

Isle of Bones

We Witches Three, #1

by Humphrey Quinn, ...

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Melinda Howard poured a potion into a small glass vial. She used a funnel, not trusting her unsteady fingers. It was her first time making this particular potion and if the results were anything less than perfect, the consequences would be fatal to the vampire standing in her kitchen.

He was across the room. A good fifteen feet away. But she'd swear he was hovering just inches behind her, watching her every move. Movements that suddenly became heavy and awkward.

Pay attention! She chastised herself silently. *Keep it together, you're almost done.*

She exhaled, letting out a surge of flustered breath, shuddering as an electrified pulse fired down her spine at the thought of him watching her. Her heart quickened, fingers quivering as she removed the funnel, the vial nearly filled. Just one final step to complete the potion. She shoved her chin-length chestnut bangs behind her ear, grabbing an already filled dropper and added the contents within to the vial.

The mixture sizzled, a small plume of steam erupting from the vial before the clear liquid inside turned to deep red. Melinda smiled, relieved by the outcome. She let the buildup of nervousness escape with her next breath, corked the vial, turned, and tossed it to the vampire.

It went high, threatening to fly over his head and crash into a wall. He deftly jumped into the air, caught it, and landed without a sound.

"Good catch, William," Melinda said, winking playfully.

The vampire silently scolded Melinda with a stern gaze before drinking the contents of the vial.

"Like you'd miss," she responded as innocently as possible while averting her gaze, unable to linger in his for long.

"I never miss," William replied matter-of-factly. The vampire straightened his black pullover, the dark color only further accentuating the paleness of his neck and face.

"Did it work?" Melinda asked, venturing a fleeting look in his direction.

"It tastes correct." He paused, savoring the warm sensation the potion gave him as it forced its way through his veins like the blood that no longer willingly pumped its way through his body. "I do believe you did perfect, Melinda. Well done."

She curtsied, nodding in appreciation to her one vampire audience, hurriedly turning away again to avoid making eye contact.

His eyes narrowed in a questioning manner. "Are you okay this morning?"

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. He noticed. I so suck at acting. "Um, yes," she answered too hesitantly. She cleared her throat. "I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"You seem on edge."

On edge? Really? You have no idea, her thoughts exclaimed loudly. She wished she could tell him the truth—that her *edginess* was completely his fault.

Melinda had dreamt about William the night before. A dream that while in the middle of, painted her the image of a goddess adored by a vampire. But once awakened from, left her restless with skin far too tight, and achy. And now, normal daily actions she'd never given a second thought to turned clunky and awkward, sitting at the forefront of her thoughts while in William's presence.

Was he watching her, right now? What did she look like through his eyes?

She'd had a crush on him for years, but she'd never dreamt of him, not like this.

"There it is again," the vampire noted, disrupting her wandering mind. "I've never heard your heart flutter like that before. Are you ill?" He stepped closer, concerned.

Stupid super vampire hearing! Melinda held her breath for a second, blood racing to keep up with her stammering heart. "I'm fine. Promise. I was just nervous about making the potion, and was recalling my dream from last night."

This was a partial truth. There had been a second dream. A much less pleasant dream, one she *had* shared with him. Her skin flushed and gaze lowered.

"Very well," he conceded with a narrow stare. She was holding back on him, something she never did until recently. What had changed? What was she hiding? Why did she not feel at ease enough to confide in him, as always?

Melinda refused eye contact, keeping herself busy and her gaze downward. And if she chewed her bottom lip any harder she might draw blood... she shivered, though it was a warm summer day. That flutter returned, blood rushing through her veins in an attempt to keep up with her erratically beating heart. It got stronger the longer his eyes lingered on her movements.

What was she hiding from him?

He cast his gaze across the room looking at nothing in particular, focusing on the pulse of her blood, a sound he was familiar with. This flutter though... it was... different. Strangely enticing. Although he could not ascertain why. Somehow, each flutter called out to him, almost reaching out across the room to him, jolting him with electric sparks of... of what? And why did it matter?

Because all things Melinda Howard mattered. That's why. And if she was ill, he needed to know. His ears tuned into her heart, his eyes closing, his mind sinking into each beat. Each pulse of blood.

Unconsciously, he licked his fangs.

What would she taste like?

He sucked in, eyes opening in disgust. A scowl etching his face.

This reaction displeased him immensely. It was not normal, appropriate, or acceptable behavior. Not for him.

It was too bad he needed to have a blood-empty stomach before drinking the potion. He'd have to wait thirty minutes before partaking of his typical breakfast of warmed, week-old animal blood. It hardly sounded appetizing compared to the lovely blood-filled creature standing just out of reach...

"William," he barely heard Melinda call out. "Would you put this away for me? I can't reach." She outstretched her arm, holding a jar filled with herbs. She lifted her head when he did not reply, the jar slipping through fingers suddenly unable to maintain their grip.

William caught the jar with ease and spun around to put it away, too late to hide his mistake. He might have controlled his fangs and kept his distance, but his eyes had turned a ravenous black.

Normally, being around humans was tolerable. He'd had hundreds of years of practice. This morning, however, was particularly difficult. Melinda's blood had always smelled appealing. But this morning it was practically calling out to him. "Please drink me. I belong only to you."

His hungry black eyes were something Melinda had witnessed before. She didn't understand why it startled her so badly this time. Perhaps it was that she'd never been alone with him before when it had happened. She'd never had steamy dreams about him before, either.

Embarrassed by her reaction, she grabbed a few potion supplies and busied herself putting them away. She took a glance and noticed William's typical emerald greens had replaced the greedy black.

Man, I love his eyes. She let out an exasperated breath, wishing she could just forget every detail of last night's *William* dream. It would never come true anyway.

William was a vampire. She was a human. A witch, but still human. And William had a strict no-dating-humans policy.

As she cleaned up the potion-making mess, a young man entered the kitchen, at the same time running his gel covered hands through his spiky hair. He quickly regretted that choice thinking instead that he needed to plug his nose. "Potion time again," he realized, rinsing his fingers off in the sink.

"Good morning, Michael," said the vampire to the young man, who was Melinda's twenty-three-year-old brother. "The taste is as loathsome as the smell." William made a face that said, *be glad you're not the one drinking it.*

Michael was about to reply when a voice startled them from the hallway, behind them. "Good thing the potion's worth the price, then."

"Charlie!" Melinda raced past Michael and jumped into her eldest brother's flannel covered arms.

Charlie twirled his sister in a circle, hugging her fiercely. He was not just older than her and Michael, but much larger, too. A broad shouldered, rugged man of twenty-six.

"Hiya, Kiddo."

"God, you reek!" she choked out sarcastically. "More so than the potion, and that's not an easy feat!"

"That's what happens when you take a three day fishing trip," Charlie said, letting her slide back down to the floor. "I had to come home before the full moon." His words really meaning, if it wasn't rising soon, I'd still be gone.

"Yeah, of course you would. It's just nice to have you back in the house again."

"Which just proves my point that you're still not getting out enough, Sis."

"Don't start with me again about that! I'm getting out plenty. Remember that date I went on, like, a month ago," her voice trailed as she recalled the date had actually been over two months previous.

"My point exactly." Charlie poked her side, affectionately.

Melinda had tried to forget that last date. It ended badly. Not that it had started all that great. But she'd given in and gone home with him. He'd proceeded to call her something along the lines of adorable. She was pretty sure when he said adorable, he meant chubby. Which she wasn't. Not really.

Yeah, she'd eaten too much during their date, but that was mostly because he never shut the heck up and gave her a chance to speak. So yes, her pooch was a little bigger than it might have been normally. But it was the way he'd spoken his goodbye. Like he'd done her some charitable favor by going out with her.

She'd left that part out when telling her brothers how the date went. The guy was a total Jerkface. Her evening had been empty. Meaningless. And a complete waste of time.

But he'd gotten what *he* wanted.

Of course, if her brothers or William had found out how Jerkface had treated her, they'd probably have killed the guy. Or at the very least, injured him severely.

Charlie grabbed a mug of coffee and nodded toward his brother Michael, who refused to return the gesture. Charlie had hoped to avoid another argument so soon after arriving home.

As it turned out, Michael didn't feel like arguing either. "Meeting Emily for coffee," he explained, promptly leaving.

Charlie shook his head, disappointed.

"Give him time," the vampire advised kindly.

"Why does he have to be so darn stubborn?"

Melinda snorted. "Um, gee. Maybe because he's a Howard."

"Exactly. He is a Howard, and like it or not we have a responsibility to uphold."

"Michael gets that, Charlie," Melinda cut him off before his rant continued. "He's just not as accepting of his *fate* as we are," she added dramatically. "He sort of has a point though. I mean, why should he be forced to spend his life protecting the Isle, just because he's a Howard?"

"We don't get to make that choice, Melinda." Charlie stated it with finality. He glanced at the vampire, searching for approval, but William's face showed no sign of his true feelings on the matter. Charlie had not thought it possible, but the vampire appeared distracted. When William didn't answer he changed the subject.

"Thanks for making the potion for me, Sis. I left for my trip so fast I completely forgot about it."

"No worries. You've had a lot on your mind. Besides, I'd do just about anything for My William." She decided the best way to move past last night's dream was to treat William as she always did.

The vampire breathed out testily. "Melinda, you must stop calling me that. It is not right. Not only am I nearly four hundred years old, but until quite recently I was your legal guardian. Must I keep reminding you of this?"

"William," she retorted innocently. "I'm twenty-one and you're the only man I can flirt with in this testosterone filled house. Besides, you make it so easy. Have you looked at yourself lately? That's right, you can't. So I must take it upon myself to remind you how handsome a vampire you are."

Yes, she thought. *Ridiculously handsome*. No, he was beyond handsome now, especially after last night. He'd gone straight from handsome vampire she had a crush on to forbidden fanged hotty in a matter of a single dream. She tapped her fingers on the counter as if this movement would somehow drown out the racing heartbeats thudding against her chest.

Apparently, forgetting about the dream was not going to be easy.

And the truth was, William did have a reflection. But it wasn't one his own eyes could see. A side effect of the potion he'd just downed. It made looking into glass difficult. Things had a fuzzy appearance. One bad side effect that was worth the freedom the potion gave him.

William noted the change in her heart rhythms again but ignored it, tossing Charlie a look that pleaded for his agreement in the matter of her affections.

"Maybe, Melinda, you would be better off saving your attention for someone your own age," Charlie said, backing up the vampire. "And not to bring it back up again, but perhaps if you got out of the house more often..."

"Charlie, you've scared off all the guys I've dated!" *Except for Jerkface*, which she'd done herself apparently, by just being her. And there had only been two other guys she'd dated before him. *Three whole guys, twenty-one years old*. So beyond pathetic. Melinda tensed. She had chosen Jerkface, to give herself to. She

was never going to forgive herself for that choice. But she hadn't wanted to carry the label *virgin* anymore.

How stupid that label seemed now. She still felt like a virgin. At least she hadn't told Jerkface he was her first, not that the fact redeemed her decision at all.

She put her stubborn gaze back on. "Charlie, between you, Michael, and William drilling my dates with questions no normal human would comprehend, it's no wonder they never call back for second dates." She lashed out, preferring to believe it was them and not her, driving them away. But how could it not be her? She just wasn't date material. Or perhaps the other two had just wanted what she'd given Jerkface, and when she didn't...

Dating sucks.

But she'd blame it on her brothers, just the same.

Charlie patted her shoulder. "I'm just looking out for you, Kiddo."

"Well, you can't have it both ways," she argued hotly. "If I leave the house and start dating more, you have to accept the guys I go out with. No more scaring them away."

"Okay. You're right. Why don't you go out now? I can clean up this mess."

Melinda shook her head, a hesitant tingle creeping into her gut. Talking about leaving was easy, but actually leaving the house was a much scarier thought. And going on another date with another guy she didn't know, just a bad idea.

"I made the mess, I'll clean it up. Besides, it's sort of a badge of honor, first time making the potion for My William and all. I just hope I got it right."

Charlie threw her a look that said, *you're making excuses*, but let it slide as William dramatically rushed to the front kitchen window. He tore off his pullover revealing his chiseled bare chest and flung open the curtains, the bright morning sunlight flooding the room, exposing him to potentially fatal rays.

Both Melinda and Charlie stood wide-eyed, waiting to smell smoke or see flames erupt. Instead, William's mouth turned into the slightest of smiles.

"You nearly gave me a heart attack!" Melinda shouted. "What if the potion hadn't worked?"

"There is only one way to find out if the potion did work."

"But you could have tested it on a finger, not your entire body!" she protested.

"I have complete faith in you, Melinda." William pulled his shirt back over his head.

She made a face, knowing he was just trying to prove a point, by agreeing with Charlie. She was a bright, beautiful, and talented young woman that needed to find a life outside of the Howard Mansion. But they were the only ones who had such thoughts.

William had just been standing in the kitchen, shirtless. And she'd been too stunned by his attempt at burning himself that she hadn't even enjoyed his magnificently chiseled perfection. She shivered at the thought of reaching out and touching that cold skin.

Did it just get hotter in here? Did the air just get sucked out of the room?

Why did William have to be an off-limit vampire?

Physically, he was the epitome of perfection, at least in her eyes. Tall. On the thin side but not wiry. A first glance wouldn't tell you instantly that he was stronger than any human man. That awareness came from the confidence he

exuded in every movement he made. The draw of his gaze, the pull of his smile, the very manner in which he carried himself just strutting down the sidewalk. All things, which depending on his mood, either blanketed you in complete security, or emitted predatory threats that warned, *I wouldn't walk down any dark alleys alone if I were you.*

More than all that, Melinda knew him. Trusted him. Heck, he was her best friend. Her confidant. Why couldn't real life be as easy and exciting as her dream life?

Melinda kept up her stubborn front. "You haven't tested the potion completely, William. It's the other function that's the really tricky part."

"I will be out taking a stroll if you need me," the vampire responded tersely.

Melinda spoke quite seriously as he departed. "If anyone suddenly realizes you're a vampire that has lived in this town for over a hundred years and hasn't aged, come home at once and I'll try again."

Getting the potion just right was usually Charlie's job as he was the most practiced at making potions out of the three siblings. But after a heated argument with his brother, Michael, he had abruptly left for a fishing trip and had forgotten to make William's masking potion. They always kept an emergency vial of it, just in case, but Melinda had wanted to try her hand at making it instead.

As long as made correctly, and taken every three months, the masking potion allowed William not only to walk in the daylight, but allowed him to live freely, leading an almost normal life.

The potion kept people in the town from realizing he did not age. They just knew him as William Wakefield, longtime friend to the Howard family; one of The Demon Isles founding families.

In addition, four years previously, William had temporarily become guardian of the three siblings after their parents had mysteriously disappeared during a hunting trip into White Pines National Park. A place frequented by many tourists on the Isle. Not that they needed a guardian seeing as Charlie was twenty-two at the time. But the siblings had needed William, and he had been their parent's longest and most trusted friend.

Some locals believed that their parents had befallen some terrible accident, the type usually associated with careless tourists that refused to heed repeated warnings. Like how one misstep on the rocky cliffs might send you plunging to your death, or how fast you could find yourself in trouble when the tide came in and suddenly you're stuck on the one rock that's just barely sticking out of the water, or worse, in a cave that now has no exit.

However, a handful of locals were aware of the truth: that *hunting* meant their parents were searching for The Demon Isle's magical power source. A source that to this day, had yet to be located; even by the many generations of Howards to have come and gone from the Isle. All the siblings were certain of, is that the search had claimed the lives of their parents, just as it had claimed the lives of numerous Howard Witches before them.

But it was this very power source that the Howard siblings also defended, often putting their own lives on the line to protect. It was what their family had always done: protect the source from being discovered and falling into the wrong hands.

Of equal importance were the incessant attempts by various supernatural beings that came to the Isle in hopes of drawing on that power. Or overthrowing the Howards and claiming the Isle for themselves, therefore putting the locals and the tourists in constant danger.

Dangers that newer locals opted to ignore or pass off as strange, but somehow explainable, events. Many, of course, chose to exploit the Isle's mystical draw, now making it a top vacation spot for fans of the supernatural and paranormal. This only complicated the lives of the siblings as these fans often got more trouble than they bargained for.

Charlie offered again to help clean up the kitchen.

"I can handle it," Melinda said. "You should get unpacked, maybe take a shower." She wrinkled her nose at his fishy stench.

"I should have been here to help you." His voice held guilt as he grabbed half-filled vials and dried herbs, returning them to their cupboards. Melinda didn't argue, she enjoyed her brother's company.

"For your knowledge," she explained after a bit, "I did get out while you were away. I went on a patrol with William."

"That's not getting out," her brother argued.

"Is too."

"We patrol at night. And patrolling is work."

"Yes, but there's sometimes still people around."

"Work is not a life, Melinda. You need friends. You need to get out and have fun. What about the friends you used to go to school with?" Charlie asked. "That guy you went out with a few months ago?"

Jerkface, or possibly the guy before Jerkface. "They've all moved away, gone to college," she claimed quickly. "And what's wrong with hanging out with my brothers? Or William? And there's Emily."

Charlie snorted. "When she comes to the house to see Michael. I don't want to push you, Melinda, but like you said earlier, you're twenty-one. You should be out on the beach, partying, going on dates, and getting into trouble." He thought about that for a minute. "Okay, make that partying lightly but you get what I mean."

"I'm trying, Charlie."

"I know, Kiddo." He saw the uneasiness in her eyes. "Just keep taking little steps and even though we give you a hard time, screw us! Just go have some fun."

"Yeah, okay. Fun. It's my top priority," she voiced, with fake enthusiasm.

Charlie didn't push it further.

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Michael got out of the house as fast as possible, making his way toward the café he was sure Emily would be exiting at any minute. She always stopped for coffee and a crème horn on her way to work.

He heard the ding of a door opening and out she stepped. It calmed him immediately, bettering his mood, as Emily emitted brightness and happiness.

"Michael," she called out upon seeing him. "What are you up to this morning?" Her southern drawl was muffled by the swallowing of coffee.

He caught up with her. "Hi, Em. Thought I'd walk you to work."

"That's so sweet of you." She grinned widely. A grin that shot warmth into his core. She'd done that to him since the day they'd met, just under five years before.

She reached up and tousled his newly cut hair. Not one hair moved against her touch. Each firmly in its place, almost as if Michael had ordered each hair to its position with the threat of punishment if they disobeyed. She chuckled, but told him, "I like it. It's very *you*."

"You think? The stylist almost talked me out of it. She kept running her fingers through my hair, trying to change my mind."

"That's just because she thinks you're hot." So did every woman on the Isle. Including far too many tourists. It was hard to rise to the top of the competition for Michael's affections.

"She did keep me in that chair for a ridiculous amount of time," he noted.

"Face it, if they're single and from the Isle, make that any woman alive that's stepped foot on the Isle, they're in love with you."

He wanted to blurt out if that included her as well, but bit his tongue. He didn't need to ask that question. Her answer screamed at him silently. *I've always loved you*.

"It suits you well," Emily said of his new hairstyle. "Truth be told, the shoulder length locks weren't right for you. And this style makes that baby face you tote around completely irresistible." *Kissable*, was what she was really thinking.

He blushed a little. Always did when she flirted with him. He would have liked nothing more than to take hold of her hand and walk her to work, to kiss those peach colored lips until they were swollen.

But he did not.

"It was definitely time for something new," he told her.

"Well, no girl can resist that face, no matter what your hair looks like." She played down her flirting. She might have found his face kissable, but she'd never dared. "So what do you have lined up tonight, two dates? Three? One right after the other."

"Ha. Very funny." He rolled his eyes as they walked to her store. "Had three dates in one night, one time, almost a year ago and you're never going to let me live it down, are you? God! That night ended so badly."

Emily laughed. "Good thing I was around to come to your rescue. I guess it's my job to remind you and keep you out of trouble." She winked, toying with him.

She really wished it was her job.

He really wished it was, too.

"Actually, I haven't been on a date in weeks," he admitted.

"You? Michael Howard, dateless?"

He chuckled. "Just haven't been in the mood."

"Charlie, still?" she questioned knowingly.

He shrugged.

"You're still arguing I take it."

"Yeah." He sighed. "Charlie got back this morning and I don't want to be in the same room as him. Don't want to talk to him. Don't want to hear his nagging voice all condescending because I'm not as into this lifestyle as he is. *My brother Charlie*. Talk about Mr. Perfect-can-do-no-wrong in the eyes of anyone. Everything he says just irritates the crap out of me right now. But hey, enough of me complaining for

one morning. I enrolled in classes," he announced, ending his tirade and starting a new subject.

"Really? That's great, Michael." She stumbled across the words a little, the revelation catching her off guard. She tried to sound excited and upbeat, but Michael knew she was disappointed by this news. Her smile never faded, but he sensed it, the brightness lessened. Her eyes dancing just a little less.

Emily realized she'd given herself away and tore her gaze off him, her cheeks fiery with embarrassment.

Michael hated hurting her. "It's not for a while yet. Summer's just started really. Fall's still a ways away."

"I'm really happy for you," she told him. She meant it. She didn't want to see him leave the Isle, but she wanted nothing more than for him to be happy. And he wasn't.

"Thanks, Em. So, um, have you ever thought about going back to college?"

"You know I can't, Michael. I left because Dad needs me here. And he's stubborn about moving anywhere else. I really don't know why that is, but..."

"Sorry. It was dumb of me to even bring it up." They were at her bookstore. "I guess I'll see you later, Em."

