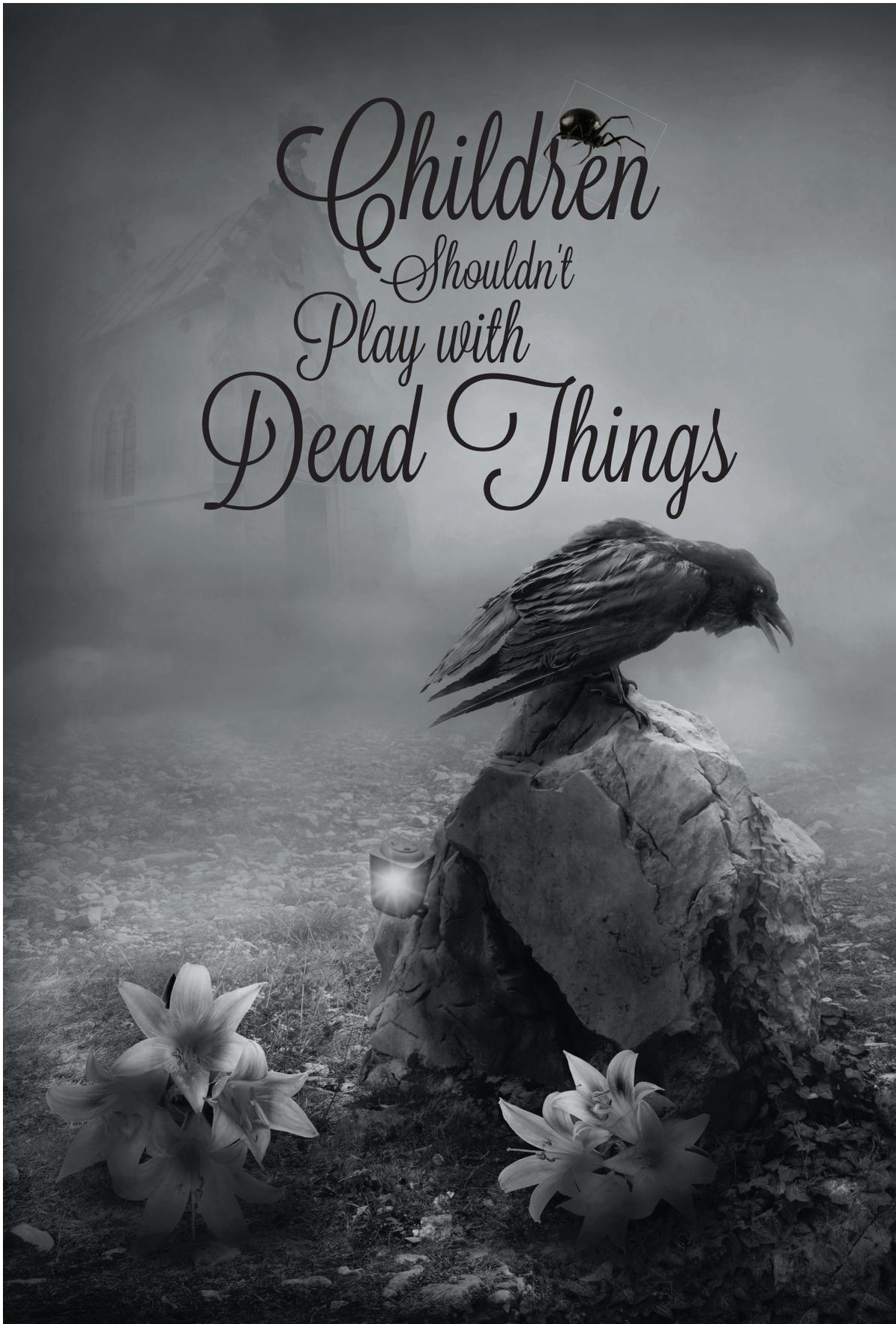


Children
Shouldn't
Play with
Dead Things



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Martina McAtee



Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things

Dead Things Series Book 1

by Martina McAtee

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mom and dad. I wish they could have been around to see this.

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There are so many people I want to thank for helping me along the way that I don't even know where to start. To my daughter, Mikyla for putting up with me living with my head in my laptop for six months. To my sister, Susan, and my nieces, Shannon and Dani for holding my hand, reading terrible drafts and basically just listening to every freak out. To my best friend, Melissa for reading this book not once, not twice but three times looking for my numerous grammar errors (I have a comma problem). Thank you to Lee Ann for reading this book and encouraging me along the way when you were under no familial obligation to do so. To Kathy, who was as proud of me as my own mother would have been. Also, thank you to Nathalia Suellen for taking my cover design ideas and turning them into the most beautiful design ever and Atmosphere Designs for designing the perfect website in such a short time. And, finally, thank you to Google, you've always been there when I needed you, even when I didn't quite know what I was looking for. You're the best.

"Thus strangely are our souls constructed, and by such slight ligaments are we bound to prosperity or ruin."

~Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

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Chapter 1



EMBER

“You know, Ms. Landry, you have the best skin I’ve ever seen on a corpse.” Ember Denning told the body lying before her. “I would know; I’m a professional.” She dusted powder across the older woman’s cheeks, her whisper conspiratorial as she added, “But if you see your sister up there, don’t tell her I said so, since I may have told her the same thing last month.”

Her latest client was predictably silent on the matter. She sighed. She needed livelier friends.

“Ember?”

Ember squeaked in terror, spinning around, makeup brush brandished before her like a weapon.

Her boss chuckled, “What are you going to do, rouge me to death?”

She dropped her hands and shrugged, defeated, going back to her task. “It’s a powder brush, actually.”

He looked at his watch. “What are you doing here, Ember?”

She furrowed her brow, hoping she looked suitably confused. “I work here?”

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That got her the eyebrow. Miller Hammond was a lot of things—including the owner of the funeral home she stood in—but he wasn't stupid and he wasn't buying it. He folded thick arms across his chest and fixed her with his best-hardened stare. He was trying for threatening but with his dark freckled skin and kind eyes, he looked like he should be playing God in every movie.

"You know exactly what I mean. I thought you were going to the cemetery today?"

She shrugged, eyes sliding away. "The day's technically not over yet."

"Girl, do not play games with me," he said. "You need to go see your father. You missed his wake. You cannot miss his burial. You need to see him before..." he trailed off, letting his words go unspoken.

He didn't have to say it. She needed to see him before social services came to collect her. She didn't see the point of shoving a seventeen year old into foster care for one year but the social worker had assured Ember her opinion didn't matter.

"Why do you even care?" she asked, tone casual as she slammed her brushes back into their proper containers. "He didn't care about me when he was alive. Why should I care about him now that he's dead? It's not like he knows I'm there."

He glanced at the old woman lying on the table. "Who are you trying to convince? You spend more time talking to the dead than the living."

Her face flushed. She didn't really have a good answer for that so instead she said, "The difference is, these people just died." She snapped her rubber gloves off. "My father has been dead for years. Somebody just finally laid him down."

"Ember," he said, his voice soft with...something, sympathy, maybe pity. "Your dad was troubled, he—"

"—was a drunk." Ember finished.

"He loved you." He moved towards her but she held up her hand. He stopped, palms raised in surrender.

She hunched in on herself. She had a thing about personal space. She gave him a ghost of a smile. It wasn't his fault she was weird. Miller was just trying to help. He was always trying to help.



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“I...” she started, apology dying on her lips.

“No. Nope. You don’t have to believe me but you do have to listen to me. Not another word. Take your skinny behind out of here and go do what’s right. Now. I’ll have Alice finish up with Ms. Landry.”

She did not have a skinny behind, she thought with a huff. “Fine,” she said, snagging her sweater from the hook by the door. “But don’t blame me when she ends up looking like one of those queens on Bourbon Street.”

“Uh huh.” He waved a hand at her. “And you go straight home after the service. It’s going to be crazy in the quarter tonight. I don’t want you getting caught out in that.”

She rolled her eyes but nodded. “Yeah, yeah.”

“I mean it.”

“Okay!” Jeez, it’s not like it was her first day living in New Orleans. There was a festival in the quarter pretty much every day, especially this close to Halloween.

“Oh, and Ember?”

She turned with an exasperated sigh. “Yes?”

“Happy Birthday.”

She gave him a lopsided smile. “Thanks.”

The walk to the cemetery was quick. Along the way, people were already celebrating. Men wore skull masks and top hats and women wore elaborate face paint and beautiful dresses in honor of Dia de los Muerta. She stared longingly at a dark haired girl with a huge red rose in her hair and sugar skull face paint. If she were a normal girl, she’d be preparing for the event with her friends. Despite having shared her birthday with the day of the dead, she’d never celebrated it herself.

