

BOOK 1 OF THE SECOND SIGHT SERIES



DAYWALKER'S
STONE

MARTHA WOODS

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MARTHA WOODS

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CHAPTER 1



The small white candle on the table between us sputters once, twice, and then goes out.

Maybe he'll get the message now and stop talking! I think to myself.

I am on one of my more disastrous Tinder dates. Matt and I seem to have very different opinions on how the night is going. The man has talked us through several rounds of drinks and a three-course meal, not once stopping to come up for air. I have been doing my best to look interested. Apparently, I've played the part too well. Now Matt eyes the charred snub of wax, pauses for a breath, and then keeps right on talking.

Seriously, dude? Now he is telling some story about the time he and his roommate thought it would be a good idea to jump off the roof of their house onto a trampoline. If this is supposed to be impressing me, it isn't. I sigh and let my gaze slip out the window. Now might be the time to bring out the big guns. Show him I'm not interested in hearing any more. I stare out across Cary Street. It has grown dark during our time in the restaurant. The glow of street lamps has replaced the afternoon sun. Matt is still droning on, ignoring my disinterest, so I let my mind wander out into the night. And somewhere on the edge of a pool of light, I think I see a man. He is standing very still. So still in

fact, that it is a little unnerving. I feel the hairs on my arms begin to rise. I shiver and rub my tingling skin, turning my gaze back to my date for a moment. When I look back to where the mysterious man was, he is gone. Ok, maybe being stuck with Matt isn't such a bad thing after all.

I snap back to rational thinking, and fluorescent lighting, when I realize we are the only customers left in the restaurant. And Matt is still talking, oblivious. How did I let myself go on a date with such a bore of a man? Around us, wait staff are sweeping the floor and wiping down table tops. A few are parked at the bar, shift beers in hand, laughing with each other about some ridiculous customer who stormed in earlier that evening. How I wish I could join them now. I'd regale them with the tale of this absurd man sitting across from me. They'd laugh. Then we'd all take a shot together, bonded through our mutual terrible experiences.

Instead, I am being held hostage at this rickety little table in the front window, watching Matt wave his hands around as he finishes telling yet another story about himself. Fascinating! Now, don't get me wrong, I am not a rude woman. I was raised right by my southern grandma. But there is only so much I can take. The bartender is starting to glare and the floor staff are putting up the chairs in the back of the restaurant. It's time to go. I cut my hand out across Matt's waving ones and flag down our waiter.

"We'll take our check please!" The saint of a man reaches into his black apron and pulls out our checkbook, ready to go. I go to grab it as he hands it to us. I already have my credit card out. I just want to get this date over with. But Matt is faster.

"I win!" he exclaims with a sly smile and grabs the book from our waiter's hand.

Crap.

Matt then makes a big show of not even looking at the bill, instead just placing his card on top of the checkbook, a smug look painted across his face, and handing it back to our waiter. How obnoxious can this guy get? At least this is almost over.

Our waiter brings the book back to us and thanks us. As he's turning around to walk back to the bar, he looks me dead in the eye in one of the most sympathetic stares I've ever been given. I return the look and, as I'm standing up from my chair, slip a \$20 under my water glass. Thankfully, Matt doesn't notice. I'm sure he's not a great tipper and I want our server to know I'm a decent human, even if my date isn't.

I reach for my coat, which I'd hung on the back of my seat, only to find it isn't there. Somehow Matt has moved around me without my noticing and is already holding the blue cotton blazer in his clammy hands.

"M'lady," he croons, holding it up for me to slide my arms through. I sigh. And then obediently turn around to let him dress me in my coat. I wait to roll my eyes until I'm facing away from him. We walk out to the front porch and my stomach drops when he leans over to me and says in what he must believe is a seductive voice, "Wait here, I'll go get the car." *Crap.* I'd forgotten he'd picked me up and I don't have enough time to think of a decent reason for why I should just take an Uber instead. I was so close to freedom. Oh well. I lean against a nearby railing and wait for Matt to come back. I'll be home soon enough. In my queen sized bed, under my goose-down comforter. My cat, Oliver, is waiting for me. We'll watch Netflix together like we do every night. And drink a glass of wine. A huge glass. Maybe two.

And there it is again! A flash of movement across the street. A whisper, barely audible. Is it two people over there? And why are they hiding? I peer out into the night. Around me, Cary Street is emptying out as people finish dinners and bar staff begin filing out of the earlier

closing restaurants. Couples walk briskly past me, on to late night bars and late night plans. And here I am, staring out into the shadows of storefronts and closed bars, trying to figure out just who or what I am seeing out there. *Maybe I should just go check it out quickly*, I think to myself. *It'll take Matt a few minutes to bring the car around*. I look around me, checking for traffic. When I see the coast was clear, I dive across the road.

Something is making a noise over there, I'm sure of it. My foot is hovering over the curb on the other side of the street, about to land, when I hear my name. First, it is a whisper, "*Alexandra*," in the dark.

Then, it is a whistle and a shout, "Alex! Hey, Alex! Over here!" Matt is back, pulled up in front of the restaurant steps in his blue Mercedes. I put my foot back on the ground. So close. I turn around to walk back to Matt's car. As I do, I feel a breeze slide past me. Something about it feels too solid to be just the wind. But whatever it is has moved too fast for me to see. What is going on? Maybe I don't need those glasses of wine when I get home.

"What were you doing over there?" Matt asks me as I slide into the passenger seat. The first question he's asked me about myself all night! Buttery tan leather envelopes me. Man, wouldn't it be nice to have rich parents like his? I could get used to this. Too bad their son is a cretin.

"I thought I heard someone call my name. Must have just been the wind or something." I deflect the question. I don't want him to know how spooked I am.

"Silly girl!" Matt laughs. In the dark of the car, I cringe. Universe, please let this car ride end quickly! He punches on the radio and the air around us fills with the blare of that cheap rap music that white frat boys love. *Oh God. This cannot be over quick enough*. I slump down in my seat and hoped no one I know sees me. Impossible. This is Richmond and I am a bartender. We may be big enough to be called a city, but at

heart this is still a small, southern town and everyone knows their bar staff. Still, I slink down as low as I can. Matt won't notice. He's busy telling me another story. This time about the day he swam across the river at Pony Pasture and almost got hit by a passing kayaker. Too bad they missed.

Traffic lights paint the road in front of us. Red, then green, sometimes yellow. People scuttle through them in front of us. Murals splash across the walls of so many of the buildings around us. In the daylight, these are some of my favorite paintings. They're bright and interesting. I've always loved them. In the night, they take on a different persona. There's something almost sinister about them. The cracks and chinks in the walls they're painted on are much more apparent now, without the direct light of the sun. They pit the surfaces of the murals and creep across them. Colors that are bright during the day have faded and washed out. Shadows dominate the images.

Soon, the car passes out of Cary Town and we continue across the city to Church Hill, my neighborhood. History buffs know the place as the home of the famous St. John's Church, where Patrick Henry gave his famous "Live free or die!" speech. I know it as the most beautiful neighborhood in an already beautiful city, and the place I'm lucky enough to call home.

I move up a little in the seat as we continue our drive. We are out of the brightly lit, busy streets of Carytown. Church Hill is much quieter at night. Trees line the old streets, many of which are still the old cobble stone. The rest are pitted and pocked with deep potholes. Richmond is apparently banking on you spending more time paying attention to the scenery around you than the road under your car. It is only when Matt hits one of those potholes that I realize with a lurch that we aren't heading in the right direction to get to my house.

"Uh, Matt?"

"Yeah?"

"You know I live off 30th street, right?"

"Yeah!"

"So... why are we over on this side of the neighborhood?" I look out my window at the James River winding along below us. It was apparently this view that in 1737 caused William Byrd to put down his traveling bags and settle what would become the city of Richmond. The rest is history, I suppose. But, while the view is certainly a striking one, we are still far from my street and my house.

"Oh. I thought we could grab one more drink at Poe's. Finish the night off right!"

Great. Lovely. This is exactly what I want to be doing right now!

"Uh Matt, I'm kind of tired. I really just want to go home."

"Just one drink!" he wheedles me. He's determined to drag this night on for as long as possible. I can't fathom why. There's no way he has more stories about himself. A girl can dream, can't she?

CHAPTER 2



Matt swings the car into the parking lot of Poe's. The place is still pretty busy, despite the later hour. It's Church Hill's gritty old dive bar, perched on the edge of a hill overlooking the river. Nothing about this place is fancy. And that's exactly why I love it. I come here quite often actually. Maybe too often some weeks. But tonight, the thought of sharing my bar with Matt is anything but appealing. Nevertheless, I drag myself out of his Mercedes and walk with him up to the doors of the bar. He makes a grab for my hand as we walk in, I guess hoping I would think this is a cute gesture? I manage to slip my fingers out of his clammy grasp, instead pulling my hand up to straighten my hair. I have to give him credit, instead of making another grab for my fingers, he follows my lead and shoves his now balled fist into his pocket. Only his mouth betrays him. It is set in a tight line as he steers me towards a bright corner table.

"Drink requests?" he quips.

"Whisky. Neat please."

Matt turns on his heel and stalks over to the bar to get our drinks. I take this time to scan the room for any friends who may be able to help me save myself from this night. And of course, it's just my luck that I can't find a single face I know. Typical. Your friends are never around

when you need them. I do see a lot of faces that I don't know, though. That's odd. Poe's is a little off the beaten track and its dive bar status normally keeps all but the most determined tourists away at night. Church Hill didn't use to be a very safe neighborhood, especially for out of towners at night. Even a decade after the city started cleaning it up and creating a nice family neighborhood, we still can't compete with Carytown or Shockoe Bottom for tourist appeal. And that's just fine by me.

But that makes it all the odder that I'm seeing so many faces I don't know here tonight.

Matt walks back and hands me my whisky. He has a Budweiser for himself. I feel bad for my stunt with my hand earlier, so to try to make things up to him, I start the conversation. Plus, maybe if I'm the first one to talk, he won't be able to launch into one of his platitudes.

"Is there something going on in town this week? Lots of new faces here."

"I don't know. I was actually thinking the same thing myself."

Alright, this is going well so far. We're having real conversation! Ok, so it's a little stunted so far, but it's better than anything we had earlier. Matt doesn't seem to agree, though. And for the first time that night, he has nothing to say. So we sip on our drinks in silence. I continue my scan of my fellow patrons. Three in particular catch my eye. Two men and one woman. They are leaning over a small table in Poe's shadowy side room. They seem to be arguing with each other. But I can't be sure, they are whispering. Suddenly the woman turns and looks at me and I almost drop the glass I am holding.

She is stunning. I feel like a deer in the headlights staring back at her. Her eyes are every different color. First they seem green, then blue, then a golden brown. It must be a trick of the light. No one's eyes can shift shade like that. And it is so seamless, just colors converging in on

one another. It doesn't even seem strange. She is very pale. In fact, her skin almost glows in the darkness around her. She is wearing long sleeves, so I didn't notice before she turned her face to me. One of the men laughs at something on the TV screen behind the bar. A deep, wolf-like laugh. Almost a bark. The woman turns back to her partners.

I look back at Matt, hoping he has seen the woman too. To my dismay, he seems to have gotten over the insult of my scorned hand hold and is merrily chatting away about himself again. *Sigh*. Well, I can do this for a little while longer I guess. So, I resume my nod and smile game for the next twenty minutes or so. Out of the corner of my eye, I keep watch on the three at the shadowy table. I can't quite put my finger on it, but something about them seems familiar.

After fifteen minutes of pretending to be interested in a story about his dog eating a sock, I decide I can reward myself with an escape to the bathroom. I excuse myself and hurry to the two-stalled bathroom in the back. I am standing at the sink, leaning my forehead against the cool glass of a mirror, when she walks in.

"Hi," she extends her smooth, pale hand to me, "My name is Lisette."

"Uh, hi. I'm Alex," I respond, unsure of exactly how to handle this situation. I've met plenty of women in bar restrooms. And had some great conversations with them. But normally our talks take a more roundabout route. Someone will complement a shirt or lipstick. Another one will be crying about an ex and everyone will flock around her to wipe her tears and tell her how pretty she is. Female friendships are strange things, forged in the superficial details of our lives. Half the time, I don't even think I get my fellow bathroom-goers names, content to know only a chest size or makeup brand. I've certainly never had someone just walk straight up to me and introduce themselves.

Lisette doesn't seem fazed by my reaction. Instead, she takes up the space at the sink next to mine before pulling a tube of lipstick out of her

bag. I'm realize I'm still just standing there, ogling this woman, so I clear my throat, "So Lisette, I've never seen you at Poe's before. Do you live in Richmond?"

"No," she's filling in her lips now. *Wow, her lips are really red! I wonder if that's all the lipstick or if some of that's just natural color? I'll have to ask.* "Family reunion." She snaps the tube closed and turns to look at me with those eyes that are still constantly shifting and changing, even in the brighter, fluorescent light of this bathroom.

"Oh! I just thought you and your friends looked familiar for some reason. Are they your brothers? Do either of them live here? Sorry, I'm a bartender, so I see a lot of faces and I swear I've seen yours somewhere!"

Lisette smiles at me, "Nope! We're all from out of town. Though, we're thinking of moving here. I like this place."

"Oh, cool! Yeah Richmond's great. Well, if you do end up here, stop by Roberta's sometime. I work there Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. Nights. It's in an area called The Devil's Triangle. Kind of near VCU."

"I like it," she says, "I'll be sure to pay you a visit. Well, Alex," she extends her hand to me again, "It was great meeting you. Until next time then." And with that she saunters out of the bathroom, leaving me standing there agape.

I splash some water on my face and steel myself to go back out there to Matt. Ok. I can do this. Not much longer. Then bed, Netflix, kitty.

I return to our table. I see Matt's almost done with his beer, so I down the rest of my whiskey and then put on my sweetest smile, "Hey Matt, this has been great and all, but I really need to be getting home. I forgot to feed Oliver before I left my house and he's probably hungry and wondering where I am."

"Who's Oliver?" he asks. Oh right. He doesn't know because tonight has been all about him. How could I forget?

"My cat," I respond. Deadpan.

“Oh, don’t they usually have a self-feeder or something? See, my roommate’s cat just has this huge plastic thing–”

No. Not another story. I cut him off, “Not Oliver! He’s getting kind of chubby, so I like to feed him myself. Otherwise he’d just eat everything, you know?” I giggle, hoping this will help my cause.

Apparently it does. “Ok, let’s get you home to your cat. You sure?” He looks at me hopefully.

“Sorry. Got to take care of the kitty!” I give my best “aww shucks” face and shrug. *Please God, Universe, Morgan Freeman, let this date end soon!*

Matt gets up from his chair and I follow suit and we begin our walk back out to the parking lot. We have to pass by Lisette and the two men on the way. She flashes a smile and waves to me as I pass. “Night Alex!”

“Night Lisette. Nice meeting you.”

The other two just stare as we walk by. Something about them both has the hair raised up on the back of my neck. I feel the same way I did earlier in the night, standing outside that restaurant in Carytown. I don’t like it.

Matt opens my door for me and I slide into the passenger seat of his car. I have to hand it to him that while he may be a total bore in the conversation department, in other ways he’s quite the gentleman. We begin the drive back to my house in silence. I think Matt’s finally realized I’m not enjoying this night as much as he’d thought I was earlier.

He’s driving too fast. The roads up here are old. They twist and wind and are lined with potholes. I try not to worry. We’re almost back to my house. Just another minute or two.

Something rushes in front of the car, too dark and too fast for either of us to see clearly what it was. We both feel the bump though, as Matt hits it.

“What the hell was that?” Matt exclaims as and the Mercedes begins to spin on the dark road. We stop with a lurch as we hit another car, parked on the side of the road. For a moment, he and I sit in shocked quiet. I turn to look at him and he faces me. His eyes are wide. I know I look the same way. I see his hands shaking on the steering wheel.

I recover first. “We should try to find it, whatever it was. It might be hurt out there.”

