bushing a town full of paranormal inhabitants wasn't in his best interest, Jaret decided to take the direct approach. Walk straight in during daylight hours and meet Kane face on.

Jaret camouflaged his truck with tree branches, secured a silver-bladed knife to his ankle, and hid the rest of his weaponry behind the brush, near the fence. From the inside, he could reach through the metal rungs and arm himself tonight, after nightfall, once he was sure no one was watching. Kane was smart enough that he'd do an ammunition check before he'd let them through that barrier, but knowing there was a pack of ferocious wolves inside, Jaret wasn't about to go in completely unarmed. It wasn't in his nature to go anywhere defenseless, and if he walked in completely weaponless, it would raise Kane's suspicions. By rights he should have called for backup, but he wasn't quite ready for his comrades to go in guns blazing, not before he figured out the spiritual shifter's identity and the spell she had over them. And then there was that nagging point that this little exercise carried out by him and his cousin hadn't been sanctioned, and could cost them their jobs. But he was sure once they cleansed the town, ridding the streets of an army of monsters, headquarters would overlook their covert actions and move them up a rung or two.

Toby stepped up beside him as he scanned the perimeter while trying to get a mental reading from inside. He shook his head. "Nothing."

"Let's move." As they walked toward the gate, Jaret lengthened his stride and worked to keep his heart rate level. Christ, it felt like he was walking into the lion's den and it was the pride's mealtime. He was pretty damn sure his comrades would question the intelligence of the two cousins going in alone, entering such a dangerous town practically unarmed, but he suspected Kane was smart enough to

keep his pack at bay for the time being. Kane was trained by the PTF, so Jaret knew full well his first instinct would be to gather intel while he tried to control the situation. He'd work to assuage their suspicions and send them away none the wiser. But his second attempt to protect his community wouldn't be so pleasant. Jaret would count on it.

As they moved toward the booth, they studied the guy manning the station, and the out-of-place cowboy hat he had angled on his head. His yellow eyes narrowed and in a subtle move that hadn't gone unnoticed by either cousin, he sniffed the air upon their approach. Had he smelled the silver residue on their hands, their clothes? Jaret felt Toby flinch beside him.

"*Easy*," he warned when he too caught the rich amber gleam in the man's eyes.

"*What the fuck . . . ?*"

"*A demon*," Jaret responded, more to reinforce it for his own benefit than for Toby's, because, like him, Toby possessed the skills to instantly identify the beast inside that security booth.

Even though they were unable to probe its mind, with all their paranormal training it was easy for them to pick out a creature of the night. Any other unsuspecting human would think he'd stumbled across (a) a cowboy with strange eyes, or (b) one who was sporting fashionable contacts. But Jaret could hardly believe a demon was manning the gate and protecting both lycans and witches.

The man cocked his head, blocking the light with his Stetson and giving them both a good hard look before asking in a Southern drawl, "You two lost?"

Jaret pushed back his hood and tried to read him, but his attempts proved unsuccessful. He looked past the gate and cataloged the quaint town. He shifted his stance and marveled at the normalcy of it all—he'd never seen a pack so organized. But, he reminded himself, there was more than just a pack of wolves living behind that fence.

Toby spoke up first. "We're looking for Kane."

Jaret studied the demon and watched the exchange. The demon's lips tightened and he gave Toby a once-over. Suspicion grew in his amber eyes and he straightened his shoulders.

"You got business with Kane?"

"Not that it's any of yours, but yeah, we do."

The demon glanced down and seemed to check over some list he had pinned to a clipboard. He shot Toby a questioning glance. "He knows you're coming?"

Toby gave a derisive twist of his lips, and worked to keep his temper in check. "No, it's a surprise."

"Easy, Toby," Jaret warned, sensing Toby's rising anger and impatience with the situation. Jaret knew his cousin was itching to take the bastard out, and it was becoming harder and harder to leash his control. His cousin had little tolerance for anything that prowled the night, but had a special hatred for demons ever since he'd witnessed one feasting on a young teenage girl, the same highly motivated, brilliant high school girl who'd served them coffee and chatted easily with them every morning before she went off to class. She'd wanted to be president, she'd said. Toby had done all he could to save the innocent girl, but in the end simply couldn't. The demon had torn her to shreds and there was nothing Toby could do to put the pieces together again. Toby had a soft spot for the girl who wanted to change the world, and had never quite gotten over that night or forgiven himself for her death. But it wasn't Toby's fault. They couldn't save everyone. It was the nature of their business, the trial of the streets.

"A surprise, huh?" the demon said in that lazy drawl of his that pulled Jaret's focus back. The demon unfurled his fingers, folded his arms, and leaned back in his chair. "We don't much like surprises around here."

“Is that a fact? What exactly is it that you do like around here?” Toby questioned in a condescending voice meant to provoke the demon cowboy. The strangest damn persona Jaret had ever seen a monster take on. “Let me guess, horseback riding and rodeos more your speed?” Toby asked.

A long pause as the demon stared him down; then his eyes flared hot when he warned, “Be careful there, boy, or you’ll be in for a few surprises of your own.”

Toby widened his stance in a combative move. “How so?”

As if he’d said too much, the demon picked up his phone, and spoke in whispered words. A few moments later Kane came sauntering toward the gate, alone.

In a show of dominance, a pissing contest of sorts, they all stood their ground. Kane stepped up to the gate, and his dark eyes—camouflaged by contacts—met Jaret’s straight on.

“You two are a far way from home,” he said, and angled his body like any good hunter would. Clearly Kane was as uneasy about this meeting as Jaret and Toby were.

With a nod, Jaret rooted his feet and gestured toward the town. “Could say the same about you.”

“Like you two always said, I was getting too old for the hunt. Time to step down and let the younger guys handle it.”

Jaret inhaled but couldn’t decipher any lycan scents on their former colleague. Whoever was teaching him how to mask his appearance was doing a damn fine job.

“So what is it I can do for you two?” Kane asked. He always was one to get right to the point.

“You left the city rather quickly and the captain was worried about you.” It was a flat-out lie, planted on purpose. Jaret wanted Kane to chew on that tidbit, to wrestle over it as he struggled to determine if this trip was sanctioned or not. “He put us on the case to track you

down and make sure you hadn't gotten yourself into any trouble."

Kane gave a casual shrug meant to placate. "As you can see, there is no trouble here and I couldn't be better."

Jaret nodded. "You're looking good, Kane. Retirement's done you well." Jaret cast Toby a glance. "Maybe we should think about retiring too, Cousin."

"I was well past my prime," Kane responded in an easy, laid-back voice. "You both even said so yourself. But you guys, well, you guys are still needed on the streets."

Jaret smirked and slanted his head. "Well, well, I never thought I'd see the day when the infamous Kane Reynolds would give us a compliment. Looks like retirement has softened you."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Either way I've grown fond of this place, and I'm not looking for trouble."

"Neither are we."

Kane stared at them, his expression dubious. "This is a nice, quiet gated community, boys. Don't come here looking for trouble, because if you do, you just might find it."

Jaret tried to read him, but he had a mind shield in place that prohibited him from touching his thoughts. "I read you loud and clear," Jaret assured him, understanding the underlying threat. It was time to make nice. "I know we've had some troubled times, Kane. But it's time to move past that, don't you think?" Jaret held his hand out.

With that, Kane exchanged a look with the guard and a moment later the soft hum emanating off the electric fence vanished. After a long pause and a good hard warning glare, Kane reached through the gate and shook his hand, and in that instant the three of them appeared to forge an uneasy truce.

"Since we're here, we might as well stick around and soak up some of this fresh country air, seeing as how it's done a world of good for you," Toby added.

Cutting right to the chase, Kane asked, "You boys armed?"

Jaret resisted the urge to laugh. He held his arms out. "Check yourself."

Kane cast the demon a glance. "Check them, Jake."

Crowding them, Jake did a pat down and pulled the knife from Jaret's ankle. He tossed it to Kane and Kane secured it under his belt.

"No weapons are allowed inside. I'll give this back when you leave." He turned toward the demon and said, "Open the gate, Jake."

Jake gave a look that suggested Kane had gone insane, but then immediately followed orders, which, coupled with the way Kane had issued them, led Jaret to believe that Kane held a damn high ranking in this secluded community, the same way he had in the Chicago branch.

Sure, Jaret respected him for that, and sure, the cousins had razed him about his age, because the truth was they were threatened by his intelligence and seniority, and coveted his superior position.

Jaret studied Kane's body language and action. He'd hazard a guess that the spiritual shifter had told the former PTF officer of their presence and he was fully expecting their company, and no doubt he had a plan of his own in place—not that anyone could easily sneak up on the cousins. At least they had that on their side, and that was something. But nonetheless, they'd have to be very careful once they were on the other side of that guarded fence.

The gate slowly opened and both Jaret and Toby stepped into the town. Off in the distance their presence was met with curious stares and disapproving scowls.

"Any hotels we can check into?" Toby asked.

"No hotels here. You might want to try Silver Springs. Not too far from here. Nice town. More amenities than Serene."

Was he trying to drive them out of town?

Jaret took in the rows of houses just beyond the main road. "Rental

houses?”

Kane folded his arms and rocked back and forth on his feet. “I suppose I can arrange that. We have a nice two-bedroom near the running park that you both might like.” Kane stopped to give them a once-over. “You both still run, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, then the house will suit you fine.”

Or was he was trying to get them to stay?

Toby’s stomach took that moment to grumble. “Can you point us to the best place to get some grub? I could use some good old-fashioned country cooking.”

Kane led them down the main street and gestured toward the café. “You two go ahead. I have some things to do and will catch up with you later with the rental paperwork and key.”

With that, Kane disappeared around the corner, and Jaret and Toby entered the café. They shed their coats, took a booth in the corner, and pressed their backs to the wall, a defensive response when entering foreign territory. Before they flipped open their menus, they took note of the crowd and documented the way their presence had garnered so much attention.

Jaret attempted a smile, to see if he could pull a reaction from the lady with the pewter eyes in the booth beside him. She simply grunted and shifted her head.

“Friendly bunch.”

“They don’t take too kindly to outsiders.”

“Not much wonder.”

The bell above the café door sounded and Jaret looked up in time to see a group enter. Well, well, so it appeared that everyone in this peculiar town was stopping by to check out the strangers. The man at the tail end of the line, a man who was tall, well built, and athletic, cast them a quick glance, his green eyes raking over them with quiet

concern; then with long, catlike strides, he sauntered up to the counter.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." Toby shifted, clearly uncomfortable as he did a tally. *"Witches, lycans, demons, and now panthers."* Incredulous, Toby shook his head. *"What next? Vampires?"*

"I guess we won't know that until tonight," Jaret said, unease moving through him as his fingers itched to reach for his gun, but he knew it wasn't there.

"Well, I'm guessing we can count on it. What the hell is this place anyway?"

Jaret really didn't know, but the sight of all these monsters cohabiting in one town raised another question. Were there any other similar covert communities like this one set up around the globe? That was something he damn well planned to find out before he finished his business in Serene.

In answer to Toby's question he said, *"Well, after we gather information, and obliterate it, it's our ticket to a huge fucking promotion, that's what it is."*

"But the witch . . ."

"Yeah, the witch. First we need to find out what kind of spell she has over us."

Toby pressed against the wall harder, his dark brow furrowed with concern. *"Maybe we should just get the fuck out of here, and come back with reinforcements. We're way too outnumbered."*

"Kane's not going to react, Toby. Not yet. We've got time. If he kills us, he'll fear others will come looking. He's not going to discount the possibility that this trip was sanctioned, and as long as we have that on our side, we're safe. He doesn't want to bring that shit down on his town. He's simply going to want to send us away quietly."

Toby nodded, knowing he was right, but still not liking the odds.

Jaret turned his attention to the counter, and the second he set eyes on the beautiful violet-eyed woman who'd come from the back, his entire body reacted with primal need, and the odd tug of familiarity hadn't gone unnoticed by him.

"Jesus."

Toby turned to identify the source of Jaret's sudden discomfort. He sucked in a breath and said, *"She's fucking gorgeous."*

Jaret thought gorgeous didn't even begin to describe her. She had long dark hair, pinned haphazardly on the top of her head, a few wayward tendrils falling across her creamy cheeks and dipping down into her cleavage, mostly obscured by an antique amulet. Knowledgeable yet guarded violet eyes, flawless skin, a full puckered mouth, and a body so full of want that it begged for their undivided attention filled him with undisguised lust. She wore a tight, sexy fifties-style uniform with a V-necked zip front, short sleeves, and a flared skirt that reached her midthighs. Jaret ached to slip his hand under that skirt to see if she was wearing any panties, or, better yet, pull the zipper from her ample cleavage to the juncture between her legs to discover all her little secrets.

Just thinking about her naked body had his cock throbbing and his mouth dying to take possession of those plump lips—both sets. She bent forward, affording him a view of her pert breasts and milky cleavage, and that was when her scent reached him. Warm sugary vanilla. That had to be the sweetest, sexiest scent on earth. His mouth watered. His fingers itched. And his cock grew another inch.

"Fuck . . ."

The mere sight of her filled him with passion and had him envisioning her sprawled across the bed, Toby and he stripping her bare and pleasuring her in the most decadent ways before spending the night buried inside her beautiful body. He ached to push inside her and ride her with reckless abandon for the remainder of the day,

week. Year.

Everything from the way she moved, the way she smiled, to the way her body beckoned his rocked his world and shook him to his very core. Never in his life had he experienced such powerful emotions, and honestly he wasn't even sure how to handle it. From the strained look on his cousin's face, he'd say Toby also felt the physical chemistry, and was just as confused by it as Jaret was.

Jaret concentrated and tried to forge a connection with her, but when he did, her head came up with a start and she sucked in a tight breath. She'd felt him. She'd felt him trying to prod around inside her mind. But her protective shield was too secure for him to work around. He'd have to find another way to get inside her head and gather information on this sexy spiritual shifter who had the ability to rattle him like no other.

But how?

"I know how," Toby announced.

So did Jaret, in fact. *"We catch her with her guard down so we can read her."*

Toby gave Jaret a crooked grin. *"After her erotic show, we both know there's only one way for us to get her to drop her defenses."*

Jaret gave a slow nod of his head, determined to get to the bottom of matters. *"That's right, Cousin. It's time to seduce our way into her thoughts."*

He stole another glance at the waitress. She moved with a sensuality that nearly drove him to his knees. As he studied her, his cock throbbed in a way it had never throbbed before, and it begged the question—was he seducing his way into her bed purely for informational purposes, or for his own selfish ones?

Chapter Six

Even from across the room Lily could feel their sexual heat reaching out to her. How the heck was she supposed to maintain focus, feign normalcy, and tap into their thoughts unobserved when her hormones were on overdrive and her lust-saturated brain was off spinning erotic tales about these two *ruthless* hunters, as Kane had called them? Well, she had damn well better find a way, because there was an entire town counting on her and she refused to let them down.

Flashes of the way she'd let down her coven centuries ago rushed through her mind. Her fingers curled into fists and she sucked in air. Dammit, she should have found a way to push that rock aside to help them. As equal measures of anger and frustration welled up inside her, Lily felt her whole body tighten and in that instant made a vow that she'd never let anyone destroy her community or her family again. She was just thankful that no one had gotten hurt in Wellington after the Darkland men had tracked her there.

Pushing all those painful thoughts to the dark recesses of her mind, she grabbed two mugs from the top rack of the dishwasher and pivoted on her toes. As she reached for the freshly brewed coffee, she once again wondered why those long-ago memories had suddenly resurfaced. Was her subconscious trying to tell her something? Warn her?

Coffeepot in hand, she drew a deep breath and centered herself, determined to do her part, as per Kane's orders, and figure out what the two were up to, how much they knew, and whether their trip had been sanctioned. Not that Kane thought it was, as their MO was to work alone, but still, they had to cover all angles, and the sooner they dealt with these men and turned them into one of their own, the

better. Because only then did Lily feel she could get her life back on track, and her thoughts off her budding sexuality. As a witch, head of her coven, no less, it was her job to concentrate on the town's health, medicine, and well-being, not her raging libido.

She let her breath out slowly and proceeded with caution. There was no denying that she was nervous. Far more nervous than she had been in years. Striving to tamp it down, she plastered on a fabricated smile and pushed on. Small, determined steps brought her to their table, and she could feel their attempts to read her mind, but her shields were strong. It was the one and only strand of magick that she'd nurtured and practiced daily over the years, the one strand that she used to protect herself and, inadvertently, others—if no one knew what she was, then no one could get hurt through her—and it gave her a measure of comfort to know there was nothing they could do to tap into her thoughts.

She stepped up to their booth and worked to sound casual. "What can I get you two?"

"What's good?" the man with the shoulder-length hair asked, and Lily wondered whether he was Jaret or Toby.

She cleared her throat and focused on the menu, not the gorgeous brown eyes moving over her face with genuine interest. "Everything's good. The morning special is steak and eggs."

"What are you having, Jaret?" the man asked.

Lily turned her attention to Jaret, who was studying her, not the menu, and took in his captivating eyes, which smoldered with need. It was easy to tell these two were related by their cognac-toned skin and similar features. Although Jaret was the bigger of the two, they were both large men, with powerful athletic bodies, and enough sexual sparks to set the place ablaze.

As her heart rate accelerated, she drew in a deep breath, and caught their rich, earthy scent in the air. Instantly, a fire ignited in her loins

and lust stole over her. If they were hunters, here to harm her people, then why did she find the rich, earthy scent of their skin so enticing? It was a question she couldn't answer, yet. But what she did know was that there was something about these men—these empath hunters—who called out to her in the most seductive way.

As her body buzzed to life, she could feel her nipples press against the cotton top of her waitress's uniform and prayed they couldn't see the effect they had on her. Although after last night, after inviting them into her mind, she was certain they already knew.

How horribly embarrassing . . .

Striving to appear unaffected and needing to escape before her cheeks flared hot and matched the raging fire in her body, she pressed, "So what is it I can get you?"

When they both turned their attention back to their menus, Lily took that moment to look at them, really look at them to determine who they were and what their connection was to her. Toby's hair was longer, but they both sported thick dark locks that her fingers itched to touch. Her gaze panned over their faces and she put them both in their late twenties, but they had dark turbulent eyes that had seen far too much carnage in their young lives. They weren't perfect by any means. These two had seen action, been in numerous battles. They had flawed skin and lacerations that she longed to caress. Both were gifted with firm square jaws that spoke of good breeding and likely ran in the family. They were capable men. Powerful. Commanding.

Familiar . . .

What was it about them that struck her as familiar? Her brain began to race, filling in the pieces of the puzzle, and then suddenly, recognition flashed in her brain.

Her pulse leapt and a tremor moved through her. She faltered backward, her knees going weak.

Surely they weren't . . . ?

As she took a moment to sort through matters, old buried memories once again came flooding to the forefront.

Fire.

Smoke.

Chaos.

Hooded men.

Memories of the men who'd killed her family exploded in her mind. As she processed that information, she thought of the one man who'd lit her mother on fire, and suddenly remembered the way he'd fallen to the ground, holding his head and shouting in pain, when her raven had probed his thoughts. Jaret and Toby had reacted the exact same way.

Was it possible . . . ?

She certainly couldn't discount the likelihood. Their features and the way they reacted to her mind touch were too similar to simply overlook. Could this be why those deeply buried memories of the night her coven had been massacred were suddenly resurfacing? Was her brain trying to warn her all this time, but her body was too damn preoccupied with its sexual awakening to take notice? After leaving Wellington behind and finding sanctuary in Serene, Lily had always assumed that as long as she'd kept her magick buried, the Darkland men would never find her. Was she wrong?

Determined to find out exactly who these men were, Lily pulled a small thread of magick and carefully weaved her way into their thoughts, and when she met with cold darkness, her blood turned to ice and she took another step back. The men turned to her, their expressions pained, aware of her probing attempts, and she gripped her apron, wringing it between her fingers.

Her pulse trip-hammered, and as her blood ran cold, it penetrated her bones. Could they be relatives of the clan that killed her family, here to finish what they'd started? Lily pulled another small thread of

magick and slipped inside their minds a second time, desperately trying to discover their true identities. The men blinked and gripped their heads like she was causing them a great deal of discomfort, but under the circumstances it didn't stop her from pushing deeper.

As she examined the dark recesses of their minds, flashes of werewolves, vampires, demons, and other creatures whipped by in fast-forward. She tried to slow down the moving images, but when she did, she saw these two men, back-to-back, circling and shooting at anything that moved. Terrified at what she saw, she tuned everything else out and slipped in deeper. Horrible images of a band of hooded beasts on a killing spree, the horrified cries of an elderly female cutting through the carnage.

What had they done to that poor old woman?

Lily's knees slowly began to give out on her, and the room started to spin on its axis. Feeling light-headed and afraid, she quickly broke the connection, hardly able to believe that she hadn't put it together until now. Lady, how had she missed it? Likely because they'd awakened some bizarre sexual need inside her and it overrode her ability to think straight, she concluded, answering her own question. That, and the fact that she hadn't quite seen their dark features until now. In her raven form, the distance prohibited her from identifying the men until she was up close and personal, putting her in a dangerous position, to say the least.

"Are you okay?" a deep male voice asked, but he sounded so distant, channeled, like he was speaking to her from the other end of a long tunnel. Her mind spun out of control, trying to come to terms with this new piece of information as she looked for something solid to grip onto. If Jaret and To by—dangerous PTF officers—were also Darkland men, descendants of the monsters who killed her entire coven, then that made them twice as dangerous to her.

Lily swayed and feared she was about to drop to the ground when a

set of arms slipped around her waist and captured her. Their gazes clashed, and despite the fear paralyzing her, the ice in her veins immediately turned to molten lava. Heat prowled through her, driving the air from her lungs. Jaret pulled her against his chest, anchoring her to his body, and it was all she could do to focus her thoughts. How was it possible that one touch from him instantly turned distress into desire?

Jaret furrowed his brow and she met his gaze straight on. “Are you okay?” he asked again, and the intensity in his gaze triggered an unfamiliar craving inside her. As her body urged her to answer the incessant ache running rampant through her blood, she tried not to melt all over him.

Lily swallowed, and diligently worked to pull herself together, but her voice was as shaky as her body when she said, “Yes, thank you. I’d just forgotten to eat this morning. Low blood sugar.”

He gave her a suspicious glance and didn’t let her go. Instead he stared at her with those dark, penetrating eyes of his, looking so deep into her soul that she was certain he could read her every little secret, her every carnal desire. But he couldn’t, she reminded herself—her shield was firmly in place. That thought gave her a measure of comfort as she strove to focus her thoughts.

“Toby,” he called out, and the genuine concern in his voice caught her off guard. “Grab a glass of orange juice.”

A warm hand brushed her hair from her face, and he placed a palm on her forehead. “I don’t think it’s your blood sugar at all. You’re burning up.”

Oh, he didn’t know the half of it.

As his gentle hand raced over her cheek and the soft cadence of his voice played some mysterious alchemy on her soul, she wondered if he knew who she really was. Did he know she was a Brighton? The last of her coven and wanted by the Darkland men for reasons she’d

yet to understand, even after all these centuries.

“What’s your name?” he asked as dark eyes flitted over her face, desire dancing in their stormy depths.

Lily blinked, not at all immune to his charm, and, without thinking, whispered, “Lily. It’s Lily. . . .”

He smiled, and when he said, “Such a pretty name,” the deep tenor of his voice, and the intimate way he continued to hold her, made her quake. He must have mistaken the ripples of sensual pleasure that moved through her. He pulled her in tight to offer his comfort.

“You’re both hot and shivery at the same time. Are you sure you’re okay?” For a man who was a ruthless hunter, the tenderness in his voice and the concern in his eyes really threw her for a loop.

With her nose inches from his hard chest, she breathed in deep. His rich, earthy scent, not at all offensive like that of his ancestors—if indeed they were his ancestors—teased and tormented her libido and she damn near liquefied under his touch. His mere touch had pressure brewing in her womb, generating warmth and need in her entire body, and she wondered what it was about this man—this PTF officer and possible Darkland descendant—that spawned such peculiar emotions in her.

Regardless, she knew they were dangerous, and what she was feeling was downright insane. Unexplainable, really, and highly inappropriate under the circumstances. She commanded herself to get it together before she raised any more eyebrows. The townsfolk were already giving her odd looks, and she didn’t want to draw any more unnecessary attention to herself. Toby came back with the juice, and after she gratefully accepted, she took a huge gulp, extricated herself from Jaret’s arms, and excused herself.

As the men returned to their seats, never taking their watchful eyes off her, she rushed to the back of the café and worked to ignore the curious glances from the other waitresses. She slammed her half-full

glass of orange juice down on the countertop, the liquid sloshing over the side and spilling on her hand. Lily cursed under her breath and the sounds garnered Harmony's attention. The coven elder turned to her, her violet eyes widening in concern.

"Lily, what is it?"

Lily shook her head, wiped her hand on her apron, and plunked herself down on the nearest stool. "Those men," she whispered, and pointed toward the dining room in need of confirmation. "Do you recognize them?"

Harmony's gaze flew to the long rectangular serving slot that separated the front counter from the kitchen prep area. When she gasped and took a distancing step back, Lily clutched her stomach and bit down a groan. As her palms moistened, she leaned forward, suddenly feeling very ill. Harmony's reaction spoke volumes, and answered any remaining doubts lingering in the depths of Lily's mind. Those two were none other than descendants of the Darkland men.

But had they simply stumbled across her community through Kane, or had they come for her?

A warm hand cupped her cheek and tilted her head until their eyes met. A strange look came over Harmony's face when their gazes locked. It was a look Lily had witnessed only once before, and that was so many years ago when Lily was a tiny child peeking out at the woman who'd saved her from within a dark cavern.

As Harmony continued to study her, unease moved through Lily. "What?"

Harmony put her hands behind her back and gripped the edge of the stainless steel counter. "Do they know who you are?"

Lily pinched her eyes shut and took a moment to think things through. She thought about the curious way Jaret had looked at her, and the way he'd asked her her name. His curiosity might have been piqued—heck, how could it not have been after she'd invited them to

participate in her erotic fantasy?—but she didn't get a sense that he'd recognized her as a Brighton. Intuition told her he knew something, but it also told her that he didn't know her true identity.

"I don't think they do," she whispered, and shot a cautious glance toward the front counter.

Violet eyes that matched Lily's narrowed in apprehension. "Okay, that's good. Now we have to ensure you keep it that way."

"How?"

"By never letting them inside your head, Lily," she rushed out. "They can read those memories from long ago if you do."

Too late for that . . .

"What is it?"

"Nothing," Lily hedged, pretty certain they hadn't explored her thoughts because they'd been too busy enjoying her solo act. "I'm just frightened."

Harmony didn't push the matter. Instead she warned, "Lily, I mean it. Be careful. If they discover who you are, you'll be in serious trouble."

Lily pressed her palm to her forehead. "But why, Harmony? What do they want with me?" It was a question that had plagued her for years, a question Harmony either didn't know the answer to or refused to disclose. Lily could never be sure which, because in the past whenever she'd broached the subject, Harmony skillfully redirected the conversation. And judging by the look on her face now, she was about to do it again.

"You need to work extra hard to suppress your powers so they can't identify your magick as Brighton."

Lily swallowed. Even though Harmony was right, it went completely against council directive. It was up to her to nurture her powers, slip inside their minds undetected, and gather intel. As Harmony continued to talk, Lily's mind raced. She had two choices

here. One, she could grow her powers to tap into their thoughts and risk them recognizing her Brighton magick, or two, she could suppress her magick to keep them from discovering her secrets and putting her town in jeopardy. Could there possibly be another way to accomplish both these tasks?

Harmony pressed something into her hand, and Lily stared blankly at her palm and the packets of herbs. "What are these for?"

"I want you to draw a pentagram on your floor, ingest these every night before bed, and recite these words." Harmony grabbed a pen and paper from her apron and scribbled down an inscription. She handed the paper to Lily, and closed Lily's palm over it for safekeeping. "This is for your own protection. Don't let anyone see this, and don't let anyone know what you're doing."

"I'm not sure—"

"Lily, think of what those men did to your mother, your coven." Lily swallowed down a huge lump of guilt as she digested Harmony's words. "Do you want that same fate for you?" She stopped to wave her hand toward the patron-filled café, and added, "For your family here in Serene?"

"No," Lily whispered. "Of course not."

"Then trust me. This is the only way."

If there was one person Lily knew she could trust, it was Harmony. Harmony had been protecting her all these years. After the Wellington incident she'd never allowed Lily to play with her magick or to nurture it, always encouraging her to keep it hidden for her own safety. If the Darkland men smelled it on the wind, they could find her again, which led her to believe that her meeting with Jaret and Toby had merely been a coincidence. She hadn't played with her magick in centuries; surely they would have no way of knowing she was a Brighton.

Until they'd seen her in raven form, she reminded herself. But did

they recognize that it was her that they'd seen?

Lily looked at the herbs. "So these will help suppress my magick so they can't smell it or recognize it as Brighton?"

"Yes," Harmony said quickly.

Shaky hands unfolded the paper and glanced at the chant Harmony had written. "Then what is this for?"

"It's an extra precaution to help shield your thoughts. But you need to practice every night; otherwise . . ."

Harmony didn't bother to finish the sentence and simply let her words fall off because *otherwise* was far too dangerous for either of them to consider further. Lily had no idea why the Darkland men had killed her family and searched for her, or why she felt such a strong sexual pull toward these descendants, but she sure as heck wasn't going to act on those powerful urges. No matter what.

She shot the cousins a sidelong glance and instantly felt heat flare up inside her. No way, nohow would she ever act on those urges. Not now. Not ever.

Jaret blinked and shook the fog from his head. "*She's powerful, Toby.*"

"It's like she can't control her magick, and she's pulling too much. You think that's why she's skewing our abilities?"

"Maybe. Or maybe it's something else."

Jaret stretched out in his seat and extended his legs as he took a much-needed sip of his coffee. The throbbing in his head had subsided, but there were still a few lingering effects from her forceful mind probe. His body was a little shaky, a little unstable. Then again, his discomfiture could be more from their encounter than from her surfing around inside his head, unwelcome. Just feeling her soft body against his did the weirdest things to his insides. As he'd anchored her to him, he tried to remain cold and disconnected—after all, she was an

evil witch who preyed on the innocent—but there was something about her that warmed his darkest corners, and caused his insides to soften and give, just a little.

And that was unacceptable.

He wrestled with himself, uncomfortable with those foreign feelings. Jaret cleared his throat and worked to pull himself together. He was a hunter, ruthless, skilled, swift, and determined. There was no room for emotions, connections, or family for either cousin. They had only each other, and planned to keep it that way. A wife and 2.4 kids weren't in the cards for him or Toby. Not now. Not ever. They had to keep their mind in the game, especially after coming across this covert community and understanding there was a distinct possibility that other towns just like this one existed. Honestly, if Jaret didn't know better, and if he was interested in settling down, he'd think he'd stumbled across the perfect place to put down roots.

But he did know better. And roots were overrated.

Never again would he watch someone he loved die. Which was why he'd completely buried any feelings of compassion and warmth after he and Toby had watched their grandmother get murdered in her own home by a pack of monsters, dark crows covering their identity. Fucking cowards.

Why anyone would want to hurt their nurturing grandmother was beyond him. She was sweet, kind, and caring, and had spent every spare moment with Toby and Jaret, her “precious grand-sons, different from the rest,” as she used to call them. Then in a blink of an eye, life as the two boys knew it had changed.

It had all happened so fast, a blur really, but memories of the way those creatures of the night had broken through his grandmother's front door still haunted Jaret. He wasn't sure how many there were, and to this day couldn't positively identify the creatures, as he and Toby had been only small children, their abilities untutored. They'd

been enjoying a glass of cocoa and playing a board game with their grandmother when all hell broke loose. Literally.

In an unconscious move, Jaret planted his elbows on the café table and covered his ears, as if to quiet the shrieks that still agonized him. Here it was years later and he'd yet to wipe the bloodbath from his memories. He still wasn't sure why he and Toby had been spared, why they too hadn't been ripped apart by those sharp fangs and long, lethal black nails that resembled claws. If indeed they were sharp fangs and clawlike nails. All he really remembered was flickers of silver, and the slice marks on his grandmother's dead body.

He gave a heavy sigh. Honestly, some days he wished he hadn't been spared. Survivor's guilt, he supposed. Other days like today, after stepping foot into a monster haven, he was glad he had been—so he could terminate every last one of the creatures before they hurt another innocent.

Jaret knew that horrendous night was a turning point in his and Toby's lives. The attack had changed everything for the cousins. It was the night they'd both shut down their emotions and hardened their hearts. And no mystical witch was ever going to change that, no matter how much of a spell she seemed to have over them. She might be able to crack the shields on their minds, but she'd never be able to crack the shields that guarded their hearts.

As he thought more about his clan in Colorado, and the nights he and Toby had sat around the bonfire with their grandfather Maddox, listening to him recite stories, tales that were handed down from generation to generation, something began niggling in the back of his mind.