She smiled at the girl as they passed but the girl dropped her eyes and moved as far away as possible on the narrow sidewalk. It didn’t hurt her feelings anymore. People avoided her as if she existed in an invisible bubble. It’s why she usually ignored Miller’s fatherly warnings about being careful. Nobody wanted to go near her. People were afraid of her. She just didn’t know why.

It was cold even for November. Swollen grey storm clouds marred the afternoon sky, casting the landscape around her in



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shadow. She pulled her sweater tighter around her, hoping her arm hid the largest hole. She shivered as the wind picked up and swirled the fallen leaves around her feet.

She wasn't the first to arrive at the service. A sea of strangers stood before the large mausoleum housing the remains of her father, all gawking at her with undisguised interest. They were mostly his students and other colleagues from the university, there to satisfy their morbid curiosity. Her father had no friends. It was hard to make friends when you spent your whole life as a barely functioning alcoholic; not many friends at the bottom of a whiskey bottle.

She could feel their scrutiny, like tiny daggers, piercing her skin. She hated when people stared. And they always stared. She knew she was strange looking; her hair too orange, too wild and her wide violet eyes too strange. New Orleans was a superstitious place and something about her made people afraid.

She set her jaw, grinding her teeth until the muscle in her jaw popped. She just wasn't herself since he died. Maybe she was getting sick. Thunder rumbled overhead and she squinted into the sky, inhaling deeply. It smelled like rain. Of course, it was going to rain. She hadn't brought an umbrella.

As the minutes ticked by, she became restless. She hated waiting. It made her feel like she was crawling out of her skin. She just wanted this useless ritual to start already. People whispered to each other, their gazes heavy on her back.

She glanced at the gates. She could go. She could just turn and leave. But everybody would see. She chewed at her thumbnail. What did she even care what a bunch of strangers thought about her? She could do as she pleased. She had nobody to answer to. Her breath caught on the thought. She had nobody. She stayed where she was, frozen at the thought.

A dark skinned man in a long black robe ambled his way to the front of the crowd, smiling and shaking hands with the people, clasping them warmly on the shoulder like a visiting dignitary. The group quieted and the woman closest to her smoothed her hands over her blouse as if there would be an inspection after the service. Ember rolled her eyes.



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“Brothers and sisters,” the man’s voice boomed in the silence, echoing off the surrounding stones. “We are gathered here to say goodbye to a dear friend.”

She couldn’t help the snort that escaped, covering it with a cough, as eyes swung towards her. It was his job to say nice things about the dead, she reminded herself. What was he going to say? ‘We’ve gathered to say goodbye to a man who was a lousy professor and even worse father. A nasty, neglectful jerk that spent his days trying to decide if he would ignore his only child or verbally abuse her to the point of neuroses. That he spent most nights passed out in his own vomit and nobody would really miss him?’

She felt feverish, a heat overtaking her body starting at the soles of her feet and crawling higher. Beads of perspiration formed on her lip, despite the cool air whipping around the stone mausoleums. She must be sick.

She tuned out the preacher and his platitudes. Her eyes fluttered and she swayed on her feet, vision swimming. Was she going to pass out? She blinked hard several times and dabbed at the sweat at her forehead with her sleeve.

A wave of black umbrellas swung into the air as the sky opened up. People huddled together, trying to ward off the frigid cold and the rain coming in sideways.

She made no move to protect herself from the onslaught, all her energy focused on staying upright. Her hair stuck to her face, her sweater and black dress clinging like a second skin. She should be freezing but she was in flames, her head stuffed with cotton. What was happening to her?

The preacher droned on despite the weather. The woman in the blouse rushed forward to shield the good reverend with her obnoxiously large black umbrella. What was this ladies problem? Was she trying for extra grace in heaven? Ember’s fingers buzzed like she held a live wire, the sensation growing until she felt like a million fire ants crawled beneath her skin.

Her eyes swept the crowd, noting how people inched even further away from her. Could they see what was happening to her? Maybe they just questioned the sanity of a girl who didn’t have the sense to get out of the rain.



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Her eyes scanned the perimeter, looking anywhere but the crowd. At first glance, she thought him a statue; an apparition in the deluge of rain. He sat perched on top of a mausoleum, crouched like a gargoyle with his elbows on his knees, hood shrouding his face. Three stone crosses rose behind him giving him the appearance a post-apocalyptic monk guarding a sacred shrine.

That feeling beneath her skin intensified and she fought the urge to tear at her flesh with her nails. How could anybody not see something was wrong? She balled her hands into fists, clenching until her nails pushed tiny half-moons into her palms. She felt the tiniest bit of relief if she focused on the biting pain in her palms and not the razor blades beneath her skin.

Then it hit her, pain like a lightning bolt, ripping through her skull. She would have hit her knees, but she was paralyzed, hanging like a marionette doll controlled by some unseen puppet master. Her limbs wouldn't budge, cement heavy and useless. She tried to scream but no sound came. Nobody looked her way. Could they not see there was something wrong with her?

She had this overwhelming sense of dread; it clung to her skin like the rain that poured down on her. She was going to die like this, standing at her father's funeral, drenched and in agony. She was on fire. She needed to cool down but the rain was as hot as the blood pounding in her ears.

Her eyes found the figure in the distance. If he was a monk, maybe he'd hear her prayers. Maybe he could end her misery. He tilted his head and she stupidly thought maybe he'd heard her somehow. Maybe he could sense what was happening.

He stood then, rising from the top of the mausoleum like another spire. He pushed his hood back. She wished she could see his face. She needed him closer. She needed to see him, to know he saw her. Shit, she was going crazy. He was too far away to help. She was going to die there and he was going to watch.

She found it weirdly comforting. At least she wouldn't be totally alone in the end, not like her dad. Another shot of pain seared through her, her vision whiting out. She hoped it happened soon. She could lose consciousness. She just needed the pain to stop.

Her panic ratcheted up as she felt herself losing the battle to keep herself upright. She didn't want to die. Then she felt it; a slippery



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coolness washed over her, like icy fingers pressing against her temples and working their way under her skin. She wanted to cry it felt so good, soothing the searing heat like ice water through her veins.

She wasn't sure how long she stood there, eyes closed, breathing deep, letting the break overtake her but by the time the sensation started to fade, the rain was gone and the people were drifting away. She shook her head, trying to clear the frosty cobwebs clouding her brain. She timidly took a step forward, relieved to find her limbs working.

She looked to the mausoleum in the distance but there was nobody. Had he ever really been there? Was this what it felt like to go crazy?



Chapter 2



MACE

Mace kept his head down and his sopping wet hood up. It may not have protected him against the weather but it afforded him some anonymity. She had seen him in the cemetery, forcing him to hang back further than usual. He wasn't afraid of losing her. The girl only had three destinations, the funeral parlor, the cemetery or that ramshackle apartment she called home. He was more concerned with her getting herself killed along the way.

He weaved through drunken revelers, doing his best to keep her in his sights despite the crowd. She paid no attention to her surroundings, drifting along in a daze. She stepped in front of a cab, earning her a honk and a shout in creole. She didn't even acknowledge him. He couldn't tell if the girl had left her father's funeral with a death wish or if she was still suffering from the effects of whatever happened in the cemetery.

It honestly didn't matter to him either way. He'd spent the last seven days bored out of his mind. It would be a shame if she was hit by a bus just when things finally got interesting. He couldn't fault her for his boredom, he supposed. It's not as if she knew he followed

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and it seemed unreasonable and somewhat impolite to task somebody with keeping their stalker entertained.

Keeping him entertained was an impossible task, really. Immortality sounded great in the brochure but after the first hundred years, everything seemed redundant. His life had become a tedious loop of Stalk. Kill. Repeat. He had to eat, but it didn't make hunting any less monotonous. Take now for instance. He was famished but when he looked at the crowd, not one of them seemed more appealing than following the girl. He'd rather go hungry. Besides, cleanup in a crowd like this would be messy. People shouldn't let the media fool them; murder wasn't that exciting after the first fifty bodies or so.

His eyes landed on a group of drunken college guys currently harassing one of the street musicians, eyes lingering long enough that one of them might mistake his intentions. He glanced at his charge, still wandering through the crowd like a ghost, before looking back at his meal options. He shouldn't, not in this crowd. Really, though, would the world even notice one less douchebag in boat shoes and a backwards ball cap? It would be a public service.

He shook his head as one of the boys tried to snatch the wig off a female impersonator getting a right hook to the face for his trouble. Call it what you will, natural selection, Darwinism, king of the food chain; some people just didn't make the cut. He rarely went after humans. They didn't provide much of a challenge but sometimes he was willing to make an exception for the greater good.

With one last glance, he shook it off and went back to following the girl. He was certain those boys would be around later. The rain started once again, just as the girl made it to her apartment. Mace pulled himself further into his damp hoodie, grateful the cold didn't affect him. If he weren't immortal, he'd likely die of hypothermia. Instead, he was just very uncomfortable.

