

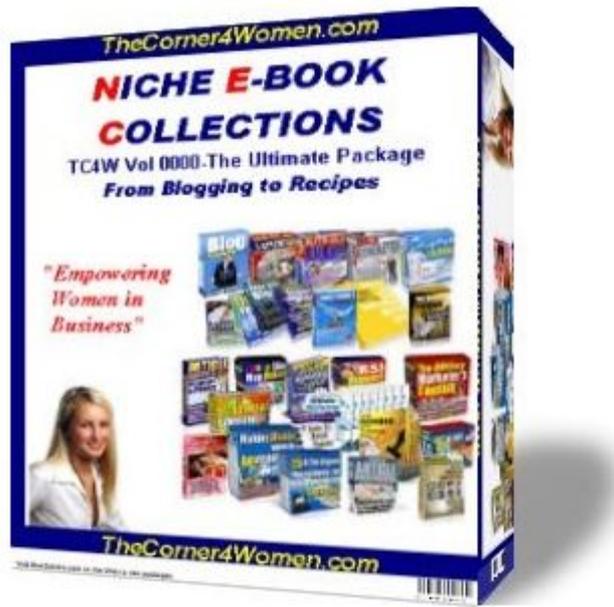
A woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a black leather motorcycle jacket and black pants, stands in a forest. She is holding a long, silver sword upright in her right hand. The background features a city skyline with tall buildings under a dramatic, orange and yellow sky, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is mysterious and action-oriented.

KC KINGMAKER

WHEN THEY
COME FOR US

A BRIARWITCH ACADEMY PREQUEL

When They Come For Us
KC Kingmaker
A Briarwitch Academy
Prequel Story



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By KC Kingmaker
Briarwitch Academy
A Whisper Before Dawn (Book 1)¹



“Dammit, Giddy, stop being such a cockblock,” I hissed, trying to nudge my brother away with my elbow.

Gideon frowned and raised a brow in confusion. “But . . . you don’t have a—”

“Clamjam? Muffin muzzle? Clitorference? It’s a figure of speech, okay?” I snapped, my mind running wild.

“Okay. Ew.” He shook his head.

Archer was the first boy I’d really clicked with in a looong while, since finishing finals and graduating and throwing the terrors of high school behind me.

God, I really wouldn’t miss that place.

I felt like a whole new woman ever since leaving school. It was summer, I was ready for college, but first I had to get my rocks off. I was young, single, and ready to mingle. Full of energy.

I had found out about this party—an end-of-school, end-of-days rager—from my friend Jillian. She told me a bunch of hot guys would be here, including new dudes that hadn’t attended my school, and boy was she right.

The only problem: Gideon was the one with the car. So, I had hesitantly invited him along. I’d told him beforehand that my goal was to get

1. <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08GJNDR8P>

my box stuffed, and his face had screwed up like he'd eaten a ghost pepper and was about to spew.

He said I was just trying to piss off Mom and Dad, and I said, "No, just you," stuck my tongue out at him, and giddily skipped out to the car.

For a guy whose nickname was "Giddy," he was surprisingly . . . not that. But I knew he meant well. He was just overprotective.

At the party, I had quickly bumped into Archer. He was a tall skinny boy with sad eyes, a low voice, and a mysterious allure I couldn't put my finger on. All I knew is I wanted to run my hands through his thick curly hair and pull on it while he made love to me and moaned in my ear like "*Dawn, oh my God you feel sooo good*" and—

I wasn't always this horny. And excitable. But I guess I was just happy that school was over *forever* and I was *free* and the next chapter of my life was open to me and as bright as the sun!

After grabbing drinks from the keg in the corner of the living room, Archer and I had snuck off outside, where some kids were playing beer pong and there was a nice backyard where we could roam around under the starry night, learning about each other before we sucked face and hopefully more.

The nighttime wind was just right in Southern California. I couldn't stop staring into those big sad pools he called eyes—a whole cosmos of intelligence and curiosity just beaming in there.

And then, right as Archer and I started really hitting it off, Gideon came over like a total beaver dam and shut the whole operation down! Goddammit!

Like any responsible, boring big brother, he started asking Archer all these *questions*. To me, they sounded more like accusations, like, "Where are you from?" and "Did your family just move here?" and "Haven't seen you around these parts before."

I had the urge to tell him, "I think he passes the serial killer litmus test, Giddy," but I refrained.

And now, as Archer wandered off with our red Solo cups to pour us some more beers, I was trying to get Gideon to scam.

“What about that one?” I said to my brother, pointing to a girl playing beer pong.

She was absolutely terrible at the game, but her smile lit up that side of the yard and every time she threw the ball her whole curvy body jiggled and her big tits bounced in her low-slung tee and everyone slyly glanced over as she let out a cute laugh. She was trying to act like she didn’t know how much she was turning on the guys around her, but come on—

We’re women, not dumbasses. We know what we’re doing.

The guy on her team and the two boys on the opposite side of the table kept rearranging their crotches and abashedly looking away after getting caught peeking, and all I could think was, *Damn, I would kill for some hooters like that.*

“What about her?” Gideon asked, raising a brow.

I sighed. “She’s cute! And she’s surrounded by loser try-hards. Come on, stop being so serious and go get her!”

His head lurched back, like it was blasphemous that I’d even *suggest* he go actually *talk* to a girl.

And it’s not like my brother was Nosferatu. He was handsome and bulky, with strong arms and a no-nonsense face.

I think it was that no-nonsense part that held him back.

I was trying to give him confidence, but my main goal was to get him to *fuck off* because Archer had finished pouring the beers and was heading back! Shit!

“I—what? I don’t know about that, Dawn, she’s in the middle of a game and—”

“Excuses are like assholes, broham,” I said, putting my hands on his back and pushing him forward. “Just go be yourself!”

He turned to me. “Really?”

I frowned. “Uh. No. Actually. Be someone else.”

“But—”

“Look, Giddy,” I said, gesturing at the pretty girls that dotted the backyard like trees in a forest. “There’s a whole harem at your disposal here, and you’re over here haranguing your little sister. How do you think that looks?”

My hands went back to his shoulders and I grunted as I tried to push him away, but he was like an immovable fucking elephant.

“Yeah, but you know I’m not great at this whole thing . . .”

I growled, and when he looked over his shoulder at me I beamed at him. “Go! Be free my little tadpole! Explore the big wide pond!”

And then he was shuffling off, fidgeting awkwardly—it was pretty adorable, actually. He had completely forgotten about Archer, and the tall, lanky glass of nectar started walking toward me once he saw chaste Brother Gideon leaving my side.

Archer smirked as he approached, flashing some perfectly white teeth. He handed me my Solo cup and pulled the sleeves of his button-down up to his elbows to expose some glorious forearms.

God, it was so hot when a guy did that. Especially when you had perfectly sculpted forearms like Archer—which were much bigger and more vascular than I thought they’d be given his slender frame. In fact, I noticed with enthusiastic glee as he wrapped his fingers around his cup, he seemed to have some pretty big hands, too . . .

He stood beside me and we both stared out at the zoo of partiers—the beer pong players; the group on the patio next to them chatting and smoking; the kids inside cutting the rug to some thumping trap music.

“What’d you do to get him to bail?” he asked without turning to me.

I tore my eyes away from his beautiful hands, blushing, and jutted my chin toward the beer pong table. “Told him the big-titted bimbo over there wanted to fuck him.”

Archer broke into a huge laugh, throwing his head back, and it was contagious enough to make me start chuckling.

“W-Wait,” he stuttered, trying to get control of himself and turning to me. “Are you serious? Does she?”

I shrugged. “He’ll never know until he tries to talk to her, right?”

Archer stopped laughing, took a sip of his beer, and stared down at me over the rim of the cup. When his cup lowered, he was looking me square in the face, with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Butterflies somersaulted in my stomach.

Oh, shit, I know that dreamy look.

“You’re a good sister, Dawn Rose,” he murmured, his voice thick and gravelly.

I frowned, but maintained eye contact. “No, I’m really not. But he’s a good brother.”

