

Tonya Coffey ∞ A New World Bk. 4 Thunder Moon



Thunder Moon

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THUNDER MOON

First edition. September 15, 2017.

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ISBN: 978-1548533144

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Chapter 1

Micha

The sun sank into the mountain. Golden streams of orange and red drifted across the horizon, showcasing the hills in front of me. I stood on a cliff, overlooking the valley of Shadow Cove along with the lake at its back.

The lake, ah, the lake, I thought. I never looked at a pool of water the same since then. The siren made an impression on me.

I saw a flicker of light beneath the surface.

“What the ...” I mumbled, as I knelt at the water’s edge, straining my eyes to see from where the light originated. I inched closer to the water, trying to see how the spark burned in the liquid. It was not possible. How?

The small flicker danced beneath the surface, like a flame of a candle but quickly it grew into a raging wild fire, which burst from the water. I jerked back, landing on my backside, as a hand broke the calmness of the water then a fist gripped my shirt. The fabric ripped under the force. Startled by the attack, I gripped the hand. The fist was solid and no matter how hard I pulled against the grip, it would not budge.

It pulled me head first into the darkness. I struggled against the tendrils, wrapping around me, holding me hostage. As my air slipped from my lungs, I began to panic then I heard it, the voice of an angel humming a song that made me relax. I listened to the tune as a figure came forward. She held me by my shirt while the other hand slid along my cheek. Her eyes were gold and bright as the sun and her hair danced around her body as if she were the Kraken of the sea. It is her. My eyes focused on hers. The warmth of her touch eased my mind, stilling my movements. Then she sang to me, gently coaxing me into a dream, as if I were in the warmth of my bed, I fell asleep.

As I pushed the memory away, I glanced at the water, glistening with the setting sun. The night was ready to make its debut and the creatures who called out to the humid evening agreed, it was time for their chance to spread their wings and meet the world.

I came here each night. I watched the sun set and I waited. Waited for a sign from the gods above or a message from her—anything to give me hope; however, it was hard to have faith when each sunset brought me nothing.

My heart told me she would contact me. Even though her body lay in a bed, in Bren’s home, I knew her spirit was somewhere else. Where was the question? Yet, I wondered why it left? Was Cynthia’s spell so powerful? Did she have help? Each day I asked myself the same questions and each day I got a silent answer.

Standing from my crouched position, I took a breath of fresh but humid air. Again, I would wander through the forest back to the home where Jessa and I were supposed to live. I would walk through the gates of Shadow Cove and into the role of the King but not as the husband I wanted to be, her husband. The time I had spent as such was short but I

loved each moment we spent together. The memories we had made together kept me going.

The moon, a slice of a fingernail, hung above me. The pale blue reminded me of Jessa. Before we were together, I sat under the heavens, in our field and waited for her. I felt as if I were in the same place yet different. I waited, hoping she would appear from behind a tree with a smile on her face. I glanced over my shoulder every time a twig snapped, hoping it was her. It was not.

The underbrush crunched beneath my boots as I made my way through the forest. I never knew the forest between White Lily and Shadow Cove had a name. *Splendere*, he called it. To King Hicort's people, it was the birth place of Trolls.

King Hicort told me of his past, the true beginnings, and I took each word to heart. He spoke of the forest as if it were a child to him; a lost gift from the gods to help the Trolls make our world a better place. With his words, I uncovered more lies. It seemed as if each person I came into contact with hurled false statements of our world, hoping I would trust them, expecting me to not question it.

King Hicort told of the fall of his people. When the Elementals gave up their powers to part, the forest reverted back to the womb. It no longer created life for the Trolls or the others who called it home. They retreated to different realms and worlds to survive, leaving the Faeries and Ancients to fight and destroy what was left of their home.

King Hicort wanted one thing from me. He asked for me to bring back the world that was. The home he believed would emerge for the future races. It was a question I did not know how to answer. As a man, a warrior, a husband, I knew the importance; however, as king did I know the risk?