Idiot. That's what I am. Hurting people. Disappointing people. These were things he excelled in. By not living up to people's expectations of him. Expectations he didn't want to live up to. And never asked for.

"Later, Michael."

"Yeah, bye. Have a good day at work."

"Thanks. See ya." She tossed him another wide smile and gave her lips a timid pull with her teeth. Lips he'd very much like to kiss. Instead, he fled.

She always made him feel bad for wanting to leave the Isle. Not on purpose, and she never once vocalized it. But he saw it in her eyes. Felt the cut of it in the things she did not say. Her reactions to him. What scared him most, was that if there was one thing, one person, who could get him to stay on the Isle, it would be Emily Morgan.

But she would never ask him to stay. Never in a hundred years if she thought it would make him unhappy. She liked to make people happy, thrived on it, almost to a fault. Heck, she lit up the darkest room just by entering it. Everyone loved Emily. He more so than anyone. Brakes squealed in his brain. He could not afford to think like that.

He forced the thought out of his mind. He'd never found the courage to come out and ask her. If she said yes, she did want him to stay, he'd never be able to leave. And he needed to leave. To get off this lame, stuck-in-the-last-century island before he got sucked in so deep that he never left. Never explored the world. Like every other Howard that had come before him.

He didn't want that fate. He didn't ask for it.

Didn't he get a say in his life, at all?

He looked up to see William not too far ahead, heading into the mansion. "Potion worked," he noted. "Good job, Melinda."

He was going to have to go home and face Charlie. Face whatever this day brought him. Regardless, he was proud of his sister, she was getting better every

day. Her panic attacks were less frequent. Slowly, she was immersing herself back into the outside world.

Mainly, what this really meant was he didn't need to stay on the Isle. They'd be fine without him.

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William reappeared in the kitchen of the Howard Mansion with Michael just behind.

"All went well?" Melinda asked the vampire.

"Yes. As expected, no one realizes I am not a thirty-one-year-old man."

Melinda nodded satisfactorily and turned to Michael. "You're back sooner than I expected."

"It was just a quick walk with Emily to work at the bookstore."

Charlie's eyes lit up. "I have been meaning to congratulate her on taking over the place," he admitted, apologetically. "Once Renee retired a few months ago, Emily was the perfect replacement."

"Yes. She is," was all Michael acknowledged to Charlie's attempt to engage him in conversation.

"And how did she like your new haircut?" Melinda inquired.

"What's not to like?"

"Oh get over yourself!" she shot back in amusement.

Although brothers, Charlie and Michael didn't share many common traits.

Michael was wiry, yet athletic, with smooth, slightly flushed skin. He never had to shave. He was also slower than Melinda when it came to getting ready in the morning, even though his outfits consisted mostly of jeans, sandals and some kind of pullover shirt. However, the hours spent getting every strand of hair on his head into its perfect place were too many to count.

Charlie, on the other hand, had enough hair for two men. His dusty brown locks were thick and disheveled, falling just above his shoulders, and his facial hair grew fast enough that he could shave twice in one day. More often than not, he had a couple days' growth on his face. He found most shirts constricting, being that he had shoulders and muscles like a football player, and preferred on nice days to wear tank tops and khaki shorts. When the weather cooled, he simply added a flannel shirt, always with the sleeves rolled up carelessly.

The only similar traits they did share: dazzling blue eyes and a killer smile that knocked any girl's socks off. Both things inherited from their father, Jack Howard.

The kitchen phone rang loudly.

"That would be the Mack line," Charlie stated, grabbing the phone, grateful for the distraction. "Have I even been home a full hour yet?" he asked no one in particular.

"Oh, I need to talk to Mack before you hang up, okay?" Melinda blurted out.

Charlie nodded that he'd heard her, while speaking into the phone, "Hello, Mack! How can we help the sheriff of The Demon Isle this morning?"

"Oh good, you're home, Charlie. Hope the fishin' trip went well." She gave him no chance to reply. "I'm actually calling for your brother. Afraid I need a death readin'."

"Just say where and I'll send Michael right over."

Michael sighed, relieved at the sound of his name. "Any excuse to get out of here," he grumbled under his breath. "Even if it is work."

"The morgue," Charlie spoke to Michael. He aimed at Mack, "A local or tourist this time?"

"That's what I'm hoping Michael can tell me, actually. You see, all I got is *drybones*..." Her tone turned ominous.

"A skeleton. I see."

"Yeah, a first. Not a stitch of meat on'em."

"Michael will be right over to help." Charlie was about to hang up when he remembered his sister needed to speak with the sheriff. He tossed Melinda the phone.

"Hiya, Mack," she greeted. "Sounds like you've got a lot on your plate, but I'm afraid I have another job for you."

"Anything you need. You just tell me what it is."

"There's a back door at the Fishhook Seafood Company that's broken. A lock keeps jamming and if they don't fix it, in three days someone that works there dies because it won't open."

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about it. I'm on it! Just consider me your own personal dream killer," the sheriff added with a haughty laugh.

Melinda let out a dark chuckle.

Mack disconnected.

Charlie and Michael stared at Melinda, awaiting explanation.

"Yeah yeah. Another dream. I took care of it didn't I?"

"You're supposed to tell us when you have a dream, so we can help," Charlie reminded gently. Instant guilt consumed him. He'd been gone. Out of reach part of the time. She couldn't have told him even if she'd needed to.

"I did. I told William, and we decided it was best handled by Mack. What are we going to do? Walk up to the owners of the Fishhook and say, hey, Melinda, yeah that girl everyone already thinks is a freak, also has prophetic dreams and last night, she dreamt your broken back door would cause someone to die?"

"Point noted. They've only been on the Isle for a couple years and are not aware of what goes on around here. However," started Charlie, "how can we decide if it's something we can or should handle if you don't tell us? I trust William's opinions, of course, and I wasn't home. But you can tell us too, Melinda. Just remember that, okay."

"Maybe she can make up her own mind," Michael defended.

"This isn't about you and me, Michael," Charlie breathed out heavily.

"I'm just saying she's not a kid. And who made you captain of this ship? What rule says we have to tell you every little thing that happens?"

Charlie closed his eyes, searching for a reply that would not make the situation worse. But all he wanted to do was grab his brother by the shoulders and shake some sense into him. An annoyed groan slipped across his lips and he opened his eyes to see Michael leaving the kitchen in a huff.

"I gotta go. Job to do," he spouted with mock enthusiasm.

"I think I'll go with him," Melinda said, frowning in displeasure. First, because she had just volunteered to leave the house, and second, that Charlie and Michael were no closer to ending their argument. She patted Charlie's shoulder and

followed Michael, hoping her voluntary departure from the house would help improve his mood.

After Charlie and William were alone Charlie let out a strained breath as if he'd been holding it in. "The full moon is almost here. It's so much harder not to get angry, about anything or everything, the closer it gets."

"And they know this, Charlie."

"I'm going to go unpack, take a cold shower," Charlie decided. "Cool down a little."

"I will be in my study, should anyone need me," William spoke evenly.

However, Charlie didn't leave, and instead, stared at the wall, rubbing his hand across his stubble covered chin.

"Is there something else, Charlie?"

"To be honest, William, I'm not sure. I'm not even sure how to explain it. Something about this approaching moon feels different. Harder to control myself than usual."

"I will check if this particular moon has any unknown significance, just in case."

"Thanks, William. I'd feel a heck of a lot better knowing I'll still be me when the full moon rises."

* * * * *

Melinda followed her brother out of the front door, across the stone porch and down the steps of the Howard Mansion, stepping onto a cobblestone driveway. She froze for a moment, her feet suddenly unwilling to move forward.

There's so many people!

Just people vacationing and having fun.

She berated herself silently, fighting off the urge to run back inside the house.

She took the next step onto the street. Michael wrapped his arm around Melinda, securing her to his side. Her panic leaked into his senses; would she be able to continue? It was early summer, which meant fighting their way through bustling-about tourists. But driving would be harder and take twice as long as walking while waiting for tourists to figure out where they were headed, or while they attempted to park in cramped spaces.

"Okay to keep going?" Michael prodded gently.

She nodded and shook it off. "Fine, let's go." She left the safety of his side, her thoughts screaming *so not fine!* But rather than turn and run home she sidetracked herself by talking to her brother. "You shouldn't be so hard on Charlie. He's doing his best."

"Don't be so hard on Charlie!" he repeated incredulously.

"I know, I know. It's just, you know how he gets around the full moon."

"How he gets is irritating, infuriating, and... and... pigheaded and bossy! And it doesn't matter how close we are to the full moon."

Melinda groaned. What she said next would just make Michael angrier. "I'll give you that he can be a pain in the butt, but he is kind of right though. You can't leave, Michael. What would this town do without you? What would Charlie and I do without you? And he's not the only one who's pigheaded," she mumbled under her breath.

Michael frowned. She wasn't wrong. But still. "Just because I'm a Howard, this automatically gives me a life sentence to live on The Demon Isle?"

"I never said it was fair, but it's not so bad either. You've got Emily," she pointed out.

"We're not dating," he retorted haughtily.

"And whose fault is that?" she snapped just as haughtily. "All you need do is ask. That girl is head over heels crazy over you! Always has been. *You're her baby face*," Melinda's voice mocked.

"This face is appealing," he agreed coolly, twirling his hand in circles around his face. Melinda hit his shoulder in a humored reply. "Really though, why start dating her now? I am leaving the Isle," he spoke determinedly. "And she has to stay with her father."

Melinda bit her tongue to keep from responding. What would it take to keep her brother from leaving? Perhaps if she had another nervous breakdown, this would keep him around. She chastised herself again. That was not a place she wanted to go back to, ever.

With nothing else to say, she focused on making eye contact with the locals and tourists that hustled about the town. Many of the tourists were surprisingly polite, returning her gesture. The locals, however, just stared or ignored her attempts to nod or say hello.

"And the *friendly* locals are part of what gives The Demon Isle its charm," she grumbled sardonically, recalling that line from a Demon Isle vacation brochure.

"Be patient with them, Melinda. Just give them a chance. They don't all think you're a freak," her brother razed, with a loving wink tossed in her direction.

"That guy over there," she pointed, "totally talking about me. It's ridiculously obvious."

"Well, what do you expect, Sis? They're curious. You've hidden yourself away for the last four years, ever since your dreams started and Mom and Dad," he cut himself off. He was already arguing with Charlie, he didn't want to argue with his sister, too. "Look, let's just do this favor for Mack, and thanks for coming with me. I know how hard it is for you to leave the house, but you're getting better at it every day."

"There's a part of me that wants to escape this place, too," she admitted with a sigh. "But it won't stop the dreams, which just get worse when I have actual contact with people. I really am trying."

"I know, Sis. You are. You're doing really great. I mean, you only pointed out one guy that was talking about you behind your back today," he jested, with a nudge to her arm.

She rolled her eyes as they turned the corner entering another street. It was lined with boutique stores, gift shops, pubs, grills, bars, cafés, and even a company that organized tours of the Isle—anything from trips to the beaches, the National Park, or even haunted tours through graveyards, lighthouses, and old homes or buildings that were believed to be frequented by ghosts.

The end of this street curved, landing them in a section of the town nicknamed Fortune Alley. It drew many tourists, eager to seek details about their future, or learn more about the Isle's mystical background, or people that just desired to wrap themselves in fantasy for a day.

This section of town was plotted with magic shops, comic book stores, book and movie sellers specializing in sci-fi, fantasy and the paranormal; fortunetellers, and herb shops, which sold touristy things like love potions. A regular geekdom fit for any fan of the supernatural, or in the case of the Howard Witches, a place to buy the necessary ingredients for potions they used in real life. It also happened to be the fastest way to get to the morgue.

As they walked through Fortune Alley, Melinda saw three psychics set up at the edge of the street, offering free, five-minute readings to passersby. It was a promotion store owners did often, in hopes of attracting longer, purchased readings, or to drag customers into their shops.

Melinda wondered if they had any true foresight. She also wondered how many of them were aware of the true supernatural side of the Isle, as typically, only locals who had lived on the Isle for many years knew the truth that magic did exist here; a truth they preferred to keep to themselves. Nevertheless, they did allow rumors to spread, stories to leak, and even the occasional photo to surface (but only if blurry enough *not* to prove anything real).

The only fortuneteller Melinda recognized was a woman known as Mystic Mona. She sat draped in long flowing scarves, mysteriously moving her tattooed hands over a fogged up crystal ball. She had told the Howard's a long time ago that she was a complete fake, but for some reason she was also the most visited reader on the Isle. She winked at the duo as they passed by her.

Near the end of the street, a light salty mist spread across Melinda's skin. They were very close to the harbor. So close, she could hear the sloshing of the waves crashing up against the dock and the boats. "I do love this air," she said, closing her eyes for a moment, feeling the damp saltiness layer across her face. She sucked it in, and upon opening her eyes, noted, "The view isn't too shabby either."

Michael took a glance and looked at her as if to say *No way! Not happening!*

"What? He's cute." Actually, way more than cute. Yummy, to be more exact, but she'd never say that to her brother.

"You're afraid to leave the house, and yet the first guy you pick out of the crowd is the one on the motorcycle."

"Well it's not like I'm running over there and just hopping on. Geesh! I just thought he was cute. And look, he wears a helmet. Safe driver," she argued.

Michael continued toward the morgue, dismissing her argument. Thinking of his sister being old enough to make her own choices about the men she dated was never going to be easy. She was perpetually a teenager in his mind. And in some ways, because of her anxiety and breakdown, and locking herself away these last four years, she was still naïve to the real world. But she was growing braver with each day, and she'd catch up, hopefully without getting her heart broken too many times. His sister was the type to fall, and fall hard, and want it to be forever. Regardless, she was always going to be his little sister and no guy would ever be good enough for her.

Please don't let her find someone like me. The thought crept into his brain giving him an instant sourness in his gut. He really did string Emily along. Flaunting all his other girlfriends, dating like it was no big thing. And it wasn't, and that was the point. He didn't want the big thing. The *real* thing. He wanted off the Isle and to get a new life. Emily was beautiful and smart and had the most natural way of

making him feel like he'd just come home every time he saw her, or heard her voice. But The Demon Isle was not going to be his home for much longer. Emily would have no trouble finding a good man. Someone who was not him. She deserved much better than him.

Melinda watched the dark haired young man get onto his motorcycle. He slid over the seat with ease, straddling the metal machine and pumping the clutch hard. It roared to life. With each pulse of the clutch and vroom of the gas, a zing of excitement shot up Melinda's spine. What was it about men, metal, and machines? She'd never even been on a motorcycle before.

Michael shook his head, letting out an annoyed groan. He didn't need this. Didn't need to know how his sister felt right now.

Melinda swallowed hard, clearing her throat. "Sorry." She wasn't sure who was mortified more, herself or Michael. How was she supposed to keep her feelings to herself when he was around?

"Just try to rein it in a little, please." Sometimes, being an empath really sucked. No strike that, it always sucked. Knowing what emotions people were feeling, all the time.

I really need to get off this island.

Not that it would make any difference. He'd still sense what people were feeling.

"It's partly my fault," Michael said to her. "I have a hard time managing it when I'm pissed."

She tossed him an understanding shrug.

Traffic cleared and motorcycle man pulled away from the curb, making a U-turn. His dark eyes caught Melinda's and he winked as he drove by. Her cheeks turned rosy, a sudden self-conscious awareness washing over her. She gazed down at her dress, and sighed.

This was her reality.

She was certain any TV fashion show would call it a bag, not a dress. She'd be the woman they'd ambush on the street and transform from an ugly duckling to a swan. Only to give up mid-makeover after realizing this task was impossible.

I really need to pay more attention to what I'm wearing before I leave the house. I'm beyond pathetic. The dress was old, sack-like, and fell to her ankles. It was also comfortable and hid the shape of her. No one needed to see her curves, or lack thereof. *Curvy in all the wrong places. Maybe I should eat fewer donuts?* What was it Jerkface had called her? *Oh, right, adorable.* Not beautiful, or gorgeous, or even pretty, but adorable, with that look of yeah, you should lose a few pounds. Yup, *adorable* was currently her least favorite word.

Michael shook his head but held his tongue. His sister flipped through emotions faster than changing the TV channels. He almost wished the guy on the motorcycle had hit on her, just to make her feel better about herself. Then again, his sister was vulnerable and would fall for just a single act of kindness, and he knew exactly what some guys did to those types of chicks. Because he was one of those guys. That sour pit in his gut dug a little deeper. Another reason he'd stopped dating recently. Even he was getting sick of his own bull. But yeah, screw motorcycle guy. His sister was sweet. Had a bit of a stubborn streak like her mother. And deserved way better than some fly by night tourist.

Melinda sighed. Wink or no wink, there was no way a handsome guy like motorcycle man would ever be into her, never mind that he was most likely a tourist and would leave town any day. She would probably never happen across him again.

She squeezed her fists in frustration. William's dream had left her worked up and on edge. However, picking up a total stranger was not the answer to her conundrum. Although as she thought about it, perhaps it was exactly what she needed.

She squelched the thought. It was a bad idea. A stupid idea. Melinda Howard and strangers, even gorgeous ones on motorcycles, did not mix. Look at what had happened with Jerkface! Did she learn nothing?

Blasted hormones and stupid steamy vampire dreams.

"And we're here," announced Michael, loudly intruding her thoughts. He held open the front door of The Demon Isle Morgue, eyeing Melinda as if about to ask her something uncomfortable.

If it wasn't William and his super vampire hearing, it was Michael and his ability to sense her emotions. Could a girl not keep any secrets?

"You ready to do this?" she asked, straying from topics she did not wish to discuss with her brother.

"Um. Never. But it's my duty, isn't it?" Bitterness skimmed across his tongue.

Mack, the town sheriff, met them just inside. She was a sturdy woman with keen eyes and sea-air worn skin that had never seen sunblock. Her real name was Mackenzie Briggs. Most of the townsfolk called her Sheriff Briggs. But the Howard Witches had been assisting the local police since the Isle's inception, plus the sheriff had also been friends with the siblings' parents.

"Ah, Michael Howard. You're looking as scrumptious as ever," said Mack, her eyes dancing in a playfully flirtatious manner.

"Good morning, Mack." He tossed her a seductive grin and a wink as he passed by her.

"Yup. Scrumdiddlyumptious." She smacked her lips, making a point to watch him walk by.

Melinda laughed. She enjoyed how the sheriff taunted her brother. He needed to be put in his place now and then.

"Where to?" Michael asked, his enthusiasm lessened.

"Yes, to the business at hand." Mack motioned for them to follow. She entered an examination room. "Always sorry to make you do this, Michael. But we're stumped on this one."

"Always glad to help," Michael insisted. He attempted eagerness, but wasn't fooling anyone.

Mack locked the door behind them. "I asked my deputy to leave. Told him I needed time to do my own investigatin'. Better to keep'em in the dark about this whole crazy supernatural thing as long as possible I figure. New guy's gonna work out great though. 'Course, I said that about the last guy."

Melinda chuckled.

Michael stared at the examination table, which Mack stepped over to and gently lifted a sheet and exposed an intact skeleton.

"Drybones is right." Michael let out with a whistle.

Melinda would have, but she had never really been able to whistle, so she just replied with a wide-eyed, astonished nod.

The skeleton was lying flat on its back, except for the skull, which was turned as if staring at the siblings. Even skinless, its mouth stuck open in a horrified silent scream, its final terrified moments permanently etched into the bones.

"Sure is something ain't it?" said Mack. "Called you guys 'cause I've never seen bones come in as clean as these. At first, we weren't even sure they were real. Sure enough they are. Looks like something came across the body and just plain sucked everything right off 'em!"

Michael stepped closer. He'd never seen anything like it. Whenever Mack called on his services, it was usually someone recently deceased, that still had muscle and skin attached to the bones.

"Diver found these bones in an underwater cave in Bloodsucker Bay," Mack explained further. "After initial examination we confirmed it's a male, and found damage that seems to indicate some kind of trauma." She pointed out the spot, just to the side of where the heart should have been.

"Considering where they were found, and the condition of the bones," aimed Michael to the sheriff, "my guess would be a Sea Hag. I've never seen their handy work personally, but William's told me about them. Our parents killed one when I was about two if I remember right. Sea Hag does not explain the trauma to the chest though. Hags attack their victims using a poison that releases from tentacles *they* call hair."

"Icky," shuddered Melinda.

"I'm with her," agreed Mack. "Nice to see you out and about, by the way," she added bluntly.

Melinda just nodded thanks in reply, preferring to ignore the topic.

Michael stepped toward the skeleton. He took a concentrated breath and extended his arm out to touch the bones. "Why don't we find out what really happened," he said, laying his hand on the skeleton. Michael's eyes closed and began to flutter back and forth under closed eyelids.

A long minute later, he gasped and let go, taking a few unsteady steps backwards.

"You okay?" his sister inquired, concerned.

"Ju-Just a little more violent than I expected," he stuttered, catching his breath. Something in his eye told Melinda he wanted to say more, but held his tongue. After a moment, he turned to Mack. She always waited patiently after Michael's assistance, realizing how equally helpful and disturbing his ability as a death reader could be.

"This man was definitely murdered," he informed her.

"I was afraid you were gonna say that."

"Right before his death he was in some kind of rage, shouting like a madman, but nothing comprehensible. It looked like he was trying to attack someone and *that* someone shot him, which explains the chest trauma. They left him to die at the hands of a Sea Hag, as I expected, which explains the stripping of the bones."

