

a *magical* journey of epic romance

B.C. BURGESS

retribution
the mystic series 4

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About the Author

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retribution

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to the
members of The Mystic
Coven.

Your love for the series makes
my heart soar higher than
witches and wizards fly.



Author's note:

Retribution is not a stand-alone novel and begins a few hours after Deception ends. There is no recap of the story.

Click [here](#) to read book one :
Descension

Click [here](#) to read book two:
Impassion

Click [here](#) to read book three:
Deception

*When we last left Layla, she
and Quin had finally
consummated their
relationship and were in the
bathtub at Karena's Royal
Suite. They've bonded,
increasing their magical
power, and though they
couldn't be happier with each
other, their world is more*

dangerous than ever.

Agro wants proof of Layla's location before invading the Conn/Kavanagh coven, but his patience is dwindling, and after a fit in which he slaughtered over fifty of his own soldiers, so is his army. Agro wants nothing more than he wants Layla, so he has given Guthrie three days to collect more soldiers and

recruit new soothsayers. If Agro doesn't get his treasured witch soon, others will pay the price with their lives.

Prologue

March – Klamath Mountains

The snow came at Guthrie in cold, gray swirls that matched his stormy gaze and the granite peaks slicing through the eastern sky. The fluffy flakes that slipped past the hood of his crimson cloak clung to his lashes then succumbed to his magical heat, melting into quivering droplets.

Guthrie expected no less of the flight over Ship Mountain, which found itself

blanketed in snow six months out of the year, so he didn't bother cursing nature as he wiped away the moisture blurring his view. The unit behind him, however, started grumbling the moment they began following the Klamath Mountain Range into California.

Noon had come and gone, and Guthrie knew the soldiers were tired and hungry. They usually slept during the day, and they'd been on the move since dawn. But Agro had given Guthrie a mere three days and two nights to collect an army large enough to obliterate the coven protecting their target – a witch more powerful than any other.

Because Agro had already summoned the troops near Oregon – only to

slaughter most of them – rallying more would require a trip through California, Nevada, Wyoming and Montana. Then there was the matter of flying back to Oregon. The boss wanted Guthrie back in the Clatsop State Forest before the sun snuffed out the third night, and if the lieutenant found himself unable to make his deadline, he'd be wise to fly in the opposite direction, because those who failed Agro generally failed to draw breath long enough to regret their mistake.

Wiping away another melted snowflake, Guthrie dipped into a ravine and slowed to a hovering stop. According to Agro's map, a unit of Dark Elite soldiers camped nearby, awaiting

the boss' call.

Guthrie lifted the concealment spell on his body and opened the sleeve of his cloak, letting his snake taste the air. Then he dug into a hidden pocket and retrieved a map printed on a scroll of parchment.

Several soldiers dropped into the gully around him and lifted their concealment spells, relieved to be out of the wind, but Guthrie ignored their sighs as he unrolled the map and mumbled the word *Appalachia*. Wind whistled along the jagged mouth of the frozen chasm as he scanned the map's legend. Then he flipped the scroll over and located the correct coordinates. The camp was less than ten miles away.

Tucking the map in his cloak, he glanced at his unit, who wisely kept their complaints to themselves while awaiting their next command. Most of them were experienced soldiers who knew better than to expect a reward for their obedience, but Guthrie decided to throw them a bone.

After ushering Silestra back into his sleeve, he concealed his body and floated toward open air. “We’ll take a break and eat when we reach the camp ten miles south, but then you have a twelve hour task ahead of you.”

“What will you have us do?” Lynette asked.

Guthrie looked at her, a woman as deadly as she was beautiful, a tempting

rose with razor sharp thorns... which she'd recently plunged into his sides with whispers of rebellion. "We'll split up," he answered.

Lynette scowled, her porcelain skin creasing around her violet eyes and red lips.

Guthrie ignored the look and continued. "A few of you will accompany me to Nevada to fetch Agro's soothsayers, while the others continue south. There are a few more settlements in California I don't have time to visit. Now conceal yourselves. A hot meal is less than twenty minutes away."

With exact coordinates, they easily found their destination and entered the

sleepy camp unannounced, bringing down protection spells with predetermined passwords.

A nearby guard jolted to attention and scanned the crimson cloaks. Then he met Guthrie's confident stare and tried to stand taller. "What's the meaning of this?"

Guthrie sized the man up then looked around, pinpointing the largest tent. "I'm Agro's new lieutenant, here on his command."

The guard slowly relaxed and eyed the rest of the travelers. "What happened to Farriss?"

"Good question," Guthrie returned, heading for the tent undoubtedly housing the camp's commander. "He went

missing five days ago. Wake everyone and tell them to prepare to depart.”

Lynette huffed and crossed her arms. “I thought a hot meal was on the menu.”

Guthrie narrowed his eyes on her, and her arms slid to her sides as she bowed her head. “Sir.”

Guthrie stifled a smirk, wise enough to know Lynette wasn’t submitting. She was merely appeasing him in an effort to get what she wanted, which happened to be his ear, so that she may whisper mutinous plots into it. And considering her outrageous schemes, she probably wanted to build him up in front of the other soldiers, cement him as a man worthy of an army’s obedience and loyalty.

Guthrie found the guard's curious stare and set him to task. "Have someone prepare breakfast. Everyone will need sustenance for their journey."

"What journey?" a gruff voice cut in.

Everyone looked over, watching the camp's commander emerge from his tent as nude as the day he was born. A witch in a skimpy, red slip followed him out, paying little attention to the crowd as she made her leave, and the commander gave her ass a slap before rubbing the sleep from his eyes. His blond hair and beard were in need of grooming, and his puffy eyelids bore witness to his disturbed slumber. But at thirty-two-years-old, he had youth on his side and stood as tall and sturdy as his morning

wood. He was also a bonded child and had a thick and solid power-band to prove it.

“Guthrie,” he laughed, tossing his hands up in welcome. “Fuck the Heavens, man, I haven’t seen you in six years.” He threw an arm around Guthrie’s shoulders and looked to the other newcomers, quickly spotting Lynette. A grin twitched his facial hair and exposed a perfect row of shiny teeth. “Lady Lyn, you’re aging like a fine wine.”

Lynette snorted and rolled her eyes. “You’re full of shit, Token. More like a used mattress.”

“Do I sense some tension?” Token asked, turning his olive-green gaze on

Guthrie.

Guthrie left the question unanswered and addressed his unit. “If you want to eat, you better do it.”

The soldiers hastened away, and after a moment’s hesitation, Lynette followed.

“Got any food in here?” Guthrie asked, giving Silestra some air as he entered the commander’s tent.

Token followed him in, magically donning a pair of shorts as he gestured toward a sofa. “Sure. Take a seat. How have you been, man?”

While Token put together a tray of cheese and crackers, Guthrie scanned the impressive expanse of the commander’s opulent quarters. “I’m Agro’s new lieutenant.”

“No shit?”

“No shit,” Guthrie mumbled.

Token set the tray on the coffee table and poured two glasses of wine.

“Congratulations are in order then.”

That was a lie, and both men knew it, but they played the roles they’d played most their lives. “Thanks, Toke,” Guthrie replied. “Got any meat?”

“It’s on its way. So what happened to the last guy?”

“Missing.”

“Flee?”

“Probably not.”

“Dead then.”

“Most likely.”

A witch entered the tent with a tray of ham then promptly made her exit, and

Guthrie took a few bites before looking at the commander. “Have you heard any news?”

Token crossed his arms over his broad chest, holding his bicep in one hand and his glass in the other. “I know the boss is after a witch. All the commanders received orders to search for her, and I was told to move north. We were about three hours down the coast. I’ve been sending out teams to gather local gossip, but we don’t know anything more than a name and that she’s a bonded child.”

“*The* bonded child,” Guthrie corrected.

Token’s forehead wrinkled as he took a swig. “You’ll have to explain.”

“How old were you when you were brought into camp?”

“Seven.”

“Then you may not remember.”

Token grabbed a piece of ham and sat on the sofa’s armrest. “Remember what?”

“Twenty-two years ago, two bonded children bonded with each other.”

“What? That’s impossible.”

“Most magicians would agree, but I saw them. Their lights were bigger and brighter, and their power-bands put others to shame. When Agro found out about them, he set out to acquire their child.”

“Of course.”

“But he was fooled into thinking the

woman died while their child was still in the womb and too young to survive. The father sacrificed his life to ensure Agro believed the lie.”

Token gave an impressed nod and took another swig. “Now the truth’s out?”

“Yes. The witch is alive, and we’ve been on her trail for nearly a month, but we haven’t been able to catch her. When we do manage it, we’re going to have a fight on our hands. Her parents are long gone, but her grandparents and their coven are prepared to die for her.”

Guthrie paused, taking the time to chew and swallow a bite. Then he charged on. “And it seems Agro is prepared to do the same. He’ll stop at nothing to get this

witch.”

“And that’s why you’re here,” Token surmised, slowly running his gaze over his luxurious abode. “Calling the troops home.”

“Yes, all those I can gather by Thursday night. I also need to make a trip to southern Nevada to buy a couple of soothsayers.”

Token rose from the sofa and moved to the entrance of his tent, moving one flap aside so he could see the soldiers eating breakfast. “And the children? Will they accompany us?”

“No. I need your weakest soldiers to take the children to a camp near Lake Tahoe. The witch’s family wants us to believe her trail leads to the area, and

Agro wants them to think we've fallen for it. Once the children's handlers get them settled, they're to make public appearances and ask blatant questions regarding the witch, so word will get back to her family that we've moved on. Then, once they let their guard down, we'll move in. Unless the new soothsayers prove useful, which is about as likely as the witch turning herself in. Of all the visions Agro's yanked from soothsayers over the past twenty-two years, none of them have pertained to the witch or her family."

Still gazing outside, Token gave a nod. "Lynette seems on edge."

"That bitch is crazy," Guthrie replied. Token loudly laughed as he turned into

the tent and grabbed a piece of cheese. “I see your passion for each other still burns.”

“That’s one way to put it. So, how do your soldiers measure up? Anyone worthy enough to lead besides yourself?”

“Lead in what way?”

“Excluding those taking responsibility for the children, most of the soldiers need to head to Oregon, but I need a trustworthy unit to take your map and collect the rest of the troops in California. They have two nights. They need to report to Agro before the sun rises on the third.”

“I have a handful who can handle the task,” Token assured. “What would you

have me do?"

"You'll go with me. When we're done in Nevada, I need to hit Wyoming and Montana."

"Shit, man. Are we starting a war?"

"We've already cleaned out Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, but Agro's been on edge and skimmed us down to around seventy soldiers. We'll be lucky to double it within the time limit he's given me." Guthrie ushered Silestra up his sleeve as he stood. Then he downed his wine and headed for the exit. "And yes, Agro's preparing for war. We'll either capture the witch or die trying."

"But it's one witch."

Guthrie halted and turned, finding his

comrade's stare. "A witch favored by the Heavens, Token. You'd be wise to remember that from now on. This is no ordinary hunt. The stakes are higher than ever, and the boss is following this one through no matter the cost."

Token took a long look at his comfortable quarters – a luxury he may never experience again. Then he found Guthrie's stare and gave a nod. "I'll set the soldiers to task."

Chapter 1

Cannon Beach, Oregon Karena's Royal Suite

The first time Quin awoke to a gold and silver haze floating around him and Layla's naked bodies, conflicting emotions crashed over him, squeezing his heart as the organ soared. He'd received the most amazing gift life could give – she was tucked into his chest, her warm breath a tingling channel for the peace and desire she instilled in him – and he was beyond grateful for the gift,

but wicked talons lurked in the shadows, threatening to swoop in and grab his angel away.

Everything had changed. The situation was completely different now, but the danger remained and had strengthened. He and Layla would never be able to live a risk free life. Overnight they'd become the most dynamic witch and wizard the world had ever known, and there was no doubt in Quin's mind they were the only two of their kind, making them a delicacy coveted by every evil magician in the world. And not only would wicked magic users want control over them; common magicians would view them as an intriguing freak show set up for the entertainment of others.

The two of them might as well have targets painted on their backs.

Quin had already considered a life in hiding, and it wasn't an appealing idea. He loved his family and cherished his home. When his friends had been mentally preparing to someday leave their communities, he'd refused to consider it, telling himself it would take an angel to separate him from his coven. Well, he had his angel now, and he'd follow her anywhere, but she didn't want to leave either. And who the hell could blame her? She'd grown up with only one person to love and to be loved by. Now she had a whole slew of them, twenty-six people who'd give their lives for her; twenty-six people she'd die for.

She'd just gotten her hands on it; of course she didn't want to let it go.

He looked down at her long, onyx spirals. Then he watched her peaceful aura flutter around them, holding more ribbons of color than any other aura he'd seen. Twenty-six of the distinguishable cords – those representing their covenant – quivered and flowed a little faster than the rest, drawing attention away from the thinner and wispier strands. Then there was the thick band of sparkling dark-brown, which flowed like an espresso river sprinkled with pulsing stars, so bold and so substantial it looked tangible.

No, he didn't want to leave, but if that's what it would take to keep her

from harm, that's what they'd do. The sacrifices would be difficult to make; they'd miss much of what life had to offer, but the emptiness would never compare to what they'd feel if they lost each other. Through all the worry and fear, every second they spent in each other's arms was a blessed second, and Quin would turn away from the rest of the world in a heartbeat to hold Layla's breathing body against him.

Her aura continued to flow peacefully, but Quin knew that would change the moment she awoke and started worrying about the difficult decisions facing them. He despised the notion. He wanted her to wake up and feel the pure wonder of it, not the worry of it.

Taking a chance, he moved his arms from around her and replaced them with magic. Then he carefully floated her further up his body. She stirred, but he had no problem adjusting his spell to her movements. After catching a glimpse of her serene expression, he slowly rolled her over. Then he gently lowered her back to the bed. Her aura picked up speed when she made contact with the blankets, so he quickly formed his body to the back of hers and touched his lips to her ear.

“Layla, my perfect angel, are you ready to wake up?”

She smiled and stretched against him, then rolled back into a ball, but she didn't open her eyes or seem fully awake

when she mumbled his name.

He gave her earlobe a nibble then moved his mouth to the back of her neck, listening as her sigh whispered across his pillow. He reached up, finding her parted lips with his fingertips. Then he trailed his hand down her torso, emitting soft shocks that twitched her stomach and vibrated her aura. When he got to her thighs, he slipped his hand between them, completely covering the smooth entrance to her body. Then a whoosh of magical warmth flowed from his palm, igniting sensitive nerve endings and jolting her awake.

Her arm flew behind her, frantically searching him out, and he abandoned her thighs to grab her hand. He pulled the

inside of her wrist to his lips, kissing it until she relaxed. Then he stretched her hand over her head and placed it in his idle palm.

His freed fingertips trailed down her arm and side, finding their way to her inner thigh, and with a little tug, she was open to him, surrounding his erection with humid heat. His heart pounded against her shoulder blade as he lowered his lips to her ear. Then he whispered her name as he pushed inside her body, his passage tight and swollen from the night before.

She cried out, her insides flexing as her hips jerked, and he made to pull away so he could heal her. But before he could free himself, or even murmur an

apology, she arched and forced him deeper. A shaky breath lodged in his throat, nearly choking him as his arm flew to her torso, and her wrist slipped from his other hand with ease. She reached behind her, clutching his jaw as she tilted her head back. Then she held his cheek to hers while moving against him in a way that can't be learned, not by time nor experience. Only instinct driven by pleasure moved like that.

“Damn,” he mumbled, trying to maintain his sanity, but he hadn't expected such a carnal reaction. She'd yanked away his control in more ways than one, leaving surrender his only option.

His twitchy fingers came to a rest on

her collarbone, and his forearm kept her close as her lungs and hips quickened, spurred by an oncoming wave of pleasure.

He sharply inhaled, and her palm slid from his jaw, her rapid breathing in sync with her flexing core. Her breast cuddled his arm as she found his hand. Then she locked their fingers together and squeezed. His chest deflated as he firmly pulled her closer, and she used magic to keep it that way as she arched and undulated, welcoming deepened thrust with pulsing insides.

Her head rolled, gliding moist and parted lips across his cheek, and as her breathy exclamation floated over his jaw, intense tingles erupted, making him

feel as light as air as they pushed him over the edge. His chest rumbled as he buried his face in her hair, drowning his senses in her heavenly bouquet. Then a rush of relief launched him into a fit of spasms.

Several sensational minutes passed before their muscles melted into sated mush, and they both sighed as fulfillment replaced urgency.

He remained submersed in curls, and after a deep breath, he mumbled into them. “You're amazing.”

She wiggled, moving her neck closer to his lips. “You're the perfect alarm clock.”

He laughed, and shivers shot through their bodies.

“What could I do?” he breathed. “You looked stunning sleeping in my arms, so beautiful and bright. When my naked angel tempts me, I bite.”

“Tell you what, feel free to wake me up anytime, because apparently temptation is the root of all that's wonderful.”

He laughed again, and it included a combined twitch. “You're heavenly,” he whispered, blindly finding her cheek, “in so many ways.”

“I can't believe it's like this,” she replied, turning her lips into his palm. “Each time it gets better, which is crazy, because the first time was insane. I mean, how are we ever going to get anything done?”

He laughed yet again, a little harder this time, and tingles shot through their bloodstreams, turning his laugh into a groan that muffled into her neck.

“See?” She'd won her debate.

“Productivity has become impossible.”

“I'm okay with that.”

“We're going to have to be. We're pathetic when it comes to controlling ourselves, and neither of us wants to change. We'll just have to surrender and live the rest of our lives like this.”

“I'm okay with that.”

She kissed and nuzzled his palm. “Me, too, but I think we should figure out a safe way to drink coffee. We don't want to burn ourselves.”

He hugged her tightly and took a deep

breath. Then he removed himself from her hair and body.

“No,” she protested, quickly rolling over. “Don't go. I don't want coffee. I want you.”

He smiled as he scooted closer. “You got me, love, forever. But we need coffee if we're going to keep up this regimen.” He brushed her hair from her face as he glanced at her aura. Then he found her shiny, emerald eyes. “It's also one in the afternoon, and I need to call your grandparents to check in.”

“Oh.”

As she processed the comment, her brow wrinkled over her cute nose, so he reached up and smoothed it. “What's on your mind, Layla?”

“Are you going to tell them we bonded?”

“Not over the phone.”

“Then how will we do it?”

“Well, I guess we should have them come see for themselves. They won't believe it otherwise, and I'd rather not leave the inn until we've talked to them.”

Layla's mouth fell open as her eyes widened. “You're going to invite them over like it's no big deal then let them walk in on this shocker?”

“I'll ask them and my parents to visit; tell them we need to talk. And yes, they'll have to just walk in and see it.”

“Oh,” she murmured, biting her lip. “You're calling them now?”

“Do you want me to wait?”

“I don't know. It's kind of scary.”

“What's got you scared, angel?”

“Well, it's like I'm a teenager about to tell my parents my boyfriend knocked me up or something.”

He laughed and caressed her pout.

“It's nothing like that.”

“Kind of. I mean, we're basically saying *hey, we had sex, and now we're committed for life. We understand it's going to be hard. Will you help us?* If that isn't eerily similar, I don't know what is. Besides, I'm scared they'll get really upset. The last time they walked into a situation like this, it was the first step in a disastrous journey that ended with the deaths of their children. How will they see anything other than bad

memories when they look at us?”

“Okay,” Quin soothed, “I see your point, but you’re forgetting how much resilience your grandparents have, how much appreciation they have for life, and how much love they hold for you. Yes, they’ll be scared and worried, but above all, they’ll be happy for us.”

“Maybe.”

“No, Layla Love, not maybe. They know what it's like.”

Layla stared into his eyes – into his soul and all the sincerity it held – and his reassuring words soaked in, loosening her tight stomach while allowing for a smile. “It's perfect, you know.”

“Yes it is, and it's nothing like a teen

pregnancy, no matter how you spin it.”

Her smile stretched. “But the analogy sounded good, right?”

His dimples appeared as he kissed her grin. “Yes it did. You are witty with your words, my love, and you make me smile.”

Her expression softened as she moved a forefinger to one of his dimples. “I love your smile, Quin. It makes my life better.”

“Your smile is like a shiny star, Layla, and I'm not the only person who treasures it. Your grandparents will need time to process the shock and worry, but in the end, they'll want to celebrate your happiness. So, should I invite them over now, or wait? Either way I need to call

to check in.”

“I guess now. They're going to know eventually...” She paused, eying him as her lips twitched into a sly grin. “Just like when a teenage girl gets pregnant.”

He laughed and lightly tickled her neck. “You're sticking to that analogy?”

“No,” she giggled. “I just wanted to see your dimples get deeper.”

His grin widened as he gave her a kiss then another. “I'll call them while I get your coffee.”

“Okay,” she agreed, pretending to examine her fingernails. “I'm going to go take a shower.”

“Oh yeah?” he laughed, recognizing her game, but instead of calling her out, he took it a step further. His fingertips

slid down her back and over her butt. Then they were between her thighs, softly stroking her opening before pressing inside.

She gasped and gripped his bicep, wiggling against his hand like an attention-starved feline, which was crazy, because she'd just gotten off!

He moved closer, wedging her between his hand and hips so she couldn't move. "Hold still," he whispered. "I'm healing you."

This was *not* what she thought he was doing, and her eyes narrowed. "Tease."

He flashed an ornery grin as his fingers inched deeper, meticulously healing sore flesh along the way, and her eyes rolled back despite her attempt to

pout. By the time he was satisfied with his work, she was fighting the urge to scream at him to stop healing her and start doing her!

“Listen,” he insisted, taking her cheek in his free hand as his fingers slid away. “If I want to keep making love to your body, I need to take care of it. We’re a blessed breed, but our bodies bruise and break as easily as anybody’s. They can’t keep up with us without a little help. Now go get in the shower,” he added, giving her butt a soft pat, “and I’ll bring your coffee to you.”

She cocked an eyebrow, trying to read his expression while wishing his hand was back between her legs. “Is coffee an analogy in this case? Because that would

be lovely.”

He laughed as he pulled her into hug and buried his face in her hair. “Take a long shower, my love, and I’ll meet you there.”

“Mmm... That sounds much tastier than coffee.” She playfully bit his neck then pushed on his shoulders. “Hurry up and make your phone calls, then come get clean with me.”

Following one more kiss, he rolled out of bed and headed for the parlor, and Layla boldly watched him go, surprised by how unabashed she was to do so. Her embarrassment from the night before seemed unreasonable now... and downright foolish, because he was fine as hell, with a tight and muscular

backside, and a well-endowed front that made her ache with need. They'd finally had sex, which was *supposed* to release the tension, but her desire burned hotter than ever.

With tremendous effort, she shifted her attention from his gorgeous body to his aura, and her eyes widened. The haze covered a bigger area than before, the colors were bolder, and his power-band was almost twice the size of her grandparents' power-bands. "Your power-band is different," she noted. "It's much bigger."

"I know," he replied. "You should see yours."

She foolishly looked down at herself, like she'd actually see it, and of course

she couldn't. But she could see shiny, golden swirls and silver rivers, which seemed lost without Quin beside her. The silver strands usually looped around both their bodies, like they were trying to tie them together, but with him out of reach, the glittering bands repeatedly stretched out then curled back in, as if beckoning him. She'd never seen anything like it in another magician's aura or bonded light, not even her parents'.

Quin had been out of the room for about five seconds, and Layla could feel his absence – an unsettling sensation that started small but got stronger every second he was gone. She crawled out of bed and walked across the room,

gauging whether or not the amount of distance between them made a difference. Her heart lightened as she drew closer to the parlor, and by the time she turned and pressed her back against the wall, her anxiety had nearly disappeared. Suddenly and without conscious reasoning, she understood why – he stood on the other side of the wall, testing their new bond the same way.

He quietly laughed, and she smiled as she rested her head against the soft wallpaper. “I already miss you, Quin.”

“Me, too, love, but you know what this means, right?”

“What?”

“We’ll always be able to find each

other, even when there are obstacles in the way.”

“How about we just skip the losing each other part, huh?”

He was silent for a moment. Then she felt a spike in his energy, in the soothing warmth she experienced when he was nearby and loving her. “That’s the sweetest deal I’ve ever been offered, Layla. I’d die to keep you within reach.”

She turned and pressed her palms to the wall, knowing in her gut he was doing the same. “Then that’s the deal.” An emotional lump had captured her throat, but she forced it down, replacing it with the humor, peace and pleasure he brought into her life. “Now go get my coffee and come finish what you

started.”

Chapter 2

Quin bypassed breakfast on the balcony, serving it on the kitchenette's bar instead, and Layla didn't mind losing the ocean view, because she had a better one sitting beside her. He'd thrown on a pair of shorts after their steamy shower, but his chest was bare and mere inches from her roaming hands. She wore a robe, but only because she didn't want crumbs in her lap. Getting fully clothed seemed unnecessary since the layers would soon be stripped away.

She took a bite of apple and laid her head on his shoulder as she chewed, but

when his hand slid inside the front of her robe, her chewing stopped. “You’re going to make me choke.”

“If I do, I’ll save you then start pureeing your food.”

“Eww...”

“Then don’t choke,” he laughed, keeping his hand on her chest.

Obviously he had no plans to remove it, so Layla concentrated on chewing and swallowing, a task that had come naturally for two decades.

“Does it bother you?” he asked.

Her eyes widened as her head jumped from his shoulder. “Are you reading my mind?”

He laughed and pulled his hand from her robe, moving it to her curls instead.

“No, but I see your aura more clearly than I see others, and when I’m close to you, I can sense your emotions.”

“So what did you sense?”

He intently studied her for a moment, like he was trying to decide what he wanted to say, and when he finally got around to saying it, he pulled her close for the delivery. “I’ll tell you, but I want you to do something for me.”

“Okay,” she agreed, and what a silly request it was. She’d do anything for him.

“I want you to work on being more open and vocal with me.”

“Oh,” she breathed, stunned by the request. Guess it wasn’t so silly.

“I know you’re not used to expressing

yourself out loud,” he continued, “but that needs to end with me. Please.”

“Okay,” she agreed, feeling guilty.

“Thank you.” He kissed her head then gave her some room. “So, I get the sense I make you feel dependent.”

Layla grabbed a piece of blueberry muffin and stuffed it in her mouth, trying to ignore how buttery and delicious it was so she could consider his interpretation. “That’s a good way to put it,” she decided, “a nice way, because what I really feel like is a child. And that muffin is incredible.”

“Hmm...” His fingers trailed from her hair to her throat then lower. “I don’t see you as a child.”

“I know,” she assured, pulling his

palm to her heart.

“It’s the way the men in my life treat women,” he added. “It’s the way I was raised to be. I know you’re not helpless. I take care of you because I want to, because it makes me feel good.”

“I know,” she repeated, keeping her eyes on his, which seemed to be pleading with her to understand and accept.

“Then back to my original question,” he whispered. “Does it bother you?”

“No, Quin. I love how you take care of me, but it’s still new. I need to adjust.”

“It’s not all on your shoulders, Layla. I can adjust, too. If you need a sense of independence, tell me, and we’ll figure

out a way to give it to you.”

“Thank you.”

He laughed and drummed his fingers on her heart. “You’re silly. Don’t thank me for this.”

She smiled as she pulled his palm into a kiss. Then she placed it on one of her breasts before attacking the rest of that muffin.

Once they'd eaten enough to stay nourished, he carried her to the sofa. Then he showered her in teasing kisses before leaving her there so he could clean their breakfast mess. She pouted as she watched him walk away, but the TV remote was nearby, so she reached for the distraction.

“I wouldn't bother with the TV,” he

said, refilling their coffee mugs.

“They’re almost here.”

Layla jolted upright, her stomach flipping as her fidgety fingers dropped the remote. She stood, thinking she might get dressed. Then she sat, deciding there wasn’t time. She played percussion on her knees then turned her attention to a fruit basket on the table. Apples and oranges hopped around in the air before peeling and slicing themselves. Then a plate flew from the kitchen and smoothly landed on the coffee table. The uniform pieces of fruit arranged themselves on the plate as the rejected peels and cores zoomed to the trash. Then a fresh flower arrangement appeared on the table.

Quin laughed, and Layla looked up,

watching him approach with their coffee. He placed the mugs on the table. Then he sat on the sofa and pulled her onto his lap. “That looked like a fun way to fidget.”

The moment he touched her, her heart rate slowed and her muscles relaxed. She remained nervous, but the need to act was gone. “It makes a big difference when you touch me.”

He smiled and pulled her palm to his cheek. “It's the same for me, and it will always be that way. We'll never get over that feeling.”

She watched him kiss her wrist, remembering the unease she felt when they were in separate rooms. “So how do bonded couples leave each other's

sides?”

“They don't unless absolutely necessary.”

Her eyes widened. “So you and I will never be apart?”

He soberly looked over. “I sincerely hope not.”

“What about your job?”

“We'll figure something out.”

“I guess we have a lot to figure out.”

Her gaze fell to her lap as her mind flipped through things that would need to change. His career was on a perpetual hiatus, he'd have to move in with her, and any future plans he'd made would have to be rethought. His life had been flipped upside down overnight.

“Stop, Layla.”

His stern voice had her head snapping up. “Stop what?”

“Stop thinking I'm making big sacrifices, because I'm not. You're my life, just you. All the other things are accessories, and I don't need accessories if I don't have my life. Do you feel like you're missing out?”

“No!”

“Then you must know I feel the same. We're bonded, love. We're on the same wavelength. We have been this entire time, but now we have proof, and not just emotional proof.” He waved a hand through the gold and silver haze around them. “We have visual proof of how much we love each other and how much we need to be together. What you feel, I

feel, so if you're concerned I'm missing something, search yourself, because if I'm missing it, you're missing it.”

“Is that really how it works?”

“Yes, angel. I'm only as happy as you are, and you're only as happy as I am.”

She pulled his fingers to her lips. “We make each other very happy.”

“Yes we do,” he agreed. Then he leaned in for a slow and sweet kiss.

“They're here.”

“All of them?”

“Yes, your grandparents and my parents.”

Her heart sped up, and he quickly placed a palm over it. “It's okay, love. This is good news.”

She buried her face in his neck and

took several deep breaths, trying to draw strength from his sturdiness. “Right... good news.”

He quietly laughed, and it soothed her until someone tapped on the door.

“I love you,” he whispered, softly kissing her ear.

“I love you, too,” she returned. Then she took a deep breath and pulled her face from his neck. “Okay, let them in.”

He kissed her cheek while mentally telling their family to come in, and she blindly clutched his hands, her eyes glued to the foyer.

When the three golden couples entered the suite to find a fourth, their mouths fell open as the door flew shut behind them. Frozen in place, they didn't say a

word. They just stared, their features strained by disbelief; their complexions blanched by surprise.

They eventually inched further into the room, taking in the details of the new bonded lights and changed auras, but only sighs drifted from their parted lips as their wide eyes searched and searched again.

Finally, Cordelia and Daleen left the others and rushed forward, putting a small dent in the tension. Quin's mom sat next to him on the sofa while Daleen knelt at his feet. Then they both took him and Layla's hands, but they still didn't speak. They just stared, their auras vibrating and pulsing.

Morrigan soon followed, and she

didn't speak either, nor did she sit. After getting as close to Layla as she could, she laid her hands and lips on the top of her head and squeezed her eyes shut.

The three men remained frozen, staring at the newly bonded mates in shock, but after a long and emotional moment, Serafin broke the heavy silence by clearing his throat. "How did this happen?"

Quin looked away from Layla and raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Serafin lifted a hand to his throat and cleared it again. "Just yesterday, when everyone saw you around town, you weren't... you weren't... *bonded*."

"No," Quin confirmed. "We bonded

last night.” He smiled at Layla, remembering, and she smiled back, her eyes shiny with comprehension.

Caitrin stepped forward with stiff shoulders and a wrinkled forehead. “Are you telling us... Are you trying to say...” He huffed as his nostrils flared. “Are you saying last night was the first time you had sex with each other?”

Layla buried her face in Quin's neck, and he wrapped her in a hug while meeting Caitrin's stare. “Is that so hard to believe?”

Caitrin's chest expanded as his face reddened. “Yes! You've been sleeping in her bed for over a week. And I've never seen such a strong connection between two people without a sexual relationship

present. *Never.*”

Quin shrugged as he stroked the back of Layla's neck. “I won’t pretend it wasn’t a challenge, but I can control myself, particularly if her well-being warrants it. And I think this golden light surrounding us would explain our connection sans sex. If this wasn't so unbelievable, I’d say we should have seen it coming.”

Caitrin scowled and started pacing. “I might have seen it coming if I'd known you hadn't consummated the relationship.”

“Are you suggesting I should have filled you in on our sex life?” Quin returned. “There's no way I could have predicted this. I realize our relationship

has been intense from the beginning, but what else would it be when someone like her is involved? She's perfect in everyone's eyes, not just mine, and nearly every wizard in the world would trip over themselves to give her what I've given her. Never in my wildest dreams did I think it was leading to this, so why would I concern you with our sex life?"

"You wouldn't," Caitrin conceded. "But never in my wildest dreams did I believe you hadn't bedded her already."

"You have to give him credit for willpower," Kemble mumbled.

Caitrin halted and looked over. "Insanity is what most wizards would call it."

“She was dealing with injuries,” Quin cut in, “and daily drama. You know what, this discussion is pointless, and it’s embarrassing her. It doesn’t matter when it happened or whether or not we saw it coming. What would you have done if you’d known, Caitrin? Tell me to leave her alone? No. And even if you had, do you think I would have listened? Nothing was going to stop this from happening. Now let’s move on.”

Silence captured the room once more, and its occupants barely breathed, slowly pulling in air heavy with contrasting emotions. An invisible game of tug-of-war was taking place. Happiness and love battling worry and fear. Everyone felt it, even as they

struggled with their own internal conflicts, attempting to secure a victory for optimism. Some had an easier undertaking than others.

Kemble eyed his son's aura as he moved behind the sofa. Then he laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "The silver cords in your auras – I've never seen anything like it. They're connected, circling both of you."

"I know," Quin replied. "And they're not in our auras. They appeared with our bonded lights. We can see them."

"Really?" Caitrin asked, moving in for a closer look.

"Yes," Quin answered. "We hoped one of you could explain them."

Caitrin looked at Serafin, who

shrugged and shook his head, so the subject was brushed aside as Caitrin continued pacing. “What are your thoughts, Serafin?”

Serafin ran a hand down his face then mumbled into his palm. “I don't know, Caitrin. This is... this is so many things. I don't know where to begin.” He pulled his hand away from his mouth, but only to move it back to his forehead. “I don't understand how this happened. It should be impossible. Of all the unbelievable things that occur in the magical world, this is something no one *ever* thought they'd see.” He dropped his hand and looked over, watching the back of Layla's head with glistening emerald eyes. “Sweet Layla, we must beg your

forgiveness. We're so happy for you. I know we're not properly expressing it, but we're... overwhelmed."

Layla pulled her face from Quin's neck and found her grandpa's stare. "I understand the feeling."

Caitrin's gaze snapped to Quin. "Did you perform an anti-fertility ritual?"

A collective gasp echoed through the room. Then everyone held their breath as they watched Quin. Everyone save for Morrigan that is, who held her breath, but kept her face buried in Layla's hair.

"Yes," Quin answered, and when they didn't exhale, he expounded. "I swear, there's absolutely no way she's pregnant."

Layla returned her scarlet face to his

neck and quietly giggled, and everyone breathed.

Quin laughed at them then touched his lips to Layla's cheek. "You just saved everyone from suffocation, my love. What was that giggle about?"

She stayed hidden as she answered. "That was the second time you've had to swear I'm not pregnant, and I think you used the same words and everything. It's not really funny, though. I don't know why I laughed. It just felt like a moment that needed a laugh."

He smiled and played with the tips of her hair. "You're very intuitive, angel, because the moment did need a laugh." He dropped her curl and looked up. "We understand the situation is fragile, and

we're well aware of the difficulties we face, but there's no point in standing around uptight about it. That's not going to help anyone. So get yourselves something to drink and find comfortable seats. Then we'll figure out what to do next. Layla and I are worried, but we're happy, and we'd prefer it if our union didn't have rainclouds constantly hanging over it."

"You're right," Cordelia agreed. "This is a blessed union."

"Yes," Kemble added, giving Quin's shoulder another squeeze. "Now we must keep you safe so you can enjoy it."

"It's my number one priority," Quin assured.

Kemble cleared his throat and pulled

his hand away. "Of course it is."

Layla left Quin's neck and looked at Daleen. Then she tried to look at Morrigan, but everywhere her head went, Morrigan went. Layla finally tilted her head all the way back, forcing Morrigan to leave it. Then she flipped her gaze between her grandmas, the only two in the room who hadn't spoken. "Are you two okay?"

Daleen reached out with a shaky hand and touched Layla's cheek. "We're so happy for you and Quin, darling, but we're also worried. I'm sorry we aren't able to express how happy we are, but you must know we understand how beautiful and special this is."

Morrigan ran a hand down Layla's

hair as her lips quivered. “We can see how happy you are. Now we just need make sure you stay that way.” She was obviously fighting an emotional breakdown – tears sparkling in her peach eyes like morning dew.

Layla watched her for several seconds then reached out with both hands, taking one of Morrigan’s and one of Daleen’s. “I understand why this is hard for you, but the situation is different. *I’m* different.” She paused and looked down, staring at their delicate fingers as she swallowed a lump. “Please don’t look at me and picture my ill mother. It makes me sad to think that’s what you see when you look at me.”

Every heart in the room constricted

under the weight of her blunt honesty, and Morrigan's mouth dropped open. "It's not like that, sweetie. Of course we see you."

"I know you do," Layla assured, "but you also see her. I can tell by your faces, your auras and your touch. I'm sure if I were looking at me through your eyes, I'd see the same thing, but I'm asking you to try to stop, because it's not doing anyone any good. It just makes things harder, and it makes everyone sad. She wouldn't let you get away with it if she were here."

Morrigan and Daleen took a long look at each other. Then they breathed deep and turned to their granddaughter.

"You're right," Morrigan conceded,

leaning over to kiss Layla's head.

“Rhosewen would tell us to leave and come back when we were ready to see the glass half-full.”

“Well don't make me kick you out,” Layla playfully warned.

Morrigan stole one more whiff of Layla's hair then straightened. “I can hear Rhosewen as clearly as I hear you.”

She kissed Layla's hand then let it slip away, but apparently she wasn't strong enough to handle this one on her own, because she immediately fled to Caitrin, who welcomed her with open arms.

He lifted a palm to her cheek as he worriedly searched her face, and she reassured him with a small smile. “Help me get everyone coffee?”

“Of course,” he agreed, taking her under his arm. Then they headed for the kitchenette. “Does everyone want some?”

Mumbles of agreement floated through the room as six more seats were summoned to the table, and within seconds the golden family was gathered with fresh coffee in hand.

Caitrin summoned a pipe and lit it with a flaming fingertip. Then he passed it to Morrigan, who took a pull before passing it to Daleen. Layla curiously watched the exchange while sniffing the air, but every time someone exhaled smoke, they waved a magical hand and swept the fumes away.

When Daleen passed the pipe to

Serafin, who also partook, Layla raised an eyebrow at Quin. “What are they smoking?”

“Cannabis,” he answered, as casual as ever, like they were passing around tea and cookies.

Layla flipped her stunned gaze to Kemble, who took his turn before passing the pipe to Cordelia.

“Are you serious?” Layla asked, turning back to Quin.

He smiled as he tucked a curl behind her ear and smoothed her wrinkled brow. “Yes. It’s a natural relaxant; eases stress and helps us think calmly when emotions are high.”

“Do you smoke it?”

“Sometimes.” He slid a forefinger

down her nose and lightly tapped the tip.
“You've never tried it?”

“No. I've seen people smoke it, but I thought it was bad for you.”

“Smoking isn't good for your lungs, but we're healers, so that's not an issue for us.”

“It's also illegal,” she pointed out, and several people in the room laughed.

“We don't live by the government's rules,” Quin returned, accepting the pipe from his mom. “And the law doesn't make much sense in the first place. Luckily for the hexless, state legislatures are catching on. Medical marijuana is legal in Oregon.”

“It is?”

“Yep.”

“Hmm... So you guys wait until I’m bonded into the family to spring the drugs on me?”

Again, several people laughed, and Quin smiled as he wiggled her nose.

“You’ve seen Caitrin smoke it.”

“I have?”

“Yes, and you’ll see it again. Most magicians smoke as often as they drink.” He paused and held up the pipe. “Would you like to try it? Few people could benefit from its calming effect more than you. You’ve had a shitty week.”

“Um... I probably shouldn’t. I don’t know how, and I don’t want to be stupid.”

“It won’t make you stupid, Layla. I promise.”

“I’ve seen people smoke it, and they’d get goofy.”

“Do they look stupid or goofy?” he asked, motioning to the others.

Layla looked at them, noting their auras were more peaceful than before, and their expressions held calm amusement as they watched her and Quin's conversation. “No, I guess they don't, but they've done it before. It might be different with me.”

“It's your choice, love, but I promise it would merely relax you.”

Layla stared at the pipe, thinking it would be an interesting experience if nothing else, and the relaxation he spoke of was tempting. “I don't know, Quin. I feel weird about it.”

“How about I help you, and you just inhale a small amount?”

“How would you do that?”

He stared at her face for a moment, then her aura. Then he winked and tucked the stem of the pipe in his mouth. Layla watched closely as he lit the weed and sucked, and when he pulled the pipe from his lips, he pulled her to them, kissing while releasing half the smoke into her mouth. His mental voice invaded her head, telling her to inhale as he deepened his kiss, and she lazily obeyed, so wrapped up in him she practically forgot about the herb. The smoke hotly entered her lungs. Then it rolled from her nostrils, but she was concentrating on the softness of his lips

and tongue, so she barely noticed.

The weed... or his mouth... or a combination of the two, made her melt, and he enhanced the experience by blindly passing the pipe along and wrapping her in a warm hug. A long and blissful moment passed before he pulled his lips from hers. Then he searched her eyes and aura before kissing her nose. “How do you feel? Stupid or goofy?”

Layla’s lips twitched with humor as she wiped his taste from them, trying to separate her reaction to his kiss from her reaction to the weed. Both had been instantaneous, but while his kiss was powerful, the herb had a more subtle effect, and neither had been unpleasant. She just felt more at ease with

everything, a little tingly... and hungry for his mouth. “No,” she assured.

“Stupid and goofy aren't in the list.”

“Relaxed?”

She grinned, and it was probably a goofy grin, but it had nothing to do with the cannabis and everything to do with the throb between her thighs. “Sure.”

His dimples deepened as he glanced at her aura. Then he stole one more kiss before summoning her coffee from the table and heating it up. “Good. Lean back while we figure out our next move.” He carefully passed the mug over then looked at Caitrin. “Let's start with the most pressing issue. Agro. He's tiptoeing around now, but that won't last forever.”

Caitrin took Morrigan's hand and leaned back in his chair. "No it won't. We tried to lead him to Lake Tahoe, but judging by the fit he threw on our lawn Saturday night, it doesn't look like he took the bait."

"How long do you think we have before he makes his next move?" Quin asked.

Caitrin shrugged. "He's probably still nursing soldiers back to health and trying to replace those he slaughtered on our lawn. We might get another day or two of peace before he shows up... we might not. He's too volatile to predict."

Quin closed his eyes and nodded, and Layla studied his features, knowing he was contemplating decisions no one

should ever have to face.

“What do you think Agro would do if he saw Layla and me?” he asked, opening his eyes.

An uncomfortable beat of silence passed as everyone traded glances. Then Serafin leaned forward to answer. “He won’t dismiss the situation, but that’s the only certainty I can offer.”

“Let’s hear the guesses,” Quin insisted.

“The guesses,” Serafin mumbled, resting his chin in his palm. “He’d probably be disappointed at first, but then he’d realize all the ways your union could benefit him. He’ll no doubt want what the two of you have to offer, but it’s hard to say which path he’d choose or

how he'd go about walking it. He isn't getting any younger, so he may break his own rules and try to force you both into his troops, or he may gamble on longevity and deem your offspring a higher priority. Either way, the results aren't pleasant.”

“What about the rest of the magical world?” Quin asked. “What do you think about them seeing us?”

Everyone shifted as Serafin responded. “There would be negative ramifications, a lot of them, but dealing with them is worth considering since the alternative is quite heartbreaking.”

Layla straightened and looked at her grandfather. “What alternative?”

“A life in hiding, and not just from the

Unforgivables – from everyone. And not just for a while – forever. No social life in the magical world, and no public appearances near coven populated areas, which is about every beautiful location in the world. It would all have to end if you choose to keep your status a secret.”

“Even if we conceal our auras?”

Serafin frowned and gave a shrug. “Of course that would help you maintain your anonymity, but every time you step out with hidden auras there's a chance something will have them snapping free, so you'll be taking a risk no matter where you go. Besides, constantly concealing your auras isn't an ideal option. I know you handle it well, but

over time it will start to wear on you. Prolonged concealment can bring a magician down to a level that's difficult to recover from.”

Layla sent her untouched coffee to the table and tucked her face into Quin's neck. “And what are the negative ramifications that would accompany an open life?”

“You'll be under constant scrutiny,” Kemble predicted.

“And treated like objects,” Caitrin added. “If word travels, which it likely will, they'll come from miles away to see if it's true. Oregon will swarm with foreign magicians asking questions about you.”

“If word travels,” Serafin noted, “you

could have more than curious eyes headed your way. Every greedy magician in the world will want a piece of you. Agro would be a drop in the cauldron if the world was alerted to your union.”

Layla’s chest felt heavy and tight, pressing on her lungs and making it hard to breathe. “Are there a lot of magicians like Agro?”

“Yes,” Serafin answered. “Agro’s currently the top terror in the states, but there are a few groups based in other countries that are trouble on all accounts. And if there was any truth to Finley’s claims, one of them already has you on their radar.”

“So those are our options,” she

mumbled. “Stay hidden from everyone and everything, or face a life of constant scrutiny and lurking danger.”

No one answered, so they might as well have said a big fat yes.

Layla moved her mouth to Quin's ear and whispered. “I'll be right back.”

She unfolded herself from his lap and flew to the bedroom. Then she numbly walked to the bathroom and seated herself on the vanity. She needed to think, and she didn't want to do it with her loved one's voices bouncing in her head, so she stared at the mirror and contemplated her and Quin's options, as pitiful as they were.

She laid her hands in her lap and stretched her fingers, thinking about what

she was capable of. Why were the two most powerful magicians in the world being pushed around? It wasn't fair, and she was already sick of it. She and Quin hadn't hurt anyone, yet they were being punished, and it seemed there wasn't a damn thing they could do about it, which was ridiculous considering they held more power than anyone. She didn't want people to fear her; she didn't want to revel in her power and hold it over people's heads. Nor did she want to live in fear. And she shouldn't have to, damn it. And Quin shouldn't have to give up his home and the life he'd made for himself simply because he'd gained uncanny power. If anything, the increased magical ability should expand

his opportunities, not limit his options.

She raised her hands, watching summoned flames ripple from her flesh. Then the fire turned to ice as she grasped it in her fists, letting the cold sink its teeth into her joints.

She was done hiding. She and Quin deserved a happy life, and while they might find contentment hidden away with only each other to love, they'd miss out on the world around them. Her parents didn't die so she could live a life severed from the world. They died to give her a full and free life, and she wasn't going to let it slip away so easily. If someone was going to get it, they'd have to rip it from her cold, dead hands.

Chapter 3

Quin's eyes stayed on the bedroom door as he flexed his empty hands, catching sporadic snippets of the discussion taking place around him.

Damn. He couldn't concentrate when he couldn't see her, and she'd been gone for at least ten minutes.

He was leaning forward to stand when the bedroom door opened and Layla walked through it, floating the clothes from the closet with her. Quin paused, his hands on his knees as he watched her send their wardrobe to the foyer and walk to the kitchenette. She grabbed a

plate of chocolate chip cookies off the bar. Then she turned and leaned against the counter, finding his stare as she ate her snack.

“Want one?” she asked, holding up a half-eaten cookie.

Quin shook his head no, wondering what conclusions she'd reached in her absence.

She looked to the others and raised her eyebrows. “Anyone else? They're really good.”

They silently shook their heads no, and Quin scooted to the edge of the sofa, resting his elbows on his knees while freeing his itchy hands. “What are you doing, Layla?”

“Eating a cookie,” she answered, her

smile genuine and easy.

He couldn't help but smile back. "I can see that. What's with the clothes?"

"We're going home," she announced. Then she summoned a carton of milk, poured a glass, emptied it, then filled it again.

"Are you tired of Karena's best room?" Quin asked, conflicted about the emotions in her aura.

She blissfully sighed and sent the milk to the fridge. "No. I love this suite. I hope you'll bring me here again and again."

"Sure, love. Anytime." He glanced at the clothes then found her eyes. "So why are you in such a hurry to leave?"

She watched him while she finished

her second glass of milk, her gaze meaningful, her jaw set. By the time she lowered the cup and wiped her mouth, Quin knew what was coming.

“I'm done hiding, Quin. And you're not going to start.”

Everyone looked from her to Quin, who had to swallow a lump to find his voice. “Layla Love...” He didn't know what to say, how to tell her the thought of her facing endless danger terrified him, stole his breath and tormented his heart.

Keeping her gaze locked on his, she slowly shook her head. “That's not how I want to live; it's not how my parents wanted me to live, and it's not how you should have to live. We're going home

and living our lives exactly the way we want to.” She magically cleaned her glass and placed it in the cabinet. Then she turned her back on everyone and rested her palms on the counter. “If we'll be placing the coven in danger by coming home, we'll move, but I'm not leaving Oregon. We'll build a house nearby. That's fine with me. That's an option I can live with.”

Serafin looked from Quin's face to Layla's tense back. “Agro's still close, sweetheart.”

“I don't care,” she returned. “Let him find me. I'm useless to him now. He won't want me once he realizes my loyalties will always lie with Quin. You guys know that.”

“He may have lost any chances of loyalty,” Caitrin countered, “but that won’t deter him from claiming the treasure. Even if he decides you’re too much trouble, he’ll do everything he can to get his hands on your children.”

There was a moment of silence that seemed to draw out forever. Then Layla firmly broke it, her voice like cold stone. “There won’t be any children for him to take.”

Everyone gasped, and Quin clutched his chest, the heart within twisting as his lungs flattened and his stomach flipped. His whole body felt bruised and weak, crushed by the weight of her words. Using magic to loosen his tight throat, he forced himself to breathe. “Really,

love?”

More silence. Then she drummed her fingernails on the counter and tapped a toe on the floor. Her shoulders shook and expanded with a choppy breath, and the beauty in her aura started draining away, making room for intense grief.

Quin flew to her and tentatively reached for her curls, worried she'd reject his touch in her sorrowful state, but the moment she tilted her head toward his fingers, he took her in his arms and pulled her back to his chest. His palm found her cheek as he kissed the top of her head, and she leaned into his hand, drifting trembling lips across his thumb as a tear rolled over his forefinger.

“Really, Quin,” she whispered. “We can't.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to endure the anguish pressing in on him. “Maybe it doesn't have to be that way.”

She gave a tiny nod as more tears followed the first. “But it does have to be that way. Look at the position we're in because of our powers. Now imagine what our child would face. From their very first breath to their very last they'd be a victim of circumstance. I can't do that... I can't put a child through that.”

Layla couldn't find the strength to come right out and say it, but she knew having a child with him would be impossible, *literally* impossible. Bonded couples couldn't conceive if one

of them had doubts, and no matter what happened down the road, she'd always fear bringing a child into their predicament. Bonding with Quin had made it impossible to have babies with him. She would never carry a baby. She said the words in her head, and they pierced her heart more keenly than expected. She would never carry a baby.

Quin sucked a deep breath into his burning lungs and pulled her tighter against him, knowing she was right — passing their burdens on to a child would be the epitome of selfishness, no matter how long they waited to do it. Several images flashed through his mind — some he'd seen before, some he'd yet to dream about, but all of them were

gone now and would never be. He always imagined he'd someday have a child, and since he'd met his angel, he'd seen it in his dreams – a baby girl with dark curls, emerald eyes, and a soul-softening pucker framed by dimples; and two versions of a baby boy, both with his face, but one with Layla's emerald gaze.

As the visions disintegrated and drifted away, his heart broke for himself and busted for Layla. She'd be a fantastic mom – he knew by the way she doted on Alana – but she'd never get the chance to prove it.

Ignoring his churning stomach, he turned her into a hug. "I'm sorry, love."
"Me, too, Quin. I want to give you

everything, but I can't give you this. I can't do that to a baby... to our baby.”

“I know, angel. I'd never ask you to.”

Layla filled her lungs with his strengthening scent. Then she pulled her face from his chest and wiped away tears. She tried to smile at him, but only managed a twitch. “If we ever get out of this mess, we'll adopt. We'll find a child who's had their family torn apart by people like the Unforgivables, and we'll give them the life they deserve.”

He reached for her face, and she closed her eyes, letting tingles flood her nerve-endings as his fingertips drifted across her forehead and down her nose, coming to a rest on her pulsing lips.

“That's a beautiful solution, my love,

and if that's what you want, that's what we'll do. When it's safe enough.”

She opened her eyes and managed a smile. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Layla.”

“So we're going home?”

He hesitated then sighed. “I don't know. It's a big risk, and I'm not as ready as you are to take it.”

“I don't want to leave. I'd rather stay and face the danger.”

“We're talking about our lives, Layla.”

“We're not helpless, Quin. We're the exact opposite of helpless. You and I can do anything we set our minds on. Surely we stand a good chance against anything they can throw at us.”

“You want to face them?”

“Only if we have to.”

“If we don't leave, we'll have to face them.”

“Then that's what we'll do.”

“Layla...”

“No, Quin. I don't want to hide. I don't know much now, but if you help me, I'll be able to defend myself better than anyone else in the world. The last thing I want is for one of us to get hurt, but we're not weak. We can live without hiding like meek rabbits.”

“I don't know if we can.”

She huffed and straightened her shoulders, her jaw set, her chin tilted.

“We can. Finley lived in the magical world without being hunted, so can we.”

Quin's eyes flashed as his voice

hardened. "Finley did it all wrong."

The pain and anger in his aura tugged on Layla's heart, but she held firm. "He did do it wrong, but we'll do it right. He was crazy, but he made a valid point beneath the nonsense. Why is our power punishing us? Obviously I don't believe I should get everything handed to me, but I shouldn't have everything taken away either."

Quin stood silent for a long moment, and Layla could tell he was reading her, trying to decide if he had a chance at changing her mind. "What are we going to do about Agro?"

She shrugged. "Let him find me. What can he do? He'll never be able to sway my loyalties, and there won't be any

children for him to take. I'm no longer his perfect treasure.”

“If he can't use you, he'll kill you. He might slaughter everyone in sight when he realizes you're bonded and there's nothing for him to gain by it.”

“Well, we can't have that, can we?”

“No, we definitely cannot.”

She searched for answers, but came up with nothing. “I'm still not hiding, so let's figure out a solution.” She pulled Quin to the sofa and urged him to sit. Then she made herself comfortable on his lap as she looked at the others. “Any ideas?”

The women watched her with bloodshot eyes, a result of the tears they'd shed for her desperate situation,

and the men watched her with wrinkled brows, still shocked by her stubbornness. Layla watched them right back, determined to get her way.

After a full minute ticked by with no answer, she dropped her gaze and played with Quin's fingers. "When was the last time someone tried to kill Agro?"

Their silence stretched; the sad hues in their auras growing bolder.

Layla kissed Quin's pinky then moved to the next finger. "Is anyone going to answer me?"

Serafin caved and cleared his throat. "It's been twenty-nine years since the last group, but I'm sure there have been individual attempts."

“How many in the group?”

“Around forty. They tracked down his camp and invaded it.”

“Any survivors?”

“No.”

Layla had showered Quin's left hand in kisses, so she laid it in her lap and took the other. “Tell me about the group. Was it a coven?”

A quiet moment passed, and Layla thought they were going to refuse to answer, but then Serafin sighed and came to the rescue. “They were from five different covens that had suffered losses at Agro's hands. They wanted revenge, so their strongest joined together and planned for several months before marching to their deaths.”

“When you say their strongest, how strong were they?”

“Above average, but if you're asking if any of them had bonded powers, the answer is no.”

“No bonded children?”

“No, but Agro does have bonded children.”

“A lot of them?”

“Too many.”

“But they lead the other groups, right? They're not with him.”

“Many of them lead other troops, yes, but the outfit he travels with consists of his strongest soldiers and a handful of bonded children. He usually has a few sets of twins on hand as well.”

“Twins?”

“Yes. Multiples are more powerful than singles. They absorb a fraction of each other's ability while still in the womb. Much like bonding, but not as potent.”

“Oh.” She was playing with Quin's forefinger now, and she smiled as she kissed it. “Do you guys want to see something cool?”

Everyone looked at her like she was crazy, and she laughed as she looked at Quin, who stared back with an odd mixture of admiration and dread. Her laugh abruptly died, but her smile stayed in place as she reached for a hidden dimple. “Want to show them our new trick?”

“Sure,” he agreed, taking her hand.

Then he kissed her finger and looked at the others. "Layla's brilliant and taught me a new trick, and she did it before we bonded, so I can't imagine what she'll teach me next. Go for it, angel."

Her smile stretched as she licked her lips and held up his hand, and everyone intently watched her touch his forefinger. His chest expanded with a deep, slow breath, and Layla could tell he was pleased by the sensation of her fire. His flame-free hand crept into her hair as he reached up with the other. Then a grape-sized fireball unfurled from his fingertip.

The others watched and waited for the new trick, and Layla giggled as she glanced at Quin. He laughed as well. Then he hugged her to his chest and

looked at their family. “That was her fire, not mine.”

“What?” they exclaimed.

“Yep,” Quin confirmed. “Layla decided she wanted to combine our fire spells before they left our bodies, so she filled me with her fire, like it was the easiest thing in the world to do.”

Serafin stood and moved closer. “She didn't burn you?”

“Nope. The temperature of my skin doesn't change, and the inside merely warms up.” He held out his hand for Serafin to examine, then took it back. “I can add my own fire to hers for a stronger effect. Do it again, love. Just the fingertip. We don't want to burn down Karena's best room.”

“No we don't,” she agreed, touching her forefinger to his.

He added his own magic then pushed the combined spell from his fingertip, creating a fireball almost twice the size as the one before. “That was about sixty percent hers; forty percent mine.”

Serafin took Quin's hand and closely eyed the spot Layla had touched. Then he handed it to Caitrin so he could do the same.

“Are you sure it's her fire?” Caitrin asked.

“Positive,” Quin answered. “Let her show you.”

“Ooh fun,” Layla approved, reaching for Caitrin's hand.

He let her take it, and she eagerly

watched his face while touching his forefinger. When her fire found him, his eyes widened and his aura pulsed. “I can't believe this.”

“Cast it,” she insisted.

He did, marveling at the flame that rolled from his flesh. “How did you figure out you could do that?”

“I just tried it, and it worked.”

“Let her show you, Serafin.”

Caitrin moved aside, and Serafin took his place, letting Layla repeat the process. “Amazing,” he praised, flashing a broad smile.

“Thanks,” she returned. “Does everyone want to feel?”

Those still in their seats replied with a resounding yes, so Layla kissed Quin's

jaw then rose from his lap. One by one she placed magic into fingertips, and one by one tiny fireballs were flipped into the air. When she got back to Quin, she reclaimed his lap and picked up his wrist, placing all five fingers to his.

“I want to try something,” she said, filling his hand with fire. Then she let go, but kept her mind on the flames. “It’s still there, right?”

“Yes.”

Layla looked away and slowly scanned the room, focusing on the calming palette, the open floor plan, and the pretty art adorning the walls – anything but the magical fire in Quin’s hand.

“How about now?” she asked,

returning her gaze to his. “Still there?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I stopped focusing on it, but I guess it won't go away until it's shot. You probably shouldn't add your own to that,” she warned, glancing at his hand.

He smirked and raised his palm, shooting a fireball about a foot in diameter toward the ceiling. The flames fizzled before getting there, and Quin quickly waved a hand, vanishing the smoke before it hit the alarm.

“Amazing,” Serafin repeated. Then he offered Caitrin his hand. “See if you can do it.”

“I'll most likely burn you,” Caitrin warned.

Serafin squared his feet with his

shoulders. "I'm ready for it."

Caitrin touched the back of Serafin's forefinger, and Serafin softly cursed while jerking his hand away. "No, it didn't work." He took a moment to heal the burn. Then he cocked an eyebrow at Caitrin. "One more shot, my old friend. Then you'll have to find someone else to practice on."

Caitrin smiled as he attempted the magic again, and Serafin cursed louder the second time. "No, it's definitely not working." A devilish grin youthened his features as he reached for Caitrin's hand. "Let's see if mine's any better."

Caitrin laughed and prepared himself for a burn, but still yanked his arm back when his skin singed. "You're not getting

two attempts,” he refused, shaking his head.

Layla laughed then glanced at her grandmas. “Let the ladies try.”

So they did. Daleen was the first to try, burning Serafin with the attempt. Then Morrigan had to be coaxed into testing the magic out on her mate.

“If you’re not going to try it on me,” Caitrin insisted, “grab Serafin’s hand, because I want to know if you can do it.”

Morrigan was obviously tempted to take him seriously, but after a deep breath, she clutched his hand and touched his finger.

Caitrin sucked in a deep breath when her fire hit him, and Morrigan murmured an apology as she healed the burn, a tear

skating down her cheek.

Caitrin dried her cheek as soon as his finger was healed. Then he looked down the line. “What do you think, Kemble? Will you bother trying?”

“I am curious,” Kemble replied, turning deep dimples on Cordelia. “What do you think, love? Want to hurt me?”

She returned his grin and grabbed his wrist. “Of course. You know how much I like torturing you. It's my favorite pastime next to hammering nails through my feet and pouring lemon juice on my self-induced paper cuts.”

He laughed and kissed her nose. “Torture away.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, she touched

her finger to his, but her attempt was no more successful than Morrigan's and Daleen's.

“Who wants to be my lab rat?”
Kemble asked, looking between Caitrin and Serafin.

“I say Caitrin does it,” Serafin answered. “He offered me up like a pig for slaughter just moments ago.”

“Guess I deserve that one,” Caitrin laughed. “Get it over with, Kemble.”

Kemble gave it a try, but his magic couldn't successfully penetrate skin without burning it. “Sorry,” he offered.

Caitrin shrugged and passed his hand to Morrigan for healing. “Have you tried it, Quinlan?”

Quin sobered and tilted his head. “Do

you think I'd try that on her?"

"No."

"I told him he could," Layla interjected.

"And of course I refused," Quin added.

Layla scowled then grinned at him. "You're stronger now. I bet you'd have no problem doing it." She held out her hand, and he actually took it... so he could pull her fingers into a kiss.

"No," he refused.

"Of course not," she whispered. "So who's going to be Quin's lab rat?"

Kemble stood and approached the sofa. "Ready when you are."

Quin grimaced at his dad's hand. Then he found Layla's stare. "Just make it so,

huh?”

“Yep,” she answered. “I think you'll do fine. Then you can try it on me.”

Quin watched her eyes for a moment then turned his attention on his dad's hand. After staring at his mark for several seconds, he touched it, but only summoned fire into his own fingertip. Merely pushing the flames toward his goal seemed doomed to fail, so he decided to transfer them without passing through skin. He used the concept all the time with objects, so why not do it with fire? Fire constructed by imagination – malleable and harmless in its current state, warm but not hot, formulated but not created. If it would remain that way through the transfer, it would be painless

for his father, who'd then be set with the task of making it a reality. Quin took a steady breath before releasing the heat from his finger. Then he let go of his dad's wrist and looked up.

Eyes wide with wondrous comprehension, Kemble raised his hand and flicked a small fireball toward the ceiling.

"See?" Layla beamed, taking Quin's hand. "I told you it would work."

"It was easy," Quin confessed, pulling her closer. "The concept is simple."

"What concept?" Kemble asked.

"Just transfer it," Quin answered. "We use the theory all the time with objects."

"I tried that," Daleen interjected. "It didn't work for me."

“So did I,” Caitrin added. “On my second try.”

Serafin raised his hands, remembering. “I didn't notice it at the time, but now that you mention it, I received two different types of burns with you, Caitrin. Your first try singed the outer layer of skin, while the second, and Daleen's attempt, burned beneath the flesh as well. So in all likelihood, it did work in that you successfully transferred it, but the fire was in the form of an attack rather than a delivery, which is natural for the spell. When it leaves our bodies it's very real and will burn whatever it touches, but apparently our newest bonded mates are somehow handing over an incomplete spell, one

that's missing the final component, the act of turning it into a reality. They give us the product they create, but we have to turn it on, physically and mentally make it happen.”

Quin took Layla’s jaw and brushed his thumb across her lips. “I'm glad I didn't try it on you before we bonded. If Caitrin and Daleen failed, I would have failed.”

“Hmm...” she hummed. “Maybe. So you transferred it, huh?”

“Yes.”

“That's not how I do it.”

“It's not?”

“No.”

“What's your theory?”

“It's hard to explain. I never even feel

the magic. I don't summon it in myself first. I summon it straight into you. Like... if I *were* you, or part of you. Or vice versa, I guess.”

Everyone contemplated this as they stared at her. Then Quin looked at Serafin. “What do you think? Has she figured out how to manipulate other people's magic?”

“It's hard to say,” Serafin answered, “but I doubt it. It sounds like she's combining... or incorporating, I should say, herself into others. She's not manipulating their magic. Like you said, it's definitely hers. She's just giving them the short-term ability to possess what's hers, the power and the body to handle it. I can't say for sure, but I imagine she

can cast any spell she wants using a foreign body. She's working her magic through others.”

“Have you heard of another magician doing the same?” Quin asked, ever intrigued by his angel.

“No,” Serafin answered, “and here's why. All of us, with practice, can bend, break, heal and manipulate a body and its physical functions, inside and out. And we can negatively affect another's spells by magically tweaking the brain with corporeal force, which scrambles the senses. We can even boost another's magic with emotional encouragement and physical contact, which is simply a manipulation of the psyche, a stimulation of soul and personality. But we can't

make a person do what they're not meant to do. We can't make their magic and body surpass what they were made to handle. We can't create within them something that wasn't there to begin with. We can speed up a heart, but if we pump it faster than it was made to withstand, it's going to bust. If we provide a body with magic it's not built for, it's going to break or burn or freeze or explode. I have a feeling Layla can prevent those consequences. Now keep in mind this is all speculation, but from what little information we have, I'd say that, with a touch, she gains... an equal of sorts, and somehow, while that equal remains cognizant, in control of their mind and body, she's in there, too,

molding their bodies to meet her requirements while mentally operating from within. She's, in a sense, living inside them, raising them to her level.”

Quin found Layla's face and smiled. “Does that sound right?”

“Kind of,” she answered, “but I never really thought of it like that. I didn't put that much consideration into it.”

“Thinking up and performing that kind of magic is probably as natural to you as hovering is to everyone else.” He paused and ran a forefinger down the bridge of her nose. “No wonder it feels so good when you share your magic. You become part of me, and I can't think of anything more pleasing than that. You're incredible.”

“Thank you, but it sounds kind of creepy – living in someone else. Not you of course. I could live in you forever. But others.”

“You're not, though. You're doing it with a touch. It's wonderful magic, Layla.”

“I guess.”

“I know,” he countered. Then he kissed the tip of her nose and looked at Serafin. “I'm not working the magic like she is. Does that mean I shouldn't fill people with a full dose of heat?”

“I wouldn't try it yet,” Serafin advised. “With some experimentation, you might be able to do what she's doing. Or you might be able to adjust your own theory to compensate. It's

undiscovered territory, so it's going to take trial and error to get it right. We'll need to figure out a way for you to safely test yourself.”

“And we will,” Kemble cut in, giving Quin’s shoulder a proud slap before returning to his chair. “Have you experimented with Layla's trick?”

Layla and Quin grinned and answered in unison. “Yes.”

Layla laughed as she turned her face into his neck, and his smile stretched as he drifted his lips across her hair. “It was fantastic,” he recalled. “I don't think you guys will believe it until you see it. If the media reports a meteor landed off the coast of Oregon last night, don't buy into it.” He paused, remembering they

were even stronger now. “I can't imagine what we can do now. It might be difficult to figure out. We'll need a huge testing area.”

“How large was your combined fireball before?” Caitrin asked.

“I can't say for sure,” Quin answered, “but it was unlike anything I've seen or heard about. I wouldn't feel comfortable trying it on our lawn.”

Everyone's foreheads wrinkled, and Quin laughed as he shook his head. “Just wait. You'll believe it when you see it. We'll have to figure out a safe place to play. Then we'll test our new abilities.”

Layla's aura flashed with colors that didn't belong, and though her face remained hidden, her voice was sure and

strong. “I like that idea.”

Chapter 4

Quin stared at the top of Layla's head, the haunted haze around her squeezing his heavy heart. "What's on your mind, love?"

"Lots of things, Quin."

"I know," he whispered, nuzzling her hair. "Would you like to tell me what you're scheming on?"

"I'm not scheming on anything. I'm just trying to figure out how to stay alive, and I think testing my magic is a good place to start."

He knew there was more to it than that, and so did everyone else. He

looked at their worried faces and could tell they felt as helpless as him. “So we're going home?” he asked, looking back down.

“Yep,” she answered, “as long as it's okay with the coven. If not, we'll find a place nearby.”

“We'll stay *in* the community, not outside of it.”

“Then it's settled.”

“It's not settled.”

She pulled her face from his neck and found his stare. “What do you mean?”

“What do you intend to do about Agro?”

Layla opened her mouth, but didn't answer, because she didn't know what to say. What she wanted to do was let the

bastard come so she could tell him to go to hell, but a response like that would get her family killed, so of course it was out of the question.

“Layla.”

“I don't know, Quin.”

“You're not facing him. I can't let you do that.”

She twisted and pulled herself up, bringing her face closer to his. “How much sense does it make for me to run and hide while others stay and face him? I don't have to be helpless anymore, Quin, and it's unfair for other people to protect me. Do you think our family wanted to face them? No, but they did.”

“This is different.”

“You're right. It is different, but no

matter how the victims vary, this is about me, so it's something *I* should be dealing with. Not everyone except me.”

He took a measured breath while laying his palm on her heart. “It is about you, and that's exactly why you're not facing him. He may be hurting our loved ones, but he's not stealing them, or cursing them, or killing them. Those are the things he'd do to you, and those are far worse than torture spells.”

“He hasn't done any of those things to our family yet, but it's going to happen. Caitrin told us Agro had to refrain from slaughtering the entire coven the second time he blew through. Then he slaughtered his own soldiers when he dropped in to find the community empty.

If he sits on his hands while rebuilding his army, his patience will be spent by his next visit.”

Quin's jaw flexed as he breathed through his nose. “And what do you plan to do about it?”

Hating his tension, Layla snuggled closer and ran her fingers along the curves of his face. “I don't know, but we need to figure it out. I don't want to hide like a helpless victim while others die for me. I followed your rules and ran from him while everyone else stayed, and I did it because I was helpless to do anything else. I'm still helpless, but I don't have to be, and I need to learn how not to be. Until that point, I don't know what I'm going to do.”

“And after that point?”

“I'm going to let him find me.”

“And do what?”

“That depends on him I guess.”

“Are you thinking about trying to kill him?”

She carefully considered this then shrugged. “If that’s what it takes to protect myself and the people I love, yes, I’ll do my best to kill him.” She paused then nodded. “I think I’d have a decent chance.”

Quin's face paled as his aura darkened. “If you learn more about your magic, I have no doubt you could defeat Agro, but he doesn't travel alone, and it's always the others who keep his skin intact. You wouldn't be facing Agro,

you'd be facing his army.”

“Well that's something we'll have to consider, isn't it?”

Quin closed his eyes, keeping one hand on her heart and one in her hair, and he stayed that way for a long time, his shadowed aura flowing slowly... sadly. “I can't,” he breathed, finding her stare. “We'll die. Do you understand that? We'll both die whether we take Agro with us or not.”

Layla watched his eyes... his soul, and she could see how torn it was. His pain made her nauseated, and she was tempted to say *Okay, let's hide. Just you and me. Forever.* But it wasn't right, it wasn't fair, and it wasn't what they wanted, what they deserved. “You really

don't think we have a chance, Quin? Not one glimmer of hope?"

"We don't have the power to take on a ruthless army, Layla."

"There has to be a way."

His eyes widened on her. "Aren't you scared?"

"Of course I'm scared, Quin. I'm terrified, but if we give up and hide, and let him take everything we have, he wins. I don't think my mom and dad would have hid if she hadn't gotten pregnant, and I'm not going to get pregnant, so why should we leave? Teach me how to defend myself and let the dice roll."

He didn't reply. He just watched her while swallowing hugely, and she didn't

need words to know how he felt. Taking his jaw, she slid her thumb to a hidden dimple and quietly pled her case. “We have a beautiful life here, Quin. I know if we die, we lose it, but if we hide, we're giving it away. Of course I could live hidden from the world as long as I stayed tucked in your arms. You know it's my favorite place to be. But a life in hiding isn't what we want, not for ourselves or for each other. We want to be able to sit on the lawn with our family; eat our meals at a table with the people we love before lying on the ground to watch them perform magic. We want to see Alana and Brayden grow up, and Bann and Sky graduate. We want to take walks on the beach, fly over the

ocean, and drink amazing coffee at Cinnia's cafe. I don't want to surrender the things that are special to me, Quin. It feels like I'd be placing them in Agro's hands and bowing my head in defeat. You once told me some things are worth dying for, and you're right. I have a long list of things worth dying for, and by hiding, I'd be giving all but one of those things away."

He took her face in both hands, blinking as he swallowed another lump. "It's impossible to do this by ourselves, Layla. It can't be done. One of us would have to watch the other die, then turn and face our own death. And I can't watch you die." He pulled her closer, whispering against her lips. "I'm not —

that – strong.”

Seeing his glistening eyes and hearing his tortured confession tied Layla in knots, and since she wasn't as good as he was about controlling the waterworks, her tears quickly spilled over. “There has to be a way, Quin. We have to find a way to end this. I don't like living this way. Always afraid. Always hiding.”

Quin quickly dried her tears. Then he tucked her face into his neck and looked at the others. His eyes went from one pair to the next, waiting for someone to object to what he was about to do.

After several silent seconds, Serafin stood and walked behind Daleen, placing his hands on her cheeks as he met Quin's stare. “We'll figure out a

way.”

Quin closed his eyes and laid his head back, his body heavy like lead, his lungs struggling under the weight of trepidation, the weight of all those who’d line up in front of a firing squad for him and Layla, the weight he’d carry until his dying day.

Layla pulled her face from his neck and looked around, noting everyone’s auras and expressions while putting them together with Serafin’s agreement, and when comprehension slapped her, it also nudged her gag reflexes. “No,” she blurted, scowling at her grandpa. “We’ll not ask people to die for us. That’s not an option. Quin and I will handle this. No one else.”

She turned away so they'd know the topic wasn't up for discussion, and when she saw Quin's disparaging aura, her stomach rolled. She snuggled into his chest and drifted her lips across the tight tendons in his neck, and he wrapped his fingers in her hair, covering her back with solid arms just the way she liked it.

“You're not asking,” Serafin replied, “and this isn't just an option. It's the only option. If you face them, we'll face them. That's how it's going to work.”

Layla stopped moving her lips along Quin's neck, but she didn't look up. “I don't want you to. I don't even want Quin and I facing them, so if you throw yourself into the mix, it just makes things harder.” She straightened and raised a

suspicious eyebrow at her grandpa. “Are you just saying this so I'll reconsider my decision not to hide?”

Daleen's mouth fell open as she grasped her heart. “Of course not, Layla. We understand why you don't want to hide, and we don't want you to go.”

Layla's gaze softened and saddened as her grandma squeezed her eyes shut and hugged Serafin's arm. Daleen had always been a rock and was usually the first to suck it up and move beyond her grief. But at the moment, she was struggling, and Layla hadn't seen her this way since watching Aedan and Rhosewen's memories.

Taking a shaky breath, Daleen opened her eyes and met Layla's stare. “The

reason we supported Aedan and Rhosewen's departure into hiding was for your protection, Layla. We didn't want them to leave, but there was an innocent and precious life on the line, so that's what had to happen. If things had been different and Rhosewen hadn't gotten pregnant, they would have stayed and faced the Unforgivables, and we would have faced the evil with our children. We want you to stay, darling, and if that's what you want, we'll support you every step of the way, which includes any you take toward the Unforgivables. We'd be devastated if we lost you to them, so we're not going to sit by and watch when there are ways we can help. We're only doing what we

would have done two decades ago had it not been for you. Your existence has given us an extra twenty-one years to enjoy our lives, and if we must sacrifice those lives to give you a better chance, that's what we'll do. We owe them to you.”

Layla's face flexed as her lips trembled. “You don't.”

Morrigan pulled away from Caitrin's hug and rapidly blinked away tears.

“What do you think your mom and dad would ask of us if they were here?”

“That's not fair,” Layla squeaked.

“It's the truth,” Caitrin returned. “If Rhosewen and Aedan could speak to us, they'd tell us to do whatever we could to protect you and give you the best

possible chance at a happy life. That's what we're going to do, and it shouldn't come as a big surprise."

He was right. Layla should have known they wouldn't let her do this alone. She looked at Quin, who still had his eyes closed. Why wasn't he alert and responding to this discussion? "What do you think of all this?" she asked, shriller than she'd meant to.

His eyes popped open, and his heart beat faster as he slid a hand to the nape of her neck. "We can't face them alone and keep our lives, Layla. We don't stand a chance, and I'm not prepared to watch you die, so I'm going to accept all the help I can get." He paused and took a labored breath. "You might find it

selfish of me, and that's fine. You're too kindhearted to accept the help, so I'll do it, and the guilt can rest on my shoulders. That's exactly how I want it.”

Backed into a corner, Layla stupidly stared at him, her determination to live by her own rules draining away. Hopelessness flooded in, swirling into a familiar void, one she hadn't suffered in weeks, and she began resigning herself and her hero to a half-life – a life full of love and magic, but empty of family to share it with.

She sank into Quin's chest as she concealed her aura. “Fine. Let's go. Start planning and we'll leave. We'll hide until Agro dies of old age. Then we'll come back until the next evil person

comes along.” Her throat tightened, which was weird, because the rest of her body was numb. Despair and loss acting like Novocaine against hurt and anger. She touched her neck, willing her vocal cords to relax. “Where do you want to go? Think we can still take Vegas by storm?”

When she yanked her sad aura from Quin’s sight, she yanked the air from his lungs, and he realized there was only one choice. Watching his angel suffer in life wouldn’t be much better than watching her life drain away. He couldn’t acquire satisfaction if he wasn’t satisfying her, and while she may find contentment in hiding, she wouldn’t be able to reach the level of happiness that

made her shine like a star. He'd be lucky to catch rare glimpses of the woman who made his heart soar.

His path was clear now... terrifying, but clear.

He pulled her closer, wanting to carry her back to dreamland where she could forget about the heartbreak and stress plaguing her life. "Layla Love."

"Yeah, Vegas probably isn't a good idea. Maybe somewhere with less people. Karena has a computer downstairs. We'll do some research on the internet."

"Please let me see your aura."

"No."

The flat refusal felt like a dagger to his heart, but she didn't notice the sharp

edge on her tone and kept brainstorming.

“I don't want to go back to the Bible belt, so that's out of the question. I guess somewhere along the Gulf of Mexico might be okay, but the humidity's hell on my hair. I don't know. What do you think? Anywhere you want to live that's not swarming with covens? Maybe a cave on a distant mountain top...”

Quin took a deep breath and looked at his dad – a man who never failed to give him good advice. What Quin was about to do would be a first for him, and he needed to know he wasn't crazy for doing it.

Able to read his son without a mind-search, Kemble gave a sad nod, and Quin looked back down, wondering if he

was strong enough to follow through.

“How about some input?” Layla mumbled, her voice monotone. “Where do you want to live?”

He didn't answer, but returned his gaze to his parents as he sent them a mental message. *'I'm sorry it has to be like this.'*

Cordelia shook her head while touching her heart, but it was Kemble who responded. *'We live for you, son. You and Layla. This is a sacrifice we're prepared to make.'*

“Quin,” Layla demanded, scowling up at him.

He met her stare, struggling to endure the twisting of his stomach and the cracking of his heart. This was the

biggest decision he'd ever made, and a lot of lives could be lost as a result. Steeling his nerve, he finally gave his terrifying reply. "We're not leaving."

"Yeah we are," she disagreed. "I'm not going to do anything to Agro, and neither is anyone else. We can't stay and hide from him, because I'm not going to watch him destroy my family while I remain out of sight. Nor am I going to stand there and face him while my family falls around me, so only one option remains. We'll show our faces somewhere far away to get him out of Oregon. Then we'll hide. That's the only way to keep everyone safe, so that's what we'll do."

Quin braced himself. "No, Layla.

We're staying, and when it's time to face Agro, we'll do it with allies.”

She straightened, finding the energy she lacked in her depressed state. “Why are you fighting me on this? You wanted me to hide, and I know you don't want your family hurt.”

He kept his voice even and undeterred. “I'm not fighting you. The decision has been made. I want to protect you from the danger, but not at the price of your happiness. And no, I don't want my family hurt, but walking into the lion's den alone is certain death. That leaves one option. It's a sad choice and a hard one to accept, but you're going to have to figure out how, because I've made up my mind. As long as we

have people who are willing to help, we'll stay and face our enemy.”

“I'm okay with hiding,” she argued, but with little conviction. “I'll have you with me and that's all I need. I'll adjust to a life in hiding fine. I'm flexible. I can be happy, Quin.”

“You're lying, Layla, but it doesn't matter, because this is non-negotiable.”

Her eyebrows furrowed as she leaned back. “What do you mean it's non-negotiable?”

He hesitated for a short moment then cursed himself for doing so. “It's not up for debate. I've made up my mind, and I'm not going to change it.”

“That's not how it works, Quin.”

“That's how it's working this time,

Layla.”

She took a deep breath and pushed her shoulders back. “You can't force me to do this.”

His jaw tightened as he stared into her beautiful and angry eyes. “Are you going to leave without me?”

Her mouth dropped open, but she quickly closed it, her eyes narrowing as she icily whispered. “I'm not asking people to die for me.”

“You're right.” He knew what was coming, so he reluctantly loosened his hold. “You're not, but I am.”

“But... You can't... This isn't...” Her face turned red as she looked for an escape, but there wasn't one. She would never leave him. He knew it, and she

knew it, so threats would be useless and immature.

Layla's nostrils flared as her lungs burned, and she clenched her fists, digging nails into her palms. The fact that he could control her was nothing new. A week had passed since she realized he had the power to do what he wanted when he wanted to do it. But the fact that he was willing to use that power to strip away hers *was* something new, and it pissed her off. He'd made her weak and helpless, everything she was tired of being. Blah!

Soaring from his lap, she flew into the master bedroom and magically slammed the door.

Quin watched her go, and it felt like

she'd taken half of him with her. He was riddled with holes that only her touch and forgiveness would fill, and it left him drained of energy and confidence. He ran a hand down his face then looked at his dad. "She didn't like that."

Kemble sympathetically shrugged. "It's for her own good. She'd never accept help, no matter how badly she wants to stay." He paused, sadly searching the air around his son. Then he bowed his head. "It's the best solution, Quinlan."

Quin wasn't so sure and feared his decision would haunt him in more ways than one. He stood while glancing at the bedroom door. Then he looked to Serafin and Caitrin. "We need to figure

this out, and we need to do it quickly. The eight of us are strong, but it's not enough, and I won't let anyone march to certain death. We need more help, but the guilt is heavy enough without involving innocent bystanders, so let's make a list of people with personal vendettas against the Unforgivables. Maybe some of them harbor a death wish and would jump at a chance to fight. We need volunteers, *trustworthy* volunteers. If they're shady, we don't want them around. Oh, and we need a place to practice – an open, fire-safe area much bigger than our lawn. Please put all your resources to work on this right away. If we want to survive, we need help. Layla and I will be home

later this evening.” He turned and headed for his angry angel, but paused with this hand on the doorknob, the rhythm of his wounded heart resounding in his ears. “See you guys after a while.”

And with a deep breath, he opened the door.

Chapter 5

When Layla heard Quin enter the room, she buried her face further in her pillow and concealed her aura, barely resisting the urge to angrily kick the bed.

Blah! She'd just released the emotions. Now the damn things had to be sucked back in. Hiding her aura ate at her already marred insides, and she just wanted to be alone so she could let it go and wallow in her grief.

Quin's hand flew to his heart when she hid the lovely yet haunted haze, and he yearned to pull her into his arms, force

her to take all her frustrations out on him. But he didn't sit or lie down when he reached the side of the bed. He just watched her tense form while clutching his aching chest.

“I need some time,” she mumbled.

Her voice was muffled by grief and cotton, but he clearly sensed her anger and betrayal. “Okay,” he agreed, summoning a chair and sitting beside the bed.

“Alone,” she huffed.

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, thankful he no longer had to stay stern. It had been beyond difficult to speak to her so severely when all he wanted to do was whisper reassuring words in her ear. “I

understand why you're angry with me, Layla, but I won't let you push me away. Take all the time you need. I'm staying right here.”

She balled her hands into fists. “Damn it, Quin, stop making me feel weak.”

With that, his control broke and he floated to the spot beside her. She wiggled away the moment he landed, and his entire body cringed as his stomach churned. “Please don't move away from me.”

“Oh you're asking now? I thought you'd moved on to demanding.”

Her words were salt in his wounds. “Layla.”

“What?”

“It's not like that.”

“That's exactly what it's like.”

“I had to make a decision, so I made it. I don't want to control you. It broke my heart to force you into that decision, but I didn't have a choice.”

“*You* didn't have a choice? I was the one left powerless.”

“You're not powerless,” he whispered, running his hand an inch over her hair. Her uncanny power over him made it damn near impossible for him to keep his distance.

“That's how I feel,” she snapped. “It's like I'm one of those women who let their husbands control them. I have no leverage and no guts.”

“That's enough,” he returned, rolling her over to face him. “Don't compare me

to men like that and don't compare yourself to those women.”

Her bloodshot eyes narrowed. “I guess we're back to a demand and obey relationship.”

Quin was shocked by the way she was treating him, but he couldn't blame her. She was under too much stress to soundly deal with the overwhelming emotions clogging her insides. “I know you're angry,” he replied, dialing down the heat, “and I understand why, but you know that's not how our relationship works. I have no desire to control the women in my life...”

“Only when it's necessary,” she interrupted. Then she rolled over and buried her face.

“Don't you understand why?” he asked, gripping the blankets so he wouldn't grip her.

“I do understand why,” she conceded, “but I still can't believe you used our relationship like you did. You have complete power over me, Quin. You could lift me up or tear me down in a heartbeat. I'm at your mercy at all times. I was okay with that, because I just knew you'd never misuse the authority you have over me. But you did, like it was no big deal. You looked at me and wielded that power like a sword, slicing away my choice in the matter. I do understand why you did it, but I don't understand how you could do it like that, and it hurts me you find it so necessary

and easy to use that sword against me. It shakes my confidence and my faith in our relationship.”

Panic bubbled in his stomach, quickly rising to his chest, and he pulled her around, holding her against him so she couldn't roll away. “No, Layla. Please don't say those things. I'll never tear you down. Ever. Your opinion means everything to me. *You* mean everything to me, and I hated using our relationship against you.”

Tears slipped from her lids as she attempted to move away from him, but he held tight. “Just let me go, Quin.”

“No.”

“I need time.”

“Take your time, but I'm not letting

go.”

“Damn it, Quin. You're not the boss of me.”

“You're absolutely right.”

She stopped struggling, but she stayed rigid as she looked him in the eye. “Let — go.”

He solidly met her stare, his heart in his throat. “No.”

Her anger wavered, exposing her sorrow, and her lashes fell as her body shook. “Why won't you let me be?”

“Because I'm selfish and I need you. Be as angry as you want with me, Layla. You're welcome to scream and kick and curse, but I'm not letting go. I hate the way I've made you feel, and if I walk out of here, I'll go crazy. So be mad, but

please don't put me through that.”

She sobbed, and he pressed his lips to hers. “Please, love, I know you're mad, but I need you.”

Her flexed muscles finally relaxed, and he quickly curled her into a ball and moved her to his chest. Once she was tucked in, he firmly wrapped his arms around her body and buried his face in her hair, kissing between deep breaths.

Layla had surrendered yet again, but it wasn't like the time before. Yes, she still felt weak, but the shame of subservience wasn't there with this concession. Before, he'd sternly told her exactly how it would be while making it clear she had no choice, but this time, his demands came with heartfelt pleas and loving

caresses. “Damn it, Quin. I have no leverage, and I don't like the way it feels.”

“You have as much leverage as I do, and I'm not using mine right now.”

“Yes you are.”

“I'm not.”

“You don't see it?”

“Would you rather I *not* tell you what I need from you?”

Her frustration paused as his words sank in. Then the frustration returned.

“No. I would not prefer that.”

“I did misuse your devotion earlier,” he admitted, “and I'm sorry. Maybe I should have gone about it differently. But this right here...” He squeezed tighter. “...this is something I need right

now, and I don't consider this using my power against you.” He rubbed his face in her hair, kissing her head again. “I know you're hurting, and you can be mad at me, but I don't believe you really want to be mad all by yourself, so please let me hold you while you tell me how angry you are, and I tell you how sorry I am.”

She huffed. Not because he was making her angry, but because he was making sense. The last thing she wanted was to move away from the most heavenly spot in the world. It would make her feel lonely and empty as well as sad and afraid. She swallowed the bitter taste of defeat. Then she released her aura and moved her hands to her

face, catching a flood of tears.

Quin released a heavy sigh when her aura flowed free, and he let her cry in silence for a long time. When her sobs turned to hiccups, he kissed her head and rubbed her back. “I’m sorry it has to be like this, love, and I’m sorry I handled the situation unfairly, but this is our best chance.”

“What about everyone else, Quin? What about their chance?”

“They want us to stay as much as we want to stay, and they’re prepared to do whatever they can to make our stay safe. It’s what they want, Layla. We’re giving them what they want.”

“And possibly taking their lives in return.”

“We're going to do everything we can to keep that from happening.”

“It's unfair.”

“Yes.”

“It's selfish.”

“Yes.”

“And it's all on my shoulders.”

“No,” he disagreed, tightening his hold. “The blame rests on my shoulders. I made it so when I broke your heart.”

Layla wiped her tears and stared at his chest, contemplating that last part. He'd made his demands intending to completely relieve her of guilt while giving her exactly what she wanted but wouldn't take. Damn it. Every bit of his demand was for her sake and her sake alone, even the fierceness with which it

had been delivered, which, ultimately, was the fire to her fuse.

Pressing her palms flat against his stomach, she touched her cheek to his heart. “What if I can convince you I could be happy hiding?”

“You can't. I'd know you're lying.”

“I can be happy, Quin. I'll stay just like this all the time, tucked away in my personal heaven until the day I die.”

“No, Layla.”

“You don't believe me?”

“I do believe you're happy when you're in my arms, but I also know how much it would hurt you to leave our family. I saw it, Layla. I felt it. Your spirit was draining away right before my eyes, and I can't let that happen. You're a

happy person. That's one of my favorite things about you, and there's no doubt in my mind that if I were to take you away from here, you'd change. I don't want despair changing you. I don't want you to lose the personality traits that make you so special, beautiful and bright.”

She slowly rubbed her face back and forth across his warm chest, trying to find the optimism that had slipped from her grip. “How will we ever succeed, Quin? I don't want to watch everyone die. I don't want to watch you die.”

“I know, love, but we won't face him without a fighting chance. This isn't about letting Agro find you anymore. This is about us setting him up for a fall. Hopefully his patience will hold out

until we can come up with a plan.”

“You still have hope?”

“As long as I have you.”

“I thought you were lacking it.”

“Doing this by ourselves would have been suicide, but we're not alone now.” He hugged her close. Then he pulled her up his body, stroking her moist cheek as he searched her eyes. “Is this okay?”

He'd stolen her forgiveness the moment he touched her, so she nodded her agreement while massaging the tight tendons in his neck and shoulder.

His consoled sigh sent heat across her nose as he kissed it, but his solaced expression didn't last. He closed his eyes, his face flexing as he spoke in a strained voice. “You have to understand

something, Layla.” He swallowed and found her stare. “Even though I have hope and we have help, there's a solid chance we'll die when we face Agro.”

A tear slipped from the corner of her eye, and he wiped it away before going on. “I've embraced the odds. They terrify me and weigh heavy on my heart, but unless we resort ourselves to an unfulfilled life far away from here, we're stuck with the possibility of striking out. You've made it clear you'd rather die than give up our life here, so we'll take the chance and let the dice roll, just like you said.”

A few more tears rolled from her lids at the prospect of their death, and this time he kissed them away. “We have a

lot to accomplish in a small amount of time, my love, and it may be the only time we have left on earth, so I have a favor to ask, and if I have to, I'll beg on my hands and knees to make it so.”

Like he would have to. “What is it you want?”

“You,” he answered. Then he kissed her nose, cheeks, eyelids, and lips.

“Every free moment we get, I want you in my arms. I want us to hold and love each other like there's no tomorrow, and I want to treasure each moment like it's our last. If we have to die, I want to die knowing I held the most amazing woman in the world the way she deserved to be held, that I showed her how much I love and need her, and that I'm happier than

I've ever been when I'm with her. I want to spend the rest of our lives, no matter how short they may be, showing you these things while touching your soul and letting you touch mine." He kissed away more tears then found her eyes again. "Will you please let me do that, Layla? It's all I want. It's all I need to make everything worth it. If you'll give me this, I'll fight every day for the rest of my life."

His sweet and sincere request grabbed her heartstrings and yanked, leaving her a vulnerable ball of raging emotions. Tears burst forth as sobs exploded from her chest, and she burrowed into him, her body quaking as love and sadness grasped it and fiercely shook. Her

fingers clawed at him, attempting to pull him closer, unconcerned with anything besides his feel and his flesh and the man beneath its surface. She wanted to melt into him. She wanted to be a part of him. She wanted to be securely nestled within him, right next to his heart.

She flattened her palms on his pecs, her cheek pressed against his neck, her lips perched on his shoulder. Then she mentally urged his soul to touch her, attempting to draw his love and devotion and strength and sincerity to the surface of his skin. She just wanted to feel it.

He gasped, jolting as her magic clutched his insides and pulled. Then he exhaled hugely when the force reached the surface of his skin and collided with

hers. The atmosphere flashed, and the air filled with heat, a peaceful cocoon delivering magical morphine straight into her pores. This was exactly what she wanted... what she needed. It felt like every wonderful thing he'd ever said to her and done for her had been woven into a blanket that was now wrapped around her body, delivering much needed love, security and hope. It felt like she was nestled in his soul, right next to his heart, right where she wanted to be.

She sighed his name. Then she selfishly held onto the feeling for over a minute before letting the tangible emotions slip back into his body.

“How did you do that?” he

breathlessly asked.

“I shouldn't have, Quin. I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“No,” he assured, pulling her face from his neck. “How did you do that?”

“I don't know. I just did.”

“Do you know what that was?”

She bit her lip then guiltily whispered. “Your soul?” As she said the words aloud, the absurdity and presumptuousness of her actions sank in, and she panicked. “I'm so sorry, Quin. I should never mess with things like that...”

He put a finger to her lips and stopped her babbling. “It was my soul,” he whispered, scanning the air around him. Then he returned his gaze to hers. “And

do you know what I saw?"

"You saw something?"

"Yes," he confirmed, a grin stretching between deep dimples. "I saw my aura."

"You what?" she asked, looking at the bright haze around him. "You saw your aura?"

He took her cheeks and gave her a happy kiss. "Yes, my perfect, beautiful, amazing angel, I saw my aura."

The magic left Layla feeling sedate, and his joy was contagious, so her smile came naturally. "I told you it's magnificent."

"It is magnificent. And do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because of you. Once I realized what

I was looking at, I saw you. You're all over my aura, and you make it shine beautifully.”

“It's your heart and soul, Quin, not mine.”

“You're wrong. They are yours. I just saw visual proof of that.”

Her throat tightened as her heart swelled. “If you keep saying things like that, you're going to make me lose it again. I can't seem to control my emotions.”

“Stop trying. I want to see them. I want to see everything about you. Remember? Live every second like it's our last. That's what I want.”

She slid her hand from his chest to his cheek. “That's what I want, too, Quin.

No more wasted moments.”

“You're not going to make me beg?”
he asked, flashing a grin.

She guiltily looked down as she quietly responded. “That would be a wasted moment.”

“Hey,” he whispered, and her thick lashes fluttered up, revealing the deep, emerald eyes that, on so many unpredictable occasions, left him breathless.

“Hey back.”

His lungs found air again, and he pulled a curl to his nose, sweetening the oxygen. “Even if I die tomorrow, I'll be able to say I was a lucky man; that I lived a blessed life where my most amazing dreams came true. You've made

my life breathtakingly beautiful and uniquely divine, and no matter how this turns out, I'll never regret one second I've had with you. Eleven days is short, but it's been long enough for you to provide me with more happiness than most people discover in a lifetime. For that, I owe you my heart and soul, and they're yours."

More tears slipped from her lids, and he quickly kissed them away while working his fingers into her hair. With her cheeks momentarily dry, he moved his lips to hers, and she could feel herself getting sucked in, just as she could feel herself being pulled back. She was halfway between the dark state-of-mind their troubles generated, and the

glorious peace-of-mind their relationship provided. If someone stood in her brain, they could look to the left and see a black abyss, then look to the right and see a bright and beautiful haze.

Layla turned toward the light, snapping the chains stretching from the dark while moving toward the silver wisps sweetly summoning her. No wasted moments. There was still so much she wanted to do with him, so much she wanted to show and tell him; sides of him she wanted to see and words she wanted to hear. There were parts of him she had yet to touch, and ways he had yet to touch her.

She closed her eyes, turning her intense focus to the sensations produced

by contact with him – the blood pulsing her pout each time his lips brushed hers; the twitching at the corners of her mouth each time his tongue lightly licked; the tickling of the nerve-endings around her eyelids when his thumb dried her tears; and the tingles that stretched across her scalp when he gathered her hair in his fist.

She could also feel the rhythm of her heartbeat – solid and steady; and her breathing – slow and deep. And by expanding her focus, she could feel her skin thrumming at her pulse points, and the air whispering across her feet. She'd managed to search out all the sensations her body was undergoing and could concentrate on all of them at once. She'd

heard of others achieving a similar state-of-mind through meditation, but this was the first time she'd ever experienced such intense self-awareness.

Keeping the feel of her body in the forefront of her mind, she vanished her robe then did the same with his shorts. When her skin was exposed to the air, when it should have chilled, her heart beat hard, and hot blood rushed her veins, warming and stimulating her flesh.

She blindly found his hand then drifted his fingertips down her neck, reveling in the tingles and goose bumps sprouting along the trail. As she pulled his hand lower, a chill swept across her shoulders and shot down her spine, and

she shuddered from head to toe.

His heavenly appendages were between her breasts, warm and pliable, so she took his forefinger and brushed it across one of her nipples. The flesh puckered beneath his compliant touch, and her breathing deepened as she provided her other nipple with the same treatment. She slid his fingers lower, quivering when they flitted across her abdomen. Then she formed her hand to the back of his and slipped it between her thighs.

Her breathing was no longer slow, but it remained deep, and her heartbeat had gone from solid and steady to powerful and sporadic. He wasn't kissing her, but his parted lips touched hers as she

breathed into his mouth, compelling his fingers to press and caress her in all the right places.

If ever there was a heaven on earth, Quin was in it, his body throbbing as he watched his angel's expression, inhaled her sweet breath, and touched her sultry sex. It was difficult – keeping his fingers relaxed as she manipulated them to her pleasure. He itched to do things his own way, explore more territory while staking claims on more prosperous realms. But to see and feel her leave her troubles behind using his hand as transportation merited more than mere willpower and patience. He'd sell his soul to be at the center of all her experiments, to remain her mode of

transportation, so he remained motionless, his heart thundering as his lungs swelled.

Her back arched, her alert nipples entertaining his chest as she took his fingers in both hands and opened her thighs, exposing herself to full discovery.

He squeezed his eyes shut, swallowing hard while willing his hand to stay limp in hers. Then he returned his gaze to her face. Her expressions and aura were beyond stunning as she worked her way up the mountain of pleasure; and each crinkle of her nose, tweak of her eyebrows, and flutter of her lashes sent an extra burst of need down his spine to his groin. She was almost to

the top. He could see it and feel it.

She sharply inhaled and shifted her hips forward, sliding two of his fingers inside while adding pressure against his palm, and he severed his restraint, grasping her outside and in. Her fingers stretched as her palms pressed, and a rapturous hum rolled from her tongue, vibrated across his starving lips.

She jolted before going limp, and he relaxed his hand, giving her muscles a break. But as soon as her blood slowed, calming the rapid pulse he could so easily and erotically feel, he began pushing her back up the mountain.

Layla didn't realize his intent at first, as her insides were flooded with sensations and his touch was so tender,

but when she expected his fingers to withdraw, yet they advanced, her eyes popped open. He grinned, humored by her shock and happy to have the upper hand, but she wasn't going to yield so easily.

Keeping her eyes on his, she reached for his stomach, then followed the ridged slant of his flexed abdomen. When she found what she was looking for, she found it hard, and she firmly grasped him with both hands while curling her tongue around his.

She'd meant to get a reaction out of him, to drain his ever present control, but she didn't expect what happened next. His chest rumbled, his fingers flexed and curled inside her, and his

magic clutched her body, supporting her weight as he lifted her from the bed and pressed her against the wall.

She flashed her gaze from the ceiling a few feet above to the bed several feet below. Then she found his confident stare as his mouth came down on hers and his fingers abandoned her body. His erection throbbed in her hands, daring her to let go, and the emptiness left by his fingers joined in the chorus.

She relinquished her grip, squeezing his shoulders instead, and he grasped the back of her thighs, gliding sensitive skin over his arousal as he lifted her up and spread her open. His lips skimmed her jaw as he positioned himself at her entrance. Then he bit her earlobe as he

pushed hard into her body.

Layla screamed, rocked by a painful yet pleasing jolt. He'd never filled her so forcefully and quickly... so roughly, and somewhere in the back of her swirling mind she realized this was what she'd get when she attempted to play games with him.

He pulled away so she could fill her lungs, but they emptied again when he powerfully moved back inside. She clamped her teeth together, caught in a riptide of pleasure and pain as he grinded inside her, forcing her to conform to his girth. Then he tilted his head back, letting the thunder in his chest resound his pleasure throughout the room.

She breathlessly watched his flexed neck and jaw, her lips quivering as she ached and pulsed around him. Then he met her gaze and lifted her legs higher, moving between them with impassioned purpose.

Her hands slipped from his shoulders and slapped the wall, and her eyes rolled back as he pushed her to the edge. Leaving her left leg trembling around his waist, he took her jaw. Then he forced her to look at him as he shoved her off the cliff. She should have been embarrassed – screaming his name as she looked him right in the eye, but his reverent expression merely fueled her orgasm.

Drifting his thumb across her lips, he

smiled and moved in for a kiss, and though she'd been the one to finish, she got the sense he'd won. In one of the most honest exchanges they'd shared, she'd given up a bigger piece of herself than he had; it was her who had surrendered control and submitted to the pleasure and the pain it entailed... submitted to him. And it was obvious, now, that this was the way it would always be. He may let her win outside the bedroom, but in this, he'd always have the upper hand. She wondered if he'd groomed her this way, taking things painstakingly slow so she'd understand he set the pace, that he was the authority on the subject, not her. Then she realized she didn't care. Submitting to his carnal

desires was the most amazing feeling in the world.

His lips toyed with hers as his eyes glinted, and she knew he was aware of her comprehension as well as her acceptance. And she found immense pleasure in giving him what he wanted. About damn time she had a way to tip the scales.

His lips left hers. Then he pulled her to his chest and leaned back in mid-air, letting her rest on his torso. She twitched, he throbbed, and her quivering body ached for more. She kissed one solid pec, then the other. Then she slid her tongue over his heart while dragging her palms down his tight sides.

He grasped her butt in both hands,

lifting it high enough to catch a glimpse, and as he slowly brought her back down, her body tightened and curled, dragging her lips and nose down his stomach. She felt like she'd explode should the tension break, so she made herself relax and flipped up. Gravity forced her to take everything he had to offer, and she arched as a thrill shot through her core.

He groaned his approval, and she raised her head, tingling from head to toe as she stared down at him – his magnificent body suspended in mid-air; his warm eyes observing every inch of her unveiled and fluctuating flesh; deep dimples flickering outside parted lips curved with content. She took a mental snapshot, tucking the extraordinary

image away for later. Then she left his gaze and rolled against him, braced by magic and his strong hands.

When his aura swelled around her, his shaft swelled inside her, and she raised up, holding them both hostage on the brink of ecstasy. His fingers dipped into her hips as a rumble rolled in his diaphragm, and the next time she exhaled, she bore down on him, her body tight and tingly as she slipped over the edge. Her breasts heaved as she reached behind her and clutched his hard thighs, and he stretched, his satisfied growl surging loud and clear from his chest.

They hovered that way for several heavenly minutes, slightly curved over

the bed, wavering within their indulged and swollen auras – he like an unstrung bow, and her a beautifully bent arrow frozen upon its magical release.

When she smoothly flipped forward and rested her chest to his, he descended to the bed, hugging her close while burying his face in her hair. They melted into the blankets, and somehow, the outside world stayed quiet, letting them linger in the bliss. Life was perfect, if only for a while.

They held on to the sublime feeling as long as they could, drowning in a sea of transcendental tranquility, and when the unease tried to creep back in, he rolled her onto her back and returned her to their erotic dreamland.

It was amazing – the stamina he had with her. Wizards were naturally able to keep up in a way hexless men only dream about, but it had never been like this. Never without breaks and never without the use of focus, willpower and magic. That, however, had changed. A new talent had been awakened by his angel, so they stayed wrapped around each other for hours, pausing only to absorb the rush and catch their breaths. He used magic to heal their bodies, soothing tender areas inside and out, and so their pleasure continued well into the evening.

They eventually lost count of their orgasms, but they didn't care and would have kept going if her stomach hadn't

growled. She giggled into his chest, and he smiled as he wrapped her in a tight hug. “Layla, my love, you are, without a doubt, the most amazing woman in the world.”

She rubbed her face over his heart, tasting him as her lips throbbed with its beats. Then she gave his chest a kiss and smiled at him. “I think we've put Karena's best room to good use. What do you think?”

He laughed as he brushed her hair from her face and took her cheek. “I doubt this room has ever seen anything like us, and it won't again until we return.”

“We'll have to hurry back then. A room like this should get its fair share.”

“I agree, and we will come back. Again and again.”

She walked her fingers up his chest and neck. Then she skipped them to his lips. “I look forward to showing our bedroom what we can do.”

“Then we'll have to show it soon.” He tightened his grip. Then he pulled himself from her body while bringing her face closer to his. “Are you ready to go home, angel?”

“You are my home, Quin.”

“You make me lighter than air when you say things like that,” he whispered, working tangles out of her curls.