Something important. Something lodged so deep in the back of his brain that he couldn't quite put a finger on.

He thought more about his grandfather's accounts, and his favorite anecdote of how the witches from the Brighton Mountain had stolen

the Darklands' divine power, leaving them with only empath abilities. So much for the Wiccan Rede: "An' it harm none, do what ye will." Maddox had also told the cousins that the witches had all died, taking their Darkland magick with them before the Darkland clan could find a way to get it back. It was a tragic accident, his grandfather had said. They'd all burned to death when their village had caught on fire, but he was certain a child had survived. Karma, his grandfather had told them. It was the threefold law. Whatever you send out comes back three times. The Brightons put out evil, and in turn received what they deserved.

But there was something else his grandfather had told him about the witches. What was it . . . ?

Toby said up straight. *"Jesus, Jaret . . ."*

He shot his cousin a glance. *"What?"*

"The Brightons used to inflict pain when they stole Darkland magick," he responded, rattling and dislodging that long-forgotten memory from the recesses of his mind.

"Fuck . . ." Jaret slowly turned toward the witch who stood at the counter, and took in her watchful eye. As their gazes collided, her cheeks flushed hot. A fine shiver moved through him and he was unprepared for the mix of emotions that erupted inside his body.

"Do you think it's possible? Do you think she's a Brighton?" Jaret gave a slow shake of his head, his eyes wide in sheer amazement.

"Christ, what Maddox would do to get his hands on her."

It certainly made sense, Jaret mused, and took a moment to consider this new twist further, and the odd way *she'd* reacted after she'd probed them. As he stared at her, he worked to piece it together. She knew they were hunters; her raven had spotted them in the woods two nights previous. But there was something else about the two cousins that had alarmed her, and had her nearly falling to her knees. If she truly was a Brighton, did she know who they were? And

if so, was she attempting to steal the rest of their abilities to grow her own?

But what he really wanted to know was, if indeed she was a descendant from the evil Brighton coven, why the hell were the cousins so drawn to her?

Chapter Seven

When darkness fell, Lily changed out of her uniform into her casual clothes and prepared to head home. She placed the herbs and chant Harmony had given her into the pocket of her jeans and slipped out the back door, into the alleyway. Her temporary plan was to avoid the cousins until she could figure out how to probe them without giving away her identity.

Wanting to keep out of sight, she cut through the empty running park, taking the back way home. As she pressed forward, she caught fleeting glimpses of the vampires who were rousing from their daytime slumber and were now making their way to the blood bank for nourishment. Fortunately there were enough deer and coyotes in the bordering woods so a fresh supply of food was always on hand for them.

Lily reached her door, and with the eerie feeling that she was being watched, she shot a glance over her shoulder before entering. Once inside she let out a breath she hadn't even realized she was holding and sagged against the door. She took a moment to gather herself, then went straight to her kitchen to boil water for a cup of tea.

Before dashing up the stairs and into the spare room, she grabbed a spoon from her kitchen drawer, dropped it into her teacup, and gathered a few candles from her countertop. After wrestling with the idea all afternoon, and trying to decide the best course of action for the inhabitants of Serene, she'd decided to temporarily tamp down her magick until she could come up with another plan. If these men discovered she was Brighton and killed her, she'd be no good to anyone. There had to be a way to tap into their thoughts undetected; she was sure of it. She just had to figure out how.

Lily rushed upstairs and into the spare bedroom. As she entered, she felt a little pang in her chest right around the vicinity of her heart. Painted in warm pastel colors, with a single bed, dresser, and area rug to warm the oak floor, it was a room she longed to turn into a nursery. Then, thinking about her friend Sunray and her ever-expanding belly, Lily found her hand go to her own flat stomach, and an overwhelming sense of emptiness welled up inside her. What she'd do to have a child of her own. To hold, love, and nurture. But bloodlines didn't mix—they simply weren't compatible—and Lily could never have what her heart longed for: a family of her own.

As that old familiar yearning worked its way through her body, she tamped it down and focused her thoughts on the task at hand, following Harmony's very careful instructions. She pulled back the area rug to expose the wood beneath, then drew a pentagram on the floor. After positioning the candles around the room, she lit them, and sat in the center. Once she was comfortable, she pulled the herbs and the chant from her pocket, unfolded the paper, and smoothed it out on the wood floor before her. She sprinkled a bit of the scented mixture onto her palm, able to identify a few of the spices by smell. Brushing her hands over her steaming cup of tea, she dusted the herbs into the warm water, stirred it, and then took a sip. She turned her attention to the paper and began to recite the words, repeating them and drinking the concoction until she absorbed every herb into her system.

Seconds turned to minutes and soon Lily could feel an odd stirring in her stomach. Her lids felt heavy, her tongue was dry, and her blood seemed to grow thicker, moving through her bloodstream so slowly it made her feel light-headed and sleepy.

She drew a fueling breath, but couldn't seem to shake the buzz. Deciding to just let the sensations take over, she allowed her head to fall forward, and in that instant she felt her raven awaken. Shock

moved through her. If the herbs were designed to suppress her magick, to keep the Darkland men from identifying its particular signature, why had it provoked her raven? Lily could feel herself drifting, and despite her restraining efforts, her raven left her body.

Wings spread, her raven slipped out the window and took to the night sky. The cool wind felt good on her face, and she stretched her feathers farther, to soar higher. As she hovered over the town and breathed in the clean, crisp spring air, one scent rose above the others and called out to her.

She let loose a shrilling sound, her instincts sharpened, and she flew higher and higher as primal urges overcame her. She whipped across the sky, taking in the movement below, searching for the source of her distress. Sailing lower, she scanned the streets and the array of houses, seeking out the distinctive scent that called to her. In no time at all she zeroed in on it. Through an open bedroom window she spotted one of the cousins, a hunter, a man who wouldn't think twice about shooting her out of the air.

But despite that, and going against her own best interests, her raven flew closer. A towering oak tree stood tall and proud outside his window. One of the long, armlike branches extended outward, coming to rest mere inches from his windowpane. Her raven dropped and gained purchase on the sturdy branch. She stepped closer, tiny careful steps, her talons wrapping around the bark until she was hovering on the edge. The location provided her with an unobstructed view into the hunter's window, and allowed her to study him incognito, to learn more about these men and gather information for council.

One cousin stood at the door. Toby. The other sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her. They were speaking, but from her perch she couldn't discern the conversation. The intense look on Toby's face, however, told her it was a very serious discussion. Her pulse leapt and she intuitively knew their solemn exchange had something

to do with her, because deep inside she knew they felt the pull every bit as much as she did.

It'd be easy to tell herself that she'd intentionally searched their scent out and flown to their rental house to watch them for information purposes only. But it'd be a lie. She was there because the pull was strong, and the need to connect intimately with those two on another level overruled common sense.

Her raven took note of Toby's rock-hard body, his piercing brown eyes, and his tense stance as he scrubbed a hand over his firm chin. Looking like sex incarnate, he leaned against the doorjamb and all she could think about was their warm, salacious bodies moving together in perfect sync. The sudden erotic image of Toby backing her up against the wall, stripping her naked, and securing her hands over her head while he buried himself in her needy body had her insides quivering.

But where had that image suddenly come from? Who was projecting it? Her? Or Toby?

A moment later Toby gave a brisk shake of his head as if to clear it, then jammed his hands into his pockets and left the room. A light downstairs flicked on as Jaret kicked off his boots and stretched out on his bed. She hunkered low and tucked in her wings as she watched him. He shifted restlessly and her raven tried to identify the strange look that had come over him.

She shouldn't be watching him sprawled out on his bed like that—it was risky and inappropriate, and until she could figure out how to tap into his mind without him feeling her, she should keep her distance. Every instinct she possessed told her to fly home to safety, yet she couldn't seem to move, let alone look away. Honestly, he was simply magnificent. So hard and muscular, it had her aching to rush back to her body and return in her human form, so he could do delicious things to her, things, she decided, only a man like him would know

how to do.

But the truth was, she didn't want to just climb into that bed with Jaret alone. She wanted Toby to join them, to sandwich her between their bodies while they pleased her in ways she'd never been pleased before. She ruffled her feathers, shocked at her sheer wickedness.

Her movements stilled when Jaret stood, and began to remove his clothes. He pulled off his sweater and the T-shirt he wore beneath, making short work of his attire. Her raven blinked, and took in the sight of his spectacular naked chest. The hiss of his zipper sounded in the quiet room, and he discarded his pants and boxers with the same smooth swiftness. Her raven could see him well in the dark, could see his hewn thighs, his taut stomach, and every other striated muscle that beckoned her body. Her glance dropped to his midriff, and there was nothing her raven could do to stifle the tortured noise that rose from the depths of her throat. The sight of his magnificent cock, so hard and erect, nearly had her tumbling from the tree. She'd never seen a cock quite like his before. So beautiful. So big.

Jaret discarded his clothes, and instead of leaving them in a pile on the bedroom floor forgotten, as the few men she'd been with would do, he took meticulous care to fold them, and place them in a neat pile on top of his dresser. Something about the way he carried himself, his every movement calculated, purposeful, filled her with pleasure. He truly was a man who knew what he wanted, and took what he needed.

Stark naked, Jaret eased onto the bed and spread out on top of the quilted comforter. He placed his hands under his head and stared at the ceiling as his aroused cock strained and reached for his belly button. For a brief moment his eyes shut, and in that instant her raven's head came up with a start.

She could feel him. He was searching for her.

Jaret gave a low moan, and then, as though no longer able to

ignore the ache, he reached down to grasp his cock. He shifted restlessly and widened his legs as he took his throbbing erection into his palm and gave a slight stroke. His other hand reached lower to cradle his balls. Her raven inched closer, mesmerized by the show unfolding before her. Lovely spurts of precum dripped from his engorged head and he dipped into it, rubbing it around his crown and using it for lubricant.

As her raven watched on in heated interest and indulged in the show, she acknowledged the strong urge to weave her way into his mind, to partake in the act. But it was dangerous, and she knew it. He reached out to her again, and it was all she could do to maintain composure. Blistering heat exploded inside her as the desire in his body moved through her blood. The man was simply irresistible.

Oh, Lady, she *needed* ...

Completely intrigued, she watched him, watched the way he worked his big deft hands over his cock, and the way his body shook with unabashed hunger. Oh, how she ached to touch him, to have him touch her. He licked his lips and a tortured grimace spilled across his face as he lost himself to the haze of lust exploding inside him. She could almost feel his thoughts scatter as he concentrated only on the points of pleasure. Perhaps, her raven mused, perhaps he was too far gone to feel her slipping inside to explore his fantasies.

Perhaps if she was extra cautious . . .

As her mind sorted through matters, a gust of wind came from the west and rattled the windowpane as it rushed over her streamlined body. Jaret, however, remained oblivious to everything around him as he worked his hands over his cock. Happy voices sounded below, rising up to meet her ears before the partygoers moved down the street. Soon their laughter faded in the distance. Then the sound of music drifted from Vibes when the patrons opened the door and stepped inside. Again Jaret remained distracted.

Shrouded in darkness and ignoring everything but the captivating man in that room, Lily drew the tiniest thread of magick and completely ignored the fact that her actions were incredibly risky. If she pulled too much, it could harm him, and if she caused him pain, it could draw attention to her presence. And her Brighton magick. Despite that, she couldn't seem to help herself. She was far too eager to observe the erotic escapades playing out in his mind's eye than to pay heed to the alarm bells jangling in the back of her head. With the utmost care not to draw too much magick, she moved inside his mind and her entire body quivered in response to what she saw.

Instantly, salacious images popped into her head and a slow tremor moved through. As she tapped into his fantasy, she massaged his thoughts and watched the erotic show through his mind's eye.

Jaret was inching open her damp pink lips, the dewy set between her legs, and as he pressed his mouth hungrily to her sweet spot, his tongue was doing the most delicious things to her pussy. Jaret sucked her clit and raked his teeth over the hard nub while he slipped a thick finger inside her. But they weren't alone, she noted. A fine shiver of excitement rushed through her. Toby was there, paying homage to her aching breasts, laving her tight skin with his hot tongue and drawing her throbbing nipple into his mouth for a deeper, more thorough taste. His hands were all over her, touching, and shaping the pattern of her curves like he couldn't get enough of her.

Jaret's hand worked his cock harder. With his senses exploding, he dragged in air, his veins bulging with heated blood. His breathing grew erratic, as he brought himself to the precipice.

In his fantasy he was lavishing her body with attention, fucking her with his fingers, and using slow and steady strokes until she quaked, shuddered, and orgasmed beneath him. Then he lapped up her sweet nectar, rehydrating himself with her cream. After he drank in every drop, he climbed up her body until his mouth found hers, and

positioned his cock at her sopping entrance. In one thrust he drove all the way into her and rode her with wild abandon.

That now familiar grimace was on his face again, and this time she questioned its cause. Was it from the blinding pleasure or was it because he felt her moving inside his head? He stroked his cock hard, squeezing to the point of pain, but all thoughts flew out of her mind when he groaned out loud, pain and pleasure bleeding into one.

As he envisioned her heat closing around his cock, he shouted out loud, and she could feel the pressure mounting inside him. "Fuck . . ." he whispered into the night. He stroked his raging hard-on a last time before he stilled his movements. His cock pulsed once, then twice, and a moment later he shot his warm cream all over his stomach and chest. His chest heaved and he swallowed hard. He gave a low growl of contentment, temporarily sated, while he worked to regulate his breathing. His face softened, his body relaxed. For a long time he didn't move; he just lay there enjoying the afterglow. And for a long time she simply watched him, unconsciously allowing herself to get lost in his thoughts.

Then in a move that both shocked and frightened her, he levered himself up on one elbow, twisted his head, and met her gaze straight on. A knowing look slowly spread across his handsome face.

Her raven faltered backward, and she let loose a shrilling sound as she took to the sky. Flying at breakneck speed, Lily rushed home, slipped through her open window, and, speaking in her raven tongue that only Lily could understand, whispered into her human ear before the two beings became whole again.

"Lily, wake up."

Lily's eyes flew open and her head snapped up. She blinked rapidly and glanced around, trying to orient herself. Her breath began to slow as her heart became regulated. After realizing she was in her spare room, safe, she took a moment to center herself.

But for how long would she be safe?

She climbed to her feet and dusted off her hands, still sprinkled with the herbs Harmony had given her. When she turned, she tripped on the rug, which reminded her to put it back in place and hide the pentagram. The use of witchcraft for one's own purposes was forbidden in Serene, but under the circumstances, and with the town's best interest at heart, she felt she had no other choice.

Lily tidied the room, hid the remaining small packets of herbs inside her old jewelry box, the one Harmony had given her when she was a child, and left the room. In need of a distraction, she rushed downstairs and plugged in the kettle. Restlessly, she paced as she waited for it to boil. As she walked about the room, that old ache of loneliness once again moved through her, except this time it felt stronger, gnawing at her insides like a thousand hungry rats. She tried to ignore it, she really did, but beneath that ache there was an incessant need that she couldn't seem to sate. She thought about calling her friend Sophie over, just to chat, but feared her witch friend would smell the herbs and know what she'd been up to. Then she thought about Sunray, but she had a mate now, and the two were likely snuggled up in bed thinking about the future and the baby they were going to bring into the world. Lily's hand moved to her stomach when off in the distance music wafted through the streets and reached her ears. As the patrons entered and exited Vibes, their laughter echoing down the streets, Lily decided that was the kind of distraction she needed again tonight.

Toby awoke with a start, glanced around at the eerie, blue-tinged room to gather his bearings, and then blinked the sleep from his eyes. Instantly understanding what had woken him, he jumped to his feet, and looked at his watch. He hadn't meant to doze off. He'd meant only to relax in front of the TV for a few minutes before he threw

something together for dinner.

The glow from the television screen lit the room in ghostly shadows and paved a path to the stairs. Taking the steps two at a time, he rushed up the oaken staircase to Jaret's room. Worry gnawed at his insides as he pushed open the door. His gaze went to the window—as if drawn to it by some unidentifiable force—before he stepped inside to check on his cousin. Jaret was already up and dressed, and just pulling on his boots.

“You okay?” Toby asked. Relief moved through him and helped calm his erratic heartbeat when he spotted Jaret bustling around the room. Fortunately Lily's probing hadn't debilitated him for any amount of time. Physically he looked okay, but emotionally . . . now, that was a whole other story.

“Yeah, I'm good.” Jaret turned protective eyes on him and gave him a once-over. “You?”

“Yeah.” Toby walked to the window and peered out. “Did you scare her off?” He double-checked the lock, then turned to his cousin.

Jaret didn't meet his eyes. “She's gone.”

“Think she'll be back?”

“You can count on it.”

Toby drove his hands into his pockets and stared at Jaret, taking in the fine worry lines around his eyes. “Are you sure you're okay, Cousin? Is she getting to you?”

“I can handle it,” he bit out.

Toby backed off. Ever since that horrid night their Nanna was killed, both he and Jaret had hardened themselves and prided themselves on being able to handle anything thrown at them. This time Toby wasn't so sure about Jaret. Sure, Jaret was attracted to her physically—hell, so was Toby—but Toby had an uneasy feeling that his cousin was also being affected by her on an emotional level, and it worried him.

Jaret moved to the door and Toby read his impatience. Neither of them was used to being cooped up inside a house. Any other night they'd be out prowling the streets.

"I need to get out of here," Jaret announced.

Toby gestured toward the park. "Run?"

"No. I need a drink. Let's head to the nightclub."

Toby leaned against the window ledge, but then got the oddest feeling of being watched. As unease moved through him, he stepped away from the window and fought off a shiver.

"You think that's wise?" he asked his cousin.

"If they were coming for us, they would have done it by now. Kane's got his people under control, and the full moon is still a month away."

"Yes, but we have more to worry about than just lycans."

"Let's go see what else is out there." Jaret reached under his mattress and grabbed his weapons, which the two had retrieved shortly after nightfall. They'd also picked up a few supplies from the one and only grocery store before Kane had led them to their rental house. "You equipped?"

Toby tapped his leg, touching the gun he'd fastened to his ankle. "Yeah." He stole one last glance toward the window and couldn't deny that he was intrigued by this town and its inhabitants, five species all working and living together harmoniously. It was unheard of, and if he hadn't seen it for himself, he certainly wouldn't have believed it.

"Let's go," Jaret said, and secured his gun in the holster on his side, then covered it with his parka. He raised one brow and added, "And if need be, shoot first; ask questions later."

The crisp evening air wrapped around them as they stepped out into the night. Toby breathed in the scents, identifying a few of the budding plants, as well as the stink of dog, cat, and demon. The only scent he found pleasing was that of the coven, although tonight he

couldn't pick out the sweet, sugary vanilla scent he'd caught on Lily earlier.

As he thought more about the demons walking freely, at liberty to engage in every degenerate activity known to mankind, he swallowed, striving to keep his control. Honestly, when he'd encountered Jake, the demon gatekeeper, it was all he could do not to drive his fist into the bastard's heart and tear it clear from his chest. Jaret's hatred, on the other hand, fell more into the vampire category, most likely because he believed it was a band of vampires that had killed their Nanna. Toby, he wasn't so sure. But they all had their own demons to fight, so to speak.

He stole a glance at his cousin, who was giving him a warning glare. He'd obviously felt his rising anger, and giving off such intense emotions in a town like this was dangerous, to say the least. It could provoke an unwanted attack by any of the five species they'd already identified. Toby breathed deep, let it out slowly, and tightened his mind shield—too bad it didn't seem to work on Lily. The witch didn't seem to have any trouble moving past that guard and could surf around inside his head at will, leaving him feeling stunned and debilitated.

He noted the way Jaret was still looking at him. *"I'm good,"* he said, answering Jaret's unasked question as their boots echoed in the night. They made their way to Main Street and walked past a few houses. Toby peered into the windows. He shook his head and grumbled something under his breath.

"I know," Jaret said. He waved his hand toward the row of bungalows, all nestled behind white picket fences. *"It's so civilized, so fucking normal, it's surreal."*

The hitch in Jaret's voice hadn't gone unnoticed. Did *Jaret* want this? Toby turned in time to see a man, a lycan no less, swinging his child in his arms before securing him in his chair at the dining room

table. As the child's gleeful laughter reached his ears, he instantly thought of his Nanna. He remembered happy times like that before her death. She'd taken care of the boys since they were mere infants, after their mothers (both sisters) had been killed in an auto accident. Toby would be lying if he said he didn't long for a family, the two having missed out on their own childhood. After his grandmother's death, the men in the coven, especially their grandfather, the family leader, had taken them under their wings and begun training them for the streets, like all the men before them.

Until that horrid day, Toby had wanted to be a doctor, and his grandmother had taught both him and Jaret all about the use of herbs for medicine. Now instead of healing, he was killing. But he consoled himself that his actions were justifiable, because these beings were monster, not man.

Toby turned and exchanged a look with Jaret before he pulled open the doors to Vibes. The loud music reached his ears as he stepped inside. He was instantly bombarded with tangled emotions. Even though the patrons had shields around their thoughts, he could still feel their awareness, and the emotions they were projecting. He felt everything from arousal and temptation to distrust—a distrust that was mainly directed at them. Energy circulated through the room like a thick column of smoke. But he also sensed someone had these beasts on a short leash, and for the time being, both he and Jaret were safe.

They walked through the throngs of people, and Toby tuned out the crowd and their cacophony of emotions, and energies. Jaret secured their seats as Toby grabbed two beers from the bar. Drinks in hand, he moved toward Jaret and studied the partygoers as he shuffled into a booth that allowed him and his cousin to observe from afar. Pushing back in his seat, Toby shed his coat and nursed his beer while he studied the lascivious crowd. The front door opened and

closed.

“*Son of a bitch . . .*” Jaret said, and gestured with a nod toward the two towering men who’d just entered.

Toby angled his head, and watched two vampires glide through the room, their movements fluid and dynamic. Their dark, penetrating eyes scanned the crowd. But who or what they were searching for was anyone’s guess. Toby pressed himself harder against the cushioned seat, and took note of the tables nearby. His eyes dropped to the nice, sturdy wooden legs. Not his first choice of weaponry in a battle against vamps, but it’d do in a pinch.

Jaret’s face was expressionless when it met his. “*Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that tonight.*”

As the vamps moved by their table, Toby could feel the mind probe, but unlike Lily, they weren’t able to get in, nor did the caress hurt. Just then Toby stiffened, and so did his cousin, but it had nothing to do with the vamps seeking a way into their thoughts. Toby breathed in deep and sagged against the seat, hardly able to believe the effect she had on his hormones, even from across the room.

“*She’s here,*” he announced, but the look on Jaret’s face spoke volumes. He was already fully aware of her presence.

Toby caught her skittish glance before she sat herself at the bar and ordered an orange juice. With the nervous way she was acting, Toby would hazard a guess that the sight of the two of them had caught her off guard. He could see her chest rise and fall rapidly and her cheeks flare hot. Like a child, she swiveled on her seat and she stared out at the dance floor. It was clear that she was pretending not to notice them. Even though she was trying not to give off any emotions, keeping her impenetrable shield in place, Toby could see the desire and lust in her eyes as she watched the couples sway erotically to the tunes.

Restlessness moved through him, and he knew they needed to set

this seduction into motion before Kane changed his mind and ordered an all-out attack. That really was his only reason—it had nothing to do with the strange sexual pull he felt toward her, the way he craved to touch and taste her entire body, and bury himself inside her. He heard Jaret give a low needy groan from across the booth and knew he was reading his thoughts.

“What do we do?” Toby asked.

“Nothing. We watch, and we wait.”

Watching was fine; waiting wasn't. Impatience trickling through his blood, Toby took another slug of his drink and spotted one of the vamps moving across the room toward Lily. With unhurried movements the vamp closed the distance and settled himself on the stool beside her. He put his hand on her shoulder, and when he gave a squeeze, Lily physically braced herself.

Toby watched Jaret stiffen and could feel his anger rising. Intense emotions laced with shards of jealousy swirled around his cousin, and this time it was Toby who was telling Jaret to take it easy. Disconcerted by the role reversal, Toby shook his head with genuine concern because what it confirmed was that the little witch really was getting to his cousin on another level.

“What's he want with her?”

Toby tunneled his focus and tried to read the vamp, but he was powerful, a vampire elder, and the attempts proved futile. The vamp slowly angled his head and an all-knowing smirk turned up his mouth. Toby lifted his beer in a friendly salute, and the vamp simply turned his attention back to Lily.

When he spoke to her, she nodded and Toby could see the tension drain from her face. What was he saying to her? The vamp stood, and held his hand out to her. A moment of reluctance, then she took his hand and allowed him to lead her to the dance floor. The medley of multicolored lights overhead spilled over their bodies and framed her

like a halo.

Toby might not be able to read the vamp's thoughts, but he sure as hell could feel him, and what he could feel was equal mixtures of concern and . . . *duty*. The vampire cared about Lily, felt responsible for her and the others, and was attempting to help her in some way.

As the music picked up tempo, so did his cousin's impatience. Jaret tapped an anxious foot against the floor, and as though unable to stomach seeing Lily in the beast's arms, he made a move to rise. Toby grabbed his arm to still him. *"Jaret, wait. Look. He cares about her. If you just let go of your own emotions for a second, you'll be able to feel it."*

"Vampires don't care about anyone but themselves. Neither do witches."

The vampire pulled her in close and touched her forehead. As the monster loomed over her, it was then that Toby realized just how petite Lily was. Small, delicate bones, soft porcelain skin, long dark hair that flowed down to touch the graceful curve at the small of her back. She seemed almost fragile, birdlike.

Oddly enough, as he watched them, his protective instincts came out full force. But he knew Lily needed no protection from them. It was Jaret and he who needed protection from her. Because she was birdlike, except that bird was a raven—a bird of prey.

Lily closed her eyes, intense concentration written all over her face, and she seemed to be focusing on her breathing.

"What the hell are they doing?"

After a few moments, frustration overrode her concentration and she threw her arms up in defeat. With soothing fingers, the vampire touched her forehead again and spoke to her. Once again she relaxed and shut her eyes.

"Is he teaching her something?" Jaret asked.

Toby shrugged and continued to study them. *"What could a*

vampire possibly be teaching a powerful spiritual shifter?"

"I don't know, but just look at them—there is something going on. Fuck, maybe he's trying to teach her how to steal our abilities without us being aware of her probing."

If Toby didn't know better, he'd think the vamp was teaching her how to control her magick, which had numerous questions rolling around inside his head, namely, why hadn't she been taught to control it before now?

He turned to his cousin, and said, "It's time."

Jaret nodded and handed the reins over to Toby, because they both knew Jaret was getting in too deep, despite his best efforts not to. Toby climbed from the table to set the next stage of their plan into motion. With slow casual strides he cut across the dance floor and stepped up to Lily. Startled eyes met his. Big. Violet. Beautiful.

"Mind if I cut in?"

"Quinn?" she asked out of courtesy.

The vampire Quinn and Lily exchanged a long look, a silent exchange. When Lily nodded, Quinn stepped back, and took his seat at the bar. His watchful eyes never left the action.

Toby pulled her in close and her soft, sweetly scented body melted against his. He inclined his head and smiled at her. Maybe this seduction wouldn't be so difficult after all. But when she smiled at him in return, her warmth moving through his bloodstream and touching his darkest corners, he sucked in air, finally able to understand Jaret's reaction to her. She was caressing them on an emotional level, and while Toby felt the warm waves wash over him, it was Jaret who was drowning in them.

Chapter Eight

Lily tried to summon a defense against his charm, but simply couldn't. She tilted her head and looked deep into his rich mocha eyes. They were swimming with lust, physical desire, and something she couldn't quite identify. As his intense glance moved over her face, there was nothing she could do to pull herself together and get her thoughts in order.

He cleared his throat. "I'm Toby."

"Lily," she disclosed, but suspected he already knew that. After all, she'd told his cousin her name when he gathered her body in his strong, capable arms at the café. Lady only knew what else she would have spilled if she hadn't immediately extricated herself from the warm circle of his embrace.

He gestured toward his cousin with a nod. "And that's Jaret." Lily nodded, acknowledging his introductions, and not wanting to divulge that she was privy to more than just their names. She knew about their occupation, their heritage, and their family's ongoing hunt for her.

"Nice to meet you, Toby," she whispered, and could feel the shift in his body as he pulled her impossibly closer. "You two here on vacation?" She instantly recalled the projected image of him pinning her against the wall and securing her hands over her head as he ravished her needy body. She gulped air as her body rippled in remembrance.

"Something like that." He gave her a sexy, bad-boy grin that made her pussy clench. His fingers dipped lower, hovering over the crest of her buttocks, and she became hyperaware of the way he was stroking her, slow, sinuous circles meant to entice, and she wondered if he'd

touch another part of her body in such a deft manner, the part that craved to feel his fingers, mouth, and tongue.

Oh, Lady!

“Friend . . . of . . . Kane’s?” Despite her best attempts to maintain a modicum of composure, her words came out broken. Toby gave her a quizzical look, one she couldn’t identify. Was it because of the ridiculous way she was stammering? Or was it because she was privy to his association with Kane? She corralled her libido and went on to answer his unasked question. “I saw you talking with him, and he gave you a key to the rental.”

Toby ignored her question and redirected the conversation. With a tormented look on his face, he cast Quinn a curious glance and asked, “Is that your boyfriend?” Lily noticed the way he’d said *that*, and not *he*. She wondered if he even knew he’d made the slip. From what Kane had taught them, PTF officers didn’t give the creatures they hunted an identity. When it came to killing them, it made it that much less personal.

With unhurried movements Toby’s thumb moved over her back, caressing her sensitive flesh in the most sensual way, and she suspected he didn’t even realize he was doing it. There was something deeply intimate in the way he was stroking her, and she couldn’t fight down the effect it had on her hormones.

“No, he’s a friend,” she said, and tried not to think about how good it felt to be held in his powerful arms, how good it felt to be touched by him, even if he was an empath hunter. There was no doubt in her mind that he felt the connection between them every bit as much as she did. With that last thought jangling around inside her head, she wondered if it would be so easy for him to kill her and keep it impersonal.

She placed her hands on his broad shoulders and noticed his strength, and the power radiating off him, not to mention the six-pack

of steel pressing against her body. She drew in a sharp breath. The man was lethal, a killing machine. And she'd be smart to get her mind off his body and onto her task.

With exquisite gentleness, and no attempt at discretion, he pushed a knee between her legs to spread them open. He placed his hard muscular leg so deep into the V she was practically riding his thigh as they danced to the slow song.

"A friend, huh?" he probed.

Oh, Lady, the rich timbre of his voice did the most delicious things to her insides, and she didn't think she had it in her to resist him. With her hormones on a mission, lust whispered through her blood and her pussy moistened in heated response. As her body stirred, her traitorous libido begged her to answer the urgent demands pulling at her. Demands, she suspected, only the cousins could sate.

"Yeah," she croaked out, hating that her voice was as shaky as her insides, a dead giveaway to her rising lust. Sure, he might not be able to penetrate her shield, but she was intelligent enough to know that he could read her body language, and sense the shameless want emanating off her. Goodness, she was sure everyone within fifty yards could feel her desire, smell her arousal.

"So this friend of yours," he said, confidence oozing off him in waves and seeping under her skin to play havoc with her resolve. "He's not going to cause a riot when you walk out of here tonight, is he?"

She crinkled her nose and gave a quick shake of her head. "No, why would he?"

Toby dipped his head. His hovered so close to hers she was certain he was going to kiss her. Instead, in the softest seductive voice, he murmured, "Because you're walking out of here tonight with me, Lily."

When her nipples grew harder and pressed against his chest, his

hands tightened around her back and she could feel the length of his cock against her midriff.

Thickening.

Growing.

Tempting.

A violent shiver moved through her, and when Toby felt her body's reaction, he offered her a sexy grin full of promise. Lily briefly shut her eyes. As her desire mounted, she could feel her guard slip, just a little, just enough that he could slide inside and unearth all her secrets, all the town's secrets. She drew a fueling breath and locked her knees to keep herself upright.

The slow song ended and a fast one replaced it, but Toby didn't pull back or sever the intimate connection. Instead he kept her anchored to him, forcing her to fight the temptation to rip his clothes off and offer herself up to him right then and there.

In need of a reprieve, she angled her head and pulled in air. She spotted Quinn from the corner of her eye, and the look on his face reminded her of her mission—not the one between her legs. Then Kane's warning words came back to haunt her. *The two men will use any means possible to learn more about this place.* Was that what they were doing? Using the powerful pull between the three so they could get inside her head and read all her classified information?

Lily touched Toby's mind to see what he had planned. She tried to be careful, drawing only a small thread, as Quinn had been trying to teach her, but with the way her heart was pounding so hard, and the way her hands were quivering like leaves in a windstorm, she ended up pulling far too much. Toby stepped back and grabbed his head, his eyes shooting to hers, and the dark, accusatory look he gave her frightened her to the core. What did he think she was trying to do to him?