He settled himself on the roof across from her building, tugging his sleeping bag around his shoulders, grateful for the overhang that shielded him from some of the rain. He tucked his knees against his chest, resting his elbows there as she came into view in the window. She flung off her wet sweater and moved out of view only to reappear in her bedroom window. When she yanked her dress over her head, he dropped his gaze to his phone, glancing at the time. It was almost time for check-in. He was to call every six hours, no



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exceptions. It was part of the reason he'd almost declined the offer. He wasn't much for deadlines. He felt it stifled his...creativity.

They were quite insistent he be the one who watched the girl, despite his taste for exotic cuisine and his penchant for homicide. It made no sense. Mace knew where he ranked among his kind. He was very much a last resort. He wasn't a babysitter or a bodyguard. They didn't hire him to follow humans, no matter how bizarre they appeared. They didn't even hire him to kill humans.

He pulled a granola bar from his bag and tore into it. It didn't satisfy his hunger but it gave him something to do with his hands. As he watched, she stopped to answer the phone. She became more agitated as the call went on, finally slamming the phone down in its cradle and ripping it from the wall. She smashed it on the floor. His brows knitted together, she was acting quite strange since the funeral.

He wanted to talk to her. He needed to know what she was, but his orders were clear. Observe her behavior and report what he sees. Do not interact with her. Do not kill her. They stated the latter explicitly...twice. He was to report anything unusual immediately.

The term unusual was subjective, it would seem, because everything about this girl was unusual. She had no friends, she interacted with very few people, she only went to school once in the last four days and when she had, she'd kept her head down and hadn't spoken a single word. Her classmates hadn't been so kind. It seemed not even the death of a parent, could stop people from being people. She didn't acknowledge them in any outward way.

She hadn't been back since. Instead, she chose to hide in the cemetery. He'd first thought her there to visit her father. He'd been wrong. She was familiar with the cemetery in a way no girl her age should be. She knew everybody, literally, every body. She spent hours putting single flowers on the graves of the deceased. She lit the candles often left as tribute. She carefully righted trinkets friends and family left behind. She wasn't just respectful of the dead; she was reverent.

When she wasn't tending the dead, she was talking to them. Before that first day in the cemetery, he'd thought her mute. Then, he'd watched her have a forty-five minute conversation with a mausoleum with the name Arsenault etched across the top. As she carried



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on her one sided chat, she drew, pencil flying as she sketched the face of an old man dressed in his Sunday best and a beat up fedora.

It was safe to say his new charge had a singular preoccupation with the dead. Perhaps they were speaking to her. Even so, it wouldn't explain why he was watching her; his employers rarely concerned themselves with the special humans. But after what he'd just witnessed in the cemetery, he supposed it was safe to put her firmly in the non-human column, breed undetermined.

Given her fascination with the dead, he would almost think Valkyrie or reaper but power didn't seek them out. He'd watched that power come for her, swirling up from the ground and swallowing her whole. She'd stood there paralyzed, helpless to do anything. Had she unwittingly called that power to her, or had it come for her of its own free will? He wasn't sure which was worse.

He supposed she could be a witch but she hadn't been in control of the power. If she was a witch, she was very new or completely incompetent. Perhaps if he could get close enough to see her mark it would give him a clue as to her origins but that would mean getting closer. He'd already gotten too close. He'd already interfered. He'd disobeyed his direct orders.

They knew what they were getting into when they'd picked him so the fault lay entirely with them. He had no idea why he did it really, other than just to see what would happen. So much energy surrounded her, how could he not try to tap into it? He was curious by nature. They had to know he wouldn't be able to leave something so tempting alone, not when they dangled it right in front of him.

Theoretically, it shouldn't have worked. His magic should have had no effect on hers. Very rarely could you temper somebody else's magic by adding your own. If anything, he ran the risk of creating a much bigger complication, such as killing a large crowd of people at a funeral and rendering himself unemployed.

It had worked, though. Her magic had practically rolled over and purred at his and his magic had responded in kind, wrapping itself around hers and making itself at home. Witch magic didn't do that. It was maddening. He felt like he was missing something, something important. It gnawed at the corners of his mind, just out of reach.

A flash of color caught his attention at the window. She had changed into jeans and a bulky sweater, tattered purple duffle bag in



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her hands. She stuffed clothing, her sketchbook, shoes and anything else she could fit into the bag. She went to the kitchen and pulled out a coffee can from the top shelf, pulling out cash and stuffing it into her jean pocket.

Interesting.

His phone vibrated in his hand, startling him out of his thoughts.

“Mace,” he answered.

“It’s like you are trying to piss him off.”

“Echo,” he grimaced at her tone, picturing her pinched face. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Check your watch. You’re late checking in.”

He glanced at his phone. “Ah, right you are, Luv.” He’d lost track of time.

“So, anything to report?” Echo prompted, annoyance creeping into her voice.

The girl flitted around the apartment, a rare smile blooming on her face. The rain began to fall harder, coming in sideways. She rushed to the window, hands on the edge, making to close it against the sudden assault. She looked up and froze.

He did too.

There was no way she could see him, not from this distance, not with the rain. He squinted as she turned away just a bit before looking back, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. Maybe she could see him? She’d seen him in the cemetery earlier. He couldn’t help but stare back. Her cloud of orange hair was billowing in the chilly air and even with the rain gusting in her face, she looked...captivating, like some vengeful spirit out of a gothic novel. She stared for another second before slamming the window shut hard enough to rattle the glass in its frame.

He blinked, spell broken.

“Hello?” Echo said through clenched teeth.

He opened his mouth to tell her what he’d seen but faltered. If he told them she was a...well, a not human, there was a very good chance his next assignment would be to kill her like the others. It had to be why they’d chosen him for this assignment. Nothing else made sense. They’d obviously wanted him to ensure she was supernatural and now they would want her dead.



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He wasn't quite ready for that. He had to know what she was. He'd been around a long time and he'd never seen somebody who appeared to leach power from the ground they stood on. His fingers flexed. His magic wanted to know too.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry, bad reception up here. Nothing to report yet. The girl is dismally boring. I should charge him triple for forcing me to endure this type of torture." He lowered his voice, attempting a flirty tone. "Any chance you feel like telling me what he wants with her? Since when did we start concerning ourselves with humans?"

She snorted, "That's hardly any of your business, is it?"

"No need to get snippy, Luv. It was a fleeting curiosity."

"He doesn't pay you to be curious; he pays you to do as you're told."

"Well, somebody has her sassy pants on today. What has your knickers in such a twist?"

The girl's voice dropped to a whisper, "Please, please, don't do anything stupid, Mace. Just watch the girl and report what you see. A trained monkey could do it."

"Yes," he told her. "That's the thing of it. He could have assigned anybody to watch the girl. Why the homicidal maniac? Why hire a killer to babysit one tiny human girl? Seems like a terrible staffing choice, really, like hiring an alcoholic to tend your bar."

"Just mind your business, do your job and don't do anything that is going to get you in trouble."

"What's he going to do? Kill me? I'm immortal."

She made a grunt of frustration. "Yes, well there are far worse things than death as you well remember. Whatever she is, she's got him on edge. Don't make him mad."

He sighed. "I'll be in touch."

He ended the call just as the girl opened the old laptop on the coffee table. She sat on the floor typing furiously for the next few hours, her attention never wavering. The rain had disappeared by the time she hoisted her bag over her shoulder and headed for her front door. She didn't even bother to lock it behind her.

"Now where are you headed?" he asked the empty rooftop.



Chapter 3



• KAI

Kai Lonergan hated math. You would think being a supernatural creature in a supernatural town would make you exempt from mundane things like math and econ, but no; the authorities forced shifters, witches and even reapers like him to endure the horrors of high school. The town claimed they had their reasons; keeping up appearances-blah, blah, blah-but as far as he could see it was just good old-fashioned torture.

He dropped his chin to his hand and sighed dramatically. “I hate this,” he told his sister. Tristin didn’t even look up from her notebook. He leaned forward to peer past the waterfall of her dark hair. She sat hunched over her desk, tongue poking from the side of her mouth. His sister was no artist but he could see she was doodling dismembered stick figures with pools of black ink at their feet. Great, as if people didn’t already think they were freaks. The school therapist would have a field day with that.

He continued his conversation despite his sister’s lack of participation. “Hate’s not even a strong enough word,” he decided. “I loathe math. Detest it. I hate math more than I hate asparagus, more than I

hate that weird fruit thing Isa makes us choke down every Christmas. I hate math more than I hate—" he shuddered. "-marshmallows."

His sister shook her head and grunted but didn't otherwise acknowledge him. If Quinn were there, he'd understand. Quinn understood his hatred of squishy weird foods because he was the best, best friend ever. However, Quinn was in smart people math where they started throwing in hearts and hieroglyphics and alchemical symbols, most of which Kai was sure they just made up. Quinn assured him it wasn't so but he knew no good could ever come from putting math and chemistry together.