"Don't suppose you could help a sheriff out and just tell me *who* shot this man?"

"Sorry. No face. Only a gun." Michael stepped toward the door, appearing eager to leave.

"It gives me a place to start at least. Appreciate it, Michael. I always hate draggin' you into these things, but at least you're nice to look at." Mack raised her eyebrow in sarcastic seduction, her tone laden with flippant innuendo.

"Glad to help," insisted Michael, this time avoiding her attempt to flirt.

"You guys'll look into the Sea Hag?" the sheriff assumed.

"Naturally," he replied, grabbing Melinda's arm, promptly departing.

"Be careful!" Mack ordered. "Don't want to be collectin' your bones next," she mumbled after their disappearing frames.

Michael took rushed steps out of the morgue and down the street. Melinda grabbed her brother's arm, forcing him to stop.

"You're clearly upset over what you saw. Talk to me," she pleaded.

He bit his lip, unease spreading splotches of red across his smooth skin.

"I didn't tell Mack everything I saw," he finally admitted.

"Why on earth not?"

"Because," he started, but stopped. He looked down shaking his head, unable to believe what he was about to say.

Melinda lifted his chin, making him look her in the eye. "Out with it, Michael. We don't need two crazies in the house."

He inhaled deeply, and upon exhaling let slip out the words, "I saw Mom."

"What?" she breathed out in shock. "In the death reading? Just now?"

"Yes. I saw her clear as day, Melinda. And if I'd told Mack everything, our mother wouldn't just be dead, she'd also be the number one suspect in a murder investigation."

* * * * *

Charlie and William sat in silence thinking over what Michael had just told them. Twice, Charlie started to speak and stopped. Finally, in an uncertain voice he got out what he was trying to say.

"Our mother shot a man? A living man? Are you absolutely sure, Michael?"

"You know how my ability works, Charlie. It's *never* wrong."

Before Charlie and Michael allowed their tempers to flare further, William intervened. "We all know that what Michael saw is truth. Therefore, logic tells us your mother had a very good reason for her actions."

"But a *man*, William? Demons, other witches, any number of other supernatural creatures, sure. But why this man? Could he be the reason our parents are dead?" A low growl rumbled in Charlie's throat, and the whiskers lining his face stood to attention, thickening and darkening, giving him a sudden savage disposition.

"Charlie," Melinda spoke anxiously. "Cool it!"

Her eldest brother closed his eyes taking deep breaths to regain his control. "Sorry. Full moon's really getting to me this time."

"Yes, well, Mr. Wolfy needs to stay nice and locked up. When you get agitated you don't think straight."

"I am aware, Sis," he grumbled, at the same time distressing over the panic in her voice. *You have to keep it together if not for anything else but Melinda. She's*

just starting to get better. Of all the times to have a case centered around our parents.

Charlie motioned that he was fine and for them to continue.

"Nothing in what I saw," explained Michael, "indicated that this man had anything to do with our parent's deaths, but we would be stupid not to investigate it further, and regardless, we need to deal with the Sea Hag if she's still around."

Charlie and Melinda nodded in agreement.

"Any thoughts on where we should start, William?" Michael asked.

"Only one. We need to visit this underwater cave. That is to say, *you* need to visit this cave. I, of course, would sink to the bottom of the ocean like a stone."

"And as much as I would *love* to join this party," Melinda spoke in a sarcastic drone, "you know my stance on ocean dives and cave exploring. So not going to happen. I'll leave this investigation up to you two."

"Great," murmured Michael, his mouth twisting into a smirk. "I get to watch Charlie do the doggy paddle."

Charlie ignored the comment. "So which cave are we heading to?"

"It's in Bloodsucker Bay. On the northern outlet," relayed his brother.

"Must be why the body wasn't discovered sooner," William assumed. "Only the most competent divers attempt to explore those caves. The weather on the northern shore is most temperamental."

"Chances are, the Sea Hag's not even venturing into that cave anymore," Michael said. "Mom and Dad died four years ago, so this guy's been dead awhile. From what I've heard, Sea Hags tend to move around."

"We'll find out soon enough," huffed Charlie. "If this guy, or the Sea Hag, did have anything to do with our parent's deaths, we won't rest until we find out everything. But we'll need time to prepare. We don't want to end up like the dead guy."

"Or our parents," reminded Melinda in a strained voice.

Michael did not argue as he agreed fully with his siblings on this matter.

He cringed though, the uncontrolled emotions flowing freely out of his sister and brother piling on top of his own. He could do without this *gift* his Howard blood had given him. Melinda was fighting off a major panic attack and Charlie was anxious, Michael imagined in part, due to Melinda being in such a panic.

He tried to shut it out but his empathic ability was still somewhat new to him and he had a difficult time doing so. He worried about Melinda too, but he didn't need Charlie's worry loaded on top of his own.

"Sorry, Michael," Charlie apologized, seeing his brother's face. "We're not exactly holding anything back right now. We need to be more mindful until you can handle your empathy better."

Michael waved it off, nothing but irritation rampant in his glower. Charlie was trying to be nice, but somehow, every time he tried, all Michael heard was, *you're not doing it right*.

"How about we leave at first light tomorrow?" Charlie suggested.

"Yeah, that's fine," agreed Michael. "That'll give me time to prepare the diving gear." He hurried out of the room to start packing for their trip to Bloodsucker Bay.

“Poor Michael,” whispered Melinda. “I really don’t know how he can stand it. Having to deal with his own feelings and everyone else’s, too.”

It filled her with guilt instantly. Michael didn’t stay hidden in the house all the time. He dealt with his magical gifts. He didn’t necessarily want them, but he accepted them and was learning how to manage a daily life that came with magical gifts attached.

She, on the other hand, preferred to lock herself away in her room, hoping her prophetic dreams would just go away if she didn’t interact with anyone.

Melinda glanced up in time to catch William just looking away from her. If only all her dreams could be as pleasant as the William dream, rather than predicting tragic and sometimes gruesome deaths. She shuddered and heard Charlie say her name.

“Sorry, what?”

“Since you’re getting so good at it, would you mind helping me whip up some potions?”

“Be delighted,” she answered, taking off towards the kitchen. She needed something to keep busy with before her thoughts became overwhelming and she locked herself in the bedroom again.

“And William,” continued Charlie.

“I’ll be in my study, doing research. Perhaps there is something in your parents’ journals regarding that cave.”

Charlie nodded his approval and William dashed away, ardently retreating to his study.

* * * * *

The next morning did not come soon enough to keep Melinda from getting stuck in her dreams. It was early, a few hours before sunup. She grabbed and fisted her bed sheets. Kicked at the one across her body, needing it off her overheated skin, which glistened, covered in a feverish dew.

Her dream was vivid. Intense. Lifelike.

She was standing in the kitchen, it was night. Or perhaps just dark inside the house.

She couldn’t see more than a few inches in front of her, but she felt William’s presence. Standing right behind her. His vampiric chill not quite touching her.

She fell into him, her body melting into his possessive embrace. She could have lived right there. Forever.

“Do you want me to kiss you, Melinda?”

“Yes,” she breathed out.

Her body spun around, her hands went to the counter behind her for support.

William cupped her face, caressing her with his gaze.

His approach was slow. Cautious. Gentle. Melinda closed her eyes, a shiver consuming her lips. Cool breath rushed into her mouth sending a shudder down through her insides.

She reached out and grabbed hold of his shirt to pull him in closer.

His hands left her cheeks, sliding down her neck.

Melinda's pulse quickened when she felt the soft brush of her hair swept free of her neck. He pulled back, releasing her lips and she opened her eyes to see hungry black globes staring back at her.

Her eyes widened when his tongue licked at fangs drawing downward.

William groaned. He needed to taste her. Had to.

Melinda's legs faltered. Something told her she should be afraid. But the thought was small and near the back of her mind.

"Yes, William," she answered his silent question. His response was instant, sucking away her ability to breathe. His arms imprisoned her body against him, his mouth quivering against the delicate skin in the crease of her neck. Fangs drew across, pinching. Threatening. Then punching into her. Blood rushing up through her body into his mouth.

Darkness. Sudden darkness.

Like a curtain just fell over her, waiting to open to a new scene.

Total quiet, other than heavy breaths escaping her own lungs.

"William?" she called out.

No answer. Her vampire wasn't there anymore. He'd been torn out of her dream.

Her vampire. Melinda had to stop thinking like that. He did not belong to her.

Her hand jerked up to her neck, no fang wounds. A sting still forged into her skin. The memory of his fangs sinking into her. But there was no mark. It hadn't happened for real. It was just a dream.

Her hand dropped. Disappointment and frustration flaring through her nostrils.

These dreams are going to be the death of me!

Warm air brushed across her cheeks and the dark curtain lifted.

She wasn't in the kitchen any longer.

She was surrounded by shelf after shelf of books.

A bookstore.

Wait, it wasn't just any bookstore.

"Emily's bookstore."

Melinda spun in a circle, the heat still lit inside of her, stripped suddenly away, leaving only cold dread in its wake. Emily Morgan raced up the stairs with a stack of books in her hand, her lanky ponytail bobbing behind her.

"Oh, no. No. No. No. No. No." Melinda let out in a panicked heave.

All the steam froze, turning into sharp stakes stabbing into her core.

"I can't dream this. Please don't make me dream this."

Was it not possible to sleep and dream like normal people? Just once! Instead, it was like being awake all the time, even though her body slept soundly. She was still somehow conscious and present in her mind, even while dreaming.

And this dream, she didn't want it. It was no ordinary dream. This dream had interrupted her ordinary dream. It was far from ordinary, but this dream, this was a prophetic dream.

Melinda knew at once.

The way she watched like a stalker sneaking a peek into someone's life.

The foreboding pang squeezing her heart tighter and tighter.

It all led up to one terrifying realization.

She was about to watch her friend, Emily Morgan, die.

* * * * *

Just after four a.m. Melinda awoke quite forcefully. From total bliss, to totally messed up. Again. It was the second time this week her risqué William dream was abruptly interrupted by the throes of death.

She sat up, catching her breath, needing the one person she wasn't sure she could face right now. "Suck it up. Emily's life is at stake."

She threw on a pair of pajama shorts to go along with the tank top she'd worn to bed and tiptoed downstairs so as not to awaken her brothers, and entered the study.

"William," she whispered, hoping he was home and not out for one of his midnight strolls, or patrols.

A swoosh of air tore across the room, stopping a few feet in front of her. Just out of her reach.

"Now how could a girl not fall in love with that? A vampire flying to my aid the moment I call." *Oh my God! Why did I just say that?* She hoped he would think it just her typical flirtatious playfulness.

He ignored her remark, sensing a fearful inflection in her tone as she spoke.

"The better question is why I needed to fly to your aid at this early hour."

His gaze was penetrating. Concerned. She wrapped her arms around her waist as if trying to hold herself up. *Why didn't I put on a robe?* She'd never cared what she wore before, but suddenly felt half naked, standing in front of a vampire she was far too attracted to.

William backed away, clearing his throat. He returned to his desk, feeling the need to sit and steady himself. Amidst the panic washing off her was something else.

A scent far too enticing, which stuck in his nostrils and coated his tongue. His mouth watered, his jaw aching to release his fangs, hungry for the witch shivering just out of his reach.

He blinked, begging his eyes to stay green. The monster threatened to surface.

He growled in displeasure.

His reaction to Melinda was unacceptable. And dangerous. For both of them.

He stood back up with strained control. "I take it you had another dream."

"Um. Yes." Melinda didn't hear the strain in his voice, too preoccupied with her own. *Focus. Focus. Focus.* "Yes, it was a dream," she confirmed. "This one I definitely need help with, William." *God, I need help with both.*

"Should I awaken your brothers?"

"No!" she answered hastily. "I mean, they have a lot to deal with already. And if I told Michael what I just dreamed, he'd probably have a major freak out. Bad enough he had to see our mother shoot some guy."

"What does Michael have to do with your dream?" the vampire asked.

"Not Michael. Emily. The love of his life that he won't just admit is the love of his life already."

"Emily. This is most distressing," William replied evenly. "Explain."

"I didn't see enough, William. Not nearly enough. But if I don't figure out the who, what and how, Emily *will* die."

"You did not say when or where," he noted.

"Bookstore. Right after closing today."

Melinda took a deep breath and closed her eyes, letting go of everything else except her prophetic dream, willing another to show her more. It didn't happen. It never happened like that. Not at will.

She let out a frustrated whine.

Her eyes opened and she gave a start when William's distressed emerald greens drilled down into her baby blues. She hadn't even heard him approach. He stood so close she could feel his nearness, yet he did not touch her. Just like the dream. She swore there was an energy field pulling them together.

Her eyes closed. A silent scream reverberating through her skull.

SAVE EMILY, YOU COMPLETE MORON! A defeated breath escaped her lips.

She opened her eyes. Determined. Feeling more in control.

"Do not worry, Melinda," William sang to her soothingly. "This dream will not come to pass."

Which one? Her overworked brain wondered.

Melinda nodded in response to him, unable to find her voice. She rarely ever saw William up so close. His skin was smooth and pale, almost glass-like in a way. Not a wrinkle. Not a single age spot revealing his hundreds of years of life.

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd sucked in and held, tearing her eyes away, cheeks flush from the desire to look so closely. She could not control her heart though. From the look on his face, he heard the pounding beats.

He took a step away from her, a peculiar look flitting across his face.

She swore his eyes flashed from emerald to black, but the black vanished so fast that by the time she blinked, it was gone.

She hated this feeling welling up inside.

She hated that she'd had those stupid dreams.

She hated that she wanted it to be more than just a dream.

She needed to forget about it. William was her closest friend. Her confidant. Although lately, she'd had a harder time talking to him. Even before her dreams started, she'd realized her feelings towards him had changed. Her crush was something more. Something she could not have. Something William would never want, and it would do nothing but put a wedge of uncomfortableness between them.

And hello!

Her only other friend in the world needed her help!

I think I'm losing my mind. Maybe I am headed for another nervous breakdown.

William backed away, needing both space and the security of his desk. He wanted to escape the mansion and leave Melinda before something irreparable took place. Before he did something unforgivable.

To leave was the right option. The smart option.

Frustration mounted. Why was this happening all of a sudden? He'd remained in control of his blood cravings for such a long time. Was he simply doomed to fail, and this was the moment the switch, flipped?

Desires he'd locked away over a century ago clawed their way toward freedom. The darkness hidden deep inside, wanted out, craving escape. He needed to put out this fire, and fast. Before he did something he could never take back. Before he hurt her.

He was protector of the Howard Witches.

This was his solemn duty.

This was his purpose for existing. To make amends for all the things he'd done before he'd found The Demon Isle, and come to serve the Howard Witches.

Melinda needed his help.

He focused on this one thing.

He looked up and saw that she'd followed him to his desk.

Melinda absentmindedly ran her fingers across the surface of his desk, admiring The Demon Isle Oak. It had probably been built back when William had first come to live with the Howards. Over a hundred years ago now. It was Sturdy. Dependable. Would always be there, just like William. She let calm wash over her, regaining her focus.

"What will we do about Emily?" Melinda asked quietly. "I want to keep Charlie and Michael out of this if we can."

"I will not allow anything tragic to befall dear Emily. She is as precious to me as the three of you."

"Emily is practically like family, huh? I just wish Michael would see it."

"He does see it. This is the problem, however. He sees her as another bar on his prison cell."

"The Demon Isle being his prison," Melinda noted.

William nodded. "Tell me each detail regarding your dream." He took on a business like demeanor, taking a seat behind his desk.

"Okay. Um, Emily had just locked the front door at the bookstore and unplugged the open sign. She was holding a few books in her arms heading to shelve the books before leaving. As Emily often does, she gets sidetracked browsing through the books she's putting away. She gets all but one back on the shelf, opening the last one, and is surfing through the pages." Melinda paused, recalling the details of her dream.

"What are you remembering?"

"It's odd, William. That ring Emily wears. She can't see it, because her hand is hidden behind the book, but the ring is glimmering. Kind of a fiery color."

"That's very intriguing." Nothing came to mind as an explanation however.

"After the ring starts to glimmer, Emily drops the book and is screaming that it's burning her and she's trying to force the ring off her finger. It takes her a second, but she gets it off. And then... she's lying on the floor, dead," Melinda ended hastily.

"Just like that?" the vampire grilled, not believing her.

"No. Not, just like that. I really don't want to see the next part again, William."

"Melinda. This gift you possess is meant to save lives. You cannot leave out the parts you do not wish to see again, however difficult they might be to relive."

"Why not? Isn't it enough to know we need to find out more about Emily's ring?"

He waited in silent defiance, tossing her a severe stare.

"Fine," Melinda gave in begrudgingly. Steamy dreams or not, she could never say no to William.

"After Emily takes off the ring, she starts having some kind of seizure. At first she's swatting at something, but it's either invisible or out of my range to see, and she just stops. Her arms drop to her sides and she falls to the floor. She's on her back and her eyes... her eyes are open, frozen with this look of complete fear."

Melinda's voice dropped, getting raspy as she continued. "She's alone, William. Totally alone and scared when she dies. And that is where my dream ended."

William flew to her in a blink, his emerald greens drilling into her tear-filled gems of blue. "We will not allow this tragedy to happen." He spoke with confident determination, but her voice wouldn't work right, so she sniffled her reply, hoping desperately he was right.

He reached up to touch her shoulder but his hand fell short and he stepped at human pace, back to his desk. "From what you dreamt, I suspect that our dear Emily was not alone, and since the attacker was out of your view, I'll assume for the moment it is supernatural in nature." He retreated into his thoughts, his face statuesque as he sat behind his desk in deep contemplation.

Melinda stepped closer to the fireplace, leaning on the arm of a sofa, her gaze getting lost in the flames. William rarely ever let it die out, even on hot summer nights. It did not warm his permanently cooled skin, but he often spoke of it like an old friend that kept him company during lonely hours, while his human friends slept. Melinda had never understood his desire for it as fire could also kill him.

As the flames flickered, she relived the dream again, searching for any little detail she might have overlooked. Normally, when it came to her dreams, she tried to keep herself unattached to the problem, preferring to act as though she were simply an outsider with a glimpse of something no one else could see.

Just a thing. No big deal. Attachment meant frayed nerves and constant sorrow.

This dream, however, was not the first time she had dreamt about someone close to her dying. Unfortunately, when it had occurred the first time, Melinda had not understood that her dream was really a vision of something to come. Something preventable had she been aware. She had thought it just a nightmare, as it was not yet known that prophetic dreams were her magical inheritance.

Tears escaped down her cheeks. She couldn't stop them.

William's head flicked upward, and fearing she was slipping into despair, dashed to her at once. He knelt on one knee in front of her. "Melinda, this will not be like last time. I promise."

She could not respond. The lump in her throat was too constricting to allow her to speak.

He had to order his hands to stay by his sides, rather than reach up and swipe away the tears, or offer comfort. He'd started to enjoy when she needed his comfort, much more than he should, he realized now. Something he would not allow to develop any deeper. Especially after his reaction to her just minutes before.

"I wish to order you once and for all, not to carry this guilt over something you had no control over," William told her. He may not have had a beating heart, or blood pumping through his veins, but love and compassion emanated from him.

It was apparent to him now, that any true progress he believed Melinda had made was a lie. She had not forgiven herself at all.

"How can I?" she squeaked. "How can I ever forgive myself? Mom and Dad are dead because I didn't stop it. And now Emily."

He toyed with waking Charlie and Michael, sensing that Melinda would take too many steps backwards if she continued with this line of thinking.

His uncertainty apparent, she stood up, wiped her eyes, and shook off her apprehensions.

"William, please don't look at me like that. I can see you're disappointed with me."

"Melinda, I am never disappointed in you. Only concerned. I only want the best for you. I want you to live your life. I want you to stop feeling guilty, but I cannot force it upon you."

She wanted to shout, please, force it. Reach in and just rip it out of me because I can't take it anymore.

"I'm fine," she insisted weakly. "Really."

He searched her face, looking for his answer. "No, you are not *fine*, Melinda. But I will let it slide, for now, as we have urgent matters to attend to."

"Just help me save Emily," she begged softly.

"I will always be here to help you, Melinda." This statement sobered him up, completely. The monster sinking back into the depths in which it slept.

Assisting the siblings was his mission. Nothing more.

"Where should we begin?" she asked, sucking in a sniffle and letting out an uneasy breath.

"The ring, as you said, seems to be of some importance. We will pay Emily a visit, but not until morning. If you truly do not wish to alarm your brothers, we should wait until they depart for the cave at Bloodsucker Bay."

"And what do we do now? There's no way I'm falling back to sleep tonight." She didn't want any more dreams, of the prophetic or steamy kind!

He disappeared in a blur, returning a moment later with a stack of books.

"Perhaps, if we are lucky, we will locate information regarding Emily's ring."

"I don't feel that lucky at the moment, William, but hand me a book."

She spent the remaining hours of night flipping through page after page, but found nothing that looked anything like the ring Emily wore. William, even reading at speeds no human could imagine, did not have any better luck. Daylight crept upon them and Melinda tiptoed back into her bedroom. She wanted to at least pretend she had slept through the night, so as not to worry her brothers. When she heard them stirring in the hallway just minutes later, she exited her room, dressed and ready to go.

"Rough night, Sis?" questioned Charlie, instantly concerned when he saw her.

"Why do you say that?"

"You don't look rested."

"A nice way of saying I look like crap." She blew it off. "A little tossing and turning, nothing to worry about."