Her stomach growled again, and he wrapped one arm around her waist, running a hand down her rumbling

tummy. "I better feed you, my love. I can't have you getting weak on me."

"We'll feed each other."

"Now that sounds like a good plan. I'll have to find some particularly messy food so when I *accidentally* miss your mouth, I can lick it off your chest."

She giggled and wrapped her fingers in his hair. Then she buried his face in her breasts. "What makes you think you need an excuse to lick my chest?"

He filled his mouth with her, gently kneading her nipple between his tongue and the roof of his mouth. Then he let it slip away before giving it one more lick. "It's tasty, but it won't fill our stomachs with anything more substantial than flutters."

“To quote the man of my dreams, I'm okay with that.”

“Well I'm not okay with letting my angel starve.”

“Okay. We'll go home and find some messy food, then eat it off each other's naked bodies. That way our hunger will be satisfied in more ways than one.”

“That's a brilliant plan, but I doubt my hunger for you will ever be satisfied.”

“Good, because I don't want to have to rub food all over myself to get your mouth on me.” She paused and pulled herself tighter against him. “But I would if that's what it took. I'd make a menu and lay it by the bed. Then every time you got hungry, I'd take your order and serve it up on a naked platter.”

“Mmm...” he murmured, rolling her onto her back. Then he lowered his mouth to the pulse point at her throat, tasting it as he whispered. “Sounds like fine dining to me.”

Chapter 6

The blaring lights of Las Vegas came into view long before Guthrie reached Vortigern's institute, which was located on a more secluded plot of sand west of Vegas.

Given Vortigern's association with Agro, it was safe to assume his institute was guarded, so Guthrie signaled for his unit to land more than half a mile outside Vortigern's property. Guthrie could see the institute in the distance, lights flickering in the windows of a sprawling Santa Fe style ranch, and he spotted a few shadowed figures patrolling the

land, their concealed auras shimmering under a full moon.

The closest of the figures approached, and Guthrie ordered everyone to stay put as he met the guard halfway. The exchange was short and civil. Then Guthrie patiently waited for Vortigern, who soon flew across the desert with a handful of teenage magicians in tow.

Vortigern eyed the twelve guests as he gracefully landed, his tall frame thinner than most wizards, but what he lacked in muscle, he made up for with his piercing stare – pale-blue and full of mystique. Guthrie had seen that look before, in a soothsayer who'd lasted about a year in Agro's camp before losing a few fingers due to inaccuracy; it was the wise and

wandering gaze of a man who'd been practicing mental magic far too long. The prolonged strain on the brain tended to drive the best of them mad.

“Vortigern,” Guthrie greeted.

“That’s who I am,” Vortigern returned. “Who are you?”

“Guthrie – first lieutenant of the Dark Elite.”

Vortigern subjected the claim to mental evaluation, the way all men of his sort did. Then he looked to Guthrie’s companions. “And what does Agro’s finest want with me?”

“Soothsayers. And we’d appreciate a break within the safety of your compound while we broker a fair deal.”

“Agro doesn’t play fair,” Vortigern

laughed, “but only a fool denies the man service. Come on in. We’ll strike our deal over a hot meal. Have you traveled far?”

By the time Guthrie stepped into the largest of the adobe buildings, Vortigern had invited everyone to stay the night, and since Guthrie’s current plan was to sleep under the stars in the middle of the desert, he humbly accepted.

“Your hospitality is warmly received,” he returned, scanning the institute’s modernized interior. They’d gathered in a living room that seemed to double as a lobby. Witches and wizards milled around, the majority of them under thirty, and for the most part, they appeared in good spirits. Only a few

wore the expressions of captives, which was exactly what they were – brainwashed girls and boys torn from their homes at an age too young to remember.

“First let’s fill your stomachs,” Vortigern suggested, leading his guests down a corridor. “Then we’ll attend to business.”

The meal was the finest Guthrie had eaten in a long time, and it was served by skimpily clad witches just old enough for him to admire without feeling guilty. When dessert was served, Guthrie caught Lynette’s eye and knew his appraisal of their servers hadn’t gone unnoticed. Not that he gave a shit what Lynette thought. He still wasn’t sure why

he'd brought her to Nevada instead of sending her with the soldiers scouring California. It had been a last minute decision, one brought on by those damn eyes, their violet depths a reflection of his fractured soul.

As the dishes were cleared, Vortigern invited everyone to his library for a drink, which eventually turned into a full blown party. Quality booze, potent cannabis, and unrestrained sexuality flowed freely among magicians who'd been denied simple pleasures far too long, and Guthrie kept an eye on things from a comfortable chair in the corner, unwilling to deny his comrades a good time.

Vortigern stayed on the fringes as

well, keeping Guthrie's scotch filled while playing host through commands to his students, all of whom addressed him as Master Vortigern, and some of whom doubled as party favors.

Guthrie had worked out the details of Agro's order by his second round of drinks; now Vortigern was explicating the theory of negative energy and how it relates to a person's aura and well-being. Guthrie couldn't care less, but he gave the impression he was listening as he drowned the lecture in liquor.

Scanning the long room, he found Token getting blown by a witch who had her ass in the air for a second wizard, and it made him think of Lyn, who'd been surprisingly quiet. He searched the

sea of faces, but didn't find her. Three others were missing as well.

“Problem?” Vortigern asked.

“Some of my soldiers are missing,” Guthrie answered, leaning forward to rise.

“Relax,” Vortigern insisted, pouring another round. “They retired to their room. I had a student lead the way. If I'd known you were coming, I would have been better prepared. As it is, I only had two rooms to offer you. I'm afraid your soldiers will be sleeping together tonight.”

“You've offered more than expected,” Guthrie noted. “Agro will hear of your hospitality.”

“Don't bother. He won't give a shit.”

Guthrie swallowed a smirk then downed his drink. “Well know that your kindness wasn’t lost on my comrades.”

“They looked weary,” Vortigern replied, sweeping his gaze across the room.

“You wouldn’t know it now,” Guthrie laughed. “I need to rein them in.”

“I’m surprised you refrain from joining them. Or does a man of your status get enough fun in camp?”

“A man of my status doesn’t know the meaning of the word.” Guthrie stood and turned to his host. “But a soft bed, I can appreciate.”

“I’ll have one of my girls show you the way,” Vortigern allowed. “Let your comrades play. We’ll lull them to sleep

soon.”

Guthrie scanned Vortigern’s aura, looking for a hint of betrayal, but the man had proved himself an ally on all accounts. Even the deal had gone down smoothly. His best soothsayers, he claimed, were away on a job, but he offered the best of those in his reserve.

“Then I’ll let them play,” Guthrie agreed. But before following a young student from the library, he interrupted Token’s fun and placed him in charge of those staying up.

The scotch hit Guthrie’s head as he navigated the institute’s hallways, but he wasn’t so impaired he felt comfortable being alone with a scantily-clad witch who’d barely reached puberty. To

Vortigern's credit, Guthrie hadn't seen any teenage witches thrown into the sexual games taking place in the library, but he had no doubt the institute held ugly secrets beneath its fancy surface.

"This is it," the young girl announced, motioning down a hallway with two doors. "The first room is for your soldiers; the second is yours."

Guthrie headed for the second door without looking back. He didn't much care for children and had no desire to talk with one.

Being a man of few indulgences and accustomed to the fact, he hadn't considered what his chamber might look like, so he entered the room without the slightest anticipation. Then he stumbled

to a stop.

There, in a room bigger than the boss' tent, and on a bed bigger than any he'd slept on, lay two naked witches – Lynette and another woman, a student, who was spread open and moaning as Lynette's fingers pumped inside her.

“There you are,” Lynette greeted, her hand surfacing as she rose from the bed. “Look what I found.”

Guthrie glanced between the temptation on the bed and the one walking toward him. “Where did you find her?”

Rolling her eyes, Lynette reached up, hovering wet fingers an inch from his lips. “Relax, Guthrie. She was eager to play along when our host made the

suggestion.”

“So this was all Vortigern’s idea.”

Lynette ignored his sarcasm and moved her fingers closer. “Taste her. I know you want to.”

Guthrie’s lips parted, his tongue moistening as it slid over his teeth, but then he grabbed Lynette’s wrist and looked at the witch on the bed, who’d begun stroking herself in Lynette’s absence. The wrist in his fist squirmed, but he didn’t ease his grip as he spoke, his voice strained by undeniable arousal. “How old is she?”

“Twenty. And she likes being told what to do. Don’t you, sweetheart?”

The woman writhed under her own hand as she cooed an agreement, and

Lynette yanked her wrist from Guthrie's grasp so she could return to the bed. "See? All we're missing is you. Now stop being so damn uptight and get over here."

Lynette buried her face between the woman's legs, and Guthrie watched while pulling Silestra from his sleeve and shedding his clothes. After sending the snake on its way, he approached the bed and looked down at the student's face. She was nearing orgasm and probably wouldn't be able to recall her own name, so Guthrie didn't ask. He didn't want to know.

She peaked, and Lynette emerged from her thighs, barely giving the poor girl time to recover before taking her by the

hair and directing her mouth to Guthrie's pleasure. Once the student was set to task, Lynette stood on the bed, her face slick and shiny as her eyes drew level with Guthrie's. "How is she?"

Guthrie swallowed, his gaze boring into Lyn's. "She's good... and acting of her own free will about as much as we are."

"You like it, though."

"Her lips on my cock? Yeah. Your schemes? No."

Tracing the tattoos stretching up his neck, Lynette leaned close and whispered in his ear. "This could be your life, Guthrie... every night... forever."

She nibbled his earlobe as her friend

took him deeper into her mouth, and he shuddered and closed his eyes. “You’re a succubus, Lyn.”

“No,” she softly disagreed, sending a chill down his spine. “I am the light leading your way.”

Chapter 7

Layla and Quin had no problem figuring out how to conceal their bonded lights. They'd succeeded on the first try, and while it was uncomfortable, it wasn't as bad as keeping their auras hidden. Having their auras pulled in resulted in mood swings, like they could emotionally explode with a nudge, whereas having their bonded lights trapped inside filled them with so much love, they thought their hearts might burst with it. Still an emotional feeling, but at least it was limited to pleasing emotions.

The worst part of hiding the hazes,

they soon found out, was not being able to see each other's. Layla burst into tears the first time she saw Quin bereft of his aura and bonded light. Until that moment, she'd never seen him conceal his aura... *ever*. The only time she'd seen him without it since he first revealed it to her was when she hid it for him, and the two instances had only lasted a few minutes. His aura was as much a part of him as anything else; to see him pull it in was a complete shock. But that wasn't what pushed her to tears.

Bonding with him had been the most wonderful and life-altering experience she'd had, and the one thing she held most dear was his love for her, so when she looked at him and could no longer

see visual proof of those two things, her heart protested. That mixed with the overwhelming love she held for him, and the fact that her aura and bonded light were clammed up, triggered a breakdown.

Quin was quick to soothe her, releasing his aura and bonded light as he took her in his arms. Then he distracted her with a kiss when he sucked the lights back in. Seeing him without them still stung Layla's heart, but she didn't burst into ridiculous sobs.

Their strengthened powers made it easy to transfer their belongings to the house, and after donning their cloaks and saying a quick goodbye to Karena's best room, they flew from the rose-covered

terrace into the night. He quickly pulled her against him. Then he held her there all the way home.

They landed in the middle of their deserted lawn around midnight, and they leaned into each other as they sighed. No matter how beautiful the suite was, it didn't provide that warm and cozy feeling that accompanied a family.

Keeping their hazes hidden, they walked to Caitrin and Morrigan's, eager to get the greeting over with so they could go home.

As Quin reached up to knock, the door swung open to Caitrin, who offered a relieved smile and moved aside, motioning for them to enter. The rest of Layla grandparents and Quin's parents

were seated in the living room, but Layla and Quin ignored them as they moved into each other and released their lights.

“That's better,” she sighed, vanishing their cloaks. Then she shamelessly touched her cheek to his bare chest.

“Yes it is,” he agreed, intently searching her aura.

Layla kissed his heart. Then she took his hand and moved further into the room. “Sorry we're so late.”

“Don't apologize, sweetie,” Morrigan insisted, rising from the couch. “Are you guys hungry? I can have something ready in two minutes.”

They were starving, but they didn't want to eat there. Layla met Quin's stare with a smirk, and he grinned as he

forced his gaze away. “Thanks, Morrigan, but we'll eat when we get home.”

“How about coffee then?”

“Yes,” they answered, and Layla's cheeks flushed as she buried her face in Quin's chest.

Kemble quietly laughed, and Morrigan's lips twitched with a knowing smile. “Have a seat,” she suggested. “I'll be right back.”

Quin and Layla obeyed, sitting beside each other on the couch, but she steadily moved closer as he steadily pulled her in. By the time Morrigan returned with their coffee, Layla was on his lap.

“Thanks,” they replied, taking their mugs.

“Made any plans?” Quin asked, his lips alternating between her hair and his mug.

“Yes,” Caitrin answered, summoning chairs for Morrigan and himself. “But before going much further, we need to let the rest of the family in on the secret. We've asked them to be here at four tomorrow. If it's okay with you, they'll find out then.”

Quin found Layla's eyes then returned his gaze to Caitrin. “That's fine. The sooner they know, the sooner we can relax when we're home.”

“Will they be able to stay a while?” Layla asked. “I haven't seen all of them since Friday.”

Everyone smiled as Caitrin answered.

“They'll stay for dinner.”

“Good. I miss them.”

“They miss you, too, sweetie,”

Morrigan assured.

Quin's coffee was half gone, and he itched for his naked angel. “Have you made any other plans?” he asked, watching her lips part around the brim of her mug.

Kemble laughed again, tearing his gaze from Quin's aura so he could pull Cordelia onto his lap; and the other mates reached for each other as Caitrin answered the question. “We've found a few possible locations to test your magic. We hope to settle on one by tomorrow afternoon.”

“We've also brainstormed ways to

stall Agro,” Serafin added. “We want him to wait as long as possible before making his move, but there isn’t much we can do. The fact that we’ve moved some of our members out of the community is the best leverage we have, so we’ve told the locals to be honest about our family staying elsewhere should someone approach them for information. If we can keep Agro believing we’re expecting him, maybe he’ll give it more time before moving in. There’s no guarantee, though, so be prepared to flee if he comes.”

Layla straightened and scowled at her grandpa. “No.”

Then Quin scowled at her. “What do you mean *no*?”

“He'll kill them, Quin. I'm not leaving while everyone else stays and dies. I already told you that.”

“You haven't learned to protect yourself, Layla. If he shows up tomorrow and we walk onto that lawn, we'll die. We need a plan and some help before facing him.”

“If we don't walk onto that lawn, everyone else will die. Then where would we be? Stuck with no help, that's where.” She gulped the rest of her coffee and sent the mug to the table. “I understand we need a plan before facing him, but we need a contingency plan in case he shows up before we're ready, because I'm not leaving this community and hiding unless everyone goes with

me.”

Quin grimaced at her then turned to Caitrin. “Do you know where he's camped?”

“We have a general idea,” Caitrin answered.

“We need someone watching him,” Quin insisted. “I know it sounds dangerous, sending one of our own to spy, but if Layla or I cast our concealment spells on them, they could fly right over the Unforgivables' camp without being noticed.”

“Yes, I suppose you're right.”

Layla twisted and looked at Quin. “If it's that easy, why don't I just conceal myself and go cut his throat in his sleep?”

Everyone gasped as Quin's face drained of color. "I don't like hearing you talk that way, Layla."

"Well I'm not going to apologize. I know it sounds cruel and a little shady, but he's wreaked havoc on my life, and I'm tired of it." Her jaw flexed as her eyes narrowed. "You feel the same way."

"Of course I do. I wouldn't hesitate to cut Agro's throat, but I don't like hearing my angel talk that way. I'd do anything to keep his blood from staining your hands." He took a calming breath. Then he swept his fingertips across her heart. "Besides, it would be impossible. Our concealment spells would keep the Unforgivables from seeing us fly over

their camp, but if we moved closer the spells would break. They set magic around their settlement to keep people from entering undetected.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders sagged as her chest deflated. “Why didn't you just say that in the first place?”

Quin sighed as he softly tugged on her pucker. Then he looked at Caitrin. “If we have someone watching him, we can empty the community before he gets here. That way no one will have to face him until we're ready.”

Layla perked up. “I like that idea... as long as the spy stays safe.”

“It's better than walking out to an execution,” Caitrin agreed. “We'll speak with the coven and ask for volunteers. In

the meantime, you *are* leaving if he shows up.”

“No,” Layla refused.

“Layla...”

“No,” she interrupted. “I’m being forced to face him with you beside me, so it’s only fair you’re forced to face him with me beside you.”

Quin closed his eyes and tilted his head back. “Do we still have guards watching the community?”

“Yes,” Caitrin answered.

“How long is the warning time?”

“A little over a minute.”

Quin raised his head and opened his eyes. “A minute isn’t long enough to get everyone out of the community, but we might be able to move away from the

lawn. Then Layla and I can conceal everyone before going any further.” He reached up, taking Layla's chin and forcing her to meet his stare. “If Agro manages to locate us before we finish setting the spells, it's every man for himself and we flee. All of us. No one stays to face him. We'll conceal the slowest fliers first to give them a better chance, but that means no waiting for them.”

“Fine,” she agreed. “Where will everyone meet?”

“We believe his camp is northwest,” Caitrin noted, “so we'll gather on the east border of the lawn, behind Lann and Rhiannon's.”

Quin finished his coffee and vanished

his cup. Then he hugged Layla close. "It's going to have to work for now. What about help?"

"We have a few people in mind," Serafin answered. "There's a handful from our home state, and a few others scattered around the U.S. and Canada. There's also one in Nova Scotia and two in Mexico."

Layla turned her face into Quin's chest, and he tucked his chin in, whispering as he drifted his lips through her hair. "You okay?"

"No," she answered, "but I'm going to have to learn to deal with it, right? Don't stop the conversation on my account." No one said anything, so she spoke again. "Just a few people, huh? Will that

be enough?”

“No,” Quin answered. “We need more. The more we get, the better everyone's chances will be.”

“Naturally,” Serafin agreed, “but we have a problem.”

“What’s that?”

“You stipulated the volunteers be trustworthy, which severely limits our options. There are magicians all over this continent wishing they could watch Agro die, dreaming they could have a hand in it, but we don't know them, so we can't trust them.”

Quin contemplated this as he ran a lock of Layla's hair beneath his nose. “It’s dangerous to let strangers see what we've become.”

“Yes,” Serafin agreed.

“What about those we know?” Quin asked. “Where will they be staying?”

“Everyone we've thought of so far would be welcome in the community.”

Quin was undecided, and he was tired of thinking about it. “Go ahead and make the calls to those you know. Tally up how many will join us. We'll decide if we want to risk bringing strangers in once we see where our numbers stand.”

Serafin nodded. “We'll try to have them tallied by tomorrow evening.”

“The sooner the better. Is there anything else we need to discuss tonight?”

No one answered, but when Quin looked up, he could tell they had

something on their minds. “What’s going on?”

Several of them exchanged hesitant glances. Then Kemble cleared his throat and answered. “We’ve been discussing the situation all afternoon, contemplating different theories, and we're curious what you two think of them.”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Quin urged.

“Well,” Kemble replied, linking his fingers with Cordelia's, “we were discussing the possibility of a preordained union.”

Layla left her sanctuary and glanced around. “You mean destiny?”

“Yes,” Kemble confirmed. “Under the circumstances, we wonder if you and

Quinlan's relationship isn't meant to lead to bigger things.”

“Right,” Layla mumbled, cuddling back into Quin.

He shifted her into a cradle hold and stood. “The bizarre circumstances haven’t escaped our attention, but we haven't discussed it or decided how we feel about it. What do you think, love? Got an opinion on the matter?”

She shrugged, her eyes glued to his chest, her fingernail tracing hearts on his pecs. “Not so much at the moment. Ask me again when Agro's dead.”

“Good answer,” Quin approved. “Our future is worth considering, but for now, we're going to concentrate on surviving our confrontation with Agro. Is there

anything else we need to deal with tonight?”

“No,” Caitrin answered. “Stay alert and be ready to meet behind Lann's.”

“Will do,” Quin assured, carrying Layla to the door.

“And don't reveal your auras and bonded lights until everyone's here tomorrow,” Caitrin added. “You'll answer far less questions if you answer them all at once.”

“That's fine. We won't be leaving the house until they're here.” He burrowed into Layla's curls and whispered in her ear. “Conceal us.”

She did. Then they both mumbled *goodnight* as the door swung open.

“Goodnight,” their family called back.

Then Caitrin laughed as he shut the door.

The house remained dark as Quin carried Layla through the living room, his lips on hers, their clothes magically discarded at the door. When he reached the kitchen, he abandoned the kiss and wrapped her legs around his waist.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Whatever you feed me,” she answered.

A rush of cold air blew across her backside when he opened the fridge, and she giggled as her arms tightened around his neck. “That's cold.”

He gave her a dose of magical heat

with a kiss to her forehead. Then he took note of the fridge's contents before closing the door and carrying her to the table.

He sat in a chair with her on his lap, and for a while he just watched her face while playing with the curls falling over her cheeks. When he touched his lips to hers and whispered, her lungs expanded as her heart fluttered.

“You're so beautiful, Layla. Everything else looks ordinary in comparison.”

Unable to properly breathe, she merely mouthed the words *thank you*.

Taking her face in both hands, he tilted her head back, exposing her throat to his kisses, and she clutched his sides,

getting lost in a wave of tingles. Her lungs quickened as her legs flexed around his thighs. Then he suddenly let go and leaned back, leaving her on the edge of insanity alone.

She peeked with one eye and found him grinning at her while holding up a bowl of fruit. “Ready to eat?”

He offered her a strawberry, and she smirked as she took a bite, her heart tap dancing on her ribs. His gaze stayed on her mouth as he vanished the stem. Then he dug back into the bowl. “You know, when I took you to breakfast the day after we met, you wouldn't let me watch you eat.”

“You didn't ask.”

He laughed and touched a grape to her

lips. “You would have thought I was crazy if I had.”

She sucked the fruit in and grinned. “Can you imagine how red my face would have gotten? But you’d already charmed me with your wizardly charisma, so I probably would have agreed. Then I would have choked because of my nerves.”

“I would have saved you.”

“Which would have been pointless, because I would have died of embarrassment once I realized what happened.”

He gave her another bite. Then he set the bowl aside and waited for her to finish chewing. Once she had, he took her by the waist and lifted her onto the

table. He candidly stared at her naked body for several seconds, taking in every inch by the glow of her aura. Then he moved his mouth to her hip. “You're not so embarrassed anymore.”

She absently reached for the bowl, popping a bite into her mouth while watching his kisses glide along the crease of her upper thigh. Then his tongue dipped between her legs, making her jolt and swallow a half-eaten slice of kiwi. “Does that disappoint you?” she breathed.

He stopped what he was doing and looked at her with glinting black eyes. “Does it look like it disappoints me?”

She grinned as she shook her head no. Then she pulled him to his feet and fed

him a bite. “You're not eating.”

“I have all night to eat,” he countered, grabbing a strawberry before sending the bowl away. “Don't worry about my stomach.”

“I'm not worried about anything right now,” she whispered, unable to look away from his hungry eyes.

“Good,” he approved. “That's exactly how I want it to be.”

He held up the strawberry, and as he watched her take a bite, he slowly pressed inside her body. She struggled to chew and swallow as a moan vibrated her throat. Then she lay back on the table, ready to accept anything he wanted to give her.

They didn't sleep that night, not until

the sun slithered through the cracks in the curtain, at which point she fell asleep on his chest... with him inside her. He passed out soon after, and it was a true testament to how exhausted he was that he was able to do so.

Chapter 8

The desert sun crept through polished windows and across a woven rug, pouring over Guthrie's eyelids. He blinked while shielding the harsh rays with his hand. Then he looked around, finding Lynette sitting beside him, magically scrawling something on a piece of paper. Last night's love puppet was draped over his midsection, her limp mouth mere inches from his manhood.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "What are you writing?"

"A list," Lynette answered.

The sleeping woman stirred, and Guthrie groaned as her soft murmur whispered across bare flesh, bringing him erect. “Damn you, Lynette.”

“What?” Lynette coyly returned. “She was fun... and well rewarded for her willingness.”

Guthrie looked down, and while the responsible part of him wanted to remove the witch’s head from his lap, the depraved part of him wanted to move her mouth a few inches to the left. “I hope she isn’t one of the soothsayers we’re taking with us.”

“She isn’t. I checked. She cleanses auras; they call themselves expurgators.”

“Good. The last thing we need is a soothsayer looking to screw her way to a

better life. I doubt she has it any easier than we did at that age.”

“Are you fucking kidding me, Guthrie? Look around. We never had shelter like this, or food like we ate last night. Not even the most privileged soldiers in the Dark Elite see amenities like these. Vortigern’s students may be his pawns, but at least he allows them daily comforts.”

Guthrie curiously met Lynette’s stormy stare. “You think that makes it better?”

“Yes,” she firmly answered, “square meals and soft beds are better than tents and community cauldrons.”

“I guess,” he conceded, looking away. “We need to get her out of here. We don’t have time to waste.”

Lynette was quiet for a moment. Then she gave him her list and scooted closer, laying her head on the hip opposite the one the student occupied.

Doing his best to ignore the fact that his cock throbbed between two sets of lips, Guthrie scanned the paper, finding the names of several Dark Elite soldiers. “What’s this?”

“That,” Lynette answered, taking him in her hand, “is a list of soldiers who’d kill to upgrade from soup to steak... soldiers who’d welcome a shift in power.”

Guthrie balled up the paper and threw it across the room. Then he opened his mouth to reprimand her mutinous behavior, but he couldn’t find the

words... only a groan elicited by her lips parting around his erection.

Chapter 9

Layla was having a good dream... a *very* good dream. She was walking down the beach, her hand in Quin's, her bare soles sinking into silky sand. Haystack Rock jutted from frothy waves, a mere silhouette against a bright moon, and a puppy – a teeny King Charles spaniel – bounded beside them, occasionally distracted by a clump of kelp.

Quin squeezed Layla's hand, and as she turned to smile at him, he dove in for a deep kiss. The tide crept up, soaking their feet, and she shivered as he gripped

her backside and picked her up. Only then did she realize she was naked. There was nothing to stop him from pushing inside her, which he did, right there on the beach!

Yes, it was an incredible dream... and it merged into sweet reality when she awoke to find she wasn't merely dreaming Quin was hard inside her. He *was* hard inside her, stretching her with his morning arousal.

She moaned and flexed, so turned on by the dream the real finish line was in sight. Then she jolted when a growl tore from his chest. Without warning, she was on her back, and he had her by the collarbone and inner thigh, holding her open as he plunged deep inside and

stayed there. His muscles rippled as he squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. Then he glared down at her, his gaze a turbulent mixture of anger and need.

Body breathless and yearning beneath his rough grip, Layla stared back with wide eyes, unsure how to perceive this side of him.

When his name squeaked from her pulsing lips, another rumble barked from his chest, but his grip on her collarbone eased as he leaned close. “Never again,” he sternly stipulated. “We can’t sleep like that.”

Ha! He’d lost control!

Layla was tempted to grin, but he was pissed, so she stifled her smug humor

and slid her hands to his butt. “Don’t stop. It feels good.”

The request garnered another quiet growl as he moved inside her, and though he maintained control the remainder of the time, he played rougher than usual. Probably because he was still mad at himself, and... well, she might have egged him on.

They peaked loud and hard. Then his tension melted as he burrowed through her unruly hair and whispered in her ear. “Did I hurt you?”

She breathlessly laughed as her vision cleared. “No.” It was the truth... mostly. She’d experienced a little pain – in his grip and around his girth. But she was learning some aches could feel

incredible. “I love how tender you usually are, Quin, but that felt amazing.”

He kissed her ear then leaned up, searching her for injuries. When he found red marks on her clavicle, he grimaced and slid healing fingers over the welts. “I meant what I said. We can’t sleep like that. It would be entirely too easy for me to hurt you, and the thought alone makes me ill. Do you understand?”

She raised a hand to his heart as she nodded her compliance, and he slowly pulled himself from her body before lying down and wrapping her in a hug. “If you want me to be more aggressive,” he added, playing with her hair, “I’m more than happy to oblige, but it’s not a good idea for me to lose my head and

forget I'm making love to an angel."

She cuddled close and pressed her lips to his heart. "Then we'll go back to sleeping like this."

The family gathering was minutes away by the time Layla and Quin emerged from the shower, and she stared at the curtains while scarfing down a piece of toast and rushing through a cup of coffee. Their entire family was on the other side of the velvet, waiting for news that would change their lives.

"Are you worried?" Quin asked, refilling her coffee.

"Yes," she confessed, finding his

stare. "I know they'll be happy for us, but they've already had their lives flipped upside down because of me. Now I'm piling more on their plates."

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and looked at the window. "They won't mind."

She sighed and took one more sip of coffee. Then she sent her mug to the table and headed for the closet. "I better get dressed. Will you be able to summon clothes from your parents'?"

"Yep," he answered, doing just that.

She glanced over her shoulder, happy to see he'd merely donned shorts and no shirt. Then she entered the closet and shuffled through the multitude of dresses. When she emerged, she wore a black

maxi dress boasting several layers of chiffon and a neckline deep enough to display the chrome tourmaline necklace he'd given her.

She walked to the dresser to get the jewelry, and his gaze followed her across the room. "Black looks good on you."

"You say that about everything I wear."

He approached and took her necklace, motioning for her to turn around. "I mean it."

"I know," she whispered, shivering as his fingers brushed the back of her neck.

After securing the necklace around her throat and the bracelet around her wrist, he turned her into his arms and gave her

a deep kiss. “Are you ready?”

“I guess.”

“We need to conceal the proof,” he noted, gathering her skirt in his fists. Then he grasped her butt and picked her up, urging her to wrap her legs around his waist.

“Let's wait until we get to the front door,” she suggested. “I don't want to hide our lights longer than necessary.”

“Good idea,” he agreed, carrying her down the hallway.

She laid her head on his shoulder, but when they entered the living room, she blinked and straightened. “Quin!”

In the corner, between the fireplace and window, stood a wooden table holding a large TV and a wide range of

accessories.

“I forgot about that,” he mumbled.

“What do you mean you *forgot about that*?”

“I got it Sunday,” he explained, “before we bonded. You made me forget.”

“But I don't need a TV.”

“I know you don't *need* it, Layla.”

“Then why did you get it?”

“I told you – I want you to show me the things you enjoyed before moving here, and you can show your grandparents your home movies on it.”

“It's huge.”

“Not really. Besides, if you're going to watch TV, you might as well do it right.”

She sighed and met his stare. “Well

thank you, but you didn't need to do that.”

“I have to be honest with you, Layla – this wasn't a sacrifice for me. I've been working for my parents for years, getting paid very well to do so, and I don't have anything to spend money on. No house, no car, no bills, my parents refuse to let me pitch in on overhead for the business, and the same goes for upkeep on their house. I don't even buy my own food most the time. I have plenty of money, love, so indulge me by letting me indulge you. Please.”

She smirked and narrowed her eyes in mock suspicion. “Do I have a new library as well?”

He took a measured breath. Then he

looked away and headed for the front door.

“Quin!”

“What?”

“Did you really?”

“We have a lot of people waiting for us. Let's argue about this later.”

“You did! Where did you put it?”

“I'll show you when we get home.”

“I can't believe you, Quin. You really built me a library?”

He stopped at the door and found her eyes. “Yes. Well, kind of.”

“When?”

“Sunday.”

“But you were only gone a couple of hours.”

“Yes, and that's why it's not really

accurate to say I built it. My mom and dad did most the work.”

“Oh my god, Quin. Your mom and dad built me a library?”

“No, they built *me* a library. I set the groundwork and told them what I wanted, and they did me a favor by putting it together. It was easy and only took them a few hours.”

“A few hours? Yeah right.”

“I swear. All the material was in our warehouse, and the furnishings and woodwork were things I'd already made. They just had to transfer everything and put it in the right spot, a task they were thrilled to see through. They've wanted to use the design for years, but I wouldn't sell it, because I made it with my own

home in mind, so I'm sure they enjoyed putting it together. It's what they do. Dad builds it; mom fills it."

"And what do you do?"

"I do it all."

"Of course," she whispered, shaking her head. "I can't believe you did this, Quin. You shouldn't have gone to all that trouble."

"When we get done dealing with all this," he replied, motioning toward the lawn, "we can come back here, take off that lovely dress you're wearing, and go sit in our library while you scold me for building it for you. I'll be okay with that."

A smile twitched her lips, but she tried to hide it. "Fine. Prepare to be

scolded by your naked angel.”

“Sounds like heaven,” he approved, leaning in for a kiss. “Now show me that smile you're hiding before I have to watch you conceal your aura.”

The entire coven sat in a circle when Quin carried Layla onto the lawn, and as they drew close, the family did a double-take, scowling at the empty air around Quin.

Several of them questioned him, but he ignored them and looked at Caitrin. “Let's get this over with.”

Caitrin stood and moved to the middle of the circle, and Quin followed,

lowering Layla's feet to the ground beside him. Her cheeks were on fire and her stomach was a knotted mess, so she turned and hid her face in Quin's chest.

Caitrin leaned close and whispered. "Would you like to tell them or should I?"

"We'll just show them," Quin answered.

Caitrin gave a nod then looked at their family. "Quinlan and Layla have... news."

"Quin's getting married," Banning assumed, shooting magical sparks in the air.

Several members expressed favor toward the idea, and Layla laughed as Quin rubbed her back.

“I was beginning to think we’d never see the day,” Catigern noted.

Caitrin laughed, but he put a stop to the excitement by raising a hand. “That’s not the news. Maybe someday.” He looked at Quin. “Go ahead. They’re as prepared as they’re going to get.”

Quin leaned in and kissed Layla’s head. “Ready?”

She nodded. Then they both sighed as they released their auras and bonded lights, filling the inner circle with a dazzling mixture of bright colors, silver ribbons, and golden mist.

A collective gasp pulled lungfuls of oxygen from the atmosphere, but Quin ignored the family’s shock as he whispered through Layla’s hair. “That

feels better.”

“Much better,” she agreed.

He looked up, but she stayed hidden.

“How are they doing?”

“It's what we expected,” he answered.

“They can't believe what they're seeing.”

“Disbelieving is better than
horrified.”

“Of course they're not horrified,
love.”

Staying true to form, Brietta broke the
coven's silence. “But... but...” She
stood, propping one hand on her hip as
she pointed. “You weren't bonded
Monday, at the hockey game... were
you?”

“No,” Quin answered. “We bonded
that night.”

“But how is that possible?”

“Be more specific.”

“Well...” Brietta glanced at the back of Layla's head then met Quin's stare. “I mean... doesn't it happen when... you know, other things happen?”

“Yes.”

“So you're saying you two hadn't... you know, before Monday?”

“Yes.”

Her mouth fell open, her eyes wide as she stared at him for several seconds. Then she laughed and sat down. “Geez, Quin, when did you become such a prude?”

This broke the tension, and several people laughed, including Layla, which eased Quin's tension. “I'll let the jab

slide, Bri, but only because you made my angel laugh.”

Catigern stood, and Zenith shook her feathers before taking flight from his shoulder. “This is huge, Caitrin.”

“Yes it is,” Caitrin agreed.

Lann stood as well, his stunned gaze glued to his grandson. “This is bigger than huge.” He paused and found Kemble. “What do you think of this?”

“I think it's amazing,” Kemble answered, giving his dad a shrug, “and yes, it's bigger than huge.”

“It is amazing,” Catigern agreed, “but we can't ignore what else it is.”

“It's insane,” Banning interjected. “Look at their power-bands.”

“Unbelievable,” Kearny and Enid

whispered.

“It's destiny,” several people murmured.

“I think it's lovely,” Skyla dreamily noted.

Her parakeets tweeted their agreement from her shoulders. Then a hush fell over the family as they reverently stared at the lights.

Catigern eventually cleared his throat and sadly broke the silence. “It is lovely, but it's also a number of more unpleasant things.”

“We understand what else it is,” Quin sharply returned.

“Good,” Catigern countered, “because we're talking about a lifetime of worries and lurking danger, and at the present

time, Agro's right around the corner.”

“We're well aware of our predicament,” Quin assured, “and I'm glad you understand as well. If everyone fully comprehends the situation, we can move on to discussing what to do about it.”

“What's to discuss?” Rhiannon cut in, rising from her chair. “You have to hide. You have to stay away from that man at all costs.”

Layla cringed, and Quin tightened his hug. “We're not hiding, grandma.”

Several people gasped as Rhiannon stepped closer, her grace faltering. “What do you mean? You have to, Quinlan.”

“No, we don't, and we're not going to.

The decision has been made, so this discussion is a waste of time.”

Tears gathered in his grandma’s mint-green eyes as her ferret crawled from her satchel and skittered to her neck.

“He’ll kill you,” she whispered, blindly grasping for Lann’s hand, “both of you.”

“That’s a risk we’re willing to take,” Quin replied, “but we’re hoping to turn the tide.”

Every spine straightened as several people got to their feet.

“You intend to challenge him?” Belinos asked.

“No,” Rhiannon protested. “You can’t.”

“Why can’t they?” Banning argued. “I don’t blame them for not wanting to

hide.”

“I second that,” Drystan offered.

Selena threw him an incredulous look.

“We're talking about their lives,
Drystan.”

“Yeah,” Alana agreed, following her mom's lead.

“I know that, honey,” Drystan soothed, running a forefinger across his wife's and daughter's wrinkled foreheads. “But a life in hiding would be miserable. Fighting for freedom is a viable option.”

“Yeah,” Brayden added, following his dad's lead.

“It's not that simple,” Kearny noted.

Banning twisted in his chair to face his father. “You think they should hide?”

“I'm not saying that,” Kearny

corrected, “but a suicide mission isn't what I'd consider a viable option.”

“Who says it has to be a suicide mission? Look at their power-bands. Agro wouldn't stand a chance.”

“Agro isn't the one to worry about,” Catigern interjected. “It's the vultures watching his back that make fighting an impossible option.”

“Absolutely,” several women agreed.

“Absowutewy,” Alana repeated.

Quin scanned Layla's aura and could tell she was feeling the pressure. “That's enough,” he insisted, but nobody paid attention. Nearly everyone had stood and was offering their opinions, their voices a steady stream of quick rebuttals. Quin was okay with this. It was pointless,

sure, but his family could debate all day then hug and kiss one another goodnight. For them to disagree so avidly was nothing to get worked up about, but Layla didn't know this about her family. She'd never seen them debate, and since her face remained hidden, she wasn't seeing them now. She was merely hearing them, her head filling with fervent voices and conflicting point-of-views.

Her lungs quickened as her muscles tensed, and Quin ran a hand down her hair while getting Caitrin's attention. "Either you put an end to this or I will..."

His threat trailed off as the dark blue in Layla's aura expanded, stretching like a dome to envelope the entire circle. The

arguing abruptly ceased, and everyone's mouths hung open as they stared at the bold and colorful ribbons spiraling through the sad swell – twenty-seven rivers of light, one for each coven member. The inky-blue haze reached beyond the chairs and halted, trembling in place for several seconds. Then it snapped back in, leaving a soft and melancholy hum floating on the air. The pets released dejected noises as they tucked their heads in, and the magicians stared at Layla in dumbfounded wonder while the wind carried the sorrowful tune into the forest.

Quin had never seen anything like it, and panic disrupted his pulse as he carefully pulled Layla's face from his

chest. A solitary tear skated down her cheek, and he brushed it away with his thumb while sliding his fingers into her hair. “Did you mean to do that?”

Her forehead wrinkled as she took a choppy breath. “Do what?”

“Your aura, it just pulsed, covering this entire circle.”

“Did it? I’m sorry.”

He sighed and ran his thumb over her lips. “Don't be sorry.”

He was sure the aura’s odd reaction stemmed from her extreme sadness over the situation. She'd always felt emotions on a higher level than normal, and it seemed their bonding had increased her sensitivity. This deeply troubled him. If the strength of her emotions affected her

aura so fiercely, he couldn't imagine what they did to her heart, particularly when she had her aura concealed.

He cupped her face and leaned close.

“Do you want to go inside?”

“I go where you go,” she answered.

“Are you okay?” he pressed.

“Physically?”

She nodded, so he kissed her forehead and wrapped her in a hug, turning his attention on their family. “This discussion is over. I’ve made up my mind, and there isn't anything you can say that will change it, so there's no point in debating the issue. As you can see, it's a sensitive subject.”

Everyone bowed their heads and returned to their seats, and Quin relaxed.

“Thank you. Like I said, we're not hiding. We're going to prepare ourselves the best we can then face the Unforgivables.”

Several people mumbled their disbelief, and a few women sobbed. Rhiannon, in particular, struggled to accept this decision. “It's not possible, Quinlan.” She looked at her son with bloodshot eyes. “How can you just sit there and let this happen, Kemble?”

Kemble sighed as he squeezed Cordelia's hand. Then they both stood and walked to their son. “I understand this is difficult to accept, mom, but it wouldn't be any easier for us to watch them leave not knowing if they'll ever come back. Furthermore, and most

importantly, they don't want to live that way. They'd rather die than give up their life here, so they'll fight for their freedom. And they'll not fight alone. They'll have three bonded couples standing with them.”

More sobs stabbed the air, and Catigern scowled while shaking his head. “That's not enough.”

“You're right,” Kemble agreed.

“So what do you intend to do?”

“We're recruiting volunteers, people who are itching to see Agro die and don't mind risking their lives to do it.”

“You have people in mind?”

“A few, but not enough, so if any of you know someone who might want a piece of the Unforgivables, let us know.

We're desperate for help.”

“Why?” Banning asked. “There must be thousands who’d love to take a chunk out of Agro.”

“We can't trust them,” Quin explained.

“So?” Banning returned. “That doesn't mean they won't be useful when the time comes.”

“That's true, but we’d prefer it if our situation doesn't become common knowledge. We could be facing several battles if that happens.”

Catigern ran a hand down his face and looked at the sky. “That won’t be an issue if you don't survive this one.”

“We understand that,” Quin replied, “and if we can't get enough trustworthy help, we might resort to strangers, but

we'll attempt to keep our secret unless it becomes necessary to reveal it.”

“When do you plan to do this?” Lann asked.

“As soon as we're ready,” Kemble answered. “We don't know how long Agro's patience will last.”

“And how do you intend to get ready? Besides calling in help.”

“We need to find out what our new bonded mates are capable of, particularly Layla. And she needs to learn defensive magic. Then there's the matter of making the plan and setting the trap.”

“Do you have a timeline?”

“No. But our plans are already underway, so we'll know more soon.”

“What plans?”

“We've made calls to several people; a few of them are on their way. And we've secured a location for Layla and Quinlan to practice.”

“You've decided on a place?” Quin asked.

“Yes,” Kemble answered. “It's two hours from here, which is a little inconvenient, but it's fireproof and remote. The forest rangers were our only issue, and we've convinced them to let us camp for a couple of weeks without interference from their men. We'll cast a hexless shell the first time we visit and leave it up until we're done.”

“Good,” Quin approved. “Did you hear that, love? We get to play without

limits.”

“That will be fun,” she mumbled, still tucked in her safe spot.

“Why do you need a special location?” Lann asked. “Why can't you practice here?”

Quin laughed. “Because we’d burn the place down. Layla taught me a new trick before we bonded, and the result was a fireball bigger than six of our houses combined. She didn't even put everything she had into it, and now we’re stronger. We could probably torch our lawn with one spell.”

“What new trick?” Lann asked.

Quin looked down. “Would you like to show them?”

“I have a better idea,” Layla

countered, grinning up at him. “Let’s give them a sample. You get the men; I’ll get the ladies.”

Quin smiled and kissed her nose.
“That’s a fantastic idea.”

They spent the next hour letting their family experience their fire, and the way the magic affected everyone’s attitude was encouraging. Post-power euphoria undoubtedly contributed to the positive shift, but Layla could tell hope wiggled into their hearts when her fire blossomed in their hands.

Only one coven member remained – little Alana, who’d been patiently waiting on the edge of her seat. Layla hated making her wait, but not as much as she hated the idea of burning her, so

she saved the toddler for last, intent on testing her skill as much as possible before taking the risk.

Alana hopped from her chair when her turn finally came, and Layla tried to hide her concern as she knelt. “Hold up your hand, angel.”

“Otay,” Alana agreed, reaching for the sky.

Keeping her gaze on the baby’s shiny purple eyes, Layla touched a forefinger to the back of her tiny hand.

“Wow,” Alana whispered. “That feews gweat.”

“Good,” Layla breathed, picking her up. Then she lifted her into the air.

“Now shoot it at the clouds.”

Alana's nose wrinkled as she obeyed,

and an emerald-green fireball twice the size of her teeny body shot from her palm. She squealed and clapped, and her excited gaze didn't leave the sky until the fire and its trail of smoke dissipated. "That was fun, Waywa! May we do it again?"

Layla laughed and lowered her into a hug, nuzzling her strawberry-blond curls as she answered. "Absolutely, my little flame-thrower, anything you want."

Chapter 10

The family stayed on the lawn throughout the afternoon and into the evening, brainstorming, playing, and keeping each other close. By the time the table was set for dinner, they had a plan to pinpoint the Unforgivables' camp, seven volunteers to spy on it, and they'd added five names to the list of people who might be willing to fight.

Caitrin was double-checking the contact information on possible volunteers when his head snapped up. His focus shifted for a few seconds, and when it returned, he searched out

Brietta. “Did you forget to tell us something, dear?”

Brietta's eyebrows drew together then lifted with realization. “Kegan and Weylin,” she blurted, looking at Quin. “I invited them to dinner. I thought it would be okay since they'd met Layla. I... I didn't know,” she quietly finished, motioning to the gold and silver haze around them. “I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” Layla assured.

Quin shrugged as he looked at Caitrin. “They're on their way in?”

“Yes,” Caitrin answered, returning his attention to his list. “You have about thirty seconds to decide what you're going to do.”

“Hide your lights, Layla,” Quin

instructed, following his own advice.

Layla quietly cursed, but obeyed, trying not to pout about it. Then Quin's arm came around her shoulders and pulled her close.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

She gnawed on her lip as she watched the sky. "We should tell them, right? I mean, we're not hiding from the people we care about, the people we can trust. Can you trust Kegan and Weylin?"

Several people answered yes, including Quin, so Layla lifted her hand. "I guess that's your answer."

"Okay," Quin agreed, "but don't release those heavenly lights yet." He looked up as Kegan and Weylin descended into the clearing. "They still

don't know who you really are. Let's explain that first, then ease them into the shock of our auras and bonded lights.”

“Okay,” she mumbled, snuggling into his side. Then her heart swelled when he shifted her onto his lap.

Brietta met their company halfway, and Kegan pulled her into a hug as Weylin ruffled her hair.

“Why so concerned?” Kegan asked, sweeping his gaze over her aura.

Before she could answer, Alana and Brayden bombarded the guests. “Keg!” Alana squealed, jumping into flight.

Keeping one arm around Brietta, Kegan caught Alana in the other then flipped her around, perching her in the crook of his elbow. “Hey, little Alana.

You've grown.”

“Wike a weed,” she confirmed. Then she kissed his cheek before turning her attention on Weylin, who was hanging Brayden upside down by one ankle. “I wiww save you, Bwayden!”

Soaring from Kegan's arm, she safely landed in Weylin's. Then she tried to tickle his thick neck with tiny fingers. He grinned as he tossed her into the air, and with a little help from his magic, he softly caught her by one ankle.

“Ha, ha,” he taunted, swinging the siblings back and forth. “Now I have two prisoners to tickle.” And with that, they both doubled over, laughing hysterically as Weylin tickled their bellies with magic.

Kegan returned his attention to Brietta and the air around her. “Is something wrong?”

“I forgot to let everyone know you were coming,” she explained.

“Oh.” He smiled and kissed her forehead. Then he turned to the rest of the family. “I’m sure they don’t mind. Right, guys?”

“Of course not,” several people replied.

Free from Weylin’s snare, Brayden jumped on Kegan’s back. “Of course not,” he repeated, his voice mockingly mature as he gave him a noogie. Before Kegan could retaliate, Brayden soared away, pointing and laughing as he went.

Catigern laughed at his great-great-

grandson's orneriness then smiled at their guests. "You and Weylin are always welcome, Kegan. Grab a chair. Dinner will be ready soon."

"Don't mind if I do," Weylin accepted, sparring with Banning on his way to the circle.

A moment later Banning was in a headlock, and Weylin turned his blond hair gray before letting go and flying toward an empty chair. Halfway there, his gaze landed on Quin, and he halted in mid-air, suspiciously eying his friend for several seconds before landing in front of him. "I see you still have your mysterious angel."

Quin smiled. "Did you have any doubt?"

“No.” Weylin shifted his gaze to Layla. “Hey, gorgeous.”

“Hey, Wey,” she returned. “How's it going?”

“Grand as always. Still hiding that beautiful aura, I see.”

“For the moment.”

“That's a shame. I barely got a glimpse of it before you flew away Monday.”

“You'll see it again.”

He grinned and raised his eyebrows. “I look forward to it.” Then he sobered as he looked at Quin. “Is she rubbing off on you, man?”

Quin laughed. “You could say that.”

But his good humor didn't placate Weylin. “Why are you hiding, Quin?”

Kegan approached and stood beside

Weylin. “Good question. I can't remember the last time I saw you without your aura.”

“I'll explain,” Quin offered, summoning two chairs. “Take a seat.”

They did, and Brietta quickly summoned another chair, positioning it so she could watch their reactions.

“First of all,” Quin stipulated, “what I'm about to tell you is sensitive information and should never be repeated.”

Kegan's and Weylin's eyebrows drew together as they nodded and leaned back, ready to listen.

Quin looked at Layla, smiling as he ran a forefinger across her lips. Then he met his friends' stares. “Layla's an

extraordinary witch, guys, and I'm not just saying that because I love her. I'm saying it because she's Rhosewen and Aedan's daughter."

"What?" they returned, sitting up straight.

They knew the story... well, *some* of the story. All the locals did. Any coven that had anything to do with the Conn/Kavanagh coven knew of Aedan and Rhosewen's sad tale. It had become a legend of sorts among the younger generation, and over the years it had been distorted by those who weren't close to the family, warped and glamorized into fiction. But nobody outside the family, no matter what they might claim, knew the whole story.

“Aedan and Rhosewen had a child?” Kegan asked, turning wide eyes on Layla.

“Yes,” Quin answered, “and you're looking at her.”

“But that would mean... What *would* that mean?”

“Well, as you know, Aedan and Rhosewen were bonded children who bonded with each other, so Layla was born with magical and physical abilities handed down by three bonded unions. We didn't get a chance to discover Aedan and Rhosewen's magical limits, but using what little knowledge we have, we've estimated Layla could surpass the combined power of four magicians.”

“Are you serious?” Weylin exclaimed.

“It's a guess,” Quin clarified.

“But where has she been?” Kegan asked.

Quin searched Layla's eyes, getting unspoken permission to recount her sad beginning. Then he kissed her head and looked at his friends. “To answer that I need to start at the beginning. You’ve heard the story about Agro discovering Aedan and Rhosewen's union and showing up at their wedding, which is true. That's exactly how it happened. But the rumors claiming they fled for their safety are false. They fled for Layla's safety. Rhosewen was already pregnant when they left. But what nobody knew, not even them, was that Rhosewen had been cursed the night of her wedding.

The spell was meant to kill her upon giving birth, and that's what it did."

Kegan and Weylin frowned, their auras darkening as they looked at Layla, but they didn't interrupt Quin's explanation.

"Aedan feared Layla would be an easy target if she returned home, and he didn't want her carrying these burdens through childhood, so he chose to hide her in the non-magical world. She was adopted by a hexless woman the day after she was born. Then Aedan searched out Agro and somehow convinced him Layla had passed away with her mom. Aedan didn't leave that meeting alive, and he'd asked Layla's adopted mom to change her name and

move without telling anyone where she was going, so Layla dropped off the radar. They ended up in Oklahoma with new identities, both of them completely unaware that magicians exist.”

Kegan and Weylin silently stared for several shocked and ponderous seconds. Then Kegan ran a hand down his face and shook his head. “Man, Layla, I’m sorry. That’s... it’s... horrible. I’m sorry it happened to you.”

She gave a nod, but didn’t say anything, and they didn’t expect her to.

“So how did she get here?” Weylin asked, his voice unusually quiet.

“That’s an even longer story,” Quin answered, “and there’s a lot I don’t know, but here’s the rundown. Her mom

died a few months ago, and she left a letter revealing Layla was adopted from a family who lived near Portland. Layla took a chance and moved, and she quickly found Cinnia's café by following a recommendation from her dad." He paused, looking at Layla as he ran a hand down her curls, and she closed her eyes, practically purring as she leaned into his touch. "And that, guys, is where I found my angel."

"Did you know it was her when you saw her?" Kegan asked.

"No," Quin answered. "Not until she told me her name."

"Layla," Kegan and Weylin whispered.

They'd been hearing the name for

years, mostly from witches begging for details about Quin's dreams. Hell, they'd been saying the name for years, when they'd ribbed Quin for giving up another woman because he refused to rid himself of the visions. Now that they were looking at his mysterious dream girl, surely they understood why he refused to give her up. She wasn't just a dream. She was flesh and blood and beautiful.

"That explains why she hides her aura," Weylin noted, "but it doesn't explain why you're hiding yours."

"You're right," Quin conceded, "but you needed to know that to understand what we're about to show you." He looked from Weylin to Kegan. Then he smiled at Layla and kissed her nose.

“Show them your aura, love.”

Quin released his aura the same time Layla let hers go, and as the bright and colorful hazes rolled from their bodies, Weylin jumped to his feet and knocked over his chair. “Whoa!”

Kegan stayed seated, but his mouth hung open and his eyes were huge.

“What the hell happened to you, man?”

“I’m glad you asked,” Quin replied.

“Let the other one go, my love.”

Their bonded lights rushed from their bodies, surrounding their guests in shiny, gold and silver swirls, and Weylin stumbled back, nearly tripping over his fallen chair. “Whoa!”

Kegan stood as well, his eyes bugging as he pointed.

Several people laughed, but then they stifled their humor, giving their guests time to come to terms with what they were seeing.

“You're bonded?” Kegan whispered.

“Yes,” Quin confirmed. “We bonded Monday night.”

“Whoa,” Weylin whispered, and more musical laughs drifted through the air.

“This is crazy,” Kegan breathed, slowly examining their auras. “What’s that silver? I’ve never seen anything like it?”

“We don’t know,” Quin replied. “It appeared with the gold.”

Weylin flipped his chair upright with a wave of his hand. Then he sat and motioned toward Quin. “So what does

this mean? Are you a super wizard now?"

Quin shrugged. "I wouldn't say that."

"Of course not," Weylin returned, his full beard twitching with a grin. "So what would you say?"

Quin looked at Layla and smiled. "I'd say I'm the luckiest man on earth."

Weylin loudly laughed. "Hell yeah, you are. You walked into a coffee shop and found a customized angel. We should all be so lucky." He shifted in his chair and searched out Cinnia. "I'll be coming to your café once a day from now on, doll. Expect a lot of business from me. Just keep luring in those angels, and I'll be there."

Cinnia laughed and shook a finger at

him. "Now don't you come in there and scare away my patrons, Weylin."

"You think I scare the ladies?" he asked, feigning a broken heart.

"No," she countered, "but I don't foresee very many men coming in there if they know it's your hunting ground."

"Ahh... You make a good point. I don't want the men to stop bringing the angels, do I? I'll have to keep a low profile. My plan needs work." He grinned at Quin. "Maybe super wizard can help me out."

Quin smiled as he shook his head, but then he looked at Kegan and sobered.

"What's on your mind, Keg?"

Kegan intently eyed him for a moment. Then he sat back down, but he didn't

relax. “Is this why you've had your community guarded? And why some of you are staying elsewhere?”

Quin looked at Caitrin, who shrugged while relaying a mental message. *'This is your call, Quinlan. Not ours.'*

Quin found Layla's eyes, and she laid a comforting hand on his cheek, pressing her thumb to a hidden dimple. “Yes,” he sighed, returning his attention to Kegan, “we've been guarding our community for Layla's safety.”

“Is it just a precaution,” Kegan pressed, “or is she in some kind of danger?”

“Well,” Quin replied, pulling her fingers to his lips, “you could say she's in the worst kind of danger. The

Unforgivables are camped less than an hour away, and Agro suspects she's here.”

Kegan and Weylin froze, unable to respond, and Quin watched their faces while giving them time to swallow the news.

“Without going into detail,” he eventually explained, “here’s the bottom line. Agro recently found out about Layla, and of course he wants her. He doesn't know we've bonded, so we have no idea what he'll want with us now. He's already been here three times, and he could show back up any day, but we don't foresee it happening for a while since he slaughtered over fifty of his own soldiers the last time he was here.

Nevertheless, Agro isn't what you'd call predictable, so we stay guarded.”

Kegan opened his mouth to talk, but Quin quickly held up a hand. “Before you even say it, Keg, we're not leaving. We have no intention of hiding, so don't tell us we need to, or ask us why we're not. Think about leaving not only your family, but the entire magical world... forever, and you'll find our reasons to stay.”

“So what are you going to do?” Kegan asked.

“We're going to prepare ourselves the best we can then let him find us.”

“You're going to face him?” Kegan breathlessly muttered.

“Yes,” Quin confirmed. “And if it

comes to our lives or his... well, the choice is obvious.”

Weylin's sea-green eyes flashed gray, like stormy waters, and the corners of his mouth twitched. “You're fighting.”

“Yes,” Quin answered, “we're fighting.”

Weylin slapped his leg and exposed his grin. “Ha! Agro's going to get his comeuppance, and it's about damn time.”

Kegan twisted in his chair, looking at Weylin like he was crazy. “You need to clear your head, Wey, and stop celebrating. Don't you understand the possible consequences?”

Weylin's smile fell as he scanned Kegan's aura. “Quin doesn't fail, Keg. He'll ensure a victory before he even

walks into battle.”

“Not this time,” Quin confessed.

“We’ll take every possible precaution, but our chance of failure outweighs our chance of success.”

Kegan’s complexion paled. “Are you facing him alone?”

“No,” Quin answered. “We’re accepting all the help we can get from people who are eager to see Agro fall.”

“And how much help can you expect to come of that?”

“We don’t know yet. At the moment, only my parents and Layla’s grandparents are committed. Hopefully we’ll have more before the time comes.”

“That’s three bonded couples and you two,” Weylin noted. “Surely that gives

you an edge.”

Quin shook his head. “The eight of us can’t compare to an army, Wey. Agro has hundreds of soldiers at his disposal.”

Everyone was silent for a long time, probably trying to find slivers of hope or elusive solutions. Then Kegan leaned forward, his posture burdened by the news. “It doesn’t sound like you have a chance, Quin.”

Quin shrugged and laid his cheek on Layla's head. “I wouldn’t say that. If we get some help, there’s a chance. Layla's powers are incredible. She's a magical miracle on every level. I don't think there's anything she can't do if she really wants to do it. You've seen her work.”

“Hell yeah,” Weylin recalled. “It was amazing.”

“To say the least,” Quin agreed, “and she performed those things just ten days after learning magic does exist and she possesses it. She's done things you wouldn't believe without seeing proof, and that was before we bonded. After some preparation, she'll be able to perform magic we've never even dreamed about, and now that she's shared a piece of herself with me, I'm capable of magic I never knew exists. A smart plan and larger numbers could equal success.”

“And you're prepared for the alternative?” Kegan asked.

Quin looked at Layla and pulled a

corkscrew curl from her cheek, wrapping it around his finger as he answered. “I'll never be prepared for that. But hiding isn't an option we're willing to accept. We'll fight to keep the life we love, not run toward a life we hate.”

“Hear, hear,” several people advocated.

“Hear, hear,” Layla whispered, and Quin smiled as he pulled her into a kiss.

Chapter 11

Mentally and physical exhausted, Guthrie practically belly-flopped onto the bed of blankets spread over the floor of his tent. He'd left Vortigern's institute in southern Nevada more than twenty hours ago, and he'd been all over the damn Rocky Mountains collecting soldiers. Now he lay in a basin in Montana's Glacier National Park, surrounded by freezing lakes and snow-covered mountains.

“It's a far cry from last night's quarters.”

Guthrie jolted and rolled over, finding

Lynette standing over him. “Go to bed, Lyn.”

“That’s what I’m doing.” She knelt then crawled to the spot beside him.

“Will you keep me warm?”

“I didn’t invite you to stay.”

She ignored the remark and laid her cheek on his bicep. “Why else would you keep me with you when you could have sent me to Yellowstone with Token?”

Staring at the ceiling of his tent, Guthrie took a deep breath, preparing himself to meet her gaze without falling victim to it. “I kept you so I can keep an eye on you. You speak too freely of dangerous things.”

“You’re worried I’d try to sway

Token?”

“I think you’d do anything to reclaim the power Agro stole from you.”

“Then why am I still alive, lieutenant?”

Guthrie’s expression hardened. “Don’t tempt me, Lynette. My world would be easier without you in it.”

Brushing the jab aside, she slid her hand down his stomach and firmly curled her fingers around his manhood. “But I make you feel good.”

“You scare the hell out of me,” he corrected, yet his cock grew all the same.

Lynette laughed and moved closer, gliding her hand along his expanding shaft. “You know what I think?”

“What?” he mumbled, eyes drifting shut. He knew what she was doing. She was trying to manipulate him. But he was too exhausted to protest.

She kissed the tattoo on his neck as she murmured an answer. “I think you’re intrigued by my dangerous talk. You just refuse to admit you have a deep...” Her gripped tightened. “...down...” Her lips found his ear. “...desire...” Her tongue flicked as her palm rolled over the head of his erection. “...to reclaim your own power.”

He shuddered, and her lips curved into a smile, her breath steaming up his ear and neck. “You don’t have to pretend with me, Guthrie. What do you think I’d do? Tell the boss?”

“You’re going to get us both killed.”

“Or we could live like royalty, sleep in the finest beds and eat the freshest food, spread our wealth to those who will praise your name for replacing the man who starved them for so long.”

Guthrie took a measured breath, suppressing his pleasure to seek out answers. “And where do you think that wealth will come from?”

“Agro’s a rich man, Guthrie. He could put us all in mansions, but he’d rather keep his treasure locked in vaults.”

“Perhaps, but his plunders won’t last forever, not when we’re spreading the wealth to hundreds of subordinates. What happens when we run dry?”

“We get more.”

“By what means? Will we rob, rape and murder? Steal other’s power just as Agro has stolen ours? If you want to live like him, you have to act like him. Is that what you want?”

“We already act like him. We’re his right hand, there to rub him off every time he gets a hard-on over a new target.” She shifted, propping her upper body on his chest, and he opened his eyes to find her intently staring at him. “But if we take him out, the whole world will be better off, especially us.”

“Replace the old power with a new duo,” Guthrie replied. “That’s what you want?”

“Yes,” she whispered, like a lover in the throes of passion. “That’s what I

want, and you're the only man who can do it."

"I wouldn't live to see another minute. Those loyal to him would kill me."

Lynette smiled and shook her head. "You don't have to plunge the dagger in. He's doing that to himself. You just have to let him... while we silently sway the soldiers' loyalty. Then, when he falls, you'll hold the power. You'll be the savior everyone's dying to please."

Guthrie's forehead furrowed. "The man's crazy, Lyn, but he's not suicidal."

"He's worse than suicidal, Guthrie. He's obsessed with a witch. Women are always the death of the men who fixate wholly upon them."

As Guthrie stared into Lynette's

conniving eyes, he couldn't remember truer words being spoken. "Nothing's going to stop Agro from getting his witch."

"So it would seem. But what do you think will happen when he does?"

"He'll have even more power than he has now."

"No," Lynette disagreed. "That witch will ruin him. She'll fight him at every turn, and he'll eventually lose his patience and kill her."

Lynette had gotten lazy with her hand, but Guthrie barely noticed. "So?"

"So," she huffed, "how do you think he'll handle that? He's risking everything he's built for her; turned his life upside down for her. Nothing else matters to

him now, so how do you think he'll react when his finest treasure is lifeless in his arms? And how will he deal with the regret of being the one who destroyed her? He's either going to die getting his witch, or he's going to let her ruin him. Either way, we're going to make sure no one's there to save him. Then we're going to assume power."

"And the witch? What would we do with her? If she manages to kill him, we're next on her list."

Lynette's grin stretched as her fingernails drifted over his inner thigh. "But we'll be expecting it; we'll have the upper hand. And what better way to assume power than to control the fate of the most powerful witch in the world?

Agro can't possess her without losing himself, but we can. What you do with her will determine the direction of your rule and cement you as the undisputed leader of hundreds of magicians."

Guthrie took Lynette by the wrist and pulled her palm from his manhood. "And if we don't get the witch? What will cement me as a ruler then? Should I kill you? The woman who's been plotting against our boss for weeks. Perhaps I should place your severed head on a pedestal as an example of what happens to traitors."

Lynette's devious determination wavered, exposing remnants of the fragile witch she left behind years ago. In her shiny eyes, Guthrie found fear,

weakness and need, a plea for mercy, acceptance and protection. Tears swelled as she wiggled her wrist, but Guthrie held firm, his expression stern.

“Is that the kind of man you want me to be?” he whispered. “A man who will fuck you and kill you in the same day?”

She blinked, sending tears down her cheeks, but her trembling lips stayed sealed.

“Remember,” he added, watching moisture pool at the corners of her mouth, “if I want to live like Agro, I must act like him. I must become a cruel man who will stop at nothing to get what I want. Now tell me – is that the man you want me to be? And would you sacrifice yourself to make it so?”

“I thought we were in this together.”

“No.” He rolled her onto her back and pinned her arms to the ground, leaning close enough for her to feel the quiet growl rumbling in his chest. “When you take a position like Agro’s, a position of complete power, you have no partners. You trust no one. You value yourself above all others and will sacrifice the most beautiful woman in camp to prove it. That’s what being a dictator is about. That’s how Agro has maintained power for more than sixty years. That’s what he has that others don’t – a willingness to stop at nothing to get what he wants. Now answer me before I throw your ass out – is that the man you want me to be?”

Her breathing quickened, her heart

rapping on his ribs as she timidly searched his eyes, like she might find the answer within them. “Yes,” she confessed, “I want you to value yourself above the others... above me, because you’re better than Agro, and when he falls, you’ll lead us in a better direction.”

“No, Lynette. What you speak of isn’t possible. If I were to take control and present myself as a fair leader offering equality and power, I’d be dead within a month, murdered by a soldier jealous of the power I’m clearly not willing to kill for. An army like this must be ruled with an iron fist. So you see, a shift in power won’t save these soldiers. It will only elevate me to an enviable status. If this

is to be done, it's to be done selfishly, not with grand fantasies of a happy family full of cold-blooded killers. This is not a coven, Lyn. This is a snake pit, and every single one of these slithering bastards is fighting for survival. They'll strike the moment you show weakness – a point proven by your grand schemes. So, are you ready for me to become the man you hate? Because that's what will happen if you keep this up.”

Her arms remained pinned to the ground, but her hips wiggled. “Sounds like everyone's screwed either way. Why not remove yourself from the snake pit and lord over it?”

“And what about you? What should I do with the one woman in camp I know

for a fact is capable of mutiny? Letting her live would be a risk. It would show weakness.”

“Not if she has something to offer in return.”

He cruelly smiled and tilted his head. “What do you have to offer me, Lynette? Your body? I could fuck every witch in the Dark Elite if I were in Agro’s position.”

She pouted, but was quick to smooth her expression. “If that’s what you want, I won’t stop you. But I’ll be loyal, Guthrie. I’ll do whatever it takes to put you in power, and I’ll stand beside you once you’re there.”

“You’re forgetting,” he countered, pressing down on her, “no one stands my

equal. You will have no more power than you have now.”

She rapidly blinked, like that thought hadn't occurred to her despite his lecture, like she'd just realized she'd be powerless forever, and her violet eyes once again glazed over. “So what will it take to stay in your good graces?”

“How far will you go?” he asked, aroused by her submission... and repulsed by the fact, repulsed by the power-hungry man ingrained in him. “Will you kill for me?”

She answered without hesitation. “Yes.”

“Will you die for me?”

She wiggled again, trying to feel more of his erection, but he wouldn't let her.

“Yes,” she breathed, finding his stare.

“Will you enslave yourself to me, Lyn? Beg me every day to spare your life?”

She nodded, and he scowled while tightening his hold on her wrists.

“You’re a liar, Lynette. Either that or you’re a damn fool, because I’m no better than the man you wish to defy; you’d be no better off in my bed than you would his. You think you can manipulate me into taking the tough job while you sit pretty on your throne, but you’re mistaken. I’m not your puppet; I’m not going to take the risk just so you can fuck your way to the top. You want this army, go for it. Take down Agro and gain control. But leave me out of it.” He let

her go and rolled onto his back. “Get out of here.”

She lay silent and shocked for about three seconds. Then she scrambled to her hands and knees and crawled toward him. “Guthrie...”

“I said get out. I’m done with your bullshit, Lyn. I already have one power-hungry person pulling my strings. I’m not handing the rest to you.”

She panicked, wildly shaking her head as she clutched his chest. “That’s not what I want...”

“You’ve made your intentions clear,” he interrupted, grabbing her wrists, “and I’m done playing along and protecting you. We’re going to take these soldiers back to Agro and go get his witch. Now

get out.”

She made no effort to move, and he growled as he threw her hands off him. “That’s an order!”

Her chest shook with a choppy breath as tears sprang from her eyes, and Guthrie’s stomach churned as he rolled away. Aside from the week she was brought into camp as a small child, Guthrie had seen her cry only four times, and two of those had been in the past thirty minutes.

Several seconds passed before he heard her rise and leave his tent, and the burning ache in his chest flared. He’d been cruel to the only person in the world he cared about, and while she’d asked for it by trying to manipulate him,

he could hardly blame her for wanting a better life, even if she were willing to screw and kill for it.

Chapter 12

Thursday morning's sunshine crept over Layla's lids as Quin's kisses drifted over her head, and she lazily opened her eyes to her new library, which was actually an add-on to the original structure of the house.

Accessible from the downstairs hallway through a door positioned between the guest bathroom and the stairs, the library stretched into the backyard, with a set of double-doors leading onto the deck, and a huge bay window facing the forest. The furniture combined sublime comfort with the

simple beauty of earth tones and solid patterns; and the accessories and artistry were custom-made, each piece unique yet complementary. There were enough shelves in the high-ceilinged room to hold all the books in Layla's high school library, and every ledge boasted magically-carved designs that varied from shelf to shelf but were repeated often throughout the room and its objects.

The night before, when Quin first showed Layla the room, he'd apologized for not filling the shelves yet and promised to make it a proper library soon. Then he'd led her toward the bay window, saying he had to provide at least one book, or he wouldn't feel right

calling it a library.

But it wasn't just any book, and Layla knew that by the exquisite lectern holding it. Carved from one solid piece of cedar and magically stained dark to match the bookshelves, the base of the lectern had several feet resembling tree roots, and a narrow trunk that twisted like a Contorted Willow – each groove and knot skillfully defined. The top branched out to cradle any size book, and a few of the limbs held small wooden creatures, including a caterpillar, a few butterflies, and an assortment of birds.

The book that occupied the coveted spot atop the carved branches was a leather bound collection of family trees

and detailed histories on every person who'd ever been a member of the Conn/Kavanagh coven. It was her parents' copy, kept safe at Caitrin and Morrigan's over the past twenty-one years; now it was home, in a room designed around it. The markings on the spine and covers were the repeated designs in the woodwork and artwork, and the stain on the shelves matched the well-maintained leather of the priceless tome.

Quin had silently watched Layla spend more than forty-five minutes poring over every word and picture in the first three pages. Then he teased her for being a bookworm while marking her spot and closing the cover.

She started to protest, but forgot what the problem was when he pulled her into a kiss and carried her to the couch, stealing her attention with no plans to let it go.

They only got around four hours of sleep, but when Layla awoke to her new library with its creator's morning arousal pressing on her back, she had no desire to go back to dreamland, so she rolled over and helped herself to something stronger than coffee.

After a couple of refreshing doses, he reluctantly left the room to fix breakfast, and she curled up in a cashmere throw with her cellphone, set with the task of calling Travis and Phyllis.

When it came to her two non-magical

friends, Layla's stomach squirmed with guilt. She wasn't calling them enough, and when she did, the conversations were one-sided and short. Obviously she couldn't go into detail about her life, and it seemed like she always had a reason to hang up within ten minutes of calling them. This time was no different. She and Quin were due on the lawn in thirty minutes, and she hadn't showered or eaten. Sure, she could have cut her time short with Quin and called her friends sooner, but she wanted nothing more than she wanted her hero, and she'd willingly harbor guilt for the rest of her life for one minute of his.

She'd finished her conversation with Phyllis and started one with Travis when

Quin walked in with coffee and doughnuts. Layla's eyes widened on the sugary pastries, and she quickly used magic to hover the phone so she could grab a doughnut and her mug.

"My hero," she mouthed, and Quin kissed her forehead before taking a seat across from her.

She stayed on the phone through breakfast, pausing her chewing long enough to ask a few questions, but she was careful not to ask any that might lead to a discussion about Travis visiting. He only brought it up once, and it was to tell her it might be a few weeks before he could get away.

With a full stomach and a sad goodbye, she hung up the phone, and

Quin grasped her body with magic, keeping her wrapped in the blanket as he floated her onto his lap.

“How's Travis?” he asked, summoning her coffee.

“Good,” she answered, taking the mug as she cuddled into him. “Gander Creek has been dragging him down for years. Now that he sees a way out, he's even more upbeat than usual.”

“Good. Now how about you share your concerns with me?”

“You can see them, huh?”

“Always, my love, and I want to help you bear them.”

“Okay. I was wondering what Travis and Phyllis might do if... if I... you know, dropped off the face of the earth.

They'd have no idea what happened to me, and it's probably better that way, but it makes me sad to think about it. They might think I abandoned them, or that I've been abducted and kept against my will. I don't want them to go through that." She paused and looked up. "You know?"

He watched her face for a moment. Then he pulled her into a tight hug. "I do know. We'll talk to our family and figure out a way to provide solace for your friends if... if this doesn't end right."

"That would be nice. I hate the thought of haunting them with an unsolvable mystery. Finality is better. Closure. Even if we have to lie to give them peace."

"Sure, love. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you."

“You don't have to thank me for that.”

“Well can I thank you for this room? Because it's gorgeous; even more beautiful in the daytime than at night.”

“I'm glad you like it.”

“No, Quin. I love it. And I love the effort and thought you put into it. The stuff you buy me is nice, but the things in this room took you countless hours to create and you put them in a room designed just for me. I feel very spoiled.”

“Good,” he approved. “That’s how I like it.”

She took a sip of coffee then sent her mug to the table. “How long before we have to be out there?”

“About fifteen minutes. But what will

they do if we're late? Ground us to our room? I'd be okay with that."

She grinned and bit her lip, her lashes demurely fluttering. "Would you like to help me get clean?"

He grinned as he vanished their breakfast mess. Then he stood with her in his arms. "Always, my love."

Before walking outside, Layla and Quin paused at the front door, kissed each other, then concealed their auras and bonded lights. Two of Serafin's contacts were due to arrive any moment, and Quin insisted the shocking hazes stay hidden until he got a chance to evaluate

their company. Serafin approved, saying it was a good idea to ease his friends into the unbelievable mists.

To help plan for the impending confrontation, most members of the family had put their businesses on hold or in the hands of other covens, and those still going to work had cut their hours back, so when Quin and Layla walked onto the porch, they found over half the family on the lawn.

As Layla and Quin approached, seven wizards stood – Catigern, Lann, Cadman, Devlin, Drystan, Belinos and Kearny. Tasked with locating Agro's camp, the seven men lined up and let Layla and Quin conceal their bodies and auras.

“What do you think?” Quin asked, glancing at Caitrin. “Can you see them?”

Caitrin intently stared at the spot Catigern had stood a moment before. Then he jumped when someone said *boo* in his ear. “Damn you, Cat,” he cursed.

Catigern’s laugh floated from seemingly empty air. “Guess they work. See you in a couple of hours.”

The invisible men said their goodbyes and moved away from each other. Then a whoosh of air rushed over the lawn as the scouts shot toward the sky.

Not long after the departure, Serafin's head perked up, and he announced the arrival of his friends. Two auras soon flew overhead, circling twice before landing in the middle of the lawn, and

Serafin and Daleen walked to meet them.

“Dallas,” Serafin greeted, shaking the hand of a wizard slightly older and smaller than he. Then he turned his smile on the other man, who was younger and much larger. “Grant, you big lump, how've you been? I forgot how fat you are.”

He jabbed at Grant's large abdomen, which probably didn't have an ounce of fat on it, and Grant laughed as he pulled Serafin into a bone-crushing hug. “Hey, old man. Virginia hasn't been the same since you've been gone.”

“I'm sure Virginia's doing just fine,” Serafin countered. “What do you think of our new home?”

“Gorgeous,” Grant answered. “And

speaking of gorgeous.” He moved around Serafin and lifted Daleen into a hug. “How's my darlin' Daleen?”

Daleen laughed as she gave his back a solid pat. “I’m good. Even better now. I missed your smile.”

“You, too.”

He lowered her feet to the ground, and she squeezed his massive bicep before turning to the other guest. “How have you been, Dallas?”

Dallas smiled and looked around. “Well, my dear, if the birds are chirping and I'm breathing, life's grand.”

“Yes,” Daleen agreed, scanning the surrounding forest. Then she linked her arm with his. “Come meet our new family. I think you'll find they're

incredibly special.”

Serafin made the introductions, leaving Quin and Layla for last, but their missing auras drew the guests’ curiosity right away. When Serafin got to his granddaughter, he spoke as casually as he had with the others, but there was no mistaking the pride in his eyes. “This beauty is Layla, and that’s Quin.”

Grant smiled and offered his hand. “You are a beauty, Layla.”

She smiled back, letting his large palm swallow hers. “Thank you, Grant. It’s nice to meet you.”

He held on to her for several seconds, tilting his head while watching her eyes, and she swallowed as her cheeks flamed.

Keeping his gaze glued to the scene, Quin squeezed Layla's other hand, fighting the urge to pull her away from the stranger, to calm her embarrassment and ease his own nerves.

Grant finally released her, cocking an eyebrow as he looked from her eyes to Serafin's. Then he moved over, letting Dallas take his place while he greeted Quin.

The older wizard stared at Layla with equal curiosity, but Serafin didn't give him time to linger. "You'll meet the rest of the family this afternoon. Take a seat."

Dallas and Grant obeyed, and the rest of the family sat around them, summoning drinks while Serafin tended

to the guests. Once everyone was comfortable, Grant leaned back and looked around. "So who has the skirmish with Agro?"

"We all do," Serafin answered.

"Of course," Grant returned, "but where did it start? Aren't you going to tell us why this conflict is brewing?"

"Yes. But first, do you mind telling us your experience with Agro?"

"Not at all. I'm an open book."

"Dallas?"

"Sure," Dallas agreed.

"Great," Serafin approved. "Go ahead, Grant."

Grant took a swig of wine and a deep breath. Then he ran a hand through his blond hair. "Let's see. Guess I'll start

from the beginning, thirty-two years ago. I'd just finished high school and was on a solo trip to Indian River Bay in Delaware. I was there to fish, but at one o'clock in the morning, a witch landed on the beach." Grant's turquoise eyes unfocused as a sad smile curved his lips. "Erin... that was her name. And she was terrified, which was odd because there was no one else around and I was just sitting on the bank with my hands full of fish. And I probably looked like an idiot, because all I could do for the first several seconds was stare. She was beautiful – long red hair and cornflower-blue eyes that glowed through the bright layers of her aura. I could tell she was about to take flight, and I didn't want to

see her go, so I tossed my fish in the water and stood. All I said was hi, but she acted like I'd threatened her life, looking from me to the sky while twisting her cloak. She was literally frightened of her own shadow; I actually saw her jump when it moved. But she must have been starving, because I got her to sit with me by offering a sandwich. Before long she was sobbing and spilling her story, and I learned why she was so scared. Erin was one of two, a twin, *and* she was a bonded child."

Layla's throat tightened as her insides squirmed. This story wasn't going to end well, she could tell. Swallowing a lump, she looked at Quin, who magically held her coffee in place while shifting her

onto his lap.

Grant was lost in memories and paying no attention to the people around him, so Layla's shift didn't disrupt his story. "Erin's twin sister had fallen for one of Agro's soldiers and willingly pledged her allegiance to him. And of course, Agro wanted the other piece of the set. Erin had no intention of joining him, and she didn't want her family hurt, so she fled her community without telling anyone where she was going. For three days she'd been zigzagging across the country without food or sleep, and she was on the brink of an emotional meltdown. I'd never felt such profound sympathy for a woman. All I wanted to do was take care of her, so I spent the

entire night trying to talk her into coming home with me, just long enough to get some sleep and food. By sunrise and the grace of the Heavens, she agreed, and every day I did everything I could to convince her to stay one more day. After about two months, I somehow convinced her to love me.” His expression changed again, haunted by regret and longing.

“We thought Agro had lost her trail. We hadn't heard a word out of him or received news he'd been in Virginia or any of its bordering states, so we dropped our guard and planned to marry. Five months from the day we met, we did just that. I married a gorgeous witch who was way out of my league yet thrilled to be carrying my baby.”

Layla's stomach flipped as she squeezed her eyes shut, tempted to ask Grant to stop. She didn't want to hear more.

Grant dropped his head, finishing his sorrowful tale in a muffled voice. "The day after our wedding, we flew to Vermont, to a cabin in the middle of nowhere, miles from anyone. There wasn't even a coven nearby, so we thought we had the forest to ourselves. To this day I don't know how they found us, but it doesn't matter how. All that matters is what they did. We'd been there for two days when the cabin door was blown off the hinges by Agro's soldiers, and within seconds they'd overpowered us and cut off our magic

with brain shields. Of course I tried to put up a fight, but I was worthless against their numbers. They had me beat before I could throw a punch, so I had no choice but to lie there and watch Agro give Erin an ultimatum – join his ranks willingly or be taken by force. I remember her looking at me with beautiful blue eyes full of tears and terror, silently begging for a miracle, and I wanted to reassure her so badly; tell her it would be okay; that I'd take care of her. But it wasn't okay, and my mouth was so crushed I couldn't tell her a damn thing. Crawling to her wasn't even an option; my body was broken and bound... useless. I wanted to close my eyes, but I couldn't tear my gaze away,

so I watched Agro lose his patience and yank her from the floor. That's when Erin put up the struggle she'd been avoiding for our baby's sake. She fought their grip with tooth and nail, putting everything she had into that fight, and when all five of her fingernails ripped across Agro's face, his eyes burned like fire. A flash of his hand and Erin was dead, along with the baby inside her. I remember every detail – the flutter of her hair as her body fell to the floor; the dimming of the room when her aura disappeared – and I swear I felt my heart split in two. Part of it went with my love and my son that night, and that's where it stays.”

He paused for several seconds, his

eyes shiny and distant, and the entire lawn was quiet, weighted with compassion and sorrow.

Grant eventually took a drink and cleared his throat. "I don't know why Agro left me alive. I've often wished he hadn't, but he seemed to forget about me altogether. He was pissed he lost his mark and left as soon as her heart stopped beating, screaming for the others to follow, so they did, leaving me bound, beaten and sobbing like a baby as I stared into empty blue eyes. Since then, I've had nightly dreams about killing Agro, and I've waited thirty-two years for the chance to do it right, for the day others like me were ready to stand up and bring the bastard down."

There were several teary eyes in the group, and Layla quietly cried into Quin's neck, her body vibrating with soft sobs.

Grant looked over, noticing her distress for the first time, and his eyebrows drew together as he glanced at Quin. "Is she okay?"

"No," Quin answered, his jaw achingly tight. "She's sad for you."

Grant tilted his head to the side. Then he sighed and looked away. "Well she better prepare herself, because Dallas' story is no walk in the park."

Quin burrowed his face through Layla's hair and whispered in her ear. "Do you want to take a break?"

"No," she croaked. "Please just get it

over with.”

Quin considered the option of releasing their auras before hearing what Dallas had to say, but if they paused the sad recounts to explain their own predicament, it would merely prolong the heartbreaking story hour. “We need to get through this,” he said, looking at Serafin.

Serafin nodded then turned to their company. “Let's hear yours, Dallas. Then we'll tell you ours.”

“Sure,” Dallas agreed, bracing his elbows on his knees. “My story starts long before Grant's took place – fifty-nine years ago, when I was a carefree seven-year-old. Agro had been building his army for about four years and had

already procured a substantial following. The name Unforgivables hadn't been coined yet; people called them the Lost Ones, because they were magicians who'd lost touch with their peaceful roots. Today his army mostly consists of people forced or brainwashed into servitude, but back then the bulk of his followers were willing rebels, and they weren't as hidden as they are now. It wasn't uncommon for them to be seen in public, acting disrespectful and bullying the locals, both magical and non. When they first started haunting our restaurants and taverns, we dealt with it. Well, I say *we*, but I was just a boy and hadn't seen them. The adults had banned the children

from going into town to keep us safe, so I stayed home and raptly listened when the adults complained about them, wishing I could see the bad wizards for myself. Looking back, of course, I wish I'd never made that wish at all. After two weeks of inappropriate behavior, my coven decided to ban Agro and his delinquents from their businesses, and from then on, when the Lost Ones showed up, the proprietor would close shop, leaving Agro with no magical watering holes or eateries. And that's all it took to bring his wrath on my family. Four days into our stand against them, Agro showed up at our community, and he had no intention of negotiating. They were there for one reason only – to show

the rest of the magical world what happens when someone defies the Dark Elite. His army came in blazing, and within minutes the other children and I were watching every adult member of our coven burn in a pile in the middle of our lawn. There were six of us; my three-year-old brother, my four younger cousins and myself, the oldest at the age of seven. We were held by Agro's men and forced to keep our eyes open as our family turned to ash. When residue and smoke was all that remained, Agro walked down the line, staring at us with red eyes as he drove his point home. He said, *when asked what happened here, you'll tell them your ignorant family was foolish enough to deny the Dark*

Elite, and for that, they burned. Then his men dropped us to the ground and took flight. We stayed with our charred family until a neighboring coven came to check on us. Then my brother and I were separated from our cousins and relocated into a new community. That was almost sixty years ago, and since then, I've sat in on plans to defeat Agro on eight separate occasions, but each time I've respectfully bowed out, because the missions were doomed to fail. I won't waste my life by lending my support to a half-ass attack, but when my revenge is in sight, I'm all in. It's not my end that concerns me, only Agro's."

Everyone on the lawn stayed silent, haunted by the heart-wrenching image of

six small children with deadly firelight reflecting off their tear-streaked cheeks and in their frightened eyes. And Layla was shaking as she choked back sobs, still hidden in Quin's neck.

"You know," Grant blurted, quizzically staring at Layla's back, "she wouldn't be hurting so much if she'd let that aura go."

"She knows," Quin replied.

Grant shook his head then looked at Serafin. "I guess it's time you share your story. I have a feeling it's going to be remarkable."

Serafin cracked a smile as he gave a nod. "Yes, let's get on with it. Layla, sweetheart?"

Layla took a deep breath as she wiped

her face. Then she looked at her grandpa. "I'll be better in a minute," she assured, turning her attention on Dallas and Grant. "Your history with Agro is heartbreaking. Those you lost would no doubt be proud of your endurance to not only live, but to live in a way that allows you to smile on the same day you have to recount your sad stories. May we all find a measure of peace when wounded so deeply."

Grant smiled, once again tilting his head as he examined her. Then he looked at Serafin. "Are you going to tell us who this sweet young lady really is? Or do we have to keep guessing?"

Serafin threw Quin a glance then turned to their guests. "Dallas, Grant, I'd

like you to meet my granddaughter.”

Their gazes snapped to Layla, then back. “Your...”

“Granddaughter,” Serafin repeated.

“But...” Grant’s gaze flashed back and forth. “That would mean she’s Aedan’s daughter.”

“That’s exactly what it means.”

Their mouths fell open, and Serafin lifted a hand. “You see our predicament.”

They silently nodded, so Serafin went on. “Well that’s only half of it. Quin, the young man she’s sitting with, is a bonded child. The son of Cordelia and Kemble,” he elaborated, pointing out the golden couple, “and as of Monday night, he’s Layla’s bonded mate.”

“No way,” Grant mumbled.

“It's not possible,” Dallas added.

“I assure you it is,” Serafin disagreed, looking at his granddaughter. “Let your lights go.”

Quin and Layla released their auras and bonded lights, sighing as they examined the explosion of color. Then they kissed and looked at their company.

Dallas had a hand to his heart, and Grant stared with bulging eyes while holding his breath. He eventually filled his lungs while shaking his head. Then he turned to Serafin. “You do have yourselves quite the predicament, don't you?”

“More than you know,” Serafin confirmed. “Agro's aware of Layla's

existence, he suspects she's here, and he was in this community less than a week ago. We believe he's camped about an hour away, undoubtedly plotting his next attack, and Quin and Layla have chosen to stay and fight rather than run and hide. When Agro returns, we'll have a battle on our hands, and we need help fighting it. So what do you say, guys?" He grinned and raised his eyebrows. "Ready for that revenge?"

Chapter 13

Three more guests were due to arrive that day, one witch at noon, and two wizards at one-thirty, so the family chose to stay outside and get to know their company while practicing defensive spells.

Caitrin and Serafin stood in the center of the lawn with Quin and Layla beside them, and everyone else watched from a nearby circle of chairs.

“Okay, Layla,” Serafin started, “the first thing you need to know about defensive magic is how complex it is. The caster must specifically mold the

shield to protect against certain types of magic. For instance, I can cast a shield that will protect me from fire, but water magic would fly right through it. To protect myself from fire and water, I must mentally make it so. A magician can cast a shield that protects them from everything, but it's difficult to think of all the offensive spells at once when forming the shield in your mind, because not only is defensive magic detailed magic, it's pressured magic. You're not going to have time to work things out in your head. When you need protection, you need it within seconds, so you need to train yourself to instinctively cast a thorough shield.” He paused and walked several yards away. “Am I making

sense?”

“Yes,” Layla answered, “and it sounds difficult.”

“It is. Especially in the beginning, but you'll quickly produce a basic shield that will protect you from the most utilized spells, such as elemental and summoning magic.” He eyeballed the distance between himself and Caitrin. Then he took five more steps back. “There’s another form of defensive magic that has a simpler concept, but it can be trickier to perform. Send something my way, Caitrin.”

Caitrin grinned and threw out a palm, sending a wave of water arching through the air, and Serafin smirked as he swept a hand in front of him. The swell

gracefully curled and reversed its course, and Caitrin raised a palm, halting the wave in mid-air before dropping it to the grass.

“That didn't look difficult,” Layla noted, smiling at the sparkly grass.

“It wasn't,” Serafin confirmed, “but the bigger the spell, the harder it is to control, and sometimes you must battle the original caster for possession. Also, you have to catch the spell first, so if something comes at you and you're not expecting it, or you don't know where it's coming from, it can be difficult to grab. Once you do get control of it, you have to send it somewhere, so it keeps your focus for as long as it's active. The shield can be activated then ignored.”

“I see,” Layla mumbled, wondering which method she’d prefer. “Let’s practice. I’ll try the shield first.”

“It’s not that simple,” Quin objected.

Layla looked over and found his concerned aura. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not letting anyone on this lawn throw spells at you.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t considered that.

“Well how did you learn?”

“Through a long process that took years. We don’t have time for that.”

“So how will I practice?”

He grimaced and looked at her grandfathers. “Got any suggestions?”

“Yes,” Caitrin answered, “if you’ll go for it.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“You could cast your shield around her. Then she can cast hers outside of yours.”

“That works,” Layla agreed, but Quin wasn't so sure and watched her for several seconds before yielding.

“Fine, but nothing gets thrown at her without my approval.”

Caitrin and Serafin agreed, and Quin swept Layla off her feet, carrying her several yards away from everyone. He gave her a long kiss before lowering her feet to the ground. Then he took a step back and waved a hand.

Layla smiled as a pearlescent bubble surrounded her, and Quin grinned as he reached over her head and dumped a wave of water from his palm. She

cringed. Then she laughed as the water hit the shield and splashed down the sides.

“Ha, ha, you can't get me.”

Quin laughed and took a step back, casting a second shield around the first, and this time he tested it with a small surge of electricity aimed at her feet. The spark hit the barrier and fizzled, and Layla smirked. “Satisfied?”

He shook his head no as he stepped back. Then he set a *third* shield around her, testing it with a tiny puff of fire that dropped from his forefinger. The flame dissipated when it hit the barrier, and Layla laughed as she shook her head.

“Am I going to be able to send a shield through all that?”

“Yes,” he answered. “I didn't block defensive magic.” He glanced at the others then back. “Are you sure you're okay with this?”

“Don't I look okay?”

“Yes, I guess you do, but it can be overwhelming – having spells thrown at you.”

“I trust your shields,” she assured, putting emphasis on the plurality.

“Okay,” he conceded, “but if gets too stressful, don't be afraid to say stop.”

“I promise, Quin.”

He watched her for a few more seconds then sighed. “I love you, Layla.”

“I love you, too, Quin. Now get over there and try to shoot me.”

He smiled then walked to Caitrin and

Serafin, speaking as all three of them faced her. “We don’t need to make them big or throw them hard. Just give them enough power to get there. Mentally tell me what you're going to send before casting it, and if I don't respond, consider it a green light.”

They nodded their agreement, and Quin took a deep breath. “Okay, love, make your shield.”

“Well that's not fair,” she protested.

Quin’s lungs deflated. “What's not fair?”

“You can't give me all the time in the world to come up with it. I'll be able to guard against more than if my time was limited. It's not realistic.”

“This is your first attempt, Layla.

You're just getting a feel for how it works.”

“Fine, but I think it's silly.”

“Just cast your shield, my ambitious angel.”

Layla obeyed, allowing herself ten seconds of planning, and when the idea left her head, a large, silver dome stretched over Quin's opalescent spells, spreading about ten feet in every direction. “Why does it look different than yours?”

“Because that's the way you imagined it, my love.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Are you ready?”

“I guess. I don't have to do anything but stand here.”

Quin smirked and raised a palm.
“Here they come.”

Water flew from Caitrin's hand, ice flew from Serafin's, and fire flew from Quin's.

Layla braced, tempted to squeeze her eyes shut, but she forced herself to watch as the spells hit the silver barrier. The fire fizzled, the ice shattered, and the water splashed to the ground. She smiled, but had no time to celebrate as three more spells headed her way. Bolts of lightning stretched from Caitrin's palm, a gust of wind carrying a pile of leaves blew in from behind Serafin, and Quin motioned to the earth at the base of the shield, making the short grass grow and curl toward the silver dome. The

lightning hit and exploded into sparks, the leaves flowed over the top of the shield, and the grass engulfed it in greenery.

“See?” Layla called. “You made it too easy on me.”

Quin laughed. “It was your first try and it only took you ten seconds to cast a shield that covered all the elements. That's not easy.”

“But how will we figure out what else it protects against? We won't know if it blocks bodily harm, torture spells, or summoning spells, because your shields will stop them if mine doesn't.”

“Mine aren't protecting against summoning spells.”

“Oh. Well try to summon me.” She

waited, but nothing changed.

“I guess you didn't feel that?”

“No.”

“Then it's protecting against summoning spells.”

“What about internal attacks and other torture methods?” she pressed. “How will we test them?”

“We won't.”

“Don't you think I need to know how?”

“Yes, but if you specified it to protect against those types of spells, I have no doubt you succeeded. Why would they get through when the others didn't?”

“I've never performed that kind of magic,” she explained, “so I'm concerned I didn't protect against it correctly. We should try just in case.”

“No, Layla. We'll just have to assume that one.”

“Well that's risky.”

“Tell you what – later I'll let you slice me open so you can see how those spells work. Then you'll feel better about protecting yourself against them.”

“Not going to happen, Quin.”

“Then don't expect me to let it happen to you.”

She huffed and swallowed defeat.

“Fine.”

“Good. Now drop your shield, and we'll give you more of a challenge.”

“Okay,” she approved, vanishing the grass-covered dome. “What's the challenge?”

“On the count of three, set your shield,

and we'll give you five seconds before casting our spells.”

“Ooh, pressure.” She cleared her head and gave a nod. “Okay. Whenever you're ready.”

They held out their hands as Quin counted. “One... two... three.”

The pressure was heavier than she anticipated, and she still hadn't cast a shield by the time their spells charged her, so she quickly threw out her hands, not at all sure what the shield was set to protect against. Serafin's fire sizzled, and Quin's wind floated around the barrier, but Caitrin's water shot right through it, splashing against Quin's outer shell.

“Damn,” she sighed. “I didn't even

guard against all the elements. Try earth.”

Quin pointed at the ground, and the grass grew and curved, easily creeping through the silver fog then up his pearly shield.

“Damn,” she repeated.

“It's okay, Layla.”

She didn't respond, and even though Quin couldn't see her through the grass, he could tell she was pouting. He grinned as he tried to grab her with magic, and when she let out a small cry of surprise, he knew it had worked. He vanished the greenery hiding her then pulled her through the air and caught her in his arms.

“I guess it didn't do any good against

summoning spells either,” she noted.

His grin widened. “And for that, I’m thankful.” He leaned in and gently bit her pout, which promptly curved into a smile.

“Are you my consolation prize?” she asked.

“You didn’t fail,” he countered, carrying her toward the chairs.

She tensed and looked around.

“Where are you going?”

“To sit down.”

“Why? I need to practice.”

“You will. Let’s take a break and watch other people practice.”

“But this is important, Quin.”

He stopped walking and met her stubborn stare. “I know it’s important,

Layla, but you don't have to learn it all at once, and I want you to take a break.”

“But I don't need a break.”

“Not even for one of Cinnia’s mocha shakes?”

She opened her mouth to refuse then closed it again to reconsider. But she couldn’t be swayed. “I don't need a shake. I need to learn.”

He watched her for several seconds then brought in the closer. “*I need you to take a break. Please.*”

Yep, that's all it took. “Okay. We'll take a break.”

“Thank you, angel.”

She playfully scowled and pointed at him. “But I want my shake.”

Once Quin got Layla on his lap, he had no problem keeping her there, and soon they were concealing their auras and bonded lights in anticipation of their next guest.

The witch flew into the clearing at noon and made a smooth landing, running her pink and purple gaze over the family. “What a fabulous looking group.” She lowered her hood and flipped her silver hair behind her shoulders. Then she walked forward with long and lithe strides.

Morrigan and Caitrin met her halfway, and Morrigan beamed while opening her arms. “Cece! It's been too long.”

“Yes it has,” the woman agreed, giving Morrigan a tight hug. “Forty years too long.”

Morrigan pulled away and scanned her friend. “You don't look any different.”

“Liar, but thanks anyway. I believe the last time I saw you my hair was brown.”

Morgan laughed and tousled the witch's sterling strands. “I guess it was, but the silver looks beautiful and goes great with your eyes.”

“Thanks, sweetie. I'm just glad it went silver instead of gray.”

“You'd look lovely either way.”

The guest took Morrigan's cheek and smiled. “Sweet as always, Morrigan. I've missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too, Cece.”

Caitrin stepped forward, resting a hand on Morrigan’s back while looking at their company. “Welcome, Cecelia. It’s wonderful to see you looking so well.”

Cecelia stepped back and scanned him from head to toe. “You look just as I remember, Caitrin. Why hasn’t anyone else gone silver?”

He laughed and offered her his arm. “I think the silver looks more natural than the brown. Perhaps you were simply a late bloomer.”

“Late indeed,” Cecelia replied, slipping her arm into the crook of his elbow while taking Morrigan’s hand. “This happened two years ago.”

“I’m so excited you’re finally meeting my family,” Morrigan said, leading her friend to the circle of chairs.

“Me, too,” Cecelia agreed. “It will be nice to put faces to the names. I feel like I know them already. Your letters and phone calls are always so in-depth and full of love; breaths of fresh air.”

“I’m proud of my coven,” Morrigan bragged, tilting her chin.

“And for good reason,” Cecelia replied, scanning the faces around her. “They’re lovely.” Her gaze stopped on Layla and Quin, but if she was confused by their missing auras, she didn’t show it. “Quite lovely indeed. So,” she chirped, looking at Morrigan, “would you like to make the introductions or

should I?”

“I would *love* to make the introductions,” Morrigan gushed.

“Everyone, this is Cecelia. She became one of my best friends when we were teenagers in Virginia. Now she lives in Nova Scotia.” She began pointing to each of the witches and wizards, announcing their names and giving brief descriptions.

Cecelia did, in fact, know a lot about the people she was meeting, and every once in a while she'd bring up certain accomplishments or funny anecdotes she'd heard from Morrigan.

When at last it was time to introduce Layla and Quin, Morrigan led Cecelia closer. “This is Layla. She's new to our

coven.”

“You're stunning,” Cecelia observed, shaking Layla's outstretched hand.

“Thank you,” Layla returned. “You're very lovely yourself. Your aura as well.”

Cecelia smiled, keeping Layla's hand as she intently searched her face. Then she cocked a perfectly arched eyebrow. “You're an extraordinary witch, aren't you, Layla?”

Layla blushed and shrugged. “I wouldn't say that.”

“I would,” Quin interjected, offering his hand to their guest.

Cecelia's smile stayed in place as she accepted the gesture and sized him up. “You're not so average yourself, young

man.”

“This is Quinlan,” Morrigan explained, “the son of Kemble and Cordelia.”

“The bonded child,” Cecelia recalled.

“Yes,” Quin confirmed, glancing at her aura. “I assume you can relate.”

“Then you assume correctly.”

“You’re a bonded child?” Layla asked, scanning Cecelia's aura.

“Yes,” Cecelia laughed. “Does that intrigue you?”

“Yes,” Layla mumbled, blushing again.

“Don't be embarrassed,” Cecelia insisted. “I only ask because you seem to be more extraordinary than Quinlan and I combined.”

“Oh.” Layla bowed her head and moved closer to Quin. “I’m not competing.”

Cecelia’s smile broadened as she glanced at Morrigan. “Who is this stunning creature?”

“Well...” Morrigan mumbled, looking at Quin, who shrugged, giving her silent permission to tell their secret.

Morrigan’s aura brightened as she grinned and turned to her friend. “Cece, you’re about to see something amazing, something you’ll never forget.”

“It must be big,” Cecelia observed, laughing at her friend.

“Bigger than big. Are you ready, paying attention, excited?”

“Yes, sweet Morrigan. I’m all those

things. Now quit teasing me and tell me the big news.”

Morrigan stopped bouncing and proudly looked to Layla. “This stunning creature is none other than my granddaughter.”

Cecelia's expression sobered as her gaze snapped to Layla. “Rhosewen and Aedan's child?”

“The one and only,” Morrigan answered.

Cecelia looked at her with wide eyes. “How have you kept this secret for so long?”

Morrigan's smile fell as she met her friend's stare. “Her life depended on it.”

“Of course,” Cecelia conceded, finding Layla again. “My, my, sweetie.

Yes you are an extraordinary witch.”

“That's only part of the news,”
Morrigan added.

“There's more?”

“Oh yes, there's more. Three days ago,
Quinlan and Layla bonded.”

“What?” Cecelia gasped.

“Yep,” Morrigan confirmed. “Let the
lovely hazes go.”

Quin and Layla were thrilled to obey,
enveloping their guest in sparkling fog
and bright colors.

“Wow,” Cecelia whispered. “It's...
it's beautiful.” She shook her head in
amazement then sadly found Layla's
face. “And incredibly dangerous.”

After getting comfortable, the family
listened to Cecelia's story, and while it

was heart-wrenching for Layla to hear, she handled the sadness better when her aura wasn't stifled. Having the emotions on the outside, however, had a disadvantage. Each time she felt a particularly strong surge of sadness, her aura reacted, making everyone gasp or stare. The first few times this happened Layla apologized. Then she decided to ignore their shock, because she couldn't say sorry every time she experience strong feelings. She'd be saying it all the time.

Cecelia's tale was devastating, her status a constant burden. When she was eight, her family fled their home in Michigan and moved to France to protect her from the Lost Ones. Once

Agro went underground with his army, Cecelia and her bonded parents returned to the states, joining an entirely different coven in Virginia. She'd been thirteen then, and that's when she met Morrigan. Her location remained a secret until she was nineteen, at which point Agro found her and tried to coerce her into joining his army. She refused, and before he could return to force the issue, she moved to her fiancé's community in Massachusetts, hoping the relocation would throw Agro off track. A week before her wedding, the Unforgivables came looking for her, and when she refused to leave with them, they killed her fiancé and six of his family members. Cecelia fled again, moving to

Georgia, and at the age of thirty, she married and had a child. At the age of thirty-five, the Unforgivables caught up with her yet again, and she lost her husband and her four-year-old daughter to them. She was able to escape with her life and her little girl's body, but she never fully recovered from the tragedy and devoted herself to a life of solitude, vowing never to marry another man or bear another child. She moved to Nova Scotia by herself, and that's where she'd been for the past twenty-five years, living an odd existence. She held no permanent connection to a home or a family, and she was considered nomadic by the few magicians who knew her.

She quickly committed herself to the

fight, telling of the continued regret and guilt that haunted her. The fact that she'd lived when her child had not led to reoccurring ruminations of suicide. Only one thing kept her from following through. For twenty-five years her life had been driven by one purpose – to defeat Agro so others wouldn't suffer at his hands.

By the time her story was told and her commitment obtained, it was time for more guests to arrive. Mere minutes after Layla and Quin concealed their lights, two identical wizards landed on the lawn.

Their names were Darrion and Delano. They were twenty-five-year-old twins born and raised in Virginia. At the

age of twenty they were discovered by Agro, who kidnapped their seventeen-year-old sister in an attempt to blackmail them into the Dark Elite. They were willing to sacrifice their freedom to save her and set up a meeting to make the trade, but when they arrived, they found their sister stripped and abused, undoubtedly used to fulfill the lewd desires of Agro's men. Tempers flared, and the twins went for Agro's throat, but the coward retreated, ordering his unit to follow, which they did. But not before killing the twins' sister. Darrion and Delano vowed vengeance, and in an effort to protect the rest of their family, they deserted their coven. Now they lived near Acapulco, Mexico, awaiting

their revenge.

They had no problem committing to the battle to come. “At this point,” Darrion said, “our lives hold little value.”

When Layla and Quin's secret was revealed, it merely added to their determination to destroy the threat. Like Grant and Cecelia, the twins thought a bond so special and beautiful should have the chance to blossom in the sun, not be shadowed by evil. Only Dallas was hesitant to commit, saying he'd waited too long for revenge to sacrifice his life for a flawed plan. He did, however, agree to stick around and help and perhaps reevaluate his decision to fight should they procure a larger army.

The sad recollections were over... for now, and as Layla reflected on them, she realized she had mixed feelings about them. On one hand, bringing in help was crucial to their success. And on a more personal note, hearing their reasons to fight eased her guilt. She didn't feel so bad about calling in strangers when they'd spent much of their lives waiting for the invite. But on the other hand, reliving the sad stories of others while constantly hiding her aura took a toll on her energy, and she needed fortitude for their next task – a trip to a fireproof location to test her and Quin's new abilities.

