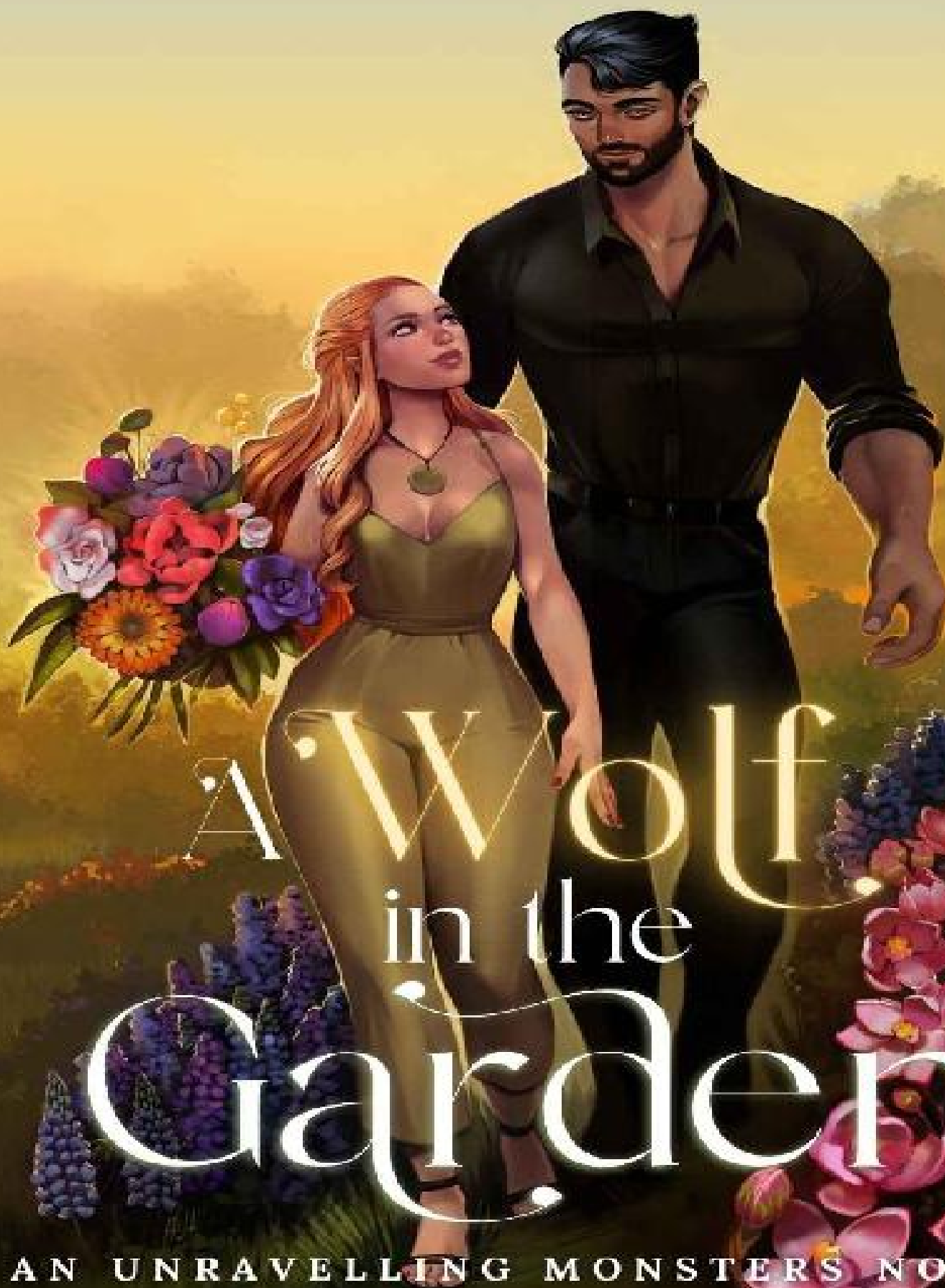


ALLEGRA HALL



A Wolf  
in the  
Garden

AN UNRAVELLING MONSTERS NOVEL

*A Wolf in the Garden*

AN UNRAVELLING MONSTERS NOVEL

# ALLEGRA HALL

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*To the pilates instructor who chose a playlist that included an acoustic cover of The Best, which in turn made these characters burst into my mind out of nowhere...*

*I have come to the conclusion that reformer pilates is not for me (and my flexibility is still terrible) but my life is a lot richer thanks to that random occurrence, and so I am forever grateful that I went to that trial class. These are the characters I waited fifteen years for.*

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# Foreword



## THE SHORT VERSION:

**T**hank you dear reader for picking up my book! This story is set in New Zealand and written in New Zealand English, with the odd *te reo Māori* (Māori language) word thrown in by our female lead who is of mixed New Zealand European and Māori heritage, so I've included a detailed foreword and glossary in order to explain a little more about the New Zealand dialect and *te reo Māori*. Feel free to skip ahead to the book if you like.

Please, however, be aware that New Zealand English differs from American English. I know of incidents where books have almost been removed from the online stores because people have used the report function on their devices to report spelling errors that are, in fact, not mistakes at all but dialectal differences. This book has gone through a series of alpha and beta readers, has been professionally edited, and has also had a team of ARC readers read through it to catch any remaining errors. If you do believe you have found an error in the text, please email me at [author.allegra.hall@gmail.com](mailto:author.allegra.hall@gmail.com) and I will be more than happy to take a look at it.

This book has a playlist that follows the arc of the story. A lot of the songs are on there because of the vibes — they helped me imagine the scenes I went on to write. If book playlists are your thing, you can access it on Spotify [here](#).

## THE LONG VERSION:

### NEW ZEALAND ENGLISH

It felt right to write this book in New Zealand English, which is a subset of British English, given the setting and the fact that it's the version of English I use personally. For those that are used to American English, this means there are extra 'u's, missing 'z's, and double letters, like the 'l's in the word like *unravelling*.

Here are some examples of words written in New Zealand English versus American English:

## NEW ZEALAND ENGLISH — US ENGLISH

Unravelling — Unraveling  
Realised — Realized  
Favourite — Favorite  
Worshipped — Worshiped  
Mum — Mom  
Practise (verb) — Practice

I've thrown mum/mom in the table above, but that's actually one of the only American spellings that you *will* see in this book — Van, our male lead, is a US citizen, and he says “Mom,” regardless of whose mum he's talking about. The other word where I deliberately use American spelling is the word ‘ass’ — for this modern-day New Zealander, *ass* sounds more natural than the word *arse*, and I have seen it spelled both ways in writing from New Zealand. Language is forever evolving, so this is the choice I've made here.

From time to time, Ellie uses language that is reflective of the New Zealand dialect. For example, she says people “get stuck in,” meaning that they start working on a job with gusto.

I really deliberated over this decision to use New Zealand English (I lost a fair bit of sleep over it, even). At the end of the day, my hope is that readers respect my right to write books using the English language from my country, since it's still English.

## TE REO MĀORI — THE MĀORI LANGUAGE

I'm of Pākehā (New Zealand European) and Māori descent, and Ellie, the female protagonist in this book, is also of Pākehā and Māori descent. There's no one way to be Māori these days — no single character can be a monolith for an entire culture. Ellie's character reflects my experiences as someone who has the same ethnic background. If you are interested in learning more about Māori who have mixed identities, may have felt the long-term impacts of colonisation, and are reconnecting with Māori culture, the podcast *The Māori in Me* (available on Spotify) is a great place to start.

As a result of Ellie's heritage, Māori words are occasionally integrated into her speech and internal thoughts. This is actually common practice and correct within the New Zealand English dialect, anyway. The New Zealand version of the Oxford English Dictionary officially recognises over 100 words of Māori origin as part of the New Zealand *English* language, because these words are used so often by all New Zealanders.

In this book, all Māori words, except the word 'Māori' itself, will be italicised, and an effort made to explain the meaning of the word within the context of that paragraph. Even so, I wanted to provide you all with a glossary of terms and their definition. This glossary will include both Māori words and English words that are unique to the New Zealand English dialect.

**You don't have to know or understand these words for the story to make sense.** It's only that I could not write a Māori woman without allowing her to express her Māori self on the page.

*Ngā mihi nui* — thank you,  
Allegra

## GLOSSARY

[Click here for audio of the pronunciations](#)

### **Māori**

Indigenous people of New Zealand.

### **Maramataka**

Traditional Māori 30-day moon calendar. It is used in many ways, including to predict which days are good for activities such as hunting, fishing, and gardening, as well as the overall level of energy a person may feel.

### **Koro**

Grandfather.

### **Ngāpuhi**

The name of a Māori iwi (tribe) based in Northland, New Zealand.

### **Ngāti Hine**

The name of a Māori iwi (tribe) based in Northland, New Zealand.

### **Iwi**

Tribe. Māori are organised into different tribes, each with their own ancestral land boundaries within New Zealand. Although many Māori have migrated away from their traditional lands and live elsewhere in New Zealand or overseas, Māori still connect to their iwi and their whenua (land) through their whakapapa (genealogy).

It is common in New Zealand to list one's tribes after their name. For example:

Ellie Hinewai Harding (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine).

### **Pounamu**

Greenstone/Jade stone.

This word is also used for greenstone pendants, worn as jewellery around the neck. Pounamu is very important to Māori and there are set rules around working with and wearing pounamu.

### **Bach** (New Zealand English)

Pronounced 'batch', as in *a batch of cookies*, a bach is a seaside holiday home, common across New Zealand. Original baches are often of 1940s - 1960s origin and can be in quite a bad state if not properly maintained and renovated.

### **Kaumātua**

A Māori elder that holds knowledge of tribal histories and traditions.

### **Tapu**

A word meaning sacredness, but that also implies there are restrictions in place or certain rituals that must take place.

(Fun fact, the origin of the English word *taboo* was the word *tapu*, which is used in many Polynesian languages across the Pacific Islands and New Zealand).

### **Aroha nui ki a koe**

Much love to you; it is one way to sign off a letter or email to someone you care about. Literal translation is "Big (nui) love (aroha) to you (ki a koe)."

### **Whakataukī**

A whakataukī is a proverb or saying, used frequently in Māori culture (in formal speeches and settings, as well as everyday life when appropriate).

### **Tikanga**

The correct way of doing things. When someone follows *tikanga Māori*, they are obeying the traditional rules that Māori collectively understand. Tikanga practices can vary slightly from tribe to tribe.

**Tika**

Right/correct.

**Gumboots** (New Zealand English)

Rain boots or Wellingtons, depending on where you are from; thick rubber boots used in gardens, on rainy days, and on farms.

**Whakapapa**

Genealogy. A direct line of descent between ancestors and a person of Māori descent. Whakapapa links a person to their whānau (family), hapū (sub-tribe) and iwi (tribe).

**Kia ora**

Hello. The most common te reo Māori greeting used in NZ and understood widely by all New Zealanders.

Kia ora is also sometimes used as a casual way to say thank you.

The literal meaning is 'be well', so when you say *kia ora* to someone, you are both saying hello and wishing them well.

**Te ao Māori**

The Māori world/Māori worldview. It encompasses language and cultural practices.

**E pēhea ana koe?**

**(This sentence structure is from the Ngāpuhi dialect spoken by northern tribes, the alternate form is *Kei te pēhea koe?*)**

How are you?

**Pai**

Good.

**Ka pai**

Well done.

**Moko (short for mokopuna)**

Grandchild.

Although grammatically incorrect, as there is no 's' sound in the Māori language, it is common to hear older Māori talk about their *mokos* when speaking English to refer to multiple grandchildren at once.

### **Kūmara**

Sweet potato.

In New Zealand, *kūmara* is the word used by all New Zealanders, and you will see sweet potato labelled as *kūmara* in supermarkets.

### **Pepeha**

A traditional introduction that is formulaic in structure, beginning with a person's connections to their tribe, their canoe, their traditional homeland (mountains, bodies of water), their community, and then family, before naming themselves last. It places the individual as part of a much wider network, and reflects the collective nature of Māori culture.

### **Pōhutukawa, kōwhai, mānuka, ngutu kākā, harakeke**

Types of plants and trees native to New Zealand.

### **Marae**

A physical place that is a traditional community centre (traditionally either for an iwi, a hapū, or a large whānau, however now pan-tribal marae also exist, often in urban settings, due to migration of Māori away from traditional lands). It includes a number of buildings that are designated for specific purposes, including a formal meeting house.

### **Ngā mihi nui**

Thank you very much.

### **Mōrena**

Good morning.



**Pākehā**

A New Zealand European person. This is a commonly used term in New Zealand.

**Tui**

A bird native to New Zealand.

**Whenua**

This is the word for both land and placenta.

**Hapū**

This is the word for both sub-tribe and pregnancy.

**Whānau**

This is the word for both family and birth.

**Te Maruaroa o te Raumati**

The summer solstice.

**E pai ana (ahau)**

(I) am good/well.

## A NOTE ON CONTENT:

A full list of warnings can be found on my carrd: <https://allegrahall.carrd.co/>

Please view the full list if you need to.

This book deals with grief regarding the off-page death of a child, which occurred in the past. A drowning incident is mentioned but not described in detail. There are also problematic family dynamics, abuse of magical powers by side characters, including taking control of people's bodies, and the associated feelings from victims of these attacks. There is an on-page attack of a wolf against another animal, which is implied to be a supernatural being in their shifted form. Blood is described and the creature dies.

$O_{n\epsilon}$

## ELLIE



**Y**esterday went really well. Today will be the same, I tell myself, breathing in the sweet morning air. *People love the garden, and it looks perfect right now.*

My attempt at positive self-talk doesn't really work; I still feel restless and full of nervous energy, and the lavender and lemon balm tea I'm currently sipping is ineffective against the churning sensation in my gut. It's the same feeling I get whenever I'm involved in an event, though today seems particularly personal as my own garden is on display rather than a client's.

The sound of car doors slamming has me rising to my feet, my mug of tea left abandoned on the small deck that surrounds my tiny house as I descend the wooden stairs, the familiar old Jeep that's parked on the road making me smile. The shell path that cuts through my yard crunches under my feet as I head for the front gate, passing row upon row of raised garden beds, all filled to the brim with lush growth. While I've left a few grassed areas here and there — small spots hidden away for secret picnics — the vast majority of my quarter-acre section is densely planted with an eclectic mix of native shrubs, flowers, berries, vegetables, plus stone fruit and citrus trees. It's an intentional jumble of plants, a riot of colour designed purposefully to evoke nostalgia, and the beehive and three free-range chickens only add to the strong cottagecore vibes. It's everything I ever dreamed of as a little girl.

Perhaps that's strange, but I've been obsessed with gardening for as long as I can remember. I grew up following *Koro*, my grandfather, around the garden — both the one at the old house I shared with my mum and the one at his — and I learned so much from him. He taught me to use the *maramataka*

to know exactly when to sow seeds, when to plant seedlings, and when to harvest, and I still use the Māori moon calendar in my day-to-day gardening. Those childhood experiences with *Koro* had a lasting impact, influencing my career choice in landscape design. Now I work for myself, using a mix of modern design principles combined with traditional Māori knowledge to create gardens that my clients love.

I lift a hand in greeting to my two very best gardening buddies, Ana and Betty, both in their early seventies. I met both ladies through the local gardening club after I moved here two years ago, just after the Unravelling. Ana and I bonded immediately over the fact that we're from the same *iwi* — Ngāpuhi — and that we both grew up in Northland. Although we only see each other once a month, the old grannies and grandpas of the club have become some of my closest friends and found family.

Today these two are here to man the volunteer station at the front of the yard. We're on day two of the weekend-long Garden Festival here on Motuwai Island, and my yard is one of the ten chosen this year for the festival goers to attend.

I can already tell by the wide-eyed look Ana gives me that she's got some serious gossip, and I shake my head. I taught the oldies what the phrase "spill the tea" means, and now all I ever hear is some sort of mangled version of it.

"Ellie, I've got so much tea to spill that my old teapot can't handle it!"

I bite the inside of my cheeks to stop myself from laughing, just as Betty adds, "So much tea!"

They're both fizzing with excitement, and I grin as I help them unpack the last of the items from their bags; wristbands for visitors that don't have one yet, a first aid kit, a huge pump bottle of sunscreen, plus some flyers. To that I add a fresh stack of my business cards that I pull from the deep pocket of my maxi dress, tapping on the top of the pile to bring their attention to it.

"We know," Ana reassures me. "Don't you worry, we're talking up your business to everyone we see, aren't we Bets?"

"Yes we are." Betty is originally from England, and her proper British accent is such a contrast from the Kiwi slang that Ana and I speak.

"Have you got your sunscreen on?" she asks. "You're not quite as pale as me but you'll burn just as easily."

"Not yet, I'll do it now." Betty's right; I'm of Māori and New Zealand European ancestry, and with long blonde hair and a lightly tanned complexion, I've definitely fallen victim to the sun a bunch of times. "I don't

know why, with all the magical powers that now exist in the world since the Unravelling, that someone hasn't fixed the bloody ozone layer already," I complain as I slather on the sunscreen I'm currently stealing from the bottle reserved for guests. "Surely there's a spell for that. In Europe I went half a day without my skin frying; here, I'm burnt in twenty minutes."