Once the siblings had gathered in the kitchen, Michael shot a sideways glance at her.

"Ugh, Michael. I'm fine. You guys go check out the cave already!"

"Melinda, I don't even need my empathy. I can almost see the anxiety pouring off you. Although, the panic you're emitting right now is shouting pretty loudly too."

"Don't use your empathic abilities on me, Michael."

How were they supposed to function with a brother who was an empath? A death reader was one thing, but it was impossible to keep one's true feelings to

themselves. She wondered if he'd picked up on her feelings about William. *I'll never hear the end of it, if that happens.*

As if his presence had been requested, William breezed into the kitchen standing just behind her. Melinda told herself to rein it in, but his arrival kicked off another series of heart flutters. She hoped Michael assumed it was whatever bothered her already, and nothing to do with the vampire.

William meandered to the other side of the kitchen near Charlie, his breathing strained.

Michael wasn't ready to drop the subject. "Melinda, what's going on?"

"It's nothing, really," she insisted again. "I already talked to William about it and we have it all sorted out, don't we?" Her eyes pleaded with him not to tell.

"It is nothing of consequence," William confirmed with outward ease.

"If William says they have it under control, I say we get going," Charlie chimed in.

"The jeep is packed and ready," Michael informed him.

"Let's get moving then."

"You two be careful, okay?" Melinda hugged each of them.

As soon as her brother's jeep had left the garage and pulled away, William held out his hand motioning for Melinda to lead the way.

Their intention was to bump into Emily as she stopped for her morning coffee. Melinda ignored the people she crossed paths with, not in the mood for the local's uncomfortable stares.

It was a tense walk. William just inches to her side. Normally, his presence would be a comfort. Today it was maddening. Why did he have to have such an appealing strut?

She tugged at her lip, trying to keep her heart beating at normal rhythm, forcing her hands deep into the pockets of her sweater.

He glanced down at her five foot three frame, his gaze narrow. Penetrating. Perplexed.

She gulped, her cheeks getting hot. She kept her gaze forward at that point, thankful he could only hear her heart, and not feel the reason it fluttered like crazy.

C'mon, Melinda! Get over the stupid dreams already! Just ahead, she saw Emily. *Thank God. Good old predictable Emily.*

Emily was stepping into the Wicked Muddy Café. They stepped in after her, hopping into the line, already filling up with caffeine-deprived early risers.

"Emily," called out Melinda.

Emily's lanky, dark auburn ponytail nearly took out three customers as she swung around to see who was calling her name.

"Melinda! William! What a nice surprise," she greeted, moving back a few customers to stand with them. She gave Melinda a quick hug and allowed William to kiss her cheek, which turned rosy as she readjusted her glasses.

"It is always lovely to see your beautiful smile," William told her.

"Isn't he just the sweetest," she replied. Her Georgian drawl seemed overly accentuated. "What brings you two out this morning? I can't recall the last time I saw you both out this early."

"We decided it was too nice a morning to have coffee at home," Melinda lied, trying to catch a glimpse at Emily's ring. It was hidden from view by the coffee mug and large purse Emily carried with her.

Emily eyed Melinda suspiciously. Since when did she ever want to go for coffee in a public place? She shrugged it off, happy to see her friends.

They arrived at the counter to order.

"Ah. Ms. Bookstore Manager. The usual?" the gruff looking woman behind the counter assumed.

"Predictable me," Emily giggled, shrugging.

"Comin' right up!" She glanced sideways shouting, "One wicked muddy, regular, crème horne, cut in half, don't need a fork." She grinned at Emily as she took her money. "You have a nice day now, Hun, ya hear?"

"Oh, you too, Grace," Emily said with complete sincerity. "See you in the morning." She grabbed her order, allowing William and Melinda to step up to the counter.

"I'll have a wicked muddy coffee as well, please," Melinda ordered politely. "But not regular, just cream, no sugar. And no crème horne. That much sugar and I'll be trying to climb walls," she tried to joke. "Not that I do that sort of thing," she hastily rambled. "I mean, who could actually climb a wall?" *Just shut it! Why do I try to converse with people?*

The woman named Grace threw her an odd look and slapped down a paper cup filled with coffee so darkly colored that Melinda thought she'd need a cup twice the size to add enough cream to her liking.

"Cream's over there." Grace nodded toward the end of the counter.

"Oh, I just add it myself?" Melinda questioned, confused, since it had been added to Emily's coffee for her.

"We find that people who don't take it regular prefer to fix it themselves," explained Grace. She walked away to grab another stack of paper cups.

"Okay then," Melinda mumbled, heading to add her cream. When Grace returned, she asked William what he'd like to order.

"Nothing for me, thank you. Just the coffee for Ms. Howard if you please."

Not even gruff Grace could ignore William Wakefield's charms, whether he intended it or not. She blushed as she took William's money and handed him back his change.

"Please keep the change, dear lady. Good day to you."

"You don't be a stranger now," Grace called out as he and Melinda departed the store.

"See Melinda, you're making friends with the locals already," he whispered.

"Yeah, um, I'm pretty sure she meant you, William. Not me."

He shrugged as they stepped outside, where Emily waited for them.

"Can we walk you to work this morning?" William asked her, holding out his arm. She took hold and giggled again.

A twinge of jealousy pinched at Melinda. William never offered his arm to her. He used to now and then when they'd patrol together at night. It was the only time she ever left the house, sometimes for weeks on end. He'd stopped though. She had trouble recalling just when.

Emily chirped a greeting to a passerby before asking, "What is Michael up to today?" Always her first question. Michael was such an idiot, thought Melinda. Emily was a catch.

"Exploring a cave with Charlie," informed William.

"With Charlie. That's great! Are they getting along better today? If I have to listen to Michael go on and on about Charlie this and Charlie that," she stopped, biting her tongue.

"Don't worry, Emily. We feel the same way," Melinda retorted.

"To be honest," began William, "they are researching a case for the sheriff. A man's skeleton was discovered in a cave yesterday."

"Oh. Well, that's too bad, but maybe the time together will be good for them."

"We can only hope," Melinda agreed wholeheartedly.

"It's just so nice to see you both," Emily said with a happy sigh. "It's the perfect start to my morning. Well, including this." She grinned as if she'd just been caught doing something naughty, while holding up her crème horne bag. "Just can't seem to get my gumption without my morning sugar fix."

"Frankly, Emily, it's sort of a relief to know you have a weakness. You're too perfect!" claimed Melinda.

"Me? Perfect? Hardly," she snickered.

Melinda wished she could have an ounce of the likeability Emily possessed. She always found it so easy to be around people as if they'd been friends her entire life.

"Here we are," announced Emily, scrounging through her oversized purse for the key. A carved wooden sign hung out over the edge of the building. It read, Harboring the Book. Aptly named after the harbors that surrounded the town, and for being a haven for new and used books.

Twice, while searching for the key, Emily's glasses fell off and into her bag, and once she had located the key, she dropped it. William's astute movements caught it just before it slipped into a deep crevice in the pavement.

"Thank you, William. You move so fast. That must come in super handy." She entered the store, leaving the door open so they could follow.

Emily Morgan knew all the secrets of the Howard family. About them being witches, about Michael's ability to see how someone died, about William being a vampire, and about Melinda's prophetic dreams. She even, at times, assisted with research on difficult cases.

Emily had moved, with her parents, to The Demon Isle from Savannah, Georgia, at the start of her senior year of high school. She and Michael became fast friends, especially after her mother's death just months after their move. This was followed by the Howard's parent's deaths, just a few months later.

After graduation, Emily left the island to attend college, but a year in, her father's health had taken a toll for the worse and she returned home. The bookstore owner hired her as part-time help, and just a year and a half later decided to retire, leaving Emily to manage the store.

"Ah, the smell of books." She let out a satisfied sighed, set down her belongings and turned to Melinda and William. "So what brings you out today? I'm guessing this isn't just a social call. Do you need help with research for the case your brothers are working on?"

"Well, actually, we *are* here to see you, Emily," Melinda admitted. "I wonder, would you mind if we took a look at your ring?"

"This ring?" Emily held out her hand. "Whatever for?"

William dashed over and grasped onto her hand, splaying her fingers, looking closely at the ring, searching for any clue as to its true purpose.

"I am afraid I have never seen a ring like this before." William frowned, disheartened. "I had hoped upon closer inspection I would recognize it at once."

"Well, what's so important about my little 'ole ring?"

Sudden comprehension stretched across Emily's face. She pulled her hand away from William and stepped back, her eyes darting to Melinda.

"You had a dream about me, didn't you?" Her tanned skin paled, taking on a sudden sickly appearance.

Melinda gulped. She would not be able to hide what she had seen from Emily. William handled the difficult part of explaining.

"Emily, it is true. Melinda has had a dream regarding you."

"Everyone in your dreams always dies."

"Please don't panic, Emily! We think we already have a good lead on how to save you!" Melinda blurted out artlessly, her own panic mounting.

"*Save me?* This does not sound good at all."

"Emily," spoke William, gazing into her eyes assuredly. "We will not allow anything to happen to you."

She didn't speak, but rather nodded that she understood. She at least seemed less panicked. William took her warm hand, gently, into his cold hand, and inspected the ring again. "What can you tell me about this ring?" His voice was soothing and controlled so as not to cause additional concern.

"Nothing really. My dad gave it to me when I was a little girl. Told me never to take it off."

"Did he ever tell you why you should never take it off?" inquired Melinda.

"I never asked. I just thought he didn't want me to lose it, seeing as I do have a habit of losing things."

"Emily, have you ever suffered from seizures of any kind?" Melinda questioned next.

"Seizures. Well, no. I can't say that I've ever had a seizure. Why? Is that what happens to me? Do I have some kind of seizure?" They could hear the doom returning to her voice.

"I'm sorry, Emily. I really don't know. The dreams, they are not always clear. But I am confident that it has something to do with your ring."

"Here, then." Emily started to slide it off her finger.

"Do not remove it!" said William emphatically. His tone calmed. "I fear it may not be safe for you to remove the ring, Emily."

"Oh, okay," she muttered in a daze.

"Now that I have properly inspected the ring, I have a good picture in my mind. It is all I require for research."

"Which William is an expert at," reminded Melinda.

"You know," started Emily, scrunching her nose, as if trying to remember something. "Now that you mention seizures, I do remember my mom having one once. Oddly enough, it was just a few weeks later that my dad gave me this ring."

"Your mother?" William repeated.

Melinda could practically see William's mind racing through his vast stores of knowledge, hoping some bit of information would lead him in the right direction to solve this puzzle.

"Was your mother prone to seizures? Did she have them often?" Melinda prodded.

"I only remember the one time."

A little ding sounded at the front of the shop.

"Oh dear, a customer." Emily rushed off in a blaze. Melinda was impressed at how easily Emily seemed to put aside her fears and help the woman locate the book she was looking for, with a smile, as always.

While Emily was away, Melinda noted a familiar look spreading across William's face. He was listening to something no human could hear.

"What?"

"Be right..." before she heard *back*, he sped away so quickly, no human eye could have seen him. A minute later, William returned to her side as if he had never left.

"There is something in this bookstore," he informed her. "Something not human. Something dead I do believe. We may need Michael's assistance after all."

"You mean, like a ghost?" Melinda clarified.

"I believe, yes."

"Can Michael even read a ghost? There's no body for him to touch."

"I am unsure as he has never tried."

"Okay. So do we focus on the ring, or the ghost?"

"Both," answered William. "Perhaps this spirit has some interest in the ring? It might be the reason you did not see what was attacking Emily. I also think it necessary to have a chat with her father."

"Okay," agreed Melinda. "Should I try to reach Charlie and Michael?"

"Not yet. We will investigate first."

William walked next to Melinda, at human speed, back to the front of the bookstore.

"Find anything?" asked Emily, alone again after her customer's departure.

"Not really. Look, Emily," said Melinda. "We've got some things to look into. Why don't you just go about your day, try not to freak out, and call me on my cell if you think of anything that might help us figure out what's so special about your ring."

"And do not take it off," reminded William, kindly.

"Yes, sir," she saluted, attempting bravery. "I'll just stay here," she called after them as they left the store. In a small voice she whimpered, "and try not to think about the fact that you just told me I'm gonna die."

* * * * *

The jeep bounced as Michael drove he and Charlie out of town, edging their way toward the outskirts of The Demon Isle. He made a turn toward the ocean, passing by the harbor where a ferry was just arriving full up with early arriving tourists.

Michael tossed a dazzling smile to a few bikini-clad twenty-something's leaning over the ferry's railing, waving to anyone watching from the shore, excited to spend a day on the Isle. He groaned, watching them bounce around on the deck.

One thing I might miss just a little when I leave.

There are other beaches, he reminded himself.

Michael glanced at Charlie and shook his head. He hadn't even noticed the women waving at him, his gaze straight ahead and focused. Michael sped up, jetting down the road before the cars could start pulling off the ferry, jamming up the traffic.

They continued on, after a couple more miles, passing by the entrance to White Pines National Park, which included Fort Ridgley, a fort that had been mainly used as a commerce port during the late 1800's and early 1900's.

After another mile of winding roads, they came to a fork. One direction led to a lighthouse, the other, toward Bloodsucker Bay. About five miles down the road Michael slowed to nearly a stop, taking a sharp turn down what appeared to be an old, infrequently used dirt pathway. It was dotted with mud-filled potholes, which splattered the sides of the jeep as they drove across.

After another thirty minutes of bouncing across the poorly maintained road, Michael pulled the jeep off to the side and parked. Just ahead sprawled the rocky beach of Bloodsucker Bay.

The bay consisted of both fresh water, which leaked in from a nearby lake, and saltwater, which leaked in from the ocean during high tide. The lake was infamous for its bloodsucking leeches; leeches which had adapted to living in both fresh and saltwater.

"You sure this cave will be easy to find?" Charlie asked Michael as they readied their diving gear.

"Got a crystal ready to go. Should be easy." Michael took it out of his pocket. He plunged it into the water and after a second, it twisted in the palm of his hand and lit up. "That's the way we head."

"Nicely done," Charlie said, impressed. "You're good at being a witch, you know."

"If this is your way of trying to suck up, don't bother, Charlie. I've made up my mind. I'm leaving at the end of summer. I, uh, already enrolled in classes."

Classes... wow. He hadn't realized his brother had done that.

"Just because you're given some *gift*," Michael continued after a minute, "doesn't mean you should be stuck with it the rest of your damned life."

"I get that, Michael. Of all people, I really do."

"I didn't mean it to come out like that," his brother apologized sincerely.

"The thing is, Michael, you're not wrong. You're not wrong to want a life outside The Isle. What happened to me, that wasn't my choice, but I have to live with it regardless. Just remember that you'll have to live with the choices you make. And your choices don't affect just you. They affect me, and Melinda, and William, too."

"You think I don't know that? Why do you think it's taken me this long? I wanted to leave with Emily back when she went to college. But I stayed, Charlie. Mom and Dad were gone and Melinda was a wreck. But she's getting better now and Mom and Dad aren't coming back. They're gone." Michael took a frustrated breath. "Have you ever considered that maybe it's just time to move on? Let someone else handle all this supernatural, protecting-the-isle bull?"

"Someone else? Like who?"

"I don't know, Charlie. Just, not us. Hasn't our family given enough? What law says it has to be a Howard sacrificing their lives to protect this island? And for what? To die trying to find a magical power source hidden on the Isle hundreds of years ago. Look, I get why you don't want to leave this place. You fear being away from the Isle might trigger your curse. And you feel a responsibility to be here. That it's your solemn duty to be here. But I don't, Charlie. And that's the God's honest truth. All this place does, is *take* from us."

Charlie dropped his head, no idea how to respond. On so many levels, he agreed with his brother. But the obligation that plagued him to uphold his family's heritage overshadowed everything else. Everything except, as Michael said, the fear that something would trigger his curse.

They finished readying their diving equipment in silence. Charlie's thoughts strayed to the day his life had changed; the day he had lost control of his own future.

It was ten years ago now, he'd been only sixteen, and yet he remembered every detail as if it had just happened. They had been hiking on the Isle, deep in the woods. Michael, Charlie and their father, Jack.

He saw the pathway they had been hiking, clearly in his mind. They were walking downhill, hurrying to get back to their campsite as the sun had set and the moon was rising up over the tall pines and maple trees. It was big and bright, but still a day from full.

Charlie could not help but grin as he remembered them laughing. He could not recall the joke, but their father had told it, and it wasn't even remotely funny, and yet they had laughed and laughed. They had been laughing so hard that the attack caught them completely by surprise.

A monstrous white wolf jumped onto their path, blocking them, almost as if it had been awaiting their arrival.

Charlie remembered that before feeling fear, his first thought was, *Why is there a wolf on the Isle? There are no wolves here.* Yet here one was, lunging toward his father's throat. They'd had but a second to react.

All Charlie could think to do was use his own body in defense and threw himself in front of his father. Even at sixteen, he was bulkier than his father was.

Michael attempted to use magic to stop the wolf, but he wasn't fast enough and the spell missed the lunging beast, hitting a nearby tree and shattering the branches. The wolf sank its teeth into Charlie's shoulder, forcing them both to the ground. His father blasted the wolf with a strong spell, tearing it off his son's body. Amongst the torn flesh and profuse bleeding, a tooth jutted out of Charlie's skin. A souvenir he had hung on a chain and now wore around his neck.

The wolf had run off into the woods, howling as it did so.

Michael and his father had used what magic they could to stop the bleeding, but it didn't help for long. They rushed him out of the woods and to the hospital. After a long night of tests, stitches, and shots for fighting rabies, Charlie was allowed to return home.

It wasn't until a month later as the full moon approached, that they got confirmation that the wolf had really been something more than just a wolf.

Months of research followed.

Their first thought was werewolf. However, no known cases of werewolves turning before the full moon had ever been documented, and it had looked like a regular wolf, just oversized. Whereas a werewolf would have been much larger, and trim, yet muscular, and most likely have used its hind legs to stand, like a human. And not run on all fours like the attacking white wolf had done.

This noted though, it was obvious over the following months that Charlie took on traits known to belong to werewolves. Like an increased appetite, a higher body temperature, and faster healing from wounds. Although, the wound inflicted by the wolf bite did not ever fully heal and left a scar in its place.

As each full moon approached, Charlie would get agitated easily, and when his temper got the better of him his features would change, taking on a feral quality. His hair would darken and stiffen. His facial hair came in thick. His eyes would change from the bright blue the Howard's were famous for, to sharp silver.

As time passed, his wolf nature began to emerge whenever his emotions were heightened. He didn't have the complete strength of a fully transformed werewolf, but he was quite a bit stronger than a human should be.

Regardless of all the changes taking place, he never fully transformed. Each month as the full moon neared, he tried, if possible, to avoid things that would set off his temper. The wolf craved to escape. To be set free. But he kept it locked up, never allowing it to fully surface.

How?

No one had any explanation. Even after months of research that included William leaving The Demon Isle to search out myths and legends, they had no explanation. The best they could determine is that because Charlie wasn't bitten on a full moon, or due to the powerful witch blood coursing through his veins, that somehow this affected the outcome. Over the years, Charlie had also theorized that the power source might be keeping the curse at bay. But again, there was no proof, only speculation.

Not being able to contain the wolf was Charlie's number one fear. He reached up and brushed the scar with his hand, and watched Michael stepping into the frigid waters of Bloodsucker Bay. *He shouldn't be forced into this life, but do any of us really have a choice?*

Charlie dropped his hand and silently joined Michael in the water. He was already swimming away from shore and diving underneath. About ten feet out his head popped out of the water and he took out his mouthpiece.

"There's a steep drop-off just a few feet out," he warned Charlie.

He nodded, taking a few cautious steps until he saw the drop-off. He dove in alongside Michael.

"Test. Test," Charlie spoke into his microphone.

"Hear you loud and clear," Michael returned. Charlie let him lead the way.

Michael opened his hand where he still held the crystal. It was heavy and didn't float in the partially salted water. It made a slight turn in his hand and lit up. He motioned for Charlie to follow and they set off. It took Michael about ten minutes to locate the entrance to the cave. He motioned for Charlie to look, but his brother's attention was drawn to the depths below the cave's entrance.

"I think there's another diver." Charlie pointed with his head. His voice broke up a little, but Michael heard enough to understand.

"I'll take your word for it. You can see better than I can."

Another gift the wolf bite had given Charlie.

They swam a little closer, curious as to who else would be diving in the area.

"Hey! I think they're in trouble!" Charlie took off, his muscular arms and powerful thighs pumping downward toward the ocean floor.

Michael followed, apprehensive at first, but trusted his brother's eyes at these depths, more so than his own.

As usual, Charlie's instincts were correct, for as they swam closer it became clear that the diver was in serious trouble. It was a woman, and it was her unusually fierce white hair that Charlie's eyes had been drawn to. As soon as the diver noticed the brothers, she began waving her arms frantically.

"Her leg is stuck in between two rocks," Michael pointed out as they approached. The woman took out her mouthpiece, pointing at it.

"And I think she's out of air," Charlie exclaimed. "I'll give her mine. I don't need it anyway." Charlie could easily use a spell to breathe under water. They just preferred to do things the normal way, to avoid raising suspicions from any unaware onlookers. But he wouldn't risk a life for it.

Charlie took off his oxygen tank and handed it to the woman. She looked puzzled for the briefest of moments, until Charlie shoved the mouthpiece through her lips, ordering her to breathe. He kept the headpiece with the microphone and the goggles. A second later, a large air bubble surrounded his head, like a helmet.