With each night, my eyes seemed to adjust to the lack of light. I could see the trees out in front of me and the things at my feet but it was not like walking in the day light; still, I preferred the darkness. I did not have to hide the frown on my face in the forest. I could show the world my mood and not worry of the people I offended, for I could not tell them why I wore the scowl. Only my men knew the truth and they kept it to themselves. They seemed to understand the struggles Jessa and I faced. Their words of praise for Jessa's recovery gave me hope but I tried to not notice their pity for me.

As I moved over a small creek, the shallow water trickled down a rock then dripped one slow drop at a time. My eyes swept the forest as I paused there. A feeling deep in my gut told me I needed to be more vigilant, so I heeded the call and listened beyond what was normal. The drip of water echoed a slow beat and, with it a faint growl, surfaced. Narrowing my eyes, I searched the underbrush. Hunkering down to get a better view of the land, I tried to see where the growl came from. I could not see past my outreached hand but movements were noticeable.

I knew it was stretching it as I narrowed my eyes into the shadows but I hoped it was a raccoon or an opossum. When nothing stood out, I sighed as I rose and stepped over the stream. With each of my steps, I lightly set my boot down, heel to toe, to keep from making any more noise than I needed.

After a few steps, the sound of paws stepping on dried leaves drifted through the night. It was soft, light as a feather dropping on the vegetation. It became louder the closer it tread. I turned to my left, ready to face what closed the gap on me. Reaching my stance, I waited but the sounds stopped. It was as if the animal knew of my readiness. I frowned. *Why?* I wondered.

Then, as if it heard my thoughts, a growl rolled from deep inside the bushes not far from where I stood. Slowly, I reached for my sword, hoping my movements did not threaten the animal. As my hand gripped the handle, a pair of eyes, blue as the autumn sky appeared from the darkness. A panther; black as the night around us, slipped between the branches into my line of sight. Hair erupted along his back and his ears laid back in a warning to me. I did not want to engage, however, as the panther slowly moved forward. I realized it was inevitable.

His lips pulled back, showing me teeth as long and sharp as a dagger. Even though I did not want to fight, I knew I had to stand my ground. After all, I was not in his territory. He was in mine. Pulling my sword from its sheath, I watched the panther. His eyes never left my movements as he came forward, still showing me his aggressive intent. Narrowing my eyes, I waited. I refused to make the first move; nevertheless, I would make the last.

As I waited, watching him, something struck me as odd. He moved forward but not in a movement to attack me. Panthers were known for their stealthiest, which made me wonder why he came out of hiding to attack me. He could have jumped me from cover and I would have been useless. He would have won.

So, as he made his gestures, I realized he was a decoy. He made me keep my eyes on him while...

I turned, raising my sword into the air. A second panther stood feet from me, ready to slice into my gut with one swift swipe of his claws. *I was right*, I thought as I swiftly stepped to the side, keeping both cats in front of me. *Smart boys...*

With my next step back, the second panther sprang. His teeth barred at me. His paws outstretched, claws flashed in the moonlight. I swung my sword, hoping to not get a face full of teeth or claws. My blade hit; the feel of the metal parting flesh caused me to pull back. I wanted no part in killing him. I only wanted to keep him from killing me.

When I did, the cat cried out. A roar erupted from the animal as if it were a woman screaming to the top of her lungs. The reaction surprised me. I lowered my weapon and watched as the first panther ran to the other. It stood by the animal as the wounded cat got to its feet and limped off. He watched me then narrowed his eyes, growled a warning and stepped into the underbrush after it.

What the... I stood in the forest, my mouth ajar. *Panthers should not act that way...*

Sliding my sword back into its scabbard, I turned and continued back to my castle. If it was not one thing, it was two more. I had hoped the realms would calm down and accept a new reign but the attack was proof someone did not want a peaceful union. They wanted war and I would give it to them.