"Maybe you should try and do one of those magic spells yourself, since you've got some of that in you," Ana replies, pointing to my head. "Your ears are showing, sweetheart."

"Ah *shit*," I hiss, grabbing at my ears.

Two years ago, on the day the Unravelling occurred, the entire world suddenly found out that humans weren't alone but instead lived amongst monsters and mythical creatures. It was quite literally a veil lifting from our eyes, revealing the sometimes-bleak reality of what was really going on between monsters and men.

That morning I woke, looked in the mirror, and found that overnight my ears had changed shape and were suddenly pointed, as if I were an elf straight out of some fantasy world. I'd screamed, freaked the fuck out, and wondered if I was going crazy, before I finally checked my phone and realised that I had over fifty different messages from people I knew saying things like "*Holy shit, Shirley Smith from high school is an orc!*" and "*Turn on the news!*" and "*People are going nuts at the supermarket and there's no toilet paper left!*"

Turning on the news had given me some answers and many, many more questions. Turns out there was an entirely different realm, like a second Earth, mirroring ours for all time — one where centaurs and kraken, elves and witches, vampires and werewolves, and so many others had lived for as long as humans had roamed the Earth. Some had chosen to live in the 'human realm', their identities protected by the collective magic of the millions of magic wielders — witches, mages, wizards and the like — and they went about their day to day lives wearing glamour that meant no one was the wiser to what they really were.

I'd sat watching the news for hours, frozen as stories poured in about people like *me*; people who did not know they were not quite human, and woke to find they now had extra body parts, funny ears, tusks, or sharp teeth. Some men woke to find they had a different shaped penis, or no visible penis at all where there had been one. It was on that day that I learned what a 'cock pocket' was, as well as a knot, and that dragon shifters existed and they had

two dicks, because somehow one wasn't enough.

Two years on, most humans have processed it enough to comfortably coexist with their paranormal neighbours, while many of those that discovered their non-human status in the Unravelling formed support groups, helping each other make sense of their new bodies and place in society.

Then there's me. I have absolutely no issues with anyone being supernatural or magical or monstrous in any way, shape, or form, but I still haven't truly processed what the Unravelling has done to *me*. When my mum saw me for the first time afterwards she cried, and at first I thought it was because she couldn't stand seeing the physical change in me.

It turns out that they were tears of frustration because she couldn't give me the answers I needed; Mum didn't have any physical changes from the Unravelling, so it's safe to say that whatever I am has come from my wonderful 'sperm donor' of a father, a mystery man known only as *TJ*. Mum had been a flight attendant when she met him at a bar while on an overnight stay in Wellington, had invited him back to her hotel, and when she woke the next morning he was already gone, never to be seen again. "*He left me a present, though,*" Mum always jokes, as if my conception was just some minor inconvenience and not something that completely upended all of her long-term plans. At one point I'd considered doing one of those DNA test kits to see if it gave me any leads on who my father was, but then the Unravelling occurred and that option no longer felt safe to me.

As a result, I've been stuck in this weird limbo of not knowing *what* I am, and not knowing who I could really trust for advice. Given how some humans initially reacted to the Unravelling — ranging from fear to outright hostility — joining a support group felt too vulnerable to me at the time, especially because I still *feel* completely human.

Consequently, I've been hiding my slightly pointy ears with my long hair or hats and have become paranoid about people finding out about me. Other than my mum, only Ana and Betty know — and only because I messed up and forgot to braid my hair over my ears on a particularly windy day. The lie seems to get bigger as more time passes, the stakes higher now that I've made friends and established myself within this community as a human, and although I always do my best to push it aside, the weight of it sits in my chest, bubbling to the surface every so often.

Like now.

"Just go and get your hat," Betty says, patting my arm reassuringly.

“Nobody will know with that thing on. Then come back here and listen to our news before the first group arrives. We’re getting an extra special guest here today!”

“Oooh yes,” Ana adds. “Hurry back bub, you’ll want to hear this.”

I scan the garden quickly as I walk back to the house, checking for what feels like the tenth time today that everything looks right. It does. The sky is clear this morning, promising a perfect spring day, and songbirds — tuis, grey warblers, even the odd fantail — sing in the trees, harmonising with the hum of the bees from the hive. I watch a plump bumblebee drift from flower to flower, disappearing into the trumpets of a spire of foxglove, while the hens cluck away in their coop. Everything is exactly as it should be.

When I get back to the volunteer station, this time with a dark green fedora on my head, Ana launches into her story straight away.

“The new owner of Lost Moon Estate is here on the island; he spent all of yesterday going around gardens with Cameron Morrison, and apparently they’re doing the same with the rest of the gardens, which means he’s coming here!” she explains.

“Did Lost Moon sell? I didn’t even know it was on the market.” I’ve only been to that particular vineyard once, and it wasn’t the greatest experience. Motuwai is known for its wine and wineries, and although the wine itself was good, the buildings at Lost Moon were a little run down, the gardens tired and sad, and the staff less than enthused.

“Well no, that’s the exciting part,” Betty jumps in. “Rumour has it that the new owner heard from Cam that it was in a bad state and made the old owners a cheeky offer, knowing it was going to be a fixer-upper. Who does that?”

“Someone with a lot of money,” I say.

“Exactly,” Ana agrees. “This man is *loaded* from what I hear. And that’s not even the best part.”

“What is it then?” I can see the first wave of visitors arriving, their cars pulling over to park on the side of the road. “You better make it quick, the crowds are coming.”

“He’s a *werewolf*.”

“A *wolf*?” I don’t bother hiding the surprise on my face. There aren’t many wolf-people around Auckland City and Motuwai, at least compared to the more obvious orcs and elves. Then again, the biggest tell that someone is a wolf is their eyes, which range from bright yellow to dark gold, and that is



easily enough disguised with a pair of sunglasses.

“I thought he was a wolf shifter,” Betty muses.

“Aren’t they the same thing?” Ana asks.

“No, I think they’re different,” I answer, stepping back because I really need to finish setting up the drinks station at the back of the garden. Ana’s hand on my arm stops me, her ruddy brown skin glowing in the sun as she grins.

“Wait, wait Ellie. He’s *handsome*.” She gives me a knowing look.

I laugh, shaking my head “You haven’t met him!”

“I have it on good authority that all the ladies were swooning over this man yesterday. He’s about your age. And single! And nice!”

“You can’t know all of this!”

“We know it! Ellie, this could be the man for you.”

“Rich, handsome, American man,” Betty interjects. “Owns a vineyard! They say he used to visit New Zealand in the summers so he knows it well enough. There’s the wolf part, but I’ve heard that’s a good thing, if you know what I mean,” she adds with a waggling brow.

“Betty!” I say with disbelief. I *do* know what she means — I don’t think there’s an adult in the world now who doesn’t know what a werewolf knot is, thanks to the Unravelling — but I can’t believe old Betty here is bringing it up. Then again, that’s a me problem if I’m judging her based on her age; if she wants to spend her days thinking about werewolf penises, more power to her.

“Ellie,” Ana says gently. “At some point, you’re going to need to let a man get close to you again. Nine years is a long time to let some teenage heartbreak get to you.”

Nope, nope, *nope*. They mean well, but I am not having this conversation now. I regret the day I ever explained to them the reasons why I’d left my hometown, where my mum still lives. I ignore that sour pang in my gut because *Ana’s right* — the sting of that first heartbreak that drove me to move down to Auckland is still so much worse than all the others since then, and it *does* still get to me — but I’m only twenty-seven, and it’s not like I’ve been single in *all* the years in between — I’ve had relationships, just not recently. *And none with half as much passion as...*

I don’t let myself finish that sentence, not even in my head. Today is *not* the day to think or talk about any of that. Carefully, I pull myself out of Ana’s grasp. “I’ll be up in my usual spot if you need me, okay?”

“I’m going to yell out to you when the wolf man arrives.”

I put my hands on my hips, hoping it plays off as comical and hides the fact that even just thinking of home hurts a little. “No, you’re not.” I give them both a stern glare and then turn away, heading back up the path before either woman can say anything else about it.

With guests almost at the gate, I run my eyes over the garden once more, allowing myself to feel really proud of what I’ve achieved here. When I bought the land two and a half years ago, I’d planned on building a small two-bedroom house on it. Then the Unravelling occurred and the economy crashed in the wake of it, and building materials and costs skyrocketed. In the end, all I could afford was a tiny house built on a truck bed. Since it sits on wheels, it’s classed as a vehicle and not a building, and I was able to save money by bypassing council permits and bylaws when placing it at the back of my property. Other than that, the only structures on the land here are the garden shed, the greenhouse, and the chicken coop.

I chose my little home based on aesthetics as well as functionality, picking one with cute Scandinavian styling and large windows that let in tons of light. Inside, I repainted everything white except the floors, so that light is reflected rather than absorbed in the small space. It’s my cosy, eco-friendly, solar-powered happy place, and all I need. I spend large portions of my day outdoors unless I’m catching up on business admin or drawing up my designs for clients. I haven’t been with anyone in the past two years because I’ve been paranoid about the *ear thing*, so I don’t need to worry about the fact that my double bed sits above my bathroom, has only three feet clearance from the ceiling, and isn’t really designed to enable fantastic sex.

I finish setting up the drinks station for guests to help themselves, placing the large dispensers of chilled water — flavoured with homegrown mint and cucumber — on the rustic outdoor table I picked up for free from a local family. It all sits under my largest plum tree, a beautiful old specimen that’s still a great producer. Even now it’s covered in tiny green plums that will ripen in the first week of January, and it’s this tree and the others like it that sold me this specific piece of land over any others on the island.

I’m setting out the last of the paper cups when I spot something strange and white in one of the flower beds.

At first I think it’s a ball — my neighbours have kids, and sometimes the odd toy ends up getting tossed over the fence by accident — but as I step closer I realise it’s a mushroom, pale white and perfectly formed, with a large

domed cap about the size of my fist and a thick stem. “Bloody hell,” I mutter to myself, bending down to look under the cap, ignoring the fact that I’m probably muddying up my pretty white dress that I wore today specifically because I’m not meant to be doing any dirty work.

The underside of the mushroom is pure white too, the gills closed tight, and I breathe a sigh of relief at that, since I seem to have caught this before it’s released all its spores into the air. I’ve never seen one like this before, but I can hazard a guess that it’s probably poisonous. The last thing I want is a toadstool infestation in my garden.

*It’s probably all through this garden bed already, damn it.* Mushrooms are only the tip of the iceberg, and I cringe at the thought of all the thread-like mycelium that’s probably hiding under the surface. I snap a photo of it on my phone before running to grab a pair of disposable gloves and a paper bag to place it in.

I dig it out with a trowel that I’ll chuck in a bucket of anti-fungal treatment later, carefully depositing the lot into the bag. My gloved fingers brush the mushroom cap, and I jolt as a flash of green light shimmers across the whole thing, moving outwards from my fingers like ripples in a pond.

Shit. *Shit, shit, shit.* That’s... that’s *magic*. My heart hammers in my chest as I stare at the damned thing.

Two years ago I would have questioned if I was hallucinating and going insane, but post-Unravelling...

I touch the mushroom once more, and the waves of green light ripple over it again.

“Oh no,” I whisper, frozen. It’s a magic mushroom, and not the fun kind. It’s the *something creepy is going on here, and you’re part-supernatural-something that you don’t know, and now it’s all coming to bite you in the ass* type of thing. I can barely breathe; the secret I’ve been hiding feels even more oppressive than usual.

The sound of shells crunching under feet makes me jump, and I get up, hastily brushing the dirt off my dress and plastering on a smile as the first visitors walk through. I throw the whole bag, trowel and all, in the rubbish bin because I don’t want that magic spreading in my garden. Between that and the conversations with guests, I forget all about the supposedly hot, rich werewolf that’s meant to be visiting.

I t's the end of the day when Cameron Morrison finds me sitting under one of the rose archways, his grin stretching wide around the two tusks that jut from his lower jaw, his green skin blending in nicely with the shrubbery behind him. My feet are aching, I'm exhausted, and my voice is hoarse from talking more in one weekend than I have the entire month prior, but when he opens his arms wide and says, "Ellie!" in his strong Scottish accent, I push myself up off the grass and lean into his hug, feeling like a child next to his giant orc body. He's in his late-50s, though orcs live longer and age incredibly well, and the only indication that he's older are the smile lines around his eyes and mouth, and his thick salt-and-pepper hair that he wears loose around his shoulders. Divorced with two kids who still live back in Scotland, he was born and raised in this human realm, and says he still has just as much trouble adjusting to his body minus the glamour as everyone who meets him.

Cam and I met on a ferry ride home from Auckland City last year; it was a rough sailing and I gave him the shopping bag I'd hastily emptied for him to puke in. At some point during the forty minute sail I mentioned what I did, and he became my first independent client, hiring me to transform his tired backyard on an otherwise remarkable property with panoramic sea views. He's the one that really encouraged me to leave the landscape design firm I used to work for and branch out on my own, and since then he's been one of my biggest supporters. I don't have any family here on Motuwai Island and neither does he, so we've become each other's fill-in family, I suppose.

He's the person I feel most guilty about deceiving, in terms of hiding my non-human status. It's just hard; when I meet new people, I'm not ready to tell them. When I do feel like I can trust them, I've kept the secret for too long, and fear their anger and hurt. I'm too scared someone I care about is going to turn around and say 'No, that was too big of a lie,' and I'll end up rejected and alone all over again. I should probably see a therapist about all my issues, but I've never been in a position to afford it until now.

"Just the girl I was hoping to see!" he rumbles. "I've been showing the new owner of Lost Moon around and he's got big plans for a full refurbishment of the place. He wants to turn it into one of those fancy wineries for the tourists and weddings and the like, and make it all inclusive for all peoples. He wants a huge garden done which is why I said to him we had to look at the festival, and I knew yours was the best and that you could maybe design his garden because you're so talented, so I said to him 'I'm

saving the best for last, wait 'til you meet our award-winning designer,' and he's just down there waiting to meet you."

I grin, processing all the words from his rambling sentences as I step back and peer up at him. At eight feet tall, he towers over me, completely blocking out the sunlight. "A little birdy told me something about this," I say.

"Oh did you hear all that already? Did old Betty spill her guts again? Or was it Ana? Or Sammy Barnett?"

Laughing, I shake my head. "I'm not telling you who."

"Well I'll tell you this," he crouches, until his face is at my level. "He's a fine young man, about your age —"

"Not this again," I mutter under my breath.

"— and he's single, and the young ladies have been after him all weekend," he continues.

"They have not."

"Aye they have, like sharks when there's blood, just circling the waters. He's a big lad. Handsome fellow. Come on." We round a planter box full of edible flowers and step onto the main path. "There he is now, see, with the ladies of course."

The ladies in question are Ana and Betty, staring up at a man who has his back to us. My breath catches in my throat, seeing those broad shoulders, that olive skin and dark hair.

I know the tilt of that head, the way his body moves when he nods at the women, listening intently to whatever they are saying. He turns ever so slightly, and I get a good look at his profile; even from this distance, I recognise those strong cheekbones, that straight nose and square jaw. In my old life in Northland, almost a decade ago, I'd known that face, kissed that face, loved that face.

I still see that face in my dreams, from time to time.

Cam continues to babble beside me, but I'm no longer really listening, my mind racing as all the clues about this mystery man fall into place. A wealthy American, someone who knows New Zealand well, a fucking *vineyard*.

*Van.*

He'd been three years into his bachelor's degree in viticulture and enology — *winemaking* — when I last saw him nine years ago.

Evander Livingston, oldest child of billionaire couple Weston and Bronte Livingston, is standing in my garden. He's the boy I grew up with every

summer, the guy I spent most of my teenage years pining after, and the man I fell so deeply in love with when I was eighteen. He broke my heart that same year, though given the tragic circumstances, I could never blame him for it. Loving and losing Van, and the grief that I had over the death of his youngest sister, broke me so fully that I left my hometown at the end of that summer. To me, Bluewater Bay holds far too many memories of summers spent at the Livingstons' holiday mansion, and although many of them are good, I can't reflect on them without the hurt of the bad times twisting its way in and souring the lot. These days, I only go back occasionally to visit my mum.

“— just one thing, Ellie, so you don't get a shock when you meet him,” Cam whispers, bending so close to my ear I can smell the coffee on his breath. “The man's a wolf, golden eyes and all. I know there's not many of them around here yet and I didn't want you to get a surprise. Not that you have ever shown any prejudice against us non-human folk, but still, I thought it best to warn you.”

My brain isn't functioning properly but I nod along. “Okay.”

*Van is a wolf. Van. Van is here. He is a wolf.*

He. Is. A. Wolf.

I know the words mean something, but I can't quite make sense of them right now.

“Evander!” Cam yells in his booming voice, making me jump. “Come meet Ellie!”

I see the moment Van lays eyes on me, the smile faltering on his face, though he recovers quickly. His long legs eat up the path as he strides towards us, looking like a goddamn movie star with his dark sunglasses and white teeth, and I still can't believe what I'm actually seeing as I take in the sight of him. My heart races, breath caught in my throat.