Michael tried to free the woman's foot, but to no avail. He wasn't strong enough. "I can't free her."

Charlie dove and tried to free the woman's leg. The rock fell slightly, discharging a stream of blood from the woman's injured leg, but not releasing it.

The woman let out a short scream, nearly sucking in water as she almost dropped the mouthpiece. The scream rattled the brothers. They didn't have much time. The blood would soon attract unwanted company, leeches, topped by the fact that the woman was in serious danger of dying if they could not free her.

Charlie decided he had only one choice: to let go of the control he tried to keep so carefully in check.

He let the strength of the wolf course through his veins, which popped against his skin and sped up his heartbeat. In a blink, his blue eyes flashed to bright silver. The stubble on his chin darkened as if thickening, fast.

A low snarl forced its way out of his throat and into the air bubble surrounding his head. Muscles rippled through his shoulders, down the length of his arms and with one thrust, he heaved the rock off the woman's leg like it suddenly weighed nothing. It fell to the ground a few feet away with a slow crash.

Charlie grabbed the woman, pulling her out of harm's way.

He swam with her in tow, into the cave, as it was the closest spot they could safely check the woman's injuries. A few seconds later, their heads popped out of the water. Michael surfaced alongside them.

Charlie needed no help pulling the woman out of the water. She wasn't a tall woman, about five foot five, and her body was thin, but well-toned. His wolf strength yanked her body out and to the top of a rock, with ease. His grip was firm and strong, but his touch and movement of her, gentle.

The woman coughed out some water and fell onto her back, long white strands clinging to her water soaked skin, and the rock below her. Charlie straddled the woman's legs, wild eyes peering down at her to see if she was okay. He guessed her to be in her mid-twenties.

His wild gaze met hers; shock swirled through her widened hazel globes. She stared up at Charlie's animalistic features, her mouth hung open in awe.

How am I going to explain this?

"Wh—what?" her stunned voice trailed off, caught in her throat.

He jumped up and spun around, trying to re-cage the wolf. Perhaps he'd blame it on her injury. Although, it wasn't her head that was injured.

Charlie calmed himself, his chest stretching in extended breaths. There hadn't been another option. He couldn't let the woman die, stranger or not. But he'd just exposed himself, and therefore his family, to an unknown outsider.

Michael's empathy picked up on Charlie's concern and he knelt down next to the woman, distracting her from his brother. "Are you okay?" He could have answered on her behalf but bit his tongue. *I so hate my life.* She was more than okay. Charlie's appearance hadn't frightened her at all. She was mystified and electrified by it.

Michael cleared his throat but said nothing to indicate he knew this.

The woman nodded yes. "Yeah. I'm fine. Thanks to you two." Her voice held an edge of exhaustion. She took a quick side-glance at Charlie.

Michael helped her sit up. "Nasty cut you got, though," he noted, pointing toward her leg.

"I've had worse," she admitted.

Charlie spun around, looking human once again. "If you're so clumsy, maybe diving isn't the best idea for you. Especially alone." There was a harshness in his tone he hadn't meant to use, but he hoped it might scare her, just a little. Keep her from asking questions he did not want to answer.

"Right now, I cannot argue that point," she replied, her voice guilt ridden. "Thanks, for saving my life," she added, as if those words hardly made up for what they had done for her.

"Lucky we dove when we did," Michael told her. He allowed his empathic ability to engulf the woman, sensing for her emotional state again. He was surprised she held no lingering concern or fear from seeing Charlie as something more than human, and did not seem fazed by her near death experience. Abnormal things did not bother her. Hopefully, this would prove to their advantage.

Charlie knelt down to check her leg. He heard the woman suck in a wince as his hand ran down her calf, examining the wound. The cut was substantial in length, but not deep enough to require stitches. He frowned. All their medical supplies were in the jeep. He unzipped his diving vest letting it fall to the rock, and pulled his white tank top over his head, tearing it into strips.

She exhaled sharply, her eyes wide, taking in all of him. Broad shoulders. Powerful arms. Abs so perfect they might have been painted on. She had to force her mouth closed, realizing she'd let it fall open.

Michael wanted to dive back in the water and leave this party.

His brother, however, was oblivious. Charlie tied the torn shirt strips around the wound, gently.

"This should hold until we get back to the surface. We've got medical supplies in our jeep."

"You carry medical supplies. Do you often find damsels in distress?"

Charlie just shrugged as if to say, *something like that*. Their eyes met and a sudden coolness stretched through his muscles, shooting an icy sensation pulsing through his veins. It was as if his wolf-warmed hot blood dropped a few degrees, instantly.

He shivered, goosebumps popping up on his arms.

Charlie Howard had not shivered due to being cold since before he'd been bitten by the wolf, ten years prior. He had forgotten what it even felt like.

He didn't like it. Something about it screamed, this is wrong. Unnatural.

Charlie let go of the woman's leg, standing, his usual hot blood returning, melting away the icy chill. He shook it off, letting it go with his next breath.

The woman grabbed hold of her long mane of white, wringing out excess water. "What are your names?"

"I'm Charlie. *Charlie Howard*. This is my brother, Michael."

"Well, Charlie and Michael, what brings you two down to the bottom of Bloodsucker Bay, other than happening to save this gal's life?"

"What brings you down to Bloodsucker Bay? Ms? Mrs?" Charlie questioned in return.

"Eva Jordan. Ms. I guess, if it matters." Her gaze fluttered up to Charlie.

His face hardened, then softened. He could not figure this woman out. There was something unsavory about her presence here. *Stupid wolf. I got to get off the paranoia wagon*. Another gift of the wolf. Bouts of paranoia and distrust.

"To be honest," the woman named Eva, explained, "I was looking for some adventure." She made a face that said, *Boy, did I get more than I bargained for*.

Michael chuckled. "It's nice to meet you, Eva. Although I'm sure different circumstances would have been preferred. My brother and I are from the Isle. We often spend our days diving in these waters, strictly in search of damsels in distress." He winked in a flirtatious manner.

There goes my brother, thought Charlie. *Turning on the charm no woman can resist*.

Eva Jordan did resist, however. Her curious eyes still landed on Charlie. He leaned over, outstretched his hand and helped her to her feet. He felt better once he'd touched her again and the strange drop in temperature did not happen a second time. Perhaps it had just been the dive messing with him.

"Thank you. I'm really quite fine now. You two can just do whatever you came to do."

"And just how are you going to get out of this cave?" Charlie asked her.

"Hadn't really thought that far ahead. Boy, do I sound like a dope. Guess you boys are stuck with me."

While Eva gathered herself together, Michael whispered to his brother. "This complicates things a bit. Can't use magic."

"We'll just have to investigate the old-fashioned way," Charlie grumbled.

"Um, I don't mean to," the woman named Eva interrupted. "But I can't help hearing what you guys are saying. Everything bounces off cave walls, you know." She twirled her finger as if to remind them of their surroundings.

The brothers stared in silence, unsure how to explain to this stranger about magic and witches.

"Look, don't worry," she assured. "It's completely obvious you guys are magical types, witches or something, and you Charlie, well, you are definitely something more than human. I'm sorry for freaking out on you a minute ago. Your face up close like that, it just startled me."

"Wh—What?" It was Charlie's turn to get tongue-tied and Michael did no better.

"When I was a kid," she continued to explain, "my dad summered here on the Isle a few times. He said it was some kind of Mecca for the supernatural community. And he always told me he was sure there were witches living here. Let's just say I am well versed in the world of the supernatural."

"So you know about witches and magic... and stuff," Charlie confirmed, sounding uncharacteristically confounded.

"Yup. Can't do any magic. Not a witch. But my father is what you could call an expert, and I, well I travel around with him now, helping him with his research."

"Wait a minute," Michael said. "*Eva Jordan*? Your dad isn't by chance Anthony Jordan, the author, is he?"

Eva's face lit up.

"Who is Anthony Jordan?" asked Charlie.

"My father," confirmed Eva.

"Wow!" replied Michael with renewed interest. "Your father wrote the *Modern Day Guide to the Supernatural*, didn't he?"

"That would be correct."

"William has that book in his study, Charlie. For someone coming from a non-magical background, his work is quite thorough. It's a handy guide, I must say."

"Of course, most people think it's just made up drivel," Eva remarked. "He is not exactly a respected literary genius in the writing or scientific community."

"Well in the witch community, at least this witch community, he's got fans," said Michael.

"You've read it?"

"Cover to cover," Michael told her. "I'm not just a pretty face," he claimed with a wink.

"Got a little inner geek, eh?" she jabbed lightly.

"I'll never admit that," he responded through grinning lips.

She laughed at his response. Michael liked her. She was easy going and his empathy didn't pick up on anything potentially dangerous. No warning signs popped out of her emotions. Her feelings made a lot more sense now.

Eva wasn't scared seeing Charlie in his non-human form because she was aware of the supernatural side of the Isle. Still, she had amazing recovery for being in a near death experience.

Charlie, on the other hand, did not like the situation at all; it seemed wrong to him. First, that they just happened upon a woman in trouble near a cave not often explored, only to find out she is aware of their world, something few know. And the timing, right after a dead body was found in this very cave.

Then again, she did have a nasty gash on her leg and was truly panicked when they had found her. Plus the man found in the cave had been dead for years, and

had been killed by their mother. This Eva Jordan couldn't have anything to do with that.

He could tell by Michael's reactions that he wasn't getting any strange vibes, so Charlie shook it off as paranoia. His wolf senses were tingling at full speed though, warning him there was something not right about this entire situation.

But perhaps that had more to do with the fact they were standing in a cave where his parents had stood, shortly before their deaths, and had nothing to do with Eva Jordan.

"So you're summering on the Isle again?" Michael asked her.

"Yes. My father rented a place on the shore, just outside of town near the Mermaid Point Lighthouse."

Her father was on the Isle as well. Michael wondered if he might get to meet him.

Charlie cleared his throat. "This is all quite interesting," although his tone clearly meant the opposite. "But we're losing the day. We should get a move on."

He tried to pass off his doubts as purely paranoia, but something nagged at the back of his mind. Something about this woman was not trustworthy. And the sooner they got out of the cave, the sooner he could be done with her.

"So where are you headed?" Eva asked them.

Michael smiled, taking out the crystal.

"We are heading that way," he pointed, as the crystal turned and lit up, toward the darkness of a cavern not too far ahead. They jumped back into the water and swam to the embankment of the cavern. Once out of the water, they unhooked their flippers, leaving on shoes that were flexible and waterproof. Eva wore the same style flipper. They left the flipper parts behind and carefully stepped into the cavern.

The crystal grew brighter, and the cavern was surprisingly easy to walk through. The brothers had expected the terrain to be more difficult to negotiate. Another five minutes in, the light from the crystal unexpectedly went out, plunging the trio into complete darkness.

Up ahead, voices echoed.

They were not alone in the cave.

* * * * *

William and Melinda reached Emily's house. They located her father in the garden out back.

"William Wakefield and Melinda Howard. Well, I'll be! What brings you two out my way?" He motioned for them to have a seat under a gazebo in the center of the garden.

"It's good to see you, Mr. Morgan. You look like you're getting around better," Melinda noted, although she had not seen him since his last visit, with Emily, for dinner a few weeks prior at the Howard Mansion.

"That I am. That I am. Doc finally got the pain meds right and my back has never felt better! Just you two wait until you're this age," he trailed off.

Melinda took a sideways glance at William. Aging. Something he would never experience. Something she would. Another reason they could never be together.

"Mr. Morgan," began William, "we actually came today to speak with you about something rather urgent."

"Oh. I see. What can I help you with?"

"It's regarding Emily," William revealed.

"Emily!" His eyes widened. "Is she okay?"

"Um. Well. We are hoping you might be able to tell us if she's okay," Melinda said.

Emily's father looked confused.

"Mr. Morgan, what can you tell us about Emily's ring?" William got right to the point.

At the mention of the ring, Mr. Morgan's face turned ashen, and he lost all vigor.

"It was a gift," he stammered. "I gave it to her years ago, but it once belonged to Emily's mother."

"Does it have any special purpose?" Melinda prompted.

Mr. Morgan still did not answer.

"Look, Mr. Morgan. I hate to be blunt," Melinda stated, "but we don't have much time. I am sure, after living on The Demon Isle these last few years, that you must be aware there are things on this island that are not *normal*."

Mr. Morgan stood and paced the gazebo.

"I am quite aware," he divulged with complete seriousness. "It is the reason I moved my family out of Georgia, and to The Demon Isle in the first place."

William and Melinda listened intently.

"It took me years to locate this Isle. I tracked rumor after rumor, followed clue after clue. I needed to find a home for my family that strengthened magic and my search led me to here, to The Demon Isle. Of course, there were also warnings, that because of the nature of the Isle, many dangerous things were attracted here as well. It didn't matter though. I needed powerful magic to save Emily from a life of pain, and fear. It was her mother's dying wish that I bring her here. She lived just long enough to see it through."

He paused, taking a coarse breath and continued, his voice sure, but sad.

"You see, Emily takes after her mother. She was a spirit vessel. So is Emily."

William's eyes brightened with understanding. "The ring, it blocks the spirits?"

"Yes. We gave Emily the ring when she was a little girl. As I said, it was once her mother's ring. But when Emily started exhibiting signs that she also had the gift, her mother took off the ring and we gave it to Emily. Removing the ring left Emily's mother vulnerable to spirits. Normally, she was prepared for this. She had taken the ring off many times, and allowed spirits to enter her body willingly. There was a time she helped many lost souls pass along messages and move on from this world."

"It is not always as simple as that," William surmised. "Is it?"

"No. It is not. Her mother came into contact with an evil spirit. I don't know how much you understand about spirit vessels, Mr. Wakefield, but some spirits, if strong enough, can possess a living, human vessel. It is nasty, hard work to get them back out once you let them in. One such spirit tricked my wife and possessed her for weeks. Emily was still young; she just thought her mother was ill. Not long after it was over and my wife was free from the possession, I gave Emily the ring. Her mother did not want her to experience such things at her

young age. You both know my Emily,” he justified, gazing at them. “She’s so sweet natured, so lost in her books, and studies.”

“She’s also super smart and quite strong-willed when she puts her mind to something, Mr. Morgan,” Melinda reminded confidently.

He nodded in worried agreement. “She is. Now. She had to become strong after her mother passed away.” He swallowed hard before continuing. “You see, before we came to the Isle, the ring’s power had started to weaken. We feared what would happen if the ring failed completely. We just wanted Emily to have a normal childhood. A normal life.”

“So you moved here,” Melinda confirmed. “So the Isle’s magic would strengthen the ring’s power.”

“Yes. Once we were here, and my wife knew that the ring would protect Emily, she passed on. She had been sick for some time. Cancer. She stuck it out long enough to see for herself that Emily would be protected.” He paused again and shakily continued. “I was terrified when she left to go to college, but the power from the Isle seemed to hold, especially since Emily came home to visit nearly every weekend.”

“Mr. Morgan,” said William pointedly. “With the full understanding of everything you have gone through to protect your daughter, I fear I must inform you that something is trying to use Emily as a vessel.”

“I feared this day might come,” he whimpered grievously. “I have never even explained to Emily what she is. What her mother was. She has no idea.” His face pleaded for their help.

“William,” cried Melinda in a tone that begged, *please go protect Emily*.

Without question or hesitation, he sped instantly away toward the bookstore.

“Wh—where did he go?”

Melinda sighed. She spent the next several minutes explaining to Mr. Morgan that she and her brothers were witches and that William was a vampire. She continued to explain her prophetic dreams, including the one she’d had about Emily. She purposely left out the part where Emily died at the end, fearing his reaction.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Morgan. Now that we know what Emily is, we have a far greater chance of helping her through this.”

“Is there anything I can do?” He suddenly looked old and worn.

“Honestly, I think this is better handled by us. This is what we do, and William is quite knowledgeable. If anyone knows how to stop a spirit from entering a vessel, it will be William.”

* * * * *

Charlie, Michael, and Eva stood in the cave, their eyes adjusting to the sudden darkness. The voices some distance ahead had caught them off guard, echoing ominous warnings back to them.

Eva tripped, clutching Charlie for support. He grasped her, to keep her from falling over fully. “You steady?” he asked in a low voice.

“Fine. Really not normally this clumsy.”

He looked at her incredulously.

“I swear it,” she mouthed.

He could not resist a low chuckle. He might not trust her, but she was attractive and had a keen mind, regardless of her clumsy missteps. Eva's hand slid down his arm; her fingers radiating against his skin like cool satin. The nagging suspicion returned. A tingle twisting in his gut. What was it about her that sent his wolf senses into overdrive?

He turned and stepped forward cautiously until light drifted in from up ahead. They stopped, listening, trying to decipher if the sounds they heard were friend, or foe.

"Eat. Eat it all," a cringing cackle reverberated through the cave.

They listened closer and heard odd sounds.

Sucking sounds.

Slurping sounds.

"I am thinking hostile," Michael muttered, stepping closer to investigate. He motioned for them to hold up and wait. His footing was lighter and quieter than Charlie's.

"Does this sort of thing happen a lot around here?" Eva asked Charlie. She'd snuck up alongside him.

He leaned down, just an inch from her ear. "Welcome to the real Demon Isle." His tone taunted, with a mixture of fright and sarcasm. He grinned, dazzling her without meaning to, breathing her in. On his first inhale, his head went hazy. With the second, he might as well have downed a six-pack of beer laced with a love potion.

Instantly heavenly and captivating, it shattered his guard, making him forget that he was on the job. Or standing in an underwater cave. With his brother ten feet away, and an unknown assailant just around the corner. Or that the woman next to him was a complete stranger who got his hackles fired up.

None of that mattered. Only her. Only that smell. Like crisp air at night under the full moon. The smell of the earth under his feet. Of animalistic desire to run free, and wild. The promise of the hunt. The reward of catching his prey- the white-haired woman caught between him and the cave wall.

He leaned down, wanting more of it. His lips just missed brushing down her neck.

Eva replied with a quick inhale and lifted her chin as if to give him access, encouraging his lips to taste her.

Why would she do that? He wondered. The thought dissolved into not caring about the answer. Words would not formulate. His mouth unable to make the right movements to create speech.

He stumbled over his own feet.

One hand reached out, using the cave wall to keep his balance. The other hand wrapped around Eva's waist. He towered over her, coming in at six foot three, his frame large enough to hide her petite size from anyone. His hand splayed and tightened against her back. He could not force himself to let go. If he let go he'd lose the delicious intoxication. Never have it again.

Part of him panicked. That small human part of him struggling to remain coherent and make sense of all this. But every time the human side threatened to resurface the intoxicating smell fed into him, goading the wolf. Stoking its wild urges.

"You okay, Charlie?" Her eyes radiated amusement over Charlie's sudden inability to speak or move correctly. But she didn't pull away. She didn't seem surprised by his behavior.

No. It wasn't him attracted to her. It was his wolf.

A tiny voice shouted in the back of his mind, his human voice. No! This isn't right.

Control was failing. The hair on his face growing in thick and dark. A snarl built in his throat, a sudden desire to sink his teeth into her porcelain flesh.

Then it vanished.

The sudden intoxication lifted.

Just *gone*. Clarity returning to Charlie's befuddled brain.

He stepped away, although clumsily tripping as he did so.

His human face returned, the wolf receding back into its hiding place.

Michael rejoined them with a grimace. *Seriously? Charlie goes from not noticing scantily clad women bouncing around the ferry to hitting on a total stranger. I'm gone for two minutes.* The rest, he grumbled silently.

"Sorry," was all Charlie could muster as he turned away from Eva. His mind just repeated *I am so screwed!* Over and over. There was no logical explanation for what just happened. It made no sense whatsoever.

Michael motioned for them to follow. Charlie did so, his memories a hazy mess.

But he did remember his wolf coming out to play. Wanting to devour Eva. Literally, to tear into her flesh.

Where the heck does such a sadistic idea even come from? Who the heck is this woman? Biting was one thing, but this was much different. This was a need to inflict fear, and pain. For no other reason than he could.

He'd never been so glad to avoid dating humans. They were so fragile. He was dangerous. Possibly deadly if his wolf ever bit someone.

He needed to be done with this job and get away from this vexing, white-haired jezebel. As far away as the island would allow.

Why would he react to her like this? No, not him, his wolf. It was his wolf that craved her. Not him.

It was a smell, he recalled. An intoxicating smell had set it off.

So the solution is easy. After we get out of this cave, I never get close to her again. Problem solved.

He stepped up beside his brother, having difficulty focusing. His breathing uneasy.

"What the heck was that all about?" mouthed Michael. He held up his arm. "Rhetorical question. Can feel it, remember?" And he was *super* freaking happy about it.

Charlie wasn't thrilled either, and wondered just how much of that Michael had picked up on. Sometimes, having an empath for a brother was a pain in the butt. It could come in handy, but at times like these... "I have no idea what that was." Charlie shook his head. "Let's just focus on what's ahead. *Please.*"

Michael's empathy picked up on the fact that Charlie was now in freaked out mode. Something about what just happened had him teetering on a precarious edge.

They didn't have time to deal with it now.

Eva joined them.

Charlie ignored her, focusing on the voices ahead. Overwhelmed by a need to control the situation. The smell was at least gone. *Thank. God.*

"I think it's time to crash this party." Charlie narrowed his gaze.

"Yeah, let's," agreed Michael.

The brothers wasted no time, rushing forward, only to freeze in their tracks once out in the open. Horrified disgust washed over their faces.