Everyone on the lawn was going, and the family members who weren't present,

planned to meet them there, including the seven sent to find Agro's camp.

Everyone lined up, and Layla and Quin shared the task of concealing them and their auras. Halfway through the process, Caitrin looked to the sky. Then he sadly shook his head and found Quin.

“Kegan and Weylin are here.”

Layla looked at Quin as he looked at her, and they knew they were thinking the same thing – Kegan and Weylin aimed to fight. “What can we do?” Quin asked. “Cut them out of our lives? Not let them see and hear what's going on?”

“I guess not,” she conceded.

Everyone looked up as Kegan and Weylin flew into the clearing and landed. Then Kegan headed for Brietta

while Weylin walked toward Quin.

“You guys going somewhere?” Weylin asked, slowing his approach as he eyed the strangers.

“Yeah,” Quin answered. “We’re heading to Washington to play with magic. Would you like to join us?”

“Sure,” Weylin agreed, closing the gap between them. Then his hand covered Layla’s shoulder, warm and surprisingly gentle as he scanned the air around her. “Hey, gorgeous.”

“Hey,” she replied, flashing him a smile.

Turning his bearded grin on the newcomers, Weylin offered his hand to Grant, who was nearly as big as he. “I’m Weylin.”

Quin took it from there, rushing through the introductions between his friends and the guests. Then he and Layla continued concealing the group. Once they were done, the lawn looked empty save for Cinnia and Arlen, who planned to conceal their own bodies, but leave their auras visible so they could lead the way.

“Fly straight,” Caitrin called. “Try to avoid collisions.”

The invisible crowd murmured their agreement, and Quin picked Layla up into a hug, smiling as she dove for his neck. “We're going ahead,” he announced, grasping her backside and pulling her close. “See you when you get there.”

Chapter 14

Layla stayed lost in Quin's tingles and magical warmth as he flew to the fireproof location, but when he descended, an icy breeze found her fingers and toes. She flexed against the chill, and he filled her with another dose of heat while whispering in her ear.

“Lift your spells, love.”

She pulled away from his neck while exposing their bodies and lights, and her mouth fell open as she took in their surroundings. He stood on a spacious expanse of ice blanketed in loose snow, and no matter which way she turned,

snowy mountains towered over them. The frozen surface was remarkably smooth for a natural formation, and it gently sloped toward a small lake so vividly blue it looked like an animated drawing. Nearly everything glittered – the ice, the snow, the water's surface, even the mountains, except for the ridges where dry snow had blown clear of the land, leaving it lackluster gray.

“Where are we?” she asked. “A winter wonderland? Shouldn’t there be an ice princess floating on that lake or something?”

“It's a glacier,” he laughed. “There are several around here. We're in Washington right now, but there are some in Oregon as well.” He curled his

fingers into her hair, compelling her to look at him instead of the scenery. “Are you cold?”

“No. I can still feel your heat.”

He hovered from the ground and leaned back, letting her lie on his torso. “Let me know when it wears off and I’ll give you more.”

She wore a cloak, but his chest was bare, and she perched on bronze muscle as she smiled down at him. “You know, you could teach me how to warm myself. Then you wouldn’t have to constantly worry about it.”

His eyebrows drew together as his lips dropped into a frown. “Is that what you want?”

“No,” she answered, forcing his lips

back up with her forefingers.

“Me neither,” he whispered, pulling her to his mouth.

Magical heat rushed her body as his tongue slipped over her bottom lip, and her blood pumped faster, increasing the warmth. She stretched and vanished her cloak, taking his face in both hands. Then she contributed to the kiss with an expertise she didn't possess two weeks before.

His fingers curled around the lace trimming the skirt of her dress. Then his hands were on her thighs, forcing them open. Her panties moistened as they rubbed over hard stomach muscles, and her lungs quickened, sending puffs of steam into the chilly air.

“How long before the others get here?” she murmured, shivering as his fingers slid to the satin between her legs.

He moved the material aside with one hand and softly stroked pulsing flesh with the other. “About twenty minutes.”

“Mmm...” Doing it right there in the middle of a winter wonderland was risky, and they’d have to rush, but considering their schedule, their uncertain future, and their insatiable appetite, Layla decided to seize the moment.

Vanishing their clothes, she trailed her kisses over his jaw and down his throat. Then she reached between her legs, finding him solid. She firmly gripped his erection, and he shuddered as her thighs

slid down his sides, her body slowly enveloping him in moist warmth. Her moan muffled into his pecs, her insides flexed and throbbing. Then she looked up, finding his dark eyes as she pulled her hand away and lowered herself in its place. His muscles jolted and swelled as his palms found her butt, his fingers spreading her open so she could take his full length, and she purred as she forced her body to conform.

She kept her movements slow, sure and intense, holding on to control by a tiny thread while enjoying the burn, the overwhelming need for release. She could have continued that way for hours, starving yet satisfied, but their time was limited, and no matter how confident

she'd become, if their family and guests descended on the intimate scene, she'd be mortified. That fact was present in her mind... somewhere... way in the back, doing its best to make itself known, but she couldn't bring herself to break the rhythm of her hips and end the ride... until he gave her no choice.

Sitting up in mid-air, he grasped her shoulder and thigh then forcefully pulled her down around him. With that, the thinning thread snapped, and half a heavenly minute later they were breathing into each other's mouths as gratification rolled over their vibrating bodies.

The waves of ecstasy eventually ebbed, but Layla continued to shiver as

the cold crept in. Quin softly sucked on her bottom lip while filling her with heat. Then his warm breath tickled her face. “That was fantastic.”

“It's always fantastic with you,” she countered.

He grinned and hugged her tighter. “It's never been like this, my love.”

Keeping her torso pressed to his, he slowly pulled himself from her body, and she replaced their clothes, trembling when the chilled cotton found her form. His flesh was much warmer.

Her cloak appeared over her dress as Quin filled her with more heat, and after donning his own cloak, he reached for her feet, which dangled several feet from the ground. “I'm going to cast a spell to

keep your feet warm. It will protect them from the snow.”

“I was wondering how I’d avoid frostbite.”

“This spell should keep your toes safe, but if they get cold, let me know.”

“Okay, but don't put me down yet. I want to stay like this until they get here.” She paused and bit her lip. “I mean, if that's okay with you.”

His forehead wrinkled as a smile twitched the corners of his mouth.

“Really, Layla?”

“Really what?”

“Do you really feel like you have to ask? And do you really think I’d want it any other way?”

She shrugged as her cheeks warmed.

“Not really, but I don’t want to be demanding.”

He laughed as he licked the lip she’d been chewing on. “Feel free to make your demands anytime, love. I live to please you.”

“And you do, Quin. I’m a lucky woman.”

“Mmm...” He moved his lips to her throat and licked its pulse points, tasting one of the many reasons he had to treat her like an angel. “You’re my woman,” he whispered. Then he breathed deep, gathering a lungful of the sweet nectar that gave him life and made it worth living. “And that makes me the luckiest man alive.”

He spent the next few minutes tasting

her while filling her with magical heat, and they were so wrapped up in each other, they didn't notice Cinnia and Arlen land beside them. Arlen smirked, and Layla jolted and blushed, knowing the entire group was nearby and staring. Oh well. It would have been a lot worse had they shown up ten minutes earlier.

“Lift these spells, you two lovebirds,” Brietta called out. “Then you can get back to what you're doing.”

Layla quietly giggled as her hand flashed through the air, and half the crowd appeared, but Quin's concealment spells stayed in place as he felt his way to Layla's lips for another kiss. Only then did the rest of the magicians show up, adding to the assortment of cloaks

dotting the white glacier, and Caitrin walked forward, raising Morrigan's hand to his lips as he glanced around.

“Will this suffice, Quinlan?”

“It should work fine,” Quin answered. “We might have to repair the ice a few times, but that's easy enough.”

“Good.” Caitrin smiled, excitement brightening his sea-blue eyes. “Would you like to show us what you can do?”

“Ready to play?” Quin asked, flashing Layla a grin.

She returned his smile as she touched a deep dimple. “Sounds fun.”

After a big kiss, he lowered her feet to the snow and led her away from the others. “How are the toes?”

“Toasty.”

“Good. Tell me if that changes.”

“Believe me, I'll let you know if they get cold. I hate cold toes. Once, I ran through the snow barefoot, thinking it sounded like something fun to do. You know, like something you'd see in a movie, but it was *not* fun. I thought my feet were going to fall off.”

“How old were you?”

She blushed and looked away.

“Seventeen.”

“Let me get this straight,” he laughed, “at the age of seventeen, you went frolicking through the snow?”

“Are you making fun of me?”

He grinned. “I'm just trying to picture it – you running in the snow by yourself, constantly jumping because your feet are

freezing.”

“I wasn't by myself,” she corrected, “and yes, jumping was necessary.”

“Were you with a friend?”

“Yes, my mom.”

“Katherine ran barefoot through the snow with you?”

Layla smiled, remembering. “Yes. It took me an hour to talk her into it. Then it took me three hours to get her to stop giving me the silent treatment. She soaked her feet in warm water the rest of the day.” She paused, wrinkling her nose as she looked at him. “You think I'm weird.”

“No,” he assured. “I think you're fun. If I'd been there, I would have run through the snow barefoot with you.”

“Without magic keeping you warm?”

“Yep.”

“I might make you prove that someday.”

“I thought you didn't like it.”

“I didn't, and if I do it again, I'll be using magic.”

“I'm not sure that's fair.”

“Hey, you're the one who agreed to do it without magic, not me.”

He laughed and shook his head. “You know, for every trick you pull on me, I'll have two waiting for you.”

“I like your tricks, so that's not scary.”

They were a few yards from the icy lake when he halted and turned her toward him. “You like my tricks?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He glanced at the others, who watched from the top of the slope. Then he found Layla’s eyes and vanished his cloak. “Do you want to show them one of our tricks?”

“I don’t care if they watch or not,” she answered, “but I’d like to see what we can do.”

He smiled as he stretched and squared his stance. “Okay, my love, fill me with your fire.”

She’d watched his bare chest flex when he stretched, and as if her hands had a mind of their own, her palms found his pecs, her fingers dipping into the hard grooves of defined muscle. Sliding her hands over his shoulders, she took the back of his neck and pulled his mouth

to hers, giving him a long kiss.

“Mmm...” she purred, licking her lips.

He smiled as he slid his tongue along the same trail. “That successfully filled me with heat,” he whispered, raising tender fingers to her throat, “but it wasn't what I meant.”

“Sorry. I just can't get enough of you.”

His fingers slid around her neck and curled into her hair, and his other hand found the small of her back, pulling her against him as he dipped her toward the ice. “It goes both ways, my love.” His kiss started soft and sweet, but passion quickly took over, stealing her breath and stimulating delicate areas.

Several family members laughed, and Brietta's voice drifted over the ice. “You

guys know we're watching, right?"

"I don't think they care," Weylin noted.

"Apparently not," Brietta giggled.

"Looks like Layla's worked her way out of that shell she showed up in."

Quin's lips stilled, and Layla grinned. "They're making fun of us."

"I don't care," he countered. "Do you?"

She kept her eyes on his as she answered. "Nuh-uh."

"You have no idea how much that pleases me," he approved, pulling her upright. Then he took a step back. "Shall we show them why we really brought them here? Or should we keep showing them how great our kisses are?"

“We can show them our fantastic kissing technique at home, so I guess we better get to the point.”

He flashed a hand toward the spectators, and a pearlescent fire shield enveloped them as he raised his eyebrows at Layla. “Fill me up.”

“Do you want me to give you as much as I can?”

“Sure. I see no reason to hold back.”

She walked around him and placed her palms flat on the small of his back. “Ready?”

“Yep,” he answered, aiming his palms at the sky.

Her lips caressed his spine as her palms slid up his back and shoulders, but then she had to stop kissing so she

could hover to his forearms. Once she got to his wrists, she paused, leaving her fingertips touching the back of his hands as she looked down.

His head was nestled between her breasts, and his eyes glinted as he met her stare. “I can’t tell if it’s your fire or your position turning me on.”

“Then it worked?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “It definitely worked. Are you ready for me to let it go?”

“Whenever you are.”

“Look up.”

She did, and he took several quick breaths before going rigid. Noticing his tension, Layla looked down as their fire exploded from his hands, blotting out the

sun and casting a bloody hue across his closed lids and flexed face. The roaring flames expanded, sucking oxygen from the atmosphere, but Layla barely noticed as she shouted Quin's name and slid down his body.

He went down with her, dropping to his knees in a river of melted snow, and Layla scrambled in front of him, her heart thundering as panic clutched it. Slumping to the ice, she frantically searched him with eyes and hands, looking for injuries, but she knew it was pointless. The pain was on the inside, not the outside, and she didn't have a damn clue how to heal internal injuries.

“Oh god, Quin,” she whispered, tears swelling over her lids. “What can I do? I

don't know what to do.”

He popped his head up and opened his eyes. Then his hands were on her cheeks as his thumbs dried her tears. “I’m okay.”

“I know better,” she cried. “You’re hurting.”

“Look at me, Layla.”

Her hands stilled as she met his stare, and he ran a thumb across her lips. “I’m okay. I can still feel the burn, but it’s no longer unbearable. Now please calm down.”

She burst into sobs and collapsed into his arms. “I’m so sorry.”

“Hey,” he soothed, pulling her onto his lap and kissing away her tears. “It’s okay. Please don’t cry. That hurts far

worse than the fire.”

She sucked in a choppy breath while trying to stem the tears and regret. “I’m so sorry.”

“Listen to me, Layla. Your fire didn’t burn me. Mine did. You have nothing to be sorry about.”

“I’m sorry you’re hurting.”

“I’m fine.” He lifted his hand and flexed his fingers. “I can barely feel it now.”

Their audience approached, most of them smiling and looking toward the sky, but a few watched Quin and Layla with concerned eyes.

“That was incredible,” Grant exclaimed, finally dropping his gaze, and his head bobbed when he found them

sitting on the ice.

“Was it?” Quin asked. “We missed it.”

“Unbelievable,” several people mumbled.

Dallas shook his head as he glanced between Quin and the sky. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“And you won’t ever see it again,” Layla added, her face buried in Quin’s neck.

“What’s going on?” Cordelia asked.

“It burned me,” Quin answered.

Cordelia moved closer. “What do you mean?”

“When I added my fire to hers, it was too much. It burned my insides.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I immediately healed myself. I can barely feel it now.”

“And you'll never feel it again,” Layla interjected.

Quin gently pulled her from his neck and found her eyes. “Please don't say that, Layla. I love the way it feels when you summon your fire in me.”

“That's fine, and I'll do it again, but never like that. Never that much. We're never doing *that* again.”

Her voice rose as she expounded, so he tightened his hug and stroked her hair. “Okay, love. We won't summon that much again.”

“I know,” she shot back.

Brietta laughed and shook her head. “Considering all the things you’ve been

through since you got here, Layla, I'm surprised you're freaking out about Quin feeling a little discomfort.”

Layla's gaze shot to her cousin. “I’d do it all again to keep him from burning his insides.”

She meant it, and Quin's jaw tensed as he tightened his hold on her and stood. “Let’s drop it. So the fire was impressive?”

“That's putting it mildly,” Kemble answered. “And you were right about having to repair the ice. That one spell melted about an eighth of an inch off the top, and it's a good thing you had us shielded, or we'd be missing our hair.”

“Sorry,” Quin returned. “I didn't have any control over where it went.” He

dried Layla's cloak then scanned her body. "Still warm?"

"Yes."

"Good. Everyone hover."

The crowd obeyed, and the runoff that had melted into the lake flowed from its flooded banks, creeping back up the frozen slope until the glacier was fully repaired.

"Okay," Quin said, lowering Layla's feet to the ground, "let's see what we can do on our own." He paused, glancing at the others. "You might want to back up."

They nodded their avid agreement then began working their way up the slippery slope. Before the explosion of heat, snow added traction to the glacier, now there was none. A few people floated to

the top, but others had too much fun conquering the challenge to bypass it.

Once everyone was at a safe distance, Quin and Layla began testing their limits, which stunned the observers into awed silence. Even Layla was impressed with herself, particularly with the control she held over her spells once they were cast. She could summon a fireball and toss it any way she wanted, forming it into any shape she desired while changing its color. She could break a massive piece of earth from the mountainside then break it again and again before juggling the debris. And when she was done playing, she could put the jagged rocks back together and fit them into the mountain like a puzzle piece. She could

lift the entire lake into the air then turn it into a cyclone or a sphere or a liquid beast. When she held it over everyone's heads and threatened to let the floating wave go, some of them actually believed her. Replacing the lake, she grabbed a gust of wind and changed its course, slowing it down and speeding it up. Then she tested her precision by sneakily lifting Brietta's skirt with a gentle breeze. After adjusting the garment three different times, Brietta finally caught on, and Layla laughed while lifting the skirt a little higher.

Brietta giggled and struggled against the summoned wind. "All right, Layla Love. Very clever."

Kegan grinned and tilted his head,

candidly admiring her legs. “I like that bit of magic.”

The wind finally died down, allowing Brietta to let go of her skirt, and she wrinkled her nose while punching Kegan’s bicep. “I bet you do.”

A cluster of auras appeared near the southern mountains, and everyone looked over as the hazes filled with Selena, Brayden, Alana, Banning, Skyla, Edana and Enid.

“Where’s Drystan?” Selena asked, alighting with a kid on each hip.

Enid landed beside her and scanned the crowd. “Are they not back from finding Agro’s camp yet?”

“They should be,” Edana noted. “Devlin said he’d probably beat me

here.”

Caitrin laid a hand on Edana's shoulder. “Don't worry, ladies. We don't expect them for another thirty minutes.”

They nodded, prepared to wait, but none of them relaxed.

Brayden wiggled from Selena's grip and hopped to the ice. Then he grinned at Quin, who was making his way up the slope. Without warning, Brayden sprinted forward then slid one foot ahead of the other, positioning himself to glide down the glacier.

Letting go of Layla's hand, Quin quickly knelt and braced, catching Brayden before he could skate into the lake.

“That was fun,” Brayden exclaimed.

“It looked fun,” Quin returned, meeting his excited grin.

“Come on, sis,” Brayden called. “You try. Layla will catch you.”

Alana bounced as she looked at Selena. “May I, mom? Pwease.”

“Go for it,” Selena allowed, lowering Alana’s feet to the ice.

Alana's little legs immediately pushed her forward. Then she positioned her feet like her brother had and skated down the slope. Layla’s heart rate spiked as she knelt and used magic to stay planted. Then her pulse calmed as the toddler slid into her arms. “Wow, Alana! That was very graceful.”

Alana beamed as she clapped her hands together. “That was fun!”

Layla laughed and continued the climb toward the others, getting there as Caitrin finished the introductions between their guests and the new arrivals. After introducing Alana and Brayden, he looked at Layla. “Do you want a break?”

Layla shrugged. “I don't need one.”

Then Cecelia stepped forward and spoke. “I'd like to feel your fire, Layla. If you don't mind?”

“Of course not,” Layla agreed. “I'll give all the newcomers a sample.” She kissed Alana's curls before passing her to Morrigan. Then she gasped as Quin swept her off her feet.

“Ready?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

“For what?” she returned, but he didn't answer. He just took off running then slid down the glacier.

Squeaking her surprise, Layla's eyes widened on the lake. The water quickly approached, and he wasn't slowing down. “Quin!”

She tightened her grip and sucked in air, tensing against the looming cold, and as they reached the water's edge, she squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the icy lake to engulf her. When the chill didn't come, she peeked with one eye and found him floating over the lake, grinning at her.

“Did you really think I was going into the water?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered, pinching his

bicep. “You have a history of plunging me into cold water.”

“But I always fill you with heat first.”

“That's true.”

He nuzzled her curls and floated back to earth. “I like teasing you.”

The two of them spent the next few minutes sharing their fire with the guests. Then Catigern's voice drifted from an empty spot behind the family. “Quinlan, Layla – release your spells.”

He sounded agitated, so Layla and Quin swept their hands through the air while taking flight toward the family. The seven men who'd been searching out Agro's camp appeared, and a glance at their auras suggested the trip hadn't gone smoothly.

“Did you not find it?” Quin asked.

“We found it,” Catigern answered.

“We didn’t get a good look inside their land shield, but we got a glimpse when they opened it for incoming soldiers – a group of thirty, and there were many more within. We’re talking a hundred soldiers or better, Quinlan. He’s done with the chase and preparing for obliteration.”

Quin felt sick, and he couldn’t find the ability to hide it from Layla’s searching gaze – big, shiny green eyes looking for hope but finding a bloodless face.

“Maybe they’re here for a different reason,” she suggested. “Maybe they’re not part of his attack against us at all. Why would he think he needs that many

soldiers? Surely it's for something else.”

“Not likely,” Serafin replied.

Layla huffed and looked over. “What makes you think that?”

“Agro has every intention of coming for you, dear, and he’s made it clear his next visit with us will be his last. He's either going to leave with you or he's going to wipe us out. To do that, he needs soldiers.”

“But he had them. Why would he think he needs more?”

“He's scared,” Serafin explained. “He knows there are three bonded couples and a bonded child in the community, and I'm sure he fears you. If there's one thing Agro does well, it's protect his own neck. If he thinks we have a chance,

he'll arm himself with the only weapon he knows how to wield – subordinates.”

“But... That's... Maybe...”

Her nostrils flared as her jaw tightened, and Quin tried to pull her under his arm, but she couldn't be comforted. Shoulders rigid, she walked away from him, turning her back on everyone as she stared across the glacier, her aura a sad swirl of dreary colors.

Quin didn't know what she was thinking, but the possibilities tormented him. Maybe she was brainstorming ideas, maybe she was resigning herself to a life in hiding, or maybe she was looking out over the winter wonderland and thinking she'd never see such beauty

again.

Her back shuddered with a shaky breath, her aura steadily growing darker as she raised a hand to her face. Then she turned and smiled at Alana. “Want to slide down the slope with me, angel?”

“Otay,” Alana agreed, unable to fully understand the terrifying situation.

Layla ignored everyone’s stares and approached Alana. “Do you want to hold hands? Or I could hold you in my arms like Quin held me.”

Alana eyed Layla’s aura, which had expanded to nearly twice its normal size, but the toddler seemed soothed by Layla’s plastered smile. “I bet we’d go weawy fast if you held me.”

“Hop up,” Layla instructed, opening

her arms.

Alana flew into them, and Layla pulled her into a tight hug while burying her face in her hair. Quin sadly watched and waited, knowing Layla's façade would soon shatter, leaving her disheartened and defeated.

Shifting Alana into a cradle hold, Layla smiled down at her. "Ready?"
"Yes!"

Layla took two long strides then slid her right foot forward, and Alana squealed all the way down the slope. Layla pulled the same trick Quin had, waiting until the last second before soaring over the lake. Then Alana clapped while Layla flew to the family, her face hidden in the toddler's curls.

Kneeling to place Alana's feet on the ground, Layla smiled and whispered.

"That was fun."

"Yes it was," Alana agreed, raising a small palm to Layla's cheek. "Thank you fowr taking me."

"You're welcome, angel. Maybe we'll get to go again someday."

The word *someday* landed on Quin's heart like a sledgehammer, and he closed his eyes while taking a deep breath. When he returned his gaze to Layla, her aura had grown darker, and he could feel her pain as surely as he felt the wind on his face. Walking toward her, he said her name, but she ignored him.

"You know what would be fun?" she

asked, searching out Brietta and Skyla, who stared back in sad confusion.

Quin wrapped one arm around Layla's shoulders, and her aura expanded, making several people gasp as Quin's arm fell away, his heart and ego bruised. He, of all people, should be able to offer her comfort.

Still ignoring the world and its troubles, Layla walked to Brietta and Skyla and took their hands, leading them away from the others. Facing the lake, she released Skyla and swept a palm through the air, and a vibrant rainbow sprouted from the ground, rising steeply then arching toward the bottom of the slope. The colorful mist landed at the edge of the lake before climbing back

up. Then it came to a halt halfway over the water.

Taking Skyla's hand back, Layla glanced between her and Brietta.

“Ready?”

“For what?” Brietta asked.

Layla looked to the rainbow, her smile trembling as she blinked back tears. “To run.”

She took off, and her firm grip on Brietta and Skyla forced them to run with her. When they reached the rainbow, their feet found stability upon the translucent mist, so they continued up one side of the spell.

Grant stepped forward and paused beside Quin. “Does she always handle bad news so well?”

Agitated and tense, Quin shook his head as he walked toward the rainbow. “She’s losing it.”

The three witches reached the peak of the rainbow then leapt for the other side, landing on their butts as they slid into the curve at the water's edge. They had so much momentum, they flew right up the other side, and Quin shivered as a chill ran down his spine. He didn't understand why, but every muscle in his body flexed as he poised to move.

Reaching the end of the rainbow, Brietta and Skyla took flight, but Layla dropped like a stone toward the icy lake.

Quin was halfway down the slope before Layla's name burst from his chest, but she was winning the race and

only a few yards from plunging into the lake. Bending his knees, he made a soaring leap, and his arm hooked her waist as her feet disappeared beneath the water's surface. His feet went under as well, but he ignored the icy shock and flew higher, flipping her into a cradle hold so he could search her face. Tears flowed from her wide eyes, soaking her flushed cheeks, but she seemed alert and unharmed.

“What in the hell were you thinking?” he scolded, drying her feet and calves.

Layla had no idea what she was thinking. Falling just seemed like the thing to do, like maybe all the terror would disappear when the icy water struck. Maybe physical agony would

numb the pain in her heart. Or maybe she was going crazy and thought a bone-chilling dip would bring her back to her senses. But she didn't tell him any of this, and she couldn't find any guilt or embarrassment about the senseless fall. All that was left was hopelessness, so she buried her face in her hands and cried.

“Shit,” Quin sighed, pulling her into a hug. “I’m sorry.”

Tucking her face in his neck, he flew to the others. “Who's going back to watch Agro?”

“I am,” Lann answered.

Quin walked over and concealed his grandpa's body and aura with one hand. Then he concealed himself and Layla.

“We're going home,” he announced, and before anyone could protest, he shot into the air.

Chapter 15

On the way home, Layla cried while Quin searched for solutions, but none of his ideas could conquer an army of ruthless killers.

He landed on their deserted lawn and looked around, making sure the enemy hadn't dropped in. Then he released his concealment spells and carried Layla home. Bypassing the bedroom, he climbed to the turret room and sat on the sofa, hoping the bright room would improve their moods. If any two people needed light shed on a situation, it was them.

Several tense and silent minutes passed before her sobs quieted, and if her aura hadn't been so active, he would have thought she'd fallen asleep. But she was wide awake and filled with dread.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Me, too," she squeaked.

Fresh tears moistened his neck, and his entire body contracted, like his skin was shrinking, smothering and crushing his insides. Vanishing her cloak, he worked his fingers into her hair and forced her face from his throat. "It rips my heart open to see you like this."

"I'm sorry, Quin. I don't know how to fix it. I'm so scared for us, and for everyone else."

"I know, but I'll not die with regret in

my heart. Remember? Live every moment like it's our last and fight for what we love. That's what we're doing."

"We can't lead our family into a losing fight, Quin. That will put regret in my heart."

"I understand, but your grandparents and my parents won't let us to do this alone, no matter how slim our chances are. That would put regret in their hearts."

"I don't want that either."

Her pout quivered as more tears threatened to spill, and he pressed his lips to her forehead, desperate to make the depression go away. Their lives were too risky to spend them in sorrow.

His gaze landed on the guitar across the room, and he raised an eyebrow, wondering if her soul was too bruised to be soothed by the tried-and-true method of music. “Hey.”

“Hey back.”

“I wrote you a song.”

Her forehead creased beneath his lips. “Just now?”

“No, over the past few weeks. I started it the night you got here.”

“Really? Like... a poem?”

“Sure, but song sounds better. It’s the rock stars who make the panties drop, right?”

She smirked. “I hear poets get plenty of action.”

His heart lightened as he shifted her to

one leg and summoned the guitar. “How about guitarist? What do they get?”

“You *play*, too?”

“A little. Would you like me to teach you?”

Her chest deflated as she laid her head on his shoulder. “We don’t have time.”

“Sure we do,” he disagreed, laying the guitar across their laps. “Put your fingers over mine so you can get a feel for the chords, and I’ll use your hand to strum. We need a pick... hold on.” He closed his eyes and summoned a pick from his house. “Here, we don’t want to damage those beautiful nails.”

“I have no idea what I’m doing, Quin.” Nevertheless, she hovered the pick over the strings and molded her left

hand to the back of his.

“You’re going to help me play your song,” he replied, magically tuning the guitar.

She turned her head, finding his cheek with her lips. “You really wrote me a song?”

“Yes.”

“Why haven’t you already shared it with me?”

“I didn’t write it to impress you.”

“Why did you write it?”

“Because I was lying there, watching you experience your parents’ memories while thinking about how I felt about you, and the words came, but I didn’t finish it that night. I knew there was more.”

“That’s sweet.”

“That’s the truth, as sappy as it sounds. Ready?”

“Yes.”

He took the back of her right hand and urged her to strum. Then his fingers began moving along the fret board, testing out a tune. “See? Easy.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Layla countered, watching his fingers compensate for her clumsy strumming. She wanted to tell him she’d learn to play so she could write *him* a song, but there wasn’t time. The end was closing in on them faster than ever. “Did you write the music, too?”

“I had a tune in mind, but this is the first time I’ve played it, so there are a

few kinks to work out.”

“I like it.”

“That’s all that matters.”

“So you write, play *and* sing. Is there anything you can’t do?”

“I can’t seem to cheer up my angel.”

“I’m sorry, Quin. I’m trying.”

“I know, love, and don’t be sorry. Just meet me halfway.”

They kept repeating the tune over and over again, tweaking it a little each time, and soon their haphazard composition sounded like a catchy song. Layla had the rhythm memorized and was strumming on her own, and he’d worked out the kinks in his notes while fine-tuning the strings.

Nuzzling through her hair, he

whispered in her ear. “What do you think?”

“It’s pretty.”

“Ready for the words?”

“Yes.”

He waited for her to strum through a refrain. Then he began singing in a deep, heart-melting voice.

*“Eyes of emerald and a heart of
gold;
soft, rose lips and treasures untold.
This is the woman for whom I fell.
This is my love,
my sweet angel.
Soul so pure, none can compare.
My lovely lady, so precious and rare.
My heart soars when she speaks my*

name.

Her beautiful smile will do the same.

*All that she does she does so well,
my perfect love,
my sweet angel.*

*She captured my heart and holds it
tight.*

*When she's in my arms the world is
right.*

*Whatever may come, I will conquer
with pride*

as long as my love is by my side.

She gives me strength to face the day.

Wherever she is, my heart will stay.

My love for her will never fail.

*She has it forever,
my sweet angel.”*

He took her hand and helped her strum the final chord. Then he waited for the note to stop echoing through the room before kissing her ear. Tingles slid down her neck to her throbbing heart, and her chest quaked as tears filled her eyes. “That was beautiful.”

“You're beautiful,” he whispered.

“I'm an emotional wreck,” she corrected.

He nibbled on her ear while sending the guitar to its base. Then he picked her up and turned her around, parting her legs around his waist. “You're my emotional wreck, and I wouldn't have it any other way.”

“I make you sad.”

“No. This situation makes me sad.

You make my heart beat.” He slid one shoulder of her dress down, exposing the left side of her chest. Then he cupped her breast while drifting his thumb over her heart. “I know yours is sore right now, but I’ll fix it.”

She swallowed a lump while blinking back tears. “How? Because usually, when you touch me like this, the rest of the world slips away and I’m in heaven. It’s been that way from the beginning, but it’s not that way now, and I don’t know how to fix it.”

He flashed a grin and raised his eyebrows. “Good thing you got me.”

She gasped as he picked her up and practically tossed her onto the couch beside him. Then the room dimmed as

shades fell over the windows. In the time it took her to glance around, he'd moved between her legs and leaned over her, but they still had clothes on, and only their thighs touched.

"I'm afraid it won't be so simple this time," she whispered, trying hard not to fidget, but she was tense and guilty and uncomfortable.

"I'm up to the challenge," he returned, lowering his lips within inches of hers.

Usually this would catch her breath as she anticipated his kiss, but at the moment, she was doing her best not to squirm.

Bracing himself with one hand, he found the buttons running down the front of her dress and unfastened the top three.

Her breasts spilled out, and as cool air rushed over them, she pulled her arms in to cover herself. He let her, and he still hadn't kissed her.

She glanced between his face and aura, wondering if her rigidness upset him, but he seemed calm and patient and prepared for the challenge, just as he'd claimed. Layla didn't want to be his challenge; she didn't want to be chased. She got enough of that from the people hunting her. With Quin, she wanted it to be easy. She wanted to be putty in his hands, but she felt more like a rock weighing him down.

Her throat swelled as she squeezed her eyes shut, and he gently swept his fingers down her face before tilting her

head to the side. His lips found her neck, and his magical warmth spread through her tense body.

The heat didn't relax her, but it made her feel more comfortable with her exposed breasts, so she let her arms slide away.

“There you go,” he approved.

She tried not to flinch as she awaited his touch, but when he moved his hand from her jaw, he slid it to her heart instead of her breasts. His fingers stretched as his mouth found the pulse in her neck, and the tingles she'd been missing shot from his lips, zipping through her chest to his hand.

She jolted as her lungs hiccupped, and while her head still worried, he'd gotten

her body's attention. She sobbed with relief, so happy that, through all the darkness, she still had the ability to enjoy his touch.

He returned his hand to her chin, urging her to face him. Then he softly kissed away her tears. She slid her fingers into his hair to keep him close, and he blindly reached for her skirt, hiking it up her thighs while vanishing his shorts. Her bare legs found his hips, and the tingles stretched, simultaneously soothing and arousing her.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He drifted his lips across the tip of her nose while shaking his head. “I’m not done.”

The pad of his thumb swept over her

closed lids. Then his fingers trailed through her curls, sending chills across her scalp. Taking her by the thigh, he pulled her closer, intensifying their electric connection. Then he gave her a long kiss while sliding his hand up her leg. His knuckles skated over her hip. Then his palm covered her pubic bone as his thumb dipped between her thighs. She still wore her panties, and the satin stimulated sensitive areas as his thumb pressed and rubbed. Her breathing quickened, and she felt his lips curve into a smile, his thumb stroking her panties until they were wet.

Yes, her body had definitely forgotten their troubles. Now she just wished her head and heart could do the same.

“More,” she whispered, and his chest rumbled as he moved the moist satin aside and slid his fingers over bare flesh.

His lips left hers and trailed down her throat, and as he took one of her nipples into his teeth, two of his fingers dipped inside. The heavenly appendages curled as his thumb pressed and swirled, and like a cleansing flood, moisture rushed his fingers, washing away the world and all its troubles.

“More,” she gasped, desperate to stay lost in him, in his physical, mental and emotional bliss... his heaven.

His fingers slid away, taking her underwear with them, and as her nipple slipped from his lips, his erection

emphatically filled her.

Her body quaked, her core a delightful mess of fluttering muscles and tingling nerve-endings, and her eyes popped open to his flexed neck and shoulder. Moving her mouth to his throat, she slid her palms to his hard pecs, and he grasped her butt, lifting it from the couch as he took her, his rhythm steady and powerful.

A hum rolled from her diaphragm and vibrated her lips, and the fire inside burned hotter. She was reaching another orgasm, her body a receptive pool of emotions and adrenaline, but she wasn't ready to stop. If she came, he'd come. Then he'd have to stop and catch his breath. And she wasn't ready to give up

her rediscovered heaven, not yet.

“Don't stop...” she breathed, dipping her nails into his chest. “Please.” Then her plea flowed into broken moans as she fell over the edge.

He quietly growled into her hair as she came, but he didn't stop, and the pounding on sensitive nerves was half torture, half divine. With every thrust, squeaks burst from her chest, and her skin twitched around convulsing muscles. The acute sensations were almost too much, and she squeezed her eyes shut, forcing herself to endure them.

Apparently he noticed her struggle, because his movements slowed, but she quickly protested. “No, Quin... Please don't stop.”

He mumbled a few profanities as he throbbed inside her. Then he grasped a fistful of curls and picked up the pace.

“Yes...” she breathed. “Keep me there.”

“Damn.”

Tightening his grip on her hair, he tilted her head back, and she opened her eyes, finding his smoldering stare. His lips came down on hers, hard and hungry, and she reached her pinnacle again, moaning into his mouth while trembling around his manhood. He kept going, and her moan built into a scream as she drowned in a potent concoction of torment and rapture.

Near bursting with overwhelming sensations, she didn't know how much

longer she could take the flames licking her tender and susceptible insides, so when she felt herself peaking again, she grasped his butt and pulled him deep inside, urging him to stay there.

Her muscles rolled and stretched as a wave of fulfillment crashed over her. Then her core rippled as more than mere tension rushed from her body. He left her mouth, his fist flexing in her hair, and the fingers dipping into her backside squeezed and pulled, forcing his arousal deeper as a string of profanities skipped from his tongue.

She felt him surge inside her, a sturdy dam reaching its breaking point, and his grip on her didn't ease until his twitching did. His lungs emptied as the

pressure ebbed, and the arm holding him up shook.

Running his hand up her spine, he pulled her to his chest. Then he sat up and leaned back, propping his head on the armrest while settling her weight on his torso.

Filled with more than physical relief and sexual indulgence, Layla floated in a sea of tingles as her heart soared. She'd been terrified she wouldn't find her heaven again before the grim reaper tracked them down, a thought that scared her more than death. She'd found life in Quin. Not just in the emotional connections they shared, but in the physical connections as well. The two went hand in hand. She'd found her lungs

and her heartbeat in him. She'd found herself in him, so without him, without the things he did for her, the words he said to her, the way he touched her, and the things he made her feel, she'd be breathless, heartless... lifeless, scraps ripe for Agro's dogs.

“I guess you're not angry with me,” she whispered, attempting to trace the contours of his pecs, but her flimsy muscles wouldn't allow it.

His lungs slowed as he peeked at her with one incredulous eye. “Why on earth would I be angry with you?”

“Well... because I was demanding and selfish, making you wait while I got mine. That wasn't very fair of me.”

“Layla, Layla, Layla. What am I going

to do with you?" He took her by the waist and slid her up his torso, pulling himself from her body while laying her cheek on his shoulder. "Hey."

"Hey back."

"What you just did to me was incredible," he assured. "Hearing your demands shot my arousal and ego through the roof, and giving you what you want turns me on in ways that wouldn't make much sense to anyone else. I get a full-body high when I please you."

Moving a forefinger to one of his dimples, she finally found her smile. "No one pleases me like you do, Quin. You're amazing."

"You amaze me every day, Layla."

You're like an eclipse, but somehow, at the same time, you're like the sun. Everything's shadowed by your beautiful face, and the rest of the world fades away when you express your lovely heart, yet somehow, you shed light on everything around you, effortlessly nurturing the people you choose to share your soul with. There's nothing else like you out there. There never has been. You're the brightest star that's ever burned, and I'm beyond blessed you choose to burn me.”

“You say such beautiful things to me, Quin. I'm the blessed one. You never fail to give me what I need.”

“Well that's exactly what I need, so we're in good shape.” He tucked her hair

behind her ear then stroked her cheek with his thumb. "I love you, Layla. You're my life, and I'll spend whatever time I have left on earth making sure you're taken care of."

"I know. Everything you do proves that."

"Good."

"You know, right?"

"That you love me?"

"Yeah."

"Of course, angel. You show me constantly. There's not a doubt in my mind I have the love of the most perfect woman who'll ever walk this earth."

"So if I'm perfect, and you're perfect, maybe we should be immortalized in stone."

“Makes sense. Where should they put it? In the city of love next to the Eiffel Tower? Or in front of Lady Liberty? Or they could carve us into Mount Rushmore.”

“Hmm... how about on top of Lady Liberty's flame? It can represent our burning desire.”

He laughed as he gave her bottom lip a gentle tug. “Perfect. There's nothing more welcoming or more beautiful than you.”

“Not everyone feels the way you do,” she countered, moving her face closer to his. “But it would be better world if they did, because you have the most amazing heart of anyone I've met.”

“Only because it's beating your name.”

“That’s not true. I’ve seen evidence otherwise; people you left your mark on long before I came around.”

“I’m sure you’ve touched more lives than you realize, love. Oklahoma lost a star when you left.”

“I’m a different person now, Quin. You don’t know what I was like in Oklahoma.”

“I know this heart,” he replied, rubbing the left side of her back, “and it’s always been beautiful. Nothing can change that.”

“But it has changed. It’s bigger now, and it grows every day. It feels things it never felt before, and it’s so full, it seems more susceptible to pain. I’m like a walking puzzle that hasn’t been glued

together. If you touch me wrong, I crumble as my heart bleeds the excess weight.”

“You've always had a big heart, Layla. You just have more people to share it with now. And even though I hate to see you hurt, your emotional capacity is one of the reasons I fell in love with you.”

She grinned and cuddled closer.

“When did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That you were in love with me?” She loved hearing his stories. They wrapped her insides in a warm and blissful cocoon.

He returned her smile and gave her a kiss. “I loved you the moment I met

you.”

“No you didn’t.”

“I did,” he insisted. “I loved your aura, your face, your voice. Then I learned your name and loved you even more. You were the witch I’d never known but always loved. However, it’s not quite accurate to say I instantly fell *in love* with you. That happened gradually. Every minute I spent with you made me want to stay, and with every word you spoke, you managed to work deeper into my heart. You still do by the way. That hasn’t changed. But back to my point. Yes, I fell for you constantly and gradually, but I can tell you the moment I realized I was in love with you, the moment my life became crystal clear. I

guess you could say I saw the light.”

He paused, running his fingers through her hair while studying her face. He already had her features memorized; his brain could summon a perfect replica of her. But it was a mere reproduction, one that could never equal the work of art it attempted to emulate. The moments he spent looking at the original were the most amazing moments of his life.

“I told you as soon as I knew, Layla. I didn't hide it. You were so happy, jumping in the wave you'd summoned up the cliff, and as I watched you, I felt you, not just in my heart, everywhere. You'd taken over and become as vital to my happiness as air is to my life. In that moment, I found everything I've ever

wanted and more. Your resilience, your spirit, and a heart like no other, all wrapped up in the most beautiful package imaginable. Then you smiled up at me and... well, of course I fell in love. Anybody would have.”

Tears swarmed her eyes as she laid a hand on his cheek. “That's a lot more beautiful than my story.”

He grinned and kissed her nose. “That's because you're more beautiful than I am.”

“No,” she disagreed. “It's because I'm a bumbling idiot who doesn't know how to interpret my emotions, let alone express them.”

“You were never a bumbling idiot, but you did have a hard time expressing

yourself.”

“To say the least.”

“You're much better at it now.”

“To say the least.”

He laughed, which made her smile, and he took the opportunity to kiss her grin. “So,” he whispered, “now that you can express yourself, tell me – when did you realize you were in love with me?”

Her cheeks flushed, and he laughed again.

“You're laughing at me,” she accused.

“I think it's funny you still blush around me,” he confessed. “I like it, though, so don't try to change.”

“It's good you like it, because I can't change.”

“May I ask why you're blushing?”

She sighed and slid her fingers into his hair. “Because my story isn't very good. I didn't have any epiphanies while standing on a magical cliff.”

“I know you struggled with your feelings for me, Layla. You don't have to be ashamed of that.”

“I'm not ashamed. I just wish I had a beautiful story for you.”

“I see. But I'd rather live the beautiful story than hear it, and I was there every day. I'm still living it.”

“But...see, the thing is...” Her nose wrinkled as the rest of her sentence rushed out. “It was the one time you weren't there that made me realize I was in love with you.”

His eyebrows furrowed as his heart

and arms squeezed. “Regrettably, I wasn't there on more than one occasion, so you'll have to be more specific.”

“There's only one, Quin. The one time I had to wake up in my bed without you next to me. That's when I knew. I've never felt so empty. It was horrible, and I knew then I'd never get over you. You were there to stay, whether I had you or not.”

“I'm sorry I wasn't there,” he whispered. “That was my fault, and I never should have let it happen.”

“Don't apologize, Quin. You've more than made up for your absence that morning. Besides, you can figure in some time served since it took me a while to tell you I love you. That's

another reason my story isn't pretty. Even after you'd said those beautiful words on our cliff, even though I already knew I was in love with you, I didn't tell you. Not until I faced death did I regret my silence. When I thought my time was up, the thing I wanted most was the chance to tell you how I felt... how I feel."

"But you were showing me long before that, and you do it with more beauty and grace than any story could portray."

"I love you, Quin."

"I know."

"I know you know, but I have to make up for lost time." She flashed a grin as her eyes twinkled. "I love you."

He smiled and tightened his hug. “You don't have to make up for anything.”

“I do. I love you.”

He laughed and nuzzled her nose.

“Are you going to start saying that at the end of all your sentences?”

“I could... I love you. Maybe I'll use it in place of a period... I love you. Every time you hear me say it, consider it a pause... I love you.”

He laughed again, reveling in her playful spirit. “I think that might get confusing if other people are trying to follow what you're saying.”

“Good point. Guess I'll have to get in as many as I can while we're alone.” She took a deep breath then let it out, saying *I love you* over and over again until she

needed to draw another breath. Then she repeated the process.

He watched her vivacious determination, committing every detail of the carefree moment to memory, and when she paused to inhale again, he interrupted her game by tickling her ribs.

“Hey,” she squealed, wiggling and tilting her head.

He dove for her neck, his hands coming to a rest on her sides, and as his lips found her pulse, they both stilled, listening to each other breathe as their hearts beat in sync.

“I love you, Layla,” he whispered, and she tickled his scalp with a sweet sigh.

“I love you, too, Quin.”

Chapter 16

Around dinnertime, Layla and Quin left their blissful bubble and walked onto the lawn, finding everyone seated at the dinner table. The entire coven was there, except for Lann, who was keeping an eye on Agro's camp. Weylin, Kegan and the five guests from out of town were also present, and everyone had just begun to eat.

They looked up as Layla and Quin approached, and Layla's heart squeezed at the sight of her grandparents' expressions and auras. They were worried sick about her, and she wasn't

doing enough to reassure them. Walking to each of them in turn, she wrapped her arms around their shoulders and kissed their heads, and they noticeably cheered up, giving her heart a reprieve.

Quin held her chair out as he waited for her to finish. Then they took their seats between Morrigan and Cordelia. Everyone went back to their meals, and Quin filled his and Layla's plates as she studied the surrounding faces and auras.

Everyone was remarkably subdued and remained that way through the first half of dinner, barely speaking and using low voices when they did. The silence depressed Layla, the weight of it adding layers to her guilt. Not one time had she known her family to go so long without

saying a positive word, let alone without saying anything at all, and as she watched their faces, she wondered if they kept quiet due to despair, or if they were walking on eggshells because she was an emotional train wreck.

She glanced at Quin, who seemed calm and contemplative as he ate. Then another thought struck Layla, and her throat swelled as she searched everyone's auras. Maybe they were mad at her for taking off from the glacier only an hour and a half after getting there. Maybe they thought she'd been rude, and that she should acknowledge her lack of consideration and apologize for her ridiculous emotional outburst.

With a great deal of effort, she

swallowed the bite she'd been chewing. Then she tried to strengthen her nerve while taking three large drinks of wine. Once the goblet was back on the table, she looked up and cleared her throat. "I'm sorry I took off like that earlier." It was the loudest anyone had spoken since she'd sat down. "That was rude of me to leave everyone standing there with no reason to stay. I'm sorry I didn't take that into consideration."

Quin stared at her with wide eyes, his chewing on hold. Then he scowled and swallowed. "Why are you apologizing?"

She straightened her shoulders and scowled back. "Because it's the polite thing to do when you make a rude exit."

"Nobody here thinks you were rude,

and if by some chance they do, they can take it up with me, because I'm the one who carried you out of there. And if they're mad at me, they can piss off, because I'm not apologizing.”

He took a bite, and Layla watched him with her mouth hanging open.

After swallowing, he raised his eyebrows at her. “What?”

“That was rude,” she pointed out, stunned by his behavior. Usually he was an exemplar of politeness, especially around his family.

He grinned and stabbed another bite. “Were you offended?”

“Well, no, I guess not, but they might have been.”

He looked around the table. “Did I

offend someone?”

A few people mumbled *no* while others shook their heads or waved a dismissive hand. Then Weylin set his fork down with a noisy clang, a mischievous glimmer in his sea-green eyes. “As a matter of fact,” he objected, elbowing Banning in the side, “you did offend me. Bann, too. He just told me so.”

Quin laughed and took a bite. “So what do you want, Wey? An apology?”

“Hell, yeah, I want an apology.”

“And if I don't give it to you? Will Bann whip me into shape?”

Several people laughed, and Layla raised an eyebrow at Quin's feistiness.

Weylin slapped Banning's back while

taking a heaping bite of mashed potatoes. “Go for it, kid. Show Quin what happens when he forgets his manners.”

“You must think I’m an idiot,” Banning refused. “Quin would tie me in a knot.”

Quin pointed his fork at Banning. “Smart kid. You should take a lesson from him, Wey.”

Weylin’s eyes narrowed, and Quin set his fork down while pulling his arm from around Layla’s shoulders. Flashing her a wink, he scooted his chair back. Then he turned his ornery dimples on Weylin. “You could use some more common sense. You’re about as clever as that plate you’re scraping clean.”

Weylin impishly grinned. Then he soared over the table as Quin shot into

the air. Their bodies collided with a loud crunch, and Layla jolted as they flew backward. She twisted in her chair, gasping as they hit the ground rolling. Then they both jumped to their feet, meeting each other's stare for a split second before moving into battle.

Layla clutched the back of her chair and started to rise, but Morrigan's palm came down on her shoulder, returning her to the seat. "Don't worry, sweetie. They'll be fine."

Morrigan casually speared a bite, and Layla returned her incredulous gaze to the wrestling match, wondering how Quin could possibly equal Weylin in a physical battle, a question soon answered. Speed... sexy and shirtless

speed. With athletic grace and extraordinary reflexes, Quin stayed a step ahead of Weylin, anticipating every move before it could be executed. And Weylin was far from slow or clumsy. Considering his size, he was incredibly agile, and he probably would have looked damn sexy if he'd been shirtless, but after nearly five minutes of cat and mouse, he began wearing down, so Quin showed mercy and made his move. Dodging Weylin's grab, Quin darted in and swept the giant's legs out from under him while slamming his shoulder into his chest.

Layla gasped as Weylin's back hit the ground, no doubt knocking the breath from his huge lungs and shooting pain

through his massive body, but he didn't express a hint of distress. Quin flew into the air, and Weylin immediately jumped to his feet, smiling as he shook his head.

Quin descended and landed next to his chair. "I don't know why you put yourself through this, Wey. You haven't defeated me in seven years." He sat then wrapped a perfectly relaxed arm around Layla's tense shoulders.

Giving a defiant laugh, Weylin flew over the table and reclaimed his chair. "When it comes to backing down from a challenge or getting slammed to the ground, I choose getting slammed. At least I get practice that way. And that's a lesson you can take from me," he added, jabbing Banning in the ribs. "If you back

down once, you'll back down again. Then you'll find yourself backing down every time. You'll never know if you can win, because you've doomed yourself to lose."

"Point taken," Banning conceded, "but you're forgetting something."

"What's that?" Weylin asked, picking up his steak with his fingers.

"I've known Quin my entire life," Banning explained, "and I've watched him slam you, the biggest wizard I know, to the ground on numerous occasions. I can't beat him. It's a fact, so even though I love a good concussion and a broken rib or two, I'll leave the challenges with Quin up to you, because you can't seem to get enough of them."

Quin laughed and nodded. “Like I said, smart kid.”

“Well it doesn't take a genius to figure it out,” Brietta cut in. “I mean, really, Wey, you're the only one who can't get it through your head.”

Kegan laughed, and Weylin looked at him. “You think Bri's funny?”

“I know she is,” Kegan answered, “and she's right. I gave up on Quin's challenges six years ago, and I don't understand why you continue to try.”

“Weylin has a lot of pride,” Brietta noted. “Even when Quin's stomping on it.”

“I think Weylin makes a good point,” Layla interjected.

Everyone looked at her, and their

collective reaction made her blush, so she dropped her gaze and took a drink.

“Thanks, gorgeous,” Weylin returned. “I got the angel's vote. I win.”

An uncomfortable stretch of silence passed. Then Quin pulled Layla close and stroked her hot cheek. “So tell us, what should we take from Weylin's point?”

She swallowed then straightened, but she couldn't make herself look up. “Well, I'm not saying Weylin isn't pigheaded with a primordial and testosterone-driven urge to prove himself.” She threw Weylin an ornery grin, and he chuckled as he bit into his steak. “However,” she went on, “I think we can all draw inspiration from his

determination, resilience and confidence. Those are admirable qualities. A person lacking any one of them will most likely face desperate times at one point or another.”

“Hear, hear,” Caitrin called, lifting his goblet, and the rest of the family and guests followed suit, chorusing their agreement and swigging their drinks.

Weylin drained his cup. Then he laughed as he looked at Layla.

“Apparently I need you to interpret my points for me, gorgeous. Only when an angel speaks them do they make perfect sense.”

“I wouldn't say it made perfect sense,” she disagreed. “Bann's point made as much sense as yours. Why on earth

would you volunteer to get slammed to the ground? All that determination, resilience and confidence is being wasted. You're putting them toward a pointless effort.”

“Hear, hear,” Banning proclaimed, smiling as he raised his goblet, and the family chimed their bold agreement.

Quin returned his glass to the table and summoned a chocolate chip cookie, passing it over to Layla. “You should have aspired to be a judge, my love. You seem to see both sides of a debate with crystal clear vision.”

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “Sounds like an awful job, drawing conclusions on people you don't know, conclusions that might have

a profound effect on multiple lives. I can't imagine the stress, uncertainty and guilt. I understand judgment is a way to protect ourselves, but it's a flawed system." Looking up, she realized every person at the table, right down to little Alana, was staring at her as she rambled on, and heat flooded her cheeks as she dropped her head. "Anyway," she hurriedly concluded, "judgment is a necessary evil, and those who take on that burden put themselves in a position of life-altering power, essentially playing god. I don't want any part of that." Her stomach tightened as she fidgeted with her cookie, and because she was at loss of what to do, she forced a bite down her swollen throat. She felt

like she was in the spotlight, giving a group of bored students a lecture on molecular biology, and she had to fight the urge to hide her face in Quin's neck.

“That was insightful,” he offered, running a hand down her hair.

“I think boring might be a better word,” she countered.

Several people laughed as their attention returned to their food, and Quin took Layla by the chin, forcing her to meet his stare. “No one thought that was boring,” he whispered. “You speak beautifully, and your words are lovely. It's a privilege to be your audience.”

“Thank you,” she replied, unconvinced his words applied to anyone besides him, but she appreciated

them anyway.

He smiled and kissed her nose. Then he returned to his meal while she braved a glance at the others. Most of them had gone back to eating, but a few continued to stare. Cecelia watched her like she was the most intriguing thing that had ever lived, and Dallas studied her aura, obviously doing a little judging of his own. When she made eye contact with him, he smiled, unconcerned by the fact that she caught him staring.

Utilizing another wave of confidence, Layla leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table and her chin on her knuckles. "I have to say, Dallas, and please don't take it the wrong way when I do, but I'm surprised you haven't

already called this a bad idea and left.”

The family looked at her with wide eyes, but Dallas merely leaned forward and smiled. “Well, dear, I know the situation seems dire at the moment, but a well devised and properly orchestrated plan can work miracles.” He paused, motioning between her and Quin.

“Particularly when the conductors themselves are miracles. I won't call it hopeless when I haven't even heard how you intend to succeed.”

She raised an eyebrow and waved a hand. “Do we look like we have a smart plan?”

Several mouths fell open, and Quin leaned forward, finding her face.

“What?” she asked. “Am I being

rude?”

“Not by my standards,” Dallas assured.

He seemed to mean it, so she looked at the others. “Is this an inappropriate subject to be discussing at dinner or something?”

“No,” Caitrin answered. “There's no such thing as an inappropriate subject here. We're just surprised by your bold approach on this subject, due to its sensitivity and... well, to be honest, honey, you're not usually one to speak up.”

“But that doesn't mean we don't want to hear what you have to say,” Morrigan added. “I, for one, would love to know what's going on in your head.”

“I’m not so sure,” Layla laughed. “It’s a mess in there. My thoughts are about as organized as the closet in my old bedroom, piles that would take hours to sift through only to come out empty-handed and exhausted, wondering why you went in there in the first place.”

Quin laughed and refilled her wine. “You and your witty analogies. You’re quite good at making sense out of them.”

She flashed a smile and tilted her glass. “That’s because they do make sense.”

“I understood every word,” Weylin offered.

“Well,” Banning smirked, “if Weylin understood it, you can bet everyone else did, too.”

Weylin grabbed Banning in a headlock and ruffled his short blond hair, using magic to make it grow long and curly. Letting him go, Weylin pointed and laughed. “Look, Brayden, Bann's Goldilocks.”

Brayden burst into giggles. Then Alana joined him, and as Layla watched the children's vibrant faces and listened to the beautiful sound of their happiness, she couldn't help but laugh along. Soon, the entire table was laughing at Banning's expense, including Banning, and while a small prank ignited the lively chorus, it burned bright with the need for release. With a cloud of doom hanging over them, the positivity they thrived on had been stifled, clogging

their insides, and now the knot unwound, leaving them as light as air and ready to face the next challenge.

Chapter 17

Following dinner, the large table was cleared away and replaced by a small table bearing beverages; and the chairs were rearranged into a circle beside it. Once everyone had reclaimed their seat, Caitrin waved a hand and ignited a fire at the heart of their gathering. Then he, Catigern, Dallas and one of the twins summoned pipes, which they lit and passed to their right.

Layla leaned forward and watched the pipes work their way around the group. A few people passed without partaking, but most took a pull from the pipe before

sending it on its way. Layla studied their expressions and auras, looking for anything abnormal, but nothing stood out as odd, nothing felt odd. Not the magicians or the summoned fire or the smoke rings floating toward the night sky. Traditional rules didn't exist inside the community or apply to its magical denizens. They were removed from the world she grew up in – two worlds so close yet so far apart – and within this beautiful bubble of sorcery and abnormality, cannabis didn't have a stigma. "It's like another dimension," she mumbled.

While she watched the others, Quin watched her, wondering how she still managed to surprise and amaze him after

all the time he'd spent in her presence. Every day she revealed something new about herself, and it was never a disappointment to discover another layer of her complex personality. Each of them glittered like a star, so it was no wonder she sparkled brighter than the sun.

Tonight, he had the pleasure of watching her shed the armor she usually donned in social settings. She tended to drift through group discussions without reaching out or inviting people in. But tonight, for reasons Quin couldn't fathom, not only was she joining discussions, she was starting them, bypassing the insecure hems and haws and getting straight to her beautiful point.

“Quin!” Kegan laughed and nudged his

shoulder. “Snap out of it, man.”

Quin looked over, finding Kegan holding out a pipe. “Thanks,” he mumbled, taking the herb. Then he lit it while returning his gaze to Layla. She was watching him, and he smiled as he pulled the pipe from his lips and blew her a heart-shaped smoke ring.

Kegan laughed, and Brietta grinned as she wrapped his bicep in a hug and laid her head on his shoulder. “I think it's sweet, but you know, he was like that with her even before they bonded.”

“I remember,” Kegan replied. “It surprised me when he agreed to play hockey. I didn't think he'd be able to pry himself away from her long enough to step on the ice.”

“I know,” Brietta giggled. “I had to talk him into it.”

“That explains it. You can talk anyone into anything. If you're selling it, people are buying it.”

Layla listened to their conversation while examining the pipe Quin handed her. The wooden stem was carved with the same markings Quin used in her library, and the dark stain was polished to a shine, reflecting the fire and moon. She had no idea how to smoke by herself, and while it didn't look difficult, she didn't want to make a fool of herself by fumbling through the process like an amateur, particularly since everyone who'd already taken a turn looked normal and not at all klutzy. They'd

probably suggest she not partake if she couldn't even handle lighting the thing.

Quin leaned forward and quietly spoke. "Want some help?"

"No," she answered, stubbornly tilting her chin. "I can do it... I think." Holding up a forefinger, she summoned a small flame. Then she grinned at Quin. "Had to make sure I wouldn't disintegrate it."

He laughed as he sat back, but his gaze stayed on her profile as she tucked the stem of the pipe in her lips and carefully sucked while lighting the herb. Once she felt the smoke enter her lungs, she passed the pipe and slowly exhaled, glad she hadn't screwed up.

Nevertheless, she had no interest in pushing her luck, so she declined when

the next three offers came around.

Banning, Grant and Weylin were holding a spirited conversation about hockey tactics, and she humorously listened in until Quin grabbed her attention. “Brace yourself, love.” His magic clutched her body, and she relaxed as he floated her onto his lap. Sweeping her hair aside, he ran a forefinger down her neck, but when he got to her collarbone, he paused and found her eyes. “You seemed content sitting by yourself. Would you like me to return you to your seat?”

She took his hand and cuddled into his chest, kissing his fingertips as she looked up. “I was content, but this is much better.”

“I’m glad you think so, because I was missing you.”

He leaned in, kissing her forehead as light tingles slipped between them, and she giggled as her entire face twitched. Pulling his fingers from her lips, she buried herself in his neck, her smile parting around his strong pulse, and he sighed while wrapping her in a warm hug.

“We better get on with our discussion,” Kemble smirked, “before we lose two of our members for the evening.”

“By the look of those lights,” Brietta giggled, “we’ve already lost them.”

“Isn’t it interesting,” Kegan noted, “that *we’re* the ones who seem out of

place? Like the glow they're drowning us in is as natural and necessary as air, but we don't have the lungs for it."

"It's beautiful," Brietta whispered.

"It's inspiring," Kegan replied.

"Yes," Catigern agreed, "it's all of those things and more, and we're extremely lucky we get to witness it, but perhaps we should figure out a way to keep it alive."

Quin breathed deep then whispered. "You have to let me focus, love."

Her mouth closed and stilled, and he pulled his face from her curls and shook his head. Glancing around, he shrugged and flashed a smile. "What could I do? She'd found my kryptonite."

Layla giggled, but no one else

responded. They just stared with dumbfounded fascination, a reaction that made the difficult decision Quin had come to earlier in the evening even harder to swallow. If their family stared at them that way, he couldn't imagine what strangers would do, and his stomach tightened at the mere thought of his angel being endlessly ogled.

“I believe we have a discussion to get on with,” he pressed, looking around. “Unless you’re waiting for us to go back to what we were doing so you can continue to stare.”

Layla laughed again, and as she peeked from his neck to see what he saw, her mental voice entered his head. *‘Watch the fire.’*

Quin flipped his gaze to the flames as they loudly popped, and the surrounding magicians nearly fell from their chairs as the blaze expanded with a loud roar.

Flashing from one bright color to another, the fire rolled high into the air, illuminating the entire lawn and its shocked inhabitants. Then a final boom made them all jolt before the flames swirled into a cyclone and subsided.

Layla and Quin watched with amused smirks while everyone attempted to compose themselves, straightening in their chairs as leery pets slowly settled back in.

“Good one, love,” Quin approved. “That will teach them to interrupt us for no reason.”

“Yeah,” Brietta sarcastically agreed.
“Really good one, if you consider an exploding heart good.”

“*I* thought it was funny,” Alana offered, giggling at Selena, who held one hand to her own chest and one to her daughter’s.

“Me, too,” Brayden agreed, staring at the fire with an ornery gleam in his eye.

“Oh great, Layla,” Selena cut in.
“Now you’ve given Brayden another trick to play on us.”

“Glad I could help,” Layla laughed.
“But remember, Brayden, you have to pick your moments carefully. It’s all about the timing.”

“Pick my moments carefully,”
Brayden repeated. “Got it.”

Caitrin laughed as he pulled Morrigan under his arm and leaned back. “We really should get on with it. So what do you think, Quinlan? This is your call.”

Quin looked at Layla, who looked back, her gaze a trusting sea of innocence. She wouldn’t remain so naïve. Not after this. He pulled her wrist to his lips. Then he closed his eyes and breathed deep.

“Call them in,” he answered, finding Caitrin's stare.

“You’re sure?” Caitrin asked, nodding his agreement.

“I am,” Quin confirmed. “It really comes down to two options. Either we accept the probability of dying now, or we expose ourselves, improve our odds,

and face the possibility of dying later. I choose later.”

“Wise choice,” Caitrin approved. “So we’re calling in strangers.”

“Yes.”

“How do you want to do it?”

“I don't want them near our homes. I suggest they stay in the clearing southwest of Mount Hood, the one used for our local herb festivals. It's big enough to hold a crowd, but not too big to conceal. It's also a good distance away from the glacier, our community, and Agro, so as long as it's not in use and everyone agrees, let's secure it.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“Yes I have.”

“Good,” Caitrin replied. “We'll make

sure nothing's set to happen there in the next two weeks. Now, we need to spread the word, and with that, there's inevitable risk.”

“Yes,” Quin sighed, wrapping a spiral around his finger. “But it's a risk we're going to have to take.”

“Will you reveal yourselves to the strangers?” Caitrin asked, motioning to their bright hazes.

“They'll see us and our work,” Quin answered, “but they won't see our lights until it's absolutely necessary, and it will become necessary. We can't face Agro with our auras and bonded lights concealed, but that doesn't mean he needs a heads up. If someone from his cesspool makes it into our allies’

clearing, the less information we give them the better.”

Caitrin nodded then looked around the circle. “Obviously this will be a group effort. Once the help arrives, we’ll need to keep an eye on them while providing them with necessities. Secrecy will be of the utmost importance, so we’re talking about living in a way most of you have never lived before. We’ll be hiding ourselves and our auras, covering our tracks, and with three different locations – our home, the glacier and the allies’ clearing – there will be a lot of daily travel. I’m sure I already know your answers, but as our coven is a democracy and I don’t believe Quinlan and Layla would have it any other way,

let's see where everyone stands and open the floor for objections.” He paused, scanning everyone's faces. “Does anyone have a problem with our plan?”

A moment of silence passed. Then Catigern spoke for them all. “We'll do whatever's necessary, Caitrin.”

Caitrin smiled and squeezed Morrigan's hand. “We're lucky to be members of such an amazing coven. Thank you. Now, to spread the word...” He searched out Dallas. “Are there others like you, Dallas? Others who've sat in on battle plans, then removed themselves from the failed efforts before it was too late?”

“Of course,” Dallas answered.

“There's a group of six who hail from one coven. They've been waiting fifty-three years for retribution. I've seen them at two different strategy meetings. Then there are two wizards and a witch who've sat in on the same plans as I on four separate occasions, and another handful I've met at one or two of the doomed gatherings.”

“Do you know how to contact them?”

“Yes, and while I can't vouch for their personalities, I can tell you that when it comes to Agro, their intentions are clear.”

“Call them. We understand they're reluctant to join without a reasonable chance of success, so we'll meet them in Portland and consider welcoming them

into our community. If we feel they can be trusted, we'll let them deeper into our plans than the others.”

“I'll make the calls in the morning,” Dallas agreed.

“Everyone needs to start making calls in the morning,” Caitrin added. “If you trust them, call them, and be sure to stress our need for secrecy and the ticking clock. Have your friends and relatives pass the word on to people they know and trust, and if they have someone in mind already, try to get the contact information and make the call yourself. We'll have the location secured shortly after daybreak, so contact me in the morning and I'll give you its latitude and longitude points to pass on to the

volunteers. Tell them they'll be provided for, and make sure they understand peace will be kept in the camp at all costs, so if they enjoy anarchy, they should stay home. We'll not tolerate hotheads with a disregard for other people's rights." He stood, and the fire died down. "Oh, and no children. Eighteen and over. No exceptions. If you have any questions or worries, let us know, and if you're even the slightest bit unsure about something when you're spreading the word, run it by us before going any further. Any questions?"

Weylin leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he cocked an eyebrow. "What about the locals, Caitrin? Are you not going to enlist the

help of your closest friends?”

Caitrin sighed and looked at Quin, who tore his gaze from Layla’s sad eyes and rubbed his tight jaw. “Your coven has no history with Agro, Weylin. There’s no reason for you and Kegan to bring your families into this.”

Weylin scoffed as Kegan scowled.

“No reason?” Kegan asked. “They’d object to the murder of everyone here.” He paused and found Caitrin. “You and my grandpa have been friends your entire lives. He stood beside you at your wedding. Or how about you, Cat? How many times have you come to the aid of my coven? Don’t you think my family is as committed to helping and protecting their friends and neighbors as you are?”

Everyone remained quiet, so Kegan motioned to himself. "What if it were the other way around and I was being targeted? What would you do?"

"We get your point," Quin interjected.

"Good," Kegan returned, "because not only would they be willing to help, they're trustworthy. And our coven isn't the only one you can count on."

"No," Quin objected. "Are you suggesting we endanger the entire magical community surrounding Portland? We're talking annihilation if things go wrong. What are we supposed to do, leave every coven within a three hundred mile radius with nothing but women and children? No one here wants that, and I can guarantee Layla will put

up a rip-roaring fight to keep it from happening.”

“Got that right,” Layla mumbled.

“See?” Quin added. “Are *you* going to challenge her?”

“No,” Kegan conceded, “and I understand your concerns, but there are a few covens that are practically related to you, my own included. Are you really going to keep this from them?”

“No,” Catigern answered, and everyone looked at him. “Kegan's right, Quinlan. His coven and the Owen/Sullivan coven are like family to us. It would be a betrayal to keep this from them when we're alerting the rest of the world. Besides, we could use the trustworthy help.”

Quin's lungs burned, seared by guilt as he watched his great-grandpa. "And if things go terribly wrong and half of them lose their lives in our defense?"

"I'm not suggesting they fight."

"What?" Weylin blurted.

Catigern looked at him. "If we get enough volunteers here with personal vendettas against Agro, there's no need to pull innocents into the battle."

"Hear, hear," Layla and Quin agreed.

"But like Caitrin said," Catigern went on, "we'll need to keep a constant eye on our company while providing them with daily comforts. We could also use help sniffing out any rats, and it wouldn't hurt to add more brainpower to our battle plans."

“And if they want to fight?” Weylin countered.

“It's not their fight,” Quin returned.

Weylin scooted to the edge of his chair and intently met Quin's stare. “If this family dies, it becomes their fight, so either the circle of revenge continues, or we band together to take the bastard down.”

“Then you'll have the choice to do so,” Catigern cut in. “As will your family.”

Quin sadly shook his head as his stomach churned, and Catigern quietly cleared his throat before going on.

“They're a smart group of magicians, Quinlan. They'll do what's right for their family, just as we're doing what's right

for ours.”

“Then it's settled,” Weylin approved, getting to his feet and finding Layla.

“When do you want to meet them, gorgeous? We can't just tell them about you. They'll never believe us. You and Quin are going to have to shove it in their faces.”

“Whenever,” Layla mumbled, laying her head on Quin's shoulder.

He kissed her forehead then looked at Weylin. “Find out when you can get everyone together then let us know. We'll come to you.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Weylin agreed, rubbing his hands together as he winked at Layla. “I know you're uncomfortable with it, but I can't wait to see my

family's expressions when their eyes behold a true angel. Trust me, it's going to be fun, and aside from their stares, which, let's face it, would be hard to contain, they'll be sure to treat you right, so try not to worry."

Layla smirked and raised an eyebrow. "I have to tell you, Wey, your coven's reaction to me isn't too high on my list of concerns."

"Good. It shouldn't be." He looked at his timepiece. Then found Kegan. "I need to go. You coming?"

Kegan nodded then looked at Brietta, who was staring at him with big, multicolored, doe-eyes and a sad pucker. Kegan laughed as he kissed her pout. Then he turned back to Weylin.

“Go ahead. I'll be home in the morning.”

Brietta grinned and laid her cheek on Kegan's bicep, and Weylin offered everyone a wave. “Thanks for dinner. See you guys tomorrow.”

Everyone else leisurely got to their feet. Then most of them began saying goodbye. The five guests were given the choice of remaining in the community or going to Karena's inn, and they all chose to stay, so they were filled in on the contingency plan should the Unforgivables show up.

Drystan would soon be relieving Lann of his position over the Unforgivables' settlement, so he was saying goodbye to his wife and kids, and another six wizards were taking up border patrol for

the night.

Layla and Quin hung around, concealing Drystan and saying their farewells; and when the lawn finally settled down, Layla glanced between her grandparents and Quin, struggling with an internal battle. It was fairly early, and while her first impulse was to grab Quin and retreat to their bubble, she wished she could spend more time with her grandparents. They were constantly stealing glimpses of her, and despite their endless understanding, it had to upset them to sacrifice this time with her so she could be alone with Quin.

She found his attentive eyes and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Hey.”

“Are you finally going to tell me what you’re scheming on?” he asked, taking her cheeks.

She smiled as her heart swelled. “You could tell, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn't you ask?”

“I assumed you’d tell me when you were ready. So what's on your mind?”

“My grandparents.”

“Ahh... What else?”

“You.”

He leaned in for a sweet kiss. “I love that.”

“I know you do.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“Lots of things, all of them with you by my side.” She grinned and raised her

eyebrows. “Or in front of me, or behind me, or beneath me... I'm sure you get my point.”

“I do,” he laughed, “and I think it's the most arousing point I've ever heard. But I get the feeling I need to rein myself in for a while.”

She bit her lip as she nodded. “I was thinking it would be nice to invite my grandparents over to look at those pictures and home movies. It feels like time is running out, and I hate the thought of them not getting to see them. They got so excited when I mentioned it.”

He smiled and ran a thumb across the lip she'd been chewing. “I think that's a fantastic idea.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Don't get me wrong, I look forward to getting you alone, but I'd enjoy catching a glimpse of your past. Heaven will still be there when we're done.”

“It might take a while.”

“I don't care how late it gets, if heaven's where you want to go, I'll take you there.”

She smiled as she rested her cheek on his heart. “Okay. Do I need to buy my ticket now?”

“Silly angel,” he whispered, lowering his lips to her hair. “You ride free.”

Layla's grandparents were thrilled

with her offer to go through the photographs and videos – Morrigan actually broke into happy sobs at the invitation – so within ten minutes they were in Layla’s living room, huddled in a circle on the floor while slowly passing around snapshots of her childhood.

“Look at this one, Quinlan,” Morrigan insisted, passing him a photo.

Layla was on his lap and saw the picture the same time he did, and her cheeks flushed as she looked away.

“Don’t ask.”

“About what?” Quin laughed. “The expression on your face? Or the boy in tights trying to kiss you?”

“That’s Peter Pan,” Layla explained,

“getting a little too close for Wendy’s taste.”

“How old were you?”

“Um... around eleven. Mom loved the theater and started auditioning me for local performances when I was two.”

It took several hours to sift through eighteen years of pictures, and when they got to the end of the pile, Morrigan and Daleen began cycling through them again.

“There's still a stack of videos here,” Layla reminded them. “And feel free to take some of those. Just run them by me first if they have Katherine in them.”

Her grandmothers' auras pulsed and brightened as they began selecting photos from the huge pile, and Serafin

took the liberty of picking out a few of his favorites as well. Caitrin refilled everyone's coffee while approving the snapshots Morrigan flashed him. Then he found the oldest video and inserted it into the VCR.

Everyone looked at the TV as the screen filled with Layla's smiling face, which kept coming in and out of focus as Katherine tried to figure out her camcorder.

“How old are you in this?” Daleen asked.

“Almost seven,” Layla answered.

The shot finally panned out, showing off a blue and silver leotard, and Morrigan and Daleen cooed as Layla giggled at the younger version of herself.

Quin smiled as he tightened his hold on her, and soon he and her grandparents were seeing a side of Layla they'd never seen before.

“Okay,” Katherine announced, prompting Layla to perform for the camera.

Without a moment's hesitation, Layla began humming a tune and tap dancing... very well for such a small child, but then she grinned and started throwing in overzealous moves and humorous sound effects. The camcorder shook as Katherine quietly laughed behind it, and her enjoyment seemed to spur her adopted daughter's zest. The routine ended with Layla flashing hyper jazz hands. Then Katherine cheered as Layla

took a bow.

“Like it?” she asked, twirling a long curl around her finger.

“*Loved* it,” Katherine corrected. “Is that one of the routines you’ll do at the dance recital tonight?”

“Nope,” Layla answered, twirling in place. “That was one of my own routines.”

“I thought so,” Katherine laughed. “It looked like your work.”

“The ones I’ll do later aren’t as funny. I told Miss Janette she should let me do our tap routine dressed like Charlie Chaplin... you know, to spice things up. But would you believe she said no?”

“The nerve.”

Layla propped her hands on her

glittering hips and raised an eyebrow. “I’m telling you, mom, some people wouldn’t know entertainment even if it tapped across their face in a bowler hat and mustache.”

“If you’re on the stage, Layla Love, the audience will be entertained. I promise.”

“Maybe, but they’d laugh if I looked like Charlie Chaplin.” She broke into another dance. “I should surprise Miss Janette and extend the boring routine she’s making us do. After the others leave the stage, I’ll go into a number from *Cabaret* and mix it with the choreography from *Grease*. What do you think?” she asked, mixing soft shoe jazz with the moves of a Pink Lady.

The camera jarred as Katherine

laughed. “I think the audience would love it, but Miss Janette is another story.”

“Well she's not committed to the art of comedy. I guess I'll have to take on the exhausting job of opening her mind.”

“And you'll do it with pizazz.”

Layla pirouetted then posed with one hand and one foot out in front of her. “Of course.”

The screen went fuzzy, and everyone looked at the modern day Layla, stunned by the vivacious and intelligent little girl they'd just discovered.

Layla blushed and shook her head. “I was a goofball.”

Quin laughed as he kissed her red cheek. “Yes you were, and too cute.”

“That's an understatement,” Caitrin whispered. “That was the most beautiful bit of film I've ever seen.”

“I bet Katherine never stopped laughing,” Daleen quietly noted.

Layla shrugged and fidgeted with the tips of her hair. “She did laugh a lot, but that was her personality. It didn't have anything to do with me.”

“I'm sure it had *everything* to do with you,” Serafin disagreed. “You were an entertainer, a comedic genius at the age of seven, and cute as a button.”

“I wasn't like that around everyone,” Layla confessed. “Katherine was the only person I felt comfortable enough with to be whatever I wanted to be.”

Morrigan took a shaky breath and

wiped at blossoming tears. “That was so special, sweetie. I could watch it a million times and never get tired of it.”

Layla laughed as she magically pushed play. “How about we watch the next part instead?”

Everyone's attention returned to the screen as Layla and five other girls danced onto a stage in matching silver and blue leotards. Layla was the smallest in the bunch, obviously the youngest, but she led the others as she flawlessly performed a gymnastics routine.

Quin looked from the angel on film to the one in his arms and noticed her aura slowing as her lashes dropped and fluttered back up. He kissed her head

while cuddling her to his chest and dimming the lights, and before the dance recital was over, she was asleep.

He and her grandparents stayed put, wide awake and raptly watching every moment recorded on the pile of video tapes. They stifled their laughter so they wouldn't jar Layla awake, but occasional tears flowed as they viewed more than a decade of birthdays, holidays and events. They watched her get her driver's license on her sixteenth birthday, just in time for Katherine to surprise her with keys to her first car. They saw her dressed for prom, and watched her walk onto a football field in an evening gown to be crowned homecoming queen. They witnessed her

valedictorian speech and the opening of six college acceptance letters. And she gracefully crushed the competition in every sport she played. At sixteen, she blew an unsuspecting audience away as Shakespeare's Juliet, and at seventeen, she mesmerized an entire town when she emerged from the choir to sing a solo at the induction of Gander Creek's new mayor.

Her aura didn't show up on film, but Quin could tell when it touched the unwitting people around her, and this was particularly true with Katherine. Between the accomplishments, Katherine recorded lovely moments with just her and Layla, and on more than one occasion, Katherine had quietly gasped

and reached for her cheek or heart, tears swelling in big brown eyes as a smile curved her lips. She had to be feeling Layla's aura at the time, and though she didn't understand it, she obviously loved it. Layla would curiously watch the reaction, but then Katherine would continue with the fun and games, compelling her daughter to do the same. They'd dance in the living room, sing cheesy karaoke, or put on fashion shows and skits.

The most recently recorded tape was only half-filled, and it ended with Layla disregarding an acceptance letter to NYU, because she wanted to head west, not east. The screen went fuzzy, and everyone looked at her – a woman now,

thrust into a new world and a new identity, but the lively and fun person she'd been on the videos was still in there, stifled by worry and fear yet willing to step out when the world needed her.

The morning sun crept through the windows as Layla's grandparents waved goodbye and left, but Quin didn't move. Vanishing his and Layla's clothes, he used magic to rewind the video to her graduation speech. Then he laid his head back and closed his eyes, falling asleep with her voice in his head and her body in his arms.

Chapter 18

Guthrie couldn't have cut it any closer and kept his skin intact. The sun crept over the horizon less than five minutes after he landed in the Clatsop State Forest and directed his unit to the sleeping quarters.

“Find a place to sleep then report to the boss for inspection.”

Guthrie turned away, and his gaze flashed over Lynette, who hadn't spoken to him since he kicked her out of bed. He couldn't blame her, and it was just as well. Her silence in all matters would make their lives easier... and perhaps

longer.

As Guthrie made his way toward Agro's tent, a soldier named Wesley approached and fell into step beside him.

"Wes," Guthrie greeted. "How's it going?"

"The boss has been oddly quiet," Wesley reported. "Like the calm before the storm."

"No deaths?"

"I didn't say that. Soldiers have been trickling in, and a few of them couldn't keep their mouths shut during inspection. He also ordered the disposal of the wounded."

Guthrie halted and turned. "He what?"

"The first night you were gone,"

Wesley explained. “We were keeping about a dozen soldiers sedated until we could get a better healer in here. One of them started raising hell when we woke him for dinner, so Agro ordered us to put them all out of their misery.”

Guthrie sighed as he pulled Silestra from his cloak and laid her in the leaves. “Have you found a better healer in the newcomers?”

“Two,” Wesley answered, “or so they say. After Agro’s mass euthanasia, they have no way to prove it.”

Guthrie walked backward toward Agro’s tent as he finished the conversation. “I’m expecting more soldiers. They should be here by tomorrow. Question them as they come

in then bring me a list of everyone who claims to be exceptional healers. I want to make sure they're not cowards trying to escape the front lines. Oh, and get me a list of all the bonded children."

"Yes, sir," Wesley agreed, taking off in the opposite direction.

Guthrie turned and picked up the pace. Then he paused at the entrance of Agro's tent, composing himself before going in. The chamber was dark, but Agro was awake and sitting on his throne, his elbow on the armrest and his chin on his knuckles.

"You were born for your position," he greeted. "You have yet to fail me."

His voice was calm, and his body was relaxed, but his aura was a tumultuous

mess, as was his tent.

Stepping over a broken goblet and a torn dress, Guthrie moved closer and bowed his head. "I live to serve."

"So it would seem. Do you have soldiers for me to inspect?"

"Yes, sir, and there are more on the way."

"What about my soothsayers?"

"Vortigern says they're the best he had on hand."

"Vortigern's scum and would lie to his own mother, but when you deal in dark matters, you must tolerate shady dealers." Flipping on the lights, Agro stood and summoned a glass of wine. Then he handed it to Guthrie and nodded toward a chair. "Sit."

Guthrie did as he was told, sipping as he slid his gaze across the illuminated room. Everything was out of order, and the thick crimson rug told the story of Agro's pacing, a faded river of bare threads winding through the Persian design.

"Do you remember your first kill?" Agro asked.

Guthrie looked up, wondering why the boss was getting so personal. Maybe he was that way with all his lieutenants.

"Sure," Guthrie answered. "Why wouldn't I?"

Still following the threadbare trail across his rug, Agro stared off into space. "I don't remember mine. I was only one, barely walking, or so I hear. I

smothered an infant. Whether by accident or on purpose, nobody knows. They say my mind held no remorse or pity afterward.”

“Who are *they*?”

“The coven I was born into.” He halted next to a table and shuffled through a drawer, coming out with a pipe and herb. “I do remember my second kill, though, a deliberate murder committed when I was nine.” Turning toward Guthrie, he tucked the stem of the pipe into his lips and touched a flame to the bowl. “What did you feel the first time you committed murder?”

Guthrie’s forehead furrowed. “Sir?”

“Emotions, Guthrie. What kind of emotions? Anger, sadness, relief, guilt?”

“All of the above, I suppose. Sounds like a common line-up.”

Agro kept his gaze on Guthrie as he slowly exhaled smoke. Then he turned away and resumed his pacing. “Maybe, but I didn’t feel any of it.”

That’s because you’re a psychopath. Guthrie cleared his throat and leaned back. “So what did you feel?”

“Have you ever torn the ass off a lightning bug?”

Guthrie stifled a laugh and gave a nod. “I vaguely remember being intrigued by the light.”

“Yes, well that’s how I felt when I opened up my sister.”

A disturbing visual came to mind, but Guthrie hid his repulsion well. “She was

your science project.”

“Not really. I didn’t kill her in a quest for answers, but I found the entire process intriguing – the idea, the plan, the execution, even the stillness that swept through the air when her aura disappeared and she stopped breathing. None of it felt unnatural.”

“It didn’t bother you that your sister was gone?”

“No. She was a sweet girl, but nothing on earth is permanent. It doesn’t make sense to mourn loss; you’ll mourn your whole life. Even at nine I understood that, yet others waste their entire lives trying to disrupt the cycle. And what happens? They spend all their time mourning not only loss, but their

perpetual failure.”

The theory made little sense to Guthrie. Accepting loss and causing it were two different things. But he kept his mouth shut. If he disagreed with the boss, he'd be accepting the loss of his life sooner rather than later.

“Most of the coven branded me a lost cause at that point,” Agro went on. “I was locked up and mostly ignored. My mother tried to fix me by calling in magicians who specialized in healing and mental magic. But see, the thing is, I couldn't be fixed, because I wasn't broken. I was simply one of the lucky ones who somehow escaped the shackles of a delusional society hell-bent on fitting people into nice and neat

boxes. Compassion for the dead is useless. And guilt defies human nature. I proved that at the age of one. Babies don't cry over lives lost. They don't feel guilt and compassion. It's taught to them. Children are brainwashed into acting against the laws of nature, so their true colors stay hidden, seeping out only when they think no one's watching. I eventually played along with my family, but only as a means to escape. I grew into an old man never feeling what they wanted me to feel."

He turned and looked at Guthrie, like he wanted feedback, so Guthrie gave him a contrived reply. "You see things crystal clear, sir."

"And you?" Agro returned. "Do you

still feel guilty when looking down on your fresh kill?”

Guthrie swallowed, disheartened by the truth. “No, sir.”

“Then you’ve found your roots, a gift given by nature and restored by me.”

Guthrie bowed his head and replied through clenched teeth. “Thank you, sir.”

“I’ve spent over sixty years giving magicians the freedom to release their natural born instincts, washing away the guilt drilled into them by covens. And in return, I demand their respect and a portion of their plunders – a small price to pay considering the weight I take off their shoulders. Now, one might wonder what my motivation is. Do I do this because I want wealth and supremacy?

Or because I care about the quality of your lives?”

Care? The notion was laughable, and Guthrie smirked as he shook his head.

Agro lifted an eyebrow, a smile stretching across his gaunt face. “You’re right. I don’t give a shit about any of you.”

Ooh... shocker.

“Nor do I strive for wealth and supremacy.”

Now that was surprising.

“I do this for one reason,” Agro explained. “Self-preservation. And I don’t do it because I think my life is important. I do it because I know it’s not.” Puffing his pipe, he started pacing again. “I’ve lived longer than I thought I

would, and while there are misconceptions that I'm a greedy man, the truth is – I've never wanted anything. Sure, I've been intrigued by things and I've taken things, but I don't stay intrigued, and I don't hold things dear, because this world is a toy on loan. What happens to it is none of my concern. Desires are fleeting; those I embrace can be disregarded in the next breath. The only constant in my life is the act of staying alive. And to do that, I must stay in power, which happens to be a position with perks I can use and abuse with mild interest." He paused and looked over, motioning to Guthrie with his pipe. "You look confused."

Guthrie smoothed his expression and

leaned forward, placing his goblet on the table. “I guess I’m wondering why you’re telling me all this.”

“Because,” Agro answered, fire flashing in his steady stare, “after a life of wanting nothing, I’m ready to collect.”

Guthrie had seen the fire in Agro’s eyes many times, usually when a kill was moments away, but lately, the flame flickered constantly, threatening to roar into a blaze at the slightest misstep. “Collect?” Guthrie asked.

“Yes,” Agro confirmed. “I never mourned a loss, not until twenty-one years ago... almost to the day. And I’ve never wanted something so much I’d be willing to risk my life for it, not until

now.”

Guthrie’s confusion ebbed as he sighed. “The witch.”

“Yes,” Agro bellowed, throwing his hands in the air. “The fucking witch.”

“Why?”

Agro’s fit paused as he found Guthrie’s stare. “Come again?”

Guthrie understood he was playing with fire, but that was nothing new. And Agro didn’t need a reason to kill, so why pussyfoot around? “Why do you want her?” Guthrie clarified. “If you don’t want the power, why do you want her?”

Agro gave this a short moment of consideration then pointed with his pipe. “In the beginning, it was the power, another means to secure my position.

Then I thought she died, and for the first time in my life, I mourned a loss. That's when I realized her power was merely a perk. This witch is an anomaly, vastly different than I in so many ways. I want to experience those differences. I want to know how she sees life. Then I want to wash away her guilt and watch her eyes open to a new world. I want to watch her transform into the witch she was meant to be, a witch unburdened and unrestrained. She intrigues me like nothing else before her, because there's never been anything like her. If anyone's existence is remarkable, it's hers, and I want to leave my mark upon it."

"No offense, sir, but your logic sounds like a twisted love story."

“I don’t love, Guthrie. Haven’t you been listening?”

“But this time is different. The question is why.”

“No,” Agro barked. “The question is where the fuck is she.”

“Right,” Guthrie conceded. “You didn’t discover anything while I was gone?”

“No. I have spies posted half a mile outside their property, which they keep guarded, but the traffic in and out is slow and the witch hasn’t shown her face. We followed a group of them to an inn on the coast. It’s owned by one of them, and it seems that’s where several of them are staying, but the witch hasn’t shown up there either.”

“Then I’d say she’s in the community.”

“We don’t even have proof she’s in Oregon. If we invade that community and she isn’t there, we’ll lose the only link we have to her, and it’s a damn good link. I’m not starting from scratch on this. All four of her grandparents are in that community. If she isn’t there now, she will be eventually, and they will slip up.”

“So we wait?”

“Unfortunately, but I’m done keeping my head down.”

Guthrie set his jaw and stifled a groan. The only rational thing Agro had done since arriving in Oregon was keep his head down. Considering his volatile mood, interacting with the public was a

bad idea.

The fire had drained from Agro's eyes, leaving them rusty. "Bring me the wizard who showed up unannounced last week – Dolan Barr. We'll brief him then send him into the fray. He has until Monday, using whatever means necessary, to come up with something useful, either proof of the witch's location, or a clue leading to proof. Failure's not an option and will lead to his demise. He already seems eager to please. A threat will merely spur his motivation."

"Yes, sir," Guthrie agreed, getting to his feet. "Are you ready to inspect the newcomers?"

Agro vanished his pipe and summoned

a cloak. “Yes. I need to set the soothsayers to task. While I do that, search out six soldiers with mild appearances and low profiles. Send them to the shops owned by the Conn/Kavanaghs, including the inn. Instruct them to hang around and listen without drawing attention to themselves. They're not to act without my permission.”

“I'll see it done,” Guthrie assured, hastening from the tent.

But Agro barely noticed the exit. An image of the witch's nubile face had burned his brain, and his eyes blazed with it.

Chapter 19

Quin and Layla must have been exhausted, because neither of them stirred until the phone rang at noon. He jolted awake, making her jump as well, and she blinked away blurriness while trying to remember when or how she'd fallen asleep. Pulling her cheek from Quin's heart, she found his eyes and frowned. She'd missed her ride to heaven.

He kissed her wrinkled forehead then summoned the cordless phone. "Hello."

Tucking her face in his throat, Layla pouted against his pulse as he finished a

short conversation. Then his strong arms wrapped around her and squeezed. That's when she realized they were both nude. "When did you strip me?"

He shivered as his hand slid to her butt. "Right before falling asleep."

She was cradled in his lap, and his morning arousal nudged her hip as his fingers stretched across her backside. Tingles ignited, slithering through flesh and veins to form a web of energy, and her lips parted as her lungs quickened. "Was that phone call important?"

He tightened his grip, quietly groaning as he used her body to counter the pressure of his erection. "Yeah," he breathed. "It was pretty important. We slept through the guard change."

Torn between responsibility and bliss, she struggled to reply. “What’s that mean?”

He eased up a little, letting her breathe, but she remained tingly and insanely aroused. And if the hard-on still pressing on her hip was any indication, he wasn’t calming down either. Guess that’s what happened when they missed a trip to heaven.

“Kearny’s supposed to be watching Agro,” he explained, “but he’s using his own spells and can’t get close enough. We need to conceal Belinos so he can take Kearny’s place. Then we need to go meet Kegan's coven.”

Now that kind of killed the mood.
“Damn.”

“I’m sorry, angel. I know you’re uncomfortable meeting people.”

“I don’t care about that. Well... I mean, yeah, it makes me uncomfortable, but I don’t care. I’m just mad we’re so pressed for time.” She pulled away from his neck and found his eyes. “What happened last night? Did I fall asleep on the first video?”

His aura brightened as he smiled. “Yes. You didn’t even make it through your dance recital.”

“Geez. I must be boring.”

“Nu-uh, Layla Love, you captivated your audience. Your grandparents and I finished the videos.”

“All of them?”

“Yep, and you are unquestionably the

most magnificent creature that's ever lived.”

“They weren’t that good.”

“Yes they were, and it blows me away that you don’t comprehend your own worth or notice how others value you. People gravitate toward you, and you respond to the attention beautifully, humbly touching lives with your heart and aura, but you fail to realize why they gravitate toward you or the impression you leave on them. I’m not the only person who’s been blessed by an angel. You’re everyone’s star.”

“Nu-uh,” she disagreed, touching a forefinger to his nose. “I only shine for you. How long before we have to be outside?”

“I told them we’d be out in about thirty minutes.”

She pouted, but cuddled closer, wiggling against his arousal. “Not enough time for a proper trip to heaven, but maybe enough for a taste. Come get clean with me, and I’ll shine for you in the shower.”

He grinned as he tightened his hold and stood. “I’m a lucky man.”

After spending twenty-seven of their allotted thirty minutes in the shower, Layla and Quin skipped coffee and breakfast and rushed onto the lawn... mostly dressed. Layla managed to

remember her chrome tourmaline jewelry, but somehow forgot underwear, and Quin zapped on a pair of shorts, but didn't bother with a shirt.

The moment Layla looked over at his bare chest, she realized her error and suddenly felt nude, exposed to the breeze drifting up her dress, caressing her the way she wished Quin were caressing her right now.

They were approaching Belinos, and she didn't want to draw attention to her goof, so she attempted to summon a pair of underwear from the house straight onto her body. She felt the lace on her skin and knew the magic worked, but to be sure, she glanced down while smoothing the ruffled layers of her knee-

length skirt. Everyone would probably think it was hilarious had the garment fitted itself on the outside of her dress rather than underneath, but she'd be mortified. All was as it should be, so she looked up to watch her shirtless hero work his magic on Belinos.

Quin reached out, and Layla fixated on his bare back, seeing it in a whole new light. Literally. Illuminated by the cloudy, mid-day sun, his skin shimmered but wasn't shiny, no glares and few shadows, nothing to disrupt the graceful flow of flesh over brawn. Her vision narrowed as the world around her faded and disappeared. She couldn't look away; couldn't focus on anything save for the hard muscles shifting the terrain

of her gorgeous view. Her hand rose on its own accord, like her wrist was tied to a huge, helium-filled balloon, and as her fingertips found the center of his lower back, tingling sparks shot up her arm, flooding her body and all its sensitive parts with vibrations.

Her lungs yanked in air as her vision blurred, and she tilted her head back, squeezing her eyes shut as the surging sensations culminated in what felt like a short and powerful orgasm. Right there on the lawn!

She quietly moaned as Quin's head rolled, and Belinos cursed as he stumbled backward. Apparently skin contact with Quin put Belinos in the line of fire. "What the hell was that?"

Quin and Layla shivered. Then he reached behind him, taking her hand from his back and pulling her into a hug. “That, Belinos, is what it feels like to be touched by an angel.”

“That happens every time she touches you?”

“It generally isn’t that powerful, but yeah, she has a magic touch.”

“Sorry,” Layla mumbled. “I didn’t mean to.” She pulled her face from Quin’s chest and found his uncle. “Did I hurt you?”

“Well, no,” Belinos answered, rubbing his arms. “It just... shocked me. In more ways than one. I expected a concealment spell and got hit with something I’ve never felt before.”

Quin laughed. “Did you think I was casting odd spells on you?”

“I didn't know what to think. My brain was scrambled.”

“She tends to do that to people.”

Layla laughed and playfully bit Quin's chest. “I do not.”

“Deny it all you want, love, but you just scrambled two brains with one touch. My case is solid.”

“Fascinating,” Cecelia murmured.

“Truly,” Dallas agreed. “Someone should be recording this. These two are changing the magical world as we speak. Are you writing this stuff down?”

“Yes,” several coven members answered.

“You are?” Layla asked.

“Of course they are,” Quin answered. Then he looked at Belinos, who hadn’t yet recovered from his shocking experience. “Get over here and let me conceal you,” Quin laughed. “We need to leave soon, and we haven’t eaten breakfast.”

Layla left Quin to the task and walked to a buffet on the edge of the lawn, fixing two plates and two cups of coffee. They ate standing up, and they both remained thoughtful and quiet – her staring at her food while he stared at her.

Grabbing one more slice of apple from her plate, she looked up and vanished her dishes. “I suppose you’re wondering what I’m thinking.”

“Yes,” he confessed.

She took a bite, her gaze flitting over the people who'd put their lives on hold for her. "Well," she explained, finding Quin's eyes, "as guilty as it makes me feel, I'm wondering if we could take an hour or so for ourselves this afternoon, before it gets dark."

"Sure," he approved. "Our predicament can't get much worse, and I doubt an hour or so will make a difference. What are we taking time off for?"

She hesitated, her throat tight as she fidgeted with a curl. "Well... I want to visit my parents' memorial. It's been over a week since I was there, and the last time I went, I was really upset. I know this probably sounds weird, but I

thought it would be nice if I went back when I'm not so sad. Nice for me... and for them. Weird, I know, but..."

He cut her off with a kiss. Then he whispered across her lips. "Not weird. I think it's sweet, and I'm glad you're not so sad anymore."

She smiled as her tension eased, and he straightened, keeping his eyes on her aura while taking a bite. "Do you want to visit them by yourself?"

He held his breath as he waited for her answer, and she didn't know if it was because he did or didn't want to go. "Do you want me to go by myself?"

He slowly exhaled as his brow furrowed. "Do you remember the request I made the day after we bonded?"

Her chest deflated as she looked down. Of course she remembered. He rarely asked her for anything, so it was a big deal when he did. “You asked me to be more open and vocal about my feelings.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

He stepped closer and took her chin, forcing her gaze back up. “I don’t want you to be sorry. I want you to answer my question. Do you want to visit the memorial alone?”

“Okay,” she caved, “here's the deal. I want you to go and sit with me, but if you're uncomfortable with that, then I don't want you to go, and I'll be fine going by myself.”

He smiled as he slid his thumb across her lips. "I'll go."

"Are you sure?"

"Layla, my love, in case you haven't noticed, I don't like to be a few feet away from you, let alone out of your sight. Staying near you is my number one priority, so yes, I'm sure." He let go of her and grinned. "By the way, I know you were lying."

"About what?"

"You wouldn't be fine going by yourself."

"Yes I would..." She paused, her face growing warm as she realized he was right. If he made her go without him, she'd be nervous and missing him the entire time, and she'd end up rushing to

get back to him. “So why did you ask if you already knew the answer?”

“I didn't know, not until you told me, but once you told me you want me there, I knew it wouldn't be okay if I'm not.”

“Oh.” She narrowed her eyes on his aura. “Is that the only reason you agreed to go?”

“No. I want to go.”

His smile was easy and reassuring, so she relaxed and nibbled on her apple, hoping he'd finish his breakfast even though she was done.

“I know what you're doing, Layla.”

She huffed and rolled her eyes. “Just eat.”

He grabbed a piece of ham before vanishing his dishes, and she finished

her apple as she closed the distance between them. Taking the meat from his fingers, she fed him a bite. Then she hovered from the ground and stole a salty kiss. “I love you, Quin.”

Carefully working his fingers into her hair, he took her by the cheeks and whispered. “I know, angel. I love you, too.”

Chapter 20

Most of the coven members were busy – guarding, spying, planning or dealing with everyday life – which left only a few to welcome the newcomers due to arrive that afternoon. Insisting they didn't need escorts, Quin and Layla told the available family members to stay home. Then they used her superb concealment spells to make the trip to the Cormac/Adair community by themselves.

She'd dressed with the meet-and-greet in mind, wearing a cute, fit-and-flair dress with a knee-length skirt and layers

of peach lace, but she still felt self-conscious when she flew into the community and revealed her and Quin's bodies.

Hovering over the clearing, she blushed and looked down, finding a lawn similar to her own. Of course the houses were unique, and the people and pets were different, but it had the same shape and organization, and it gave the same impression of a peaceful fairy tale land.

“Ready?” Quin asked, pulling her against his bare chest.

She looked away from the crowd and found his dark stare. “Kiss me.”

His eyes brightened as he flashed a grin. Then he dipped her into a deep,

spine-tingling kiss that would keep her blood pumping hot for at least an hour.

His mouth eventually abandoned her, but her eyes stayed closed as she licked her lips. “That was... um... perfect. And a little cruel.”

He laughed then gave her a much softer kiss. “How about that?”

“Still perfect, but if you thought it would simmer me down, you were way off.”

“I wouldn't dream of simmering you down, Layla.”

She tucked her fingers in the front of his waistband, urging him into another kiss, and as natural tingles ignited, she mixed in some magic. The energy stretched and strengthened, making his

lower abdomen twitch, and she smiled, her tongue flitting over his bottom lip as she shot the shivers to his groin. His body went rigid as a moan gurgled in his throat, and she giggled while pulling her hands from his shorts.

She tried to back away, but he wasn't having it. One of his hands tightened around a fistful of curls as the other grasped her hip, firmly holding her against him. "My naughty angel," he softly admonished. "Are you sprouting horns on me?"

She widened her eyes. "Who me? No. I just like playing tricks."

"Well I'm tempted to show you a trick right now, and I don't think you'll like my timing."

Her eyes narrowed as her stomach flipped. “You wouldn't.”

“Wouldn't what? Take you into the forest and have my way with you before introducing you to my friends? Yes, I absolutely would.”

He was telling the truth, which kind of turned her on, but she'd be mortified if he actually went through with it. “Cool yourself down,” she smirked. “We have people down there waiting for us.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then his lids popped open as he shook his head. “Nope. That didn't help a bit.” Releasing her from his embrace, he took her hand and kissed it, spreading magical heat throughout her body. “Oh well. This won't be the first time I've

had to talk while thinking about my naked angel. Ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Tucking her under his arm, he descended toward the lawn, landing several yards away from its residents. Layla scanned the waiting coven, and had just enough time to register their curious stares before a pack of wolfhounds charged her. They were huge, like miniature horses, and they quickly covered a lot of ground with lengthy legs and bodies. Layla braced to take flight, unafraid of the dogs, but smart enough to know they could easily overpower her. Aside from the puppies in the pack, all of them would stand taller than her and could probably knock

her to the ground with a hyper nudge.

The dogs were halfway across the lawn when someone whistled, and the pack slid to a halt before dropping to their bellies. Two puppies thought they'd be sneaky and crawl forward, but two adult dogs bit their scruffs and pulled them back.

Layla laughed as she counted the beasts. Aside from the two ornery puppies, there were eight adults, but their immense size gave the impression a dozen or more lay there.

Several men stepped away from the watching group and reprimanded the dogs, who slowly rose and turned, shamefully bowing their heads as they retraced their steps. Weylin called one

of them to his side. Then they both approached Quin and Layla. When Weylin stopped, the canine sat, but its thick tail kept wagging, and its eyes stayed on Layla as its big tongue lolled from a furry face.

“Sorry about that,” Weylin offered. “We’ve never seen them run up on guests like that. Guess they already sense something. Did they scare you?”

Layla smiled and shook her head. “No, but I was ready to get out of their way.”

Weylin laughed as he pointed to the dog beside him. “They’re surprisingly gentle. This one is mine. Her name’s Otsana.”

Layla extended a hand, and the dog’s

tail went crazy as she leaned into Layla's palm, not stopping until Weylin spoke again. "Okay, Otsana, go brag to the others that you got to touch the angel first."

The dog gave Layla's hand one more shove. Then it trotted to the others with its head held high.

Weylin laughed as he watched her go. "I should have known you'd attract the beasts. I imagine most animals are drawn to you."

Layla shrugged. "No."

"Yes they are," Quin disagreed.

"No they aren't," she argued. "Our coven's pets don't act weird around me."

"Because they were warned not to."

"They were?"

“Yes, before you ever stepped on the lawn.” He paused and tilted his head.

“How have you not noticed animals are drawn to you, Layla? It must have been that way your entire life.”

Layla considered this, her mind flashing over the past twenty-one years — all the times she walked outside to find neighborhood pets on her porch; the raucous and furry greetings she’d get at the animal shelter; the butterflies that would land on her fingers; the birds and squirrels that would draw close when she was alone, but retreat to the trees when someone else came along. “I guess they do like me, but I thought it was because I gave them treats and attention, or because I was quieter than others. It

never struck me as unusual.”

Quin’s forehead furrowed. “What kind of pets did you have?”

“I didn’t have pets.”

He straightened and frowned.

“What?”

“No pets,” she repeated. “That’s the one thing mom wouldn’t let me have. Seriously, she never told me no, but animals were off limits.”

“Why?”

“She was allergic.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, love.”

“Don’t be. I spent a lot of time at the animal shelter and spoiled the neighborhood pets, so it’s not like I missed out.”

“Hmm...” He stared at her for a few

more seconds then looked away. “Well I have no doubt you’d be an excellent creature caller.”

“Creature caller?”

“Someone who excels at connecting with the minds of creatures.”

“We can do that?”

“Most of us, especially with our own pets, but there are some who can connect with just about any creature in the area, whether they've met them or not.”

Weylin's eyes lit up as he rubbed his palms together. “See if you can call Otsana.”

Layla looked between him and the dogs. “I don't know how.”

“It's the same as connecting with human minds,” Quin explained. “The

difference is the way creatures read and relay thoughts. It's not really a language; it's an assortment of feelings. You won't understand words, but with practice, you'll understand what they're trying to convey by the way they're feeling and by the way they're making you feel.”

“It sounds difficult.”

“It's extremely difficult for some. For you, it will be easy. Just try a connection for now. Don't worry about understanding her.”