*Evander.*

Built like a bodybuilder, the outline of his muscles are visible beneath his white t-shirt, and his designer jeans don't hide the size of those muscular thighs. When he stops a few feet away, I have to tilt my head up to look up at his handsome face. He stands at least half a head taller than he used to, not nearly as tall as an orc, but far taller than most human men. *Glamour must have been hiding his true size all that time.*

His full lips, chiselled jaw and cleft chin are all so familiar despite the many years that have passed since I last laid eyes on him, though he's lost the soft baby-skin look that his twenty-one year old self had. I can't see his eyes

behind his glasses, but the slightly strained smile he flashes me is enough to confirm what he is; no human has canines *that* sharp and long, and a shiver runs down my spine. *Wolf. Predator.* It's an instinctual reaction, a recognition of *fear*, made all the more confusing because my body remembers just who he once was to me; he's so physically beautiful that arousal curls in my core, memories of straddling those hips once upon a time flashing through my mind.

I hate that I'm already reacting this way to him. I was never mad at him, at least not for long — how could I blame a man in the depths of grief, the same as I was? — but I was so deeply hurt when he left, especially by the way he and his family cut all contact, as if fifteen years of memories together meant nothing.

“Evander Livingston, meet Ellie Harding. This is her garden. She's the designer I was saying you need to hire; there's no one better out there than this lass. She —” Cam trails off, finally appearing to realise that there is something odd about Van and I, both of us wearing equally frozen expressions. “Is... is everything alright?”

I am speechless. Someone has cut the connection between my brain and my mouth and no sound will come out. All I can manage is a dazed shake of my head.

“Ellie?” Cam asks, concerned.

“Ellie and I know each other already,” Van says, and on hearing his deep, gravelly voice, just the same as it was nine years ago, I let out a shaky breath.

“Yeah,” I add, still in a stupor, my voice sounding small. “I'm sorry. I... I'm completely lost for words. When people said there was... I didn't realise it was *you*.”

“The feeling's mutual.” He pauses a beat and then adds, “It's good to see you, Ellie.” This time he gives me a more genuine smile. “Are you... how are you? You look good. Really good.”

“I'm good,” I lie. Right now in this instant I'm an absolute mess. The words *screaming internally* come to mind.

“That's great. This place is amazing.”

“Thank you.”

Is he as fucked up as I am by this? If he is, he's a better actor than me. I can see Cam staring at us both in turn, though I can't take my eyes off Van.

“Are you alright, lass?” Cam asks me softly. “I didnae know you knew him.”

“I’m fine.” I turn my wooden smile in his direction. He looks unconvinced. “You know what it’s like here, how they say there’s only two degrees of separation in New Zealand. Everyone is a friend of someone you know.”

Cam shrugs his hulking shoulders. “Aye, but —”

“Perhaps Ellie could show me around her garden?” Van interrupts. He pulls something from his pocket, tossing it to Cam. *Keys*. “Take the car if you need to leave earlier than me, Ellie and I have a bit of catching up to do. I can make my own way back.”

Hearing him use that slightly authoritative tone causes a visceral reaction in me; a confusing mix of longing and pain, thrown in with the ongoing shock that *he’s not even human*. I’ve heard him talk like that a thousand times before, back in that old life we had together — bossing his younger siblings around, taking charge, making me feel safe. It’s bringing it all back, as if I was last standing in his parents’ mansion yesterday rather than nine years ago.

Cam seems to recognise that he’s being dismissed. “Well okay then. Are you sure you’re alright, lass? You seem a bit shell shocked.”

Shell shocked is an accurate description. I do my best to gather myself just enough to seem unaffected. *Fake it ’til you make it*. “It will be good to talk to Van. I heard you might need help redesigning the garden at Lost Moon?”

Van smiles softly. “Yes. That’s what you do now? Garden design?”

“Does she ever!” Cam cuts in. “You should see what she did to my own place.”

Van nods. I nod. Cam nods. We all stand there awkwardly in a very strange three-way impasse. The silence stretches on for far too long.

“*Weeell*, I’ll go and help the ladies pack up down by the gate,” Cam announces.

“Thank you.” My mouth feels dry, and it’s an effort to speak. “I appreciate that.”

“You two have fun.”

I watch the huge orc make his way back to the gate, politely side-stepping around a group of human guests who don’t bother to hide their open-mouthed stares.

I can feel Van’s eyes on my face. “Ellie,” he says, his voice gentle. I don’t like it. I don’t like how the sound of my name on his lips wraps around



me like a long-overdue hug.

Once upon a time, I loved Evander Livingston with my whole being. I was young and naïve and far too optimistic for a girl having a summer fling with a guy who only visited once a year.

At the time, what we had felt so real, and I'm absolutely terrified of feeling that again. It never lasts.

Two

VAN



After a weekend of listening to orc and werewolf themed dad-jokes, it's a relief when Cameron finally says "Turn down here, lad. This one's the last stop." I like the man, but there's only so many versions of 'an orc and a wolf walk into a bar' that I can handle before I go completely insane.

It's been an interesting weekend. I flew into New Zealand two weeks ago after nine years away, and I've been constantly flowing between states of feeling entirely at home here and culture shock ever since. Spending two days visiting the gardens of locals on the island where I've just bought a vineyard... well it's one hell of a way to get your name out there in a small town, especially when you're a big wolf being shown around by an even bigger orc.

To be fair, I've enjoyed it far more than I expected, and in general the people we've met here have been the most accepting of us non-humans that I've come across in the past two years. There's something about Kiwis that makes you feel at home even when you're a complete stranger; it's a mix of their down-to-earth attitudes, relaxed natures, and welcoming smiles. Small-town New Zealand is what I love — it reminds me of all the best moments of my childhood — and although I'll never go back to Bluewater Bay, I'm glad to be here.

Still, I'm ready to be done with these garden tours. It's given me plenty of ideas already for what I can do with the vineyard, but Cameron's been harping on about this last one all day, so I'm keeping my lack of enthusiasm to myself.

"This is the garden designer, right?" I ask as I pull over, parking on the grass berm that blends almost seamlessly onto the tar seal. This street is a

little further inland than the others we've visited today, but there's something charming about the lack of sidewalks and the wildflowers growing on the roadside. "What did you say her name was again?"

I shut off the engine as Cam replies. "I dinnae think I did, lad. Her name is Ellie."

I freeze for a moment, my hand hovering over the door handle. *It has to be a coincidence.* I clear my throat as Cam throws his door open, and I do the same a moment later, climbing out of my car.

Her scent hits me instantly.

I grunt at the shock of it, and Cameron's big head whips around, his dark eyes full of worry. He's the definition of 'gentle giant', and I'm thankful that after everything that went down between my father and I, at least one of his former associates stuck by my side when the dust cleared. "Everything okay lad?"

"Fine," I say through gritted teeth. "You go ahead, I'll be with you in a moment."

I'm grateful he doesn't question it, because I need a minute to compose myself. Inside me, my wolves whimper and howl, the shifter in particular nipping at my skin, begging to be set free so we can run to her and throw ourselves at her feet.

*Mate. Mate. Mate. Mate,* they both chant.

The word repeats like a drumbeat in time with my heart, and I take in a shaky breath through my mouth. It doesn't help all that much; her scent is so thick in the air here that I can taste it on my tongue, so sweet and perfect and mouthwateringly *good*. I run my hands back through my hair, clutching at my scalp. "Fuck *me*."

In all the years and women in between, I've never once met a wolf whose scent drove me half as wild as Ellie's did, despite the fact that she's human. And it's more than that; we shared a history, a childhood, adventures and fun and laughter.

We shared unimaginable pain, too, and though I'd loved her dearly, in my darkest moments I'd burned what we'd had to the ground.

**E**llie is even more beautiful than I'd remembered.

I had planned to track her down once I got settled, once I had the vineyard — and everything else that's currently a mess — in order. Only *then* was I going to try and find her, to apologise, to grovel, to hope that maybe she would be willing to let me into her life again in some shape or form. I don't deserve it, but I'm selfish enough to hope she'd give me a chance, regardless.

Was this fate? For years I tried to pretend that such a thing didn't exist, but it's hard to deny when the wolves inside me howl with joy at her sweet scent and the sight of her pretty face, her big brown eyes wide with shock. I'm struck by how much she reminds me of the sun goddess that was once worshipped by the wolves of old, with that sun-kissed skin and honey-blond hair glowing in the afternoon light. The light breeze tugs at the loose fabric of her dress, for a moment pulling it flush against her body, accentuating the full curve of her hips, the dip of her waist, and the outline of her pert breasts that even now I remember so fondly. The wind shifts again, and for the briefest moment I catch the sweet tang of arousal in her scent, saliva flooding my mouth, instincts screaming *taste her*.

But I can also hear the quick hammer of her heartbeat. It hasn't slowed at all in the five minutes since I approached her, and I can see the way Cameron glances at her with concern. My presence has stressed her out; while I may be shocked as hell to find her living here on Motuwai of all places, she's undoubtedly more stunned, and I can only assume that she never expected to ever see me again.

Right now she's looking at me as if she's seen a ghost, and the fact that I'm a wolf isn't helping — it's another surprise for her on top of my sudden appearance in her garden. My eyes may be concealed by my sunglasses, but every time I open my mouth her gaze zeroes in on my teeth, and it's pretty obvious that she's bothered by it. I can't blame her. In the wake of *The Unravelling*, most of the humans I'd known were shocked when they found out what I was. Plenty were *hurt by the lies*, not understanding that the glamour that held everything in place in their perfect little human world pre-*Unravelling* ran far deeper than they realised and had bound all us non-humans to silence in almost every situation. Humans are not the only ones who have had their worlds turned upside down in the past two years since the *Unravelling*.

There are some positives to it, though, the main one being that relationships between non-humans and humans are no longer the taboo thing

they once were in our world, now that the pressure to keep our existence secret is gone. For that alone, I'm thankful that those in power finally let go of their tight control on the two realms, even if the rumours about why the glamour *really* fell away are concerning.

Cam dismisses himself after one final worried look, and I watch as Ellie nods, wide-eyed as she thanks him for the offer to help the old women at the gate. Her eyes stay trained on Cam's retreating form, as if she would rather follow him than be left standing here with me.

"Ellie." I do my best to sound gentle. She turns those soulful eyes towards me, and I can practically see the pain leaching out of her. *Baby*. It makes me feel sick to know she's hurting like this. But then she squares her shoulders, lifting her chin in a determined tilt as she takes a deep breath.

"Hi, Evander."

"Hi, Ellie."

"Did you want to look around?" She tucks her hands into the pockets of her dress, and I get the sense that she's trying hard not to fidget, though she still shuffles one sandal-clad foot repetitively, kicking up bits of shell from the path.

"Yes, absolutely. Is it too much to ask for a personal tour?"

"It's not too much," she replies. Her eyes scan over our surroundings, landing on the different groups of visitors still walking through, and I can see her thinking. There's still an hour to go before the festival officially ends, and although the crowds are a lot thinner now, the garden is by no means empty. "Shall we start up the back? I don't think anyone's up there at the moment."

"Sure. Lead the way."

I follow her up towards her tiny home, which fits in perfectly amongst her cottage garden. The wheels that the house sits on are all artfully disguised by huge wine-barrel planters and vintage tubs, filled with an array of flowers and citrus trees, and the pale brown wood of the structure compliments the garden rather than dominating it. An incredible amount of work has gone into this place and it's obvious that she's very talented at what she does. She was always garden obsessed, even at eighteen, and to see what she's done in the time since is surreal.

To the right of her house is the most elevated part of her yard. We climb a short stairway to a grassed area, where a park bench sits under a huge archway of grapevines.

"What's the variety?" I ask, touching the new growth as she takes a seat. I

can see she hasn't pruned the vines over winter, unheard of in winemaking, but perfect for an aesthetically pleasing backyard crop.

"Albany surprise. They're one of the very first things I put in here; I wanted to get fruit crops established quickly."

I sit beside her, careful to leave a gap between us on the small seat. "Smart thinking."

"Thanks."

We sit in silence, and I can feel the tension emanating from her. She picks at the fabric of her dress, her gaze focused on the others wandering through, while I rack my brain for something to say.

"This is a good spot for people watching." Inside I cringe at myself. It's a fairly average way to start a conversation. What I really want to do is ask her a million questions, but I hold myself back, lest I overwhelm her. *I'm* still feeling stunned, and that's just from the fact that I've found her here. She's got far more to process, her eyes darting to my teeth once more.

"It is. That wasn't my intention, but it works for today..." She shrugs, smiling softly. "I just wanted a place to sit and enjoy it all at once, after the garden was done. Not that it's ever really *done*, with seasonal changes, and the veggies, annuals, et cetera."

"It looks amazing. There's a lot of raised beds for crops — you must be pretty self-sufficient here?"

She nods. "Yeah, fruit and vegetable wise, I am. The excess I sell at the farmers market on Saturdays; I do the same with flowers too, especially dahlias in summer. It's not a huge profit-generating thing, but I get a bit of pocket money to spend from it. Most of the time I just channel those funds back into the garden."

"That's really smart. I hadn't even thought of the idea of monetising flowers." I didn't purchase Lost Moon with the expectation of turning a huge profit, at least not for the first few years, but it doesn't hurt to think about alternative revenue streams.

"It's the new trend over here. Small-scale flower farms are popping up across the country at a really fast rate, and there's a handful of pick-your-own flower farms now." I can see her growing more comfortable as we speak, her body relaxing into the seat behind her, her face lighting up as she speaks.

"Really?"

"Mmhm. You could definitely do that at your vineyard, if you wanted to, depending on how much land you've got set aside for gardens. Even just as a

side attraction, something to entertain people — flowers look great on social media, and these days that alone motivates people to visit a place, because people want to look good on the ‘gram.’”

“Offer it in a package deal; wine tasting, flower picking... I like it. I’ve got a hectare of paddock farmland that I want developed into designed garden spaces,” I say, already thinking ahead. I want her for the job. *I want her.*

“A hectare!”

At my nod, her mouth falls open. “A *hectare*,” she repeats. “Holy *shit!* Sorry, ’scuse me.” She covers her mouth, her eyes wide.

I laugh. *This* is much better, the ice between us melting, already feeling more like old times. “It’s fine. Would you be interested in the job?”

“In designing a garden? For you?” she asks, and I nod again. “On over a hectare of land?”

“Yeah.”

“You can’t use that land for grapevines?”

“No, it’s flat terrain in that paddock. They had sheep grazing on it, but I’ve already sold them off.”

“Not a sheep fan?”

“Not quite.” I refrain from saying that it’s more that wolves tend to be a fan of the taste of sheep, and the temptation with them so close by would be too much, particularly on a full moon. Better for them to live out their days on a farm where they don’t run the risk of being eaten by a hungry werewolf.

She stares at my face for a moment, and perhaps she’s already figured that out, because her next request pivots the conversation towards my nature.

“Can I see your eyes?”

Spoken in her soft voice, it’s an intimate request, far removed from the blunt demands that I’m sometimes subjected to when in public.

“Of course.” I remove my sunglasses, turning my torso towards her, my knee accidentally bumping hers. She doesn’t shift away from the touch, only stares into my eyes with a sort of stunned acceptance on her face, and I wonder what she’s thinking, and whether she’s comparing what she sees now to how I used to look, pre-Unravelling. “Do I scare you?”

A small frown appears between her brows. “You could never scare me, Evander.”

*I absolutely could.* I keep my thoughts about the full moon to myself, sitting still as her gaze dances from my eyes to my lips and back again.

“I... I’m just adjusting,” she adds. “My brain hasn’t really caught up yet.”



There's a lot to process. You're here. You're offering me a job, maybe. You're not human. You never were... I mean, you *knew*, right? You knew the whole time?"

My lips twitch with the urge to smile, but I don't want her to think I'm laughing at her question, as strange as it is. "I knew I was a wolf, yes. I'm sorry I was never able to tell you, before."

For the briefest moment her expression flickers with an emotion that's too quick for me to recognise, but then she smiles softly again. "It's okay. I understand."

My knee is still pressed against hers. Sitting this close, her scent borders on overwhelming because she smells *so fucking luscious* and it's triggering a whole summer worth of memories; of my hands on her body, of her taste on my tongue. Of what it felt like — before my life fell apart — to be buried deep inside her, her arms around me, believing that we had our whole future ahead of us.

I clear my throat, forcing myself to focus on the conversation, willing my dick to cooperate and not get any harder than the half-chub I'm already sporting. "I'm definitely offering you the job, by the way, but I don't want you to feel like you're being pushed into it."

She lifts her hand, adjusting her hat ever so slightly. "I would have to see the space first. I usually visit the client's property, do a walkthrough with them, draw up some basic ideas on the spot, and then quote in the days after the meeting. I need to know that I'm suited for a job before I agree to anything; sometimes I'm not, depending on what the client is requesting. In those cases, I usually refer them on to the design firm I used to work for. And you may want to shop around, check that there's not someone cheaper that you could go for."

I have no intention of shopping around. "Are you insinuating I couldn't afford you?"

She laughs, a nervous giggle that ends as quick as it begins, shaking her head. "I don't know what your finances are these days, Evander. A lot of people lost a lot of money in the wake of the Unravelling when the economy crashed."