Eva came up behind them. "What. The Heck. Are. Those?" she choked.

Michael tried to answer. "Those are the sickest, most disgusting," he was cut off by Charlie.

"Sea Hag!"

"A what?" Eva shouted, her eyes bulging.

The brothers did not reply to her question.

Michael stretched out his right hand, his palm facing the Sea Hag.

The Hag turned to face Charlie and Eva, hissing at them through jagged teeth. Her eyes were a milky white and her skin, scaly, and covered with a thin layer of greenish slime.

Eva stayed hidden behind Charlie. He almost laughed when he saw her face. She may have known about the supernatural, but she had never seen anything like a Sea Hag. The humor of the moment shook off whatever messed-upness had just happened between them, and helped him refocus. He was Charlie Howard. Not a werewolf. And he was in control of his actions.

"Watch out, Charlie," Michael warned as the Hag advanced toward his brother.

Michael pushed his arm forward as if shoving something away from his body. Something appeared in his hand- a round, surging energy ball, which he thrust at the Hag. She ducked, it missed, the energy ball smashing into the side of the cave. Slivers of rock fell to the ground.

The Sea Hag skittered closer, her slimy webbed feet easily clinging to any surface. Then, what had only a moment ago looked like stiff quills covering her head started to shift and wriggle, like snakes swimming in water. Each quill-like strand was much longer than it had initially appeared, and each one took on a life of its own, striking out at Charlie and Eva. Each strand came to a sharp, thorny arrow-like point. Something the brothers knew contained a toxin that could easily incapacitate them in seconds.

"Eva, stay away from those things on her head," warned Charlie.

"Don't intend on getting that close."

Charlie handed her three vials. "These are potions that will blow up just about anything," he explained. "If something happens and we're knocked out, throw them at whatever's coming at you, and get out of here!"

She nodded and glanced at her hand in awe of what she now held.

Charlie egged the Sea Hag, trying to keep her attention, while Michael positioned himself for a straight shot at her.

The Hag bared her teeth, a rattling hiss emanating from her mouth.

"Howards," they heard her speak, in her hissing tongue.

"She can talk," Eva said, surprised. "And she knows who you are."

"Most creatures around here do," Charlie replied. His concern for their safety, as well as the desire to find out if this Hag knew anything about their parents'

deaths, sent his emotions into overdrive. Charlie let out a primal snarl that seemed to catch the Hag off guard, sending her back a few feet to rethink her approach.

“Why are you in this cave? What are these *things*?” Charlie interrogated.

Behind the Hag, wretchedly bloated, charcoal colored creatures that the brothers had never seen before sucked the walls of the cave like addicts of whatever substance they were sucking.

The Hag did not answer Charlie. Instead, she turned to the wall-sucking creatures and spoke to them. “You eat enough, pets.”

To the brother’s surprise, the bloated creatures listened to the Hag and stopped sucking, convening around her, as if she were their mother.

Eva stepped back, watching wide-eyed as Charlie’s human face shifted into the wolf-like one she had seen earlier. Her stare lowered to his hands, as jagged nails grew long, extending outward from his fingers. He snapped his head, his fierce silver eyes shooting warnings at her. “Stay back,” he snarled. She pressed her back against the wall.

Charlie leapt closer to the Sea Hag. “What are you doing in this cave?” he asked in an ill-tempered growl. “Answer now or you will die!”

“You killed my kind before,” she rattled, her eyes blazing with anger.

Michael raised his arm to the Sea Hag, his palm pointed toward her, ready to strike if she attacked.

“Come pets, *now you kill!*” the Hag ordered, her voice a loathing purr.

Their bulging bodies, thick with whatever substance they were sucking, moved deceptively easily, skimming over rocks and cave debris as if the surface was smooth, like glass.

“Are those?” started Michael.

Charlie finished. “Leeches. Really gigantic leeches.”

“Never really been a fan of bloodsuckers before, but now,” Michael choked on his words, disgusted.

“How did they get so big?” asked Eva, gagging as she spoke.

There was no time for discussion as one of the leeches approached Charlie. When it was about five feet away, it did something even more surprising. It stopped and stood up, leaning on its backside, as if trying to walk.

Its intention, however, was not to walk. As it stood, the contents of its body shifted as if everything inside the creature just sank to the bottom. The head of the creature elongated and swung out in a circle, ready to knock over anything that got in its path.

Michael focused on this one, as it was the closest to causing harm and pushed his palm forward; a force of energy blasted out of his hand toward the leech.

A shimmering force field pushed through the cave, knocking the creature over. Michael turned and did the same to two other leeches that were climbing the cave walls, over Charlie and Eva’s heads.

These leeches also slammed down to the cave floor. However, in seconds, had up righted themselves to attack again.

“Use more, Michael,” urged Charlie.

“If you say so. This could get messy.”

“No choice! Do it!” Charlie shouted.

Michael pushed out another energy ball, this time it surged across the cavern and upon impact, ravaged the leech, blowing it into bloody bits. The others, smelling the blood, stopped their attack and raced to the blown up bits, gorging on what was left of their comrade.

“Stupid pets,” the Sea Hag rattled.

Charlie saw his opportunity and lunged forward, knocking the Hag flat on her back, pinning her to the ground. “Did you ever kill any Howards?” he grilled viciously.

“Kill,” she croaked under his tight grip. He ducked out of the way of her poisonous quill-like strands.

“Answer me!” Charlie demanded. “Did you ever kill any Howards?”

She flailed like a fish out of water, opening her mouth as if to speak. At first, Charlie heard nothing. A second later, a high-pitched noise pierced his ears. A moment after, Michael and Eva heard it too.

“She’s going sonic!” Michael warned. “Stop her now, or we’ll have more company than we can handle!”

In one swift movement, Charlie lifted his arm and swiped his wolf-like claws across her scaly skin, slitting her throat. She gurgled through the blood gushing out of the wound and seconds later, the Sea Hag was dead.

Charlie’s fist pounded into the cave floor next to her head, and he let out a cry that was a blend of both human and wolf. Killing her was the right thing to do, but he had not gotten the answers he had desperately wanted.

He angrily kicked her dead body into the water.

One after another, the leeches plopped in after her, seeking out the blood.

“Charlie,” called out Michael.

Charlie gave him a sign that he was okay, and just needed a minute to regain his composure. He leaned on the cave wall, resting his forehead against the cool, damp, rock, his breathing still coming out in ragged pants.

Michael turned to Eva. “You okay?”

She just nodded in bewilderment.

“A little more than you bargained for, eh?” Charlie’s breathy human voice jeered from a distance. He cast his blue eyes in her direction.

“Something like that,” she insinuated warily.

“What do you suppose those things were eating?” Michael asked, investigating the walls of the cave more closely.

“Don’t know. Never heard of anything in these caves that any sea creature would find edible,” said Charlie, joining him.

“So those things were once bloodsuckers... leeches?” confirmed Eva.

“Still are. Just much, much bigger than they should be,” Michael said.

“Those aren’t in the bay, are they?” Her mouth twisted downward as she thought about what she was asking.

“God I hope not,” droned Charlie. Just thinking about it made his stomach turn.

“My guess would be no,” thought Michael. “I’m sure there would have been reports of monsters in the lake by now if they were. Which begs the question, where exactly are they hanging out? And just how many of them are there?”

“Better inform the sheriff, just in case,” said Charlie.

“Yeah, good idea,” agreed Michael.

"The local police know about all this crazy stuff too?" Eva clarified.

"Um. Not all of them. Just the town sheriff. She's from the Isle," Charlie answered, curious as to why Eva would care if the police knew about the supernatural.

Michael ran his hand over the surface of the wall. "What is this stuff?" Rust colored specks spackled the entire cave wall. He scraped bits of the substance into a plastic bag he had stored in his diving suit.

"Whatever this is, I'm guessing it's what transformed those leeches," guessed Charlie.

"They were clearly addicted to it," Michael remarked.

"Plus they can now move on land and in water," Charlie added. "We're going to have to keep watch I think, even after warning the sheriff. We can't have those things showing up on beaches..." Charlie stopped himself. "I mean that I will keep a look out."

Michael averted his brother's gaze and did not reply, but did nod just slightly. This was Charlie's subtle way of accepting that he was leaving the Isle. Michael was really going to leave the Isle. "Once we get home I'll run some tests," he said after collecting what he hoped would be a sufficient amount of the rust colored leech food. "See if I can figure out what this stuff is."

After a few minutes, they began the trek back towards their diving gear.

"Do you think this stuff is why our parents were down here?" asked Michael, as quietly as he could, hoping Eva would not overhear.

"No idea. I don't think we're going to get the answers we came looking for today. But at least there's one less Sea Hag to contend with."

Slowly and carefully, they made their way back into the water and out of the cave. Charlie used his underwater breathing spell to swim back to the surface, allowing Eva to use his air tank. Once out of the water they headed for the jeep. Michael worked on packing up, while Charlie grabbed the first aid kit to clean and dress Eva's leg wound, properly. He was surprised that the cut did not look as bad as he'd first thought.

He nervously grasped her leg, letting out a relieved breath when nothing out of the ordinary happened. He'd thought about asking Michael to fix her up, but he'd wanted to see for himself that it was all nothing. Just some freak reaction to her in the cave that would never happen again.

"So, do you like being your father's assistant?" he asked, making small talk while opening a tube containing an antibiotic ointment.

"Sure..."

There was an inflection that made Charlie believe otherwise. "What do you think about your father's work after today?"

"Actually, today just made it all *quite* real. Not that I haven't always had complete faith in my father. I always believed him."

Charlie smirked. "I still remember my first time," he told her, grinning smugly as he stroked ointment across her calf.

She made a face that begged him to tell her more.

"I was just turning seven. I knew I was a witch, but my parents, they did everything they could to keep us away from the scary stuff. Didn't want us growing up too fast I guess. One night though I snuck out. Followed my dad into the

woods. Let's just say I got a pretty huge dose of reality and got myself pretty nearly scared out of my wits."

Eva laughed. "Sorry. I'm sure it wasn't funny at the time."

"No. It wasn't. But I did decide that night that I wanted to be just like my dad. He wasn't scared at all. Just did his job and headed home like another day's work was done."

He finished wrapping a bandage around her leg and put away the first aid kit. "It's not quite good as new but a lot better than what it was. You might want to get that looked at by a real doctor though."

"I can almost guarantee there will be no need. I'm the daughter of a plant expert. My dad will mix up some remedy that'll have it healed up in no time."

"You need a ride somewhere?" Michael asked Eva, seeing as she was back on her feet. He was putting the last of their gear back into the jeep.

"Nah. My car is just around the other side of the beach."

"You sure? Hate to leave you stranded out here, especially wounded," Charlie said.

"I swear to you, I'm really not the damsel in distress I was made out to be today."

Charlie smirked. "I'm still not sure I believe you."

She reached out her hand, daringly, and stroked his bare chest, as he had not put on a new tank top after tearing his into pieces, to dress her wound in the cave.

"Sorry about that."

"Just a shirt," he answered, grasping her hand and gently pushing it away from him. He wanted to make it clear nothing would ever happen between them.

Charlie had already let the wolf out enough today. Plus he still had no explanation as to what had happened in the cave, the intoxicating smell that had nearly hypnotized him into doing potentially fatal acts of violence.

And if Eva was responsible for that smell, he could not trust himself around her. Being with a human woman was too dangerous. They were too frail. Too breakable. They could not protect themselves from him. One bite would change their lives forever if he didn't accidentally kill them first.

And for a reason he did not understand, this particular woman was in a lot more danger, as she appealed to his wolf. Something he had never experienced or dealt with before.

"I'd be more than happy to replace the shirt for you," Eva insisted. "I mean, you saved my life, it's the least I can do."

Charlie lingered in her gaze for a moment, ignoring her request. Something in her eyes tugged at him, begging the wolf to come out and play. Worse, he felt a sudden, inexplicable urge to lunge at Eva, pin her to the ground and sink his teeth into her luminous skin.

He took an uneven breath, shaking himself back into the moment. He said nothing, his fierce blue eyes flashing flustered confusion.

Eva's mouth twisted in a mysterious smile as she backed away. "Bye, Charlie," she mouthed.

He said nothing in return. Did she have any idea what she was doing to him?

No. of course not. She was just a girl flirting with him. She had no idea she was flirting with her own destruction.

What about this woman made him want to literally, devour her? Was it even her? Or something about the upcoming full moon? Was the wolf getting stronger?

That thought terrified him.

"You know, Michael," said Eva, as she turned away from Charlie. "My dad and I are here for the duration of summer. If you'd like to meet him, he'd get quite the kick out of meeting a real witch."

"Actually, I'd love to meet him," Michael replied. "I could spend hours talking about his book." He made a face when he realized his geeky side was making an appearance again.

"I guess I'll be seeing you around then." Eva laughed, waving. She walked back onto the beach and around the corner out of sight. Charlie noticed she didn't seem to be limping. He hoped that meant her injury wasn't as severe as he'd first thought.

Michael shot Charlie a knowing smile.

"What?"

"She's so into you, dude."

Charlie narrowed his eyes, annoyed.

"Not lying, Bro. And even with this face around," he twirled his hand around his own face. "Apparently she prefers the doggy paddle."

Charlie still said nothing.

"Ah, C'mon. I saw that *twinkle* in your eye."

"No twinkle," Charlie insisted solidly. "Believe me, there was a complete lack of twinkle. There is *something* about her."

"She's attractive, only here for the summer, which is your kind of fling, and she knows about the seedy underbelly that is our everyday world. Even better than attractive if you ask me."

"That's the thing though. Her knowing about magic. Us finding her. Something about it just seems..."

"Perfect!" Michael shot back. "Don't be so paranoid all the time. Some people are just that. People."

Charlie shook his head. "Maybe you're right," he conceded. "Still, she's a human woman. You know that doesn't work for me. Especially not this close to a full moon, and especially not this full moon," he found himself admitting.

"What do you mean?"

"Not sure exactly. Something is just *different* this time."

"Perhaps William can..."

"He's already working on it," interrupted Charlie. He opened his mouth to say more, but stopped when his cell phone buzzed from inside the jeep. He picked it up. There was a message. As he listened, his face turned grave.

Michael didn't even need to ask. He could feel the dread etching its way through every fiber of Charlie's being. Michael jumped in and started up the jeep. Charlie hopped in and they sped back toward town as fast as possible.

* * * * *

William whisked into the bookstore to find it empty.

"Emily," he called out calmly. There was no reply. He listened intently. Screaming. In the basement.

William dashed to the basement entrance where Emily crashed into him, in an attempt to escape.

"Oh, William! I don't know what it is," she cried out. "It's been chasing me. I don't know where to hide. It can go through walls!"

"Go upstairs," he ordered. "I'll deal with this ghostly fiend."

Emily raced up the stairs shouting, "It was at the end of the hall."

William honed in on the length of the hallway until catching the shimmer of a floating shadow. His eyes narrowed in excitement as he readied to give chase.

"I have always wondered if I could outrun a ghost."

If he'd still had a living heart, it would be thudding against his chest in anticipation. William took off at full speed, gracefully maneuvering around, below, up or over any obstacle in his path.

The spirit had the advantage, however, of being able to move through objects, as William needed to propel his body around them. The spirit was also faster than William. Nevertheless, he was able to keep up as they darted through hallway after hallway and book stack after book stack.

"Confound it all!" he bellowed, unable to get ahead of it.

Determined to catch this malevolent spirit, he did something reserved for necessary moments only. Not missing a step, he reached into a pocket and took out a blood pack filled with human blood; the only thing that could potentially make him fast enough to catch this spirit. With a ferocious snarl, his fangs dropped, tore open the pack, and he sucked it dry.

His breath drew deeper as the blood raged through his body, invigorating him with newfound stamina. Drinking the human blood was worth making sure Emily was safe, and Melinda's dream did not come true.

His speed increased just enough to stride alongside the spirit. At the least, William hoped to see a recognizable face in the ghost's silhouette.

The spirit had no intention of slowing down, however. Streams of white flew by William as the spirit sprinted past him. William swore he heard laughter emanating from the spirit, almost as if it were toying with him.

He made a final attempt to catch up to the spirit, and when nearly upon it, thrust his body into the spirit's essence, hoping to catch it off guard enough to give it pause.

The vampire somersaulted through the streams of white, landing on his feet with a soft patter. He remained statuesque, his eyes and ears watching and listening for any clue as to who, or what, the spirit might be.

His maneuver, however, did not faze the spirit even for a moment.

It simply dissipated, vanishing, giving William no hint of its identity.

"Pity," the vampire whispered, not even winded.

Perhaps it wasn't possible to discover the spirit's purpose in this manner. Even if he could keep up with it, there was no way to catch it and force it to reveal what it wanted. It is why ghosts sought out spirit vessels after all; they needed a body to speak on their behalf. They could not speak to the living in spirit form.

Regardless, he had not succeeded, and proceeded to the main lobby of the bookstore, where he found Emily cowering underneath her desk.

"Did you find it?"

"Find it, yes. Capture it, no," he answered dryly, assisting her out of her hiding place.

"Oh, um, you've got a little blood," she pointed.

William's eyes opened wide. "Sorry," he apologized earnestly, wiping it away. "I didn't mean for you to see that."

"Oh, please. You're a vampire."

"Still, it is most *unseemly*."

Emily made a funny face and grabbed a tissue, dabbing at his chin as he had missed the blood completely.

"Thank you," he said.

Emily sighed. "What was that thing, William? And what does it want with me?"

He wanted to soften the blow, but time wasn't on their side. Honesty would be necessary. "I regret there is no easy way to break this sort of news, Emily. Melinda and I visited your father, and he explained everything. You are a spirit vessel as was your mother before you." He paused for a moment, but seeing she wasn't understanding yet explained, "That ring you wear keeps spirits from possessing your body."

Emily leaned back onto her desk. "I'm a what? And spirits want to do what?"

William continued patiently. "You have the ability to permit the dead to speak, through the use of your body. Normally, these spirits are friendly and simply want to pass on a message to a living relative so they can move on. However, on occasion, there are malevolent beings that wish not only to use your body to speak, but to possess and control. To use as they wish."

"Use my body as they wish," squeaked Emily. "Oh dear. That doesn't sound fun at all." She gazed at her ring, the only thing keeping the spirit from taking over her body. "Why didn't my father ever tell me this?"

"I imagine he hoped the spirits would not discover what you are, therefore allowing you to live your life as you see fit, Emily."

She nodded, obviously still in shock.

Melinda bounded through the front door. "Emily, thank God! You're okay." She took a relieved breath. "Did William explain what's happening?" She took a glance at him and knew before Emily answered that he had done so.

"Yes, and I don't really understand it all. But I'm quite sure I don't want any dead thing controlling my body."

"Yeah, I don't really blame you," Melinda replied, agreeing with her. Although, her eyes slid to William, she could think of one dead thing she wouldn't mind controlling her body. *Ugh! Seriously! Enough already! I need to wipe the William dreams out of my memory.* She tried to focus on his voice as he calmly explained what had occurred just moments before she'd arrived.

He cast a fleeting glance in her direction, observing again, that same heart flutter he'd heard earlier that morning. Her skin flushed right after, blood pumping hard to keep up with the flutter. Curse that human blood he'd just drank! His fangs ached to drop. To taste her. An accusatory snarl hissed through his brain. It had nothing to do with the blood he'd just drank, and everything to do with that flutter.

It enticed him. Invited him to take what he wanted. He needed to get to the bottom of that flutter and get her to stop doing it before he lost control.

With no outward sign of the angst swirling in his mind, he continued seamlessly explaining the encounter with the spirit he'd chased and nearly caught.

Melinda breathed out heavily as he finished.

William had downed human blood to help Emily. It hadn't done much good in the end, but he was willing to go any lengths to make sure the prophetic dream did not come true. Melinda sent him a compassionate shrug, understanding how this would affect him later, when the thirst for human blood would become overwhelming and he'd lock himself away until the craving subsided.

His emerald green eyes darkened, just a little. He cast a fleeting glance at her neck.

Without even realizing she'd done it, Melinda reached up and stroked her throat.

Another flutter, William noted, watching her fingers glide over a pulsing vein.

What is this response? It was driving him mad. He needed to understand it.

Melinda dropped her hand, swallowing a shallow exhale. William was high on human blood, but she trusted him completely.

"William," she let out in a huff. "I don't know what to do. It's time to call Charlie and Michael. I should at least let them know what's going on at this point."

"There's nothing wrong with admitting you need help, Melinda, and I agree. I think we'll need both of your brothers before this ends."

"I'll make the call," she told him.

"There are some things I need to fetch from my study." He abruptly whisked out of sight before she could ask more.

Melinda blew out a breath, equally relieved and anxious that William was gone. She stepped over to Emily. "This is a lot to take in all at once, huh?"

"You could say that," Emily's voice wavered slightly. "It's all so very strange. And I don't think there are any books about spirit vessels. If there are, I've never read them."

"And you remember everything you read," Melinda recalled. "We will figure it out, Emily. I'm sure your father can explain it better. He must have information to help you understand this power. But for today, no matter what, keep that ring on."

At that moment, a furious whirlwind of white ravaged its way through the bookstore, accelerating toward Melinda and Emily. It thrashed everything it came into contact with, leaving behind a cloud of books, papers, and furniture.

Melinda grabbed Emily, and they slid across the top of the checkout counter ducking down underneath it. Melinda dug into her pocket for her cell phone, dialing Charlie.