After seeing the pain, Lily instantly dropped the connection, and

that was when she noticed both Jaret and Quinn cutting through the people and coming her way. She put a placating hand on Toby's shoulder, but he jerked back, like her touch had burned him.

When she reached for him again, Quinn stepped up to her first and wrapped protective hands around her waist and pulled her to him, severing her touch with Toby. "Lily, are you okay?"

She attempted a smile. "Fine."

Quinn turned to Toby. "And you?"

Ignoring him, Toby shot Lily a knowing glance but said nothing. Instead he backed up and bumped into his cousin. He exchanged a look with both Jaret and Quinn. He weighed his odds, then said, "I'll see you later, Lily." Even though it was a statement, Lily sensed the question, and the lingering promise in his words.

And oh how she wanted to see them later, but she couldn't. She just couldn't do it. She had to resist. Because being with him, or Jaret, was wrong on so many levels.

But if it was so wrong, then why the heck did it feel so right?

Jaret guided Toby outside as Quinn and Lily went back to the bar. Once out in the fresh air, he turned to his cousin and narrowed his eyes in concern. "*You okay?*"

As though still too weak to forge a mental connection, Toby spoke in whispered words. "Jesus Christ, Jaret, she's full of latent magick. She has to be a Brighton. She's powerful. More powerful than any witch I've ever encountered."

"She's powerful because she steals other people's magick and abilities." He clenched his jaw hard enough to grind bone. "We need to put a stop to it before she tries to do it to us."

Toby pressed his palms to his temple as his boots tapped a rhythm on the pavement. "She completely skewed my abilities and left me mentally confused."

Jaret shook his head and clicked his lips. "Yeah, it's like she's gathering all this power inside her, but doesn't know how to control it. You think that's what Quinn was doing? Helping her control all her stolen and stored-up magick?"

Toby shook his head. "I don't know what the hell is going on. Maybe it's time to call in backup and kill them all."

Jaret let loose a long slow breath and put his hand on his cousin's shoulder. "Normally I'd agree with you, Toby. But don't you remember what Maddox told us? The Darklands used to have magick until the Brightons stole it all. Then the entire coven, all except one child, died before they could get it back."

"Do you think Lily is that child and she's the key to getting it back?"

"Maybe," Jaret said, as something niggled at his insides. A warning of sorts. Until he discovered what that peculiar alarm was all about, what his intuition was trying to tell him, he resisted the urge to rush to their clan elders to present their discovery. He'd never kept anything from the elders before and wondered why his instincts compelled him to do so now.

"*It's Lily,*" Toby supplied, answering his unasked question. "*There's something about her that has us acting out of character.*"

They both remained quiet, lost in their thoughts, as they made their way back to their rental house. Toby went straight to his room, and Jaret plunked himself down on the sofa. Letting out a breath, he processed everything that had happened since he'd spotted the spiritual shifter.

He glanced out the huge bay window. Sprays of light from the towering street lanterns spilled out onto the sidewalks and lit up the smattering of townsfolk as they made their way home, the distant music fading as their beds beckoned. Jaret stayed there for a long time, too wired to sleep, and yet too damn tired to think matters through, at least with any clarity.

Hours later, still sporting his parka, he climbed from the sofa and made his way to the kitchen. As a nocturnal hunter, he decided a fresh breath of night air was needed to help get his head on straight. A little parched, he poured himself a glass of water and pushed open the patio door. A gust of wind moved over his body and helped cool his heated flesh. As he took a slug of the lukewarm tap water, he spotted the distant moon, merely a sliver of pearl now as it hovered over the horizon. In a few short hours morning would be upon them.

Jaret drew a medley of scents into his lungs, engaging in a familiar military exercise for the tired mind, one taught to all officers in basic training. The seasoned hunter in him sorted through the aromas and that was when the sweet, sugary scent of vanilla wafted before his nose. He stilled, and using his excellent night vision, he stared out into the darkness, the fraction of moon providing little to no light. With careful precision, he positioned himself in the shadows, his shrewd glance moving through the jogging park in search of movement, or anything else out of the ordinary.

That was when he saw her.

Shrouded in darkness herself, in her human form, she was studying him, big violet eyes piercing the night and moving over his body with intimate recognition. From across the park, hidden among a scattering of dense trees, she stood motionless, her eyes assessing him in the most unnerving way.

Conflicting emotions raced through him, an equal mixture of his and hers. Confusion. Turbulence. Excitement. Jaret put down his water glass, fisted his hands, and drove them into his jeans. Jesus Christ, he wasn't sure what to do. For the first time in his fucking life he was standing at a crossroads, the officer in him urging him to take one path, the man pushing him to take the other. He had two choices here, really. One, capture her, flee Serene with his cousin, and take her back to his family in Colorado, and, if she was indeed a Brighton,

force her to give them back their magick. Or two, walk out there and put a bullet in the center of her head, then terminate every other fucking creature in this town—a town where, surprisingly, five species all lived harmoniously behind a gated fence.

Then again there was always that third choice....

Yeah, he knew he needed to seduce her, penetrate her shields, and catch her with her guard down, but career, research, and intel aside, every essence of his being urged him to go out there and just fuck her senseless for his own selfish reasons. Then he could start thinking the way a hunter was supposed to think, goddammit. In an instinctive move, he tapped his side, finding security in the knowledge that his gun was slumbering in its holster, loaded and ready should he need it.

Jaret swallowed and stepped off the patio. The long, cool grass muffled the sounds of his military-issue boots as he took a tentative step forward. Would she run? Would he chase her?

He reached out to her with his mind, and knew she felt it. As he approached and her scent thickened his blood, not to mention his cock, he was certain he heard an erotic whimper bubble up from the depths of her throat.

“What are you doing out here?” He spoke to her telepathically, testing her, wanting to see if he could communicate with her in such a manner, the same way he could with his kin.

She didn’t respond telepathically, but answered the question that was clearly written all over his face. “I was just on my way home,” she said. “Taking a shortcut.”

Hating that he was so transparent, he pointed in the opposite direction and took a small step closer, gauging her reaction to his presence. “Your house is that way, Lily.”

She didn’t run, or move. In fact, she seemed to almost sway on her feet, leaning toward him, her body calling out to him in the most subtle ways. It was then that he noticed just how tiny she was. Petite.

Delicate. Breathtakingly beautiful.

"I . . . uh . . ." she murmured.

His gaze panned her clothes, or lack thereof. She had a red tinge on her cheeks, her blue lips were swollen, and her teeth were chattering. Concern spread through him, and he drew his brows together in thought. "Where's your coat?"

She nodded to her right, and there was such honesty in her big violet eyes, and in her every sensual movement, that it did the weirdest things to his insides. "I forgot it at Vibes," she whispered softly. "I left in a hurry."

How long had she been out here watching? He gave a soft sigh, something strange going on inside him as he crooked a finger and motioned her closer. "Come here, little one. You need body heat."

Violet eyes widened in astonishment and she was visibly shaking, but he was no longer sure that it was from the cold.

"What . . . what did you call me?" Her voice was rough with emotion, and there was a tenderness on her face that he hadn't seen before. He took a long time to look at her, and couldn't help wonder about this spiritual shifter and what secrets she held close.

"What are you talking about, Lily?"

"Just now, what did you call me?"

He thought about it for a moment. "You mean 'little one'?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Why did you call me that?"

He arched a brow, not really understanding what she was getting at. "No reason." At least none that came to mind. "Why? What is it?"

She blinked, and a fraction of a second later, whatever was going on inside that pretty head of hers was gone. "It's nothing. I'm just cold."

As his protective instincts kicked in, he opened his coat. "Come here," he repeated. When she did as he requested, he pulled her inside to offer his body warmth. At first she tightened in his arms, feeling the gun pressed to his side. He could sense her fear and her

blatant unease with this unnatural situation between predator and prey. Despite it all, he pulled her in tighter and captured her in the circle of his arms, refusing to let her go. Unable to let her go.

Silence droned on and after a long moment he felt a shift in her, and soon some small part of her fear abated. It was replaced by arousal. Warm, needy, sweet, sugary arousal that swirled around and coated his taste buds until he craved her with an intensity that scared the shit out of him. He gave a rough groan and shifted her small body in his arms. When she melted against him, a shudder rippled down his spine.

“Lily, Jesus, girl, what are you doing to me?” he asked, and let his gaze drop to her mouth. He focused on her lips, and when she wet them, it was all he could do not to rip her clothes from her body and bury his cock in her until he consumed her, drinking in her essence, feeding on her soul, her spirit.

A strange noise sounded in her throat, and he guessed she knew exactly what he was thinking. Even still, she didn’t pull away, didn’t run. And that was because she needed this every bit as much as he did.

“I could be asking the same about you.” She whimpered and shifted until her hot, honeyed pussy was pressed against his thigh.

She looked at him, her gaze penetrating deeply, and even though she wasn’t probing, every fiber of his being told him she could see into the depths of his soul, read his every dark secret, his every dark desire.

God help her if he acted on them.

A warm finger traced the scar on his neck, and there was genuine concern in her eyes, a sincere candidness that no one could fake. Not even a spiritual shifter living in a bloodthirsty town full of deadly secrets.

Her voice hitched when she asked, “Who did this?”

He shook his lust-rattled brain in an effort to think straight. "I can't remember," he answered honestly, even though the officer in him knew better than to open up to her, to tell her any of his dark secrets.

She pulled back, perplexed. "You have a scar like this, and you can't remember how it happened?"

"I have a lot of scars, Lily."

The warmth in her eyes reached out to him, and in the softest, silkiest voice she said, "I know you do, Jaret." His stomach clenched and he got the distinct impression she wasn't talking about the physical inflictions on his body.

She traced the scar, her gentle, barely there touch somehow soothing all his demons, making the pain nothing but a distant memory. But he needed that pain, he stressed to himself. It was what kept him going, what reminded him. . . .

Then, catching him off guard, a strange mixture of surprise and confusion came over her, and she stiffened, but it wasn't from fear. Her violet eyes glimmered and something that resembled trust passed over her face when she whispered, "You're not going to hurt me."

It was a statement, not a question, but she was wrong. Oh yeah, she was most definitely wrong about him. He was a hunter. A killer. Ruthless. A PTF officer whose main creed was to shoot first and ask questions later. And he was pretty certain he'd just stumbled across a dangerous spiritual shifter, one who'd stolen magick from his ancestors no less, and caused them a great deal of pain in the process.

She should never underestimate him, because he was far from trustworthy.

So what the fuck was stopping him from acting on that creed and blowing her fucking brains out this time?

He struggled to harden himself and he wasn't sure why, but he felt compelled to remind her, to lay it on the line once and for all. He pitched his voice low and said, "Lily, you and I both know what I am."

Then again, there was always the small possibility that his words were simply to remind himself of what he was.

“A hunter,” she offered. “But still . . .”

“No buts, Lily . . .”

Her chest began to rise and fall, and the scent of her arousal was so strong and intoxicating it was all he could do to remain upright. He’d never needed anyone in the ways he needed her. His cock thickened and ached for release.

She sensed his discomfiture as much as he sensed hers. “Jaret . . .” she whispered.

“I know, Lily. I know.”

“But why?”

Now, that was the million-dollar question, and one he couldn’t answer. Although at this particular moment his addled brain wasn’t quite so interested in trying to figure out why there was such a strong bond between them, a chemistry, not when lust tore through him like a freight train, needing, demanding, pushing him into action. So instead of trying to sort through matters, he gave himself over to those unrelenting demands and allowed the deep gnawing ache between his thighs to win this battle. In a swift move that seemed to both frighten and excite her, he inched her backward until he captured her body between his and the towering maple tree.

Jesus, he’d never felt so animalistic, so desperate. He should fight it, tame it, before it consumed him completely, but the need pulling at him was too overwhelming to deny. Her breathing changed, grew rapid. Shoving at her, he ran his fingers through her hair and grabbed a fistful of her long dark curls. With a forceful tug, he angled her mouth to his. Her beautiful puckered lips opened and invited him in.

He was being rough with her, he knew. Acting like some wild animal in heat, but the goddamn ache was too much, too intense. Sexual tension billowed like smoke in the wind, the taste lingering on

his tongue, clinging to his skin. Never in his life had he felt anything like it.

Her hands dug into his shoulders. Searching. Seeking. Needing. Pleasure burned deep. Fire singed his skin and boiled his blood. Her lips widened even more, like she wanted to say something, but before she had a chance to speak, his mouth took possession of her.

Ah, Jesus.

She was the sweetest-tasting thing he'd ever had the pleasure of sampling. As his keen senses exploded and his cock throbbed, he pushed his tongue in for a deeper taste. Her body responded to his urgency, shamelessly moving against his and letting him know in no uncertain terms that her needs matched his. Their tongues tangled and danced as he ached to lose himself in her, just for the night. Just for one fucking night . . .

He trailed his mouth to her neck and breathed in her scent. She wrapped her hands around his head, weaved her fingers through his hair, and held him to her. Warmth spread over his flesh, the pleasure of her touch most exquisite. As though she was lost in the sensations, air rushed from her lungs. He inched back to look at her, and the ardent darkening of her eyes fed the deep hunger swirling inside him.

"Lily . . ."

She didn't speak; she merely moaned, and her soft, throaty purr resonated through his body. Desire twisted inside him and pushed him past the point of no return. He was going to take her. Tonight. Here and now. And there wasn't a damn thing anyone, or *anything*, could do about it.

Anxious, unrestrained, he slipped a shaky hand between their bodies and, like an inexperienced schoolboy, fumbled with her zipper. His normally deft fingers could barely work her button, and he began panting heavily, desperation propelling him on.

"I need to fuck you," he growled.

She whimpered and grabbed a fistful of his shirt. Her eyes were wild and frantic when she rushed out, “Please . . .” A shiver racked her body and he could feel the ache inside her. “Please, I need . . .” she begged again, her voice falling off into a tortured whimper. As her warm need reached out to him, wrapped around his flesh, and seeped under his skin, he felt like he’d been lanced, the hot arrowhead spearing the shield around his heart, and that was when he felt it. The goodness inside her. The warmth. Vulnerability. Honesty. Honor.

Fuck . . .

Astonished at that unexpected discovery, he froze, and pulled back slightly. As his stomach dipped, he suddenly feared he could lose himself in her, body, heart, and soul.

But she was the enemy.

Christ, he should stop. He had to stop. As he warred with himself, she slipped her hand inside his pants and wrapped her soft palms around his raging erection.

“So big and beautiful,” she murmured. “I want to feel you inside me.” The heat of her breath assailed his neck in the most provocative ways.

She went up on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth to his. So soft. So intimate. As she crushed her lush breasts into his chest and forged an intimate connection that went beyond the physical, his resolve melted. Need ruled his actions.

He grabbed her pants and yanked. Ripping the button and zipper, and anything else that stood in his way. She gasped, but he smothered the sound with his mouth. He pressed down on her so hard he was sure to leave a mark, but that thought pleased him on some primal level, because he wanted to leave his mark. Come morning he wanted her to remember every minute of this—whatever *this* was—the same way he knew he would.

Lacking his usual finesse, he roughly pulled her jeans off and

kicked them away. Her panties posed less trouble. He gripped the thin elastic, gave a firm tug, and ripped them from her slim hips. His nostrils flared when he looked at her, and seeing her this needy—for him—damn near shut down his brain. He pulled open his own zipper and pushed on his pants. He lowered them only slightly, just enough to expose his cock.

He crushed her against the tree, pressed his fingers into her hips, and lifted her clear off her feet. He angled his body and slipped one finger inside to test her readiness. Jesus, she was hot and wet and tight. So fucking tight. She moved against his finger, driving it in deeper, and giving a small whimper when he pulled it out.

“More,” she whispered.

“I have something better.” He positioned his cock, but Jesus, he was big and she was so tight and tiny. He should go slower and prepare her better. But when she bucked forward and his crown breached her opening, his brain shut down and he drove home. Her back slammed against the towering oak, and she gave a moan, a combination of pleasure and pain. He slammed once, twice, until her cries grew louder.

Oh, fuck, he was hurting her. He needed to stop. To slow down. Forcing himself, he dug deep to find the gentleman inside him, and eased off a bit.

“More,” she murmured, and bucked against him. Her eyes were fierce, savage. “Harder.”

Fuck . . .

Forgetting chivalry, he drove into her, but couldn't seem to go deep enough, push hard enough. He was consumed, completely and utterly consumed by her. As she arched into him, her legs tightened around his waist and she rested her head on his shoulder. It didn't matter that he was big and she was small. They fit together so perfectly, her body effortlessly opening to accommodate his thickness

and length.

When her muscles clenched around his cock, he pitched his voice low. "Lily, oh God, Lily."

She pulled her head back to see him, their gazes colliding. As his body vibrated, he watched, transfixed, as her eyes glazed over, dimming with desire. He shuddered involuntarily. Her defenses were dropping—he could feel it in every fiber of his being. She was slowly opening herself to him, but he couldn't read past the lust. *Fuck*. He tried to focus, to concentrate, but as her sweet cunt milked his cock, so tight, so goddamn fucking tight and gripping him so hard, he couldn't find the energy or the strength, not when he was so infused with need.

"Jaret," she murmured, and threw her head back. "So good . . ." He pushed all the way up inside her and she opened her mouth, but this time no words came. She'd never looked more beautiful than right now, he decided.

"That's it, Lily, come for me." Christ, he'd never experienced such raw need before.

Her pussy spasmed with the approach of a climax, and her lids flew open in surprise. "I've never . . ."

When her words fell off, Jaret asked, "Never what?"

Instead of answering, she slid her pink tongue over her bottom lip and bucked against him; then her walls tightened and clenched around his dick. She locked her arms around his neck and held on as her hot cream singed his cock and dripped down to his balls. He inhaled as her sweet scent perfumed the night air. With one arm around her waist he ran his hand along her neck, loving the look on her face as she came for him.

When she squeezed her muscles around his pulsing cock, he groaned out loud and plunged as deep as he could, the tight heat bringing on his own climax. She shifted her chin to see him, pleasure

and contentment written all over her pink-tinged face. Once he was buried deep, he stilled, and drew a deep breath as he splashed his seed high up inside her, his moisture mingling with hers in the most intimate ways. As he depleted himself, she gave a small whimper and slowly circled her hips to draw out every last drop, squeezing her muscles and siphoning his hot liquid deep into her body. Jaret shut his eyes and just enjoyed the sensations as he concentrated on every delicious point of pleasure.

After a long moment, he opened his eyes to see the sun on the horizon, the moon having gone to rest for another night. Keeping his cock buried inside her, he inched his head back and struggled for composure, for some semblance of control. But after that ride, he was pretty damn sure he wasn't going to find it anytime soon.

When he saw Lily's worn, disheveled look, tree bark stuck in her long dark hair, he shook his head and realized just how rough he'd been with her. He winced at his own barbaric behavior, and picked the bark chips from her locks as he tried to read her. But her shields were back in place. Nice and tight and impenetrable.

He cleared his throat. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head, her breathing still labored when she answered, "No."

"I didn't mean . . ." Fuck, what was he going to say? *I didn't mean to go at you like a rutting animal?* Jesus, he'd been in such a hurry, he hadn't even bothered to remove his pants. But this chemistry, what the hell was it? He tried again. "I just don't understand why—"

Her mood changed quickly. Her earlier bliss disappeared and a crestfallen expression moved over her face. He tamped down the tug of emotions when her beautiful guarded eyes locked on his.

He reached for her. "Lily—"

She pressed her index finger to his lips to hush him.

His stomach lurched. "What is it?"

“Someone’s coming,” she whispered. Her voice sounded tight as she struggled to extract herself from the circle of his arms.

He glanced around, taking in the trees, the houses on the other side of the street, and the emptiness. But when he narrowed his concentration, and let his senses guide the way, he felt Toby’s presence, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. Toby was always with him. He reached further, and that was when he felt the presence just beyond the park. Someone watching them. He hadn’t noticed it earlier because he’d been too far gone, lost in a haze of lust. Not a smart move for a hunter who was smack-dab in the middle of enemy territory.

Dark lashes blinked over anxious eyes. “We need to get out of here.”

Jaret inched back, and as he lowered her silky legs to the ground, and withdrew from her tight heat, a cool breeze rushed over his damp cock and brought on a shudder. Moving quickly, he tugged his pants up and reached for hers.

“Thanks,” she murmured quietly, and hastily began to climb into her torn jeans.

As the far-reaching rays touched the jogging park, and spilled over her body like a halo, he glimpsed the anxiety in her eyes. The guilt.

It was the guilt he focused on. “Lily, there was no way to stop this.”

He felt her pull back and shut down emotionally. “It shouldn’t have happened.”

As his passion receded, he pulled himself together, braced his arms beside her head, and pressed his palms into the tree, caging her, as he thought about the reason he hadn’t yet terminated the entire town. He lowered his voice, schooled his expression, and, without trying to soften his words, asked, “Who are you, Lily?”

Her eyes widened, and the acrid scent of fear drifted by on the breeze. Her fear. She ducked under his arm and tugged on her jeans.

Her face had taken on a ruddy hue when she whispered, "I have to go."

"Lily, don't."

She made a move to turn, but Jaret gripped her elbow and stopped her.

"Jaret—" she began, trying to tug away, but he cut her off.

"Wait." He shrugged out of his coat and draped it over her shoulders. Without thinking, he blurted out his Nanna's favorite line, one she always used on the cousins when they were little and refused to wear their hats and mitts. "I don't want you to catch your death of cold."

She briefly stilled. "What?"

He shook his head quickly and tugged the coat tighter around her waist. "Nothing. It's nothing. I just want you to stay warm."

Conflicting emotions passed over her eyes as they locked on his. "Jaret," she said, then stopped to wag a finger back and forth between the two of them. "This shouldn't have happened."

She looked like she wanted to say something else, but when a twig snapped in the distance, fear welled up in her eyes and she turned her back to him and made a hasty retreat.

As he watched her run away, he drew a fortifying breath, drove his thumb into his chest, and called after her, "You came to me, Lily, remember?" When she tossed one last glance over her shoulder, and met his gaze straight on, it hit him: She wasn't afraid *of* him; she was afraid *for* him.

Chapter Nine

After catching the tail end of their frenzied sexual encounter, Toby stepped from the window, pulled on his clothes, and made his way downstairs. Jesus, he'd never seen Jaret so crazed before, so completely wild and unfocused that he hadn't been able to concentrate on the real reason he needed to fuck her. He was a soldier through and through, the job coming first and foremost. Losing his edge was completely uncharacteristic of him, and it deepened Toby's concern for him.

Toby glanced out the patio door in time to see Jaret cut across the park and rush up the gravel walkway leading to the back door. Fine lines crinkled his eyes and he ran his hands through his mussed hair, turmoil emanating off him.

... she's not afraid of me; she's afraid for me. . . .

As Jaret's thoughts drummed in Toby's head, he grabbed the coffee grinds from the cupboard just as Jaret pushed open the door and stepped inside. A gust of wind followed him in. It carried the scent of the park as well as the heady scent of sex.

"Hey," Jaret muttered, sounding completely spent. The wooden chair scraped across the tile floor before Jaret dropped down into it. Toby kept a close eye on his cousin as he put the freeze-dried crystals into the coffeemaker. Jaret planted his elbows on the table and stretched his legs out in front of himself. "Make mine strong."

Toby added an extra scoop of coffee, but suspected it wouldn't even begin to shake the fog from his cousin's head. Jaret was tired. Drained. Dead on his feet, in fact.

Once the coffee was made, Toby brought Jaret a mug and took the seat opposite him. He wrapped his hands around the warm ceramic

and got right to the point. “Did you get anything?”

“No. Nothing.” Jaret lifted his gaze from his coffee. “You?”

“I came in too late.” Toby stared into his mug, then asked, “So you can’t confirm whether she’s a Brighton or not?”

“Afraid not.”

Frustration over the situation moved through him. “And we still have no idea why there’s a chemistry between us? Or if there are other covert communities like this one?”

With quiet distress, Jaret scrubbed a hand over his face, shook his head slowly, and took a drink of his coffee. He shifted in his seat, and Toby studied him, real concern gnawing at his insides.

“She’s really doing a number on you, isn’t she?”

After a long pause and a futile attempt to hide his feelings, he conceded, “Appears that way.”

It was clear how difficult it was for Jaret to admit failure of any kind, as he always prided himself on his ability to get the job done, no matter how hard, or how many obstacles. He’d always maintained his distance from their marks, never thinking of them as humans, and never, ever sympathizing. Until now. But it was useless to try to hide his feelings from Toby. Not only could Toby read his cousin like an open book; the turmoil was written all over his face, making him completely transparent.

Jaret took a sip of his coffee and glanced outside, lost in his thoughts. “Next time I’ll join in—at least that way one of us should be able to concentrate,” Toby said.

“Yeah,” Jaret murmured, sounding dubious. “I sure as hell hope so.”

“I’ll get what we need,” Toby assured him.

“There’s just something about her, something that draws you in and fucks you over. It’s hard to fight it, Toby. Real hard.”

“She’s a witch. Have you ever stopped to think it’s a trap?”

Jaret clenched, and Toby could see the muscles rippling along his jaw. "You're probably right."

"I am right. Tonight, Jaret," Toby said with finality. "Tonight we get our answers, and if she's a Brighton, we'll capture her and send her back to Maddox before blowing this place all to hell. If not, she goes down with it."

Jaret looked troubled, and by small degrees his body tightened. "Yeah, it's a good plan."

Toby pushed back and folded his arms. "Jaret, come on. This town is full of soulless monsters," he reminded. "You need to get your head back into the game before she steals the rest of our Darkland abilities."

"She never even tried," Jaret said.

"This time. Likely because she was too busy enjoying a good fuck. Can you say the same about the next? You shouldn't have gone in alone, Jaret. It was dangerous."

Jaret groaned. "You felt her fear, Toby. She's actually worried about us, our safety. If she were so fucking evil, acting purely with her own best interests at heart, then why the hell would she be worrying about us?"

Toby ran his fingers through his hair. It was true. He felt the good inside her, the virtue, but still . . .

As he thought more about her fear, rolling her worries around inside his head to consider further, he said, "Obviously something's going to go down. Kane is up to something. I can feel it."

"And we need to buy ourselves some time before he acts."

"Tonight," Toby reaffirmed, "we'll amp up the seduction and get all the answers we need from Lily." He gestured toward the stairs. "You go get some sleep and don't worry. I know how to take care of Kane and buy us some time."

He felt Jaret inside his head, reading the direction of his thoughts

before he nodded in agreement. As sleep pulled at Jaret, his cousin closed his eyes and pressed a finger to his temple. Toby stood and put a placating hand on Jaret's shoulder, to address his worries.

"Jaret—" he began, then stopped abruptly.

Jaret's head came back with a start. "What?"

"Jesus, Jaret, don't you smell it?"

Jaret inhaled and held his hand out in front of himself. "I smell Lily."

"Go deeper," Toby said.

Jaret shut his eyes and concentrated. He took in deep breaths and physically relaxed as he sorted through the medley of scents. A moment later, his lids flew open, and he angled his head to meet Toby's glance.

"Black magick."

"That's right," Toby said. "Black magick. And it's coming from Lily." He paused for a moment to allow his cousin a minute to digest that tidbit before adding, "Maybe she's not so virtuous, after all."

Early-morning light poured through the barren trees, spilled over Lily's body, and lit her small frame up for all to see as she rushed through the jogging park and made her way home. The last thing she wanted to do was get caught having sex with a hunter, not to mention the fact that she had his coat on. Such actions would be considered rogue behavior. Siding with the enemy was punishable by death.

Lily knew that her unorthodox behavior could expose her town and all its secrets, and if council found out what she'd done, she'd be placed before the disciplinary board. She shivered, fully aware of what the outcome would be. Honestly, the thoughts of bringing harm to her community, her family in Serene, scared her more than anything. She'd never forgive herself, just like she'd never forgiven herself for not being able to help her coven all those years ago.

As guilt moved through her, she rushed down Main Street and hurried past the town hall. When she reached her house, she took her front steps two at a time, twisted the cool metal knob, and pushed open her door. Before entering, she stole a quick glance over her shoulder. Concentrating, she scanned the area, and pulled a tiny thread of magick, weaving her way around the houses in an effort to discover who was watching her.

Her skin tingled and a fine shiver of foreboding moved through her. She hurried into her house, set the lock behind herself, and sagged against the secured door. She stood there for a long moment, trying to gather herself before she had to prepare for the day ahead.

Once she had herself semicomposed, Lily made her way up the stairs to her bathroom. She was in desperate need of a shower, to wash the forest, as well as any lingering traces of Jaret, from her skin. She turned on the nozzle and carefully shrugged out of his heavy coat. Her heart did a little flip as she hung it on the doorknob. For a toughened warrior, he was unexpectedly kind and considerate, and she couldn't deny that it did the strangest things to her insides. Turning her focus to her soiled clothes, she stripped out of them and climbed into the hot water.

Reaching for her sugary vanilla scrub, she inhaled, but the only thing that filled her senses was Jaret's scent. It was all over her, in her hair, on her skin, inside her mouth, and, yes, even deep between her legs. She needed to cleanse her flesh and rid herself of his rich, earthy aroma before she went into work. The last thing she wanted was for someone to smell the sweet tang of sex on her body, and figure out what she'd been up to.

Goodness, she knew better than to be *with* him like that. It was wrong. No matter how right it felt. Council had charged her with getting close to the cousins, but *this* wasn't what they had in mind. *This* was dangerous. And it went against directive.

But she couldn't seem to help herself....

Those two had been seducing her mind, body, and soul since she'd first set eyes on them in her raven form. And earlier tonight, Jaret called out to her in ways that baffled her and left her unable to summon a defense against his charm.

Warmth moved through her as she remembered the pleasure of him inside her, moving, pushing, giving and taking, and driving into her body so hard and deep she thought she'd died and gone to heaven. Their bodies locked together and rocked as one in perfect sync, and for the first time in her life, a man had brought her to orgasm. She couldn't help but grin now as she thought about the rippling waves of pleasure. But it wasn't just Jaret with her in that jogging park earlier. Toby had been there with them too, partaking in the action from afar. She'd felt him. Jaret might have been with her physically, but Toby was there on another level, and it excited her beyond anything she'd ever known.

Deep down, on some basic level she needed the two, and not even the fact that they were deadly hunters from the Darkland clan could stop her from taking what she needed—what her spirit craved. The second Jaret touched her needy body, she knew he was more than just a ruthless killer. She never would have given herself over to such a heartless being. On some unconscious level she knew there was goodness inside him. The man had a conscience, no matter what he thought or said. As she opened herself to him, he in turn opened himself to her, and when he did, she felt something inside him. Some inner warmth and compassion that he kept buried behind those cold, haunting images of cloaked beasts, locked behind a prison door for no one to see or touch.

Her heart skipped a beat, and she shivered despite the hot spray on her body. What happened to make his blood turn to ice? She felt a pang inside her gut and her hand instinctively moved to her abdomen.

She rubbed her flat stomach, and could almost feel his seed inside her, moving through her fruitful womb: searching, seeking, attempting to fertilize, to procreate. They hadn't used protection, but it didn't matter, she thought solemnly. With him she was sterile—they weren't of the same blood, making them incompatible.

After scrubbing her hair and body, washing away all traces of Jaret, she climbed from the shower and wondered when Kane would call another council meeting. What would she report? What would they decide? Now that the men were inside the protective walls, council would never let either leave. Soon their futures would be decided and a new member of one of the five existing species would be created.

Lily pushed those thoughts aside for the time being. She glanced out the window to see sunshine give way to dark clouds. *April showers bring May flowers*, she mused. With that, she dressed in a new pair of jeans and a sweater and dabbed on a bit of makeup to take away her tired, sleepless look. She grabbed her raincoat from the closet, then made her way to the café. She needed to talk to Harmony about these herbs she insisted Lily take. Lily gave her usual early-morning greetings to the townsfolk, and studied them carefully as she walked to work. It could have been any one of them watching her.

She slipped inside the near-empty café and made her way to the back to prepare for the morning crowd. Harmony stopped what she was doing and with shrewd eyes cataloged Lily's every movement through the serving slot, taking in her every nuance and making Lily feel a little self-conscious as she crossed the wide expanse of floor.

Lily stepped in the back and plastered on a smile. She prayed she didn't have any telltale signs from her early-morning indiscretion written all over her body or her face.

Harmony placed her hand on Lily's arm. "You've taken the herbs." It wasn't a question, but Lily nodded anyway.

“And the chant? You’ve recited the chant?” There was a strange urgency in Harmony’s voice that Lily had never heard before.

“Yes,” Lily said, appeasing her mentor and chalking up her jittery behavior to her concern for Lily’s well-being. Lily removed her coat, then reached past Harmony to grab her clean uniform off the rack.

“But—”

Harmony narrowed suspicious eyes. “You did exactly what I told you to do?”

“Of course,” Lily responded.

“The pentagram.”

“Everything,” she assured the coven elder, suddenly disliking this unnecessary interrogation.

Harmony leaned back against the stainless steel counter and smiled, and as Lily watched her, she briefly wondered if it was Harmony in that park earlier that morning, watching over her, looking out for her. But if it had been her, surely she would have said something.