"I didn't. But I know what you mean. I hope it didn't hit you hard."

"I've been okay. I was supposed to have a full-size house on this property, not one that's only a fifth of the size, but," she shrugs, "it's worked out well. More room for the garden. I don't know if I would have fit in the

big shed, the greenhouse, *and* the chicken coop otherwise.”

“Have they got names?”

“The chooks? Yes. Rachel, Monica, and Phoebe.”

I laugh. “You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m dead serious. I even got their personalities right; Rachel is a spoiled brat but she’s got gorgeous feathers, Monica is ridiculously energetic, and Phoebe is just plain nuts. She acts more like a dog than a chicken.” Her small laugh is light and carefree.

I shake my head, grinning. It is indescribably strange to be sitting beside this stunning creature again. She is beyond lovely, naturally beautiful, and perfectly at home among the pretty flowers of her garden. Her smile fades as her eyes search my face once more. “I can’t believe you’re here right now,” she admits.

“I feel the same.”

We stare at each other for far longer than what would be considered appropriate between acquaintances. There’s a charged tension in the air, broken only when a bumblebee flies right for my face. I huff, leaning back and watching as its little round body disappears through the archway surrounding us.

“Let me tell you about some of the garden features you might be interested in,” Ellie says, turning the conversation towards her business.

**T**he rest of the guests and volunteers have long gone by the time we finish discussing garden design and its application on a vineyard like Lost Moon. Ellie shows me her greenhouse — an attractive all-glass structure, filled to the brim with seedlings and warm-weather crops — and grabs a huge harvesting basket from the old wooden shed, where tools line the walls and bouquets of flowers and herbs hang in bunches from the rafters, drying out for future use. We move about her garden, making small talk — I ask her about the weather here on Motuwai Island, she asks about my flight from San Francisco to New Zealand — and I watch her as she carefully selects each and every leaf, fruit, and vegetable she harvests, squashing the odd snail she finds along the way. There’s a real sense of calm amongst all the plants, the only sounds the buzzing of bees, our steady heartbeats, birdsong, and the odd

passing car. It's as if time slows here, and it's exactly what I want recreated on the vineyard.

I desperately want to feel at peace, the way Ellie seems to be in her garden.

"All of this is for you," she announces, once her basket is overflowing with produce.

"Wait, what?" I wasn't expecting her to give me anything, and I don't *need* any of this food, not when it's her secondary income.

"You used to love to cook; I'm guessing you still do? You can't get food fresher than this."

"I do, but Ellie... I can't accept all of this. It's yours."

"And it's mine to give. I didn't sell at the market this weekend because of the festival here, so," she shrugs, "some of this stuff will be rotten or bitter in a week's time. I can't eat through all of it myself, so you're doing me a favour by taking it off my hands."

"Sure I am," I say, making sure to sound unconvinced. She grins, the smile reaching her eyes and filling my chest with warmth at the sight of it. "I was going to run home," I add, eyeing up the basket. "Cameron has my car."

"Run? In jeans?"

"Uh," I hesitate, scratching at the back of my neck. I suppose now is as good of a time as any to go into details. "I was going to shift and run on four legs."

Her mouth drops open in a little 'o', her eyes wide as she searches my face. "I didn't know how to bring it up," she says quietly, "but I don't actually know *what* kind of wolf you are. The old ladies at the gate today — they're my friends from gardening club, by the way. Yes I know, it's a very sad social life —" she adds, noting the amused expression on my face, "anyway, they're a bunch of old gossips and they'd heard about you from their other gardening friends —"

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Because you're a handsome, extremely rich newcomer on the island?"

Although I'm flattered by her use of the word *handsome*, that's not the reason people are talking. "Or because I'm a wolf."

"Or that, yeah. Maybe. I mean you're very *big*." Her eyes bug out comically as she realises how that could be construed, and I laugh, having caught the way her gaze darted down to my crotch ever so briefly as she spoke. It's not like she hasn't seen me naked before, although my cock never

had a knot, pre-Unravelling. She splutters, adding “I mean you stand out in a crowd, you’re giant now! Anyway, they were debating about whether you were a werewolf or a wolf shifter, and what the difference was. But I suppose you just answered that, huh? Werewolves shift at the full moon only, right? But you just said you could run home now. The full moon isn’t ’til the end of next week.”

I note the way she shifts the basket of produce against her hip, redistributing the weight of it, and step forward, taking it from her hands. It’s heavier than I expected, and I reevaluate how strong she is. Even after working in viticulture for a few years, I often forget how much of a workout you get from gardening. In answer to her question, I say, “I’m both.”

“Both? What...?”

“Mom is a werewolf and... my father...” I pause for a moment, the word *father* feeling dirty in my mouth. “He’s a wolf shifter. A pairing between the two types of wolves doesn’t happen often but it does happen.” I shrug. “The result in the first generation is always wolves with two forms; the shifter wolf and the werewolf.”

Ellie remains silent, searching my face. I expect her to ask more about wolves. What I don’t expect — but what I should have anticipated — is that after nine years apart, she’s just as sharp as ever, and picks up on exactly what I’m *not* saying.

“You and your dad still aren’t getting along, are you?”

Well, *fuck*.

I open my mouth to say something, but freeze, not knowing where to start. *Aren’t getting along* is putting it mildly. *Can’t stand being in the same room as each other*, is more accurate.

“You don’t have to answer,” she says quickly. “Sorry, that was... I’m being rude and nosey, prying like that.”

“No! No, ask. Please, feel free to ask me anything. I don’t think it’s rude. It’s a long story. The short answer is no. We’re no longer speaking.” *Because he shifted and went for my throat.*

“I’m sorry.”

The bitter part of me wants to say ‘don’t be,’ even though that’s not at all how I really feel. Almost everything regarding my family — my old pack — is broken now. The cracks were already there long before Jenny’s death nine years ago, but after she drowned everything got worse, despite our best efforts to move on, to keep living. Dealing with this kind of grief and guilt,

when everyone else around you is living it too, is like wading through never-ending mud. It's *exhausting*.

By the time my father tried to lay down another one of his archaic alpha laws with my sister Lacey six months ago, potentially putting her and her two kids in danger, I was done with his bullshit. It hadn't been my intention to challenge his position as alpha that day, but he took it that way, and when the argument between us turned physical there was only ever going to be one outcome.

The reality is that it had been a long time coming, and *had* to happen at some point. As an alpha myself, I'd let the question of when I'd challenge him hang over all of our heads for far too long — but even with that knowledge, it's still a bitter pill to swallow.

“Wolves — shifters, I mean, not werewolves — we organise our communities around packs, with an alpha as leader. My father has always been the alpha of his pack. Six months ago he tried to force Lacey to...” I trail off. Lacey's relationship with her problematic ex is not my story to tell; better Ellie hear it directly from the source. “He tried to make Lacey stay in a situation that wasn't good for her or her kids.”

Ellie's entire demeanour shifts, standing straighter at the mention of Lacey's name. It's not surprising. Before Ellie and I were ever together, it was Lacey that she'd adored. They'd been best friends every summer since they were toddlers. “Lacey has kids?”

“Yeah. Two boys. Two and four. They're cute as fuck, but total handfuls, as you'd expect from wolf pups.”

She shakes her head in shock. “Wow. Wow. And she's okay? You said —”

“She's fine.” I take a deep breath, pulling my gaze away from Ellie's concerned face. Sometimes it's easier to say things when you're staring into nothing. “My father and I physically fought. Fists first, then as wolves. I broke off from the pack at that point. I would have been what you would call a *lone wolf* but Lacey immediately joined me — it's hard to explain...”

“Is it a mental bond, you're talking about. Magic based?”

“Yes. Yes it is. Have you heard about it, somewhere?”

“I read something online a while back. So does that make you...”

“The alpha of a new pack, yeah. It's just myself, Lacey, and her boys.”

“She's *here*?” Ellie doesn't bother to hide the shock on her face, though I can tell from the look in her eye that she's excited at the prospect of seeing

Lacey again. I'm glad.

"She lands in two weeks. I had to come over first and get things set up. One of the reasons I chose Lost Moon is for the living arrangements — there's two houses on it, and there's enough distance between them that we're not going to be tripping over each other."

Ellie's hand lands on my arm, giving it a gentle squeeze as she peers up at me from under the brim of her hat. "You're a good big brother."

I grimace. I'm really not. I still feel responsible for Jenny's death, and when I split the pack, my younger brother Seth stayed with my parents. I haven't heard from him since. I hope, one day, our family can reconcile enough to be in the same room together. We'll never be one pack again, but I would like a relationship with my brother, my mother, and even my father.

"You are." Ellie repeats. "You always were."

"No. No I'm not." My father's voice echoes through my mind. "*She's dead because of you!*"

Ellie's lips press into a straight line, but she doesn't push it any further. Instead she sighs, pocketing her garden clippers, the white fabric of her dress now marked with various smudges of dirt and green, the odd leaf clinging to her skirt. It's endearing as fuck and something I always appreciated about her; like so many Kiwis, she spent every summer living in flip flops or bare feet, her beach hair smelling of salt from the ocean, sand forever stuck to her legs. She loved the outdoors just as much as I always have, our days spent climbing around the rocks and finding hidden sea caves to sneak into — innocently back when we were kids, not so innocently when I returned after a few years away at college — and following the steep path up to the lookout at the top of the southern cliff, where you could see the amazing views out across the neighbouring bays of the Tutukākā coastline.

I'm not a fool. I know there will be plenty of ways in which we have both changed significantly since we last saw each other — at eighteen and twenty-one, we were practically babies, after all. It's nice, though, to be reminded of how things were, back when — for the briefest time — my life felt perfect.

"How 'bout I go get my keys, and I can drive you home. Or to Cam's, if you prefer, and you can pick up your car from him? I'm still shocked that we both know him so well, it's a small world."

*It's fate*, my wolves insist. I ignore them. "Cam's sounds good. Thank you."

"No worries. I'll meet you down at the car." She nods in the direction of

her surprisingly large SUV, parked just inside her fence line on a small patch of gravel that serves as an ad-hoc driveway.

“Sure.”

I watch her disappear into her house, and it’s tempting to follow her and ask for a look inside her tiny home, but I know that would be a step too far. Instead I turn and walk towards her car. I’m weaving between her flower beds when a sickly-sweet scent hits my nose.

*Fae.*

It’s faint but it’s there; I’m almost certain of it, and my hackles rise. *What the fuck.*

I set down the basket I’m holding and stalk up and down the rows of flowers, trying to pick up the scent further, but the wind shifts, the smell dissipating into thin air.

“Van?”

I whirl around at the sound of Ellie’s voice.

“Did anyone else non-human visit here today?”

She takes a step back, brown eyes wide and startled.

“Not that I’m aware of. Yesterday there was a family of rabbit-people; the kids found my strawberry patch while I was busy chatting to their parents, and next minute they’d cleared it out entirely. Why?”

I shake my head, tracing my footsteps once again, nostrils flaring as I try to pick up the scent. I brush past Ellie and she sets a hand on the centre of my chest, stepping so close that I can feel the heat of her against me.

“Van, you’re beginning to freak me out.” There’s a tremble in her voice. *Didn’t take long.*

“I thought I smelled something, that’s all.”

“Something or *someone*?” Her heart rate — which had eventually calmed down over the course of this afternoon — has picked up again, and I feel like a monster for scaring her.

“Something. Nothing. It’s fine, I didn’t mean to alarm you. It was just a whiff and now it’s gone; maybe I was imagining things.”

There’s a deep frown between her brows now. “Do I need to be worried?” she whispers.

“No. No.” I don’t want her worrying, and hate that I’ve panicked her. It’s an issue of mine I’ve been trying to work on; the urge to protect everyone and everything around me is part alpha instinct and part trauma-induced response, as my therapist puts it.

“Alright.” She sounds unconvinced, her lips pursed. “Let’s get you home, then.”

I load the basket of produce in the back of the car. Before she climbs in the driver’s seat, she lifts her face to the sun, and I realise she must have ditched her hat in the house and tied her hair into a messy braid that I’m only noticing now that the scent of fae is out of my nose. I watch her close her eyes and take a deep breath, the light setting her golden hair aflame, shining like a halo around her face, the freckles that dot her nose and cheeks testament to her time spent outdoors. *Sun goddess*. When she opens her eyes, she seems calmer.

It doesn’t feel like I have a home, yet. Seeing her like this makes me wonder if she could be it; the place I settle, an anchor I would happily remain tethered to.



Three

## ELLIE



I'm a nervous wreck as I drive to Lost Moon Estate Winery for my consultation meeting with Van, that *heart-caught-in-your-lungs* feeling enhancing my nausea. Outwardly, I appear calm, but inside my head I'm having a full-on, stress-fuelled conversation with myself, and I adjust the aircon in my car until it's blasting cold air directly at me in order to combat the inevitable nervous sweat. *Just don't cry. We're setting the bar really low for the day. No crying about the ex-boyfriend while meeting with said ex-boyfriend, equals success. If you additionally manage to get a job out of it, that's a bonus.*

The drive is only a short ten minutes — the benefit of living on a small island — taking me down across a causeway that stretches over a mangrove-covered inlet and then up again, winding through the hills into the more elevated area of the island, where the microclimates are perfect for growing grapes. It's a surprise when I pull into the gravel parking lot outside Lost Moon and find it over half-full, despite the fact that it's a Tuesday morning. I enter the main building through the arched brick entrance into a wide lobby with a vaulted ceiling, the hum of chatter and music filtering through from the restaurant off to the right. The customer service desk in the lobby is empty and Van isn't in sight, so I head into the restaurant, looking around for someone who can point me in the right direction. I'm not really dressed in restaurant attire; I took far too long debating what to wear this morning, but settled on high-waist jeans and a white linen shirt with the sleeves rolled to halfway, paired with my fancier set of ankle-height gumboots. Tidy and practical was what I was aiming for, and if my ass looks amazing in these jeans, well that's just a nice bonus — they were definitely *not* intentionally

chosen because of who I'm meeting with. I've also taken no chances with the hair today, plaiting it in a loose fishtail braid that hides the points of my ears.

A young waitress approaches, and I give her a friendly smile. "Hi, I'm looking for Evander Livingston, I've got a meeting with him. Do you know where he is?"

She's more nervous than I first realised. "Oh, um, he was here a minute ago... I think he went that way," she points outside, looking rather lost herself. "Sorry, it's my first day back since he took over. I've been on holiday. Crap timing, right!" Her eyes grow round as she snaps her mouth shut, and I have to stop myself from laughing. She looks fresh out of high school, and it's obvious she hasn't quite figured out the art of customer service yet.

"It's fine, I'll go look for him. Thank you."

I step through the restaurant and onto the huge outdoor deck at the back of the building, moving around tables already filled with patrons. The main building sits at the top of a ridge, and from here the ground slopes away at a gentle angle, a grassed clearing — where picnic blankets are already laid out for guests — leading to a grove of olive trees, and the start of the grapevines after that. The huge flat paddock Van described to me sits to the right of all of this, the grass looking long and lush now that there are no animals grazing it. I take a moment to just enjoy the view; from the deck it's all field upon field of grapevines in neat rows, sloping down towards the ocean that spreads out wide and vast, bright blue and completely flat on this windless spring day. In the distance, the high-rises of Auckland City stretch towards the sky, the Sky Tower's spire a prominent figure against the horizon.

There's a house below the last field of vines, before the land drops off in what looks like a steep cliff, and from what Van described to me the other day, I guess that it must be his new place. I look around again and notice a second house up on the opposite ridge, behind the huge empty paddock and further rows of grapes. *That's got to be the house Lacey will move into.*

I spot Van at the start of the vines, dressed in a pale blue business shirt and black pants, and wearing the same dark glasses as he did the other day. He holds his phone to his ear, and even from this distance it's clear from the set of his shoulders that he's unhappy. As I walk closer, the deep frown on his face becomes apparent, making him look just like his father, and I stop, lingering in the clearing, not wanting to intrude.

Everything about this moment — Van's designer clothes, his father's

scowl, the watch he wears that glints in the sunlight and probably costs just as much as my little house — seems to highlight the differences between us, between an ultra-wealthy Livingston and the poor, small-town girl that I still am at heart. While Van's mother always welcomed me with open arms and a "*There's my sweet Ellie,*" allowing me to practically live at their house every summer, Van's father, Weston, always made it a priority to point out the differences between us. His dislike of me was never a secret, my presence barely tolerated, and I can still hear his voice from that last summer I saw him; "*If you think that fucking my son is going to get you somewhere, you're wrong. He's heading back to college in the new year. You know that he's in a different league to you. You have been a pleasant enough plaything for my children, but that's all you'll ever be to them.*"

It hurt then, and it still hurts now. Growing up, I definitely had moments where I felt a level of *whakamā*, of embarrassment and shame, just for being poor. Those feelings were especially pronounced when I compared myself to the Livingstons, which is so stupid, because their wealth is extreme and abnormal; unattainable for all but a *very* select few in this world. Weston seemed to think I was there every summer to leech off their money, but for me, it was *never* about that.