Voicemail. Shoot!

"Charlie! Michael! Bookstore!" she shouted urgently. Before she could hang up, she dropped the phone, she and Emily screaming as a light fixture came crashing down, smashing over them. Glass shattered and flew in all directions.

The front door swung open and William flew in, screeching to a halt just inside. "I see I'm right on time."

Melinda, seeing William, jumped out from behind the counter. She accidentally stepped on and crushed her phone. She did not notice it though as William tossed a small velvet bag into her hands.

She caught it and glanced inside. Her face lit up. "You think?"

"It worked on a demon."

"What would I do without you, William?" Melinda stepped out from behind the counter, into the store that was now a fury of streaming papers and debris. She emptied the contents of the bag into her palm. Three smooth stones, each with a symbol carved into the top.

Melinda threw the stones onto the floor.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

The stones lifted into the air, rotating together, forming a circle of flying stone.

"Carcer," she spoke.

The symbol on the first stone lit up, like the color of fire.

"Vincula," she said, and the second stone's symbol burned as brightly as the first.

"Capere!" Melinda finished firmly.

The third symbol lit up, and the stones fell back to the ground with a flat smack, forming a triangle. The light emanating from the stones shot into the air, like extended arms. These fiery arms reached out and ensnared the spirit, dragging it downward. Once inside the stone's triangle, the arms became a wall of fire that held the spirit, prisoner. It struggled to break free but could not.

Melinda sighed. "It won't hold for long, William. It's meant to hold and bind demons, not spirits."

"It will buy us time," he reminded. "And we don't yet know for sure if this spirit is friend or foe. It might well be a demon."

Emily joined Melinda and William, staring into the temporary cage.

"That wants to take over my body," she said, curiously. "Huh." Emily eyed her normally tidy bookstore. "It's going to take weeks to clean this up." She started picking up papers and books, trying to organize the chaos.

Melinda went to stop her but William nodded to let her continue. "She's in shock."

"How do we fix this, William? It will escape, eventually, and it's just going to keep trying to use Emily as a vessel."

"I believe our only option is to force the spirit to move on. Somehow, we need to make it believe that its unfinished business is finished."

"How do we do that? How do we make a ghost move on?"

"I must return to my study."

Again, he left Melinda standing in the bookstore, this time alongside a very irritable and trapped spirit.

"Great! What do I do in the meantime?"

"You could help me clean up," Emily mumbled, while shrugging.

"Why not? Nothing else I can do right now."

Melinda and Emily spent the next thirty minutes cleaning. Every minute or so the spirit would try to escape its cage and sparks would pop and startle them.

Where is William? And for that matter, where are Charlie and Michael? Melinda found her thoughts growing more agitated as each minute passed. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, William reappeared.

"Sorry," he apologized, upon seeing Melinda's face. "I had to read many books to locate the information I needed." He held up a piece of paper. "An incantation, which if said properly, should force the spirit to move on."

As if it could understand William's intentions, the spirit desperately searched for a way out, but all it could do was slam up against the fiery energy field.

"I hope those stones hold," muttered Melinda.

"I think I'll just go put these books away now," said Emily, holding a hefty stack in her hand. She scurried up the stairs, stopping at a nearby shelf on the second floor.

"She's in complete denial," Melinda worried. She turned her attention to the incantation. "So what do I need to make this work, William?"

"Your brothers, I'm afraid. Your power is not enough. This spell requires a lot of magic."

"I'll call them again." She darted across the room to locate her cell phone, which she had dropped behind Emily's desk earlier. "Darn. I broke it. Stepped on it and it's crushed."

Electric pulses struck the walls inside the spirit's prison. The thwacks of energy getting louder and faster. Melinda slowly turned around. The spirit was crashing up against the sides with increasing speed. The three stones began to shake, causing its fiery walls to vibrate.

"They're not going to hold," Melinda determined, stepping closer.

Sparks flew into the air.

The energy field imprisoning the spirit radiated brightly, expanding like a balloon.

William flung his body in front of Melinda, shielding her. It was not necessary though as the only remnant from the burst was a curtain of light that melted like falling snow.

Melinda gasped.

In the next instant, her dream unraveled before her eyes. She looked upstairs and saw Emily standing in front of a bookshelf, holding a book. The spirit flew full speed toward her.

The ring worked, repelling the spirit from taking over Emily's body.

The spirit attempted to find a way in but could not. A white film surrounded Emily's hand, the ring on her finger vibrating. Emily batted at the spirit with a book, which did nothing but wisp through its body. She dropped the book, at the same time, screaming in pain.

"Don't take off the ring!" William shouted.

Emily started screaming louder. "It's burning me!"

William flew up the stairs.

The ring smoldered, burning Emily's finger, threatening to burn her entire hand.

William, realizing the risk, slipped the ring off her finger with ease, leaving behind a perfectly burned mark where the ring had been.

Melinda started up the stairs when the front door flew open and her brothers came running in.

"Melinda!" shouted Charlie, relieved to see her.

"Emily!" Michael called out, panic-stricken.

"I'm up here, Michael," Emily responded despondently.

They were too late.

In that moment, the spirit surged straight through William and engulfed Emily's body, draping it in streams of white. William had no choice but to let go of Emily as the spirit took control of her body.

"The spell, Melinda!" William commanded, returning to her side in a flash.

Melinda raced to her brothers.

"What's going on?" Charlie and Michael asked at once.

"Just say this spell with me! It's the only way to save Emily."

"Wait!" a voice boomed from upstairs. "Please, let me speak!"

It was Emily's mouth that moved, but not her voice that spoke. It was a familiar voice though. One none of the Howard siblings dare believe they had heard.

* * * * *

"I am sorry for frightening you, and hurting Emily, but this is the only way in which I can speak with you. I would never intentionally hurt the woman my son loves."

"Mom?" Michael uttered, barely audibly.

Melinda covered her mouth, gasping.

Charlie stepped forward; he still did not believe it.

William's head tilted to one side, and he stared into Emily's eyes, looking as equally perplexed as the siblings.

Emily's possessed body climbed down the stairs.

"I am sorry," their mother said again. "I realize this is a shock. I have spent years trying to contact you and only recently did I learn that Emily was a vessel. I knew it might be my only chance." She now stood in front of them.

"Catherine," William confirmed. "If I had tears," he held his hand up to his lifeless heart.

Charlie, Michael, and Melinda rushed forward, wrapping themselves around each other, and Emily's body.

"I'm so sorry, Mom," Melinda cried. "I thought you were evil."

"It's okay My Sweet Girl. You could not have known. Although, I was getting a bit desperate there at the end."

Melinda had not been called *My Sweet Girl* in so long she had nearly forgotten what it sounded like.

"Why are you here?" Charlie asked astonished by what he was seeing. "That came out wrong. I mean, it's just..."

"Is Dad here too?" Michael interrupted.

Their mother, Catherine Howard, backed away.

"No. Your father is not here. But your father is why I am here. I could not move on until I had told you."

"Told us what?" Charlie asked.

She closed her eyes and spoke the words she had longed to say since her death.

"I waited for your father's spirit, believing that we had died together, but his spirit never joined me. I believe your father is still alive."

No one spoke. Each completely stunned by this revelation.

William was first to break the silence. It was the first time they had ever heard him speak with such awe. "Catherine, you are telling us that Jack Howard still lives?" For a normally controlled vampire, heavy emotion leaked into his words.

"Where is he?" Charlie needed to know. "Why hasn't he contacted us?"

"I don't think he can, Charlie. He needs your help."

"Tell us what to do!" Michael begged.

Catherine lowered her head. "I fear I have so little to help you find him."

"Tell us everything you know," William urged.

"At the moment I died, I believed your father had died alongside me. But after, I waited. I didn't move on. I was expecting him, but he did not join me. It took months to learn how to maneuver my new spirit body. By the time I did, there was no trace of what had happened to your father. And unfortunately, the longer I was in spirit form the memories of how I died grew hazier. Now, no matter how hard I try, I just cannot remember what happened. Only that he never joined me. And he would have. Of that I'm certain."

"Where exactly did you die, Mom?" asked Melinda, her voice unsteady. "Your bodies were never found. Or your body, I guess," she clarified.

"As I said, that moment is rather hard to remember," her mother replied apologetically. "I can recall every detail from my life, but not the moment of my death. However, I have a pretty good guess."

Melinda started shaking, trying to hold back tears. "I dreamed about it," she choked out, her voice breaking as she spoke.

"I know, My Sweet Girl," her mother's compassionate voice whispered.

"First prophetic dream I ever had, I just didn't know it at the time. I could never remember any of the details other than you both died because I had the dream weeks before it happened."

Her mother stepped closer and cupped Melinda's face in her hands. "You must let go of this guilt you carry. There is no way you could have known your gift was presenting itself. My death was unavoidable, and it was *not* your fault, Melinda."

"But I should have known. Even after you died, I should have been able to remember something, anything that would have at least let us know what happened." She paused, wiping her eyes. "I could see it in everyone's eyes when they looked at me. If only she had known. If only she could remember something. *If only.*" Melinda could no longer speak.

Charlie and Michael sighed, feeling guilty. They had both thought it, numerous times. *If only.* But they had tried very hard to hide those feelings around their sister, knowing how guilty she already felt.

Catherine stepped forward, addressing each of them. "You must all move on from this. I couldn't be prouder of each of you," she told them. "But I want you to live your lives in the present, never in the past. What's done, is done."

Charlie couldn't help but smile. He would have given anything to hear his mother say those words to him, just one last time.

"The pull to move on gets stronger every minute. I must tell you everything I know while I can."

They listened intently, hanging onto every word Catherine Howard spoke.

"Your father and I were exploring a cave, one accessed only at the foot of a very old tree, at the base of White Pines Mountain."

"Old tree?" questioned William. "You don't mean the one we used to picnic underneath when the children were but toddlers."

"The very same, William. We never knew back then that this cave existed since it is hidden by *ancient magic*." Her words seemed to have more meaning to William than it did her children.

"You mean, *The Magic*. The Demon Isle's power source?"

"Yes, William. We believed we had at last discovered its location. Unfortunately, we were not alone in the discovery."

"If that power source fell into the wrong hands," Charlie puffed air into his cheeks, letting it out in a huff.

"The man that made the discovery is dead. And seeing as the Isle is not in any more chaos than normal, I am guessing the power source's location still remains a secret, or that we were incorrect about the location."

"Hold up a second, Mom. This man that found out about the source, is that the man you shot?"

Catherine sighed in a deeply regretful manner.

"I'm afraid so Michael. We were tracking the man and followed him into an underwater cave. The one you boys were in today. The man had made some arrangement with a Sea Hag that frequents that cave. We were caught off guard though. The Sea Hag gave the man something, something that changed him, turned him into an enraged madman. We presented ourselves, thinking we could kill the Sea Hag and question this man, but whatever the Hag had given him made him crazed. The Hag escaped, and the man attacked your father, knocking him unconscious. Your father is the Howard. Not me. But I did have potions, as always, all of which I used, trying to stop this crazed man's attacks. Nothing worked. I tried to wake your father but to no avail. The man lunged at me and pinned me to the ground. Somehow, I wrestled him off me and grabbed my backup weapon, the gun. I do not regret my actions, seeing as the man tried to kill me. I deeply regret, however, not being able to question him about who he was, or what he knew about the power source."

"We killed that Sea Hag today," Charlie informed his mother with finality in his voice. She already knew this, but understood why Charlie needed to say it. He left out the rest of the story, deciding to fill everyone in later. "And the man in the cave, I think it's safe to say the secrets he discovered died with him. I'm sure attempts would have been made against the power source had he shared his information."

It didn't offer much solace, but it would have to do. Drybones was in the sheriff's morgue and other than reading the man's death, whatever secrets he might have discovered, would never be found out now.

"So what do you remember about your death, dear Catherine?" William asked. Somehow, the question sounded more graceful coming out of the vampire's mouth.

"Sadly, I have only been able to put together little bits and pieces. I know that after I shot and killed that man, we set out that very night for the old tree in White Pines, determined to find out if we had at last found the Isle's power source. I'm afraid my last memory is entering that cave."

"Michael," Melinda started without thinking. "You could," she did not finish, instantly revolted by what she was asking of him.

"No. You're right," Michael swallowed his reply. "As frightening as the thought is to me, I think I'd rather know how it happened. These last four years of not knowing..."

Charlie put his hand on Michael's shoulder. "Are you really sure?"

Michael nodded yes and stepped toward his mother, bravely. "I don't even know if this will work. I normally touch bones, or dead bodies," he explained, pursing his lips.

"Just take hold of Emily's hand. For all purposes right now, Emily is me. She's perfectly fine, by the way," she let him know. "Her body is built for this, and I must say, I could not have wished a more perfect woman to come into your life, Michael."

Michael nearly crumpled hearing his mother speak so kindly of the woman he really did love with all his heart whether he had admitted it openly or not.

"I know how you struggle. This life isn't one I'd wish on anyone. I can only plead with you to find your father before you make the choice to leave the Isle. And just know that I love you, no matter which path you choose."

He nodded, unable to speak his answer. It was like having her back again if even for just a moment.

"Are you ready?" she asked him.

He replied by grasping his mother's (Emily's) hand.

The death reading came instantly.

He saw Jack and Catherine Howard entering a tunnel under the old tree. Once inside, they lit torches to see the way. They took each step cautiously. Michael heard his father say something about 'traps to look out for' and no more than a few seconds later, they were accosted by ghostly bodies, flying at them from all directions. The ghostly frames dissipated into darkness moments later.

He saw his parents laughing.

"I guess that might scare away some people," his mother said.

"Still, let's be careful. I would bet my life there are very dangerous things protecting this power source."

"It's probably not the power source anyway. How many times have we thought we'd found it?"

"You're probably right, but maybe this time we'll get lucky."

Catherine rolled her eyes and they continued forward. Soon the tunnels split into two directions.

"Do we split up or stick together?" Catherine asked.

"I don't like the idea of splitting up, especially since we don't know what obstacles we might come up against."

"So which way, then?"

Jack pointed right, and continued onward. Not ten steps in they sprung another trap. This one, much more dangerous. A pit was opening underneath their feet, Catherine slipped in, losing her footing.

Michael could not see into the dark chasm. But he watched as his father grabbed onto his mother and pulled her out. As her body got free, a torrent of sheeted blackness shot out from the hole.

"Son of a bitch!" shouted Jack, covering his wife's body with his own. Once gone, he jumped up. "It's a malevolent force, no doubt. I'm guessing it's been imprisoned for a long time."

"How do we fight it?" Catherine shouted over the whirling blackness that now raced for the cave's entrance and its freedom.

"I don't know, but we cannot let it escape. Who knows what kind of evil this thing is." Jack proceeded to chase after the unknown evil. Catherine dragged behind him a few steps, trying to keep up, as she searched her pockets, taking out a few potion vials.

Michael watched his mother's death unfold before his eyes.

The whirling blackness twisted in circles like a tornado, blowing out his mother's torch. She screamed, tripping over a jutting branch. The potions flew out of her hands, smashing against the hard cave wall. One of the bottles broke, splashing the contents onto Catherine's face, leaking into her mouth.

She knew instantly she would die. The potion she'd swallowed included substances no human could ingest and survive. She had no protective witch's blood coursing through her veins. It took only seconds for her body to weaken. She used all her strength to pick up her head and call out to her husband.

He hadn't seen what had happened, and even if he had, there was nothing he could have done. He was fighting this streaming blackness with every ounce of strength he could muster. Sending spell after spell at the thing, and watching, horrified as each one simply passed through it like it was made of air.

Jack shouted for Catherine. When she did not return his call, he looked back into the cave and saw her lying on the ground. He raced to her, no longer caring about the evil he could not stop from escaping.

Catherine opened her eyes just in time to see him lean down in front of her.

She, in turn, watched in wide-eyed fear as the blackness followed, surging over him and engulfing her husband's body. It gyrated its way out of the cave, taking Jack Howard with it.

"Jack," Catherine whispered with her last breath.

Her head fell to the ground and the death reading ended.

Michael gasped loudly and let go of his mother's hand.

It took him a moment to remember he was in the bookstore.

Catherine had seen everything along with Michael, and a great sadness spread across her face.

Michael could not speak. His mind blank other than the images he'd just seen rolling through, like a movie projector replaying the scene of her death over and over.

"Now that I have seen it, it is a wonder that I could have forgotten," Catherine spoke thoughtfully. "Perhaps I just didn't want to relive the moment."

The others, of course, wanted desperately to know what Michael had seen, but dared not ask upon seeing his distraught face.

Michael was in disbelief that a potion had taken the life of his mother. Such a stupid thing it seemed. *A potion.* A simple thing like tripping and smashing open a vial. They used potions all the time. Never once had it occurred to him they could potentially be harmful. Of course they had witch blood, his mother had not. *Like Emily*, he couldn't help but think. *Or even Eva Jordan.* They had handed her a few

vials while in the cave, not even thinking about the consequences. They would need to be much more careful in the future.

And just what exactly was the streaming blackness that had taken his father? He had never seen such a thing before. Was his father still alive? A prisoner somewhere perhaps. He could only speculate and already dreaded the moment that would soon come when he would need to explain what he had seen to his family.

Catherine Howard looked upon her children and William, with great love and sadness. "My business here is finished and I'm afraid the pull to move on is stronger than I can fight."

William stepped forward and took hold of Catherine's hand, kissing it gently in farewell.

"Thank you for watching over my children."

"Until I am no more, I will protect this family."

"You're a good man, William."

"And you are always too kind," he replied, at her use of the word, man.

"I don't know what this family ever did to deserve you, but I am forever grateful."

Her voice lowered suddenly, so only William could hear her speak.

The siblings had no idea what she told him, but he let out a shocked exhale, a horrified look flitting across his face. He tore away from her abruptly, acting as though her words had cut him open. He turned away from them, hiding his face.

What could their mother have said that upset him so badly?

Something she wanted to keep from them, perhaps? Some piece of terrible news she could not handle telling them in person? Or was it something more personal. Either way, they'd never seen William react in such a fashion.

Catherine turned to her children.

Charlie stepped forward and embraced her before she could disappear. "I won't stop looking for Dad, however long it takes," he promised her.

She cupped his face. "I know. And I don't want you to. But Charlie, don't forget to live a little in between your duties. I know us leaving you so suddenly put a lot of responsibility on your shoulders and for that, I'm sorry."

"I'd always rather have you here, Mom. But I don't mind the job. I like what I'm doing, it feels right for me."

"You are so much like your father," she chuckled. "Just promise me you'll try to have a normal life, too. I may not be here with you, but I'd like to have grandchildren to watch over."

He lowered his eyes, cheeks set aflame. "I'll do my best," he promised, stepping back. "After I find Dad," he clarified with a stubborn smile.

She sent him a stern, but proud motherly look.

"That sentiment goes for you all," she told her children. "You are the future of the Howard line. But you must *live*. It cannot always be the job. If I learned anything during my life, it was to take the time to live." At that moment, Catherine's voice flickered, Emily's surfacing. Their mother's voice returned as the Howard siblings looked on, frozen and helpless. They could not stop the inevitable.

"Melinda," called out their mother. She joined her. "I always thought I'd be here to help you through these years. And since time is short, I'll give you this advice. Young hearts are fickle. They don't always know what they want."

"You can say that again. Minute to minute, I don't even know."

Her mother smiled, understanding. "Just know that one day, Melinda, it could be next month, it might not be for years, but one day you'll just know. With such absolute certainty you'll be willing to bet your life on it. And when *that* happens, don't let *anything* stop you from taking what makes you happy." Her eyes grazed over to William, who could not look Catherine in the face. "It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. Your brothers. Your friends. Even what you believe I, or your father, would think. If it makes *you* happy. Do it."

"Okay," Melinda squeaked out. Tears flowed freely.

Why couldn't that moment of clarity happen now? She wasn't sure she could survive through months, or potentially years, waiting for her heart to make up its mind.

How was it, even dead, her mother knew exactly what she needed to hear? She hugged her a final time. "I love you so much, Mom. I miss you every minute."

"I'll always be looking in on you." Catherine's spirit body pulsed inside of Emily's human body. Her time was running out and she could not keep possession of Emily's body any longer. She faced everyone, her voice now a distant echo.

"Michael, Emily's coming back to you now. Take care of her. She is very special."

He wrapped his arms around his mother, saying a silent goodbye.

The siblings joined each other, William turned to cast a final farewell, his face hardened stone. They wondered if he'd ever share what their mother had told him.

"Be good to each other," Catherine called out, her voice an echo. "I love you all so very much."

Her spirit pulsated and left Emily's body, dissolving into nothing.

Then, the final part of Melinda's prophetic dream came true.

Emily's body slumped to the ground; her eyes open wide, unblinking, as if frozen in complete terror.

* * * * *

Michael rushed to her side calling out Emily's name.

Slowly, her eyes began to flutter and blink. "Michael," she whispered, grabbing him.

William reached down and slipped the ring back onto Emily's finger. The scorch mark instantly disappeared, healing itself. There was much he did not know about spirit vessels. A topic he would now research in great depth.

He pulled back, allowing Michael to help her off the ground.

The request Catherine had whispered to him; it tore at his insides. He suppressed it, burying it deep down until he had the time to process it appropriately.

Melinda was grateful that Emily had not died, alone and in terror. She wondered if her dreams were changing, growing more powerful, perhaps not just dreaming about death, or if they had changed Emily's outcome by helping her find out what she was. There was no way to be certain. However, Melinda knew her mother would never have caused permanent harm to someone, even to share such important news about their father.