We both glanced over at the table and, to my delight, Gideon was chatting the girl up! He was talking with his hands, but his nervousness was wholesome and precious and it was making the girl smile and laugh and my heart soared.

When I turned back to Archer with a warm smile on my face, I saw that he’d been staring at me the whole time.

“Nah,” he said seriously, “you really are.”

He paused for a beat and time seemed to stand still.

I cleared my throat, feeling tears sting the corners of my eyes. I don’t think I’d ever been called a “good sister” before.

This freaking handsome stranger was about to make me cry.

I blinked rapidly, smiling sheepishly at him and taking a sip of beer just to give myself a moment.

“C-Can we stop talking about my brother?” I asked in a meek voice.

His smile wavered. “Uh, sure. What do you want to talk about instead?”

My eyes narrowed mischievously. “Nothing.”

Then I went on my tiptoes and kissed him.



“I WANT YOU, ARCHER,” I moaned, cupping the boy’s gaunt face in both hands. His cheeks sunk inward as he puckered his lips and kissed me, our tongues swirling and dancing. A surge of endorphins shot through my body, like a long-lost friend I’d forgotten all about.

We kissed passionately. Hard. Like our lives depended on it. Like this was the last bang either of us would participate in.

We were upstairs in a vacant bedroom, while the party raged below. The heavy bass thudded through the floor and we could hear loud voices outside the window, above the bed, where the festivities continued into the wee hours of the night.

I was feeling tipsy and warm. My head was buzzing with lewdness, but I couldn’t hold a coherent thought. One second I was wondering if Gideon was doing all right—if he was worried sick that I’d disappeared. Then I was thinking about what Archer’s cock looked like, and how it would feel inside me. Then I was debating whether to get a burrito at a drive-through spot on the way home, or just go to bed hungry.

Hopefully I’d be fulfilled after Archer was done with me.

He parted from my lips and my face nearly chased his. A string of saliva detached from my lip and reached to his like a web.

“But you don’t even know me,” he said in a strangled voice, a slight smirk on his face.

I didn’t care. I had total tunnel vision. The curve of his lips—the upper lip looking like the top of a heart—was enough to make me want to devour him. I would deal with the repercussions later.

My hand ventured down to his thigh. We both sat on the edge of the bed, side by side. I could feel the warmth of his body heat through his jeans, the muscles of his thigh flexing from my touch.

My hand slid along that toned leg and felt for a different appendage on the inside of his thigh. The outline of his cock bulged into my palm and I rubbed it, drawing a choked groan from the young man.

I smiled at him and said, “I don’t care,” and then reclined back onto the bed.

He stood up, standing over me with that mysterious smirk. From my view below him the outline of his hardness was even more egregious and impressive, straining his skinny jeans, leaving little to the imagination, protruding down his right thigh.

“Wow,” I mumbled. “Fuck.” Tingles ran up my spine and I bit my bottom lip.

His smirk grew into a smile as he unbuckled his belt and zipped down his pants, leaving me on the edge of my seat. While I watched him with unadulterated awe, I hiked myself up on my elbows.

I reached into my pants and started playing with myself, feeling the slickness between my tender lips that made my panties damp. I made a seductive face for him, scrunching my brows just so, and moaned.

He started to pull his pants down, revealing the thick, smooth base of his cock—made even bigger by his slender frame.

My heart jackhammered behind my ribs and my mouth fell open—
A piercing cry split the night.

The scream sent my heart soaring into my throat, my eyes bulging even wider.

Archer’s pants immediately went up. I was selfish enough to curse the unlucky interruption, denying me the trophy that he had been about to whip out and ravage me with.

The sticky hand I had shoved down my pants shot up to my chest, falling over my breasts in sudden panic as I felt my heartbeat pick up to an even faster rhythm.

I held my breath, then started to say, “W-What—”

Another scream, clear as night, coming from the backyard. I rolled over and crawled across the bed. Archer joined me once he had himself resituated.

The energetic music still blaring inside was a brutal contrast to the scene playing out in the backyard.

Partiers were being forcefully separated. The beer pong table was upside-down, legs sticking up like a dying animal. Chaos had broken out. I figured a drunk fight had started.

My first thought: *Oh no, is Gideon involved?!*

But then I saw two figures mowing through the partiers, splitting them up and pushing them aside roughly. I didn't recognize these two men.

"Fuck," Archer muttered under his breath.

Apparently, he did.

One brave soul approached one of the strangers and put a hand on the man's shoulder to stop him from his determined march toward the sliding door leading inside.

The stranger spun around in an instant, and the audible crunch of the partier's hand being broken was loud enough to hear upstairs.

I yelped as the young man was kicked aside, crumpling to the ground.

One of the strangers—a tall man with ripped muscles and a buzz-cut—made it inside the house, disappearing from my view. He looked far too old to be in a party full of late-teens, like he was a retired SEAL or UFC fighter.

Archer grabbed my hand, turning me away from the window before I could witness more chaos unfold.

"Dawn, come on, we have to go!"

I gazed up at him and, to my dismay, saw that he looked even more scared than I felt.

"W-Who are those people, Archer?!"

He yanked me up from the bed. "I'll explain later."

We rushed over to the door and he swung it open. Down the hall and to the right, I could see a shadow on the wall—a silhouette of a man's body, gaining the stairs.

Archer slammed the door shut, cursed some more, and threw me back toward the bed, behind him. "Stay right there," he growled, and I thought I saw his eyes flash amber.

Stunned into disbelief, I simply nodded like a simpleton. He positioned himself to the side of the door, and I opened my mouth to ask what the hell he was doing—

The door crashed open—an angry white mug fixated on me, a tattoo mucking up the side of his face.

Fear struck my heart and I fell back, sitting my ass on the bed. My hands slapped my face and I unleashed a scream.

The man bounded in toward me.

Archer swooped in from the side, swinging his arms down, looping them around the man's bulkier bicep. He twisted near the elbow.

A *crunch*, a grunt, and the SEAL-looking motherfucker swung with his other arm.

Ducking low, Archer dodged the blow. The fist battered the wall above his head, sinking into the wall itself and sending plaster chips cascading down on the boy who had been ready to fuck me just thirty seconds earlier.

Archer kned him in the nuts, then pulled back with his right fist, roaring like a primal animal.

The SEAL's eyes went wide as he doubled over and instinctively grabbed his crotch.

Archer launched a devastating punch—I could hear the thudding impact from where I sat—and the bad guy literally *flew* across the hall, landing hard on his back about five feet away.

Archer turned to me, and now I definitely saw something in his eyes—a yellow flare and a snarl on his jaw that screwed up his features. The softness from his face was gone, and every fiber of his being seemed to flex, the veins on his beautiful forearms bulging.

"I'm sorry, Dawn."

Then he was sprinting right toward me and I held my breath.

I fell onto my back, shielding my face with my hands.

Archer launched over my prone body like an animal, on all fours, and with a deafening crash he shot right through the second-story window.

His shadow streamed over me and the bed as he jumped, and then sharp glass was raining down on the covers behind me.

I sat up on my elbows, confusion and anger fighting for dominance in my head. Down the hall, the prone bad guy was getting up, groaning and growling as he rose to his feet.

And Archer had just left me with him. Alone.

“Son of a *bitch*,” I said aloud, but I felt much meeker than my fury made me sound.

The man ran into the room. I screamed again.

Never mind the other thought roaming around my head—that there’s no way someone could make that jump through a window and land on the concrete patio without breaking an ankle.

That Archer was probably a wailing mess downstairs, legs snapped as he writhed in pain.

Serves him right, leaving me with—

The man’s dark eyes glanced at me with an alien expression. When he came to me, I shouted, “W-Wait, please!”

He shoved me off the bed, to the side.

I fell onto the carpet and rolled, and when I looked back up the man had broken through the rest of the shattered glass and was gone.

“Oh.” I heaved, exhaling slowly.

I mean, of course. Here I thought the guy was going to try to attack me or worse—but it was obvious he wasn’t here for me.

Archer had done me a solid by fleeing, knowing the guy would follow him and leave me alone.