He stammers, “Yeah,” but makes no moves to get out of the car. Looks like I’ll have to be the brave one here.

I get out of the car and begin to walk up the darkened street to find whatever it was we hit in the night. It was moving fast, but it can’t have gone too far. I search the ground for spots of blood, bits of fur, anything that might tell me more about what just happened. Matt seems to have come to his senses, because I hear a car door open behind me and his heavy footsteps head in my direction. I jump as a light flashes across my feet. Then I realize Matt has brought a flashlight with him. Well, he’s good for something at least.

Together, we begin to search the surrounding area. The night is oddly quiet. Even though it’s October, it’s still warm enough in Virginia for there to be crickets out. And the odd bat or bird can always be heard chirping somewhere in the night, especially this close to the river. But tonight, the world around us sits in silence. For the third time this day, I’m finding myself on edge and unnerved.

Matt moves through two parked cars to search in the grass on the other side. I watch his large form hunch over. He’s staring intently at something on the ground. “Hey Alex! I think I found something! Come over –”

He’s cut off as something flies straight at him. It’s large. Too large to be a bat or a bird. And too fast. I don’t even have time to register what’s happening before Matt is pulled up into the air by what looks

like a person...*but that's impossible. People don't move that fast and they certainly don't fly!*

I'm standing there in shock, unsure of what to do. Matt's legs and arms are flailing in the air above me. It's his screaming that snaps me back into the moment and drives me to do anything I can to rescue him. He may be a terrible date, but he's not a bad guy and I can't let this happen.

As quick as I can, I squeeze between cars to get to the grassy area he's floating over and run to his feet. I try to jump and grab onto a leg or a foot. But as soon as I do, I hear a terrible sort of laughing in the air above me. *No. This is not happening. Breathe, Alex. Just get Matt down.*

I try to jump again for Matt's foot. He's gone eerily quiet now. His legs have stopped moving. And then, before I realize what's happening, he drops to the ground with a loud thump. At the same time, I'm attacked from the side.

Whatever it is hits me hard and fast. I try to scream, but the air has been knocked out of me. When I open my mouth, nothing comes out. I'm flying. I can feel that. I'm maybe ten feet in the air, and whatever it is that has attacked me is holding me tight to its chest...it's very human chest with it's very human hands...*what is happening? Was there something in that last drink I had at Poe's? This has to be a dream. A nightmare.*

We're flying, my attacker and I. I feel cool air rush against my back and realize I'm over the river. I hear water rushing along below me. And then I feel it. Cold breath just under my left ear, on my throat. And then pain. Sharp pain in my neck. Suddenly I can barely breathe. I'm uncomfortably aware of the pounding of my heart in my chest. I try to fight. I kick and scratch and try to shout for help. But nothing is working. I am getting tired. I feel myself beginning to fade. Mist is

enveloping me and I can't tell if it's from the river or something more serious. In a minute, I'll be passed out.

And then something slams into me again. I'm released from my attacker's grasp. Air is rushing into my lungs again and so I scream. But I'm falling too. Soon I will be in the river, at the mercy of rocks and rapids. At the last minute, something catches me. This thing feels like the creature that attacked me. But the smell...the smell is different. It's holding me to its chest and we're flying back over trees and darkened roads. It's whispering something to me, but all I can understand is, "Alexandra. Hold on, Alexandra."

We fly through a door and there is light and then a bed. *Is this my bed? Oliver? Do I hear Oliver?* I hear heavy breathing next to me and rushed movements. And then, something warm is in my mouth. Salty. It's spilling over the sides of my mouth, onto my chin and into my hair. I don't know what it is and I don't care. Everything in my body is telling me to take it, so I do. I let that hot liquid rush into me. My pain goes away, replaced by a sense of peace, safety. I can hear my heart beginning to beat strong again.

I open my eyes and squint at the light around me. I was right, I'm back in my room. There is a man sitting on the end of my bed. He's staring at me, a worried look painted across his face. As soon as I open my eyes, he leans across my bed and takes one of my hands in both of his. They're ice cold. I flinch at his touch and he drops my hands back onto my bed. I wrap my arms around my chest, feeling suddenly very exposed, despite the thick quilt covering me.

"Alexandra. How are you feeling?"

I want to question how this man knows my name, but I don't know if I could handle the answer. This night has been overwhelming enough as it is. And where is Matt? I'm worried about him. The stranger seems

to read my thoughts and he says to me, "Your friend will be fine. He's hurt. But he'll be ok. He's in the hospital."

"Well, I wouldn't call us friends," I reply. I can't help myself. Even in a moment like this, I can't let myself be attached to my date. "But I'm glad he's ok. Who are you?" My vision is coming back to me. The light isn't hurting my eyes as much anymore. I take a good look at the man who is sitting in front of me. I realize with a gasp that he's one of the men who was sitting with Lisette earlier. Not the one who laughed. The other man. Who are these people and what do they want with me?

I hear another person move into my room and I turn to see Lisette glide in. She swoops down over me, feeling my forehead with her cool hand. She and the man exchange a silent look. I notice then that his eyes are like hers, the color constantly shifting depending on the light and angle. And even in the warm light of my bedroom, they're both still incredibly pale. And cold to the touch. And beautiful. Every movie I've seen, every book I've read about vampires comes swimming up to the top of my mind. *No. Vampires aren't real. I'm sure there's a rational explanation for all this.*

I swallow and then slowly turn to face her, "Lisette...what's going on? What *are* you?"

CHAPTER 3



“Wow! Your date was that bad huh?” Sam grabs my phone out of my hand and, with a look of mock seriousness, begins swiping through the faces that swim across the screen. My friend has caught me red handed. I am Tindering one day after a date.

I push a fallen lock of hair back from my forehead and sigh. “Yeah. That bad. You have no idea.” I try to grab my phone back.

“Oooh tell me more! I want to hear all the details!” She giggles and runs around to the other side of the bar, my phone still in her hand.

“Not right now Sam. Give me my phone back.”

“Hmmm...only if you pinky swear you will tell me later! And help me look with you now!”

“Alright! Alright. Bring my phone back now, please?”

Satisfied with herself, my friend smiles and slides back behind the bar with me. Technically, she isn't allowed back here since she isn't actually an employee. But my boss, Doc, gave up enforcing rules with Sam a long time ago. And she is great in a pinch or on a busy night. The girl can cut fruit faster than anyone I've ever met and is better at washing dishes than my barback, so we kept her around. And maybe occasionally traded a few free drinks for work. But we don't tell the liquor authority that.

We begin to slide through pictures on my phone. Frat boy wrapped in an American flag? Nope. Hipster with a dog? Eh, maybe? Nope. Ok, one decent looking guy. He's got a nice smile. Sure, why not? I want to tell my friend about what happened the night before, but I don't know where to start. How does one begin to explain Lisette? Dominic? Seeing Matt flying through the air, helpless and flailing? And then what happened in my room after. The things Lisette told me. They can't be true. But they would account for everything that happened last night. The strange man I saw on the street in Carytown. The disembodied voices in the dark. That *thing* that Matt's car hit. Whatever it was that swooped out of the sky and stole him, and then turned its sights on me. The terror I felt as my life drained out from my neck. The sound of my own heart beating furiously in my chest. I shiver. *It's ok Alex, just stay focused on where you are right now. Just keeping swiping. Right. Right. Left. Right. Left*

An unfamiliar finger slides across the screen. The hand attached to it grabs my phone and pulls it out of my grasp.

"Hmmm 'I like long walks at Texas Beach, my dog, and BEER.' How sweet. This one's definitely a keeper, Alex." Dominic is sitting across my bar from me, my phone in his hand, a sly smile spread across his pale face. He slides a finger across the screen and inspects the next man whose profile pops up, "Oh, look! His name is Alex too! How cute. Should I swipe right?"

I choke. I have been hoping the events of last night were a bad dream or the product of some drug slipped into my drink when I wasn't looking. And while I've done a pretty good job all day of ignoring the bite-sized bruises on my neck, I can't ignore the man who is now sitting right across from me. Excuse me, the *vampire* who is sitting right across from me.

Sam's arm shoots out next to me, hand extended. "Hi! I'm Sam, Alex's best friend. Nice to meet you Gorgeous man?"

"Dominic."

"Dominic!"

He takes her tan hand in his pale one and, instead of giving it the customary shake, pulls her hand toward his lips. I shiver, memories of the night before still swimming in my brain. A heartbeat. Blood running down my cheeks. His breath so near my ear. Before I realize what I am doing, I jump and try to grab her arm, to pull her away from the danger of his mouth. Dominic shoots me a mischievous look out of the corner of his eye. He knows what I am thinking. Sam's eyes grow wide as he continues to raise her hand to his lips and kisses it.

"M'lady. Pleasure to meet you."

She giggles and turns to me. "I like this one, Alex! You keep your tinder boys; I'm sitting with Dom!"

I feel my jaw drop, but make no move to stop her as she moves back around to the other side of the bar and plops down on the stool directly next to him.

"So Dominic what a cool name! Can I call you Dom? Where are you from?" For the next two hours, my friend peppers him with question after question. He laughs easily, and often.

With a start, I notice he has a nice smile. It lights up his otherwise pale and serious face in a wonderful way. He catches me once, watching him smile and laugh with my friend while I am stuck trying to convince one of my more drunk patrons that he's had enough to drink for the night. Those magical eyes of his bore straight into mine. The intensity of his gaze makes me blush, and I look down at the bar. I cough and look back to my customer.

"I'm sorry Beau, but you need to have a glass of water before I can give you anything else. I'm just looking out for you, buddy."

“Aww c’mon Alex! Just one more. I’ll tip you real well!” He slurs, eyes half closed in a drunken stare.

“Sorry, can’t.” I try to pat him on the hand. He reaches around and grabs me roughly, then pulls me so I lose my balance and lie sprawled across the bar.

“If you’re not going to give me a drink, then give me a kiss!” I fight to get out of his grip. Beau can be a handful, but he is a good customer and he always brings a lot of friends with him. I need to get out of this without making a scene.

“Hey!” I hear a rough voice ring across the bar, “Let her go!” A chill runs down my spine. I know that voice.

Suddenly Beau is flung off his bar stool and onto the floor. A tall, dark man stands over him, fists clenched, ready for a fight. Dominic is up in a flash, his hand on the newer man’s chest. He is looking him in the eye and whispering something in a voice so low I cannot hear it. They seem to be arguing. People are starting to stare.

I clap my hands as loud as I can. “Ok everyone! Someone call a cab for Beau. Once he’s gone, round of shots for the house on me!” Cheers go up from around the bar and in a matter of minutes, I have my blackout patron safely in a cab home and a full tray of shots poured for everyone in the bar. There is a loud noise of collective cheers and a slamming of shot glasses before conversations resume. Peace has been restored. And I desperately need a break! “Sam! Hey, Samantha! Watch the bar for me will you? I’m gonna take five.” My friend nods to me and moves back behind the bar to take my place. Three seconds in and she is already smiling and flirting with the newest customer to sit at the bar. She’s a natural. I laugh and then slide out the back door so I can take my much-needed breather outside.

CHAPTER 4



I suck in the night air and try to calm myself. The cool brick of Roberta's feels good on my back. I'm not a smoker, but at that moment, I could go for one good long drag on a cigarette. That second man. I know him. His voice. The feel of his chest as we flew through the night. The weight of his teeth as they pierced my neck. He is the man who attacked me and Matt the night before. I shiver and press my back up against the wall. I need to feel anything solid underneath me right now, or I might faint.

I hear the door to the bar creak open and slam shut. Somewhere inside, a bell tinkles. And then I hear his voice again. It is smooth as glass and right next to my ear.

"Fancy meeting you here, Alex. I was sad we didn't get to dance for longer last night."

"That's what you kids are calling it these days, huh? Dancing?"

He throws his head back at my response and laughs that bark of a laugh I heard issue from him just twenty-four short hours ago at Poe's.

"You almost killed me last night! And my date! And now you have the nerve to try to joke with me?"

"Oh, I was never going to kill him," he drawls. "I just wanted to shut him up for a while. You weren't enjoying your time with him, I

think?" He has a point there and he knows it. He has the most smug look on his face I have ever seen. I want to find a way to wipe it off.

I find my way. "But why did you attack me?" I ask, trying to keep my voice as innocent and hurt as possible. For a moment, it seems to work. Bronson looks down at the ground. For the smallest of moments, the smirk disappears. I win! Or so I think.

The moment soon passes, however, and sarcastic Bronson is back. "You? Once I heard that heartbeat of yours, so strong and fast for that silly boy you were so worried about once I heard that, I couldn't stop myself. I had to have a taste. My apologies...Miss?"

"Alex."

"Miss Alexandra. But you are rather intoxicating."

This is too much. I came out here in hope of some respite from the drama inside. Instead, I am face to face with my attacker, being told how appetizing I am! I need to get back inside. Now. I turn towards the door and start to move. He puts an arm out, catching me against the brick. He lowers his face close to mine, lips an inch away from my ear. Despite myself, I feel my heart begin to pound again in my chest.

"Ahh," he whispers to me, "there it is. That beautiful heartbeat. What I wouldn't give for just one more taste." His lips have moved to brush my ear. I feel goosebumps rise on my arms. I feel sharp teeth begin to caress my neck.

"Bronson!"

He pulls away from me with a sharp intake of breath.

"Dominic. Always interrupting me at the worst possible moment."

"I think Alex has to be getting back to work, Bronson." Dominic has come out of the bar and is standing beside me and the man. Bronson.

I look from one man to the other, and then scurry in between them, back into the darkness of my bar. I keep one hand on my neck to make sure it's still there.

A few minutes later, Dominic returns. Without Bronson. He slides into his vacated seat and once again takes up conversation with a very animated Sam. They spend the rest of the night drinking and chatting with one another. Just before the bar closes, he leans over to me and asks, "Where are you going after this? I would like to see you home safely." I hate to admit it, but he's touched a weak spot for me. I have been dreading the end of the night and the trip home. I don't trust myself alone with Bronson around. He is too fast, too quiet, too persuasive. Too dangerous.

But I don't want to admit that to Dominic.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself!"

He gives me a worried look with those eyes of his, but he wisely doesn't try to argue with me.

Soon the night is over and Roberta's is closed. I shoo the last few stragglers out of the bar and finish my cleaning. I allow Sam and Dominic to stay after the doors are locked. They aren't really customers, after all. Sam is bar family. And Dominic has proven himself twice now. We have one last beer together. I resist the urge to ask Dominic how he can even drink beer. I'll wait until we aren't around Sam. I'm not quite ready to expose him, or myself, to this strange new truth I have learned only the night before. And then it's time to close up for the night. I hug Sam and make sure she makes it safely to her Uber. Then walk out and lock the door behind me. Dominic grabs my arm.

"You sure you're ok going home alone? I don't mind coming with you."

"Thanks. But I'm fine. Really."

Besides, I'm not going home. Not yet.

CHAPTER 5



I love working in my studio late at night. No one is around. I can blast my music or paint in silence, only the swish of the brush on canvas or the scratch of charcoal on paper to keep me company. And it's the perfect way to unwind after a crazy night at work.

On this particular night, I put on my old stand-by, Mozart. Strains of his *Requiem* float out of the radio and fill the sparse room around me. Alright, maybe I am feeling a little morbid. I'm still processing the fact that I now have at least three vampires in my life and that, one of them at least, seems to have quite an affinity for my arteries. Mozart's ode to his own death seems fitting in the moment.

I walk over to my work desk and begin sifting through my sketches. In the last month or so, things have gotten dark. I am an art student at VCU, and for my senior thesis project, I've been working on a series of self-portraits. I'm adopted. I grew up here in Richmond, but I was born down in southwest Virginia, not too far from the Tennessee line. I don't know too much about my parents. I've heard my mother was young, too young, to have a child. I've also heard that she may have had an issue with substance abuse. Drugs, alcohol. I wouldn't know. Aside from the months I spent in her womb, I've never met her. The hospital staff

wouldn't even let her hold me after I was born, afraid she'd get too attached to a baby she couldn't keep. My father I know nothing about. He's just a shadowy figure somewhere in the background. Probably some young kid who made a mistake and fixed it by disappearing into the mountains or the military like so many of them do.