“Okay,” Layla agreed, turning toward the pack. “Which one's Otsana?”

“She still boasting,” Weylin answered, “in the very middle. The one with her nose in the air.”

Layla found the target and expanded

her mind, searching for another. Then she jolted as hordes of voices invaded her head. She squeezed her eyes shut, shocked and disoriented by the river of nonsensical words and sounds splashing around her brain.

Quin's voice broke through. "Layla!" And not his mental voice. He'd yelled at her. All at once, the noisy clatter ceased, and her lungs emptied as she turned into his chest.

"What did you do?" he asked, wrapping her in a hug.

She drew a deep breath laced with his scent, trying to calm her shaking. "I don't know. Did you hear them?"

Quin's confusion grew as he stared at the top of her head, trying to piece

together the chain of events. He'd been watching her pinpoint her target, and suddenly she was in his mind, uncovering every thought, idea and memory it held, including those tucked away for safe keeping. He'd never been so exposed, and his gut reaction was brutal, an urge to grab her by the shoulders and shake her from his brain. But when he jerked his head up, he found everyone glaring at her, and his innate need to protect her kicked in.

“No,” he answered. “I didn't hear them.” He looked at Weylin. “Did she connect with your mind?”

“Intruded would be more accurate,” Weylin corrected. “She cracked me open.”

Layla gasped, and Quin tightened his hug as he narrowed his eyes on his friend. “She didn't mean to.”

Weylin held up his hands. “I didn't say she did, and I'm not mad about it, but there's a good chance your angel's ready to condemn me to hell after what she just witnessed.”

Quin grimaced as he looked down, urging Layla's face from his chest.

“What did you do, love?”

“I don't know, Quin. I was looking for Otsana's mind, but I guess I did it wrong. Tons of voices came at me.”

“That's because you tapped into every mind in this clearing.”

Her eyes widened as her mouth fell open. “But... I didn't... How could I...”

She stopped stuttering and looked at Weylin. “I swear I didn't mean to, Wey, and I promise I didn't comprehend anything. There was so much noise, I couldn't understand any of it.” She took a shaky breath and returned to Quin's chest. “They must be so angry with me. I swear I didn't mean to.”

“It's okay,” Quin soothed. “They'll understand as soon as we explain things.”

Kegan approached and held his hands out beside him. “What was that all about?”

Layla cringed, and Quin's jaw flexed as he checked his temper. “It was an accident, Keg. She was trying to connect with Otsana.”

“Ah... First creature call?”

“Yes. And apparently that’s something we need to practice in a more controlled environment. But don’t worry, she didn’t comprehend anything she heard, and you can assure your family she’d never do something like that on purpose. She’s more freaked out by this than anyone.”

“I’m sure,” Kegan replied, staring at Layla’s back. Then he cleared his throat and slapped Weylin’s shoulder. “We’ll go let them know it was an accident. Come over when you’re ready. And don’t worry about this, Layla. They’ll understand.”

She nodded, but she didn’t say anything or look at him, so after throwing Quin a sympathetic glance,

Kegan and Weylin walked away.

Layla sighed and shook her head. “So much for first impressions.”

“Hey,” Quin whispered, forcing her to look at him. “Don't worry about this. That impression will be wiped away as soon as they meet you and see how incredible you are.”

“I'm not sure they'll get over it that easy, Quin.”

“I am, but they don't concern me right now. I want to know how you feel about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, are you okay?”

“Yeah, just embarrassed and guilty.”

“Did it scare you?”

“It was jarring, yes, but I'm okay

now.”

He searched her eyes, making sure she wasn't downplaying her emotions.

“Good. Now let's talk about how amazing that was.”

“What?”

“I've never heard of anyone having that ability, Layla. Cracking open one mind is a challenge, and you unintentionally opened more than twenty. If you hone that skill, who knows what you could do with it. It could come in handy.”

“I guess, but I don't have a clue how to hone it, and what just happened wouldn't do anyone any good. It was a jumbled mess.”

“It was an unprecedented magical

feat.”

“I bet you can do it, too.”

He grinned and raised his eyebrows.

“Maybe. Then we could hone together.”

“Mm... that sounds a lot more fun than honing by myself.”

He laughed as he glanced at the waiting magicians, noting their expressions and auras had mellowed.

“Ready to go wipe those confused looks off their faces?”

Her cheeks reddened as she drew a deep breath. “Yes. I hate that I have to start the introductions with an apology.”

“You don't have to apologize, Layla.”

“Yes I do.”

“You didn't mean to.”

“That doesn't matter. If you step on

someone's toes, you apologize whether you meant to do it or not.”

“I see your point.” Pulling her under his arm, he lifted her hand to his lips.

“Let's go get this over with.”

The rest of the visit went much smoother than the beginning, and while Layla's cheeks stayed warm, the more she dealt with the process of revealing herself and her lights, the easier it became. She knew what to expect from people now, the wide eyes and open mouths, and she found the reactions easy to ignore if she had a distraction. In the case of Kegan's coven, her distraction was his niece – Shaylee.

Following Layla's bold apology, she and Quin took their seats. Then he

introduced her to the two families that comprised the coven. Layla paid close attention to this part, trying to remember at least some of the names, and after meeting over two dozen people, her gaze returned to Kegan's niece.

Shaylee had just turned one, Quin had explained. And she was precious as she sat at her mom's feet, fidgeting with a daisy while raptly staring at Layla, who was equally enthralled. The baby had bright platinum hair that stuck out in every direction because it was too thick and too short to go anywhere else, and her angular face held small, pixie-like features. Except for her eyes. Her eyes were huge and lime-green, and they sparkled like the top of a lake on a sunny

day. Her aura was small, but bright, almost the same color as her hair, and her fair skin shimmered despite the gloomy weather.

Quin went into his explanation, and Layla tuned him out, offering the baby a smile and a wave. Shaylee returned both gestures then fidgeted more intensely, like she wanted to stand, but wouldn't give in to the urge.

Layla left her chair and got comfortable on the grass in front of it, and Quin's story paused as he watched her. Once he realized she wasn't going anywhere, he continued.

Layla smiled at Shaylee while motioning for her to come over, and the baby's aura brightened as she pushed

herself to her feet and toddled across the circle. Layla patted the ground in front of her, and Shaylee sat, expectantly looking up with mesmerizing eyes.

Layla leaned close and whispered. “Hi, Shaylee. You have a very pretty name.”

To Layla’s surprise, Shaylee responded, her voice small and adorably sweet. “Ankoo.”

“You’re welcome,” Layla returned, her heart melting. “Do you like daisies?”

Shaylee gave an avid nod. “Es.”

Layla summoned a large pile of miniature daisies between them, and Shaylee’s eyes widened and twinkled.

Unable to look away from the baby’s beautiful gaze, Layla blindly picked up a

daisy. "When I was a little girl, I liked to put flowers in my friends' hair." She slowly tucked the bloom into one of her own curls as an example. Then she grabbed another. "Would you like a flower in your hair?"

"Es."

Layla tucked a daisy into Shaylee's soft, white hair, using a short-term dose of magic to help it stay. Then she leaned back and smiled. "Beautiful. Would you like one on the other side?"

"Es," Shaylee answered, handing over another daisy.

"Would you like to put one in my hair?" Layla asked.

This made the baby very happy, and she bounced while grabbing another

flower. “Es!”

Layla quietly laughed as she stretched out on the grass, lowering her head so Shaylee could reach it. “Tell you what – I’ll put some in your hair, while you put some in mine.”

This time Shaylee grabbed a whole handful of flowers. “Tay!”

Shaylee stayed quiet as she concentrated on her task, and Layla held her head perfectly still while giving the baby a crown of daisies. With time to spare, Layla moved on to a matching bracelet, so she was braiding flower stems around Shaylee’s tiny wrist when Quin said her name.

Careful not to move, Layla called back. “Yeah?”

“You can let your aura go.”

“Oh, okay.”

Worried the sudden explosion of color might scare the baby, Layla considered moving away to release it, but she couldn't make herself go anywhere. A tiny palm had just touched her cheek, and big, green eyes were intently watching her.

Layla smiled and softly tapped Shaylee's nose. “Would you like to see my aura?”

Shaylee straightened and bobbed her head. “Es.”

“Okay, but it's going to be really big and really bright, so get ready for it.”

“Tay.”

Watching the baby's eyes, Layla

released her aura, and of course she couldn't see a thing, but nearly everyone else gasped or mumbled, and she could hear Weylin laughing.

“Wow,” Shaylee exclaimed, running her fingers through the air.

Layla giggled as she glanced at Quin. “Look, Shaylee. Quin’s going to show off his aura now.”

Shaylee obeyed, and Quin smiled at her as he released his new and improved aura.

“Wow,” Shaylee repeated.

Several people stuttered questions at Quin, but he ignored them as he left his chair and lay on the ground, letting Shaylee get a closer look at his aura. Layla *was* able to see his, so it made for

a more beautiful moment when Shaylee ran her fingers through the air a second time.

Quin took a flower from the pile and transformed it into a bouquet of much larger daisies. Then he handed it to Layla while smiling at the baby. “Would you like to see some more bright lights?”

“Es,” Shaylee answered, looking back and forth between them, unsure which one would show her the lights and unwilling to miss a second of it.

Taking Layla's hand, Quin gave her a wink while warning the baby. “Here they come.”

Their bonded lights flowed free, immersing Shaylee in gold and silver mist as well as a multicolored haze, and

she excitedly bounced while lifting both hands in the air. “Wow!”

Layla reveled in the baby’s reaction, and Quin earnestly watched them both, half soaring, half heartbroken. Layla’s affinity for children, and theirs for her, was astounding. The proof swirled through their auras, sliding over him like a cool river on a scorching day. He eagerly drank it in, this rare and beautiful moment, but he mourned the moments lost when he and Layla bonded, those that starred a child of their own. And if he mourned the loss, she undoubtedly suffered under its heavy weight. But no one else would know it by looking at her. At the moment, she was wholly absorbed in a baby that

wasn't hers, one she may never see again, and she was treasuring every second like it was her last.

Chapter 21

Layla continued to play with Shaylee while Quin completed his explanation, informing everyone about the danger they were in, and just as Kegan and Weylin predicted, their families were eager to help. Quin pointed them in the right direction, telling them to coordinate with Catigern and Caitrin. Then he waited for Layla to say goodbye before taking her hand and soaring into the air.

Staying low and visible, they neared the community's boundaries, and Layla looked over, wondering why they hadn't concealed themselves.

She didn't get a chance to ask.

He tugged on her hand, spinning her to his chest. Then he dropped into thick timber, vanishing their clothes while safely maneuvering through needle covered branches. He landed, but he kept her in his arms and showered her neck and chest in kisses laced with magical heat.

Struggling to catch her breath and focus her vision, she squeezed his tense shoulders. “Quin.”

“What?” he mumbled, sliding his hands to her butt.

He lifted her higher, poising a nipple at his lips, and with another wave of magical heat, he sucked it in, his fingers emitting light shocks across her

backside.

“Not here,” she gasped. She didn’t want the coven she’d just met to hear her scream, which would happen any minute if he kept going. They’d only been on the ground for ten seconds, and he already had her chest heaving and her toes curling.

“Yes here,” he disagreed, his breath steaming up her breast. Then his pinkies dipped between her thighs as his fingers dug into pliable flesh. “Open your legs.”

As if he’d said the magic words, her knees parted and rose to his hips. She didn’t even recall making the decision. Her body made it for her.

“That’s better,” he approved, spreading her open with one hand as the

fingers of the other delved into moisture.

She arched against his touch, her nipple catching in his teeth as a moan skipped from her chest, and she didn't even care that it echoed through the timber.

He paused to listen, waiting until her voice faded away. Then he gripped her shoulder and pulled down, keeping her open with his fingers while filling her up. He didn't take it slow; he took her with a quick thrust, and when her body failed to accommodate his entire length, he forced it to, roughly squeezing her backside while grinding into her. Her cry was inevitable, her core a tight and tingly playground where pleasure outweighed pain and desire outweighed

worries. All that mattered was the hunger in his touch and how amazing it made her feel.

He paused again, listening to her voice haunt the forest. Then he raised her up, completely pulling himself from her body. She took a breath, but then she lost it when he pushed back inside, halting in her depths to revel in her vocal reaction.

When he deserted her again, she gasped and opened her eyes, finding a smile that told her he'd love to see just how loud he could make her scream. "You're cruel," she breathed.

"You love it," he countered.

And she did. Moments like these brought her a profound sense of freedom,

a release of responsibility she'd never achieved anywhere else. His arms securing her in warmth; his hands squeezing like he never wanted to let go; his body invading hers, taking over every part of her, inside and out; the force with which he ruled over her, stripping away her burdensome power, the measured pain a mere demonstration of the strength needed to shield her from the outside world as well as the conflicts within. And he did it all with the purest intentions, elevating her with devoted touches and loving kisses. Though he took control, he gave her everything, making her feel like a queen while washing away her will, and with it... her shackles.

He was inside her again, pausing to listen to her moan before abandoning his position. He did this over and over, prolonging the burn until she was a fantastic mess of sensations. She wasn't just on the brink of an orgasm. She'd already been pushed over the edge... a couple of times, but then he'd desert her, suspending her between the jump and the fall.

He left her empty once more, and she clutched fistfuls of his hair. "Quin..." As much as she loved his tricks, she was about to lose her mind.

Letting her nipple slip from his teeth, he moved his lips to hers, poised to fill her up. "What is it, angel?"

He already knew. He just wanted to

hear her say it.

“Let me come,” she breathed.

“Please.”

He pulled her down around him, throbbing inside her, and her bones sang as her body contracted. She was finally falling, and he let her, slowly rolling her against him as he inhaled her scream.

Her voice faded as her shaking quieted, and Quin smiled as he wrapped her in hug. “Better?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” he murmured, delivering a dose of warmth with a kiss. Then he braced her with magic and forced her to lie back in mid-air. “Ready for another?”

Her eyes fluttered open, and as she

gave a lazy nod, he forced her knees out and up. His palms trailed down her inner thighs, coming to a rest on the stretched valleys between her legs and pubic bone. Then his thumbs pressed on sensitive nerve-endings.

“Give me your hands,” he instructed, flipping his gaze between his point of penetration and her aura, both of them beautifully exposed and eager to accommodate him.

Her hands found his, and he took her fingers, forcing her to touch the folds of flesh stretching around his arousal. She offered no resistance, but he still scanned her for embarrassment as he urged her to apply more pressure. Her expression held no shame, only a

willingness to please and a thirst for her reward, so he left her fingers alone and took her by the thighs.

As he slowly backed away, she jolted, her hands creeping up her stomach, but he grabbed them and brought them back down. “Keep yourself open for me.”

She obediently repositioned her fingers, and he braced her with magic, his palms gripping her butt as he refilled her. The tightening of her muscles drew her thighs in, but she spread them open again, paving his way with slender appendages growing slick with her own moisture.

“Perfect,” he whispered, flashing his gaze over her aura, which brightened at the praise.

He eased back before burying himself inside her, and she quaked in his hovering spell, but her legs remained open and her hands stayed between them, her fingers enhancing her own pleasure as well as his.

Locking his hands behind his head, he built her up with long and steady thrusts, his view a delicious combination of billowing breasts, him taking her, and her aura thanking him for it. She began lifting her hips and rolling against him, her fingers rubbing herself more intensely, and a growl rumbled in his diaphragm as his gaze went to the treetops, his mind and body on the verge of exploding.

Her rhythm picked up, making his

vision blur, and he cursed as he took hold of her hips, trying not to crush them while countering her pressure and speed. Looking down, he watched her body embrace the pounding he was giving it – the rippling of slick skin and the fluctuating of heavy breasts. Then her muscles tightened, flattening the waves of flesh. Her flexed core threatened to suck him dry as she arched, forcing him as deep as he could go. Then she let out a beautiful moan that made him unload.

When the intensity ebbed and the euphoria seeped in, he twitched and blinked open his eyes. “Damn, baby, the things you do to me – they’re mind-blowing.”

She gave a raspy laugh as she scanned

his body and the air around it. “It’s not like it’s hard work – lying here on a cloud of magic while a sexy man takes me to heaven.”

He smiled as he hovered from the ground and leaned over her, wrapping her quivering body in a warm hug. “I guess you’re not mad about my timing.”

Her eyes flipped toward the lawn they’d just left, a grin tugging on her lips. “I think you wanted your friends to hear me scream.”

He laughed, nuzzling her hair out of the way so he could kiss her ear. “I doubt they heard you, and if they did, it’s not the first time they’ve heard satisfied moans coming from the forest. And that wasn’t my goal.”

“No?”

“No, love. I just didn’t want to wait for tonight.”

“I didn’t either, but we could have moved further away.”

“Then we would have had to conceal ourselves, including our auras.”

“Oh... ew.”

“Exactly. I love your aura, Layla, and I love watching it when we’re together like this. When I take your body, I take over your aura, too, and maybe it’s vain, but I love seeing myself painted with your colors.”

“Don’t you always find yourself in them?”

“Yes, but I’m not talking about having a place in your aura. I’m talking about

owning it, being the only person on your mind and in your heart, and that only happens when I own your body.”

A moment of thoughtful quiet passed – just their combined pulse and the whisper of the trees. Then she softly responded. “You do, you know?”

“Do what?”

“Own me.”

Keeping his lips to her ear, he flashed his gaze over her aura while laying a hand over her heart. “How do you feel about that?”

She laid her hand over his. “It should bother me, but it doesn’t. I want it that way, because I love how it feels, and I can accept that without shame, because I know you’ll take care of me better than I

take care of myself.”

“For as long as I live, Layla.”

He wanted to promise her a million lifetimes, all of them filled with love, security and happiness, but he only had one, and lurking danger threatened to cut it short. “We need to go, love.”

She sighed and nuzzled his neck. “I know.”

Sunset was about an hour away when Layla and Quin made it back to the community, so they went straight to Aedan and Rhosewen's memorial. Quin stood on the edge of the small clearing, making contact with his dad's mind,

while Layla took a moment by herself, revealing the names on the boulder and covering the ground in emerald-green roses.

Quin listened to his dad, but he watched Layla lie against the rock and close her eyes, glad she was comfortable enough around him to do so. When his mental conversation ended, he stayed still, waiting for her to finish her silent exchange with her parents.

She eventually pulled away from the stone and looked up. “Have you been here before?”

“Yes,” he answered, doing his best not to crush her roses as he moved to sit beside her.

“To visit them?” she asked.

He took her by the hand and raised it to his lips, magically warming her up.

“To pay my respect, yes.”

“When was the last time you were here?”

“The morning after I met you.”

“Really? Why?”

“I had to come tell them how beautiful their daughter is. And I wanted to thank them.”

“For what?”

“For giving you life... for giving you to me.”

She smiled and raised an eyebrow.

“Were you that confident you’d get me?”

“Not at all. I was a wreck that morning, plagued by doubt like never before. I didn’t know if I’d even get you

to the community, let alone earn a piece of your heart. But no matter what was in store for us, I'd found a beautiful face to go with my sweet dreams, and for that, I owed your parents the world, least of all a thank you."

She pulled his palm into a kiss. Then she placed it on the boulder, smiling as she scanned the dark-brown roses sprouting alongside the emerald blooms. "I didn't know if it would work the same since you're not related and didn't know them."

"They're as much my family as anyone else in the coven."

"But you don't share blood, and you were only a year old when they died."

"That's true, but Rhosewen and I

connected when I was born, and Aedan and I connected when he joined the coven.”

“You did?”

“Yes. When a baby's born into a coven, those who aren't blood relatives take part in a binding ritual with them, and your dad went through the same ritual you did when he moved here.”

“Oh. I didn't know. I wonder why he didn't show me that in the memories.”

“Maybe he wanted you to experience it without relating it to sad memories.”

“That makes sense.” She scooted closer to him, working her fingers between his so they were both touching the stone. “I like that they know you. I like to think that if they're aware of

what's going on right here, right now, they can rest easy knowing I'm in good hands; knowing I'm happier than I ever thought possible because of a man they know and love.”

He smiled as he played with a spiral falling across her cheek. “I have to believe that's the case, Layla, because I wouldn't feel worthy of you if I didn't believe your parents would agree.”

“Hmm...” She playfully wrinkled her nose as she shifted her gaze toward the memorial. “What do you think, guys? Is he worthy?”

More roses bloomed – dark-brown at the base with tips of emerald-green, the two colors bleeding together for a marble effect – and Layla gawked at

them before finding Quin. “I didn’t know they’d answer. Guess that’s a yes.”

Touched by the occurrence, Quin swallowed, hoping he could live up to the role of hero to such a precious life. “It would seem so.”

Noticing his concern, she moved onto his lap and pulled his hand from the boulder, bringing it to her heart instead. “You take perfect care of me, Quin.”

“I wish I could do more, Layla. I want you to have everything you deserve in life, but you keep getting things taken away.”

“That’s when I come to you,” she countered. “I can always count on you to fill the void and heal the hurt.”

“I’m glad I give you a reprieve from

the sorrow, but I'll never stop trying. Until my final breath, I'll do everything I can to give you the life you deserve. My heart might as well stop beating if it's not beating for that purpose."

A small smile of acceptance touched her lips as she watched his eyes. Then she fidgeted with his hand as she looked at the darkening sky. "Um... feel free to tell me no if you think it's weird, but will you lie here with me for a while?"

"Sure," he agreed, vanishing a patch of roses. Then he lay down and tucked her in beside him, resting her head on his arm. "And I don't feel weird about it. We'll stay like this until you're ready to move."

"Thank you."

“Anytime.”

She silently traced hearts on his chest for several seconds. Then she found his eyes and blushed. “There’s something very comforting about this.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Do you want to hear about it?”

“Of course.”

“You might think it's morbid or depressing.”

He smiled as he rolled her into a hug.
“Try me.”

“Well, it's nice to know that when all this comes to an end, whether that's tomorrow or a week from now or a hundred years from now, I'll be able to spend eternity just like this, tucked in your arms and next to your soul. I don't

know where my parents are, but my heart believes they're together, and it gives me hope that no matter what kind of death we face, we'll still have each other when it's over. And if we're lucky, maybe we'll have a memorial that the people we love can visit, touch and talk to. And maybe we can talk back by sending them gorgeous flowers the color of their eyes.”

He smiled as he touched his forehead to hers. “That's a beautiful outlook, angel. And while I'm not going to go into a lecture on spirituality at the moment, I will tell you this. There is a heaven, and someday, when our time on earth is over, we'll see your parents there. We'll be able to experience the afterlife with

the loved ones who passed before us, while staying connected to this life through the survivors we love.”

“If that's true, why is death so scary?”

“Because you can't come back, not in a way that would satisfy you, and even though you remain connected to survivors, you can't touch them like you want to. This is our only chance to experience this leg of our journey. If we didn't want to live this life to the fullest, it would be like going to our cliff without making the jump.” He wrapped his fingers into her hair and softly kissed her nose. “You and I have not lived long enough, Layla. There are so many things we haven't done. It's only been two weeks since I found my reason for

living. No way am I ready to give up the journey. And more than anything else, I want you to experience everything this stretch of road has to offer.”

“That's not possible, Quin.”

“I know, but that doesn't mean I'm going to give up.”

“You put too much pressure on yourself.”

“No I don't. I understand I may fail. I may not be able to get us through next week, but if I don't try, I might as well end it tonight. Besides, like you said, if I do fail, we still have eternity waiting for us, and I'll get my chance at a new purpose. A million and one ways to please my love in the afterlife. How does that sound?”

“Perfect.”

“No, love, it's not perfect. It's plan C. Plan A is perfect and very unlikely. Plan B is flawed but beautiful. And plan C is a contingency plan we'll use as a last resort.”

“I find them all lovely, Quin. I'd rather go to our cliff and not make the jump than never go at all. If I can't have the whole pie, I'll take a slice.”

He smiled as he moved his mouth to her neck and softly nibbled. “I'd definitely consider this a slice of heaven.”

She giggled as she nuzzled her way to his throat, and after a few kisses, she tucked herself into his chest. She fell silent, her body tranquil, and he played

with her hair while watching her aura. He could tell she was reflecting on her life – past, present and future – and he could tell her heart hurt for the things she'd lost... for the things she'd never get. Ever connected, his heart followed suit, squeezing with a pain more real than any he'd endured. But unlike physical wounds, there was no healing this one, not his own or hers, so he just hugged her tighter, focusing on the slice of heaven in his arms rather than the pieces he'd never hold.

Chapter 22

A light drizzle arrived with nightfall, so Layla was damp by the time she left Quin's chest and sat up. The bitter wind penetrated her lace dress, but Quin had been frequently filling her with heat since they took up their position.

“We should go,” she said, magically drying his hair.

He helped her to her feet. Then he dried her hair and dress and summoned her cloak on over them. “Anytime you want to come back here, let me know. We'll make time.”

“Thank you.”

After studying his bare torso for a moment, she magicked his cloak over it, and he pulled her into a hug as he kissed her curls. “We have three people to meet when we get to the lawn, so we need to hide our lights.”

“Okay. You get mine and I’ll get yours.”

They concealed each other’s auras and bonded lights. Then he carried her as he flew through the forest.

Despite the rain, there were over thirty people on the lawn, standing or sitting around a large fire, and the atmosphere seemed more hectic than usual. When Quin and Layla landed, several people approached them at once.

Layla's grandparents were among them, so she moved away from Quin to greet them with hugs, and he took the opportunity to wrap his arm around his mom's shoulders. "The energy on this lawn," he observed, finding his dad, "it's restless."

"Yes," Kemble confirmed.

Layla finished her greetings and moved back to Quin, so he pulled her under his free arm. He wore a contemplative expression as he looked from his mom's platinum waves to Layla's ebony curls. Then he shook his head and found his dad. "What's going on?"

"Several things," Kemble answered, "but let's get the newest introductions out

of the way first. We don't have time to waste, so make them as short as possible while remaining thorough.”

Quin gave a nod as headed for the circle of chairs surrounding the fire.

“Should I be concerned?”

“No,” Kemble answered.

Quin stopped outside the crowd and kissed his mom's head. Then he let go of her and turned toward Layla. “How do you want to do this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, now that we’re involving strangers, secrecy is pointless. We don't need to go through the process of finding out why these guys are here, so we can skip the formalities and get to the point.”

Layla smiled and raised her

eyebrows. “No sad stories and less time holding in our lights. Let's do it.”

He returned her smile then led her to their company. “Hi. I'm Quin, and this is Layla.” He went down the line, shaking their hands, and Layla politely followed suit.

The three newcomers were Brennan, Bryant and Broderick, brothers who hailed from a coven in New Hampshire. They'd been contacted by Arlen, who'd been good childhood friends with the trio.

Once the introductions were made, Quin cut to the chase. “Layla and I have a lot on our plates, so I'm not going into detail about our situation. I apologize for the abruptness, but anyone here will be

able to answer your questions. I hope you won't find us rude for rushing this along. That being said, I'm sure you've noticed the extraordinary amount of gold floating around, and our situation has everything to do with that. Those two bonded couples there..." He pointed to Layla's grandparents then paused and looked at the brothers. "You've met them all, right?"

The three guests gave a nod, so Quin continued. "Good. Well here's the deal – their son and their daughter bonded."

"What?" Broderick asked, sharing a look of confusion with his brothers.

"Two bonded children bonded themselves," Quin clarified.

"That's not possible," Brennan argued.

“I assure you it is,” Quin countered, “and I’ll show you proof.”

Bryant raised an eyebrow and looked around. “Are they here?”

“No,” Quin answered. “Unfortunately, and with Agro’s help, they died over two decades ago.”

Bryant smirked. “So you have no proof.”

“I’m not here to debate, gentlemen. If you’ll let me finish, you’ll get your proof.” Quin waited to see if they had anything else to say then went on. “They aren’t here, but their daughter is.” He gave Layla’s shoulders a squeeze.

“Layla is the biological daughter of two bonded children who bonded themselves.”

The three brothers scanned Layla from head to toe. Then they narrowed their eyes on Quin as the eldest spoke. “We can't just take your word on that.”

“You don't have to, but before I show you proof, there's more to the story.” He pointed to his mom and dad. “I'm Kemble and Cordelia's son, a bonded child myself, and four days ago, Layla and I bonded with each other.”

Brennan loudly laughed as Broderick looked at Arlen. “Are you kidding me, Arlen? You brought us all the way here as a joke?”

Arlen chuckled as he shook his head. Then he pointed at Quin, who smiled at Layla. “Let's rest our case, love.”

“Let's,” she agreed.

They released their concealment spells, quickly putting an end to the newcomers' doubt, and Quin gave them a moment to absorb what they were seeing before wrapping it up. "This is why we have a confrontation with Agro on the horizon. Now, we understand you probably have questions, and we welcome them, but someone else will have to field them."

He shook each of their hands again. Then he led Layla to his parents. "So what's going on?"

"Conceal grandpa Cat," Kemble instructed, waving Catigern over. "Belinos needs a break."

Quin obeyed, working his magic on his great-grandfather. Then he turned

back to Kemble. "Let's hear it."

"The volunteers' clearing needs to be concealed," Kemble explained.

"That can wait until morning," Quin countered.

"No it can't," Kemble disagreed.

"There are already sixteen people there, and most will choose to fly in at night, so who knows how many will be there in the morning."

"Sixteen?"

"Yes, and that's just a tip of the iceberg."

"What makes you think so?"

"We just started spreading the word to strangers this morning, so anyone on the other side of the Rockies hasn't had time to make it here yet, even if they left right

away. If sixteen have already shown up, there are probably many more en route, and most volunteers will spend one more night with their families before their morning departure.”

“Good point,” Quin conceded. “This is a good thing.”

“Yes, but the bigger this gets, the more hectic our lives will be.”

“I guess. Is there anything else we need to take care of before we go conceal the clearing?”

“Yes. We want you to start concealing the community guards. We've doubled the security, and with that many of them using their own spells, they're easy to spot. It's probably not life or death considering we have eyes on Agro's

camp, but you might as well conceal them if you're around when the guard change happens.”

“That's fine,” Quin agreed. “Who's going out?”

Kemble led the way to ten wizards – five from their own coven and five from Kegan and Weylin's. “They'll be on guard until seven.”

Layla began concealing her own family members while Quin took care of the others, and Kemble continued divulging information. “Everyone will be here for breakfast in the morning, and we've invited the Cormac/Adair and Owen/Sullivan covens to join us. It would make things easier if the two of you were out here.”

Layla knew the Cormac/Adair coven was Weylin and Kegan's family, but she had no idea who the others were. After concealing her fifth and final person, she turned to Quin, awaiting his explanation, but it didn't come.

Pulling her into a hug, he looked at his dad. "We'll be here. Anything else before we go?"

"No," Kemble answered, "but we're not comfortable with you two traveling by yourselves. We know you're more capable than we are, but your mom has been a wreck today, so from now on, we're sticking with you."

"Us, too," Layla's grandparents added.

Quin smirked then looked at Layla. "Guess we have bodyguards now."

“It would seem so,” she murmured, sharing a moment with his eyes.

He gently tapped her nose then found his parents. “That’s fine, but if we want to be alone, we will be, and you guys will just have to deal with the nerves. Sorry.”

“We understand,” Cordelia insisted. “Just let us know when to get lost.”

Layla blushed, knowing she’d never take advantage of that offer, but Quin didn’t seem to have a problem with it. “We’ll try to be polite about it. Is everyone ready?”

The three golden couples nodded, so Quin picked Layla up and kissed her forehead, filling her with magical heat.

“Let’s get this over with,” he said, and

the eight of them shot toward the cloudy sky.

Layla kept her face tucked in Quin's neck until he slowed to a hovering stop on the outskirts of the volunteers' clearing – a remote glade located in a deep hollow snaking off the southwest side of Mount Hood. He revealed their cloaked bodies. Then the others did the same, but the auras and bonded lights remained hidden.

“We're not going to land,” Quin announced. “We'll shield the area from up here. Then we're going home. Meeting the volunteers is on the bottom

of my to-do list, and I'm starving.”

“Why did you have to mention food?” Layla asked, wrinkling her nose.

Quin laughed as he tickled her ribs. “Your stomach mentioned it ten minutes ago.”

“You heard that, huh?”

“I did, and I didn't like it.” He paused and waved at Weylin's uncle, who was one of six wizards patrolling the skies around the clearing. Then he looked at Caitrin. “Are we keeping the guards in place after we hide it?”

“Yes,” Caitrin answered. “We want you to cast a spell that will prevent anyone from entering without a guard's permission. We don't know these people, but we can't have them

slaughtered if our plans are discovered by Agro. If you succeed in your spell work, we'll need the guards to allow entry for new arrivals.”

“That's complicated magic,” Quin noted. “With the security constantly changing hands, the details will be tough to work out.”

“What about a password?” Layla suggested.

Quin took a moment to consider her idea before responding. “A password would be easy to pull off, but it's not ideal for secrecy. We'd be giving it to a lot of people – everyone in our family and Kegan's family. We trust them, but it could easily get out unintentionally.”

“There's touch,” Layla offered, “but

that would mean placing spells on everyone, huh?”

“Yes,” Quin confirmed, “and aside from the hassle, Agro can cut off a person's hand as easily as he can get a code word out of them.”

“Ew...” Layla objected, “morbid.”

Quin laughed and shook his head.

“Come on, love. This whole situation is morbid.”

“I guess. So what if we change it every few hours?”

“The password?”

“Yeah. We could have it change three times a day, morning, noon and night, a different set of three every day, and we only give the current password to the current guards.”

Quin raised his eyebrows. “That might work. Now we need to come up with a slew of passwords and set them to specific times, because I don't want to fly back here every morning to reset them.”

“Me neither,” Layla agreed.

Morrigan floated closer and gave Layla's cheek a kiss. “You guys work your beautiful magic while we go check on our guests. Mind search if you need us.”

“Okay,” Layla agreed, returning the kiss, and Morrigan's aura slipped free, teasing the air around her with a touch of bright pink love.

Once Layla and Quin were alone, they began brainstorming code words, and

within ten minutes they had enough phrases to get them through a couple of days. Talking into each other's heads to collaborate, they began the actual spell work, but Quin doubted success on the first try. In order to summon a combined spell instead of two individual spells, they needed to cast the magic with the exact same theory in mind – a feat that ended up being easier than Quin expected. After a short explanation to Layla about his own theory, they gave it a shot and ended up casting a flawless land shield. They'd been hovering on opposite sides of the clearing, and when they mentally conveyed their magical command, white fog rolled from their hands, spreading out to blanket the entire

glade. When the mist met in the middle, it seemed to solidify then disappear altogether.

Layla cocked an eyebrow, wondering if they'd failed, but when she looked up, she found Quin walking, not flying or floating, but walking toward her. She smiled and hovered forward. Then she slowly descended, finding solidity on what looked like thin air. She cautiously released her magic, resting her weight on their spell. Then she giggled at the weird feeling of standing on... well, nothing. Only then did she realize the clearing below looked dark and empty now, whereas before it had been a bustling campsite.

“I guess it worked,” she happily

noted.

Quin looked at her and smiled. "It would seem so."

"It's crazy watching the rain go right through when we aren't."

"It's an odd sensation, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but kind of cool."

He laughed. "Yes it is. Let's check the password."

They both knelt and touched a palm to the shield, thinking about a line from Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee": "We loved with a love that was more than love."

The invisible surface beneath their hands transformed into thick, white fog. Then it began spreading out until there was a hole big enough to fit through.

They smiled at each other. Then they looked into the clearing, which held several tents, a table of food, a few fires, and more than two dozen people.

Quin mind searched his dad. *'We're done. Are you guys flying back with us?'*

'Yes,' Kemble answered. *'What's the current password?'*

'We loved with a love that was more than love.'

'Appropriate.'

'Yes.'

'Go give it to the six guards. We'll meet you in five minutes.'

Quin removed his hand from the barrier, and the fog rolled back together, solidifying into a deceptive shield. Layla

curiously watched it, then followed suit. “Well that's just handy,” she approved, stomping a foot to test the shield’s durability.

Quin closed the distance between them and picked her up. “I agree, but it's not invincible. A powerful spell could shatter it.”

“Oh. Well it's better than nothing.”

He smiled as he searched her face, finding contentment in her happiness – a miracle considering the stress they were under. “Are you ready to go home, my love?”

She grinned and gave a nod. “More than ready.”

“Tuck in,” he instructed. “I'm going to let the guards know how to get through

our shield. Then we'll be on our way.”

She sighed and moved her face to his neck. “Perfect.”

The lawn remained active when Quin and Layla landed, so they stayed outside for a short visit and dinner, but as soon as Layla finished eating a couple of chocolate chip cookies, Quin ushered her inside.

She was still checking for crumbs when he closed the front door and swept her off her feet.

“Breakfast at seven, huh?” she asked, trying not to look too disgruntled.

He vanished their cloaks as he carried

her down the hall. “Yeah, and it’s already eleven. I rushed you home for a reason.”

Her mood lightened as she raised her eyebrows. “So we can take the ride we missed last night?”

He halted in the middle of the bedroom and lowered her feet to the floor. “Yes.”

Her smile widened as she vanished his shorts. Then she looked at her dress, intent on getting it out of the way as well.

“Wait,” he interrupted, lifting her chin.

Her eyebrows drew together as her cheeks flamed, and he laughed while lowering his mouth to her throat. “Why are you blushing, Layla?”

“Why are you telling me to keep my clothes on?”

He laughed again, slipping aside lace so he could kiss her shoulder. “You don’t think I want to see your naked body?”

“Well, I thought you did. Then you went and told me to keep my clothes on.”

He stepped behind her and swept her hair out of the way, kissing the nape of her neck as he unclasped her necklace. “I never said that.”

She started to argue then paused. “I guess you didn’t. You told me to wait.”

“Yes,” he confirmed, sending her jewelry to the dresser.

“Why?” she asked.

His fingers followed the dip between her shoulder blade, nimbly pulling buttons from their loops. Then he brought her hair behind her and slid her other sleeve aside, showering that shoulder in kisses too. “Because I want to do it.”

“Oh,” she breathed.

He moved his lips to her ear, softly nibbling before whispering into it. “I’ve been undressing you for almost two weeks now, and I have yet to take my time and appreciate the process.”

“I see,” she mumbled, inert save for the shivers running down her neck and chest.

Every time he showed her something new, no matter how big or small, she felt

flutters in her belly, warmth in her heart, and her muscles would freeze as her brain sped, wondering what was coming next. It was the same feeling she got when she first met him, the same sensations she experienced the first time he kissed her. She got them all the time really, so one would think she'd get used to them, but it was like the first time every time.

He moved in front of her and smiled, the same kind of smile he gave her when they met. Then he tucked his fingers into her neckline, taking hold of the material loosely covering her chest. "Physically undressing you is a pleasure I haven't had the good sense to pay heed to, and I'd hate to miss out on it completely."

He pulled down, and her breasts spilled free, a feeling she was learning to love. His palms cupped their weight, his thumbs toying with her nipples until they were hard, and his chest expanded with a deep breath.

Licking his lips, he found her eyes. “You make my mouth water, Layla. You know that, right?”

She shook her head no, but she didn't speak. She couldn't. She was fighting the sudden urge to throw herself into him, to press her chest to his. A moment before she'd been frozen. Now she struggled to hold still and let him take his time. And she was rewarded for her patience, basking in his adoration while bursting with love for him. She could never begin

to describe the way he made her feel about herself; and when he looked at her, touched her, and spoke about her like she was a heavenly gift, she could feel her love for him grow. It made the butterflies in her stomach turn flips. It made her heart lighter than air as it thumped harder than ever. It weakened her knees, sent chills up her spine, quivered her lips, and tightened her throat. All while her desire for him spread heat through her veins and pulsed tender areas.

“Well you do,” he insisted, pulling her bodice to her waist. Then his hands traveled her exposed curves, as if memorizing her proportions. “Before you, I wouldn't have been able to

envision a body this beautiful no matter how long I thought about it or how creative I got. For years I fantasized about the way you'd look, a *lot*, and my mind came up with dozens of exceptionally beautiful women, but none of my dream girls could turn me on half as much as you do." He tilted her chin up and gave her a soft kiss. Then he knelt, pulling her dress over her hips and letting it fall to the floor. "And it's been that way since I met you..." His gaze roamed from her feet to her face. "...two weeks ago tonight." Dipping his fingers into the top hem of her panties, he pulled them down while moving his mouth to her hip, but his hungry eyes stayed on hers. "I've never wanted anything like I

want you.”

She trembled, trying not to become a puddle on the floor as her head and heart screamed *take me!*

His kisses trailed down the crease of her thigh, and two of his fingers dipped between her legs, coming out slick with moisture. Gripping her backside with his free hand, he sucked her essence from his fingers. Then he looked up and flashed a smile. “You taste incredible.”

Her lungs emptied as her knees gave out, but he caught her in a summoning spell and hovered her feet from the floor. Laying her back in mid-air, he opened her flimsy legs. Then he pulled her to his mouth and began to feast.

His fingers opened her up to him,

emitting magical vibrations that seeped into all the right places, and she arched back, letting out the scream that had been building in her diaphragm from the moment he began undressing her. He had her legs over his shoulders and his magic beneath her, keeping her safely elevated, and while the freedom somehow strengthened the sensations, she was out of control with no way to hold herself together.

She gripped her own breasts, desperate to clutch something, *anything*, as she jolted in mid-air. Then her muscles grew rigid as her fingers and toes flexed. She stretched back, giving free rein to whatever was sure to burst from her chest, and the result was a

carnal yell that wasn't very pretty, but it seemed to please him, like she'd just put the whipped cream on his sundae.

Her spasms eventually ceased, and his fingers stopped vibrating, but he continued to kiss and lick moist and swollen flesh. When her hands fell from her chest, his incredible tongue trailed up her stomach then flicked one of her nipples.

"You make my mouth water, Layla," he repeated, moving to her other breast. "You know that, right?"

She tried to answer him, but in her thunderstruck state, she merely squeaked.

That wasn't what Quin wanted to hear, and he raised his head, watching her

face as he carried her to the bed. Laying her on her back, he moved between her legs. Then he pulled her knees to his waist as he licked her lips. “Have I shown you, love? Have I proven how much I crave you?”

Her aura thickened and flared, exploding with shiny, dark-brown ribbons and vibrant swirls of dazzling pink, and her bonded light practically solidified, glittering as if set with millions of tiny diamonds.

Quin's mouth fell open as he stared at the lustrous air bathing him in warmth, and a tear slid down Layla's temple. She quickly brushed it away, but another followed, and he caught her hand before she could get rid of it.

Moving his own fingertip to the teardrop, he pulled it from her temple. Then he transformed it into a rose petal – brown and green like those that bloomed at her parents' memorial. Placing the petal in her hand, he closed her fingers around it. Then he leaned through the magnificent lights and brushed his lips across hers. “I couldn’t have hoped for a more beautiful answer. Thank you.”

She dropped her petal and moved her hands to his cheeks, grasping them like her life depended on it. “I love you so much, Quin.”

Sliding one arm under her back, he braced her while easing into her body. Then he tilted her head to the side,

whispering in her ear as he slowly worked her up. “The word love doesn’t do us justice, angel.”

No, what they had betrayed the boundaries of human language and couldn’t be described, only felt... and it felt amazing.

Chapter 23

Guthrie watched Agro's newest victim crumple to the floor of the tent, a mere bag of bones wrapped in crimson velvet.

"Is it so hard to remain inconspicuous?" Agro raged. "You're magicians for fuck's sake."

Taking the dead man by the collar, Guthrie dragged him outside while Agro questioned the rest of the soldiers tasked with spying on the Conn/Kavanagh businesses. Guthrie had already talked to them and knew they hadn't heard anything useful. Most of the shops were closed, and even if they were open, the

soldiers couldn't get close enough to hear a damn thing.

"Multiple magicians guarded the entrances," one soldier said of the inn.

"Four tending one counter," another said of the café. "I could feel their eyes on me the moment I stepped on the deck."

"And the bookstore?"

"Closed."

One soldier dared to enter an establishment and was immediately questioned. Instead of spinning a likely tale, the idiot fled, and that's why Guthrie was turning the man's body to dust. Guthrie knew the soldier was a dead man as soon as he heard about the incident. The soldier knew it, too, but

that didn't stop him from entering Agro's tent – a condemned member of the flock following the will of his shepherd... his executioner.

Guthrie reentered the tent as the rest of the spies rushed out, happy to still have their lives. “Do I need to deal with them?” Guthrie asked, turning toward the boss.

“No,” Agro answered, slouching into his chair. “I’m giving them the weekend to get the job done. Dolan has the same, and if someone doesn’t come up with some answers...” His voice rose as his fist smashed into his armrest. “...I’m going to burn this whole fucking state down.”

Guthrie stood quiet and still, waiting

for the fit to pass, which it did, but then Agro stared off into the distance, as if he'd forgotten Guthrie was there.

Guthrie cleared his throat, and Agro slowly turned his head. "What?"

"What would you have me do, sir?"

"Go check on the soothsayers. If they haven't done any good, kill one to motivate the other. Tell the survivor they have one day to prove useful or I'll start taking a finger every few hours."

Guthrie bowed his head and turned toward the exit, already picturing the soothsayers' faces – a witch in her twenties and a middle-aged wizard, the latter of whom would no doubt sacrifice his life for his feminine companion. Guthrie numbly made his way to their

quarters, clearly seeing the distraught expression the woman would wear when she watched the life drain from her savior, clearly seeing the everlasting scars the terrifying moment would etch into her soul. Not that she'd suffer long. Unless she somehow managed a miracle, she'd follow her friend to the afterlife in a couple of days.

A waste. That's what it was. All of it. All for one witch.

Guthrie paused outside the soothsayers' tent and looked over, making eye contact with Lynette. She sat outside her sleeping quarters, eating a meal by herself. Her aura looked wistful and quiet, and her gaze didn't waver.

Guthrie swallowed, finding himself

drawn to her calm confidence. Then he broke eye contact and returned to his deadly task. Maybe afterward, he'd pay Lyn a visit, let her wipe away the memories he was about to make.

Chapter 24

With less than four hours of sleep, Layla and Quin forced themselves out of bed and began getting ready to join over sixty people for breakfast.

Quin was manually dressing Layla in an outfit of his choice when she realized she didn't know who, exactly, she was having breakfast with. "Should I know who the Owen/Sullivan coven is?" she asked, painting her toenails to match her eyes.

Quin finished tying the white, satin belt of her bright yellow dress. Then he summoned her chrome tourmaline

jewelry. Magically lifting her hair, he fastened the necklace. Then he dropped her curls and picked up her hand, kissing her palm while wrapping the bracelet around her wrist. Once his task was complete, he took a step back and ran his gaze from her head to her toes.

“Perfect,” he praised. “Like sunshine and lemonade.”

She smiled and pulled him closer, kissing the skin over his heart. “Thank you.”

“Mmm... thank *you*. The pleasure is all mine.”

“Nope. You don't get all the pleasure. Sorry.”

He laughed as he raised her knee-length skirt to her thighs. Then he picked

her up and wrapped her legs around his waist. “To answer your question, no, I guess you don't know who the Owen/Sullivan coven is, but you know a few of their members.”

“Who?”

“Nevyn, Brynton, Caitlyn and Maeveen. Oh, and you met Dion, the witch who works the front desk at Karena's inn. She's Nevyn and Maeveen's aunt.”

He headed for the front door, and Layla swallowed as she looked away. “I see.”

“What's wrong, love?”

“Nothing.”

“Hmm...” He paused in the entryway and searched her aura. “Why are you

lying to me?”

Her mouth fell open. “I... I...”

As Quin watched her eyes moisten, it felt like a blade punctured his chest and drained it of everything that mattered.

“Hey,” he whispered, touching her trembling pout. “What’s that about?”

As soon as she opened her mouth to answer, a tear slipped free. “I didn’t mean to lie to you, Quin. I’m sorry.”

He sighed then kissed away the moisture. “Don’t apologize, angel. It’s not like it was a big lie, and I’m not mad, but I don’t want you to hide your feelings from me. I want to know them, good or bad, and I’ll never judge you or think less of you. It will only make me love you more.”

“But I didn’t tell you because I don't know. I don't understand why I got all weird when you told me who was out there. It doesn't make any sense, so how am I supposed to explain it to you? That's why I said nothing.”

“Okay,” he soothed. “I understand, but not knowing why you're feeling the way you are doesn't mean everything's okay. Something's wrong. Let's stop pretending otherwise and figure it out, so we can fix it.”

She gave a nod, and he carried her to the sofa, carefully looking her over as he sat. “Our company makes you uneasy. I want to know why.”

She didn’t offer any suggestions, so he slid his hands under her skirt and softly

squeezed her thighs. “Are you still worried about my relationship with Caitlyn?”

Layla quickly shook her head no, but didn't say anything.

“Are you sure about that?” he pressed, firmly holding her gaze.

“I'm sure, Quin. It's obvious she's not obsessed or crazy, and I know I'm the woman you want, so it's not like I'm jealous of her.”

“I'm relieved to hear that, because if jealousy was the issue, my heart and confidence would undoubtedly take a hit.”

She puckered. “No, Quin. I know you're in love with me and no one else, and if for some reason I ever forget, all

I'll have to do is look at you to be reminded.”

“That's right, and if there ever comes a time when I'm not showing you how much I love you, I want you to slap me straight.”

“That will never happen.”

“I'm confident you're right. So, if it's not Caitlyn, is it Maeveen?”

“Not really. I guess it's just the thought of them looking at me and judging me and talking about me behind my back.”

“What makes you think they'll do that?”

“I don't *think*, I know. First of all, Maeveen's a gossip, and second of all, they've done it before.”

“What do you mean? When?”

“While you were playing hockey.”

His hands flexed around her thighs as an unexpected rush of anger washed over him. “What did they say?”

“It's not a big deal, Quin.”

“Please tell me, Layla.”

She sighed then looked down, fidgeting with her dress as she answered. “Well, while you were playing, those other two witches showed up – Meckenzie and Dahlia – and Meckenzie asked Caitlyn about me. Then they spent the next thirty minutes debating whether or not I'd be around longer than a month and trying to figure out how I was managing to keep my claws in you when no one else could.”

“Why didn't you tell me this before?”

“Because it's not a big deal. It's not like they said anything mean.”

“It was rude.”

“A little, but not that bad. Meckenzie was the only one who seemed spiteful.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because she was the one who was sure I don't have what it takes to keep you. She kept accusing Caitlyn of exaggerating things, and when she finally came over to talk *to* me instead of about me, she didn't even return my greeting. She just started asking questions she'd already heard the answers to, and she seemed intent on finding out how long I'd be around. It was pretty obvious she would have been delighted to hear me say I'd be leaving soon.”

“You're not going anywhere.”

“I know.”

He ran a hand down his face, hating that people he considered friends made his angel feel ostracized and insecure.

“Okay,” he finally said, moving his palm to her cheek. “First of all, Meckenzie can be a snob and was probably intimidated by you, so I want you to disregard everything she said or will ever say to you or about you. Her opinion means nothing to me or anyone else in this family. We're not as close to her coven as we are the two that are here today, so she isn't someone who'll be hanging around all the time.”

“I'm not worried about her, Quin.”

“Good, because there's no reason to

be. Now, as for our company, they're really great people, even Caitlyn and Maeveen. Yes, Maeveen's obviously a gossip, but I can tell you with certainty her heart's in the right place, and the same goes for Caitlyn. They'd do anything for their family and friends, and neither of them would be malicious toward you or anyone else." He paused and leaned closer, touching his forehead to hers while running his fingers into her hair. "I'll be honest with you, Layla. When we go out there, everyone will stare at you, but only because you're so beautiful. You and your lights are beyond pleasing to the eye, and I can't blame anyone for wanting to look. And the other covens are going to make

judgments about you, but only because they're human and curious and they've never seen anything like you before. And I have no doubt they'll talk about you, because a person doesn't witness a miracle then never speak of it again. They'll do all those things, but I can promise you this, everyone out there will accept you. They'll hold you in the same regard they hold me, and if they fail to treat you kindly, they'll leave and not return. You're here to stay; you're as much a part of this coven as I am, so you'll be treated with respect, or the guilty party will be dealt with by the entire family.”

She gave a little nod. “I know.”

“Good. So tell me, are your nerves the

only reason you're hesitant to go out there? Or is there something going on I'm not aware of?"

"There's nothing going on. It's just the embarrassment of sitting there while everyone's looking at me and talking about me, but I'll be fine. I promise."

"Okay, but if there's anything I can do to make it easier, please let me know."

"You already make things easier, Quin, all the time. I wish you'd realize that, because you don't give yourself enough credit."

He grinned and laid a hand over her heart. "Are you kidding? When I make you smile, or satisfy even the smallest of your needs, my ego shoots through the roof. It gives me a huge rush of

accomplishment to please you. That's why I'm always looking for ways to keep you happy. When I'm feeding you, I'm feeding my ego."

She smiled and mischievously wrinkled her nose. "Ahh... so there's the motive. This whole time I've been wondering why you treat me so well; now I know. It's all about *you*."

He laughed as he nuzzled through her hair and softly bit her neck, making her scrunch her shoulders and giggle. "That's more accurate than you think, angel. I'm a selfish man. Now..." He leaned back and looked her over. "...let's suck in our lights and go hunt down some of Cinnia's coffee."

"That suggestion's half hell, half

heavenly.”

Nevertheless, she sucked in her lights, and he followed suit while carrying her across the room. “It's getting easier, right?”

“Easier to keep our lights hidden?” she incredulously returned.

“No,” he answered, making sure her skirt covered her backside as he opened the door. “Easier to go through the process of telling people who you are.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess. The first time's always the hardest, though. That's true with almost everything.”

They both looked toward the lawn, finding more than fifty pairs of eyes staring, and Layla blushed as she turned her head. Quin faced her away from

everyone and lifted her chin, forcing her gaze to his. Her breathing was sporadic, and her pulse was rapid, yet she seemed oblivious to the fact that she was about to hyperventilate. “They’re not all looking anymore,” he assured. “You just glanced up at the wrong time.”

“Oh,” she mumbled, resting her cheek on his shoulder.

He let her stay there while her heart and breathing calmed, and when she raised her head, he was happy to find a more confident expression.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “I need my coffee.”

He lowered her feet to the porch. Then he wrapped his arm around her

shoulders and pulled her close, kissing her head as they walked down the stairs.

Halfway to the breakfast table, their trek was interrupted by Brynton, Nevyn, Kegan and Weylin.

Brynton and Nevyn scanned Layla from head to toe, returning the warmth to her cheeks, but then Weylin eased her embarrassment with a smile and a wink. “Hey, gorgeous.”

“Good morning, Wey,” she returned, compelled to smile back. Then she offered the others a little wave before shrinking into Quin’s side.

“What’s up, Quin?” Brynton asked. “Wey and Keg aren’t giving anything away, and your coven’s keeping their lips sealed. Where’s your aura?”

“Concealed,” Quin answered, “but I’ll be letting it go in a bit, so don’t get worked up over it.”

“Hmm...” Nevyn hummed. “I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you without it.”

“What’s going on, Quin?” Caitlyn asked, approaching with Maeveen.

As everyone looked at them, Layla turned away from Quin’s friends and raised a hand to his heart. “I’m going to go get us some coffee. Meet me there?”

He picked her up and nuzzled her neck. Then he whispered in her ear. “I won’t be long.”

He lowered her feet to the ground, and she gave his friends another wave before walking away, but part of her stayed behind. She was suddenly half the

woman she'd been a moment before, the distance cutting deeper than expected, and she ached to go back. Her legs actually shook with the urge. But turning around would be embarrassing as well as needy, so she straightened her shoulders and kept walking.

Quin watched her go until Brynton brought his attention around. "What's going on, man? Why has everybody been called here? And why is your aura gone? This whole situation is bizarre."

"Everyone in your family has the same questions," Quin returned, "and I'd rather answer them all at once, so you'll have to deal with my refusal for now. I need coffee before I dive into an explanation."

Weylin and Kegan laughed as the others slouched, but no one argued, and Brynton's disappointment lasted about three seconds before he smiled and rubbed his hands together. "Intrigue and mystery. What a way to start a Saturday. I like it."

Quin laughed at Brynton's enthusiasm, but then he sobered when Caitlyn and Maeveen started to turn away. "Just a minute, you two."

They turned back, and Quin glanced at Layla, finding her waist-length spirals. "Beat it, guys," he told the wizards. Then he waited for them to obey before looking between Caitlyn and Maeveen. "Layla overheard your conversation with Meckenzie Monday."

They both blushed, and Maeveen got defensive. “What did she do, tattle?”

The mild insult heated Quin’s blood, but he was quick to rein the anger in.

“No, Maeveen, she didn’t tattle. I didn’t find out about it until ten minutes ago when I yanked it out of her.”

“Oh,” Maeveen mumbled.

“We didn’t say anything bad about her,” Caitlyn interjected.

“I know,” Quin assured. “She made a point of telling me that. But you know very little about her, which means you shouldn’t be talking about her, and if you did know more, you’d never treat her that way. I know she’s new around here, but she’s as much a part of this family as anyone else, so you should give her the

same consideration you give the rest of us. I don't believe for one second you'd sit a few yards away from Bri and hold a gossip session about her, so you shouldn't do it to Layla either."

Their lungs deflated as they dropped their heads. "You're right," Caitlyn conceded. "That was rude of us. I'm sorry."

"I don't need your apology, and neither does Layla, so don't give her one. Just treat her like you do the rest of us and we won't have any problems. You'd really like her if you got to know her. She has a heart of gold and she shows it off all the time. Just watch, you'll see it before you leave this lawn."

Caitlyn nodded, and Quin glanced at

her aura, sighing as he reached for a faded wisp of blue – proof of her lingering sadness over the way he ended it. “Guess it's my turn to apologize.”

She furrowed her eyebrows at his hand. Then she realized what he was seeing and blushed. Looking away, she gave a shrug, but she didn't say anything.

Her silence was loud enough to tell him he'd handled the situation poorly. “I'm sorry, Cait. To this day I don't know if I should have told you about Layla when I ended things with you. I'm not sure if it would have made things better or worse, and that's why I didn't mention it. I was in a position I've never been in before, and I didn't know the protocol. If I made it worse, I'm sorry, and I hope

you'll forgive my ignorance so things can go back to the way they've been for the past twenty-one years.”

Caitlyn looked at the ground as she fidgeted with her skirt. Then she took a deep breath and met his stare. “Don't sweat it. I had no delusions about our relationship... or lack thereof. You were straight with me the whole time. And no, it wouldn't have made things easier to hear you were moving on to another woman, so don't beat yourself up over not telling me. But you could have, you know? I would have understood.”

“If I would have been able to tell you the whole truth, I have no doubt you would have understood. But there are things about Layla I couldn't talk about

then, for her sake, and for our coven's sake. What little information I could give, would have left you with more questions... questions I couldn't answer until today."

"I see," Caitlyn murmured, curiously glancing at Layla. "How long did you know her before you ended things with me?"

"Three days. I met her the night you left for your trip." He paused, carefully evaluating what he'd say next. "Please don't take this the wrong way, Cait, because I'm not saying it to hurt you. I'm saying it because it's the truth. If you'd been home the night I met Layla, I would have gone to your community the moment I left her and told you things needed to

end. I never wanted to be anything but fair with you, and telling you right away would have been the fairest way to go, because with Layla, there was never a choice to be made. It was decided the second I met her.”

Caitlyn scanned the air around him then shrugged. “After seeing you with her, I have to believe that. She is your dream girl after all.”

“It's much more than that. You'll see, and you won't be sorry you're here to witness it.” He paused and narrowed his eyes on Maeveen. “Did you catch all that?”

Her cheeks reddened as she wrinkled her nose. “I get your point, Quin. I'll work on controlling my trigger happy

tongue.”

“That would be wise. Not all witches are as forgiving as my angel. Or as patient,” he added, glancing at Layla.

“Talk to you ladies later.” He headed for the table, but then he paused and turned back. “By the way, you can tell Meckenzie Layla's here to stay.”

After a smile and a wave, he headed for Layla, who still had her back to him as she visited with her grandparents and sipped her coffee. He magically held the hot liquid in place as he wrapped his arms around her waist and made her jump.

She looked down, expecting coffee to burn her hand. Then she smiled and turned her head. “My thorough hero.”

He grinned and kissed her cheek. “My jumpy angel.” Moving beside her, he looked at Caitrin. “Are you discussing anything important?”

“Yes,” Caitrin answered. “We were talking about how lovely my granddaughter looks in yellow.”

“That is important,” Quin approved, raising his eyebrows at her.

She blushed as she leaned into his side. “It's a good color.”

“Wait until you see it with her aura,” Quin added.

“Then let's not delay,” Daleen insisted. “Everyone's here. I say we get the hard part out of the way so you two can shine.”

“I like how you think, Daleen,” Quin

agreed. “Has everyone eaten?”

“Everyone but you two,” Serafin answered.

Quin looked at Layla. “Do you want to eat before or after?”

“I’m okay with coffee for now.”

Quin smiled then gave Caitrin a nod. “Round them up.”

By the time everyone found chairs, Layla had finished two cups of coffee and was restless. She vanished her mug while looking around the large circle of magicians, and when her eyes met Shaylee's, she smiled and waved. Shaylee waved back from her position at her mom's feet, and her aura brightened as she excitedly bounced.

Caitrin was handing the floor to Quin,

so Layla quickly leaned over and kissed Quin's cheek. "I'm going to skip this one, okay? Let me know when you need me to do my part."

"Where are you going?" he quietly asked.

She smiled and raised her eyebrows. "To play with the kids."

He relaxed and smiled back. "That sounds like fun."

"It's okay, right?"

"Of course it's okay. I'll let you know when to let your lights go."

She gave him one more kiss then headed for Brietta, Banning and Skyla. "You guys know the story already. Do you want to play with me?"

"Yes," they answered, jumping from

their chairs.

Layla laughed at their excitement then moved to Alana. “Want to play, angel?”

“Yes,” Alana agreed, soaring into Layla’s waiting arms.

“Come on, Brayden,” Layla added. “You don't want to sit around listening to the same old story when there's fun to be had.”

“What are we going to do?” he asked, hopping along beside her.

“Oh... I don't know, lots of things.” She made her way to Shaylee then looked at Alana. “Hop on my back so Shaylee can join us.”

“Otay,” Alana agreed, shifting around. Layla turned to Kellyn – Shaylee's mom and Kegan's older sister. “May

Shaylee come play?"

"Sure," Kellyn answered.

Layla knelt and held out her hands, and Shaylee toddled into them.

"Hi, sweetie," Layla greeted, heading for the next child in the circle. "I'm glad I get to play with you again today."

The baby eagerly nodded and bounced on Layla's arm.

"Do you know Shaylee?" Layla asked, glancing at the other angel she held.

"Yes," Alana replied. "Shaywee's my friend."

Layla continued her conversation as she gathered every small child in the circle. Then she led them away from it, not stopping until they'd reached a wide open area of lawn. She waved a hand

through the air, and eight magical chairs appeared, each of them comprised of rainbows and custom made to match each child's individual size.

Quin hadn't started his explanation yet. From the moment Layla left his side, he'd been watching her and nothing else, and he wasn't the only one. Everyone in the circle was watching her, but she was so wrapped up in the children, she didn't notice. Quin cleared his throat. Then he attempted to start his story while watching Layla settle Shaylee in the tiniest of the foggy chairs. He knew his words were a bit mumbled and slow, but he couldn't tear his gaze away from his angel long enough to fix the problem.

She stood in front of the kids now,

getting to know those from the Owen/Sullivan coven, and she had Brietta and Banning to her left and Skyla to her right. While she talked and listened, she absently waved a hand through the air. Then she kept an eye out for the sticks that flew from the forest. Catching them from the sky, she worked her magic while continuing her conversation. Then she blew into the end of an altered stick. A soft tone whistled across the lawn, and Layla smiled as she passed out the homemade flutes, making sure they all understood how to use them.

Soon the clearing hummed with haphazard tunes and the sweet laughter of the young; and Layla, Brietta and

Skyla were decorating the children's temples with shiny stars or crescent moons. Once the kids were temporarily tattooed, Layla summoned a few needle-covered twigs, a sprig of Deer Fern, and a pile of flowers. Then she gave the girls wildflower tiaras while Banning gave the boys crowns of pine branches and feathery fronds.

Quin hadn't said a word in several minutes, and nobody had called him on it, so he gave up. "You take this one, Caitrin," he suggested, turning in his chair so he could watch Layla without twisting.

"Go for it, Kemble," Caitrin mumbled, his shiny gaze on his granddaughter.

Kemble looked around then shook his

head. “No one's paying attention.”

“Just talk,” Caitrin returned. “They'll hear you.”

Kemble stood to better project his voice, but as soon as he opened his mouth to speak, the crowd gasped, their eyes on a flock of birds diving into the clearing – at least three dozen of them, of varying breeds. They soared over the crowd and gathered in a quivering cluster next to Layla, who found Quin's stunned gaze and gave a confident wink.

She'd figured out how to creature call.

He didn't want to interrupt her fun, but he couldn't help himself. He had to know, so he mind-searched her. ‘*How?*’

‘*I aimed for the sky,*’ she mentally replied. ‘*Didn't figure I'd intercept*

anyone up there.'

The flutes had stopped buzzing, and the kids raptly watched as Layla held a silent conversation with the winged creatures. When she returned her attention to the children, the birds flew away, but Quin knew they'd be back.

Layla went along the row of kids, summoning furry caterpillars onto their fingers. Then she stretched a rainbow table across their laps, instructing them to lay their hands on the multicolored mist. Sixteen palms went down, and as the caterpillars crawled away, they transformed into butterflies. The kids jolted in surprise. Then they clapped and squealed while reaching for their fluttering creations.

The butterflies teased the air around the young group for several seconds. Then the winged insects lined up in front of Layla. She reached up, intensely concentrating as she carefully touched the first butterfly in line, and a large, silver bubble appeared around it, quivering with every waft of its inhabitant's wings. Layla leaned close, examining the shiny sphere to make sure the butterfly was safe. Then the bubble floated toward the sky, not stopping until it was at least forty feet from the ground. Each butterfly took its turn, and soon sixty-four bubbles were tightly grouped above the lawn like a shimmering cloud.

Layla vanished the rainbow table while motioning for Alana to hop on her

back. Then she retrieved Shaylee from her teeny chair and instructed the others to stand. They eagerly complied, and she lined them up, forming a train with Brietta, Skyla and Banning at its end. After taking the lead, Layla guided them across the lawn, and everyone happily followed, playing their flutes along the way.

When their caravan halted, Layla waved a hand through the air once more, and a wide, rainbow staircase sprouted from the grass and climbed toward the sky. As it neared the butterflies, it leveled out, creating a large platform. Then it steeply dipped toward earth like a misty slide. The music had stopped as the children stared with wide eyes, but

then Layla turned around and twirled her hand like a conductor, prompting them to continue their performance. They obeyed, and she marched them up her spell, looking back every few steps to find the kids dancing along behind her.

They didn't stop again until they were on the rainbow's plateau, at which point Layla brought her hand down, signaling the kids to stop playing their flutes. Silence held the clearing as eight bubbles descended, halting right in front of the children's faces. Then they all raised a forefinger as Layla counted down.

“Three... two... one.”

The children popped their bubbles, and as if they'd pushed a magical button,

their world became a frenzy of fun.

The birds swooped in behind them, dropping flower petals from their talons and beaks; and the rest of the bubbles exploded, showering the children in silver glitter. The birds looped around, singing as they circled the rainbow platform, and the freed butterflies flitted among the kids, tickling their faces with soft sweeps of their wings.

Layla laughed as the children cheered and played. Then she sent the creatures away and shifted Alana into her free arm. After making sure both babies were snug, Layla turned and jumped onto the slide, riding the rainbow to the ground. Shaylee and Alana squealed the whole way down, and Layla was cracking up

by the time she stood and stepped aside, watching the others follow her lead.

Quin couldn't take it anymore. His aura was about to burst free, and his heart ached to go to her, so he abandoned his chair and flew to his playful angel. He swept her off her feet, making sure he had Alana and Shaylee as well. Then he made his way to her rainbow staircase. "Hey," he greeted.

"Hey back," she returned. "Are you done telling your story?"

"The story hasn't even started, my love. You've been distracting us."

"Everyone's been watching?"

"Of course they have. Your magic is appreciated by adults and children alike."

“Well that's embarrassing.”

“No. That was beautiful.”

“It was fun,” Layla countered, looking at her tiny passengers. “Wasn't it?”

“Es,” Shaylee replied.

“That was the most fun,” Alana agreed.

Quin reached the rainbow's plateau and smiled at his precious cargo. “Are you ladies ready to slide?”

They answered with a resounding yes, so Quin looked at the slide. “Let's spice it up a bit,” he suggested, shifting and twisting the colorful mist to add two loops to their ride.

“Ooh yeah,” Alana and Layla exclaimed. Then they grinned at each other before looking at Quin.

He laughed at them. Then he secured his hold on the trio of angels and leapt onto the slide.

Chapter 25

All of the kids and half the adults played on the rainbow while Kemble explained the situation to the Owen/Sullivan coven, but he eventually needed proof, so he mind-searched Quin. *'We're ready for your lights.'*

Quin nodded his understanding then gathered the kids, instructing them to follow him and Layla to the circle of chairs. “It's time to shine, my love. Are you ready?”

“More than ready,” she answered. The inevitable stares and gasps wouldn't bother her as much as keeping her

feelings bottled up; and no amount of discretion was worth not being able to see his.

They reached the middle of the circle, and Quin wrapped his arm around her shoulders as he addressed the kids.

“Would you like to see some more beautiful magic?”

The children nodded, their wide eyes raptly glued to him and Layla, and the adults scooted to the edge of their seats, equally intrigued.

“Okay, love,” Quin whispered, touching his lips to her head.

She sighed as they both released their auras and bonded lights, and the adults jumped to their feet as the children cheered and twirled around in the

colorful cloud.

“Look at them,” Layla laughed, smitten as she watched the kids, but her view was interrupted when Quin picked her up. He motioned for Alana to join them, and once the toddler was in their arms, he began spinning around with the other children, engulfing them in a bright and shiny cyclone.

Layla laughed as Alana squealed and raised her hands, like she was on a rainbow roller coaster spiraling through a golden cloud; and in the chaotic swirl of their surroundings, Layla glimpsed Brayden, Brietta and Skyla, then Kellyn with Shaylee in her arms, all of them taking joy in the lights. Stunned stares and questions went ignored, and though

the spinning eventually ceased, Quin and Layla didn't stop playing with the kids until her stomach growled.

Quin picked her up and carried her to a chair. Then he summoned a plate filled with her favorite foods. After passing it over, his own plate appeared, but he kept a hand on Layla's thigh while splitting his attention between his food and Caitrin.

"Agro's getting reckless," Caitrin noted. "We think he's spying on some of the businesses."

"Think?"

"We don't have proof, but yesterday a magician entered your grandpa's shop then bolted when questioned. And some of the others felt like they were being

watched.”

“Then they probably were.”

“On the flip side,” Caitrin added, “we heard Agro’s in the Lake Tahoe region, asking questions about Layla.”

“What? Where did you hear that?”

“A reputable source. The area’s magicians say Agro’s name is being tossed around more freely than usual, but the man himself hasn’t shown up, which makes sense, because he’s here. He probably sent a troop down there to mislead us and give us a false sense of security, hoping we’ll let our guard down. If we make it clear that’s not happening, we might be able to buy an extra day or two.”

“Still,” Quin mumbled, “we have a lot

to do and not enough time to do it.”

“Such is life,” Caitrin sadly noted. “Finish your breakfast and conceal the next round of guards. Then we’ll work on Layla’s defense magic.”

They ate the rest of their meal in silence. Then they followed Caitrin to a row of seventeen wizards. Those assigned to watch over Agro or the community needed to be concealed, and those heading to the volunteer clearing needed the current password – a quote from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*: "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same."

Most of the guests had left, so Layla didn’t feel too insecure when she and Quin met her grandpas in the middle of

the lawn for a lesson.

“Remember what we taught you about shields?” Serafin asked.

“Yes,” she answered, throwing Quin a pointed look. “And this time, I’m not stopping until I get it right.”

Her grandpas looked at Quin, as well, obviously waiting for his objection, but he didn’t give one. Pulling Layla into his arms, he gave her a lingering kiss on the head. Then he backed up and cast multiple shields around her.

Soon the spells were flying, the challenges getting harder each round, the time getting shorter until she had no warning whatsoever. And after a solid hour with no breaks, she was repelling everything that came at her with

ridiculous ease.

Quin dropped his barriers, and she grinned and hopped around, riding the wave of accomplishment. “What's next?”

Quin laughed as he waved a hand, and a huge box appeared beside him, as big as a storage shed and stuffed with large, foam balls. Quin jumped and pulled one out, tossing it into the air to let it regain its round shape. Then he winked at Layla. “Now we get to throw things at you.”

The ball slowly floated across the lawn, and she grabbed it from the air, feeling how squishy it was. “What's this for?”

“It's how we teach children to catch spells,” Quin explained. “We'll shoot

them at you, and you have to try to catch them with your magic. It's easier than catching spells, but the theory is similar, and we'll try to counter your magic to make it more difficult.”

She sent the ball back then squarely faced him. “Go for it.”

Quin waved a hand, and the box flipped upside down, dumping at least fifty foam balls onto the lawn. Serafin and Caitrin lined up beside him. Then they each hovered five spheres from the pile.

“Here they come,” Quin warned.

Fifteen blurs came at her from different directions, but she easily spotted them all, and catching them was equally easy, so she floated them back to

her three favorite men. She couldn't help but grin and do a little dance, but she kept the jig short since people were watching.

Quin laughed then grabbed ten more, repeating the process while Serafin and Caitrin did the same, but Layla had no problem locating and stopping the projectiles. She forced them back the way they came, tucking them in with the others. Then Quin shot the entire pile at her without any warning.

He succeeded in taking her by surprise, but she quickly found her wits and raised her palms, stopping the foam missiles a few feet from her face. Without a moment's hesitation, she shoved and extended her arms, and the

balls reversed course, charging down on Quin like a cartoon cloud.

He raised his hands, and as his magic intercepted hers, the balls halted in mid-air, flattening under the force of opposing spells. His eyes met hers, and they both smiled as they turned their attention to the projectiles, battling to see who'd prevail and who'd get a face full of foam.

Everyone watched the cluster shift back and forth, as if confused on which way to fly, and it wasn't until Quin had a good lead that Layla got serious about her task. His magic snapped, and he ducked as a wave of foam sped toward his face. A few of the balls hit his back and bounced away, but most of them

soared over his head, bombarding an unsuspecting Weylin. Everyone laughed at Weylin's dazed expression. Then they looked at Layla, who'd doubled over with giggles.

"I'd say you have this kind of defensive magic figured out," Quin observed.

She stifled her laughter and flew across the lawn, landing in his open arms. "It was easy."

"Good," he approved. "The safer you are, the better I feel."

"Hear, hear," Caitrin agreed, stepping away to take a call.

Serafin squeezed Layla's shoulder and kissed her head. "You truly are a miracle, my dear. Good work today."

“Thanks,” she returned. “I feel good about it.”

“As you should.”

He ran a hand down her hair before walking away, and Layla watched him go until Quin brought her attention around. “Will you sit with me for a while? I’ll hunt down one of Cinnia’s shakes. You can drink it while I kiss your neck.”

She grinned and widened her eyes. “Now *that’s* what I call a reward.”

Quin laughed as he carried her toward the circle of chairs, but halfway there, Caitrin motioned for them to wait, the cordless phone still to his ear.

Quin and Layla traded curious glances then waited for Caitrin to finish his call.

After hanging up, he tucked the phone in his bag and looked at Quin with wide eyes. He blinked and swallowed, like a man who'd seen a ghost but refused to believe it. Then the color slowly returned to his face as he explained himself.

“That was Morrigan's cousin. He talked to a friend who's been seething with vengeance against Agro, and you'll never guess what the guy has been up to for the past month.”

“What?” Quin asked.

Still stunned, but in better spirits, Caitrin smiled and raised his hands out beside him. “He's been planning an assault on the Unforgivables, him and more than fifty others.”

Several people gasped, and Quin froze. “You're kidding.”

“I'm not,” Caitrin returned. “They've been gathering and planning for weeks, and when they heard the Lake Tahoe rumors, they headed for California. Morrigan's cousin convinced them they're chasing a false trail; now they're eager to join us.”

“Fifty?”

“More than fifty. They should be here by morning.”

Quin shook his head. “I can't believe it.”

“Well believe it, Quinlan. Hope is alive and well.” He slapped Quin's shoulder and kissed Layla's cheek. Then he searched out Morrigan. “Come, sweet

peach. Let's open a bottle of wine and toast our good fortune.” He opened his arms as Morrigan flew into them, and the rest of the crowd followed them for a toast.

Layla smiled as she watched them go, but when Quin made no effort to follow, she found his face, its strong contours furrowed, his eyes shiny. “Quin? What's wrong?”

“I just... It doesn't seem...”

He paused and took a shaky breath, and Layla's heart jumped into her throat. She rarely heard him struggle with a sentence, and the word stutter never applied to him. “What's going on, Quin?”

He still didn't answer. He just sat on

the ground, made her comfortable on his lap, buried his face in her neck, and cried. Cried! She'd never seen him cry! Not even a little bit.

Her throat tightened as her heart squeezed, her own eyes growing moist. Then she swallowed a lump and raised a hand to his head, running her fingers through his hair while his tears moistened her shoulder. After several seconds and a deep breath, he kissed her neck and found her face.

Trying hard not to burst into hysterical sobs, Layla took his cheek. "What's going on, Quin? Please tell me."

His palm closed over her hand as he touched his forehead to hers. "For almost two weeks now, I've been facing

not just the possibility of your death, but the probability of it. It's been like a red-hot anchor in my stomach, constantly weighing me down, constantly making me feel like I'm failing. The moment we found out you're being hunted, a timer started, and I've been terrified of its ticking, dreading the day Agro finds you. The consequences haunt me – a cloud raining physical pain on my body as surely as it rains emotional terror on my heart. But now, with Caitrin's news, and for the first time in days, I can look to the future and your death isn't the first thing I see. Now I can hope for survival, a chance at life without Agro, and it's beautiful, Layla. It's what I want most and we're closer than ever to getting it.”

Layla blinked back tears as she shook her head. “I had no idea. Why did I not know this?”

“Because you're the only thing that makes it better, angel. You make me smile and ease my pain, so don't feel guilty.”

Before she could argue, he flipped her around and laid her on her back. Then he had her pinned with a kiss, just his lips on hers as his sturdy arms braced him in a push-up position. She gripped his sides as her knees started to part and rise, but then she remembered they were on the lawn and forced them back down.

His lips curved toward deep dimples as his eyes sparkled. “Does this embarrass you?”

“It doesn't matter,” she answered, trying to pull him back to her mouth, but he rolled onto his side, blocking her from everyone's view.

“It matters to me. Besides, who says we can't take our break inside?”

“Mm... When you put it that way, yes, this is extremely embarrassing, and I'll simply die if I have to take one more second of it, so you should probably take me home if you want to keep kissing me.”

“What about your shake?”

“Screw the shake. Take me home and kiss me.”

He wasted no time scooping her off the lawn, and as he carried her to the house, he connected with his dad's mind,

letting him know the afternoon's
password – a quote from a letter written
by John Keats: "Love is my religion – I
could die for it."

Chapter 26

The temperature dropped as the forest grew dim, the sun sinking behind western clouds. Agro had been asleep for hours, and Guthrie had tried to do the same, but peaceful rest eluded him. He'd tossed and turned and drifted in between sleep and wakefulness for hours, so he finally gave up and got dressed.

Maybe he had time to drop by Lynette's tent before Agro rose for the night.

A visit before his attempt to sleep would have been ideal, and he tried, but she wasn't in her tent and he wasn't

about to hunt her down. If she still wasn't there, he might have to settle for another witch. His tension was at an all-time high.

As he approached Lynette's tent, Token emerged from the canvas flaps, and Guthrie's temperature spiked, his jaw and hands flexing.

"Hey, man," Token greeted, slapping Guthrie's tense shoulder. "You look rough. No sleep?"

"No," Guthrie answered, glancing between him and Lynette's quarters. "You?"

"Woke up about an hour ago," Token returned. "My new tent's a far cry from the old one. It's a damn shame commander's quarters aren't allowed in

the boss' camp. How does he treat his lieutenant?"

"Better than the rest. I have a bed."

"An uncomfortable one by the looks of it. Well, try to relax, man. We're on this roller coaster for better or worse. No sense in being uptight about everything." After one more slap to Guthrie's shoulder, Token strolled away, whistling and waving to people as he went.

Guthrie watched Token's aura for a moment then ducked inside Lynette's tent. At first he didn't see her, and for a split-second he forgot where he was, because the chamber looked nothing like it had that morning. She'd enlarged her living space by digging into the earth and adding a balcony to the ground level,

and every object she'd ever collected was on display – jewels, antiques, rugs, paintings, statues. She'd crafted a bed out of local trees and softened it with a pile of blankets as thick as two mattresses, and the steps leading downstairs came to a halt next to a bar and cooking station, which was piled with plundered booze and food.

She popped up from behind the bar with a bowl of cereal, and Guthrie gawked at her for several seconds before coming to his senses. “What have you done?”

“What any self-respecting witch would,” she answered, coming around the bar. Then she halted at the foot of the stairs and pointed her spoon at him.

“And don’t you dare raise a finger to destroy or remove my stuff. I’ll kill you.”

She meant it, and he tucked his hands in his pockets as he descended the stairs. The underground room was even bigger than he thought, and he shook his head as he looked at her. “You’ll be the dead one if the boss sees this. You know better, Lyn. He doesn’t want his soldiers comfortable. And how did you manage to save all this from his purges?”

“It’s easy if you’re willing to take the risk. And he’s too busy obsessing over his witch to see anything, so unless you run and tell him, he’ll never know.” She plopped down on her bed and took a bite, talking as she chewed. “Besides,

we're all going to die soon. Might as well live it up while I can."

Guthrie moved to the bar and picked up one of two glasses. "Is that what you were doing with Token? Living it up?"

She laughed. "Are you jealous, Guthrie? I've never seen that shade on you."

Guthrie replaced the glass and crossed the tent, stopping in front of her. "You could say I'm concerned."

"About what? Me screwing Token?"

"No. About you and Token screwing me."

"Wow. Being the boss' bitch has made you paranoid. Token and I don't want to hurt you, Guthrie. In fact, we're worried about you."

Guthrie set her bowl aside. Then he took her petite chin and forced her to meet his gaze. “Token’s a killer, just like our boss, just like the rest of us. And I don’t want your worry.”

“You can’t control my emotions, Guthrie.”

“Bullshit. I’ve done it before.”

Her eyes hardened and narrowed. Then she jerked her chin away. “Get out.”

“No.”

“Then I’ll go.”

She stood, and Guthrie grabbed her arm, sitting her back down. “No you won’t, not until I get some answers. So is Token my replacement?”

She looked up and furrowed her

eyebrows. “Your replacement?”

“Yeah. Since you couldn’t fuck some rebellion into me, you’ve moved on to fucking it into Toke.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“We both know that. Let’s talk about something new.”

“I’m not sleeping with Token, Guthrie. We get along, so he comes around for a visit once in a while. But I’m sure he wouldn’t kick me out of bed, and since I got the boot from you, why shouldn’t I fuck him? I hear he’s good. Maybe I’ll go see for myself.”

She stood and headed for the exit, but he threw her back on the bed, and this time he moved on top of her, pinning her arms and legs to the blankets.

“That’s more like it,” she taunted, her eyes defiantly flashing.

“Stop,” he ordered. “I’m not playing around.”

“Bummer.”

His nostrils flared as he took a deep breath. “If he wasn’t in here fucking you, why was he here?”

“I told you – to visit.”

“About what?”

“Whatever we damn well please – you, the boss, the mission, whether we’ll live to see the sun rise. We’re people, Guthrie, we like to talk.”

Guthrie’s eyes narrowed as he searched her aura. “Did you tell him the ideas you told me?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not. I was just feeling him out, wondering if he’d welcome a shift in power, but I didn’t tell him anything we’ve talked about.”

“Are you sure? Because you can’t trust him.”

“Yes I can.”

“No,” Guthrie snapped. “You can’t. Token is smart and powerful and only cares for himself.”

“Like you.”

“Yes... no...”

“Which is it, Guthrie? Yes or no.”

Guthrie stared at her as his lungs dragged in air, his temper an unstable bomb, his heart hurting. His heart... He hated having one. “Damn it, Lynette.”

“What, Guthrie?”

“You know I care about you.”

“Actually, I don’t. I thought you did. I had delusions that, in the end, you and I would be standing side by side. But you wiped those away during our last visit.”

“Because I don’t have a place to stand, Lyn. Don’t you get that? I can’t be your man, because I’m not my own man.”

She wiggled one hand from his grip and took his cheek, holding his shiny stare. “Then let’s fix it, Guthrie, or go down in flames trying.”

Chapter 27

With the rise of Sunday's sun, came the rise of anxiety. Layla and Quin awoke feeling like their hourglass was down to its last grains of sand, like the clock ticking away the seconds of their lives was ticking louder than ever. Agro had waited longer than expected, so they knew his patience must be wearing thin. His silence would soon shatter, and the coven had yet to form a solid plan.

Quin examined Layla's aura as they got dressed, and knew it mirrored his own, but he was powerless to do anything about either of them, so they'd

remain haunted by murky green, dark-red, and midnight-blue until the moment Agro died... or they died. Both scenarios would be the end of many things.

Quin's heart quickened as he watched her manually slip her underwear on, but then he lost the erotic view when she magically donned a white, cotton dress. The gown fit loosely everywhere except her hips, which held a wide emerald-green sash. He stood and stepped toward her while summoning her jewelry, and after kissing her cheek, he wrapped the gems around her neck then secured her bracelet. Holding her palm to his lips, he urged her cheek to his heart, and she relaxed against him as he showered her entire hand in kisses.

When his lips trailed to the inside of her forearm, she turned her head and kissed his bare chest. “Do you plan to keep going?” she asked. “Because having magical powers sure makes it easy for me to get this dress out of your way.”

Layla could never get enough of him, no matter how long they stayed wrapped around each other. They'd just had sex in the shower, and as always, it had been fantastic, yet she was ready for more. They were so right together, and made each other feel so good, she truly believed she could live her entire life with him inside her, with his lips kissing hers, his hands touching her body, his voice whispering in her ear. It was her

favorite place to be. Every minute she was there was another minute in heaven, and out of all the hours she'd spent there, not once had she gotten bored or restless or ready to leave. He was the perfect drug, and she never wanted to sober up.

He smiled as he kissed a few more times. Then he pulled his lips away.

“Don't you want a cup of coffee?”

“No.”

His grin widened as he swept her off her feet. “What has happened to my coffee addict?”

“She's moved on to a more thrilling drug.”

“So you're giving up the old habit altogether now?”

“No, but if I have to choose, the coffee

loses.”

“I see.”

He looked at the clock. They only had five minutes before they were supposed to be on the lawn, but while they did their best to abide by their family's schedule, they were free to be wherever they wanted whenever they wanted. Right now his angel wanted her heaven, so their family would have to wait.

He vanished their clothes while carrying her to bed, and she moved her mouth to his neck, murmuring between kisses. “Thank you.”

“Layla, Layla, Layla,” he teased, keeping her tucked in his arms as he lay down, “will you never learn?”

“Learn what?”

“Why are you thanking me?”

She smiled. “Oh. That.”

“Yes. That.” His fingers slowly trailed from her lips to her stomach. “Do you feel like you owe me a thank you for this?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Quin. These are the most amazing moments of my life. Of course I'm thankful for them.”

He rested his palm on her hip as he watched her eyes. “They're the most amazing moments of my life, too, love, and I'm beyond thankful for them, but you don't owe me anything.”

“It's not like it's hard, Quin. Saying thank you is easy, but if you don't want

me to say it, I won't. I don't need to say it. I just want you to know.”

“I do know.”

“That's not what I mean. I just want to remind you, not because you need me to, but because I like to. But I can come up with a better way to express my gratitude.” She dragged her fingernails down his side then slid them to the sensitive spot below his abdomen, making him twitch. She grinned as she moved her mouth to his heart, and when she kissed, her fingernails slid lower.

His breathing deepened as he watched her mouth slowly travel from his chest to his stomach. Then he quietly gasped when her hand found his erection. In that moment, he honestly believed his

arousal was at its peak, but then her eyes flashed up at him as her sweet lips parted around his manhood, and his entire body throbbed and solidified.

He cursed as his blood rushed toward her mouth, the softest mouth to ever take him in, swallowing him in heat and tingles. His normally adept brain struggled to form words, its receptors tuned in to her and what she was doing to him and nothing else. She wasn't experienced; had never taken a guy in her mouth... as far as he knew, and as a man who'd received the favor many times from more practiced witches, he didn't recognize the telltales of a pro, but rather the passion of a woman discovering something she loved. She

wasn't just licking it and holding it – she was tasting it and feeling it. And she wasn't just giving pleasure – she was taking it.

He shook his hands, forcing them to relax. Then he gently worked his fingers into her curls and gathered them in a ponytail. She raised up, her slick lips hovering on the precipice of mind-blowing pleasure, and as he ran his thumb over one corner of her mouth, she took him back in. Delicate fingers firmly curled around the base of his shaft as her tongue rolled over the top – textured taste buds followed by silk – and he groaned and stretched, his lungs and heart stuttering.

“You're amazing,” he breathed,

preparing for a trip, because she was about to take him to a place he'd never been.

Layla and Quin were well over an hour late for breakfast, and of course everyone looked at them when he carried her onto the lawn. But no one said a word about their tardiness, and they didn't offer an apology. They had no excuse save for the obvious one.

After gathering coffee and food, they joined the crowd around Drystan, who'd recently returned from spying on Agro's camp and remained invisible. Quin released the concealment spells he'd set

on his cousin, and one look at his aura told Quin time was not on their side. He wasn't surprised; he'd sensed the day wouldn't go smoothly when he woke up. And while his angel had successfully drained him of physical tension, the nerves remained.

“Agro’s close,” Quin noted.

Drystan looked at him with furrowed eyebrows. “How did you know?”

Quin took a drink of coffee then motioned to Drystan’s aura. “Your colors.”

“My colors could mean any number of things.”

Quin shrugged. “It was a good guess.”

“You don't seem too concerned.”

“I wouldn't say that. I'm just not

surprised. So how many soldiers?”

“We figured around a hundred Thursday, and we’ve seen more than fifty show up. No more last night. Grandpa Cat thinks it’s because they’re almost ready. And there’s a nervous energy radiating from their camp, like his soldiers are counting down.”

“Do you have a guess?”

“If he has all the soldiers he intends to collect, why wait? But he’ll need to take stock and form a plan, and I didn’t see any evidence they’ll attack tonight, so maybe tomorrow night... or the next. I’ll be surprised if he gives us more than that.”

Layla’s heart lurched as her body went numb, and she vanished her coffee

and toast while hovering from the ground. She wasn't sure her legs would hold her, because she couldn't feel them. She couldn't feel anything except her heart, which thundered like never before. In the past, she'd felt the organ nearly burst from her chest, but this time was different, because her breathing didn't match the rhythm of her speeding heart. No heaving lungs; they rose and fell slowly, and the calm of her respiration, along with the desensitization of her muscles, made the forceful pounding of her heart much more severe. She could hear it loud and clear as blood surged behind her ears, and when she looked down at the left side of her chest, she could see the white

cotton of her dress fluttering. Surely the frantic organ would soon pop through her ribs, rip through her chest, and fly toward her family.

Quin curiously looked over as Layla floated from the ground, and when she looked down, he looked down, laying eyes on her abnormal heart rate.

Vanishing his coffee and sandwich, he placed one hand on her back and the other on her chest, trying to count the beats while keeping track of real time in his head, but he'd never felt such a rapid heart rate.

“Serafin,” he shouted, pulling Layla into his arms as he knelt.

Serafin jolted then dropped to one knee beside them, replacing Quin's hand

with his own.

Quin turned his attention to Layla's face, which was scared and perplexed, but not pained. "Talk to me, love. Are you hurt?"

"No," she answered. "Nothing hurts. It just feels weird. I'm scared it's going to explode or something."

Her grandmothers and Cordelia gasped, and Quin tightened his hold on her, touching a forefinger to her lips. "We won't let that happen." He looked at Serafin. "Well?"

Serafin shook his head, his hands moving along Layla's torso and neck. "I don't know, Quin. Everything's working great."

"Obviously not!"

“There's nothing wrong,” Serafin insisted, retracing his path. “Her heart's in perfect shape, her arteries and veins are handling the pressure magnificently, and it isn't affecting her respiratory system.”

“That's not possible,” Quin argued.

“I know,” Serafin countered, removing his hand from her chest, “but if you don't believe me, check for yourself. I can't find anything wrong.”

Quin closed his eyes and reached for her heart, recalling everything he'd learned about the human body and its functions. For several minutes he searched and searched again, but he didn't find anything odd save for the unexplained heart rate and the fact that it

wasn't affecting the rest of her body. Her lungs were somehow keeping up with the increased blood flow, yet they remained steady in their search for air. It didn't make any sense. And why in the hell was her heart racing? She was remarkably calm considering the situation.

He scanned her face, finding it flushed from the blood rushing beneath her skin, but other than that, it was perfect. “Do you have any idea what's going on, Layla?”

“Not a clue,” she answered.

He looked to Serafin. “What should we do?”

“What can we do?” Serafin returned. “There's nothing to fix.”

Quin growled and shook his head. Then he checked his temper and looked at Layla. “Can you try to master it? For me? I can't take this. Maybe nothing's wrong, but it's scaring the hell out of me. Use magic to slow it down.” He looked at Serafin. “Be ready to intervene if she goes too far.”

Layla took his tense jaw in her palm as she closed her eyes, and a few seconds later he felt her heart rate receding. She took her time, steadily slowing down the overwrought organ, and she didn't stop until he sighed and relaxed.

“How do you feel?” he asked, moving his hand from her heart to her cheek.

“I'm fine, Quin. I have been this whole

time.” She shifted, pulling his face closer to hers. “Please stop worrying so much.”

“No.” He kissed her forehead while throwing Serafin a turbulent look. “So are we just going to pretend this didn't happen?”

“I don't know what to do about it,” Serafin answered. “Like you said, it isn't possible, so how are we supposed to compare it to another case? I have no explanation for what happened, and I can't even begin to imagine why it happened. It's as though her heart was acting as a separate entity, like it has a mind of its own and can operate with or without the rest of her organs. It's unheard of, so I have no solutions.”

“I hate not knowing,” Quin simmered.

“Hey,” Layla whispered, pulling his attention around. “Please stop. I’m fine. Everything’s fine.”

Quin shook his head as he tightened his hold on her and stood. Everything was *not* fine, but since he didn’t know what to do about it and she was fretting over him, he dropped the subject and summoned a chair. He sat and made her comfortable on his lap. Then he laid a hand over her heart, his gaze flipping between her face and aura.

Layla sighed and summoned her coffee, but as soon as the mug filled her palm, it disappeared. She looked at her empty hand in confusion then raised her eyes to Quin.

“No,” he whispered, his jaw achingly tight.

“No what?” she asked.

“No coffee,” he answered.

Her eyes widened as her mouth fell open. “What?”

“Not right now.”

“Quin.”

“No.”

“But...”

“Please, Layla. Just wait a while.”

“Fine,” she huffed.

He stretched the tension out of his muscles then took the back of her neck, bringing her closer. “Please don't be mad at me, love. I'm a mess right now. Just give me and your heart a rest. Then you can have your coffee.”

Her frustration melted away as she stared into his eyes. Then she ran her fingers into his hair and pulled him into a kiss. “I’m not mad. I don’t need the coffee.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, hating himself for taking away something she loved.

“Don’t be.” She summoned her toast and laid her head on his shoulder. “I understand why, and I’m okay with it. Now eat something. That’s my request.”

He kissed her curls. “Thank you.”

“Blah,” she mumbled, waving a hand. “Eat.”

He obeyed, summoning his sandwich. Then he looked at Drystan, who’d been standing there in shocked silence the

entire time. "Who's taking your place?"

Drystan smoothed his expression and cleared his throat. "Kearny."

"Is there anything else to report?"

"No."

"Sorry you had to be the bearer of bad news."

"I'm sorry I couldn't give you better, Quin."

"I know."

They shrugged at each other. Then Drystan headed for Alana, who was being entertained by Brietta and Kegan.

Quin called Kearny over and concealed him from his chair. "Let's cut the shifts in half. We need to stay up to speed on Agro's activity, so come back around two."

“Will do,” Kearny agreed. Then they felt a whoosh of air and knew he was gone.

Quin popped the last bite of his sandwich into his mouth then laid a hand over Layla's heart, which pulsed at a normal rate. “We need to finalize our plans and take control of the situation,” he said, looking at their golden family. “If Agro's going to make his move tomorrow night, we need to make ours tomorrow afternoon. The army we've gathered will be useless if we're not organized and ready when he moves in.”

“Yes,” Kemble agreed. “We have a busy day ahead of us.”

“So what's first?” Quin asked, once again counting Layla's heartbeats –

within three beats of the last exam.

“Let's start with a trip to the volunteers' clearing,” Serafin suggested, “see who we have to work with. We can't form a plan without knowing a little about the people who'll help us carry it out.”

“That works,” Quin agreed. “We need to set new passwords anyway.”

He stood from his chair then lowered Layla's feet to the ground, summoning a sliced and peeled apple and a glass of milk. He passed them to Layla before opening his arm for her, and she tucked into his side while nibbling her fruit. “I need to conceal the community guards,” he said, looking at his dad. “Then we'll go.”

Kemble gave a nod, and Quin walked away, an angel under his arm... and the weight of her life on his shoulders.

Chapter 28

When Quin and Layla arrived at the clearing near Mount Hood, ten magicians hovered above it, accompanied by Weylin and his father Conan, who was as big as his son.

Quin and Layla revealed their bodies while keeping their auras and bonded lights concealed. Then his parents and her grandparents followed suit.

“What's going on?” Quin asked.

Weylin floated closer as he explained. “We can't get in; don't have the morning's password. They showed up about thirty minutes ago,” he added,

motioning to the ten people behind him.

Quin and Layla peered at the nervous group, who returned their stares with wide eyes. "Sorry about that," Quin offered, hugging Layla to his body as he approached them. He went around and shook their hands, but his firm hold on Layla kept her from performing the same courtesy. "I'm Quin. It's my fault you've had to wait."

The eldest wizard in the group moved forward, speaking for all of them. "Not a problem, young man. I'm Allan, and these are members of my coven. We've come from Florida to join your cause."

Quin pulled Layla with him as he dropped onto the land shield and placed a palm on its surface. "We're glad you

have.”

“Aren’t there others who’ve answered your call?” Allan asked, scanning the glade below. “If not, there’s no reason to let us in. We were under the impression an army was gathering.”

Quin nodded as he thought about the password – a quote from the song, "Ae Fond Kiss" by Robert Burns: “But to see her was to love her, love but her, and love her forever.”

Once the words had formed in his head, the surface beneath his hand turned to fog and drifted apart until a large hole had opened up.

Voices rose from within, and Allan looked down into the clearing, which was abundant with tents, fires and

magicians. “I guess my concern was unnecessary.”

“I wouldn't say that,” Quin countered, “but it does ease the heart to see such a sight.”

The rest of the newcomers gasped as they glanced through the hole, and Allan looked at Quin. “Yes it does. Perhaps Agro will finally pay for his wicked ways.”

Quin pulled Layla with him as he straightened and took a step back. “I'll accept nothing less than his life as penance.”

Allan smiled. “Then we're on the same page.”

“Good to hear,” Quin approved, motioning toward the hole. “Go and

make yourselves comfortable. There are friends of ours down there who'll provide you with everything you need. They'll approach you as soon as you land.”

“Thank you,” Allan said, shaking Quin's hand again. Then he and his family dropped into the foggy opening.

Quin searched out Conan's mind, giving him the current password as well as the afternoon's – a quote by Aristotle: “Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies.” Quin asked him to convey it to the other guards, and Conan flew away.

“What's new, Wey?” Quin asked, keeping Layla tucked into his side. He'd been checking her heart rate every five

minutes since the odd episode on their lawn.

“I'm glad you asked,” Weylin replied.
“Seal that hole and I'll fill you in.”

Quin waved a hand, and the fog sealed then disappeared, putting an end to the chatter rising from the crowd below.

“What's going on?” he asked, looking at Weylin.

“A group of mercenaries showed up last night.”

Quin's eyebrows furrowed as his tension spiked. “How many?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Did you talk to them?”

“Yes. I spoke with their leader, a wizard by the name of Sloan, no last name. He was closemouthed about

everything; says they were paid to be here, but it stopped there. I have no idea who paid them or why. We weren't sure what you'd want us to do, but figured it would be better to keep them and have to get rid of them later, than to get rid of them and need them later.”

Quin absently nodded while trying to consider every angle the mercenaries might be working. His parents and Layla's grandparents contemplated the same thing, and Caitrin was the first to comment. “This could be a dangerous situation.”

“Yes,” Quin mumbled, looking at Weylin. “He said they were paid to be here? Those words exactly?”

“Yeah,” Weylin answered. “Why do

you ask?"

"So he didn't mention anything about fighting the Unforgivables?"

"No."

Kemble scanned Quin's aura as he floated closer. "Do you really think that's possible, Quinlan?"

"I have to tell you, dad, the word impossible is losing meaning with me."

"What am I missing?" Weylin asked. "What do you think the mercenaries' purpose is?"

"There are a few possibilities," Serafin answered, throwing a glance at Quin. "They might be on a sabotage mission, paid to make sure our side doesn't win. Or they could be on a plunder mission. With this many

magicians gathered, there are treasures among them, particularly since they're gathering with the knowledge they may die. Many are carrying their most prized possessions. A group of twenty-five mercenaries is expensive, but there are more than enough riches in this clearing to compensate the investor.” He paused, his sorrowful stare sliding to his granddaughter. “Then there's the possibility they're seeking something far more valuable than possessions.”

Weylin's eyes widened. “You think they know about her?”

“Me?” Layla asked, pointing to herself.

“Yes,” Serafin answered, “you.”

“But how?”

“The same way others have found out,” Quin answered. “Finley told us there was a threat bigger than Agro. We’d be fools not to give his claim weight.”

“But that means everyone down there could be looking for me.”

“Yes, but most of them will give you their first and last names, and most of them will tell you they're here to fight Agro and why, exactly, they hate him. We know for a fact the mercenaries aren't here for personal reasons. They don't have a vendetta to carry out. They're here to make money. How much money do you think it would take for a magician to face their death?” He gave her a moment to consider this then

answered. “A lot. Now how much money do you think it would take for a magician to go snatch a witch? A lot less. It doesn't seem likely they're here to enter a battle against an army that's survived for over sixty years. Maybe they're suicidal idiots, but I sure as hell wouldn't take money in exchange for my life.”

“I see,” Layla mumbled. “So what will we do? Send them away?”

“No.”

“But you're right. Who would accept a mission like this? It seems obvious they're here for other reasons.”

“Yes.”

“So why let them stay?”

“Do you think they'll just go away?”

“Oh,” she breathed, her shoulders sagging.

“Mercenaries don't quit,” Quin added. “That would give them a bad reputation. Then they'd be out of a job. They may agree to vacate the clearing, but they won't leave the area. They'd stay close, watching us, but we'd have no clue what they're up to.”

“So we let them see us?”

“We have to.”

“That's risky.”

He pulled her close and brought her palm to his heart. “If they're here for you, it's unlikely they know what you look like. Even the best soothsayers can't summon clear visions of a person they've never laid eyes on in reality.

They might know you're female and your age, maybe even your eye color and hair color, but as far as the big picture goes, they shouldn't see you clearly, unless they've met someone who's met you."

"What about my name?"

"Magicians don't put a lot of stock in names, and mercenaries are thorough. They won't act until they have more proof than a name."

"Well if they have any of those descriptions, and I'm walking around with my lights hidden, performing powerful magic, don't you think they'll figure it out?"

"Yes, but they'll wait for your aura to be revealed before making their move. It will be the surefire proof they'll require

to complete the job.”

“Okay. And then?”

He lifted her palm into a kiss. “One problem at a time, love, but for now, don't let those beautiful lights slip a bit, keep your amazing magic to a minimum, and don't you dare leave my side.”

“You'll not hear me argue with that,” she assured, holding him tighter.

He kissed her head then looked at Weylin. “Did the other army show up, the group of fifty?”

“There are fifty-eight of them,” Weylin clarified. “And yes, they're here.”

“Good,” Quin approved. “Anything else to report?”

“No, but I have to tell you, man, I

spent some time down there last night, and you have a lot of edgy magicians on your hands. Some of them are shady, some are terrified, and some are ready to defeat the Unforgivables all by themselves. Few of them can be trusted, and none of them are trusting anyone else, least of all us.”

Quin shrugged. “It's about what we expected, but there's nothing we can do about it. It's always better to trust the guy standing next to you when you're facing a fight, but it's either this or we're done. Agro has over 150 soldiers. If we don't have these magicians, the fight is over and we're gone, whether we die or spend the rest of our lives hiding. Hopefully the vengeance boiling

everyone's blood will provide a united front that will push beyond the mistrust. We may not be alike or know each other, but we do have one thing in common – our search for retribution. That's what will bring this army together. It has to. It's our only hope.”

“Hear, hear,” Caitrin agreed. Then he slapped Weylin's massive chest. “Go get some rest, Weylin. We're looking at tomorrow or the next day, so we have a busy evening ahead of us.”

With the mention of the timeline, Layla's muscles went numb, all of them save for her heart, which jumped into action. She looked at her chest, wondering why in the hell it was slamming against Quin's side. Caitrin's

comment hadn't alarmed her any more than the rest of their conversation.

“Damn it,” Quin hissed, picking her up in one arm while laying a hand on her quivering bodice.

“I'm okay,” she assured. “Please calm down.”

He didn't listen and was already performing an examination. “Why?” he whispered.

“I'll slow it down,” Layla offered, laying a hand on his tense bicep.

“Wait,” Serafin interjected.

“What in the hell do you mean *wait*?” Quin barked.

Layla's mouth dropped open. “Quin!”

He slowly inhaled then looked at her. “It's not right, Layla. Everything isn't

fine.”

“Maybe it is,” Serafin suggested.

Quin scowled at him. “Why would you say that?”

“I don't have the answers, Quin, but Layla's a miracle in every way. Her magic, her mind, her soul, her *heart*, they're all perfect, but they're not normal. Nothing about her is normal. She's extraordinary right down to her toes. She doesn't function the way we do. We've known that all along. Her mind works differently, she feels things differently, and she sees things differently. Is it so hard to believe her body works differently? Because you have proof beneath your hand that it does. Her heart's beating like that for a reason. I

don't know what it is, and I can't promise you it's a good reason, but it has a purpose. And her body has somehow adjusted to its need, because she's not affected by it in the least bit. Look at her face, Quin. Forget the organ for a minute and look at her. That's where you'll find your peace-of-mind, because she's fine aside from her concern about you.”

Quin searched every inch of every feature, looking for the peace Serafin spoke of. Her expression wasn't pained or panicked, even as her body performed a feat none other could possibly execute. Maybe she shouldn't alter her heart's abnormal yet natural reaction. Quin hated to think it did more harm than good. “Are you sure you're not hurting,

love?"