Harmony’s perfect white teeth flashed in the light overhead. “Good. Be sure to do it every night after dinner, and no matter what you do, don’t nurture your magick.”

Lord and Lady, she was damned if she did and damned if she didn’t.

When the door chimed, Lily leaned in and spoke in whispered words. “I don’t think the herbs are helping.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Last night, after I ingested them, my raven stirred. If the herbs are to suppress my magick, why would it arouse my raven?”

“It’s just your body getting used to them, Lily,” she said, brushing off the incident with a dismissive wave of her hand that both shocked and irritated Lily. “No matter what, don’t stop taking them. Fight off the pull of the raven and don’t ever let those two feel your

magick—otherwise they'll identify it as Brighton power, and you and I both know what will happen then."

Lily nibbled on her bottom lip, remembering the warmth she felt inside Jaret, and wondering exactly what would happen if they found out. "I don't think they want to harm me."

"How do you know that?" Harmony shot Lily an accusatory look, and it stirred some foreign darkness inside her. "They're ruthless," Harmony bit out, her hateful words causing a storm to brew in Lily's belly. A whirlpool of anger stirred, gaining strength and energy as Harmony continued to forewarn Lily about the dangers that lay ahead. Lily closed her hand over her amulet as Harmony droned on about the cousins. As she squeezed her mother's charm, it seemed to vibrate in her hand and give off an energy that she'd never felt before. She clutched it harder and could feel this strange new darkness burning in her belly. Lily had always been even-tempered, and this strong bout of anger and upset building in the pit of her stomach took her by surprise.

"I sensed it," she said, keeping the intimate details to herself. "I sensed goodness in them." Albeit it was deep, locked up inside a prison, nonetheless it was there.

Harmony gave a brusque shake of her head. "You're wrong, Lily. They're a special breed of empaths, and they're just tricking you."

"Maybe," she agreed, not at all sure Harmony's observations were correct, but deciding to redirect the conversation. "The herbs also made me feel very . . ." She hesitated, feeling a tad uncomfortable talking to Harmony about such private matters.

"Made you feel what, Lily?"

She glanced over her shoulder to ensure that no one was within hearing distance. "They made me feel . . . *aroused*."

"It should pass." Harmony pursed her lips and again brushed it off far too quickly. Harmony was being vague, dismissive, and Lily didn't

like it. Lily was about to press, but Harmony narrowed her eyes and scrutinized her. “Are you sure it’s the herbs and not those two men stirring your hormones?”

Lily pulled back, interested to see where this would lead them. What exactly did Harmony know? “Why would you think I would be attracted to them?”

Seemingly frustrated, she blurted out, “Because these men are your . . .” She stopped, and that moment of hesitation told Lily that she was keeping something back from her. Suddenly, as if she’d said too much, Harmony pinched her lips, clasped her hands, and began backpedaling. “I mean . . . they . . .” She briefly shut her eyes, and tried again. “They have empath abilities, Lily.”

“And?” Lily asked.

“Where do you think empath abilities come from?”

Lily shrugged, unsure, as Harmony had always kept her in the dark about such things. The coven elder feared that too much knowledge of the craft could lead to her discovery. “Where?” she asked.

“Magick, of course.”

Understanding dawned. “And magick is drawn to magick,” Lily supplied. Was that why she was attracted to the Darkland men? Magick to magick? Or was it something else? As she thought about it, it raised another question. A question that had been burning a hole inside her gut for the last five hundred years, a question that, under the circumstances, she refused to let Harmony evade.

“What do they want with me, Harmony?” she asked in a deceptively calm voice and refusing to let the subject go this time. She wanted answers and she wanted them now. She’d never stood up to Harmony before, never demanded an explanation from the woman who’d rescued her. Perhaps it was the herbs doing something to her, giving her a lick of bravado. Or perhaps it was her encounter with Jaret. Oddly enough, there was something about those cousins that

empowered her. And now, as strange as it sounded, after having sex with Jaret, she felt a little bolder, a little stronger.

Harmony stared at her for a long moment, then exhaled a resigned breath. "Okay, I guess it's time for you to know." She placed both her hands on Lily's shoulders and lowered her onto the old chrome chair with the padded vinyl seat beside the counter. "I've only kept it from you for your own safety," she said, and turned quiet for a moment as though thinking things through. Lily got the distinct impression that she was trying to choose her words carefully. "Under the circumstances I think you should be aware of what happened and why."

"Tell me," Lily insisted as impatience moved through her. "Tell me everything," she rushed out, her tone demanding.

Harmony planted her hands on her hips, her actions conveying without words that she was hardly overjoyed with Lily's newfound confidence and bravado. "They want your magick," she announced flatly.

Lily blinked, confused. "My magick?" She looked past Harmony's shoulder, and stared blankly at a grease spot over the fryer as she considered that. "I've never heard of empaths stealing magick before."

"That's because you've been sheltered, Lily. Here in Serene. If not for me . . ."

Lily held her hand up. "I know, Harmony, and I'll always be grateful." Interrupting Harmony's familiar spiel had earned her a scowl, but it didn't stop her from pressing on. She was determined to get to the bottom of matters. "But I just don't understand. Are you trying to say that the Darkland men killed my family because they wanted to steal our magick?"

"What I'm saying is the Darkland men killed your family because the Darkland clan used to possess magick until your ancestors stole it from them, leaving them only with empath abilities."

Shock moved through her, and her head began to spin as that horrid day rushed through her mind. “No . . .” Lily bit out. “That’s not true.” Her coven was good and kind and caring. She remembered. Never would they do something like that. Ever. This had to be a mistake. It just had to be. Her stomach tightened, and her hands grew moist and she fought down the unwanted prick of tears. As moisture threatened, Lily’s amulet once again began to vibrate.

Harmony softened her voice, but it did nothing to comfort Lily. “Lily, you were a mere child. How do you know what’s true or not?”

Lily swiped at her eyes. She might have been a child, but she remembered. “You’ve got it wrong, Harmony.”

Harmony ran her hand along the top of Lily’s head, soothing her. “Hush, now, child. Everything is going to be okay.”

As if Harmony’s touch burned her skin, she pulled away abruptly. “Why did you keep this from me?”

Harmony’s voice grew stern; she was clearly insulted at Lily’s accusatory tone and challenging behavior. This time she didn’t bother to soften her tone when she said, “I’ve kept this from you to protect you from the ugly truth of what you really are. What your family was. You see, child, I’ve only ever had your best interests at heart.”

Lily got quiet for a moment, thinking things through. It couldn’t be true; it just couldn’t be. The bell above the door chimed and Lily worked to pull herself together, but her mother’s words whispered through her blood, “*I have to go now, Lily. But we’ll see each other again. I promise. And don’t forget I’ll always be with you,*” and it was all she could do not to drop to the floor and weep for her lost family. She should have been able to save them. Then she would have known the truth. Everyone would have known the truth about that ugly night.

“How did you know where to find me? How did you know where I’d be?” Lily asked quietly.

“Luck.”

“Luck?” Lily blinked and shot Harmony a skeptical glance.

Harmony’s eyes hardened. “Just be thankful it was me and not them who discovered you behind that rock. If they found you, you’d likely be dead, which is why you can never let them know you are a Brighton. They believe you’ve stolen their magick and will stop at nothing, even trickery, to get it back.”

As her amulet gave off warm energy, warning bells once again jangled in the back of Lily’s mind. No one could ever convince her that her family had stolen magick, but that certainly didn’t mean the Darkland clan didn’t believe it. And if they were angry enough . . .

What other explanation could there be for their destroying her whole coven?

Was this why Toby had pulled away from her touch at Vibes? Did he think she was trying to steal the rest of his abilities? Was it possible that he knew who she was? If he did, surely he would have reacted to the threat he thought she posed.

Lily glanced up in time to see hatred burning in the depths of Harmony’s eyes as she looked through the serving slot and out into the dining area. Lily angled her head to see what had darkened Harmony’s disposition. After she spotted Kane, she turned back to Harmony. When Harmony realized that Lily was observing her, she blinked the anger from her face and turned her attention to Lily. Sure, Harmony was upset with Kane and Sunray for voting to remove her from council, but intuition told Lily there was more going on between them, and that hatred she’d just witnessed was stemming from something else entirely. For the first time in her life Lily was about to pull a thread of magick to tap into Harmony’s mind, to understand the depths of her emotions, but Harmony offered her a warm motherly smile and it tugged at her insides, bringing back memories of her own dear mother. Much to her dismay, Lily had never known her

father—he'd died before she was born—but when her mother talked about him, she always had fondness in her eyes and love in her heart.

“We need to be careful, Lily. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you. And I know you don't want anything to happen to your family here in Serene, now, do you?”

Lily swallowed. “Of course not.”

Harmony gestured with a nod, and there was bitterness in her tone when she said, “I think Kane wants you.”

With that, Lily climbed to her feet, stepped into the small bathroom to pull on her uniform, then smoothed down her mass of long curly hair instead of clipping it back. She took a moment to pull herself together before returning to the prep area. Focusing on the task before her, she was about to grab two coffee mugs when she remembered Sunray's condition. Sidestepping Harmony, she went to the fridge and pulled out the orange juice. She poured a generous amount into the glass and prepared Kane's coffee. As she made her way to the booth, and took in the distraught look on Kane's face, unease moved over her and her steps slowed. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. The second she set eyes on Sunray, her stomach tightened, and she sank down into the booth opposite them.

Lily reached out to touch Sunray's hand and found it cold and clammy. “Sunray, what is it?”

With a great deal of tenderness on his face, Kane wrapped a protective arm around his wife and pulled her in closer. It was scary how pale Sunray looked against Kane's bronzed skin.

“She's sick,” he said, concern evident in his voice.

Lily could see the love and worry in Kane's eyes as he looked at Sunray, and for a brief moment it caught her off guard. Her heart clenched, as she knew the day would never come when a man looked at her like that. But regardless, she still wished for it just the same. Sunray pushed the glass of orange juice away and made a small

distressed noise that pulled Lily's focus back.

Lily's glance darted back and forth between the two lycans. "Is it morning sickness?" Lily had never heard of a lycan getting morning sickness before, let alone any other kind of ailment. They had regenerative powers and any sort of an affliction was unheard of.

"No," Kane answered for her. "We're not sure what's going on."

Lily studied her friend, taking in her big pewter eyes, glossy from fever, the beads of moisture on her forehead, and the white pallor of her skin.

"Have you taken anything?" she asked.

"No, nothing," Sunray said, her voice weak and distant. "The baby . . ."

"Of course, the baby," Lily answered, and brushed her hair from her face as she worried her bottom lip. "Let me talk to Sophie and have her put together something holistic for you."

"If you're sure it won't hurt the baby."

"Sophie can make up an elixir and I'll bring it to you later. And some nice chicken soup too," she added with a smile.

With obvious effort, Sunray returned the smile. "Thank you, Lily. I'd appreciate that, but right now I'd love a glass of water."

Lily climbed from her seat and hurried to the kitchen for a glass of cold water. When she came back and leaned over Kane to slide Sunray's drink across the table, she noticed the strange look that had come over his face. He leaned close to her and breathed in deep, and Lily knew exactly what he smelled.

Sex.

Her stomach sank. This was so not good. Not good at all. Disgust was written all over his face as his eyes met hers. She swallowed hard and considered his next move. Would he pull her off council, or, worse, report her to the disciplinary board?

Maybe, just maybe if he understood. Honestly, if anyone knew

about forbidden love, it was him.

He grabbed a fistful of hair and shook his head. “Jesus Christ, Lily.”

Lily sat down across from him and contemplated her best approach. What was the best way to make him understand the predicament she’d unwittingly found herself in?

“Kane—”

Leaning in, he lowered his voice, even though they were the only ones in the café. “I can smell them all over you.”

“You told me to get close,” she said in her own defense.

“Fuck, Lily. You know that’s not what I meant. You—”

She held her hand up. “Kane, wait—”

Astute as he was, Kane drew back his head with a start, and it stopped her midsentence. He scrutinized her for a long time while he tried to console his sick wife, who shifted restlessly beside him, clearly too weak to join in the conversation.

“Jesus, Lily, I can’t believe this.”

“What?” she asked, aware that she was wearing her emotions on her sleeve.

“You don’t want me to hurt them, or turn them,” he stated, then shook his head, obviously perplexed by her uncharacteristic conduct. “What the hell is going on between you three?”

“I have a connection with them,” she said softly, putting it out there for them both to examine and dissect. Maybe Kane would have the answers, because they certainly continued to evade her.

Kane blew out a long, slow sigh, and arched a questioning brow. “What are you talking about?”

“There is chemistry between us, a connection.”

“Lily, why didn’t you tell us this before?”

“I honestly don’t know.” She pressed her hand to her stomach, and suspected she just wanted to keep it close, nurture it, enjoy it, even if

only for a little while. Never had she felt anything like it, and she suspected she never would again. “Something inside me prevented it. Maybe because I didn’t understand it myself, or maybe . . .” Her voice dropped when she said, “Maybe because these men are ancestors of the Darkland clan that killed my family and I didn’t want to believe in the pull.”

Kane let loose a low whistle and Sunray bristled beside him.

“Lily, my God,” Sunray whispered with effort, and captured Lily’s hand in her sweaty palm to give a comforting squeeze. That small endeavor seemed to take its toll on Sunray, and she paled even more when her hand touched Lily’s.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen; it just did,” she explained. When Kane got quiet, she rushed on, “Kane, you know all about forbidden love.” Lily shot Sunray a quick glance. “Falling unexpectedly for the last person you ever thought you could love.”

“Point taken, Lily,” he murmured, a troubled look on his face. After a long moment, Kane broke the quiet. “Tell me more about this chemistry.”

“I don’t really understand it myself. They’re not from my bloodline, but nevertheless, the pull is powerful.”

“Lily, think this through. If they’re not from the same blood, you shouldn’t feel a connection, right?”

“Right,” she agreed.

“These two men are powerful, and very, very good at their jobs. It could be a trick, and I suspect it is.” He touched her hand. “I think your emotions are overruling your ability to reason right now.”

“I felt a goodness in them, Kane.”

He eyed her suspiciously, a dubious look on his face. “Lily, we can’t take a chance. I told you before that these two will stop at nothing, and use any means possible to learn more about this place, and any other places like it. Do they know who you are?”

"I'm not sure."

"Then you need to fight this until we change them."

"I just don't want—"

"Lily, they killed your family."

"*They* didn't," she countered. "Their ancestors did."

"Look, the cousins have a hatred for me. They show up and suddenly my wife gets sick. You and I both know lycans don't get sick, and I don't believe in coincidences." Lily nodded, knowing he had a point there.

Sunray gripped her stomach and leaned forward. "You'd better take her home, Kane," Lily suggested. "She needs rest."

He nodded his head in agreement. "I'm going to. I need to talk to the cousins, but first I need to take care of my wife." Sunray touched his face and he smiled. "Let's go, sweetheart," he murmured, and helped her from the booth.

Lily climbed to her feet, and when she watched him zipper Sunray's coat up, she couldn't help but think of the way Jaret offered her his coat.

Lily smiled in remembrance.

"What?" Kane asked.

"I was just thinking about the way you always fuss over Sunray, despite her protests." But Lily knew Sunray loved his nurturing attention. He was going to be a great dad, and dammit, no matter what it took, she was going to ensure nothing happened to that baby, or to anyone else in her community.

"Yeah, well, I don't care if she protests or not. She's sick and she needs someone taking care of her." Before Kane left, he turned to Lily and warned, "This sickness has to have something to do with them, Lily." He brushed his thumb along Sunray's ashen cheek, and murmured, "It just has to." He angled his head slowly and met her gaze. "For now, this stays between us. Just don't give me a reason to

take this incident to council.” He leaned a little closer and said, “You know what you have to do.”

Yeah, she knew. Try to prod their thoughts, and keep her own identity a secret while fighting every instinct and impulse inside her urging her to give herself over to them, body, heart, and soul. Those two might be irresistible to her, but she could do this. She could fight it. She let loose a long slow breath and nodded, understanding and accepting her mission.

Chapter Ten

As Jaret slept off last night's erotic adventure, Toby threw on his parka and left the house, eager to investigate every inch of this paranormal town. He walked briskly through the jogging park, noting there wasn't a runner or dog walker to be found, and made his way to the main drag. Not that any pets could survive for long in this place, he mused.

He walked across the small town and moved down the sidewalk on Main Street. As he did, he took in the perfectly manicured lawns, the charming houses nestled behind their white picket fences, and all the concerned parents bundling up their little ones on this crisp spring morning. His thoughts journeyed, wondering when Kane would react to the threat the two cousins posed to his perfect little community. It gave him a measure of comfort to know his gun was close by, and he could take the former PTF officer out if he became too much of a problem.

A small droplet of cold rainwater splashed on his forehead and he glanced upward. The late-morning sky looked threatening, casting a gloomy feel over the quaint town. Then again, maybe *gloomy* wasn't the right word; maybe it was . . . *cozy*. Okay, now, that was a word not normally found in his vocabulary—at least it hadn't been for a very long time. But he was suddenly reminded of the rainy days he and Jaret had spent inside with their Nanna. Nestled inside her small bungalow on the outskirts of their tight-knit community, safe from nature's elements as they baked cookies and played games.

Hating that this town, and the monsters in it, were making him feel so sentimental, he buried that fond memory for the time being, and turned his attention back to the streets. Putting on his best

hard-assed-officer face, he cataloged each and every person, committing the features and every nuance from each species to memory in case he needed to draw on them later.

Inside the fire station a group of men—a brotherhood, despite the diverse species—were washing their already spotless trucks. When they turned to face him, his instincts kicked in and his pulse leapt in preparation for a fight. But their attention drifted, as if he posed little to no threat. Oh yeah, they were all on a very short leash indeed.

Instead of attacking, they all turned their attention back to teasing a fellow firefighter, a panther, as they slapped him on the back good-naturedly. The panther took it all in stride, laughing along with them. Toby watched on in mute silence, and before he even realized what he was doing, he found himself smiling. He'd personally never experienced such camaraderie with the men from his unit, likely because most of the other officers were suspicious of the Darkland family, never really accepting them as one of the team. Then again, it wasn't like the cousins went out of their way to fit in, or play nice. It wasn't in their nature, and in the community he grew up in, any sign of compassion was considered a weakness, and was snuffed out early by the men in their clan, especially Maddox.

As Toby moved down the sidewalk, he took in the townsfolk, who were all milling about easily, chatting, laughing, and sharing their umbrellas to help keep their neighbors warm and dry. Without warning, the oddest sensation sneaked up from the depths of his gut and took the wind out of him.

Longing.

Overcome by that foreign emotion, he pressed his back against the brick wall behind him, and wondered why that feeling had suddenly come over him. A lycan and her two cubs moved past him, completely ignoring him, and walked into the candy store, big smiles plastered across the little cubs' faces as their mother bought them sugary treats.

Jesus, it was all so heartfelt, the way real loving families were supposed to act. Like the families in the real world that he'd vowed to protect.

As his head began to spin, he continued to scan this strange new town he'd stumbled on. Off in the distance he spotted a demon working side by side with a witch; both were smiling and talking easily as they rolled out a vinyl awning in front of the grocery store, to protect customers from the impending downpour.

What the fuck . . .

There was nothing demons liked better than possessing witches and snacking on their souls. Yet here they were, working together for the greater good. Showing concern for all other species. How was it possible? Why weren't they feuding, each species vying for leadership? He'd seen no signs of a police force. So who the hell kept order? It all baffled his mind, really, and if he had a heart, seeing them this friendly and amicable with one another would certainly take the joy out of obliterating the town.

Toby shook his head, astonished and dumbfounded at what he saw. As he stood there in awe, a few of the townsfolk glared at him, and he guessed they sensed he was trouble, or, worse, a hunter, which worried him. Kane wasn't going to put up with them hanging out in his lair a whole lot longer.

As he continued to take in the various acts of kindness, it occurred to him that he'd been inside Serene for only a short time, but in that short time he'd seen more kind gestures from the very beasts they hunted than he did from humans he protected.

He turned his attention to the café and spotted alpha dog Kane, his mate, Sunray, and Lily inside. His gaze settled on Lily and noted the way her long silky hair fell over her shoulders. She was so goddamn beautiful, breathtaking really, and while he found himself physically attracted to her, she didn't seem to have the same hold over him

emotionally as she did over his cousin. Hell, no woman was ever going to make him lose his cool and turn into a lovesick teenager, and after smelling black magick on Jaret's clothes, Toby didn't trust her.

They were all leaning forward and chatting quietly, their body language an indication that their conversation was meant for their ears and their ears only. Lily had an intent, worried look plastered across her face, and figuring nothing ventured, nothing gained, he took a chance and probed her mind, wanting to glimpse their conversation, but her damn shields were impenetrable, locking him out. When Lily stood and left the table for a moment, Kane glanced out the window, and scanned the streets. When his gaze locked on Toby's, he visibly tightened, and leaned over to say something to Sunray, who looked ill.

Something about the look in Kane's eyes told him the lycan was itching to exchange words with him, which was good, because Toby wanted to speak to him as well, but then Kane turned his attention back to his wife. Preoccupied with helping her, Kane offered Toby his back, and was practically carrying Sunray to the door. What the hell was going on with Sunray? If Toby didn't know better, he'd think she was sick. But he did know better. And lycans never got sick.

He remained pressed against the wall, blending with the shadows, as he observed Kane from afar. He'd have to wait until he wasn't so engrossed with his wife to talk to him. As the two moved down the street, it occurred to Toby that Sunray was pregnant, bringing Kane's dog into the world. Toby frowned. Another damned beast that would prowl the streets and turn on the innocent. He cheered himself up by thinking about their impending termination, and his plan to kill her before she brought another monster into the world.

As he waited for Kane to resurface and Jaret to awaken from his nap, he spent the remainder of the day moving through the town, but the whole time he felt like he was being watched. He could feel an

invisible set of eyes on his back, noting his every movement. Not wanting to draw too much unnecessary attention, he played the part of the tourist and visited nearly every store on Main Street, even purchasing a few goods, including an umbrella.

As nighttime closed in on him, the rain subsided and his stomach grumbled. Deciding it was time to move forward with their plan, he began his trek back to the rental house to check on Jaret. He cut down a side road, but when he came across a small store just off the main road, tucked off the beaten path, he stopped. It was a health food store, offering all-natural ingredients and herbs. At first he thought it odd, then remembered that the witches residing in Serene would need fuel for their spells, which once again had him thinking about the black magick he smelled on Lily.

If Lily was indeed a Brighton, and they were going to subdue her and send her back to Maddox, they'd need the right mixture of herbs to accomplish such a task. Fortunately for him, his grandmother had trained both cousins in the use of herbs, those needed to weaken magick, and those needed to enhance it.

He took the old wooden steps two at a time, and closed his umbrella and left it outside before he pushed open the door. The frame was old and small, like the building itself, so he ducked and stepped through. Instantly, the sweet scent of cinnamon hit him.

"Superstitious?" a female voice asked when he entered. He stepped in farther to see who'd spoken and the old floorboards creaked under his weight. He peered around a rack of spices, but when he caught sight of the woman behind the counter, it was all he could do to maintain a coherent thought.

With dark hair and eyes more blue than they were violet, she stunned him with her beauty. Her smile was tentative and unsure, and although he had no idea why, he immediately felt compelled to put her at ease, to address her worries and tell her she had nothing to

concern herself with. But that would be a lie, he reminded himself. She had lots to worry about. Mainly him.

“Superstitious?” she asked again, and gestured toward the umbrella he left outside.

“Wouldn’t want to upset the household guardian spirits,” he responded.

She chuckled and seemed impressed. “So you do know your theories, then?” She shot him a quick glance and went back to making her tea, pouring hot water from a steaming kettle into a teapot filled with herbs. As he closed the small distance, he noticed that the platform she stood on was at least a foot higher than the wooden floor he walked. Behind her, through the slightly parted plaid curtain she used as a door, he could see a greenhouse where she grew her own plants, plants used for medicines and . . . *spells*, he assumed.

“It pays to be aware,” he mentioned.

“Is that so?”

He leaned against the high wooden countertop, and could feel the tension drain from his bones as he breathed in all the soothing herbs and spices emanating from her teapot.

“When you’ve had as many shitty days as I have, you begin to watch out for the little things.”

She arched a perfectly manicured brow. “Like leaving your umbrella outdoors.”

He gave a sheepish grin. “Yeah, like leaving my umbrella outdoors.”

“And how about today? Are you having a bad day?”

“It’s beginning to look up.” Jesus Christ, he was flirting with her. He was actually flirting with this Earth witch. But he couldn’t deny that there was something about this woman that put him at ease. Must be the concoction she was mixing together back there, he concluded. Either that or he was really losing his edge, and he never

lost his edge.

“Is it, now?” She smiled. A bright, beautiful dazzling smile that took his breath away. “Here, try this.”

Toby took the teacup and inhaled the fragranced water. Cloves, cinnamon, and cardamom filled his senses. “What is it?” He took a sip, savoring the flavor.

“It cures whatever ails you.”

Toby took another drink and cocked his head. “I’m pretty sure nothing in this place can cure what ails me.”

A strange look that tugged at his insides came over her face, and she murmured in the softest seductive voice, “I think you might be surprised, Toby.”

Sensations moved through him, her words unearthing things inside him, triggering warmth and need. “Seems a bit unfair, now, doesn’t it?”

Fully aware of what he was referring to, she held her hand out and said, “Sophie.”

Toby put his cup down and extended his arm. “Ah, so that explains it,” he said as they exchanged greetings.

“What does it explain?” she asked as bright and intelligent eyes, so full of warmth and kindness, met his.

He narrowed his eyes and scrutinized her. She seemed a little different from the others. Friendlier. “*Sophie* means wisdom, so I guess that’s how you knew my name.”

She gave an easy, casual shrug of her shoulder as humor flashed in her eyes. “That’s one theory. The other is that it’s a small town, and news travels fast.”

This was so bizarre—he didn’t even know this woman, yet he’d never felt such an easy intimacy with anyone before. Christ, he hadn’t expected this turn of events.

“What is it I can get for you, Toby?”

“I just need to pick up a couple of things for dinner.” A weird, unexpected pang of guilt moved through him, as he knew he was putting together an elixir to subdue Lily—a member of Sophie’s coven. He quickly tamped it down and reminded himself of who he was, and why he was here. Hardening himself, he grabbed some herbs off the rack, adding a few odd things so it wouldn’t raise Sophie’s suspicions, not that he believed Sophie would expect a PTF officer to practice herb magick, but taking precautions just the same.

Toby piled his goods onto the counter, and Sophie rang them up. As soon as she began to pack them, a worried look crossed her face. She looked past his shoulder and out into the dark night. “You have to go,” she said firmly. “It’s closing time.” She rushed to finish putting his goods into a bag and disappeared through a curtain and into the back room.

What the hell ... ?

Toby turned and peered out into the night. Across the street, beneath the lamppost, he spotted Kane. Prepared for an unpleasant altercation, Toby exited the shop and descended the stairs. Like a predator hunting its prey, Kane crossed the street and walked to where Toby stood, never once taking his penetrating gaze off him.

“Evening, Kane,” Toby said with a smile.

“Toby,” Kane responded. “Surprised to see you’re still here.”

“It’s a nice place. I can see why you like it.”

When Kane angled his head and caught sight of the bag of herbs in his hand, his expression changed so fast it caught Toby off guard. With the exceptional speed of a lycan, Kane grabbed Toby by the collar and hauled him into the alleyway.

So it appeared that nice time was over.

“What the fuck do you want?” Kane barked out as the light from the shop window overhead fanned into the alleyway and lit the two.

Toby held his hands out in a gesture of peace and Kane took a step

back. "I want to stay. Both Jaret and I like it here." When Kane got quiet, and studied him, he continued. "I know what this place is, Kane. I'm a trained PTF officer, and an empath to boot. We knew what this place was the minute we walked through that gate."

Kane kept his face expressionless, but Toby sensed his unease and distrust. Fuck, who could blame him? Which meant Toby had to do some fast talking.

"Yeah, I'll admit at first we wanted to blow it to hell, but Christ, Kane, I've seen more humanity on these streets than I have in all of Chicago, let alone in Colorado, my usual stomping grounds." Sad thing was, he was speaking the truth.

"You're full of shit, Toby. You're here to make your mark at the precinct."

"You're wrong," he lied with ease. "If I wanted you dead, I would have done it by now."

"That goes both ways," Kane assured him.

Toby watched a bevy of emotions move over the former PTF officer's face. Kane didn't believe his spiel for a minute. Even so, considering the circumstances, Kane wasn't attempting to rip his throat out. A good sign in Toby's books. But it led him to believe, like the cousins, Kane was biding his time with them.

Genuine concern passed over his eyes. "What are you doing to my wife?"

A lycan with concern for someone other than himself. Shit, today was full of all kinds of surprises, now, wasn't it? Through the small window on the side of Sophie's shop he spotted her moving around upstairs. The mere silhouette of her caused a melee of sensations to move through him, and much to his dismay, he could feel his hard edge soften. He gave Kane a perplexed frown, and couldn't believe that he actually felt sorry for the guy. Must have been something in that damn tea.

He let loose a slow breath. “What are you talking about, Kane? I never touched your wife.”

“You show up in town and all of a sudden she’s sick.”

Toby frowned. “It’s not me that’s making her sick,” he said honestly.

Kane studied him for a long moment. Toby couldn’t read him—his thoughts were protected—but he intuitively knew Kane was considering that option. “If not you, then who?” Kane asked.

“Maybe that’s something you should be asking the good townsfolk.”

“So help me, Toby. If I find out—”

“It’s not me, Kane,” he assured him.

Kane glanced at his watch, worry spreading across his face. “Go check on her,” Toby said, and Kane shot him a warning glance before turning to leave.

“Don’t try anything, Toby, or you’ll regret it.” With that, Kane left and Toby made his way home. As he moved down the sidewalk, he kept his gaze focused, not wanting to see any more random acts of kindness. Jesus, he couldn’t believe the way these people were affecting him, including the Earth witch Sophie. Nor could he believe the way he’d felt sorry for Kane.

Suddenly it dawned on him. He was thinking of the townsfolk as people, not vile monsters. His muscles tightened as he reflected on the emotions they brought out in him.

Fuck . . .

Okay, enough was enough. He needed to collect Jaret—who, he feared, had been far too emotionally affected by Lily. They needed to get inside the little witch’s head to discover her identity and the whereabouts of other towns like this one, and then get the hell out of Dodge before he too grew soft.

Chapter Eleven

As night fell around her, Lily finished her shift at the café, and filled a container with chicken soup. Without bothering to change out of her work clothes, she hurried to Sophie's to grab the concoction she'd put together for Sunray. They chatted at the front door for a moment; then Lily put in an order for more herbs, since her work supplies were getting low.

After their quick exchange, she stuffed the packet into her apron and made her way down the stairs. A bout of exhaustion pulled at her and she was thankful that tomorrow was her day off—because she really needed some downtime. She stood on the sidewalk for a moment and breathed in the fresh air. The rain had cleansed the town and left behind the sweet, fragrant scents of spring, her favorite time of year. As Lily moved down the sidewalk and made her way to Kane and Sunray's place, the hairs on her nape began to tingle, and without even sending out a probe, she sensed the Darkland cousins following her. She drew in a breath and found their enticing scent on the wind. The aroma immediately triggered a reaction from deep within and she grew warm, needy. As her body reacted with want, it was clear that she hadn't yet recovered from that wild liaison with Jaret earlier that morning.

Ignoring her body's demands the best she could, she fought down the rising lust, ever determined to follow council's orders. She darted a glance over her shoulder, but met only with darkness. Regardless, she knew they were out there, watching, waiting. Ready for her.

But was she ready for them?

Hurrying along, she rushed to Kane's, climbed the three steps to his door, and knocked. Kane's footsteps on his wood floor echoed

through the hall and heralded his approach. He swung the heavy wooden door open, and when he swept his hand beside him, she noted the deep worry lines crinkling his eyes.

“Come on in, Lily.”

“No,” she declined, knowing neither Kane nor Sunray was up for company. Plus, she was anxious to get home, to pull herself together and strategize her next course of action. “Just make sure Sunray takes these herbs with some hot tea. They should help with the nausea, and the chicken soup is for her soul,” she added with a smile.

Kane placed the soup on the table behind him and stuffed the herbs into his pocket as he offered her a smile of gratitude. Then he looked past her shoulder, his smile dissolving as apprehension moved in to take its place.

“Have you seen the cousins?”

“No.” It wasn’t a lie, not really. Sure, she’d sensed them out there somewhere, walking among the shadows undetected, but she hadn’t *seen* them.

Kane leaned against the doorjamb. “I met with Quinn earlier.”

Lily tightened. “Why?”

“Townsfolk are demanding we take care of this situation, and you’re in too deep. The only other council member who stands a chance against them is Quinn, so I’ve tasked him with the job. Tomorrow night, Lily. We need to meet and put a plan into motion. We have to find a way to distract them and to catch them with their guard down so we can change them.”