I cannot remember a time when I did not know Van and his sister Lacey. They were the best parts of every summer, of every Christmas and New Year. I spent time with them because I loved them. I missed them when they were gone for ten months of the year. I was *devastated* when Van didn't come to New Zealand for the first three years of his college degree — by then I'd been harbouring a major crush on him for a couple of years, and it only got worse the longer he stayed away. When he did finally return, the summer I was eighteen, I got swept up in the sudden passion that ignited between us, and for the next six weeks we were near-inseparable. I'd stayed over at their house every year since I was eight, so it wasn't *that* much of a stretch that I wound up sleeping in Van's bed nearly every night that summer, and if his mother ever had an issue with it, she never said anything about it.

Reliving all of this has been fucking exhausting. My head has been so full of the past these last two days that I feel like I've been floating around only half-awake, caught in a bad daydream. It's not quite a nightmare — there's a whole childhood of happy summers — but it always ends in the most heart-wrenching sorrow, and that black cloud of depression that hung over me for so long afterwards terrifies me, because I don't ever want to go

back there.

I'm scared. I'm scared of how *good* it feels to see Van again, and I'm so fucking scared that history will repeat itself.

Part of the exhaustion comes from the fact that I'm now trying to see these memories through a new lens, now that I know that all the Livingstons are wolves. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary to me as a child, so it feels odd to realise that there's *so much* I didn't know about so many of the people I was closest to. Then again, there's so much I didn't know — that I still don't know — about myself. It's why I'm not at all upset that they never told me; if anyone understands *why* someone might want to hide that sort of information, it's me.

“Sorry, are you okay?”

I jump, startled by the male voice behind me. It's another young staff member, concern etched across his face, and I realise I've been standing in the middle of the clearing like an idiot for far too long. I clear my throat, nodding in Van's direction, where he's still pacing up and down in front of the vines, looking agitated as he talks into his phone.

“Yeah, I'm just waiting for Evander to finish his call. I'm a garden designer — I have a consultation with him.”

“Ah, sweet as. I was just checking. You seemed lost.”

I shake my head, and the kid walks off. I'm not lost, but I *feel* it. Further memories flood my mind, of Van naked, stretching over me, filling me, murmuring dirty things in my ear. Those six weeks were *intense* in the best way, and I can tell myself it was just the teenage hormones, but deep down I know that it wasn't. It was *him*, and in all the men since then, no one has ever come close.

I keep walking, and as I reach the last of the olive trees, Van's entire demeanour changes at once, the scowl disappearing in an instant as he waves at me, then lifts one finger as if to say 'give me a minute'. He turns his back to me, though I can still hear the cold, authoritative tone in his voice as he speaks to whoever is at the end of the call. “Look, I've got a meeting to get to. You want to talk, *properly* talk, next time schedule a call with my assistant.” He pulls his phone away from his ear, ending the call with a swipe of his thumb. I wait patiently as he pockets his phone, trying and failing not to look at his perfect ass in those tight pants.

It's frustrating, this attraction, this *pull* I feel towards him. Despite the shock of seeing him again, I so quickly found myself slipping into easy

conversation with him the other day, my guard falling, huge holes being poked in the walls I thought I'd built around my heart. Right now I'm just one big walking ball of hurt and excitement, anticipation and fear, utterly conflicted and I have no idea what I'm doing. Part of me wants to turn down the work here for this very reason, but I can't do that. I've worked too hard to not take up an opportunity like this, and I know I'd regret it every time I drive past this place if I let some other designer take this job.

Van walks towards me, looking apologetic.

"Ellie, sorry, I had every intention of meeting you at the front door and then this call came through and," he shrugs, the crease between his brows deepening for a moment, "I had to take it, unfortunately."

"It's alright."

"It was my father," he blurts out, digging his hands in his pockets, looking far too good in his business attire, the fabric of his shirt straining over his biceps and pectorals, and I have to force myself to focus on what he's telling me.

"I thought you said you weren't talking to him."

"I wasn't. And turns out all he wanted was to tell me he'd heard I'd bought this place and that it was a poor business decision and that it's not going to turn a profit. So," he shrugs again. "I didn't want you thinking I'm a dick to everyone on the phone. It's just *him*."

"I get it." I say the words without thinking, that memory of the last time I actively spoke to Weston Livingston still fresh in my mind. Van barks out a short laugh.

"I know you do. Come on," he gestures for me to follow him, "I'll show you around. You saw the restaurant and bar?"

"Briefly. For some reason I thought you wouldn't be up and running at the moment — I guess with it changing hands I assumed a refurbishment was on the cards."

He chuckles, shooting me a quizzical look. "You're saying it currently looks like shit here?"

"No! No, I mean —"

"Relax Ellie, I'm teasing. And it does look like a mess; the decor inside is at least ten years too dated. It's got good bones, that's why I bought this place, but you're right, it needs a full refurb. That's where you come in — I want the outdoor area to be an attraction in itself. Those things we talked about on Sunday — sunflower fields, pick your own flowers, a setting people

want to share on social media — that’s what I want. I *had* planned on closing us down to get things sorted, but when I got here I realised how stressed all the staff were. They thought they were going to lose their jobs.”

“So you’ve stayed open for them?”

He nods, looking up over my head to where the building sits at the top of the hill. “Even when we close the restaurant for the refurb, we can do that quickly; two weeks, if I throw enough money at it, which I’m inclined to do. The books might look shit for the first year, but I’m in this for the long haul. This place is where I want to settle, where Lacey is going to raise her kids. So the plan is to do everything that we can in stages. The staff that I can temporarily redirect to other areas of work on the vineyard will do that, and the rest will be put on paid leave while we renovate. It’s not their fault that the vineyard sold. I don’t want good people stressing about their job security when there’s no need.”

“That’s thoughtful of you.”

He shrugs dismissively. “It should be what all employers do — take care of their employees. What little extra cost it will be to me in the short term will well and truly pay for itself in the long run. I like to invest in the people that work for me.”

I nod, not exactly surprised, but impressed all the same. It’s a far cry from the topics we discussed when we were younger, and a clear reminder of how much we’ve both grown since then. For all that I feel like I know him, so easily slipping into that sense of bone-deep familiarity, we are just as much strangers to each other now. Nine years of life and experience separate us from the people we once were.

We walk adjacent to the grapevines, following a grassed path towards the expansive paddock that sits parallel to the road. As we approach it I can see what he meant by it not being suitable for growing grapevines — you could, technically, grow them here, but on completely flat terrain your yield is going to be less for a number of reasons, and probably not worth it in a business sense. “Have you thought of anything else in regards to the space? Are you going to be hosting weddings here? Are there any special requirements to consider with certain guests?”

“No water features.”

I glance at him, noting his clenched jaw, and the way he keeps his eyes trained on the horizon as we walk. I don’t blame him for wanting to avoid anything that could result in a drowning accident, though it makes me wonder

about the beach here. Since Sunday, I've spent my time researching Lost Moon, and I know that there's a private beach at the base of the hill here, tucked in a small bay and accessible only from the Estate's land. "Everything I'm going to suggest will meet safety regulations, but absolutely, we can rule out water," I reassure him.

"Thank you."

An electric fence runs around the perimeter of the field. "The current is off," Van informs me, climbing over the wooden stile with ease. It's a single step on either side of the tall fence, serving as the access point, just a tad too high for me to navigate gracefully with my short legs. I wobble at the top of the stile, and Van's big hands catch me around the waist before I fall. He plucks me from the fence as if I weigh nothing, murmuring "*Careful*," quietly as he lowers me to the ground. I catch a whiff of his scent, all dark, spicy musk and so achingly familiar, and his hands remain on me a beat too long after I've found my footing, fingers curling in a caress of my waist before he pulls away.

"Thanks," I croak, heat coiling down my spine, licking between my legs. We walk side-by-side in silence, the ghost of Van's touch lingering on me in an entirely distracting way.

"Thoughts?" he prompts.

"Hm? Oh, this will need to go," I say, gesturing at the fence behind us, "You could replace it with nicer fencing or a wall along the roadside and then," I step around him, "along *this* line we can talk about creating a natural barrier between the vines, dense hedging or espaliered fruit trees."

There's a hint of a smile on his lips. "If we can keep the fruit trees at a lowered height, I'd prefer that. I don't want anything that's going to disrupt the light on the vines."

"Of course. Totally." I take out my tablet from the small satchel I wear across my body, and begin to jot down notes, bringing up a blank screen in my favourite design software. I start to sketch freehand my ideas, my spine prickling with awareness as Van steps closer, peering over my shoulder.

"Who are your clientele?" I ask.

"All people," he replies, his tone clipped.

I keep sketching as I speak. "I mean, are you going to market the vineyard to adults only, or will it be more of a relaxed family affair? Some of the vineyards on this island aren't really set up for entertaining children, while others have specifically added features to keep kids busy when



designing their outdoor spaces.”

“Like what?”

“Swing sets, small playgrounds, sandpits — that’s a really popular option with children; you can’t really go wrong with a sandpit — some have trampolines, even.”

“And they’re safe?”

“A sandpit is safe. A swing set is safe — they wouldn’t have them at public parks, otherwise. We can skip the trampolines, if you like.”

He nods, jaw clenched once more, and I bite my lip, considering what else to ask. *Safety is an obvious concern of his. Inclusion probably is, too.*

Van sounded unhappy with my question about his clientele, and I can take a guess as to why. Yesterday I came across a thread on social media within the local community group, one about Lost Moon and the ‘*lovely new wolf owner*’. While many of the comments were really supportive, there were a few very vocal anti-wolf, anti-foreigner, anti-non-human people sharing their nasty rhetoric about why a non-human owning a winery here on Motuwai was wrong. Reading it had made my skin crawl and my stomach churn; it was beyond upsetting to read about those attitudes, made worse by knowing they were talking specifically about Van, their comments occasionally alluding to violence, and had sparked a fresh wave of anxiety in regards to my own secret non-human status. Even if Van hasn’t seen the thread yet, I have no doubt that he’s run into these opinions in person since the Unravelling.

It’s one of the reasons I keep hiding my own status like a coward.

I take a deep breath, and tilt my head right back to look Van in the eye. “Why don’t you tell me what your dreams for this space are? What is it that you absolutely see being included here?” We already discussed some ideas on Sunday, but I don’t want to miss anything that he might have his heart set on.

He frowns behind his glasses. “This needs to be a place for everybody. Children absolutely need to be included — this whole vineyard is going to be kid-friendly. It makes no business sense to exclude kids when you’re hosting weddings and other functions where families attend. And by everybody, I mean *everyone*.”

“Is there anything in particular that would need to be accommodated for depending on the species of people? Take orcs, for example — if I only order tiny little French bistro style seats, Cam won’t have anywhere to sit. I mean,

you'd barely even fit on one. How tall are you these days?"

"I'm six foot eight."

"*Six-eight!*"

There's a hint of a smile on his lips. "You're still as short as ever."

"Yeah I know," I grumble. "I haven't grown any taller since I was fourteen. I mean, five foot four isn't *that* small."

"It's small," he teases, flashing me a sharp grin. "You're cute."

I'm blushing again. I can feel it, the way I'm practically glowing like a lightbulb under the slightest hint of praise. I clear my throat, trying to get back on track. "I know I should probably already know all the different ways to modify amenities to accommodate non-humans, so I apologise for putting that on you as a client, but I'm still fairly new to working with different species in mind, which sounds awful, but I've —"

"Relax, Ellie. I know what you meant when you asked. I'm not offended, and I can't expect a human that hasn't ever set foot in the First Realm to know the ins and outs of every type of being. I can email you a list of things to consider."

My gut twists at the word *human*, the lie I'm living growing more bitter by the day. "Thank you," I tell him, and then, because I'm curious, I ask, "Have you been to the First Realm much?"

*The First Realm*. Though all humans know the name of it, there's still very little information on the realm where all the non-humans supposedly originated from. All I know is that some have chosen to live their whole lives here in this world, while others move freely between the two realms, and the rest never come to this plane.

"I've only been there a handful of times, but my mom was born and raised there."

"Wow, *really?* I mean, I don't know why I'm so surprised now, it's not like she's human. You said she's a werewolf, right?"

"She's a werewolf, not an ounce of human blood in her, as far as I'm aware." He grins, his wolfish fangs catching my eye once more. I never thought teeth could be attractive, but seeing those elongated canines *does things to me*, and I imagine them scraping along my skin.

"You're taking all these revelations in your stride pretty well," he says. "Going back to your question... my whole life is here, in this realm. My father grew up in this realm, and while his pack has ties back to the First Realm, all three hundred of them are on this side, too. Everything you ever

heard about his company is true — he started it when he was young, got it off the ground. It's just Mom that has the First Realm history. She's a witch, actually."

I know I'm staring open mouthed, but I can't help it. "She's a *witch*?" I think back to my memories of Bronte, Van's mother, adding yet *another* layer to what I thought I knew. "She's a werewolf *and* a witch?"

"Sounds complicated, right?" He removes his sunglasses, and I'm hit with the full force of those golden eyes. I used to love the light brown of his eyes, back then, but he's even more stunning now. They crinkle at the corners with wry amusement. "When it comes to magic, all species practise it. So you can get orcs that are wizards, werewolves that are witches, elves that are druids. Any and all combinations are possible."

"Human witches?"

Amusement tugs at his mouth. "Yeah," he says with a shrug. "It's not as common, but it can happen. Although, if you dig back a few generations, you'll usually find that those humans have some non-human blood, an orc ancestor or something."

A shiver crawls down my spine. *Some non-human blood.* I should tell him; *I can* trust him, I know that much, but I can't find the words, the fears I have around that strange mushroom I found and my pointed ears glueing my mouth shut.

Van continues talking, circling back to the First Realm. "You have to be pretty skilled, magic-wise, to open a portal through to the First. My mom can do it, but I definitely can't. That's always put me off visiting — it's easy enough to find someone on that side that will open up a portal for you to come back, but just the idea of possibly getting trapped on the wrong side gives me the creeps. Lacey lived in the First for a while, though. For a couple of years, after... after Jenny passed."

There's only the briefest catch in his voice, but I notice it and feel the twin ache in my own heart, thinking about Jenny's sweet little face, only six years old when she died. Instinctively I reach out to him, rubbing his shoulder in comfort, my hand trailing down his arm. He twists his palm upwards, catching my hand in a gentle squeeze before dropping it. No words are exchanged, and yet I feel like we have just shared a conversation on our joint grief. *I know. I understand. I'm here.*

His skin is far warmer than it used to be, and the heat lingers on my palm. We both stand in silence, and here it's so easy to forget all the reasons why I

should not want a relationship with him. Part of me wants nothing more than to close the gap between our bodies, to put my hands on him once more, to rekindle the intimacy that was by far the most passionate that I've ever experienced. That same part of me wants to know what it's like to kiss him now that he has those sharper canines, what it would feel like to have that searing heat of him naked against me, to be filled and knotted by him, sealed together and bound in a way only a wolf-man could achieve. The thought alone is enough to make me wet, and I can feel the slick damp in my panties. He'd slide home between my legs with ease right now, if I let him.

Van's nostrils flare ever so slightly, and he reaches out towards me. Too late I realise he means to tuck my hair behind my ear, something he used to do often when we were together, and as his fingers brush the side of my temple I panic, flinching back automatically, *Not the ears!* ringing in my head before I can process what I've just done.

His hand falls in a solid thump against his thigh, his mouth slightly parted in shock, confusion, and hurt. He swallows heavily, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, that was..." he says, and inside I cry *Oh no, I ruined it*, though all I can manage is an open-mouthed shake of my head, my heart hammering in my chest.

"It's okay." My voice sounds hollow to my own ears, and I clear my throat, desperately wanting to set this meeting back on track. "Let's talk about the plants needed for the project. It's going to be a long list."

**I**t takes two hours to pace out the entire field, discussing various projects within the garden with Van. We both agree that the best decision is to tackle the garden in thirds, starting with planting both flower and vegetable seedlings, with the goal of all the produce ending up on the restaurant menu. Usually, I hire contractors to help complete the physical labour, but Van and I decide that he'll first attempt to find contractors that can work on both the garden and the restaurant, and reach out if he needs any of my contacts. We also decide that I'll be physically present and overseeing the work two days out of five per week, which will give me the flexibility to complete the other design jobs I already had lined up for the next few months, while still keeping a close enough eye on the progress here. I can't give him an exact figure for

the quote yet, but the numbers I do mention don't appear to panic him, despite being eye-wateringly high due to the sheer scale of this project. I don't mention that this will surely mean the vineyard will be running at a loss for this financial year, as I get the feeling that Lost Moon is more than just a business for him. It's the place he wants to settle down in, and I wouldn't be surprised if he pays for this work out of his own pocket rather than trying to balance the vineyard's books.

Van convinces me to eat lunch at the vineyard, insisting that it's on the house. I should say no, but having gone through occasional periods during my childhood where there was very little food outside of the basics of bread, milk, and eggs, offers of a free meal are an absolute weakness of mine. After hours spent in the heat of the sun, it's nice to relax into one of the cushioned booths in the corner of the restaurant. He slides in opposite me, and the same waitress from this morning scuttles over, wide-eyed.