"I'm sure, Quin. Everything's numb except my heart."

"Does *it* hurt?"

"It feels weird, but it doesn't hurt."

"At all?"

"I swear, Quin, I don't feel any pain, anywhere."

"You're numb everywhere?"

"Yes."

"Can you still use your muscles?"

She tested them by lifting her arm and making a fist. "Yes."

"Did you feel that?"

"Kind of, but it's not a normal feeling. There's no resistance."

"Squeeze my hand as hard as you can."

She obeyed then looked to his eyes.
“How was it?”

“You couldn't tell?”

“Not really. Have you ever had a dream where you're hitting something as hard as you can, but it's like you're not hitting it at all?”

“Yes.”

“Well it's like that. I knew I was squeezing my hardest, but I couldn't tell if it made a difference.”

“Hmm...”

“So how was it? Was it weak?
Weaker than normal I mean.”

“No, it was stronger.”

“Really?” She grinned and raised her eyebrows at Weylin. “Want to arm wrestle?”

Quin soberly interrupted before Weylin could answer. “Layla.”

“What?”

“Not the best time for jokes.”

Her expression fell as she met his steady stare. “I’m going to tell you something you once told me. Life doesn’t stop when times are bad. It’s worth living, always. I won’t deny myself life’s pleasures just because they’re being threatened.”

“Wise words,” Kemble commended. “I’m proud to be the father of the man who said them.”

Quin sighed as he looked at Layla’s rapid heartbeat. Then he closed his eyes and ran a hand down his face, forcing himself to accept the odd occurrence

while resolving to look beyond it. When he opened his eyes, he took her flushed cheek and drifted a thumb across pulsing lips. "If anything changes, and I mean anything, I want to know immediately."

"Okay," she agreed. "If anything changes, you'll be notified at once."

"Promise?"

"I promise, Quin, but you'll probably know before me, so I doubt the promise is necessary."

Keeping a firm hold on her, he glanced at the others. "Ready to get this over with?"

They nodded, and Quin returned his gaze to Layla. "Don't leave my side under any circumstances, and if I tell you to do something, don't hesitate."

“What if you tell me to leave your side?” she returned, flashing an ornery grin.

He cracked a smile as he lowered his feet to the land shield. “My funny, funny angel.”

Surrounded by six loving bodyguards, Quin opened the barrier and dropped into the clearing, keeping Layla tucked under a tense arm. He slowly descended toward the center of the glade, but halfway down, they gained the crowd’s attention.

Silence captured the air as curious and suspicious gazes traveled over the newcomers, noting the lack of auras and not liking it. Those who were sitting rose to their feet, and those who were

standing inched forward.

Quin tightened his grip on Layla and halted twenty feet in the air, and the six surrounding him followed suit. Then the family and friends among the crowd moved to the center of the clearing and formed a protective circle.

For a long and tense moment, no one spoke or moved. Then a tall and brawny wizard in a blue cloak stepped away from his comrades and held out his arms. “It would be wise of you to reveal your colors. There are a lot of magicians down here waiting for them.”

“That's not going to happen,” Caitrin replied. “Our auras will remain concealed.”

Murmurs floated through the crowd,

and the wizard in blue glanced at the men behind him. “Then perhaps an explanation is in order,” he said, looking back up. “Or maybe you should leave and not return.”

The bold suggestion raised some eyebrows and spiked the anxiety, but Caitrin took it in stride. “We're not going anywhere, and we're not offering any explanations. This is our party. We're the ones running the show, so if you have a problem with us, you and the rest of your comrades can decamp.”

More mumbles drifted through the clearing, and the wizard in blue took another step. “You're the family who called us here?”

“Yes. I'm Caitrin, a lifelong resident

of a local community that's been visited by Agro three times in the past two weeks.”

“And we’re supposed to believe you regardless of the absence of your auras?”

“Do we look threatening? We're merely hovering here. It's you who's on the edge of hostility.”

“Why is Agro targeting you?”

“We won't answer that.”

“Why? Do you have something to hide?”

“Yes,” Caitrin confessed, “and we don't know you, so we won't reveal it.”

“You know why we're here,” the wizard countered, motioning to the people around him, “yet you won't

provide us with the same courtesy?”

“We don't know everyone's history, and we're not asking for it. We know most of you are here to put an end to Agro's cruelty, and I can assure you we're here for the same reason.”

A formidable looking wizard with steely eyes stepped from a large group wearing olive-green cloaks. “We’re not hiding our auras,” he noted, his voice calm and cold. Then he motioned toward those forming a protective circle in the center of the clearing. “And neither are your defenders. Why do you feel the need?”

“Who are you?” Caitrin asked.

“Sloan, leader of the New England Mercenaries.”

“Isn't it interesting,” Caitrin countered, “that a mercenary is questioning our motives. Who accepts payment for a mission like this, Sloan? How much money does it take to sacrifice life on earth?”

Sloan and his mercenaries shifted as the crowd's suspicion turned on them.

“That would depend on the life,” Sloan answered, “but our compensation isn't up for discussion. We have a confidentiality agreement with our boss, and we won't reveal him or the amount of money he's paid us. However, we're not hiding our auras, and neither is anyone else.”

“That's your choice,” Caitrin pointed out. “We haven't been requiring them for

entrance into the camp, so anyone interested in lightening their auras, go for it. You have the right. We're not here to control you. We've asked for your help, not your servitude.”

A feminine voice arose from the other side of the clearing. “So how can we trust you? Who's to say you haven't called us here to feed us to the wolves?”

Layla looked at the witch, who was about the same age as her and seemed to be by herself. She looked scared, like it had taken the last of her bravery to speak, but her aura was beautiful – bright and exceptionally powerful.

She was staring right at Layla, who gave her a reassuring smile and a little wave. “Hi.”

The witch's mouth hung open for a moment. Then she swallowed and waved back. "Hi."

"You have a pretty aura."

"Um... thanks."

"Are you a bonded child?"

After a moment's hesitation, the witch pushed her shoulders back and confessed. "Yes."

Layla pointed at Quin, thinking she better leave herself out of it. "This is Quin. He's a bonded child, too."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes," Quin confirmed. "That's one reason we're anxious to be rid of Agro."

"That's a good reason," the witch conceded, "but it doesn't explain the absence of your auras."

“No it doesn't, but we won't reveal them. We have other reasons to want Agro out of our lives, and we're not willing to share them. Not because they're immoral or shameful, but because they'd be dangerous in untrustworthy hands. Agro isn't the only enemy out there.”

“That's true, but you must understand our concern.”

“We do,” Quin assured, “and we're sorry we can't relieve you of it. But there have been magicians gathering here for three days, and no harm has come to any of them so far. If we weren't being honest about our objective, don't you think you'd already have cause for alarm? We're not here to harm you.

We've provided protection, shelter, food, and the freedom to come and go. Those aren't the actions of enemies looking to hurt you.”

The witch considered this then relaxed. “I see your point.”

“I'm glad you do, because in case you and everyone else can't tell, we're as concerned for our safety as anybody.”

“You say you're a bonded child,” Sloan interjected, bringing Quin's attention around.

“Yes.”

“Where are your parents?”

“Right here,” Quin answered, nodding toward Kemble and Cordelia.

The wizard in blue spoke again. “Are we going to get proof of that? Agro's

known to have bonded children in his troops, but if a bonded couple accompanies you, it would be easier for us to believe you're not under his control. He doesn't use them.”

Quin looked at his parents and shrugged. “We need to move on, and we can't do that until they're satisfied we're not the enemy.” He twitched his fingers, and his parents' bonded lights swirled free, but their auras stayed inside. “Does that satisfy you?” Quin asked, looking back down.

“I doubt anyone here is comfortable with the absence of your auras,” the man in blue countered, “but you're not imposing a threat, so we won't threaten you. I only speak for my company,

though. I can't answer for the others.”

Quin scanned the rest of the crowd. Many of them shrugged before turning away, but others stayed wary and kept their eyes on the sky. The outspoken man in blue headed for a large tent, and Quin looked at Sloan and his mercenaries, who continued to stare.

“Will we learn the rest of your names?” Sloan asked, sliding a hand down his long black beard.

Quin made the introductions, pointing as he went. When he got to Layla, he kept his gaze trained on the mercenaries, who didn't react or seem to recognize the name.

“I'm going to assume by the way you're clutching her,” Sloan observed,

“that Layla isn't your sister.”

“Obviously,” Quin replied.

Still sweeping his shiny beard through his hand, Sloan looked at Layla. “Are you a bonded child as well?”

“No,” Quin answered.

Sloan's eyes narrowed as they flipped to Quin. “Let her speak for herself. She has an entrancing voice.”

Quin's jaw flexed, his fingers curling around Layla's waist, and she quickly backed him up while laying a hand over his heart. “He tells the truth. I'm not a bonded child.”

Sloan raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“You wanted her answer,” Quin cut in. “Now you have a problem with it?”

“Is she lying?”

Layla shot Sloan an indignant look. “No, and I’m offended by the baseless accusation.”

Guffaws chorused from the crowd, and Quin withheld a curse. His angel’s heavenly voice and visage was giving her away.

“Don’t play coy, Layla,” Sloan insisted, scanning her from top to bottom. “You shine with or without an aura, and your body, well, it’s quite...”

“That’s enough,” Quin interrupted. “Layla’s status is none of your damn business. And I suggest you refrain from staring at her and speaking to her that way, because as you so rightly assumed, she’s mine. Her exceptional beauty is mine to admire, not yours. And if you

don't have more respect for women than what you've shown so far, you don't belong here." He paused, sweeping his gaze over the rest of the volunteers.

"That goes for everyone else as well. So do we have a problem? Or can we keep peace long enough to form a plan? Agro has over a 150 soldiers and will be ready for battle tomorrow night or the next. Unless we can get our shit together, we might as well leave before he comes and slaughters us all."

Quin looked down, discretely checking Layla for signs of distress. Her heart had finally returned to a normal pace, but the mention of time sent the organ into another frenzy. She remained outwardly calm, and Quin didn't want to

draw even more attention to the fact that she was extraordinary, so he forced himself to look away.

The news about Agro made most of the volunteers anxious, but Sloan was the epitome of calm, and Quin was more convinced than ever the mercenaries were there for all the wrong reasons. And on a more personal note, he didn't like their leader. "Do we have a problem, Sloan?" he asked, tempted to put all twenty-five of the mercenaries out of commission right there.

Sloan watched Quin and Layla for a long moment while fidgeting with his beard. Then he turned away and headed for his tent. "No problems here."

Quin sighed. Then he descended to the

ground while mind searching his dad. *‘I don't like this. It's too risky. Let's get what information we need and get the hell out of here. Don't move away from us for any reason, and keep your eyes on the mercenaries. Pass the word along.’*

Kemble agreed, and Quin connected to Layla's mind. *‘Are you okay?’*

‘Yes.’

‘How's the heart?’

‘I'd say it's definitely working.’

‘Not hurting?’

‘No.’

‘Good. Keep your chest against me so others don't notice.’

‘You won't hear me argue with that.’

He smiled as he kissed her forehead.

‘Don't shake anyone's hand, and if someone touches you, immediately get them off you. Or tell me and I'll do it, as long as it gets done.’

‘Okay.’

‘Are you frightened?’

She smiled and cuddled closer. *‘No. I have my hero taking care of me.’*

‘Tell me if you do get scared. We'll leave if you need to, and if something concerns you, speak up.’

‘Okay.’

He smiled as he spoke out loud. *“I love you.”*

“I love you, too.”

“Ready?”

“Yep.”

They spent almost two hours in the

clearing, getting to know a little about their fellow fighters, and while everyone remained leery of each other, there weren't any confrontations.

The friends and family who'd been aiding in keeping the army fed and sheltered had already compiled a list of exceptional skills, along with the names of those who possessed them, and they'd kept a log of all the twins, bonded children, and bonded couples.

Nine bonded children ranging between the ages of twenty-two and sixty-five were present, and each of them had been pursued by Agro at one time or another. All nine of them had lost their parents to Unforgivables, and six of them continued to spend their lives in hiding or on the

run. Also present were three sets of twins and a group of triplets, who spent their time in constant travel to remain free. And there were five bonded couples, who were seeking revenge for their offspring.

Layla found the bonded couples' situations particularly sad, and learning about them resulted in a struggle to keep her aura concealed and her sobs at bay. Three of the couples had watched the Unforgivables kill their children – a tragedy no parent should face. But it was the other two bonded couples who had Layla fighting tears, because their children were alive. They were alive and under Agro's command. Layla couldn't imagine anything harder than

entering a battle knowing your child fought for the opposite side. The mere idea squeezed her heart so hard, physical pain shot through her body, and she soon found herself tucked in Quin's neck while his mental voice echoed distractions in her head.

Many of the volunteers had their own theories and suggestions for the upcoming battle, so everyone was given the opportunity to express them on paper. They were promised their ideas would be taken into consideration, which was true, and assured everyone would know the plan before the fight took place.

As Quin and Layla prepared to depart, the outspoken wizard in blue emerged

from his tent, puffing a pipe while eyeing his secretive hosts. “So we're to remain in the dark about your reasons for concealment.”

“It's irrelevant,” Quin answered. “We want Agro dead. That's all you need to know.”

“Hmm... Well if your vengeance burns half as bright as mine, I look forward to joining you on the battlefield.”

“Likewise,” Quin returned. Then he wrapped Layla in a hug and got the hell out of there.

Chapter 29

Another visit to the glacier was in order, so Quin and Layla flew to Washington after leaving the volunteers' clearing. They tested a few theories and practiced some new spells. Then they headed home, Layla growing drowsy in Quin's warm embrace.

She was tempted to suggest a nap when they got home, but when Quin landed on the lawn, he gently pulled her face from his throat and found her eyes, a sparkle in his own. "There are some people here to meet you."

"Who?" she asked, looking around,

and her mouth fell open as her gaze landed on a large group of strangers, all of them staring at her and Quin with shiny eyes and emotional smiles. Layla's cheeks burned as she instinctively retreated to Quin's neck, shocked and a little frightened. "Who are they?"

"It's okay," he soothed, running a hand down her hair. "They can be trusted."

"But who are they?"

Before he could answer, Daleen appeared and laid a hand on Layla's back. "They're your family, darling."

"And a damn fine sight to see," Serafin added. Then he grabbed Daleen's hand and flew to the watching magicians.

Kemble and Cordelia dropped right

into the middle of the company, and when Caitrin and Morrigan touched down beside Quin, their faces lit up with smiles.

Morrigan giddily danced in place while squeezing Layla's arm. "There's no reason to hide, sweetie. They already love you." After letting go, she grabbed Caitrin and flew to the guests, happily squealing along the way.

Layla watched them then furrowed her eyebrows at Quin. "I don't understand. Who are they?"

"The majority of them are your relatives," he answered. "Mostly blood relatives. About half of them are Serafin's or Daleen's family members, and a few are Morrigan's."

Layla's eyes widened as she glanced at the group. "Really?"

"Yes, and some of them are my mom's relatives from Alaska."

"Oh. I didn't know they were coming."

"We weren't sure they'd get here on time. Plus, it was kind of a surprise."

"I see," she mumbled, feeling ungrateful, but she couldn't disregard her anxiousness.

"What's wrong, love."

"I'm nervous, Quin."

"Ah... Well let's get the meet and greet out of the way so you can relax and enjoy your extended family."

"Okay," she agreed, swallowing a lump.

But he didn't walk forward. He just

stared at her face, obviously trying to figure out a way to make her feel better. “How about we get a cup of coffee first?”

Her posture perked up then fell again. “You don't have to do that, Quin. I know you don't want me drinking it. Let's go meet everyone.”

“I'm not cutting off your coffee, Layla. I wouldn't dream of it. I asked you to wait, and you did, but now you can have a dose of your second favorite drug.” He summoned an oversized mug of coffee. Then his dimples appeared as he drifted the cup beneath her nose. “I know you want it, my beautiful coffee addict, and I want you to have it.”

She closed her eyes while breathing

deep. Then she smirked and took the mug. “You should know better than to tempt an addict. I’ve proven again and again I can’t be trusted with temptation, particularly when the fruit is one of my two favorite flavors.”

He leaned in and nibbled her neck. “I’m a flavor?”

Goosebumps tickled her flesh, and her blush returned. “Stop,” she giggled. “I *just* told you, I can’t take the temptation.”

He pulled away, grinning as he found her face. “You’re right. That was *really* insensitive of me.”

She laughed then kissed his smiling lips. “Put me down so I can meet my extended family.”

The afternoon of introductions was

extremely emotional for Layla, but the majority of the emotions were good, and she always found strength in Quin's arms. She was shocked by how many blood relatives she had, and even after laying eyes on the proof and feeling the tingles run up her arm again and again, she had a hard time believing it. She'd met a few great-grandparents, several aunts and uncles, and many more cousins, most of them bearing a resemblance to either her mom or dad, so she also saw herself in the faces she met.

Quin stayed by her side, meeting most of them for the first time as well, and he didn't greet his own family until Layla was free to accompany him. She was

much quieter through this point in the afternoon. The touch of his relatives didn't provide the instant ease and openness supplied by her own family's touch, but she managed to keep her blush light, and she didn't stutter once. Not that it was hard. His family made it easy. They were as wonderful as Cordelia and treated Layla with impeccable politeness and kindness, never once making her uncomfortable or putting her on the spot.

Around three, Quin pulled Layla away from the crowd and led her to the buffet table. "Your stomach's been growling for twenty minutes," he said, summoning two plates. "I can't take it anymore." He hovered the dishes out in front of them

then began walking along the table, magically filling both plates.

“What are you doing?” she protested. “I can't eat all that.”

“Try. We have a lot to do, and I don't want to waste our free time eating and sleeping. You need all the fuel you can get when you can get it.”

She hovered up until her eyes were level with his. Then she flashed a mischievous smile and stuffed a raspberry in his mouth. “Are you worried I can't keep up?”

He grinned and pulled her into a hug. “No, because I'm going to make sure you stay nourished.” After swallowing the fruit, he pulled her into a deep kiss. Then he licked her lips and lowered her feet

to the ground. “Now make a happy plate, love,” he teased, holding her steady while she found her equilibrium, “so you can have your dessert later.”

She grinned as she grabbed her plate and the glass of wine he’d summoned. “Ha. Like you’d deny me my dessert whether I touched this food or not. I’ll believe that when I see it.”

He took his wine from the air, but left his plate floating so he could keep one arm around her as they headed for the circle of chairs. “Are you challenging me, Layla?”

“You wouldn’t,” she countered, narrowing her eyes on him.

He laughed as he threw her a sideways glance. “You’re right.”

“Told you,” she returned, smugly tilting her chin.

“I like that,” he approved.

“What?” she asked. “My arrogance?”

“I wouldn't call it that, because calling you arrogant would be like calling me short. But you're pretty confident I can't resist you, and not only is that a turn-on, it's the truth, and it's something I want you to be aware of at all times.”

They sat then began eating while continuing their racy conversation. “So if I told you to take me inside right now,” she said, “you'd do it?”

“Yes,” he answered. “Shall I prove it?”

“Hmm... What if I said I wanted to stay inside the rest of the day and all

night?"

His chewing paused as he contemplated this. Then he gave a nod and went back to his meal. "Yes. If that's really what you want, that's what we'll do."

She'd watched his expression and aura as he found his answer, and her heart swelled as her veins warmed. "Thank you," she whispered.

He shook his head as he swept a forefinger across her lips. "No, love. Don't thank me for that. If that's where you want to be, it's exactly where I want to be. All you have to do is say the word and I'll prove that to you."

She grabbed his hand before he could pull it away. Then she kissed his

fingertip. "I believe you, and your offer is extremely tempting, but let's get some work done. Then we'll play."

"If that's what my angel wants," he agreed.

She laughed as she released his hand. "I'm surprised you haven't bought me a pony yet, Quin. Every spoiled girl gets a pony, right?"

"Do you want one?" he asked.

Her smile fell. "No. It was a joke."

He quietly laughed while taking another bite. "I know."

She playfully pinched his arm as her smile returned. "You and your funny tricks."

He watched her take a drink of wine. Then he leaned in and licked her lips. "I

happen to know my angel loves my tricks.”

She greedily sucked his whisper into her lungs, her heart stuttering his name. “I love everything about you, Quin. Now stop tempting me, or I'm going to bite.”

After one more lick, he moved away. “Like I said, just say the word, and I'll take care of the rest.”

She smiled as she took another bite, knowing he spoke the truth, but she had no intention of taking advantage. Not because she didn't want to, but because there were so many reasons not to. The lawn was full of people she loved and family she'd just met, and it buzzed with plans to save her life. Leaving the scene would feel wrong, and the guilt would

keep her from getting lost in her heaven, so they stayed on the lawn, taking advantage of their gathered loved ones and participating in group discussions about the challenge ahead of them.

An assortment of strategies were considered, scrapped or combined with others, all in an attempt to find the safest plan of action for their well-intentioned yet inexperienced army. Those who weren't concentrating on the fight to come were catching up with the family members they hadn't seen in a while, spending time with the family members they saw every day, or in Layla's case, getting acquainted with the family members she never knew about and may never see again.

Quin spent the afternoon divided, devoting part of his attention to Layla while the other half tuned into plans to keep their freedom. When Layla said she wanted to go play with Shaylee and Alana, he easily agreed, but when she headed for the littlest angels on the lawn, he followed, and so did everyone he was speaking with. They continued their discussion as they walked, and Layla curiously watched them, confused by their actions. But when she made it to the baby girls and sat, she knew exactly what was going on, because everyone else sat as well. Her cheeks flamed as she scowled at Quin. He'd made seven people switch chairs just so he could stay beside her while she played with

the babies.

Quin seemed wholly absorbed in his conversation, but the moment Layla narrowed her eyes on him, he turned away from his great-grandpa and met her stare.

'Don't do that,' she mentally demanded.

But he didn't respond, which told her he had no plans to yield, so she didn't give him the opportunity to repeat the embarrassing scene and stayed put throughout the rest of his conversation.

Quin felt a little guilty he'd upset her, but he was fine with the new arrangement and would prove himself the most selfish man on earth if that's what it took to stay by her side. His own

likability meant nothing as far as anyone besides her was concerned. She was his angel, and when it came to the deepest chambers of his heart, she was the only thing in the world that mattered.

Chapter 30

Over a hundred magicians inhabited the clearing by dinner time, so the food was once again served on a buffet. Layla and Quin found seats between his grandma and Daleen, and he stayed quiet and thoughtful as he hurried through his meal. Layla noticed his rush and sped her own meal along, but he beat her anyway, vanishing his dishes before she was halfway done.

She looked at him in confusion, and he kissed her cheek. “Eat. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” she asked,

sitting up straight.

He pointed at Kemble, who sat three chairs away. "To talk to Caitrin and my dad."

Layla relaxed and took a bite. "Okay." After watching him walk away, she shifted her attention to Daleen, who was looking at her with a sweet smile.

Layla swallowed her food and grinned. "Hi."

"Hi," Daleen returned, her voice warm and peaceful.

"That was quite the surprise you guys sprang on me," Layla noted, motioning to the extended family.

Daleen's aura pulsed and brightened as her smile widened. "I hope we didn't put too much pressure on you."

“I was nervous at first, but the blood connection made it easy to relax around everyone.”

Daleen's eyes grew shiny as she squeezed Layla's knee. “I'm glad you got to meet them. It means a lot to them, and it means even more to your grandpa and me.”

“I'm glad, too,” Layla agreed, laying her hand over Daleen's. “I've known from the beginning how difficult it must have been for you to move here, but now that I see how wonderful everyone is, I appreciate your decision even more.”

“This is where we want to be, darling.”

“I know. That's what makes it so special. You made that sacrifice because

you love me, and I'm so glad I've had this time with you. I've always wanted grandparents, but you're even better than I imagined."

Daleen turned her face into her free hand as she quietly sobbed, and Serafin summoned a silk handkerchief while wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

Layla's eyes widened as she squeezed her grandma's hand. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told you that while you're trying to eat."

Daleen shook her head and cleaned her face. "No, darling, please don't apologize. Those words were beautiful, and I'm so happy you said them. They kissed my heart, and it's always the right time for that."

“I’ll be replaying them in my head for the next several hours,” Serafin added.

“Oh,” Layla sighed. Then she shrugged and smiled. “I just wanted you to know.”

“And for that,” Daleen replied, leaning in to kiss Layla’s cheek, “I’m grateful.” She leaned back and took a bite, scanning the air around Layla as she chewed. “You’re a shiny star, my darling.”

“Then what does that make you?”

“A small piece of something quite amazing.”

“Well something can’t be whole without its parts.”

Another tear rolled from the corner of Daleen’s eye, and Serafin caught it, but

neither of them said anything as they continued eating. Their auras said more than enough.

Quin immediately noticed them upon his return. "I see my angel's been touching hearts."

"Always," Serafin confirmed, and Daleen nodded her agreement.

Layla's cheeks warmed as she dropped her gaze, but when her plate disappeared, she looked at Quin, who remained standing as he held out her wine. "Drink up," he instructed.

She raised an eyebrow at him, but obeyed, and as soon as she'd drained the cup, it vanished. Magic grasped her body and lifted her from the chair, and Quin laughed at her shock as he caught

her in a hug.

“I'm going to steal the angel for a while,” he told her grandparents. Then he carried her away, leaving the crowded lawn behind.

He didn't head for the house like Layla thought he would, and when they neared the tree line, curiosity got the best of her. “Where are we going?”

“It's a surprise.”

“I love your surprises. But do you think it's a good idea to be sweeping me away right now?”

“Yes.”

They reached the cover of tall firs, and he tightened his hold on her as he leaned back, hovering a few feet above the forest floor. “Are you comfortable?”

he asked, floating further into the timber.

“Of course,” she returned, letting him bear her weight.

“Good.” He kissed her curls then tilted his head back, double-checking his path. “Even though I think this is a fine idea, we're limited on time. We need to be back in an hour and a half.”

She raised her eyebrows while kissing his heart. “I can think of a lot of things we can do in an hour and a half.”

“Mmm... me, too, but believe it or not, I have a destination in mind, and we'll be there soon. We're not leaving the property.”

Her lips trailed to his neck, murmuring between kisses and licks. “Oh yeah?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, losing his

fingers in her hair.

“Okay. Let me know when to look.”

After a few more minutes of bliss, he slowed down and leaned his head back.

“Are your eyes closed?”

“Mm-hm.”

He floated on for several more seconds. Then she felt him halt. “Okay,” he allowed, “look up.”

She gave his throat one more suck before raising her head, and her mouth fell open as her eyes widened. “Wow.”

They hovered on the edge of an oval clearing at least double the size of their lawn, and there was so much to see, Layla struggled to decide which way to look. On the left end of the glade stood a barn as big as any she’d laid eyes on –

an impressive feat considering she traveled Oklahoma's rural highways for twenty-one years. But this wasn't just a big red barn; it was made of polished granite that shone like a dark ocean, the cloudy moonlight catching every angle, and it was surrounded by a white wooden fence that looked like it had been painted yesterday. Another large enclosure connected to the first fence, holding in a variety of animals, and a much smaller pen connected to the second, housing chickens.

On the opposite side of the clearing, Layla found a huge garden – dozens of rows of plants overloaded with an array of fruits and vegetables. It was so big, it continued into the forest, mingling with

tree trunks, moss and ferns, and it somehow looked right at home.

Next to the garden, and also stretching into the firs, was an orderly grove. By the variances in the sizes and shapes of the trees, Layla knew they held an impressive variety of fruit, and she also knew the miracle plants had been touched by magic. Tending a garden wasn't on her list of talents, but she'd paid enough attention in school to know most of the vegetation she was seeing needed abundant sunlight, a different season, and an entirely different climate.

After several seconds of searching the vast family garden, she tore her gaze away and scanned the remaining structures. The side she and Quin

hovered on was a wide open expanse, but the opposite side was lined with three white outbuildings and one newly built garage.

“What do you think?” Quin asked.

“It's perfect,” she whispered, taking it all in again.

“I'm surprised you've never asked to see it.”

“We've been busy, but I had no idea it would be like *this*. I figured a couple of garages and a mediocre barn, but this is a dreamland.”

“I meant to get you here sooner, and even now our time is limited, but I want you to see it. You need to see it.”

She looked from the utopian clearing to his attentive eyes. “I'm glad you made

the time, Quin. It's beautiful.”

He pulled her into a soft kiss. Then he swept her hair from her face. “What would you like to look at first? I'll float you there.”

“Um... Let's take a look at the garden then go see the animals.”

“Perfect,” he agreed, hovering toward the grove. Then he floated between two rows of fruit trees.

“Who takes care of all this?” she asked, finding everything from oranges and limes to plums and pears, and that was a mere portion of what the grove had to offer.

“Grandpa Cat mostly,” Quin answered. “He doesn't work outside of the community, so it's his job to tend to

the gardens and animals.” He circled around a fragrant lemon tree then paused at a cherry tree, picking a small cluster of fruit. “Here,” he said, handing them over. “I’ve already magicked the pits out.”

“Thanks.” Taking note of its extraordinary size and bright red color, she pulled a cherry from its stem and popped it into her mouth. It was, without a doubt, the most delicious cherry she’d ever had. “So Catigern does all this?”

“For the most part. The rest of us help when we can, or if he needs us to. But we’ve all been busy lately, including him, so we’ve had Kegan’s great-grandpa giving us a hand. Even with our magic making things easy, keeping up with this

clearing and its occupants takes time.”

“I can imagine.”

He floated out of the grove then made his way down one of the wide rows of the garden. “It's not really this half that's so pressing. Growing our own produce isn't a necessity, but there are quite a few animals on the other end, and not only do they need to be fed and watered, they need to be exercised. They get to roam the clearing when someone's here to watch them, but that's not enough for some of them. Every day the horses are taken for a run on the trail that skirts our property line.”

“How many horses are there?” she asked, eyeing a bed of bright-red strawberries.

Quin noticed, and summoned her a sample of the fruit as he answered.

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen? How does Catigern find time to exercise that many horses?”

“Don't forget, love, we're magicians and very in tune with animals, especially our own. Grandpa Cat can exercise several horses at once, but he rarely has to take care of all fifteen by himself.

Everyone in the coven rides, and when life's passing at a normal pace, most of us spend a couple evenings a week here, and some of us come daily, if only for a little while. Grandpa Cat knows which horses haven't had their daily run, and they're the ones he takes out.”

“Do you come here daily?”

“At least every other day.”

“You should have told me, Quin.”

“It's not a priority right now, so stop feeling guilty. When this mess is over, I'll make time to do the things I enjoy, and they'll be even better now that you'll be doing them with me.”

“I can't wait,” she approved, looking over a vast sea of grapevines. “Are these for wine?”

“Mostly.”

“Do you guys really drink that much?”

“No,” he laughed. “We sell it.”

“We do?”

“Yes. The same goes for the rest of the produce. What we don't use ourselves, we donate or sell.”

“Who makes the wine? All of you?”

“Most of us know how, but Cadman and Flanna are the experts. They have a store in Seaside.”

“Oh. I guess I'll have to get over there when things slow down. I still haven't seen my grandparents' art gallery.”

He drifted away from the garden then floated along the side of the clearing that held the outbuildings. “I can't get you there before our confrontation with Agro, but if we succeed, it will be at the top of my to-do list.”

“I know. You're thorough like that. What's in the sheds?”

“Tables, chairs, extra supplies. You'd be surprised by how much is in there. They've been touched by magic. The long table we eat family dinners at is in

one of them, and usually the buffet table is in there with it.”

“Really?”

“Yes, love,” he confirmed with a smile, “really.”

He stopped in front of the garage and waved a hand, opening the door to reveal her car. A light flickered on as he floated to the driver's door. Then he wrapped his arms around her waist and flipped upright. After lowering her feet to the ground, he opened her door and held out her keys.

She accepted them with furrowed eyebrows. “What are these for?”

“I thought you might want to start your car, since it's been a while.”

“Okay. Hop in.”

He made sure she was in before closing her door, and a few seconds later he slipped into the passenger seat, laughing at the way she wiggled and bounced, trying to find familiarity in the position.

“Is it weird?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “It doesn't feel right at all.” She started the engine then rested both hands on the wheel. “Ever since I started driving, there's only one other time I went more than a day without doing so. I didn't drive for five days when my mom died, and I remember feeling odd the first time I got back behind the wheel, but it wasn't this bad. I feel like I'd need to do a couple of laps on an empty track before driving on

a road with other vehicles.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Are you kidding? Flying is way better than driving. I mean, I guess it would be okay to take a road trip once in a while, just to see things from a different point-of-view, but as far as necessary travel goes, driving is a pain, while flying is a thrill every time all the time.”

He propped his elbow on the armrest and took one of her hands from the wheel, linking her fingers with his. “We'll take a road trip sometime.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Sure. If it's something you want to do, I'd love to do it with you. And if you don't want to drive the whole time, you

can teach me how and we'll share the wheel.”

“That sounds fun.”

“I think so, too. Where do you want to go?”

“Hmm... the most beautiful drive I've taken was on my way here. There was a lot to look at between Oklahoma and Oregon.”

“We could do that if you'd like. Then you could show me your home state.”

“There's not much to see, not compared to Oregon.”

“I bet we'd find stuff to look at.”

She smiled. “I'm not betting against you, because Oklahoma would be heaven with you there.”

“We'll add it to the list. But how

about this? We take our time driving down the coast, catching every sunset along the way, and when we get to Long Beach, we'll work our way east to the Grand Canyon. Then we'll try our luck in Vegas before coming home."

"That sounds amazing, Quin, a dream come true. I've never seen California or the Grand Canyon, and I've always wanted to explore the west coast. My mom and I used to talk about it all the time."

"I know. I saw one of your discussions on your home videos."

"You did?"

"Yes. It started with an acceptance letter to UCLA."

"Oh yeah..."

Her voice faded as her thoughts drifted into the past, and he let her stay there for a long moment before pulling her back. “Do you feel like you've missed out?”

“On what?”

“The chance to go to college? To discover a career?”

“I wouldn't say I've missed out, but my life turned out a lot different than I once thought it would.”

“I'm sure. What did you see for yourself?”

“Well, when I was in high school, doing the student council thing and getting good grades, I saw myself going to college on the west coast, then figuring out a career from there, because

I never really had one in mind. Of course mom would make the move with me, because she had no reason to stay behind, and we talked about living on the beach. If we didn't have enough money for seaside realty, we'd just have to sleep under the stars and be beach bums, and I'd have to go to class smelling like the ocean I'd bathed in."

He laughed as he pulled her fingertips to his lips. "Sounds sandy and salty."

"Yes, but to a couple of Oklahoma girls, it sounded like heaven." She paused, briefly reflecting on the outcome of her life. "I thought about California a lot, but I didn't have a path carved in stone. Well, that's not true. I was sure I'd go to college out of state, and I was sure

my mom would go with me, but I was proven wrong on both accounts the night she had her stroke.”

“I’m sorry your plans were changed by such a sad tragedy.”

“Me, too, and I wish I still had Katherine. For three *really* long years I was a mess over her condition, and to lose her body as well as her mind broke me in a way I’d never been broken. But now that I’m here,” she added, squeezing his hand, “now that I’ve lived a beautiful and blessed life for over two weeks, I can’t be sorry anymore. I’d be an ungrateful brat to say I was sorry about the way my life has turned out, because aside from a few annoying and temporary inconveniences, it’s perfect.”

He kissed her hand then pulled her palm to his cheek. "It's less than you deserve... less than I want you to have."

She smiled, keeping her eyes on his as she laid her head back. "That's because you get off on spoiling me."

He laughed as he glided his teeth across the inside of her wrist. "That's one way to put it."

Tingles traveled up her arm, but then he pulled his lips away and let her go, severing the electric connection. "Turn off your car, love. Let's go see the animals before we have to get back."

"Okay."

He abandoned his seat as she killed the engine, and he was opening her door before she could remove the keys from

the ignition. He offered his hand, and she let him pull her from the car into a hug. “You make me feel like a princess,” she whispered.

He kissed her head and rubbed her back. Then he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and headed for the outdoor animals. “Do I?”

“You didn't know?”

“I aim to make you feel like the amazing person you are, Layla, but no, I don't always know if I'm succeeding, so it's nice to hear you say it.”

“Don't I show you?”

“Show me what, exactly?”

“How much the wonderful things you say and do mean to me.”

“Yes, you express your appreciation

all the time.”

“Then why are there times when you're not certain?”

“We weren't talking about how much you love the way I treat you, we were talking about the way I make you feel about yourself.”

“Oh yeah, like a princess.”

“Yes.”

“I don't show you that?”

“Sometimes, and it gives me a huge rush of pleasure to see you so confident, not just because I got you there, but because that's where you should be. But you lost yourself when you spent all that time alone, and you still have a hard time seeing yourself clearly, even when someone's pointing out the evidence.”

“I don't know why.”

“Why what?”

“Why I lost my confidence.”

They reached the chicken coop, and he summoned some grain, placing half of it in her palm before urging her to kneel and let the hens eat from her hand.

“Would you like to hear my theory?” he asked.

She giggled at the chickens then found his stare. “On why I lost my confidence?”

“Yes.”

“Sure. Maybe it will shed light on why I can't speak without blushing.”

“I love your blush.”

“But you don't love why it's there.”

“Not always, but sometimes your

bashfulness is cute, and your humbleness is always lovable.”

She smiled then turned back to her fat hens. “Thank you. Now let's hear your theory on why I'm a head case.”

“You're not a head case, Layla.”

“Call it what you want, but I'm completely different than the rest of you.”

“You weren't always so self-conscious.”

“No, and there's no excuse for it now.”

“Most people aren't meant to be alone, Layla. Everyone needs companionship, and that's particularly true with magicians. That's one reason we live in covens with dozens of family members,

and why we're able to do so without driving one another crazy. We thrive on interaction with others, and we have a strong need for intimacy. When we're isolated for a significant amount of time, things that are innate to us are repressed until they're lost. Obviously I've never experienced it, but I've read about the effect of solitude on magicians. They all go through personality shifts. They lose their optimism and openness. Your thoughts and feelings have been forced to stay inside for three years, so it makes you uncomfortable when they're forced to the surface, which is inevitable now that you're living in a coven. That unease is a stark contrast to the way the rest of us feel.”

“I’m a social pariah,” she mumbled.

He frowned as he took her hand, dusting off the leftover grain. “I understand why you feel that way, and for a lot of nomadic magicians, that’s how it turns out. They live disconnected and unfulfilled lives, or they misuse their magic to compensate for their insecurities, and most of them suffer depression. You, my beautiful angel,” he said, pulling her to her feet, “were very sad when I met you, but you weren’t lost. Your determination, along with Travis and Phyllis, kept you grounded. But your natural response is to hold things in.”

“Do you think I’ll ever adjust?”

He smiled as he led her toward the next enclosure. “You already have.”

“A little, but not much.”

“That's not true. When we first met, you had to make yourself to look at me.”

“Nuh-uh,” she argued. “I couldn't keep my eyes off you.”

His dimples deepened. “As long as I wasn't looking back.”

Her cheeks flushed as she dropped her gaze to the ground. “I did look at you.”

He reached up, lightly tugging on her pout with his thumb. “I know you did. You were committed to making eye contact, but in the beginning, you had to force yourself to do it. You got better about that pretty fast, though. You were boldly meeting my stare by the time I left you at Karena's inn.”

“But you can't count yourself, Quin. Of

course I've gotten better around you. I've spent nearly every minute of the past sixteen days with you, and you make me feel safe, not insecure. And not only am I in love with you, but I know, without a doubt, that you're in love with me. You've been yanking my feelings to the surface since that first night, but you always replace them with kindness, making me feel loved. And you never judge me, so I know there's nothing to be afraid of when you crack me open. I know that for every emotion you yank out of me, you'll replace it with something special, and that's why I'm not afraid with you. Just being near you makes me stronger, and being in your arms gets me through things that would

make me crumble otherwise. But I'm still a mess around other people, and there are still times when I feel like I'm not getting any air in until I bury my face in you and hide from them.”

He pulled her closer and kissed her head. “It makes my heart soar to hear you say such wonderful things about me, Layla, but I have to disagree with your comment about not getting better around the others, because it's not true. I've watched you do things around them that other witches would be hesitant to do, and I've seen you speak up and meet challenges when dozens of eyes were on you. When you find a point to focus on, you forget to hide. Then you're the same person around them that you are around

me.” He paused and flashed deep dimples. “Well, almost the same. I’m pretty sure I’m the only person who can get you to bare it all.”

She smiled, too. “You’re good at breaking me open. You have been from the beginning, partly because you’re stubborn and refuse to let me hide, and partly because you’ve been treating me like a princess since the moment I met you.”

“That’s because I was dying to make you my queen the moment I met you.”

“Would you say you’ve succeeded?”

“I can say with conviction that I have.”

He opened a gate leading into a large corral, and a flock of sheep trotted

closer. A few bleats rang out, and Layla giggled as they pushed at her hands and legs with wooly heads. She looked up to smile at Quin, but her attention was diverted to the other animals staring at her. The large enclosure was separated into four smaller areas, and each one contained one or two different species. Aside from the sheep, there were ducks and swans swimming in a pond, and another pen held a donkey and several fat goats. But it was the biggest pen that captured Layla's interest, and she soon found herself floating toward it in an emotional trance.

On the other side of the fence, stood nine adult alpacas and three babies, all of them watching her with shiny, black

eyes. She landed a few feet away, then slowly walked forward, trying not to scare them, but the precaution was unnecessary. The soft creatures were eager to get close and nudged one another out of the way in attempts to make it so. Quin landed beside her and reached over the fence, drawing the attention of two of them, but the others continued to vie for Layla's affection.

Eyes growing moist, she reached out, carefully petting the snouts of the gentle beasts. "I had no idea."

"About what?" Quin asked.

"That we have alpacas," she answered. "When did you start keeping them? Because my mom had never been around one until she met my dad."

“I guess you saw that in their memories?”

“Yes. He took her to an alpaca farm on their first date.”

“I wasn't aware you knew about that.”

“You knew about it?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “It's why we have them now.”

“What do you mean?”

He picked her up then flew to the outside edge of the fence, and the alpacas followed, resuming their struggle for attention. “This is one reason I wanted to bring you here,” he said, removing a framed picture from a white wooden post.

He held it out, and she took it, looking

down on a remarkably clear photograph of a blonde alpaca. Below the picture, inscribed in gold lettering, was her name – Oriana. Layla looked from the photo to Quin. “What's this?”

“Oriana was the first alpaca we got. She was a wedding gift for your mom from your dad, but Rhosewen never got her.”

Layla's gaze returned to the picture. “Why not?”

“Aedan bought her from the same farm he took Rhosewen to in Virginia, but Oriana wasn't born yet, and he'd specifically ordered a blonde female. She was born a month before you, the first of February, but we didn't get her until the following September.”

“So my mom never even knew about her?”

“No.”

“That's sad.”

“It's bittersweet,” Quin agreed, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

She blinked back tears, unwilling to blur her view of Oriana. “I guess she's not alive anymore?”

“No. She died last year. But seven of these are her babies,” he added, motioning to the adult alpacas.

Layla looked at the creatures, swallowing an emotional lump as she watched them push each other out of the way. “They're beautiful.”

“Yes they are. We're blessed your dad brought them into our family.”

She turned her attention back to the photo. “Who named her?”

“Morrigan. The Irish meaning is blonde or golden, and the Latin meaning is rising sun.”

“It's pretty.”

He tucked a curl behind her ear and touched a forefinger to her flushed cheek. “It could have been your name.”

“What?” she asked, looking back up.

“Your parents had two names picked out for you,” he explained. “One for if you were dark and beautiful like your dad, and one for if you were fair and beautiful...”

“Like my mom,” she finished, remembering the discussion her parents had held with Katherine about naming

her.

“Yes,” Quin confirmed. “Oriana was the name you would have gotten if you'd been golden like your mom, so that's what Morrigan named Rhosewen's alpaca six months after you were born dark and beautiful.”

“Oriana Love,” she said, testing the name. “Not quite the same, huh?”

He took the picture and magically adhered it to the post. Then he wrapped her in a hug. “No it's not. I've gotten used to calling you Layla Love, and I can't imagine it any other way.”

She kissed his heart then laid her cheek against it, resuming her watch over the alpacas. “I can't believe this place, Quin. It really is like a

dreamland.”

“You haven't seen it all yet.”

“I know, but it's already perfect. I'd love to spend more time here when we get the chance.”

“Then that's what we'll do. So would you like to stay here with the alpacas? Or would you like to check out the barn?”

“Both, but I guess I'll settle for the barn. I want to see the horses before we have to go back.”

He picked her up and flew to the barn, magically opening a door to the right of the large double-doors. Then he entered an office area that was completely void of anything official. Set up like a quaint coffee shop, it had cushy armchairs and

bookshelves instead of a desk and filing cabinets. Quin flew past it all, making his way through another door. Then a light flipped on as he landed in a wide open area with stalls on three sides.

He lowered her feet to the floor, and she looked around with wide eyes. She was definitely in a barn, but it didn't smell like a barn, and it certainly wasn't dirty like a barn. Not one speck of hay was out of place, not one spider web hung in the rafters, and not even the thinnest layer of dust covered the floor or wall hangings. And not only was the building spotless, but the animals were shiny, too. Every horse had a perfect mane and coat that brightly reflected the overhead lights, and the dairy cows'

black spots were so glossy, they looked like marble.

Layla grinned as she slowly shook her head. “Is it really a barn when you can eat off the floor?”

He laughed as he led her to one of the stalls. “I’m going to say yes, but others might disagree.”

He halted and reached out, touching the snout of a dark and lustrous bay horse, and Layla moved closer to the gate, standing on her toes to look at the equine’s body. Its coat was almost the exact same color as Quin’s hair in the sun – dark brown with a touch of amber, but the horse was a bit lighter. She also noted the color of its mane, tail, and lower quarters were like her hero’s eyes

in the dark – black with the slightest brown still visible when they caught the light.

“Is this one yours?” she asked, running her hand down its sleek neck.

“Yes. His name is Arion.”

“He's beautiful.”

“Thank you.” The horse nudged Quin's hand, then his face, and Quin nudged back. “He misses me.”

Layla offered the horse a sympathetic pout. “I'm sorry, Arion. It's my fault.”

The horse looked at her for a moment. Then he gently nudged her cheek before returning his attention to Quin. “I've had him since he was born,” Quin revealed. “He's the son of my mom's mare.”

“That worked out well.”

“Yes it did. I was here when he was born, so we've been together every step of the way. He'll be four years old in two months.”

“I bet he has missed you then.”

The horse snorted and twitched his head, as if to agree, and Quin laughed. “Yes, but he'll have to wait to get the attention he wants. I have more important things going on right now.”

He gently patted Arion's snout. Then he led Layla along the three rows of stalls, letting her get a glimpse of all fifteen horses and the six dairy cows.

“Do you know how to milk them?” she asked, pointing to one of the glistening cows.

“Sure,” he answered.

She humorously crinkled her nose.

“Really?”

“Yes. Is that weird?”

“No, but I didn't peg you as a farm boy.”

“I'm not. Farmers work hard all day and keep up with way more land and livestock than we have. There are over twenty of us here, and we keep a few animals because we like them. Milking a cow here isn't a chore. It's an interesting experience that provides an appreciation for nature's gifts, and there are so many of us around, we don't have to do it if we don't feel like it, because someone else will feel like doing it that day. I'll teach you how sometime if you want to learn.”

“Sure,” she agreed. “It’s funny, I lived in a state known for its farms and cattle ranches all those years without getting personal with a cow, and now that I’m in Oregon, I’m going to learn how to milk one. Seems backward.”

He laughed as he led her away from the cows. “Yes it does. You should be showing me the ropes right now. I can imagine it, my cowgirl from Oklahoma showing me how a real farm should be handled while laughing at our pitiful excuse for a barn.”

She smiled, imagining herself decked out like the rodeo queen she once aspired to be. “What would you have done if I’d shown up at Cinnia’s café wearing a cowboy hat and boots?”

“What do you mean? I would have done the same thing.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think cowgirls are sexy?”

“I think you're sexy.”

“Even with a huge hat on my head?”

He halted in the middle of the barn and turned her toward him. “I'm telling you, Layla, you could vanish your hair, and I'd still think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I'd miss it, though,” he added, running his fingers into her curls. “I love your hair.”

“Believe me, it's not going anywhere. *Ever*. I have an odd emotional attachment to it.”

“That's because it's perfect, and I'm

sure it would look gorgeous with a hat.”

“I know what we should do,” she excitedly suggested. “Someday, we should both dress up and go to a rodeo. Just for fun.”

“Okay. The next time a rodeo comes around, we'll dress appropriately and go country for the night.”

She flashed an indulged grin and raised her eyebrows. “Playing dress up is fun.”

“You're fun,” he countered, gathering her hair in one palm as the other slid down her back. Then he pulled her closer, pressing her against the arousal tightening his shorts. “We have thirty minutes, angel.”

“Mmm...” she murmured, reaching for

his waistband, and her nimble fingers
made quick work of the buttons,
dropping his shorts to the floor before
her purr reached his heart.

Chapter 31

Layla lay curled up on Quin's chest as he floated through the forest, blindly skirting around tree trunks and drifting over ferns. Their foray in the barn left her so relaxed, her eyelids would only open halfway, and his heartbeat had her in a trance.

"I have a confession," he said, breaking the strong rhythm. "I had an ulterior motive for sweeping you away when I did."

"Something besides showing me the clearing and taking me to heaven?"

"Yes."

“I’d guess, but I have no idea, and my brain's being lazy.”

His chest softly shook with a laugh as he played with her hair. “I did want to show you the garden and animals, and I always love spending time in our heaven. But I swept you away because I wanted to give you a break from everything, and I wanted you in a good mood.”

She raised her heavy head. “I wasn't in a bad mood.”

“I know. I just wanted you to relax, because you were anxious.”

“I will be again.”

“I know.” He smiled and raised his eyebrows. “And I'll relax you again.”

“Hmm... I might have to work myself

into a frenzy right now if that's the antidote.”

He laughed as he tightened his hug.
“My frisky angel.”

She rubbed her lips over his heart then returned her ear to it. “So why do I need to be relaxed? What is it we're about to do?”

He sighed and went back to playing with her hair. “It's time to count our army.”

Her lethargic eyelids found energy, widening as she looked at him. “The extended family that got here today, they're here to fight?”

“Some of them.”

“But there are over a hundred volunteers. Why should our distant

family fight when it's not their battle?"

"It is their battle, Layla. Agro's threatening the lives of people they love. And we need them. The more people we have on our side, the better everyone's chances will be."

Layla didn't respond. She was thinking about how hard it would be to watch people she barely knew but already cared for counting themselves in on a deadly battle. She'd soon have to look them in the eye as they offered her their lives. The extended family she'd just met and members of the Cormac/Adair and Owen/Sullivan covens – practically strangers to her – would be risking their lives because of her. Then there were the people she loved with her whole

heart, members of her own coven. She cringed, knowing their commitments would be the hardest to take. Until then, the subject of who'd fight had remained in the background, always on their minds but never said aloud. Now she was moments away from finding out which members of her own coven would throw themselves into the fire with her and Quin. She hated the thought.

Quin watched her aura expand – dark-blue and murky-green rivers swimming with ribbons that matched her family's eyes – and his aching heart took a hit. Wrapping his hands around her waist, he pulled her up his body and carefully tucked her face into his neck, not only because she needed comforting, but

because he needed her – the sweet remedy to his guilt, fear and pain.

“I’m sorry, love.”

“Me, too, Quin.”

When he reached the outskirts of the lawn, he halted and flipped upright, keeping her cradled in his arms. “Hey.”

“Hey back,” she returned, finding his eyes.

“I know this is going to be hard,” he whispered. “It’s sad and it’s scary and it hurts, but we’ll help each other get through it. Then we’ll move on to the next challenge.”

“I know, but I’m still going to have a hard time with it.”

“I have no doubt, and that’s okay. It’s okay if you cry, and it’s okay if your aura

goes crazy. That's how you feel, and I don't want you trying to hide it, because that makes it worse.”

She gave a nod. Then she laid her head on his shoulder and wrapped her arms around his neck.

She was as relaxed as she was going to get, so he kissed her cheek and walked forward. “Will you do me a favor?”

“Yes.”

“Let me hold you while we deal with this. As long as I have you in my arms, I have sunshine in my life, and the clouds are just passing by.”

She tightened her hold on him, and he entered the large circle of magicians, taking a seat next to Kemble.

Catigern vanished his pipe and looked over. “Ready?”

Quin gave a nod, and Zenith took flight, screeching as she circled the clearing. Everyone stopped talking and looked at Catigern, who cleared his throat and stood. “Everyone knows why we're gathered, so let's get to the point. Here's where our numbers stand.” He paced as he recalled the figures. “As far as we can tell, Agro holds between 150 and 200 soldiers. At last count, we had 140 volunteers, but that includes twenty-five mercenaries who can't be trusted, so we'll count them out and lower the number to 115. In this clearing, we've had seven guests commit to the fight, including a set of twins and a bonded

child.” He halted, the haze around him growing morose as he looked at the golden cloud beside him. “Not everyone in my own coven has spoken, but so far eight members of my family are committed to the battle, including three bonded couples and... well, the two most powerful magicians this world has ever known.” His lips twitched into a small smile as he looked away. “So there you go. Our army is smaller and less experienced than our enemy’s, but we have a miracle on our side – the one Agro threatens to snatch away.” He glanced at the shiniest witch and wizard in the clearing then scanned the surrounding faces. “We don’t want you to fight. We want everyone here to stay

happy and healthy, so if you don't feel the need to enter this battle, we beg that you don't. But if you do choose to fight, know that your sacrifice is recognized, and that our cause is honorable. You'll not only be fighting for a miracle; you'll be fighting for what that miracle represents – love, generosity and happiness. Our enemy spends his life destroying those gifts, planting fear and despair where love once bloomed, and he's done it for too long. It's time to take the bastard down.”

“Hear, hear,” the crowd chorused.

Summoning his pipe, Catigern sat back down. Then Zenith swooped in and landed on his shoulder. “It's time for all of you to make a tough decision,” he

noted, flicking a flame from his fingertip. “Take your time and let us know when you’re ready.”

The guests began conferring with one another, filling the clearing with a steady thrum of voices, and Kemble shifted in his seat to address Quin. “How do you feel about our numbers so far?”

Quin took a deep breath as he looked around, watching nearly everyone he loved discuss whether or not they were ready to die. “Both sides are a lot bigger than they were ever supposed to be – a blessing and a curse. It could mean victory... or the biggest disaster the magical world has seen in over sixty years. I look at our numbers and think this is it, this is the biggest resistance

Agro has ever had to face and it's going to be his last. But then I look at the people, and I can't believe I've done this. I'm putting hundreds of lives on the line, and I don't feel good about that at all. But it's too late to back out. The volunteers will attack with or without us. We lit this fire; it's our responsibility to fight it. As for whether or not I think we have a chance, yes, I do. But even if we manage a win, we're walking away with blood on our hands."

"Yes," Kemble sadly agreed. "Blood will spill on both sides."

The Owen/Sullivan elder stood, and the lawn fell quiet as everyone looked at him.

"For the security and survival of our

children,” he announced, “only five members of my family will be allowed to fight.”

The five new recruits rose from their chairs and stood next to their elder, who met Catigern’s sober stare. “I’ll be joining them, so put us down for six.”

Quin scanned the volunteers, finding the oldest generation in the Owen/Sullivan coven. Eyes shiny and shoulders squared – they stood ready to protect their friends as well as their offspring. Layla looked as well. Then she turned her face away as her aura pulsed with sad colors.

“Thank you,” Catigern offered, trading a meaningful look with his old friend. Then he turned to his best friend – the

elder of the Cormac/Adair coven. “Has your family reached a decision, Phelan?”

Phelan stood, large and intimidating, but with the same mischievous spark Weylin possessed. “Yes,” he answered, glancing behind him.

Several women sobbed as eight more wizards stood, including Kegan and Weylin, and Quin's jaw tightened, his lungs burning with the breath he'd been holding. Flipping his gaze between his friends, he forced himself to breathe while minding his hold on Layla. “Don't do this, guys. We have plenty of help.”

Across the circle, Nevyn stood from his chair. “If they're allowed, Brynton and I should be allowed.”

“I don’t think so,” Maeveen protested, grabbing Nevyn's hand and yanking him back down. “You're too young, and so are they.” She scowled at Kegan. “I know Weylin can't resist a challenge, but what's your excuse? You're usually the sensible one.”

“This isn't a game of hockey, Mae,” Kegan returned. “We're not talking about pride and glory. Our friend’s life is on the line.”

Quin shook his head. “I appreciate the gesture, Keg, but it's unnecessary. We have help.”

Weylin scoffed and rolled his eyes. “You need more, Quin, and I can't believe you're fighting us on this.”

“Why not?” Quin countered. “You

don't think I value your lives?"

"I know you do, and that's exactly why we're doing this. You'd do the same for us. You, me and Keg have been standing up for one another for more than twenty years. What makes you think this time is different?"

"Because this fight is deadly."

Kegan stepped forward and squared his stance, taking on an air of confidence and looking much like the soldier he aimed to be. "We're aware of the consequences, Quin, but if we don't help you when you need it most, we're not the men we claim to be. Out of all the incredible people I know, none of them devote themselves to others like you do. You have this uncanny ability to read

people, to recognize when they need help, and you're always willing to offer it. I've turned to you with problems I didn't even take to my own family, and you've never left me to handle them on my own. Now you need help, and I know that's probably hard for you to swallow, because you're the man with the answers not the problems. But you've finally gotten yourself into a predicament, and it's a big one, so I'm going to help you resolve it, just like you've helped me over and over again.”

A moment of tense eye contact passed between them before Quin quietly responded. “You don't owe me anything, Keg.”

“That's for me to decide. I'm taking

this one off your hands, Quin. You have no say in the matter.”

“Well,” Phelan interrupted, slapping Weylin and Kegan on the back, “those were brave and devoted words, spoken surely and with finality. I'd say they're going to stick. Besides, if you can't count on your friends, who the hell can you count on?” He walked back to his chair and sat. “Put us down for nine.”

Quin's chest felt solid as he watched his friends return to their seats. Then he looked away, hating his lack of control. Layla's fingers slid into his hair, and he took her other hand, pulling her palm into a lingering kiss. The conversation would only get harder.

After giving Phelan an appreciative

nod, Catigern looked at Serafin. “How many from your and Daleen's family will join the fight?”

“Twelve,” Serafin answered, and the dark blue in Layla's aura quivered.

“And yours?” Catigern asked, looking at Morrigan.

“Ten,” she whispered, clutching Caitrin's hand as if it were the only thing keeping her from shattering.

Layla's aura expanded, vibrating so fiercely, it looked like it was on the verge of bursting or disintegrating. Catigern noticed and looked at Quin, who shook his head, urging his great-grandpa not to draw attention to Layla's sorrowful state.

Catigern hesitated then turned to

Cordelia. “How about your family, my dear?”

“Thirteen,” she answered.

Quin's throat swelled, and Layla's aura stretched into the fire – a rainbow rippling through spitting flames.

Next up were Dallas and his fourteen contacts, so Quin took a moment to close his eyes and lose himself in Layla's hair.

“Well, Dallas,” Catigern said, “you've seen what we have to work with, and you know the odds. So what's it going to be? Are you in or out?”

After a long moment of contemplative silence, Dallas firmly replied. “I'm in. This is the best chance of success I've seen, and I've been looking for a long time. If I don't jump on this ride, I'll end

up missing my destination.”

Following another round of debates, Dallas’ fourteen contacts agreed with him. Then more silence passed, heavy with trepidation. Quin eventually raised his head and found his great-grandpa, who was already watching him, gearing up to say something difficult.

“Our entire family is at the heart of this struggle,” Catigern noted, his aura darker than Quin had ever seen it. “No matter who goes into this battle or who comes out, the death of just one person will leave us all broken and guilty. We've accepted that, because we know our bonds will ease the pain. But our age-old alliance is being threatened along with our lives.”

Quin furrowed his eyebrows, and Catigern flipped his gaze down the row to Caitrin. “Your ancestors and mine have lived together for centuries, and while we've faced tragedy and heartache in the past, never has our existence been threatened like it is now. When this is over, we're either going to be separated and lost forever, or we're going to be stronger than we've ever been.” Looking back at Quin, Catigern ran a hand through his hair and quietly continued. “I vote we strive for unity, Quinlan, and make separation our final option. To do that, we have to stick together, or we'll end up losing our chance. I know the two of you are harboring painful amounts of guilt, and I'm sorry we have to add more,

but our decisions have been made, and they're final.”

Layla raised her head, looking at Catigern in confusion, and Quin fought nausea as he responded. “What are you talking about?”

“I'm saying if one of our members wants to fight, they're going to fight. No one will stop them.”

Morrigan jolted as Caitrin shot to his feet. “Where was I when this was decided?”

“Everyone decided on their own,” Catigern answered. “Are you going to deny them free will?”

“That depends on who we're talking about.”

“This is their fight, too.”

“Our coven will be lost.”

Catigern's chest expanded as he stood. “This coven consists of two families, Caitrin, and yours is dwindling. If we're not successful in this endeavor, your legacy is gone, and the few who survive will struggle to recover.”

Layla leaned close to Quin and whispered. “I don't understand. What is he implying?”

“I don't know yet,” Quin answered, but he had his suspicions, and his nerves were hopping. “Just get on with it.”

Catigern flipped his gaze to Quin. Then he sighed and searched out Cadman. “Would you like to speak for your family, son?”

Cadman nodded as he met Quin's

stare. “For Alana and Brayden's sake, Selena, Drystan, Edana and Devlin will stay behind, but Flanna and I will join you.”

Layla sighed, undoubtedly relieved Alana and Brayden would still have their parents and grandparents, but the news didn't comfort Quin. He knew Selena and Drystan wouldn't enter the battle, and he wasn't surprised Cadman and Flanna were joining the fight. The hard part had yet to come.

Lann was on guard duty and unable to speak for himself, and Rhiannon was barely holding in a mess of emotions as she leaned on Karena for support, so Catigern spoke for them. “I'm sure you're aware your grandpa Lann and grandma

Rhiannon will join you.”

Quin gave a stiff nod. Why would his grandma and grandpa stay out of it when their only son and grandson were in the middle of it?

Catigern spoke again. “And you know I’ll be there.”

“Yes,” Quin returned, finding Belinos. “What about you?”

Belinos waved Blue and LaLa away from Skyla's shoulders. Then he wrapped one arm around her while taking Karena's hand. “We're staying behind.”

“Good,” Quin approved, and another whoosh of air rushed from Layla's lips.

They’d reached the final family, and Quin knew the bad news was coming,

but there was no way to defend against such a blow.

Catigern met Quin's stare, portraying a silent apology. Then he turned to Cinnia and Arlen. "Would you like to speak for your family, Arlen?"

Arlen leaned back in his chair and roughly pulled a hand down his face. Then he looked at his wife and daughter, who kept her eyes on her own children. Releasing a huge sigh, Arlen got to his feet, and he was quickly followed by Cinnia, Enid, Kearny, Brietta *and* Banning.

"We're all in," Arlen rasped, looking at the sky.

Yep. There it was – the fist to the gut. The protests rang out. "No!" Then

Caitrin pointed at his sister. "Put a stop to this, Cinnia. Now."

Cinnia had already been on the verge of tears, and at Caitrin's forceful tone, the moisture broke free, running down her flushed cheeks to her quivering lips. "No, Caitrin. They have the same rights and motivation as the rest of us. I won't force them to stay behind and live a life without their family when it's the last thing they want to do."

"Then all of you are out," Caitrin demanded.

"No," Cinnia argued, half shouting, half sobbing. "We've lost people to Agro, too, Caitrin. Rhosewen and Aedan were our family, too. Kearny was Aedan's best friend from a year old until

the day he met Rhosewen, who was my niece and Enid's cousin. And if this doesn't work out the way we want it to, we're going to lose even more to him, so much more. We can't just sit here and let it happen without helping, and it's unfair of you to expect that. You can't force us to stay here and do nothing while we watch the rest of our family leave for a deadly battle. Our hearts would be irreparably broken if we did that.”

Caitrin stubbornly shook his head. “Banning's only seventeen. The kid needs to live before he dies.”

“He's less than two weeks shy of eighteen,” Catigern cut in, “and he won't be on the front line. If we succeed, he'll live.”

“And if we don't succeed?” Quin asked, narrowing his eyes on Banning. “Have you thought about what that means?”

“I have,” Banning replied, looking and sounding more sober than usual.

“Then why?” Layla whispered.

Banning's posture sagged at her sad voice, but he quickly corrected it.

“Because my life will never be the same if we lose this battle. I'm not saying it would be impossible to move on, I'm saying I don't want to. This is the life I want, just like it's the life you want. Isn't that why you're taking the risk? You don't want to live without us, so you're going to fight to keep us, and I'm going to fight to keep you. The last thing I want to

do is sit here and surrender what I love to Agro. And I know you understand how I feel, because you feel the same.”

“Hear, hear,” Brietta agreed, taking her brother's hand.

Layla struggled to breathe as she looked at her sunshine. “Bri,” she choked. “Please don't.”

Brietta's eyes grew shiny, but she somehow managed to crack a smile. “Almost everyone I love will be there, Layla. Where else would I be?”

“Anywhere but there,” Layla pleaded. “Cabo, France, Australia, wherever you want to go, I'll send you there. Just don't do this. Please.” Tears broke over her lashes with a vengeance, dampening her cheeks. “I don't want you to do this.”

Brietta's smile wavered, and she quickly waved a hand to vanish the moisture escaping her eyes. "I don't want to spend a long and healthy life looking back on this moment and regretting the way I handled it. I know I'm only one person, and I know my being there probably won't make a difference. But if I don't do this and you fail, I'll always harbor guilt for not helping when I had the chance, and I'll spend the rest of my life with a huge hole in my heart..." She clutched her chest, her voice cracking as her face flexed. "Because I'd miss all of you so much. It would hurt me every day for the rest of my life if I lost you, so my guilt would have despair and pain as constant companions." She paused,

raising Banning's hand to her cheek as she took a deep breath. "Like my baby brother, I don't want to live that way."

Layla's aura rolled out like a mushroom cloud, eclipsing the flames and astounding the people. It was full of love, haunted by guilt, and drowning in sadness, but her expression didn't portray any of those emotions. She was pissed, jaw rigid, cheeks flushed, eyes narrow and unfocused. Her anger broke through the surface and seeped from her body, swimming through her colorful aura like rivers of blood – veins flooding love with hate. Then her eyes flashed. And not just the shiny emeralds, but the whites around them. Both resembled the black hole of her pupil,

empty chasms where her big and beautiful eyes used to be.

Brietta shrank away, Banning's mouth fell open, and Quin tensed as an electrifying jolt shot through his bloodstream and hit his heart. In that moment, he was sure the organ had exploded, that his angel's anger had just killed him, but after skipping a few beats, his heart recovered and the shock dissipated.

"Layla," he whispered, and her eyes returned to normal, but she didn't respond.

Because she couldn't.

Layla had heard him, as clearly as she heard her cousins say they were going to fight... as clearly as she felt the hate

poisoning her blood. She despised the feeling with every beat of her heart. It turned her stomach into a raging sea of unease, overshadowing everything good in her life while panicking Quin and making her family cringe. Yet she didn't want to send the hate away. She thirsted for it, but it scalded her tongue, breaking her heart while supplying it with a reason to beat. It scared her family, but it strengthened her. If she sent it away, she'd shatter, but if she kept it, she'd turn into the very thing she hated.

Chapter 32

Quin touched his lips to Layla's cheek and whispered her name, somehow making it through the muck to gain her attention.

"I need a break," she blurted, grabbing his hand as she stood. Then she yanked him along while stomping away from everyone.

Quin caught up then kept her pace. "Talk to me, love. What's going on?"

"Hate," she answered. "I hate this."

She threw out her free hand, and a huge fireball shot toward the cloudy sky, releasing a loud scream before bursting

into sparks.

“Me, too, Layla.”

“No, Quin, I don't think you understand. I've never felt like this in my life. Not even with Finley. I was scared of him, tired of him, and mad at him, and I thought I hated him, but no. This is hate, and it's got a hold on me. It's suffocating, but at the same time, it's like the piece of me that's been missing, and if it goes away, I'll crumble. Then there's nothing I can do to save these people from death, which is so unfair, because it's me death's aiming for.”

She threw another fireball into the air, watching it transform into a burning depiction of Agro. Then her eyes narrowed as the flaming portrait

exploded, piercing the night with a bloodcurdling scream. “You see that? That's satisfying. And you know why? Because I *hate* that man. At this moment, I want nothing more than to bury my hand in his chest, rip out his heart, and squeeze it dry while I watch his eyes empty of life.” She looked down at her hand, squeezing as if she actually held Agro's heart, and her throat swelled as tears sprung from her eyes.

She looked at Quin, and though her aura remained enraged, her gaze was pleading, spilling her grief and revealing her sweet soul. “What do I do, Quin? How can I make it better?”

He swallowed and pulled her stiff body to his, holding it there as he stroke

her hair, but she didn't relax, so he wrapped his hands around her waist with the intention of picking her up.

She stiffened, and his heart squeezed as he looked down. "Layla Love."

"I'm not in the mood to cuddle, Quin."

He sighed and worked his fingers into her hair, holding her moist cheeks in his palms. "Look at me, love."

She looked up, and for a tiny moment her lips softened and quivered, but she immediately set her jaw. "What?"

"You may not be in the mood to be held, but I'm in the mood to hold you. Are you going to tell me no?"

Her tears stopped as her eyes narrowed. "Don't do that." She lifted a hand, and a huge chunk of ice grew from

the ground then shattered into thousands of razor sharp shards.

“I'm being honest, Layla.”

“You're trying to manipulate me, Quin.”

“Damn it, Layla, stop looking through me and look at me.”

She jolted, her eyes widening at the reprimand, but then she focused on him for the first time since learning her cousins' intentions. She scanned his aura first, then looked at his face, and her shoulders sagged as her eyes filled with tears. “I'm sorry.”

He ran his thumbs over her quaking pout and brushed his fingertips across her moist cheeks. “Don't be. Just let me hold you.”

She nodded, so he quickly swept her off her feet, not giving her a chance to change her mind. Tucking her face into his neck, he sat on the grass. Then he burrowed his lips and nose into her curls, letting her scent soothe his aching heart. “This is much better, love. It numbs the pain to hold an angel.”

“I’m not an angel, Quin. I’m angry and destructive and hateful.”

“It’s okay to feel that way, Layla. You have every right to be angry, and you have more than enough reasons to hate Agro. I also understand why you’re reluctant to let that anger go, because it gives you strength, and you feel like you need it to get through this.” He pulled his face from her hair and gently forced her

to look at him. “It’s okay to feel those things, and you’re right – that anger will motivate you when we face Agro, but right now it’s going to waste. You don’t need to hold on to it while you’re with us, so tell it to come back for the battle. Then it will get a chance to wreak havoc on the bastard doing this to us.” His eyes flicked to her aura, watching the crimson veins slowly recede, and he sighed as he found her eyes. “For now, I want my sweet angel.”

“What if I don’t get it back, Quin? What if I force the hate away, then I can’t find it again when I need it?”

“You will. When you see Agro, everything he’s done, all the ways he’s hurt you, will come rushing back, and

they'll finally have a target to take aim at."

"But if I let it go, I'll fall apart. It's holding me together, suffocating the pain of heartache."

"It may numb the pain of sadness, but it has its own method of torture, and you know it." He paused and pulled her tighter against him. "Besides, you're just delaying the grief. It's still there, and it's going to be there when the anger subsides, no matter how long you wait. Please let it go. For me."

"It's got a hold on me, Quin. I don't know how to let it go."

"Then I'll help you," he offered. "Close your eyes." He waited while she reluctantly obeyed. Then he lay back on

the grass and tucked her in beside him, resting her head on his arm. As he brushed her hair from her face, she peaked at him with one eye, and he cracked a smile. “You're already fighting me, Layla. I can tell you don't want this to work.”

“So? Fix it anyway.”

“A challenge, huh?”

“Or you could forget it and let me be. It will pass eventually.”

He scowled at her closed lids, somewhat surprised by her taunts, but he wasn't discouraged by her stubbornness. Time was running out, and there was no way in hell he'd spend the last hours of his life holding an angry angel.

He moved his hand to her chest and

slid the loose cotton of her dress aside, touching the skin over her heart. After counting the organ's fitful beats for several seconds, he leaned in and kissed the erratically pulsing flesh, focusing on the reasons her heart usually beat, all the love and kindness it portrayed, and he hoped to draw her attention to them as well, help her rediscover the virtuous beauty beneath the anger. He found it every time he looked at her, even in the most tumultuous situations. And when he touched her, when her heartbeat thumped against his flesh, pulsed within his ears, and throbbed along his core, he gained what was hers. All the internal beauty she possessed momentarily became his, and he was, for a sublime moment in

time, the man he always wanted to be, the man she needed him to be.

The tranquility of the moment should have slowed his heart, but his pulse remained sporadic, beating in time with hers. Confused and intrigued, he furrowed his eyebrows. Not because it was a new occurrence. Several times in the past, when they'd been wholly in tune with each other, on the same level emotionally, mentally and physically, their hearts beat as one. But at the moment, they were on entirely different levels, yet his heart ignored his body, reacting to hers instead.

He kept his lips to her heart while finding her hand. Then he touched her fingertips to the left side of his chest,

holding them there as he waited for her pulse to shift. When it did, he felt his own shift, and so did she. He knew because their hearts skipped and leapt. She felt it and she liked it.

He kissed the warm skin thumping against his lips. Then he moved to her face, kissing her forehead, eyelids, cheeks and nose. By the time he made it to her lips, they were shaking, and tears streamed down her temples. He let the moisture flow. It needed to be shed, so he kept her in a soft kiss while holding her hand to his heart. She sobbed, unable to contribute to the kiss, but he didn't need her to. He needed to provide her with a safe place to mourn.

"I hate this," she repeated, but with

much less conviction than before.

“I know,” he whispered.

She clutched his face in both hands and sobbed again. “I'm sorry.”

“It's okay, angel. This is a sad situation. You have every right to be sad.”

“I'm so sad, Quin.”

“I know, love.” And he did. Her sadness gripped his insides and twisted.

“And that makes me angry,” she added, but there wasn't any anger in her voice, just grief and pain.

“That's okay, too,” he assured. “We'll put that anger with the rest of it. Then we'll have a steady supply when we need it.”

She trembled as more emotions

bubbled to the surface. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“Don’t worry about that. I told you to express your feelings, and you did. Quite clearly.”

“Bri and Bann were scared of me. I hate that.”

“They just haven’t ever seen you mad. Now they know.”

“What about you? You seemed worried I’d do something, that I’d lose control.”

He sighed as he dried her tears. “Your eyes flashed, and that scared me.”

Her forehead creased. “My eyes did what?”

“Changed color.”

“Oh,” she breathed, finding him with

shiny emeralds. “I didn't know. What color?”

He hesitated then quietly answered. “Black.”

A disappointed look flashed across her face. “Black? Of all the possibilities, they turn black? Is that normal?”

“I don't know. That's not something you see in everyone you meet. It takes intense anger to trigger it, and magicians are generally mellow.”

“Oh.” She swallowed and looked away, sadness washing over her as she compared herself to the rage-fueled wizards she'd come across.

“It's okay, Layla. Your anger is justified.” He moved his hand to her

heart and brushed a kiss across her lips. "The past two weeks have put you through hell, and you have every right to be pissed off at the world. If I had to deal with the bullshit you have, I would have lost my mind days ago. But over and over again you've amazed me by bouncing up when something slams you down. Your resilience is inspiring, and your regard for life makes you live each day separately and entirely. When one of them sucks, you move on to the next, waking up with sunshine in your eyes."

"You make me sound strong, but I'm not."

"Yes you are, love. You're the strongest woman I've ever met."

"I'm a crybaby."

“Crying isn’t a sign of weakness. It’s a result of love, sympathy, and pain, which you’ve been enduring since you got here. But you’re too stubborn to be weak. You’d take on the whole world before you’d surrender what you cherish.”

“I hold so much,” she whispered. “I don’t want to let it go.”

He smiled and nuzzled her nose.
“See? Stubborn.”

She stared into his eyes, her forefingers dipping into his dimples.
“How do you do that? How can you be so sad one minute, then showing me these dimples the next?”

“That’s an easy one.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“I have an angel.”

Her heart stuttered, and so did his.

“You light up the dark, Layla, and I do the same for you. It just takes more effort on my part because you’re dealing with more heartache. But when we do find each other, the pain melts away and life is perfect, if only for a while. We’re lucky to have such a beautiful diversion from the hardships of the world.”

“Lucky,” she repeated. “Not many people in our situation would find that word applicable to their lives.”

“That's because you're mine, not theirs.”

Her eyes moistened again, but her lips curved into a sweet smile. “You’re right. I am lucky. Thank you for reminding me.”

“Anytime, my love.”

She sighed then pulled him into a kiss.

“We should get back to the others.”

“If you're ready.”

She gave him another kiss, then another. “Now I am.”

“Okay,” he agreed, going in for one more kiss.

He stood. Then he waited while she cleaned her face and magicked tangles from her hair. When she offered her hand, he took it, and he immediately noticed a shift in his heart rate. Once she was on her feet, he let go of her. Then he focused on his pulse while touching her arm.

“What's up?” she asked, glancing between his face and hand.

He tested the miracle once more, getting the exact same results, and his eyes widened as he grinned. “My heartbeat changes when I touch you.”

“What?”

“My heart,” he elaborated. “It starts keeping time with yours when I make skin contact with you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“It hasn't always been that way?”

“No. This is brand new.”

“But nothing's changed. Why would your heart suddenly change?”

“I don't know. Maybe it happened when you got upset. When your eyes flashed, I felt something I've never felt before, like a jolt to the heart, but then it

went away.”

She moved closer, looking up at him with big eyes as she touched the left side of his chest. “Does it hurt?”

“Are you kidding?” He pressed her palm tighter against a pulse that wasn't just his, but theirs. “I don't think I can properly express how good it feels; how happy it makes me to share the beats of your heart. I couldn't keep my hands off you before. Now there's a whole new element adding fuel to my desire.” He paused to absorb her pulse... literally. “Yep, I'm already hooked.”

She smiled as she took his hand and headed for the other side of the lawn. “Maybe we should get a pair of handcuffs and chain ourselves together.”

“I like the way you think, angel, but handcuffs would limit where my hand goes, and I don't like that at all.”

“Hmm... good thinking. Guess I'll just have to keep my claws in you at all times.”

“Sounds perfect. I love being your scratching post.”

“Then I won't retract the daggers.”

When they reached the circle of magicians, all of them looked up, and Layla's cheeks burned as she tucked her face into Quin's side. He wrapped a strong arm around her shoulders, and she took a few deep breaths before pulling away and heading for her cousins.

“I'm sorry I worried you,” she said, pulling Banning into a hug. “I wasn't

angry with you.”

He lifted her from the ground as he hugged her back. “I know. It’s this situation. It sucks.”

“Yes it does,” Layla agreed, pulling Brietta off Kegan’s lap. Then she gave her a tight hug as she whispered in her ear. “I’m so sorry, Bri, for scaring you and for getting you into this mess.”

“I’m here because I choose to be,” Brietta insisted. “So stop apologizing.”

Layla backed up and sadly looked between the siblings. “I still hate that you’re doing this, so if either of you feel like making my day, bow out, because I’d be thrilled to accept your resignations.”

“I second that,” Quin added. Then he

led Layla away before Banning or Brietta could argue or crush Layla's hopes.

"Are we done with the formalities?" he asked.

"Yes," Catigern answered. "The final count is 206, and we might get a few more volunteers before the time comes."

Layla's mouth fell open, and Quin smiled. "Guess we have the edge now," he noted, squeezing her hand. Then he looked at Serafin and motioned for him to stand. "Check this out."

Serafin got to his feet and moved forward. "Check what out?"

"Give him your wrist, Layla," Quin instructed.

Layla obeyed, and Serafin worriedly

scanned her wrist before curiously looking at Quin. “What am I supposed to check out?”

“Her pulse,” Quin answered, offering his own hand. “Check hers and mine at the same time.”

Serafin did as he was told, holding both of their wrists while concentrating on their heart rates. Then his eyebrows raised and furrowed. “They’re beating in sync,” he observed, “not uncommon for bonded mates, but it doesn’t happen when they’re surrounded by people and sad situations.”

“Exactly,” Quin replied. “Keep paying attention.” He waited for Serafin to delve back into his task. Then he let go of Layla's hand for several seconds

before taking it back.

“Amazing,” Serafin whispered. “Do it again.”

Quin gave him another sample of the miracle, and Serafin’s chest expanded as he flashed a grin. “Incredible.”

Layla jolted as those surrounded in gold jumped from their chairs and approached. “What’s incredible?”

“His heart,” Serafin answered, “it instantly changes its rate the moment he touches her, adapting to what hers is doing.”

Everyone stood from their chairs, and Layla blushed as the crowd moved in for a closer look.

“It’s doing what?” Caitrin asked, taking their wrists from Serafin.

Quin let go of Layla's hand, waited, then took it back, and Caitrin's eyes widened. "Impossible," he mumbled, handing their wrists to Kemble.

Layla giggled, but abruptly stopped as her blush darkened.

Quin smiled as he moved closer and squeezed her hand. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing really," she answered, her eyes nervously flashing around. "It's just kind of funny that people keep using the word..."

"Impossible indeed," Kemble exclaimed, passing their wrists to Cordelia.

Layla laughed and pointed at Kemble. "There it was again. People keep using the word impossible, but it hardly ever

applies anymore.”

Quin's smile widened. “You're right. After all the impossible feats you've performed, the word holds very little value. We should probably omit it from our vocabulary.”

“You're performing this one.”

“I don't think so,” he disagreed.

“You're the miracle worker. I'm just the lucky man holding your hand.”

“What kind of miracles has she worked?” Caitlyn asked.

Layla looked over, surprised Caitlyn was taking an interest in her when she usually tried to avoid her. The two of them made eye contact, and Caitlyn's fair skin flushed as her posture dropped. This was a shock as well. Layla was

under the impression she was the only witch with insecurity issues.

“Layla has all kinds of tricks up her sleeve,” Quin answered. “Her heart acts like it has a mind of its own, she can summon her magic into other people's bodies, and she's performed unheard of mind searching magic on more than one occasion. But this new occurrence, along with another miracle she performed almost a week ago, are my favorite tricks so far.”

Layla's eyebrows furrowed as she tried to figure out what kind of miracle she performed a week earlier, and Caitlyn spoke again, but this time, and for the first time ever, she addressed Layla. “What did you do last week,

Layla?”

Layla shrugged as she shook her head. “I have no idea what he's talking about.”

Quin smiled at her grandparents. “You haven't heard this one either.”

“Have I heard it?” Layla asked.

He laughed as he looked at her. “Yes. You're the one who did it.”

“What was it?” Morrigan asked, bouncing in anticipation.

Quin pulled Layla into a hug and raised her hand to his lips, kissing her palm as he peacefully answered. “She showed me my aura.”

A collective gasp echoed through clearing, and Cordelia's hand flew to her mouth as tears stung her eyes. “You saw your aura?” she whispered, reaching for

her son.

“Yes,” he answered, “I saw my aura.”

Feeling responsible for Cordelia’s tears, Layla quietly spoke to her. “Are you upset?”

Cordelia quickly shook her head. “No, sweetheart. I’m so happy.” She paused, wiping moisture from her cheeks as she stared at Quin. “I love that you got to see how beautiful your aura is, Quinlan. I don’t know how many times I’ve wished I could show it to you, how many times I’ve wished I could give you a glimpse of what I see in you. I think every parent wishes that at some point.”

“It was amazing,” Quin confirmed, “and I got more than a glimpse. She kept

it there for over a minute.”

“Kept it where?” Kemble asked.

“Here,” Quin answered, waving a hand through the mist surrounding his body. “Right where it is on everyone else, but mine was visible and tangible.”

Daleen’s eyebrows shot up in alarm.

“It was tangible?”

“That’s the best way I know how to describe it,” Quin confirmed. “I could feel it on my skin, but I couldn’t grasp it.”

“Could you feel it, sweetie?”

Morrigan asked, looking at Layla.

“Yes,” Layla sighed, smiling as she remembered. “But I wasn’t looking, so I didn’t see if it appeared any different.”

“You felt his soul?” Daleen

whispered.

“Yes,” Layla confirmed, cuddling closer to Quin.

Morrigan started bouncing again.

“What did it feel like?”

“It was perfect,” Layla answered, and Morrigan stopped bouncing.

“That's all you're going to give me?”

Layla laughed then elaborated. “Think about every wonderful thing Caitrin has ever said to you, and all the wonderful things he's done. Remember how they made you feel, then strip everything else away. Don't think about the words or the actions, just the feeling they gave you. Then imagine being submerged in that feeling, wrapped up in it... breathing it.” She finished in a whisper, her heart

sighing its content. Then she shook her head clear and looked at Morrigan, who'd closed her eyes as she tried to imagine the amazing feeling Layla spoke of, and she wasn't the only one. Half the crowd was doing the same thing. "That's what it was like," Layla finished, smiling up at Quin. "It was perfect."

"Yes it was," he agreed, brushing her curls back so he could kiss her cheeks.

"So how did you do it?" Caitlyn asked.

"Um..." Layla murmured, wrinkling her nose as she tried to figure out the answer.

"Just give them the same answer you gave me," Quin suggested.

She looked at him in confusion. "What

answer did I give you?”

He laughed as he looked at her grandparents. “When I asked her how she did it, she simply said *I don't know. I just did.* And that's how easy it is for her to perform miracles. If she wants to do it, she just does.”

“Amazing,” Serafin mumbled. Then he cleared his throat. “I'm honored to be a part of you, Layla Love. I couldn't be more impressed by the person you are or prouder of the things you do.”

“Hear, hear,” Caitrin agreed.

“Are you sure she's human?” Maeveen asked.

Weylin loudly laughed and ruffled Maeveen's hair. “Come on, Mae, catch up. She's an angel. I thought everyone

knew that already.”

“I’m serious,” Maeveen insisted.

“So am I,” he returned. “That girl’s an angel. I’ve seen nothing to discredit that. But go ahead, Mae, doubt her. Maybe she’ll reveal her celestial wings just to prove you wrong.”

Layla blushed, and Weylin snickered as he jabbed Banning in the ribs. “Do you think her wings will blush, too?”

Banning smiled at Layla as he replied. “If her cheeks are any indication, I’d have to say yes.”

“I bet they will,” Weylin decided. “Want to make a wager?”

“That’s enough,” Quin interrupted, smiling as he stroked Layla’s hot cheeks.

“Uh-oh,” Weylin murmured. “If she’s

the angel, he's the chosen one, so I'd better listen.”

“Why?” Layla taunted. “Not in the mood to get body slammed?”

Several people laughed, including Weylin. “Not tonight, gorgeous, but if your protector's feeling scrappy in the morning, we'll go a round.”

“I'll make sure he's primed to kick your butt before we leave the house.”

Quin grinned, and Weylin released another boisterous laugh while wrapping one arm around Maeveen's shoulders. “What do you think, Mae? Want to get me primed for the wrestling match?”

She rolled her eyes and tossed his arm off her shoulders. “That would be a no, but I'm sure you'll find a replacement.”

“You interested, Cait?” he asked, raising his eyebrows at Caitlyn.

“Move on down the line,” she smirked, waving a dismissive hand, so he did, turning to Brietta with a wide grin.

Before he could say anything, Brietta held up a palm and shook her head.

“Looks like you've run your wells dry around here, big boy. Good thing you have friends in other covens.”

He crossed his arms and thoughtfully stroked his beard. “I think you're right, Bri. The three of you have had your fair share. It's time to give the rest the ladies a taste.”

“Like you haven't already been feeding it to them,” Brietta laughed.

Several conversations popped up, and now that there weren't so many eyes on her, Layla's blush receded. "What time is it?" she asked, nuzzling Quin's heart.

"10:30," he answered, watching her feed his ego and desires. "Why do you ask?"

"Do we have to be out early tomorrow?"

"We'll have to conceal the guards around eight, but we can have them come to us."

"So we can stay up later?"

"Sure," he agreed. "If you tell me what you're scheming on."

She smiled up at him, excitement brightening her big eyes. "A magic show, with everyone who wants to

stay.”

“Good idea,” he approved, grinning back. “Let's see who's up for it.”

Chapter 33

As it turned out, everyone was up for a magic show, and Layla got the feeling most guests stuck around just to see what she was capable of. She didn't mind. The spells she planned to send into the sky were things she wanted people to see, and her embarrassment always ebbed when performing magic.

Half the lawn was covered in blankets, and each family had claimed their share, lying down and facing the dark, cloudy sky. Layla lay between Quin and Morrigan, and the rest of her grandparents were only a few feet away.

She loved this, and her heart swelled, indulged by the nearness of the people she cherished most.

“Who wants to start?” Caitrin asked.

Skyla raised up on one elbow and looked at Layla. “You should perform the magic I made up for you. I want to see how you'll interpret the challenge.”

Layla laughed as she thought about Skyla's ambiguous theme – simple in concept, but open to complicated detail. “Okay,” she agreed, “I'll see what I can do, but then I want to see some of your magic.”

“Deal.” Skyla lay back and rubbed her palms together. “I'm so excited.”

Layla giggled as she looked at the sky. Then she waved a hand, creating a tent

of magic that completely covered the clearing. The clouds disappeared, a sun replaced the moon, and the midnight heavens faded into a tranquil, baby-blue azure.

Everyone gasped as they glanced around the bright clearing, and the sun's heat kissed their skin as a gentle breeze lifted their hair.

Skyla quietly squealed and clapped her hands. "It's already better than I imagined, Layla. Keep going."

Layla waved again, and a gray cloud accumulated above them, halting the heat as it shadowed the crowd. Once the cloud was dense and ominous, Layla flashed a mischievous grin, and the thunderhead broke open, spilling fat

raindrops from its dark depths. Several people yelled and covered their faces, but when the raindrops struck, they were dry and soft like cotton, yet they splashed like liquid, breaking into smaller droplets of softness that halted in midair. Murmurs drifted through the crowd as everyone stared at the curious magic. Then they gasped as the floating drops bloomed into spring flowers, bathing the clearing in color and a sweet, floral fragrance. The magicians laughed as the blooms rotated, their petals slowly unfurling. Then the flowers exploded into butterflies, which fluttered among the crowd and tickled their faces.

The storm cloud evaporated, and the

sun moved closer, raising the lawn's temperature by several degrees.

“Everyone hold up a hand,” Layla instructed.

The crowd eagerly obeyed, and over a hundred kites appeared in the air, each with a string leading to a hand below. The atmosphere buzzed with chatter, and Layla grinned at Quin, who had a firm hold on an emerald-green kite.

“How long has it been since you flew a kite?” she asked.

His dimples deepened as he found her eyes. “I’ve never flown a kite, love.”

“Really?”

“Really. It’s not something magical kids do. I’m sure this is a first for most of us.”

She wrinkled her nose and looked up.
“It's boring, huh?”

Taking her by the chin, he turned her head and kissed her disgruntled nose.
“Not even a little bit. Is anyone bored?”
he called out, and a loud *no* arose from the group. Quin smiled as he looked to the sky. “Do you like to fly kites?”

“When I was little,” she answered,
“but it's been a while.”

“Why didn't you summon yourself one?”

“I'd rather watch everyone else.”

“I see.”

“But it's time to move on,” she noted, waving a hand, and the kites and their strings exploded into sparkling glitter.

As soon as the sky cleared and the

butterflies flew away, dozens of trees began taking root in mid-air, circling the crowd as their anchors twisted toward soil. The trunks grew taller and thicker, developing branches that stretched out over the reclined magicians. Then the limbs began sprouting bright green leaves and fragrant white blooms, burgeoning until the audience below was once again shaded from the hot sun.

“Wow,” several people breathed.

Skyla wiggled and clapped her approval. “I can smell the flowers. This is way better than I thought it would be.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Layla replied, wafting a hand through the air.

The bright sky dulled to gray, and cold wind blew through the clearing, casting

chills across the crowd's flesh while nipping at fingers and toes. The leaves on the trees began a steady transformation from vivid green to glossy shades of red, orange and yellow, and the white blooms broke loose, showering the bodies below in soft, aromatic petals. Soon the branches looked like they were ablaze with red and gold fire, and as Layla snapped her fingers, all the leaves fell at once, blanketing the lawn and its occupants in fall foliage.

The children squealed as they jumped to their feet and kicked the leaves, and everyone else watched and laughed until the last of the foliage caught the wind and drifted away. The floating trees

shrank into seed pods before disappearing altogether. Then the sky brightened, turning more silver than gray. But the sun stayed hidden and the temperature in the clearing dropped further.

For a long and quiet moment, everyone watched the empty sky, waiting for Layla's next move, but she just lay there, smiling as she held one of Quin's hands in both of hers. People began to fidget, and a few of them mentioned the cold, but then warmth emanated from the blankets, surrounding the crowd in comfortable heat.

“Oh,” Skyla exclaimed, pointing toward the sky.

Everyone looked up, finding a

spattering of huge, sparkling snowflakes, and millions more followed, a massive canopy of arctic powder. The first snowflake to find the crowd landed on Quin's nose, but the rest weren't far behind, and soon the lawn was covered in snow – snow that didn't melt or make them cold.

Snowball fights broke out, and Skyla called to Layla while zooming a pile of white fluff toward Banning. “That was fantastic, Layla. When I came up with the theme, I had no idea you’d make it so incredible.”

Layla giggled at Skyla then looked at Quin. “Was the theme obvious?”

He reached out, pulling a pure-white snowflake from an onyx curl. “The four

seasons?”

She smiled and gave a nod. “Yep.”

“Can you believe that, Quin?” Skyla interjected. “I told her to depict the four seasons. That's it. I didn't give her any details to work with, and she comes up with this. Who knew she'd take it so literal and actually show the seasons? I'm thinking a pretty spring flower, a burning sun, maybe an animated snowman, but *no*, she goes and dumps all four seasons on us in less than twenty minutes. And they were interactive! I just can't believe it.”

Quin laughed at his little cousin then smiled at Layla. “I can.”

“It was fun,” Layla whispered, “like we just spent a whole year together.”

He scanned the air around her. Then he rolled onto his side and pulled her close. “Vanish your magic, my love. Let someone else play while I kiss you.”

“Okay,” she eagerly agreed, waving a hand, and the snow and magical sky vanished, leaving the lawn a little warmer and a lot darker.

“Aw...” several people protested.

Layla puckered at Quin, who kept his gaze on her lips as he responded to the complaints. “You’ll have to perform your own magic for a while. My angel’s busy.” Then he leaned in, kissing her deeply despite the crowd around them, which was fine, because she forgot about them anyway.

The show went on without Layla and

Quin for half an hour, but when Alana was given a request, she asked Layla to *make some mowe fun and pwetty magic*.

Pulling away from Quin's lips, Layla flashed a guilty smile and whispered. "I can't say no to her."

"I know," he conceded. Then he gave her one more kiss before rolling onto his back and looking at the sky. "Show us what's up your sleeve, because you've been thinking about it for a while."

"You could tell?"

"Yes, love."

"Of course," she mumbled. Then she got comfortable, preparing herself for another performance. "What's your favorite animal, Alana?"

"Monkeys!"

“How about you, Brayden?”

“Jaguars!”

“Good ones,” Layla approved. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah!”

Everyone raptly watched the air, waiting for monkeys and jaguars to appear, but when Layla raised her hands, a massive cloud of colored fog appeared. The crowd gasped as Layla intensely concentrated, moving her eyes and hands with purpose, and the haze started swirling, shifting from one form to another until a clear scene materialized from the rainbow of smoke.

The crowd murmured their approval as they studied their surroundings – a tropical rainforest complete with mossy

trees, vines and underbrush. The vegetation swarmed with creatures, everything from snakes, frogs, turtles and chameleons to sloths, toucans, insects and monkeys, lots and lots of monkeys. Everything was in motion and looked and acted incredibly real, flooding the suddenly humid clearing with foreign sounds and smells. Birds comprised of mist dove into the crowd, soaring past magicians' heads as if they stood in the middle of a rainforest, and when the winged creatures hit the blankets, they disintegrated into puffs of colored smoke and drifted away.

Several marmosets and capuchins leapt through the branches, coming to a halt right above Alana. Then a tiny

marmoset hopped on her head and played with her curls, while the capuchins tickled her belly and grabbed her nose. Alana giggled and squirmed. Then Brayden did the same when an orangutan swung out on a vine, sweeping the fronds of a king fern along the child's soles.

The trip through the rainforest lasted more than ten minutes, and Layla kept her hands in the air, animating the animals and directing them to interact with the crowd. When her movements ceased, the creatures retreated into the trees, and the lawn fell still as everyone waited... and waited... and waited.

Silence stretched on, bodies got antsy, boredom spiked. Then it all shattered as

a ferocious jaguar lunged from behind a cluster of bamboo shoots. An echoing roar drowned out the screams, and menacing jaws stretched wide as the cat closed in on Brayden, who lay frozen, open-mouthed and bug-eyed. Everyone else flinched as razor sharp teeth came within inches of Brayden's face. Then the feline exploded into black and orange smoke, drifting away as Brayden breathed.

Laughter rang out from the crowd, and Brayden excitedly stuttered as he tried to discuss the ordeal with his mom and dad.

Layla giggled as she watched him. Then she looked at Quin. "What did you think?"

“Phenomenal,” he answered, “as always. Is that what you've been scheming on?”

“No.”

“I didn't think so.” His gaze flipped to her aura, then back. “What's wrong?”

“I'm hesitant to keep going.”

“Why?”

“You'll see.”

“You're going to do it even though you're hesitant?”

“Yes.”

He smiled as he pulled her hand into a kiss. “I can't wait to see what it is.”

“Do you think they're ready to move on?”

“Who cares? I'm ready.”

Her mouth fell open. “Quin.”

“I’m kidding,” he laughed. “Yes, they’re ready. They’ll watch whatever you toss up there.”

“Oh. Okay.” She swallowed a lump and looked at the sky, unsure of how her next bit of magic would be received. After a deep breath, she sucked up her fears and held out her hands.

The rainforest blurred and shifted, swirling into a foggy, unreadable mass. Then it took on the form of Multnomah Falls. Artificial water roared down the fake Mountain, warm mist moistened the magicians’ faces, and real birds emerged from the forest, perching on the edge of the lawn as they sang a sweet tune.

After a long and peaceful moment, the

smoke shifted again, then again, then again, giving the crowd beautiful glimpses of the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Highway and Portland. Quin paid close attention, picking up every detail of the memories she was bringing to life, not only because he was interested in seeing them, but because he was curious to know where they were going.

A short tour down the highway connecting Portland to Cannon Beach; an outside view of Cinnia's Cannon Café; then a large depiction of Brietta, who stood behind the coffee shop's counter, looking at everyone with utter confusion wrinkling her beautiful features.

The real Brietta laughed and pointed. "That's the first time I saw you. I didn't

know what to think.”

“You were weird,” Layla teased, “but nice, and very pretty.”

The scene altered, panning out to include the inside of the cafe's entrance, and soon a foggy likeness of Quin walked in, making his way across the virtual scene to Brietta. Layla watched with a smile, and Quin had a feeling she'd summoned that image for no one other than herself.

She waved a hand, and the café disappeared, replaced by a pristine representation of the very lawn they lay on. But it looked much different – dark and empty, like the first time she saw it.

Out of the corner of his eye, Quin saw Layla glance at her grandparents, and he

tightened his arm around her shoulders, trying to give her strength for whatever she was about to do. She cuddled closer to him. Then she took a deep breath and a chance.

The dark and deserted clearing above transformed into a bright and crowded lawn, and the peaceful atmosphere shifted as everyone searched the foggy faces of unfamiliar magicians. Quin didn't recognize any of them, and he had to bite his tongue to keep from asking who they were, where she'd seen them, and why she was showing them off. Smoke figures floated around them as though they were walking through the throng. Then the crowd opened up to a hill scattered with people. Layla's

audience approached a nearby group, and as one of them turned around, gasps rang out from the watching magicians.

“Rhosewen,” Morrigan whispered, reaching for the flawless image of her happy and healthy daughter, aura included.

The scene opened up to reveal Aedan and his aura, and several more gasps resounded. Aedan took Rhosewen's hand, lifting it into a soft and slow kiss, and at that, Morrigan and Daleen started sobbing.

Layla had been smiling at the meeting between her mom and dad, but her expression grew troubled as she looked at her grandmas. “Should I stop?”

“No,” several people answered, and

Morrigan shook her head as she reached for Layla's shoulder. "Please keep going. They're so beautiful."

Layla searched her grandma's face and aura then returned her gaze to the sky, changing the scene yet again to depict Aedan and Rhosewen's first kiss. From there she recalled their first date, creating images from the alpaca farm and the cave at Devil's Den. Then she created a slide show of random moments – her grandparents meeting each other; the kiss Aedan and Rhosewen shared when he agreed to relocate; the first time the two of them woke up in each other's arms. Older coven members got to relive meeting Aedan. Then everyone watched him slip the zultanite ring on Rhosewen's

finger. The magical wedding came next, and many people in the audience laughed at younger versions of themselves while teasing one another. When a baby Quinlan came into view, already flashing deep dimples at the witches, Layla giggled and nuzzled his heart.

The wedding wound down, but Layla took a long moment to focus on Aedan and Rhosewen's dance around the bonfire. Aedan lifted Rhosewen in the air and spun her around. Then their faces froze in the sky, their eyes on each other, expressing a love that can't be described with words.

Layla took in the details, sighing as a tear rolled down her temple. Then she waved a hand, melting the beloved

image while sending the birds back to the forest.

Quin expected the fog to dissipate, but Layla had other plans, and soon her entire audience stood on the ledge of a tall cliff, staring out over the ocean at a silver moon. Lightning flashed in the distance, and the salty smell of the sea spiced the air.

“Perfect,” Quin whispered, smiling as he found her eyes.

She smiled back. Then they both looked forward, squeezing each other’s hand as she took everyone off the cliff. Many of them gasped as real wind and fake water rushed at their faces. Then they oohed and awed when they pulled out of the dive and soared toward the

artificial moon.

The virtual flight slowed, and Layla dropped her hand, letting the fog separate and drift away. Quin turned his head to look at her, but she rolled into his side, hiding her face and clutching his waist.

Shifting so she could have his chest, he wrapped her in a hug and kissed her head. “That was beautiful, Layla.”

“Yeah?” she asked, peeking up at him.

He smiled as he brushed her hair from her face. “Yes. I had no idea magic could be so beautiful.”

“Do you think I crossed a sad line?” she whispered, afraid to look at her grandparents.

“I think you toed the line perfectly,”

Quin assured. “Those memories made your grandparents sad, but they're glad they got to see them.”

“Do you think it was boring for the others?”

“No, but if it was, they'll just have to get over it, because it was special to us.”

“I should talk to my grandparents.” But she stayed put, worriedly chewing her lip.

“Stop that,” Quin insisted, running a thumb across her pout. “Your grandparents don't regret what they just saw, and they're waiting for you to finish with me so they can tell you that themselves.”

“Oh. Well I'm never going to be

finished with you, but if you'd like to roll with me, we can go talk to them.”

He smiled. “Roll with you, huh?”

“Yep. I think two turns should do it.”

Utilizing magic to keep from crushing her, Quin rolled to the right, and Layla ended up partially lying on Morrigan. Layla laughed as she tried to scoot over, but Morrigan grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into a tight hug.

“Oh, sweetie. That was the most beautiful... the most precious... I mean to see them... Then when they... And when you...” She paused and breathed deep, struggling to calm herself as she found Layla’s eyes. “Thank you. Every second of every image meant the world to us, and we're so grateful you shared them.”

Layla forced herself to maintain eye contact as she replied. “I hope I didn't upset you too much.”

“The tears are bittersweet,” Serafin returned, “but more than welcome and a small price to pay for those lovely recollections.”

“We got to see their first kiss,” Daleen whispered. “I can't believe we got to see all those things. After all these years, we got to see them fall in love from an intimate perspective. It was so beautiful.”

“It was the start of something extraordinary,” Caitrin added, “something perfect. You're amazing, Layla. Your parents would be proud of the woman you've become. Their love

for you would know no bounds.”

“We’re all proud of you,” Morrigan added. “These golden lights around our bodies pale in comparison to the sunshine you shed on us. We love you so much, Layla. So much. Every second you’re with us is a blessed second, and we wouldn’t trade one of them for anything else in the world.”

“I love you, too,” Layla squeaked. “All of you.” Fighting imminent tears, she found Morrigan’s stare. “You’re the foundation of my bouquet.”

Chapter 34

Guthrie blinked his eyes open to purple velvet and scowled, wondering where the hell he was and how he'd gotten there. Glancing around, he realized he was in the underground chamber of Lynette's tent, lying on her squishy bed.

He cursed and sat up, trying to find his shorts and cloak. "Shit. I fell asleep. How did I fall asleep?"

"It's a comfortable bed," Lynette explained. "And you were exhausted."

Guthrie looked over, finding Lynette sitting at her bar with Token. "What the

fuck is he doing here?”

Lynette lifted her glass and shook the ice. “Having a drink.”

“What time is it?”

“About seven in the morning.”

“Shit!” Guthrie found his shorts and yanked them on, mentally calling for Silestra. She was outside, ready and waiting for him to retrieve her.

“Why are you freaking out?” Lynette asked, rising from her stool.

“I’m supposed to be on duty, Lyn. And I don’t want to be in here when you get busted for having all this shit.”

Lynette rolled her eyes then looked at Token. “Told you he was a stickler for rules.” Turning back to Guthrie, she summoned his cloak and threw it at him.

“Agro stayed in his tent all night. The place was like a ghost town until five minutes ago.”

Guthrie pulled on his cloak, making sure everything he'd left in his pockets remained there. “What happened five minutes ago?”

“The soldiers who've been spying on the Conn/Kavanagh businesses slinked into camp.”

“Why didn't you wake me up?”

“What are you going to do, Guthrie? Save them? The poor bastards were dead the moment they got the job.”

“Watch your mouth,” Guthrie hissed, throwing a turbulent glance at Token, who laughed as he took a sip from his tumbler.

“Told you he was paranoid,” Lynette sniffed.

Guthrie stormed forward and grabbed Lynette’s throat, bringing her nose to nose with him. “Sounds like you’ve been telling Token too much about me.”

Token held up a hand, motioning for Guthrie to wait as he drained his drink. Then he set the glass on the bar and stood. “That’s not necessary, man. I’ll leave.”

“Sit down,” Guthrie demanded, pointing at him.

“Okay,” Token agreed, reclaiming his seat, “but how about you chill the fuck out, let go of the lady, and let her explain herself. I don’t know what’s going on between you two, but she hasn’t said

anything to me to warrant this kind of reaction. As for her mansion,” he added, motioning to the two-story, hole in the ground, “she’s just trying to find something of value in this piece-of-shit world.”

“No,” Lynette corrected, defiantly staring at Guthrie. “I’m starting a new trend.”