“Kane—”

“I ran into Toby today outside Sophie’s shop,” he said, halting her protest before she could even make it. “He says he knows what this place is.” Kane’s tension was palpable as he studied her. He distrusted the cousins. That much was apparent. It emanated off his skin like rancid cologne.

Anxiety surged inside her even though that information didn't shock her. "Of course they do. They're very powerful empaths."

"They say they like it here, want to stay and start over."

"And what do you say?" she asked.

Lily could feel anger move through him. His face began to elongate and morph into his primal being, but he diligently shook off the call of the wild. Kane was a man who thought with logic and wasn't about to give in to impulse and let emotions rule. His entire body shuddered as he pushed back the wolf. "I don't believe that for a minute," he bit out. "They're up to something."

She nodded, knowing survival instincts had taken them this far in life, and a response to the threat the cousins posed to their community was necessary. But that didn't necessarily mean she liked it. She also knew if they didn't soon react, the townsfolk would be up in arms, especially since they were already unsure about Lily's abilities, and that was something to be avoided.

"I understand."

"We need to act now," he reinforced.

The hidden uncertainty in his voice raised another question. "Has this trip of theirs to Serene been sanctioned?" she asked. "If they go missing, will it draw others?" When Kane got quiet, she considered the storm it would bring down on her town, the parade of officers who'd march on in and obliterate everyone in their path. "We can't change everyone, Kane."

"I know that, and I'm almost certain it hasn't been sanctioned."

"Is 'almost certain' good enough?" she challenged. Tension tightened her stomach as she thought about the cousins and what their futures held, as well as all the innocent townsfolk counting on her and the other council members to keep them safe. The last thing she wanted was for an army of soldiers to invade their home. Never again. She had to do something to prevent that. She just had to. After

a quick consultation with herself she said, "Give me until tomorrow. Let me try to find out more."

"What if they try to harm you?"

She thought about Kane's warning, as well as Harmony's theory behind her attraction to the Darkland cousins. Yes, she felt goodness in them, but she couldn't discount the consensus that it was all some sort of elaborate trick to bait her, and she had to do whatever was necessary to protect her family in Serene. As she imagined the town in chaos, it renewed her purpose and she said, "It's the only way, Kane."

"There has to be another—"

She squared her shoulders. "There isn't. I'm the only one who can slip past their shield." She'd been practicing her probing skills like Quinn had taught her—too afraid to nurture and grow the rest of her powers to their fullest. Now if only she could do it without them knowing or feeling her Brighton magick.

"How will you do it?"

"I'm working on it."

Looking rumpled and sleepy, he brushed his hand over his jaw and gave a resigned sigh. "I'll have Quinn keep you under surveillance."

As she regarded Kane, it occurred to her that something else was bothering him, something besides Sunray's sickness and the cousins' unwanted presence.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Distracted, he paused, furrowed his brow, then went on to explain, "I've been trying all day to contact the western branch to speak with the alpha leader there about Sunray's condition, but I can't get an answer."

Lily crinkled her nose, concern registering inside her. "You think something is going on?"

"It's not like Mason to ignore a call."

"Did you try any of the other council members?"

“All of them. And again, no answer. Quinn’s been trying too.”

“I could try contacting Ivy in the morning.”

“Yeah, why don’t you go ahead and do that for me.”

She grasped for something to ease his worries. “Maybe they’re all just at a council meeting.”

He attempted a smile. “That’s one hell of a long council meeting, don’t you think?”

She could feel his mind drift back to Sunray, and the lines on his face deepened. Ever determined to comfort him, she reached out to put her hand on his arm. “Hopefully this is nothing, Kane, and it will just pass.”

“Yeah, hopefully,” he murmured under his breath, sounding hopeful but dubious just the same.

She took in the weariness in his eyes and guessed lack of sleep was getting to him. “You need rest.” She gestured toward his pocket. “Make sure you give those herbs to Sunray, then crawl in bed with her. Come morning I’m sure you’ll both feel right again.”

“Thanks, Lily. And you be extra careful out there.”

With that, Lily turned to leave, praying that sleep was all they really needed and things were running smoothly in the western branch.

Strides determined, she moved into the darkness and thought more about Quinn, and the fact that he’d be watching over her. She wasn’t keen on the idea, but she also knew it was the only way to appease Kane.

As she moved through the streets, they came alive with restless residents. People were moving about under the cover of darkness and making their way to the nightclub. Despite the shield over the town, she could feel the energy, the emotions emanating off the crowd. Tuning out those around her so she could think, Lily bypassed the club and tried to put together a plan of action. Until she learned to control her power, she couldn’t probe the cousins, not without them

feeling her Brighton magick. Maybe if she caught them sleeping, she could slip into their minds unnoticed.

She quickened her pace as a cool breeze chased up her naked legs and blew her skirt around her thighs. With the frigid night air nipping at her exposed flesh, she decided to take a shortcut home. She walked through the alleyway by the town hall, and picked up her pace even more. With her head down and her mind blocking out those around her as she formulated a plan, she hurried her steps. But she was so preoccupied with her thoughts that she hadn't noticed the wall up ahead. A big, muscular wall, with dark piercing eyes and a body designed to satisfy. As she walked right into the powerful body, she berated herself for allowing her thoughts to stray. These men were stealthy, and moved like the wind, and she never should have allowed herself to get distracted. As she lectured herself, she bounced backward, knocked off balance by that impenetrable barrier. Instead of falling, she hit another firm wall behind her.

Unstable, air rushing from her lungs, she groped for something to right herself before her legs gave out and she intimately introduced herself to the cold ground below. A warm hand slipped around her waist to help stabilize her, and there was nothing she could do to stop the surge of lust that whipped through her blood. She angled her head to see who it was, but the point was moot. From his touch alone, she already knew who'd captured her.

From behind, Toby pulled her in tight and crushed her body to his. Erotic delight brought on a shudder as Jaret, carrying himself like a predator, stepped closer. Some part of her brain registered that he wasn't wearing a coat, but didn't seem bothered by the cold. He swiftly anchored her to his fine warrior body. As they sandwiched her small frame between theirs, her brain stalled and it was all she could do to keep a coherent thought.

Jaret dipped his head, and his eyes locked on hers, holding her

“Yes . . . no . . .” Honestly, as lust consumed her body, she wasn’t even sure what she was feeling anymore. Toby moved her hair off her shoulders and brushed his lips over the sensitive area at the crook of her neck. Urgent need moved through her, and some small coherent part of her brain warned her to run away. Go. Flee. Get as far away as possible. She was supposed to be collecting intel, not allowing herself to fall under their seductive spell. But then again, maybe this was the key to tapping into their thoughts and uncovering the information her council needed. While they were preoccupied with pleasure, maybe they wouldn’t feel the pain of her probe this time. Even though she’d been tamping down all other aspects of her magick with the herbs, she continued to try to hone and perfect her probing skills.

Then again, she thought soberly, even after her practicing, Toby *had* felt her probe at the nightclub. But this time around, if she could keep herself calm and collected, maybe it would work. Hope weaved through her as she ran through the details. Catching them off guard and lost in the haze of pleasure would surely give her the perfect opportunity to weave her way into their minds, providing she governed herself, that was.

Yes, she thought, convincing herself that sleeping with them was the ideal way to gather information. Offering her body to these two powerful men was not about satisfying the lust, desire, and need pulling at her. Oh, no, not at all. It was just sex—sex she would simply take lightly as she enlightened herself about their covert mission. It was good, solid logic. Of that, she was sure.

But much to her dismay, that logic was lost on her the minute Jaret’s deft fingers toyed with the zipper on her uniform, and his eyes visually caressed her. “You’re not dressed for this weather, little one.”

She shivered under his touch, and once again something about the way he called her “little one” had her thoughts fragmenting. As her body beckoned his, it took effort to formulate a response. She bit back

a breathy moan and said, "Neither are you."

He grinned. "That's because someone has my coat. What's your excuse?"

"I was in a hurry."

"You seem to be in a hurry a lot these days," he countered, clearly remembering their tryst in the park, specifically the way she'd hurried out of the club without her jacket and the way she scurried home after he'd filled her with his seed. The mere memory of it now made her blood burn with hunger.

Easy, Lily . . .

"Where are you off to in such a hurry anyway?" Toby asked. He ran his hands along her curves, and she absorbed the warmth of his body as it reached out to her.

She pointed a shaky finger, and her teeth began to chatter, but it was from the excitement bubbling up inside her, not the cold.

"Home."

"Home, huh?" Jaret glanced in the direction of her outstretched finger, then back at her. "And is home where I'll find my coat?"

She nodded and they both knew it was a ruse for the cousins to follow her back to her place.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Jaret grabbed her hand and gave a slight tug. When a shiver racked her body, he stopped and furrowed his brow. Lacking artifice, his voice softened when he said, "Come on, Lily. We need to get inside and warmed up before you catch your death of cold."

Her knees wobbled as she took in his eyes and noted the way they were smoldering with want and lust. Her heart skipped a beat and she tried to keep her voice normal.

"What are you suggesting?"

She angled her head to see Toby, who flashed her a grin. "Body heat, Lily. It's the only way." As his voice caressed her all over, he

nudged her with his chest, herding her and Jaret forward. The sexual energy between the three was tremendous. They all felt it. Knew what it was. Heck, she was certain anyone within the town could feel it. Maybe even the next town over. She had no idea why it was so powerful and all-consuming. All she knew was that she was driven by a force she couldn't identify and the unrelenting pull was not to be denied. She feared if she didn't soon feel their naked bodies next to hers, she'd explode into a million tiny pieces.

Tonight she'd use this opportunity to tap into their minds, to gather information for council, and maybe, just maybe while she was surfing around inside their darkest corners, she could discover why there was a bond between them and why being with them felt so right in every sense of the word.

Tomorrow she'd take what she'd learned to Kane and things would return to normal. She was sure of it.

But tonight ...

Jaret moved in on her left and Toby came around to her right as they rushed down the alley and guided her home. She could feel their need as if it were her own, their warmth, body heat, and passion clouding the air and exploding inside her. A shiver stole over her when she reached her front steps, and her heart was pounding so hard with fervid need that it took effort to speak.

"We're here," she said for lack of anything else, and noticed the way her words sounded so tight and breathy.

Jaret grinned, and it was so soft and sweet it turned her inside out. "So we are, Lily. So we are. Now let's get you inside and warmed up."

Something about the way he said *warmed* fueled the flames inside her belly. Consumed with need, she could barely get her legs to move.

Jaret took the lead, and for that, she was grateful. He grabbed her hand, guided her up the stairs, and opened her door. He gestured for her to enter, and when she did, he followed her inside. Catching her

by surprise, he grabbed her by the waist and spun her around to face him. Lily gasped when she saw the fire burning in his eyes.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you," he murmured into her ear as he backed her up against the wall and caged her with his body. "This time it's not going to be a hurried fuck in the park, Lily." He gestured toward Toby as he proceeded to widen her legs with his knee and press his thigh to her panties. "We've got all night, and we plan to use every minute of it. This time you're not going to run away when we're done."

Lily felt suddenly feverish, and she gave an enthusiastic shake of her head. It wasn't like her to step out of character, to move beyond her normal comfort zone, but she wanted this more than she'd ever even known. She couldn't deny that since meeting these two she'd not been herself. Something was happening inside her. Awakening. Growing.

"Tell me you want it, Lily," he rushed out. "Tell me you need my cock inside you." She saw the vulnerability in Jaret's eyes before he quickly blinked it away and regained his tough bravado.

"I want it, Jaret," she murmured, and looked past his shoulders to Toby. "I . . . *need* this."

Intent evident in his passion-imbued eyes, he reached for her zipper, a suggestive edge in his voice when he said, "You look so fucking sexy in the uniform, but goddammit, I bet you look even sexier out of it." With one fluid movement, he released the zipper, pulling it from her neck to her legs. As the material fell open to expose her bra and panties, fire lapped at her thighs. Jaret stepped back to stand beside Toby as her body called out to the two, beckoning their mouths, their fingers, and their cocks. As electricity sizzled between them, the two men looked at her and a wave of heat moved through her body. Her pussy grew damp, her nipples hardened. She parted her lips as her breathing grew labored, her body burning from the inside

out just from the intensity in Jaret's gaze.

"What do you think, Toby?" Jaret asked as his eyes slowly journeyed downward to take in her hard buds straining beneath her lacy bra.

Toby stepped up to her and roughly tugged her to him. He slipped his big warm hands inside her uniform and ran his fingers over her trembling flesh. As he cupped her aching breasts and lightly brushed his thumb over her nipple, he offered her a wolfish, playful smile. "I think I'm going to enjoy this a whole lot more now that I'm here in the flesh."

She felt color move up her neck, knowing he was referring to that first night when she'd invited him into her mind to play with her while she masturbated. Except this time the color moving over her face wasn't from embarrassment; it was from the sheer excitement of things to come.

Jaret came close and leaned against the wall beside them as the two began to play out her secret fantasy. "You're so fucking sexy," he whispered, his eyes softened with desire, yet hardened with unyielding need. He brushed his finger over her cheek, and as his gaze moved over her face, she'd never been so turned on in her life. Her pulse skyrocketed, and as her libido roared to life, she angled her head to see Jaret better.

As she took pleasure in his masculine features, the firmness of his chin, and his dark, penetrating eyes, his lips came down on hers, a warm yet light caress that she feared would brand her for an eternity.

When she felt the heat of his mouth, basic elemental need took over and some coherent part of her brain warned her that after tonight life as she knew it would forever be altered. But she was too far gone to consider that further.

Jaret coaxed her mouth open with his, and when she responded, he kissed her with such gentle persuasion, such warm passion, that if

Toby hadn't been pinning her to the wall, she'd have collapsed to the floor in a mass of quivering need.

As Jaret slowly seduced her, his tongue moved into her mouth and urged hers on. Their tongues played and dueled and he made a deep guttural sound as he tasted and savored her like she was the sweetest, most decadent morsel on earth. Toby groaned and dropped his lips to her neck and she could feel the hunger building in him. Sexual energy swirled around them, racing over her body and exploding her senses.

Impatience thrummed through her and her entire body burned from the inside out. As a guarded witch, she'd never felt such freedom in physically letting go. She was giving her body over to these two in a way that went against her nature. As they stroked her flesh and seduced her senses, they pulled reactions from her like none other—reactions that empowered her, made her feel bolder, courageous . . . *sexy*. After all these centuries, after meeting the cousins, she no longer felt like Lily the wallflower. She felt strong, awakened, and exceptionally powerful.

Then she remembered what Sunray had told her after her stint in Chicago, following her first mating with Kane, and that realization made her breath catch. Surely there was no way one of these men could be her mate. They weren't even of the same blood.

Or were they?

Her thoughts scattered when Toby widened her legs with his knee and she could smell the tang of her arousal as it saturated the front entrance of her home. With want burning in his eyes, Jaret's nostrils flared, and the low growl that caught in his throat elicited a shiver from deep within, which reminded her....

With need driving her actions, and feeling both naughty and adventurous, she murmured, "About this body heat . . ."

Her boldness did something to Jaret, seemed to unleash something inside him, something so primal and animalistic that his

eyes darkened and his body shook. Aware of the rampant heat rising in him, and the way it reached out to her in the most erotic ways, she gulped air.

With his eyes still trained on her, he spoke to Toby. "Bedroom. Now," he commanded in a soft voice that nearly made her lose all composure.

Forging full force ahead, Toby circled his hands around her waist and lifted her onto his hips. Desire thrummed through her veins as she secured her hands around his neck and held on. With determined strides Toby carried her up the stairs. When he reached the top of the landing, Jaret tight on his heels, he stopped and glanced down the hall.

"Which room?" he asked, his voice gruff and needy.

As she thought about giving herself over to these two, a fine shiver of excitement moved through her. She gyrated against Toby and shot him a look, the message in her eyes clear. Toby growled with pleasure and dropped her lower on his hips, pushing his cock against her throbbing pussy. Since speech was beyond her, she made a small noise and pointed the way to her bedroom.

Jaret stepped ahead of them and widened her door and she could practically taste his sexual tension as he moved past. Without bothering to turn on the light, he cast a longing glance her way as Toby carried her in and deposited her in front of her four-poster bed. Light from the hallway fanned into the room and spread out over her floor, giving the men sufficient light to examine her near-naked body. When they stood back and stared at her, she once again became fully aware of her unzipped dress, and the effect it had on the two before her. Her heart pounded erratically and want singed her nerve endings as they gazed at her with unfettered need. Lacking patience and giving in to her desire, she crooked her finger, and motioned them closer.

Jaret moved first. He advanced with purpose and she watched the

play of his muscles as he came toward her, a predator stalking its prey. She tilted her chin, bringing them face-to-face. He loomed over her, and with little finesse he gripped her hips and pulled her toward him, packaging her against his body. As his hands bit into her flesh, she could feel the tension coiling inside him, and she could only imagine how wild and savage he'd be when he allowed it to unravel. He positioned his body just right, pressing his cock against her swollen clit. Lily gave a needy, lusty groan as pleasure gathered at the juncture of her legs.

"You like that, sweetheart."

"I think you know I do," she managed to get out between serrated breaths.

"I bet I know something you'll like even better."

As need pumped freely through her veins, she didn't even bother to hide her enthusiasm. She lowered her voice and whispered, "And what exactly is it that you know?"

As Jaret's gaze slid over hers, he grinned, lust burning in his eyes. "I know where you want my mouth, Lily. You showed me."

Indeed she had. Visions of Jaret buried between her legs, lapping at her clit and stroking her sensitive G-spot with his thick, deft fingers, played out in her mind like an erotic slide show. Uninhibited and knowing the three were well past modesty—after all, she'd invited them to partake in her sexual fantasy the first night they met—she widened her uniform, aching to lose herself in him again. In both of them.

Eager for him to do just that, her skin flushing hotly, she asked, "Then what are you waiting for?"

The hard angles of his face softened when she offered herself up to him, his to do with as he pleased. Without ever touching her body, Jaret gripped her dress and pushed it off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor in a heap.

She whimpered, her body craving his skillful touch as his eyes moved over her bra and panties. "Get undressed," he ordered. Watching the action unfold, Toby pulled back the bedding and took up position on the edge of the mattress at her rear, enabling him to observe her from behind.

A small whimper sounded in her throat and she couldn't believe how much she loved Jaret's take-charge attitude, how much she loved the way they were both watching her with pure desire. If only they'd touch her again. A warm shiver moved through her as she willed it to happen. Lady, what she'd do to have them touch her . . .

With her breasts feeling heavy and achy, Lily slipped her hand behind her back and unhooked her bra. She released her breasts from the confining material and felt her nipples harden to tight peaks. After discarding her bra, her gaze lit on Jaret, and in a seductive move meant to tease and entice, she ran her hands over her body, going lower and lower until she reached the thin elastic on her panties. Feeling brazen, she toyed with the scrap of lace. As she grew slicker between her legs, Jaret looked past her shoulders to exchange a long heated look with his cousin. His eyes darkened unnaturally as sexual tension filled the room.

With agonizing slowness Jaret stalked closer, and without ever touching her, he put his mouth close to hers and spoke in whispered words. "Are you hot for me, Lily?"

Virility and strength radiated off him and she quivered in reaction. "Yes . . ."

"And what about To by ? Do you want to fuck him too?"

Feeling dizzy with need, she nodded, hardly able to believe they were playing out her scandalous fantasy, one she didn't even know she had until she stumbled across these two men in the woods.

"So tell me, sweetheart. Where do you want him to fuck you?"

Her voice trembled and she slid her tongue over her bottom lip as

she answered. "Everywhere . . ."

He cocked his head. "Everywhere?"

When she nodded, he brushed his thumb over her mouth, touching her with such familiar warmth and experience. "You want him to fuck you here?"

There was no denying it. They both knew her wants and desires. Not only had she shown them her secret cravings, but they were seasoned lovers, and probably knew her wants better than she knew them herself.

"Yes," she whispered softly as the sexy image of Toby's cock moving in and out of her mouth made her lips water.

That seemed to please him. His big warm hands moved to her chest, and he gave a light stroke of her hard nipples before gently squeezing her breasts together to form a channel. "How about here, Lily? Do you want him to fuck you here?"

"Mmm," she moaned, and briefly shut her eyes as she envisioned Toby's cock moving in and out of her cleavage. She listened to the soft rustle of clothes as Toby undressed behind her, and she could feel his hot breath on her back. It seeped under her skin and traveled all the way to her pussy.

Toby placed his palms on her waist and skimmed her curves as Jaret's hands traveled downward to slip between her legs. He ran his thumb along her wet slit, and a jolt of fire rushed through her. His throat worked as he swallowed, and she could tell that the feel of her damp sex positively rattled him.

"And here, Lily? You want him here?"

"Yesss," she hissed out, and bucked against him, trying to force his finger inside. She whimpered in sheer sexual frustration when he pulled back, refusing to give her what she wanted. Drawing out this seduction, and building her pleasure, he circled his hands around her hips and moved his fingers to her ass. When he pulled open her

cheeks, she could feel two more hands join the play. Jaret held her open as Toby gave a soft stroke of her puckered passage.

“What about here?” When she tightened, he inched back and gave her a perplexed look. “Didn’t you say everywhere, Lily?”

The thought of being penetrated anally both excited and terrified her. She’d never had any man invade her backside before, never trusted anyone enough with her body to let him enter her from behind. And the truth was it seemed so personal, so intimate, something she’d only ever do with the right man, a man who would take painstaking care to make it good for her. A man she felt a strong emotional bond with. A man like Jaret.

As she considered that, she noted the way Jaret was watching her, and an odd surge of warmth flooded her veins. She’d known him for just a short while, but not only had he given her a physical connection; he’d also given her an emotional one that she’d been lacking all these years. Silence ensued as she tipped her eyes up to meet his gaze.

“Well, Lily, what about it?” Jaret asked again.

Decision made, a shiver of anticipation swept through her and she said, “No, Jaret. I don’t want him there.”

Jaret arched a brow. “No? But you said—”

She pressed her finger into his chest. “I want *you* there.”

Silence met her words, and once again she detected a glimmer of vulnerability in his eyes as they mellowed and moved over her face. His gaze, more intimate than a caress, whispered through her blood. With shaky hands he brushed her hair from her face and something inside him seemed to give, soften, as he understood the implications of her words.

His voice thinned to a whisper as he said, “Lily. Oh God, Lily . . .” He stared at her and she could feel the emotions pouring off him. Loneliness. Longing. Need.

Desperation.

For her.

She didn't miss the urgent edge to his voice when he said, "I really need to be inside you, sweetheart."

Her hands intertwined in his hair and she went up on her toes. When she pressed against him, crushing her bare breasts into his chest, Jaret cupped her face, held it between his palms, and captured her mouth in a slow, simmering kiss that left her shaken.

Toby stood up behind her, and as desire consumed her, she reached for him, needing the physical contact between all three. Cocooned in the circle of their arms, she trembled from head to toe. The feeling was most erotic.

Their bodies moved against hers and the sweet friction warmed her flesh. As unbridled desire trickled through her blood, her skin came alive and moisture dripped from her pussy.

Oh Lady, she needed. *Craved.*

"Jaret, please," she pleaded, not really knowing what she was pleading for, but feeling the need to beg just the same. He confused her, stirred such unfamiliar feelings in her.

Toby slid his hands around her waist and reached up to cover her breasts with his palms. "Yes," she cried out, and arched into his touch. His thumbs idly stroked her breasts, ensconced in his warm hands, filling her with heated blood as he addressed the hunger in her.

Jaret dipped his head and drew her nipple into his mouth. His warm tongue brushed over her gently, wetting her hard buds and breasts in preparation. He spent a long time laving her breasts, while Jaret's hands slipped lower to brush over her engorged clit. When she cried out in pleasure and moved her hips forward, Toby circled his hand around her waist and sank back onto the mattress, pulling her with him.

Having positioned her on his lap, he slipped his feet to the insides

of hers, and with her legs captured by his, he opened her thighs to expose her sex to Jaret. Her breath caught on a gasp. Never had she been spread so wide for anyone before.

Jaret dropped to his knees to see her better. He reached out and lightly stroked her pussy. "Very, very pretty," he murmured.

"How does she taste?" Toby asked as his cock pressed so hard against her ass she was sure if she shifted, he'd penetrate.

Jaret lowered his head between her thighs, and that first sweet touch of his tongue nearly pushed her over the edge. He licked her lightly, brushing his mouth over her clit and pulling it into his mouth. As he feasted on her, she cried out and he leaned back on his heels to insert a thick finger. After lathering his finger, he brought it to his mouth and took a long hard suck. Lily watched in fascination and gave a sexy moan of delight.

"Better than anything I've ever tasted," he murmured. The dark desire in his eyes dipped below her skin and spread all the way to her soul.

Lily reached for him, but Toby grabbed her hands and anchored them to her sides. She'd never been restrained before, but couldn't deny that it felt erotic.

When Toby widened her legs even more, pushing them open to the point of pain, she made a feeble attempt to stop him.

"Toby . . ." she began, but Jaret silenced her protest with a kiss. He kissed her so deep and thoroughly, it magically turned pain into pleasure.

"I want you wide-open for me, sweetheart," he murmured into her mouth. "Now keep them spread."

Jaret looked at Toby and they made some silent exchange. Reading his cousin, Toby released her arms, his hands going to her breasts to cup them.

Jaret stood, and never took his eyes off her as he made quick work

of his clothes. Instead of folding them neatly, he dropped them to the floor, leaving them in a tangled mess, which spoke volumes about his state of mind. It thrilled her to know she could do this to him.

He ran his thumb over her cheek and with her breasts still wet from his tongue, he drove his cock inside the tight channel that Toby had molded for him.

Her head lolled back to rest on Toby's shoulder, and he pressed his mouth to hers while Jaret fucked her breasts. As Jaret moved urgently, spending a long time riding her cleavage, her hands found his balls and she gently squeezed, needing in the most desperate way to pleasure him in return.

"Christ," he bit out, and gripped her shoulder. He inched back and withdrew his blood-filled cock from her tits. "You're killing me, girl."

Once again he dropped to his knees, and when she turned to face him, he poised his mouth over hers. "Are you ready for me, Lily?"

She nodded, pretty certain she'd been ready for him her whole life.

He glanced at Toby, who inserted a finger all the way up inside her. When he gave a light stroke over her sensitized G-spot, she whimpered and lifted her hips off his lap. Her body spasmed with pleasure. Heat flooded her skin and she suspected that if Jaret didn't soon fuck her, she was going to spontaneously combust.

"Easy there, little one," Jaret crooned in the softest tone. "Don't worry. I'm going to give you what you need."

"Please . . ."

He angled his head. "Toby?"

"Oh yeah, she's ready," he assured his cousin. He made a strange noise, something between a surprised chuckle and a needy moan. "In fact, she's already halfway there."

Jaret brushed his thumb over her pussy. He pitched his voice low and *tsked*. "Lily, you're about to come and I haven't even fucked you yet."

She took a shuddering breath and wondered how she ever thought sex with him could be taken lightly. Not with him. Not with Jaret. “I know. . . .”

The pleasure that danced in his eyes was unmistakable. She could feel a deep sense of satisfaction rolling over him. It pleased him that she needed him, in ways, she suspected, that he didn’t even understand himself.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked, prolonging her agony. His hard cock teased her opening, and he rocked his hips, offering her a small sampling, then quickly withdrawing and leaving her aching for more.

She moaned in protest, her hair falling forward to brush over her breasts. “What I want in me is you,” she countered, her bold words bringing a sexy grin to his face.

He pushed her hair back to expose her nipples, and lightly brushed his palms under the swell of her breasts. “Look at you. All hot, wet, and sexy, and spread so wide for me.” The heat that burned in his dark eyes made her quake. Without his gaze ever leaving hers, he trailed his finger down to run the soft pad of his thumb over her engorged clit.

She pinched her eyes shut. “Jaret, please . . .”

“Please what?”

Her lids flew open. It was the first time she’d heard Jaret use that raspy tone with her. It was deep, gravelly, so full of unchecked emotion. It occurred to her that he wasn’t taking this lightly either. This physical joining was taking its toll on him as much as it was affecting her, and that knowledge deepened her desire for him.

She cupped his cheek and put her mouth close to his. “Please . . . I need you inside me,” she murmured.

With excruciating slowness he offered her an inch. When her walls closed around his cock and drew him in deeper, he dug his fingers

into her thighs and threw his head back.

Toby positioned his mouth next to her ear. Electricity sizzled between them as his breath burned over her flesh. "Do you like that, Lily? Do you like having Jaret's cock inside you?"

"Yes," she moaned, and couldn't believe how sexually flustered she felt. She squirmed against Toby's lap and he growled in response. "More."

In tune with her needs, Jaret took charge of her pleasures and pitched his hips forward.

"So good," she cried out. He pushed deeper, driving all the way up inside her until he gave her every delicious inch of his magnificent cock. As he drove home, she opened her body to him, loving how he made her feel so full.

He pushed deep and remained still for a long time, until she rolled her hips and urged him on. With that, he rocked into her, slow, skilled movements that pulled all her attention, and stole the breath from her lungs.

"Is this what you want, sweetheart?" Jaret asked as the heat of his mouth fanned her face.

She moaned in acquiescence, a soft mewling sound that lingered in the air. When she shifted, trying to accommodate his length and thickness, Toby shackled her wrists and held her tight. As he anchored her arms to her sides, it raised her passion to new heights and excited her beyond anything she'd ever known. Her nipples tingled, her pussy throbbed, and a violent shudder made her body convulse.

"That's it, relax and take all of him inside you like a good girl," Toby coaxed.

As Jaret's cock filled her, she pulled in a breath and tried to concentrate, to move inside his mind and discover his secrets, but when he pressed his hungry mouth to hers, something inside her

gave. His kiss was so full of passion and warmth it completely caught her off guard and she forgot that she was on a mission and this sex was for research purposes only. Everything about the way he touched her and moved his cock deep into her body threatened all her emotional barriers. She could feel herself weaken, her resolve melt.

But at the moment, none of that seemed to matter. All that mattered was the pleasure these two were bestowing upon her. For the first time in her existence, as she let herself go, something began brewing inside her and her entire being came alive, new life surging through her veins.

“You’re so tight, Lily,” he growled. “I’m not going to last.” His cock throbbed inside her and she knew he was close. She tightened her sex muscles, clamping them around his cock to hold him in tight.

“Lily . . .” he whispered, his voice so soft and warm it curled her toes. A barrage of sensations overcame her and her hips surged upward. When he pushed into her, she could feel a strange new energy in the room. It was powerful, all-consuming, swirling around them like a thick fog. Lily clung to it, savoring it as it burned through her body like a healing potion, doctoring the loneliness that had resided in her soul since she was a small child, since losing her family. It was true, she hadn’t known these men long, but as they touched her with intimate recognition, it felt like she’d known them forever.

Toby gripped her breasts roughly, and scraped his thumb over her nipples, pinching and pulling until they were red and swollen.

As the two lavished her with attention, she tried to steady herself, but when she felt Jaret reach out to her on an emotional level, needing the intimacy as much as she did, it rattled her to the core.

“Jaret . . .” she murmured into his mouth.

His hands slid over her body, giving and taking as his eyes held her captive. His touch was commanding, yet soft, giving yet possessive.

It occurred to her that the last time she and Jaret had come

together, he'd been wild and savage with her. This time he was soft and gentle. He was a hunter, a skilled warrior. She expected dominance and fierceness from him, but she hadn't expected the underlying tenderness, and it was that tenderness that turned her inside out.

Perspiration gathered on his upper lip and he gripped the back of her head as Toby continued to knead her breasts. "Sweetheart, you feel so fucking good."

Every square inch of her skin burned, and the combination of Toby's roughness and Jaret's softness pushed her over the edge. Her blood ignited to a near boil and her pussy clenched around his cock, holding him in deep as a powerful orgasm rolled through her.

"That's it, baby. Let it go," Toby encouraged, the soft warmth of his voice pulling her under.

She rode out the spasms, nurturing each and every pulse for as long as she could. When her body stopped vibrating, a wheezing sound escaped her lips and she practically sobbed. Even though she'd just orgasmed, so hard and powerful it damn near wiped her out, there was still an unidentifiable need burning inside her, one she couldn't seem to assuage.

"More," she whispered, needing something else, something she couldn't quite identify.

"What do you need, Lily?" Jaret asked, a new urgency in his voice. "Tell me what you need."

"I need you both inside me," she confessed.

"Baby, come here." Jaret pulled his throbbing cock out of her pussy and pulled her to her feet. She wrapped her arms around his neck and moaned in bliss when Toby pressed against her back, the two sheltering her body with theirs.

Toby ran his hands over her ass and parted her cheeks. He reached around the front and lubricated his hand with her cream, then

brought it to her puckered passage. Slowly, he eased his finger into her.

“Is this what you want, Lily?” Toby asked.