"Come on, Tristin, commiserate with me. Be my sister. Let us band together over a mutual hatred of math."

A desk chair scraped behind him and a shadow loomed over his desk. Warm air puffed against his skin as an angry werewolf rumbled, "Shut. Up."

Kai grimaced. He'd managed to forget Rhys' annoying presence for almost ten whole minutes. That was a new record for him. In Kai's defense, it was hard to forget a six foot six slab of muscle that shadowed your every move. It was especially hard when they wore their shirts tight enough to count their abs and smelled like rain and sex and poor life choices. He closed his eyes, attempting to regulate his teenage hormones and wildly thumping heart before Rhys smelled it on him.

He needed a distraction. He decided on the easiest course of action, annoying the wolf. It was a win-win. He leaned back until his head was resting on Rhys' desk and grinned up at his perpetually grumpy face. "From this angle it looks like you're actually smiling." He laughed softly. "It's like an optical illusion."

Rhys growled low in his throat. "Get off my desk."

Kai schooled his expression into a pout. "Now you're just hurting my feelings on purpose. Tell me I'm pretty and maybe I'll relinquish your desk." He batted his eyes, satisfaction warming him as Rhys turned an unnatural shade of purple. "Come on," he coaxed. "Use your words."

Rhys started to partially shift into wolf mode, eyes glowing, the light bringing out the gold flecks in his brilliant green eyes, his canines elongating dramatically. Kai snorted a laugh, "You're so easy



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to rile up. One little joke and you go all flashy eyes. Those stopped working on me when I was like seven, dude.”

The wolf moved closer until his face hovered just over his, a lock of mahogany hair falling across his forehead. Kai’s mouth went dry and he swallowed convulsively, definitely not imagining the epic upside down Spiderman kiss they could be reenacting. Rhys made a choked noise that was as close to a laugh as he got. Kai knew it was because he heard his heartbeat stutter. Stupid werewolf hearing; It was such an invasion of privacy.

“Pay attention or I’m going to tell Isa you requested that weird pickled herring recipe she made last year and I’ll ask her to put that clotted cream sauce on it too.”

Kai shuddered at the memory of the alpha’s attempt at foreign cuisine and stuck his tongue out at Rhys, relinquishing the desk. “You suck.”

“You wish.”

His sister snorted at that, glancing up long enough to laugh at her brother. She thought Rhys was hilarious. They were two peas in an emotionally constipated pod.

Their teacher, Mr. Keller, appeared, looking as thrilled to be there as the rest of them. He took one last slug from his Styrofoam cup before throwing it in the trash. He dropped his bag on the floor loud enough to cut off the low murmur of restless students and waited until all eyes were forward. “Okay, who wants to get us started on last night’s quadratic equations homework?”

Crap. He knew he’d forgotten something. Kai dropped his head onto his desk with a loud thump.

“Has math finally killed you, Mr. Lonergan?” The teacher asked, sounding far too hopeful to Kai.

He heard the snickers of his classmates and lifted his head just enough to make eye contact with the aging witch. “No. Unfortunately, I’m still here but I think my brain is literally melting.” He dropped his head back on his arms.

“Tristin,” Mr. Keller said. “You seem to be working very hard on what I’m sure are your notes. Perhaps you could share them with your brother?”



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Kai rolled his head towards his sister with a smirk, brow raised, eyeing her morbid drawings. “Yes, Tristin, you take the best notes, perhaps you could share with the whole class.” Her pen slowed and she looked up from her grisly masterpiece long enough to scowl at her brother and shoot him the finger from her lap.

She forced her face into some semblance of a smile. “Of course, Mr. Keller. I’d be happy too.”

“I guess your sister absorbed the brains and the manners in the womb. Did she leave anything for you?” Keller asked.

Kai leaned back with a grin, tapping his pencil against his notebook, “She got the brains and the manners but I got the looks and the personality.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, Sunshine,” his sister retorted as she flipped to a clean sheet of notebook paper and started a new picture.

The teacher eyed him. “Mr. Lonergan, do you think I can get through the rest of class without you derailing my lesson any further?”

Kai looked pained, the tapping of his pencil increasing. “Hard to say really. I can’t help it, dude. Math physically hurts me.”

“Don’t call me dude.” The teacher’s eyes dropped to the pencil, warning clear as he gritted out. “Mr. Lonergan.”

Kai opened his mouth to promise his best behavior when Rhys’ hand appeared snatching his pencil and snapping it in half before dropping it on his desk.

Kai’s mouth fell open. That was his only pencil. He went to say so but went temporarily mute as he felt a familiar burning at his wrist. He didn’t look at first, just rubbed absently at the spot, dread pooling in his stomach. Why did collections always seem to come on a Friday? Nobody should have to die on a Friday. It was the best day of the week. Whoever makes these decisions should reserve deaths for awful days like Monday. People shouldn’t have to work all week long just to kick the bucket just before things got good. Not that anybody cared about the opinion of one novice reaper.

He glanced at his sister, wondering if he should tell her now he wouldn’t be at work tonight. He pushed the sleeve of his shirt up just enough to peer at the name, more curiosity than anything.



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He skimmed over the name, letting his sleeve drop back into place, before yanking it up again in confusion. The hitch in his breathing sounded loud in the sudden silence.

There was no way that was right.

Rhys sat forward enough to whisper, “What is your problem now?”

“Can I help you?” Kai snapped, yanking his sleeve down to cover the name, sounding scandalized.

Rhys stared at him for a good thirty seconds before he opened his mouth. Whatever scathing retort he had planned was lost as Tristin’s pen fell from her fingers. She looked at her brother, eyes bleeding red as a shriek ripped from her lips. Everybody whipped around in their seats, hands covering their ears, cringing away from her.

Goosebumps erupted along his skin. Tristin covered her mouth with her hand, eyes wide as she looked at him. Kai’s heart slammed against his chest as he stared at his sister.

“Well, that was unexpected.” He said to nobody in particular.



Chapter

4



TRISTIN

Tristin sat on the wooden bench in the main corridor outside the principal's office staring at her hands in her lap. She refused to look up, knowing she was the reason for the whispers and the laughter as the other students moved between classes. This was so embarrassing. Kai sat next to her, quiet for once. She could feel the empathy rolling off him in waves. Her brother hated to see somebody miserable. She knew he would sit and stare, radiating love like a sad eyed golden retriever until she placated him.

"I'm fine, really. You don't have to keep me company. I'll just tell them I...saw a spider, or something."

Kai arched a brow at her. "Tristin, two months ago, you ripped out a wendigo's jugular with your bare hands." He pulled a face, like he could still see it. "Nobody will believe you."

Tristin knew he was right. There was no way anybody was going to believe anything she said, maybe not even the truth. She wasn't sure she believed the truth. She'd spent the last twelve years as a banshee who couldn't banshee. She'd finally started believing she wasn't ever going to get her powers back and wondering if she'd ever really had them at all.

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She had no memory of ever screaming. Allister swore he'd heard her scream as a child and Allister wasn't really one to make stuff up but the adults in this town hid too much and she just didn't trust them. Her brother was the reaper so she had to be human. That's just the way it worked. Yet, suddenly she wasn't and now everybody knew it. Her face burned at the thought of more attention on her.

"Why now?" she asked, mostly to herself.

Kai took a deep breath and looked at her. "I think I may know why."

She glowered at him, eyebrow raised. Of course he did. How long would he have sat their giving her puppy eyes if she hadn't said anything? She said as much, earning her a hurt look and a deep breath. "Okay, I need to show you something and you can't freak out," Kai told her.

Tristin blinked at him slowly. "Bro, I'm not the drama queen in this particular duo."

He shrugged. "True." He turned to shield himself from the passing students and pushed the sleeve of his plaid shirt up. "Look."

Her gasp was audible even in the crowded breezeway. Kai's eyes widened, reminding her where they were. She glanced up to make sure nobody noticed before dragging her gaze back to the name. She ran her hands across the letters and numbers.

November Lonergan

29° 59' 8.2644" N

90° 6' 40.2552" W

She was freaking out. Holy crap. She was definitely freaking out. She fought to get a grip on her heartbeat. She breathed in and out slowly. She stared at the name more confused than ever. This made no sense at all. November was dead.

"What the hell is going on?" she whispered.

Kai thought about it for a while, his thumb rubbing absently over the words on his arm. "Maybe it's a coincidence?"

She fixed him with a look to let him know how unlikely that seemed. "You think it's a coincidence that my abilities return the exact same moment our dead cousin's name shows up on your arm to be collected? Really?"



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“Well, it is our birthday,” he said, cheeks flushing. Even he knew it was a stupid theory.

“Happy birthday, here’s your reaper powers and your dead cousin?” she asked. “Nothing about this makes any sense.”

“I don’t know, Trist, Allister said your powers would resurface eventually.”

“Let’s just forget my freaky banshee powers for five minutes and focus on our dead cousin.”