Footsteps sounded and my eyes darted over just as Gideon bolted into the room and struck a defensive stance.

He saw me on the floor and his face lit up with panic. “D-Dawn! Are you okay?!”

He rushed over to me, but I was already helping myself up. “Y-Yes,” I managed to say, and then I gingerly crawled over to the bed.

I peeked into the wide hole in the wall—where the window had been shattered—and the breeze of the night sky cascaded into my face.

In the distance, I saw two figures sprinting into the darkness, jumping over fences and inadvertently turning on floodlights from other houses. A third figure—from the party—dashed away in pursuit as he saw them take off.

Within seconds, all three of them were gone, blipped into the night. They had been running faster than any human should've been able to go.

And that's when I realized it:

“Because they aren't human.”



UP UNTIL THAT FRIGHTFUL moment, the supernaturals in our town had been the stuff of fables and legends—like a global disease that rips through the world, yet you tell yourself you'll never get it. You'll be the safe one.

Supernatural beings . . . humans . . . whatever they were—they were something I never thought I'd see.

We heard about them on the news. We learned that they had started populating our cities, mingling with humans in a peaceful way. At least that's how the news portrayed it.

They had seemingly come from nowhere.

One day the world was how I remembered it, and the next day there were shifters and fae and vampires and nightmarish fairytale people inundating our country.

It was like an alien invasion, but political bigwigs quickly held press conferences to tell us that we weren't in danger—that they came in peace and we had nothing to worry about. We should go on with our lives, as if they never existed.

Yeah, right.

You can't just one day tell everyone in the world that Pandora's Box is *real*, and then *open it*, and then try to convince everyone that it was all just a funny ha-ha magic trick.

The day the supernaturals were announced—the day they made “first contact”—stock markets worldwide crashed. People thought it was the end of days.

But then the chaos sort of . . . mellowed. Things *did* go back to normal. Economies rebounded. The world *did* continue as if they were never even there.

But now, there was always that nagging at the back of everyone's mind—a collective stressor that weighed on every living being:

Who are they?

What do they want?

Why are they here?

Where did they come from?

. . . And when will they come for us?

It was a terrifying thought—the five Ws for a supernatural apocalypse.

The politicians on the tube hit us with smiles and shrugs and good-natured laughs. But I didn't believe it for a minute.

We didn't—my family.

Lunch was a quiet affair the next day with my fam, all four of us huddled around the little table at our house. Like a good little snitch, Gideon had told Mom and Dad about the party from the night before.

My head ached from a hangover, and my shoulder was sore from when I'd been tossed aside off the bed. As I nibbled on my ham sandwich, the hangover started to dwindle, but I still wasn't feeling too talkative.

I couldn't stop thinking about Archer, wondering if he'd made his escape, or if he was even now captured and held hostage by some Bond villain, in some dingy motel room or basement.

The thought nearly brought me to tears. But then I thought, *Shit, what's wrong with you, Dawn? Why do you care about this guy so much? He even said it himself. . . we barely know each other.*

Last night could've easily turned into a one-night stand before Archer ghosted me, and then I'd never think about him again.

But it *hadn't* turned into a one-night stand. It had turned into something much more real—more surreal, to be honest.

I never expected to be involved with someone who was . . . wanted. Was Archer a criminal? Was *he* actually the “bad guy” in this situation, and the mean men from the night before his valiant captors?

I couldn't come to terms that that was a possibility.

And then again, my “involvement,” if it could even be called that, was rather insignificant thus far.

I would probably never see him again.

Our yellow Lab Scotty came up to the table and hid beside my chair. I was his favorite, because he knew I'd always give him scraps.

As Mom and Dad started to talk to Gideon about the night before, I tuned them out and ripped off some bread crust to toss to my bestie.

Scotty smiled at me, tongue lolling, and wagged his tail as he snuffed up the food from my hand.

“Your brother's right, you know, Dawn,” my mom said. Judy Rose had the same chocolate hair as me, curly and bouncy on her shoulders. She was just past forty, but didn't look a day over thirty. My dad, Roger, was the assistant to the Homeland Security Officer of our town, so he was kind of a big shot. He didn't participate in our family's petty squabbles very often.

I looked up from Scotty and noticed everyone staring at me. “About what?” I asked, making it clear I hadn't been listening.

Gideon groaned. “That the guy from last night is bad news. Obviously, I don't need to tell you that. You were there.”

Rage flared inside me. “Obviously,” I said through gritted teeth.

But it wasn't obvious. Yes, Archer might have been different and mysterious, but that was part of his allure. I desperately wanted to know more about him, and if I was being honest, the way the night ended only made me want him more . . .

Being a vigilante, or a bank robber, or whatever—it was hot.

But I knew he was more than that. I just didn't want to admit it to myself, or my family.

I narrowed my eyes on Gideon, feeling petty. "And what about *your* little fling, Giddy? Did you tell Mom and Dad about that?"

He looked struck, head lurching back. "M-Me?" he said innocently. "You mean Marie? You *told* me to go talk to her!"

I scowled at him, baring my teeth. "I didn't think you actually would."

Feeling that he had the high ground, he looked haughty and it pissed me off even more. "Marie is a sweet, normal girl—"

"She's a bimbo, bro."

"Hey," Mom snapped, "don't tear other women down like that, Dawn. What have I taught you? You should be happy for your brother."

I had the grace to look shamefaced, but I didn't feel it. The rage was still percolating inside me. Obviously, since I had no defense against Gideon's accusations, I was trying to bring him down with me.

It made me feel a bit guilty.

"And besides," Gideon said, reveling in his momentary power, "it wasn't Marie who jumped out of a second-story window and ran off into the night like Usain Bolt."

"That part is a bit disconcerting," my dad said with a frown. His elbows were triangulated around his plate, hands steepled, and he looked deep in thought.

"Yeah, well, it should be," Gideon continued. "I asked around. Apparently that guy's name is Archer Rockford."

I raised a brow, as if that meant anything to me. But a look of surprise flashed across Dad's face. He stood up from the table and we all looked up at him—the patriarch of our family.

“Your brother is correct,” he said in a raspy voice, “you need to stay away from that young man, Dawn.”

“Why?”

He sighed. “The Rockfords are a powerful family—a powerful *new* family that has infiltrated the city's politics. They can't be trusted.”

He began to walk away, but that one cryptic comment wasn't good enough for me. I leaped up from my seat, nearly knocking over my chair in my sudden fury. “What the hell do you mean ‘they can't be trusted,’ Dad? Come on! You're all being paranoid!”

Dad spun on me, his piercing eyes burning a hole through my soul. I'd never seen him look so perturbed and angry before—he had always been a gentle, mellow soul, if not a bit stern.

“I mean exactly what I said, Dawn!” he snapped. “Archer Rockford is one of *them*.”



I SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN too surprised to learn that Archer was a supernatural. I mean, at this point it was either that or an Olympic gymnast. Or a ninja.

No normal person could have launched a guy five feet with a punch, and then crashed through a window, landed effortlessly on concrete, and sped off like the cartoon Roadrunner.

That night, I was in my room reading Stephen King's *The Stand*, because it seemed like pertinent reading material given the way the world was going.

A tap at my window startled me. I was on the second floor of my house, so nothing should've been tapping on my damn window.

I got up and then hesitated. When I threw open the curtains, I had to cover my mouth to keep from yelping.

Archer was staring at me with his glorious peepers, but at least they weren't flashing yellow or amber. I would've had a heart attack.

I cracked the window and hissed, "W-What are you doing here? How the hell do you know where I live? Have you been . . . stalking me?!"

He smirked—the same endearing, nonchalant confidence that he portrayed the night before, as if he hadn't been running from vigilante justice warriors all day. "Your dad's a bigwig at Town Hall, Dawn. It wasn't hard to find out."

I sighed, then looked over my shoulder to make sure my bedroom door was locked. "I . . . I can't let you come in here. If my family found out, they'd have my head. And yours."

"I know." He paused, his eyes squinting. "Come with me, then."

I made a strangled sound in my throat. I wanted him something fierce. "I can't just waltz out my front door this late in the evening without drawing attention, man."