Instantly, her eyes collided with Jaret’s and they exchanged a long, lingering glance.

“Is it what you need, sweetheart?” Jaret asked in the softest voice.

She nodded, and he put his hands on her hips to spin her around. He placed his mouth next to her ear. “I want you to ride Toby, while I take you from behind.”

As she entertained the idea, her entire body shuddered. Toby crushed his chest to hers, and kissed her. His mouth felt warm and silky and tasted like cloves and cinnamon. Lily moaned in delight.

Toby’s gaze brushed over her face as he backed up. He lowered himself onto the mattress, and pulled Lily on top of him. He flattened himself out as she straddled him from above. Hungering to feel both men inside her, she positioned his engorged cock at her entrance and stole a glance over her shoulder to see Jaret.

She gasped when she saw the intensity in his eyes, the flash of possessiveness. “Jaret . . .” Her voice came out unsteady and she drew a breath to center herself.

He angled his head to the side, and smiled at her. “Put Toby’s cock inside you,” he commanded, and lightly ran his fingers over her ass. “I want to watch you fuck him.”

Obliging, she began to sink down onto Toby’s cock, and Toby gripped her hips to help guide her down. As he filled her completely, she let loose a heated moan and cupped her breasts, enjoying the feel of his cock inside her.

“Oh, yes. So good,” she murmured, his thickness pushing open her tight walls.

She felt Jaret move closer, his heat reaching out to her. His fingers crushed through her hair and he murmured, “I’m going to make this

good for you, sweetheart. Real good.”

His hands moved from her hair to her back, and he gave a slight push until she was leaned over Toby, her breasts pressing into his chest.

Toby’s mouth settled on her lips. “Come here,” he whispered.

As her mouth met his, she positioned her body wide-open for Jaret, and a growl ripped from his throat as she granted him entrance.

Toby grinned, and murmured into her mouth, “I think Jaret likes that.”

Jaret stroked a tender caress over her tight opening, and she clenched, her heart rate accelerating.

She glanced over her shoulder to see him. His expression was tender, and hot, and the way he looked at her made her shiver.

“Easy, little one. I won’t hurt you.” He gave another featherlight sweep over her ass. “Now, can you try to relax for me?”

Toby’s hips came off the bed, his pubis smashing against her clit and manipulating her body. She moaned, and when she exhaled, she could feel herself loosen.

“That’s a girl,” Jaret encouraged. “I’m going to put my fingers in first to prepare you.”

As though the two were completely in sync with each other, Toby read Jaret’s intent and lifted Lily’s hips to pull her clear off his cock. As she hovered over him, Jaret dipped into her cream, lathering his finger, and when he brought it to her back opening, Toby pulled her down onto him again.

Her stomach rose and fell like she was on an out-of-control roller-coaster ride. She cried out from the euphoria, and dug her fingers into his shoulders.

“Do that again and you’ll make me come,” she cried out.

He gave her a sly grin. “You think that’s good, wait until you see what Jaret’s going to do for you.”

Her body flushed hotly and she vibrated in bliss, both excited and nervous as Jaret spread her cheeks and massaged her warm cream over her ass.

He eased one finger inside and Toby reached down to play with her clit. The mixture of pain and pleasure did the oddest things to her senses.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Toby asked in a bid to relax her.

She opened her mouth to speak, but her words were lost on a moan when Jaret wiggled his finger and eased it in and out of her in a slow, smooth fashion. She lifted her hips and impaled herself back onto Toby, suddenly feeling very crazed, almost frantic.

Jaret pushed another finger in. “Oh my,” she cried out, loving the feel of what he was doing but desperately needing more. “Jaret, please, I want your cock.”

He leaned forward and pressed a soothing kiss to her back. “Oh, no, you’re not ready for my cock, little one. Not by a long shot.”

Her heart missed a beat as his words sank in. He wanted to make this good for her, and was taking painstaking care with her body. She could feel her eyes moisten as her blood filled with warmth.

“Just enjoy riding Toby while I get you ready.”

Once again Toby lifted her off him and Jaret dipped into her cream. When she came crashing back down, an orgasm tore through her and took her by surprise.

Toby groaned as her hot come dripped down his shaft. His eyes flashed darkly and he gripped her hips hard to hold her in place.

“Jesus, girl, do that again and you’re going to make *me* come.”

Using slow, controlled movements, Jaret spent a long time preparing her ass as Toby pulled her mouth to his for a hard kiss. As he pillaged her mouth, he eased his cock in and out of her slick pussy, once again building the pressure inside her.

Jaret pulled his fingers out and leaned over her. His breath was

deep, labored, and there was urgency and emotion in his voice when he said, "Sweetheart, I'm going to fuck you now. If this hurts, let me know and I'll stop."

She didn't care if it hurt. She needed him inside her more than she'd ever needed to breathe. "I just want you to fuck me, Jaret," she murmured.

He made some deep guttural sound, as if she'd snapped his last vestige of control. A moment later his thick cock breached her ringed passage and she gripped Toby's shoulders as pain sluiced through her.

"Relax, baby," Toby cooed. "You're going to like this."

She blew a breath, and when she did, Jaret penetrated deeper. As he moved past her tight muscles, they clenched and gripped him hard. She winced in response and Jaret immediately slowed. He spoke soothing words to her while she got used to the fullness. His hands slid around her body and stroked her breasts while Toby slipped a finger between them and brushed her clit. Moisture sealed their bodies together, creating warmth inside her. After a few short moments the pain ebbed and passion moved through her. She began to rock her hips, encouraging Jaret to bury himself in her deeper.

He moved his hips in response and surfed his fingers over her body. As all three moved in sync, she could feel something happening to her and the world as she knew it shifted.

"That's my girl," Jaret said from behind as she concentrated on the soft quakes beginning at her core.

As flames moved through her, she pressed a hot kiss to Toby's mouth and the two drove deep into her body. She cried out in heavenly bliss and soon their moans of pleasure merged. Everything in what they were doing felt so right, so perfect, and the connection between them grew as all three became one.

As Jaret's cock moved in and out of her, he caressed her skin. His soft, barely there touch was the most intimate thing she'd ever felt.

The intimacy in what they were doing had an invisible band tightening around her heart.

As they indulged in her body, she tossed her head to the side and her hair tumbled in waves over Toby's face and chest. He buried his nose in it and inhaled.

She turned to Jaret, and when their eyes met, he growled and clenched down on his jaw. Lily sensed his restraint as he waited for her to come first.

"Together," she murmured, no longer knowing where her body ended and theirs began.

"Now," Toby growled as his cock pulsed and throbbed inside her.

"Jaret," she pleaded, a desperate edge to her voice. He drove his cock into her ass and pleasure like she'd never before experienced swamped her and pushed her over the edge.

He was driving into her so hard now, searching for relief but seeking something else. She could see it in his face, read it in his body.

"We're coming, Jaret," she cried out. "Come with us."

When Jaret threw his head back and joined them in orgasm, she closed her eyes and surrendered to the pleasure as they both splashed their hot seed high inside her.

Once they depleted themselves and her pussy stopped spasming, she collapsed on top of Toby. Completely spent, completely sated.

By small degrees they pulled out of her, but she was too far gone, lost in the haze of lust and concentrating on the pleasure still zinging through her body, to realize she was drifting. Jaret laid her out on the mattress and pressed in beside her. As he offered his warmth, she moaned and burrowed closer, unable to put into words how he made her feel.

Ruled by emotions, the logical part of her brain abandoned any rational thought and she could feel her guard slip, feel the men move inside her head. As she drifted from her body, floating through time

and space, there was little she could do to pull herself together. She needed this more than she needed anything in her entire life. She needed to feel their touch, to join their bodies as one and cocoon herself between these two powerful men. Never had she felt so connected, so complete.

“Sleep now, Lily. Sleep.” Jaret’s voice was soothing, hypnotic, and so genuinely tender that she let her lids fall shut. As warmth and familiarity moved through her, she knew she gave herself to both men physically, but could hardly believe that she gave herself to Jaret fully, body, heart, and soul, which went completely and utterly against her guarded nature and council’s directive.

Chapter Twelve

“You okay?” Toby asked, his voice heavy and breathless.

Jaret swallowed, dipped his head to look at the beautiful naked woman beside him, a woman full of goodness and compassion, a woman who’d reached out to him in ways that left him rattled and defenseless. He gave a quick shake of his head, his body tightening as foreign emotions prowled through him.

He grunted, knowing he’d crossed an imaginary line with her and understanding there was no turning back. “Not even a little, Cousin,” he managed around the lump forming in his throat. “Not even a little.”

Toby touched his shoulder in a placating manner and softened his tone when he said, “You’d better get it together, Jaret. We’ve got her right where we want her.”

Jaret nodded and tried to clear his passion-rattled brain. Jesus, she’d pulled so many emotional reactions from him that he had no idea how to handle it. He didn’t even know where to begin, in fact. Long ago, he’d made a vow never to let anyone in emotionally. Lessons learned had taught him that nothing good could come from putting oneself out there, yet here he was, traveling a road he’d sworn he’d never travel. So how this little mite of a witch had managed to crack the shield protecting his heart without even trying was beyond him.

“Cousin?” Toby asked.

“I’m good,” he lied, and they both knew he was anything but. When Jaret reached down and grabbed the sheet to cover Lily’s naked body, she made a soft sexy noise and snuggled in closer to him. He gifted himself with one more minute to think about the way she wanted

him, the way her body beckoned his touch, and the way she opened to him, even in sleep.

As her warm, needy flesh pressed against his, he darted a glance Toby's way, let out a long slow breath, and frowned. "Okay, maybe I'm not so good."

Toby gestured toward the open bedroom door. Light from the hallway spilled inside and lit a path. "You want to get out of here and leave this to me?"

Jaret scraped his fingers through his hair and worked to compartmentalize his newfound emotions. Under the circumstances, fleeing was probably his best course of action, but there was no way in hell he could bring himself to leave. He wanted to be with her, felt protective of her, and needed the physical contact at all times.

He mentally pulled himself together and said, "No, let's do this." Determined to finally find an explanation—who was this witch and what kind of spell did she have over them?—he lowered himself beside her and cleared his thoughts. Next to him, Toby mimicked his actions, the two securing her small body between theirs as they began the penetration process.

With the utmost care Jaret dropped all his shields and moved inside her head. Slowly peeling back the layers, he proceeded to read her thoughts, her emotions. Without any barriers in place, the connection between them was strong, and if he didn't know better, he'd say she'd come from his bloodline.

He surfed around inside her psyche and was immediately bombarded with her most recent feelings: goodness, strength, passion, warmth, and something else. Something that felt like . . . *love*. His heart trip-hammered and his insides twisted.

"Jaret?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"You okay?"

“Been better.”

A pause and then in a soft voice Toby announced, *“She really cares about you, Jaret.”*

“She cares about you too,” he countered, but they both knew the truth. With Toby it was physical; with Jaret it was emotional. Her heart belonged to him, and quite honestly, he knew he didn’t deserve it.

With little effort, Jaret continued to peel back the layers and press deeper. As if he were watching a movie in reverse, he moved past her most recent emotions, running through her life backward until he hit a wall of darkness.

“What the hell does she have buried behind that wall?” Jaret asked.

“Memories of the ways her coven had stolen all the Darkland magick perhaps,” Toby offered.

Jaret scanned the wall, looking for a way in. Soon he came across a crack and he gently but firmly brushed along it until it widened, the barrier inching open and allowing him access to her secret compartment. That was when he felt it.

Fuck . . .

He jerked back on the bed as a cold shiver moved through him. Lily shifted in protest as he dredged up those old painful memories that were, perhaps, best left forgotten. Instinctively, Jaret wrapped his arm around her slim waist to shield her.

Smoke. Fire. Running. Pain.

So much pain.

His thoughts instantly went back to the first night he spotted her in raven form, recalling those same deeply embedded emotions emanating off her then, before she’d secured her shield.

Once he pulled himself together, he surfed around. He looked at the landscape through her mind’s eye, and spotted images of Brighton Mountain and a little girl—Lily—being dragged up it. Equal measures

of anger and sadness moved through him as he watched a barefoot little girl flee from the carnage.

“She’s a Brighton,” he announced flatly. Except being a Brighton meant he had to turn her over to Maddox, whose volatile anger and resentment ran deep. Christ only knew what he’d do to Lily if he relinquished her to him, how he’d handle her magick, her life. It was a risk Jaret couldn’t take. Not with her. Not with Lily.

It was clear that she was different from her corrupt, self-indulgent ancestors. Intuitive intelligence told him she wasn’t like the rest of her depraved family, but he’d hazard a guess that Maddox wouldn’t believe that for a minute.

“Jesus,” Toby said as he watched the flames lick up the mountain. *“What the fuck is going on?”*

As Jaret recalled Maddox’s story of the Brighton massacre, he said, *“It must have been from the fire that killed her coven.”*

Toby made a strangled noise and gripped Jaret’s arm. *“Wait. Look. She’s in her raven form.”*

From the aerial view, Jaret took in the action from her raven’s eyes. Fear, anger, love, and . . . *guilt*, all mingled together in her young-child mind as she flew over the town. As disturbing images flooded Jaret’s brain, he pressed his palm to his temple to sort through them. Bloodshed, carnage, screams.

Death.

So much death.

Then her raven stopped flying to watch a woman—her mother, he presumed by the intense emotions rushing through her—burn at the stake. Feeling a mixture of anger, confusion, and helplessness, her raven dipped lower to tear away a cowl concealing the identity of the man who’d set her loved one ablaze.

A very familiar cowl.

When her raven met his black eyes, the man gave a derisive twist of

his lips. *"I'm coming for you, Lily,"* he announced. *"You can run, but you can't hide."*

Both Jaret and Toby jolted upward. Their chests rising and falling erratically, moisture beaded on their foreheads as they realized the significance of that familiar cowl, and the bloodbath they'd just witnessed.

Again.

"What the fuck?" Jaret growled, his gaze colliding with that of Toby, who looked and felt equally as troubled and confused as Jaret. For a long time, they stared at each other in mute bewilderment, their minds rationalizing and sorting through the turn of events, and snapping together the pieces of the puzzle known as Lily.

Toby finally broke the quiet and spoke in whispered words, "Tell me that wasn't . . . ?"

"It was."

Toby glanced at Lily, then back at Jaret. "You don't suppose . . ."
His words fell off; he was clearly unable to bring himself to say it.

As emotions clogged Jaret's throat, he too found it hard to continue with his line of thought. But in a bid for answers, he forced himself to follow the logical path, to discover the truth and come to terms with the fact that all was not as it appeared.

That cowl.

That man.

The carnage.

It was all so familiar. Too familiar.

His chest began to ache and he swallowed down the lump that had gathered in his throat as he thought of his deceased grandmother, killed by the same blood—his blood—as Lily's entire coven.

He fisted the sheets with his hands, his blood boiling with rage. He spoke through clenched teeth. "Why, Toby?"

Toby didn't speak—instead he jumped from the bed and began

pacing, rage pouring off him in angry waves. "I'm going to fucking kill someone." He raked his mussed hair off his forehead and gave a brisk shake of his head.

"Nanna was full of goodness and love, and only ever wanted to raise us with the same empathy for others." Jaret's voice hitched when he added, "Why the fuck would they do this to her?"

Toby cleared his throat, walked to the window, and pounded his fist on the wooden frame. "We used to be so happy there. She was so loving and compassionate, and was raising us the same way until those monsters tore through her house. . . ."

"Like they wanted us to bear witness."

"Yeah," Toby agreed.

"Then Maddox hardened us," Jaret recollected.

Toby spun around to face Jaret. "Fuck, Jaret, we were just kids."

Fighting down the urge to find Maddox and kill the fuckers responsible, Jaret stroked Lily's arm as his heart ached. She needed him now, and that was more important to him than revenge.

"Lily was just a kid too, Toby. And she feels responsible for the loss of her entire coven. She still holds an incredible amount of guilt for not being able to save them."

Toby resumed his pacing and angled his head to study her. "Why do you suppose they were looking for her?"

"I have no idea. All I know is that Maddox lied to us about the Brightons."

"Yeah, it wasn't a tragic accident that killed her coven." Toby held his palms out to examine them. "Their blood is on our hands." Jaret could sense Toby's temper rising to dangerous levels. "What else has he lied to us about?" Toby asked.

Jaret scowled. "Let me take a stab at it. Everything," he announced bitterly.

"What the fuck do you suppose they want with Lily?" Toby asked

again. “Any one of those witches could have been forced to give them back their magick, but they wanted Lily. They were specifically calling out to her.”

Jaret thought about Lily’s compassionate nature, and her empathy for others. Hell, she’d even brought her werewolf friend chicken soup and herbs to help heal her sickness. Witches and wolves working together in harmony for the greater good. Fuck, he’d never thought he’d see the day. But he certainly couldn’t discount what he’d seen with his own eyes, what this town was. And contrary to what had been drilled into him since youth, not all creatures that walked the night were inherently evil. Nor, he suspected, were the Brightons. Intuition told him, like Lily, her family possessed nurturing qualities and were filled with warmth and love.

“You’re missing the point, Toby. The Brightons weren’t evil, and had never stolen Darkland magick at all.”

“So why does her probing hurt?”

“Not because she’s trying to steal our magick.” Jaret searched through her thoughts, but Lily didn’t have those answers either. Someone was keeping her in the dark.

“Maybe because she’s simply too powerful, and no one has taught her to nurture her powers,” Toby provided.

“Which begs the question, who is trying to suppress her magick and why?”

“And where does black magick come into all this?”

Jaret frowned. “I don’t know.”

Toby’s eyes swept over her body. “What’s so special about her, Jaret?” he whispered as he brushed her hair from her forehead.

“She’s a spiritual shifter for one, and that’s pretty fucking rare.”

“Yeah, but there’s something else, isn’t there? And there is only one way to find out the answers we need.”

Jaret tightened, not liking the direction of Toby’s thoughts. The last

thing he wanted right now was to leave Lily alone and engage in a confrontation with Maddox—he wasn't about to risk exposing her whereabouts.

Reading him, Toby pushed, "I have to go, Jaret. We have no choice."

Jaret looked at the woman asleep in his arms. "Toby—"

Toby put his hand on his shoulder. "Like I said, Jaret. *I* have to go, and you have to stay here to protect Lily."

Jaret gave a heavy sigh, then offered Toby a grateful smile. "Leave at sunup. We can't do anything else tonight. So let's sleep. Something tells me we're going to need all our strength in the coming days."

Lily awoke with a start and her hand went to her stomach as warm, passionate memories of their lovemaking came rushing back to her. Her gaze flew to Jaret on her left, then to Toby on her right. Both men were asleep, looking so peaceful and angelic it had her heart racing and her body aching to lose herself in them again.

With Jaret's sheet haphazardly thrown over his body, she let her glance travel over his nakedness, stopping to linger at the juncture of his legs. His beautiful cock, still at half-mast, called out to her, and she'd like nothing better than to climb between his legs and draw it into her mouth, to pleasure him the way he'd pleased her. As her mind filled with salacious thoughts, her pulse raced in anticipation.

Lady, she'd never reacted to anyone the way she reacted to these two. She shivered now just thinking about the way they touched her and had taken such painstaking care of her needs, her body. As ripples of sensual delight washed over her, she bit back a breathy moan and lightly brushed Jaret's bangs from his forehead. *Jaret*. His touch went beyond the physical, reaching so deeply inside her that it had awakened the broken part of her soul and helped mend the pieces. He did something to her, touched her on another level where

emotions ruled and nothing else mattered. She smiled as ribbons of need and desire twisted inside her.

Then suddenly, that smile fell from her face and she trembled, remembering how Jaret's deep soothing voice had pulled her under, encouraging her to let her guard down with them. She'd allowed them into her thoughts, to read her deepest, darkest secrets, which went against everything council had expected of her.

She shook her head to clear the lust that still lingered there, and swallowed as she processed that bit of information. After a quick consultation with herself and a reminder that her town was counting on her, she sat up in her bed. If they were tricking her like Kane and Harmony had cautioned, and they'd discovered she was Brighton, surely they wouldn't be sound asleep, nestled all comfy in bed beside her.

Or would they . . . ?

She thought about the way Jaret had touched her with such tender concern. Surely that couldn't be faked.

She pinched her eyes shut, then opened them again, working to make sense of it all as she berated herself for getting lost in their erotic touch. Her game plan was to slip inside their minds while they were consumed with passion, but it was *she* who'd been too far gone, too lost in a haze of pleasure to even think straight.

Moving quietly she shimmied to the foot of the bed, carefully climbed from the mattress without stirring the men, then hastily threw on her robe. She padded silently to her window to glance out. As she faced the town, she took in the early-morning rays still climbing the towering mountains. She scanned the quiet streets, and off in the distance she spotted Quinn, masking himself in the shadows as he in turn watched her. Quinn was tasked with turning them, and she knew how he worked. He was waiting, watching, letting the hunger grow. But farther away she sensed another disturbance in the

air. Someone else was out there. Watching.

Harmony?

The same eerie feeling she'd had at the park trickled through her blood, and oddly enough, her amulet once again began to vibrate. As it gave off a warm energy, she held it tight and looked heavenward, thinking about her mother.

"Are you out there?" she whispered tentatively, never once forgetting the sacrifice her mother had made in order to save her only child. Lily blinked back a tear as warmth moved through her and settled in her solar plexus. *Mommy*. She let out a breath and closed her hand over her stomach, wondering if her mother was with her, or if she was just imagining it during these troubled times.

Jaret shifted behind her and the sound pulled her focus. Feeling suddenly very vulnerable in front of her window, she marshaled her thoughts, stepped back, and tightened her robe around her waist. As she hugged herself, she considered her next move. She had to get inside their thoughts, and as dawn approached, time was quickly running out.

She stole a sideways glance at Jaret and Toby, and even though deep in her soul she felt they weren't like the rest, that they were different from their brutal ancestors who believed the Brightons had stolen their magick, the fact that there was a restlessness in the air, a warning on the wind, and someone was out there, watching, stalking, had both Kane's and Harmony's warnings coming back to haunt her.

It could be a trick.

Lily wasn't so sure, but as that seed of doubt grew, nourished by the coven elder and her fellow council member, she knew it wouldn't hurt to ingest the rest of the herbs. It would be in her town's best interest if she tamped down all aspects of her magick and added extra protection to her mind shield until she found out more about these men, their mission in Serene, and how they were able to fill the void

that had resided in her heart for the last few hundred years. If she was going to enter their minds, she knew she had to take extra precautions so they couldn't smell her magick or recognize it as Brighton, and she just prayed that slipping inside while they slept wouldn't distress them, or alert them to her probing.

Moving with stealth, Lily hurried to her kitchen and boiled the kettle. Then she made her way up to the spare bedroom, peeled back the rug, and positioned herself in the center of the pentagram.

She dumped almost the entire contents of the bag into her cup, and recited the chant Harmony had provided her while she ingested the concoction.

Once that was complete, she sat there as energy bubbled up inside her. Her head began to hurt, and her flesh began to itch and burn in the most bizarre ways, but at least this time, with extreme effort, she was able to keep her raven grounded. The last thing she wanted was for her raven to show with the Darkland men in her bed.

As her stomach churned, she held her hands out to examine them. They felt shaky, jittery, and almost seemed to be emanating a metallic gold aura.

She blinked, her vision suddenly fuzzy, and her mouth terribly dry, even after consuming a full cup of tea. As nausea welled up inside her, she made a mental note to talk to Harmony in the morning and then struggled to put the room back in order to the best of her abilities. Once finished, she tiptoed back into the bedroom to take note of Toby and Jaret, still sleeping. The mere sight of them had her heart racing, and her emotions on a roller-coaster ride. What would become of them? Of her? Her entire town?

She gripped the arms of her rocking chair, and gently eased herself down, taking extra care not to rattle her throbbing head. Lady, whatever was in those herbs certainly didn't agree with her this time. Perhaps she'd simply ingested too much of the packet.

As the two men slept, she tried to quiet her thoughts and pull herself together before she went up in a burst of flames. Feeling very feverish, she loosened her robe, and winced as she rested her head back against the hard slats on her wooden rocking chair.

She glanced at Toby and felt the tremendous connection between them. He was sprawled out on the mattress, his long hair tumbling in waves over his handsome, chiseled face. Her fingers itched to push it back, but she resisted for fear of waking him.

Her gaze slowly moved from Toby to Jaret, and when her glance brushed over him, she braced herself as emotions pressed against her heart. As a myriad of feelings ripped through her, she took in the rapid movement of his eyes. He was dreaming, but it was clear by the way his body was twisting and tensing that it wasn't a pleasant dream he was experiencing.

A surge of protectiveness moved through her and she wanted to quiet his distress, to take him into her arms and tell him everything would be okay. As she hungered to do just that, her body began to shake and she grasped her stomach to fight down the electricity, the volatile sensations building inside her and threatening to explode.

She drew a slow breath, and as she released it, she tried to center herself. Once she had herself semicomposed, she quieted her heartbeat and began to move into Jaret's head. Paying heed to the power of her magick, and her rusty skills, she drew a tiny thread and moved inside. When Jaret cringed deep in sleep, her stomach tightened and she feared she was hurting him.

She halted her probing until he settled; then she trekked forward. Her mission was to discover their plan for this secret community, and she was determined to accomplish that task.

As she entered, she instantly felt the stress of his nightmare. She needed to move past those moving images and go deeper, but as she caught glimpses of the horror he was experiencing, fear constricted

her throat and halted her forward momentum.

Violence erupted around her, and images of hooded men, shards of glass, flashes of swords, and crimson blood exploded inside her brain. She recognized those men who were terrorizing and slashing an elderly lady, snuffing out her last vestige of life. She felt Jaret's anguish, pain, and love for the woman he called Nanna.

She gripped the rocking chair to right herself and it was then that she realized she was seeing the action from a child's eyes. A very frightened child. Young. Helpless. Confused.

Jaret.

Was this what had caused him to harden his heart? The atrocity he'd witnessed had her heart aching for him, for Toby, for a childhood lost. Deep in her soul she knew the cousins weren't ruthless monsters; they were merely witnesses to the massacre. Her heart thudded against her chest, matching the pain in her head, but she remained with Jaret as he fought his way through the darkness.

Before she could go deeper, a fever rose in her, and beads of perspiration covered her body. She gripped her stomach and there was nothing she could do to stop herself from crying out. Energy was building inside her and it was becoming increasingly harder to control it.

"Jesus, Lily."

Peering through half-closed eyes, she spotted Jaret climbing from the bed and reaching for her. His warm hand felt so good, so comforting on her skin. All she wanted to do was close her eyes and climb back between the two until her head cleared.

"Jaret . . ." was all she managed to get out. She leaned into him and tried to speak again, but her tongue felt too thick, too heavy.

"Lily, oh Jesus, Lily," was the last thing she remembered hearing before she collapsed in his arms.

Chapter Thirteen

Camouflaged among the shadows, Quinn stood at the corner and watched over Lily from the sidewalk. He could feel the volatile energy in the room, but oddly enough, he could also feel love and empathy surrounding her. He remained still, and as he observed from afar, it became glaringly apparent that those men, those hunters, were not going to harm her. In fact, they felt protective of her. Possessive, even.

As Jaret and Toby let down their shields, it gave Quinn the opportunity to slip into their minds to read them, leaving them open and vulnerable to an attack, exactly where the council wanted them. Now would be a perfect opportunity to strike, but the sun was coming up and he needed to make his way home.

Quinn considered how easily Lily had lured them in with her charm, her obvious attempt to catch them with their defenses down, no doubt.

If there was one thing Quinn had learned over the years, it was that letting your guard slip could get you killed quicker than a wooden stake. Surely to God those two knew that. Quinn hadn't gotten this far in life, claiming the esteemed rank as the eldest vampire in Serene, without living by that rule. Which was why he'd never let any woman slip inside. He wasn't about to take a chance on anyone weakening him.

A movement beside him heralded someone's approach. As dawn threatened, he turned to see Kane and Sunray coming his way. He twisted sideways and took in Sunray's ashen skin.

"Kane," he said. "Sunray."

"Quinn," they said in unison.

Quinn nodded toward Sunray. "What's going on?"

Kane pulled her in closer and Quinn felt the anguish pouring off him. “We’re not sure.” Kane looked up toward Lily’s bedroom window. “I thought it had something to do with the cousins, but when I talked to Toby about it, I got the sense he really had nothing to do with it.”

Sunray leaned against the wall and took up position beside Quinn. He could feel the heat radiating off her as a fever raged inside her.

“You need to talk to Lily,” Quinn advised, worry weaving its way through him.

“She gave me some herbs, but they didn’t help.”

Just then a movement at Lily’s front door pulled their focus. All three turned to watch Toby exit. He pulled the collar of his leather coat up against the wind and descended the stairs two at a time. When he reached the bottom and spotted the three people in the shadow, he stopped and widened his stance.

As the first rays of light hit the outer edges of town, Quinn grew antsy. With time of the essence, Kane gestured with a nod for Toby to join them. Looking cautious, and prepared for an impending confrontation, Toby approached, his gaze going from Quinn, to Kane, and settling on Sunray, who had her back pressed to the wall and her eyes shut.

Toby held his hands out to palm the air around her. “Jesus, what the hell is going on?”

Kane glared at him. “I told you she was sick.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t tell me why.”

“That’s because I don’t know why,” Kane bit out.

Toby took a step toward Sunray, and in a protective move, Kane blocked his path. “Don’t touch her,” he gritted out between clenched teeth, his voice as cold as a Siberian winter. Quinn would know, since he’d spent a winter there many centuries ago.

“Look, Kane,” Toby said, squaring off against him. “If you don’t

want my help, fine, I'll leave. But if I do, you're going to lose her."

A pause, and then in a suspicious tone, Kane gave in and asked, "What do you know about it?"

"What I know is that she's under some sort of spell."

That caught Quinn's attention. He exchanged a knowing look with Kane before Kane asked, "What do you know about spells?"

"Before my grandmother died—" He paused for a brief moment, and Quinn didn't miss the emotion clogging his throat at the mention of his grandmother. It was clear that this hunter had a heart after all, Quinn mused.

Toby cleared his throat and continued. "She taught me all about the use of herbs. Herbs for increasing magick, for decreasing it, and herbs used in black magick spells."

"Black magick . . ." Kane said, his hands fisting at his sides. "Who the fuck is using black magick on Sunray?" Then his eyes widened and he grabbed Toby by the collar, anger flaring in his eyes as if he itched for a fight. "You were buying herbs at Sophie's."

Toby held his hands up, prepared to defend himself. "Look, Kane, we can do this if you want to, but if we do, your wife is only going to get sicker." Kane's brow furrowed in worry as he glanced over his shoulder at Sunray. "I can help her," Toby offered, looking past Kane.

"Why should I believe anything you say?"

"Because he's telling the truth."

Shocked, Kane let go of Toby, and spun around to face Quinn.

"What?" he demanded, as Quinn drew Sunray into his arms to offer her his support.

"He's telling the truth, Kane. His shields are down and I can read him."

Quinn could feel Kane processing that information as he turned back to face Toby. "What the hell is going on, Toby? Why would you help me?"

“I don’t think right now is the time to get into it.” He gestured toward Sunray. “She’s getting worse.”

As Sunray’s breathing grew shallow, Quinn pulled her in tighter. Toby pushed past Kane and dipped his head to assess her.

He spoke in firm but soft words. “Sunray, can you hear me?”

She nodded, and flashed pewter eyes at him as Kane moved in beside her and gathered her into the circle of his arms. Quinn noted the worry and tenderness on Kane’s face as his glance moved over his wife.

“Tell me, where does it hurt most?” Toby asked.

She touched her stomach and made a small noise. “The baby . . .”

With exquisite gentleness Toby ran his hand over her abdomen. A minute later he spun around and Quinn spotted the genuine concern in his eyes. “We need to get her to Sophie’s.”

Intense and troubled, Kane paused for a brief moment as he considered this turn of events. Quinn could feel the fear surging inside the lycan overseer. Clearly left with no choice but to trust Toby and accept his help—or accept the consequences if he refused it—Kane nodded, gathered Sunray into his arms, and whispered, “Hang in there, sweetheart. I’m not losing you again.” Sunray’s fingers curled in Kane’s shirt as Quinn moved past them to lead the way to Sophie’s.

With sunlight nipping at his heels, he turned the corner, rushed ahead, and bolted up the stairs. He knocked on the door, and waited impatiently for Sophie to come answer. A minute later a light inside flicked on and she opened the door. A worried frown marred her forehead as she took in the four visitors.

She immediately ushered them in and directed Kane to the cot in the back of the store, behind the curtain.

“We need your help,” Quinn rushed out.

Sophie brushed her long dark hair away from her forehead as her

violet eyes widened. "Of course. Anything."

Toby moved past her and scanned the shelves, pulling off packets of herbs as he went.

She stepped up beside him. "Toby, let me help."

"Thanks," he murmured, and proceeded to list off the ingredients he needed. Astute witch that she was, she gasped and clutched her chest.

"Yeah, I know," he said in response to her surprise.