I've been thinking about them a lot lately. Or rather, I guess they've been coming up in my dreams. Dark night terrors. My mother clinging to me and crying. My father, standing helpless in the mist around us all. They've made their way into the corners of my portraits. Sometimes just a speck on a page, sometimes so large behind me that it seems to be a picture of them and not myself. I don't know where these dreams came from or why they've chosen now to materialize. I've never thought too much about my parents before. Even when I was a child. I always had my adopted parents, Evie and Sumpter. And they were all I needed.

Until now.

I grab my charcoal and my sketch pad and begin to draw my face, the way I see it. I am half covered in shadow. Around me is black. I work furiously, taking up the whole space of the pad with my sketches. Red charcoal slides its way in. I color my eyes with it, my lips, my throat. Rip that page off, start a new sketch. My face, a face behind me, teeth, an eye, a mouth.

As I draw, I think about the night before. I can hear Lisette explaining things to me that can't possibly be real

"Lisette, what are you?"

She swallows hard then then takes my hand in hers. All of a sudden, I feel a tremendous calm sweep over me. Lisette looks at me with those beautiful shade shifting eyes of hers. "We're vampires, Alex. Me, Dominic here, and Bronson. We're vampires."

I laugh. This is some kind of joke. Then, fear overtakes me again. Despite the calm that had wrapped itself around me just a few minutes

ago, I feel myself begin to panic. I've heard about this type of thing before. These people have obviously drugged me at the bar. They must have slipped something in Matt's drink too. Then they attacked us on our way home and now they're in my house! Ok Alex, breathe. Breathe, breathe, breathe. If I can calm myself down, I can find a way out of this.

"Alex," I hear the man's voice say, "Alex, it's ok. We're not here to hurt you." He is looking at me with those eyes so much like Lisette's. I try to close mine. No no no. This is not real. But as soon as he looks at me, I'm once again overwhelmed with a complete sense of calm.

"Why are you here? What do you want with me? I don't have anything," I say. My voice is small, feeble, almost a whisper. At this point Oliver jumps onto my bed. He rubs his tiny black body up against the man leaning across my bed and then settles himself over my chest, purring. Even my cat is in on this!

Lisette sits down on the bed next to me, "We believe you may have something we need."

"Wait...back up. First off, you're not vampires. Vampires aren't real," I say.

The two look at each other.

"Alex, my name is Lisette and I am 397 years old. I grew up in near Marseilles, France. Until I was turned at the age of 23. Dominic here is much older than I am. However, we share the same maker, Bronson, who is the one who attacked you and your friend. I am sorry about that. He is my maker and for that, I owe him my loyalty, but sometimes...he has a hard time controlling himself. He is almost 2000 years old. He gets bored." She sighs and shrugs.

Like I was supposed to just believe this story. "Wait wait wait. How do I know you're telling the truth? If vampires are real, and you're

really vampires, prove it to me. Do something. Show me your teeth or fly or do whatever it is that you do!"

The next thing I know, I am in Dominic's arms and the world around me is dark. I realize after a moment that we are flying through the air outside. For the second time that night, I am in the arms of a strange man, completely victim to his whims. He holds me tight. Maybe it is because I am still under whatever calming influence these two have put over me, but this feels different from my flight earlier in the evening. This isn't the harsh clutching of the other man. This is tender. Almost as a parent carries a child.

"Where would you like to go?" Dominic whispers in my ear. A delicious chill runs down my spine at his voice.

"As far as we can." I whisper in return. I'm still not convinced this isn't just a terrible trip, but even if it is, I'm going to milk it for all it's worth.

I think I feel him smile at that. "Done," he says. Then he pulls me in closer to his chest and we fly on into the night.

I must have fallen asleep for a moment. The next thing I know I am watching the James River below me begin to fan out into the Chesapeake Bay. Dominic swoops down and I gasp and cling to his neck. He laughs and then reaches a hand down to trail in the cool water.

"It's ok, you can let go," he whispers into my ear. His lips brush against my hair. I take a breath and let go, and feel the river on my fingertips. And I can't help but smile. Here I am, flying a foot above the tidal basin of the James, in the arms of a man I barely know...and everything felt perfect.

In the distance, I can smell the ocean and hear waves crashing. The sun would be coming up soon. Even now, I can see the faintest bit of sparkle over the misty water. Suddenly, Dom pulls us up, high into the air. I squeal and wrap my arms tight around his neck once more. I'm

terrified of heights and have closed my eyes shut tight. Dome laughs when he sees.

"Alex, it's ok. Look."

Slowly, I squint one eye open, and then the other. And I gasp. There's the James below us, fanning out and flowing into the gray body of the Atlantic. Salt air fills my nose and whips my hair around us. And together we hang in the air for a few moments, taking in the sight around us. Early rising seagulls are beginning their morning flight. Crabs scuttle around on the sand below us, popping in and out of holes they've scratched into the earth. I could stay here forever, wrapped up in Dominic's arms, watching the world around us come to life.

"Alas, time to go, m'lady. I am a vampire, after all. The sun is not my friend." he sounds as sad about this as I feel. Then he pulls me back close and turns and we are following the river back to Richmond.

I wake up the next morning in my bed, alone except for Oliver curled up next to me. The only evidence that my night didn't go quite as planned is a note left in an elegant hand thanking me for the evening and assuring me I would see them again. It is signed by Lisette.

I realize tears are running down my cheeks and I wipe them away. This has been a long twenty-four hours and a lot to mentally digest. I still don't know why they are here or why they chose me to reveal themselves to, but I'm sure I will find out soon enough.

I haven't even been paying attention to what I am drawing and when I look down, I'm not surprised to see Dominic's face staring at me from the page.

Around six in the morning, I finally put down my charcoal and sketch pad. I look up into my mirror and I have to laugh at myself. I'm covered head to toe in charcoal dust. My forehead is black from wiping my hair back with a sooty hand. My cheeks and nose are as well. I've been using my legs as a wipe and now they're smeared with charcoal.

My t-shirt too, has a light dusting of the stuff. It's the sign of a good night.

I shake my head and get up from my stool to wash myself in the small sink in the corner of my studio. The sink is on the outside wall, right next to the room-length window that I love so much. *Thank you, VCU for giving us studios with access to plenty of sunlight*, I think. Right now it is still dark though. The sun is only beginning to peek above the line of horizon outside. I turn the tap on and blessedly cool water springs out and begins to flow over my tired hands. I love working here at nights, but I forget how tired I am after surviving a shift at the bar and then coming here to sketch for hours. My poor hands need a break. As I rinse them off, my gaze turns to the world outside my studio.

And there, in the shadow of a magnolia tree – is that Dom? His gaze catches mine and then he is gone. I shut off the tap and start to run down the hall and out into the world to catch him. But when I get outside, I realize it's too late. The sun is up now. Light has swept over the still-sleeping world of downtown Richmond. I don't quite know why, but I feel sad that I've missed him. It would have been nice, to have a friend with me in the dark night of my studio. And I realize with a start, I miss the feel of his arms around me.

CHAPTER 6



“*G*irl! If you don’t want Dom, I’ll take him!”

I’m out at Saturday brunch with Sam. We’re doing it right with a pitcher of mimosas, a Bloody Mary each, and the all-important mugs of coffee. Black, for me. Loaded with sugar and cream for Sam. I don’t know how she doesn’t have diabetes yet. On the table in front of us is a good, southern brunch. Biscuits and sausage gravy, Virginia ham, poached eggs, a little bit of green in the form of collards. You really can’t get any better than breakfast food from the south. We’re enjoying the sun and eating al fresco. It’s October and a little chilly. But Sam suggested it, and I have to admit, I am enjoying being in the company of someone who can soak in a little sun.

It’s been a few days since I’ve seen any of the vampires. But I feel them everywhere around me. Half the time when I wake up in the night, I swear I can see one of them sitting in the tree outside my bedroom window. Sometimes I even think I hear Bronson’s laugh in the darkness. Or smell Lisette’s perfume. They haven’t tried to come in though. They seem content, at the moment, with living on the edges of my life. I have a sneaking feeling that this won’t last too long. And, to be honest, I’m not sure I want it to. I’m finding that I miss them. I don’t know why. But something about being around them just feels right. Like

I've come home. They almost feel like family, a rare occurrence for an adopted child.

Sam snaps me back to the present, literally. He fingers are in front of my face, "Earth to Alex! Come in, Alex!" *Snap snap.*

"Oh, sorry! Hi! Got a lot on my mind. What were you saying? Dom? Yeah, he's cute."

"Cute?" She leaned back, face in mock horror, "Alex he's *hot*. The things I would do to that man if I got him alone Say, where is he anyways? I haven't seen him in a few days." She slaps my arm in excitement. "Invite him to brunch with us!"

Oh crap. How am I supposed to explain to my friend that I can't invite her crush to brunch because he isn't awake during the day? Because he's a *vampire*. Then I realize I have the perfect excuse. "I can't Sam. I don't have his phone number. I guess we'll just have to wait until he comes around the bar again."

"Dammit." She pouts. I have to admit, I'm relieved. I'm not sure how I feel about Dom just yet. But I know I don't really relish the idea of sharing him with Sam. Not for now, at least.

"Want to play with my Tinder?" I ask, trying to turn the subject to something else.

"Hah! Yes please!" I laugh and whip out my phone. We spend the rest of brunch planning out my dating life.

An hour later, lubricated with alcohol and laughing at my romantic life, we leave the restaurant. Sam tries to convince me to come with her to meet some mutual friends for more day drinking. While the offer is tempting, I have something else I need to do. So I hug my friend and walk to my car.

I'm on my way to the hospital to see Matt. I haven't talked to him at all since our date night and I don't trust Bronson's word that he's ok. I want to see him for myself.

I hate the area around the hospital. It's all one-way streets and out of town drivers. The worst combination. But I make my way to the visitor parking lot and then inside the large, brick building. Around me, doctors and nurses swarm the halls. They are moving quickly, and with purpose. I feel lost surrounded by them. Thankfully, the visitor's desk is close by and I get the information I need to find Matt.

He's sitting up in bed when I get to his room, watching what sounds like one of those cheap, daytime TV talk shows. His face lights up when he sees me.

"Alex! Hey! How are you?"

I wave back to him and reply, "Hey Matt. I think I'm doing a little better than you right now." I point to his arm in a sling and the bandage on his neck. Guilt sweeps over me. Though the attack wasn't my fault, I can't help but feel like I was part of the reason for it.

"Oh? This old thing? Barely hurts!" The wince on his face betrays him as he says this. "Hey Alex, listen, I'm really sorry for what happened. I shouldn't have tried to drive you after I drank so much."

I start to interrupt him. I don't want his apologies. And I don't really want to talk about the vampire attack here. Or with him. I'm still getting used to the idea myself and I am not sure I can explain it all to Matt. He ignores me however, and keeps talking. Of course. Suddenly I don't feel quite so bad for him. I'm remembering why our date was such a disaster.

"I should have known better. Deer are everywhere in the fall. I guess I didn't expect one to be running around Church Hill though. Anyways, it's a good thing one of us had her seatbelt on!" He looks pointedly at me and winks. It's not possible, is it? Does he really not remember?

"Matt, what happened to your neck?" I ask. This will be my foolproof test to see if he knows anything about Bronson.

“Doctors are telling me I must have been cut by glass when I went through the windshield. It looks pretty bad now, but they’re saying it shouldn’t leave too much of a scar. I was lucky. I was cut right on an artery! But everything seems to be healing just fine!”

He really doesn’t remember! I’m not a religious person, but at that moment, I look to the ceiling and say a small prayer of thanks to whoever is listening up there.

Matt’s starting to talk again. *Oh no.* I may have felt bad for him for a moment there, but there’s no way I’m sitting through more hours of stories about him and his stupid friends!

“Hey Matt, sorry I can’t stay,” I manage to squeak out on one of his rare intakes of breath. “I just wanted to come say hi and see how you were doing.” I rush over to him and give him a quick hug. He looks shocked. I don’t know if anyone has ever cut him off like that before. I pat his leg, say one more quick good-bye, and then escape from the room before he can say anything else.

One my way down the hall I pass a gaggle of what looks like frat boys. They’ve got a giant penis balloon with them and what I’m making an educated guess is a six pack of beer not so cleverly disguised in a backpack. I believe I know where they’re going and, if I’m right, Matt will be just fine. Just as I’m opening the door to the outside world, I hear a nurse yell, “Guys! You can’t bring beer into a hospital!” I giggle to myself and continue my walk to my car.

Once I’m outside, I look at my phone. I’ve got about twenty messages from Sam. God Lord, she’s drunk. For a moment, I consider meeting up with her. But, I want to go back to my studio. I need to get some work done. Maybe I can meet her later. I want to catch some daylight to paint in and the sun will be going down soon.

CHAPTER 7



Mozart is playing again. He just seems right, given the week I've had. Although this time he's joined by Chopin, Bach and a little bit of Amy Winehouse. What can I say? I love her. And sometimes I need a break from dead white guys, no matter how much they may speak to me.

I'm painting tonight, so I change into the set of old clothes I keep in the closet by the door. A pair of ripped, faded jeans and a battered white t-shirt. I don't wear anything on my feet. I know it's a bad habit. Paint can be toxic and enough of it splashes on the floor for it to be an unsafe space for bare feet. But I don't care. I prefer to feel my toes on the solid wood beneath me. I feel more graceful when I move barefoot. A good day of painting feels almost like dancing to me.

I pull out my brushes and begin to lay out colors on my palette. Soon I am in my own world, applying brush to color and canvas, singing softly along with my music to myself. I paint as the light outside turns from soft afternoon yellow to a true sunset bronze. The windows of the buildings outside seem to blaze with fire as the setting sun hits them. Amy's soulful voice bursts out of my speakers as the light pours into my studio and turns everything a beautiful golden hue. I stop for a moment to take it all in.

“Alexandra.”

I gasp at the sound of his voice in my ear and turn to face him. “Bronson, how did you get in here? Isn’t it still your bed time?”

“Eh. I’m an early riser,” he shrugs. He’s a few feet away from me and staring straight into me. Suddenly I feel exposed. I cross my arms and stare straight back. “Besides, you’re easy to find. All I have to do,” he crosses the room so he’s standing directly in front of me, inches away, and lowers his face to mine, “is listen for that strong heartbeat of yours. And since I’ve fed on you,” his lips graze my ear and I feel my spine start to tingle, “you’re easy to track. I can still feel you in me.” He smirks.

I feel my cheeks burning. How does he do this? I don’t even like this guy. He moves across the room and sits down in the antique chair I keep in the corner.

“Don’t let me stop you!” he calls to me, innocently. “Keep painting if you want. Nice music, by the way. Most kids your age don’t even know who Mozart is. I’ve seen the man in concert. If you like Herr Mozart, look up Paganini. I have a feeling he might be right up your alley.”

“What are you doing here?” I ask, refusing to be distracted.

“What?” He brings one pale hand to his chest, looking hurt. “I can’t just be interested in my newest friend’s work? I, my dear, am a lifelong patron of the arts.”

In response, I just stare at him. This may all be true, but something is telling me it’s not everything.

He continues, “And I am honestly very interested in your newest project. Do you know your parents, Alexandra?”

I swallow. We are getting into uncomfortable territory here. What does this man know about me? Why is he here? “No. I don’t. I’ve never met them.”

“I have.”

My heart stops. The paintbrush falls from my hand. I am not breathing as I turn to face him. "You know, Bronson I don't like you, but I was willing to tolerate you until just then. That's crossing a line. It's not funny." I look down at the ground and wipe my hands on my thighs, trying to bring myself back down to Earth. "Please, if you're going to torture me like this, please just leave." I gather the courage to look him straight in the eye. His eyes, I notice, don't shift the way those of the other two do. His irises are gold. Solid, incandescent gold. And they stare straight into mine.