“Our technically undead cousin,” Kai supplied.

“Not for long if she’s on your arm,” she reminded him. “This feels wrong. It feels like a trap. We should tell Isa.”

“No way,” he snapped, immediately looking apologetic. “I just mean, we don’t even know what we’d tell her.”

“Um, how about our dead cousin’s name popped up on your soul collecting to do list?”

Why was he being so stupid about this? “Come on, Kai, you have to admit this feels wrong. November is dead and even if she wasn’t they wouldn’t send a family member to collect her soul. It’s creepy.”

“So maybe they are sending me a message. Maybe I’m not supposed to collect her. Maybe I’m supposed to save her.”

She stared at him for a long minute. “Have you lost your mind? Do you know what the Grove will do to you if you actively interfere with a collection?”

She clenched and unclenched her jaw until her teeth hurt. They had to tell Isa; they couldn’t *not* tell the alpha. They needed somebody with more information than they had. Besides, they had to Tgo home sometime.

She didn’t look at him when she said, “What about asking Rhys?” She didn’t want to see the look of betrayal on his face. If they couldn’t talk to Isa, her brother had to be the next best thing.

“Have you suffered a recent blow to the head?” he asked. “He hates me. He would probably tell me to go just hoping I’d get killed or do something stupid so he could turn me into the Grove himself.”

“You are ridiculous,” she told him.

He waved off her comment. “Maybe but that’s not important. What is important is figuring this out without involving the others.”



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Tristin had no idea why he was so desperate to leave the pack out of this. “Why? Kai, this is crazy. We can’t just run off chasing a ghost. We don’t even know where we’re going.”

“New Orleans,” he told her, showing her the GPS coordinates on his phone.

“Are you freaking crazy?” she shouted. “Isa would never let us do this. We’ve never even left this town much less the state. We have no idea what’s out there.”

“Could it be any worse than what’s here? Tristin, this town is Disney for the paranormal. New Orleans couldn’t be any worse?”

“How would you know? All of your knowledge comes from the human internet and television shows.”

He looked at her funny. “Um, that’s where most people get their information, Tristin.”

“No, that is where humans get their information, you are not a human.”

He arched a brow. “Right back at ya, sis.”

Her sigh was long-suffering and her look withering. She went to speak but he held up his hand. “Look, I have no idea what this means or what’s out there but I’m not going to just ignore November’s name appearing on my arm, not when your powers magically resurface at the same time. I’m going to New Orleans and I’m going to save her. Are you coming with me or not?” She stared at him until he said, “Wonder twin powers, activate?”

He held up his fist.

“You are such a loser,” she muttered as she bumped her fist against his.

“Really?” he said. “We’re doing this?”

She made a frustrated noise that startled the few stragglers in the hall. “Fine, we’ll go, but when Isa finds out I’m one hundred percent blaming it all on you.”

He jumped to his feet and kissed her forehead sloppily. “I’d expect nothing less.” His smile looked positively evil when he asked, “Now, whose car are we stealing?”



Chapter 5



EMBER

Ember headed to the bus station on autopilot. She wasn't going to foster care. She just couldn't. She'd rather be homeless or sleep under a bridge than be at the mercy of somebody who thought she was a child who needed a parent. She just wanted to get on a bus and forget about New Orleans, forget about her father. Things would be different somewhere else. They had to be.

She walked, eyes down, hands shoved in her pockets to ward off the cold. She was far enough away from the quarter that the noise level was tolerable. Things hadn't truly picked up just yet but the crowds were increasing. Parade floats parked along the side streets, getting ready for the procession to start. The sky was on fire as the sun sank out of sight somewhere behind a riot of clouds, signaling the parties were about to begin.

The sounds of jazz poured out onto the streets, as people made their way in and out of bars and restaurants. She'd seen the inside of pretty much every bar in the quarter trying to retrieve and revive her father enough to drag him home. *Her father*. Every time she thought of him it was like a blow to the diaphragm, leaving her winded. He

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was dead. He wasn't coming home. He didn't deserve her feelings. This was totally his fault.

She shook off the idea. She didn't need him. She paid bills, she had a job and she dealt with his bill collectors. Hell, she dealt with his bookie. A hard assed woman named Shelby. Between her father's drinking and gambling debts, she'd spent most of her life living in squalor. She couldn't do much worse on her own. She swallowed hard, forcing back the icy panic before it could take hold.

She'd last seen him passed out in front of the kitchen sink, still clasping an empty bottle. Her boot had found his ribs as she stepped over him to get to the fridge. He had grunted and called her a selfish brat. She'd laughed at him. She'd called him a loser.

A burst of icy air hit and she tried to burrow deeper into her sweater. She'd always thought there would be time to mend things. He would get sober; explain what it was she'd done to make him hate her so much. She thought they'd get past it. She thought she'd finally get a family. Instead, he went and died on her without a cent to his name or even a will, leaving her at the mercy of the state and the world. Father of the year.

She noticed the quiet first. When she looked up, she wasn't at the bus station but back at the cemetery, standing before the closed iron gates. She looked around, disoriented. She glanced over her shoulder, eyes scanning the suddenly quiet streets for any sign of movement.

There was nothing but the sound of dead leaves, rattling on trees. Even this far from town, there should be people; partygoers just starting their nights or the early birds looking to get home before the party really picks up.

She shivered, she just couldn't shake the feeling she was being watched. She pushed her duffle bag between the bars and scaled the fence suddenly needing to put as much distance between her and her phantom observer as possible. Once over, she slung the heavy bag across her shoulder, and trekked her way past two hundred year old mausoleums.

The wind howled like a wounded animal. The sky went black and the moon rose in the sky. She used the pale sliver of light cutting across the ground to navigate her way, though she didn't need it. This was her playground. She spent more time here than her own home.



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She easily found the gaudy mausoleum housing her father. Somebody kept the place in pristine condition but she'd never been able to solve the mystery. Her father couldn't afford to pay for the upkeep and, to her knowledge, her only other family lay behind the walls.

She set her bag on the ground and laid herself along the bench, arms behind her head. Fat grey clouds dotted the sky, playing hide and seek with the moon.

The cold marble leached through her sweater but she didn't care. It felt good. She tipped her face upwards, towards its light. Was moon bathing a thing? If not, it should be. It made her feel charged up, like it gave her superpowers.

Most people found it spooky out here, surrounded by the dead; she found it peaceful. There were many graveyards in New Orleans, most brimming with tourists hoping to catch a funeral or perhaps a voodoo ritual. She liked this one because it was off most tourists' radar, too far to walk from most hotels and not famous enough to make the added effort.

She lay there for what seemed like an eternity, breathing in and out. She had to go soon. Buses didn't run all night. She should say her goodbyes. That's obviously why her Jiminy Cricket conscience pulled her there, to try to say something nice to her father.

She swung herself into a sitting position, frowning at the doors of his crypt until she was cross-eyed. She opened her mouth to talk at least a dozen times but the words didn't come. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

This shouldn't be so hard. It wasn't as if he could talk back. She could finally tell him how much she hated the way he treated her. How she hated the lies, the half-truths, the general lack of interest in her very existence. How it seemed he was constantly punishing her for something. It's not like he could yell at her now. He couldn't call her names. He couldn't tell her how much he wished she'd never been born. He couldn't walk away this time.

She blinked the wetness from her eyes, swatting at her cheeks. He didn't deserve her tears or her attention. She stood, reaching for her bag.

"A bit late for a girl your age to be traipsing around the cemetery."



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She gasped, spinning to locate the disembodied voice among the stones. There was movement to her left and a shadow broke from the rest and moved into view, head down and hands in his pockets. He wore the same black hooded sweatshirt, still pulled low, hiding his face from her.

It was the boy she'd seen earlier. It had to be. She doubted there were two people wandering around this cemetery in mysterious black hoodies.

"You," she said.

"Aye, me." That voice. She wanted to curl up in it and take a nap.

"You scared the crap out of me," she told him, hand fluttering over her pounding heart. He was still scaring her if she was being honest. She squinted, trying to make out his face inside the shadows of the hood. He made no move to reveal himself, but she could feel him watching her all the same.

As seconds ticked by, her imagination went wild, picturing everything from a sugar skull mask to a horrible deformity; a monster with no face at all. She shook her head. The holiday was getting the best of her.

She shifted her weight, "Are you going to just stand there in your creepy hood and stare at me?"

There was only a slight hesitation before he slowly pushed back the hood. Her eyes went wide as she tried to take him in. No matter how slow his reveal, it wasn't enough time to prepare her for what she saw.

He was stunning; all high cheekbones and perfect lips. His brows were just this side of too thick and as dark as the stubble on his perfectly chiseled jaw. It wasn't like she hadn't seen hot guys before. New Orleans was full of them. Some of them even shared his chiseled-out-of-marble features but his eyes...they were like nothing she'd ever seen before.