When Sunray moaned from the back room, Sophie grabbed Toby's arm and said, "We need to hurry." She turned to Quinn, who didn't miss the sparks between the hunter and the witch, and gestured toward the counter. "Plug the kettle in."

Quinn leapt into action. He hurried to the back counter, plugged the kettle in, and removed the lid from the ceramic teapot. Toby and Sophie each took turns adding herbs to the container, and once the kettle was boiling, Quinn filled the pot to the brim.

Sophie grabbed a spoon and stirred, then poured a generous amount into the cup. Her simmering violet eyes flitted across Toby before she said, "Ready?"

He nodded and pulled open the curtain leading to the back. Behind the rows of seedlings they found Sunray sprawled out on the cot, Kane perched on the edge. He pulled the sheets up to warm her, then removed them to cool her. He looked up sheepishly. "I'm new at this," he admitted. Quinn understood. Like him, Kane had spent his life alone, and nurturing didn't always come naturally.

Kane turned to Sophie for help. "What do I do?"

She gave him a warm, encouraging smile as she pulled all the blinds for Quinn. "Exactly what you are doing, Kane. Just let her know you're with her and love her."

He nodded. "I can do that."

Sophie looked at Toby. "Toby," she said, and as if the two were in

tune with each other, Toby instantly understood what she needed. He circled the cot, sat on the edge, and eased Sunray into a sitting position.

“Sunray,” Sophie whispered, and blew on the hot concoction. “I need you to drink this.” She pressed the mug against Sunray’s lips and Sunray took a tiny sip. For the next fifteen minutes they sat with her until she was able to ingest the elixir. Once she’d finished, Toby laid her down, gestured for Kane to cover her, then stepped around to stand with Quinn and Sophie.

“Now she needs to sleep,” Toby said.

Kane brushed her hair from her forehead. “Sleep, Sunray. I’ll be here with you.”

“So will I,” Sophie said.

“Me too,” Quinn added.

When Kane turned to Quinn, Quinn felt the lycan’s gratitude reach out to him like a warm hand, a gentle caress on his soul. Shit, Quinn hadn’t meant to sound so fucking soft. “The sun is up. I’m stuck here,” he added for good measure.

Kane grinned. “Right.”

Once Sunray’s breathing returned to normal and she slipped into sleep, Kane tightened her blanket around her and turned to Toby. “We need to talk.”

Sophie brought in three chairs as all four stood vigil over Sunray. Toby gave a nod of thanks and lowered himself. Sophie and Quinn followed suit.

When they were all seated, Quinn sat back to watch the exchange between Kane, the lycan guide, and Toby, his former PTF partner.

“I think you know why we followed you here,” Toby said. He leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees, and brushed his hand over his chin.

“Yeah, you knew Sunray turned me, but what you don’t know is I

asked her to do it.”

Toby looked dumbfounded. “You did? Why?”

“Because I love her, and I want to spend my life with her. Look around, Toby. You see what this place is.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty fucking surreal.”

“I wouldn’t have thought twice about blowing the hell out of this place a year ago. I would have blasted first, and asked questions later.” Kane wagged his finger back and forth between the two men. “We all would have.”

Toby nodded. “Can’t deny that. It was our plan all along.”

“Which begs the question, why didn’t you? When you discovered what this place was, what we all were, why didn’t you just set off a round of C4?”

“It’s Lily.”

“What about her?”

“That’s what we’re still trying to figure out. There’s a connection between us, a chemistry.”

“She told me.”

That seemed to surprise Toby, Quinn noted. “She did?”

“Yeah, and she also told me you’re not her blood, making a connection impossible.”

“I suspect she is, Kane.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but what I do know is that it was my family, the Darkland clan, who massacred her family.”

“Whoa . . .” Quinn said, and rocked back on the two rear legs of his chair.

“Lily told me that too,” Kane said. “She was just a child when your clan killed her coven.”

Toby let loose a slow breath and looked around the room. “Jaret and I didn’t learn that information until tonight. We had no idea our

family did this to hers. We were also enlightened to the fact that not only did our ancestors kill her family—they killed our grandmother while Jaret and I stood watching. All along we were led to believe that it was a pack of paranormal monsters that had torn her to shreds.” He swallowed hard before adding, “But we’re the monsters, Kane.” He jabbed his finger into his chest. “Us.” Then he jerked his thumb toward the window and the rising sun. “Not them.” Sophie put her hand on his knee to offer her support, and Toby attempted a smile.

“You’re not a monster, Toby,” Sophie assured him. “The second I set eyes on you, I knew you had goodness in you. I could feel it inside you.”

“That made one of us,” he said.

“Where do we go from here?” Kane asked.

“I need answers. We all do. I need to go out west to confront my family.”

Kane straightened and his eyes locked on Quinn’s.

“He’s telling the truth,” Quinn confirmed.

“We can’t take a chance that you’ll lead them back here. Even inadvertently.”

Intrigued by the whole story, Quinn said, “I’ll go. I can call shadows if need be and keep us protected. And I can stop in at the western branch, to check on things.”

Toby briefly shot Quinn a thankful glance and went on to explain, “My family wanted Lily alive. I need to find out why, and find out what they’ve been keeping from Jaret and me all these years.”

Sunray’s lids briefly flicked open and she gave Kane a warm smile, a little bit of life back in her eyes.

“The elixir is working fast,” Sophie said.

Kane touched Sunray’s forehead. When her eyes slipped shut again, he released a relieved sigh and turned back to the three. “A day ago I never would have let you walk out of here, Toby. We planned to

make your stay permanent.”

Toby gave a wry grin. “A day ago you wouldn’t have been given the chance. I would have blown this place to hell first.”

Kane smirked. “I guess we’ll never know how it would have gone down.”

“Probably better that way.”

“Most definitely.”

Needing to break up this rather nauseating moment of male bonding, Quinn redirected the conversation. “Is Jaret still with Lily?”

“Yeah, the black magick in this town is strongest on her. He’s watching over her and helping her to expel the excess energy before it consumes her.”

“Lily would never use black magick,” Sophie protested.

“Then while I’m gone, you’d better figure out who is.”

Toby stood, and his chair scraped across the wooden floor. He glanced at Quinn. “When will you be ready?”

Quinn leaned back in his seat and crossed his legs at the ankle. “We’ll fly out at nightfall. Kane, can you contact Devon and have him get his crew to ready the plane for us?”

Toby’s brow rose. “You fly?”

“When you’ve lived as long as I have, you learn a trick or two.”

“Where’s the plane?”

“Hidden in the mountains,” Kane explained. “For emergency purposes only.”

Just before Toby was about to leave, Kane put his hand on his shoulder to stop him. Toby turned, a perplexed look on his face.

Kane’s gaze went from Toby, to Sunray, then back to Toby. “Thank you.”

Quinn blinked when he felt the guilt rising in Toby. Guilt for planning to destroy Serene and all its inhabitants, and guilt for the way he and his cousin had treated Kane in Chicago. “Kane—”

“Go get ready,” Kane said. “And be careful out there.”

Chapter Fourteen

Jaret lay beside Lily on the bed, listening to her make soft mewling sounds deep in her sleep. She was hot to the touch, and her body twisted fitfully as the distinct scent of black magick emanated off her. He looked at her aura and felt her spiritual energy stirring, building, intensifying. If they didn't soon do something to release the pressure, Jaret feared it would completely consume her.

Fear welled up inside him as he watched her writhe. He tried to make her as comfortable as possible and used the time to search her thoughts, desperate to figure out who was responsible for Lily's state of mind and discover exactly what it was they were trying to accomplish. Unfortunately he couldn't get past her discomfort and find what he was looking for. He'd have to wait until Lily came out of her hallucinatory condition before she could supply those answers. If, in fact, she knew them. In the meantime, he kept an eye on her vitals and prayed that whatever was happening inside her would pass without causing any damage.

As he wiped her damp brow, she gripped him, and he drew her closer. His stomach lurched and he clenched down on his jaw, hating that he felt so damn helpless.

She called his name out in her sleep and possessiveness eddied through him. He tightened as he reflected on the emotions she brought out in him, the chemistry between them, and what their futures held.

He drew her in tighter still, and cradled her in his arms to help her ride out the fiery storm. Soon day turned to night as he nursed her, and he only briefly left her side when Toby returned to fill him in on his exchange with Kane, Sunray, and Quinn and how the master

vamp would be accompanying him to Colorado. Jaret was surprised with that turn of events, pleased that Quinn could call shadow and protect Toby. The last thing he wanted was for their family to be following them back to Serene.

As he thought about his family, his Nanna in particular, and the lies the two cousins had been fed, his anger mounted, but he quickly tamped it down, not wanting to disturb Lily any more than she already was.

“Jaret . . .”

Her weak voice brought his mind scrambling back to the present.

“I’m here,” he whispered, and leaned in to her.

She gripped his shoulders and held him close. “Jaret, please, what’s happening?”

As her body melded with his, he whispered reassuring words, determined to get her through this. He would not lose her. Could not lose her. In the span of a few short days she’d become more important to him than his own well-being.

“You’re going to be okay, Lily. We just need to release the pressure building in your body.”

She blinked up at him and licked her dry lips. “Jaret, I need you.”

In that instant a surge of love rushed to his heart and he knew he’d never be the same again. He pitched his voice low. “I need you too, Lily.”

She attempted a smile and then said, “I really need you, Jaret. Inside me.” She shimmied on the bed until she was practically under him. She widened her legs. “Make love to me.”

He furrowed his brow, his gaze moving over her ruddy cheeks, and wondered whether she was still delirious. “Lily, honey, do you even know what you’re asking?”

She touched her stomach, her hands shaking. “This energy . . .”

“I know. It’s volatile, and we have to release it.”

She ran her hand over his body, her fingers gliding enticingly along his flesh until she reached his cock. She wrapped her fingers around his thickness and gave a light stroke, coaxing him to come out to play. He groaned and threw his head back. "Jesus, Lily."

Her eyes flashed wildly, and her skin practically glowed. "Please, Jaret. It will help."

Her entire body began trembling from head to toe and the determination in her eyes became his undoing. He slid over her and propped himself up on his elbow. With his lips positioned close to hers he could feel her urgency, her desire reaching out to him.

He ran one palm over her hard nipple, stopping to give it a light pinch, then pushed her damp hair back and met her gaze as sexual energy leapt between them. "Baby, are you sure you're up for this?"

"Yes, I need you to make love to me," she cried out, impatience in her voice. "I need to feel you inside me. It's the only way."

He crushed his body to hers, positioned his cock near her pussy, and felt her slick lips open for him. "Is this what you need, sweetheart?" He could hear the raw ache of lust in his voice as his crown brushed along her damp seam.

"Yes, please," she cried out, and bucked forward to force him inside. Her hips gyrated and sent shock waves rocketing through him. He moaned in sweet agony as he ached to lose himself in her, again and again.

As her damp heat closed around his cock, warmth streaked through him. He buried his face in the soft hollow of her neck and gave himself over to the pleasure as he reveled in the new intimacy between them.

Jaret greedily drove into her, then stilled as her sex muscles tightened around his cock. *Fuck . . .* she was so hot and tight it was all he could do to hang on. When her nails dug into his flesh, he inched back to see her.

Her mouth curved in bliss. "Yes, Jaret. I love the feel of you inside me."

As her body hummed with desire, he rocked his hips and her lids briefly shut, her limbs softening beneath his. "Does that feel good, sweetheart? Is it helping?"

She whimpered and ran her nails over his ass before she cupped it and gave a firm squeeze. "Harder," she murmured, her warm breath scorching him. "Fuck me harder." The pleasure in her voice combined with the intent look on her face fueled the flames inside him and prompted him into action.

Jaret gripped her legs and spread them wider. Once he had her positioned the way he wanted, he angled his body and pushed inside her. Deeper. Harder. As their bodies smashed together, he feared he was going to drive her through the mattress, but if this was how she wanted it, then this was exactly how she was going to get it.

She thrust her pelvis forward, meeting and welcoming each push. Her body pulsed and throbbed and she grew slicker with each stroke, her wet cunt lubricating his cock and rendering him senseless.

A cry lodged in her throat as her pussy squeezed his cock. Jaret could feel his own composure slipping away as her hot cream dripped over his balls. As pressure mounted, he hungrily pressed his lips to hers as he too gave in to the pleasure and shot his seed high up inside her. He remained inside her tight sheath for a long time, drawing out his orgasm and basking in the afterglow.

Many minutes later her hand gently touched his cheek, and he rolled off her. Silence ensued as Lily grabbed the blanket and pulled it over them. Warmth settled in Jaret's stomach as she took painstaking care in covering his body and making him comfortable. It all felt so domestic, so foreign to him. Yet it was something he was certain he could get used to. *Wanted* to get used to.

As his heart responded to her touch, his gaze moved over her

features. He appraised her and his fear for her well-being slowly began to abate. Thankfully, the volatile energy had begun to drain from her body, and her metallic gold aura was returning to normal.

After he pressed a kiss to her forehead, Lily raised her eyes to meet his and offered him a soft smile full of warmth and appreciation. "Thank you," she whispered, and an invisible band tightened around his heart in response to her genuine sincerity.

"I'm pretty sure I'm the one who should be thanking you, Lily." Jesus, she was amazing, and had come to mean so much to him in such a short period of time. As deep contentment settled in his bones, he palmed the air around them, then gathered her into his arms.

"Are you feeling better?"

She smiled and cuddled into him. "Much better," she said, and let out a long, slow breath.

"The energy is dissipating, but you're still hot to the touch."

She placed her hand on her stomach, and when he covered her hand with his, heat radiated from her body, and electricity arced between them. Christ, the connection between them was unbelievable. As Jaret studied her, he knew they needed to talk, but first he had to completely rid her body of any lingering traces of energy before it built again.

In tune with her needs, he eased himself off the bed and held his hand out to her. "Come on—let's get you in the shower."

She nodded and climbed from the bed. Then her eyes widened as she glanced around. "Where's Toby?"

"He stepped out," Jaret hedged. Lily had enough to deal with already, and he knew it would only frighten her to learn that Toby had gone back to Colorado, to talk to the men with her family's blood on their hands.

When she gave him an odd look, Jaret slipped his arm around her waist and teased, "Now that I have you alone . . ." As he redirected the

conversation, he walked her down the hallway. Once inside the bathroom he positioned her on the edge of the tub, turned on the nozzle, and adjusted the temperature.

He climbed inside and pulled her into the warm spray with him. Touching her body, and needing the contact at all times, he ran his fingers over her flesh. She became pliable in his arms, melting against him in the most sensual way. It occurred to him how close he felt to her at that moment, closer than he'd ever felt to anyone in his entire life. He cleared his throat, rattled by the emotions she brought out in him.

Her gaze skirted over his face, so full of emotions and honesty it twisted his heart. "I love the way you touch me."

Jaret gave her a crooked grin and ran his thumb over her nipple. Once again pressure began brewing in his groin as her body beckoned his. "You mean like this?"

She smiled and arched her back. "Yeah," she murmured, her soft whisper covering him like an old, well-loved down blanket. "Just like that."

His cock jumped in anticipation as he trailed his hand lower, a featherlight caress over her trembling flesh. "And how about this?"

"Oh yeah."

He pressed his lips to her forehead and urged her thighs apart. He inched open her twin lips and dipped a finger inside. When he sank into her warm sweetness, hunger moved through him.

"How about this?" he asked, and felt her body shudder as he stroked her slick core.

She groaned low in her throat. A sexy erotic whimper that made him quake. "Especially like that," she whispered.

Jaret stroked her deep, pushing two thick fingers inside her while he brushed his thumb over her clit.

"Jaret . . ." she cried out in ecstasy as she clenched around his

fingers. He couldn't believe how fast she came. Jesus, he loved the way she responded to him.

"Nice," he murmured into her hair.

"Very nice," she agreed, and gave a light chuckle.

She tilted her head back. Her eyes were still full of need as she ran her hands over his body, then settled them on his cock. She began stroking him, running her soft hands over his length and taking her time to pleasure him.

He ran his fingers through her hair and dipped his head to put his mouth close to hers. "I love it when you touch me too, Lily."

With a bemused expression on her face, she stroked him harder, her soft hands working magic on his libido as well as his soul.

"Like this?" she questioned in a soft voice, giving his cock a firm squeeze that had semen spilling from the crown.

As something potent passed between them, his heartbeat accelerated and need reverberated through his blood. His gaze dropped to her mouth. As it curved enticingly, his pulse skyrocketed—he was eager to take possession of those plump lips of hers, to draw them into his mouth and spend an eternity kissing her.

"Yeah, like that, baby," he murmured, and slowly moved his hips.

Taking him by surprise, she dropped to her knees and shot him a glance. Jaret swallowed, and watched her widen her mouth. She leaned forward and ran her tongue along his length, then asked, "Like this?"

"Fuck yeah, just like that," he bit out, and cupped her head to follow along the motion as she drew him into her mouth. Lust sang through his veins as he angled his body to keep the spray off her. Lily moaned and he heard longing in her voice as she made love to him with her mouth and hands. It was good. So fucking good. As her hands raced over him in aroused eagerness, he watched his dick move in and out of her mouth and decided it was the sexiest thing he'd ever

seen.

Shivers of warm need raced through him and he could feel the approach of an orgasm. She sucked deeper and within seconds he was there. Right there. Ready to explode inside her scalding mouth. He clenched his jaw and struggled to hang on, but when her hand slid between his legs and cupped his balls, his breath grew shallow and his veins filled with hot blood.

Feeling completely out of control, he quaked beneath her ministrations and fisted her hair to give a light pull, but she moaned in protest and held tight, refusing to budge.

"Lily," he groaned, and barely recognized his voice as it curled around them.

She licked his crown, drinking in the precum and encouraging him to release in her sweet mouth. Jaret gripped her head and a growl ripped from his throat and he let himself go. Lily remained between his legs for a long time, milking him dry and drinking in every last drop.

When she drew a long, contented breath, fierce possessiveness raged through him. He dragged her into his arms and tried to remember how to breathe. Her smile was slow and inviting and the sexy look on her face wreaked havoc on his senses. He wrapped his arms around her.

"I can't seem to get enough of you," he murmured, his voice so low it was barely audible.

"Same here," she whispered, and sent him a look of intimacy and promise as she cuddled impossibly closer. Jaret could barely think as he soaked in her warmth, her love. There was a new closeness between them, one that went well beyond sex.

"Come on." Jaret turned the shower off, gathered her into his arms, and carried her back to the bedroom. He ached to hold her, kiss her, possess her, and spend the next few days buried deep inside her body.

When he'd come to Serene, he wasn't prepared for her, wasn't prepared for the way she'd penetrated the shield around his heart. She aroused things in him he hadn't felt in years, hadn't wanted to feel in years.

He laid her out on the mattress and crawled in beside her.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

She shimmied closer and yawned. "I am now."

"Good," he said, and brushed a soft kiss over her forehead, because he had every intention of keeping her in her bed, captive beneath his touch, until Kane found whoever was responsible for the black magick, and until Toby and Quinn returned from Colorado with answers.

Chapter Fifteen

Toby moved through the quiet streets, cataloging the houses in his hometown as he made his way to Maddox's place. Off in the distance he spotted his grandfather's mansion. Heavy clouds hung over it like a dark, ominous warning, and Toby fought down his rising anger. As he closed the gap, he mentally prepared for a confrontation with the Darkland elder.

Quinn had dropped him off earlier, and they'd set up a meeting point for the next evening. With night nearly behind them, Quinn had left quickly to gain shelter in the Colorado branch before sunup. Despite Toby's shields, the vamp wasn't about to divulge the location of the secret community. No one was going to take a chance that a member of Toby's family could delve beneath the surface and uncover the hidden town. Not that Toby would let that happen, but still . . .

Toby drove his hands into his pockets and listened to his boots echo on the empty streets. Unlike in Serene, the houses here were spread wider apart, and were situated some fifty feet from the road, and even though they were filled with his family members, it lacked the down-home kindred feel of the quaint neighborhood that housed those who used to be his prey.

Long ago both Toby and Jaret had moved out of Maddox's place, and before they transferred to Chicago, the two shared a condo in the city, staying close to their grandfather. But they hadn't been back to the Darkland community or Maddox's home in months. Now as he looked around, it occurred to him that everything felt the same, yet different.

He walked down his grandfather's long curved driveway and perused his estate. Maddox had come a long way since the days he'd

lived with their grandmother in that small bungalow on the outskirts of town. He must have had one hell of an insurance policy on their grandmother. Toby shook his head in complete disgust.

With the time difference between Serene, New Hampshire, and Drummond Estate, Colorado, chances were his grandfather was still awake. Like the cousins, he was nocturnal and slept only during daylight hours. A habit he retained from his years prowling the night streets, Toby supposed.

Taking the steps two at a time, Toby climbed the grand staircase and rang the bell. A short while later, a light in the main entrance flicked on and his grandfather came to the door. His face lit as he swung it wide-open and waved Toby in.

“Toby, son, what are you doing here?” As he embraced Toby, Toby could smell the bitter tang of scotch on the older man’s breath.

Toby took in the sight of his grandfather. Taller than Toby by a few inches and some fifty pounds heavier—all brawny muscle even at his age—Maddox was still a robust man, with a head full of thick white hair, and scars on his weathered face that spoke of a life hard lived.

“Just in the neighborhood,” Toby said as he considered the best way to broach the subject.

Maddox pinched his lips and gave him a once-over. “I thought you were in Chicago. Are you boys back?” He looked past Toby’s shoulders to scan the streets, then shut the door behind him. “Where’s Jaret?”

“Still in Chicago,” Toby lied, taking extra care to keep his shields in place.

“Then what brings you here?”

Toby shrugged and waved a hand around the grand front entrance, browsing the long winding staircase, marbled floors, and majestic chandeliers. “Just missed the old place.”

When a dubious look moved over Maddox’s face, Toby nodded

toward his grandfather's sitting room. "Drink?"

"Of course," Maddox said, and led him into the small room off the main hall.

Once Toby was comfortable in a plush leather recliner, a wall of books on the shelf behind him and a glass of scotch in his hand, he began the careful process of gathering information without giving away too much.

Maddox flicked the television off, seated himself across from Toby, and asked, "What's on your mind, son?"

"Just thinking that Grandmother would have loved this place," he said casually, but the ever astute Maddox leaned forward in his chair and instantly perked up at Toby's choice of conversation. Maddox always deflected questions about their Nanna. Over time the boys had learned to avoid the subject, and had spent years grieving silently.

"Yes, she would have," he agreed.

"Jaret and I still miss her." Toby took a small sip of the amber liquid in his glass, then continued, "How about you? Do you still miss her?"

Maddox's face visibly tightened. "Of course."

"Just the other day Jaret and I were talking about our childhood, and all the stories you used to tell us when we were kids. I guess that's why I felt the need for a visit," he added for good measure.

A sudden hopeful gleam in the elder's eyes filled Toby with unease. Toby resisted the urge to flinch under his scrutinizing gaze.

"You've found her," Maddox stated, and straightened his back.

Toby nearly choked on his drink. "Found who?"

"The child who survived. The spiritual shifter."

Fuck . . .

Okay, this wasn't going quite as planned. Changing tactics and deciding his best course of action was to get right to the point, he said, "What I really want to know is why the Darkland clan killed her

family, and why you wanted her.”

Maddox rubbed his hands together, barely listening as his excitement changed the energy in the room.

“Maddox,” Toby said, pulling his focus back. “Why did you kill her family?”

He shot a quick glance to the door. “Where is she? Did you bring her to me?”

“She’s dead,” Toby said. “We killed her.” He eased back into his chair and kept his tone casual when he said, “You know the creed. Shoot first, ask questions later.”

“You’re lying.” Maddox jumped from his chair so fast it caught Toby off guard. With incredible speed and strength, the elder grabbed Toby by the collar, and before Toby could react, Maddox lifted him clear from his seat and tossed him toward the bookshelf.

Books scattered around him and pages ripped from their bindings as he quickly righted himself. “Back the fuck off,” Toby bit out.

“Not until you tell me where the little witch is.”

Toby squared his shoulders. “Like I said, she’s dead.”

A look of pure loathing came over Maddox’s face. “You never could lie,” he muttered. “Just like your grandmother.”

“Is that why you killed her, because she couldn’t lie?”

Maddox’s dark eyes narrowed and in a low, controlled voice he said, “So you know.”

Toby folded his arms and widened his stance. “Yeah, it’s all coming back to me.”

“Don’t you see, Toby?” he said, trying to explain, to justify his actions. “She stood in the way. Making you boys soft, like her. I wouldn’t stand for it. I needed you both to join the hunt, and the best way to harden you . . .”

“You son of a bitch,” Toby growled, and barreled into Maddox, driving him to the floor.

Toby's anger flared hot as the two rolled around on the wooden floor. Then, tough bastard that Maddox was, he used his body weight to push Toby off and climb to his feet. Toby could feel his grandfather trying to probe, and it took all Toby's mental effort to keep the skilled elder out.

Maddox grinned. "You can't keep it from me forever, Toby. Wouldn't it just be easier to tell me now?" he asked, his eyes shooting daggers.

Toby stood and met his intense gaze unflinchingly. "I killed her," he announced flatly. "How many times do you need me to say it?"

Maddox let loose a sinister laugh. "Of course you didn't kill her, Toby. You couldn't have."

Okay, that garnered Toby's full attention. He was a hardened PTF officer who regularly hunted and killed all things that went bump in the nighttime, so why would Maddox think he couldn't have killed her?

"Of course I did. Why wouldn't I?" he asked.

A wry grin curled up Maddox's lips. "Because she's your blood."

Toby paused to take a moment to digest that. "And?" He folded his arms, offering Maddox the floor to continue.

His grandfather circled his finger. "The connection between you would have prevented you from killing her."

"How can she be my blood?"

"That's what makes her so special, son. Many years ago a Darkland mated with a Brighton, and miraculously an offspring was produced. A very special offspring. A very powerful offspring."

"What did you want with her?"

A pause and then, "Well, I suppose it doesn't hurt to tell you now. Now that you found her, and you *will* take me to her."

Not in this fucking lifetime. "Tell me what?"

"We wanted to harness her magick and breed her special talents

into our family.”

“Because the Darkland clan never had magick to begin with,” Toby said. “And when her family wouldn’t hand her over, you killed them.” He lifted his gaze to Maddox’s. “I guess their mind probes didn’t really debilitate either, did they?”

Maddox smiled. “I didn’t want you to sympathize with them.”

“So why does *her* mind probe hurt?”

His smile widened. “You really have found her, haven’t you?” When Toby didn’t answer, Maddox explained, “She’s very special, son. Her energy is so strong and powerful that if not governed, it has the ability to attack the nervous system, thereby skewing one’s thoughts and abilities.”

Was that why Quinn had been helping her, because he was a vampire with no nervous system and practicing on him wouldn’t hurt?

“Actually, I’m surprised she hasn’t learned how to control it after all these years.”

So was Toby.

“Now tell me, where are you keeping her?”

Instead of answering, he asked, “Why were Jaret and I kept in the dark?”

“Enough questions,” Maddox growled. “My patience is running thin. Tell me where she is.”

Toby laughed. Did Maddox really think he was going to hand her over? Then again, up until a day ago he did have the cousins under his thumb and they never would have gone against his demands. But so much had changed since then. Since they’d learned the truth.

“You really are a bastard.”

Maddox puffed out his barrel chest. “Yes, well, remember where you come from, son.”

“I’m nothing like you.”

Maddox smirked. "Which is why you were kept in the dark." His grandfather took a threatening step forward. "Are we going to do this the hard way, Toby?"

"She's dead," he reiterated.

Maddox's face hardened, and the muscles along his jaw rippled. "Toby," his voice grated in warning.

Toby reached into his holster and pulled his gun. Maddox stilled, a scowl on his face.

"She's dead, and in my books, you're dead too."

"You won't shoot me," he bit out. "You don't have it in you."

Toby squeezed the trigger and the silver scraped across Maddox's right ear before embedding itself into the wall behind him. Maddox paled and faltered backward.

"Next one will be for Nanna," Toby warned.

Maddox held his hands up, palms facing out. "Now, come on, Toby. Just name your price. Everyone has one."

Toby slowly backed toward the door. "Sit down, Maddox." When Maddox gingerly lowered himself into his chair, Toby said, "I'm walking out of here and I never want to set eyes on you again. If I do, rest assured the next bullet will hit a little to the left."

Lily awoke to warm sunshine streaming in through her open window, and having lost track of time, she had no idea how many days she'd spent in her bed with Jaret. But what she did know was that she never wanted to leave the comfort or security of his arms again.

Cloaked in contentment, and emotionally fulfilled, she realized her stomach was grumbling. Just how long had it been since she'd eaten? She stretched and reached for Jaret, eager for the intimate connection, but when her hand came up empty, her heart missed a beat and her lids sprang open.

"Good morning, sweetheart."

Lily jolted upward. The blankets pooled around her waist and exposed her naked body to the sexy man staring at her from across the room. As he stood in her doorway, her glance raced over him and her pulse kicked up a notch. Dressed only in his worn jeans, which rode low on his hips, he was casually leaning against the doorjamb, looking rugged and dangerously sexy as he balanced a tray of food on one hand.

“I thought you might be hungry.”

Oh, she was hungry all right, but not necessarily for what he had in his hand. When he pushed off the doorway, she tapped the bed beside her, hungering for more than just his physical touch. But instead of sitting on the mattress, he put the tray on her lap and pulled the rocking chair close.

From the intent look on his face, to the way he planted his elbows on his knees, Lily guessed that it was time to talk. She grabbed a piece of fruit and nibbled, waiting for Jaret to direct the conversation and knowing it was time they both laid it on the line.

Tension visible and conflicting emotions passing over his eyes, Jaret’s hard muscles bunched as he leaned forward and lightly brushed her hair from her face. His touch was so achingly gentle it was all she could do to maintain focus.

“Lily, we need to talk.”

She nodded. “I know.”

He let loose a long slow breath, and got right to the point. “Why are you practicing black magick?”

She stopped chewing, and her head came up with a start. “What? Black magick? What are you talking about?”

“I’ve seen the pentagram.” He pulled the remaining packets of herbs from his pocket and placed them on her nightstand. “And I’ve examined the contents in these packages.”

She glanced at the herbs Harmony had given her. “Jaret, you’re

wrong. It's not *black magick*."

Angling his head, he studied her for a moment, his intelligent dark eyes skirting over her face. "Jesus, Lily. You really didn't know, did you?"

"What I don't know is what you're talking about."

"You're using black magick," he stated, lowering his voice to soften the impact. "That's why you've been sick, sweetheart, why Sunray's been sick."

Feeling defensive, Lily gasped and placed her hand on her chest. "Jaret, I'd never do anything to hurt Sunray. I'd never do anything to hurt anyone."

His face softened. "I know, Lily. Believe me, I know," he whispered in a calming manner. "Which is what makes this all the more confusing."

Black magick?

Lily's mind raced. Surely he had to be wrong. Harmony would never do anything to hurt her. She was certain of it. Then again, Lily had suspected that Harmony knew something about the cousins and had been keeping it from her. Not to mention the coven elder's hatred of Kane and Sunray. Lily *had* witnessed her anger firsthand. But black magick? As she chewed on that, she struggled to find another explanation for Sunray's sudden sickness, not wanting to believe the worst of Harmony. It simply wasn't in Lily's nature.

Jaret pulled the chant out of his pocket and smoothed out the paper. "Who wrote this?" When Lily got quiet, taking a moment to think things through, Jaret said, "Lily, you need to tell me everything."

"Harmony gave it to me." At the mention of Harmony her amulet began to vibrate, and it pulled her attention.

"Who is Harmony?"

Lily fisted the amulet until her knuckles turned white. "She's the

coven elder.”

“The one who rescued you from the cave?”

Lily’s eyes widened and locked on his. “Yes,” she whispered, her glance moving over his face.

“Lily, this chant is dangerous. It’s what’s been making Sunray sick.”

Shock and denial rocketed through her. “That can’t be. Harmony assured me the chant would add extra protection for my shield, and the herbs were to help suppress my magick.”

“You’re wrong. The herbs were to build your magick.”

“Why would Harmony rescue me, keep me sheltered and protected all these years, and then suddenly choose to harm me? It doesn’t make sense.”

“How do you suppose Harmony knew where to find you in the first place?”

It suddenly occurred to her that Jaret had been inside her head. Her voice wavered when she added, “I guess by now you know everything.” When she got quiet for a moment, Jaret touched her cheek, completely in tune with her emotions.

“Lily, you were a child. None of it was your fault.”

“I couldn’t move the rock.”

“Oh, sweetheart. Of course not. You were so little. You didn’t have the strength.”

“But—”

He pressed his fingers to her lips. “I won’t let you own this. My family is at fault, not you.” He squeezed her hand in comfort, and as she absorbed his warmth, she could feel the strength and power radiating off him.

She gave a weak smile. “I’m sorry about your grandmother. I’m sorry you had to witness it.”