Chapter 2

The town was as stale as the air. A thick muggy heat felt heavy on my form as I entered Shadow Cove. Each time I walked up the road, across the rock bridge and into the heart of town, I expected to see someone but I never did. They slept in the safety of their homes while their king walked through the forest, searching for answers. I roamed the realm as if I were a drifter.

I walked past the bakery; my eyes barely took in the sign or the flowers that bloomed along the white fence. I did not notice the aromas that wrapped the store in goodness. My mind was locked on one thing—seeing Jessa.

Slowly, I turned the knob and peeked into the house. The lights were out in most of the rooms but a candle burned at the steps and another at Jessa’s door. That was to show me the way so I would not wake the children with my thick soles. I had learned the hard way.

The first few nights she lay in her bed and I came to visit, I tripped over steps and rugs making more noise than a caged bear. I felt bad for disturbing Bren and his family. And for that, Bren insisted the lights be left on for me for when I came to visit. He was a good man and a true friend. If it were not for him, I believe I would have joined Jessa in her sleep. He made me see there were other things to accomplish. There were things Jessa wanted me to do and I could not deny her the future she wanted me to have or the safety of the realms. She would be angry with me if I died, leaving the people without a protector. Instead, I focused all my energy on waking her. That way, when she looked at me with her big brown eyes, I could tell her how crazy she was for putting herself in danger for me. I could be angry and complain but I would pull her into my arms and I would tell her I forgave her. I would always forgive her.

At the end of the hallway, I stopped in front of her door. I seemed to always need a moment before I entered. It was at this time, I would take a breath, close my eyes and pray when I opened the door she would rise up and smile at me. *Please...*

Inhaling, I turned the knob and stepped inside. *She sleeps.* My body seemed to deflate with the acknowledgment.

A small light flickered on the table where Jessa’s books lay. From time to time, I was tempted to pick the journals up and read what was inside but I did not. They were her thoughts and if she wanted me to read them, she would ask me. At least, I hoped she would, because I would guard her secrets as if they were my own.

The candle highlighted the room in a soft buttery glow. My eyes fell on Jessa, lying on her bed, a blanket pulled up under her arms and her dark curls lying around her face. She looked peaceful as she slept; however, each night my heart ached as if someone gripped it and tightened their fist around the organ.

Sitting on the side of the bed, I ran my hand through her hair. Her soft curls wrapped around my fingers as if they hugged me. A smile twitched at my lips at the sight of it. I never got tired of the act.

“Hello, my love,” I whispered to her, hoping she would open her eyes for me. “I apologize for being late.” I took a breath, as my hand took hers, bringing it up to my lips.

When I held it, I could feel the magick we shared. It made me happy; it returned to her after Cynthia had died but I did not understand why it could not raise her. Why it would not heal her.

With a sigh, I laid down next to her. I pressed my lips to hers for a moment and closed my eyes, letting her scent fill my nose. This was the best moment of my day. It was just us.

“Something strange happened on my way home.” I thought about the panther. “Two panthers tried to attack me. Yet what was strange was how they acted when I wounded one.” As I thought about the actions, I realized just how odd it was.

“Well, my love, tomorrow I will speak with King Hicort because Shifters have returned to the realms.” *The big question is why?*



Chapter 3

Jessa

The longer I stood in the field, the more it became like the home I'd left. The field Micha and I knew as our own. Colors drifted in around me, filling the grays as if it knew I needed to see the world in color.

When I first opened my eyes, I thought it was a dream. What surprised me more was the form that stood before me. I had wanted to save him from the fate I'd witnessed but, as I sat next to him, now, I realized it was meant to be. He was destined to be here, waiting for me. To guide me through my struggles and point me to the future I would have with Micha.