They glowed. There was no other way to say it. Perhaps it was a trick of the light or maybe she was going crazy but his eyes were a swirl of liquid mercury framed by long dark lashes. She supposed they could be contacts. Either way, she knew she was staring. When his hood finally fell back, she realized his hair was silver as well, long on top and messy, shot through with strands of white. If she'd ever



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thought to draw the moon in human form, she imagined she'd have drawn him.

She almost stepped closer. His grin pulled her out of her trance. He was obviously used to this reaction. "Better?"

His voice was a low murmur in the quiet and his faint accent, English or maybe Irish, made her stomach swoop in a funny way. Her cheeks flushed. "Jury's still out."

He tilted his head, smirking like she amused him, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I'm sorry to hear that, Luv, I was hoping we could be friends."

She took a step back, wiping sweaty palms on her jeans. Her heartbeat sounded loud in her ears. Concrete surrounded her on all sides. If he wanted to hurt her, she'd made it very easy for him. He took a step forward but she stood her ground. There was really nowhere to go.

His eyes raked over her but not in a sexual way. It was methodical, unemotional, like a scientist reviewing a specimen. Her mouth went dry at the thought. She was the specimen. He arched a brow, voice conversational, "It's really not safe for someone so young to be out here all alone, far from anybody who could help you."

She couldn't help the look she gave him. "What are you, nineteen? Did they drop you off from the senior center?"

He huffed out an amused sound, his smirk bleeding into a predatory grin as he prowled closer. Goosebumps erupted along her skin. She didn't buy his amusement but that look, the cold, calculating way he moved, that she believed.

"Oh, I'm older than I look, Luv."

She believed that too. He looked young but he carried himself with a confidence most boys her age didn't possess. She pushed her hair out of her face, mind racing. She felt restless, skin crawling in a way that was too much like what happened in the funeral for her peace of mind.

"What do you want from me?" she asked.

He stopped, tilting his head, eyes cold and so very beautiful. "I told you, I want to be your friend."

That look did not scream friends. She took a moment to wallow. Seriously, what karma was she working off? Some girls get to be



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prom queen; she gets orphaned and murdered before graduation. She snorted at the thought, unable to stop the giggle that escaped abruptly. She jammed her fist against her mouth to stop it but it was too late.

She was suddenly burning from the inside, angry and scared, fear jolting along her skin like static electricity. She wasn't an expert, but she was pretty sure this was what her therapist would call an inappropriate fear response. An image of her last therapist popped into her head so clear in that moment. Her stupid horn rimmed glasses and her constant sour expression; that morally superior tone so strong in her memory as she'd lectured her, *'You don't take anything seriously, Ember'. 'Therapy only works if you work it, Ember'. You shouldn't laugh at your killer, Ember. Ever the disappointment, she was.*

The laughter bubbled out of her, as unstoppable as the tears streaming down her face. Mr. tall, light and scary looked putout, as if he didn't know what to do with her mental breakdown.

"I'm sorry." She swiped at her cheeks, pulling herself together, sniffing loudly. "But I don't think you understand the kind of shit day I've had." Though he had been there earlier. "Well, maybe you do, but I mean, you have to appreciate the irony. Ten minutes ago, I was leaving to start a brand new life, now I'm going to be killed standing five feet away from the man who swore my smart mouth would get me killed someday."

She went lightheaded as the enormity of her words hit her, "Oh, God. This is like the part in the movie where you try to kill me, right? You are going to try to kill me and I feel too crappy to even try to run."

She was talking more to herself now. She leaned back against the rusted mausoleum gates behind her, enjoying the cool metal against her skin. Her head was swimming, the stars above blurring in the sky. No, not now, she thought. It was happening again. Whatever had happened earlier in the cemetery was happening again. She could feel it rising up in her, that weird feeling like her insides were melting and liquefying while she could do nothing to stop it. Was this a panic attack? Could a panic attack cause what happened in the cemetery earlier? Maybe this was some kind of fight or flight adrenaline response.



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She felt caged, trapped by her own body. It was all in her head. The ground wasn't vibrating at her feet. There was no way she was really burning up in forty-degree weather. Even in her haze she could see him watching her. Maybe if she just held still, he would be quick about it.

Her head lulled on her shoulders. She was going to pass out. It would serve him right. Then he was just there, in her space, fingers cupping her face. She moaned at the feel of his cold hands against her overheated flesh. "And if it is, Luv? If this is the part where I try to kill you? What then? Are you going to pass out and take all the fun out of it? Or will you fight back?"

There was no mistaking the threat of his words, but he was close enough to whisper them against her skin like a promise. She couldn't think straight. Her head filled with a sound like angry bees. She pitched forward, dropping her forehead to his shoulder, eyes drifting closed.

He was so cold; even through the layers of his clothes; his body seemed to emit this pleasant icy radiance that soothed her feverish skin. She wrapped herself around him, locking her arms. She buried her face against his throat, nose rubbing against his skin.

She felt his body go rigid in her arms. She didn't blame him; on some level she understood sane girls didn't try to cuddle their killers. But nobody ever accused her of being sane. She was the girl who played in cemeteries and talked to the dead. She was the girl with three therapists before she was twelve. She was the girl in flames and he was ice water; if she was going to die, she was going to have this first.

They stood there, bound together by her forced embrace. Those strange vibrations increased, building inside her like a living thing, a burning energy trying to melt her from the inside out. She could hear his ragged breath panting against her ear, could feel him writhing in her grasp, but she refused to let go. Could he feel it too?

She clung to him, knowing if she let go this peculiar energy would overwhelm her. She breathed him in, letting him anchor her as it kept building and burning, growing until it thrust from her with the force of a sledgehammer.

He groaned like he'd received the physical blow. He may have fallen had she not been holding him to her. Finally, the world seemed



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to right itself. Her blood ceased to boil and the vibrations stopped. When her mind quieted, she became very aware of what she was doing.

She let go, shoving him back. Despite his size, he stumbled, blinking hard. They stared at each other, his confusion mirroring her own.

“What are you?” she whispered. “What are you doing to me?”

He rushed her, shoving her against the concrete hard enough to knock her teeth together. “What did I do to you? What game are you playing? What are you? What was that? What did you do?”

She whimpered, feet scrambling for purchase as she realized he'd lifted her from the ground. Her heart thundered in her chest. He was fit but not big enough to haul her off her feet like that. She shoved at him uselessly. “Put me down.”

Her descent was abrupt, her heart lodging in her throat. His eyes narrowed, his hands tangling in her messy hair, tilting her head to the side. “Come on, Luv, you can tell me. I'm sure it's eating at you, keeping this secret.”

He was insane. She opened her mouth to say so but her brain short-circuited as his nose traced along the column of her throat. “I promise, things will be so much easier if you just tell me,” he purred, lips pressing the words into her skin. She moved closer to him. In her defense, she'd never been this close to a boy before; especially not one who looked like he did.

“We can do this one of two ways.” He inhaled as if inhaling her scent. He pressed his mouth to the shell of her ear as he said, “I promise one is infinitely more pleasurable than the other.”

Ew. Oh, God. What was she doing? What was he doing? Seducing her for information? Threatening her? It really bothered her that she didn't know the difference.

She needed to get it together. Her breath hitched in her chest. This was not how she saw herself dying. She'd had a plan. She'd written it down obituary style for a morbid ninth grade English assignment. She was supposed to die of obscenely old age in her enormous but tastefully decorated plantation home surrounded by her beautiful and ungrateful grandchildren.



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He huffed out a laugh and she realized she'd said all that aloud. She was too scared to be embarrassed. Instead, she slapped at his hands ineffectively.

He stepped away so abruptly she staggered. He began to pace before her. "You're seriously not going to tell me? You're only hurting yourself on this one."

"I don't know what you are talking about," she told him. "You're crazy."

He sighed heavily, his tone shifting as if speaking to a rather stupid child. "I'll figure it out eventually," He told her, pointing at her. "You don't smell like a witch. You certainly aren't a shifter." Then he was back before her, gripping her chin, turning her head side to side, like he was examining livestock. "But you most definitely aren't human." Tiny hairs rose along her skin at his touch. "You're trying my patience. What the hell are you?"

She pushed away from him, head throbbing with his words. "Stop with the grabby hands."

She needed to think. He was clearly unhinged. She had very few options. She could run but she doubted she could outrun him. Her gaze raked across broad shoulders and a flat stomach. He looked like he did a lot of cardio. She could scream but there wasn't anybody to hear her. Instead, she did what she always did when she was nervous...she babbled.

She'd watched a million documentaries on serial killers and the mentally ill. She could figure this out. Netflix was her friend. She wracked her brain. If he was a killer she had to make him see her as a person; tell him about her life, say her name a lot, and make him believe people cared if she died. Even if that was a lie.

But what if he was schizophrenic? He thought she wasn't human. What was she supposed to do then? Orient him to reality? Play along with his fantasy? She should have paid more attention.