"Then grab on."

I gave him a look, like, *Are you fucking kidding me?*

"Please," he said, and I saw the desperation in his eyes. "I need to talk to you."

And hopefully more.

I didn't argue. Gulping, I opened my window wider and crept out onto the slanted rooftop. I felt like I was in high school again, sneaking out past my bedtime after being confined to my room like a prisoner, with Archer as my only means of escape.

The prince who had come to rescue his damsel in distress.

He turned and hunched over, and said, "Grab on."

"W-Where?" I asked. My eyes roamed around his slender, fit form, and I wanted to grip those hips or slap his firm butt.

He indicated his shoulders, and I felt slightly disappointed.

When I had a firm grasp, with my arms circled around his neck, I wrapped my legs around his waist . . . because I couldn't help myself.

He chuckled, then dashed off into the night. His hands reached back to cup under my bum, to hold me in place, and it felt strangely erotic.

I nearly screamed as we went weightless in the air, the wind whistling past me. I clenched my eyes shut and we landed on the ground hard, but I wasn't jostled or hurt whatsoever.

Then he was sprinting across the front yard and Archer's hands seemed to squeeze my ass tighter.

I couldn't help but grind up against him, noticing that my sex flared with renewed life. I made the mistake of groaning in his ear as my slickness rubbed against his spine.

And then I was bouncing on his back and that wasn't helping things any. My nipples hardened through my shirt and they stabbed into his shoulder blades.

It was the lewdest piggyback ride of my life.

By the time we reached a park nearby, I was panting more than he was, and I hadn't even moved my legs. He lowered his body and set me down, and I nearly buckled from wobbly knees.

The park had a purple sheen from the bright moon overhead. We were on a flat meadow, but it quickly became hilly in the distance. I walked Scotty around these parts often, through the trails. But at midnight, the place was silent, with only the chirping of hidden insects and the rustling of the wind to break the quiet.

An empty bench awaited us nearby.

"What are you?" I asked without preamble, gaining control over my burgeoning horniness. At least for the moment. "My dad seems to think you're . . . one of them."

"Them?" he asked, turning to me with a frown.

"Yes, the . . . Others."

He sat on the bench, spreading his legs and placing his hands in his lap. "Pretty uncreative name, Dawn. Might as well call us illegal immigrants."

My eyes didn't waver from him, ignoring his sarcasm.

He sighed. “Yeah, I guess your dad’s right.”

Shock rippled through me. “He is?!”

“I’m assuming you’ve learned my surname,” he said, and when I nodded he continued. “The Rockfords are a rather powerful shifter clan, Dawn. I don’t want there to be any secrets between us.”

Great. So there it was.

I didn’t believe his ‘no secrets’ bullshit, though. I didn’t know *nearly* enough about this guy to have that kind of trust, but I still couldn’t help myself from being drawn to him. I was ambling toward the bench.

Toward Archer. Toward my destiny.

Or at least another hot makeout session.

“And who were those guys from last night?”

“Bounty hunters from my clan.”

I slanted my head. “What? Your own people were trying to capture you?”

He chuckled and turned away. “I guess you could call me a bit of a vagabond. A maverick shifter. I don’t agree with my family’s plan of action.”

As I neared him, a cold seed was starting to sprout inside me and settle. “And what plan of action would that be?”

He frowned. I could tell he was ashamed. “It’s not my place to say, Dawn. I’m sorry. Just know that I have nothing against you people.”

“*You people?!*” I sneered, anger rushing through me. I really needed to learn to keep a lid on my temper.

When he looked up at me, I saw that his eyes were big and wet, like he was fighting back tears. It killed my rage in a nanosecond, like flames drenched with water.

I couldn’t complain—I was the one who accused him of being “one of them” just moments earlier.

“That’s not why I needed to talk to you, though,” he said, his voice suddenly low and choked. “It’s about you.”

I was just inches from his spread knees. I could have wriggled my way between his legs right then, cupped his gorgeous face in my hands, and shut him up by leaning over and claiming his mouth.

Even sitting on the bench, he was almost as tall as me, so I wouldn't have to do much leaning over . . . unless he wanted me to . . .

But I paused and stood still before him.

"What about me?" I asked, my voice a squeak in my own head. A resounding beat was thrumming in my chest, the blood rushing to my ears.

He seemed nervous. Biting his bottom lip in an oh-so-sexy way, he said, "There's . . . something different about you, Dawn. I noticed last night. You're . . . not like other girls."

I resisted rolling my eyes, but still scoffed.

"You're just saying that to get in my pants, Archer."

A sly smirk flashed. "Is it working?"

My resolve melted then, at seeing that smirk.

I pushed myself forward and did exactly as I'd thought, my hands gliding across the tops of his legs as I squeezed into him and planted my knee at the base of his crotch.

"I'll show you," I muttered.



WE STARTED WHERE WE'D left off, before we'd been so rudely interrupted last night. Despite Gideon's warnings and the parental units' scolding, I couldn't keep myself away.

Even if Archer Rockford had never come looking for me that night, I probably would have tried to find him.

I'm just being honest.

And my truthfulness showed as he took me in his arms and wrapped the strong, wiry appendages over my body, squeezing my breasts into his hard body.

I felt warm as our bodies mingled so close together, and I could smell a salty sea breeze wafting off him.

He grinded against me as I bent my head and tilted his upward by his chin, then enveloped his mouth with my own. With me standing over him, I felt like the dominant one for once, and it gave me a sense of power that I had trouble relinquishing.

It was causing a molten stream to rush to the apex between my thighs. I could feel the hardness in his jeans, straining against his pants as he groaned in my mouth, the bulge throbbing against my engorged lips and clit.

“F-Fuck, Archer,” I moaned, then kissed him some more—on his lips, cheeks, forehead, and ears.

He nibbled on my earlobe, before taking the whole thing in his mouth. “Do you still want me, Dawn? Like before?”

I grunted and couldn’t pull away. “Even more.”

One of his hands caressed my front, sliding underneath my shirt and groping my breasts. He played with my hard nipples and had me like putty in his hands, free for him to mold as he wished.

When that hand slid down my tummy and into my pants, past my pelvic bone . . . I didn’t try to stop him.

Two slender, magical fingers massaged my wet pussy before plunging knuckles-deep inside me.

I let out a ragged moan as the wind kissed my neck, lighting up the place where his wet lips had been.

If it wasn’t for his other arm wrapped around my ass, keeping me close in place, I would have collapsed into a pool at his feet. He held me up and I leaned forward, resting my chin on the top of his head as he began rubbing me and prodding me masterfully. His curls tickled my face.

Archer’s thumb circled around my throbbing clit and I felt drool dribbling out the corners of my mouth.

“M-More,” I groaned, closing my eyes and hugging his head against my bosom. “I need . . . more than that.”

He withdrew his fingers and my fluids leaked down my inner thighs. I was already close to a massive orgasm, but he smartly brought me to the edge of the cliff and then pulled back—denying me oblivion.

With his hand free and sticky, he gently started lowering my pants. I probably wasn't capable of doing it myself—not in that moment.

When my pants ringed my ankles, I stepped out of them. The wind was chilly against my bare legs. My thin, lacy panties weren't doing much to keep my butt warm, either.

I debated looking over my shoulder to make sure we had no Peeping Toms, but I couldn't turn away from him. I felt like a dirty exhibitionist, being undressed in this empty, public park.

And it only turned me on even more.

Once I was free, I bent down and ran a hand over his thigh, over the bulging outline. He groaned, and I started unzipping his pants for him.

He lifted his butt a little off the bench, and with a quickness he yanked his jeans down to his thighs—

Archer's thick, velvety cock sprang out as his pants went down to his knees. It swung toward my face like a hammer before whipping back and smacking his stomach with a fleshy clap.

The sight and sound sent a new wave of bliss cycling through me. My eyes widened as his hard length wobbled in the air, as stiff as diamonds.

I said nothing, but the impression his big dick was having on me was unmistakable. I wrapped a hand around its girth, reveling in the heat it put off and the smoothness of his shaft. Veins protruded as it throbbed in place, jutting up from his lap.