His expression made her heart ache. Lily pushed the tray aside and climbed to her feet. Still a bit woozy, she faltered and Jaret reached

out to stabilize her. She held him tight, pressed a kiss to his cheek, and then, as if drawn by a greater force, stepped back and padded softly to her window.

“Are you okay?” Jaret asked.

Off in the distance she could feel someone watching. She pulled a thread of magick and scanned the streets, and that was when she felt it. Harmony. Lily swallowed and glanced heavenward as her amulet gave off a wave of warm energy.

Her heart swelled, and she murmured under her breath, “Is this what you’ve been trying to tell me?”

“Lily, who are you talking to?”

“It’s my amulet,” she whispered as Jaret came up behind her. He pulled her to him and ran his hands up and down her arms. “It’s been vibrating. I thought my mother was trying to warn me about you two cousins, but I think all along she just might have been trying to warn me about Harmony.” She turned to face him, and there was nothing she could do to keep the moisture from her eyes.

He dipped his head. “Hey,” he whispered, and lightly brushed his thumbs over her cheeks. “What is it?”

“My mother told me to keep this amulet and that as long as I had it, she’d always be with me. It’s all I have left of her. She promised me we’d see each other again.” Lily gave a soft laugh, and rested her head on Jaret’s chest. “And here I thought she’d left me, unable to fulfill the promise she’d made to me all those years ago, when all along she’d been watching over me.”

Warm tears spilled down her cheeks, and when she rocked on her heels, unstable, Jaret pulled her in tight. “Let it out, Lily. Let it all out,” he whispered into her hair. “Just know that none of this was your fault.”

She relaxed in his arms, and as she breathed in his rich, familiar scent, the warmth of his touch pushed the guilt from her heart and

helped heal old wounds. He guided her back to the bed, and when she was comfortable, he sat back down on the rocker. He gave her a few moments to come to terms with things, then brought her attention back around to Harmony. They both needed to get to the bottom of matters.

He gestured toward the herbs and said in a soft voice, "Lily, the one thing I don't understand is why Harmony would give these to you."

"To protect me from you," she admitted. "To keep my Brighton magick hidden so you wouldn't be able to recognize it."

Jaret shook his head, perplexed. "She had to know these herbs would stir your magick, not suppress it."

Her stomach knotted. "So why did she tell me to take them, and warn me never to use my magick?"

"It's like she wanted to build it and keep it inside you." He frowned, then asked, "Why were you never taught to use your magick? To nurture it and learn to control it?"

"Harmony thought it was in my best interest." Lily frowned when she remembered the incident in Wellington.

A strange look came over his face, and she sensed his unease.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing, it's nothing." He turned his attention to the tray on her lap, and grabbed a slice of peach to hold over her mouth. "There is nothing more we can do until sunset."

Sunset?

She had no idea why he wanted to wait until nightfall, and was about to ask when he derailed her thoughts by offering her a sexy grin full of sensual promise. As her insides turned to mush, the look on his face bombarded her body with primal hunger.

"In the meantime you need to rest and eat." As her heart filled with love, he leaned in to her. He pressed his warm lips to hers and he whispered into her mouth, "You have to get your strength up."

As chemistry bubbled between them, his kiss fueled her hungers. “Actually,” she murmured, and crooked her finger to urge him closer, desperate to feel him inside her, to forge an intimate connection. “I think there is something else I need to get *up*.”

Lily pushed the tray aside and pulled Jaret into the bed with her. When his lips found hers, she temporarily forgot about all her worries, instead choosing to lose herself in him, body, heart, and soul. Just for a little while longer.

Soon day turned to night and he continued to make sweet, passionate love to her, taking her slowly, and gently, and touching her all over like it might be the last time. She tumbled into orgasm after orgasm and as pleasure morphed through her, her lids fell shut; she was so lost in a haze of love that life as she knew it would never be the same again.

As her body relaxed, she considered everything that had happened over the last few days. Everything from Harmony’s herbs, Kane’s warning, and Sunray’s sickness to Quinn’s orders to “change” the cousins, and her mission to gather intel. She hadn’t been outside in days, had no idea what was going on in the quaint town of Serene. She knew only that come nightfall, they’d have to face many obstacles, and answer many questions. But one thing continued to plague her: Would all three make it out of this mess alive?

Chapter Sixteen

Hours later something pulled Lily awake, and a strange sensation began brewing in the pit of her stomach. Disconcerted, she felt her body tighten at the noises coming from the spare bedroom. But she instantly relaxed and a smile pulled at her mouth when she realized it was none other than Jaret and Toby.

She tuned her senses as she heard snippets of their conversation. They both sounded tired, mentally exhausted, but despite that, they were still exercising caution by speaking in whispered words instead of telepathically—clearly they weren't about to risk any outsiders tapping into their conversation.

She swung her legs over the side of the mattress, prepared to join them. She wanted to find out where Toby had been all this time. But when her feet hit the floor, she heard Toby speaking quietly. He'd lowered his voice even more. But it wasn't low enough for her to miss the angst in his tone when he filled Jaret in on his trip to see their grandfather Maddox. Her head began spinning, and her stomach soured.

Toby had gone to see Maddox? What was going on?

Kane's warning words suddenly came back to haunt her. *"They'll use any means possible to get what they want."*

Instantly, her mind began racing a million miles an hour. Was it possible that Kane had been right all along, and the two cousins were simply baiting her? Was that why Jaret had neglected to tell her exactly where Toby had gone, and why he was waiting for nightfall? So he could sneak her out of the town under the cover of darkness?

Lady, could she have been so wrong about them? Thinking they were different from the rest? Was she so desperate for a sense of

belonging, to have someone love her and look at her the way Kane looked at Sunray, that she'd gone against her own best interests and disregarded common sense?

Lily took a long moment to absorb this turn of events, then straightened her shoulders and drew a calming breath. As her mind settled, she answered her own questions with absolute certainty.

Kane had been wrong about the two cousins. They might be fighting their own demons, but they were full of goodness, love, and empathy, and, most important, she believed in them. She knew she could pull a thread of magick and tap into Jaret's thoughts to prove her theory, but she also knew she didn't need to. Her intuition told her that Jaret hadn't mentioned Toby's trip because of his fierce need to protect her and shelter her from any outside threats.

Tugging the blankets around her, she continued to listen, and her entire being reached out to the two men when Toby explained how Maddox insisted they bring her to him right away, but that Toby wasn't about to do any such thing. He explained how he'd pulled a gun on Maddox, and how the cousins were both going to have to spend the rest of their lives in hiding, because if Maddox found them, he'd try to kill them.

Lily swallowed down the lump in her throat as Toby confirmed what she'd already concluded. The cousins were full of kindness and integrity and would go to great lengths to protect her.

They continued to whisper, and as she processed what they were saying, all the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. From their whispered words, she heard snippets about her heritage, that she was a descendant of both Brightons and Darklands, which accounted for their connection, their unexplainable chemistry. She also learned more about her exceptional powers—powers that Harmony had been nurturing, for her own purpose.

With her emotions in a tangled mess, Lily climbed from her bed,

and that's when she heard Toby describe how the Darkland men had killed Lily's entire coven because they wanted to breed her into the family—to harness her magick. Lily's feet skidded to a halt and tears stung her eyes.

Her heart twisted to think that so many people had died because of her, Jaret and Toby's grandmother included. She thought about her own mother, her coven, and the folks in Serene.

As mixtures of anger and fear, love, and empathy reverberated through her blood, she refocused and continued to eavesdrop on their private conversation just as Jaret began to detail his theory about Harmony.

Could it be true? Had the coven elder been in bed with the Darkland men like Jaret was suggesting? Had she really double-crossed his family in the past? And had she really been harboring Lily, and keeping her magick suppressed until she needed it?

Jaret continued to talk about Harmony and how she had to be stopped before she hurt the entire community and drew the attention of Maddox.

Lily shivered as a sense of foreboding moved through her bloodstream. What on earth was Harmony up to?

As she mulled over that worry, her heart grew heavy and she glanced to the stars. In a silent message, her amulet began to vibrate. Her stomach turned over in response to that warning. In that instant she made a vow to never let anyone use her or harness her magick for evil purposes. She hadn't been able to protect her family all those years ago, but now, because of Jaret and Toby, she was stronger both physically and mentally and she'd do whatever was necessary to safeguard those she loved from danger.

Understanding her fate, and that she'd rather die, sacrifice herself and bury her magick deep in the ground, than put anyone in harm's

way, she moved to her window and glanced out. As Serene's overseer, she had a town to protect and she would not, could not, let Harmony or the Darkland men hurt anyone else. Nor would she let Jaret and Toby endanger themselves any more than they already had, putting their very lives at risk by choosing to protect her.

She walked to her closet, knowing what she had to do and knowing that she had to do it alone.

As she warmed to the idea, a new calmness came over her and she squared her shoulders and dug deep to summon her inner strength and bravado. Hastily pulling on her clothes, she grabbed the packets of herbs off her nightstand and stuffed them into her pocket. The herbs were designed to increase magick, and before they fell into the wrong hands, she planned to bury them deep in the ground right along with her own magick.

She tiptoed silently to her back door. Instincts kicking in, she charged out into the night, losing herself in the darkness. When she sensed a movement in the shadows, she rushed her steps, but her mission came to a screeching halt when she ran smack-dab into a very familiar figure.

"Did you hear that?" Jaret angled his head and stared out into the night.

Toby silently crossed the room to glance out the window. "I heard something."

"Lily." Jaret took off for her bedroom, and flicked her light on. His glance darted around the room, but when his search for her came up empty, he cursed and spun around. "She's gone."

"Fuck," Toby bit out. "You think she heard us?"

"She heard something, and obviously that something scared her off." Jaret scanned the bedroom, looking for clues, and that was when he noticed the missing herbs. "We need to find Kane."

Twenty minutes later, the cousins, accompanied by Kane, Sunray, and Quinn, prowled through the night streets, searching for Lily's scent, a trace of her magick.

As they moved down Main Street, their footsteps echoing in the unusually quiet night, Jaret inhaled deeply, sent out a mind probe, then cursed under his breath. "She's completely closed herself off. I can't get a reading at all."

"I can't either," Quinn added, his dark, predatory eyes scanning the night.

"Keep trying," Kane said, and exchanged a look with his wife—a silent message.

"It might be the only way," she responded, with an easy roll of her shoulder.

"You're better at this than I am," Kane said, and brushed his thumb over her pink cheek. "But are you up for it?" Sunray, who looked to be in much better health now, lightly kissed him on the mouth before darting into the alleyway beside Vibes.

Understanding dawned in small fragments as Jaret watched her go. Christ, it amazed him how much these people all cared about one another. Yeah, he knew, he was thinking of them as *people*.

A moment later a tawny-colored wolf loped around the corner, and in an instinctive move, Jaret slipped his hand under his coat. Toby tensed beside him.

Kane put his hand over Jaret's to stop him, pride welling in his pewter eyes as his glance raced over his mate. "Be thankful it's her and not me. I can't tame my wolf nearly as well as she can."

With a swish of her tail, Sunray was off, her nose to the ground as she searched for Lily's scent. Kane grabbed her clothes from the alleyway, and keeping their distance, they followed her as she weaved her way around the trees, lamppost, and buildings until she stopped in front of the old town hall. She went down on her haunches, a low

growl coming from the depths of her throat.

Kane walked up to Sunray, blocking their line of sight as he spoke in quiet words. A moment later Sunray was back in her human form, Kane helping her with her clothes, and zipping her coat to her neck to protect her from the elements.

Jaret walked up beside them, warmth surging through him as he saw the love shining in Kane's eyes. There was something undeniably moving in the way Kane looked at his wife.

"Thank you," Jaret murmured to the two.

"She's in there," Sunray replied. "And she's not alone."

Anxiousness welled up inside him, and he clenched his fists. "Harmony?"

"Yes," Sunray confirmed.

Moving with stealth and precision, they slipped around back and Kane pushed on the back door. "It's open," he whispered, and even though Jaret found that odd, and had a sneaking suspicion that they were being baited, he was unable to silently communicate it to anyone except Toby.

Their footsteps echoed in the old town hall, and dust rained from the ceiling as all five quietly searched the building.

"Down there," Quinn whispered. He opened the basement door and Jaret cringed when the old hinges moaned like a wounded animal. Jaret glanced down the steep staircase. The basement was dark and dank; the moonlight streaming in through the small window provided their only source of light.

With his exceptional night vision, Quinn led the way as they all descended the stairs. Pressing his back against the wall, Jaret resisted the urge to give in to impulse and go in guns blazing. Instead he moved quietly and stealthily as they all inched forward into the unknown.

When they reached the bottom, they carefully began to spread out,

but when he spotted Lily in the center of a pentagram, an empty packet of herbs beside her, his heart raced and he rushed forward. Every buried emotion he had came rushing to the surface when her glance locked on his. But before he could reach her, a gust of wind came out of nowhere. It lifted him clear off his feet and tossed him against the wall like he was nothing more than a rag doll.

“You’re too late.”

Harmony stepped from the shadows as Toby helped Jaret to his feet, her razor-sharp laugh raising the hairs on his nape and sending chills down his spine. Harmony’s gaze lit on Sunray and she made a *tsking* sound.

“I see you’re still alive.” Harmony gestured toward Lily. “I should have known better than to count on her to do anything right.”

Kane growled, but Sunray put her hand on his shoulder to calm him. “She’s stronger than you think,” Sunray assured the witch. When Harmony gave a humorless laugh, Sunray added, “You’ll see.”

Sunray’s unwavering belief in Lily warmed Jaret. He turned toward his cousin and exchanged a silent message. With unhurried movements, they both inched along the concrete wall in opposite directions, desperate to close in on Harmony.

Harmony waved a dismissive hand. “Doesn’t matter. After I steal her power, you’ll be no match for me, Sunray. None of you will.”

Harmony lifted her arms and the wind picked up. Lily made a small gasp and clutched her stomach. “I’m sorry, Sunray,” Lily whispered. “I didn’t know what I was doing. Now, please, you all need to get out of here. Leave before you get hurt.”

Ignoring her plea, the men shimmied along the wall.

Sunray worked to distract the coven elder. “Why now, Harmony? After all this time, why now?”

“How long did you think we could go on living a secret life like this? Times are changing, my little pet,” she said. “The PTF have found our

home.” She gave a light, obnoxious laugh. “And they’re Darkland men at that.” She cast a quick glance Lily’s way. “I knew she was a gem the first time I set eyes on her, which was why I needed her family dead so I could have her all to myself.”

“So you *were* in bed with our ancestors?” Jaret asked.

“My, my, Jaret, I’ve underestimated your intelligence.”

“When they find you, they’ll kill you,” Toby added.

She pointed an accusatory finger at Jaret and then Toby. “I never planned on being found, but now that you two have infiltrated, it’s only a matter of time before our secret communities are exposed, and the Darkland men come for me. I was safe here, and happy to ride it out for as long as it lasted, but now it’s time for me to possess her power and flee before this entire town, and the people in it, are terminated.” She gave a wry grin and turned to Sunray. “And after what you did to Vall, taking you out by your friend’s hands was simply an added bonus.”

“You’re wrong,” Jaret said, knowing Lily could hear him despite her near-catatonic state. “I love her and I’d never do anything to hurt her or expose this place.” As the wind rushed over Lily’s body, and her head lolled to the side, Jaret steeled himself. “Lily,” he whispered. “You don’t have to do this alone.”

Kane came up beside him. Standing shoulder to shoulder in this fight, he said, “Lily, you need to fight this.”

Her eyes were blank as they settled on Kane. “Why? Why would I want to fight it?”

Jaret palmed the air and took in her ashen pallor. “Lily, your energy is growing. If you don’t expel it, you’re going to die.”

“I’d rather sacrifice myself and bury my magick deep in the ground before I put anyone else in harm’s way.”

“Your magick is mine, Lily,” Harmony warned as she increased the intensity of the storm.

With apparent effort, Lily shook her head. "I won't let you steal it, Harmony." She put her hand on her belly. "I'm going to keep it in here."

Jaret's heart raced and the love he felt for her completely overwhelmed him. He would not—could not—lose her. "If you do, you'll die."

"If dying means protecting those I love, then so be it."

"Lily, sweetheart. We're all here for you and we need to all work together to protect this town," Jaret said, a new urgency in his voice.

Toby piped in and spoke from the other side of the room. "Lily, I won't let Maddox anywhere near here."

Genuine concern laced Quinn's voice when he added, "Neither will I."

"Lily," Sunray spoke. "You need to release the energy before it consumes you."

Jaret's heart pounded so hard he was certain it was going to burst from his chest. He softened his tone. "Lily, please. I need you more than I've ever needed anyone or anything." He tapped his fingers over his heart. "Do you believe in me? In us? In family?" He paused for a moment, then said, "Look around. We're all family here. All of us. And families need to stick together." When a small noise sounded in her throat, he rushed on, "You don't need to bury your magick to protect us; you need to harness it. You control it, Lily—it doesn't control you. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

"We need you, Lily," Toby assured her. "We all do."

Jaret swallowed and cataloged the room. As he looked for help from his new comrades, his new family, the hard-nosed vampire cleared his throat and attempted softness. "We're all in this together, Lily."

Lily blinked, looked around at her circle of friends, and caught Jaret's glance. As he looked at her with all the love inside him, her

violet eyes mirrored his every emotion. As her glance moved over his face, searching, her lids suddenly widened and her guard lowered.

“What?” he asked.

“That look,” she murmured. Her voice was laced with raw emotions when she added in a soft, barely there tone, “I never thought anyone would ever look at me like that. . . .” As she tried to reach out to him, her face softened and her body relaxed.

And that was when Jaret’s world came crashing down around him. As her energy swirled around them, his hands began shaking. His mind spun. A lump lodged in his stomach.

Oh Jesus, what had they done?

“Oh, fuck. Lily, no,” he growled, desperate to stop her from giving in to her emotions and lowering her guard.

“Fools,” Harmony bit out, and widened her arms. The wind picked up, blowing dust and debris around them as Lily slumped forward. A moment later her raven let loose a shrilling sound and took to the air.

Now aware of Harmony’s strategy, hot blood flowed through Jaret’s veins, emotions ripping through him as Lily’s raven twisted in the wind. Her feathers flapped as she got captured in the powerful vortex. They’d been tricked. All of them. Harmony had been expecting them. She needed them to soften Lily before she could steal her magick.

Toby read his thoughts, and as energy flowed from Lily’s body to Harmony, Toby shot Jaret a look. Without giving it a second thought, he screamed, “*Now!*”

In a swift move that took the coven elder by surprise, both Jaret and Toby threw themselves at Harmony, stopping the transfer short. The volatile energy struck their nerve endings like a bolt of lightning, and Jaret’s body began to convulse and spasm. The wind died down and the rancid smell of burning flesh was the last thing Jaret recalled before the cousins fell to the ground in a lifeless slump.

"No," Lily bit out, her body jolting awake as she gasped and sucked in a huge breath. Lily angled her head in time to see Harmony stumble to her feet and stand over the men Lily loved, her hands working frantically to draw the energy from the air.

Fear and panic welled up inside Lily, making it hard to focus. She shot a glance around the room, looking for something, anything, to stop the coven elder.

When her glance locked with Sunray's, the lycan rushed to Lily's side. "Lily, you need to put a stop to this."

Jaret's words came rushing back. *"You don't need to bury your magick to protect us; you need to harness it. You control it, Lily—it doesn't control you."*

As she absorbed those words, she knew what she needed to do. She held her hands out, palms up, recalling all her energy and drawing it back to her. She breathed deep, feeling it build and grow deep inside her belly. Before it could consume her, she threw a bolt at Harmony, finally put a stop to her plans as she sent her smashing against the cement foundation. When Harmony let loose a cry and fell with a thud, Lily climbed to her feet and rushed to Kane and Quinn, who were both down on their knees beside Jaret and Toby.

When she saw the solemn looks on their faces, she gasped and swallowed down a cry. "No," she exclaimed, refusing to believe that she'd lost the men she loved. Her eyes searched their faces and her mind raced, trying to right this wrong. These men had sacrificed their lives to save her and they did not deserve this fate.

As dark silence fell over the room, she felt a hand on her shoulder. She glanced up to see Sunray. "Use your strength. Embrace your magick."

As hope moved into her stomach, Lily closed her eyes and summoned her growing magick. Soon her energy began moving

through her body, and electricity sizzled around her. She directed that energy to her healing hands, and placed her palms over their hearts, fueling them with her nurturing love.

A moment later their eyes sprang open, and when Lily felt the warmth of their breath, a cry ripped from her throat.

Jaret grabbed her, his worried glance racing over her body. "Jesus, Lily, are you okay?" Toby gripped her arm and gave a comforting squeeze.

"I'm okay now," she whispered, and sagged against him.

"Oh, God, Lily, I thought I'd lost you." As he drew her in tight, Kane helped Toby to his feet, while Quinn gathered Harmony's weakened body into his arms. When Harmony shifted in protest, the vamp touched his fingers to her temple and promptly subdued her.

As warm tears poured down Lily's cheeks, she turned to her friends and choked on her words as she whispered, "Thank you."

Sunray smiled and glanced at Kane. The lycan guide slipped her hand into her mate's. "I think we need to give these two a minute alone." Sunray's silver eyes narrowed as she turned to Toby. She arched a brow. "You okay?"

As Lily watched the exchange, she knew exactly what her friend was really asking, and she loved her for the acceptance and compassion she was showing these two men who'd originally set out to destroy their community.

Toby gave Jaret and Lily a warm smile, his way of offering his blessings to the two, and for that, Lily was grateful. She loved both men, but undeniably, her heart belonged with Jaret. Then Toby pulled a face when he looked down at his charred clothes and skin, and said, "I guess I've been better?"

Sunray winked at him. "Maybe Sophie will have something to help you feel better."

Quinn shifted Harmony's body in his arms, and as he ascended the

stairs with the others, Lily turned her focus back to Jaret. He brushed her hair from her face, and the warmth in his eyes touched her soul. She ran her hands over his wounds, testing out her new skills, and healing him as she practiced.

Her words came out breathy when she said, "Let's get you home and cleaned up."

"*Home*," he murmured under his breath as he glanced at the floor like he was taking a moment to process. A few seconds later his eyes locked on hers and a smile split his lips. "I think I like the sound of that, little one. I think I like the sound of that."

Clinging to each other, they both climbed to their feet, and Jaret slipped one arm around her waist and tugged her to him. His voice was husky and rough when he brushed his thumb over her cheek and asked, "You do know that I love you, right?"

Lily laughed and her body caught on fire just from his heated gaze. "I love you too, Jaret."

He pressed his lips to her forehead and there was so much love and empathy in his voice when he murmured, "I'll never let anything happen to you, Lily. I plan on spending the rest of my life here in Serene protecting you."

Inching back slightly, she held her hands out and examined them. She grinned up at Jaret as she felt the power running through her veins. "Ah, Jaret, I suspect it is *I* who will be protecting *you*. . . ."

With that, Jaret laughed out loud, and drew her mouth to his for a deep, soul-searching kiss. "Maybe we should go home and wrestle it out."

"I do believe I like the sound of that," she murmured, giving herself over to him, body, heart, and soul.

Epilogue

Things in Serene had returned to normal: Sunray's health was up to par, the Darkland cousins had both found love and settled in the town, and Harmony's deceit was being dealt with by Devon, head of Serene's disciplinary board. Quinn knew it was time to talk to Kane, to put together a plan of action and figure out what was going on in the Colorado branch.

He made his way to Vibes, pushed through the front door, and moved through the throngs of people. He found Kane seated in a corner booth waiting for him. Quinn nodded, and eased himself into the seat opposite him.

Getting right to the point, he said, "I need to go back."

"I suspected as much," Kane said, and scrubbed his hand over his chin. "Communications still seem to be down."

"Everything is down," Quinn added, thinking about the way he'd walked straight through the armored gate that had been put in place to protect the secret community. "And everyone is in hiding."

Incredulous, Kane asked, "There was nobody on the streets? Not a single person?"

"Nope. I could see a few people moving about behind their curtains, and even when I knocked, no one came out. I had to break into their town hall to gain shelter before sunrise. Then before I could investigate, I had to hightail it out of there at sunset and meet with Toby."

"What the fuck is going on . . . ?"

"I need more time," Quinn explained.

"You can't go alone."

Quinn leaned back into the seat and stretched his long legs out.

“Alone is the only way I’ll go, Kane.”

“Quinn—”

“You know how I work.”

A long pause and then, “Fine. We’ll call a council meeting tomorrow night. Once we apprise the other overseers of the situation, you can leave.”

Quinn made a move to rise, but when Kane grabbed his arm, he stopped, and caught the lycan’s stern glance. “Be careful out there, Quinn.”

Quinn’s skin prickled at the thought of who or *what* had scared an entire town of powerful, supernatural beings into hiding and what it would take to get to the bottom of matters.

“No risks, okay?” Kane said.

No risks? Quinn mused.

Impossible.

About the Author

A former government financial officer, **Cathryn Fox** graduated from university with a bachelor of business degree. Shortly into her career, Cathryn figured out that corporate life wasn't for her. Needing an outlet for her creative energy, she turned in her briefcase and calculator and began writing erotic romance full-time. Cathryn enjoys writing dark paranormals and humorous contemporaries. She lives in eastern Canada with her husband, two kids, and chocolate Labrador retriever.

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In three days she'd be gone. Erased. Buried.

Dead . . .

Today, however, today was an entirely different story. Not only was Jaclyn Vasenty still alive and breathing—she was hell-bent on living the last few hours of her life to the fullest.

She glanced at the well-endowed man powering upward between her thighs, taking note of his smoldering blue eyes, dark, shoulder-length hair, the clench of his firm jaw, and the small beads of perspiration trickling down his bronzed skin. Every pleasure-seeking nerve in her body came alive as her gaze traveled downward to the tuft of curly black hair smashing against her naked, passion-drenched pubis as he drove his cock all the way up inside her.

Scrumptious . . .

Oh yeah, she was going to enjoy today, she mused.

She swung her long chestnut curls over her shoulders to expose her aching breasts. Brian's hungry eyes latched onto her pale pebbled nipples. When his tongue darted out to wet his sensuous mouth, a small moan slipped from the curve of her well-kissed lips and caught the attention of those around her. A few couples stepped closer, some eager to get a better look, while others coveted to get in on the salacious action. Jaclyn's libido fed off the sexual energy swirling around her, the intoxicating euphoria drawing her deeper and deeper

into a cocoon of lust and desire.

Just knowing the voyeurs in the club were watching her fuck the dark-haired Adonis strapped to the plush sex chair, while she rode him like a feral animal in heat, brought on wild and wicked sensations.

She looked past Brian and glanced around Risqué, the erotic club where anything and everything goes. She took a moment to observe the explicit sex acts taking place on the nearby dance floor.

All in various stages of undress, hot naked bodies writhed in sync to the sensuous beat booming from the nearby speakers. Wet pussies and hard cocks were out in abundance tonight, all striving for one common goal—to get off using any means possible. In their single-minded pursuit of pleasure, some were fucking while others were licking, sucking, nibbling, or burying their faces in the juncture between their lovers' legs.

Her entire body vibrated in bliss.

As she took pleasure in the show, a rush of liquid heat rocketed through her and brought on one hell of a violent shudder. Jaclyn's pussy dripped in response to the stimuli, and her clit tightened with primal need, screaming for a little of that tongue action from Brian while she watched the hedonistic acts from afar.

God, she would miss this when she was dead.

With her pussy hot, wet, and ripe for the taking, she bent forward and loosened the silk rope from one of Brian's shackled hands. Settling for fingers over fellatio, she inched upward, her actions conveying without words exactly what she wanted from him. And she expected nothing less. Brian, the masterful lover that he was, shot her a grin and deftly parted her twin lips. With little finesse, he unceremoniously scraped the rough pad of his thumb over her inflamed clit, his perfect ministrations keeping her hovering on the precipice.

“Oh, yes . . . ,” she murmured, grinding her fleshy nub against him until pleasure bled into pain. “So good . . .”

“That’s it, baby. Let me take you to heaven,” he whispered and bucked against her, so his rock-hard erection toyed with her oversensitized G-spot.

Lust prowled through her and urged her on. Jaclyn cupped her engorged breasts, lifted herself clear off his cock, and then swiftly impaled herself onto him. *Jesus . . .* As Brian’s impressive length speared her, his girth stretched open the tight walls of her cunt until a creamy release was merely a stroke away.

She hungered to prolong the pleasure, to continue their fuck session clear on through to next week. But it couldn’t continue and she damn well knew it. Because come Monday morning at eight a.m.—merely thirty-five hours and fifteen minutes away—she’d be dead.

Well, not *dead* in the biblical, or even the Wikipedia, sense of the word, but certainly in the spiritual sense. She knew her essence for life, the uninhibited sexual force deep inside that drove her pleasure-seeking hormones, would slowly be snuffed out until she became the proper girl her family demanded and her upper-class, high-society community expected.

As a privileged socialite residing in Chicago’s Gold Coast, she was supposed to play by her society’s stringent rules, despite the fact that deep down she never felt she belonged. At times she attributed her loneliness to adoption; other times she was certain the hollow feeling stemmed from something else entirely—something she couldn’t quite put her finger on, something that was just out of her grasp.

Nevertheless, in three days she’d have to bury her wicked ways and start playing the part of the good girl. Not an easy task considering she’d been sexually ravenous since hitting adolescence. Her stomach dipped in dismay at the thought, already mourning the death of her

wild, sexual spirit.

It wasn't her fault she'd been born with a sex drive that would rival any man's, and she certainly hadn't meant for her enjoyment of kinky sex, ménages, voyeurism, exhibitionism, or BDSM to bring scandal to her family's name. Nor did she think her untamed, passionate nature would cause investors in her father's multimillion-dollar cosmetic business to turn skittish. And with the threat of a corporate takeover, any more rumblings about her after-hour activities would cause nothing but trouble for a company already treading on shaky ground.

But her daily desire for wild sex didn't mean she'd stand by while her father's empire collapsed around her. She was a high achiever, intelligent, resourceful, with a hard-earned marketing degree to back up her credentials—in addition to being her father's sole heir. It was a shame no one on the board could see past the paparazzi pictures. Sure, she went to extreme measures to keep her private indiscretions, well . . . *private*, and she maintained a professional demeanor at the office, but as heir to a multimillion-dollar company, she continually found herself in the media spotlight—and not in a favorable way. Why couldn't anyone see that her sexual appetite would in no way hinder her ability to run her father's empire?

She pushed back a cold shiver and shelved those thoughts to the back recesses of her mind. It was not the time for thinking about such bleak matters. Right now was the time to focus on the orgasmic pleasure Brian was bestowing upon her. She was going to need these hot, erotic memories to draw on later when she found herself all alone in the quaint, isolated town of Serene, New Hampshire. A town where she suspected everyone lived behind white picket fences, resided in matching houses, and had two point four kids. The perfect location for her to mend her bad-girl ways and start over.

If the town was anything like Silver Springs, the neighboring community, where her grandmother used to reside—and Jaclyn

suspected it was—she knew there wasn't a chance in hell she'd find herself another bad boy like the one between her legs. Which was exactly why Serene was the perfect spot to try on the good-girl persona and masquerade as something she wasn't. The less temptation she found in suburbia, the better. Because when it came right down to it, where sex was concerned, she had little to no self-control.

If she was honest with herself, Jaclyn felt obligated to do something to appease her parents. She owed them that much. Twenty-four years ago when her biological mother had ditched her in a Chicago subway station hours after giving birth to her, only to end up dead a few blocks away, Benjamin and Marie Vasenty rescued her from a life of foster care. They had also given her every luxury and privilege one could ask for.

She certainly hadn't wanted to disappoint them, or for them to abandon her because of her wicked ways. Sex had always felt right, never dirty or wrong. She had yet to find one man who could completely and thoroughly sate the incessant ache inside her. At least not for any length of time. When it came right down to it, she suspected no such man existed.

The door to the club opened and closed, and a pair of intense dark eyes swept through the room before settling on her. As she took in the man's watchful gaze, a wicked grin tweaked the corners of his mouth and seduced her already-heightened senses. Heart racing wildly, Jaclyn turned her attention back to Brian and redirected her thoughts.

She thrust her chest forward and placed one breast in front of his lips in offering. He flicked his wet tongue over her marbled nipple. The heat of his mouth felt like fire on her skin and escalated the tension between her legs. Brian continued to work his finger over her soaked clit. Small, sinuous circles that drew out her pleasure as he feverishly pumped his thick cock in and out of her hot, tight pussy.

Pressure brewed inside her, demanding to be addressed before she went up in a burst of flames. In no time at all, every ounce of bottled lust rose to the surface, and a powerful orgasm ripped the air from her lungs. She gripped the chair and tossed her head from side to side. Her mind shut down and she gave a broken gasp, her muscles tightening and contracting as a violent shudder overtook her. Her hands went to Brian's hair. She grabbed a fistful, and she pressed against him harder, riding, rubbing and grinding out every delicious wave of ecstasy.

Goddamn, that felt good....

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