"Mr. Livingston! What can I get you two?"

Van gives the girl a kind smile. "You can call me Evander, okay?" Her head bobs in a nod like a marionette on a string, and he continues. "Two glasses of pinot gris from the reserve collection, one of the bread boards, one of the salt and pepper squid, one lamb backstrap, one eye fillet steak, one salmon, one pulled pork pizza," my mouth drops open as he continues, the waitress furiously scribbling on her notepad, "one cheese platter, and two of the crême brûlée with the berry sorbet."

I wait until she leaves before I nudge his foot under the table. "I'm sorry, are you feeding an army?"

He leans forward conspiratorially. "Just a wolf and his friend. Thank you for taking on this job. I know it's last minute to start next week, and I know it's selfish of me to want that when you already had clients booked in —"

"I'm making it work. Don't worry about that. I have less booked in over the summer months anyway."

"I know, just... let me know if it gets to be too much. We can re-look at your workload."

I laugh, shaking my head just as the wine arrives. It's exceptionally quick service, but then again, he's the boss, so I doubt anyone is willing to leave him waiting for long. "You're meant to be the one demanding *more* gets done *faster*. Not already worrying about my workload."

"Is that how it often is for you? In your job, I mean. Cheers."

"Cheers." Our glasses clink together, our eyes locked on each other, and I

wonder if he's thinking the same thing — *Seven years of bad sex if you don't make eye contact*. It's one of the things we used to joke about when we were younger. From the way a small smile pulls at his lips, my guess is that he is.

I take a sip of my white wine, the sharp sweetness of it making me hum in appreciation, and consider how to answer his question in a tactful way.

"I'll take that as a yes," he butts in before I can say anything.

I sigh. "Well yeah, that is how it is, often."

"Why?"

I shrug, deciding to be bluntly honest. This is Van. He knows how I grew up, knows how I used to think about those blind to their own privilege. Not much has changed about me in that regard. "Because to them, I'm just an average gardening girl they're hiring, and they are the rich bitches *bestowing* me with their favour by hiring me to do their literal dirty work. Some of these people — particularly the ones with old money — I don't think they even have jobs. They just have money from god knows where. And apparently it makes them a thousand times superior than a regular pleb like me."

He stares at me for a long moment, eyes searching my face. He looks so incredibly handsome in this light, the sun streaming through the window making his eyes glow like amber jewels. "Can you promise me something?"

"It depends. What is it?"

"If I ever get like that, reign me in. Give me a kick up the ass, and tell me to stop being such a rude prick."

I huff. "You won't ever be like that."

"I don't know, money corrupts good people. Word on the street is that my father used to be a decent guy, once upon a time."

I find that hard to believe. My thoughts must show on my face, because Van only quirks a brow and mutters "Shocking, right?"

I don't have anything nice to say to that, and my *Koro's* old voice echoes in my head from long ago. "*Don't say anything at all.*"

As if he can read my thoughts turning towards my family, Van asks, "How is your mom?"

"Mum is good. She still lives at the same property, but now she's in a tiny house too; she put it in the backyard of that old bach I grew up in, and we renovated everything a few years ago, so now she rents the bach out as holiday accommodation. It's how I managed to afford my place; she signed on as guarantor on my mortgage, using the bach as equity because I didn't have a large enough deposit for the land and the house."

“I’m glad she could help you. You deserve... I always thought you deserved far more than your upbringing allowed.”

“It’s not Mum’s fault. She worked hard, there’s just shit pay in her career, and she was paying off the mortgage, back then.” I sound defensive.

“I know. I didn’t mean that. I’m not judging. I just wish... I wish things could have been easier for you, in the months when we weren’t around.”

“Hmmm.” The framing of him and his family as my saviours from poverty for two months of every year leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, but I swallow it back because part of me thinks it’s true, that is what they were. *There’s that whakamā again.* I don’t like that I feel a strange sense of guilt over the fact that I ate their food, slept in their beds, and went on excursions with them, all without paying a cent. I *shouldn’t* feel guilty. I was just a kid at the time.

“I didn’t hang out with you guys because of the money.”

Van’s hand catches mine again in a tight grasp, his eyes full of intense sincerity. “Hey. I didn’t say that. I’ve never thought that, okay? I’ve never thought that, Lacey has never thought that, Mom has never thought that about you.”

Being near Van again like this is bringing out some sort of emotional overload in me. I nod, ignoring the burning sensation at the back of my throat. *Do not cry. Do not cry.*

“The bread board and the cheese platter!” the waitress announces, and I yank my hand out of his clasp, keeping my mouth stuffed full of food until he shifts the conversation to a safer topic.

I’m almost out the door of the vineyard when Van says the one thing that’s guaranteed to make me cry. As I turn to say goodbye to him, hovering on the threshold of the brick archway, his big hand lands on my shoulder.

“I was going to track you down, once I got settled in. That had been my plan, before I knew you lived here on Motuwai. I was going to track you down. To say hello. And... and to apologise for everything.”

This is not the conversation I want to have right now. I’ve done well today, to keep the sense of hurt and betrayal at bay. To hold my emotions in. To keep it professional. To act like I belong here, as someone running my

own business, as someone with professional knowledge. I've done well, but he's going to unravel everything all at once.

"You don't need to apologise." My voice is small, and I take a half step back, his hand dropping away.

"Yes I do."

I can't make eye contact with him. I stare at the brick pattern of the wall as I speak. "You were grieving," I whisper. I know he can hear me perfectly. My breath catches in my throat, and I force myself to say the words I need to in order to end this conversation quickly. "I never... I never held any anger towards you. It... the way things ended; it wasn't your fault."

He is silent for a long time, waiting until I finally look at his face before speaking again.

"Just because the circumstances were devastating... it doesn't make it okay how I treated you," he tells me. "Ellie, I am so incredibly sorry for hurting you the way I did."

I can feel that stab of hurt as fresh as if it were yesterday, those words *I never loved you* ringing in my ears. There's that tell-tale sting at the back of my eyes, but I am determined not to cry about this. Not today. Not here. Not when I've literally just agreed to a four-month project with him. "Maybe we can talk about it some other time?" I suggest. I know my face is screwed up, on the brink of a full on ugly cry, but I hold it in. *I don't want to give him my tears today.*

He looks torn, his face full of remorse.

"Of course."

I remain frozen for a moment, because although hearing him apologise brings up so many awful feelings, now that it's floating between us, part of me won't let it go until I've said my piece. "I loved Jenny, too," I say, and I do begin to cry. I can't stop the tears or the words at this point. "I just need you to know that. I grieved for her too. I'm not saying it to compete with you, I know she was your sister but —"

"Ellie," Van whispers, eyes growing red with moisture.

"I just need you to know I cared so *much*, and I wasn't even allowed to say goodbye," I continue through gritted teeth, swiping at the tears on my cheeks. "Fuck. Forget that last bit. That's not on you. It's not —"

"Ellie," Van interrupts, his voice sounding as hollow as I feel. "*I know.*" The look he gives me can only be described as numb, and I know he feels the same emptiness that comes with grief. It doesn't matter how much time



passes; it still hits the same when it does. You just learn to live with it better, learn to pretend that everything is okay as life moves on around you.

I shake my head. “I really, really wanted to get through this without crying,” I say, gesturing between us. “Because I’ve been *good*. I’ve... I’ve *thrived*, once I...” *Once I got over you.*

“I know you have. What you have achieved, it’s amazing. Truly.”

I snort bitterly. I’m a small fry compared to all of his business endeavours, and he knows it. “I need to get going.”

“Are you sure? You don’t have to drive when you’re upset, I could —”

“Evander, I need to go. I’ll email you through the proposed design by the end of the week.” My tone doesn’t broker any arguments.

“Take your time.”

“It’ll be with you by the end of the week, the same as for any other client.” I see the boundary I set register with him in the way his lips press into a thin line. He is my client. We have a business transaction to complete. I don’t want things to get complicated.

*But you do. You do want him. You want him with every fibre of your being.*

He nods once, jaw clenched, and I escape out the door. I hold back the sobs long enough to pull out of the carpark and get halfway down the road, but by that point I can’t control it any longer, and howl with the frustration of it all. I don’t recall arriving home but I find myself there, eyes swollen and face wet, and the silence of my empty little house as deafening as always.

*I don’t want to get hurt again.*

*Four*

VAN



I stare at the twenty-page proposal for the garden design on my laptop screen, scrolling through page after page of detailed descriptions, sketches, estimated costs, and additional questions, before cycling back to the overall garden layout, sketched in perfect detail. Ellie has done an exceptional job; far more than I expected from a three-day turnaround, and worth at least twice as much as what I'm paying her.

I lean back in my chair with a sigh, opening up her email. I click the reply button, and then stare at the blank page, trying to think about how best to respond to her. She was very professional in her wording, after making it clear to me at the end of our last meeting that I was just a client, and I can't help but feel lost. I know she still feels attracted to me; a wolf's nose doesn't lie, and I could smell her arousal as we stood in the paddock. For a moment I'd been sure that she'd kiss me, but then she'd flinched away, and I realised that it was going to take more than one sweet moment for her to forgive and forget my past actions.

Most of all, I want to respect what she wants. If she doesn't want anything more than a working relationship with me, I'll just have to get over myself. My wolves whine at the thought, and I let out a growl of frustration, making my very human assistant jump in her seat. Cassidy stares at me wide-eyed for a moment through pink-rimmed glasses, blue eyes unblinking. "Everything alright, Evander?" To her credit, her voice remains calm despite the fright I just gave her.

"Fine, Cassidy, sorry. Please ignore the growls; it's part of the job when you work for a wolf, unfortunately."

"Okay. Noted."

I give her an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry I frightened you."

"It was just a surprise, that's all. I've got the name of those building contractors you were interested in, shall I email you a summary?"

"Sure."

"Do you..." She hesitates, running a hand back through her curly brown hair. "Do you want me to specify which ones are non-human, if the information is available? My old boss had me do that with contractors."

An uncomfortable feeling runs down my spine. "Was that so he could include or exclude the non-humans?" I ask, keeping my tone neutral.

"Include. He wanted stronger builders. He wanted people who would naturally work faster so he could pay them less overall."

"Ah." I shake my head. "Please don't specify. My decision to hire someone is not going to be based on their genetic makeup. It's going to be based on the quality of work they've produced in the past." I'm definitely not going to exploit non-human labour just because some creatures are stronger than others.

Cassidy nods, ducking her head down and focusing on her own screen, and I wonder if she's replaying that conversation and recognising how problematic little things like that are. I sigh again, turning my attention back to Ellie's email once more.

*Good morning Ellie, I type.*

*Your proposal looks great. I'm more than happy to proceed. I know we discussed starting Tuesday; is that still possible? Let me know your schedule around your other clients. I'm flexible on my end.*

*Thanks,  
Evander*

With a snort I delete my full name, replacing it with *Van*, and hit send before I waste any more time debating over an email. If it wasn't Ellie I wouldn't care, but it is, and like some lovestruck teenager, I'm desperate to please her.

I finish work early at 2PM, sending Cassidy home for the rest of the day.

There's a huge truck parked in front of my house, and I watch the crew of movers unloading my shipping container worth of possessions as I take the five minute walk from my office in the main vineyard building to my house. The mass of boxes and furniture finally sailed into the country on Monday morning, and it's a relief to know that's another thing ticked off the list, and that I won't have to live out of a suitcase any longer.

As I approach the house, Cam's huge truck, built big enough to fit an eight foot tall orc, comes rolling down the gravel drive that leads to my place. "Hey, lad," he grins as he jumps out of the vehicle. "I see they've done most of the job for us already."

The movers have, unloading all but a few remaining boxes into the garage. "We still have to sort through them." I wince at the sheer amount of stuff; I'd forgotten how much I shipped over. Though I'd paid for people to pack my belongings for me back in the States, I wanted to unpack it all myself so I could properly decide where things were going in my new home.

Cameron merely shakes his head, slapping me on the back with a solid *thump* that reverberates through my chest. "Better get started then."

Four hours later, all my personal furniture and ninety percent of the boxes have been unloaded into the house. I groan, suddenly starving, and stretch my arms above my head, my knuckles grazing the garage ceiling. Cam continues, oblivious to the break I'm taking, stepping over the mess and debris to pick up yet *another* box.

"What about this one? All it says is 'E'. Looks in bad shape to me — they've done a shite job of moving your things, between the dents in the table and then this."

I take one look at the small, battered box he's holding and sit down on the bench that lines the back of the garage, hanging my head in my hands. I don't want to deal with that box — or the conversation that's about to take place — right now.

"That bad, is it?"

"It's Ellie's stuff."

His eyebrows lift in surprise. "Oh, aye? From years ago?"

"Nine years ago, yes."

He brings it over, sitting on the bench next to me, the wood creaking slightly under our combined weight.

“Nine years is a long time to hold onto someone else’s possessions.”

I sigh, leaning back until my head thunks against the wall, staring up at the garage ceiling as I say, “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“Probably not, lad.” His voice is gentle but decisive.

“I already have a therapist, you know.”

“Aye. That’s good. But that therapist doesn’t love you, do they? I’ve known you since you were a wee pup, back before things soured with your father, when you used to follow him around without worrying about you both being alphas. I care about you as if you were my own lad. And I care about Ellie the same. So, you could say I have a vested interest in this matter.”

Well, *fuck*. I can’t really tell him to drop it when he goes and says something like that, and I know he’s trying to look out for Ellie too. I keep my eyes on the ceiling as I fill him in.

“All of the things in that box are her things that she had left at our place in Bluewater Bay the summer that we were together, plus the odd thing she’d given me over the years before that.”

“Remind me, how old were you two?”

“She was eighteen, I was twenty one. We always came down to New Zealand for December and January, but I’d missed the family vacation for the three years prior because of college, so I hadn’t seen her since she was fourteen and I was seventeen. Every summer she’d be waiting for us outside the gate on the day we arrived, but *that* summer I actually flew in a week early because I’d had a practical semester out at a vineyard in France, so I ended up driving straight to her house and surprising her.”

“When you hadn’t seen the lass for three years?”

“Yeah, well, Lacey had forwarded me some photos that Ellie had sent her, of her at the beach. I mean, you’ve got eyes.” I shrug. “She’s beautiful. And I hadn’t intended to go directly there, it was honestly impulsive. I pulled into the main street on the bay — there’s only one road that goes through there, and then a few side streets that split off from it — and Ellie’s house was this run down *bach* that was right there, and *she* was right there. I almost crashed my car when I saw her.”

Cam chuckles. “You did not.”

“I did, seriously, because I was going around the bend, and there was an oncoming car ... plus, that was my first time driving on the opposite side of

the road.”

“So she distracted you.”

“She... she dazzled me. She was in her garden. She’s always fucking gardening.” I can feel my throat getting tight, and take a shaky breath. “She was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen in my entire life. That moment, that’s one of my core memories, you know? She was wearing these little denim shorts and flip flops and just a bikini top, and when I pulled up I could hear her singing to herself — she’s got a sweet voice but she doesn’t sing often — she was singing some pop song, with her headphones in, not paying attention at all. Us wolves, our wolf side...” I pause, trying to think about how to best explain what it’s like, to be both a shifter and a werewolf. “I’m them and they are me, but... they do feel separate, like there’s three of us in this one body, even though we are all Evander and we all share thoughts and memories. I control it all in every form that I’m in, and most of the time I’m just *me*, but sometimes they speak separately, for themselves.”

“So you don’t have voices in your head all the time?”

“No. But at *that* moment, I did. They were very loud. I got out of the car, and her *scent*. Fuck. They still do it now when I smell her.”

“Do what?”

“They chant *mate, mate, mate, mate*, non-stop.” I glance at his slightly horrified face and realise that could be interpreted wrong. “I mean they think she is my mate, our mate! Not *mating*.”

“Suuuure.”

I jab my elbow at him. “I got out of the car and her scent was very distracting, and I was a goner. I had no hope, not that I wanted to resist it anyway. So she finally noticed me standing there and screamed because I gave her a hell of a fright, so bad that she actually burst into tears from the shock of it. I felt like a piece of shit, but it ended with me comforting her and then kissing her there in the middle of her lawn.”

“And you had a week alone with the lass.”

I grin. “It was a good week. By the time my parents arrived, she’d already stayed over four nights in a row. Her mom didn’t care because Ellie knew our family so well and she’d stayed at our place every summer anyway, though I don’t think Ellie let on that my parents weren’t home.”

Cam laughs. “Smart lass.” He turns his head to peer at me, brown eyes narrowed in thought. “You can skip the details but... did you...? I only ask because she was young, aye? So were you, but eighteen...”

“I was her first,” I answer, knowing exactly what he was asking despite actually saying the words.

“And you two were a good match?”

“We were perfect together. We clicked. It was like two puzzle pieces that fit just ri —”

“I said skip the details —”

“I’m not meaning physically!”

“Well you can choose a different metaphor next time you tell this tale then, aye?” he shoots back, making an obscenely rude gesture with his hands.

“Ye mention puzzle pieces slotting together, this is what I picture.”

I can’t help it, I laugh, and so does he. “Thank you,” I tell him. “Truly.”

“It’s alright lad. Finish your story.”