Suddenly, Archer's hands clutched the base of my curvy ass cheeks and he pulled up. I let out a giddy yelp as he firmly grabbed hold of me and hoisted me up.

His knees came together slightly—not enough to squish his fat balls, but enough so I could part my legs and straddle him.

My breath caught in my throat as I slid my panties aside and then wrapped my arms around his neck.

He lowered me onto his lap—

His cock breached my sacred place and buried deep inside me. My eyes bulged at the sudden impact and the feeling of fullness that pulsed up to my belly.

I was already wet like a river, which helped the heavenly organ slide easily into me, despite its girth.

My walls expanded, pushed aside by his size, and I let out a choking gasp, my mouth falling open so the bottom of my jaw rested against his head. I breathed heavily and kissed his forehead, then squeezed his face tighter and took fistfuls of curly hair in either hand.

A great need swelled inside me—to be held, cared for, and loved. He rocked me back and forth on top of him, embedding his hands in my buttocks with desperation that told me he needed the same things.

With silent mastery he worked, and our bodies grew sweaty and cold in the chilly air, but that heart of heat deep in my core never left my body.

For a moment while we made love, I felt as though our minds were connected as one, that I could see myself through his eyes—devouring my essence, filling my need.

His body jerked on the bench and I writhed on top of him, melting away to the ecstasy of the night.

I gasped and cradled him, hugging his body while I lifted and descended onto his shaft, that hot spear piercing and lighting up my insides.

I rode him hard, eager to devour every inch of his throbbing length.

It only took me a few minutes to come, but it felt like an eon of grunting and loving.

My body tensed, muscles clenching around his girth, and I let out a low drawl as the orgasm pulsed through me, rising up to my stomach and spreading to my extremities.

Almost as quickly, he groaned and I felt his member grow inside me, bulging and ready for release.

“I-Inside,” I stuttered, at a loss for any other words.

"I . . . c-can't," he grunted in my ear, and then he was lifting me. The solid column of flesh withdrawing left me gaping and cold and heaving—His hips bucked and the park bench creaked.

"Why not?" I asked, stumbling backward, my knees weak and unwieldy. I'd never heard of a man turning *that* proposition down.

I looked down to watch his cock explode in a torrent of steaming hot seed, his thick cum flowing around his cockhead like a volcano, before trickling down his thighs and balls.

He leaned back against the bench, deflating and exhaling loudly as his wet cock toppled over onto his leg.

He looked at me sternly, before stuffing himself in his pants. "It's . . . my people, Dawn."

My eyes narrowed.

"To do something like that . . . would be to claim you as my own. As my mate." He looked away, unable to hold eye contact any longer.

"And you . . . don't want me as your mate?" My voice sounded weak, and it pissed me off. My temper was rising already, despite the lovely time we'd just had.

His eyes shot over to me, flashing yellow. "N-No, it's not that! I just . . . don't want to put you in that position. It's not fair to you, see? Within my clan, a mate is for life. You should always have a choice."

I breathed deeply. My body was returning to normal. "I made my choice when I stepped out of my window, Archer. When I . . . climbed onto you." Although, I had to admit, a lifetime sentence with one man was pretty brazen. A big deal.

"I just don't want you to regret anything." He blinked, and I could see the torment on his face—the conflict vying, wondering if we'd done the right thing.

It certainly felt right at the time.

"I'm bad news, Dawn," he finished, frowning with sadness and staring at the ground.

My skin prickled with goose bumps.

Just as my brother and father had said.

He's bad news, Dawn.

And yet, even with all the red flags and warnings . . .

I still didn't want to believe them.



IT ALL HAPPENED SO fast. The change. The shift.

One minute, I was practically picking petals from a flower, singing, “He loves me, he loves me not.” The next minute, my world irreparably changed.

Over the next few days, I didn't see Archer much. It was like he was avoiding me, becoming distant. I took Scotty for walks to the park near our house, ran my eyes over that park bench, and replayed the torrid love affair that had happened there.

I thought Archer wanted me.

But now, I wasn't so sure.

I was walking up a rolling hill one day, Scotty streaming by me in a gleeful gallop, when I saw a shadow out the corner of my eye in the trees.

Startled, I spun. Scotty came to a halt and gave the tree line a menacing growl.

Branches jostled, and then Archer stepped out of the shadows with his hands raised.

My lips pursed, eyes narrowing.

“Where have *you* been?” I asked, my voice filled with spite. I rested my fists on my hips.

“I'm sorry things haven't worked out between us, Dawn,” he started.

I scoffed. “Not for lack of trying,” I spat. “At least on my part.”

“I know,” he said, sighing. “I made a mistake. We shouldn't have . . . done what we did.”

“I just wish this wishy-washy attitude had shown up to begin with. You seemed so certain about me just a few days ago, Archer.” It hurt to say, but it needed to be said.

His abashed flip-flopping hurt me.

Then, I noticed, it hurt him, too.

His eyes looked sunken, pushed back in his skull. He had dark bags underneath them, and every once in a while his eyes flashed yellow in a chaotic way. It was like he was trying to keep control of himself, but losing the internal battle.

My face softened at the obvious struggle that played across his features, unhidden.

Is he . . . losing his mind?

“You’re right, of course,” he said, nodding sadly. When he looked up at me, he seemed on the verge of tears, blinking them back. “Now do you see why I had to give you the choice? Why I couldn’t . . . release inside you?”

I blushed. *Okay, that had been the heat of the moment*, I told myself.

“No, Archer,” I said flatly. “I don’t see anything. Because I don’t know anything. You’re still as much of a mystery to me as you were the first night we met.”

“And I’m sorry I can’t change that.”

I sighed. I was getting tired of this runaround. Not to mention, his voice sounded . . . off. Sterner, without any of that magical vibe from before.

His words weren’t setting my libido on fire, like they had the first few times we’d interacted.

Something drastic had changed.

Probably with his family, I thought.

“Is that it, then?” I asked, hands going to my hips again. “Did you stalk me out here to tell me . . . whatever it is you’re trying to tell me?”

He shook his head fervently. “I came to give you a warning, Dawn.”

I was taken aback. “A *warning*?”

“You’re not safe here any longer. I’m sorry it has to be this way, but you must believe me. Your family . . . you all need to leave.”

I narrowed my eyes again, trying to study him, looking for any evidence of a crack in his façade—looking for deceitfulness.

And, if I was honest with myself, I saw it everywhere.

He was cracking all over—from his uncontrollable flashing eyes, to his twitchy hands, his nervous expression, the purple bags under his eyes . . . it was like the slender, confident young shifter I had met at that house party was gone.

A deep sadness welled within me.

“I don’t know what to believe,” I said in barely more than a whisper. I cleared my throat. “But I guess this is goodbye, Archer.”



THE CHANGE, as I called it, started a few days later.

It came in the form of a sudden announcement on the news, from the mayor of the city. Right before dinnertime—when most families would be gathered at home and watching TV—all other programming stopped to show the public announcement.

Mayor Thomas was an older man who smiled a lot. It was a shifty smile, but it set most people at ease.

This was different.

The mayor came out looking disheveled. Worried. His eyes darted from camera to camera, unable to focus.

He smiled, but it was a shaky, unconvincing smile.

“Fellow citizens,” he began, “I just wanted to come on to note a change in my administration. Now, this isn’t anything you should be worried about, but as your elected representative, I feel obligated to tell you what’s going on behind the scenes.”

He shifted his weight in front of the podium, hiding his hands under the lectern.

“Effective this morning, I have released my primary advisor and friend, Les Champion. As Les’ name suggests, he has been a champion to the people for many years.” He flashed that awkward smile.

Yes, Mr. Mayor, it's literally the slogan you guys ran on years ago.

“My new chief officer is another bright, dedicated individual, who I hope you all will come to appreciate, as I have. I know he will have to work to earn your trust, and to do that, I’ve invited him here to speak to you today.”

The mayor leaned in to the microphone. “Mr. Rockford, would you please say a few words?”