"You're beautiful, Alexandra."

"What did you just say to me?" I'm shaking now. "Don't try to change the subject."

"My apologies. But I have met your parents. I wouldn't lie to you about that. I've known your family for thousands of years. You're a witch, Alexandra. As was your mother, and her mother before her, and so on. I first came in contact with your ancestors when I was a young man living in what we now call England. One of your grandmothers was a very powerful witch. She was with me the night I was turned. We were celebrating Beltane. I, strapping young man that I was, had been chosen to represent the God in the Grand Rite. Your ancestor was the Goddess. Beltane, if you're unfamiliar with it, is the pagan celebration of spring fertility. We used to light an enormous bonfire to dance around. At the end of the celebration, the God must be united with the Goddess — "

"Ok stop. Stop right there. I don't need to hear about you having sex with one of my grandmothers!" This was starting to overwhelm me.

He smiled.

"I didn't. I never finished the ritual. I was running through the woods, enjoying the night air and the moon ah! I can still feel the silver light of that moon on my back. I was thinking of your grandmother.

How beautiful she was. Very much like you, actually. The same high cheekbones Wavy red hair. Like fire. I couldn't wait to take her in my arms. And then I was hit from above by something I never expected. I'd heard of these night creatures before. But I assumed they were just a tale told by the sailors coming in from the East. I didn't believe that *vampires* were a real thing. The next thing I knew, I was lifted off my feet and into the air above the forest. I could feel his stinking breath on my throat." Bronson shivers. I can see he has gone back into a very deep part of himself.

"It's ok, Bronson. You don't have to tell me the rest." I feel bad, all of a sudden. This is obviously painful for him. But all the same, I want to hear more about my ancestors.

He laughs his rough laugh. "Did you know my name isn't even Bronson? That used to be my surname. As in Bron's son. That's how we used to identify ourselves back then. I took it on as my first name in the 1800s. Anyways, where were we? Oh yes, my life was being drained out of me by some Eastern demon. Just as I felt myself begin to give up, he dropped me back through the trees to the forest below. It was your grandmother who found me. I was tangled in the bracken. Broken. Half dead. Drained of blood. Somehow she brought me back to the village, to the fire we had lit earlier in the night. But the Beltane ritual still needed to be completed. She found another man from the village, one of my friends, to take my place as the God. And then, filled with the energy of the Goddess Mother, she brought me back to life.

"It was only in the morning when the sun began to crack over the smoky ground that we knew something was wrong. The light seared my skin. The pain. You've never felt anything like it. And the hunger for blood. I had no idea what had happened to me. She kept me safe. She brought me to her hut. She cared for me, helped me learn this new body of mine. Offered me her blood when I could find no other. As the

months passed by, I grew stronger and more sure of myself. And her belly grew. She had conceived during the ceremony. I promised her then and there I would watch over her ancestors until the day I should die, should that day come. And I have. Sometimes only from the shadows. But, I've been here. And I created two children of my own, Lisette and Dominic, to help me continue my work. I doubt they'll stay with it, should anything happen to me. Or I did, until I brought them to you."

He moves to me and pushed the hair back off my face, then ran his thumb over my lips. "They like you. It's easy to understand why. You're so much like her. More than you know. And not just in looks. Her spirit lives on in you."

This is too much. This whole week has been too much. My heart is pounding. My emotions are churning in every direction.

I need a drink. Now. "I think I'm done here for the night. Thank you, for the story. It's very enlightening. But I need to go."

"Alexandra, I'm sorry. I've clearly overwhelmed you. I wanted you to know."

I look at the ground and nod.

"Your mother was a beautiful woman too, in her own way. But delicate. Too delicate for the witchcraft she tried to handle."

"I thought she was a drug addict."

"Ah. No. She was not. But sometimes, when one delves too far into things they do not fully understand and cannot find the strength to control...well...the mind turns in on itself. She went mad by the end of her short life. And your father was too young. He couldn't handle her and you. They went over the edge together. I was the one who brought you to the people you call your parents now."

"What? You know Sumpter and Evie?"

"I've only met them once. They are powerful magicians themselves, though they've kept that a secret from you. I brought you to them in

the night and they took you from my arms and made you their own. I knew you were safe for a while with them."

"For a while? What do you mean? And why aren't I a witch then, if my whole family is? And wait, Lisette told me I may have something you need. She never mentioned my family."

"You are a witch. You just haven't met the right person to teach you yet. She shouldn't have told you that. But she doesn't know any better. Her and Dom don't know why we've been trailing your family, just that you are important to me. I will explain it all another night. You need a rest from the past for now."

He is right. My heart and mind are racing.

"I brought something for you." He strides over to me and pulls something out from behind his back. It's a dress. Green and slinky. Something I would never pick out for myself on my own. But it is lovely.

"Let's go out to dinner. You deserve a real date. A nice one. You looked so miserable the other night." There it is again. That sly smirk of a smile. Dammit. He knows me too well. Because apparently he's known me my whole life. Unfair advantage if there ever was one. But I can't help myself, I giggle in return and take the dress he is holding out to me, press it to my body and twirl.

"Put it on."

"Turn around. No peeking."

He turns. And I slide the cool silk over my head. It's perfect. I twirl. It moves with me. I have never felt so sexy in my life. But my face and my hair... I never wear makeup to my studio and my hair is unkempt.

"Umm...hold on a second!" Bronson is about to turn around and I don't want him to see me only half made up. I don't know why I care so much. I still don't know much about this man. But he doesn't listen. Of course. So there I am, standing with half of my hair in one hand,

staring at myself in my small mirror, trying to figure out what to do. He walks up behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders, pulling me up to stand tall against his chest. My heart is pounding again. He seems to have that effect on me. His hands trail up to my neck. I wince. He laughs softly, and pulls my hair back, off my neck and shoulders.

“Lovely.”

I blush and smile.

“Alright, shall we get going?”

And before I can say anything, I am in his arms and we are flying out the window. I don’t know if I’ll ever quite get used to this form of travel. As we fly out into the night, all I can think about are my brushes, lying uncleaned on the floor, and the faces staring out from the pages of my sketchbook.

Dinner is wonderful. There is a soft side to Bronson that he hadn’t yet shown to me. I like it. This is a man who has lived since the first century A.D. He’s known thousands of my ancestors. Talked to them. Walked with them. Loved some of them. And here I am, sitting across a table enjoying dinner with him.

“How are you eating, by the way?” I ask, two glasses of wine deep and my inhibitions lowered enough to let my curiosity come out.

“Oh, that’s an old wives’ tale that we can’t eat human food. We don’t need to, to survive. And we have to have blood. But we can still eat and drink when we want. In fact,” he says, leaning in conspiratorially, “food tastes better now than it ever did when I was human. The colors, the smells, the *life* of it comes to me in a way a human tongue can’t comprehend.”

We are leaning across the table from one another. His hand is on mine. Those golden eyes of his staring into me. Ok, time to go. I lean back in my chair.

We grab the check and walk outside. We're on the Shockoe Slip, the oldest part of Richmond and also home to dozens of restaurants and bars. I shiver in the cold air.

"You're cold!" Bronson takes off his leather coat and wraps it around me.

"Thanks," I reply, pulling the soft leather tight around me and taking out my phone. Sam has been texting me again. And she isn't too far away, actually. Just a block up the road. I start to take the jacket off to give it back to Bronson.

"No, keep it on. I'll come with you."

"You will? Ok...well, Sam's up this way." We walk together up the street. Bronson puts his hand on the small of my back, guiding me through the waves of Saturday night revelers. We make it to the bar Sam is at, a European style restaurant by day, mid-level dive by night. I search the bar for Sam's face, but it's Bronson who finds her. How he knows what she looks like, I don't want to know. But we make our way over to the bar and I leap on my friend's back, giving her my best surprise hug.

"Heya lady!"

"Alex! Alex, look who's here! Dom!" I look past my friend to see that Dom is, in fact, sitting right next to her.

"And who's this?" she asks, grabbing Bronson's hand and shaking it. He laughs, surprised at her boldness. His face is really gorgeous when he laughs, I think to myself. It's nice to see him relax. I notice Dom looking back and forth between the two of us and suddenly I feel very uncomfortable. Like I am in the middle of something I can't quite understand. He has a stormy look on his face. I blush and look anywhere but at Dom. Then I feel a cool arm slide around my waist.

"Alex! So glad you could meet us!" It is Lisette next to me. She hugs me and kisses my cheek, "You look amazing! I adore this dress!" She

leans back and looks me up and down. I realize I am still in the slinky dark green dress Bronson brought for me, and I am feeling as awkward in it as I did when I first put it on. Lisette, on the other hand, is her usual stylish self. Her hair is slicked back in a beautiful classic pony tail. She is wearing thigh high leather boots and a sparkly black racer back tank. God, why can't I be as effortless as her? "Dom and I bumped into Sam earlier and she said she could get you to come out to meet us. And I see you brought Bronson!" She looks knowingly between the other two vampires, "It's great to have the whole family out at once!" She slides down onto a bar stool and pats the open one between hers and Sam. "Join us! Let's have a drink!"

I take her suggestion and slide onto the seat next to her. "A glass of prosecco, please!" Lisette called to the bartender. "And what would you like, Alex? It's on me. Sam, yours too."

"Dirty martini, Tito's, on the rocks," Sam orders.

"Bulleit bourbon, please," I say to the bartender, "neat."

"That's my girl!" Lisette claps me on the shoulder. "I knew there was a reason I liked you. True southern woman! Alright, cheers ladies!"

We cheers each other and begin the time-honored tradition of women: gossiping about men.

"Alex, where have you been hiding these gorgeous men?" Sam slurs to me. She is clearly one too deep in drinks. I'll have to make sure she doesn't have any more. Just how I want to end my night, as the babysitter to my best friend. Lovely.

I look at Lisette. I'd rather follow her lead on this one. "Well it's a funny story actually!" she begins, her voice light, jovial, "I met Alex a few days ago when she was on a date with was his name Matt? Anyways, we bumped into each other in the bathroom at Poe's and she mentioned she worked at another bar. I could tell she was cool —"

"Alex is the best!"

“Thanks, Sam ”

“Hah. Yes, she is. Anyways, I told my boys about her bar and the next thing we all knew, we had a wonderful new friend!”

“Wow. Alex, you’re so lucky. I wish I had your life!”

“Ok! Maybe we should be getting you home soon!” I look at Lisette. “I’m going to run to the ladies room real fast. Then I think I should take this one home.”

She laughs and nods, “Wait, I’ll come with you. Dom! Watch Sam, will you?”

Dom and Bronson were deep in conversation at the other end of the bar. I frequently felt their eyes on my back, but was pretending I didn’t notice.

He nods his assent and Lisette and I skip off toward the bathroom. We’re halfway there when she grabs my arm and pulls me into a dark corner of the bar.

“Alex, I don’t believe in nagging people so I’m going to say this once and only once: I don’t know why you were with Bronson tonight, but be careful around him. He’s my maker and I love him and owe him my loyalty. But he’s a very old vampire. Very powerful. I don’t know what he wants with you. But I do know he’s been dragging me and Dom around the world, watching your family for centuries now. Just be wary that’s all. I don’t think he means any harm but he has a temper I would hate for you to see. Alright?” She kisses me on the cheek and slips off back to the bar, laughing and hugging Sam.

CHAPTER 8



I hear a noise outside my window in the night. I am home, finally, after getting Sam safely tucked into her bed, and politely declining her appeals for me to snuggle with her. And there it is again, a tapping on the bottom corner of a window. I get out of bed, wrapping my thick knot blanket around me as I stand, and walk to the window. I see Dom's face staring back at me through the glass. His eyes seem sad and serious. And they are staring straight into mine. Despite myself, I feel my lips curve into a small smile. I crack the window open to let him in.

"I think I can guess why you're here," I say, "Look Dom, Bronson came to my studio on his own. I didn't invite him, and he's not so bad, I think."

"Shhh." He puts a cool hand over my mouth. I feel myself jump. A jolt of electricity runs down my spine. "That's not why I'm here. You looked so beautiful in that green dress earlier tonight. I wanted to talk to you earlier, at the bar, but I knew you needed time with the girls then. And," he says with a cheeky smile, "I was enjoying the view from across the bar, to be honest."

I feel myself blush and laugh.

"I'm glad you're here." I curl myself into the barrel of his chest and he wraps his arms around me. "Bronson told me a few things today. Things that were, honestly, quite a shock for me to take in. Maybe you can help me tie up a few of the loose ends."

He pulls my body tighter to him and I can feel him sigh. "Sure. Ask away and I'll answer as I can."

"Well, I'm not going to have this conversation standing in the middle of my bedroom. Shoes off please! Come, sit with me in my bed."

"Yes ma'am!"

Dom grabs me and flips us onto my bed. We shuffle around, laughing and painfully knocking heads, until we are settled side by side under my down comforter. He pulls me to him and I lay my head on his chest. I like it here, leaning on him. One arm is around me. He smooths my hair with his free hand. I feel like a child again. Evie used to rub my hair in much the same way when I was young. I am so happy in this moment. Warm and comfortable here with Dom.

And so everything spills out of me. I tell him about my past, the little I know. I tell him about my projects in the studio. How I found myself staring back at his face from one of my sketches. And then I tell him about Bronson's visit. The things he told me about my family history. My being a witch. And then I ask him about what Lisette alluded to, that I had something the vampires needed.

Dom listens to everything I have to say without interrupting. When I am done, he sighs a deep sigh and kisses my hair. "That's a lot of information to take in, Alex. I had guessed that Bronson had more of a reason for keeping close to your family than he ever disclosed to either myself or Lisette. We have been following your grandmothers for years, centuries really. I have met so many of your ancestors, Alex, and watched many more from the shadows. You are so like many of them. I

see their faces flash across yours when you laugh, when you cry. I see their stubbornness in you," I giggled at that, "and their intelligence.

"I don't know much about witches. During my human life, women were being burned across Europe on the slightest accusation of witchcraft. It was a sad time in history, Alex, and I stayed as far away from it as I could. But I wouldn't be surprised if your family has a certain skill for that work. I've heard whispers of it down through the ages. More than one of your grandmothers was a very skilled healer. And you, an artist, you craft worlds from empty space. You make complete strangers *feel* emotions they would maybe rather forget. If that's not witchcraft, I don't know what is." He took another deep breath, "And yes, I do know what we are looking for. Although, I didn't know until now how we would find it. Have you heard the legend of the vampire in Hollywood Cemetery?"

I smile. We southerners love our ghost stories. One of the most infamous of Richmond's undead is a vampire who supposedly makes his home in Hollywood Cemetery. I always assumed it was just a silly story, made up to keep children in their beds at night.

"Of course! I was terrified of him when I was a girl."

"He's not just one person, Alex. He's been hundreds of vampires throughout the years. Somewhere on Belle Isle, right across the river from that cemetery, is a stone that when worn, will allow a vampire to walk in the sun. My kind have been coming here for decades in search of that stone. No one has found it, until now. That must be why Bronson is so interested in you now. If you really are a witch, you could help us find that stone."

I turn and look him in the eye. Those flecks of color shining in the light, pulling me in. He puts his hand on my cheek.

"Just imagine, Alex, if we had that stone, we could see the sunlight again. Bronson hasn't seen daylight in thousands of years! Lisette, when

I turned her, she was a florist. She hasn't seen an open flower in all its glory in centuries, and I know how much she misses them. I could walk with you in the light. It would change everything, if we could find that stone. If you could help us."

"But Dom, I don't know the first thing about being a witch. There has to be some kind of mistake here!"

"We will help you, Alex. I believe in you. And wouldn't it be nice, to fly back out to the Chesapeake and watch the sun actually rise together? We wouldn't have to turn around just as the ocean was beginning to come to life. I want to do that for you. I want to watch the sun rise with you, to see your face as it's meant to be seen, in the daylight. I want to kiss you in the sun."

"I want to kiss you now," I say, lifting my eyes and staring directly into his.