Michael pulled Emily's body into his chest, wrapping his arms around her tightly. "You're okay, Emily. You're okay."

"What happened?" She sounded dazed.

"Do you not remember?" William asked her, curiously.

"No. But, I have this odd feeling. A good feeling. Whatever happened, it wasn't actually bad, was it?"

"No, Emily. It wasn't a bad thing after all," William told her.

"I should call my dad!" she cried out. "He's probably worried sick!"

"I'll call him," Melinda offered shakily. "You just take it easy."

While Melinda borrowed Charlie's phone to call Mr. Morgan, William explained to Charlie and Michael what had occurred and what they had discovered about Emily. Michael looked as though he had a few choice words about being left out of the loop regarding Melinda's dream, but held his tongue.

When Melinda returned, it was Charlie and Michael's turn to explain their journey into the cave. After finishing, Michael took out the bag in his pocket, which held the flecks of rust colored substance he had scraped off the cave wall.

William took hold of it, opening the bag. "No research required. This is blood."

"Really?" Melinda said incredulously. "I guess you'd know better than anyone."

"Why would there be specks of blood on the walls of the cave?" Charlie asked.

"Don't know, but I'm guessing the blood is what attracts the leeches," said Michael. "I'd also wager that this is the substance that made that man in the cave go crazy on Mom."

At mention of Mom, everyone went silent and stared at Michael. Emily, still confused just followed everyone's gaze. After a minute, when he did not respond, she wrinkled her nose and spoke in her quietest voice. "So why are we all staring at Michael? Not that I mind," she added still sounding dazed.

Michael looked as though he had no idea what to say.

"For something he's not ready to share yet," Charlie answered on his brother's behalf.

"Oh, okay," Emily replied, still confused.

"Emily, why don't you let me fill you in," Melinda suddenly spoke with a bit of vigor. "I'll walk you home, and we can have a chat with your dad. I'm sure there's lots he wants to tell you now that you know what you are."

Emily smiled and gladly accepted Melinda's offer, but before she could get out of the store, Michael grabbed Emily and hugged her fiercely, gently kissing her forehead. "I'm glad you're all right," he told her. "We'll get the bookstore cleaned up and closed up for the night, and I'll come by your place and check on you later tonight, okay?"

"Okay," she nodded, backing away, a happy grin spreading across her face.

She rejoined Melinda, and they stepped outside. As they walked, Melinda animatedly explained everything that had happened. She was so focused that she didn't even notice the busy streets lined with evening tourists bustling from place to place.

Emily noticed though, and said nothing, but was unable to hold back a happy grin. She had spent a lot of time with Melinda, but had never seen her like this. Clearly, something had changed.

She listened intently to all Melinda was telling her, still finding it hard to believe that the Howard's own mother had possessed her body. She wondered how often spirits would try to reach out to her and want to use her in this manner. How

would she know if they were good spirits or malevolent spirits? There was definitely a long talk with her father coming.

Melinda decided once she'd gotten Emily home, not to stick around. It looked like her father had a lot he wanted to discuss, and it felt like it should be a private conversation between Emily and her father.

The walk home was not nearly as easy going as the walk to Emily's. Mostly because she didn't have anything to keep her mind off the fact that she was walking down a congested street, alone. *Too many people*. All bumping into her, rushing here and there and crowding her. She inhaled deeply, hoping to stave off an oncoming panic attack.

"They are just people," she mumbled under her breath. "And just because you're around them doesn't mean you're going to start having prophetic dreams about them all!" Somehow, saying it aloud made it better.

She tried to focus her attention on something besides the people. Like the street lanterns flickering to life as the sky darkened overhead. They cast hazy beams of orange and yellow down on the cobblestone walkways below. It was pretty. Haunting, in a way. A nice thing about living on The Demon Isle. The same lanterns had been used to light up the town streets for over a hundred years. They cast a hazy glow on passersby.

Her panic was subsiding. She stopped for a minute before taking a corner and watched the tourists oohing and aahing over the lanterns. Taking out their cameras and clicking pictures.

To anyone that didn't know better, they'd look at these streets and think they had traveled back in time. This is part of what gave The Demon Isle its charm. People came here to have an old-fashioned, nostalgic sort of experience, sided with the hope of seeing a real ghost along the way.

"Just people having fun," Melinda told herself. "Something I need to do more often, too," she decided. She took the corner towards the Howard Mansion only to crash head on into a body topped with disheveled dark hair.

Instinctive arms reached out and hands wrapped around her shoulders to keep her from falling backwards.

"Oh," she released in a quick exhale, as she found herself face to face with someone familiar. It was motorcycle man from earlier that morning, minus his helmet.

He was taller than she'd thought. Not as tall as William, but she had to lift her chin to see into his eyes. Which were dark. Molasses dark. Just like his eyelashes and thick head of hair.

"Sorry," Melinda said absentmindedly. "Wasn't watching where I was going." She wished suddenly that she had put on makeup that morning and worried she had noticeable blemishes. She was thankful it was getting dark, perhaps they wouldn't show.

The young man didn't reply right away, his arms still securely around her shoulders. The corner of his mouth turned up in a playful smile. A dazzling smile that was easy on the eyes but hard on her breath; she suddenly felt very aware of her throat having a hard time swallowing or moving the right amount of air into her lungs.

"No worries, it's nothing," motorcycle man finally spoke to her. "Personally, I didn't mind it." His voice was as welcoming as his smile. A little husky. Confidence mixed with a touch of innocence.

She smiled back, shyly, the act of it surprising her a little.

Motorcycle man could not believe his luck. He'd had a strong feeling about this street, so strong he had to walk down it. Now he knew why. Although, the feelings he got normally brought him to someone that needed help. Not to beautiful women. Or maybe this beautiful gal did need his help.

He hoped it was the kind of help that required him to kiss her. Not likely, but wow, did she have come-kiss-me lips. And a longing in her eyes that begged for someone to love her, and double wow! He wanted to be the one who did. There was a nervous strum in his heart. He'd never felt anything like it. This woman set his entire body abuzz.

"Are you okay?" he asked her, his voice less husky and more timid.

Melinda nodded, unable to peel her eyes away from his. She hoped he didn't pull her in any closer; he'd feel the panic attack thumping hard against her chest. This one, however, was not due to being away from home, but rather at how awestruck she was by this total stranger.

His arms felt perfectly natural as if made to fit around her. She got a strange sense that she had known him for much longer than a minute, and that somehow, they were destined to bump into each other. Her magical gift didn't work like that though.

So what was this?

And could her mother have been righter about this? Her heart scrambled to keep up.

William.

Molasses-eyed motorcycle man.

William, *her* vampire. Who couldn't actually be hers.

The dark haired stranger, who she was clinging to, tightly! Her eyes widened and she dropped her arms. Her teeth tugged at her bottom lip, watching fingernail indents fading in the thick muscles just below his black tee shirt sleeve.

He didn't notice. Or he didn't care.

His hands slid down her spine, splaying low across her waist before freeing her. His eyes watched her every reaction to his movements. His hands searching for a sign that she enjoyed his touch.

She didn't notice her responses, other than to suddenly lose her ability to swallow, but she must have pleased him as his smile, if possible, turned even more dazzling. His molasses globes beamed as if he'd made some secret discovery meant only for him.

Shoot. My feeling is telling me I've got to be somewhere else now. Motorcycle man released Melinda, winked, and stepped by her disappearing around the corner without another word. He sure hoped that would not be their last encounter.

"Wow," she breathed out, her legs jelly. "If I'd known guys like that were walking around, I might have made attempts to get out more often, a lot sooner."

He certainly took Melinda's mind off William, the vampire she could only have in her dreams. And she guessed motorcycle man to be close to her age; her brothers would be happy about that. Although they'd definitely have a problem with the

motorcycle. Still, even with this second, chance run in, she might never see him again. Tourists came and went from the Isle as often as the tides.

The same doubts she'd felt earlier returned. Guys like that didn't go out with girls like her. Guys like motorcycle man went out with stylish girls who wore high heels and skinny jeans. *Frumpy much?* she thought, staring down at her aged, ankle length dress and flat slip-ons.

She'd barely brushed her hair before leaving the house today and was sure it was a tangled mess. She hadn't even tried to suck in her stomach to make it seem smaller. Surely he'd felt her little pooch sticking out. Too many curves in all the wrong places. A breathy groan slipped through her lips. Melinda shook her head, wrung out her hands and headed home. Worked-up level on high alert, screaming towards *Holy heck, I'm about to lose my mind*, level.

Having a nervous breakdown that had kept her mostly indoors for four years, had not only cost her the loss of friends or any social life, and pinned her as the local freak, but left her with an outdated wardrobe, and kept her carrying around a few extra pounds she always wanted to lose, but was like, why bother?

She suddenly didn't want to go home. The idea of being there felt suffocating. She needed to fix her life. *To get a life.*

Starting with some skinny jeans. She could maybe pull them off.

Although perhaps she should just start with something less bag-like.

And heels, no way that was happening! They didn't exactly go with her line of work. Quick getaways, high heels, and Melinda Howard, simply did not mix!

* * * * *

Charlie, Michael, and William looked around the bookstore at the mess the spirit, their mother, had left behind.

"How is it *we* are always the one's left cleaning up the messes, anyway?" Charlie asked. He responded to his own question by shrugging and puffing his cheeks, letting the air out slowly.

"I think," advised William, "that this particular mess is better left to me. I can have everything back in its place in minutes. Why don't you two head home. It's been a very long day."

They could not argue with William, and the truth was, he could have the place cleaned up much faster without their help. Therefore, they headed out to the jeep and drove home.

An hour later, Melinda walked into the house relieved to be home again. Not too long before, the thought had been suffocating, but now that she was here, it felt just right. She didn't feel so nervous about leaving the house, but it had been a long day and she wanted nothing more than a glass of merlot, a box of chocolates, and a few hours sinking into a hot bubble bath. And then sleep. Lots of sleep.

And just who would show up in her dreams tonight? Motorcycle man, or William? Or would she witness yet another death?

Ugh. Where is the wine? It might be a two-glass night.

Her frustration mounted as she met Charlie and Michael, ignoring each other in the kitchen. She had hoped the day's events had gotten them past their disagreements. "Did either of you fill in Mack about what you found out at the cave?"

"Already took care of it," Michael replied. "Had to tell her to stop looking for the drybone's killer."

"You told her it was Mom?" Melinda confirmed.

"Yup. Mack was a little miffed I didn't tell her before. But she understood."

"She is cool that way."

"I also told her about Dad. She is, of course, willing to do just about anything to help us find him."

Melinda nodded, just as a blur dashed into the room.

"Bookstore should be back to Emily's satisfaction if not better."

"Knowing you, My William, everything is absolutely perfect."

William shot Melinda a severe stare, however, followed it with a, *you are right of course*, smirk. She grinned, and laughed, loving even these small moments with William. And their banter had at least lessened the tension between Charlie and Michael. It also set off her heart flutter again. William proceeded to move to the opposite side of the room.

"So Charlie, tell me about Eva Jordan," Melinda teased, getting her mind off William. "Sounds like you saved a totally hot damsel in distress."

"Ha. Ha. Very funny," Charlie retorted. "Michael helped, too."

"I may have been there, but she had eyes for you, Bro. Very beautiful eyes I might add."

"Eva Jordan is attractive. I won't disagree with that."

"But..." Melinda said, waiting for the inevitable.

"We just found out our father is still alive, and where our mother's body should be. It sort of takes priority over dating."

"Oh, Charlie. For you, everything is a priority over dating," Melinda chided.

"Look who's talking," Charlie good-naturedly mumbled.

She made a funny face, refusing to get into the discussion about her social life again.

"You might be right this time though," she accepted begrudgingly. *Goodbye, dear molasses eyed stranger*, no time for boys. There would be only fantasizing and possibly more dreams, but no real life touching.

"Look, Melinda," Charlie spoke, his tone sincere. "I need you to know that I, *that we*," he looked at Michael, who nodded his agreement, "we may have had those thoughts of *what if*, and *if only*... but we never blamed you. Not once. Like Mom always said, what's done, is done."

"Don't worry. I know that. I really do this time. And I'm done beating myself up about it," she promised. "To be honest, after watching what Emily went through tonight, and how she helped us talk to Mom, and seeing the sacrifices you all make regularly, I realized that even though it might sometimes be a little scary, I help people, and I know that's what Mom and Dad would want me to do."

Charlie stepped forward and hugged her tightly, relieved. For the first time in four years he felt certain his sister had finally forgiven herself. Charlie caught William's eye. He tossed him a tight smile, understanding his relief. There was a strained look in the vampire's gaze. He wondered if it had anything to do with what their mother had told him.

Michael plunked down on a stool, deep in his own struggle. He closed his eyes, shaking his head as if not believing what he was about to say.

"I guess none of us can hold off the inevitable."

Melinda gasped, letting go of Charlie. "You're not going to leave?" she could not help but squeal.

"I can't. Not now. Not with Dad out there, alive somewhere." Michael smirked at Charlie as if to say, *you got your wish*.

"One day, Michael," Charlie told him. "I won't let you be stuck here forever." Charlie resigned to somehow making Michael's wish come true.

Michael took a deep, even breath and turned to his next heavy task. He asked everyone to join him in William's study.

"I'm going to need tissues," Melinda sniffled tears already welling up in her eyes.

Charlie grabbed a box, but took out a few before handing it to her. "Figure I might need a few, too."

"Might as well pass that box along," Michael spoke, his voice wavering as he did. "I'm not sure I can get through it."

"Just take your time, Michael," William spoke tenderly. "We know how difficult this is for you."

Michael then explained what he had seen when he had read Catherine Howard's death and their father's disappearance.

* * * * *

Eva Jordan walked into her summer home. "Dad," she called out.

"In here," he replied.

She followed his voice into the atrium at the back of their summer rental.

Anthony Jordan swiveled in his chair, turning away from a desk strewn with papers and books. He shared his daughter's stark white hair, except for a few silver whiskers scattered across his chin, which only further accentuated the white three-piece suit he donned.

"I have excellent news," Eva said, smugly. "I made contact."

Her father slid off his glasses, smiling faintly in approval. "Faster than I expected," his tone praised.

"Nothing like saving a damsel in distress to move things along."

"Did they suspect anything?"

"No. Not a thing. In fact, the middle one, Michael, has an interest in meeting you. He likes your book."

"Fascinating!" her father said, noticing the bandage on her leg. "What happened?"

"Part of the whole damsel in distress thing, nothing to worry about. I'm sure it's already healed anyway."

Her father looked at his daughter suspiciously.

"I said don't worry didn't I? I covered my bases. I told them you work miracles with healing creams and you'd have my leg healed up in no time."

"It's a darn good thing that's actually true, in case they ever call me on it," he spoke dryly.

"Believe me, we're fine," Eva insisted confidently.

"And the results of the smell test?"

"Charlie's reaction was, well, let's just say I could have wrapped him around my little finger. But it wasn't nearly enough to send him over the edge and make him

turn. You'll have to inject me with a much higher dose if I'm going to get Charlie Howard to transform into a werewolf tomorrow night."

"And here I thought we'd spend months on trial and error," her father exclaimed ecstatically. He poured two glasses of whiskey and handed one to his daughter. He raised his glass, tipping it toward her.

Eva tipped her glass back toward him and took her shot in one swallow, whereas her father just took a sip. She shuddered as the whiskey slipped down her throat, stinging at her insides. She licked her lips greedily and poured another shot.

She left out the part where Charlie's wolf had surfaced, and how she'd struggled to keep her own wolf under control. If Charlie's brother hadn't been there, she might have just let go. Had a little fun. But then Charlie would have found out who she was and her plans would be ruined.

She decided her father did not need to know this part.

And so what? It didn't matter really.

Soon, Charlie Howard would belong to her anyway. It was just an added benefit that her wolf found him appetizing. So why not have a little fun on the side? Eva didn't realize that as she spoke, her eyes had shifted from hazel to yellow. The color of her wolf.

"Make no mistake," she uttered wickedly to her father. "Tomorrow night, that stray pooch is all mine."

* * * * *

Retelling the death reading of his mother had exhausted Michael Howard. It left him feeling empty, and yet overwhelmed. He pulled his jeep into Emily Morgan's driveway. He'd done this a thousand times before, but tonight as he turned off the engine, his heart fluttered up to this throat, his nerves in overdrive.

It was getting late, but Emily sat on a bench on her front porch, a light hanging overhead, an open book in hand. She looked up, hearing his jeep pull in. The book plopped onto the bench and she skipped down to meet him.

"Hi, Michael. Dad just went to bed. You want to walk on the beach a bit?"

He didn't speak his response. Instead, he grabbed her hand, pulled her in, and claimed her lips. For the first time. He hoped, for all time.

Shock washed through her body and she tensed, but with every press of his lips, she relaxed, responding to his declaration. Her arms wrapped around his neck. His enclosed around her hips, nudging her closer.

When he released her a minute later, shock and disbelief swam in her eyes.

He had to catch his breath.

"I should have done that years ago, Emily."

She only nodded slightly in bewildered agreement.

She'd hoped. Always hoped he'd come around. She'd never been in love with any other man.

"Emily, can you ever forgive me for being such an idiot?" He tugged at her lips again, not quite so gently. "When I thought something happened to you," he didn't finish, lost in the sweetness of her lips.

Emily had no words, but a tear formed in her eye, sliding down her cheek.

Michael kissed it away. "I love you, Emily Morgan." The words slipped off his tongue, leaving a trail of relief behind them. He'd finally said it. Finally admitted it. "I fell in love with you the first day we met. I am an *epic* fool for never saying it until now."

She sniffled in a throaty chuckle. "You wanted to leave the Isle."

Still, trying to make everyone else happy. He wanted her to get mad at him. Tell him what a complete loser he'd been. Instead, all that radiated from her was complete understanding and love.

Love for him.

"Emily, I strung you along, just expecting you to always be there, and you were, *are*. I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you." He picked her up and swung her around, leaning her against the side of his jeep. "I love you so much it kills me."

Emily gasped a little, her back pressing into the jeep. The reality of what was happening finally kicking into her befuddled brain. "You're not leaving the Isle?"

"No."

"Because of what you found out, about your dad?"

"Yes, and no. It's," he shook his head in a tight fashion. "Something changed tonight. I don't know how to explain it. It just suddenly feels right to be here. I don't want it to feel right," he admitted. "But it does. This is where I'm supposed to be. Partly because of my dad, partly because of you, partly because of who I am. I guess I'm just giving in. I'm not fighting what I'm supposed to be, or where I'm supposed to be anymore."

Emily leaned in, for the first time taking what she wanted. His lips belonged to her now, and she wasn't going to let them get away.

"I love you, Michael Howard. I know you can already feel it, but I need to say it." She tugged at his lips and he returned the favor.

She tasted of peaches and cream, and now that he'd had a taste of her, he wanted all of her. He wanted to take it slow, but his body betrayed him.

Something crashed inside the Morgan house. It sounded like glass breaking.

Michael and Emily broke apart, Emily's head popping around him to see what had happened.

"Dad?" she called out.

She wiggled out of Michael's grip and ran into the house. Michael followed, worried that Mr. Morgan had injured himself. He didn't always get around so good and he'd fallen once before.

Emily and Michael burst through the front door to see her father attempting to sneak away from an open window back to his room, but he'd knocked over an old glass vase which had shattered during his attempt.

Emily planted her hands on her hips. "What were you doing?"

Her father just shrugged, holding back a grin.

"Oh my God! Were you spying on me?"

"It's sort of my fatherly duty, and, and, well it's about time young man!" he sputtered at Michael. "I was starting to think you were never going to come to your senses!"

Michael had no reply. He could only agree with her father.

"I'm going back to bed. I'll clean up the mess in the morning." He waved it off, grinning at his daughter.

"Uh, huh," she replied, amused. "Night, Dad. Love you."

"Love you too, Darlin'." He shot a look at Michael that warned, *you'd better not hurt my baby girl*. Michael swallowed hard.

It could not have made Mr. Morgan any happier. To see his daughter, a spirit vessel like her mother, with Michael Howard. Especially knowing he was a witch. Someone that could protect his daughter. It was the reason he'd come to the Isle. To protect her.

This wasn't exactly the manner in which he'd expected, but it did an old man's heart good to know she was in capable hands, should she ever need help he couldn't give her. Like today. Without the Howards, he wasn't sure what might have happened to his daughter.

Emily grabbed Michael's hand and they stepped back outside. "Let's go down to the beach. I could use some air." Her mind was stuffed to the hilt with an abundance of thought. She'd just found out she was a spirit vessel, and Michael had finally told her he loved her. It was an *air needed* kind of night.

"You read my mind. Air sounds *perfect*." He wanted nothing more than to walk along the beach, the salty mist covering them, his hand entangled with hers, as it always should have been.

Okay, so he wanted a whole lot more than just her hand in his.

Michael pictured rolling around in the sand, his hands exploring, his lips devouring...

His empathy kept him from acting on it.

Emily was overwhelmed. Madly in love with him, but overwhelmed by the day she'd had. She was vulnerable, and he didn't want their first time together to be during a moment of vulnerability.

He wanted it to be perfect. Memorable. And when she was ready.

He'd been such a jerk, stringing her along all these years. He'd let her set the pace from here on out.

For tonight, with the moon shining brightly over them, a walk down the beach just holding Emily's hand was absolutely everything Michael Howard ever wanted.