Token curiously looked over, and Guthrie furrowed his eyebrows. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the other witches who now have comfortable quarters, about thirty of them, more than a dozen tents, all decked out in pretty possessions saved from the purges.”

“Shit, Lynette,” Token exclaimed.

“Are you trying to start a rebellion?”

Guthrie narrowed his eyes on her, silently warning her to keep her mouth shut, but she wasn't swayed by the fingers tightening around her throat.

“What if I were starting a rebellion, Toke? What would you say?”

Several tense and silent seconds passed as Token flipped his stunned gaze between Guthrie and Lynette, trying to figure out his answer. Then he cleared his throat and reached across the bar.

“What would I say,” he mumbled, pouring another drink. Then he turned and held up the glass. “Well, Lyn, I'd apologize to Guthrie, because you just fucked me.”

Guthrie couldn't withhold his smirk.

“Join the club.”

“She’s devious,” Token added.

Lynette scowled. “What the hell? How did I fuck you, Token?”

“Oh you handed it to my ass good, lady Lyn, shoving me right in the middle of something I want no part of. Now I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t.”

Guthrie raised his eyebrows as he motioned to the hand wrapped around Lynette’s throat. “Now you see why.”

Token nodded and downed his drink. “Now I see why, my friend. Choke the crazy bitch if you want. I’m going to claim I blacked out while I was here. Didn’t see anything, didn’t hear anything, and I don’t remember shit.”

“What a couple of pussies,” Lynette

scolded. “Why am I the only one here with any balls? This could be our only chance to...”

Guthrie squeezed, cutting her off as he leaned close. “Bite – your fucking – tongue.”

She filled her lungs, preparing to reply. Then all three of them looked up as Agro’s voice boomed through the camp. “Guthrie!”

Guthrie flashed Lynette a warning glance. Then he headed for the stairs, halting by the bar to stare down Token. “Are you going to keep your mouth shut about this?”

Token gave him a blank look. “About what?”

“Good,” Guthrie approved. “Lynette’s

digging her own grave. I suggest you stay out of it.”

“I’m leaving,” Token assured, rising from his chair. “Let me walk you out and wish you good luck with the boss.”

They climbed the stairs and exited the tent, and Lynette rushed after them, stopping outside the entrance with her hands on her hips. She probably would have yelled at them, but Agro was in view, holding up two dead soldiers by their collars.

He shook them as he threw his fit. “These spies are fucking useless, Guthrie. Where have you been? Bring me more soldiers. I want those shops burned!”

Chapter 35

Someone nudged Quin's mind Monday morning, pulling him from dreamland, and he opened his eyes to the dim room. He was groggy, but alert enough to realize his dad was trying to mind search him.

'Quinlan.'

Quin rubbed his face as he responded.
'Yeah?'

'It's time for the guard change. Will you be coming out here or should they come to you?'

'Tell them to meet me on the porch.'

Quin sealed his mind and looked at his

sleeping angel, wondering if he could manage to get out of bed without waking her. They'd only been asleep for three hours, and she'd probably refuse to get more rest if she woke up now.

He gave it a shot, wrapping her in supportive magic before releasing her body. Then he slowly hovered a few inches away. She stayed tucked in an invisible cocoon, sleeping soundly, so he floated out of bed, watching her as he went. He was in the doorway, and she hadn't even twitched, so he turned and flew down the hall, summoning on a pair of shorts along the way.

Layla's eyes popped open as terror clutched her gut, holding her muscles and lungs captive. Where was Quin? She was alone. Why was she alone?

The grogginess of sleep cleared, and she realized she was hovering in magic that wasn't her own, but his. She could tell it was his by the way it made her feel – safe and loved – and by the way it smelled – earthy and perfect.

Her fear ebbed as she concentrated on making sense of things, but she could only come up with troubling reasons for his absence, and her panic spiked. Then she remembered he'd talked about concealing the guards from home, and she relaxed. Of course he wouldn't wake her for the task if he thought she'd sleep

through it.

Still, it was unsettling not having him next to her, and her mind tried to rile her by jumping to scary conclusions. But rather than react to her quickening heart like a panicked mother, she decided to wait another minute... or at least thirty seconds.

She hated looking at the empty bed beside her, so she closed her eyes and counted, trying to slow her heart rate and keep her head calm. When she got to twenty-four, her anxiety eased, leaving her confused but content. Then her perplexity disappeared when she felt his body heat on her skin. He was back. The world was right.

She let him think he'd succeeded,

holding still while his arms and torso replaced his magic. Then she opened her eyes and kissed his chest. “Nice try.”

He laughed as he tightened his hug. “My tricky angel. Why didn't you let me know you were awake?”

“Why were you trying to pull one over on me?”

“Because we've only had three hours of sleep and you need the rest. Were you frightened?”

“Yes. I was terrified.”

He squeezed tighter. “I'm sorry, love. You didn't look scared when I got back.”

“It helped to be wrapped in your magic, and I assumed everything was fine, but I was about to come find you anyway.”

“Did my magic waver?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did it jar you awake?”

“No. I don't know why I woke up, but I'm sure it had everything to do with your disappearing act.”

“I should have known better, Layla. I'm sorry. It won't happen again.”

She pulled away from his chest and smiled at him. “You don't have to do that, you know? I'm not scolding you. You have every right to leave the room I'm in.”

“I meant I won't try to sneak away while you're sleeping. Apparently it won't work anyway.”

“Oh. Yeah, I could go my entire life without waking up to an empty bed for

reasons unknown. I'm okay with you never doing that again. Just carry me with you next time. I'm more likely to stay asleep that way."

"Okay, love. I promise."

"I'll take that promise." She wiggled up his body and began kissing his face.

"Are you going to make me go right back to sleep?" Then her hands slid to his jaw as her mouth trailed to his ear. "Or will you let me stay up so I can take advantage of you?"

Her voice was a seductive whisper, her lips brushing his earlobe and spreading tingles down his neck, and his body tightened as he rolled onto his back, pulling her with him. "I don't think you can call it taking advantage of me

when I'm so willing and ready. But feel free to try to prove me wrong by finding something I'm not eager to do with you or for you, because that sounds like fun.”

“You make it so easy,” she mumbled, moving her lips to his throat.

Wrapping one hand in her hair, he slid the other to her bare butt, squeezing and pressing her against him. “Make what easy?”

“Everything, anything.” She slid her kisses to his chest, drifting her tongue across his heart, and her hips wiggled as she tried to feel more of him. “You make it easy for me to love you like I really want to.”

“Your love is amazing, Layla. I'm a lucky man.” He took a deep breath. Then

he gently forced her to stop kissing his torso and pulled her up his body.

Her forehead and nose wrinkled as she puckered. “Then why are you stopping me?”

He grinned as he played with her pout. “I want to look at your face.”

“Oh. Then I guess I'll let it slide this time.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes, but I may not be so forgiving the next time you pull my mouth from your chest.”

“I'll keep that in mind. So are we talking punishment? Or will I just be verbally reprimanded?”

She smirked as she ran a fingernail across the curves of his shoulder. “I

think you like both of those possibilities more than you should.”

He brushed her hair from her face and kissed her nose. “Do you know what today is?”

“Monday.”

“Yes, but it’s more than that. Tonight will be a week from the time we bonded.”

She smiled as she took his cheek. “I know.”

“I realize a week isn't that long,” he added, “but in our situation, it could be the most amazing week we'll ever live.”

“A week has given us more than most people get in a lifetime,” she agreed.

“But I don't need you to acknowledge it every time a week goes by. I know how

you feel.”

He placed his hand over hers, keeping her palm on his cheek. “I know the time we spend together can't be measured, but a lot has changed in the past week, and I want you to know how grateful I am that it has.”

She bowed her head, anxiously looking at him through her lashes. “Was it miserable before we bonded?”

“No,” he answered, tilting her chin back up. “Why would you think that?”

“You said you wanted me to know how grateful you are things have changed in the past week.”

“I am. I love where we are, but I also loved the journey we took to get here. Every second of it.”

“Come on, Quin. You can tell me. Those ten days drove you crazy.”

“They did, but I don't regret them. If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't change the fact that I waited.”

“Why? Now that you know we were always meant to be, why would you wait? We could have bonded over a week sooner.”

“You weren't ready.”

“So? I would have been the moment we bonded.”

“That just sounds disrespectful, Layla. I can't imagine how awful I would have felt doing that. Nothing would have upset me more than to feel like I'd taken advantage of you, and if we would have bonded during a situation like that, I

would have regretted it for the rest of my life.”

“Oh,” she mumbled. “I don’t like the sound of that at all.”

He smiled as he ran a thumb across her lips. “You were so innocent, Layla. I’d never been with anyone like you. I didn’t know how to be with you, and I was a wreck every time I considered our physical relationship. My body screamed your name when I looked at you, but every beat of my heart reaffirmed how vital my patience was. It was an amazing feeling, one I’d never experienced before, and yes, sometimes it hurt like hell, but compromising my future with you would have hurt much worse. I’ll admit now that I was in a

state of constant physical discomfort, and when my arousal spiked, my unease spiked, which was often, but all of it was a result of how much I care about you. Without you, none of it would have existed, so by fulfilling my thirst early, I could have risked losing both it and my water, which would have left me with nothing.”

She stared at him with moist eyes, her mouth hanging open. “Why didn't you...”

“Don't.” He closed her mouth with his thumb, cutting her off. “Don't feel guilty. Just hear me out.”

She sighed, but she didn't argue, so he went on. “The pain was very real, but it was necessary, and not just because I

wanted you to feel comfortable with your decision to be with me, but because I needed you to feel comfortable with your body before getting my turn with it. I didn't want to spend our first time worrying about what would or wouldn't make you blush. I didn't want the gratification limited by my fears and your embarrassment. I wanted it to be easy, to be about love and pleasure, not insecurities and concerns. Those ten mildly painful days gave us both time to get to know each other, and they gave me the opportunity to gain your trust while helping you realize how amazing your body is and how good it can feel in the right hands. Because of those ten days, our first time was perfect.”

“I agree with that,” she conceded, “and I see your point on the rest, but I hate that you were in pain. We didn't have to wait so long. My embarrassment would have worked itself out.”

“I have no doubt, but that's not how I wanted it to be with you. I didn't want to feel like a couple of virgins easing into an embarrassing and uncomfortable situation. The discomfort beforehand was completely worth it.”

“I would have tried harder if I'd known, Quin.”

He smiled as he ran his fingertips through her disheveled curls. “You mean you would have tried harder to hide the fact that you were embarrassed, which isn't what I wanted. That's why I kept my

struggle to myself, because I didn't want you *trying harder*."

"So you basically lied to me, Quin."

"I did what was best for both of us, but you can call it lying if you want."

His dimples deepened as he cupped her backside in both hands. "Am I going to get punished for my dishonesty?"

"You'd like that entirely too much, and it wouldn't teach you a thing, so no."

He shifted her to the side, cradling her in one arm while moving his free hand to her breasts. His forefinger traced one nipple then slid to the other, bringing it erect. "How well do you remember the first time I touched you like this?"

"Very well. Why?"

"Do you remember what it looked

like?”

Her nose wrinkled as she pouted.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because my eyes were closed.”

“Why were your eyes closed, love?”

“Because I was embarrassed.”

“Hmm... Yes you were. Your entire body stayed red the whole time.” He paused and took her by the thigh, pulling her leg onto his stomach. “How well do you remember the second time? Four days later, the day you told me you love me.”

“Very well, and I *didn't* keep my eyes closed.”

“No you didn't, but you blushed the entire time, and you weren't comfortable

vocalizing yourself. You were aware of every move your body made and every beautiful sound that slipped from your lips. You paid as much attention to the things you were doing as you did the things I was doing.”

She puckered again, and he grinned as he gently nibbled her pout. “Then there was the third time, a week after we met.”

“I didn't blush then.”

“I know.”

“You were the uncomfortable one on that occasion.”

“I know.”

“I let you wash me.”

He slid his hand around the back of her leg, dipping his fingers between her

thighs. “I know.”

“But you wouldn't let me wash yo...”

Her rebuttal cut off as one of his fingers slipped inside her body, stroking her until she was wet enough to take two fingers. “I know,” he returned. “I was there, remember?”

“Uh huh...”

“And you're also aware I was ready to take you then, just not in the shower.”

“Oh yeah,” she mumbled, twitching around his hand.

He spread her legs further apart, his fingers freely moving in and around her slick opening. “This right here is why I waited, Layla. I love being able to do this knowing you're feeling it instead of worrying about it. Your cheeks are

flushed with desire, not embarrassment, and your mind is clouded by pleasure rather than insecurities. You love the way it feels, and you know I love it, too, so you don't have to close your eyes. You can look at me while I touch you. And you don't have to keep your lips sealed. You can tell me how much you love it. It makes my heart soar to know it was my commitment and patience that got you to this point, and the fact that I struggled to do it assures me I deserve this heaven I'm in.”

“*You're* in heaven,” she choked, her expression turning doubtful, but his hand quickly had it melting again.

“Yes, love, and there's nowhere else I'd rather be. So why don't you stop

being stubborn and show me how I'm really making you feel? Because I know I'm driving you crazy. Your body's giving you away, no matter how still you try to keep it.”

“Is that right?” she mumbled, curling her fingers into his chest.

“Yes, angel. I can feel it... right...” His fingertips moved to all the right places, adding pressure and magical vibrations. “...here.”

Her eyes rolled back as she moaned and arched, pressing herself against his hand.

“There you go,” he whispered, sliding his mouth to her throat. “That's much better.”

She purred as she gripped his hair,

and her other hand reached between her legs, making sure all the right buttons were touched. His lips settled over her pulse as he lifted her with one arm, giving his other hand more freedom, and soon she was jolting and gasping and flooding his fingers with sweet moisture. He laughed at how easy it was, how quickly she found release once she aimed for it. Then he kissed his way to her languid lips.

She was exhausted. He could tell by the way her eyelids would only open halfway, and by how slow her heart was beating... *his* heart... *their* heart. She tried to curve her lips into a smile, but the corners merely twitched as her lashes fluttered.

He laughed again. Then he rolled her into a ball and tucked her into his chest. “Go back to sleep. I’ll wake you up in a couple of hours.”

“No,” she wearily protested. “Just give me a second to find myself. Then I’ll be ready to take advantage of you.”

“Okay, love. You do that.”

“Okay... Just *one*... minute...”

He buried his face in her hair and breathed deep, drifting to sleep knowing she was already there.

Rocks shifted beneath Layla’s bare soles, smooth and cold and moist, but as real as it felt, she knew it wasn’t. She

was dreaming, walking on a beach with her hand in Quin's, a tiny King Charles spaniel bounding beside them. The scene felt wonderful and familiar – the puppy, the moonlight, Quin leading her across breathtaking terrain. But she'd never seen this location. She didn't recognize the stretch of ocean, the beach or the lights of the nearby town. The last time she had this dream, they'd been in Cannon Beach, but Haystack Rock was nowhere around.

Tingles shot across her scalp as fingers slid into her hair, and her dream melted away, her head filling with Quin's voice.

“Wake up, love. I want to see your eyes.”

She smiled and sucked in his whisper, fluttering her eyes open to his gorgeous face. “Wow... you take me places I’ve never been even when I’m sleeping.”

He pulled her closer, touching his forehead to hers while carefully combing his fingers through messy curls. “Where did I take you?”

“A beach, but I don’t know where. It’s the second time I’ve had that dream – first with Cannon Beach, then this one, which I didn’t recognize, but everything else was the same, and it’s crazy how real it all felt. I even had a name for the dog.”

“There’s a dog?”

“Yes, Arabella. I like to call her Belle.”

“That's detailed.”

“I know. Even the sights and smells were detailed, but what's weird is I knew I was dreaming. As real as everything seemed, I knew it wasn't.”

“What kind of dog was it?”

“A King Charles spaniel. The kind you summoned from the water the first day we spent together. She was tiny in my dream, though, just a puppy.”

“Hmm... Are you sorry I woke you?”

“No. It was a good dream, but this is way better.” Brushing her dreams aside, she moved a hand to his heart. “I'm sorry I fell asleep earlier.”

“Don't be.”

“But you'd just told me how much pain you dealt with waiting around on me.

Then I left you hanging.”

“I went to sleep, love. I didn't lie here waiting. Besides, I knew you'd make it up to me.”

She bit her lip as she walked her fingers down his stomach. Then she met his stare while taking his erection in her hand. “I may not be the blushing girl I was two weeks ago, but I'm still an amateur at making you feel good.”

“That feels better than good,” he countered, wrapping his hand around the back of her neck. “And it's not about how much experience you have. It's about how much you enjoy doing it.” He pulled her into a kiss. Then he flipped her onto her back and moved between her legs. “But if you're aiming for

experience, we can get to work on that right away.”

He buried his face in her cleavage, playfully biting and licking, and she laughed while running her fingers into his hair. His arm snaked around her waist, and when he rose up, he lifted her with him, flipping her around like a doll then laying her back down.

She scowled at the sheets, but then his lips found the dip between her shoulder blades, and her eyes drifted shut as she shivered. He pulled his arm from around her waist, moving her hair aside as he kissed his way to her ear, and his arousal glided up the back of her thighs, coming to a throbbing halt between her butt cheeks.

Oh... this was new, and it had her blood pumping hot.

His lungs quickened, his steamy breath sweeping over her ear, and a quiet growl echoed in his chest, like it took all his patience not to plow into her. He *liked* it this way.

One of his palms found her backside, squeezing as he bit her ear. Then he let the lobe slide through his teeth before rising to his knees. She lifted herself onto her elbows and tried to look at him, but her arms were pulled out from under her when he grabbed her upper thighs and tugged.

She felt extremely exposed, on her knees with her bare ass in the air, untouched from the waist up, and she

suddenly understood why he'd never taken her this way. The position left her vulnerable, and it left him unable to look her in the eyes and reassure her.

Her lungs filled and deflated, and one of his hands found the middle of her back, his touch gentle as his fingers trailed down her spine. She quivered, letting the tender gesture do what his eyes couldn't, and as soon as her muscles loosened, his palms were on her rear-end, squeezing as his thumbs dipped between her thighs.

She stretched and wiggled, her appetite piqued and craving more.

"Beautiful," he breathed, sliding his hand from one butt cheek to the other. Then he squeezed and made it shake.

“Damn.”

She would have found his infatuation with her ass funny if she weren't so turned on by him playing with it, and there was nothing funny about the erection teasing the crease between her legs.

“You ready for this?” he asked, poised to part moist flesh.

Oh she was so ready, and she had no problem admitting it. “Yes.”

He opened her with his thumbs while dipping the head of his shaft in. Then he took her by the hips, his fingers digging in as he plunged deep inside.

She screamed, her face buried in the blankets as she clawed at the mattress, her entire body electrified and tingling.

She could feel him touching places he'd never touched, reaching deeper than he'd ever reached, and while it spread aching heat through her core, the pleasure far outweighed the pain.

He pulled back, and she gasped, her lungs pumping air as quickly as her heart pumped blood. His hand softly stroked her lower back, and she raised her face from the blanket, too shocked and aroused to claim modesty. "I didn't know you could go that deep."

He laughed, his palms spreading goose bumps down her sides before returning to her hips. "It's the position."
"Oh."

He slowly thrust in and out, not going as deep as he did the first time. "Do you

like it?”

With her nerve-endings hopping and her lungs stuttering, she struggled to answer. “Yes.”

“Am I hurting you?” he asked, going a little deeper.

She shook her head, her fingers curling around the sheet. “No... It feels good.”

“Yes it does,” he whispered, picking up the pace.

She jolted and groaned, her thighs flexing, her insides a mess of spasms, begging him to go harder and stronger, which he did, turning her moans into squeaks and screams. His fingers delved into flesh as he pounded her over and over again, his hips slapping her

backside, his erection relentless in its search for pleasure, both his and hers.

“Oh god,” she breathed, and she absolutely meant him. In that moment, he was god... or at least everything good and holy.

Fighting for air, she turned her head, and her gaze landed on his reflection in the mirror. Damn, he even looked like a god – muscles flexing as he slammed into her, his hungry eyes flipping between her back and butt, which was, in fact, perched in the air in all its naked glory, but he seemed to thoroughly enjoy the view, so she enjoyed giving it to him.

His gaze went to her head, then the mirror, and a sexy grin stretched across his handsome face when he found her

watching him. He winked. Then he went back to work, forcing a deeper arch in her back as he lifted her ass higher.

His movements quickened, and her vision blurred, her fingernails digging into her own palms. But it didn't hurt. All she felt was pleasure, as if the only parts of her body that were real were those he touched. All her energy, all her senses, all her emotions, flowed toward him and gathered in her core, building and strengthening until she was ready to explode.

She turned her face into the bed, a squeal rising from her diaphragm as she ripped the sheets from the mattress. Then she hugged the blankets close, her muscles suddenly steel.

He cursed as her body closed around him, slowing him down while spiking the ecstasy, and with a roar he forced himself deeper. One of his hands gripped the headboard, and the other stretched across her upper back, keeping her in place as his hips pressed against her backside and lifted it higher.

The bed shook with his release, and so did Layla's insides. She felt like a tub of sloshing liquid that had been hit with a live wire, sizzling and churning and unable to react. All she could do was lie there and take it... and love it. Everything about it.

The quaking eventually eased, and they both shivered as tingles swam through their sated bodies.

“Wow,” he breathed, alleviating the pressure. Then he sent chills down her spine as he swept her hair to one shoulder. She turned her head, and he lowered his lips to her cheek, kissing before sliding his mouth to her ear.

“That was incredible.”

“You’re incredible,” she returned. “And we’ll be doing that again very soon. I can’t believe you went a week without it.”

He laughed as he nibbled her ear. Then he slowly pulled himself from her body and lowered her stomach to the bed. After letting himself fall to the spot beside her, he urged her to move closer. “Do you feel more experienced?”

She smiled as she cuddled into his

side. “Yes I do.”

“You should. That was my favorite position before you came along.”

She scowled and puckered. “Why not with me?”

“Several reasons, but mostly because I love watching your face.”

Her expression smoothed as her smile returned. “Oh.”

“I also love feeling your pulse, but now that my heart keeps time with yours, I can get that in any position.”

“That’s good.”

“It’s better than good. It’s a dream come true. But we still can’t do it like that all the time. Not only because I love watching your face, but because I can’t last as long in that position as I do in

others. It gets me too worked up, and it's never gotten me more worked up than it just did. Your ass is perfect, Layla. You need to know that."

She laughed as she raised her knee to his stomach, giving him a glimpse of the ass in question.

"There it is," he approved, covering it with a large palm. "Perfect."

"I didn't realize you were an ass man."

"Baby, if it's on you, I'm an everything man."

She giggled as she kissed his shoulder. Then she rested her cheek on curved muscle. "I think that was a fantastic way to celebrate one week of bonding."

“Oh we’re not done,” he countered.
“But first we need to get some work out of the way.”

“Right,” she whispered. “There’s that whole *saving our lives* thing.”

“And what beautiful lives they are, my love. Just remember that when it gets rough.”

“I’ll never forget, Quin.”

And she wouldn’t. These moments were seared deeper than her mind. They were bound to her soul and buried in her heart.

Chapter 36

The lawn was crowded and buzzing with conversation when Layla and Quin left the house, but they bypassed everyone and headed for food and coffee. Once they had plates, they found seats between Cordelia and Morrigan.

“We're discussing how to move our army,” Kemble noted.

“Where's it going?” Layla asked.

“Closer to the glacier,” Kemble answered. “We don't want the confrontation taking place here or the clearing near Mount Hood. We would do too much damage to the forest, and

the clearings aren't big enough, so we're going to draw Agro to the glacier."

"How will you get him there?"

"We'll tell him you're there. He'll probably come here first, and when he does, we'll let him know where he can find you."

"How?"

"A magical message, and we'll include visions of you as proof. If he's as obsessed as we think he is, he won't be able to stay away. The hard part will be getting him there when we're ready for him. Hopefully the close eye we're keeping on his camp will do the trick." He paused and pointed. "Speaking of guards."

Several men approached and stopped

behind Quin, who stood and concealed them. “See you in a bit,” he said, offering the invisible group a wave.

A rush of air fluttered the grass, and Quin took his seat, summoning Layla a chocolate chip cookie before looking at his dad. “When are we moving the volunteers?”

“As soon as grandpa Cat returns with the latest news on Agro. As of 7:30 this morning, his camp was quiet, definitely not prepping for battle, but we haven’t seen new soldiers arrive in two days, which means he has his ammo. We don’t want him surprising us with it, so we need to set the pace. Besides, we can’t keep our volunteers forever. If this doesn’t happen soon, we’ll lose them, so

we're going to finalize our plans and aim for tomorrow night.”

Layla's coffee and cookie vanished, and she huffed, sitting empty-handed and disgruntled, her heart thundering out of control. The trigger was definitely the mention of how much time they had left.

After vanishing her cup, Quin vanished his own. Then he laid a hand over her heart while pulling her onto his lap. The moment they made skin contact, his heart conformed to hers, and he jolted as the organ pounded against his ribs, like it had been hexed with an aortic earthquake. Growing numb from head to toe, he looked down, stunned as he watched his chest palpitate quicker than ever.

“Is it hurting you?” Layla asked.

“No,” he answered, looking back up. She wasn’t convinced. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. I’m probably feeling the same thing you are. Does it hurt you?”

“No.”

“There’s your answer.”

“Still, it’s not the most comfortable feeling in the world, and there’s no reason for you to have to deal with it.”

“Maybe there is,” he countered, summoning her mug. “Now stop worrying about me and drink your coffee.”

“You’re encouraging me to drink coffee while our hearts are going crazy?”

“Yes. Apparently caffeine has nothing to do with it, and now I know it doesn't hurt, so drink all the coffee you want.” He handed over her coffee then flexed his fist, wondering if his grip was as weak as it felt. Summoning a stick from the surrounding forest, he reached up and caught it.

“What's that for?” Layla asked.

“To test my grip,” he answered.

“Cover your coffee.”

She did, and he grasped the middle of the stick, holding it out away from her as he squeezed his hardest. It snapped into several pieces, and most of them fell to the ground, but the section in his fist crumbled to dust and blew away with the breeze. He watched it with wide

eyes. Then he let go of Layla, breaking their connection and returning his heart to normal.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

He didn't answer, his throat swollen as he looked between his hands.

Kemble leaned forward, concern etching his features. “What's going on, son?”

“I'll hurt her,” Quin whispered. “What I just did was the definition of not knowing one's own strength. I could break her and not even realize I'm doing it.”

Layla shook her head. “You weren't hurting me.”

“That doesn't mean I won't.”

“I see your predicament,” Kemble

mumbled.

“There’s no predicament,” Layla argued, grabbing Quin's hand, but he panicked and yanked it free.

“Quinlan,” Cordelia gasped.

Layla’s chest expanded, her lips quivering as tears welled up in her eyes.

“Shit,” Quin breathed, once again vanishing her coffee. Then he carefully took her face in his palms. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pull away like that.”

Her tears broke free, running down her red cheeks to his fingers. “I understand why you did it, Quin. But it still hurt.”

“I know,” he whispered, gently drying her cheeks. “It won't happen again.”

She reached up, unexpectedly

grabbing his hands, and like before, his first reaction was to pull away. But she put her own enhanced strength into the grip, and it kept him there long enough to rethink his first reaction and go with his second. He relaxed, letting his hands go limp in hers, and more tears blossomed in her sad eyes.

“Please don't do that,” she quietly pleaded. “If you're going to refuse to hold me when my heart's acting like this, I'll change it. I'll force it to slow down, because I hate the way this feels. I'm not going to put up with your refusal to touch me.”

“It's not like that, angel.”

“I know, but that doesn't change the way it makes me feel.”

He sighed, but he didn't say anything or move his hands, and Layla set her jaw as she narrowed her eyes. "Hold my hands, Quin."

He swallowed a lump as he shook his head, hating the way he was making her feel. But he couldn't even gauge the pressure he touched her with, so how was he supposed to control it?

"Fine," she huffed, closing her eyes.

Quin's heart rate started decreasing as she magically slowed her own, and he looked to Serafin, who merely shrugged. "You have nothing?" Quin asked, mad at the whole damn situation.

"I have the same information you do," Serafin replied. "Letting her alter her heart seems contradictory to what's

supposed to happen, but we haven't seen that it serves a purpose, so maybe it's okay. Looks like that's exactly what's going to happen, because she's not bluffing and you're not caving.”

She'd managed to get her heart rate halfway back to normal, but then she got stuck.

Quin watched her struggle, noting her mounting frustration. Then he closed his eyes and filled his lungs. “Layla.”

“What?”

“Stop. It's not slowing any further. You've been at the same rate for over a minute.”

“I'll stop when you're holding my hands.”

He took a calming breath. Then he

carefully picked up her hands, giving them a kiss before sliding his fingers between hers. "Open your eyes, love."

She obeyed, satisfied she'd gotten her way. "Thank you."

"Leave your heart alone from now on."

"That depends on you."

Withholding another sigh, he returned her coffee and laid his empty hand on her thigh, fidgeting with her skirt as he closed his eyes. "Any plans besides moving the volunteers?"

"Nothing set in stone," Kemble answered. "But we'd like to make one more trip to the glacier to test our tactics, and it's going to take a while to move the volunteers. We'll probably

transport them in groups of twenty, and they'll need your concealment spells. If you still plan on keeping Layla's anonymity, you'll be on your own in hiding over a hundred people.”

Quin nodded. “I don’t want to be gone all night, so let’s be ready to go when grandpa Cat gets here. We’ll need to round up some help – people to guide the groups and extra security.”

“I’m on it,” Caitrin offered, getting to his feet. Then he held out a hand to Morrigan. “Would my sweet peach like to go on a scouting mission with me?”

“Of course,” she answered, tucking under his arm.

They walked off, and everyone else looked at Quin, who was staring into the

distance and seemed lost in thought. The others left him to his meditation, but Layla stayed on his lap, waiting for him to come back.

She was tempted to bug him, but sipped her coffee instead, letting her mind wander. And when it wandered, it found Travis and Phyllis. Oh crap. She hadn't done anything to prepare them for her possible disappearance.

She looked at Quin with the intention of bringing up the issue, but then a large cluster of colored mist sped through the air and landed in the middle of the clearing. Everyone jerked to attention, and Quin jumped from his chair, pulling Layla with him as he faced the intruders.

Coffee sloshed over her hand, so she

vanished her mug, magically cleaning her mess as she wiggled within his powerful grip. “Quin,” she breathed, unable to do more. “Situating me. This feels awkward.” That was putting it mildly, but if he knew how tightly he held her, he’d never hold her again.

“It’s Drystan and Devlin,” he said, recognizing two of the four auras. His grip eased. Then he turned her around and hugged her to his chest. “Sorry, love. Their entrance had me worried.”

Apparently he had no idea he’d been crushing her, or he would have said a lot more than sorry. “I know,” she mumbled, laying her head on his shoulder. She hated that he’d been right about not realizing his own strength. That could

definitely become an issue if her heart continued its odd spikes.

He headed for his cousins then jerked to a halt, and as Layla raised her head to find out why, her bonded light was forced into hiding. She gasped as the stifled emotions engorged her speeding heart. Then she watched Quin's bonded light disappear, but his aura remained, swelling with dark and turbulent colors.

“What the hell is this?” he barked, and the next thing Layla knew, she was on her feet behind him, stupidly staring at his back. She didn't even know how she got there, just that he'd put her there.

She leaned to the side and peered around his tense torso. Then her numb

lungs flooded with oxygen.

There, right in the middle of the lawn, on their knees and restrained by magical cords, were two Unforgivables.

“What are they doing here?” Layla demanded, looking at Drystan and Devlin. Then her mouth fell open as her heart plummeted.

Their clothes were singed and smeared with soot; their faces and arms looked sun-burnt; and their auras blazed as they glared at their captives.

Layla stumbled toward them, her feet heavy, like she was walking through a dream... through a nightmare. Then strong fingers wrapped around her wrist and pulled, yanking her from her dreamlike state-of-mind.

“Ow,” she mumbled, looking at Quin’s hand.

His expression shifted, displaying his regret, but then his eyes hardened as he took her by the waist and pulled her against him.

Everyone else on the lawn stayed frozen for several shocked seconds. Then Caitrin came to his senses and jumped into action. He moved behind the Unforgivables, using a foot to push them onto their faces. Then he secured them in his own magical cords, including new mind shields. Searching the crowd, he pinpointed the two biggest wizards on the lawn. “Weylin, Conan, keep these two incapacitated.”

Father and son approached, taking the

translucent ropes from Caitrin, who summoned two chairs as he turned to Devlin and Drystan. “Sit down. Let Serafin look at your wounds.”

The suggestions went ignored as Drystan and Devlin turned their attention to the sky, and Layla looked, too, panic bubbling up in her tight chest, her pulse out of control. “No...”

A colorful cloud came into view over the western tree line, steadily descending toward the lawn. Then Selena appeared with Alana in her arms and Brayden clutching her side. Tears streamed down Selena’s dirty face as she landed, and Brayden ran to Drystan, who scooped him up on his way to his wife and daughter.

Layla couldn't breathe or speak or move as she waited to see Alana's face, which stayed buried in Selena's neck until Drystan whispered something in her ear.

Raising her head, the toddler shifted on Selena's arm, and a wretched cry burst from Layla's throat. "No."

Fighting a gag, she looked from Alana's raw, soot-covered body to the Unforgivables, and her feet threw a fit, her heaving torso locked in Quin's firm embrace.

"Where's Edana?" Cadman demanded. "Where's my daughter?"

"She's okay," Devlin assured. "She stayed to deal with the hexless authorities."

“What happened?” Caitrin asked.

Devlin swallowed and bowed his head. “The shop's gone. We couldn't save it. Alana...” He paused and clutched his heart. “...Alana got the worst of it. She struggled with her water magic under pressure, and the flames got to her before we did.”

Serafin flew to Alana and vanished her burnt clothes, but he worked around Selena's arm. “What have you done so far?”

Taking a steady breath, Selena blinked back moisture and calmly answered. “We treated the blisters and did what we could to soothe the burn, but we had to get out of there before the police arrived. They would have sent her to the

hospital.”

Serafin continued his examination, healing as he went, and Caitrin turned toward the Unforgivables. “They did this?”

“Yes,” Devlin confirmed, narrowing his eyes on the offenders. “Drystan and I flew in as they were flying out.”

“Any bystanders hurt?”

“No. The shop was closed.”

Caitrin searched out a group from the Cormac/Adair coven. “Contact all the shops. Tell them what's going on. They need to get their customers out and close up early. They shouldn't let their guard down while people remain in the buildings.”

Layla fought burning hot tears as she

pushed at Quin's arm. "Let me go," she whispered, trying to sound calm, but she wasn't calm, she was the opposite of calm. "I need to make sure Alana's okay. She was never... This wasn't supposed to touch her."

Quin didn't let go, but he carried her to Alana, and Layla quickly wiped away tears while composing herself. "Hi, sweetie," she greeted, trying not to expose her anger.

When Alana spoke, her voice was so sad, Layla could have sworn she felt her heart crack. "Hi, Waywa."

Layla tried to find an unscathed section of the toddler's hand to hold, but the whole thing was red and swollen, so she gently ran her fingers into her hair. "I

bet that was scary.”

“Weawy scawy,” Alana confirmed. “I couldn't use my watew. I wasn't stwong enough.”

Layla and Selena objected at the same time. “That's not true.”

“See?” Selena continued. “Layla doesn't think you're weak, and she has super strong magic, so she must know.”

Layla raised her eyebrows and nodded. “I do know. I've seen you perform very special magic. You're the strongest two-year-old I've ever met.”

Alana lowered her eyes. “But my magic didn't come when I cawed it.”

“Because you were surprised,” Layla explained. “Sometimes, when I'm surprised, my magic won't come right

away, but that's okay. It's still in there. Try it now. See if you can get Serafin in the face with your water."

Alana hesitantly looked at Serafin, who smiled. "Go for it, my dear. It helps me heal when I have a face full of water."

"Otay." Alana's tiny features pinched in concentration. Then she giggled as water flew from her hand and hit Serafin's face.

"There's that water magic," Layla praised. "It was just being lazy, but I bet it will know better the next time it's surprised."

"I hope so."

"Me, too, angel. Are you still hurting?"

“I’m bettew.”

“Good. And now that Serafin has been sprayed with water, he’ll have you back to normal in no time.”

“Yep,” Serafin agreed. “You’ll be as good as new very soon.”

“Can you tell me where it hurt the most?” Layla asked.

Alana held up her right hand. “When my magic was supwised my hand got hot.”

“Does it feel better now?”

“It’s stiw hot.”

Serafin gently took Alana’s wrist, and Layla spoke again. “What else got extra hot?”

“My foot,” Alana answered, lifting her right leg, which was burned from the

knee down. “And my awm.”

“You got that, Dr. Serafin?” Layla asked, winking at Alana, who giggled.

“Got it,” Serafin replied. “Hand, foot, arm.”

“Good.” Layla glanced at her house. Then she closed her eyes and waved a hand. “Guess what, sweetie?”

“What?” Alana asked.

Layla tried to match her enthusiasm, but with little success. “I have all the ingredients for a tea party in my living room, and they're just waiting for a special hostess like you to serve them.”

“Weawy?”

“Yep, and my special candy stash is in there, too. Why don't you and your mom go have some tea and junk food while

Dr. Serafin takes care of you?”

“Otay.”

Layla kissed Alana's forehead then looked at Drystan. “You and Devlin should take Brayden in for candy while the three of you heal. In fact,” she added, scanning the rest of the crowd, which included Shaylee and several other small children, “all the kids should go in for a snack.”

“Good idea,” Daleen agreed, gathering the kids.

Layla watched them cross the lawn and disappear into her house. Then her gaze flipped to the Unforgivables, her jaw flexing as her lungs heaved. “Let me go, Quin.”

Quin looked at the Unforgivables, who remained uncooperative as Caitrin questioned them. Then he scanned Layla's aura, which had doubled in size and swam with crimson veins. "I'm not letting you go," he refused.

"Then carry me over there."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Fine."

She held out a hand, and Weylin and Conan let out a yell as they floated into the air with their captives. Wiggling and cursing, all four bodies hovered across the lawn then came to a rest on the grass in front of Layla.

Quin started backing away, but jolted

to a halt when Layla shouted.

“Stop! If you're worried Caitrin's spells aren't good enough, bind them with yours. There's no way a couple of bottom feeders like these will be able to break through your spells.”

“Geez, gorgeous,” Weylin breathed, still recovering from his trip across the lawn. “Do you have any idea how uncomfortable that is when you're not expecting it?”

Layla ignored him and stared at the Unforgivables – a man and a woman, on their knees with their heads bowed.

“Look at me,” she ordered, but their eyes stayed on the ground. “Look at me!”

She struggled against Quin's hold, her bloody aura enveloping the accused, and

they finally looked up, gasping at her huge power-band, the ominous haze around it, and the black chasms staring them down.

Weylin chuckled. “Didn't see that coming, did you?”

They didn't respond. They just stared at Layla with open mouths and frozen auras.

“Did you know that baby was in there?” Layla seethed. “Did you know there were kids in that building when you burned it down?”

The female's face flushed as she nervously stuttered. “I... we...”

“Keep your mouth shut, Doreen,” the male ordered.

Layla's left hand whipped through the

air, and several small slashes tore open the frail skin of the wizard's lips, but he just laughed as blood trickled down his chin. "What do you think that's going to do, witch? Get me to spill my guts?"

"I could do that for you," she offered, raising a hand, and every eye in the clearing widened as it came back down. His guts didn't spill, but six deep gashes ripped across his torso, slicing through cloak and skin.

"Get her out of here, Quinlan," Kemble ordered.

"No," Layla snapped.

"This isn't necessary, dear," Kemble insisted. "Caitrin and I will deal with them."

"No," she whispered. "Don't you dare

move, Quin.”

Quin swallowed as he closed his eyes, taking a moment to consider his options. Then he leaned in and found Layla’s ear. “What do you expect to gain from this?”

“Answers.”

“And revenge?”

“That depends on their answers.”

“You’re not the vengeful type.”

“We’ll see.”

“Quinlan,” Kemble interrupted.

Quin met his dad’s stare. Then he shook his head. “I’m not denying her this. Look at her aura. That’s not going away on its own.” Turning forward, he gave her a squeeze. “What do you want to do, love?”

Her aura pulsed as she answered. “If they won't give us answers, I'll take them. Move me closer and release their mind shields.”

He took a deep breath then cautiously stepped forward, his alert gaze flipping between the Unforgivables. “If you blink wrong, I'll gouge your eyes out. If your fingers twitch, I'll tear your arms off, and if you hurt even a hair on my angel's head, I'll make you wish you were never born.”

The female didn't move a muscle, but the male defiantly glared at Quin. “He knows she's with you. He's coming for her, and there's nothing you can do to stop him.”

Quin ignored the threat and took

another guarded step, overriding Caitrin's magic and breaking the captives' mind shields. "Get it done, Layla."

She leaned forward, putting pressure on Quin's arm as she lifted Doreen's face. "Did you know that baby was in the building when you threw your fire at it?"

"Keep your mouth shut, Doreen," the male ordered. "Don't tell her a damn thing."

The back of Layla's hand slammed into the wizard's face, and his head snapped sideways as fresh blood oozed from a gash along his cheekbone. He tried to shake off the hit, but Layla's palm came down on his forehead.

She gasped and swayed while pulling away, and Quin took a step back, trying not to panic. “What was that?”

“His brain,” she answered, “every thought the bastard has ever had. Move me back.”

He obeyed, and she grasped the wizard's head once more, muscles flexing as she closed her eyes in concentration. The prisoner thrashed, and Quin narrowed his eyes on him, ready and willing to commit murder.

Doreen sobbed and slouched, and Quin glanced at her before looking back to her partner. “What do you know, Doreen?”

“I didn't know the baby was in there,” she cried. “I swear I didn't.”

“I don't give a shit,” Quin snapped, his heart rate spiking with Layla's. “Are there other shops being targeted?”

“Yes. Two in Seaside, a winery and an art gallery.”

Quin glanced at Cadman and Caitrin, making sure they heard their shops might already be ash. “When?”

“I don't know,” Doreen answered. “Today. That's all I know.”

Still thrashing, the male scolded his partner. “Shut up, Doreen!”

“It's over, Killian,” she shot back. “Agro's not here. Our lives are in their hands now, and I don't want to die a painful death.”

“Traitor. You'll die a traitor's death.”

“What are you going to do, Killian?”

Tell on me? You're not going anywhere. They're going to kill you.”

“She's right,” Layla confirmed, pulling her hand away. “You won't be leaving this lawn alive, Killian. I've seen what's in your head, and you don't deserve to breathe the same air we do. You're a murderous waste of space.”

She reached over and touched Doreen's head, and Quin quickly reset Killian's mind shield.

Layla's heart skipped several beats as she collected the female's thoughts. Then she retracted her hand and narrowed her eyes. “You, however, are just a lost seventeen-year-old.”

Morrigan gasped. “She's only seventeen?”

“Barely,” Layla answered, finding Quin's chest with her tense shoulder blades. “You can move back now, Quin.”

He sighed as he took several large steps away from the Unforgivables, and he would have kept going, but Layla had other plans. “That's far enough. Move the witch, Weylin.”

“Bring her here,” Morrigan instructed, and Weylin dragged the limp body of the sobbing witch away from her partner.

Layla's black gaze landed on Killian, and the shiny rope around his wrists loosened. “Raise your right hand,” she demanded.

“Fuck you,” he refused.

She flicked her fingers at his right

hand, and it shot into the air as the sleeve of his cloak rolled up. “Tell my family what you told me.”

“I didn't tell you shit.”

“Fine.” Her fingers twitched, and Killian screamed as smoke rolled from his raised hand and arm, his skin crackling and popping as it blistered and broke, releasing an acrid odor. His screams grew louder, and he jerked his right leg, trying to pull it from the bindings as it smoldered from the knee down.

By the time Layla stopped torching his appendages, the flesh that remained sagged from bone, and his cloak and the grass were soaked with blood and bodily fluids. His screams turned to

gasps and sobs as he fell face first to the ground. Then he began vomiting and shaking while clutching the earth with his uninjured hand. His retching eventually ceased, but his shaking got worse.

“Did that hurt?” Layla asked. “It seemed like it hurt, but it's the least you deserve for putting a baby through the same thing. Doreen didn't know about the kids, but you did. You knew there were two helpless children in that building when you engulfed it in flames, and you didn't care. You didn't give a shit if they burned alive, if their beautiful, healthy skin melted from their tiny bones, and you held no sympathy when you heard their screams. You still

don't. You're remorseless. That makes you the most disgusting piece-of-shit I've ever met, and you will die today. Men who find it necessary to murder babies don't have a place in this world, so we'll do everyone a favor and take you out of it. If my family won't do it, I will." She swallowed, scanning the condemned from burnt finger to burnt toe. Then she looked at Quin with shiny, emerald eyes. "Get me away from him."

"Gladly," Quin agreed, taking flight toward their house.

"By the way, Killian," she called back, "you told me everything."

Chapter 37

Quin lowered Layla's feet to their living room floor, and Alana ran toward them, wearing a clean outfit and a happy aura. “Wook, Waywa. My hand isn't hot anymowe.”

Layla had concealed her aura right before entering the house, and the tumultuous emotions gave her the shakes. Plus her heart still thundered its impossible beat, and her muscles remained numb yet fortified. She was a mess, and barely maintained her composure as she leaned forward to examine Alana's hand. “I'm so glad it's

better, sweetie. Are you enjoying your tea party?"

"Yes. Wiww you have tea with me?"

"Um... not right now, angel. But give me just a little while to talk to Quinlan. Then we'll all three have tea together. Okay?"

"Otay, I'we wait."

Layla kissed Alana's tiny hand. Then she straightened and moved further into her crowded living room. Everyone looked up, and she forced herself to smile at the children. "Is everyone having fun?"

The kids voiced their rambunctious approval, and Layla waved a hand through the air, filling the room with bubbles. As the kids cheered and jumped

to catch them, Layla clapped her hands, and confetti made from wildflower petals rained from the ceiling.

In their excitement, none of the children noticed Layla's quick departure, and she was in her bedroom before the confetti hit the floor. She released her aura as she buried her face in a pillow, but then Quin landed next to her, and she threw the pillow aside, curling into his chest instead. With a shuddering gasp, her tears broke free.

She cried for Alana – an innocent two-year-old enduring terror no one should experience, let alone a toddler. She cried for Brayden – a happy and ornery boy who, at the tender yet observant age of five, was old enough to

know exactly what was going on, old enough to know most of his family may die soon, and instead of living the carefree life every kid deserves, he was fighting fires. She cried for Selena, Drystan, Edana and Devlin, who'd just watched their dedication burn to the ground, nearly taking their lives and the lives of their children with it. She cried for herself, for the things she'd said and the things she'd done, and she cried for the way she felt – so hateful, vengeful, harmful and shameful. She even cried for Doreen, the misguided seventeen-year-old whose future was unknown, and with that, she cried for all the misguided teenagers in Agro's army, the young lives she and her family were preparing to

destroy. Then she cried for the volunteers risking their lives for their neighbors, their family or their freedom. She cried for all of it, and even though she knew her tears were useless and wouldn't change a damn thing, she had to shed them. If she didn't, she'd explode or become an empty vessel wasting space and oxygen.

Quin stroked her hair and kissed her head until her sobs quieted. Then he glanced at her aura, relieved to find the lovely haze drained of crimson. He sighed, feeling the weight on his heart lessen. Then he softly squeezed while whispering into her curls. "I'm sorry, love."

"I know, Quin. Me, too."

She cleaned her face then sat up, crossing her legs while smoothing her hair. They watched each other as she completed her task. Then her shoulders slouched, her sad gaze dropping to the bed. She swallowed hard while fidgeting with the comforter, and her lashes shone with fresh tears when she swept them up. “Do you think I’m a monster?”

“No,” he answered, pulling her onto his lap. “You’re my perfect angel and you always will be.”

“I hate the way it feels, Quin. I despise the person I become when the rage gets ahold of me, but at the same time, it’s like I’ll vomit if I don’t use it. Like all that hate and guilt and sadness is

rolling around inside me, and it's wretched, and if I don't get it out, my body will force it away, like I'll heave the horrid concoction onto the lawn if I don't let it loose on its target. And I know it's so dangerous for me to react that way. I'm new to everything and too strong for my own good. But I can't help but feel justified in my actions, which is a whole new layer of guilt, because who the hell am I to deserve justice? But I take it anyway, and that scares me.” She found his hand, clutching it like her life depended on it. “What if I change, Quin? What if we live through this challenge to face the next, then the one after that and the one after that, and it eventually gets to where my head and heart can't take it

anymore? Just like all the other monsters who were good people until life's hardships broke them down. What if I become one of them, Quin?"

"Look at me, Layla." He waited for her to obey. Then he carefully cradled her cheeks in his numb palms. "That will never happen, so find something else to worry about."

"But I'm horrible, Quin. I'm serving inhumane punishment when it's not mine to serve, and I *wanted* to do it. I deserve to rot in prison."

"No, love. You have to stop thinking that way. This world you're in has no prisons. These people you're dealing with don't give a shit about justice or who the hell serves it. This is not a

judicial world, Layla. We catch our own criminals, we make our own judgments, and we serve our own justice. There's no one out there to do it for us, so we're left to carry the burden of punishing the offenders ourselves, and yes, it is a burden. I know because I carry it. But that doesn't make you a monster, and it sure as hell doesn't make you one of them. You're nothing like them. By serving punishment to wizards like Killian, you're not only protecting the people you love, you're protecting people you don't even know.” He stroked her cheek, then her lips. Then he moved his fingers to her heart. “And you wouldn't be the angelic person you are if you didn't feel guilty about it.”

“I didn't have to burn him, Quin. That was torture, not protection.”

“No, you didn't have to burn him, and I hate that you went through that. I know how it feels to induce pain for the purpose of revenge. As satisfying as it seems, it also hurts, and I wish you didn't have to experience that kind of turmoil. But Killian deserved what he got. Not everyone would agree, but we're the judges in our world, and when someone commits a murderous crime against the judge's family, they're going to get a harsh punishment.”

“Then I guess I'll have to get used to feeling like a monster.”

“I wish you wouldn't look at it like that, Layla. I know you think burning him

was inhumane, but his crimes aren't human crimes. They're magical crimes, which warps everything the hexless world believes about crime and punishment.”

She dropped her gaze as her aura sadly pulsed. “His crimes are horrible, Quin. I can't believe the things he's done, and he feels no regret. All he cares about are his own disgusting needs and his loyalty to Agro. It's sickening to think there are people out there who choose to live that way.”

“Now there's one less.”

She sighed and looked back up. “I hate that Alana and Brayden got caught up in this. Out of everything that's happened, that's the hardest to take. It makes me

want to rip out Killian's throat then move on to Agro's. I hate that man.”

“Now there's something everyone can agree on. Agro's a menace who's long overdue for a serving of justice. But we're going to get our chance very soon.”

“Tomorrow night,” she whispered, pulling his fingertips into a kiss. Then she worked her way off his lap.

“It's looking that way,” he said, his heart returning to normal.

She slid off the bed then held out a hand. “It has to be tomorrow or he'll beat us to it. The only reason he hasn't already attacked is because he can't prove I'm here. He tried to get confirmation from the shops and it didn't

work. That's why he ordered them burned, because he was throwing a fit. He's waiting to hear from another spy, but if that guy doesn't return today with something solid, Agro will spend tonight preparing for battle; says he's ready to burn the whole state down. We need to let him find me before that happens."

Quin stared at her with wide eyes and an open mouth. Then he shook his head clear and took her hand. "Did you get all that from Killian?"

She nodded as she led him to the door. "Yes, and I confirmed it when I mind searched Doreen. It's insane how fast the memories came at me, and how clear they appeared. It's like I lived their lives in a matter of seconds, like everything

stored in their brains transferred to mine. Anyway, back to Agro. The good news is his army's morale is low. The bad news is they're eager to get this job out of the way so their boss will chill out and stop killing everyone he sees.

Doreen's terrified of him." She halted in the hallway and looked up. "What are we going to do about her?"

He gave the question a moment of serious consideration. Then he kissed Layla's forehead. "We'll find her family and see if there's any hope for rehabilitation. But she has to stay here until after the battle. We can't risk her going to Agro."

"Right," Layla sighed, continuing down the hall. "And right now we have

a tea party date with an angel.”

Layla and Quin did their best to forget their troubles and enjoy Alana’s company. Then they were dealt more tragedy when they returned to the lawn to find Morrigan crying.

“Your gallery,” Layla whispered.

Caitrin and Morrigan looked up. Then Morrigan sobbed and hid herself in his neck.

“It’s gone,” he confirmed, “so is Cadman’s winery.”

Layla turned into Quin’s chest, struggling to breathe through the guilt and sorrow. The loss was

immeasurable. Not the monetary loss, but the sentimental and creative loss – invaluable artwork up in flames. “I’m sorry.”

Morrigan was in no position to reassure her, but Caitrin gave it a shot. “We would have burned it down ourselves to save you, Layla.”

“Absolutely,” Morrigan agreed, but neither she nor Layla left their safe havens.

“Was anyone hurt?” Quin asked.

“Both shops were closed,” Caitrin answered. “Have been for a week.”

“Good,” Quin sighed, thankful the day’s fires hadn’t taken any lives. He didn’t know how much more his angel could handle. Picking her up into a hug,

he met Caitrin's stare. "Grandpa Cat will be here soon. We're going to hunt down some of Cinnia's coffee before moving the volunteers." Then he walked away, leaving them to their grief while looking for a way to soothe Layla's.

Nervous and emotionally exhausted, Quin and Layla descended into the volunteer's clearing with more than two dozen friends and family members. Quin kept Layla in his arms when he landed, and while he gauged the crowd and eyed the mercenaries, Caitrin and Catigern called for everyone's attention.

After explaining their intentions,

Caitrin called for those with superior concealment spells, tested their claims then sent them to the new location with Lann's and Rhiannon's visible auras leading the way. The mercenaries refused to be concealed by someone else, so Caitrin sent them with several intimidating wizards from the Cormac family, who were instructed to abandon the mercenaries if trouble arose.

“They’re not worth dying for,” Caitrin quietly told Conan. “If they turn on you or get spotted, leave them.”

The remaining guests needed to be concealed by Quin, so Caitrin gathered a group of twenty and instructed them to stand in a row.

Quin gave Layla a kiss then shifted her

to his back. “Are you comfortable?”

“Yes,” she answered, resting her chin on his shoulder.

“Good,” he approved, “but stay alert. We're getting closer than I want to.”

She kissed his neck then looked at the line of magicians, searching every face and aura. “Let's get this over with so I can have your chest back.”

“Good idea.” He walked forward and gave the first wizard in line a nod.

“How's it going?”

“Could be worse,” the stranger replied, looking at Layla.

“A beautiful woman makes everything better,” Quin returned, “but this one's mine.” He waited for the stranger to look at him then reached for his shoulder.

“Are you ready?”

“Does it matter?”

“No,” Quin smirked, concealing the man and his aura.

“Why are you doing it?” the next wizard asked. “You’re just a bonded child. Why aren't your parents doing it?”

“My concealment spells are better than theirs.”

“How's that?”

“Does it matter?” Quin asked, taking a page from the first wizard's book.

The second wizard closed his mouth and glanced at his invisible neighbor.

“Guess not. It seems to work perfectly.”

“Then you're ready?”

“Yeah.”

Quin touched his shoulder and made

him disappear. Then he moved to the witch beside him. And that's how it went time and again. For three hours he walked along rows of twenty, concealing bodies and auras. Then he'd wait ten minutes before starting on a new batch.

They were on the second to last group when Layla's gaze landed on a familiar wizard. He was looking right at her, so she casually turned away, trying to figure out why she recognized him. When she found the answer, she found it detailed and had to stop herself from reacting like a prospector who'd just struck gold. He was Agro's spy, the one due back today. She'd seen him in Killian's head, standing next to a fire in a blood red

cloak, standing beside other Unforgivables. She even knew his first name, because Killian had been eaten up with envy over his notoriety. He was a new guy known for being either really brave or really stupid.

She mind searched Kegan, who'd been in the clearing all day providing security. *'Kegan, it's Layla.'*

'What's up, doll?' Kegan asked, curiously glancing over.

'Do you know the name of that tall wizard in the last group?' she asked. *'Black cloak, black hair, the one right in the middle of everyone, with a murky aura.'*

Kegan scanned the group, quickly finding who she was talking about. Then

he took a moment to recall his name. '*Sid Freeman.*'

That wasn't right. That wasn't his name. She broke back into Kegan's head. '*Act casual, Keg. Don't freak out, but you need to get Bri and get away from them. He's not who he says he is.*'

Kegan's eyebrows furrowed, but he immediately obeyed, taking Bri's hand and strolling away from the group of strangers. His uncle was nearby, so he slapped him on the back as he passed, sparking up a conversation and urging him to walk with him and Bri.

Layla returned her chin to Quin's shoulder and mentally called his name.

'Is everything okay?' he asked.

'Stay calm,' she warned. *'Don't*

react.'

Quin paused for a tiny moment then returned to his task. *'What's going on?'*

'He's here. The spy Agro's waiting for is here.'

Quin's jaw flexed as he moved to the next person in line. *'Where?'*

'In the last group. The tall wizard with a murky aura, black cloak, black hair. Kegan told me his name is Sid Freeman, but it's not. His name's Dolan and he's an Unforgivable.'

'Are you sure?'

'Positive. I saw him in Killian's head. He was standing with other Unforgivables in their camp, wearing their colors.'

Quin threw the waiting magicians a

short glance then looked forward. *'He's surrounded by innocent people. Just stay put. Don't do anything.'*

'Okay,' she agreed, touching her lips to his pulse.

With only three people still visible in the group he was working on, Quin calmly finished up and moved toward his family. Mind searching his dad, he filled him in on the situation. Then he repeated the process with Caitrin and Serafin. By the time Serafin was relaying the message to Daleen, every family member and friend in the clearing knew who the spy was, but they didn't give any inclination something was amiss.

Quin connected to Kemble's mind

once more. *'What do you suggest?'*

'This is a precarious situation, Quinlan. Are you sure he's guilty?'

'Layla's sure. That's good enough for me.'

'Okay, but we can't act while he's surrounded by innocent people.'

'I know.'

'We'll wait for them to line up, and when we see our chance to safely secure him, we'll take it. His eyes are always on you and Layla, so don't do anything out of the ordinary. Just complete your task and we'll take care of him.'

'And if I get to him before you?'

'Stall, but it shouldn't come to that. If it looks like a struggle might break out,

you and Layla need to get away from him. It won't do to have the two of you injured on the eve of battle. You're the best chance this army has.'

Quin severed the mental connection and pulled Layla around to his chest. “Hey,” he whispered, happy to see her beautiful face.

“Hey back,” she returned.

He glanced at her lips then touched his forehead to hers. “Don't let go, okay?”

“Okay.”

After a soft kiss, he shifted her to his back then headed for the only strangers left in the clearing. “Let's get this over with.”

Caitrin called for them to line up, and a kink was tossed into their obscure plan

when the enemy wizard wrapped his arm around the shoulders of an innocent witch. The two of them followed orders, obediently falling into line, but he kept his friendly hold on her the entire time. She didn't seem to mind and had turned her body toward his, offering him her undivided attention.

Quin moved to the end furthest away from them and began his task, taking his time without drawing too much attention to the fact. The rest of his friends and family kept tabs on the spy, watching him flirt with the witch next to him while flipping his gaze to Layla every few seconds. The first time he looked at something besides Layla or the witch under his arm, he uncomfortably shifted,

his eyes flitting around the clearing as his speech faltered.

Kemble broke into Quin's head. '*He's suspicious, Quinlan.*'

Quin concealed the guy in front of him then glanced over. The spy was eyeing Kemble, Caitrin and Serafin, who were chatting a few yards away. Then his suspicious gaze flipped to Quin. Their eyes met, and as the spy looked at Layla, Quin looked at the witch unknowingly tucked under the arm of an Unforgivable. She smiled as he pulled her into what appeared to be a hug, but Quin knew better. He was using her as a shield.

Quin mind searched his dad. '*He knows. Get that witch away from...*'

Too late. A large hole opened in the

land shield as three of Weylin's cousins dropped in, unaware of the situation at hand, and the spy tightened his grip on the witch as he shot toward freedom.

Quin cursed, jolting Layla to attention, and everything seemed to move in slow motion as the unsuspecting woman was taken hostage. Quin watched the scene play out with perfect clarity and awareness – the tension in the spy, the shock on the woman's face, the flutter of their cloaks... and Layla's arm stretching out beside his head.

Her breath fluttered over his ear when the spy was less than ten feet from freedom, and a thin stream of bright-blue electricity shot from her hand. The hair at the nape of Quin's neck stood on end

as her spell charged the atmosphere. Then a yell echoed through the clearing when the electricity struck the enemy's rotator cuff. His flight slowed as his hold on the hostage loosened, and Layla's hand closed into a fist, her magic grasping the woman and yanking her free.

Shaking off the shock, the spy darted toward the exit, but Quin threw out a hand, hitting him with a strong gust of wind. The spy grunted and flailed, slamming into a solid section of the shield, but he managed to grab the edge of the opening and hefted himself toward it. Several people on the ground aimed palms at the hole, trying to close it before the spy could get through, but he

slipped free without a second to spare.

Caitrin and Kemble shot after him, and Layla lowered the stunned witch to the ground next to Serafin. Quin waved a hand through the air, releasing all the concealment spells he'd just set. Then he pulled Layla to his chest and flew away from the restless crowd.

“That was amazing,” he whispered, touching his lips to her forehead as he watched the sky.

She wedged her trembling arms between them, inundated with adrenaline. “I hate that it came to that. I was so scared I’d hit her head.”

“You’re the only person here who could have done that without hitting her. You were fantastic.”

“Do you think they got him?” she asked, looking up. “I hope they're okay.”

“If he had enough sense to conceal himself, he'll probably get away. There are a million places to hide around here.”

“I should have grabbed him when I grabbed her. Why didn't I grab him?”

“Stop, Layla. There wasn't time to think things through. You saved that woman's life, which was more important than his capture.”

“I guess. Do you think this will give Agro the edge?”

“It would have been a lot worse if he'd made the move with us. As it is, he has no idea where our army is, only that we have one. Hopefully that won't

convince Agro to collect more soldiers before attacking. If that happens, we'll have to change our plans.”

Kemble and Caitrin returned empty-handed, and Quin sighed as he looked at Layla. “They didn't find him.”

“Damn.”

“It's okay, love.”

“We hope.”

“That's all we can do.”

Chapter 38

Guthrie sighed at the sky, watching the afternoon sun sink into evening. Then he sat and leaned against a tree. Silestra slithered from his sleeve, and he lowered his hand to the forest floor, encouraging her to go play.

A few yards away, a hole opened in the camp's land shield, and Token emerged with a jug. He looked at the wizard standing guard at the entrance. Then he pointed over his shoulder. "Take a break, soldier. The lieutenant and I got this."

The guard glanced at Guthrie, who

gave a nod, and Token waited for the soldier to enter camp before resealing the barrier. Taking a seat next to Guthrie, he handed over the jug. Then he pulled a pipe from his cloak and loaded it with herb. “How long have you been out here, man?”

“All day,” Guthrie answered.

“Hmm...” Token mumbled, pulling in a hit. “I’d say the guy isn’t coming.”

“I would, too, but when I told Agro that, he told me to get my ass back out here. Dolan’s his final hope for evidence the witch is with her family. We’ll be going on blind rampages tomorrow night if he doesn’t show.”

“And if he does?”

“He’ll probably die. Nobody keeps

Agro waiting this long without consequences.”

“What if he has the proof Agro seeks?”

“He’ll still die. Then we’ll attack with purpose.”

Token laughed as he passed the pipe. “The guy’s been here... what? Two weeks?”

“Not quite, but the idiot threw himself into the fire. Guess he changed his mind when facing death. We’ll be hunting him down when we’re through with this mission.”

“You think we’ll make it through?”

“Why wouldn’t we? Our army’s almost two-hundred soldiers strong and we’re facing one family.”

“Hey,” Token countered, “you’re the one who told me the stakes were high and the witch was favored by the Heavens. Remember? *We’re either going to get this witch or die trying.*”

“Some will die,” Guthrie confirmed. “Her family’s strong.”

“But you think Agro will succeed.”

“If the witch is there, yes.”

“And if she isn’t?”

“Agro will snap, and there’s a good chance we won’t make it through that.”

“Sounds like we need that spy to show up with proof.”

Guthrie nodded as he glanced at the sky. Then his forehead creased as he squinted. “I’ll be damned. Looks like he’s here.”

Guthrie stood, and Token followed suit, looking up as Dolan darted around tree limbs.

“Not the smartest soldier,” Token whispered.

Guthrie withheld a smirk, keeping his expression stern as Dolan landed. “Look who decided to show.”

“Sorry I’m late,” Dolan returned, throwing off his hood as he reached for his foot.

“This isn’t late,” Guthrie countered. “This is fucking ridiculous. What did you do to your foot?”

“Lost a toe,” Dolan answered, pulling a piece of velvet from a bloody stump.

Token’s features pinched as he leaned in for a closer look. “Looks like you lost

a toe-and-a-half,” he corrected, pointing with his pipe. “How the hell did you manage that?”

“A land shield closed on them.”

Guthrie’s gaze snapped to Dolan’s face. “Whose land shield?”

“The witch’s.” Dolan wrapped up his foot and straightened. “Or her army’s, I guess I should say.”

Token and Guthrie replied at the same time. “Her army?”

“Yes,” Dolan confirmed. “She has an army. That’s why I’m late. I managed to infiltrate the clearing housing their soldiers, but I found out this morning they were moving them. I tried to stick around long enough to follow, maybe overhear where the witch stays, but they

figured me out. I don't know how, but they did."

Guthrie's mouth hung open as he absorbed the information. Then he closed it and furrowed his eyebrows. "She doesn't stay with her army?"

"No. I didn't find them until yesterday evening, and I heard rumors of a witch matching our target's description visiting the clearing, but I didn't see her until today, when they came to move everyone."

"How big is the army?"

"Around 150, not counting her family."

"Shit," Guthrie whispered.

Token shook his head as he put away his pipe. "This just got serious."

“To say the least,” Dolan returned, hobbling toward camp. “We need to tell Agro what’s going on. What’s the password?”

Still cursing under his breath, Guthrie fell into step behind Dolan, but Token didn’t move. “What will the boss do, Guthrie?”

Dolan kept limping toward the land shield. “That’s for the boss to decide. What’s the password?”

But Guthrie had stopped and turned toward Token, seriously considering the question.

“Will he back down?” Token pressed. “Or will he go get his witch despite her army?”

Guthrie’s chest expanded as he found

his answer. Agro would go get his witch... or die trying.

“Shit,” Dolan cursed.

“It’s just a toe,” Guthrie snapped.

“And a half,” Token added.

Guthrie snickered. Then his heart jumped into his throat as Dolan screamed and threw his head back.

“What the fuck?” Token mumbled.

The screaming stopped, and Guthrie moved forward. “What’s your problem, soldier?”

Dolan gagged, his muscles flexed and vibrating, and as his bulging eyes flipped from the sky to Guthrie, something shot from his throat – something large and sharp and dripping with bodily fluids.

“Shit,” Guthrie yelled, stumbling away.

Dolan’s eyes rolled back as his body followed the bloody projectile into the air, and Guthrie looked at the ground, finding a huge tree root jutting from earth. The muddy bark disappeared beneath Dolan’s cloak, but Guthrie knew the root kept going, no doubt impaling the poor guy’s ass before carving through his throat.

Dolan’s twitching ceased as rivers of blood snaked toward loose soil. Then the ground opened, swallowing the killer root and its victim.

“Fuck the Heavens,” Token breathed, darting his gaze around the forest. “What was that?”

“I don’t know,” Guthrie whispered, watching the dirt settle.

A laugh rang out above them, and their eyes flashed up as Lynette dropped out of a tree. She lithely landed on Dolan’s grave. Then she picked up a handful of dirt and looked over. “You guys about shit your shorts.”

“You did that?” Token exclaimed.

She grinned. “Pretty clever, huh? No clean up. It pays to be an earth child.”

“What were you thinking?” Guthrie scolded.

Lynette straightened and brushed off her hands. “I seem to be the only one of us who is thinking, Guthrie. If he’d gone to Agro with this news, we’d be screwed. I know it, Token knows it, and

you know it, but I'm the only one with the guts to fix it."

"How?" Guthrie barked. "How could we possibly be any more screwed than we are now?"

"Are you kidding? This is the best thing that could happen. Now we hold the cards. You, me and Toke."

Guthrie started pacing. "Shit. What am I going to tell Agro?"

"Aren't you listening?" Lynette snapped. "You don't tell Agro shit."

"To what end? So he'll march us all to certain death?"

"He would have done that anyway."

"We don't know that."

"Yes we do, Guthrie. I saw it in your aura. You know damn good and well

Agro would risk all our lives for that one witch.”

“She’s right,” Token added. “You told me as much the day you fetched my troop.”

“We’ll still march to our deaths,” Guthrie pointed out, “just less prepared.”

“Agro won’t be prepared,” Lynette confirmed, “but we will. We know what’s coming and can work out a plan.”

“To do what? What’s your big plan, Lynette? What did you think would happen after you shoved a tree root up Dolan’s ass?”

Lynette giggled, still proud of her creative spell, but then she sobered and emphatically answered. “There are two

dozen witches in that camp ready to do whatever I tell them. And with the news of our impending doom, I have no doubt we can sway some of the others tonight. When Agro attacks the witch's army, we let him. Then we take those we've swayed and leave him to his fate."

"Damn," Token interjected, "you've really thought this through."

Lynette ignored him and stepped toward Guthrie. "The witch has strengthened her numbers, threatening the lives of everyone here, but we can save some of them. All we have to do is wait until Agro and his loyalist are getting slaughtered then step away. You'll be a hero, and Agro will be gone."

A moment of tense silence passed as

Guthrie paced. Then he stopped and looked at Lynette. “Do you know how many things could go wrong? What if he wins? Then we’ll be on his shit list.”

“Then let’s make sure he doesn’t win,” Lynette whispered. “The bastard makes our lives miserable. We can’t beat him and all the soldiers who lick his asshole, but we can let the witch take them out for us.”

“And what about her? You think she’ll stop at Agro?”

“I think we stand a better chance against her divided than if we align ourselves with the wizard she’s aiming for. If we see an opening while she’s distracted with Agro, we take it. Neither side will be expecting us.”

Guthrie stopped and looked toward the sky, watching limbs sway in the breeze as he contemplated his next move. The guard Token sent away could return any second.

“I’m done, Guthrie,” Lynette added. “I’m done dealing with that man’s bullshit, so either you join me or you kill me. Those are your options, because I’m not caving. If you won’t do this, I’ll take the girls and do it myself, and you can burn in that battle with Agro.”

“She sounds serious,” Token observed, casual as ever.

Guthrie scanned Lynette and had to agree – she meant what she said.

“Fuck,” he yelled, throwing his hands in the air. Then he turned and stomped

away.

Chapter 39

Layla and Quin stayed busy through the afternoon and evening – moving the army, taking a trip to the glacier, grabbing a bite to eat with their family, and finalizing their plans. By the time they were getting a late report on Agro's camp from Belinos, they were tempted to tell the world to go to hell so they could fly home. But they didn't.

“Did you see a wizard show up alone?” Quin asked.

“Yeah,” Belinos answered. “A wizard in a black cloak came in by himself this afternoon, but he didn't make it into

camp.”

“What do you mean?”

“A witch killed him before he could enter their land shield.”

“Agro probably ordered her to do it.”

“Maybe. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, just bits and pieces that didn’t make sense... something about a toe.”

“He was a spy,” Quin revealed. “He knew about our army.”

“Shit,” Belinos muttered, his face draining of color. “I’m sorry, Quinlan. If I’d known, I would have tried to intercept him.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Quin assured, slapping his uncle’s shoulder. “Go get some rest.”

Belinos walked away, and Layla took a labored breath as she watched him join his family. “So Agro knows.”

Quin cleared his throat and pulled her under his arm. “Probably.”

“Do you think he’ll postpone and bring in more soldiers?”

“I don’t know. Let’s hope his obsession and impatience convince him otherwise.”

“You know what’s twisted?” she asked.

He looked down and found her stare. “What’s that, love?”

“That we’re hoping battle will come sooner rather than later.”

“I wish I could delay it forever, Layla, but this is our only chance to get him out

of our lives. If he gathers more soldiers, our fight is over. We won't have the numbers to stand against him."

She nodded then turned into him. "I want to go home."

"Sounds like heaven," he agreed, leading her across the lawn.

Halfway to the house, they came across Weylin, who was lounging in a chair with one foot on his knee, his hands behind his head, and his gaze on the cloudy night sky. Quin and Layla exchanged curious glances then came to a halt in front of him.

"What's up, Wey?" Quin asked. "Why aren't you home with your family?"

Dropping his foot from his knee, Weylin grinned at them. "I have a

witching hour rendezvous with a feisty flower.”

Quin’s expression smoothed. “Does Dahlia know your plans for tomorrow?”

“Are you kidding?” Weylin returned, rising from his chair. “For one thing, that would mean revealing the secret you asked me not to. For another, if I gave her even a hint of what’s to come, she’d interrogate me the whole time I’m with her. And that’s not how I want to spend my night.”

“I see your point.”

“She’s a tough witch,” Weylin added. “She’ll handle the news better than most if it comes to that.”

“Oh crap,” Layla exclaimed.

Weylin and Quin jolted to attention,

shifting closer to her as they glanced around the lawn.

“What's wrong?” Quin asked.

“Travis and Phyllis,” she answered.

Quin relaxed, but Weylin's confusion grew. “Who are Travis and Phyllis?”

“Two of Layla's hexless friends.”

“Oh yeah. I forget you lived in that world for so long. Hexless friends... weird. Well,” he said, slapping Quin's shoulder, “I'll leave you to it. See you tomorrow, gorgeous.” After bowing to Layla, he shot into the air, concealing himself as he went.

Layla looked from the sky to Quin. “What's with him and Dahlia?”

“They're good friends,” Quin answered, leading her toward the house.

“Why?”

“Because that didn’t sound like friendship to me.”

Quin smiled as he found her thoughtful expression. “They rely on each other when they have no one else to rely on. They’ve had the same arrangement for years.”

“That’s weird.”

“Or smart.”

Layla wrinkled her nose. “But how do they make it work? It seems like things would get complicated.”

“Wey and Dahlia have known and trusted each other for a long time, and they’d much rather be friends than a couple. When one of them decides they want a relationship with someone else,

the other willingly lets go, no hard feelings. They value each other's friendship, happiness and bodies equally, so that kind of relationship works for them. And since magicians shamelessly celebrate sexuality, it's probably something you'll see again."

"A relationship like that is as foreign to me as the moon."

"Ours is better."

Dropping her gaze, she fidgeted with her skirt. "You have enough evidence to compare?"

"I don't have a backup woman, if that's what you mean."

"It is."

"But I'm no stranger to casual sex."

"I know."

He halted on her porch and swept her off her feet. “Does my past make you jealous, angel?”

“Not really. I just wish I’d found you years ago; that I was part of your past as well as your present.”

“You were. You’ve been making women jealous for years. You wiggled into my head and heart long before I had the good sense to appreciate a woman’s body, and you’ve been there since. You’re more a part of my past than any other woman I’ve been with, and you’re the only woman in my future.”

“Well when you put it that way.”

He laughed as he leaned in, brushing a soft kiss across her lips. “Now, about Travis and Phyllis.”

“Yes!” She smacked her head. “Travis and Phyllis.”

Moving his lips to her forehead, he carried her into the house and through the living room. “Let's figure it out in the morning. I promise I'll remember, and if we can't come up with something, our family will help us out.”

“Okay, but please don't let me forget. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I can't seem to keep them in my head, which is horrible. They're my friends. I'm a crappy friend, Quin.”

“I wholeheartedly disagree, Layla.”

She couldn't help but smile as she nuzzled his neck and kissed his throat. “Of course you do.”

He let her play until he reached the

bedroom door. Then he pulled her face from his neck and found her gaze. “Are you tired?”

She laughed as she skipped her fingers from his shoulder to his chest, sliding them along the contours of his pecs like they were on a roller coaster. “If I had my way, I’d never sleep again. So no, I’m not tired.”

“Good, close your eyes.”

“A surprise?” she asked, widening her eyes instead of closing them.

He laughed as he kissed her grin.
“Yes.”

“I love your surprises.”

“That’s why I do it,” he returned, waiting for her to close her eyes.

“Making you happy is my favorite thing

to do.” He carried her into the bedroom. Then he lowered her feet to the floor and turned her around. After sweeping her hair aside, he kissed the back of her neck, and when her heart stuttered, so did his.

“You make me so happy, Quin.”

“I know, angel. I see it in your aura.” He moved away from her neck and wrapped one arm around her chest, pulling her back against him. “You can open your eyes now.”

She did, and her lungs emptied as she flipped her gaze around their bedroom... only, it wasn't their bedroom. It was a perfect replica of Karena's golden suite. Tears stung her eyes as she stared at the bed they bonded in. Then the moisture

broke free as she turned and buried her face in his chest. "It's just like I remember. Thank you."

Wrapping her in a warm hug, he didn't discourage her tears or ask her to explain. "I told you I'd take you back, but I may not get the chance, so I brought the room to us. I hope that's okay."

"It's perfect," she assured, wiping moisture from her face. Then she smiled up at him. "When do you find time to do these things? You're always with me."

"I have to give most of the credit to magic and family, but while you're thinking about everyone else, worrying about all the people you love, I'm selfishly thinking about myself, wondering what I can do to make your

aura light up, because that's what I love, and I'm greedy.”

“Yeah right,” she smirked, scanning the best hotel room *ever*. “You're so selfish and greedy. You really need to start thinking about others.”

“No,” he refused. “Just you and me. That's it.”

She hovered to his lips and slid her fingers into his hair. “I'm okay with that.”

Hugging her close, he raised her skirt to her thighs and wrapped her legs around his waist. “I'm glad you like your suite, but we're leaving it for a while.”

“We're coming back, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. As long as I have you, I'll go

anywhere. So where are we going? Somalia?"

He laughed as he carried her out of the bedroom and to the kitchen. "No, love. I won't be taking you to Somalia tonight, but if you really want to visit the area, I'll do my best to get you there when we're less pressed for time."

"I can think of a lot of places I'd rather see."

"Like where?" he asked, opening the fridge.

She laid her head on his shoulder, paying no attention to what he was doing behind her. "I've always thought Australia would be fun. I've seen pictures of the Great Barrier Reef, and it looks amazing. I'd also like to see

Ireland... well, Europe in general. But there are a lot of places closer to home I'd like to see."

"Tell me about them," he insisted, turning toward the counter.

"Let's see..." she mumbled. "There's California, but you already know that one."

"Yep. Where else?"

"There are a lot of places I'd like to see, Quin. Do you really want me to list them all?"

"Sure. Just the ones you can remember. Don't think about it that hard."

"Okay. These aren't in any certain order. New England, Virginia, Yellowstone, Yosemite, the Grand

Canyon, Radium Hot Springs in British Columbia, Hawaii, the Great Lakes, and I'd like to take a cruise through the Caribbean. That's the more localized list."

"That's quite a list."

"There's a lot I haven't seen."

"It's a big world."

"Have you been to any of those places?"

"Yes."

"Which ones?"

"All of them except the cruise."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. Flying without a plane makes travel inexpensive and easy. We do it often." He turned and walked to the back door. Then he breathed heat into her

body before stepping onto the deck. “Is it really that big of a shock?” he asked, laughing at her stunned expression.

“Yes.”

“Why? Surely you've considered the benefits of being able to fly anywhere in the world at a moment's notice.”

“No. Not once has it occurred to me how easy vacations would be now. I guess I've been too busy.”

He walked onto the patio's small dock then stopped at the edge, keeping her in a tight hug with her back to the pond.

“You're right. You haven't gotten your fair share of downtime lately. But you're thinking about it now, so tell me, now that you can walk out of the house and fly anywhere, anytime, where's the first

place you'd go if you weren't so busy?"

"Hmm... That's a tough question. May I think on it a while?"

"Sure," he agreed, looking to the sky.

She looked, too, finding clouds and a blanketed moon. "No stars," she noted.

"I got one," he corrected, giving her a squeeze. "So Radium Hot Springs in British Columbia, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"My mom always wanted to go, so we planned a trip the summer before my senior year, but she got the flu the day before we were supposed to leave, and we never rescheduled. I'd done the research, looked at dozens of pictures, and gotten excited about it; now it's on

my list. Why? Is it not a good place to visit?"

"It's a great place to visit. You'd love it. I was just curious why you picked that particular place. Most Americans don't even know where or what Radium Hot Springs is, so it's surprising someone from Oklahoma has it on their list."

"Oh. Yeah, I'd never heard of the place, but mom grew up in Washington, and she'd gone to school with kids who vacationed there. She wanted to see it since she was five. I was really upset when she didn't get her chance."

"I have no doubt." He glanced behind her then found her eyes. "I'm sorry you didn't get there with your mom, and I'm sorry I can't promise to get you there

soon. However, I've been several times and remember it clearly, so I brought a sample to you."

Her eyebrows furrowed as she shifted in his arms and looked behind her. Then she gasped in a lungful of sulfuric steam rising from her very own hot spring.

He'd turned her pond into a mineral pool!

She twisted, trying to see it better. "When did you do this?"

"Just now," he answered, turning so she could stop contorting her body.

She stretched out and stared into the foggy, teal water, its depths illuminated by soft, silver light that reflected in the steam like glitter. Gray boulders had replaced the shiny slabs of granite

surrounding the pool, and flowing ferns had cropped up along the water's edge.

Once she managed to close her mouth, she found Quin's eyes. "You did all that since we've been standing here?"

"Yes," he laughed. "Why is that so shocking?"

"I didn't even know you were working magic."

"Well I was, and it was easy. You could have done it in half the time. Do you like it?"

"I love it. It looks like the undeveloped springs outside the resorts... The fish," she gasped, widening her eyes on the water. "Where are the fish?"

"Don't worry, love. I didn't cook them.

They're in a temporary pond around the corner.”

“Oh,” she sighed. “Good, because cooking them would have been sad and ruined the whole thing.”

He urged her gaze away from his creation. “I promise I didn't kill your fish.”

“Are you sure?” she teased. “Because you're horrible with details. I mean, it wouldn't hurt you to be more thorough once in a while.”

“I'll work on that,” he laughed, leaning in to kiss her playful grin. Then he floated from the dock and hovered over the water.

The steam rippled up their bodies, leaving proof of its journey, and soon

beaded moisture rolled down shiny skin and weighty material. Vanishing the cumbersome clothes, Quin descended into the water. Then he sat on a submerged bench that reclined toward the side of the pond.

Keeping her legs at his hips, he swept her damp curls from her shoulders. “Are you comfortable?”

“Are you kidding? This is fantastic.” The mineral water was already working its magic, melting her muscles and softening her skin. She wedged her arms between them then nuzzled his throat. “I could sit like this for hours and not get bored. Thank you for bringing me a piece of Radium Hot Springs. It's perfect.”

He brushed his nose across the top of her head and slowly ran his hands down her back, like he was making sure he had all its curves memorized. “If we get the chance, I’ll take you to the real Radium Hot Springs. It’s a lot better than this.”

“But this is perfect.”

“I agree, but not because of our surroundings.”

She pulled away and found his eyes. “So what makes the real hot springs so much better? This looks just like the pictures I saw on the internet.”

“Pictures don’t do their subjects justice,” he noted, sweeping a hand across the top of the water.

Layla looked over as a floating table appeared – a round piece of cedar softly

lit by seven votive candles, which circled a small cluster of white calla lilies. After casting a spell to keep the sulfuric vapors away, Quin summoned two glasses of wine, a bowl of fruit, two lobster tails, and a two bowls of chocolate soufflé.

Layla's jaw hung open as she stared at it. Then she closed her mouth and smiled at him. "I didn't even realize I was hungry, but now I'm starving."

"You should be. We skipped a meal today."

"I didn't notice." She grabbed two grapes. Then she fed him one while eating the other. "You were telling me what makes the real thing better than this, but then you damaged your case by

serving me lobster and chocolate, so you better come up with something good.”

He grinned as he handed her a glass of wine. “I could summon you dinner there, too.”

“You can do anything you want, Quin. You’ve proven that again and again.”

He laughed while watching her pick through the food. Then he let her feed him as he described the natural phenomenon that inspired his creation.

“I’ll just tell you about my favorite springs to visit. It’s not actually in Radium Hot Springs. It’s north of there, and it’s not easy to get to, so I’ve never had to share it with strangers. There are seven pools at least as big as this one, and they stair-step down a rocky incline

wedged between a cliff and a steep river bank. The highest and biggest pool is also the hottest – it has a scalding waterfall that feeds all seven tiers – and the temperature gets a little cooler as you move downstream to the different levels. The lowest pool feels like a warm bath, and it has just two feet of rock between it and the freezing cold river. It's fun to start at the top and slowly work your way down through every pool. Then you can shock your body and get your adrenaline pumping by jumping in the river. After that, you're more than ready to work your way back up to the top.”

Layla had forgotten about the bite she'd taken, and barely chewed out of

habit. “That sounds amazing. How long does it take to fly there?”

“About four hours if you don't stop for anything.”

“That's where I want to go,” she decided. “Now that I can fly, that's the first place I want to go when we have time to spare.”

“Are you sure? You have the whole world at your fingertips.”

“I'm sure. I want you to take me. I want to start at the top, and I want to kiss you in every pool before jumping into the freezing water.”

“I'd love to experience that with you, Layla, and I'll do everything I can to get you there.”

“Then I'll get there,” she returned,

smiling as she planned their future vacation in her head. “Tell me about another location you like to visit.”

“Okay. How about I start with my preferred points of interest in some of the places you mentioned earlier?”

“Perfect,” she approved, picking up her lobster tail, and by the time she finished her soufflé, she'd mentally visited a special setting in each of her desired vacation destinations.

Still reflecting on the white sands and volcanic rock of Hawaii, she finished her wine and set the glass down. “You're a good story teller, Quin. You paint a picture better than photos.”

He smiled as he vanished the floating table. “I'd rather show you those places

than tell you about them.”

“And I'd rather see them, but let's not be greedy. I mean, I just ate lobster while sitting in my private mineral pool for crying out loud. And that's not even the best part of my night, because I have you – the most amazing man in the world. I'm a lucky girl, Quin. So lucky.”

He was watching her lips. Then he looked at her eyes, staring so intently it made her throat and heart swell. She swallowed, and his gaze went to the air around her as his palms took her cheeks. He closed his eyes and breathed deep, like he was soaking in her aura. Then he looked at her and smiled. “I love you, Layla, more than I ever thought I could love someone.”

She took a shaky breath as moisture stung her eyes. “I know...”

Touching a forefinger to her lips, he leaned closer. “Just listen, because I want you to hear this, and if I don’t say it now, I might not get the chance.”

Her heart and lungs quickened, her emotions bubbling to the surface, but she stayed quiet.

He brushed her hair from her face while kissing her nose. Then he leaned back and found her eyes. “Life was ridiculously easy before you, Layla. I didn’t struggle with anything. But then you showed up, and everything changed. It’s not easy anymore. The past two weeks have been the hardest of my life.”

She puckered, and he slid his thumb to

her pout as he shook his head. “Don’t feel guilty. That’s not why I’m saying this. I’m telling you this because you need to know what you’ve done to me... what you do to me.”

Her bottom lip rested on his thumb as she anxiously waited, knowing he was about to grab her heartstrings and yank.

“The last few weeks have been hard,” he continued, “but they’ve also been the happiest and most rewarding of my life. They’ve proven my potential; they’ve shown me I didn’t have a clue what satisfaction felt like; and they’ve given my life meaning. When I look into your eyes, I see everything more clearly. When you smile, the whole world brightens. When you speak to me, it’s

like I'm hearing for the first time. And when you give me your body, I discover parts of myself I never knew existed. Then there's your heart," he whispered, sliding his fingers from her cheek to her chest. "Your perfect heart. It's so amazing, Layla. It makes my heart bigger, better and stronger, giving it a higher purpose than pumping blood. Every part of you changes every part of me, and I love the new me. When I'm your man, I'm the man I want to be, no matter how hard it gets. And it's about to get rough. But I'll either emerge from this battle with you, or I won't emerge at all. When the smoke clears, I'll be by your side, and it will be that way forever."

Yep. He'd broken her open and exposed her soul, ripping away her defenses until she was raw and vulnerable with emotions exploding all over the place, bursting from an internal glow only he could give her. She tried hard not to cry. She wanted to look him in the eye and return his beautiful declaration, but the words didn't come when she opened her mouth. Just a pitiful squeak. And with that, she sobbed and threw herself into his chest, burying her face as her tears mingled with steam.

His arms came around her back and head, encasing her in a strong hug. Then he lowered his lips to her hair, holding her close while her tender heart bled.

Once her sobs turned to sniffles, he

tightened his hug and hovered from the pool, and she barely felt the bite of the chilly, night air before the heated house swept it away. The next thing she heard was water hitting porcelain, and she braced herself to leave his hug so they could take a shower. But he kept her in his arms as he stepped under the spray. Then he washed her hair and body without putting her down.

After magically drying, he dressed her in a silk robe and wrapped a towel around his waist. Then he carried her into their golden suite. Only then did he urge her from her safe spot, and she fought more tears as she met his stare.

“There are those gorgeous eyes,” he whispered, flashing a smile.

She reached up and touched his perfect lips, those that spoke beautiful words to her and gave her soul-shocking kisses in all the right places. Moving her forefinger to a faint laugh line, she swallowed a lump and looked to his eyes. “You say I’ve changed you, Quin, but without you, I wouldn’t be the woman you love. I’d be sad and cynical and lost in the dark. My life is hard, but being with you is easy.”

He turned his head and kissed her fingertip. Then he lowered her feet to the floor while waving a hand through the air. The golden room filled with the soft tinkle of piano keys, and Layla looked over, marveling at the baby grand that appeared to play a slow and sweet tune.

He pulled her palm to his chest. Then he moved one hand to her back while taking her cheek in the other. “Dance with me, my love.”

It wasn't a request, and before she could respond, he'd swept her into a spin. Gold walls flashed around them, but her gaze stayed on his, her feet somehow keeping up. Probably because he could lead her anywhere and she'd be compelled to follow.

The music rose to a crescendo, and he danced her from one end of the suite to the other, making her feel like a princess floating across a ballroom. She could be any one of the beautiful maidens in the fairy tales she read as a child. But in her own story, a life more enchanting than

even the most magical tale, prince charming wasn't just a pretty face with good timing. Quin was much more – a strong man with an even stronger heart and the body of a god to hold it; a man who'd steal the moon for her if she asked him to. He didn't just save her, breathing life into her when she had none; he completed her, balanced her, showed her the good when faced with the bad. No one had ever loved another like he loved her.

When the music softened, he slowed, pulling her in until her ear found his heart. Then he showered the top of her head in kisses as his thumb stroked her face, their feet still drifting across plush carpet.

She wedged her arms between them and closed her eyes, listening to his heartbeat add rhythm to the tinkling of the piano, and her body throbbed with waves of emotion. They kept her eyelids stinging with tears, and her lungs heaved as her heart stuttered through what may be their last dance on earth.

The song changed, and he kept her close while adjusting his steps to the dramatic tempo, urging her to do the same with ridiculous ease. “I thought you'd never danced with a man,” he whispered.

She left his heart to find his eyes. “I hadn't.”

“You move like you've been dancing with them for years.”

“I’m not paying any attention to my feet, Quin. I’m just following you. Put me in different arms and I’m sure you’d see my inexperience.”

“No,” he refused. “I won’t test that theory. It’s within my arms you belong, so that’s where you’ll stay.” He released her cheek and wrapped his hands around her waist, pulling her up his body as the piano tapped out a faster beat. “Do you have any objections?”

“That’s a silly question,” she answered. “Not only would I be stunned if you put me in another man’s arms, I’d be pissed, and I don’t think either of us likes it when I’m mad.”

He grinned as he spun her around. Then he dipped her back and leaned in,

kissing the cleft between her breasts. His lips trailed up her chest as he straightened, taking the time to dip his tongue into the hollow of her throat. Then he licked the hot skin quivering over her pulse before finding her mouth. “Layla Love Callaway, will you make love to me until the sun comes up?”

She smiled, her tongue flitting over his bottom lip as she vanished her robe. “That’s an even sillier question. I’d make love to you until the sun blows up.”

He gently nibbled on her grin as he floated to the bed. Then he laid her down and moved to her feet. First he picked up her right foot, resting its sole in his palm as he kissed all five toes and

the arch on top. Then he returned it to the bed and repeated the process with her left foot.

She stayed quiet as she watched him, and while the piano's soft serenade was absorbed by her ears, his tender touch was absorbed by an oddball combination of her feet and heart.

He moved to her ankles, and she laughed as she wiggled her toes in his hand. "Are you going to do that to my entire body?"

He looked up, his expression serious. "Yes."

"Oh," she breathed, her heart melting as her insides quivered.

"Will you let me?" he asked.

She touched her toe to his chin and

smiled. “Yes.”

“Good,” he sighed, “because I’ve wanted to do this since I met you. I promise I won’t take all night.”

She wiggled, getting comfortable so she wouldn’t fidget. Then she took a deep breath and relaxed. “Take all the time you need.”

“I’ll make it worth your while,” he assured, moving to her legs, and before his pursuit ended, he’d literally touched or kissed every part of her body. Not one tiny spot was left undiscovered, not one curve, dip or groove neglected. There were moments when she couldn’t withhold her blush, but she didn’t try to hide from him, and by keeping her focus on the feel of him, she remained relaxed.

Along his journey, Quin memorized every detail... again. Very few of his discoveries were new, but he recommitted the ones he already knew, and scrupulously retained the few he didn't. Then he placed them all in a guarded mental compartment. The way she looked, the way she felt, her ambrosial smell and sweet taste, it was all in the forefront of his mind, burned into the backs of his eyelids, flooding his nasal passages, and tantalizing his tongue.

His final target was her lips, flushed with a delicious combination of desire and innocence, soft flesh pulsing over her strong heartbeat. Even now that he'd traveled over every tangible inch of her

body, her lips remained his favorite. “You're beautiful,” he whispered. “But that's not why I love you, so when the time comes for your body to turn to dust, you'll still be my perfect angel.”

She sucked in a choppy breath, and he smiled as he vanished his towel and parted her legs. If he shifted a bit... yes, he could feel his heaven, and it was wet. To know she was ready and wanting had him throbbing.

“Having said that,” he added, “I love your body. I've had fantasies about it since the night I met you, most of them beautifully fulfilled over the past two weeks, but there are more, and tonight might be our last chance. So put all that sweet modesty aside, because I'm about

to take your places neither of us have ever been.”

“Oh god,” she breathed, her fingernails curling into his chest, “please do.”

So he did, taking her every way desired, sweet and sinful alike, until the sun came up.

Chapter 40

Layla's heart was out of control, thumping harder than ever before, fluttering faster than a hummingbird's wings. Smoke cleared to reveal a terrain bathed in blood, and as she looked down, her speeding heart twisted with grief.

No! It can't be real, but it looked real, it felt real, it smelled real.

She stood on a vast slab of slick ice, a shrouded moon providing murky light to a scene that reeked of scorched flesh and death. And there, among the chaos, lay Quin, wounded and draining of life. His

black shorts were singed at the edges, and his biceps were draped with charred remnants of leather bands. His bare chest was pale as it laboriously rose and fell, and the muscles in his limbs bulged and tragically twitched.

“No!” She dropped to the bloody ice beside him and tightly clasped his blanched cheeks. “Quin.”

His dark eyes found her face, his feeble heartbeat trying to match hers, but it couldn't keep up. Her bare legs registered a shift in temperature, and she looked down, first to her knees, then his side, which gaped open, spilling blood over the frozen earth.

She cried out and pressed her hands to the grisly wound, trying to stem the

bleeding. Her heart was making her numb, so she couldn't feel the organs pushing at his burnt and severed skin, only warmth, but she knew they were there, just beneath her desensitized palms – palms that weren't big enough to do a damn bit of good. His blood steadily seeped around them and coagulated at her knees.

“Oh god, Quin, what do I do?”

She looked away from the horrifying tear in his left flank and found his face, but he didn't answer. He just stared at her as if watching his final sunset.

“You can't die, Quin,” she demanded, pressing her lips to his.

Her heart slowed in defeat, and she resolved to make it stop altogether if she

lost his.

Gripping his jaw with bloody hands, she noticed his face was colder than the last time she touched it, just seconds ago. Or was it minutes? She was so scared, sad and confused, she couldn't think straight, and she wasn't sure of anything except she wanted her hero to stay, to keep breathing and looking at her.

She squeezed her eyes shut, expelling fat teardrops as she begged like never before. She begged in her head and heart, sending the plea to God and the Heavens and anyone else who might be listening.

“Please don't die, Quin... Please...”

“Layla!”

Her eyes popped open as panic rushed her, scattering her brain, body and vision. Hysterically flailing her hands, she gasped while blinking away blurry moisture. Then her fingers found Quin's cheek – warm and strong – and her eyes found his skin – tan and healthy. It had been a dream, a horrid dream.

She sobbed and ran her hands down his unmarred torso, but her heart still beat its unnatural and frenzied rhythm, making her sense-of-touch pitiful, so she searched his body with her distraught gaze as well.

“Hey,” he soothed, taking her cheeks.

“It’s okay. Everything's okay. Deep breaths.”

She clutched his sides and closed her eyes, letting her breakdown take her for the ride she was powerless to forsake. She wailed in his face for at least five minutes before she could pull in a steady breath, but the tears continued to flow as she found his eyes. At least they were quiet tears. The gasping and blubbering had passed.

“What on earth did you dream about?” he asked, wiping the moisture from her cheeks.

She shook her head no, her face flexing as she stroked his.

He furrowed his eyebrows and glanced at her aura. “You don't want to

talk about it?”

She shook her head again, keeping her quivering lips sealed. She couldn't say it out loud. The dream still chilled her bones, and she didn't dare repeat it.

Quin stared at her for several seconds, shocked by her refusal. “You're really not going to tell me?”

“No. I don't want to talk about it. I can't...” Her throat tightened, and she had to swallow a painful lump to keep going. “Please don't make me.”

“Okay,” he conceded, tucking her face into his neck.

She nuzzled his throat as another wave of tears broke free. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. Just let me know if you change your mind.”

“How did you know I was dreaming? Did I say something?”

“No, but your heart was going crazy, and you were crying and trying to push me away.”

No, she was trying to stop the bleeding. “I’m sorry.”

He pulled back and found her eyes. “Stop apologizing. I can handle being left in the dark about your nightmare, but I can’t handle your guilt.”

As she stared at him, the horrible dream barged through her mind, and her jaw tensed as she fought more tears.

“Layla Love,” he whispered. “What can I do to make it better?”

She knew there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to make it better. Only pulling

through the impending battle unscathed would ease her worry. “Just hold me,” she answered, hoping the feel of his healthy body would at least ease the smothering weight of despair.

He kissed the moisture from her cheeks. Then he rolled her into a ball and tucked her into his chest.

“Tighter,” she insisted.

“I’m scared I’ll hurt you,” he countered. “Your heart’s making me numb.”

“Please. I’ll tell you if it hurts.”

He sighed then gently squeezed.

“Better?”

“Tighter, Quin. I promise I’ll let you know if you’re hurting me.”

“I’m not the only one who’s numb,

Layla. I don't want your muscles waking up to pain later.”

“I don't care about my muscles,” she snapped. “Please.”

“Okay.” He slowly tightened his hold. “Tell me when.”

She needed to know his muscles were well, so even when his grip became snug, she didn't tell him to stop, which garnered her a quiet reprimand.

“Layla.”

“Just a little more, Quin. I promise you're not hurting me.”

He added a little more pressure and finally got her approval. “Thank you,” she whispered, touching her lips to his heart. “Just stay right there. Just for a while.”

“As long as you need.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost one.”

Her heart sped up, further strengthening and deadening their muscles, and he loosened his grip.

“Quin!”

“I'm sorry, love, but I'm terrified I'll hurt you. Please be patient with me.”

His guilty and frustrated plea tugged at her vibrating heartstrings, and she sighed while wiggling up his torso. “You're doing everything right, Quin. It's me who's not being fair.”

“Nobody says you have to be, just don't make me hurt you. If I were to cause lasting damage...” He paused and swallowed. “I wouldn't handle it well.

I'll hold and touch you all day, just let me mind my force, because I can't trust it right now.”

“I know,” she whispered, wrapping one leg around his waist. Then she pulled him closer, stroking his strong features while watching his tender eyes. “This is perfect. Let's stay like this for a while.”

“Gladly,” he agreed, sliding his hand to her butt. Then he smiled and gave a squeeze. “Last night was amazing.”

“It was better than amazing.”

“Hopefully we'll get the chance to do it again, but if we don't, I'll still die a satisfied man.”

She tensed and scowled. “Don't do that.”

“Do what?”

“Don't talk about your death,” she scolded. “I don't want to hear it.”

His forehead wrinkled, but he quickly reassured her. “Okay, love. I'm sorry.”

“It's fine. Just don't do it again. It's not something that should be brought up so carelessly.”

He tilted his head as he flipped his gaze between her eyes and aura. “Is that what your dream was about? My death?”

She tried to turn away from him, but he forced her to stay put.

“I don't want to talk about it,” she whispered.

He saw through her refusal to answer, and his expression softened as his aura darkened. She could tell he was

searching for ways to make her feel better, but this was out of his hands. “Just stop, Quin. Stop looking for ways to fix it, and let me try to forget about it.” She wouldn’t forget, but maybe she could push it to the background.

Returning her face to his neck, she parted her lips and breathed him in, still unable to stem her tears. Part of her wished she could go back to sleep to be visited by her usual sweet dreams instead of horrifying nightmares. She could just sleep in his arms and experience heavenly dreams about him until it was time to move into battle. Then the nightmare wouldn't get an opportunity to haunt her like a stinging itch she couldn't reach. But if she slept,

she'd be giving up something precious and perfect – time with her hero. Real time, not dream time. Actual time to touch his immaculate body and look into his passionate eyes. No amount of peace-of-mind was worth losing that.

Taking the back of her head in one hand, he slid the other down her thigh. “Will you let me help you? I can’t make you forget, but I can distract you.”

That’s exactly what she needed – a distraction. And they were mere hours away from marching into battle. This might be their last chance.

She left his neck and found his eyes. “Distract me. Just one more time before... before we have to leave.”

“I’d love to, but not while your heart’s

beating like that.”

“I trust you won't hurt me, Quin.”

“I know you do, but I don't trust myself, so you have to slow your heart down before we do this. We'll let it have its way with us when we're done.”

She didn't waste a moment before closing her eyes and slowing her pulse, and she knew it was back to normal when Quin laid her on her back and moved over her. Her lungs froze, her eyes closed as she anticipated his touch, waiting for her distraction, dying for it.

His fingers drifted down her stomach and reached between her legs, dipping into folds that were already moist despite her despair and terror. Then he poised to enter her body and moved his

hand away. Bracing himself with one arm, he took her cheek and kissed her forehead, and she wrapped her arms around his waist, gripping him like her life depended on it.

His muscles flexed as he pressed inside her, and a heavy sob composed of the happiest and saddest feelings she'd ever experienced burst from her chest.

He halted, not breathing as he listened to her cry.

"I'm sorry," she gasped. "I'm so sorry." She felt absolutely awful for bawling in the intimate moment.

He hugged her to his chest. Then he floated from the bed, keeping her wrapped around him as he sat on the comforter. "Do you want me to stop?"

“No,” she blurted. “Please don't. It makes me so happy to be this close to you.” A thought occurred to her, and the waterworks paused as she found his eyes. “I'm turning you off. My crying turns you off.” And with that, a wave of sorrow took her, and she slumped into his chest as more tears chased the others.

“No,” he assured, stroking her hair. “It probably should, and I feel a little immoral that it's not, but I don't think anything could stop me from being turned on by you.” His thumb stopped on her temple as his chest expanded. “Look at me, love.”

She obeyed, and he gave her a kiss before whispering against her lips. “I can handle your tears. I understand why

they're there."

"Then you know it's because I love you, because I love this."

"Yes."

"Then don't stop."

He smiled and raised an eyebrow.

"That sounded like a challenge."

How he still managed to display confidence and a smile when she was blubbering during sex, she didn't know, but he throbbed inside her at the word challenge. Maybe it was his ego talking.

He reached under her hair and took the back of her neck, bracing her with his forearm. Then his other hand grabbed her butt and lifted, almost pulling her off him.

She clutched his shoulders and shook,

her rapid breaths puffing into his mouth as her body yearned for him to come back. But he kept her on the edge for a long time, teasing her and watching her face, waiting for desire to dry her tears.

The fingers on her backside curled between her thighs, and the others clutched a handful of curls, giving him precision control while keeping her from stealing it. Every time he moved her, she held her breath, waiting for more, but then he'd raise her back to the edge and leave her there, twice as turned on as before. And she loved it. At that moment, she didn't need an orgasm, she needed him. She needed his hands on her, his eyes on her; she needed the feel of his flesh and the peace of his lights.

And she had it all.

He smiled, and she realized her tears had finally run dry. Distraction indeed. She didn't even remember the moment she stopped thinking about the end.

He pulled her into a hug while pressing her down around him, and the grip in her hair loosened, his hand smoothing her curls as he kissed her head.

Considering he'd spent so much time teasing her, she didn't expect him to take things slow, but he did, and it was exactly what she wanted – to stay lost in him as long as possible.

She closed her eyes and nuzzled the dip between his neck and shoulder. Then she ran her lips over his heart. Soon, she

found herself rubbing up against him – kissing and sucking as her nails dipped into flesh, trying to pull his healthy body closer. Vocal cords humming, she groped his back, kneading rippling muscles while dragging her breasts over hard pecs, and her mouth made love to his neck, pausing only so she could stroke her face on his strong shoulder.

While she took advantage of him like a needy feline, he spoiled her by sliding his palms along every inch of flesh he could reach, making sure she got the skin contact she needed. But he was restricted to her backside, and she craved his touch in the front.

He had his hands on her thighs, his fingers curving around the back as he

raised her up, and before he could bring her back down, she arched and pulled away.

The air swept from his lungs as he sat frozen, suddenly severed from everything that mattered, but she ignored his shock, using his knee to brace herself as she flipped her left leg over him and turned around. He had yet to come to his senses when she returned to him, and his lungs refilled with a gasp when she took him into her body.

“Oh shit.”

He leaned back and stretched, lifting her from the bed as his hips thrust him deeper, and she moaned and arched toward his chest, hungry for his hands. With a quiet growl he sat up, wrapping

her in a hug. Then she turned her face into his neck, listening to his heart thunder as his palm found her breasts.

He caught a nipple between his thumb and forefinger, squeezing just hard enough to make her breath catch. Then his other hand reached between her legs, his attentive fingers pressing all the right spots.

She didn't need an orgasm, but she was about get one.

His neck flexed as he looked up, muttering a string of profanities. Then he looked back down, touching his lips to her shoulder while emitting magical vibrations from the fingers between her legs. "Come, baby. Now."