And with that, he pulls me to him and our mouths meet. I can feel my heart beating hard once again in my chest. And the smile on his lips as they crush themselves into mine.

It feels so good to kiss him. I wanted to do this since our first night together. Dom seems like he has wanted it for some time longer. His words confirm my suspicions. "Alex, I've been watching you since you were a little girl." He kisses my cheeks. "I've watched you go through boy after boy, breaking your heart," he kisses the tip of my nose, "disappointing you," he kisses my forehead, "and I wanted so badly to take you in my arms and protect you, beautiful woman." He kisses my neck, just below my ear, and begins to trace my jawline with his lips. I sigh. This is bliss. I turn my body to him and wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him in closer to me. I want to feel his strong chest against mine. My heart is pounding again so hard I can feel it in the space between us. We are both breathing heavily. Then, suddenly, he pulls away with a sharp intake of breath.

"Alex, I can't. This is dangerous."

"What?" I look up into his eyes, questioning.

"I'm not in control when I'm with you. I'm afraid I'm going to hurt you. The sound of your heart beating it's too much for me. I may be able to stop myself today, but one day I'm going to snap and I don't know what I'll do then."

"Oh." I look down to the bedspread below me. My half unbuttoned nightshirt. *How did that happen?*

Dom smiles. "Sorry, quick hands!" He begins to button me up again. I put my hand on his.

"No. I want this open. I may not be able to kiss you, but I want to be able to feel your skin on mine."

He reaches to my face then, pushing my hair back behind my ears. "We just have to take it slow, Alex. Get ourselves used to this a little bit at a time, so neither of us is hurt."

I nod

"The biggest thing that will help is you getting a handle on your witchcraft. I don't know much about witches, but from what I've heard from Bronson, it was that power in your ancestor that allowed her to let him feed from her without killing her. She was able to create some kind of protective force field so they could interact safely. If you can learn how to do that, we, us, could work "

"But I'm not a witch, Dom. I don't even know the first thing abo—"

"Shhhh," he puts a hand over my mouth and smiles, "We'll help you. Me, Lisette, and Bronson. We want this as much as you do. We'll help." Then he smiles wider and kisses the back of the hand that is over my lips. "Until next time," he says with a wink. Then he settles back on my pillow and pulls me to his chest, arms wrapped tight around me.

I lean into him and let my body relax. "We start tomorrow then."

“Tomorrow,” he repeats, and kisses the top of my head. “Now, you get some rest. I’ll keep you safe.”

I settle down into his embrace. He rocks me softly from side to side, as if I am a child. It is comforting and brings me to sleep in his strong arms.

Dom is gone when I wake in the morning. Oliver has taken his place curled next to me on my bed. I smile to myself. My first day of witch training will start today. How fitting I would wake up next to my black cat.

CHAPTER 9



Where does one start to learn witchcraft? There aren't exactly signs posted around Richmond announcing, "Witch classes here!" We may be a cool, hip city. But we're still southern. And witches aren't allowed in southern towns, unless they're on the bayous down in Louisiana.

"OLIVER?" I ask the napping cat next to me. "Do you know how to be a witch?" He just looks at me, nonplussed, then yawns and goes back to sleep. Typical.

I ROLL out of my bed and move down the hall into my kitchen to make breakfast. Greek yogurt, berries, honey: no better way to start most days in my opinion. Unless they are brunch days, of course. Those are a league of their own. I am humming and dancing around my kitchen to myself, thinking about Dom's arms around me. His lips on mine. I lick the spoon clean of yogurt and smile to myself. I can't wait for him to kiss me again! And again. And again

BUT SOMETHING else sneaks in there. The memory of the way Bronson looked at me in that green dress. The feel of his hand on the small of my back as we moved through the bar last night. His smile when he relaxed enough to produce one. I feel my face grow hot with a blush. What is wrong with me? Dom is wonderful! Romantic, smart, older man (ok, much, much older, but who's counting?). He is perfect. Bronson is moody, secretive, and honestly scary. I don't care if he knew my grandmother and loved her! He isn't right for me. So why does he keep sneaking into my thoughts? For the first time since I met these vampires, I am glad they couldn't be around during the day. Maybe I don't want to help them find this stone after all. But then I think about kissing Dom. Really kissing him, safely. If there was ever any reason for me to learn how to use my apparently innate witch powers, it's that.

BUT AGAIN, where to start? I walk back to my bedroom and find something I did not see on my way to the kitchen. It is a note, taped to my vanity mirror. I have never seen the handwriting before, but I guess it is Dom's. It is too elegant a hand to be written by any modern man. I carefully untack the note and open it to read the message:

Alex,

My apologies for leaving without saying goodbye. I was lost in looking
at your
beautiful face and forgot to keep track of time. I will barely make it out
before
the sun rises now. You are sleeping, your trusty Oliver has taken my
place

next to you. I believe he will be a more than suitable replacement for me.

Alex, you expressed your wish to start learning your craft today. Since I cannot be with you until evening, I can only leave this note to guide you in my daytime absence. There is a witch who lives on the south side of the river. Her name is Cora. She is a practitioner of old magic,
much of it inherited from her African ancestors. As you know, early slaves brought their powerful work with them to the new world. Most of them have taken it now to New Orleans. But Cora's family stayed on the land they once worked. She is a wonderful woman. Wise. Powerful. And I hear she enjoys a good glass of wine I believe you do as well? She is expecting you.

How to find her: Take the Penny Bridge over the water and drive straight into the woods until you come to her house. How will you know which is hers, you ask? My only answer to you is that, if you are indeed of witch progeny, you will simply *know*. Listen to your heart, my dear sweet Alex. It knows even things you have not realized yet. I must leave you now.

~Dominic

CORA. She is my start! What time is it? I need to wash my hair. I jump in the shower, humming to myself. I have no idea what I am getting

myself into, but I am excited. As I step out of the steamy bathroom, I jump across my bed to pick up Oliver and dance around my room with him. He meows in protest, not happy with being crushed against my still wet body. "Be happy Oliver! This is a great day for us! I'm going to be a witch and you're going to be my what is the word? Familiar! You're going to be my Familiar, Oliver!" I kiss the grumpy cat and put him on the ground so I could make my bed.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I am in my car, heading towards the Penny Bridge and Cora's house.

TWENTY MINUTES AFTER THAT, I am getting desperate. I have crossed the bridge and have been driving on the south side of the river for a while now. The area down here is wild. Overgrown forest growth creeps onto the road. The sun has to fight to break in between the branches of trees above my car. I am passing driveway after driveway, but have yet to get a feeling that any of them are right. Maybe I'm not a witch after all. But I hear Dom's words in my head. His assurance that my gut knows more than I have been giving it credit for. And so I keep driving. Slower now. I want to be certain that I am taking everything in. But something inside of me is telling me not to give up, not yet. And then I feel it. Something lurches inside my gut, pulls me to a driveway that is just becoming visible around a corner. There is nothing special about it. Crooked brown mailbox on the edge of a pine-needle covered gravel drive. But I know. This is it. I take a deep breath and pull into the drive.

I AM JUST LIFTING my hand to knock on the front door, when it opens. And there she is, standing in the entry way. "Cora?"

"ALEX! Welcome. I've been expecting you!" She gives me a knowing look and moves aside to let me in. "Tea? Wine? Both? I save the bourbon for later. Only use it on days I'm doing deep work and know I'm going to need a strong drink after!" She laughs at that. And I laugh too, even though I'm not sure I understand. This woman has a wonderful warm energy. It is infectious.

"BOTH SOUNDS GREAT, if you don't mind." I say in reply.

"WONDERFUL. My kind of gal! Take a seat. I'll be right back." She smiles and retreats into the kitchen. A few moments later, she returns with two cups of steaming tea and two glasses of red wine. She sets the tray down between us, and motion for me to take my glasses.

"NOW," she begins, "I've been talking to you friends and they tell me you're in need of some tutelage in witchcraft?"

"YES MA'AM."

"CORRA. Call me Cora, sweetheart. Alright!" She claps her hands together. "Then you've come to the right woman! I happen to be the best witch in

these parts. Really, the only witch in these parts. Protestants and their fears," she snorts. "I'm happy to help another young witch and hopefully not be the only one around here then! So let's begin!"

AND SO WE DO. We spend the afternoon learning the basics of the craft. Moon tables and star charts, grimoires, stone and plant magic. I am beginning to regret not bringing anything to take notes on. She teaches me that day how to feel the energy of the trees around me, the earth underneath me, the air above me. I hate to brag, but I am a natural. And Cora is overjoyed to have a talented student. We finish the day just as the sun is going down. I am exhausted.

"CORRA, this whole day has been amazing! When can I come back again?"

SHE LAUGHS, that round wonderful laugh of hers, "How about tomorrow, sugar? I had a wonderful day too. Nice to meet another one of my kind."

"TOMORROW THEN!"

"GOODNIGHT. See you in the morning." She sees me to my car and waves to me all the way out of her driveway.

I SMILE the entire way home. The whole world has taken on new meaning now. Everything around me is alive, and soon I will learn how to work with the energy of it all. I can't wait.

I AM STILL BEAMING when I walk in my door and find Dom in the kitchen, cooking a wonderful smelling dish. "Welcome home. I thought I'd make you a meal my mama used to make in Italy. Hundreds of years ago," He looks at me with one eyebrow arched, a sly smile on his lips. I roll my eyes. *Italian boys and their mamas*, I think to myself. *I'll make him forget her for a minute.*

I WALK UP TO HIM, feeling so full and happy with my day. I wrap my arms around his neck and pull his face to mine to kiss. He drops the spoon he is using to stir the sauce into the pot. Oops. Dinner will have to wait. We may have to take our time, but there is no better way to practice being together than to practice, after all.

ONCE AGAIN, he stops me before things get too hot and heavy. But not before I have the chance to pull his shirt off and see that gorgeous chest of his.

CHAPTER 10



Fall gives way to winter and my life fills up with work, college classes, and lessons with Cora. I barely have time to come up for breath. And I find myself increasingly spending my free time in the studio. Cora is teaching me the basics of mediumship, or communicating with the dead. So far I am having a bit of a hard time with it. As an adopted child with no remembered connection to my family members, I don't even know how to begin to bring them through. I have nothing to tether me to these people. I can't picture a face or remember a smell, the sound of a laugh, the feel of a hug, all things that are important to a beginner in mediumship. Even if some of them have been coming through for me, I have no way of knowing if they are my own relatives or just passing ghosts in the night.

But there is one place they are coming through. My art. I begin to see their faces peeking through the shadows in my sketches. Sometimes they are small, faint, far away in the background. Other times they take over half of my face, my body. What started out as a simple self-portrait project is quickly becoming much more intense. My professor loves it. I do too, though it unnerves me a bit.

Bronson has taken to joining me on my nights in the studio. I'm still not quite used to his energy. It is just so intense. I can feel him

watching every move I make around the studio. But there is something comforting about his presence as well. He likes to chat. And he has thousands of years' worth of stories. Literally. And so many of them are about my family. He even recognizes most of the people I find myself pulling up in my sketches and paintings and tells me about them. Maybe this is my mediumship for now. My family has found a much more solid conduit than the air around me, and they are using him for all he was worth.

"That's a very striking resemblance to your great great aunt Muriel," he whispers in my ear, his breath blowing my hair gently off my neck as he points to a round woman in the background of one work.

"Who was she?"

"A great woman. A suffragette over in England. She died during a hunger strike in jail, never saw the women's voting bill go through herself. Though I believe the movement would never have been so successful without women like her," he is staring intently at her face. If he is a man who could cry, I almost believe he would just then. One long finger is poised just over the space of her cheek. "A great woman," he whispers again. "Wonderful, warm sense of humor. Her husband ahhh I see you've discovered him as well. Here he is, on the other side." He points to the trim figure of a man near the bottom corner of my canvas. "He was very supportive of Muriel. Never the same after her death. A shame."

Bronson wraps his arms around my waist. I stiffen for a moment. Then let myself relax into him. "I see all their faces flash across yours, Alexandra," he says, still close to my ear. "There's so much of them in you. I wish you could have met them, any of them. I'm glad they're speaking to you now."

There is something so familiar about his embrace. It scares me a bit. His energy is stronger than Dom's. Deeper and more electric. He feels

almost as if he can shatter into a million pieces at any moment. But there is something so protective about it. This man carried me as an infant, after all. He's known me my whole life. And known the lives of so many of my ancestors. The romance of Dom is irresistible to me, while it is Bronson's danger that pulls me to him.

"How are your lessons with Cora going?" He has released me and padded back to his spot in the shadowy corner of my studio.

"Good. We're learning about tools right now. She gave me my first tarot deck. I pulled cards for each of you " I say with a sly smile, turning back to look at him. Let me shoot a little of his mischief back at him, I think, give him a little of his own medicine.

"Oh?" he says, one eyebrow expertly arched. "And what card did you pull to represent me?"

"Death."

He throws his head back and laughs that deep, barking laugh of his. I can't help myself. I begin to laugh too. After minute, he collects himself. "What did everyone else get? I'm curious now."

I wipe a tear of joy from the corner of my eye, and take a deep breath to calm my giggles before I recite the cards, "Let's see Lisette got The Queen of Pentacles."

"Ahh yes, that's very her. In her garden surrounded by everything she loves. Perfect. What about Dom?"

"The Lovers."

"Oh? The Lovers? Very interesting, Miss Alexandra. And is he? Your lover?"

I feel my cheeks flush hot and red. Dom and I haven't told anyone about our nights at my house. How we have slowly been getting more intimate as I gain control of my powers and he gains control of himself. We are still PG, but we are closing in on PG-13 and it won't be long before we are doing things I would have hidden from my mother.

Bronson laughs at the shade of my face, "I guessed as much. He's a romantic, Alexandra. Always has been. *Italians.*" he says with the tiniest bit of a sneer. "So, madam, we have covered everyone else in our little circle. Which card, pray tell, did you pull for yourself?"

I look him dead in the eye when I reply, "The Magician."

"Ahhh the Magician. You're quite adept at the cards, little one. Good. Keep them around. They'll tell you what you need to know."

"That's what Cora says too."

"She's a good woman."

"She is. How do you know her, Bronson?"

"That's a long story, little bird. But the short of it's that I met her great great grandfather during the Civil War. We vampires were hiding up in the mountains of what was the newly created state of West Virginia at the time. No one would bother us up there. The few troops who did come sweeping through our mountains had heard the local legends and stayed far away from our caves. You may ask why we didn't get involved in the conflict. A few of us did. Especially the younger ones. Dom donned his own blue uniform and fought for a time. Lisette, too, volunteered her time in the field hospitals, for both sides though I suspect that may have been more for the convenience of food than anything else."

I stare at him, unbelieving.

He just shrugs his shoulders at me. "You have to understand, Alexandra, those men were dying of the worst wounds I've seen in hundreds of years. Blown to pieces. No anesthesia. No antibiotics. Lisette saved those she could. And the ones she couldn't? She was the most beautiful woman they had ever seen, come to their bedside to bring them to a final, peaceful sleep. They were mercy killings that may also have had the benefit of adding an extra glow to her cheeks."

"Alright, fair enough," I relent. Though the thought of Lisette killing dozens of men in the middle of a battlefield still unnerves me a bit. *Vampires.*

He walks over to me then and places his hand on my cheek. Kisses my forehead and pushes back a stray hair.

"When you live forever, Alexandra, your concept of morality changes, quite a bit. Forgive us for being predators. We do the best we can."

I nod. "So, how does Cora's family fall into this?"

"Ahh yes. Well it was in this West Virginia mountains that I met her ancestor, Silas. He had joined John Brown in the fight for freedom. He'd been separated from his group during a battle and ended up on the front stoop, shall we say, of my cave one night. I almost killed him then. But he was a powerful witch himself. He drew a circle around himself that I couldn't break through. I was so hungry. I hadn't had anything to eat for weeks at that point. I couldn't even find a forest squirrel or bird. Sensing my presence, every wild creature had been avoiding my cave."