"What's your name?" she heard herself say, voice breathless.

He arched his brow, tsking softly, expression bored. "I'm asking the questions here."

"Just tell me your name," she demanded, panic creeping back in.



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“Mace.” The answer tumbled from his lips unbidden. He looked mystified, like his own mouth had betrayed him. He absently rubbed a spot on his chest.

“Mace,” she repeated, with a nod. Okay, it was a start. “So um, here’s the thing, Mace. I’m only seventeen and I don’t want to die.”

He gave her a look and a ‘fair enough’ shrug and gestured for her to continue, clearly amused by this turn of events.

She frowned, but soldiered on. “You can’t be much older than me so let’s just think about this for a minute, okay?” She raked a hand through her damp hair. “I’m not really sure why you want to kill me but my life has pretty much sucked up until now. Like so much suckage. I can’t even explain the level of suck, but I feel like, statistically speaking, that’s gotta change. I’m not trying to sound like a motivational poster but it’s supposed to get better. I’d very much like to have a pulse when it does.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, brow furrowed. He stepped forward.

“Stop.” She held up her hand, palm out. “Just listen.”

He stopped, looking at his feet then at her again.

“I’m a nice girl,” she told him, before frowning. “But maybe you don’t care about that. I mean, if you’re, like, a murderous psychopath, you probably aren’t super interested in my feelings, but what about yourself?” She reasoned, gesturing spastically to all of his... self. “You seem like the kind of guy who thinks a lot of himself.”

He cocked an eyebrow but said nothing. She was in turbo babble mode now. “If you kill me your life is over. You will definitely go to jail. I mean, look at me.” She gestured to her face. “I look like an ad for facial cleanser and girls who eat yogurt. Juries eat that stuff up. You’d probably get the chair.”

He looked a little dazed. “You make a passionate yet confusing plea, Luv.”

Her heart sank as he took a tentative step towards her, then another. He grinned as he advanced.

“Come on. I’m sure you don’t want to go to prison,” She whined. “You are way too pretty for prison. You’d make a lot of the wrong kind of friends in prison.” Stop saying prison, Ember, she begged herself. “Do you want those kinds of friends? Of course, you don’t.



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"We could be friends?" she finished lamely, face flushing with shame. Maybe he should just kill her. It would be less embarrassing.

He blinked at her, cheek twitching, "Aw, are you asking me to be your friend? One might question your judgment."

Her hands fell to her hips, swaying on her feet. "Wow, not to put too fine a point on it, but I've only seen you twice and both times you were here." She gestured to their surroundings. "You hang out in cemeteries because you have so many friends? Is this were your book club meets?"

"I can see why you have no friends," he told her drolly.

She squinted as something glinted in the air above his head.

"I-" was all he managed before the object made contact with his head, sounding like a hammer hitting an overripe melon. He hit his knees with a groan, whatever he was going to say dying on his lips.

She looked at his crumpled form, unreasonably disappointed.

She'd really wanted to know what he was going to say.



Chapter 6



EMBER

She stared, not even surprised anymore. Behind Mace's prone body stood a boy and girl about her age. The girl still held the shovel, holding it like a ballplayer choking up on a bat. The two were eerily similar in looks; tall, tan, dark hair, almond shaped eyes and long, lean muscle. They had to share DNA.

The boy hugged himself, bouncing on his heels, staring at his companion in exasperation. He had to be freezing with just his jeans and thin long sleeved shirt. Truthfully, she didn't know how they weren't both freezing. The girl wore denim shorts, a striped crop top and a long sleeved flannel shirt with combat boots. Ember supposed the beanie cap slouched on her head and the flannel might provide some protection from the cold but not much.

"That was your plan?" the boy asked.

The girl heaved a sigh, pulling a small packet from her back pocket. *"That was step one."* She poured the powder into her hand and knelt next to Mace. She slapped his face and he groaned, getting his legs underneath him. *"Ah, ah,"* she chided, kicking his legs out from under him. *"None of that. Don't want you standing; just breathing."*

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She blew the powder into his face, smiling in satisfaction as he coughed once and passed out. "That was step two."

The boy fixed the girl with a withering look. His bitch face was strong.

"What?" she snapped. "We don't have all night? I couldn't watch anymore of...whatever that was." She tapped her wrist. "We gotta go."

He turned his attention to Ember then, wincing as if he was used to having to apologize for his companion. He took a deep breath, steeling himself. "Listen, this is going to sound crazy, but you have to come with us if you want to live."

Ember blinked at him stupidly. She had no idea what to do with that.

The girl dropped her face into her hands. "*That was your plan?* Come with us if you want to live? We drove four hours so you could hit her with a line from Terminator?" She looked pained as she whispered, "This is why nobody takes us seriously."

Ember shook her head. They looked so normal. Well, they looked like hipsters but not your run of the mill straitjacket needing crazies. Maybe this really was all some sort of fever dream. Her stomach started to feel slippery. Maybe she'd passed out at the funeral and slipped into a coma. Maybe she was dead and this was hell.

The guy rubbed his hand across the back of his neck, gesturing with his head to Mace. "I'm ever so sorry if I offended your delicate sensibilities, next time I'll just hit her over the head with a shovel."

They ignored Ember's indignant, "Hey."

"Honestly, I would have respected you more," the girl told him.

"Can we get on with this or would you like to lecture me some more?"

Yep, they were crazy. She looked around searching for anything that would make sense. Maybe she was on candid camera. Maybe this was some sort of weird live role-playing game. That was a thing. She'd seen it on the internet. This was New Orleans; maybe she'd stumbled into an elaborate dinner theatre production.

She stared at the boy on the ground with renewed interest. It would explain his bizarre look. Was he faking being unconscious? Was this all part of the game? Was there another girl out there waiting



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to be 'fake' attacked? Mistaken identity made a lot more sense than her being a supernatural creature. It had the added bonus of making her crush on a killer a tiny bit less pathetic and sad.

She used the toe of her shoe to gently shove at Mace's shoulder, content to ignore the two so she could look her fill. He really was pretty with his eyelashes fanning shadows over his cheeks. She sighed. She finally meets a boy willing to have a conversation with her-albeit a strange one-and a bunch of crazies ambush them. She felt she'd been making progress.

They continued their argument, oblivious to her. "I wouldn't need to lecture you if you would stop lacing every single conversation with stupid pop culture references that nobody gets but you nerdy comic-con dweebs."

Cute-movie-guy looked personally offended. "How dare you. Terminator is a classic. James Cameron is a--"

The girl threw up her hand, "One word, bro, Titanic--"

She could try to just slip away but they were blocking her exit. "Um, guys--"

"Titanic?" the guy interrupted. "That movie was epic. Let's talk about how the last movie you liked featured vampires who sparkled like bloodsucking pixie strippers. Sparkly vampires? When was the last time you saw a vampire glittering like a disco ball? Hell when was the last time you saw one who didn't explode in sunlight?"

Ember sighed, staring at Mace forlornly. It was a testament to how screwed up her life was that she just wanted him to wake up and sniff her threateningly. He still wasn't moving. She glanced surreptitiously at the two before again toeing at him, this time nudging his chin with her foot. She cringed as his head flopped like a ragdoll.

Was he dead? She felt sick. What if he was a serial killer? She glanced at the two. What if *they* were serial killers? Did mass murderers hang out bantering after killing people? Probably in Quentin Tarantino films.

"Hey," she shouted, startling herself as her voice echoed in the silence.

They both turned to her at exactly the same time, fixing her with identical expressions.

Creepy.



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“Uh, not that I’m not grateful for the...rescue, I guess, but-” she pointed at Mace, “is he dead? And, if so, does that make me an accessory to murder?”

Movie guy sighed, raking his hands through his hair. “Despite my sister’s best efforts, he’ll live. It’s apparently not his time to go...but it was almost yours.”

Ember’s face contorted, and the girl whacked him on the arm. “You should really look up the word tact, bro.”

The girl stepped forward, smiling like it physically hurt her. “My name is Tristin and this is my brother, Kai. Do you remember us?”

She didn’t. “Um...”

“We’re your cousins,” the girl-Tristin-said.

Ember frowned at them. The three of them couldn’t have looked more different. Where she was pale they were dark, her orange hair wild and crazy next to their gorgeous dark locks. Her wide eyes looked nothing like the tip tilt eyes of the two before her. There had to be some mistake. “I don’t have any cousins.”

The two exchanged looks before Kai said, “Listen, I know this sounds crazy but I swear we’re telling the truth. It’s been a long time. Maybe you’ve just forgotten about us. It’s been twelve years.”

Even if what they were saying were true, she wouldn’t remember them. She’d spent years in a therapist’s office trying to remember her past but she didn’t think there was a way to explain dissociative amnesia in a sound bite. “I don’t-”

Tristin cut her off. “Our last name is Lonergan, like yours.”