Romulus sat on the stump. It reminded me of the night they built the cabin in the field. We sat patiently, watching my and Micha's home appear before us. I was happy then. Thinking of it saddened me. I glanced at Romulus. His normally tired frame was different. He sat prouder; a glow about him, which made me not as sad. At last he was the man he was supposed to be.

I wanted to ask him why he seemed content. Was my presence in the spirit world something he looked forward too or was it something else? Was it someone else who made him joyful?

When I first laid eyes on him, I cried. I wrapped my arms around him and held him tight. I didn't fight the tears that streamed down my face or the emotion that caused me to shake. I was pleased to see him but afraid to be away from Micha.

As he held me, letting me cry, I wondered if Cynthia suffered. Did Aurora despise me for what had happened to her? Did Micha understand why I did what I had to do? I knew it was the only way to keep him safe, the only way to keep the world whole. I accepted my fate but did he?

Taking a breath, I wiped my eyes with my hand. What was done was done. I couldn't focus on the past. I had to look at the future. The future I wanted to have with Micha.

"Why are you here, Romulus?" My voice sounded the way I looked, broken.

A soft smile worked across his weathered face. "To help you."

I sighed. Why should I get a straight answer now, when I never did before when we were alive? "Are you my guide?" I'd heard of spirit guides but I was a spirit too. Did it still apply?

He regarded me with a nod. "I am, in sorts."

Taking a deep breath, I thought of my past, of the obstacles I'd faced and where I was. "To be honest, I don't know what to do or where to start." *How could anyone know?*

"I can help you focus."

I smiled. "That would be nice but what do I focus on?"

He grinned. “Do you remember when you first came to me? You had so many questions but you only asked the basics.”

I nodded. The smell of his room still lingered in my brain—coffee and cigar. Every time I looked at him, I thought of the oversized chair he sat in. It made him look small, like a child. The feel of the velvety chair I sat in. When I relaxed into the cushion, I was consumed with warmth that made me feel safe. I smiled to myself, remembering the mountains of books.

I didn’t know where to start then either. I was in a new place, surrounded by people who expected so much of me. “I was afraid,” I admitted.

“Are you afraid now?”

I thought about the question. I was but not with Romulus sitting with me. I knew him. Trusted him. Everything was different now. I saw the new world as my home, the people were my family. “No.”

“Then let us start there.”

I frowned. “Where?”

He laughed, which caused the field to showcase how large it was. His voice echoed across the land, sending birds into flight. “It is time to rid yourself of the fear that is holding you back, Jessa. It is keeping you from becoming the queen you need to be.”

At the word queen, I slouched. I wasn’t a queen anymore. I was dead to the world. “I’m not the queen anymore, Romulus,” my voice was low as I spoke. “The Sylph made it clear to everyone.”

“Ah...” he mumbled, “Or will you be a queen to a different collection?”

I had a spark of hope. “Are you saying the spell worked? I can be Micha’s queen?”

Romulus inhaled, putting his hands on his thighs. “If we get you back to the world and into your body in time then, yes, I believe so.”

The smile that spread across my face faded when I realized what he had said. “What do you mean in time?” I didn’t know if I wanted to hear the answer or not. What was happening?

Romulus took a breath; the lines on his brow drew together. “You have been gone for two months, Jessa. The Shadows have declared you dead but Micha has not given up hope.”

I knew what they were doing. Even when I was alive they didn’t accept me as the queen. Now that they declared me dead, they could make him move on. They would force the power they had and make Micha do something he never would have done with me there. “The Shadows are making him take a queen?” A lump formed in my chest, rising into my throat at the acknowledgment.

Romulus nodded, hesitantly. “The next new moon the ceremony will take place.”

The next new moon, I thought. “How long do I have?”

“30 days.”

I swallowed the lump. If I ever wanted to live the life I'd dreamed of with Micha and our children, I had to do it. I had to focus and get out of the spirit world. I was the only one who could do it. He couldn't save me. I had to save myself.

Narrowing my eyes at Romulus, I said, "Let's get started."



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