My chest tightened. I stifled a gasp and glanced over at my family, all gathered—Gideon on the loveseat, Dad and Mom on the couch, and myself on the ottoman to the far left.

I saw that Dad’s forehead was etched with angry, concerned creases. He was leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

I knew this was bad news because Dad didn’t even pay this much attention to the tube when the Rams or Dodgers were playing. And that was, like, his life.

So, the fact that he was leaning forward—literally on the edge of his seat—was highly disconcerting.

A slick-looking man stepped forward, and I immediately recognized the familiarity. He was the spitting image of Archer, with the same slender build and lanky arms, tall stature that put him head and shoulders above the mayor—except he looked about twice the age of Archer. His curly locks were graying at the temples, but he still looked sharp and undeniably handsome.

A silver fox in truth.

He angled the microphone so he didn’t have to stoop so low as the mayor. Clearing his throat, he then spoke in a syrupy, calming voice.

“Hello, my friends. My name is Luciano Rockford. As of today, I have been appointed as Mayor Thomas’ right-hand man. I am here to assuage any fears. You have nothing to worry about—policies will not be changing. I just hope to help steer the mayor in a new, inclusive direction, so that we might bridge the gap between our peoples.”

This was Archer Rockford's father. His words had a calming effect, but their content spoke volumes . . .

He was admitting that he was a shifter. This was his "public outing"—his foray into celebrity status. He would be the spokesperson for the multitude of supernaturals that had infiltrated our community.

And there was nothing any of us could do about it, because the "primary advisor" wasn't an elected position. It was a cabinet position chosen by the mayor.

My heart rumbled in my chest.

What did this mean?

My dad abruptly growled and we all looked over, alarmed. I'd never heard such an angry sound from my sweet father.

When I looked at him, he seemed more perturbed than I'd ever seen. Gideon and Mom were also eyeing him strangely, waiting for him to say something.

"Rebels, all of them!" he snarled, clicking the TV to mute so he didn't have to hear Luciano Rockford speaking any longer.

I shivered. *Shit, even his name sounds slimy.*

"Mark my words, this is the beginning of the end," Dad continued.

I gulped. "W-What do you mean, Dad?"

He launched onto his feet and rounded the couch in a hurry. "Our city is being held hostage, Dawn. Before long, announcements like this will be happening all across the country. The Others have infiltrated every aspect of our government, and none of us are safe."

I put a hand to my breast to feel my thumping heartbeat. Roger Rose was not a conspiracy theorist—not by a long shot. He wouldn't just be rambling off his wonky beliefs if he didn't have good evidence to back them up.

In fact . . . he was believable because of the position he held. As a Town Hall rep, he was behind the scenes on most deals and legislation. He saw what the rest of us didn't.

He was probably the one person I *could* trust when it came to these kinds of things.

And it scared the hell out of me. To see him so out of sorts, now pacing around the living room, chewing on his lip . . .

Fuck.

“What does it mean for us, honey?” Mom asked, her voice strangely serene. I could tell she was trying not to frighten us kids, but Dad was already doing a superb job of that.

I shared a look with Gideon, both of us with shocked expressions.

“It means we have to leave,” Dad said, stopping to face us all. “I’m sorry, everyone, but I don’t see any other option.”

“B-But what about your job?!” Gideon asked, his voice cracking.

“Damn my job! I don’t *have* a job any longer, Son! Don’t you see?” He thrust a curved finger at the black TV screen. “Those bastards have taken over! I tried to tell the fools we couldn’t trust them, but they came with honey and silver tongues! We let them infiltrate our Town Hall, and now it’s theirs!”

This was some scary shit. I fought back tears.

Everything I’d known—school, parties, friends, places . . . they were all threatened. I would lose them all.

But my dad had a point. As ranting and raving as he sounded, Archer had warned me of the exact same thing!

I wanted to blurt it out, to spill the beans and tell everyone that Luciano Rockford’s own son had echoed exactly what Dad was saying right now.

But then I would be admitting that I met up with the boy after they sternly forbade it, and that would only open a world of questions and punishments and I didn’t want any of that.

So, shamefully, I stayed quiet.

“S-Shouldn’t we stay a little longer and just see how things play out, honey? Just a week, perhaps?” Mom asked, hope in her voice. She threw

up her arms. “We can’t just up and leave like this! Where would we go? This is our home!”

Now her voice was edging on hysterical.

Dad tried to play the calming patriarch, but he’d already said too much. Things were already on the fritz.

With a disheartened sigh, he shook his head.

“Judy, I’m sorry, but I don’t think we have a week. They’re coming for us *now*.”



DAD WAS RIGHT, AND yet we didn’t just immediately vacate our home and livelihoods.

Within a few days, another citywide announcement came via the news, and this time the words were much different.

Luciano Rockford seemed to be renegeing on everything he had promised us just days earlier. Like any good politician, he was saying one thing and doing exactly the other.

People started writing to members of Congress about the supernaturals taking away our rights and liberties; about their sudden rise to power, and how it was scaring everyone.

Within a week, it seemed a civil war was on our hands.

Because Luciano Rockford said this, more or less, in his speech:

The city would be changing electricity providers—no doubt to his own people. The whole “grid” would be swapped, and cell phone services that we used to have would no longer work.

This didn’t seem like something city government had the power to do, and yet, the Feds wouldn’t come in and stop it.

If anything, they were probably complicit.

With our phones out of commission, that eliminated a lot of the communication we once had with each other. We would be getting our news “directly from the source”—which was obviously skewed.

People became frightened.

Strikes and protests rang out, with people gathering in the streets.

The next announcement had the new supernatural government recalling people's guns, and that started an even bigger shitstorm.

Taking away people's freedom in America—taking their cell phones—was one thing, but trouncing on their Second Amendment was entirely another.

The “theory” was that the upcoming months would lead to many changes, and Town Hall couldn't risk people getting out of hand and protests turning ugly.

So, whelp, no more guns.

Yeah, right, like *that* would fly.

No one had ever been so brazen as to actually try something like that.

My family got into our SUV that very day, to leave the city behind us for good.

We had no destination—just one where a tyrannical supernatural government wasn't trying to take over.

On the way out of the city, we crossed by numerous houses where families stood on their porches, loading their guns and literally waiting for someone to try to pry them from their cold, dead hands.

People were flying American flags at full-mast, trying to show that we weren't a conquered people. We wouldn't go without a fight.

For someone who had just left high school, and had been so hopeful about my college prospects and the relationships I would covet and cherish, and my entire bright future . . . this was all a big fucking mindfuck.

My whole worldview shifted, and it turned me into a silent, brooding type. Gone was the bubbly, smiley, witty Dawn.

This wasn't fair!

Why now? Why did the Others have to be so evil and try to take everything from us? What did we ever do to *them*?

My hatred for the supernaturals grew, to reflect my dad's way of thinking.

Just weeks before, my dad had been seen by many as a paranoid loon. His popularity had tanked within Town Hall, and if he hadn't abruptly resigned, he probably would've been fired anyway.

But now people were starting to come to their senses. They were gearing up for war.

And, worst of all, for me anyway . . . all of these massive changes left a totally sour taste in my mouth regarding Archer Rockford.

I had no doubt he had succumbed to his wicked father's wishes. He might have been a "renegade" or a "maverick" before, but that day in the park when I'd started to see the cracks . . . he had shown his true colors.

Luciano had him by the short and curlies, and now he was just a pawn for the Others.

He was an enemy.

But, shamefully, that simple fact didn't dissuade me from still longing for him . . .

As I'd learned in high school from my favorite poet, Emily Dickinson: "The heart wants what it wants, or else it does not care."



WE STOPPED OFF AT A Safeway near the outskirts of town to pick up some essentials. We hadn't taken much from the house—just some sentimental trinkets and clothes—but our SUV was still cramped for space.

In the large parking lot of the market, people were loitering with angry looks on their faces. Some people were going from car to car, speaking to drivers, asking who knows what. Everyone seemed tense, and the parking lot itself looked like a battleground waiting to happen.

It was a gray day, so I threw on my gold and blue LA Rams sweater before stepping out of the car. Gideon joined me, but Mom and Dad stayed in the front.