*Finish the story.* It’s the same feeling I always get — a dagger in the heart, and this time when the lump forms in my throat I don’t fight the tears. “We were perfect together,” I whisper, my vision blurring as I stare ahead at the pile of boxes. “She’s my soulmate, I know that. I’ve missed her *so much*. I would have made it work, I could have paid for her to come with me back to the States, easily. But —” Fuck. It’s so hard to say this shit out loud, even after all this time. How the hell I’m going to manage to say it to Ellie, I have no clue.

“Take your time.”

I nod. Sniffle. Wipe my nose. I’m a mess. “We had an amazing six weeks, and then the first week of January, the nanny got sick. Real sick; it was food poisoning, but my dad, being the asshole that he is, sent her away to stay in a hotel in the city until she recovered.”

“In Whangarei? He sent the poor woman away through those winding roads when she had food poisoning?”

“In a taxi with extra cash to cover the cleaning fee for the car, yeah. He’s... you know what he’s like. So he and Mom had a function to go to, and they told me I had to babysit my youngest siblings. But I had plans with Ellie, and instead of just asking her if she would be okay with coming to the house, which she would have been, I made Lacey stay with the kids instead. Seth was twelve, and Jenny was six. We don’t know how Jenny managed to unlock the gate to the pool, but she was always so freaking smart so... ” A fresh wave of tears has me gasping for breath. “By the time Lacey realised, it was too late. And if I’d just been there...”

Cam’s huge arm comes around me, and I sob into his shoulder. “It’s not



your fault, lad. It's not, you hear me? It's not."

"She'd still be here if I didn't —"

"That is not on you, Evander. That is not on you. I know that therapist of yours will be saying the same thing."

"Yeah," I croak. "She does."

"Good. Listen to us." He squeezes me tighter for a moment. "I know it must be so hard, lad."

We sit in silence for a long time, until eventually I move, and Cam removes his arm from around me. I feel numb, which means that the next words flow easier at least, reciting a speech I've memorised off by heart despite only ever saying it out loud once, in therapy.

"Ellie was devastated, just like the rest of us. We were all grieving. We had Jenny cremated, so that she could come with us on the plane and not in the hold — not even a private jet will fly with a coffin unsecured in the cabin. My father banned Ellie from attending the small funeral we had here in New Zealand. And then he told me I could see her one last time, and he *ordered* me to cut all contact with her after that; to never see her again. He did that to all of us, bar Mom... the alpha orders won't work on a full-blood werewolf, but I think he gave her an ultimatum... either way, Mom has never reached out to Ellie, and she was the only one that could have. The orders were still there, when I last spoke to Ellie nine years ago, to never tell her what I was either, to never reveal anything about the First Realm, and the glamour was obviously still in place."

"What could you tell her, then?"

I bow my head, shame crushing me. "That I didn't love her. That it was her fault that I wasn't at the house." Beside me, Cam sucks in a breath.

"*Evander.*"

"I know," I moan, hands on my head. "*I know.* I was really fucked up. I was angry at *everything*, and my father... he abused that power as alpha. You don't use alpha orders on your family like that. Not in this kind of situation, and certainly not the way he did it. He told me it was *my* fault, and *Ellie's* fault, in that *tone.*"

"It was like an order?"

"Yes. It's essentially brainwashing, when an alpha does that to you. If your alpha tells you a statement but it's imbued with that alpha magic, you have no choice... your mind believes them."

"And that was the last time you saw the lass?"

“Until last week, yeah. Back then I thought... I thought, if I made her hate me, she would get over it faster. She wouldn’t question why none of us ever contacted her again.”

“And you never tried?” I can hear the hint of incredulity in his voice. It’s understandable — I’m sure he’s wondering how can I say I loved her, and then in the same breath say I didn’t even bother to reach out to her.

“Orders are orders. They are as binding as any other magic, Cam. You can’t just go against them, not unless you break away from the pack.”

“Christ.”

I nod, my face buried in my hands once again. I don’t need to explain to Cam how I split the pack six months ago. He already knows all those details. He also knows that I could have done it sooner, and now that I’ve reconnected with Ellie again, the guilt that I feel about not fighting for her, about not breaking free *earlier*, eats me alive.

“I don’t know how to make it right,” I admit.

Cam is silent for a long time, but finally says, “I’m no expert on these matters. I’m divorced, aye? But you could start with an apology.”

“I tried,” I say, my voice muffled by my hands. “I did; she told me that it wasn’t the time for it.”

“When was this?”

“When she came here for the consultation on the garden work.”

Cam is quiet for so long that I eventually sit back upright and look at him.

“For a smart lad, sometimes you are incredibly dense.”

I laugh, despite the situation. “It was the wrong time?”

“It was the wrong time, lad. If you wronged her the way you did... Ellie is a strong lass, and a proud one, aye? She doesnae want to seem weak. She does everything herself, and she keeps a wall between herself and everyone.”

“She didn’t used to be like that.”

“Aye, well, life experiences change you, don’t they? Especially deep hurt.”

“*Fuck*,” I croak, more tears burning the backs of my eyes. “I did that to her.”

“Maybe, aye. From what you’ve told me, though, it’s forgivable. And the fact that she’s coming here, designing your garden, speaking to you sweetly... it tells me she must already forgive you. She would know, aye, what the grief feels like herself. She would understand more than anyone bar your own family, having spent every summer with you lot. I would say she

didnae want you to speak of it in her work meeting, because it's her *work meeting*. It pays her bills. She takes it seriously. She wants to impress you. She doesnae want to seem weak."

"Like me," I joke.

"Crying does not make you weak, lad. The world would be a far better place if more men let themselves have a wee cry every once in a while."

We're quiet for a few minutes. "So when is the right time?" I ask.

He rubs his bottom lip, considering. "You could write her a letter, maybe? It would give you a chance to explain what you just told me. She wouldn't understand about wolves and alphas and the like, aye? And you said those are her things; would she want them?"

I stare at the box at Cam's feet. "There's one thing in there that I could give her." I reach down, pulling off the old tape, sifting through the contents. There's old jewellery that's now tarnished with age, a pile of CDs, sketches of plants, handwritten notes, a t-shirt, and stacks of photos. I pull one out — of Ellie and I standing together on the beach, my arm wrapped around her waist. In my pre-Unravelling 'human' body, she came up to my shoulders, and our younger selves smile at the camera, her in a green bikini, me wearing a pair of red swimming trunks.

It's amazing how a single item can bring back so many memories. I can still recall it as if it were yesterday; how Ellie drew our initials in the sand as water dripped from her hair and ran down her back, the way she grinned at me as she outlined the letters with a heart, the taste of saltwater on her lips. How both my sisters were there that day, tagging along, Lacey taking the picture and declaring that this was, "*a moment worth remembering.*"

I set the photo back down before I get too choked up again, and pull out the item I was looking for, carefully untangling the brown plaited cord attached to it.

"She left that at your place?" Cam asks, surprised, staring at the greenstone pendant in my hand. From his tone it's obvious he knows what the cultural significance of it would be to Ellie as a Māori woman.

"No. I bought it for her, before Jenny's passing, but I hadn't gifted it to her yet when..."

"Aye." He tugs on his ear. "It's a grand gesture, lad. A risky move, maybe."

It's a risky move, yes, but as I hold the greenstone in my palm, smooth and solid and carved in the shape of the full moon, it feels like the right one.

*Aroha nui ki a koe / Lots of love to you*

*Ellie,*

*I'm writing this in one go, because if I stop and start, or try to make it neat and tidy, I'm going to talk myself out of this. And there's things that need to be said, and though I may look like a big bad wolf to some people, I'm really just a coward who's "a bit shit" (as you would say) at communicating. So my apologies in advance for the mess that's about to occur.*

*I've had this greenstone, this pounamu, te marama hua — the full moon — for nine years. But it has never belonged to me. It was supposed to be yours. It's always been yours.*

*I don't know if you already own one now, but back then, you didn't. And I knew you really wanted to be gifted one. I chose the moon design because I had orders not to tell you what I was, but I wanted to include something significant to my wolf culture within my gift for you. Whether I like it or not, the moon has ruled my life since I had my first change at 13, and she will rule me till the day I die.*

*I had it blessed by a kaumātua that summer. I'd intended to give it to you, ~~but then my sister~~ ~~but when Jenny~~*

*Jenny's death destroyed me. It tore me apart. I know you know that. I know Jenny's death caused you so much grief, too. I know you loved her.*

*Thank you for loving my baby sister the way you did. You made her New Zealand summers that much better.*

*I am so, so sorry that I could not see beyond my own pain in that week after Jenny passed. I regret every word I said to you in anger. I wasn't ever angry at you. It was the world I wanted to burn.*

*There are things I want to explain to you — in person, if you will let me — about wolf shifters, packs, and alphas, and how that influenced my behavior at the time. But that does not excuse the words I said.*

*I am so deeply sorry.*

*Destroying what was once between us has been, and still is, one of the biggest regrets of my life. I was lying that day, when I said I didn't love you. I want you to know that.*

*Seeing you again, here, in this new place where I have chosen to put down roots for my small pack... it feels like it was meant to be. It makes me so incredibly happy to see the success you have created for yourself. When I say I am proud of you... Ellie, I can't even begin to describe it. You are amazing. And so incredibly brave. I should have known when Cameron was describing you that it was you. They all love you here. How could they not?*

*I know I'm being ridiculously inappropriate when I've just hired you for a four month project.*

*I don't want you to feel that I am putting any pressure on you in any way. I don't want you to feel that I have expectations outside of the working relationship we have. I want you to feel comfortable at the vineyard. I'm very excited to see you bring those visions of yours to life. I feel very lucky to have secured a talent such as yourself.*

~~*But I also I do You have to know*~~

*I am glad you are in my life again. So glad. You are sunshine personified.*

*I am sorry if this pounamu puts you in an awkward situation in regards to its ownership. I kept a box of your stuff, including this greenstone, through every house move and I would be lying if I said it wasn't a painful reminder of how badly I fucked up. My therapist called it "self-flagellation" when I told her about it and said I should get rid of it, but I couldn't — it's beautiful, and it was yours. It is yours. And I have to admit, all those years of you going on about*

*'tapu' has made me a little superstitious about these things — as I should be if I'm going to live here and get my citizenship and call myself a New Zealander. I couldn't just toss away something so sacred as this pendant.*

*Don't feel like you have to wear it. Gift it to someone else, if you wish. Whatever makes you happy. ~~But I think~~  
I think this pounamu is happy to be home, with you.  
I know I am.*

*Aroha nui ki a koe,*

*Van.*

*Five*

## ELLIE



**T**e *marama hua*. The full moon.

I sniffle, another tear rolling down my cheek and dropping onto the letter in my lap, making some of the ink run. “*Shit*,” I curse quietly, carefully dabbing at the liquid with the edge of the cami I slept in last night. Finding Van’s letter in my letterbox this morning was the last thing I expected when I checked the mail in my pjs. I haven’t moved from my spot under the roses where I stopped to open the envelope that only had a simple *Ellie* written on the front, the bold lines of his handwriting immediately familiar.

The only clue as to how long I’ve been sitting here amongst the flowers is the morning sun, now peeking over trees and filling the garden with dappled light. When I stepped outside this morning the sun was still rising, the last few stars winking out one by one in the purple cloudless sky.

The *pounamu* he gifted me is smooth in my hand, perfectly polished and perfectly round, a pale green moon flecked with darker greens and the odd hint of gold. *Inanga*. It’s one of the rarest forms of greenstone, and I smile again, thinking about the fact that of course, Van had to pick the most expensive option he could.

I’ve never owned a *pounamu* pendant myself, though I always wanted one; traditionally you have to be gifted it by someone else, have to have it blessed by a *kaumātua* — a Māori elder — and my lip wobbles again, thinking about how Van knew all of this, how he understood that he needed to get it right, to make it *tika*. That he also chose something significant to himself when buying it isn’t lost on me, making it even more precious.

I groan, rubbing my swollen eyes with the heels of my hands. “What am I doing?”



My heart aches again at the thought of what could have been between us. Evander Livingston has been one big emotional bruise on my soul for almost a decade now, my inability to truly move on sabotaging every other relationship I ever had. Nobody else has ever felt *right* in the way Van did when we were together, and it's not even shocking to me that now, in the few times I have seen him, there have been moments where I have felt utterly at home and comfortable in his presence despite the way things ended between us. In the days since our meeting at the vineyard, my feelings have been all over the place. At first I was angry at him for upsetting me right at the end when I had *tried* to keep things professional between us, angry at myself for getting so upset over an apology, embarrassed at the way I'd cried, at the words I'd said, and the way I'd fled out of there. But that anger quickly cooled, replaced with understanding. *He was trying to do the right thing.*

And now... now I don't know what to think, because every day my resolve crumbles a little more, knowing that he's *right there*, a short distance away. I don't think I've misread the signs; I've seen the way he looks at me, his eyes lingering in every place they shouldn't. Those brief moments when we've touched have replayed in my mind repeatedly, the memory of the solid strength of his hands on my waist and the gentle caress of his fingers never failing to make me wet.

We could be so good together.

There's a pit in my stomach when I think about it, when I examine all the choices in front of me. A huge part of me screams *you can't trust him!* every time I even consider the idea of beginning something with him. I don't know that he won't drop and leave me the next time life gets hard. I don't know if I'll *ever* feel fully secure enough in his arms. We've just signed a four month contract, and I cringe at the rumours that could possibly fly within my relatively small industry if people found out I was sleeping with a client.

And yet... I want him. I want his heart, his body, his soul. I want him just as badly now as I did when I was a naïve eighteen year old. I want to tell him I've forgiven him. The truth is that I have, but forgiving and forgetting are two very different things, and I may be brave on many fronts, but I'm terrified of allowing myself to feel happy in a relationship only for it to be ripped away again.

I look at the letter once more.

*I was lying that day, when I said I didn't love you.*

“Oh, *fuck*,” I cry, a fresh wave of anguish catching the air in my lungs, so that my whole body shakes with my sobbing. Still, I don’t let go of the *pounamu*. It’s far too precious to put down. I cradle it to my chest, and eventually, when I’m no longer shaking and it seems that I’ve cried out every teardrop in my body, I slip the dark brown cord of the pendant over my head, adjusting the length so that it sits flat against my sternum.

I still don’t know what I’m going to do. If I’m going to pursue anything with Van, I’m going to have to tell him that I’m not exactly human first, something that I’ve avoided dealing with for so long. Fear still has its big old grip on me, that’s for sure.

I can take baby steps. Knowing Van, I’m certain he’s waiting to hear from me about the letter. I push myself up off the damp grass, brushing away the odd leaf, and carry his letter inside, leaving it on my kitchen counter. I grab my phone and open my camera app, switching it to the front-facing camera, grimacing at my swollen eyes and red nose on the screen. I aim the camera so that it captures me only from the lips down, my small breasts looking as flat as ever since I’m not wearing a bra, the image on the screen the antithesis of a sexy photo. But the *pounamu* is there, and that’s what I want to show him — that I’m accepting his gift, that I’m wearing it, that I appreciate the gesture. I take a single photo, acting fast before I can overthink things or chicken out.

I have his number; we used it to organise our meeting at Lost Moon. I open up the short message thread and begin typing, using a mix of English and the little *te reo Māori* I know, because it feels natural to, given the context.

I got your letter, and your gift. Ngā mihi nui ki a koe e Evander.  
Thank you. He tino ataahua te marama hua, the pounamu is so beautiful. There’s a whakataukī — a saying — about pounamu. It has a deeper meaning too. Ahakoa he iti he pounamu: although it is small, it is pounamu. It’s widely understood to mean that something may be small, but still be a treasure. I will treasure this.

I hit send before I can change my mind, and then attach the photo and send that too. I snort, dropping my phone on the table and burying my head in my hands, because of course that’s not the end of my anxiety around all of this; now I’m going to be waiting to see if he messages back.

I force myself to start making some breakfast, switching on the kettle to

boil water for a cup of tea, and popping down a couple of slices of bread in the toaster. My phone vibrates with a notification and I practically lunge for it, hands shaking as I swipe to unlock it.

It looks beautiful on you. Does that saying apply to people, too?  
You are both small and a treasure.

I laugh, just as another message comes through.

I'm looking forward to getting started on this project together. I'll see you tomorrow.

I type back quickly.

Thank you. Yes, see you tomorrow. I'm looking forward to it too.

I close my phone, setting it down, only to pick it up again and look back over my messages, second-guessing everything I wrote out. *Did it sound okay?* My toast pops up, and I butter it distractedly, then stare out the window while I chew. It's only after I finish my toast that I realise I forgot to actually brew any tea, so I switch the kettle on again, rolling my eyes as I grab a mug and a teabag out of the cupboards above the kitchen sink.

I can already tell it's going to be a struggle to focus on any work today.

**B**y midday I am done. Not in the sense that my to-do list is complete — far from it — but my brain feels fried from all the emotional energy I expended this morning, and I have spent far too much time flitting from job to job and achieving nothing in the process. Working for myself means I can afford to take a day off here and there; I just have to make up the time elsewhere, so I close my laptop with a defeated sigh, giving up.