"Why didn't you just join Lisette down on the battlefields?"

He sighs at that. "I've seen enough battlefields in my time on this earth, Alexandra. The things men do to one another I just didn't feel like being around another one at the time, being a scavenger in the night. And maybe I was a little tired, to be honest. I had been trailing your family for centuries, staying loyal to my promise to your grandmother. I was starting to break and maybe a part of me just wanted to die at that point. So I began to will myself to starve."

I look into his beautiful, ancient face then. Here is a man who protected me and my unknown family for so long. For no reason other than that he loved my grandmother so much he was willing to sacrifice his freedom to fulfill a promise to her. How many people ever find that kind of love? Without thinking, I bring my hand up to his face, trace a

finger down the side of a hard cheekbone, his nose, his jawline. He brings his eyes to mine and we gaze at each other. How long, I don't know. Time seems to stand still for us in that moment. I know what I want to do then.

I pull him to me and kiss his mouth. Soft and slow. This is not the urgent kiss I shared with Dom. This is deeper, more sensual. I am kissing a man, I know. I press my lips against his cheeks, his eyelids, his forehead. Bronson may not be the right one for me. But he is the right one for my family and in that instant I feel so protective of him. Something rises in me and simply pushes me to wrap him up in myself, give him a soft place to rest.

He kisses me back. His hands are strong on my body. He lifts me off the ground and lays me on the floor of my studio, covering me with his form. He kisses me again. And then stops, laying himself down next to me on the floor. We look at each other then, taking one another in. Me, with paint and charcoal smeared across my face, my ripped jeans and raggedy shirt hanging off my body. And Bronson, a man out of time. A body that came into being in Anglo Saxon England and a heart formed by thousands of years of devotion to one singular cause. He is beautiful, really. This man loved my grandmother. And she loved him. But he isn't Dom. And I'm not her. I have never felt so confused in my whole life. I've gone on so many terrible dates in my life, given myself to so many boorish men. And now I have two wonderful ones. And I have no idea what to do.

Thankfully, Bronson seems to sense my confusion and brings us back to the subject at hand. He begins to speak quietly, "I was starving myself. And then this man showed up, neatly packaged, on my doorstep. I wasn't myself at that point. My instincts had taken over. All I knew was that he was full of blood and I wanted him. He held me off all night with that damn circle of his. Like I said, very powerful witch.

Roots in African craft. I had never encountered that sort of witchcraft before and in my weakened state, I wasn't able to defeat him.

"He must have liked me though, because when I awoke the next night, he was still sitting outside, next to a very weak young buck deer. He had wounded the poor animal and brought it back for me, an offering. Silas was a smart man. He had established a debt with me. He asked that I help bring his wife and his young son to him. And I did. And my connection with Cora's family was established. After the war, they moved back down to Richmond, onto the piece of land she still resides on. At the time, there was no south side of Richmond. It was just wild land, so they were out of the way and sheltered from the outside world. I've checked back up on them every few years. Witches and vampires don't normally have such close connections. But it seems to be my lot in life." He laughs at that admission and kisses me one more time.

"Alright young lady, I believe it is time for me to get you home and back to your lover Dominic?"

I look at the clock. *Shoot*. It is almost 4 am. Definitely time to get home. I clean my brushes and wash up. Surprisingly, Bronson helps me. I am learning something new about this man every day.

Dom is in my bed when I get home, watching Netflix and playing with Oliver.

"How was painting?" he asks, looking up at me as I walk through the bedroom door.

"Wonderful, but not as good as this!" I jump onto the bed next to him and pull him down on top of me. I want to wipe the feeling of Bronson from my body. He laughs and wrap his arms around me. No sleep for me until sun rise.

CHAPTER 11



*M*y days with Cora grow longer. She pushes me more. Though I am still lagging in mediumship, she discovers my natural talent for reading the Tarot. She teaches me more and more complicated spreads. Things that will help me help the vampires in their search, she assures me. She begins teaching me basic spell work, how to harness the energy of the moon, the elements around me, my own personal guardians. She also decides it was time to teach me about fairies. “Tricky little things,” she calls them.

“Then why do you want me to work with them?” I ask her. I am curious about these beings. I’ve always imagined them as small, winged little beings. Elegant and beautiful. Like Tinkerbell from Peter Pan. According to Cora, they are often anything but.

“Because you should. Your family line connects back to Celtic times. The Celts had, shall we say, a special affinity for the Fay folk. They even went so far as to plant special trees for them – Holly and Oak – both of which are plentiful here in Virginia as well.”

“Oh,” I reply.

“I can tell you don’t believe me.” How does Cora always know what I am thinking? “But learn to work with them. Take care of them and

they'll take care of you. They're already all around you." She looks at me under her eyelashes.

"Seriously?"

"Do things disappear mysteriously in your house all the time, only to be found a few days, or sometimes weeks, later? Your cat ever seem to be playing with something you can't see? Lights around you that you can't explain?"

"Yes how did you —?"

"I know. That's all you need to know. They're all around you. Use them. But respect them too. Leave food out. They love apples. And candies. And flowers too, actually. They'll help you out, as long as they like you. Don't ever get on their bad side. Heaven help the poor wretch who angers a fairy!"

"What do they do?" I ask.

"Make your life miserable. I assume you've heard of leprechauns pinching you if you don't wear green on St. Patrick's Day?"

I nod.

"Some pinch. Some bite. They steal things, children even, sometimes. They'll lead you astray in the night. Some even go so far as to kill you."

I swallow. "Wow. Ok. I'll remember that!"

She laughs. "Yes, it's best if you do. Don't worry too much though, just be respectful and have a bit of a sense of humor. Even the sweet ones like to play a trick now and then." She winks at me. "Alright, time for a good hot mug of tea. After lunch, we'll start learning how to ask the Fay for help. Then we'll do some more meditation. I expect that will come in handy as well in your search for this stone. And," she looks at me with a wicked smile painted across her mouth, "we can finish with some protective spells. For your love life."

"What? How did you know?" I blush.

“Oh, little one, I can feel his energy all over you. To be honest, I’m glad it’s Dom and not Bronson. Though I pick him up every now and again too.” She gives me a pointed look. “I’ve known Bronson all my life, sweetheart. And he’s known my family for longer. He’s a good friend. Loyal. I know you admire him. But you be careful around him. He’s old. And dangerous when he has mind to be. He’s not human any more. Hasn’t been for a long time. You keep that in mind. Come to think of it, maybe I should give you some basic protection spells too, as a caution. You’ll be inviting a lot of new energies in, now that you’ve opened yourself up to this kind of work. You’ve made yourself a beacon, of sorts, to all kinds of beings traveling through the universe.”

She is right. I love the work we were doing. It is fascinating. And it comes so easily to me, it feels right. But ever since Cora started teaching me, I’ve noticed the number of strange things happening in my life appear to be increasing. Loud bangs in my bathroom at night. Strange smells in my living room. The hairs on my arms standing up at odd times. Something, or things, have definitely found me.

It is Friday, a work night. Just before dinner, I say my goodbye to Cora and head to Roberta’s. Though it is still early, it is already dark out. A February chill is in the air. Cold, damp clouds wrap themselves around Richmond, settling over the James River like a blanket. My headlights bounce off the mist as I drive my car back over the Penny Bridge. I have never before been so aware that I work in a corner of the city known as The Devil’s Triangle. It got its name from the simple fact that it was close to the university and so was a hub of frat boy debauchery. Nothing sinister. But I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stiffen and stand as I park my car. Something is up. I am glad Cora had the intuition to teach me those defensive spells earlier.

Doc is waiting for me at the door. “You picked a bad night to be late, Alex. Big VCU basketball game on national television. We’re already

slammed. Suit up, get back behind that bar!"

I quickly apologize and jump back around the bar, ready to start slinging drinks. Sam is already back there. She started working officially for us a few weeks ago. One of our bartenders walked out in the middle of a busy holiday shift and never came back. Sam offered to take her place and Doc figured that might be a better arrangement than having her work under the table for free booze.

"Hey Alex! I thought you'd never make it! I'm swamped!" She smiles at me, to let me know she isn't mad.

I look at the clock over the front door. "I'm not that late guys! Only fifteen minutes. It was foggy on the road, I didn't want to have an accident."

"Sure, sure. Or maybe you were just smooching Dominic!" Sam makes a kiss face and then tosses me a lime. "Cut some of those. I filled up a pitcher with them before shift, but I have a sneaking suspicion we'll need more."

Looking around the bar, I can see she is right. We are packed. Students and townies sporting the VCU black and yellow fill the bar to the brim. There is barely room to move. One person stands out though. A woman, dressed all in black. She is sitting in a back-corner table. No one seems to be paying her any mind. In fact, they don't even seem to see her. The hair on the back of my arms stands up again. I swallow and shake my head. I have a long shift ahead of me. No need to get distracted by one stranger who just happens to give me the creeps. For all I know, she is a perfectly normal person. Maybe just a little weird. My senses are heightened now after all, thanks to my work with Cora. I get busy cutting limes and forget about the woman for the next few hours.

The game ends. It was a tight competition, but VCU managed to pull out a win for us. The bar explodes in celebration. Sam and I hug each

other. She leans over the counter top and kisses every patron who is sitting at a stool. *She's a natural at this job*, I think to myself while I laugh at her exuberance. We buy a round of shots for everyone. It is as I am handing them out that I notice the woman is still sitting in the corner. She looks up at me as I pass. I feel a surge of electricity run through my spine at her gaze and almost drop the tray. I take a deep breath and gather myself. Whatever this woman has come here for, I don't have time to discuss it right now. I set a shot down on her table and walk away before she can say anything.

Slowly the crowd clears out. People move off to house parties and beds. I look at the clock. Normally Dom and Lisette come in at about this time. I wonder what is keeping them away. Is that woman in the corner doing something? She is still sitting there, staring at me. I turn to Sam. "I'll be back in five minutes, ok? I need to go talk to someone."

"That creepy woman?" she asks. I was glad she can see her too. I'm not going crazy.

"Yeah," I say.

I walk around the bar and back into the dark corner to take a seat across from her at her table.

"Hello, Alex," she says as soon as I sit down. Her voice is smooth and dark, it reminds me of black coffee in the morning. Now that I am close to her, I can see she has deep red hair, green eyes.

"Who are you? Why are you here?" I ask, trying to sound more confident than I feel.

"Another witch, like yourself," she states simply. "I'm here to give you a warning, Alex. You're attracting a lot of attention in our world. You're a powerful witch, probably more powerful than you understand or imagine. This Cora, that's her name, yes? She's a good teacher, but I don't think she understands the depth of the situation here."

“What do you mean?” I want to defend Cora. She is all I have for a teacher and she has given me so much.

The woman look at me with those intense green eyes of hers, “You’re a beacon, Alex. Your light is shining like a beacon out into the air around you. Surely you’ve felt some of their presence already?”

I nod. Somehow, she knew about the bangs and smells in my house, Oliver’s new invisible friends.

“So they’ve found you already, some of them. More will come. And they won’t be so nice or easy to deal with. That piece of Lapis Lazuli you have on you,” her eyes turn down to gaze at my chest where I have stuffed the blue stone into my sports bra, “won’t help you against the more powerful beings headed your way. I suggest you stop doing what you’re doing now,” I start to protest and she holds up a hand, “but I’m smart enough to know that won’t happen.” She smiles then, a tiny ray of sunshine in her otherwise serious face, “When I was a young witch, no one could have convinced me to stop either. It felt too good, to finally come into my powers. But you need to be careful. Cora is a good teacher, but she only knows back-country folk magic. Let me work with you too. Use us both.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” I ask.

She stares straight into my eyes to answer. “You don’t. You’ll just have to take my word for it. But, to convince you, I’ll agree to meet you with Cora or your lover. He’s waiting for you outside. He wants to come in, but I’ve put a powerful protection spell around the building. He can’t enter until I let him.” The hair on the back of my arms stands up at that. Cora is a good witch. Smart and talented and a great teacher for getting started. There is still so much more for me to learn from her. But this woman is something else entirely. She is a trained, powerful witch. Her very energy announces her presence in a room. And she is strong

enough to keep even a vampire like Dom outside against his will. Eventually, I will need a teacher like her.

I look at her, then rush outside to see Dom. He is pacing back and forth in front of the bar. When he sees me, he starts to run to me but stops when he hits what seems like an invisible wall. He is knocked back, in shock. I run out to him and throw myself into his arms. "Dom! How did she find me?" I cry to him.

He holds me close to his chest and strokes my hair. "I'm not sure, Alex. Witches have their own ways of finding things out. What did she say to you?"

I start to tell him when Lisette rounds the corner. Her hair is frazzled and her eyes are bright. "That bitch! I can feel her in there. Who does she think she is, locking me and Dom out like this?"

"I don't know, Lisette." I say. Then I turn to Dom. "She seems to think others will be coming? She said I've become some kind of a beacon. I don't know what she means by that, but I feel in my bones she's right."

The two vampires look at one another, then back at me. "We should find Bronson," Dom says. "You wait here, Alex. Whoever that woman is, she's not going to do anything to you here, in the middle of the city. We'll get to the bottom of this." He pulls me in for a kiss. Then he and Lisette fly off into the night to find Bronson.

I turn and walk back to the bar. The woman is still sitting in the corner. Her eyes followed me as I push in through the front door. I think I see the faintest smile cross her lips. She gets up from her corner table and moves across the floor to take a seat at the bar. She is so graceful. She moves like a dancer. And she is offering me a chance to be like her one day. I have to admit, the offer is tempting. There is a quiet hum of power around her. Now that I've had a moment to sit in her energy, I see that it isn't malevolent in any way, just strong. My body

has been reacting to the sheer force of her, rather than anything negative. A part of me wants to be her one day, and she is offering me that chance.

She slides onto a stool at the bar. Sam looks at me. I shrug. I have no idea what to do anymore. My life has been turned upside down in the last few months.

Sam places a bar napkin down in front of the woman and extends her hand. "Hi ma'am. My name's Sam! What can I get you to drink?"

I have to hide my surprise when the woman takes Sam's hand and shakes it. "Hello, Sam. Nice to meet you. Please, call me Estella. You wouldn't happen to have a decent tequila around here, would you? On the rocks. With a twist of lemon." Well, at least she has good taste.

The bar is emptying out. Sam and I start to clean up, since I am not sure what to do while we wait on the vampires to come back. Soon, it is only us three women standing in the bar. Even the kitchen staff have gone home. I have a feeling their early exit has something to do with the energy Estella is sending out into the air around her. I am used to it now, but it would be unnerving to someone who doesn't understand what it is.

Suddenly the front door flies open. I turn at the sound of the cowbell we have hanging above it and the cold blast of wind that shoots through it. I swear I see a bat swooping and diving in the shadows outside, but it is Bronson who I see materialize in the light of the doorway. He tries to step inside, but whatever invisible shield Estella put around the building it is still in place. She hasn't even turned to look at him, so confident in her own defenses, she doesn't need to register his appearance.

"Estella," Bronson growls. I am shocked. *He knows her.* He wasn't lying when he said witches were his lot in life. "Estella, pussy cat, let me in."

She turns then, slow and languid, and leans her back against the bar. She looks like some kind of wild animal then, relaxed and toying with her prey. "Say please," she purrs, her eyes locked on Bronson's.

He looks down at the ground, his mouth twisted in anger, "Please," he says under his breath.

"Good enough," she sighs. She lazily sweeps her hand across the air in front of her. The air in the doorway seems to shiver and Bronson breaks through.

He is livid. Now I can see a flash of that vampire so many others have warned me about. His eyes glow gold in the dark bar. His face has lost its usual flush and is bone white. His lips are pulled back in a snarl, revealing his usually hidden fangs. I know he is holding himself back, but he still terrifies me. I know then I never want to see him in full blown anger.

Dom and Lisette come running through the door. They are both out of breath and from the looks on their faces, just as shocked by Bronson's anger as I am. They look at each other and then from their leader to the witch at the bar, and back again. "Bronson." Lisette starts to walk towards him.