"You guys know what to get?" Dad asked, turning around in the driver's seat.

“Yes, Dad, we’ve been over the checklist a hundred times,” I said, rolling my eyes.

He smiled at me. “Okay. Your mom and I will stay here to make sure the car and Scotty are safe.”

It made sense, because the car was our lifeline out of this hellhole, and Scotty was our heart.

Before Gideon and I closed the doors, I gave Scotty one last rub behind the ears, watching as the yellow Lab settled in where I’d been sitting. I heard my dad’s cell phone ring. He waited until we were walking away before picking it up.

I wanted to ask him who was calling before we left the car, but we were in a bit of a hurry. This wasn’t some leisurely shop—this was a get-in-get-out-quick deal because we wanted to make good time on the road, before turmoil spilled out onto the streets.

In hindsight, I should have waited.

Before we left the car, I looked over the hood of the SUV, debating on jumping back in. Then I saw something in the distance—across the street from the parking lot was a woodland area, and I swear I thought I saw a shadow in there, gazing at us.

Archer?

I shook the thought aside and hurried after Gideon.

Even with our list written down—rice, beans, perishables that we could heat up quick; canned goods that didn’t need to even be cooked; literal rations, which I didn’t know they made outside of wartime—Gideon and I were inside Safeway for a while.

It was a madhouse, so it was slow moving. People were crazed to get what their families needed, not caring an ounce for anyone but themselves.

My brother and I had to resort to the same tactics, and before long we had fallen into the mob mentality.

For some reason, toilet paper was about the only thing that people had completely taken. The shelves of them were fucking empty.

But, I mean, we weren't barbarians. We were still hoping to find motels and such on the way to wherever we went, so we weren't too worried about the TP. Our plan wasn't to pull over every few hours and shit in the woods.

We weren't that desperate. Yet.

Finally, after about forty-five minutes, Gideon and I walked through the automatic sliding doors with a shopping cart each, and we were back in the parking lot.

It was still midday, but that was about the only thing resembling normalcy.

Fights had broken out in the parking lot. People were still huddled together in pockets, here and there, yelling at each other. Turned-over shopping carts littered the empty parking spots. Car windows had been smashed and broken into.

I gasped when we exited.

"Stay close to me," Gideon murmured darkly.

I nodded and we rushed out into the madness . . .

I furrowed my brow.

Mom and Dad's car was gone.

"Wait a second," I said, slanting my head. "I could have sworn we parked right here."

We both stood in an empty parking spot, dumbfounded. I mean, Safeway was big, but the parking lot wasn't *that* big.

We scanned the horizon, trying to find the telltale faded blue paint of Mom and Dad's SUV.

"Maybe they moved the car when things started getting worse out here," Gideon said, but his voice was strangled, like he didn't believe his own words.

Panic set in. People started to amble toward us, like freaking zombies in a horror movie. We couldn't tell if they wanted our groceries or our brains to munch on.

"G-Giddy, I don't like this."

“Come on!”

I followed him, pushing my shopping cart with extra speed to get to the edge of the parking lot.

Something was terribly wrong.

Mom and Dad were gone.

And we didn’t have cell phones to freaking call them to see where they’d gone! Thanks a lot, supernaturals!

“Hold up,” I snapped, stopping at the edge of the parking lot. “The freaking *phone*.”

Gideon looked at me strangely.

Why hadn’t I thought of it before—originally?

“Dad got a cell phone call while we were leaving the car!” I said, anxiety riding my voice.

“Shit, you’re right. I didn’t think anything of it.”

“How is it that the entire city has lost their cell service . . . except him?”

“It makes no sense.”

He spoke for both of us.

And we couldn’t exactly wait here for them, in case they came back, or else we’d get beat up or worse. The citizens were starting to absolutely lose their shit.

In a matter of hours, people had gone from living normal lives to survival-of-the-fittest mode. People were taking what they wanted. It was like money and influence had no meaning anymore.

More cars were getting broken into.

“Dawn . . .” Gideon said sadly trailing off. “We can’t stay here.”

“I know.” I hated it. “W-What do we do, Giddy? I’m scared.”

“So am I.”

We hugged, and tears came to my eyes.

Was this it? Was this the last time I’d ever see my parents? I hadn’t even gotten to say “I love you” one last time.

And worst of all was another creeping thought:

That we'd been abandoned.

I don't know why that would be the case—our parents loved us—but when I glanced at Gideon, I could tell that the same dark thoughts were roving through his head.

“Hey!” a man yelled at us, marching over. He was big and mean looking, with tattoos sleeving his arms. “You don't need all that fucking rice! Three bags? What are you, some doomsday preppers planning to wait out this bullshit in your bunker?”

Gideon stood in front of me. “Hey, man, get the hell back!” he said, striking a defensive pose.

The man lunged, suddenly, and punched Gideon in the face.

I screamed.

Gideon's hand flew off the handle of the shopping cart and he went down.

I abandoned my own cart and hovered over him as he groaned.

Other people were crowding our carts now, pushing each other to sift through our goods.

The fucking bastards.

The supernaturals had turned us against each other. Just like that. And it had been so *easy!*

“Come on, Giddy, we've got to bail!” I wailed, helping him to his feet.

He massaged his jaw, fixed the angry mob of people with deadly stares, and bared his teeth.

“It's not worth it, Giddy!” I said, noticing that furious look. I held him back. “Let's go!”

We ran.

We left our carts behind and booked it across the street, toward a tree line that ducked away into some woods.

If our parents *did* come back, they wouldn't find us here. In fact, they'd probably never find us at all.

My brother and I were on our own.



IT WOULD HAVE BEEN *so easy* for Gideon to blame all this on me—my relationship with Archer, knowing he was an Other, seeing the trouble he had gotten us into.

Even though it was probably bullshit, I felt that if I had never hooked up with Archer or become involved in his life, things would be different.

I had flown too close to the sun and gotten burned.

But Gideon didn't blame me for anything, at least not out loud. He was still the overprotective big brother I needed, and that's why I loved him.

That's why I would always stick by his side.

We quickly decided that walking down the freeway shoulder was not smart. Hitchhiking wasn't in the cards.

For one, we could get hit by cars. For two, some creeper was bound to try to pick us up, with a smooth, saccharine voice and an offer we couldn't refuse, and before long we'd be in his torture basement getting our faces cut off Buffalo Bill style.

It's safe to say that Gideon and I had watched too many scary movies. But we came to the same decision.

While it was still light out, we decided to cut through the woods. It was even creepier, of course, but at least we wouldn't run into any frothing people around here.

Or would we?

It took all of thirty minutes for things to get sketchy.

We were holding hands, walking slowly through the brush and trees. It wasn't a thick forest, thankfully, but that didn't make it any less scary. It was still the freaking wilderness, which neither of us were attuned to.

The bright gray sky started to darken.

The chittering of bugs and birds hemmed us in, making us feel claustrophobic.

We both knew, at some point, these woods ended and we'd come to the edge of town. From there, maybe we could find a motel to hole up.

A rustling in the foliage behind us had me squeezing Gideon's hand in fear. We turned, but saw nothing in the distance.

Trees surrounded us.

Okay, again, hindsight is 20/20, and taking to the woods was probably not the best decision. We weren't exactly Katniss freaking Everdeen over here.

We had no weapons with which to defend ourselves.

I hugged Gideon's arm.

"H-Hello?" I called out tentatively.

He hushed me, scolding me, and I nearly broke into tears. I was just so scared—how was I supposed to know what to do?!

They didn't train you for abandonment and civil war and forest tracking in high school!

A dark form suddenly leaped from our left—way too close for comfort.

We spun and Gideon shoved me behind him once again, ever the protective brother, and I clumsily fell on my ass.

We both screamed, our voices echoing in the woods.

The shape was vaguely humanoid, with a dark, pale face. It definitely didn't *look* human—

In fact, it looked like a fucking dead person. Its greenish skin was peeling, its fingernails were yellow and chipped and grimy, and it looked like it had literally crawled up out of a grave.