The demand shot a tickling thrill down

her spine, and her core flexed as her vision flashed. She hugged his arm to her chest. Then he squeezed, holding her as tightly as he'd ever held her while growling into her shoulder.

Her delirious head rolled, her unfocused eyes going with it, and her body shook, riding the physical and emotional high.

He twitched and shuddered. Then his grip loosened as he turned his face into her hair, struggling to catch his breath. "Damn, you just about ruined my stamina streak."

She was too sated to move, so she didn't. "What's that mean? You've never gotten off before getting the woman off?"

"Wizards pride themselves on the

ability, and you nearly blew my perfect record.”

She smirked, too lazy to do more.
“That sounds like a challenge.”

He groaned and throbbed. “Like a fun challenge.”

Taking her wrists, he lay down, spreading her out so every inch of her back half touched his front half. And they stayed that way for a long time, silently staring at the amber chandelier while thinking about each other.

Chapter 41

Breakfast was rushed and taken over by discussions about the day ahead – their time-table, precautions, and back-up plans.

“We can’t attack his camp,” Catigern insisted. “We’ll burn the forest and involve the hexless.”

“If he has the guts to come here,” Quin returned, “he’ll find my message, and he won’t be able to resist. No one sees her like I do.”

“What are you showing him?” Layla whispered, her stomach squirming.

He looked over and ran a hand down

her hair. “Your power. Nothing sexual.”

She sighed as Catigern tossed out another concern. “What if he doesn’t have the guts to come here?”

“Do you think he has the patience not to?” Quin asked.

“If he knows we have an army,” Catigern answered, “yes.”

“If he knows we have an army, he knows we don’t keep them here. If nothing else, he’ll drop by to torch the place. But he’ll forget all about burning it down when he finds my message.”

At the words *torch the place*, Layla turned her focus to her breakfast, trying to keep it down.

The conversation ended soon after they finished eating. Then Quin refilled

her coffee while leading her across the lawn. "About Travis and Phyllis," he said, grabbing her hand before she could smack herself.

He knew her well. "I can't believe I keep forgetting them. You make me scatterbrained, Quin. It's all your fault I have the memory of a fish. I'd forget to pee if you didn't set me by the bathroom door once in a while."

He laughed, but then he sobered as pulled her to a standstill and found her gaze. "I know it seems grisly, but how does a car accident sound?"

She sobered as well, thinking about her friends getting the news she'd died in a car wreck. Yes, it was grisly and sad, but it was better than the alternative —

them searching for her, not knowing if she was alive or dead, going to great lengths to find answers that would never come. She couldn't put that kind of strain on them; leave them with a mystery that could haunt them for the rest of their lives. "Car accident," she repeated. "It's believable, and it doesn't raise suspicion. Let's go with it."

"Okay," Quin agreed, urging her to walk. "Either Edana or Devlin will give them the news, so mention their names when you call Travis and Phyllis."

Layla's stomach flipped. "When am I calling them?"

"As soon as we're done working out the details."

"Oh."

“We can’t wait, Layla.”

She gave a sad nod, and he continued explaining the plan. “When you mention Devlin and Edana, say they’re family. If anyone else calls with the bad news, it will raise even more suspicion. I also think it’s a good idea to tell them you’re going on a trip. They might call the Oregon highway patrol for answers if they think it happened here, but if you tell them you’re traveling, they’ll assume it happened on a random highway. You could tell them you’re visiting extended family in Canada. Then they’ll be dealing with an entirely different country, which will further discourage a curious investigation.”

“Okay,” Layla agreed, impressed by

how much thought he'd put into her predicament. But of course he had. He was her thorough hero. "What if they want a funeral?"

"We'll let Edana and Devlin deal with that. We don't have enough time to organize it, and they may want to hear Travis' and Phyllis' reactions before planning a fake burial. If they think your friends need the closure, they'll take care of it."

"I hate to put that on them."

"They won't mind, love. They'll do whatever they can to ease your mind and the minds of the people who care about you."

Layla fought the urge to bite her fingernails, but she lost and pulled her

thumb nail to her teeth.

“Layla Love,” Quin whispered.

“What?”

“Why don't you talk to me instead of biting those beautiful nails? Why are you chewing on your fingers.”

“My phone calls,” she answered, moving to the next fingernail.

He reached up, pulling her hand from her mouth. Then he magically repaired the damage with kisses. “I know it's going to be hard, love, but I'll help you through it, and when you're done, we'll go visit your parents' memorial.”

“Really?” she asked, perking up.
“What about our tight schedule?”

“We have time for a short visit, but we need to get through these phone

calls.”

“That’s a good incentive. Let’s do it.”

After discussing the plan with Devlin and Edana, Layla and Quin slipped inside the house and got comfortable on the couch.

She called Gerald's office first, and breezed through a short conversation in which she dropped a few family members' names and told him she'd be on vacation for a while.

When she hung up, she stared at the phone, trying to find the strength to dial Phyllis' number with a finger that was desensitized by dread and an unnatural heart rate. She blindly found Quin's hand, gripping it as she crawled onto his lap. Then she took a deep breath and

made the call.

Phyllis' answering machine picked up, and Layla exhaled, half disappointed, half relieved. "Hey, Phyllis. I was just calling to say hi, but I guess you're out on a date with that young stud you met at the community bake sale."

Quin quietly laughed, and Layla found a weak smile as she continued her message, feeling the lie in her gut. "I may not get to talk to you for a while. I'm going on a road trip to Canada with my cousins Edana and Devlin. I'll probably be gone for a couple of weeks, but I'll call the moment I get home. Be good now, and don't give them boys more than they can handle..." She paused, swallowing a lump while hoping the

machine wasn't about to hang up on her. "I um..." Frustrated, sad and guilty, she squeezed her eyes shut, trying to find the words. "Bye, Phyllis," she eventually squeaked, unable to convey how she felt about her through a machine.

She hung up, and her face flushed as she buried it in Quin's neck. "I feel guilty. It was horrible of me to do that over a machine... but it was easier."

Quin swept her hair aside and stroked the back of her neck. "Phyllis won't know that phone call was different from the others. I'm sure it will brighten her day."

"I hope so," Layla mumbled. Then she left his neck and looked at her phone. "I can't do that to Travis. If I don't get him,

I'll have to try again later. I won't leave him a message unless I absolutely have to.”

“Okay,” Quin agreed. “We'll take your cell with us if you don't get him now.”

She absently nodded, still staring at her phone like it was about to bite her.

“This will be much harder, Quin. I care about Phyllis a lot. She's a nice lady, and I know she cares about me. But what I have with Travis is completely different. He holds a place in my heart that Phyllis never reached.”

Quin shifted, furrowing his eyebrows as he found her face. “I didn't realize you were that close to him.”

“I'm not sure it's accurate to say I am,” she countered. “I mean, I can count

on one hand how many times we got together outside of work, we never hung out just the two of us, I've never been inside his house, we didn't exchange secrets or talk on the phone, and I think we seriously hugged each other maybe two or three times in the three years we worked together.”

“Then why is it so hard?” Quin pressed. “It doesn't sound like the two of you were that close at all.”

“But that was my fault. See, before my mom had her stroke, I had friends. I hung out with people from school, and I always joined my teammates to celebrate wins. But I didn't know Travis and Phyllis then. They barely got a glimpse of that side of me, because I

started working at the diner less than a month before my mom had her stroke, and when that happened, I changed. I stopped going places, and I never socialized, partly because I was busy and didn't like leaving my mom with a nurse, and partly because I was depressed and my friends didn't understand why. I brought them down, so they stopped calling, and I crawled into a hole where I could be sad without making others sad, and that's where I stayed... until Travis noticed. Out of everyone in my life, it was someone I barely knew who reached in and tried to grab me. My friends wrote me off as a head case, but Travis wasn't fazed by my attitude. He gradually wiggled through

my defenses, and before I even realized what was going on, I had someone asking me about my day, and I was honestly answering. I'd get to work, and he'd be standing in the doorway, waiting to tell me a joke. And if I didn't laugh, he'd try again the next day." She paused, her eyes shiny as she looked from her phone to Quin. "He tried to get me to hang out and have some fun, and even though I constantly turned him down, he never got upset about it, and he never gave up on me. Others found me too depressing, boring and inconvenient, and I'm sure he did, too. But he was the friend I didn't even realize I had, and he was the only one willing to give when I had nothing to return."

Quin had listened closely. Now he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and hugged her to his chest. “I had no idea.”

“I know, and really, I didn't either. Through all that, I didn't realize what I had. I looked forward to seeing him, but I never considered what my life would have been like without him, and I was never as good a friend to him as he was to me.”

“I'm sure you underestimate what kind of friend you were.”

She shrugged as she fidgeted with her phone. “I don't know what I ever did for him.”

“Apparently something, or he wouldn't have been so determined to get close and

stay there. It seems the two of you had a lot in common, so maybe you were to him what he was to you – someone who'd be there when the others weren't."

"I'd like to believe he feels that way."

"How about this?" Quin suggested, squeezing her shoulders. "As soon as this battle is over, we'll make sure Travis gets his visit, and you can ask him if you're worthy of his friendship. I doubt you'll be disappointed by his answer."

"That's pretty positive thinking, Quin."

"Have you ever known me to be negative?"

She smirked as she shook her head.

"Make your phone call, love. Tell

Travis you'll be contacting him to arrange his visit as soon as you get back from Canada. Your schedule's about to blow wide open."

"I don't want to get his hopes up."

"They already are. He mentions the trip every time he talks to you."

"True."

"Come on, love, try not to focus on the negatives. Look at the bright side, and suddenly things aren't so dark."

"The bright side," she repeated, pumping herself up. Then she squeezed his hand and dialed Travis' number.

He answered on the first ring and sounded upbeat, giving her his southern *yello* instead of *hello*.

"Hey, Trav."

“Hey, sugar. How's it goin'?”

“Pretty good. You sound chipper. Did you hit the jackpot at the casino?”

“Close, but no cigar. Actually, I was just thinkin' my mom must be rollin' over in her grave.”

“Why? Did you finally get that vulgar tattoo you've been wanting?”

He laughed then teased back. “I told ya', Layla, I already got that tattoo. It's on my ass.”

“You're lying.”

“I'm tellin' ya', I've got your face tattooed on my left butt cheek.”

Layla laughed, her cheeks warming as she looked at Quin, who'd clearly overheard and found it quite amusing.

“Tell you what, Trav,” Layla taunted,

“next time I see you, you're going to have to drop your pants and prove it.”

“Wait a minute. Are you askin' if ya can check out my butt?”

“No, just the tattoo on it. It's my face, so I'm fairly certain I have a legal right to see it.”

“I'm not sure that's true.”

“You're just trying to get out of it.”

“Not likely. It'd be fun to drop my drawers and watch your expression when all ya see is white ass. I bet you'd come out of that experience lookin' like a beet.”

Quin nodded, and Layla wrinkled her nose as she pinched his bicep. “You know I would, Trav, and I think you get too much pleasure out of embarrassing

me.”

“But your blush is so lovely, sugar. Why would ya deny me such a purdy sight?”

Quin nodded again, and Layla smiled. “There are easier ways to find my blush,” she noted. “It's not hard.”

Travis laughed. “How hard is droppin' your drawers?”

“Good point. So if that awful idea for a tattoo isn't the reason your mom's tossing and turning, what is?”

“Oh yeah. Well, for as long as I can remember she's been bitchin' 'bout insurance companies, goin' on 'bout how they're always takin' and never givin', but today she was proven wrong. I just deposited the money from her life

insurance policy, and she'd have herself a third heart attack if she knew an insurance company paid me \$250,000."

"Oh, Travis, that's fantastic news."

"Tell me 'bout it. I almost pissed my pants when I heard it."

"Did you know she had a policy that big?"

"No clue. She took it out years ago when we lost dad, and I've been writin' the checks for it since she got sick, but I never dug into the paperwork, and she never told me I should. She probably thought they wouldn't pay, so she didn't want me countin' on it, but they did pay, and now I can move anywhere I want without havin' to live on dehydrated noodles for the next five years."

“I’m so happy for you, Travis. You deserve a break like this.”

“Well I’ll take it and count my blessings... repeatedly. But enough 'bout the money burnin' holes in my pockets. What's new with you?”

“I’m glad you asked, because I called for a reason.”

“Ya' mean ya' didn't just call to hear my sexy voice?”

She laughed as she fidgeted with Quin's fingers. “You got me, Trav. I can't get enough of that southern drawl. I'm suffering up here with all these people who enunciate their words.”

“I knew it. The ladies do dig my hillbilly accent. *Ya'll* can't get enough of my country charm.”

“You're a regular chick magnet. I can't deny it.”

“I'd know you were lyin' if ya' tried.”

“Are you going to keep feeding your outrageous ego, or are you going to listen to why I called?”

“I'm listenin'. Give me the run-down.”

“I'm going on a trip.”

“Where ya goin'?”

“Canada.”

“What? Why ya goin' there?”

“I have family there.”

“No kiddin'?”

“No kidding. I'm making the trip with my cousins Devlin and Edana. We're leaving tonight.”

“That should be fun.”

“Yeah. I'm excited about it. But we're

going to be driving, so I'll probably be gone for a couple of weeks. I don't know how my cell reception will be, or if I'll have any coverage up there, so I don't know when I'll get to talk to you again.”

“Oh. Are ya gonna miss my sexy voice?”

She smiled, her throat swelling as moisture stung her eyes. “I am. I look forward to hearing it.”

“Good, cause I look forward to hearin' yours.”

“Mine's sexy?”

“The sweetest and sexiest I've ever heard.”

A tear rolled down her cheek as her bottom lip quivered, but Quin was quick to brush at them with his thumbs, drying

the tear and calming her pout.

“Maybe I should become one of those 1-900 number girls,” she joked, trying to shift toward the bright side.

“I’d say go for it if they paid well enough,” Travis encouraged. “You’d be employee of the month every month.”

“Hmm... I think I’ll look around a bit before choosing that for a career.”

“Good idea. Leave that job for someone who wasn’t blessed with a gorgeous face. So a couple of weeks, huh?”

“Probably.”

“Well take notes so ya’ have somethin’ to brag ‘bout when ya’ find time to call.”

“Okay.” She paused and took a deep breath. Then she let it out with her next

sentence. “You should come see me when I get back.”

“Are ya' finally invitin' me for a visit?”

“Yeah. I'll have plenty of time to help you blow your new found fortune. We'll dress up, and I'll make you take me out to dinner at a fancy restaurant.”

“It's a date,” Travis agreed. “My calendar's clear, so just tell me when.”

“I'll let you know as soon as I know.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Me, too.”

“Well ya' probably got a million things to do before your trip, and I got boat loads of cash callin' my name, so I'll let ya' get on with it while I go buy some diamond cufflinks or somethin'.”

“I'm glad you got your priorities straight.”

“Yep, I know what's important in life.”

“I'll miss you while I'm gone, Trav.”

“I'll miss you, too, sugar. Be careful, and call me when ya get a chance.”

“Okay.” She paused, gripping Quin's hand like a lifeline. Then she pulled it to her cheek and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Travis?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

There was a short moment of silence. Then he responded in a confused voice.

“I love you, too, Layla. Is somethin' wrong?”

“No,” she quickly answered.

“Nothing's wrong. I just wanted you to know.”

“I do.”

“Good.”

“Are ya' sure you're okay?”

She answered with forced conviction.

“Positive. I just felt like saying it.”

“You can say it anytime, ya' know? It feels good to hear somethin' like that, especially when it comes from someone unique as a snowflake and sweet as sugar.”

“Thanks, Trav.” She was barely containing tears and feared her voice would disappear any moment. “I'll call you soon, Okay?”

“Okay, hon. Be safe.”

“I'll try. Bye.”

And that was it. The line went dead.

She tossed the phone aside and buried her face in Quin's neck, letting her tears run their course while thinking about the friend who'd ultimately gotten her to that point. Without Travis, she wouldn't have Quin, because she'd still be a depressed bag of bones in Oklahoma.

"I'm sorry, love," Quin whispered. "I wish there was more I could do."

"You do so much, Quin. Please know that. I'd hate to think I've made the same mistake with you that I made with Travis. I want you to know exactly how much you mean to me."

"I do, and so does Travis." He urged her from his neck and laid her back in his arm, sweeping her hair from her

moist cheeks. “I look forward to meeting him. I'd like to shake the hand of the man who cares so much about you.”

She cracked a smile through the tears. “He'll think I won the lottery when he meets you.”

“He probably won't trust me.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. If he cares about you, he'll be suspicious of me.”

“Hmm... maybe, but we'll worry about that later. Right now I'm ready for that visit to my parents' memorial.”

Chapter 42

Slipping out through the kitchen door, Quin and Layla flew to her parents' memorial, landing on the outskirts of the small clearing. She took his hand and led him to the bare and lonely boulder in the middle. Then she urged him to touch it the same time she did. The epitaph etched into the rock beneath their palms, and she looked at the ground, smiling at the blossoming roses – dark-brown petals with emerald-green tips.

He sat, and she made herself comfortable on his lap. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to read into the

flowers, but they make me feel good.”

“Me, too,” he agreed, laying his cheek on her head.

“Do you think my parents know what we're going through?” she asked. “What we're about to face?”

“Probably, at least some of it. Why don't you ask them? That got results last time.”

“I don't think I want to. If they don't know, I don't want them to know.” She looked up, finding his eyes as moisture filled her own. “That way they might get the surprise of their afterlives later.”

He brushed a kiss across the tip of her nose while catching a tear. “And a bittersweet surprise it would be.”

She sighed as she looked at the

beautiful words flawlessly chiseled into the boulder.

Forever In Our Hearts
Rhosewen Keely Donnelly
&
Aedan Dagda Donnelly
Perfect Daughter
Perfect Son
Perfect Love

“Perfect,” Layla whispered, fully comprehending the meaning.

She snuggled into Quin and fell silent, soaking up the peace while reflecting on her parents’ memories. Then she closed her eyes and recalled the past eighteen days – the most amazing of her life.

After mentally telling her parents she loved them, she pulled her hand from the memorial and looked at Quin. “We can go now.”

He picked one of the multicolored roses and tucked it in her curls. Then he tightened his hold on her and stood. As he looked to the sky, a cluster of auras and bonded lights drifted into the clearing, so he stayed put while watching his parents and Layla’s grandparents descend.

“You’ve been here a while,” Morrigan said, beaming at the roses.

“Yeah,” Quin confirmed. “We were just leaving.”

Daleen’s smile fell as she looked up. “Oh please don’t. Kemble was about to

mind search you and ask you to join us. Everyone's coming – the rest of the coven and the blood relatives from out of town. We'd love for you to stay."

"Sure," Layla agreed. "But why are we gathering here?"

"We want to give Rhosewen and Aedan a group hug," Morrigan answered, pulling Caitrin to the boulder. She laid her hand on it, once again bringing the inscription to light, and peach-colored roses cropped up amid the others.

Caitrin examined them. Then he touched his daughter's name, generating a burst of sea-blue roses. "We want them to know we're all together. They'd be thrilled to know that."

Pale-green blooms flourished as Daleen rested her hand beside Morrigan's. Then Serafin lowered his hand next to his wife's, doubling the emerald sprinkling the clearing.

Layla grinned as she scanned the unique rainbow of perennials. "I think that's a great idea."

Quin sat back down and rested his hand next to Caitrin's. Then Kemble and Cordelia laid theirs next to their son's.

Everyone looked at the new additions to the garden. Then all eyes fell on Layla, who was the only one not touching the rock. She was still marveling at the sea of roses, but she soon flattened her palm over the words *perfect love*.

A light shock rippled up her arm, working its way straight to her heart before spreading heat through her veins, and she looked around with wide eyes, realizing everyone had felt the shock... and they were as stunned as she was.

“I'd say they're already thrilled,” Serafin noted, wiping away Daleen's tears.

“Yes,” Morrigan agreed, shedding unhampered rivers.

Caitrin smiled as he kissed Morrigan's head. “I can't wait to see what happens when the others arrive.”

He didn't have to wait long. Within minutes the air was thick with witches and wizards, who remained hovering to preserve the temporary garden, which

grew in size each time another hand made contact with the memorial.

Their coven was the first of the newcomers to work their way in, squeezing close, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, their bodies floating out away from the boulder as their hands found its surface. And once twenty-eight palms touched the stone, another tingling jolt shot from within, raising goose bumps while warming insides. Reverent sighs whispered through the air, mingling with the solace and love radiating from the memorial, and so many roses blanketed the ground, they were creeping up trees and slithering around the base of the boulder, which was casting a soft, golden glow on its visitors.

“They're so happy,” Layla whispered, and the rock brightened as the tingles strengthened.

Unable to wait any longer, the family members hovering above the crowd began squeezing around those already spiraling from the stone like water lily petals. Hand after hand worked its way in, and by the time every person in the clearing managed to claim a piece of Aedan and Rhosewen, the rock was almost too bright to look at and the atmosphere was dense with a sense of security.

Layla's legs were covered in a heavenly assortment of roses, and as she ran her fingertips across silky waves, she mind searched Quin. *'I want this. If*

it's at all possible, I want this when we're gone. Right here, in this spot, with them. With all of them.'

He gently squeezed as he lowered his lips to her ear. "I want that, too, love."

He'd spoken softly into her thick hair, but the entire awestruck cluster of magicians heard him, and many of them knew what he was talking about.

Layla continued to bask in her parents' heaven-sent message as she hitched a ride back to the lawn on Quin's torso, and for the first time since they left the replica of the golden suite, her heart wasn't performing its impossible feat. It

still beat abnormally fast, but not impossibly fast.

Quin stayed silent most of the trip, but when they were almost to the lawn, his chest expanded with a deep breath.

“Angel?”

“Yeah?”

“It's time to say goodbye to those who'll stay behind. They're taking Doreen and most of the coven's pets to Karena's inn.”

Layla's throat closed, her lungs froze, and her heart dropped. Quin quickly hovered upright and cradled her in his arms, looking from her aura to her face.

“Breathe, Layla.”

Her lungs heaved, dragging in air as an ocean burst from her eyes, and she

dropped her face into her hands. "I can't do this." Her mind flashed through images of the family members she'd be saying goodbye to, touching on fond memories she'd made with them, particularly Skyla and Alana. "I don't think I can pull myself together long enough to do this."

"You don't have to pull yourself together," Quin returned, "but you do have to do this. You'll regret it if you don't."

"I can't let Alana see me like this."

"No one will breeze through this, Layla. Alana's going to see heartbreak today. I know it's sad, but it's something that has to be done. She's not old enough to absorb the enormity of the situation,

but she gets the gist, and she'll demand your farewell. I have no doubt.”

“Oh god,” Layla breathed, trying to find it in herself to be strong for her favorite little angel, but every time she thought she had control, she’d envision Alana's face, and another rush of emotions would have her gasping and crying.

“Okay,” Quin mumbled, carrying her toward the lawn. Then he called for Caitrin.

Soon Layla felt her grandmas touching her hair and back, but it made her cry harder so they stopped.

Quin sat on the ground, keeping Layla on his lap. “Do you have your pipe, Caitrin?”

“Yeah,” Caitrin answered, “but I’m not sure how much it will help with an aura that looks like that.”

“Well it can’t hurt,” Morrigan noted. “Just looking at her makes me want to cry.”

Quin pulled Layla’s cheek to his bicep and moved her hands from her face, forcing her to look at him. After wiping the tears from her cheeks, he reached for the loaded pipe Caitrin held out.

“Hit this,” Quin urged.

She accepted the pipe without hesitation, willing to do anything to find her way through the goodbyes without losing her breakfast. She had to steady her breathing to accept a chest full of smoke, but she finally tucked the pipe's

stem in her lips and let Quin light it. The fumes hotly rolled down her throat, and she tried to return the pipe to Quin, but he didn't take it. He just watched her face and aura as she exhaled. Then he pointed to the herb.

“Take another one.”

She'd never taken more than one, but she trusted Quin not to put her in harm's way, so she obeyed. Warm smoke filled her lungs, and as she exhaled, the first hit took effect, relaxing her muscles and tingling her toes.

Quin's eyes stayed on the air around her as he puffed on the pipe, and apparently her aura calmed down, because he eventually released a small sigh of smoke while passing the pipe to

Caitrin.

“Thank you,” Layla whispered, finding the rivers of tears wouldn't stop, but her throat wasn't so tight she couldn't breathe, and the gasping and heaving had settled.

“Anytime,” Quin returned. “May I make a suggestion?”

She nodded her curious approval, and he took her cheek as he explained. “Let's say goodbye to Alana first, while you're relaxed, because you won't stay that way.”

Finding it difficult to speak, she nodded while wiping away fresh tears, but her lungs stayed steady in their search for air.

Quin stood, and she tucked her face

into his neck, trying to find strength in his firm flesh and masculine scent. He let her stay that way as he crossed the lawn, so she didn't know they'd reached Alana until she heard her tiny voice.

“Waywa's weawwy sad, Quinwin.”

Layla's lungs hiccupped, but she focused on breathing as she left Quin's neck, finding Alana in Selena's trembling arms.

Quin reached out and wiped a tear from Alana's face. “We're all sad.”

“I'm sad,” she confirmed, her pout trembling.

Quin's chest expanded as he brushed his thumb across Alana's pucker. “I know, angel. This is really hard, isn't it?”

Alana and Layla nodded at the same time, and Quin swallowed as he glanced between them. “Hey,” he said, “I have an idea. Let’s go for a ride.”

Alana’s eyes widened. “I can fly with both of you?”

“Sure. Right, love?”

Layla quickly nodded as she looked at Alana, somehow managing a shaky smile. “I’d love to fly with you and Quinlan,” she whispered, afraid a sob would burst loose if she said it any louder.

“There you go,” Quin added, tapping Alana on the nose. “Layla can hold you while I hold her. How does that sound?”

“Perfect,” Layla whispered, and Alana flew into her waiting arms.

They hugged each other, and Quin spoke into Layla's hair. "Are you two beautiful girls ready?"

"Yes, Quinwin," Alana answered, "I'm weady."

Layla opened her mouth to say the same, but then she snapped it shut when her lips vibrated. Instead, she nodded her approval, and Quin tightened his hold on her before shooting into the air.

Once he was over the houses, he leveled out with his back to the ground, and Alana lifted her face from Layla's chest, watching the scenery fly by as excitement twinkled in her purple eyes.

After ten silent laps around the clearing, Alana shifted her attention away from the bird's-eye-view and

looked at Quin, but her little hand stroked Layla's cheek. "Mommy says you might go away fowr a whiwe. She says I might not get to see you fowr a wong time."

Layla couldn't respond. It took every ounce of willpower she possessed to keep her sobs at bay.

"Your mommy's right," Quin confirmed, letting Alana's curls feather across his palm. "We might not get to see you again until you're a big girl like your great-grandma Flanna, but we will see you again. I promise."

"She says you wiww be in a safe pwace with peopwe who wuv you."

"We will," Layla whispered.

Alana found Layla's stare while

wiping away her newest tears. “I asked mommy why we couldn't go there, too, cause *I* wuv you, and she said we would someday.”

“She's right,” Layla assured.

Alana's expression turned thoughtful as her toddler mind tried to decode adult problems. “But I don't weawy know why we have to wait. Mommy says we have things to do hewre, but I'd wather go with you to the safe pwace.”

“Oh sweetie,” Layla sobbed, unable to stop herself. “I want us to stay together and be safe, too, and maybe we will get that. Quinlan and I are going to try really hard to make sure we get to stay with you.” She paused, painfully inhaling. “But even if we can't, and we have to be

apart for a while, you're going to be safe, and you're going to have your mommy and daddy and your brother here to take care of you and give you lots of love. And Quinlan and I, and all the others who might be gone for a while, we'll still have each other to love, just in a different place.”

She paused, her face flexing as she took another burning breath. Then she cupped Alana's cheek and slipped her fingers into soft ringlets. “I know that's sad, sweetie. It will make us all so sad to be apart, but you can't come with us yet. There's still fun for you to have here. I need you to stay and learn more magic so you can show me special tricks the next time I see you. And I need you to

experience everything there is to do around here so you can tell me about it later. You have a long time before you're all grown up, and I want you to have as much fun as you can before coming to see us. We'll wait for you there. I promise, so take your time.”

“But I wiww miss you,” Alana countered, tears spilling from the corners of her eyes, “and that makes me sad.”

Layla quickly dried the baby's tears while ignoring her own. “I know. I'll miss you, too. So much. But the sad feelings will get better. We'll keep missing each other, and we'll always love each other, but we won't always cry. I promise, Alana. It will only be

super sad for a little while. Pretty soon, you'll find something fun to do. Then you'll forget to be sad.”

“Weawy?”

“I promise, sweetie. I bet your mom's already thinking about fun activities that will help the sadness go away.”

Alana's eyebrows furrowed with a sweet concern normal two-year-olds couldn't possibly possess. “What about you? Who wiww make youwr sadness bettew? Wosewen was youwr mommy, but she's gone...” She halted, her face wrinkling in contemplation then enlightening with answers. “Wiww you go to the same safe pwace Wosewen and Aedan went?”

Layla's mouth fell open. The toddler's

knowledge and comprehension of the situation was blowing her away. Plus she didn't know how to answer. Steadying her voice, she went with the truth. "Yes, angel. If we have to leave, that's where we'll go."

Alana's face flushed with painful realization. "But that means you can't come back."

"Yes," Layla whispered. "But remember, when you've had all the fun you can have here, and you're a big girl like your great-grandma, you can come to us. It won't be forever, Alana, just a little while. So have fun, and pay attention, because I want to hear all about it next time we see each other."

Alana sadly nodded, and Layla caught

one of her tears. “Just a little while, sweetie, not forever.”

“Just a wittwe whiwe,” Alana whispered back, using her entire palm to wipe Layla's cheek. “You wiww get to see youwr mommy and daddy if you go. That wiww make the sadness bettew.”

Layla found a weak smile while kissing her little hand. “Yes it will, but I'm still going to miss you, and I'll be waiting for you to get done here so I can play with you again.”

“I wuv you, Waywa.”

“I love you, too, Alana.”

Layla hugged the baby close as her control started cracking, and Quin made his way back to earth, his heart beating hard against Layla's back.

When he landed in front of Selena, he lowered Layla's feet to the ground, but he kept a hold on her to make sure she was steady.

Breathing deep, Layla reluctantly left the child's hair and found her eyes. "I hope I get to see you again really, really soon, but if not, I'll see you when you're all grown up and full of stories and tricks. Deal?"

"Deaw," Alana agreed. Then she reached out and touched Layla's cheek. "I wiww miss you."

"I'll miss you, too, angel," Layla whispered, nearly choking on it. Then she touched her lips to Alana's forehead, unable to say the word *goodbye*.

Her knees shook as her throat closed

up, so she kissed Alana's forehead then passed her to Quin. She couldn't watch their farewell. It would kill her, so she turned and stumbled into Selena's hug. With that, the dam broke, and Layla started bawling.

Quin turned his back on Layla's haunted aura and walked a few feet away, trying to tune out her sobs so he could concentrate on Alana. He smiled at her. Then he ran his fingertips over her forehead, nose, cheeks and lips. "My littlest angel. We've had some fun, haven't we?"

She nodded, but her frown squeezed his aching heart. "The fun isn't over," he assured. "There's more to come."

She nodded again, but she didn't speak

as she fiddled with his jaw.

“I look forward to flying with you again,” he added. “I’ll never forget the first time we flew together. It’s one of my favorite memories.”

“I don’t wemembew it.”

“I know, but I do. You were only two days old and just a lazy, little lump. I couldn’t even get you to open your eyes and look around. You snoozed the whole time.”

One corner of her pucker twitched at his teasing. “You’we my favowit to fwy with, Quinwin.”

“I know, and the next time we see each other, whether that’s tomorrow or when you’re all grown up, the first thing we’ll do is fly together.”

“Weawy?”

“Absolutely.”

“Otay.”

“Practice lots.”

“I wiww.”

“I love you, Alana.”

“I wuv you, too, Quinwin.”

“Lay one on me,” he instructed, pointing at his cheek, and she stretched up to kiss his dimple. He returned the favor then smiled. “Now let's see your pretty grin.”

She gave him a weak smile, and he brushed his thumb across it. “Goodbye, Alana.”

“Bye, Quinwin.”

His lungs struggled with red-hot air as he returned to the family and passed

Alana to Morrigan. Then he looked at Layla, whose aura was out of control as she let herself be handed from person to person. He closed his eyes, forcing himself to do nothing about her sorrow while preparing for the next goodbye. Then he took a deep breath and turned toward Brayden.

Chapter 43

Saying goodbye to her coven was one of the hardest things Layla ever had to do, and she sucked at it. As they passed her around, giving her hugs and whispering reassurances in her ear, she couldn't form one coherent word. She just cried on them, trying to memorize their voices, scent and feel.

Even when she was done and Serafin took her in his arms, wrapping her in a strong hug while moving her away from the crowd, she continued to blubber. Then she was handed off to Quin, and as her ear found his heart, she managed a

deep breath, her soul instantly soothed.

They stayed silent for a long time, just holding each other as they mourned, and her tears eventually dried as her lungs steadied.

“I was pitiful, Quin. I didn’t say a word.”

“Your aura said enough.”

“Are they gone?”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

Those who'd left were his blood relatives. He'd been closely connected to them his entire life, living near them, counting on them, loving them for twenty-two years. She had no idea how he was able to say goodbye without having an emotional breakdown.

He squeezed and kissed her head. Then he took her by the cheeks and forced her to look at him. "I'm not giving up hope until I have to, Layla. I intend to see them tomorrow."

"The bright side."

"Yep."

"You're good at seeing it."

He smiled. "I'm looking at it."

Her insides warmed, and she found the ability to smile back. "Thank you."

"Anytime."

"So what's next?"

"Next," he sighed, looking at her aura, "we have to let go of each other for a while."

"What? Why?"

He motioned to the other side of the

lawn, and she looked over, finding two large tents.

“Because Morrigan and Daleen want you to join the rest of the women while they get ready,” Quin explained, “and I’m not allowed in that tent. The men are in the other one.”

She puckered while tracing a heart on his chest. “Am I allowed in there?”

He laughed. “I doubt they’d mind a bit, but you’re sure to find it embarrassing. They’re changing their clothes.”

“Oh. Yeah... a tent full of naked wizards might be tempting to some, but since I’m related to half of them, I’ll pass.”

“It would probably be the men not

related to you who'd make you blush. Weylin's in there."

"Oh god," she smirked. "And I'm sure he's proud of himself."

Quin laughed as he looked up. Then Morrigan emerged from the women's tent. Returning his gaze to Layla, he leaned in for a kiss. "I'll hold you again soon, my love. Find my mind if you need me."

"How long?" she asked, glancing between him and her grandma.

"Less than an hour."

"Okay," she conceded, pulling him into another kiss.

Morrigan walked up, wearing nothing more than a thin, silk robe, and while her eyes were slightly red-rimmed from her

recent crying binge, she looked youthful as she held out her hand. “Come play with the girls for a while, sweetie. Give Quinlan a chance to miss you.”

Layla looked at Quin, trying not to show her anxiety. “Less than an hour?”

“Yep.” He gave her one more kiss then placed her palm in Morrigan’s.

Layla turned away, fighting the urge to look over her shoulder as her grandma led her to the tent. She did pretty well, and only spared him one glance right before slipping through the closed canvas flaps. He was watching, and he flashed a smile and a wink before losing sight of her.

A strong and heady mixture of earthy cannabis, sweet jasmine, and spicy

cypress hit Layla like a steam bath when she turned away from the open air, and for a moment she could have sworn she was in a dream, or peeking in on a veiled and surreal fantasy world.

Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes grew wide as she tried to figure out if she should divert her stare. But divert it where? Unless she looked at the lush, royal-blue carpet pampering her soles, her gaze would find the nude flesh of beautiful witches. They weren't just changing their clothes. They'd stripped down to nothing and were lounging on cozy furniture, leisurely chatting, smoking cannabis, drinking wine, working magic on one another's hair, nails and skin, or sifting through sheer

material, shiny gemstones, and metallic trinkets. And they acted like it was perfectly normal behavior to do so while exposing it all.

Layla closed her mouth and tried not to pay too much attention to any one area as she followed Morrigan further into the gathering, but when her grandma's robe disappeared, unveiling a smooth and slender backside exuding femininity, Layla's jaw fell again. Daleen approached, nonchalantly baring a gorgeous, bosomy figure, and Layla's cheeks flamed hotter, even as her curiosity and wonderment grew.

Closing her mouth once more, Layla concentrated on making eye contact, and Daleen quietly laughed as she touched

Layla's cheek. "Have some chamomile tea, darling. It will help."

A steaming cup of tea floated across the smoky tent, and Layla mumbled her appreciation as she took it from the air. It did help, instantly, but only because it gave her something to look at.

"You don't have to be embarrassed, sweetie," Morrigan whispered, purposefully playing with Layla's hair. "We're all comfortable, so you can relax, too."

"I don't know if I can," Layla confessed.

Morrigan gave her a tight hug, and when she pulled away, Layla's dress had been replaced by a silk robe. "I know it's different from what you're used

to,” Morrigan offered, “but you can trust everyone here to understand as well. Have a seat.” She patted the velvet cushion of an oversized easy chair. “Let your grandmas play for a while.”

Layla had no idea what exactly that entailed, but she obeyed anyway, sitting and sinking into the squishy chair that smelled of sage and lavender. Daleen lifted Layla’s feet. Then Morrigan slid an ottoman beneath them, propping her legs up like a pampered princess.

Brietta walked up, proudly wearing nothing but her birthday suit, and she flashed an ornery grin as she scanned Layla’s modest attire. Leaning forward, she winked at Morrigan and patted Layla’s shoulder. “Scoot over.”

Layla looked up in confusion, getting an eyeful of Brietta's perky breasts. Then she found the twinkle in her cousin's multicolored gaze.

“Do what?” Layla asked.

“Scoot over,” Brietta repeated. “I want to sit with you.”

“Oh. Okay.” Flustered by the whole situation, Layla magically held her tea in place while making room for two.

Brietta squeezed in beside her, forcing her to confront and accept her nakedness. Then she summoned a pipe and hit it like a pro. After pulling the stem from her mouth, she moved it to Layla's, urging her to take a hit. Then she took one more puff for herself before passing it on.

Turning back, she smiled and tossed a flap of Layla's robe over her exposed knee, shielding it from view. "Geez, Layla, cover up. Don't you have any decency?"

Layla laughed as her muscles loosened up. Then her grandmas began running their fingertips over her fingernails and toenails, applying glitter that flashed without the assistance of light. Layla wiggled her big toe, appreciating the effect. Then she looked at Brietta, who was perfectly relaxed as she received the same treatment from Enid and Cinnia.

"Quin said he wasn't allowed in here," Layla noted, "but I didn't expect this."

Brietta laughed as she summoned a glass of wine. “Quin could park himself right in the middle of this and not blush about it.”

A few of the coven members voiced their agreement, and a smile twitched Layla’s lips as she looked down. “I believe you. Quin doesn't blush.”

Brietta nodded as she swished wine around in her mouth. Then she swallowed and grinned. “Is this why it took him so long to have sex with you? Because he couldn't get your clothes off?”

Layla's mouth fell open as her cheeks burned like never before. “Bri!” Braving a glance at Cordelia, Daleen and Morrigan, Layla found the three of them

stifling laughter, which flustered her even more, so she looked back at her audacious cousin and scowled.

“What?” Brietta asked, innocently raising her eyebrows. “I’m curious why it took him eleven days to do what he wanted to do from day one. Not just day one, minute one. I was there when he met you, I could see his aura, and I can tell you with certainty that sex was on his mind from the moment he saw you. So just say yes or no. Did it take him so long because you wouldn’t shed the clothes?”

Layla looked around. No one was staring at her, but she knew a lot of them were listening, and Morrigan and Daleen were hiding grins as they magically

adhered tiny gemstones to her nails.

Layla sighed as she returned her gaze to Brietta. Then she took a big breath for bravery. “No, Bri, that's not why. He started taking my clothes off the third night I knew him, and by the sixth night, he'd seen me completely naked. The seventh night I fell asleep with my bare chest against his, and by the time we bonded, he'd touched and looked at pretty much every part of me.”

It was Brietta's turn to drop her jaw, and she wasn't the only one. Several witches stared at Layla in shock.

Brietta eventually closed her mouth, but her eyebrows drew together in confusion. “Are you saying he had you naked within a week and didn't do

anything?”

“That depends on what you mean by anything,” Layla mumbled, rubbing her burning forehead. “He didn't do anything for himself, if that's what you mean. It was his clothes that stayed on. He didn't take his shorts off around me until the night we bonded.”

Several people murmured their disbelief, Brietta's mouth fell back open, Cordelia proudly smiled, and Morrigan and Daleen quietly laughed as they abandoned Layla's nails and moved to her hair.

“You have to be lying,” Brietta countered. “I can't believe that of any wizard, least of all Quin.”

“Well believe it,” Layla returned,

“because I'm not lying. He didn't even take them off when we showered together.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did he keep his clothes on for eleven days when you were shedding yours within a week? Why was he taking showers with you but not taking his shorts off to do it?”

“Because he wanted to,” Layla impatiently answered. Then she softened her voice. “He wanted things to be perfect.”

Brietta shook her head. “I can't believe what I'm hearing. Weren't you suspicious about his motivation to wait?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you're not the most secure person, Layla. Didn't you worry about why he wasn't fulfilling his needs with you?”

“Do you really have to ask that, Bri? You saw how he treated me, and that was when people were watching and he was trying not to embarrass me. Surely you can imagine how he treated me behind closed doors. He was very thorough in showing me how he felt.”

Brietta's forehead smoothed as her ornery grin reappeared. “So what you're saying is – you got yours.”

Layla shrank into the chair as her cheeks ignited. “God, Bri, you're blunt.”

“Just figuring that out?”

Layla cracked a smile as she confessed. “Yes, I got mine several times before he got his.”

“The mark of a true gentleman,” Daleen declared, pulling a section of Layla's curls from the rest. Then she held it while Morrigan worked magic on it.

Layla gave a nod while timidly looking at Cordelia. “Quin exceeds the word. He's unrivaled in his affection, honesty and optimism, and his attention to detail is flawless.”

Cordelia and Rhiannon had been painting each other's nails, but they both looked up and raptly listened to Layla's compliments.

“And his heart and soul,” she added. “His heart and soul could move

mountains. They're the most beautiful and powerful things I've ever experienced, and the fact that he shares them with me makes me feel like the luckiest woman in the world. You must be an amazing mother, Cordelia.”

Rhiannon and several others wiped their eyes, and Cordelia held her heart while letting the tears flow. “Thank you, Layla. For more than the words. You make him so happy, like never before.”

“He makes me happy,” Layla returned, running her finger through her bonded light, which wasn't as bright as usual due to the distance between them, but it was still the brightest bonded light in the tent.

Brietta stared at the gold and silver haze as she downed her wine. Then she

vanished the glass and stood, giggling as she went.

“What's so funny?” Layla asked, letting her grandmas usher her from the chair.

Still laughing, Brietta turned and held out a hand. “Can you imagine the ribbing Weylin would give Quin if he knew why it took so long for the two of you to get busy? Quin would never live it down.”

Layla considered this then shrugged. “Kegan would do the same for you.”

“Ha,” Brietta blurted, making Layla jolt. “Kegan's sweet, but there's no way he'd wait around for perfect. Wizards don't do that. If they want it, and it's being offered, they take it. And if it's not being offered, they put all their energy

into getting the offer on the table. They don't just sit on their hands and wait around for the perfect moment. They're proactive, not patient, and most of them would think Quin was mental for taking things so slow.”

Layla intently met Brietta's stare, trying to ignore the fact that Daleen and Morrigan were putting something in her curls. “I'm not like you, Bri. I didn't know what you've known for years. Before Quin, I'd only kissed three guys, two of them once.” She looked down, her cheeks burning as she quietly continued. “And I'd only had sex once... if you want to call five uncomfortable minutes in the cab of a pickup truck sex.”

The women who weren't members of

her coven gasped, but her own family watched her with sad eyes and auras, and her grandmas had stopped fussing with her hair.

Layla swallowed her embarrassment and urged Morrigan and Daleen to continue doing whatever it was they were doing. “Don't feel sorry for me. I'm doing just fine now.” She looked at Brietta, who remained speechless. “But you see my point. Quin might as well have been dealing with a virgin, a scared and insecure virgin. I think Kegan would have shown you the same consideration if that's what he thought you needed.”

Brietta tilted her head and smiled. “Maybe.” Then she turned to a table and

grabbed a pile of blue and green chiffon wrapped in silver chains. “So it's no wonder you're so shy.”

“That's part of the reason, yes.”

“Well,” Morrigan interrupted, “there's no time for modesty now. We're ready for you to lose the robe.”

Layla tensed as her gaze snapped to her grandma. “What?”

“It's okay, honey,” Daleen soothed. “There's no reason to be embarrassed. You're absolutely beautiful. Now lose the robe or I'll have to vanish it.”

Layla's entire body flushed with heat as she glanced around. At least thirty witches were there, and some of them were practically strangers.

Brietta flashed a cheeky grin while

holding her arms out, baring her body with comfort. "It's no big deal, Layla. We all have the same parts, and we're all blessed with beautiful bodies. I say be grateful and show off how lovely you are."

Layla sighed and squeezed her eyes shut, mentally pumping herself up. "Fine." She found Brietta and pointed. "Stop staring at me. It messes with my head and you know it."

Brietta returned her attention to the material in her hands, attempting to hide her grin. "Okay, okay. I won't stare."

Morrigan laughed as she slipped Layla's robe off her shoulders. "Brietta's an ornery one, isn't she?"

"She has it down to an art form,"

Layla agreed, trying to ignore the air hitting her unclothed body, “and she makes it so damn cute. It's like looking into the eyes of a puppy that just crapped on your floor. Do you love on her? Or get stern with her? It's a toss-up every time.”

Brietta laughed as she looked up to respond, but then she fell silent, doing exactly what she said she wouldn't – curiously staring.

“Bri!”

“I'm sorry, Layla, but I didn't know you wore underwear. They're shocking.”

At that, everyone looked at Layla's white, lacy panties, and her arms shook in an effort not to hide herself. “*My* attire's shocking?”

“They're cute,” Brietta replied, leaning around to peek at Layla's backside.

Morrigan ran her hands down Layla's arms, leaving shimmering trails that seemed to glow. “I'm surprised you still wear them.”

“I like them,” Daleen offered, giving Layla's legs the same shiny treatment.

“Does Quin like them?” Brietta asked.

Layla's mouth fell open. “Bri!”

“What?”

“You're feisty today.”

“I know,” Brietta confessed, wrinkling her nose. “So does he?”

Layla's lips twitched into a smile, but she kept them sealed as she awkwardly stood there, letting Morrigan move her

underwear aside and add sparkles to her hips and rear.

“He does,” Brietta assumed. “That's one reason you still wear them.”

“You got me, Bri,” Layla confessed. “Maybe you should get yourself some. See what they do for Kegan.”

“I just might, Layla Love, I just might. So, anymore tricks up your sleeve?”

Layla shook her head no, but she gave Brietta a wink, leaving her to wonder. Then her eyes widened on Daleen's hands, which were sliding over her breasts, making them shimmer, too. “May I ask why you're decorating me with glitter?”

Daleen and Morrigan froze, glancing at each other before nervously looking at

Layla. “Do you not like it?” Morrigan asked.

“I didn't say that,” Layla countered. “It's pretty. I'm just wondering why you're going through all the trouble of tinseling me up like a Christmas tree.”

“We just want to draw attention to your brilliance,” Daleen answered. “As you can see, we're all dressing more glamorous than usual.”

“Why?”

“To look pretty,” Brietta answered. Then she huffed at the material in her hands and held it out to Cinnia. “Here, grandma. I can't figure the damn thing out.”

Morrigan stepped closer to Layla and played with her hair. “It's okay, right?”

“Sure,” Layla agreed. What could it hurt to let her grandmas play?

“Good,” Morrigan approved, “because you look even more stunning than usual. Do you like the stones on your nails? They’re rainbow moonstones.”

Layla looked at the gem on her thumbnail, admiring the light blue sheen radiating from the depths of its pearly shell. “They’re pretty.”

“They emanate good energy,” Daleen revealed. “We’ve added them to your hair and clothing as well.”

“My clothing?” Layla asked, looking up.

“Yes,” Daleen confirmed, adding an iridescent luster to Layla’s face.

“Morrigan and I made you something to wear tonight. It's loaded with gemstones, and held together with silver – a feminine metal that protects and calms.”

“Oh,” Layla mumbled, nervous about what they had planned.

“It will look lovely, darling,” Daleen assured. “You'll shine like the star you are.”

Daleen moved behind Layla, messing with her hair and whatever she and Morrigan had put in it, and Layla's gaze fell on Brietta, who was dressed and ready and looked like a sparkling, ocean goddess. The outfit she wore was the skimpiest and prettiest Layla had ever seen – sheer material in turquoise and sea-green, hugging Brietta's perfect form

while adding little coverage to the silver bikini barely hiding her intimate areas.

“What do you think?” Brietta asked, noticing Layla's stare.

“You look beautiful,” Layla whispered, “like a goddess.”

Brietta happily hummed and clapped her bejeweled hands. “I can't wait to look in the mirror.”

“You'll like what you see,” Layla assured.

“I hope so,” Brietta returned. “Playing dress up is the only reason I volunteered for this.”

“Don't,” Layla scolded.

Several people jolted, and Brietta shrank back. “I'm sorry, Layla. I shouldn't have said that, but you know I

didn't mean it.”

“I do, but please don't joke about that. It's not funny and it ruins the moment.”

“Okay. I really am sorry. So I look pretty?” she asked, half smiling, half puckering.

Layla grinned, confirming all was forgiven. “You look gorgeous. Very easy on the eyes. I don't want to look away.”

“Just wait 'til you see yourself.”

“I'm naked, Bri.”

“Not for long,” Morrigan noted, vanishing Layla's underwear as Daleen magicked a new ensemble onto her glittering body.

Several people gasped their approval, and tears flooded her grandmas' eyes.

“Oh, sweetie,” Morrigan whispered,

touching Layla's cheek. "Your radiance could light up the darkest night."

"Stunning," Daleen agreed.

"Quinlan will love it," Cordelia assured.

"Maybe a little too much," Brietta teased. "We might lose his attention for good once he sees you."

Layla's cheeks flamed. Then she looked down, choking at the cleavage staring back at her. "I'm supposed to wear *this* out *there*?" she blurted, pointing from what could hardly be called an outfit to the tent's entrance.

"Yes," Daleen answered. "Most witches will be wearing less than this, so I promise it's not too revealing. You look perfect, and there's absolutely

nothing to be ashamed of.”

“She's right,” Brietta offered. “It covers more than mine, and you really do look amazing. You make the rest of us look like crones.”

“Impossible,” Layla mumbled, making sure all her private parts were covered while trying to figure out how she'd find the courage to walk around in such risqué attire.

“Stop fidgeting,” Brietta demanded, grabbing Layla's hand. Then she pulled her close, placing her at her side.

“Someone get us a mirror. If I still look pretty standing next to Layla, I'll know I'm in good shape.”

A large, oval mirror floated across the room and landed with its back to them.

Then Cinnia placed her hand on top.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Brietta answered, and Layla gave an insecure nod.

Cinnia spun the mirror around, and Brietta gasped while twisting and turning so she could see herself from every angle, but Layla just stood there, staring at a woman she didn't recognize.

Literally sparkling from head to toe, she exuded traits she'd never seen so clearly in her reflection – confidence, strength... and sexiness.

She looked at her hair – ringlets threaded with silver fibers, giving the onyx spirals a platinum sheen. The crown of her head held a delicate, silver circlet embedded with grains of rainbow

moonstones; and countless silver strands cascaded from the band, dangling miniscule gems down the length of her curls. A thicker braid of silver scattered with larger stones wrapped around the back of her neck, intersected at her collarbone, then separated into much thinner chains that scalloped over her breasts. It looked like her nipples might find their way through if she moved the wrong way, but she knew better. She could feel silk beneath the metal even if she couldn't see it. Her stomach was bare, just shimmering skin, a belly button, and a fragile-looking silver chain poised on the curve of her waist, sprinkling her sides with dainty jewels. The curves of her hips held a bejeweled,

silver belt draped with two strips of white silk, one in the front and one in the back, which reached halfway down her thighs... or, to be more precise, between her thighs, providing minimum coverage to her most intimate body part. Like the stringy bra, she could feel more silk beneath the skimpy loincloth, but she couldn't see it. What she did see were the outer curves of her butt and thighs, which weren't the least bit hidden by the transparent fabric flowing from the sides of the belt. The same wispy material fluttered from thin silver bands wrapping around her biceps and upper thighs, and more fine-spun silver circled a couple of her toes.

Morrigan and Daleen watched Layla's

reflection as they knelt, adding silver bands to her ankles. Then they stood and dressed her wrists in feminine, silver bracers.

Brietta was celebrating her own outfit, performing a sexy sashay away from the mirror while looking over her shoulder at her backside. “I do believe I pull this look off perfectly. Maybe I should start dressing like this all the time. What do you think, grandma? Can I wear this to work?”

“It would definitely keep the customers pouring in,” Cinnia laughed, “but they won't be able to look away from you long enough to read the menu.”

“Then I'll serve them the most expensive item.”

“That's my clever girl,” Cinnia approved. Then she magically donned her own glamorous ensemble.

Layla still hadn't said anything, and Morrigan couldn't take her silence any longer. “So what do you think, sweetie?”

Layla blinked at the image, the confident, strong and sexy image. But it was an illusion. She didn't feel any of those things.

Swallowing a lump, she looked at her grandmas. “It's beautiful. You did a lovely job making it.”

“That's not what I meant,” Morrigan clarified, finding reasons to touch her here and there. “What do you think of the whole package? Not just the clothing.”

“Oh,” Layla mumbled, looking at the

mirror. "I feel like a fictional character. It's hard to believe that's me in there."

Morrigan smiled and sighed. "You're not telling me what I want to know, Layla. Do you feel pretty?"

Layla turned away from the mirror, flipping her gaze between Morrigan and Daleen. "I've never felt more glamorous than I do now, but..." She paused, glancing back at her scantily clad and glittery reflection. "I don't think I can wear it. There's no way I'll be comfortable walking around in front of people dressed like this. I'm sorry."

Brietta's strutting halted as she scowled at Layla. "No way," she protested, shaking her head while walking forward. "You're not taking that

off. You *can't*.” Her expression turned pleading as she shook Layla’s shoulders. “You look *so* pretty. You have to wear it. How could you keep such an enchanting sight from the people you love?”

“That's not fair,” Layla returned. “And stick that lip back in. It will do you no good.” She lifted her chin and looked away from Brietta's pitiful face. “I can't walk out there like this. I'd die of embarrassment before I ever made it to the battle.” She turned toward her grandmas, feeling like a brat, and her eyes moistened as she spoke to them. “I'm sorry. It's so beautiful, and I appreciate the thought you put into it, but I can't get past the unease.” Guilt

tightened her throat, and she dropped her ashamed gaze to the floor. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Daleen insisted. "You have nothing to be sorry for." She stepped forward, straightening the chain around Layla's stomach. "Because you *are* wearing this. It's absolutely bewitching on you; the gems and silver radiate positive energy; and you're going to appreciate it later. I promise. Just try to trust me on that."

Layla's mouth fell open, and Brietta flashed a smug smile as she walked away.

"You're going to make me wear it?" Layla asked. Never in a million years did she believe Daleen would force her to do something she didn't want to do.

“How about a compromise?”

Morrigan offered.

“Like a bribe?” Layla countered, thrown further off balance by Morrigan's participation.

“No, sweetie,” Morrigan corrected, “a compromise.” She stepped forward, summoning a pile of shiny, white material. “We made a cloak to match. It's pure silk with fibers of silver woven into it, and it has a rainbow moonstone clasp. You can wear it until you feel comfortable taking it off.”

Layla glanced at the cloak then suspiciously eyed her grandmas. “What if I wear it all night?”

“If that's what you want to do,” Daleen answered, “that's what you'll do. We

won't ask you to remove it. Here.” She took the cloak from Morrigan then helped Layla into it, fastening the clasp at her neck before pulling her long, shiny curls from the collar. “What do you think?” she asked, looking at Layla's reflection. “Better?”

Layla nodded as she examined the filaments of silver incorporated into the soft fibers of bright-white silk. “I can handle this,” she answered, wiggling around to make sure the outfit didn't hinder her movement. Everything felt fine and none of it was constricting. In fact, she felt naked, like her bare body was floating in a silky cloud. “And it's still glamorous,” she added, looking at her grandmas. She wished she could

give them more, provide them with some well-deserved enthusiasm, but strutting like a proud peacock was something Brietta could pull off, and Layla would only feel foolish if she tried to do the same. “Thank you for putting so much thought into this. It's gorgeous, and I really do appreciate it.”

“We're so happy we get to do these things for you,” Daleen replied. Then she carefully swept the pads of her thumbs over her Layla's eyes, making her long lashes sparkle. “And we're thrilled you like it.”

“That's what's important,” Morrigan added. “And you're all set save for one last thing.” She stepped behind her and began moving the outer layers of Layla's

curls aside. “Don't be alarmed now. I'm going to take a lock of your hair.”

“What?” Layla blurted, jerking away.

“Just a little, sweetie. You'll never know it's gone.”

Layla shook her head, looking at Morrigan like she was crazy. “Why?”

“To tie in with Quinlan's armbands.”

Layla's expression fell as her shoulders sagged, and while her eyes remained fixed, her gaze was somewhere else. “Quinlan's what?”

“The bloodstone-studded leather armbands he'll be wearing,” Morrigan explained, once again digging through spirals.

Layla didn't resist. “Blood...” she breathed, dread hitting her like a fist to

the chest.

“Bloodstone,” Morrigan repeated, severing a lock of hair with magic, “the stone of the warrior.”

Morrigan kept talking, but Layla couldn't hear her. Blood rushed past her eardrums so quickly, it sounded like she was under a waterfall. Her heart was at it again, slamming hard and fast against her ribs as her muscles went numb. Her mind flashed with an image of Quin's blanched and bleeding body, his biceps draped with charred leather bands, and her stomach churned. “Oh god,” she breathed, looking for the exit.

“What's wrong?” Daleen asked.

Layla didn't want to explain herself. She couldn't, so she tried to get a grip

while making her way across the tent. “Nothing,” she lied. “I just need some air.”

Her grandmothers rushed to catch up.

“What's going on, sweetie?” Morrigan asked. “Is this about the hair? I can fix it.”

“No. The hair's fine. Can't even tell it's gone.”

“Layla,” Daleen demanded, grabbing her arm before she could escape the tent. “What's going on?”

Layla's expression tensed as she struggled with tears. “This was an amazing experience, and I'm so thankful for it, but I... I just... I need to see Quin.”

“Oh,” Daleen whispered. “Okay. We

understand.”

“Thank you. I'm sorry I'm leaving early.”

“Don't be,” Morrigan insisted. “I think you've given him plenty of time to miss you. Do you want me to mind search him for you?”

“No,” Layla refused, glancing at the sliver of light seeping between the canvas flaps. “I'll find him.”

“Okay,” Morrigan agreed. “We'll be out soon. Here,” she added, placing a long lock of hair in Layla's hand. “You'll need this.” She pulled her into a hug then forced her into Daleen's arms.

“Go,” Daleen urged.

Layla ducked out of the tent and scanned the deserted lawn. Then she

turned toward the other tent, aiming to mind search Quin. But before she made the connection, she hesitated, thinking maybe she shouldn't. She couldn't properly explain herself, so her stress and worry would merely add to the weight he already carried. Besides, it would make her feel awful to pull him away just so he could be her tissue. That wasn't fair at all.

She sighed then headed for her house, fighting tears while considering her predicament. She magically picked a bouquet of roses as she walked through her garden. Then she snatched the flowers from the air and floated to her porch swing, determined to find a way to conceal her grief before Quin could see

it.

Chapter 44

Quin sat with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, meditating on his angel and his challenge to keep her safe, while Kemble silently worked magic on his back, pondering similar notions while receiving similar treatment from Lann. When Kemble's magic paused, Quin raised his head, hoping his dad was done, but then Kemble's magic resumed, so Quin's forehead went back to his palms.

A few seconds later, Kemble's magic paused again. "Has Layla mind searched you, son?"

Quin's head popped back up. "No. Why?"

"Because your mom thinks she did."

"When? Is she not with her?"

"I'm trying to find out." Kemble added a few finishing touches to the magical tattoo on Quin's back then leaned away. "Layla left the tent fifteen minutes ago to find you."

Quin shot from his seat and headed for the exit.

"Quinlan," Kemble called, tossing him two strips of leather.

Quin paused long enough to catch them then flew from tent. '*Layla*,' he mentally called, scanning the empty lawn.

'*Hey*,' she called back.

His gaze shot to her porch, landing on

her smiling face, and he sighed as he flew toward her, mind searching his mom and dad to let them know she was fine. He alighted in the garden and took the stairs two at a time. Then he came to a stumbling halt on the landing, staring at her with wide eyes and parted lips. He couldn't look away. She was... heavenly. If ever a celestial being walked the earth, it was her.

Her smile widened as she ran her gaze across his bare chest and shoulders, noticing their golden sheen. "You look yummy."

Keeping his eyes on her face, he slowly walked forward. "You look..." He had to pause, because there were no words worthy of her.

“Silly?” she offered. “Ostentatious? Like a Christmas tree? You can say it. I don't mind.”

He sat down and took her right hand, which was closed around a lock of her hair. First he scanned her shiny spirals. Then he searched every inch of her radiant face before finding her eyes. “You look beautiful, Layla. You're always beautiful, but right now you're glowing, more than usual.”

She smiled as her sparkling cheeks reddened. “It's a bit fancy, don't you think?”

“No. If it looks this good on you, it's just right.” He pulled her onto his lap, keeping his gaze on her face while stroking her warm cheek and playing

with a shimmering tendril falling over it.

“Why didn't you call to me?”

“Who told on me?”

“It wasn't like that.”

“I know,” she assured, looking at the bouquet of roses in her left hand. “I didn't want to cut your time short. I was going to call to you, but I didn't really need anything, so I decided to let you finish.”

He intently watched her profile for a moment. Then he looked at her aura, finding the two didn't match. “Then why didn't you stay with your grandmas?”

“I just needed some air. And like I said, I'd intended to ask you to join me, but I changed my mind at the last minute, so I decided to swing and smell the

roses while I waited.”

“I see,” he mumbled, but he didn't see at all. He knew she wasn't telling him everything, but he saw no proof to back up his theory. “Were you uncomfortable with the other women?” he asked, urging her gaze to his.

She smirked and raised an eyebrow. “Did you know what I'd be walking in on? Because a little warning would have been nice.”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you know they'd be sitting around naked?”

He couldn't help but smile at the visual of her walking into a tent full of naked witches. “No, I didn't know that. I figured you'd see more flesh than you're

used to, but I didn't know they stripped and stayed that way.” His expression sobered. “Is that why you left?”

“No. It was embarrassing at first, but good ol' Bri was entertaining me before too long, and the nudity got easier to ignore. I was done getting ready before I left.” She glanced at her sparkling cloak. “I guess you could call this getting ready... if I were heading for a Halloween party or Mardi Gras. You, however, look golden and delicious.” She leaned closer, running her tongue over his shoulder. Then she stuck it out at him. “Ith it gold?” she asked with a lisp.

He laughed as he curled his fingers into her hair. Then he slowly sucked her

tongue into his mouth. His kiss deepened as her arms encircled his neck, but then they heard voices drifting across the lawn, so they broke apart and looked over.

Gorgeous magicians poured out of the tents, and as the men turned toward the women, Weylin loudly whistled. Layla smiled as she watched the witches playfully strut toward the eager wizards. Then she laughed as Brietta twirled toward Kegan, landing in his arms with the panache of a comedian and the grace of a ballerina.

“They look beautiful,” Layla whispered.

“Yes they do,” Quin agreed. Then he found Layla's profile. “Did Morrigan

and Daleen manage to dress you up?"

"You think *I* did all this?" she asked, flipping a silver-laden curl.

He laughed as he shook his head. "No, but I wasn't talking about that. Did you refuse their outfit?"

"Did you know they were making me one?"

"No, but looking at everyone else, I seriously doubt they'd leave you out. I have a feeling they did their best to get you into something more provocative than you usually wear."

"Would it make you happy if I wore something like that?"

His expression softened as he pulled her closer. "I don't care what you wear, love. I like your clothes best when I'm

taking them off.”

“So you wouldn't be disappointed if I'm wearing the same dress you last saw me in?”

“No. You're the sexiest woman I've ever seen, no matter what you're wearing.”

“Good answer,” she approved, laying her sparkly head on his shoulder.

He laughed as he nuzzled her hair, glad all the silver didn't change its feel and scent. “I guess you're not going to answer me.”

“It doesn't matter what I'm wearing, so why bother?”

“I should have made that bet with Serafin.”

“What bet?”

“He was sure Daleen would succeed in dressing you up. When I told him I had doubts, he wanted to gamble on it. It was Daleen's stubbornness versus yours. But I didn't bite, because I wasn't sure how far you'd go to please your grandmas.”

“Hmm...” she murmured, and because of the confusing inconsistencies between her face and aura, he worried she was concerned.

“Layla.”

“Yeah?”

“I don't care what you're wearing under the cloak.”

“I know.”

“Good. Shall we join the others?”

“Carry me away, my thorough hero.”

“Gladly, my perfect angel.”

He carried her across the lawn, and as they approached the glamorous group, Layla tossed her roses into the air, transforming them into colorful butterflies. Returning her cheek to Quin's shoulder, she watched the winged creatures flutter among her loved ones, but then Quin lowered her feet to the ground.

She glanced around, finding several witches tying armbands around their wizards' biceps, and the nifty trick she'd taught herself twenty minutes ago was put to the test. And what was so damn difficult about the test was the fact that she had no way of knowing if she was succeeding. She couldn't tell if the panic she attempted to shove into a hidden

chamber of her heart exposed itself, because she couldn't see her aura. All she had was a theory, which was much like the one used to hide thoughts. She'd know soon enough if it wasn't working, because Quin was always watching her.

She nonchalantly looked up at him, checking if he was searching the air around her, and he did, in fact, glance at what must have been her aura, but he didn't react to what he saw, which was a sign of success. As soon as she was inwardly celebrating her achievement, she realized she shouldn't have been so cocky, because the test wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

“Would you like to do the honors?” he asked, holding up two leather bands.

“Um...” Using magic to steady her hand, she reached for them. Then she looked between the bands and her severed curl. “I don't know how.”

“Here,” he offered, taking back one of the leather strips. Then he worked half of the hair out of her other hand. After looping the curl several times to make it more compact, he magically adhered it to the inside of the band. Then he handed it back before taking the other. “I'm surprised you let them cut your hair.”

She had both strips of leather back in her palm, but she didn't look up. “How should I tie them?” she asked, holding absolutely still. The alternative was a speeding heart, numb and shaky muscles, a lot of tears, and a pale face. Damn it.

She was a mess on the inside.

“With magic,” he answered.

“Right,” she returned, forcing a laugh.

“Of course.”

“Is something wrong, Layla?”

Damn it. “No,” she lied, and guilt seeped through her veins like poison, crippling her defenses. “Why do you ask?”

“Because you're not looking at me. In fact, you're not moving at all. You could replace the statue of Aphrodite at the Louvre.”

“You flatter me,” she replied, still not looking at him, but she discontinued her effort to look away from him and moved to his side. Time to attempt the impossible – tie the bands without losing

it.

“You're hiding from me,” he realized, looking between her aura and face.

“You've learned a new trick.”

“Quin,” she whispered, her heart bubbling with love for his sincere attention to detail. But she didn't say anything else as she pulled his arm from his side and wrapped the leather strap around his bicep.

“Why?” he quietly asked, his aura darkening.

She didn't answer. She couldn't. She merely moved her face closer to his arm, pretending to concentrate on her task, but she was really hiding the moisture in her eyes as she secured the dreaded armband with magic.

She walked behind him to get to his other arm, but when she glanced at his back, she halted, examining the symbol depicted between his shoulder blades in what looked like metallic-gold paint. It was a symbol she'd seen many times before – two sprigs of leaves crossing at the stalks, their fronds stretching out away from each other before curving back in to form an incomplete circle, like a horseshoe. It reminded her of wings, or the leafy crowns toga clad Romans wore, but she had no idea what it meant. She reached up and gingerly touched the design, half afraid it might rub off on her finger, but his skin felt the same as always, and her fingertip didn't turn gold.

“Is there gold embedded in your skin?” she asked, moving to his bicep. Then she pulled it from his side so she could put a damn armband around it.

“Yes,” he answered, narrowing his eyes on her. “It's a laurel wreath, a symbol of victory. Now why don't you try answering mine?”

She was almost done, damn it, but his sharp tone had her hands shaking, making it impossible to secure the strap, so she stopped trying and looked at him. “I can't, Quin. Please drop it.”

“No,” he sternly refused, drawing the attention of bystanders.

“Please, Quin,” she breathed.

“No, Layla. I won't have you lying to me. That's not how this is supposed to

work.”

“It's not like that,” she countered, returning her gaze to the band as she once again tried to fasten it.

“Yes it is,” he insisted. “You're purposefully keeping things from me.”

“I just...” Her voice trailed off as she moved closer to his arm, angry her fingers and magic wouldn't do what she wanted them to. “I just...” The band slipped from one of her hands. “Damn it.”

“Forget the damn armband,” Quin ordered, grabbing her wrist before she could go back to her attempt.

“I'd love to,” she shot back.

He moved her in front of him and took her other wrist. Then he pulled her to his

chest so she couldn't turn away. "Look at me."

His rough demand and untamed handling of her wrists had her moist eyes snapping to his, and her lungs emptied as her fingers and toes went numb.

"Stop – lying – to me," he fiercely ordered, but then his temper melted, softening his expression and voice. "Do you have any idea how much you're hurting me right now?"

Her eyes widened as tears rolled from their corners, and he intently watched them as he continued. "Do you have any idea how it makes me feel to know you're coming up with magic for the sole purpose of hiding things from me? Do you know how terrified I am that you're

going to make a habit out of lying now that you can get away with it? Why are you doing this? What is it that has you risking my trust?"

"Quin," she cried, dropping her ashamed face to his chest. "I'm sorry... I'm so... sorry..."

As her tears found Quin's flesh, every muscle in his body flexed, his wounded heart leaping into his throat, but he wouldn't cave. "Then stop doing this, Layla. Don't hide from me."

Dark blue and brown fog rolled from her body, polluting the bright haze around her until it was practically black, and everyone gasped as Quin's lungs deflated.

Wrapping her in a hug, he carried her

away from the others. Then he sat on the ground with her on his lap. He didn't ask her to explain herself, and she didn't offer, so he just held her while watching her honest aura.

Once her sobs quieted and the sad hues thinned out, allowing the prettier colors to shine through, he leaned her back and wiped the moisture from her sparkling cheeks. "No more hiding, Layla. You don't have to explain your feelings if you don't want to, but at least give me the opportunity to figure them out for myself. I don't know how you managed to manipulate your aura. I don't want to know, and I don't ever want to see it again, not for my benefit."

She nodded as she averted her

bloodshot gaze. "I shouldn't have, Quin. I'm sorry."

"Do you want to tell me why you did?"

"No."

"Fine. Please don't do it again."

"I won't," she assured, still looking at her lap.

"Layla."

"Yeah?"

"Why won't you look at me?"

"Because I'm ashamed, Quin. I lied and I hurt you. I did it all wrong. I did exactly what I didn't want to do." She covered her face with a shaky hand. "I don't want to lose your trust... I hate the thought."

"Hey," he whispered, once again

forcing her to look at him. “I do trust you, Layla, more than I've ever trusted anyone, because I know you, inside and out.”

“No, Quin. I've ruined it. You'll always wonder now.”

“You're allowed mistakes, love. I have no doubt you had the best intentions when you hid your feelings from me, but now you know that doesn't work. It hurts us both, so I trust you not to repeat this mistake. I know you have no problem hurting yourself, but me, you'll protect.”

She nodded, and he sighed. “Well you need to realize what hurts you, hurts me, whether you hide it or not, so stop trying to be my martyr. We're supposed to be sharing our lives, not hiding them from

each other.”

“Times are bad right now, Quin. I have more terrifying shit going through my head than I know what to do with. I can't unload it all on you. There's not enough time for that.”

“I understand that, but going out of your way to keep your fears out of your aura won't solve anything. It will only distract us both, and it's sure to cause the inevitable release to last twice as long.”

“I won't do it again, Quin. I promise.”

“I believe you.” He stood then lowered her feet to the ground. “I'm all ears if you decide you want to talk about what started this whole thing.”

“I know,” she mumbled. “Please don't be offended if I don't.”

“It takes a lot more than that to offend me,” he assured, reaching for her cheek.

Her chest rose with a shaky breath as she turned her face into his palm. “I love you, Quin.”

He pulled her into a tight hug and kissed her head. Then he leaned back and found her shiny eyes. “It's time to leave, angel. Are you all set?”

Her heart jumped into an unnatural race, and he loosened his hold on her.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“It's not your fault, love.”

She scanned the lawn, taking several seconds to stare at her house. Then she sighed and looked at Quin. “Did I mess up Daleen and Morrigan's handiwork?”

“No. It's set with magic, so you look

exactly the same as you did before the tears – beautiful, stunning, angelic... Call it what you want. You look like a heavenly dream come true, and I'd follow you anywhere, anytime.”

“Thank you.”

He kissed her sparkling nose. “You're welcome. Now, would you like to put that armband on me?”

Her aura swelled with sadness as she looked at the leather strap in her hand. “Could you have your mom do it?”

He intently watched the haze around her, trying to figure out why the accessory caused her such anguish, but he couldn't make any sense out of it. “Sure,” he replied, relieving her of the armband.

And it lessened her load far more than he realized.

Layla let him lead her to his mom, but she looked away when Cordelia fastened the leather strip around his bicep.

“All set,” Cordelia announced, patting his arm. “Now get down here and let me kiss you.”

After letting his mom kiss his cheek, he turned to Layla and carefully raised her hood over her hair. “Ready?”

She wasn't. She wasn't ready at all. She'd never be ready to leave her home without knowing she'd come back.

He leaned in and touched his forehead to hers. “Don't forget the bright side.”

She swallowed a lump as she gave a

sad nod. Then she hovered up his body and tucked her face into his neck. “Let's go.”

Chapter 45

The time consuming trip north gave Layla's heart time to slow down to an almost normal pace, which gave Quin the opportunity to hold her tightly.

She spent the journey concentrating on forgiving herself for her lie, because she refused to spend what little time they had left hiding her shameful face. She wanted to be the woman Quin loved when they landed. She owed him that and so much more.

When he alighted on the land shield camouflaging their army, he instructed her to lift the concealment spells on their

bodies, and she obeyed while pulling her face from his neck. He smiled when he found her eyes. Then he pulled her into a kiss, keeping her there until the rest of their party caught up.

“So what do you think, Quinlan?” Caitrin asked. “Will we let them see our lights now, or are we still keeping them under wraps?”

“Layla and I won't show ours this soon, and since they probably realize she's related to you, I suggest you don't either, but I won't demand it of you.” He looked at his parents. “They already know I'm a bonded child, so you two don't need to hide anymore.”

All those involved agreed, and Caitrin knelt, touching his hand to the invisible

shield. White fog rolled out from beneath his palm, and a loud thrum pulsed from the clearing below. "I'd say they're almost ready," Caitrin noted, smiling up at everyone. "Shall we join them?"

"Hell, yeah," Weylin agreed, flipping through the smoky opening.

The majority of his family followed him with similar enthusiasm. Then Banning dove in, and Brietta wasn't far behind as she pulled Kegan along. After glancing in the hole, she turned into his chest. Then she flashed a cheeky smile and fell backward, forcing him to fall with her.

Layla wasn't sure what all the excitement was about, but it seemed fun.

“Ready?” Quin asked, squeezing her hand.

“I don't know,” she answered. “But who cares? Let's go.”

They both walked forward and stepped into the fog. Then they floated out of the way of the opening and slowly drifted toward earth.

The atmosphere felt charged and bubbly; and a brisk and catchy beat swirled up around them, rising from a large assortment of instruments manually played by an array of magicians. Layla smiled at them, but then she focused on the details of the dynamic clearing, and her eyes widened as her cheeks warmed.

The witches and wizards who were dancing, playing music, drinking, or

lounging around watching everyone else, had gone glamorous as well, and many of them wore outfits that couldn't really be classified as such since they provided less coverage than a swimsuit. None of the men had shirts, and there wasn't one conservatively dressed female in the glade. In fact, aside from the mercenaries and herself, no one wore a cloak, and some of them might as well have been wearing nothing at all. Many of the witches displayed their breasts as though it was perfectly normal behavior, and a few of the wizards had nothing but leather and metal bands keeping them from flashing the world.

After taking in all the provocative details, Layla looked at Quin, curious

about his reaction to them, but he was merely grinning at her blush, unaffected by the nudity below.

“Let me guess,” she smirked, “you see stuff like this all the time.”

“Not all the time, but I've been to gatherings similar to this before.”

They landed, and he kept his arm around her as he turned toward the middle of the clearing, letting her watch those taking advantage of the music. Many from their own party had joined the fun, and Layla laughed when she found Brietta in the thick of it, dancing like a salsa queen for Kegan. Weylin had already found himself a topless witch, but he watched her face instead of her exposed chest as he pulled her in for a

dance.

“What do you think?” Quin asked.

“It's fantastic,” Layla answered, still watching the magicians party. An outsider would never know the crowd was mere hours away from a deadly battle. “It's kind of weird,” she added, “but it's fun, very entertaining.”

Her gaze fell on a witch salaciously dragging two wizards into the surrounding forest, and Layla's cheeks flamed as she searched the tree line, counting four couples either emerging from the timber or escaping into it. Apparently it was no big deal to grab a partner... or two, and drag them out for a romp in the pine needles.

Quin followed her stare and laughed.

“Does that make you uncomfortable, Layla?”

She shrugged as she looked at him. “It's shocking, but it doesn't make me uncomfortable. They can do whatever they want.” She flashed a grin and turned toward him. “And I can't blame them for wanting what I constantly crave.”

His dimples deepened as he pulled her to his chest. “No, you can't, because I'd take you into that forest in a heartbeat, and we'd see the squirrels blush before I finished with you.”

She laughed as she raised her eyebrows. “Prove it.”

“I will. But not yet. Let's eat something so we don't have to worry about it later.”

After a trip through the busy buffet, they hovered their food between them and ate standing up. The music never stopped, but it would fade into different tunes with different beats, staying hyper to keep the energy high.

Layla soaked it all in, once again feeling like she'd stepped into a surreal fantasy world. But no matter how much she believed she was a part of it, she remained an observer, rarely slipping into the role of participant.

She looked at Quin, wondering if he felt like he was missing out. "Are you bored, Quin?"

He found her eyes as he took a bite of bread. Then he watched her in confusion as he chewed. "Why would you think

that? This isn't a boring atmosphere at all.”

“What I mean is – would you rather be out there than here?” She pointed to the spot beside her, and he looked down before grinning at her.

“No, Layla. Of all the fun things I've taken part in throughout my magical life, none of them have provided me with the kind of satisfaction I get from being by your side. I have no desire to leave it.”

She hadn't taken a bite in several minutes, so he swept the leftovers away. “However,” he added, tapping the tip of her nose, “if you ever do decide you want to join them, I'd be thrilled to join you, but not because of the activity. It's all about the company.” He glanced

around then pulled her close. “Speaking of company.”

She looked over, finding Brietta, Kegan, Banning, Weylin, and Weylin's new female friend approaching.

Brietta was in her element, grinning from her perch on Kegan's back while slapping a beat on his shoulder blades, but then she gave Layla an ornery wink and tugged on his hair. “Whoa, there,” she ordered. Then she reached over his shoulder and patted his chest. “Good boy.”

Kegan smiled as he reached behind him, hooking her waist with one arm. Then he flipped her in front of him, spun her around, and tossed her over his shoulder. After a playful slap to the ass,

he started tickling her thighs, and she giggled and kicked her feet, powerless to escape his strong arms.

“Help me, Bann,” she squealed. But Banning just pointed and laughed as he headed for their parents, who were several yards away with the majority of their coven, alertly sitting on a raised wooden platform positioned high enough to view the entire clearing.

“Weylin,” Brietta called, still searching for aid.

Weylin smirked and ruffled her hair, passing by with one arm wrapped around the unknown witch, who was curiously watching Quin and Layla.

Layla offered a polite smile, and while she examined the stranger’s dainty

face, she made sure her gaze didn't roam below her chin. Although, Layla was pretty sure it wouldn't matter if it did. Why would the witch show her breasts if it upset her when people looked at them?

Weylin halted when his eyes fell on Layla, and he ran his gaze from her head to her toes, getting a good look at her for the first time since she'd gotten the tinsel treatment from her grandmas. “Hey, gorgeous.”

“Hey, Wey.”

“Are there wings under that cloak?”

She blushed as she thought about what *was* under the cloak. “I'm going to leave you guessing on that one.”

His grin widened. “Good idea. Keep the intrigue going. This is Fiona,” he

revealed, motioning to the witch tucked under his arm. “I’m sure you’ve already heard their names.”

Fiona nodded as she offered her hand. “Yes – Quin and Layla. It’s nice to meet you.”

Layla shook her hand. Then Quin did the same.

“We’re getting a bite to eat,” Weylin said, looking at Layla, “but I’ll be watching you, because I have a bet going with Bann.”

“What kind of bet?” Layla nervously asked.

Weylin laughed as he led Fiona toward the food. “I’m going to leave you guessing on that one.”

Layla wrinkled her nose, thinking she

deserved the cheap shot.

Brietta had been freed from the tickling, but Kegan had other snares, and the two of them ignored the world as they teased and kissed each other.

Quin took Layla's hand and led her toward their family, but halfway there they had to stop for a large crowd heading for the food. They both watched the variety of magicians file past, and when the horde thinned, he found her profile. "Let's go see where we stand on time."

Layla felt his gaze on her, but hers was aimed at two bare-breasted women who'd altered their path to the food so they could ogle Quin. They'd been toward the back of the crowd, chatting

as they followed the flow, but when the brunette with the rather large breasts spotted Quin, she grabbed her perky-breasted, blonde friend and pulled her toward him. They barely hesitated, just long enough to flip their gazes to Layla, noting her cloak with judgmental expressions, and apparently they determined they had no competition in such a modest witch, because they flashed knowing smiles at each other and walked forward.

Layla looked at Quin and found his attentive stare. He had no idea he was being hunted.

“What’s that about?” he asked, reaching for her scowl.

She pointed at the witches, who’d

stopped right in front of him. “I believe they want to talk to you.”

He looked forward, and his eyebrows shot up, but he wisely kept his gaze on their faces. His own was etched with understanding as he glanced at Layla. Then he greeted the women with a polite smile.

“Ladies. May I help you with something?”

The brunette held out a hand. “You're Quin, right?”

He accepted the gesture as he answered. “Yes.”

“I'm Idelle; this is Jenny.”

The blonde extended her hand, and Quin shook it before pulling Layla under his arm and pointing her out. “This is

Layla.”

The witches didn't even look at her, let alone shake her hand.

“You seem to make a lot of the decisions around here, Quin,” Idelle noted. “Is this your party?”

“I wouldn't say that,” he answered. “It's a group effort.”

“Aren't you a humble wizard?” Jenny observed, shamelessly scanning his chest. “A rare gem.”

“Rare indeed,” Idelle added. “So, since you're not running the show, I guess it doesn't matter if you miss some of it. Would you like to take a break from the masses and join Jenny and me for a walk through the firs? We'd enjoy getting to know you better.”

Layla sucked her lips into her teeth. *Did Idelle just invite my wizard out into the woods for a ménage a trois? Right in front of me? While I was watching and listening?* Layla couldn't believe it. She knew wizards were bold, but she had no idea witches were so brazen.

Her incredulous eyes narrowed on the intruders, but she managed to keep her mouth shut, determined not to make a jealous fool of herself.

Quin seemed genuinely shocked as well, and he kept Layla close as he answered. "I'm not interested."

"Well that's a lie," Jenny huffed, and Layla's mouth fell open.

"There's no point in lying," Idelle

insisted, sparing Layla a glance, but her eyes went right back to her target. “Not when we have such precious little time to work with. I'm sure your lady friend understands you need things she just can't provide.”

“Says who?” Layla countered, unable to keep quiet a second longer. “What on earth makes you think you have more than I have?”

Quin looked at Layla with wide eyes. Then he cleared his throat and tightened his hold. “Let's go.”

He attempted to lead her around the women, but Layla stood firm. “Well?” she sharply prompted. “Let's hear what makes you so damn special.”

Unfazed by being called out, Idelle

confidently raised her chin. “First of all, there are two of us and only one of you. And frankly, sweetie,” she added, motioning to Layla's cloaked body, “you don't seem too worried about keeping Quin's eyes on you, which tells me you're not too worried about keeping him satisfied.”

Layla was seething, but she fought hard to keep her actions from reflecting her anger. “You're mistaken, Idelle, so you and your friend need to move on to another conquest. This wizard's spoken for.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Why don't you let him speak for himself?”

“I already told you,” Quin interjected, “I'm not interested, not even tempted.

Find someone who is.” He didn't wait for a reply before leading Layla around them, but they felt the need to respond anyway.

“She must have sent him to obedience school,” Jenny scoffed.

“Apparently,” Idelle smirked. “I mean, she has a pretty face and all, but she wears that cloak like a condom. I bet the poor guy doesn't even get to see it when he makes love to it.”

Layla halted and took a deep breath, using both magic and meditation to cool down. She was determined to remain calm, but she was also determined to force the witches' catty words back down their skinny, little throats.

“Come on, love,” Quin insisted, but

she didn't budge.

Once she had her emotions in check, she removed his arm from her shoulders, but she kept his hand as she turned, pulling him around with her. "Hey," she called, getting the witches' attention. Then she took another deep breath and vanished her cloak.

Uncomfortable with the entire situation, Quin watched Idelle and Jenny while waiting for Layla to say what she needed to say. When the witches' arrogant expressions melted and their mouths dropped open, he had no idea why.

He glanced at Layla's face, finding it calm. Then he did a double-take, his own mouth falling open as he took a step back and scanned her body. His breath caught in his chest as his throat swelled shut, and even though he was touching her, his heart became his own for a moment, stuttering, then stopping, then slamming against his ribs.

She was always stunning, and the outfit by no means made the woman beneath it, but it enhanced the natural glow she always possessed, and it unveiled personality traits she usually hid, busting open her shell and exposing everything beautiful about her. No one in the world, let alone the crowded clearing, could compare to her radiance

when she let it shine. She eclipsed them all.

“Suck on that bitter lollypop,” she said, staring down the stunned witches, “and maybe it will humble you. You shouldn't be so quick to judge, and you should learn to take no for an answer. Obviously he's not going to accept anything from either of you while I'm around, and I'm not going anywhere, so I suggest you move along before you make me angry.”

Quin smiled, surprised and pleased she was sticking up for herself, and the witches blushed as they diverted their eyes and walked away.

Layla impatiently waited for them to move out of earshot. Then she looked at

Quin and flashed a smile. “Can you believe that? I just made two topless witches blush. Brietta would be proud.”

“Hell yeah, I am,” Brietta called out, and Layla jolted.

“Now *that* was entertainment,” Weylin noted, lounging on the ground. “And Bann owes me fifty bucks.” He looked up at Banning, who sat on the edge of the raised platform. “I told you she’d fight fire with fire. Just because she’s an angel, doesn’t mean she’ll let another witch target her wizard.”

Layla looked around, realizing their family and dozens of strangers were watching, and she burned with a full-body blush as she turned back to Quin. “Damn it. And I was doing so good.”

“Layla,” he whispered, lifting her gaze to his.

All he wanted to do was touch her. Nothing else mattered in comparison. She was the perfect drug calling his name in the sweetest of ways, and he had to have a taste. One of his hungry hands moved to her heart then slid over her bare shoulder, working its way under sparkling spirals to the back of her neck. His other hand stretched across her back. Then he pulled her against him, pressing her cleavage to his tight stomach. Her fingernails dipped into his sides, and he quietly growled as he grabbed her ass and pulled her up his body, finding her ear with his mouth. “You look amazing.”

“Oh yeah?” she breathed.

“Mmm hmm...” His starving lips trailed down her neck, his tongue eager for her shoulder, but he managed to rein himself in long enough to mind search his dad. *'How much time do I have?'*

'Forty-five minutes.'

That would have to do. Quin pulled himself from her hair. Then he concealed their bodies and headed for the forest.

The rhythm of distant drums vibrated through Layla's body like the echoing growl of a far-off thunderstorm, but all she could see were the backs of her eyelids as she sedately hovered in

Quin's magic, letting him repair and replace the skimpy outfit he'd ripped off her thirty minutes before. She concentrated on his hands while he concentrated on her, and neither of them spoke until his task was complete.

He moved a forefinger to her cleavage, taking a moment to trace the soft flesh flowing from the scalloped silver. Then he rested his hand over her heart. "My perfect angel."

Pulling his hand from her chest to her cheek, she rubbed her face in his palm. Then she swallowed hard when his familiar scent fluttered her heartstrings. "Bonded couples never leave each other, right?"

"Not if they can help it," he answered,

moving his other hand to her face. “And bonded or not, I'll never leave you.”

“Will you want another woman's body?”

“Let me see your eyes, love.”

She looked at him, and he leaned closer. “Why are you asking me these things?”

“Because I need to hear the answers.”

“Don't you know them?”

“I need to hear them, Quin.” Keeping her lips in his left palm, she moved the right to her heart. “If we live through this, and sometime down the road, two beautiful and topless witches offer you their bodies, will you want them?”

“No,” he answered, flipping her

upright, but he kept her floating in his spell.

She searched his eyes, wanting so badly to believe him, but a person can't control what their body wants.

“Why do you doubt me, Layla?”

“Can you promise?” she returned.

“Can you promise you'll never want another woman?”

“I can. Not because I'm a saint or the king of monogamy, but because our relationship is incredible, and you're as extraordinary as a person can get. You'll always be the one I see when I close my eyes, and while I believe other women are beautiful and deserve my respect, only one gets my heart and soul. You're my one and only, Layla, and it will be

that way forever. Fate and blessed magic have made it so, and I'm grateful they have, because it's what I want most. You, me and forever.”

“You just promised, Quin. You just promised me forever.”

“I thought I'd already offered you forever.”

“You have.”

“Then why are looking for additional coverage?”

“Because I'm insecure,” she confessed.

He furrowed his eyebrows and tilted his head. “It's been a while since you've felt insecure about yourself when it comes to our relationship. Have I done something that worries you? Or have I

stopped doing something?”

“No, Quin, please don't put this on yourself. Here,” she said, pulling her face from his palm. “Bring me closer.”

He obeyed, pulling her body against his, and she reached for his jaw while staring into his eyes. “You've done everything right, but I can't compete with multiple women throwing themselves at you. I feel confident I can handle one witch, but I'm only one person, so when they start attacking you in packs I'm at a huge disadvantage. I know you find me more beautiful than them, and I know I do things for you they can't, but they offered you the one thing I'll never be able to provide, and that made me insecure, no matter how wonderful you

were in turning them away.”

“Do you feel better now?”

“I do. It helps to know our bonding secures my number one spot. And please don't think that's because I don't trust you, because I do, but acting on something and wanting something are two different things. A person has no control over what they want.”

“That's true,” he agreed, keeping his eyes on her face as he floated toward the clearing, “but I assure you, Layla, you have nothing to worry about. And I'm not just saying that because we're bonded. I'm saying it because of who I am and who you are. I'd never choose a trail lined with dozens of average flowers when there's another that leads to a

perfect rose. Two witches are not better than one, not in my case. I have the best.”

“Thank you.”

He laughed as he shook his head. Then he tapped the tip of her nose with his own. “I should be thanking you, my love. I can't believe Morrigan and Daleen got you to wear this.”

“It's a good thing you didn't bet Serafin, huh?”

“It wouldn't matter if I had. I'd burn all my money to see you confidently standing in an outfit that shows off exactly how stunning you are.”

“So it pleases you?”

“Yes. I'd absolutely be lying if I said otherwise.”

The music had grown louder, and they could hear obscure voices floating through the tall tree trunks and ferns. Quin's feet touched the mossy earth, but he kept her in his arms. "Will you be putting your cloak back on?"

"No."

"Really?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Really," she confirmed. "Will you keep me warm?"

"Of course." He searched her aura then found her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Do you want me to put it on?"

"I want you to be comfortable."

"Well I can't say I'm comfortable walking around like this, and I never intended for anyone to see it, but I also

don't feel comfortable having to defend my territory against the hungry hellcats. Apparently seeing me covered up makes them think you're an easy target, and I have enough fighting to do without having to chase women away, so I think I'll let the cloak stay in your bag. Maybe they'll think twice before swooping in on what's mine when it's obvious I intend to keep it.”

His lips twitched into a smile. “You're sexy when you're passionate, Layla, and I love that you're willing to fight for me, but it's unnecessary.”

“I'm still not going to give them an open invitation to take their best shot. It has to be embarrassing when they fall on their faces, and I don't need a bunch of

witches pissed off at me for humiliating them.”

“Pull your lights in,” he instructed, and they both concealed their auras and bonded lights as he continued toward the clearing. “I doubt I get another invitation. People were on the prowl earlier, but if they haven't found what they're looking for by now, they're out of luck and out of time. We're close to abandoning camp.”

Her heart jumped into a supernatural race, pulling his with it, and he adjusted the force he held her with.

“Are we going to the glacier?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered. “We'll organize then wait for grandpa Cat. Hopefully

he'll show up with news that Agro got our message and took the bait."

"Where did you leave the message?"

"It's triggered to start the moment he lands on our lawn."

The clearing became visible through the trees, and he halted while finding her face. "Are you sure about the cloak?"

"Yes, and you don't have to put me down if you don't want to. They might have a harder time flirting with you if they have to look around my head to see your face."

His dimples appeared as he continued walking. "I didn't know you possessed such a jealous streak, my love."

"I didn't either," she returned, wrinkling her nose.

He crossed the clearing to the platform. Then he leapt onto it and joined his parents and Layla's grandparents. "Are we close?"

"Yes," Caitrin answered. "We're about to cut the music."

"Oh yeah?" Quin asked, glancing at the musicians. Then he looked at Layla. "Will you dance with me?"

The invite surprised her, but she quickly erased her dumb expression and smiled. "Yes."

"We'll be back," he said, taking flight toward the center of the clearing.

He landed near the impromptu band. Then he got the attention of a wizard playing a guitar and told him they had one more song. The guitarist nodded

before breaking the news to the others, and Quin carried Layla to an uncrowded section of the glade.

“Would you like to touch the ground,” he asked, “or would you prefer I hold you?”

“I’m just fine right here,” she answered, wrapping her arms around his neck.

His dimples deepened. “Then that’s where you’ll stay.”

The song flowed into a sweeter tune, but it stayed upbeat, and Quin braced her with magic, keeping her eye-to-eye with him as he laid a palm on her lower back and took her right hand. Once he held her stare, he smiled and winked. Then he moved into their dance, staying on the

edges of the crowd while carrying her into quick, playful twirls and wide, graceful spins.

He didn't stop until the music faded into the forest. Then he kissed her nose and cheeks before diving in for her smile. It was with great reluctance that they severed the kiss, but she stayed in his arms as he returned to their family and landed next to Brietta.

“Where's Bann?” Quin asked, scanning the crowd around the platform.

Brietta's face flushed as she threw Layla a glance. Then she raised an eyebrow at Quin. “Banning found himself a date.”

“Good for him,” Quin returned, giving Brietta a shrug.

Kegan flashed a smile as he softly pinched her nose. “It would be more accurate to say he found two dates, don't you think?”

“You think it's funny?” she scolded.

Kegan stifled his grin as he ran a forefinger across her wrinkled forehead. “Give the kid a break, hon. Why would he turn them down?”

“I thought that was obvious.”

“What's the deal, Bri?” Quin asked. “Why do you care what Banning does or how many people he does it with?”

Her eyes narrowed on the tree line as she jabbed a finger toward it, and Quin and Layla looked to see what had her so riled.

Banning had just emerged from the

timber with a satisfied expression and aura, and he was accompanied by Idelle and Jenny.

Layla's mouth fell open, and she couldn't help but laugh as she turned back to Brietta. "Why does that upset you?"

Brietta scowled, but then she sighed and relaxed. "I thought it would upset you. But apparently I was wrong."

"Stop worrying about me," Layla warmly insisted. "And no, I'm not the least bit upset with Banning." She grinned as she glanced at him and his *dates*. "I'm glad it worked out for him. If I'd been thinking straight, I would have sent them his way the moment they walked up. It would have saved

everyone embarrassment and time.”

“It would have saved *them* embarrassment,” Brietta corrected. “You had absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about. You crushed them quite beautifully, and I was very impressed.”

“I think everyone on this half of the clearing was impressed,” Kegan agreed. Then he laughed as he looked behind Quin and Layla. “Trying to come up with excuses, Bann?”

Layla looked as well, grinning at Banning’s nervous posture. “You don’t have to make excuses on my account,” she assured. “I’m glad you could help them sweep up their shattered egos.”

He instantly shed the guilt and flew

onto the platform, landing beside her.

“And help them I did.”

“You can leave out the details,” Layla insisted. “Save those for Weylin. I'm sure he'll be glad to listen.”

“I second that,” Brietta added. “I don't need to hear the specifics of my baby brother's first threesome.”

“Who says it was my first?” Banning countered.

Brietta wrinkled her nose as Kegan and Quin laughed. But then the laughing died when Caitrin magically magnified his voice and called for everyone's attention.

It was time to make their way to the battlegrounds.

Chapter 46

The setting sun reflected brightly off snow-covered, easterly mountains, but only a sliver of the small lake still captured the solar rays to reveal its magnificent blue surface. The rest of the water was shrouded in mountainous shadows and resembled a slab of pewter, solid in its appearance save for the slight wakes occasionally roused by the unconventionally calm wind.

When more than two-hundred magicians flowed in from a trail between two westward mountains, the white glacier slowly filled with color,

and the loose layers of snow danced up in swirls around alighting feet. Those seeing the area for the first time looked around, taking in the views while judging if the location was battle worthy, and on both accounts, the army seemed satisfied.

Quin landed next to his family. Then he filled Layla with magical warmth while casting a spell to protect her feet, ankles and calves. After lowering her soles to the frozen earth, he reached up and felt her face. “Are you warm?”

“Yes,” she assured, nuzzling his palm.

“Let me know if that changes.” He kissed her forehead then turned to Caitrin. “We need to keep a close eye on

the mercenaries from now on. If they're here for Layla, their time's up and they'll be acting soon. They won't want her going into battle.”

“I agree,” Caitrin replied, glancing toward the suspicious group. “We need to start separating our fighters by skill. Then we'll put them into formation. We don't want any last minute confusion giving Agro the edge.”

Quin nodded his approval. Then he and Layla followed his parents and her grandparents around the glacier, picking out the strongest attackers, the most reliable defenders, and any others who possessed unusual skill. They divided them as they went, placing them into separate ranks so they could organize

their lines and clarify what everyone's responsibilities would be.

As they walked among the masses, Quin tossed back shot after shot of jealousy. Layla was out of her cloak and out of his arms, providing everyone with a heavenly view. He forced himself to accept the gazes constantly flipping toward her. He couldn't blame them for staring, so he endured the bitter medicine as well as the tension that overtook him when particularly obscene expressions flitted across gawking faces.

By the time they were ready to begin placing soldiers into their positions, the entire area was shadowed, and the moon had appeared overhead, its edges blurred by a twilight sky. Due to the

missing sun and the wind that had found its way into the basin, the temperature had dropped, and many magicians were huddled around floating fires, keeping themselves warm without constantly making it magically so.

Quin gave Layla another burst of heat, keeping her close as they made their way through a knot of magicians sitting on magical chairs, and when he pulled her hand from his lips, his gaze landed on a wizard sitting two feet away. He was staring at Layla like a starving convict faced with a prime piece of beef, and his fingers twitched as his vulgar gaze took in her body. Quin's attention stayed fixed on the wizard's hands as they walked by, and it wasn't until they'd

moved past that the guy made a foolish mistake.

With raised eyebrows and lewdly curved lips, he reached for her ass.

The insolent fingers made it halfway to their goal before Quin had them in his grip, and he squeezed with less force than he wanted to as he bent them toward the man's tattooed chest, nearly snapping his thick wrist.

“If you want to keep that hand,” Quin growled, “you'll keep it to yourself.”

Spit gathered at the corners of the wizard's mouth as he hissed through clenched teeth, and his aura expanded as he glanced to his left and right. Quin's eyes followed, finding two wizards flanking his captive, and they looked

pissed. Shit.

Quin blindly reached around Layla's waist, and as he swept her behind him, the two meddlers started to stand, intent on sticking up for their friend. Quin's mind flashed through possible solutions, but the wizards didn't get a chance to cause trouble. Before they could even straighten, Layla hovered up Quin's back and stretched her arms over his shoulders, shooting two pencil-thin streams of fire at the interfering wizards. The burning currents came within half an inch of their right eyeballs before halting, and the wizards froze, fearfully staring at the tiny, red-hot flames scorching the moisture from their twitching eyelids.

Quin and the man in his grip froze as well, worried even the slightest jolt would force Layla's fire to find its marks, and Quin didn't even breathe as he assessed the situation, severely uncomfortable with the position she'd put herself in.

But she was steady as a rock as she looked down her burning beams to their targets, and her voice stayed even as she spoke. "I suggest you sit back down, gentlemen, and let your friend deal with his own consequences."

The two men swallowed, leaning their heads away as they slowly lowered their butts to their chairs, and Layla's fire followed, staying within an inch of their eyeballs with perfect precision. The

burning streams of magic looked like laser beams rather than flames, and they didn't shift, flare or waver as she steered them through the air.

Quin pulled in a careful breath, finding the eyes of the man who started the confrontation with his itchy fingers. "If you try to touch her again, I'll rip off your hand and turn it to ash. Do you understand?"

"I got it, man," the wizard grunted, and Quin released him, but he didn't straighten. Layla was still within a few centimeters of burning out a couple of eyes.

"Let them go, love," Quin instructed.

She obeyed, letting the cold wind separate the beams of fire into wisps of

smoke, and Quin kept his eyes on the three bitter magicians as he backed away.

Layla's grandparents moved in, blocking his view as they formed a protective circle around them. Then Kemble and Cordelia parted the crowd of dumbfounded bystanders so their family could safely emerge.

Quin pulled Layla from his back to his chest, worried the incident might have upset her, but she looked fine. "I'd say they just learned a valuable lesson," he noted.

She shrugged. "Some people never learn."

"True, but I doubt they mess with you again. That was amazing. I've never seen

anything like it.”

“Neither has anyone else,” Caitrin interjected, nodding toward the army.

Quin and Layla glanced around, finding everyone staring at them as they gossiped. Layla blushed and turned away, and Quin kissed her shoulder, filling her with heat while looking at Caitrin. “They’re going to figure us out soon anyway. We’re about to perform unheard of magic, and we need to release our auras to do it. It uses too much energy to keep them concealed.” He lowered his voice. “Our bonded lights will stay hidden until we’re ready for Agro to see them.”

Caitrin nodded. Then he looked to the inky blue sky, which had lost the sun's

kiss altogether and was sprinkled with bright stars and a clear moon. It wouldn't remain that way for long. An ominous line of gray clouds rolled in from the southwest, threatening rain and decreased visibility.

“Well,” Caitrin said, looking at Serafin and Kemble, “let's start lining them up.”

They flew to the southern side of the glacier, which was bordered by a massive crag stretching at least three-hundred feet across and fifty feet straight up. Positioning the army at the base of the cliff would prevent them from being surrounded, which was the worst thing to be when deadly magic was flying.

Everyone who'd volunteered from the

Cormac/Adair and Owen/Sullivan covens, along with nearly everyone from Layla and Quin's coven, lined up in front of the protuberant stone, taking the safest positions in the planned battle formation. This was the one stipulation Quin and Layla wouldn't budge on. If their friends and family were going to fight, they'd be in the best position to survive. Only his parents and her grandparents would join them on the front line.

Caitrin turned to the watching volunteers and called for the magicians with the least amount of experience to line up to the right and left of his loved ones. Then he summoned those who possessed powerful defensive spells and instructed them to form a row five feet in

front of the first. More witches and wizards who possessed average skill lined up next to them before spilling into a third row. And the fourth and final row, the one furthest from the stone backdrop, consisted of their most powerful and practiced magicians, including ten bonded children, five bonded couples, four sets of twins, and one set of triplets.

The only magicians left to place were the mercenaries, who insisted on staying together, so Caitrin instructed them to fall into formation at the east end of the army. They easily agreed and flocked to their positions.

The entire process had gone smoothly, and those who orchestrated it were

surprised and relieved their army was being so patient and compliant as they stood in uniform rows, waiting for their next instructions.

Quin breathed heat into Layla with a kiss before lowering her feet to the ice. Then Caitrin moved to her side, magically magnifying his voice while speaking to the crowd. “When the Unforgivables arrive, each of you will be poised to attack on command, but you won't be casting your own spells.”

A rumble of confusion rose up from the soldiers, and Caitrin raised his hands for silence. “I know you're confused, but we'll make it perfectly clear for you. Layla and Quin can perform magic that will be extremely beneficial to our

cause, and if you'll be patient and open-minded while Layla demonstrates it for us, you'll see just how beneficial it will be.” He paused, searching the front row of soldiers. Then he pointed to one of the bonded children. “You, sir. Your name’s Doyle, right?”

“Yes,” the man answered.

“What’s your element?” Caitrin asked.

“Fire.”

“Perfect. Will you volunteer for us?”

“Sure,” Doyle agreed, stepping out of formation. Then he walked forward as Caitrin spoke to the crowd.

“Doyle’s a bonded child, a fire child.” He looked at his subject. “Will you give us an example of your largest fireball?”

Doyle nodded then walked several

feet away and stretched his hand in the air. His fireball was impressive, about twenty feet in diameter and perfectly round, and the crowd mumbled its approval as Doyle confidently returned to Caitrin.

Caitrin offered him a smile then addressed the army. "I'm sure everyone agrees Doyle's fire magic is some of the best around. But now we'd like to show you what Layla and Quin can do with fire, because their spells are beyond impressive, and they can put them into other people without any adverse effects."

The glacier hummed with doubt, and Caitrin had to call for everyone's attention. "Please be patient and give us

a chance to show you what we're talking about. We're limited on time.”

The crowd obeyed, and Caitrin looked at Doyle, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. “Layla's going to summon her fire magic into your body, Doyle. Then, when I tell you to, you'll cast it off as if it's your own.”

“I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that,” Doyle replied. “How is she supposed to do that without burning me?”

Layla stepped forward and gave him a reassuring smile. “I promise I won't burn you. I've done it several times, and I've never burned anyone.”

Quin stifled a laugh as he watched a dumbfounded expression slide over

Doyle's face, and he wondered if Layla noticed the effect her smile and voice had on the stranger. If she did, she didn't show it.