"Stay back, Lisette." Bronson throws a hand back at her in a warning. "This is between me and the witch."

Estella watches the two vampires, her red lips pressed into a tight smirk, like a ribbon slashed across her beautiful face. Her pale skin glows in the moonlight that is spilling through the high windows of the bar. Her green eyes are like a cat's, bright and alert in the dark. She is calm, sure of herself in the middle of the storm.

Sam and I stand behind the bar, not understanding the scene playing out before us, afraid to move.

"Bronson, who is she?" Lisette whispers. Gone was the usual confident timbre of her voice. Instead, she speaks like a child. Quiet,

unsure, afraid even. It surprises me.

“Yes, my dear,” Estella purrs, “why don’t you tell your children who I am.” She leans back against the bar top again and crosses her smooth arms.

Bronson growls, “She’s a *witch*.” He spits the word with a vehemence that surprises me. The slightest smile cracks across Estella’s lips. “We’ve known each other for many years, my pussy cat and I,” Bronson continues.

And then I realize, Bronson had been in a relationship with this woman! There are few things that would raise this type of anger in a man like this, but an old lover is one of them. I look at Dom for confirmation. His face is a blank of shock. This is news to him as well, though he has apparently made the same connection I have.

Estella slides off the chair then and walks over to Bronson. Her hips sway in that same, dance-like grace she displayed earlier in the evening. She reaches Bronson and runs her hand over his cheek. He swallows. “Why are you here?”

Her pale fingers trace the line of his cheek, down across his throat, to his chest. It is heaving with angry breaths. She puts her hand firmly on the barrel of his ribs and speaks: “Your little witch here is very powerful, Bronson. But you knew that, didn’t you? She’s sending out a beacon. Others are coming. I came here to warn you and the girl. You’re not the only one close to her family. I knew her mother.” She looks at me and I feel my heart stop in my chest. *She knew my mother*. She continues, “The child is important to me as well, my dear. And to be honest,” she arches an eyebrow then as she looks at him, “I could not pass up the chance to train a witch with as much potential as her. Oh I know you’ve already got a tutor for her.” She waves her hand in the air as Bronson starts to protest. His mouth snaps shut. This woman is powerful.

“But Cora, though a good witch in her own right, will only be able to take our Alexandra here so far. She’ll need to join a real coven and study under masters if she ever wants to reach her full potential – the potential she inherited from Edit.” I know from the look on his face then that Edit must have been my many-greats grandmother. The woman Bronson had loved so much he had spent centuries trailing my family, protecting us from the dark. *Edit*. Pronounced Ee-dit. One long syllable that sounds like a bird’s call. One short ending that seems to slip off into the corners. Edit. My grandmother.

I don’t know what happens after that. The sound of my grandmother’s name is too much for me after the events of the night. I feel my body begin to sway as the world around me grows foggy, but I think I feel Dom’s arms catch me just before I hit the ground in a faint.

CHAPTER 12



*I*wake up in my bed. Sun is peeking through the cracks of thick curtains that have been pulled over my windows. Where did they come from? Why are they there? Something heavy is laying across me. I turn my body, trying to catch hold of whatever it is pressing down on me and find Dom curled around me on my bed. It was his arm lying across me. The curtains on the windows make sense now. He must have put them up so he can stay here with me in my normally light-flooded bedroom. I kiss his collarbone and snuggle into his sleeping form. Oliver lies on the bed between us, purring.

“How sweet,” I hear a low voice sneer out of the dark corner of my room. I look up, shocked. Bronson is sitting in my overstuffed vanity chair, arms crossed over his broad chest, watching us on my bed. He looks exhausted. To be honest, he looks like crap. He has clearly been awake all morning, his night, guarding me. I stick my tongue out at him in jest. A reluctant smile cracks his face and my heart swells with love for him just then. No matter his faults, he is a good man. Loyal beyond even the wildest expectations. I am glad to have him around. I start to get up. I want to shake his hand, hug him, thank him. But a sudden bout of dizziness knocks me back.

“Stay in bed, little one. You had a long night. Dominic and I are here for you. Lisette is somewhere around here, guarding the rest of the house. You have a lot of work ahead of you. Rest, for now.”

I take his advice. My eyelids grow heavy. I curl back up in the safe embrace of Dom’s arms and go to sleep.

When I awake, I can tell by the quality of the light sneaking in under the curtains that it is late afternoon. The sun has exchanged its bright morning hue for a more golden one. I can’t stay in bed anymore. I need to move. Dom is still asleep. I am careful not to disturb him as I slip out of bed. Bronson too, has finally let his exhaustion take him. He has pulled his knees up to his chest so he can lay his arms and head on them. He reminds me of a snail, pulled into its shell. I smile and lightly kiss the top of his head. Then I squeeze through the bedroom door, unsure if the rest of my house is curtained and not wanting to take the chance that the light will harm the sleeping vampires.

Everything in the house is quiet. It is a little unnerving. As I move down the stairs to my kitchen, though, I hear the faint sound of my TV, turned low behind the closed living room door. I pour myself a bowl of cereal and milk and then sneak in through the living room door. Sam and Lisette are sitting next to each other on my couch, painting their toenails and giggling about something. Thick as thieves. They both turn at the sound of me and their faces both break into wide smiles. Though the windows are covered in thick curtains, the light from their faces fills the room and I feel the weight in my chest lift. I jump onto the couch next to them.

“Anything good on TV?” I ask, grabbing one of the bottles of nail polish and holding it up to look at it. Coral pink. I like it. I shake the bottle to mix the paint so I can apply it to my toes.

“Real Housewives marathon!” It is Lisette who has spoken. Her excitement about modern trash TV surprises me and I look at her wide-

eyed before bursting into a deep belly-laugh. The other two women laugh too and soon we are all giggling together, watching the exploits of women who are richer than we will ever be. It feels almost normal. It is nice, after the drama of the night before.

We are making dinner when the boys come downstairs.

"Don't get too comfortable, ladies. Alex, after dinner, Dom and I are taking you to Cora's. It's not safe here in your house anymore. I was stupid to think no one would find you. Estella reminded me of that last night "

"Oh, sit down and relax for once in your life, Bronson." Lisette shoots him a warning look. "Let's have a nice dinner. We can talk about Alex's life later. But right now, I want to hear about your relationship with Estella!" She giggles. I have to hand it to Lisette, she isn't afraid of Bronson and she isn't afraid to voice what we are all thinking, but are too polite to ask.

Emboldened by her attitude, I join her in her taunting of the ever so serious Bronson. "Oh yes! Please do tell us!"

He looks like he wants to kill us both, but he pours himself a glass of wine and gives in. "Oh I met her years ago. 1937." At my look of shock, he explains, "She's a strong witch, Alex. They can't live forever, but they have ways of, shall we say, extending their youth. Anyway, she was younger then, and just as beautiful, not quite as sure of herself. And," he looks at me again, "she reminded me of Edit. She doesn't have as much grace as your grandmother, nor as much natural talent as a witch. And she's definitely not as loving as Edit was But she's a mirror image of her. And there was something, refreshing, in her boldness. So we had a brief affair that ended just as suddenly as it began."

We are all looking at him now, waiting for him to answer our collective silent question. How did ended?

"She left me for another man, alright? Another vampire. I hope that answers all your questions about my love life from now on. Maybe we should talk about someone else's for once. Lisette, care to offer up any anecdotes? Or Dominic? I know you've had a few lovers in your day."

Dom starts forward to stop him.

I put a hand on his chest. "It's fine, Dom. I'm not so naive to believe I'm the first. You know you're not mine." He relaxes.

"I'll go!" Sam's bright voice pipes up from behind me. "Let's see well two nights ago I went out with a man who used way too much tongue when he kissed me at the end of the night. Seriously guys, why do you all do that?" She winks and everyone laughs. If Sam has any super power, it is lifting the spirits of a room. It is one of the many reasons I love her.

"Alright, everyone, eat your dinner and then we're on our way. I'm serious Alex, we need to get you to safety."

"Yes, Daddy Bronson," Sam replies, making us all laugh again. But we do as he says and quickly scarf up the spaghetti we made.

Afterwards, I start to help with the dishes when Bronson grabs my wrist. "Let the others do that, Alexandra. We need to go."

I start to protest when he looks at me, eyes pleading. It is a look I've never seen on his face before. "Please. Alexandra. I'm trying to protect you."

I relent, placing the dish I am holding back down on the counter. The next thing I know, he has scooped me into his arms and is running with me out of my house. We reach the back door and he launches his body into the air, with me pressed close to his chest. I wrap my arms around his neck and settle in for the ride. I am getting a little too used to this form of travel, though to be honest, I don't mind it.

He holds me extra tight that night though, and flies us as close to the tops of the trees as possible. As if he really is afraid of someone

following us. Maybe he has reason to be afraid. In the darkness behind us, I think I see faces in the night. I pull myself tighter to him, my heart starting to pound, and I begin to whisper every protection spell Cora has taught me. I imagine white light surrounding us both, keeping the shadows away.

He knows what I am doing, and whispers into my ear, "I won't let anything happen to you, Alexandra. I love you."

I feel my heart jump at that. And I know then, that in my own way, I love him too.

CHAPTER 13



We finally reach Cora's house. The air around it feels different. She has put up a protection spell.

"Who's following us Bronson? And why?" I ask, my face burrowed into his chest as he slowly circles the house, trying to find the best place to land.

"That stone that I told you about Alexandra? The one that lets vampires walk in the sun. The one that me and Dominic and Lisette are searching for we're not the only ones. Vampires have been looking for that stone for centuries. And you're our best shot at finding it. Estella's right. You're a very powerful witch, Alexandra. More powerful than you realize. You come from a long line of witches, but none was as talented as Edit, until your mother came along and then you. They want you, Alexandra, not only to find the stone, but to do other things with. A witch is still human after all. And you're untrained. Easy for a vampire with less than noble intentions to take control of and bend to their will."

I start to shake. This is scary. "Bronson." I pull tighter to his chest. "Don't leave me. Come inside with me."

"I will." He kisses my cheek as he lands us softly on the grass. Cora is standing in the door of her house, Estella at her side.

"Come inside! Quickly!" Cora calls out to us through the dark. "Estella will open a space for you in the shield, but you have to come through fast!"

Bronson runs us through just in time. I feel the shield ripple closed after us. Estella collapses into a chair in the corner. She is exhausted.

"Where are the others?" Cora asks.

"Getting her house together and coming here as soon as they can." Bronson answers. "I felt it was best to get her out without further delay. Estella was right, I can feel them coming. A few found us before we made it here. They didn't approach, but they were definitely watching her."

The two witches look at each other and nod.

"Alright then, baby girl," Cora says to me. "You've met Estella, I've heard? She's a talented witch. Going to help me with training you. Seems we don't have as much time as we thought. You've got your Tarot?" I nod. "Good. Set them in the window so they can soak up some moonlight. Not as good as a full or new moon, but it won't hurt. Sprinkle some salt on them. That'll clean them off for you. They'll be more useful when they're wiped of old energy. Now, bring me some candles. White, red, yellow, blue, green. We're going to learn how to call the corners and tomorrow we'll do some real deep meditative work. We can't leave the house in our physical bodies, but we can do some astral travel.

"Vampires don't have the same types of souls as we do, they can't separate from their bodies anymore. But we can. And we can use that to help us search for this stone without their knowing. Estella's got more practice with this than I do, so she's going to be your guide. I'll keep watch over your body here. And we need to start teaching you some stronger protective spells, just in case anything happens to any of us and you find yourself alone and face to face with someone who wants to

hurt you. Alright? You go get my candles and I'll make us some tea. There's always time for a cup. In fact, that might be the most important thing right now." She and Estella move off towards the kitchen. Bronson stands at the front window, watching the sky outside. I go to find Cora's candles.

"They're here," Bronson calls into the kitchen a few minutes later. Estella comes out to the living room so she can let the wall down again.

"Alex, come here and help me. Take my hand." Estella reaches out to me. I take her hand.

"What do I do?" I ask, scared I will ruin something.

"Just hold my hand. Lend me some strength." I nod to her and grip her slim fingers tightly in my own. "Concentrate now," she whispers to me. "We're opening the door."

I feel it happen. The slightest movement in the air in front of me. Dom and Lisette dive through the hole in the space. Estella grips my hand tight again. "Concentrate. We're going to close it now. I need you to ground me. Focus on the solid world around you."

I feel the floor under my bare feet, the air on my face, the feel of her hand in mine. And I feel the wall in front of us zip back up. Estella relaxes and turns to me with a huge smile on her face. "Good job, young lady. We did it." Then she surprises me by stooping to give me a hug.

I hear a squeak and then a meow. I turn towards the sound. "Oliver!" Lisette smiles and holds him out to me. "We couldn't leave him behind. Every witch needs her cat, after all!" She winks at me. I take the cat, squishing him to my chest and kissing the top of his fuzzy head. He protests and tries to push me away. But I don't care. I've never been more happy to see him.

"Alright everyone. Tea's ready." Cora walks back out into the living room carrying a tray of steaming mugs, an assortment of tea bags, and

milk and sugar. "We have work to do tonight. But first, we need to cleanse ourselves. Miss Estella may not practice magic this way, but us mountain witches believe in a good cup of tea, and maybe a shot of whisky, before performing any spell work!"

"Funny you should mention that, Cora," Estella says, taking a mug and a packet of orange tea from the tray. "It's not only mountain witches who cleanse themselves before work. Though, I prefer a shot of tequila with mine." She winks.

"It's settled then!" Cora claps her hands together. We all grab a mug and a tea packet and sit down to relax before a long night of work. Oliver, my friend again, curls up on my lap, purring.

Later that night we set up Cora's candles to call the corners. East, South, North, and West. My fairies. My ancestors. The spirits of the River around us and the hills beyond us. Together, we sit in a circle as the flames danced around us, Estella's voice guiding our group in a deep meditation. A cold winter wind whips the sides of Cora's little house. But the shield holds strong, and we dive deep into work. The vampires join us this time. They hold our hands, adding their ancient energy to our own. Oliver winds in and out of the group, playing with the shadows thrown by the candles, eventually coming to sit in my lap.

I feel my powers click into place in a way they haven't yet. What I have been learning and doing before felt almost like a game in comparison. My previous studies were an awakening to a part of me I never knew about before. It was fun. This is different. Deeper. When I open my eyes at the end of the ritual, I feel I am a completely different woman. And, for the first time, one of my ancestors comes to me in a place other than my studio. A woman. Long, wild red hair. Deep green eyes. Milky skin. She is dressed in clothes I don't recognize. Old clothes. It is as if she has stepped out of time. She is kneeling by Bronson, her face very close to his, her forehead rested on his temple. She is

whispering something to him. Together, they both look at me. Two sets of intense, ancient eyes. She reaches up to her throat then, as she looks at me, as if she is reaching for a necklace that is no longer there. Her hand stays there for a minute, her eyes locked on mine. Then she drops her fingers and leans down to kiss Bronson's cheek. A moment later she has faded into the shadows around us. Edit. It has to have been her. She's come through for me. My grandmother.

I see one thick tear spill down Bronson's cheek. He wipes it away before anyone else notices it.

CHAPTER 14



T rue to her word, the next day Cora has me learning how to travel by astral body. While the vampires sleep, we set up a round of white candles. It is easier for me to fall into a deep trance now that I have truly connected to my powers. Together with Estella, while Cora and Oliver watch on, I slip into a deep meditation. Soon enough, I feel myself begin to lift from my body.

The sensation scares me at first. I panic and sink back in. Estella laughs when she comes back and finds me. "It's ok, it's strange for all of us at first. Try holding my hand. I'll guide you."

I do as she asks and together we slide into a trance. This time, when I feel myself begin to rise, I focus on the feel of Estella's hand in mine. And then I am looking at myself lying on the floor. My body has fallen into the bank of pillows we set up on the floor. Estella is lying next to me. Oliver, I smile to see, is lying on top of me.