I couldn't stop shouting. This was too much.

"W-What the fuck is that?!" I wailed.

The thing descended on Gideon before he could answer. He roared and met it.

The beastly creature was about the same size as my brother, but it had dead-man strength behind its swings.

Gideon held its arms at bay, but the thing snapped at him with blackened teeth, its red eyes glaring.

Gideon fell back, stumbling over brush.

When the creature lunged again, Gideon tripped over himself and fell back on his rump.

“No!” I screamed, crawling over toward him, if only to shield his body so this ghastly beast could eat me and not my brother.

But I wouldn’t make it in time.

The creature dove on top of Gideon.

My brother shrieked like a banshee as rancid teeth sank toward him.

A dark blur crossed my vision—

—and hammered the beast in the side—a huge *thud* causing our cries to come up short. The undead monster flew ten feet across the leafy forest floor, before smacking into a tree trunk sideways.

The blur was a two-legged monster—another one—but this one had brown fur rippling its body. It looked like a freaking grizzly bear on its hind legs, except more humanoid.

It smacked into the undead thing with vicious claws and paws, and as the smaller creature screeched and tried to tear at its legs, the bipedal bear stomped on its face and squished it like a bloody, pulpy watermelon.

I helped Gideon to his feet and we backed up, stunned. We made ready to run.

Our protector turned to us with a guttural snarl, and that’s when I saw the yellow eyes—the familiar countenance—

Archer Rockford, in his shifted form. He was some type of man-bear-beast-thing.

“*These* are the creatures you must be protected from,” Archer said in a deep, raspy voice that matched his grim, bestial visage. “They’re like us, but have malformed with . . . abnormalities. Evil, bloodthirsty, mindless.”

Gideon and I just stared wide-eyed at Archer’s giant bear form as the fur slowly started to diminish. His form was shrinking and he was turning back to normal . . .

My brother and I were at a loss for words.

He saved our lives, I thought, hope rising in my mind. *Archer* hasn't *joined the evil side of his father!*

"You changed me, Dawn," Archer said, his voice disgusted. I couldn't tell if he was disgusted with me, or himself. "Now I have to fight so I don't become one of these things myself."

I gulped. "B-But—"

Another rustling in the trees stopped me.

"Go!" Archer roared, the fur returning, his snout elongating. "Through the woods—you'll find a community!" Now his voice didn't even sound human.

He didn't need to tell us twice.

I sprinted away, tears streaming down my face, with Gideon right behind me. The sounds of primal battle diminished behind us, until we were again surrounded by silence and chirping insects.

It hurt to turn away from Archer. I needed to know what he meant—*You changed me*.

We slapped branches out of our eyes and didn't stop for half an hour.

Finally, we burst through the woods, into a clearing—another freeway. For a moment, I thought we might have accidentally circled around like idiots and were standing in front of the Safeway.

But the sight before us changed all that.

Three young men were approaching, with full-on spears in their hands.

Yes, *spears*—pointy sticks with iron at the tips.

They didn't *look* like savages or barbarians, and they eyed us like *we* were the savages.

"Halt!" one of the men shouted.

We froze, hands rising as the spears prodded close to our chests.

We were standing in the middle of the deserted freeway, and beyond the three men was what looked like a village—a settlement like we'd never seen before.

Ramshackle huts and buildings and tenements made up the area, which couldn't have been more than a few square miles wide.

But this was a total Armageddon situation—it looked like these people had been living here for years, and had reverted back to the ancient times of foragers, scavengers, and warriors.

Humans had settled this land and turned it into their very own home.

Apparently, people besides my father had seen all this madness coming. And they had prepared.

And Gideon and I had stumbled into their headquarters.

“We come in peace!” I found myself shouting, saying what I thought you were supposed to say to aliens from outer space. Which is basically what these people were, to us.

“Stop, stop,” a smoother voice said. It was a woman's voice, and as she approached, the three men leveled off their spears and stood to their full heights.

She pushed through them. She was a small, cute woman who couldn't have been much older than me.

“My name's Sara,” she said, then gave us both a once-over glance. She turned to her men with a smirk. “Boys, I think we've found new recruits.”

“Huh?” I mumbled.

“You think?” one of the men asked, skeptical. “Looks like they just had a run-in with an Abnorm!”

The three men started chuckling.

Yes . . . as Archer had said . . . abnormalities . . . Abnorms. “Yes, I think we did,” I said.

Their chuckling ceased abruptly.

“And you lived?” Sara said, scoffing and putting her hands on her hips. “Yep. Definite recruits.”

“Recruits for . . . what?” Gideon asked.

Sara narrowed her eyes on him, and apparently liked what she saw, because her luscious lips curled. “Hmm. I think you’ll make a *fantastic* addition to our people, in particular.”

He blushed, looking away. He still wasn’t used to that whole talking to girls thing.

“Your people?” I said.

Sara nodded. “Honey, we’ve been preparing for this takeover for a long time. Outcasts like you are just starting to trickle in. There are communities like ours sprouting up all over the country—let me tell you. We’ve even stockpiled a few guns.”

My breath caught in my throat.

Outcasts like us. Yes, that described us perfectly.

“But . . . what is this place?”

She turned, separating the three men so we could see past them better.

Sara gestured at the dystopian, suburban area behind her, arms going wide as if trying to showcase its glorious . . . decrepit walls and dilapidated buildings and ramshackle huts and trailers.

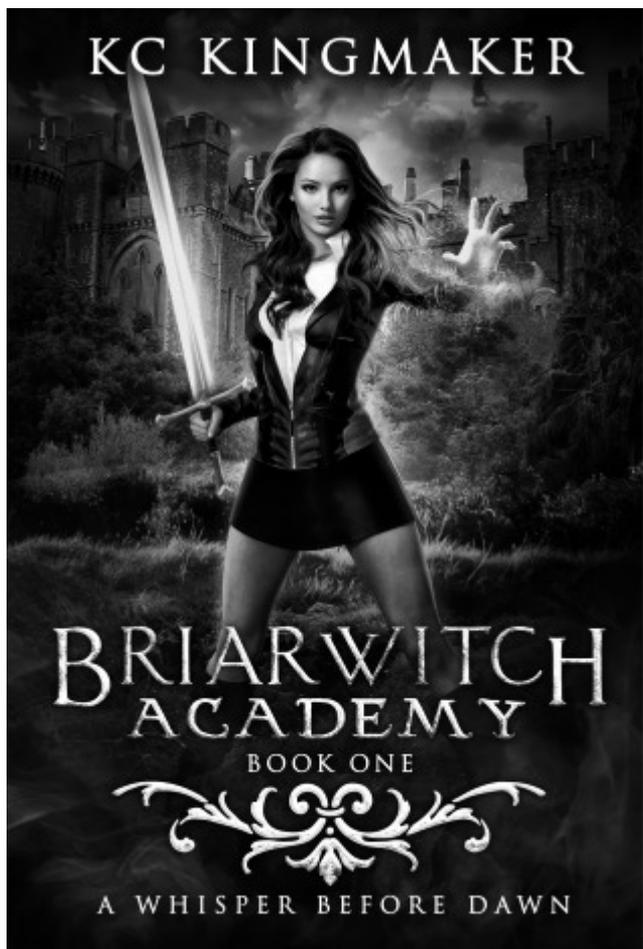
These people had made their own society. But it wasn’t exactly up to “first-world” snuff—it was more like a trailer-park for survivalists.

She turned back to us both, a proud smile on her face. “Welcome to the Fringe, my friends. Come, walk with me.” She put a hand on both of our shoulders and led us across the empty freeway. “Let me introduce you to your new home.”



I hope you enjoyed this prequel story! If you want to really dive into Dawn Rose’s story, be sure to check out [Briarwitch Academy 1: A Whisper Before Dawn](#) [right here!](#)²

2. <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08GJNDR8P>





About the Author

KC Kingmaker likes all things fantasy: urban, paranormal, high, low, dark, happy, funny, contemporary, medieval... the list goes on. KC has a penchant for writing fast-paced stories with the characters as the central focus.

KC lives in San Diego, California.



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