Doyle nodded his approval, and Layla took his right hand, raising it up so everyone could watch as she touched her fingertips to his. When her comfortable heat flooded his insides, his trance broke, and he looked from her face to his hand. "It's not possible."

"We're proving it is," Caitrin disagreed. Then he took several steps away to avoid getting charred by Layla's magic. The others around Doyle followed suit, and Caitrin looked at the army. "You just saw Doyle's strongest fireball. Now you're going to see him

casting Layla's fireball, and I assure you it's hers, not his. Will you tell them what you're experiencing, Doyle?"

Doyle swallowed his amazement. Then he spoke to the crowd while staring at his hand. "Warmth filled the upper-half of my body when she touched my fingers. It's similar to the feeling I get when I summon my own fire, but more intense and... foreign. It's definitely hers, not mine."

"But it doesn't hurt, correct?" Caitrin clarified.

"No," Doyle confirmed, "it doesn't hurt at all. It feels... empowering and energizing and... and... amazing."

"Thank you," Caitrin returned, ignoring the crowd's murmurs. "Now

expel the fire as if it were your own.”

Doyle obeyed, releasing Layla's fireball, which was twice as bright and twice as big as his. The result had him stumbling back, and the observers loudly gasped as the burst of flames illuminated their faces. Quin ignored the magic and watched the mercenaries' reactions to it. A spark of excitement flashed in their eyes as they shifted, but many in the army had the same response.

Caitrin waited for the crowd to quiet down then spoke above the whispers. “As you can see, Layla's fire magic surpasses Doyle's, and the same is true for Quin's, so they'll be filling each of you with it before the Unforgivables arrive, and it will be their spells that

will lead the initial attack. Do not add your own fire to theirs. They will be filling you with as much as your body can handle. If you add to it, you'll burn yourselves. Wait until their magic has cleared your body before casting your own spells." He paused and looked at Doyle. "You can return to your place now, Doyle. Thank you."

Doyle looked away from Layla and shook his head clear. Then he made his way back to the line of shocked magicians.

Caitrin turned to Quin and lowered his voice. "If you're going to release your auras, you should do it now. Get the shock over with so we can move on."

Quin thought for a moment then looked

at Layla. “Do you have a preference?”

“Not really,” she answered. “They already know we're not average, so if you feel more confident in your magic when you're not concealing your aura, we should release them now. If you accidentally burn one of them, they won't let us follow through with the plan.”

“Good point,” Quin conceded. Then he mind searched his dad. *'Don't take your eyes off the mercenaries.'*

Kemble nodded, and Quin looked at Caitrin. “I guess it's time.”

The eight of them lined up side by side, looking toward their army, and only Kemble and Cordelia shone with auras and bonded lights. But soon the row brightened as the other six released

their auras and Layla's grandparents revealed their golden hazes.

The mercenaries jerked to attention, but everyone was bursting with curiosity, disbelief and awe as they scanned the shiny line of magicians.

The air filled with a steady thrum of voices as the army shifted, and several people shouted questions and doubts, but when a witch stepped out from the second row and walked forward, the rest of the army quieted to observe the exchange. “You told us Layla wasn't a bonded child,” she pointed out. “If you lied about that, why should we believe a word you've told us?”

“Yeah,” several people shouted.

Quin pulled Layla closer, preparing

for an uprising, and Caitrin tightly clutched Morrigan's hand as he stepped forward. "What makes you think Layla's a bonded child?"

More murmurs rose from the crowd, and the witch who'd stepped forward pointed at Layla. "Look at her. She's not a normal witch."

"That doesn't mean she's a bonded child," Caitrin countered. Then he gestured toward the front row of soldiers. "Look at the bonded children behind you. Does Layla's aura look anything like theirs?"

The witch and everyone else obeyed, comparing Layla's aura to the much less impressive auras of the other bonded children. Then the brave spokeswoman

returned her gaze to Caitrin. “But he admits to being a bonded child,” she said, pointing at Quin, “and his aura doesn't look like the others either.”

“You're right,” Caitrin conceded. “Nor does it look like Layla's, so your argument doesn't hold water.”

“But aren't you two her parents?” the witch asked, motioning to him and Morrigan, but then her eyebrows furrowed in confusion as she pointed to Serafin and Daleen. “Or you two?”

“No,” Caitrin answered. “Layla's parents aren't here.”

“You expect us to believe she's not related to you?”

“I didn't say that. I'm her grandfather.”

“Oh,” the witch breathed.

Caitrin scanned the rest of their soldiers to make sure he had their attention. “Obviously Quin and Layla are unique, but we won't explain why, so I suggest you try to move past your curiosity so we can prepare ourselves. We're quickly running out of time.”

The witch appraised Quin and Layla for another moment. Then she shrugged and made her way back to her designated spot. No one else stepped forward or argued, so Caitrin spoke again. “Thank you for your understanding. Now, Layla and Quin are going to start placing their fire in you while the rest of us answer any last minute questions. Call for our attention if you have something to say. We're

willing to listen until time runs out.” He lowered his voice as he turned to Serafin and Daleen. “You two follow Quinlan and Layla. Stick to them like glue. Start with the front row, then work your way back to our family. Save the mercenaries for last. And hurry. We'll feel more prepared once this is done.”

Chapter 47

Guthrie glanced at Lynette as they drifted over treetops, searching the forest with eyes and ears and magic. When she met his stare, she shook her head. Then she dropped back, putting distance between herself and the boss. Another soldier followed suit, then another, and Guthrie couldn't blame them. If history served as evidence, Agro was about to go on a murdering rampage, because the closer they drew to the Conn/Kavanagh lawn, the clearer it became – no one was there.

The houses came into view – houses

that would likely go up in flames soon – and Guthrie looked at Token, unsurprised he hadn't fallen back as well. The guy never got ruffled or fought the inevitable. He just cruised through life on whatever rollercoaster he got tossed on, counting on his status as a bonded child to either save him... or not. It didn't matter as long as he had access to good booze, weed and women while on the ride.

Agro descended toward the lawn, and Guthrie followed, unafraid of dying. But his nerves were hopping due to Lynette and the damn plan she set in motion when she killed Dolan. Guthrie wasn't a fucking traitor or a leader. Like Token, Guthrie was just waiting for the end of

the ride. He didn't want to leave his mark on the world, and he didn't give a damn about the army converging on the deserted clearing. Silestra meant more to him, which was why he left her behind for this mission.

Agro growled as he landed. Then everyone tensed and ducked as a colorful cloud rushed from the middle of the lawn. The fog rolled outward, and those who hadn't landed yet floated backward, while those on the ground poised to take flight.

“Wait,” Agro demanded.

Everyone obeyed, watching with wide eyes as the colored smoke shifted into a scene, an image of the same lawn they stood on, but the way the foggy image

merged with reality made it look like daytime. A woman appeared in the middle of the lawn, and the army tensed again, preparing to defend themselves against the witch. But she wasn't real. She was composed of expertly placed smoke... and she was beautiful.

“Search the perimeters of the lawn,” Guthrie shouted. “Whoever’s doing this has to be close.”

“No,” Agro mumbled, walking forward. “It’s a message.”

“Or a trap.”

Agro kept walking toward the woman, ignoring the rest of the world as he watched her wrap a line of butterflies in bubbles.

Guthrie sighed as he glanced between

them. Then Token moved to his side, always quick with a dry joke. “Let him go. I’ve never seen his aura so happy.”

Guthrie smirked. There was no happiness in the boss’ aura and there never had been.

Agro got a good view of the witch’s ass as she walked away from him, and he followed, far beyond the safety of his troops. He truly was obsessed.

“What do you think all this is about?” Guthrie asked.

Token shrugged. “A message, like he said. If they have an army, they want him to come, and he’s taking the bait.”

“Because he doesn’t know they have an army,” Guthrie hissed.

Token looked at him as he pointed at

Agro. “Does it look like it would matter if he did? Just a smoky vision of her has him in a trance.”

She stopped, and Agro moved in close, examining her face as she swept a hand through the air and pulled a huge rainbow from the ground.

Agro marveled at the magic, and Token clucked his tongue while shaking his head. “Looks like we’re off to slaughter a lamb. She’s gorgeous, isn’t she?”

“Not you, too,” Guthrie mumbled, but he couldn’t argue. She looked like an angel, one Agro wanted to corrupt and torture until her world was black and void of rainbows.

“Don’t underestimate her,” Lynette cut

in from behind them. “She’s dangerous.”

Guthrie glanced over his shoulder, finding Lynette watching the witch as if studying the enemy’s technique.

“They’re rainbows and butterflies, Lyn.”

“Can you make a butterfly?”

Guthrie looked forward as he answered. “No.”

“Neither can I. That witch is no joke.”

“Well whatever she is, she’d be better off getting slaughtered than what the boss has planned for her.”

“Then let’s see it done,” Token suggested. “I’m with Lyn on this one. Agro’s out of his mind and about to get us killed, and we’ve never had an easier way out. I know you came to terms with

living and dying this way a long time ago, but the situation has changed, and we're in the position to come out on top. Lyn has her girls, and if you'd make up your damn mind and vouch for us, we could sway another dozen or so, some of them bonded children."

"Why don't you take charge, Toke?"

"I don't want the job, and I don't have the seniority you do. Besides, I've been leading the same troop for more than a decade. These soldiers don't know me. And they don't trust Lyn."

"They shouldn't."

Token laughed. "Ain't that the truth."

Lynette sniffed, but she kept her mouth shut and her eyes on the smoky woman, who'd been putting on one hell of a

magic show for Agro. He'd been bewitched the entire time, following her around the lawn and observing her every move, and not in an effort to learn the enemy's tactics. He studied her like a scientist obsessed with his specimen.

"Tell you what," Token suggested, "ask him when he's done."

"What?" Guthrie returned, looking at his comrade.

"When the boss is done ogling his mark," Token explained, "point out the obvious – that they're reeling him in. Then you'll know if he's as crazy as we think he is, or if he has enough sense to pull us out of this mess."

"Wait a minute," Lynette objected, but Token held up a hand, signaling her to

stop.

“It’s fair,” he insisted. “It will soothe Guthrie’s conscience, and his options should be clear before he’s forced to choose.”

“He still won’t know about their army,” Guthrie pointed out.

“Then mention the probability there is one,” Token allowed. “If he has any sense left, he already realizes he’s facing more than a coven.”

The foggy scene started drifting apart, and Guthrie stepped away from Token, watching the colored smoke curl toward the middle of the lawn. The magic seeped into the ground from which it sprung, and Agro’s tumultuous aura swelled as he walked to the spot.

Guthrie approached as well, and as the last of the smoke cleared, a note appeared.

“Clever,” Guthrie mumbled.

Agro knelt and snatched the paper from the ground. “Coordinates. She’s in Washington, about two hours from here.”

Guthrie glanced at Token then returned his gaze to the boss. “You realize what this means, right?”

“They’re waiting for me,” Agro answered, straightening from the ground. Then he slowly scanned the lawn, as if reliving the scene he just witnessed.

“Yes,” Guthrie confirmed, “and they’re probably not alone.”

Still looking around, Agro didn’t respond, and when he finished rehashing

the magical message, he merely tucked the note in his cloak and raised his hood.

Guthrie cleared his throat. “Their numbers, sir. Aren’t you concerned?”

Agro looked over, his narrow eyes flaming. “About what?”

“Losing.”

“Losing what? You?” He poked Guthrie in the chest with a forefinger then walked to Lynette, grabbing her by the hair. “Her?”

Lynette’s nostril’s flared as her eyes flashed, but then Agro pushed her aside and returned to Guthrie. “I don’t give a shit what I lose as long as I don’t lose my witch. Understand?”

Guthrie’s teeth hurt his jaw was so tight, but after taking a slow and steady

breath, he gave a calm and obedient nod.
“To Washington then.”

Chapter 48

Snow flurries began swirling around the glacier about thirty minutes after Quin and Layla started filling people with fire, but the army stayed still and cooperative.

Closely followed by Serafin and Daleen, Quin and Layla worked quickly and efficiently despite the fact that Quin was picky about who was allowed to make contact with Layla. All the wizards hopefully eyeballing her were, to their obvious dismay, filled with Quin's fire instead of hers, and she was ushered past any magician Quin deemed shady.

When they approached two topless and familiar witches in the second row, Layla couldn't hide her impish grin, and she wasn't the least bit ashamed of the ornery glance she threw Quin before walking up to them. "Hi, Idelle," she politely greeted, and Quin smirked as he stepped in front of Jenny.

Idelle's cheeks flushed as she sheepishly replied. "Hi."

"Hold up your hands," Layla instructed.

Idelle obeyed, and Layla touched her fingertips, filling her with fire. What Layla said next wasn't the nicest thing to ever come out of her mouth, but she couldn't resist the opportunity to rub a smug nose in defeat. "I hear you and

Jenny found a replacement for Quin earlier.”

A grin twitched Quin’s lips, and Jenny bowed her head, her cheeks flaming as she watched Layla out of the corner of her eye.

“Were you keeping tabs on us?” Idelle asked, defiantly sticking her nose in the air. “Worried we’d succeed if we tried to tempt your lap dog again?”

Layla smiled as shook her head. “No, silly, you could wag your dog treats in front of Quin all day long and he wouldn’t bite. Why would he want your bologna when he has steak?”

Idelle huffed and flexed her jaw. “Then maybe you should keep your eyes on him, not us.”

“I wasn't watching you,” Layla assured. “I was... busy, but it just so happens you took comfort in my little cousin's arms.”

Jenny's head jerked up as Idelle's mouth fell open. “Your cousin?”

“Yeah,” Layla confirmed. “Banning's my seventeen-year-old cousin. I'm glad he could be of service. Not as glad as he is of course.”

Jenny and Idelle just stared at her, once again speechless, and Layla gave them a wink before moving to the next person in line. While she worked her magic, she heard Jenny whisper to Idelle.

“Did you know he was only seventeen?”

“Of course I didn't,” Idelle hissed, but then she shrugged. “Oh well. The kid got the job done.”

Layla giggled, and they looked over, narrowing their eyes on the smile she flashed as Quin took her under his arm. Turning into his side, Layla looked up at him and whispered. “I should be ashamed of myself, but I couldn't help it.”

“And I should be ashamed your torture methods turn me on,” he replied, “but you're too damn cute when you're being ornery.”

When they made it to their family, they not only filled them with fire, they conveyed their good lucks, keeping the sentiments as light and simple as

possible so despair wouldn't get its suffocating fingers around them. Of course Layla struggled, but since the word *goodbye* was replaced with encouragement and *I love yous*, she didn't feel like the farewells were final, nor did she feel like she was seeing them for the last time. So after filling them with magic and getting their quick hugs and kisses, she was able to walk away with dry cheeks, if not dry eyes.

They were about to move to the mercenaries when Quin's name drifted across the ice, and he waved a hand, revealing his great-uncle Cadman, who, along with Catigern, had been spying on Agro all evening.

Quin and Layla paused their task and

headed for Cadman, meeting him and the other golden couples a few yards away from the army.

“How’s it going?” Caitrin asked.

“According to plan,” Cadman answered. “Agro left at nightfall and headed for our community. Dad was still tracking them when I left, but he planned to break loose and head this way once he could confirm Agro would follow, so he’ll be showing up just minutes before them.”

“Were you able to count his army?” Quin asked.

“Almost two-hundred,” Cadman answered.

Quin took a deep breath and let the news sink in. “That’s more than we

anticipated.”

“But less than he’s capable of,” Serafin noted. “Better now than later, and unless they make an unexpected detour, we have less than an hour to prepare ourselves.”

“Then we need to get on with it,” Quin agreed, filling Cadman with fire.

Cadman joined the family in the back row while Caitrin announced the updated situation to the army, and Quin kept an eye on the mercenaries, the only soldiers not filled with deadly flames.

“You don’t trust them,” Layla whispered.

“They’ve given me no reason not to,” Quin replied. “But no, I don’t.”

“Then we shouldn’t give them our

fire.”

Quin sighed. Then he led Layla to her grandparents and waited for Caitrin to join them. “We need to break it to the mercenaries that they’re not getting our fire.”

The golden group considered Quin’s announcement then gave their approval. “Let’s hope it doesn’t piss them off,” Kemble noted.

The eight of them headed for the mercenaries. Then Caitrin called for their attention and pinpointed Sloan. “When the battle commences, your unit will fight with your own fire.”

“Why’s that,” Sloan asked, stepping forward.

Quin’s muscles hardened as he moved

in front of Layla. “Because we don’t trust you with ours.”

Sloan’s eyes narrowed as he opened his mouth to argue. Then he and everyone else looked over as a group of five witches stepped out of formation and away from the front line, pausing in a protective huddle.

“Is something wrong, ladies?” Caitrin called across the ice.

A few of them shook their heads no, and the one in the center answered. “No, nothing’s wrong. It’s just... I don’t think Layla’s magic worked on me. I don’t feel any different.”

Layla furrowed her eyebrows at the witch, wondering how she could have made such an obvious mistake. “Did I

perform the spell on you?”

The witch nodded.

“And you're not feeling it?” Layla pressed.

“No,” the witch answered. “Nothing changed when you did it. I should have mentioned it then, but I guess I was confused about what I'm supposed to feel.”

Sloan scoffed. “Guess it's a good thing you're not giving us your shitty magic.”

Quin's chest expanded, but he ignored Sloan and looked at Layla, who was still berating her failure.

“You can't be perfect all the time, love. Now I have proof you're human. Go fix your mistake. It will make you

feel better. I'll deal with this.”

“Fine,” she agreed, and Quin looked at Serafin and Daleen, gesturing for them to follow her.

Layla examined the witch's face as she approached, and she clearly remembered her. She'd been in the second row, and Layla performed the same spell on her that she performed on everyone else. So why didn't it work? Layla hated the doubt pressing on her. With a battle at hand, now was the worst time to lose confidence in her magic.

She stopped in front of the witch, and Daleen and Serafin halted less than two feet away.

“Hold up your hands,” Layla instructed.

The witch obeyed as her friends stood nearby, intently watching.

Layla reached out, and it wasn't until her palms were an inch away from the woman's that she felt an odd sense of anxiety and skepticism. The marrow in her bones seemed to drop a few degrees, leaving her core chilled, and the hair at the nape of her neck twitched as tingles slithered down her spine.

The witch closed the gap, and the instant their fingertips touched, Layla realized her mistake, and not the mistake she thought she made, but the mistake of leaving Quin's side. The witch was lying. Layla could clearly feel her own fire pulsing beneath the woman's flesh.

Pain shot through Layla's knuckles as

the witch squeezed, twisting her hands out and down, like she was trying to pull her to the ground, but Layla ignored the pain and focused on the woman's mind. Memories and thoughts rushed Layla's brain, dozens of them in less than two seconds, and she gasped as she pulled out of the mental connection, filling her lungs so she could scream. "Get away from them, Quin!"

While her warning screeched across the ice, she cast a fire shield around Daleen and Serafin, hoping like hell the spell would work without a clear visual and a wave of the hand.

She saw the silver barrier materialize out of the corner of her eye, but she had no idea if it would save her grandparents

from the roaring flames hurling toward them. The fire was Layla's, cast by the four women who'd followed the liar out of formation, and if Layla hadn't been forced into a stooped position, her own magic would have killed her. As it was, it felt like she'd stepped into a sauna, and the snow beneath her feet melted, forming narrow rivers that flowed toward the lake.

She hadn't fought back yet because she'd been busy trying to save her family, but staying in the enemy's clutches left her blind to her surroundings. She had no idea if her shield kept the enormous explosion from incinerating her grandparents, and she didn't know if Quin managed to get

away from the twenty-five mercenaries who orchestrated the attack.

She turned her attention to the witch twisting her fingers, the witch filled with a large dose of her fire, locked and loaded with deadly magic that could kill them both any moment. The only way to get rid of it was to cast it away, which wasn't an option, so... Layla filled her with more, more than she'd ever summoned in her life. Then she took a quick breath and did it again, hoping the heat would become intolerable.

The witch tensed as her expression twisted. Then her eyes rolled back as her grip loosened. She slumped to the ground in an unconscious heap, and Layla spun around, staying low to avoid

the inferno rushing over her head. She searched for Serafin and Daleen, finding nothing but bellowing flames. Then she spotted her silver shield flying through the air, apparently knocked away by the pressure behind the magic. Hopefully her grandparents were in it.

She shot her gaze toward Quin, but it didn't get there. The fire was gone from the four witches who launched the assault on Serafin and Daleen, and they all jumped on Layla at once, slamming her to the ice. A palm came down on her head, scattering her brain and muddling her concentration, and as the coppery taste of blood swarmed her tongue, her heart rate spiked, making her muscles numb.

Damn it.

Utilizing her supernatural strength, she yanked her arms from the grips ensnaring them. Then she pressed her palms to the ice, trying to rise to her hands and knees. The witches pushed down on her with more force, but even with one of them poking on her brain, she managed to muster enough magic to brace against their weight. Once she achieved her desired position, she took a deep breath. Then she attempted to throw the women off using both strength and magic.

A crimson haze rippled from her flesh as she pushed, trying to fly into the air, and when her magic hit the witches, they lost physical and mental control. Layla's body and spell erupted from their midst

like lava from a volcano, and the impact tossed the witches at least fifteen feet before slamming them into the ice.

Layla spiraled toward the cloudy sky, and as her agile eyes followed the rotating scenery, one of her hands swept through the air, gathering the four scattered witches into a floating pile. She roughly tossed them on top of the witch she previously knocked out. Then she threw a magical cage over them while flipping her gaze to the last place she'd seen Quin.

Chaos prevailed, but she registered every detail. Caitrin, Morrigan, Kemble and Cordelia battled fifteen mercenaries, while Quin had been attacked by ten, three of whom already lay motionless at

his feet. He had Sloan's throat in his hand, and he was lifting him toward the sky as his other hand slashed through the air, magically ripping apart the magician standing between him and Layla's last known location.

She shot toward him as three people landed on his back, forcing him to his knees, but even as hundreds of pounds pressed down on him, he didn't stop fighting. He roughly tossed Sloan away and reached behind him, grabbing the neck of the wizard trying to scramble his brain. Then he yanked, nearly ripping out the wizard's throat as he threw him at a magician approaching from the front. Once his hands and mind were free, he magically grasped the two people on his

back and sent them flying across the glacier, slamming them into the side of a cliff. That left only one standing, and he was obviously scared out of his mind as Quin jumped to his feet.

But it wasn't Quin who wrapped him in magic and swept his feet out from under him, cracking his head against the ice. Layla angrily hovered twenty feet above, swiping the feet out from under every mercenary who wasn't fleeing with their cloaks tucked between their legs.

Quin watched the man in front of him topple to the frozen earth like timber. Then he frantically searched for Layla, finding a pile of unconscious bodies. His aura swelled and vibrated as his

muscles bulged, and Layla quickly mind searched him.

‘Up here.’

He looked up, his shiny eyes flashing from silver to brown as he met her stare, but his aura stayed enraged as he shot toward her.

Layla watched him ascend, and when he reached out, taking her hot and tense face in his tender hand, moisture gathered in her eyes. “Are you okay?” she whispered.

He nodded as he began healing her wounds, carefully sweeping his thumbs over her busted lip and bloody nose. “I’m so sorry, love.”

“Me, too, Quin. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” He reached down, grimacing at the bruises on her knees as he wrapped her legs around his waist. Then he hugged her to his chest and headed for earth. “But we need to check on the others.”

“Yes,” she agreed, resting her ear over his speeding heart.

When he landed, his parents and her grandparents rushed them, touching their backs and shoulders to make sure neither of them were injured. “We’re fine,” Quin assured. “I guess you guys are okay?”

“A few minor wounds,” Serafin answered, turning to heal a burn on Caitrin’s shoulder. “But Daleen and I would be toast if someone else hadn’t protected us.” He paused and looked at

Layla. “Was that your quick thinking?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “I read that witch’s mind as soon as she touched me, so I knew what was coming.”

Serafin sighed as he turned back to Caitrin. “Thank you, Layla Love, for saving our lives, but your protection should always come before ours. We’d never forgive ourselves if your sacrifice was our saving grace.”

“I can't believe we didn't see it coming,” Cordelia snapped. “We should have realized what was going on the minute those witches stepped from their positions. The timing was too damn convenient.”

Other members of their coven had been gathering the bound and

unconscious mercenaries into a pile. "There are twenty of them," Cadman called, keeping a watchful eye on the heap. "That includes the five witches not in uniform, so ten of them fled."

The ruffled family of eight approached, examining their captives while wondering what to do with them.

Kemble knelt next to Sloan and grabbed him by his long hair, forcing him to meet his gaze. "Who sent you?"

"Go to hell," Sloan rasped, his voice like sandpaper due to his crushed throat.

"Move me closer, Quin," Layla insisted. "If he won't give us the answers, I'll take them."

Quin obeyed, and Kemble kept his grip on Sloan's hair as Layla touched his

forehead, easily breaking through his defenses to his uncooperative brain. Within seconds she had all the answers she wanted, so she released his head and looked at her grandparents. “A man named Alistair Murdoch hired them to find a witch who’s around my age and more powerful than any other, but they’re not sure if I’m the person he wants. Either Alistair doesn’t know any details about the witch he’s looking for, or he chooses not to share them with the mercenaries he’s been paying for the past seventeen years.”

“Seventeen years?” Serafin repeated.

“Yes,” Layla answered. “When Alistair heard magicians were gathering for a stand against Agro, he sent this

group to see if any of us were unusual, but after seventeen years of failure, none of them counted on success. Sloan was pretty excited about finding me. If I'm who they're looking for, the payoff would be huge, millions for everyone involved."

"Did you see if Alistair is an American?" Morrigan asked.

"He is," Layla answered. "He meets the mercenaries in Vermont, near the Canadian border."

"Why haven't we heard of this man?" Serafin mumbled. "An American wizard who can afford to keep mercenaries on his payroll, someone with millions to reward a job well done, yet we've never even heard his name."

“He gets financial backing from foreigners,” Layla explained, “and there are other hired hands searching for the same witch in other countries. Alistair’s just the American liaison.”

“No,” Quin breathed, his face draining of color.

“Yes,” Layla sadly confirmed.

“There’s another coalition searching as well. They’re trying to find the witch before Alistair’s associates do. A group from that company is probably close by. They tend to tail the mercenaries when they’re sent on an assignment.”

“Shit,” Quin muttered. Then he shook his head, like he was trying to forget what he just heard. “We need to clear this trash out of the way,” he said,

motioning to the pile, “and put this news on the back burner. None of it matters if we don't make it through tonight.”

“I second that,” Layla agreed. Then she pointed to the witch who started the scuffle with her lie. “Be careful with that one. She's filled with a lot more fire than I usually summon into people. That's what knocked her out.”

“We'll sedate them and secure them with magic,” Caitrin decided, “then place them out of the way until later.” He stretched his hands out over the mound of mercenaries then looked at Serafin and Kemble. “Ready?”

Picking up the pile with magic, the three men flew northeast with it, ignoring the crude protests rising from

within the tangled mess of limbs.

Chapter 49

Only magic kept Layla's heart from beating like a drum-roll as she and Quin held each other, submerging themselves in heaven on earth one last time before risking their lives for it. The organ in her aching chest wanted to emulate the quick *tick tick tick* of time – time slipping away too damn fast – but she wouldn't let it. If their muscles went numb, he'd loosen his hold on her, and she needed his tight embrace like she needed air. How much longer would she have it?

Not long enough.

A hawk swooped into the basin,

screeching its presence, and despite Layla's efforts, her heart sped and her muscles numbed. She lost Quin's tight embrace.

They looked away from each other, and he waved a hand, releasing the concealment spells he'd placed on his great-grandfather.

When Catigern approached, he grasped Quin's forearm with one hand and laid the other on his shoulder. "You hooked him. He's less than five minutes behind me. Are you ready?"

"We still need to cast a shield," Quin answered.

"Then I'll let you get to it."

A short moment of silence passed as Catigern stared into Quin's eyes, but

then he squeezed and let go. Turning to Layla, he offered her a warm smile as he touched her cheek, but he didn't say anything more before moving away.

Once Catigern had joined the rest of their family in the back row, Kemble and Cordelia followed Quin to the west end of their soldiers, while Layla's grandparents accompanied her to the east end. Floating twenty feet into the air, Quin and Layla faced each other. Then translucent and sparkly fog seeped from their outstretched hands, spreading twenty feet down to the icy ground and thirty feet up to the top of the rocky crag. The two clouds stretched over the soldiers' heads and out in front of the leading line. Then they converged in the

middle to form a massive shield. Layla and Quin forced their way inside. Then they turned their backs on each other and closed the gaps.

While the barrier was being cast, Caitrin explained to their allies that the shield would guard against everything except fire, and he'd stressed how important it was that everyone wait for the command before attacking. "If someone prematurely throws a fireball through the shield, the Unforgivables will immediately realize its vulnerability, and they won't hesitate to use it. Our powerful preemptive strike will become mediocre if we don't cast the spells at the same time. Once you've released them, the shield will come

down and the magic you perform will be your own.”

Reuniting in front of their army, the four bonded couples sadly stared at one another, unready for the end. Quin glanced at Layla. Then he turned away from her, pulling his tearful mom into a tight hug while watching his dad's eyes.

With the exception of her speeding heart, Layla's chest felt solid, like it was filled with coagulating cement and oxygen had to seep through tiny air pockets to get to her lungs. She hardly felt like she was breathing at all, and even though her muscles were numb, her throat was achingly tight.

Her eyes filled with moisture as she watched Quin hug his mom, and when

she turned to her grandparents, the tears broke free. She wanted to say so many things, but she couldn't find it in herself to speak them out loud, so instead of trying to say it all, she spoke the most important. "I love you guys, all of you. Thank you for..." She took a shaky breath then finished with enormous effort. "...everything."

All four of them converged on her at once, encasing her in one big hug, and they each whispered their own endearments, showing her love in so many ways. When they reluctantly left the embrace, they kept their hands on her.

"This isn't goodbye, Layla Love," Serafin assured. "Now that we've found

each other, we'll always be together.”

“Always,” Daleen agreed, jarring tears loose with an avid nod.

Caitrin reached for Layla’s cheek, drying it as he whispered. “No matter what happens, honey, you keep fighting. You and Quinlan are to never give up. Do you understand me?”

Layla nodded, barely stifling a gagging sob. Then Morrigan's palm soothingly stroked the curls framing her face. “We love you, sweetie.”

She dropped her hand and turned into Caitrin's neck, gasping and shaking, and he let his fingers fall from Layla's cheek as he backed away.

Daleen moved closer and kissed Layla's forehead. “Be strong, my darling,

and let Quin help you.”

She moved back so Serafin could kiss the same spot, and after wrapping each other in a hug, they took a moment to stare into Layla’s eyes. Daleen’s lips curved into a quivering smile. Then she mouthed the words *we love you* before letting Serafin lead her away.

Layla blinked, and Quin moved in, sweeping her off her feet and spinning her around. She was still trying to catch her breath when he dipped her back, burying his face in her cleavage as he deeply inhaled. Then he kissed his way up her chest. When he found her lips, one of his hands swam through her curls and took the back of her neck. Then he pulled her into a breathtaking kiss.

She clutched his cheeks and kissed him back, molding her body to his, and the moisture flowed from her eyes in torrents – tears of happiness merging with tears of sadness to form schizophrenic rivers.

“They’re almost here,” Caitrin announced.

Quin and Layla stopped kissing, but they stayed close, breathing each other in and watching each other’s eyes as they listened to Caitrin.

“I sense them to the west,” he added. “They’re not flying in. They’re staying low.”

Quin gave Layla another kiss. “I love you, my perfect angel.”

“I love you, too, my thorough hero.”

“Don't let go for anything.”

“Never, Quin.”

He tenderly dried her tears. Then he lowered her feet to the ice and pulled her fingers to his mouth, breathing one last burst of heat into her body.

The army nervously shifted. Then Caitrin quietly spoke. “It's time.”

Quin and Layla maintained eye contact, drawing strength from each other as their hearts pumped faster, further deadening their sense of touch.

“Forever,” he whispered, pulling her palm to his heart.

She swallowed, her fingers flexing over rapidly pulsing flesh. “Forever.”

He let her right hand slip away from his heart, but he tightened his hold on her

left hand as they turned away from each other.

A profusion of crimson cloaks flowed from behind the jagged base of a westward mountain, bleeding out over the snowy glacier, and Layla remained surprisingly calm as she watched them approach. Yes, she was scared and sad and angry. But physically, she was steady, no shaking, tensing or fidgeting.

The enemy slithered across the frozen valley, noiselessly alighting on the ice forty yards away. Then they formed a multilayered circle around their boss.

“Move,” he ordered. “I want to see her.”

The Unforgivables shifted, and Layla found Agro’s eyes – those that taught her

hate and vengeance. His aura expanded as he walked forward, exposing his hunger and impatience, and his watchdogs moved with him, ready to cast their shields to protect him. If his appearance was any indication, he needed the safeguard. He was too thin, his sallow skin sinking into bone, and his eyes, though wide with greed as they took her in, were trapped in dark circles. He looked like a tired, unhealthy and disturbed old man, nothing like the killer in her parents' memories.

He stopped less than twenty feet from the shield and stared through it. "Nobody move," he hissed. "This one will be taken alive." Shedding his anger, he smiled at his mark. "Hi, Layla. You're

even more beautiful than I anticipated.” His gaze flipped to her aura then back to her eyes. “And more powerful.”

Layla took a deep breath as the blood rushing from her accelerated heart grew hotter, her skin flushing over feverish veins.

“You’ve gone to great lengths to avoid me,” he added, “when all I ever wanted was a friendly chat.”

“Liar.” The word burst from her mouth, like something deep inside her had condemned him and was listing his crimes.

Agro and his aura froze, and his lips parted as he listened to her voice. When his aura started flowing again, he tilted his head and smiled. “Liar?”

“And an idiot if you think I’m going to believe a word you say.” She didn’t know where that had come from either, but it came easily, so she kept going.

“Surely you, a man who believes I’m all-powerful, don’t really expect me to buy the bullshit you’re selling. You think I don’t know what you’ve done? The havoc you’ve wreaked on me and my family. And on the hundreds of people behind me.”

Agro's chest rose and fell as his nostrils flared and his lips twitched.

“Misunderstandings.”

“Evil,” she shot back. “You’re an evil man. You’ve spent more than sixty years ruining lives, but you’re done. Even if I have to escort you to hell, I’m going to

make sure you burn.”

Agro no longer clung to false charm, and both armies were getting increasingly nervous. “You speak bold words,” he icily noted. “Of course, I expected nothing less.” He paused, looking for his best course of action. Then he changed tactics. “You speak on behalf of the people behind you, as if you care for them, but I wonder... Are you here for them, or are they here for you?” He paused for effect, and his orange eyes brightened within narrow lids. “I’ll pardon them all, Layla, with a promise to never pursue any of them again, and all I want in return is a private chat with you.”

Quin’s hand tightened around hers, but

his concern was unnecessary. Yes, Layla wanted to save the people behind her, every last one of them, but they didn't want to be saved. That wasn't why they were there.

Agro's impatience flared, but he was outnumbered and determined to bring Layla in peacefully. "You speak as though you're their martyr," he taunted. "But how much are you willing to forfeit for them? Will you let them serve as your armor? Watch them die while you struggle against the inevitable? Are you as pure as you look? Or will you have them seeking your vengeance for you?"

"They're not seeking my vengeance," she corrected. "These are your victims, not mine. You've tortured, raped and

murdered their loved ones; destroyed their homes, businesses and lives. They're not here for your pardon. You're the accused, and we're here to serve the justice owed to all of us."

"Is that so," he bitterly replied, flames licking his eyes. "Or maybe a few of them have more sense than you think." He kept his gaze on her face as he addressed the magicians behind her. "Are there any among you sensible enough to surrender the witch leading you to your death in exchange for a long and free life?"

A tense moment of silence ticked by, and Layla and Quin struggled not to turn away from the Unforgivables so they could suspiciously search their own

army. But if any of them entertained the offer, they must have thought better of it, because no one said a word or moved out of line.

This did not please Agro. “You refuse to handle this peacefully.”

Layla raised an eyebrow. “Did you really believe I’d willingly join you?”

“It’s with me and only me that you’d flourish into the witch you’re meant to be, a witch who could hold this world in the palm of her hand.”

“Wrong,” she countered. “I’m meant to be with the man next to me, and there isn’t a damn thing you or anyone else can do to change that.”

“Wizards can easily be erased and replaced, Layla, much like chalk.”

“Not this wizard.”

For the first time since landing on the ice, Agro looked at Quin, and his eyes widened as his mouth fell open. “Two of them,” he whispered, and a wicked smile stretched from one hollow cheek to the other, his eyes glinting with bigger and brighter flames. “You just made an old wizard very happy, Layla. Why don't you introduce your friend?”

“His name is Quin, and he's much more than a friend.”

“There are two of you,” Agro whispered, acting like he'd forgotten he was outnumbered.

“You can count,” Layla dryly noted.

“Where have you been hiding, young man?” Agro asked. “How did your

parents escape my attention?”

“You've mistaken what I am,” Quin returned. “I'm merely a bonded child, a member of Layla's coven. And you've met my parents. You nearly killed my dad during one of your visits to our community.”

It seemed all but one of Quin's sentences escaped Agro's attention. “You're merely a bonded child,” he scoffed. “Your aura says otherwise.”

“If you'd look at my aura instead of my power-band, you'd realize your mistake, but since you're a blind old man, we'll make it easy on you.”

Quin raised his left hand, and the back three rows of their army left the ground, ascending far enough to have an

unobstructed view of the enemy. They halted and hovered as though perched upon a massive flight of stairs, and the Unforgivables readied their hands.

“I’m merely a bonded child,” Quin repeated, “who’s been blessed with an amazing bonded mate.”

He and Layla released proof that they were, in fact, useless to Agro, and a glittering gold cloud enveloped them and everyone around them, radiating love and swimming with silver rivers.

Agro’s malicious smile fell away, and the color drained from his jaundiced face. “No,” he muttered.

“Yes,” they confirmed.

Agro’s flame-kissed eyes flared blood-red as his body and aura vibrated.

“No!”

His army fearfully glanced at him before looking back to their opponents, shifting from foot to foot, anticipating instructions to attack. Some of them began spreading out, moving from the backs of the circles to the sides to form rows like their enemies.

“Nobody do a damn thing,” Agro growled, sweeping his gaze across his active soldiers. “Did I tell you to move?”

The wizard next to Agro spoke, his hood up, his face shrouded in shadows. “The situation has changed, sir. We’re outnumbered and out-powered. For the sake of yourself and your soldiers, I advise you to rethink your position in

this battle.”

“I advise you to keep your mouth shut, Guthrie, or you'll find your jaw buried ten feet beneath the ice.” Agro's gaze shot back to Layla. “This isn't over.” But it seemed he was trying to convince himself as much as anybody. “She can be salvaged. We'll work around it.”

“There's no time for that...”

The back of Agro's hand slammed across Guthrie's face, and his head snapped sideways as his hood fell, revealing another pair of burning eyes, but they sizzled toward Agro's profile, not the hundreds of magicians prepared to strike at the drop of a hand. Wiping blood from his lip, Guthrie gave his boss one last warning. “They're going to

attack... *sir*.”

“Prepare yourselves,” Agro commanded, backing away, and his dogs obeyed, falling back with their boss while flowing into five rows. A group of around thirty Unforgivables, those with the thickest power-bands, stood behind the others, surrounding Agro and his bitter first lieutenant.

Quin had been waiting for them to back up, and now that they were, he linked his fingers with Layla’s, letting her know what was coming.

“I want her alive,” Agro barked, pacing within his human shield. “If her heart’s not beating when I get my hands on her, you will *all* suffer the consequences!”

“What about the male?” someone shouted.

Agro halted, his red gaze landing on Layla. “Kill him.”

Layla’s cool melted as every numb muscle in her body flexed, and Quin dropped his hand, signaling the attack.

Whatever the Unforgivables expected, it wasn't what befell them, and there was a short moment, as the explosion rolled toward them, that they tilted their heads, squinted their eyes, and scrunched their noses, looking for explanations in the scorching cloud. The phenomenal heat and pressure flowing from more than two-hundred magicians turned the glacier's surface into a river of bone-biting water, and the ground shook as the

ice fractured.

The Unforgivables barely had time to react, and those quick enough to defend themselves lacked the sense to do it well. The inferno easily busted through their foremost fire shields, incinerating the thirty magicians in the front row. Then it slammed into several more shields being reinforced by dozens of minds. Only half of the more durable barriers caved to the diminishing magic, but flames curled into the exposed areas, charring another twenty-three lost souls.

In one swoop, they'd taken out over a quarter of Agro's army, and they'd done it without losing one of their own, but there wasn't time to celebrate. The devastating loss threw the remaining

Unforgivables into a panic, and they were no longer a disciplined army. They were a scared and desperate mob bent on retaliation and determined to stay alive.

Over a hundred fireballs shot from the mass of crimson cloaks, soaring toward the shiny shield protecting its contents against everything except fire. And apparently Agro's warning about keeping Layla alive had been disregarded, because the flames headed for her as well.

Many of the magicians behind Layla gasped, while others threw shields in front of themselves or over their neighbors. But Layla and her golden family were ready for the attack. As the

barrier around them drifted apart, they each raised a hand and turned the wall of fire into ice. The frozen cloud immediately busted, crashing to earth with an echoing report, and Layla knew things were about to get a lot harder.

Her gaze darted across the battlefield, taking in all the details of the enemy, and she even caught glimpses of Agro, who'd lost control of his soldiers and himself. His aura was torn between maddening rage and despair as he moved back and forth within the human circle, trying to keep his eyes on Layla while screaming at his guard. To him, only two things mattered in the smoldering valley of death – her life and his own.

Layla looked from Agro to Guthrie, watching him flip his hood up and back away from his boss. She couldn't blame him.

Chunks of ice from the failed artillery attack still smashed to the ground when the individual spells started flying, and complete chaos ensued. Agro's army divided – some remaining faithful to their boss, willing to protect him at all costs, while others drifted away, more concerned for their own safety than his. To add to the confusion, many of the magicians behind Quin and Layla lost their composure and started firing erratic and unorganized magic from shaky hands.

With a vast assortment of spells flying

at them, Layla and Quin reached out, grasping clusters of fire, ice, wind and electricity then sending them back to their casters. His parents and her grandparents helped, along with a few of the more levelheaded magicians behind them, but they couldn't keep up, and a barrage of deadly magic closed in.

Layla swept a hand around her head, casting a shield and spreading it out, but she'd only covered about twenty feet in every direction when the lethal spells showered the army. Serrated arrows of ice, sizzling bolts of lightning, and orbs of molten lava crashed into her barrier, shaking it like thunder, but it held, and the strangers who'd found themselves beneath her dome sighed their relief.

Layla was *not* relieved. She was terrified. She hated not knowing if the rest of her family avoided the assault. And if they had, would they avoid the next? Because it was coming in right behind the first, and since she and Quin had a shield around them, there was nothing they could do to lessen the blow. Their army was alone in blocking the ruthless onslaught.

The spells kept coming. The Unforgivables weren't bothering to defend themselves and fired again and again. Their arms were automatic weapons, offering no chance for a secure retaliation, and their lack of defense wasn't slowing them down. Those who attempted to counter by tossing their own

deadly spells into the mix missed their targets more often than not, and when they did manage to find their mark, they only disabled one or two Unforgivables at a time.

Agitated within her protective dome, Layla's temperature started to rise.

"What should I do?" she yelled. "We have to do something."

"You have to drop the shield," Quin returned. "On three."

She gave a nod as she squeezed his hand, and he started the countdown.

"One... two... three."

As she vanished the shield, they quickly searched the air, finding individual spells and alternating their paths to their casters. That's all they

could do, so that's what they did, and they didn't stop to cast another shield.

A large fireball maneuvered through their defenses and rained down behind them, hotly exploding into the unprepared crowd. Heat licked their backs as smoldering and listless bodies slid across the ice and hit their ankles, but they forced themselves to ignore it as they continued grabbing as many bits and pieces of the violent barrage as they possibly could, blindly sending them in the opposite direction.

After several terrifying and brutal minutes, Layla began noticing a difference in the size of the enemy's army, and hope fluttered in her belly like blessed butterfly wings.

But then disaster struck.

A few of the Unforgivables with thick power-bands united to perform a smart and devastating spell. Layla's darting eyes saw them cast it, and she was ready to defend against it, but she couldn't tell what they'd done... until she heard a thunderous crack behind her.

Rashly turning her back on the deadly magic flying at her, she focused on the cliff looming over the west end of her allies. It was splitting and crumbling, dropping bone-crushing chunks of stone on the magicians below.

Layla tightened her grip on Quin's hand as she placed her back to his. Then she swept her right hand through the air over and over again, aiming her magic

for the deteriorating crag. The rock continued to shift, but a shiny green haze had coated the breaks, and it successfully kept the fragments from falling.

She was about to return to Quin's side when another loud thwack pierced the air, so she halted, furrowing her eyebrows at the unstable section of stone. She could see rocks settling behind the green fog, but her magic had halted the corrosion. She had no idea why she heard another booming crack.

When realization hit, it hit hard and too damn late. She hadn't heard the damaged stone splitting. The sound came from a different section of the cliff, set upon by a different spell, and she found

the damage just in time to see it beset horror on her family. All of them.

She screamed and flashed her hand through the air, but she wasn't able to complete the motion before watching her loved ones disappear beneath cold, gray rubble. "No!"

Her hasty spell braced what was left of the dislocated stone, and she began grabbing the debris with magic, blindly launching it behind her while hoping it would find the bastards who buried her family. She moved away from Quin's back, giving herself more room to work – grab, launch, grab, launch.

Within seconds, she'd cleared most of the jagged boulders from the base of the rocky ridge, and what she uncovered

sent her head spinning. Bodies. Piles and piles of bodies. Some moving, most of them still.

“No,” she choked, returning to Quin's side in a daze. She was looking, but not seeing; hearing, but not listening; thinking, but not reacting.

“Layla!”

Quin's voice came to her as if from miles away, and as she turned to look at him, the world seemed to be slowing down.

“What's going on...”

His voice cut off with a grunt, and for a moment, the world stood still.

So still...

Then it moved slowly, frame-by-horrible-frame.

Layla caught every single one of them, snapped from her stupor by her worst nightmare come true, and she saw each horrid detail with crystal clear vision.

A broad, razor-sharp icicle laced with sizzling currents of electricity pierced through Quin's left flank, carving a huge chunk of flesh from his side as the voltage vibrated his muscles. The force ripped his hand from hers, flinging him into a pile of smoldering carnage, and her heart stopped.

Tick... tick... tick...

For three agonizing seconds, she could have been dead.

Her heart kicked into gear, thumping so fast she couldn't distinguish individual beats. Then something

grabbed the organ and yanked, pulling it into the air. Her head flung back as her body was forced to follow, and bright white light started seeping from her pores.

Higher and higher she floated, the battlefield far below. Then the supernatural grip on her heart squeezed, forcing her into a tight ball. The rage and sadness swelled, twisting her heart and torturing her soul, until she was so full of hate and despair, she surrendered to them.

Her limbs burst open, her body unfurling and arching, and as the bright light permeating from her flesh glowed red like the sun, a scream ripped from her throat.

All magic ceased as every conscious person on the glacier covered their ears against the piercing shriek threatening to bust their eardrums, and every alert eye snapped to Layla's flexed and floating form as she screamed like a banshee toward the cloudy moon. The haunting wail echoed off the snowy mountains, bouncing back into the basin in bloodcurdling waves, and even after the screech died in her throat, nobody moved. They just stared at her while keeping their ears guarded against the deafening reverberation.

Layla's eyes snapped open to a murky moon, and while her body was hers again, under her control, it was different. *She* was different. No longer pure of

heart. She was a force to be reckoned with, and it was time for her enemies to pay.

The silk ribbons hanging from the front and back of her belt, along with the chiffon wafting from her biceps, thighs and hips, ripped away, gracefully dancing into the illuminated air around her. The fabric caught the wind and fluttered toward thick swells of rising fumes fed by burning flesh, and as the material disappeared into the morbid vapor, Layla raised her head, ready for retribution.

Waving her left arm through the air, she swept the bodies of strangers away from her crushed family, and at the same time, she aimed her right palm at her

wounded hero, carefully floating him to the rest of their coven. As she settled him beside Catigern's motionless form, her left hand flashed again, and her magic grasped Kemble, Cordelia and all four of her grandparents, soaring them to Quin's side.

'Fix him,' she demanded, speaking into the minds of all six of them.

Before they could argue or move toward her, she launched the most secure shield she'd ever created over them, tightly encasing every person on their side of the glacier in a thick, silver fog.

She turned, setting her sights on Agro, and unrepentant hatred surged like fire through her veins, providing her with more tenacity, supremacy and potency

than ever before. He was the condemned, and she was the executioner.

Quin knew he was in bad shape, but he wasn't dead yet, and as long as his lungs pulled in air, no matter how slowly, and as long as his heart beat, no matter how erratically, only one thing meant anything, and she was out there, outside her shield, extremely outnumbered and alone, while he was within, gravely injured and useless.

He'd been trying to pull himself together, literally and figuratively, when she'd grasped him with magic, and

before he fully realized what she was doing with him, she'd isolated herself from everyone who loved her, tucking them into safety before facing the threat alone.

Cordelia dropped to Quin's side, sobbing as she searched his wound, but he ignored her.

“Layla!”

The effort it took him to yell her name was shocking, and the toll it took on his body was terrifying. He cringed against the pain and felt his severed guts shift toward open air as his blood rushed with more vigor from gaping flesh, but he ignored it all and forced away the wooziness. His angry angel hadn't responded, and she was descending

toward the ice with her focus on the Unforgivables, who'd recuperated from the shrieking assault on their ears and were watching her, anticipating her moves while planning their own.

Caitrin, Morrigan, Daleen and Kemble frantically attacked Layla's shield in an attempt to help her, performing every spell they could think of that might penetrate its foggy surface, and Serafin dropped to the ground next to Cordelia, examining Quin's wound. All of them were painfully aware of the broken bodies scattered around them, but they forced themselves to delay facing the horrifying sight until they could do something to help.

Quin refused to look at his side. He

knew it was bad, and he already swam in desperation as he watched Layla calmly stalk toward her alert prey.

“Layla...”

He choked and bitterly cursed himself. Then he cursed at his family. “Help her, damn it.” He braced himself and threw his own spell at her shield, but either the barrier was too strong or he was too weak, because it didn't make a damn bit of difference. His gaze finally left Layla's back and found Serafin's familiar, emerald eyes. “Stop the bleeding.”

Serafin hesitated. “A quick patch could...” His objection cut off as Quin grabbed his bicep and pulled him closer. “Stop the bleeding.”

Serafin dropped his head in sorrowful agreement, and Quin's gaze shot to Layla.

He froze – his heart, his lungs, everything.

She was moving in for the kill.

Layla's senses were superb, all of them heightened, and her body felt foreign, her muscles stronger and harder. She had complete control over all of it, but it was nothing like the body she knew, so she'd moved forward much slower than she wanted to, adjusting to her new and improved attributes.

Already feeling at home in her durable

skin, she bent at the knees then launched into an attack, sprinting toward the twenty Unforgivables who were foolish enough to attempt a physical assault.

They charged as if to tackle her, but when she was five feet from slamming into them, she lithely flipped over them, and in the split-second she was upside down, staring at their cloaked heads, her right hand swooped out, brushing fingertips across red velvet as she ensnared all twenty of them in a summoning spell. Her rotation continued, and before her feet returned to the ground, she'd plunged the trapped magicians into the bloody lake swamping the belly of the basin. When their cloaks disappeared beneath its

churning surface, it froze over, sentencing them to death by drowning, and not one iota of guilt found Layla's heart as she returned her gaze to Agro.

He was watching her with his mouth hanging open, not doing a thing to stop her approach.

She moved further into the fray of enemies, incredibly alert to their actions. Several immobilizing spells flew at her – a cyclone, a flash of electricity, entangling vines – and she twitched a hand, catching them all and sending them back to their casters with perfect precision. More bothersome but relatively harmless spells came, and those she didn't catch, she dodged – leaping, sliding or soaring around them

with ease.

They tried to grasp her with summoning spells, but she couldn't be grasped. The magic just twitched her skin before falling away. Her gaze flicked to the closest wizard, who braced and bent his knees, ready to attempt another tackle, but he was a fool.

He jumped, arms outstretched, expression determined, but she wasn't fazed, nor did she doubt success in the typically impossible feat she was about to attempt. She raised her right hand, squaring her stance as he rushed down on her, and while his longer arms enabled him to grab her shoulders, he couldn't hold her for long. The second his throat hit her palm, his body jerked

to a halt, and her long nails sank through his skin like butter as she flexed her deadly hand into a tight fist. His warm blood flowed down her fingers to her silver clad wrist. Then his pulse slowed and disappeared.

A fireball flew at her – the first deadly spell to come her way since she set out on her trail of destruction. Spinning to the left, she used the dead man in her hand as a shield, and the flames rolled out around him, kissing the outsides of her arms and legs. She barely noticed. It felt like she'd submerged herself in a warm bath after standing naked in a cold bathroom. But when his cloak burst into flames, she tossed him aside, narrowing her eyes on the slew of

ice heading her way.

The frozen blades were shaped and sharpened like circular saws, but she didn't hesitate to charge them, sweeping her hand out in front of her as she went. Those in her path melted, and she was moving so fast, water splashed over her face. She blinked away moisture, and in that tiny moment of obscurity, one of the frozen blades slammed into her right shoulder. The impact jerked her body, and she glanced down, expecting her arm to come off, but the ice merely rolled over her bicep, slicing skin while leaving the muscle unscathed. She didn't just *feel* impenetrable; she *was* impenetrable.

She looked up, finding the dumb

expressions of the five magicians who'd cast the ice. Then she reached toward the sky and yanked her hands back down. Five bolts of lightning flashed, pulled from land and sky, and the magicians fried as the ice cracked.

Layla was only twenty feet from her target, and she could clearly see him standing in his protective circle, which had diminished from thirty magicians to twelve.

Guthrie had left the fight, moving away from the tumult to calmly view it, and he'd taken thirty soldiers with him. Layla could see them out of the corner of her eye as she headed for her goal, but they didn't concern her. They were just watching. Her attention was on the forty-

two Unforgivables standing between her and Agro.

Thirty of them braced to cast their spells, and she slid to a halt, expelling torrents of fire from both palms. Her hands were flamethrowers, and as she swept her aim from one end of the crimson line to the other, the blaze devoured hydrated bodies like dry tinder.

The air was rank with burning flesh, a repugnant bouquet of death, but Layla smelled victory. The wall of fire had sucked its fuel dry, and the flames were subsiding, letting her find her target.

She was down to him and the twelve surrounding him. Easy. And she couldn't help but relish Agro's expression as she

launched toward him, her eyes alert and wide, her lips twitching with a malicious grin.

“Shields,” he ordered, and the soldiers obeyed, each of them casting their own barrier around their puny circle, putting twelve layers of protective fog between Layla and her enemy.

She continued the hunt, landing in a crouched position atop the hazy dome. Then she looked down, finding Agro staring at her as if she were his best and worst dream come true. Soon he’d dream no more.

She slammed her right palm into the center of the shields, putting as much magic into the assault as she had

strength, and the rainbow of hazes rippled away from her hand, exploding against their creators like seismic waves. A percussion of thuds could be heard as the soldiers hit the ice, and Layla dropped onto Agro's back. She'd caught up with her prey.

Reaching over his head with her left hand, she hooked his nostrils and yanked, and her other hand stretched high into the air, summoning an icicle. She looked down into his huge eyes, and she caught a reflection of her own — empty black chasms emanating the hate he instilled in her. Her body trembled as she took the image in. Then a bloodthirsty scream surged from her chest as she brought her right hand

down.

The sharp tip of the icicle disappeared inside his gaping mouth and pierced through his stretched throat, but she didn't relent. She forced it deeper, into his chest, and her hand followed, melting the ice until it was gone and her arm was bicep deep in his body. She stretched her fingers, finding the bastard's heart. Then she squeezed and yanked her arm free.

The lifeless body crumpled, and another scream burst from her diaphragm, soaring toward the heavens as she drained the blood from Agro's heart.

Chapter 50

In the time it took Serafin to place a magical tourniquet over Quin's wound, Layla had carved her way through dozens of Unforgivables and was scorching another thirty with her flames. And Quin had been forced to lie still and watch every terrifying and heart-wrenching move.

She was already heading for Agro's protective circle by the time Quin got to his feet, faltering then stumbling then finding his balance, and he immediately began attacking her shield, ignoring the pain as he threw a barrage of spells at

the silver haze. But his magic didn't even ripple hers.

When she dropped onto Agro's back, Quin halted, unable to breathe or move as he watched her rip out the heart of one of the most feared wizards in the world. And Quin's heart broke for her. No matter how justified the murders were, they'd make her question her morality, make her wonder if she was evil. And looking at her now – eyes closed, chin raised, body blood-soaked – many would believe she was. She was clearly inhaling the smell of victory as she calmly hovered over her enemy's slumped body, cradling his heart in her hand. But Quin knew better. She was feeling the rush now, a slave to

vengeance, but his angel would return, and her heart would bleed for the lives she cut short.

Quin was about to fire more spells at her shield, determined to hold her, when a red blur caught his eye. He snapped his gaze to Guthrie and the other traitorous Unforgivables. They'd been on the sidelines, idly standing by. But now they were taking advantage of the calm and launching their own attack, and Layla had no idea it was coming.

Serafin's magic flexed over Quin's guts as he roared. "Layla!"

He was too late. Her eyes were still closed when seven powerful magicians catapulted toward her, and she was taken by surprise, disappearing beneath

a pile of crimson cloaks while Agro's heart rolled across the ice.

“No!” Quin unleashed a torrent of magic at her shield, but it wouldn't budge. He was useless. She was overwhelmed and he was useless.

Her shield suddenly dropped, and at first, Quin felt a rush of relief, but it was quickly replaced by terror when he discerned why the silver fog dissipated. They had her. They'd successfully shielded her brain and were flying away with her.

Quin shot into the air and soared after them, immediately realizing his injury would hinder his pursuit. He was slower in flight, sluggish in his agility and physical strength, and he was testing the

durability of Serafin's bandage. With every move, the magic ominously flexed over his maimed insides, and he feared the pressure would disintegrate the magic. Swiping his hand over Serafin's work, he added another layer to the magical tourniquet. Then he summoned his cloak and secured it around his waist, adding further support.

When he noticed Layla's captors were out-flying him, his throat swelled and his chest burned. He tried to mind search her, and was able to sense her location, but he couldn't make a connection.

Losing sight of the crimson cloaks flattened his lungs, and his flight wavered, but he forced himself to shake it off and focus. He could still sense her,

and he'd follow her until they landed or until he died.

Layla had been outwitted, and rightfully so. She was a foolish witch for basking in the murder she committed. Now she was a helpless witch in the grasp of seven Unforgivables.

Her muscles remained numb, but they were no longer invincible. Her captors' fingers dug into them. And her strength, though still above average, had ebbed and couldn't match the combined power of those holding her. Her head throbbed, and blood ran from a gash over her right eyebrow, an injury inflicted when they

tackled her to the ice. The wound didn't hurt, but it increased the effectiveness of the spell they placed on her brain. Her thought process was disjointed and scattered, and she had no control over which roads her mind traveled. One second she'd be thinking about how she might escape her predicament, but before she could fully process the thought, it would change, and she'd wonder if the blood getting in her eye would make things harder. She thought about the battle she fought. She wondered where they were taking her. She remembered killing Agro. Then she remembered she was still in trouble.

Yes, she was a jumbled and useless mess, but among all the disorderly

confusion there was one constant. She never stopped thinking about Quin, and she never stopped worrying about his condition. He was always on her mind, and the other notions were merely scenery around him. Like birds flying by, she saw them, but they never had her full attention.

The sky flashed as a boom shook the atmosphere, and people starting yelling.

“We’re under siege.”

“Is it her family?”

Her family... Layla hoped they were okay.

Her body jolted, and one of her captors screamed while releasing her ankle, but the other six tightened their grips as the world brightened and

explosions rang out. The pressure in Layla's ears shifted. Then she fell from the Unforgivables' hands, dropping less than a foot before roughly landing on her hands and knees.

The ground was hard and cold – ice dusted in snow. Was she still on the glacier? It had to be a different one. Quin said there were a lot of them in Washington, and they'd been flying for a while. Or had they? She couldn't be sure. Her mind remained scrambled.

She raised her head and looked around, finding about three dozen crimson cloaks and several figures in olive-green. Forcing herself to focus on the green-swathed magicians, she realized they were the mercenaries

who'd fled her and Quin's wrath before the battle. They faced the Unforgivables, scared and nervous but ready to fight, and the Unforgivables faced them, confused and taken aback but ready to defend their prized catch.

Well she didn't belong to either group, damn it, and in the scattered seconds she achieved rationality, she wanted nothing more than to get away from them so she could find Quin. But her mind still skipped from one subject to another, and her body felt frozen to the ice. They had her wrapped in spells, so she was forced to watch and think and fear and forget and remember, while they decided her fate.

Guthrie stood between Lynette and Token, who had their palms aimed at the witch, keeping her incapacitated.

Looking from one scheming comrade to the other, Guthrie had the urge to grab their heads and slam them together. They'd been fools for taking the witch. They'd just watched her slaughter an army for fuck's sake. If they had a lick of sense they would have left the scene when Guthrie suggested it. But all the soldiers who'd defected wanted to see Agro go down, and Lynette was sure capturing the witch was the best way to restore the power they lost decades ago. And on at least one thing, Lynette had

been right – Layla was no lamb.

Shit.

Guthrie looked over the captive at the magicians who'd attacked mid-air.

“Who are you?”

“Members of the New England Mercenaries,” one of them answered.

“We've been hired to bring her to our boss.”

“Who's your boss and why does he want her?”

“That's none of your business.”

“You're outnumbered,” Guthrie countered. “Speak up or die.”

The mercenaries shifted, and the one who spoke before responded. “How about a compromise? Our boss would make a generous trade for her. We could

put you in touch with him. Then we'd all come out winners."

A woman's voice drifted across the ice. "That's not going to happen."

Guthrie tensed and looked over, finding a group of magicians wrapped in powder-blue cloaks. They landed a few yards away then squared their shoulders and raised their palms.

One of the mercenaries cursed and turned away from Guthrie, and the rest of them followed suit, preparing to defend themselves against the newcomers instead.

Alarmed by the mercenaries' rash reaction, Guthrie ordered his soldiers to spread out so they had clear shots at both factions. "And who the hell are you?" he

demanded of the witch.

“That's none of your concern,” she answered, motioning for her company to expand.

“You've been chasing our cloak-tails again, Venetia,” one of the mercenaries sneered. “You seem determined to let us do the dirty work while you claim the prize.”

“She's a soul,” the woman hissed, “not a prize.”

Guthrie's breath caught in his chest. This silver-haired witch, this... Venetia, spoke with an authority even Agro never achieved, and her pale-blue eyes held wisdom Guthrie had never seen. Her aura was strong and bright and confident, and her comrades looked

much the same.

“Fuck the Heavens,” Token whispered, staring at Venetia. Then he glanced at Guthrie out of the corner of his eye, portraying a silent apology.

Guthrie’s gut tightened, and as he turned his gaze on Lynette’s profile, he spoke into her head. *‘You were right – women are always the death of the men who fixate wholly upon them, and you just fucking killed me.’*

Surrounded by opposing armies, Layla stayed glued to the ice, her mind skipping and her heart hurting.

Something solid came down on her

back, and she tensed, holding her breath as a large arm wrapped around her ribs. She expected to be slammed to the ice or ripped into the air, but neither happened. The body encasing her wasn't putting any weight on her or attempting to pick her up. Her lungs demanded oxygen, and as the air rushed into her nose and throat, the biggest wave of emotions she'd ever experienced yanked a blubbering sob from her chest. It was him, her hero. Quin was blanketing her body. She could smell him... she could feel him.

“Quin...” she cried, so thankful he was alive, so glad he was there, so overwhelmed to be in his arms.

The surrounding armies' debate paused. Then the woman named Venetia

spoke. “Who's Quin, and why is the earth angel glowing gold and silver?”

“Quin's her boyfriend,” a mercenary answered. “He's an extremely powerful wizard who acts like her guard dog. I have no idea why she's glowing.”

“It seems you're both chasing a witch you know nothing about,” Guthrie scoffed. “Quin's Layla's bonded mate.”

Gasps rang out, and Venetia released a musical hum. “Interesting. Is he here now?”

“No,” Guthrie answered. “He was mortally wounded during our battle.”

The words *mortally wounded* made it to Layla's mixed up brain, and she sobbed again, remembering. “Quin...”

“Shh...” It was just a breath that

floated through her hair to her ear, but she heard it, and she finally realized no one was attacking her hero. Was he invisible? Or a figment of her imagination? Oh god. She hoped she wasn't imagining his arm around her. She wanted it to be there. She needed it to be there.

“She found her mate,” Venetia whispered, but then her voice hardened. “And you killed him? You killed the earth angel's most loyal protector?”

“Who the hell is the earth angel?” Guthrie returned. “Why do you keep calling her that?”

“Because,” one of the mercenaries answered, “the Crusaders have to coat everything in glitter.”

The Unforgivables gasped as Guthrie quietly spoke. “You're with the Crusaders?”

“Yes,” Venetia answered, “and we'll be taking Layla with us.”

“I don't think so,” a female Unforgivable argued.

“Quiet, Lynette...”

“No,” she snapped. “They're outnumbered, and we're the ones who snagged the witch. It's our magic keeping her from ripping everyone's throats out. If they want her, they're going to have to take her.”

Quin listened to the tumult around him,

shielding his angel with his invisible body while trying to communicate with her mind. But she wasn't able to focus long enough to receive his desperate calls, and his bandages wouldn't hold much longer. His heart had adapted to hers, and the increased pressure behind his blood flow sent the crimson fluid seeping through Serafin's spell. Now it threatened to do the same to his own magical compress.

The tension in the atmosphere spiked, and he took a chance, softly whispering into her curls. "Move your head if you can hear me, love."

Her trembling paused, her lungs calming as she gave a tiny nod.

"Good," he breathed, confident no one

else could hear him. “Try to fill me with your fire. I know they have your head scrambled, but I need you to try.”

Her breathing quickened, her aura swelling around them, dense and shadowed. Then she frantically shook her head, denying his request.

“You have to try,” he repeated.

She shook her head again, and she’d responded so quickly, he recognized it as a refusal to even attempt the magic.

“I can’t take them by myself, Layla.”

She sobbed, and he got a short glimpse into her head. Her focus was sharpening, and with his body against hers, he had no doubt she’d be able to fill him with fire. If she’d just try.

“Concentrate,” he whispered,

tightening his hold on her. His secondary bandage had succumbed to the blood pushing at it, which left nothing but his cloak between his insides and her back, and the velvet was quickly absorbing the flow. He could feel it moistening around his waist. “You have to do it now, love. Please trust me.”

“I do,” she sobbed, dropping her head.

Quin tensed and looked around, making sure no one noticed Layla talking to herself. Most of them were heatedly discussing their predicament, but the witch named Venetia was curiously watching Layla.

Sliding her gaze to Layla's lower back, Venetia's eyes widened. Then she jerked a hand into the air, getting her

army's attention. "Fall back," she calmly ordered. Then she and her soldiers drifted up and away.

The mercenaries and Unforgivables stared at them in confusion, and Quin frantically spoke through Layla's curls, knowing their cover was blown. "Do it now, Layla. Please." He hugged her tight and nuzzled her hair, and he didn't care who saw. They were out of time.

A tiny cry started in her chest, and it built into a terrified scream as she flooded his body with her fire.

The tingling warmth was more intense than usual due to his waning health, but it wasn't uncomfortable, and for a tiny moment, he considered sending just her flames out into their enemies' midst. But

he wasn't sure how much she'd given him, and he couldn't risk it. This would be his only chance to save her.

He braced himself then summoned his own fire, making the flames big and making them count. Layla's speeding heart had him numb, so he couldn't feel the burn, but he couldn't ignore what it did to his injured insides, and he nearly passed out as his body objected.

Blinking away the encroaching black ring around his vision, he sent the internal blaze from every inch of bare flesh not facing his angel, and he was barely able to keep his weight off her as the explosion rolled from his battered body.

The ice around them melted and

cracked as the mercenaries and Unforgivables burned to their death, and not one scream was heard. They didn't have time.

As soon as the inferno stopped permeating from his skin, Quin released his concealment spells and rolled off of Layla's back, falling to the slushy puddle of water around them. His sense of touch returned when he broke skin contact with her, and the pain hit him hard. He didn't have enough control over his fire spell and had charred most of his clothes, including the cloak acting as a tourniquet, and he'd burned a good portion of his skin, including the severed tissue around his injury. His insides were also singed, and he was growing

weary, his body lacking energy and blood, which continued to seep from his wound, turning the frigid water red.

Layla heard Quin splash down beside her and was terrified to look, but she forced her eyes open. What she found was even worse than she anticipated, and her stomach flipped as her brain sped.

“Oh god.” Sending the bone-biting water away with a sweep of her hand, she lowered her face closer to his, feeling for his breath, but it barely fluttered over her lips.

He looked horrible, stark-white and in

obvious agony. Every muscled was flexed as his body twitched and shivered, and his eyes were squeezed shut. Her nightmare came rushing back, but she pushed it away. She was living it, damn it. She didn't need to remember when she was seeing.

She swept a hand over his gaping side, casting a foggy bandage to halt the bleeding. Then she summoned her cloak from his bag and draped it along his torso and legs. Taking his cold cheek in one of her palms, she touched her lips to his. "Quin." It was a mere squeak, filled with every emotion she was experiencing.

Her touch jump-started his heart, and his eyes popped open, filling with

moisture as he stared at her. A smile played on his lips, and one of his hands rose to her cheek, his fingers dipping into her curls as his thumb wiped away tears. "Layla Love... You make me feel so good." He paused, taking in a shaky breath before sighing. "Always."

"You're going to be okay," she whispered, stroking his face with desperate fingers. "I'm going to make sure of it."

She searched for her family's minds, sure that if any of them were alive, they were looking for her. When she connected with Kemble, she sobbed and pinpointed his location. He was close, but not close enough. She had no idea what to do to keep Quin breathing, and

she had no idea what to do if he stopped.

‘Hurry, Kemble,’ she pleaded, sure she was getting through to him, but he wasn’t able to answer. *‘Please. Quin needs help.’*

Quin convulsed, and her attention snapped back to his face, but he seemed unaffected and still watched her with a small smile curving his bloodless lips.

“It’s going to be okay,” she assured. “Your dad’s on his way.” She glanced at his injury to make sure her magic held, and noticed the severed skin around the wound was turning a darker shade of purple. More tears streamed down her face as she turned her gaze back to his. “I wish I could make it better, Quin. I’m so sorry I don’t know how.”

“You do make me better,” he whispered, urging her face closer to his. Then he paused to breathe her in. “All the time.”

“Quin,” she choked, struggling not to lose herself in grief.

“Hey,” he soothed, drying more tears. “It's not the end. Remember?”

“You're damn right it's not. You're going to be fine. Your dad will fix this.”

She searched for Kemble to see how far away he was – at least ten miles. Oh god.

“Just a few more minutes,” she whispered, turning her focus back on Quin. “That's all you have to give me. Please...”

“I'll give you everything I have, Layla.

You know that.”

“Then you'll be fine.”

His smile fell. “Layla...” His other hand left the ice and found her face, softly stroking its features before trying to heal the cut over her eyebrow. “I can feel it happening, love. My heart won't keep up with yours anymore.”

“No, Quin. You have to make it keep up. We've won. Agro's gone. They're all gone, and I want to go home. Please...” She moved her lips to his, hotly begging against them. “Please don't die. You have to take me home...”

“I want to,” he whispered, struggling with heavy lids. “So badly.”

“Then *stay awake*.”

A hurt expression crossed his face as

his eyes swam. "I'm trying, but if I can't..." He paused, taking a raspy breath as he searched her gaze. "What will you do?"

"No, Quin," she cried, denying the urge to bury her face in his neck, to tuck herself in for whatever ride he was taking. "You can't die."

"Please listen," he insisted. "I need to know. When will I see you again?"

"Immediately," she blurted, hating the feeling of defeat washing over her.

"No," he disagreed. "Give me a head-start..." He was struggling with every word now, and his gaze was growing distant. "In case your heart... has another miracle... in store for you."

Panicked gasps overtook her, and she

quickly checked Kemble's location. "Just a little longer," she pleaded, looking into Quin's dark eyes. "Please."

His lids dropped, and his lungs paused for a few seconds before trying to yank in a deep, rattling breath. When the oxygen failed to find its way to where he needed it, his heart fitfully skipped, and his eyes found hers. "Love you, angel... Remember... a head-start..."

She wailed his name and pressed her lips tighter to his. "I love you, Quin. I love you so much."

"I know..." he sighed, and she lost his gaze.

"No!"

She felt for a heartbeat, but didn't find

one. She waited for a breath, but never got it. She looked for flexed muscles, but laid eyes on pale, limp skin. She searched for his aura, and watched it fade. “No...”

Her own heart slowed, her tight throat cutting off her air supply, and the world around her grew dark, scary and painful, abandoned by hope and robbed of the sun. There were no miracles in this world. Her miracle was gone.

“Will you let us help you, child?”

Layla lurched into a defensive position, shielding Quin's body as her fiery gaze shot toward the witch named Venetia, who hovered nearby with her soldiers.

“Get away,” Layla snarled.

“Please,” Venetia implored. “We can help him, but we have to hurry.”

Layla eyed Venetia for another moment then looked at Quin's lifeless face. What did she have to lose? She'd already lost it all.

She kissed the soft skin hiding the eyes she adored. Then she moved to the spot above his head, mournfully surrendering her hero's still heart to complete strangers. Running her fingers into his hair, she lowered her lips to his forehead. Then she slowed her own heart to a deadly pace, preparing it for its final beat.

Chapter 51

Quin's eyes snapped open to a brightly lit room, and his heart beat hard and fast as he looked around. "Layla?" He was in their bed, but she wasn't there.

"Layla!"

"She's okay, son."

Quin's gaze shot to the left, finding his dad sitting in a chair next to the bed.

"Where is she?" Quin asked, throwing the blankets aside. "What happened?"

Kemble stood, laying a firm hand on Quin's shoulder while replacing the covers. "She's with your mom, and if you're not in bed when she gets back,

she'll kill me, so stay put. And don't go mind searching her. I need to talk to you."

"With mom where?"

"At the barn, but they'll be back soon."

"Why isn't she here?"

Kemble sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. "She would be if she had her way about it. She hasn't left this room since we got you here."

"When did you get me here? What happened?"

"Where do you want me to start?"

Quin worked through his hazy brain, trying to remember, and when the answers came, they pissed him off. "I passed out." He turned away from his dad and squeezed his eyes shut. "I left

her. I couldn't stay awake.”

“You didn't just pass out, Quinlan. You were dead.”

Quin's gaze snapped back. “Where's Layla?”

“I told you, she's with your mom at the barn.”

Unsatisfied, Quin intently searched Kemble's aura.

“I'm not lying to you, son. I'd never lie about this. Layla's safe.”

Quin struggled to stay calm and take his dad's word for it, but he hated having to *hear* she was okay when all he wanted to do was see it for himself. “I was afraid she'd stop her heart if I died.”

“If given the chance, I have no doubt

she would have.”

“Did you resuscitate me?”

“No. You were already breathing again when I got there. I lost sight of you when we were pursuing her, and you wouldn't answer my calls, so I was more than ten miles away when she found my mind.”

“Who revived me?”

“A witch named Venetia. She's a commander for the Crusaders. She got your heart going about a minute before I landed.”

Quin had forgotten the Crusaders were there, and their involvement was as confusing now as it was then. A low-key and spiritual faction, the Crusaders only got involved in widespread conflicts

affecting the magical population as a whole. The rest of their time was spent meditating and honing their skills to a fine point, disciplining themselves until their magic surpassed its original boundaries and created new ones.

“What were they doing there?” Quin asked. “Did they try to take Layla?”

“No,” Kemble assured, “but that's why they were there. They're the other coalition Layla saw in Sloan's head, the ones who tend to tail Alistair Murdoch's mercenaries. And it would seem your angel is the one they want. Or, as Venetia would say, your earth angel.”

“I remember her saying that. What does it mean?”

“I have no idea, son, and Venetia

won't say, but apparently you've landed yourself a very special witch.”

“Special doesn’t cut it,” Quin mumbled, flexing his empty hands. “So Venetia didn’t try to bargain with her? My life in exchange for her cooperation?”

“There was no time to strike bargains. Venetia worried Layla would attack, so she didn’t offer aid until you were dead and Layla had nothing left to fight for. Knowing the Crusaders, they’ll try to handle this peacefully, but they’ve confirmed they want Layla for something. They won’t tell us what, but they want her to meet with their high council in France to discuss a critical matter. Layla wouldn't listen to a word

they said, so they're hanging around until you recover so they can ask again.”

“They're in the community?”

“Outside of it. Now that they know she's here, they're determined to keep Murdoch's allies away.”

“Where are the mercenaries we apprehended before the battle? Are they here?”

“Yes, and they won't leave until we figure out a way to keep their lips sealed about what they've seen. We'll keep them here forever before letting them run their mouths off about Layla's status and location. Doreen's still here as well, but we've contacted her family and will meet with them in Portland to discuss her fate.”

“Good,” Quin approved. “So what's your take on the Crusaders’ request?”

“History says they can be trusted to walk the honorable path, so I have to assume their intentions are noble, but they ultimately want to use Layla, so it's up to her whether or not she's willing to help them. I'm anxious to know why they need help. I fear their request means a storm much bigger than Agro is brewing out there.”

“So you think Layla should hear them out.”

“I do, but only when she's ready. She's had one hell of a month and deserves a break.”

Quin's concern and confusion about the Crusaders melted away, making

room for sad and sober thoughts about Layla. “How is she?” he quietly asked, bracing himself for the answer. “Has she talked to anyone about how she's feeling?”

Kemble bowed his head as he answered. “No, and that's partly why I wanted to talk to you before you see her, to fill you in on what you've missed and prepare you for what's to come. As far as we can tell, she hasn't come to terms with anything that's happened, because she won't talk to us unless it's about you and your health. We've been trying to get her out of here all afternoon so we could wake you, but she completely ignored us until your mom lied and told her nobody could get your horse to eat. She

suggested Layla might have better luck then practically dragged her reluctant butt out of here.”

“How long have I been out?”

“About forty-five hours.”

Quin's eyes widened. “Forty-five hours? Why?”

“Because you were dead,” Kemble snapped, but then he smoothed his scowl and lowered his voice. “I don't know how you managed to stay alive as long as you did. You'd lost a critical amount of blood before you ever left the glacier; it took blood transfusions from four of us to get you filled back up. Your vital organs were failing you, and your guts were a mess. After Venetia resuscitated you, we struggled to keep you that way,

and it took Serafin hours to properly patch you up. Your body's just now returning to normal and working the way it should without the assistance of magic.”

Quin closed his eyes and concentrated on his body. It felt weak, but fairly healthy. “You had me sedated.”

“Most of the time.”

Quin sighed as his mind went back to Layla. “Why isn't grandpa Cat feeding the animals?”

Kemble didn't answer, and Quin opened his eyes, finding his dad's face tense and flushed.

“He didn't make it,” Quin whispered, feeling like someone shoved a red-hot branding iron down his throat.

Kemble dropped his head and shook it. “No, son, grandpa Cat didn't make it.”

Quin squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the moisture gathering behind his lids.

“Who else?”

Kemble choked on a sob, and Quin looked at him in alarm. “Who else?”

“Your grandma,” Kemble breathed. “Mom didn't make it.”

Quin's stomach rolled as his lungs burned, and he covered his face with a palm. “I'm sorry, dad.”

“Me, too, son. So sorry.”

“How's grandpa Lann?”

“Alive but lost.”

Of course he was. How does one find their way when missing their light? “Are there others?”

Kemble nodded. "Uncle Cadman, aunt Flanna... and Enid and Kearny."

The weight of despair slowed Quin's vitals. Six of them... dead. "Brietta and Banning?"

"They're alive," Kemble assured, "very sad, but alive, and feeling guilty as sin considering it was Enid's and Kearny's sacrifice that made it so."

"Shit, dad," Quin mumbled, vanishing moisture from his eyes. "Six of them?"

"Yes, and that's just from our coven. There are more." Then he ticked off the names of twelve extended relatives.

Quin held his breath as he listened, letting the enormity of the sacrifices sink in. "What about Kegan and Weylin?"

"They're okay. Weylin's still mending;

several of his bones were crushed, and he lost his dad, an uncle, and a cousin, so he's pretty torn up. Everyone else from their coven survived, but Caitlyn's great-grandparents were lost.”

“How?” Quin asked. “How did we lose so many?”

“The Unforgivables attacked the cliff right over their heads, and every single one of our own was buried in the rubble. Layla had them uncovered in seconds, but it was too late for many of them.”

Quin closed his eyes and shook his head. “This is all on me, dad. I'm sorry.”

“Don't, Quinlan. You didn't ask anyone to be on that battlefield. They chose to be there because they loved what they were fighting for. Now you

need to pull yourself together, because Layla will be here soon, and she doesn't need the extra stress. She needs your confidence right now, not your guilt. She's carrying enough of that herself.”

Quin nodded, knowing his dad was right. Layla's heart must be in pieces over the entire situation. “What has she been doing for the past forty-five hours?”

“She's been glued to this bed. I swear she's only gone to the bathroom twice, and that's literally the only time she moved away from you until your mom coerced her with lies. She's not sleeping or eating, and when you see her, you're going to be pissed, because she doesn't look healthy.”

“Damn it, Layla,” Quin whispered.

“You would have done the same thing,” Kemble pointed out.

“True.” Quin moved the covers and examined his side. It looked normal.

“What's this?” he asked, gesturing to the bands circling his wrist and neck.

Kemble smiled as he touched one.

“Gum wrappers.”

Quin's eyebrows furrowed as he looked closer. Sure enough, they were gum wrappers – dozens of them folded into tiny strips, then tucked together to form a shiny foil band. “Why am I wearing candy wrappers?” he asked, picking up the long necklace. “There must be a hundred of them.”

“At least,” Kemble confirmed. “Layla

took a vow not to drink coffee until you can have it with her, but she's been struggling to stay awake, so yesterday morning she asked us to bring her some gum. She's been chewing it nonstop, and every time she pops in another piece, she folds the wrapper and adds it to the one from before. I guess it's something hexless children delight in.”

Quin was flabbergasted. Not only did he have a hard time believing one person could chew that much gum, he couldn't believe Layla sat there and folded over a hundred tiny wrappers into jewelry. He found it both endearing and sad. “So that's what she's been doing for forty-five hours? Just sitting here, looking at me and folding gum wrappers?”

“Well,” Kemble sighed, “the first night was really rough on her. All she did was lie there and stare at you while talking to you and herself and that's it. She wouldn't talk to anyone else or respond when we spoke to her. It had us pretty worried, and you would have flipped if you'd seen her like that. Serafin kept checking her head to make sure her brain was functioning correctly, but it was her heart that was broken.”

Quin swallowed a painful lump, and Kemble's brow furrowed as he went on. “She'd never seen you sleep, Quinlan. How you've managed to spend every night with her without letting her see you sleep, I'll never understand, but you probably should have given her the

opportunity, because it freaked her out seeing you unconscious. She kept talking about how perfect and still you looked, but then she'd start talking about how it wasn't right, you being so sober, and how you weren't you unless you were looking at her and smiling at her and holding her."

"Please stop, dad."

"She got better."

Quin hopefully looked up. "She did?"

"Yes. Your color was returning to normal by yesterday morning, and Serafin had your side patched up. That's when she finally talked to us and asked for gum. We were so relieved, we bought the store's entire stock, and it's a good thing we did, because she's nearly

chewed it all. Since then she's been using her time rather wisely. She practiced a song on the guitar, and she read one of Serafin's medical textbooks, quizzing herself on the human organ and nervous systems."

Quin raised an eyebrow, ever impressed by her determination. "Those books aren't easy to get through."

"No they're not, but I'm pretty sure Layla's talent knows no boundaries. Once she decides to do something, she does it."

"So it would seem," Quin mumbled, remembering the way she carved through Agro's army. "She saved our asses in that battle. I never meant for her to carry that burden alone."

“She surprised everyone on that glacier, son.”

“Is she remorseful?”

“I’m sure she is, but she won’t talk to us about it. Like I said, the only thing she’ll discuss is you. She tunes us out when we try to talk to her about other matters at hand.”

“What other matters?”

Kemble lowered his gaze as he answered. “Her anonymity. It’s blown, Quinlan. The clearing near Mount Hood is full of people who want to see her.”

“Survivors?”

“Mostly. But there are some who weren’t even involved in the battle.”

“Then why are they here?”

“Good news travels fast. They’re here

to see the witch who defeated Agro single-handedly. Some of them want to look, some of them want her help, some of them want to say thank you, and most of them have brought her gifts.”

“She won’t take their gifts.”

“I know.”

“I hate that they know where she is.”

“They don’t,” Kemble countered.

“They only know she belongs to a local coven, but they don’t know our location, and no one has confirmed she’s alive.

Drystan and Devlin visited the strangers to get a feel for the situation, and that was the question on everyone’s minds. Did Layla survive? They’re determined to wait around until they get an answer.”

“Are you thinking about faking her

death?”

“We just wanted to leave the option open. What happens next is up to you and Layla.”

“Does she know what's going on?”

“I can't say for sure. We've told her, but we have no idea if she heard. She didn't react.”

“What about our losses? Have you told her about them?”

“Yes, and that we know she heard. She held your arm around her with magic and cried on your chest for hours, but other than that, nothing.”

Quin looked down, running his thumb along a shiny paper chain. “Do you think she'll ever get over this, dad? Do you think she'll be okay?”

“You know her better than I do, Quinlan. I will say this, though. She needs time and healing. We all do, but I’ve never seen anyone catch the amount of shit Layla’s been thrown over the past few weeks, and her unique heart harbors as much grief as it does love. We’re lucky she’s still with us.” He paused, his eyes moistening as he patted Quin’s bicep. “We’re lucky you’re still with us.”

“I wish we still had them all, dad. I’m sorry we don’t.”

“I know,” Kemble whispered. Then he cleared his throat and rose from the bed. “Now let that be the last guilt that slips from your lips today, because Layla’s almost here, and she’s dying to see your

eyes and smile.”

Quin's heart rate quickened. “She'll be mad at herself for leaving.”

“You can blame it on me,” Kemble offered. “Just do me a favor and wait ’til I leave.”

“You scared?” Quin smirked.

Kemble quietly laughed. “It’s never a good idea to get on a woman’s bad side, son. I taught you that long ago.”

They heard the back door close, and Quin sat up, magically rearranging the pillows behind him. He flipped his gaze toward the hallway, waiting for her to walk around the corner, but she didn't walk around it. She flew around it, and when she saw him sitting up and looking at her, she froze in mid-air, her lips

parting into a tiny 'o' of surprise as she dropped toward the floor.

“Layla!” Nearly coming out of his skin, Quin threw out a hand, catching her in a spell right before she hit the floor. He sighed as he floated her back up. Then he pulled her to him much slower than he wanted to.

She came to her senses when she reached the foot of the bed, and she burst out of his magic, flinging herself at him and straddling his lap. Her hands closed over his cheeks as her shiny eyes met his. Then she showered his face in desperate kisses. “You’re awake. You’re finally awake. I missed your eyes so much, Quin... and your smile... I can barely breathe without it.”

He ran his hands down her back and thighs while letting her have her way with his face, but he wanted to look at her, so he carefully worked his fingers into her hair and halted her frantic kissing.

“Layla Love,” he sighed, searching her red-rimmed eyes, pale cheeks, and parched lips. She looked exhausted and slightly ill, but she remained the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He ran a forefinger over her lips, healing the chapped skin. Then he touched the pads of his thumbs to her eyelids, soothing the strain. “I’m sorry, angel,” he whispered, drying the tears streaming down her cheeks. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stay awake for you.”

She shook her head while stroking his jaw and brow. “You're awake now, Quin. That's all that matters.”

“Hear, hear,” Kemble agreed. Then he nudged his crying wife forward. “Give Quinlan a kiss, my love, so we can leave him and Layla alone.”

Cordelia moved in to kiss Quin's cheek, and Layla looked down, tugging on her t-shirt, which was actually one of his t-shirts, until she could have him back.

“I love you, Quinlan,” Cordelia whispered.

“I love you, too, mom,” he returned, glad he had the opportunity.

As Kemble guided Cordelia toward the door, he mind searched Quin. ‘*After*

Layla eats, she needs sleep. I suggest you help her out. Check the nightstand when you're ready.'

The moment his parents cleared the room, Layla found Quin's stare, and her face flexed as fresh tears ran down her cheeks. "I missed you so much, Quin. It was like someone had me by the throat the entire time."

"You didn't take care of yourself," he said, sweeping his thumbs along the dark circles haunting her eyes.

"I know," she confessed, "but I couldn't help it. Please don't be mad at me."

"Of course not, angel."

"I'm not an angel, Quin, but I'd walk through fire to make things right for you."

I'd do anything to stay perfect in your eyes.”

He flashed a grin. “Then I must insist you don't walk through any fires for me.”

As her forefingers dipped into his dimples, a smile curved her exhausted lips. “I would if that's what you needed.”

Quin's heart sighed, a heavy weight lifting from his chest as he brushed a thumb across her smile. “This is what I need. This makes me soar.”

“It's been lost without you. I've been lost without you.”

“Well I'm back, baby, and I have a favor to ask.”

“Anything.”

He laughed as he raised an eyebrow.

“You’re awfully compliant, my love. I could really take advantage right now.”

“I’m just so happy to see you awake and smiling at me, Quin. I’d do anything to keep it that way.”

He gave her dry lips a soft kiss. Then he held one palm in front of her mouth while summoning a glass of water in the other. “Then spit out that gum and drink some water before we have to treat you for dehydration.”

She puckered, but then she obeyed, letting her gum fall into his hand as she accepted the water. After vanishing the chewed candy and its mess, he carefully ran his fingers into her tangled hair. Then he magically worked out knots while she finished her drink.

“Will you eat something?” he asked, running a hand over her stomach.

Eager to please, she passed him the glass then summoned a bowl of fruit, feeding him a strawberry before taking one for herself. She sighed and closed her eyes, obviously missing the taste of food, so he let her eat in silence, hoping she'd keep going until she was full. When he noticed she was giving him bites without taking any, he set the bowl aside and picked her up, cradling her in one arm as he reclined against the pillows.

He brushed her hair back and kissed her nose. Then he gave her t-shirt a tug. “May I take this off?”

“Yes.”

He vanished the shirt then reached for her pajama pants, noticing they, too, were his. “How about these?”

She gave a timid nod, and he figured she was insecure because she hadn’t been showering and grooming. But she needed to know he didn’t give a shit how clean or dirty or prickly she was, so he vanished the pants and tucked her legs under the blankets with his. “That’s better,” he approved, smiling at her.

She nodded again, her eyes filling with moisture. “I can't believe we made it, Quin. I was so afraid we wouldn't.”

“Me, too, Layla, but I’d fight a million battles for you.”

She slid a hand to his healed side, her gaze wide and pleading as it searched

his. "I saw it, Quin. My nightmare wasn't just a nightmare. It was a vision. I saw your injury, and the clothes you wore, and I saw leather armbands before I knew wizards wore such things." Her tears ran like rivers now, and she and her aura shook with emotion. "I saw it all, and I was so scared... because those damn armbands told me exactly what would happen. And I didn't stop it, Quin. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

His heart squeezed as he watched her grief, and he quickly dried her tears with kisses before finding her eyes. "There's nothing to forgive, Layla. Just because you can see the future, doesn't mean you can change it."

"But I should have warned you, Quin.

I should have told you.”

“Yes, you should have told me, but not to warn me. I wouldn't have changed my path even if I'd known the details of your vision. But I want to help you carry your burdens, Layla, and that's a big one. I hate that you went through that alone.”

“I didn't. You're always there for me, always making it better, even when you don't know what's wrong.”

“I'm glad, but I'd like to know why you felt you couldn't tell me.”

“Because it scared me. I know that's not a good reason, but I couldn't bring myself to say it out loud, to describe the horrible thing I saw, and I didn't know how it happened, so I couldn't stop it. I'm sorry, Quin. I don't think I could

ever say that word enough to make up for the things I've done.”

He scowled and laid a finger over her lips. “You’ve done nothing wrong, Layla. I know you’ll probably never believe that, but you need to hear it. You’ve faced incredible adversity and did what you needed to do to survive, and you saved a lot of lives along the way. So no more saying sorry. Not to me or anyone else. We know you never meant for any of this to happen, and nothing you did caused it. Now...” He moved his finger from her lips and gave her a kiss. Then he reached into the nightstand, finding a loaded pipe. Perfect. “Get high with me while we talk about what we’re going to do next.”

“What do you mean?”

Summoning a small flame from his thumb, he used one hand to take a hit. Then he pulled her to his lips, giving her half the smoke with a kiss. “Well,” he finally answered, watching her exhale, “your schedule has blown wide open. So what do you want to do first? Radium Hot Springs? Or should we give Travis a call?”

She hesitated, her eyes anxiously searching his. “There are things we still need to deal with, Quin... sad things, difficult things. Did your dad not tell you?”

Quin played with her hair as he watched her face, feeling blessed to have such a beautiful reprieve from the

pain. “He did, and we'll deal with all that before moving on. But we will move on, and when we do, we'll need something to move on to.” He paused and took another hit. Then he held the stem of the pipe to her lips, urging her to take one on her own. “So what will it be, my love? Angel's choice.”

She eyed him as she blew out a puff of smoke, still unable to relax. “What about the Crusaders? And all those people in the volunteers' clearing?”

“The people in that clearing have no relationship with you whatsoever, so you're not obligated to them. We'll tell them to go home and leave you alone. As for the Crusaders, I owe them a thank you, and I plan on giving it to them, but

that's on me, not you.”

“You're wrong, Quin. They saved my life, too. But they're not waiting around for thank yous. They're waiting around for favors.”

“Are you interested in hearing what they want?”

“I don't know. I have no idea what I should or shouldn't do.”

“Then whatever they want from you will have to wait until you make up your mind. We can tell them you're taking a break, and that if you do decide to hear them out, you'll let them know. Maybe you and I will take a trip to Europe in a couple of weeks and drop in on them. Maybe we'll forget about them altogether, but whatever we do, we're

going to do it for us, not them.”

“I like that solution.”

“Good, because if it doesn't work for you, it doesn't work for me.” After taking one more hit, he offered her another.

Then he sent the pipe away and hugged her closer. “So, what's it going to be, my love? We could leave for Radium in a couple of days, spend as long as you want there, then come home and have Travis visit. Or we could blow off the whole world and take a cruise.”

“It all sounds wonderful, Quin, and as long as you're there, it will be.”

Her muscles had finally relaxed, and her aura had slowed, so he repositioned the pillows and lay on his side, tucking her in with him. “We'll do it all, Layla,

but you have to be awake to enjoy it, so now it's my turn to watch you sleep.”

Moisture filled her tired eyes as her bottom lip trembled. “I don't want to sleep, Quin.”

“You have to sleep, love, but I won't make you. Your body and that weed will do the job for me.”

“You're sneaky.”

He smiled as he brushed a thumb across her pout and kissed away her tears. “Maybe a little.”

She desperately searched his face, her eyelids getting heavier. “But I just got you back.”

“I'm not going anywhere, love. I'm staying right here, and I'll be holding you when you wake up.”

“Promise?”

“Yep, and the first thing I’m going to do is summon you a cup of coffee, because I’ll need you awake for what I plan to do next.”

“Please tell me you mean me.”

He laughed as he ran a hand down her back to her butt. “Yes, my frisky angel, I mean you. I’ve faced the possibility of losing this perfect body of yours, and I’ll never go another hour without finding a way to appreciate it, but right now I need to take care of it and let you sleep.”

“You’re really going to stay?”

“Yes. If I go anywhere, it will be the bathroom, and I’ll come right back.”

She watched him for another moment, no doubt wondering if she had the energy

to argue, and apparently she didn't.
“Okay.”

He smiled and leaned in, giving her a soft kiss that took her breath away, and as her heart stuttered and stopped, his did the same. They both froze, leaving their lips together as they savored the moment. Then her heart and breathing resumed, and so did his.

His smile stretched around her lips as he cupped her face in his palms. “You're amazing, Layla. What you do to me is incredible, and it's unbelievable how much I love you. You make everything better than okay, you make it perfect, and I'm going to make it perfect for you. I'm going to make it so that you're not afraid to close your eyes and sleep.”

Layla didn't know if she'd ever be able to live without fear, fear for herself, for him, and for those they cared about, but now more than ever, she knew she could live *with* the fear, because as long as she feared losing Quin, she hadn't lost him yet. And one thing was for damn sure – she'd never go down without a fight. She didn't know why she had extraordinary powers, and she didn't fully comprehend how to use them, but until the day her crazy heart stopped working altogether, it would beat for one purpose – to protect the people she loved.

And she loved no other more deeply than the man kissing her tired eyelids and stroking her messy curls.

Epilogue

The morning sun crept toward the horizon, blurring the lines between Paris and the sky. Bryce was familiar with the city from a bird's-eye view, but today he stood on a sidewalk, looking at the fading metropolis through smog and the pillars of the Charles De Gaulle Airport.

His first trip on an airplane hadn't been unpleasant, but he had no desire to do it again, and it would be a cold day in Death Valley before he'd climb into one of the taxis lining up for the hexless.

He took off walking, unfamiliar with his surroundings and the shoes on his

feet, but all he needed was a shadowed corner, which he soon found. Slipping into the dark, he vanished his shoes and summoned his cloak. Then he concealed himself and reemerged. A quick glance around assured him no one witnessed the magic, so he soared toward coral sky, anxious to leave the stress of the hexless behind.

The Crusaders' home base was more than a hundred miles away, but after being on a plane for hours, soaring free felt amazing – the cold wind flowing around his warm and weightless body. And his feet; they could breathe. He was pretty sure hexless shoes were made by people who hated feet.

With Paris far behind him and

Belgium growing nearer, Bryce descended into the French Ardennes Mountains, landing halfway into a valley dug out by the oldest river in the world – the Meuse. Trees and undergrowth owned the incline, obscuring the world around him, but he didn't need to see where he was going. This was his home, and he was glad to be back.

Hiking a few yards up the slope, he came to a rocky ridge and looked around, finding the auras of two of his comrades. Bryce revealed his body and offered them a wave. Then he looked at the stone ridge, watching as a crack widened and cool air rushed from dark depths.

Ducking inside, Bryce cast a light

from his palm, and the stone closed behind him. The rocky corridor ahead was several miles long, twisting and delving deeper than the Meuse, so he flew, eventually coming to a bright golden door guarded by a wizard in baby-blue.

“Tiernan,” Bryce greeted, landing and extinguishing his light. The guard smiled and moved aside. “Bonjour, Monsieur Bryce.”

Bryce crossed the golden threshold then followed a golden corridor further into the Crusaders' home base. Upon entering the great hall, he found the four magicians he'd come to see sitting in a circle, intently listening to a soothsayer named Gavin.

“I’ve located another guardian,”
Gavin announced.

A witch named Andraste swept her knee-length, silver hair out of the way as she replied. “Where?”

“Southern California. He’s much like the other one – a bonded child seeking a dream.”

A wizard named Roarke impatiently rapped his knuckles on the table. “If only the dream would seek him. We’ve located two wizards, yet the witch remains a mystery. Perhaps your original vision was tainted, Gavin.”

“You know I can’t guarantee my work,” Gavin countered. “We’ve been running on obscure prophecies for more than twenty-two years.”

A witch named Kassandra stood and paced the floor. “Yes, and smoky visions were fine twenty-two years ago, before the threat encroached. But we're running out of time, and our knowledge remains pitifully inadequate.”

“I agree,” Gavin conceded, “but we've recruited nearly every soothsayer renowned for their accuracy, and they hold not one shred of perception regarding the earth angel. I seem to be the only one with answers about the witch, obscure or otherwise, and I've given you everything I know. Her fate is far more legible than she, and even it remains cryptic. The goddess of mercy took pity on us more than two decades ago and no doubt got reprimanded for

meddling in human affairs. To defy Mother Ava is to risk eternity, which would explain the lack of visions. It appears we're on our own from here."

"What about the double-bonded male?" Andraste asked. "Finley. He's loose, powerful and aware of the earth angel. Perhaps he sought her out after killing his handlers and escaping the Dark Guild."

"I search for visions of him daily," Gavin assured, "but receive nothing."

"We're wasting time," a wizard named Lorcan interjected. "Let's follow up on the young man in California, see if he's found his dream girl."

"That may not be necessary," Bryce interrupted.

The five magicians turned, smiling at their company.

“Bryce,” Lorcan greeted. “Welcome back. Join us, will you?”

Bryce accepted the glass of wine. Cassandra summoned him then sat next to Lorcan. “We have every reason to believe we've found her.”

“The earth angel?” Cassandra asked, eagerly taking a seat next to him.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “Venetia had us tailing Alistair Murdoch's mercenaries when we came across the most powerful witch I've ever seen. She's young, early twenties, and her beauty... well, it's unique to say the least. She single-handedly defeated Agro after taking out over seventy of his men.”

“Agro's dead?” Andraste interjected.

“Yes,” Bryce confirmed. “The witch literally ripped his heart out.”

“Where is Venetia now?” Lorcan asked.

“She's camped outside the witch's community, keeping the enemy at bay while waiting for the witch to agree to counsel. Venetia didn't want to waste time, so she sent me here on a plane.”

Roarke laughed. “How was that?”

“Fast but uncomfortable.”

“Yes,” Lorcan agreed. “My first time on a plane was my last. Where is the witch's community?”

“Oregon.”

“Is she willing to talk?”

“I don't know. Her family suffered

many losses during the battle with Agro, so the witch is hiding out while she copes. However,” he added, leaning forward, “we’ve already won favor with her.”

“How so?”

Bryce grinned and raised his eyebrows. “Venetia saved the life of her bonded mate.”

“Bonded mate?” the council responded.

“He’s not her bonded mate,” Gavin corrected.

“She thinks he is,” Bryce noted, “and they have the golden lights.”

“Hmm...” Gavin hummed. “That’s a little surprising. I figured they’d differ from traditional bonded lights.”

“Well they do,” Bryce conceded.

“They’re laced with silver.”

“Ah... the color of the Heavens.”

Lorcan scowled and looked between them. “Explain what this means, Gavin.”

Gavin stood and paced, thoughtfully staring off into the distance. “If this witch is indeed the earth angel, she isn’t bonded, not in the traditional sense, and the same rules don’t apply. In anticipation of the earth angel’s arrival, Willa – the well-meaning goddess of mercy that she is – blessed the unborn babies of seven bonded females, thereby providing the earth angel with seven suitable mates, all born with the ability to see her to purpose. But only one gets the job, and the earth angel must choose

to give it to him. Nothing about the situation fits our idea of soul mates, except, perhaps, the way the bond is sealed. But consummating the relationship wouldn't change anything unless she'd already surrendered her life to him, and he'd have to earn that honor. Bonded mates start with that connection and merely have to decide to keep it. The earth angel will feel a connection to all seven prospects, but her trust won't come so easily. The guardian will have to work for it, and if he succeeds, their bond will surpass those of bonded mates. It will be a union unlike any other."

The majestic room was silent as everyone considered this. Then Lorcan

turned to Bryce. “Venetia saved the wizard's life?”

“Yes,” Bryce answered. “His heart had stopped, and his aura was fading. Venetia resuscitated him with just seconds to spare.”

“Well, if the witch is indeed the earth angel, and Gavin's correct in assuming she's found her guardian, Venetia has earned us the biggest favor possible.”

“It would seem so,” Bryce agreed. “But I feel I should warn you – after the defeat of Agro, the witch is no longer a mystery. Every magician in America has probably already heard of her power.”

“This would include Alistair Murdoch, I assume.”

“His mercenaries were on the scene

when we found her, but they didn't live to relay the news to their boss. Those who weren't killed remain in the custody of the witch's family. Her grandfather granted us access to one of their clearings so we could keep an eye on the prisoners.”

“That's good news,” Lorcan noted. “It shows trust on behalf of the family and ensures the mercenaries' silence.” He paused for several seconds then looked to his fellow councilors. “We must act immediately. The Dark Guild won't sit on this news. They'll start making plans the moment rumors reach their ears. We need to get the earth angel on our side before the Dark Guild finds her.”

Everyone nodded their agreement, so

Lorcan turned back to Bryce. “I want you to return to Venetia. I’m going to dispatch a guard of two-hundred to accompany you. Your objective is to get the earth angel back here alive, and I expect your lives to serve as her armor. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Lorcan,” Bryce vowed. “We’ll die to protect our future.”

“And she is our future,” Lorcan added. “If the Dark Guild follows through with their nefarious plan, the world will fall into darkness, and the earth angel will be our only way out.”

the end

destruction

the mystic series 5

Coming soon.

Author's Note

If you loved this book, please consider leaving a review where you purchased it.

Because I know that writing a review takes time, I'd like to reward your kindness with some special content.

When this book has reached 100 reviews, I will release a

*preview of Destruction: book
5 in the Mystic series.*

*When this book has reached
200 reviews, I will release an
extended scene from chapter
30 – fun with Quin and Layla
in the barn!*

**This content will be featured
on my website.**

Conn/Kavanagh Coven

Catigern (Cat) Kavanagh

Patriarch (86)

Cadman Kavanagh (66)
md. Flanna (62)

Edana Kavanagh (44)
md. Devlin Driscoll (45)

Drystan Driscoll (26)
md. Selena (27)

Bragden Driscoll (5)

Alana Driscoll (2)

Lann Kavanagh (64)
md. Rhiannon (60)

Kemble Kavanagh (42)
md. Cordelia (42)

*Quinlan (Quin) Kavanagh (22)

Karena Kavanagh (38)
md. Belinos Mochrie (40)

Skyla (Sky) Mochrie (17)

Siblings

Caitrin Conn

Patriarch (61)
m. Morrigan (59)

Rhosewen Conn (dec.)
md. Aedan Donnelly (dec.)

Layla (Callaway) Donnelly (21)

Cinnia (Conn) Giles (58)

m. Arlen Giles (64)

Enid (Giles) Gilmore (39)
md. Kearny Gilmore (41)

Brietta Gilmore (Bri) (20)

Banning Gilmore (Bann) (17)

*Main character from
desecration

Serafin and Daleen Donnelly:
Grandparents of Layla from
impassion

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write the story, but you bring
it to life.

About the Author

B. C. Burgess is a small town girl born and raised in Oklahoma, where she still resides with her devoted husband and their young son. She's addicted to coffee and writing and thinks the combination is heaven. Inspired to write by her love of reading, she feels fiction provides a healthy escape

from the hardships of life, and hopes her stories touch the hearts of her readers, just as she's been touched time and again. Though most of her visions flower in the form of fiction, she dreams of the day her passion for writing, along with determination and hard work, will prove to her son creative dreams can come true.

If you like the tales B. C.
weaves, let her know.
She loves hearing from her
readers.

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