Her heart sank. It really was a case of mistaken identity. “My last name is Denning. My name is Ember Denning.”

The two exchanged a confused look for a full minute and Ember had the uneasy feeling they were having a conversation she couldn’t hear. Kai gestured emphatically at Tristin in a sort of go-ahead motion and the girl pulled out her cell phone. With the push of a button, her flashlight blazed, blinding them all. When her vision cleared, Tristin held her cell phone to her face and waved her forward. “Come here, look.” The girl’s pupils contracted in the light, revealing the same brilliant violet eyes that Ember looked at in the mirror every day.

“But my name is Ember Denning,” she repeated.



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“No,” Kai smiled at her like she was a simpleton. The second time she’d gotten that look in one day. “Your name is November Lonergan. We’re your cousins. That thing was going to kill you and you need to come with us.”

She was getting a migraine. There was no way she was going anywhere with these people just because they shared the same eye color. This was completely nuts.

“You guys are all crazy.”

From his spot on the ground, Mace’s hand flinched spastically and he groaned.

“What did you hit him with?” Kai asked.

She shrugged. “Hellebore. Quinn gave me some stuff just in case we ran into any baddies that were immune to everyday violence.”

Mace was making another valiant effort to rise from the ground. Secretly, she was rooting for him.

Kai leaned into his sister, his whisper carrying. “It’s getting late. Isa is going to kill us. We can’t leave her here.”

Tristin eyed her up and down. “Can’t we?” she asked. “Right now we can still walk, Kai. It’s her choice.”

Kai tugged his sister aside but she could still make out their conversation. “Seriously? We already talked about this. She’s family, Trist.”

Tristin’s gaze fell to the ground before she said, “Once we do this, we can’t go back. Everything changes. This is a really bad idea, you get that, right?”

Ember wanted to believe they were just two lunatics but something about them nagged at her like a hazy picture she just couldn’t get into focus.

Kai shoved his sleeve up. “I don’t think we have a choice. Look.”

Tristin looked at his wrist, eyes widening. She paled beneath her tan skin. She eyed Mace. “Screw it.” She held out her hand, resigned. “Come with us if you want to live.”

Kai sighed, relieved. “Yeah, what she said.”

She could run. She could go back to the funeral home. Then what? A year in foster care? She just wanted to go home. Except she



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didn't have a home anymore. All she had was a skull splitting headache, a fever and absolutely nowhere else to go.

"No-"she started.

Tristin clenched her teeth. "Get in the car or I swear to whatever deity you believe in, I will knock you out and drag you there."

Kai's mouth fell open. "Wow. What was it you were saying about tact, Trist?"

"I'm done being nice," Tristin told him. "This is the stupidest thing we've ever done; forgive me if I'm not in the mood to humor anybody."

"When were you being nice?" Kai asked.

Tristin ignored her brother, looking at Ember. "Well, what's it gonna be?"

Ember rolled her eyes. "Well, when you put it that way...why not?"



Chapter 7



KAI

The walk back to the car felt a bit like a death march. He should feel pretty good about himself, he'd saved a life. He'd saved a family member. Saving people was much better than having to watch them die and crossing them over. When he risked a glance, Tristin was glowering at him. He knew she was mad. Isa would be furious at them and for all her talk, his sister liked to follow orders like a good soldier.

They tried to keep a quick pace but November-Ember-he corrected, kept craning her head behind her. He opened his mouth to reassure her she was safe, that the grim would be down for a while. He wasn't sure what it was but the hellebore seemed to be keeping it down, at least for now. The corners of her mouth drooped downward in disappointment when she saw there was nobody there.

He sighed. He really hoped that it was an incubus or his cousin had even worse taste in men than he did. She tried to slow her walk but he took her upper arm and dragged her along; gently, of course. A slow, painful death already awaited him at home; the only thing to make it worse would be accidentally damaging a human. She

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stiffened at his touch, trying to pull her arm away. He loosened his grip until they were barely touching but didn't dare let go entirely.

When they reached the Toyota, she just looked at him, sulking. He reached around her and opened the door, gesturing grandly for her to get in. She gave one more look towards the gate.

"Get the hell in the car," Tristin snapped.

Ember sighed, flopping into the backseat and crossing her arms like a preschooler on the verge of a major tantrum. It was strange to look at her. She looked like their mothers. The similarities were uncanny. She had the same ivory complexion and fiery red curls, the same freckles. She even had the tiny space between her front teeth.

Kai and Tristin favored their father's Thai side. The only thing they'd inherited of their mother's was her reaper gene and her violet eyes; the same eyes as Ember. Even if he hadn't trusted Ember's name popping up on this arm, he would have trusted her eyes. How could he not save her?

They'd only driven a short distance when she said, "I'm pretty sure kidnapping is a felony offense."

Tristin took her eyes off the road long enough to fix him with a look that screamed 'she's your problem'. Kai sighed. He would rather be doing literally anything but this, even dealing with Rhys. "Technically, you agreed to go."

She stabbed a finger in Tristin's direction. "Only because she threatened me. That's coercion."

What was she, an attorney? "I'm almost positive that is not what coercion means." Kai told her, risking a glance at his sister. Tristin didn't even acknowledge her this time, focusing instead on the miles of pavement stretched before them.

Kai rapidly tapped out a text to let Isa know they were on their way back, promising he would explain everything when they got there. His stomach swooped as he hit send. He was so screwed. While he considered saving his cousin a win, he had failed in every other conceivable way tonight. He had failed to show up for his shift at the diner. He'd failed to tell his pack about Ember. He'd failed to inform his alpha of his epically stupid plan.



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His phone vibrated, signaling a text. A single question mark popped onto his screen followed by ten exclamation points. It was the most hostile question mark he'd ever seen. Isa clearly wanted more information but there was no way he could explain it all by text.

Besides, he preferred to delay the litany of abuse for as long as possible. She was going to kill him slowly and with pain. If she didn't kill him, Allister would, and then they'd both let the Grove have him. He didn't respond. Instead, he put it on silent and settled it screen down on his leg, determined to ignore all future messages.

Tristin took one look at his face and muttered, "We should have just left her to die."

Kai shuddered. "Tristin, that's a bad way to die."

"There's a good way to die?" Ember asked, voice dripping with sarcasm.

He looked at her over his shoulder. "Yes, in your big fancy home surrounded by your snotty grandchildren."

Ember narrowed her eyes. "You jerk. How long were you creeps there listening to us?"

"Long enough to know that you suck at flirting but under different circumstances you may have made an excellent motivational speaker?" he told her.

"Different circumstances? As opposed to now when I'm...what, exactly? Marked for death?" There was a slight edge of hysteria beginning to creep into her voice and she looked even chalkier than before. He supposed it was only a matter of time. Nobody was so cool they didn't care they almost died.

She wiped the sleeve of her sweater across her brow. "Could you maybe turn up the AC?" She asked. "I wish you people would just tell me what is happening."

He did as she asked, pointing the jets at her. She shivered in response, perspiration running in rivulets down her temples. That wasn't good. Was she sick? Had that thing done something to her they hadn't seen?

"Listen, you said you don't remember us but do you remember growing up in Florida? Do you remember our mom?"



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The girl's face went pale...well, paler. "I don't remember anything before my father and I moved to New Orleans. My therapists say it has something to do with the trauma of my mother's death."

Tristin looked at him and mouthed, "Therapists. Plural?"

He gave her his angriest eyebrows. Now was not the time. What happened twelve years ago had traumatized everybody.

Ember kept going, missing the exchange between them. "This makes no sense. I feel like I'm going crazy. That...guy, Mace, said I was something but not a witch and not a shifter. Was that for real?"

Kai sighed. "I don't want to overwhelm you, Ember."

"Oh, that ship has sailed. I'm whatever is worse than overwhelmed."

"Flabbergasted?" Tristin said dryly.

Ember wiped her hands down her face. "Come on, give me something. What is happening?"

"Maybe give her the cliff's notes version, so she stops whining?"

Ember glared at the back of Tristin's skull. "You're kind of a bitch."

"It's true," Tristin agreed mildly.

Ember's head thumped lightly against the glass, her lashes fluttering against her cheeks in the dim light.

"Are you okay?" he asked, reaching into the center console. "Water?"

She eyed it suspiciously but drank it down anyway. "Thanks. I don't know what's wrong with me. I feel so...weird."

Tristin glanced at Ember and then him, telegraphing her annoyance with just her eyebrows. She cut her eyes at their cousin again and then the roadside. He gave a subtle headshake. They were not ditching her on the side of the road. How had it escaped his attention his sister was a soulless monster?

A light illuminated the interior and Ember's eyes cut to his as her fingers flew over the screen of her cell phone. Smart girl, he thought. "Shit, Ember, wait-"

Tristin glanced sharply in the rearview mirror. "Seriously?" she questioned, reaching back with one hand to pluck the cell phone