Estella pulls me up and we float through the roof of the house, up above the trees. Everything is different from this view. The world has a hazy quality, almost as if it is vibrating. Colors are brighter. I can see the energies and auras of everything around me. In fact, it is this new energy "sight" that guides me now. Slower vibrating things, such as rocks, seem to draw me down, suck me in. Higher vibrating things,

flowers for instance, almost seem to tickle me. I laugh at the sensation, looking towards Estella. She is gazing at the ground below us. Somewhere under the earth, I can feel slow, deep vibrations pulling us down.

“Vampires,” she whispers, “This is why some call them Undead. They still have souls. But they move at a different frequency than our human ones. You’ll notice that extremely negative people generate a similar feeling. We witches call them energy vampires, for they perform essentially the same function as our bloodsucking friends. Be aware of them and stay away when you are in this state. They’ll pull you in otherwise, and you’re not strong enough yet to escape.”

I shiver at that. She takes my hand again and we fly towards the river. I delight in the way the sun dances off the shimmering waters. Everything is so beautiful from up here. We watch for a moment. And then she brings us back. I don’t realize until I see my body again how tired I am from our short trip. If I am going to make it to Belle Isle to search for that stone, I will have to get much stronger.

For the next month, we practice every day. Sam explains my absence from school and work, saying I’ve had a family emergency. My professor has allowed me to finish my work remotely and Dominic and Bronson have run to my studio to collect my paint things. So when I’m not working on spells or Tarot or astral travel, I am in my makeshift studio, painting the faces of the many ancestors who have started to pop up now that I have gotten the hang of mediumship. Bronson keeps up his visits to my studio, occasionally now joined by Dom or Lisette. He does not talk as much now though, just watches me work.

I am using my Tarot to help me find the location of this stone we are searching for. Though so far all the cards give me is The Moon. Over and over again, The Moon. And occasionally the Knight of Cups. I cannot discern what they are saying.

I have more luck with my travels. During one astral trip, I came into contact with a Powhatan spirit. He has heard of the stone himself and agrees to help me. He sometimes brings forward with him other spirits who inhabit the island. Sometimes other Natives, sometimes Union soldiers who were imprisoned on the island during the Civil War. They too, have heard of the stone, and watched for years the vampires who came in the night to search for it. None know its location, but they all agree to help me.

Time is running low. Vampires are gathering outside the little cabin. Though they hide themselves well, we can feel them in the night. Lisette came home one morning, covered in blood from a fight with one of them. She left the house the evening before to feed, tired of eating our human food. All the vampires are, I can tell. It never really fills them and can't nourish them.

Dom is growing weaker by the day. I know then what needs to be done. I bring him to my room one morning,

"Alex, I'm afraid I won't be any fun right now. I'm too tired."

"Shhh " I hold a finger to his lips. They are cold. Too cold. Like death. I lean down so my neck is near his mouth. "Feed on me."

"What?" He sits up and tries to push me away, but I hold on.

"I'm strong enough, Dom. And you're growing weaker. Feed on me. Do it."

He sighs, and I think he is going to push me away. But then I feel soft lips on my neck, pain as two sharp teeth sink in, and the strong beat of my heart in my chest as my blood begins to drain out of me. I wince and suck in a sharp gasp of air, but force myself to hold still for him. In a minute, he pulls away, satiated. He kisses me with lips covered in my blood and holds me to his chest. I am in pain, but he looks better already. "You're a good woman, Alex," he says to me.

“Well.” I look at him with a smirk and then a wince. “Just think of the possibilities. I bleed from every surface, after all.”

He laughs me off then, but a few days later, teeth marks show up on my breasts, then my thighs. We may have lost the privacy of my house, but we find ways to keep our attraction alive.

The other vampires need to feed as well. I let Lisette go to Estella and Cora in turn. But I will not let anyone else feed Bronson. He has taken such good care of me, I feel it a duty to return the favor.

“Dominic,” he whispers, touching the teeth marks on my neck and chest with the tips of his fingers. Then, before I have time to prepare myself, he pulls me to him and sinks his teeth into my throat. I cry out in shock, but soon relax. This man always needs to test me for some reason. I will not be weak right now. I straighten my back, refusing to be a victim. Then I hook my fingers around his neck and pull him in closer to me. We sit like that for many minutes, him feeding off me, me refusing to back down. The only sound is my heart beat between us. Finally, he releases me. He leans back and looks me in the eye. “Just like Edit,” he whispers. Then he gets up and leaves the room so fast, it takes me a moment to register his absence.

CHAPTER 15



*W*eeks pass. I still haven't figured out the meaning behind the message my Tarot is sending me. I sit one night at the back window, looking outside and puzzling over them. The Moon. Two dogs howl at a yellow crescent moon and sun hanging in the sky above them. She seems to look down at them, though her eyes may be closed. Below her, a rain falls towards the dogs. Behind the two animals, in the foreground of the card, a lobster crawls out of water. The card is flanked on either side by two tall towers. In the background, mountains. It is a mysterious card, even for experienced readers.

AND THE KNIGHT OF CUPS. He rides in shining armor on a white steed. In his hand, a golden grail. A river runs in front of him. He seems to be in contemplation as to whether or not to cross it, though the wings attached to the knight's helmet and boots suggest that eventually he would. It is a card of pushing to your depths, crossing emotional boundaries, being brave in your psychological world.

I PULL a card for myself and am shocked. Instead of my usual Magician, I have pulled The High Priestess. The meaning is clear. The acolyte has come into her powers. It is time to push deeper, to become the High Priestess. I know then what I need to do. Though I do not tell anyone else of my plans. I need to time think.

I BEGIN to watch the skies. I throw myself into my mediumship. I am going to have to find this stone on my own, in my physical body. Everything in my gut tells me it will be during a new moon, when I will truly have to dive into my powers to find hidden things. So I wait. My art takes on a dark turn. Shadows pile up in the corners of my paintings. They swim across my face. Blues and purples show up where before there have been oranges and reds. I am preparing myself.

I BEGIN to wear only my silver jewelry. My one nice necklace with a drop pearl, a gift from Evie. I soon find out it belonged to my mother. Cora and Estella take note. Silver and pearls are ways to communicate with moon energy, feminine energy. The interior world. The world I am seeing more and more, the one I am going to have to travel in order to find this stone. They do not remark on it to me, though. Only send each other knowing looks and continue to help me with my lessons. Through them, I grow stronger and more in control every day. Though, Cora reminds me to smile. It is she who insists I keep practicing woods magic: playing with my fairy guides, and learning from them. She makes sure the smile never leaves my face for too long, and for that I am grateful.

THE MOON CREEPS along the sky. Soon, it is time. She has hidden her face
and the new moon is upon us. Tonight, I will find the stone.

CHAPTER 16



*G*ather what I need: my Tarot deck, a piece of Lapis for my protection, Moonstone to help guide me. Estella insists on me wearing her pentagram amulet for protection. Many people don't realize the five-pointed star, rather than being a sign of anything malevolent, is really just a symbol of the five points of the human body. It offers its wearer safety from bodily harm.

Cora makes me sit and have one more cup of tea and a shot of her homemade moonshine. It burns on its way down and I wince. "It's good for you, baby girl. Mountain liquor for a night you'll need mountain magic." She pats my hand, looking at me with her deep, brown eyes.

Soon it is time for me to go. The sun will set in another hour or so and I want to get out to Belle Isle before night falls. I need the last fading energy of the sun to help me in the dark.

I slip out through hugs and kisses from both women and Oliver. Estella opens a crack in the shield so I can enter the woods outside. The vampires are still asleep – those who guard me as well as those who are tracking me. Still, I can feel their darkness in the forest all around me. I creep to my car and got in. Despite the myths, witches only use broomsticks to sweep negative energies out of the corners of their houses. We've always traveled using more conventional means.

The island is deserted. Though it is nearing the end of March, it is still cold outside and people have stayed away. Good. I don't want anyone around to get caught in possible crossfire.

I close my eyes for a minute as I step out off the bridge and officially onto Belle Isle. A soft breeze sweeps around me. I think I hear a sigh, a soft tread in the dry grass. Someone touches my face. My guides are here with me. I smile and follow their trail into the forest in the center of the island. I can hear the river rushing past me on both sides. Spring thaws have created huge, fast currents. The water will be deep. And cold. Leaves crack under my feet. Though a few early buds push out from trees branches and through the undergrowth, most life is still sleeping under the still-frozen ground.

I reach the peak of the hill I have been climbing and look out through the trees. To my west, the sun has sunk into the river, the rushing water ablaze in its light. Across from me, the white and gray tombstones of Hollywood Cemetery shine in the last bit of afternoon. I think of every story I've heard of the vampire who inhabits one of the mausoleums there. The story is that he was unearthed during construction of a bridge in Church Hill and went flying down to the cemetery upon his discovery. Now I know the sightings of him are just visions of other vampires on the hunt for the same stone I am now searching for. I shiver at the thought and pull back into the forest. The sun will be down in earnest soon and I won't have much time before the vampires, both friend and foe, will learn of my departure from the safe house. I have to work fast.

I pull out my cards. Maybe they will help us now. I can't see my guides just then; they haven't made themselves visible to me. But I feel them settle down around me, keeping watch. I shuffle once, twice, three times, move the stiff cardboard through my fingers and pull one card from the deck. The Four of Swords. A medieval style coffin, its

inhabitant carved out of stone and laying on top, is sitting under three swords. Their tips are pointing down, seemingly into the stone body of the fallen knight. The fourth sword lies carved on the side of the tomb. It is a card of sleep, but also stagnation. The potential for movement is still there in the swords, though, the idea being that it may be the knight's choice to be sleeping.

As I puzzle over the card, more spirits move to join me. They are restless. The light has grown dim. The sun has sunk below the horizon. Somewhere in the distance, I can feel the vampires moving.

I looked back at the card and it hits me. Literally. A rusted washer from a pipe knocks me in the forehead. Judging by the cascade of giggles I hear, I judged it has been thrown at me by one of my fairy friends.

"Ouch! Watch it!" I cry, rubbing my head. But then I see what they are trying to say. In the early part of the 20th century, Belle Isle was home to a hydroelectric plant. The plant itself has been closed since 1963, but the ruins remain behind on the island. It makes perfect sense. The sleeping knight is the ruined plant. Work stopped. Industry put to death. The stone was somewhere in the old plant.

"Thank you!" I kiss the washer and look around me into the forest, where I know the fairies are waiting. I take off the silver bracelet I am wearing and leave it for them, a gift in thanks for their help.

I scramble back down the hill. I grew up playing on this island. I know every nook and cranny. And, in my heart, I know which part of the ruins to search in.

They are at the ruins when I get there. Two vampires. A man and a woman. She is dark, her hair in long braids. He is tall and blond. They both have those same shifting, glimmering eyes as Dom and Lisette. I stop in my tracks. My hand flies up to my neck, to rest on Estella's amulet.

“White light,” I whisper to myself. “I am surrounded by white light.” But inside, I am praying with all my might that my friends are on their way.

The woman starts laughing. My blood runs cold at the sound. “Little witch! So you’ve brought us to the stone!” She looks at her partner. “Should we keep her alive until the others come? Or drain her now? I can hear her heart beating from here. Strong. There’s powerful magic in those veins. Imagine the taste.” She licks her lips at that and stares at me. But she doesn’t attack. *She still needs me*, I think to myself. *She can’t get to the stone without me*. This is why the others have taken such good care of me. Why no one else has been able to find the stone before. It is mine to find. Even another witch will not be able to track it. Edit told me about it just weeks ago – the missing necklace she motioned to! It is her stone! Ours! She must have meant it for Bronson to have, before she died.

I snap back to the present at the sound of other vampires moving in the forest around me. Soon they begin to step out of the trees, each with their beaming eyes fixed on me. Lips parted, teeth bared. There must be fifty of them in all. And I am all alone.

I bring my focus deep inside myself, concentrating on building light around me. I hear several of the vampires begin to laugh. I can feel them pressing in to my space, trying to control me. I pay them no mind. If I waver at all, I will be lost. I need to hold the space for as long as I can. Dom will be here soon. I have to trust that. So I hold on. The spirits around me help. I feel their smooth astral bodies circling me, keeping the vampires away. They protect me as I begin to push my way into the abandoned basement. Vampires or no, I need to get down there before the night is over, before the sun rises and the magic of the new moon is gone. I just hope my friends will come soon to help. I don’t know how much longer I can last.

In the basement, I begin to dig. The vampires have followed me in. I am losing strength. The dark woman is touching me now, running her cold hands through my hair, whispering in my ear, "Where are your little friends, witch? Not here to save you now. Oh, the things I'm going to do with you once I get you under my control " She licks my ear. I wince. But the sharp breath I draw in is not in response to her tongue. My hand has found something in the dirt. Cool and smooth. And in my heart, I know. The stone.

I see a flash of light just before I faint. And what I think looks like the form of Edit. Behind her stand Dom, Bronson, and Lisette. Then there is darkness.

CHAPTER 17



I awake to the sunshine on my face. That is what I remember most. Slowly, I begin to notice the dappled shadows of leaves on a white clapboard wall. At first, I think the ground underneath me is moving. Then I realize I am swinging. On Cora's front porch swing. I am covered in a thick hand-sewn quilt. Oliver lies on my stomach, purring. I am safe. I am home.

All of a sudden, the events of the night before come flooding back to me. I sit up in a panic, searching my pockets for the stone. It is missing. "Cora!" I call out, "Estella!"

The two women come flying out onto the porch. Bright smiles light their faces when they see me. Cora takes my face in her hands and kisses my forehead. "Welcome back, baby girl! You did it!"

"Where's the stone?" I gasp.

Cora smiles and turns back to the house. "I'll let Dom answer that question for you."

And then, there he is. My beautiful lover steps out into the light of the morning. And I see him then as I have never been able to see him before. By night he is pale, dramatic. By day, he is another creature entirely. His eyes, though still shifting with the changes of light, take on a softer hue. His normally dark hair betrays reddish highlights. His skin,

though still snowy white, has gained some roundness of color. He looks almost human, his presence no longer a gash in the air around him.

He comes to me then, tears in his eyes, and kisses me. That is when it sinks in. He is kissing me. In the daylight.

"How is this possible?" I whisper into his lips.

He pulls a necklace out from under his shirt. A piece of string tied through a small, broken chunk of rock. There is nothing particularly special about the stone. It is smooth and grey. But it shines with an inner glow that is undeniable. It is Edit's stone. My stone. And it works!

I am so overjoyed, I don't know if I am crying or laughing. I pull him to me again and kiss him deeply. Oliver, caught in the middle, cries out in annoyance. We both laugh together then.

Two others step out onto the porch then. Bronson and Lisette. The sunlight has done for them the same thing it has done for Dom: made them almost human. They are both beaming as they walk over to me.

Lisette leans down to kiss my forehead. "Beautiful lady. You did it."

Bronson holds my hand, staring at me. There are tears in his eyes. He pulls me up into a tight embrace and whispers into my ear, "Edit is so proud of you. I am so proud of you. Thank you." Then he kisses my cheek and returns me back to my seat on the swing.

"Shots for everyone!" Sam leaps out onto the porch carrying a jug of moonshine and a stack of shot glasses. Everyone howls with laughter and obediently takes their glasses. Sam splashes the clear liquor into each one and then we raise them for a toast. "To Alexandra," Bronson begins, "the woman who brought us all new life." Everyone murmurs their agreement, looking at me. I blush. I don't deserve all the praise.

"And to Bronson," I cry out before anyone can down their liquor, "the man who saved my life so many years ago." We keep our eyes locked on each other as we take our shots.

We all take one more shot, for good luck. Then, Dom scoops me up into his arms. I throw my head back and laugh as he twirls me around. "Let's go on a walk, Alex! I've been waiting centuries to see a river in the daylight!"

He jumps down off the porch, me still nestled snug on his chest. I kiss his cheek and wave to the others on the porch as he carries me off down to the bank of the James. We laugh and dance the whole way there, skipping through the pools of sunlight on the forest floor.

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