I step outside on my deck, closing my eyes and breathing in the fresh air. It's a hot day for November, the sky bright blue and the air still, and I take that as a cue that I should probably just head to the beach, go for a swim, and try to clear my head. The water will still be fairly cold — it's not quite summer yet, even if today feels like it — but hopefully that does the trick and wakes me up out of this current daze, where every few minutes my mind slips back into thoughts about Van. I shake my head as I pull a bikini set out of a

drawer built into the stairs that lead to the bedroom loft, stepping into my small bathroom in order to change away from the view of the street.

Stripped down to nothing but the *pounamu* around my neck, I stand in front of the full-length mirror and wonder what Van really thinks of me now. My B-cup boobs haven't grown at all since he last saw them, but my hips, ass, and thighs have filled out, and there is no way that I'll ever have a thigh gap; my body just isn't made that way. It's not something that bothers me; on the contrary, I like the way my body looks. I like my big butt, and I love that I can go braless if I need to, since there's barely anything to hold up anyway.

It's just... Van is an incredibly gorgeous guy. He is, quite literally, the most beautiful man I have ever met, and I have no doubt that he's had women, *beautiful* women, *supermodel-level* women, throwing themselves at him the entire nine years since things ended between us. I don't think being a wolf would have changed that post-Unravelling; if anything, I'm sure he's had even more women eager to jump his bones, because it's no secret that the uniqueness of wolf-men and their knots is a huge turn-on for many. I don't want to think about how many women he's slept with, not because I'm judging him, but because I don't think I can live up to what he's already experienced. I can't stop my mind from automatically assuming that he must have encountered at least one sex goddess that would laugh at my lack of experience outside of anything vanilla. *Let's face it, there's probably actual sex goddesses out there in the First Realm, and they'd be crazy not to go for Van.*

"You said you weren't going to go there with him, anyway," I tell my reflection, but even as I do I think about him, think about what it would be like to have sex with him now, now that his true body has been revealed, even taller and bigger than before. *I bet his dick is bigger, too. It was already huge to begin with.*

I sweep my hands up my waist and over my breasts, biting my lower lip as my thumbs brush over my nipples. I have, up until this point, resisted the urge to masturbate to thoughts about Evander because I know it will only make things worse, will only cement this infatuation I have for him further, but as my right hand skims lower, my resolve crumbles entirely. I lower myself to the ground, leaning against the cool glass of the shower door behind me, my legs spread and pussy in full view of the mirror. The back of my head hits the glass with a soft *thunk* as I sigh out a breath, my fingers circling my clit, dipping lower again to gather the wetness already dripping

out before returning to my clit with a faster pace.

It's not going to take long.

I think about Van, remembering the way he smells, all spice and musk, delicious and perfect. I imagine those big hands of his gripping my waist, his teeth scraping my skin, those sharp canines biting down at my neck. The feel of his cock, thick and swollen as it enters me, isn't something I've ever forgotten; he still holds the award for the only man that could make me orgasm through penetration alone, and over the years I came to truly appreciate how lucky I was that he was my first.

But now the press of a knot would be different, *exciting*. My breath quickens, as does my hand, at the thought of discovering him anew, seeing him in his true body. The idea of being tied to him by his knot has me gasping; I think about those gold eyes of his... they would shine bright in the dark, I'm sure, watching me, missing nothing; a wolfish growl, not at all human, as he thrusts fully into me, knot and all, his cum —

I groan as my orgasm peaks, my pussy clenching on nothing. I do my best to draw it out, but it's over too quickly, the sudden urge to be absolutely *filled* by him so strong I can almost see myself jumping in the car and driving to him now, laying myself out before him like an offering, a sacrificial lamb to the hungry wolf.

"*Fucking hell*," I whisper, staring up at the low ceiling. I've managed to live a celibate life for two years without much trouble, and then Van reappears and upends that in just over a week, turning me into a horny, dripping mess every time I am near him, every time I simply *think* about him.

I really, *really* need that cold swim in the water.

**T**he swim does do wonders for me; there's something about floating in the calm water that brings a certain sense of relaxation that I'm yet to find elsewhere, as if the buoyancy of the saltwater quite literally lifts the weight of my worries off my shoulders. I acclimatise to the cold water enough that it no longer feels shocking, but invigorating instead, and I swirl my limbs as if I am cutting through the liquid, enjoying the feel of it dragging against my skin, the pull of the current barely there, waves nothing but a slight upward roll across the glass-like surface. Under the water, the green of my new

*pounamu* is more pronounced, and I cradle it in my hands again, marvelling at the colour for what must be the fiftieth time today.

As it's a Monday, the beach is completely empty, with not a single other soul around, allowing me to truly appreciate my surroundings. The blue of the ocean in the distance is breathtakingly beautiful, but around me the water is so crystal clear that I can see my toes perfectly despite being neck-deep. From the shore, a baby gull cries, begging its mother for food, while the more panicked calls of a flock of oystercatchers ring out, their bright orange beaks a stark contrast with their black feathers.

I dive under the water, touching the ocean floor with my fingertips before surfacing again with a gasp, hands brushing the excess saltwater off my face. With no wind and a sheltered bay, I feel confident to lean back until I'm floating on the surface, limbs stretched out like a starfish, letting the water slowly push me towards the shore while the odd fluffy cloud passes overhead. I lose track of time, only checking every so often that I haven't drifted too far, otherwise lost to the bliss of this place.

When my fingers and toes are properly prune-like, and the cold has started to seep into my bones, I finally get my feet underneath me with the intention of getting out of the water. It's then that I spot something off in the shadows, lurking under the overhanging branches of the huge *pōhutukawa* trees that line the beach. At first I think it's a person — which is fine — but then it moves again, and I get the definite impression of brown hide and... *antlers?*

*It looks like a deer? Can't be, they're only on the mainland. Maybe it's a big dog, like a great dane.*

*Maybe it's a shifter.*

A wave of anxiety roils in my gut, all the peacefulness of this afternoon washed away in an instant. There's still so much I don't know about the First Realm and all the non-humans and monsters that live there, and despite the reassurances of world leaders — both human and non-human — moments like this, when I just *know* that something supernatural is going on, still make me incredibly nervous.

It shifts again, and for a moment I catch a flash of glowing green eyes, sharp panic rising within me. I've seen that same glow before, on the strange mushroom I found in my garden, and it's enough to get me lunging towards the shore, the water around me now feeling like a death trap. I dive under and *swim*, pulling my body forward with forceful strokes of my arms, until I have

to stop and wade through the thigh deep water, gasping as I search the shore for the creature.

It's gone. At least, I can't see it anymore, though my eyes are blurry with saltwater and in my panic I struggle to focus on any one area on the huge beach, my gaze darting everywhere and landing on nothing. I splash out of the water, stumbling in the too-soft sand, and sprint to where I've left my keys and towel on the beach, snagging them up and continuing to run. Scrambling up the grassy bank to where my car sits, momentum pushes me forward, so much so that when I see something huge leaning against the car, I'm barely able to stop, slamming my hands and torso into the side of the hood.

An antler, almost as large as me, covers my entire driver's door.

I breathe heavily, heart racing, as I look around desperately. No one is here. *Nothing* is here. The beach is eerily silent; perhaps it's just the stress, perhaps I'm about to pass out, because I can't hear the birds anymore, can't hear anything at all. I focus back on the antler; on second glance, it's not really an antler, just a branch shaped just like one, complete with green foliage, lichen, and tiny white blooms. Still, it's too much of a coincidence, having just spotted a crazy demon deer on the beach, and I curse under my breath. "*Fuck!*"

There's a regular old stick near my feet, and I pick it up, holding it towards the antler-branch, aiming to shove the thing off my car so I can get in and go. I take another step forward, the stick connecting with the antler, and in a flash of green flames the entire thing *dissolves*, the green fire licking its way up the stick in my hand, burning the flesh of my palm. I yelp in shock and pain, dropping what's left of the stick and jumping back, watching wide-eyed as it all turns to ash that simply disappears.

*What the fuck! What the FUCK!*

The burning in my hand fades to a dull ache, and I stare at the palm of my right hand, where a nasty red stripe dissects it from the junction of my thumb and forefinger right down to my wrist. The sound of a dog barking makes me jump with a scream, and I wrench open my car door, diving inside and slamming the door closed, locking myself in. I ignore the fiery pain of my hand, barely checking in my rearview mirror before I am pulling away, flooring it, jolting over the speed bumps designed to slow traffic near the beach. The car beeps rhythmically at me, a constant reminder that I'm not wearing my seatbelt, but I ignore it, trying to focus on what to do next.

The green of the deer's eyes was far too similar to the glow of that mushroom I found on my own property, and my gut tells me that it's not safe to go home right now.

*I could go to Cam's house, it's down the next street.*

*No.*

Cam's house is beautiful and secluded, surrounded by native forest. If some supernatural creature wanted to murder me, that would be the perfect setting. I'd be drawing that thing right to Cam, and for all that he is a huge orc, he's the least combative person I know, having lived his entire life as a human without any desire to take part in traditional orc culture.

*Van, then.*

I feel awful, guilty and scared. I don't want to put Van or anyone else in any danger, but I can't think of any other options. I have to slow my driving as I catch up to the cars ahead of me, muttering "No, no, no," as it becomes obvious that I'm caught up in the after-school traffic of hundreds of parents converging on the roads at once to pick up their children from the single primary school on the island. The slow crawl is almost as excruciating as the pain in my hand, and I spend the majority of the time glancing around and in my mirrors, half-expecting a deer to jump out at me at any moment.

I'm going to have to tell Van about all of it. I hate everything about this situation, hate myself for being *so bloody stupid* and sweeping everything non-human about me under the rug for so long, as if I was going to magically wake up one day and be back to my old self with my old human ears.

The traffic finally clears and I step hard on the accelerator, not caring about how many laws I'm breaking today. Apart from the slight shake in my hands, I'm calm on the outside, though inside I'm in a full state of adrenaline-fuelled hyperawareness. I count off the landmarks on the way to Lost Moon Estate, my thoughts bouncing around in my head as I do so.

*Almost there.*

*That was definitely some sort of creature from the First Realm. I know there's no deer here on Motuwai; they wouldn't let non-native animals like that loose on the island.*

*Van's going to lose his shit over this, I just know it.*

*I don't know how I'm going to sleep at night.*

*What the fuck happened with that antler?*

*This can't be some sort of normal burn; I'm probably going to keel over and die from some sort of ridiculous magic.*



*Why the fuck is this happening to me?*

I pull into the entrance of Lost Moon and hesitate, only just now registering that I'm still soaking wet, my hair and bikini dripping, my towel thrown on the passenger seat in the mad panic. A group of patrons walk out of the vineyard's archway and into the gravel parking lot, one of the women stumbling in her heels, having clearly enjoyed her wine tastings a little too much, and I make a split decision to park here for a moment, if only to gather my thoughts. Surely if there is some sort of demon thing after me, it's not going to attack in a busy parking lot, not after non-humans have spent the past two years reassuring the human population that they are safe to be around and that life can continue on as normal. I kill the engine and grab my towel, hastily scrubbing myself before laying it over my lap and reaching for my phone. I can't walk through the vineyard — my new workplace — like this, not with my nipples sticking out in hard peaks behind the triangles of my bikini top, and my whole body shaking from the cold. Better to warn Van and meet him... at his house, I guess.

I intend to call Van, but change my mind at the last moment, and instead bring up my search engine and type in *green eyed deer burning antlers*. I don't know what I expect or hope to find, but as the search results load I scan the first page, and my stomach drops at the third result down.

### ***Three People Saw a Green-Eyed Deer, Now They Are All Missing***

I click on the article, which brings me to a news publication from somewhere within the US. I skim it quickly, noting the details of the three people; two women and a man, all three having reported waking on the day of the Unravelling to find they had '*pointed ears like an elf.*'

"Oh fuck! *Shit!*" I cry.

*Samantha Blackmore was the first to disappear; one year to the day after the Unravelling. She'd told her husband, Bronson Blackmore, that she had spotted a deer in their local park with "great big antlers with leaves all over it. Later that day, she returned to her car and had been burned by 'a flaming green stick.'"*

*The next morning she left for work, and never returned home. Despite an extensive search of the local area, no trace of her has been*

*found. "It is as if she disappeared into thin air," Bronson tells us, "or perhaps the First Realm." He has not given up hope that she is still alive somewhere, taken by the green-eyed creature that burned her.*

*The stories of the other two victims are eerily similar...*

I drop my phone on the seat beside me, hunching over to vomit into the towel on my lap. I puke again and again, until there's nothing left but bile that I dry heave. My head is pounding with a headache, and I groan, catching a glimpse of the burst blood vessels around my eyes in the rearview mirror. I'm shaking even more now as I remove the towel, looking for a place to put it, before gingerly dropping it onto the passenger floor with a grimace.

Those victims were all like me. I have no doubt they were taken by something, just as that poor woman's husband suspects. *I'm going to be dead by tomorrow morning.*

I pick up my phone again, managing to swipe it open with trembling fingers and hit the call button next to Van's name. I put it on speaker, and leave it sitting on the passenger seat, hoping like hell that Van answers the call.

"Ellie?"

I've never been so relieved to hear someone's voice in all my life. "Van!" My voice is weak, my throat hoarse, and I wonder how much of the desperation he can hear in my tone.

Evidently, a lot. "*Ellie! What's wrong?*"

"Everything. I... I'm in the parking lot of Lost Moon; are you here? Or at your house, or —"

"I'm at home. Can you drive down here? Are you okay to do that? You're okay?"

"Yes. No. I'm okay right now, but not really."

"You can drive? You know where to go?"

"I know it. You showed me last time." I'm already turning the ignition, reversing out of the park I'm in, spinning the wheel until I can take the small driveway off the main entrance signposted as *Private Residence, Do Not Enter*. My car bumps down the gravel drive, just as Van steps outside his front door, his phone still to his ear. "I see you," he says. "I'm hanging up now, okay?"

I pull up in front of him, and he sprints around the car faster than I can even track, yanking open the door. I see the moment the stench of vomit hits

his nose; he rears back just a little, though he hides it quick enough. “You’re sick? Why are you in a bikini? You’re shaking.”

“I’m not sick. I mean, I threw up but... here,” I swipe open my phone again, shoving it towards him with a trembling hand. “Read that.” When he doesn’t take it, I wave it more. “Read it, *please*. It’s easier than me explaining what just happened.”

His frown is so pronounced that his brows are two angry slashes on his face, but he takes the phone, and I watch his expression morph as he starts to read, shifting between anger, surprise, confusion — he glances up at me, as if seeing me for the first time, and in a particularly slow moment for me I wonder *why*, until he leans forward and swipes my bedraggled hair back from my ear, his hand blazing warm as it traces the pointed tip. He doesn’t swear, but he clenches his jaw so much I wonder briefly if he’ll crack his teeth, and then he’s back to reading again, eyes just a little bit wider as he finishes the rest of the article, the stuff I didn’t even get to.

He reaches out again, his grip firm but gentle as he takes my arm, turning it so that my burnt palm is on display. “*Fuck*,” he whispers, and I don’t miss the small tremble in his touch as he brushes his fingers at the very edge of the burn. “*Fuck*, Ellie. They’ve *marked* you.”

The way he emphasises the word makes me pause. “Like a brand?”

A growl, the sound terrifyingly aggressive, rips from his throat, his face contorting for the briefest moment beyond its usual human-esque limits. “*Yes*.”

“So... I’m going to end up just like *those people*?” The panic rises in my voice, and I take in a gulping breath as Van stares at me, face still contorted in a snarl.

“*No*. No one is going to come near you. If they do, I will tear their fucking throats out.”

He’s deadly serious. This is a side to Van I haven’t seen before; the animal, the wolf. *I shouldn’t like this*, part of me thinks, but my body sags in relief, believing every word of his. Still...

“I don’t want to put you in danger... I just didn’t know where else to go.”

His face softens, lips parting as he shakes his head and reaches for me. He picks me up off the seat and cradles me in his arms, his grip firm against the flesh of my thigh. I sigh into the warmth of him, my nose pressing against the collar of his business shirt, the scent of him alone making me feel safe. I’m too cold to care that I’m wetting his clothes. “I don’t even want to think about

what might have happened had you not come here,” he tells me as he kicks the door to my car closed. “*Promise me* that if you ever think you’re in danger, you will come to me. I swear to you, I will *never* let anybody hurt you.” He carries me through his front door, and I only get a brief impression of his house: vaulted ceilings and white walls, rich brown leather sofas and oiled wood, before he takes me into the kitchen. I make a distressed sound as he goes to deposit me on the countertop, clinging to him.

“*Tikanga!* No butts on tables!”

“Right.”

Perhaps it’s a weird thing to worry about in the middle of a shitstorm like this, but I just can’t switch off the rules that are so ingrained into me. You just *don’t* sit your ass anywhere where people eat or prepare food.

Van sets me down gently on the floor next to the refrigerator, pulling the door open and retrieving something from the freezer. I spy the word *dumplings* before it’s wrapped in a tea towel and handed to me. “Press that against the burn, hopefully it will help.”

I nod and do as instructed, my teeth chattering from the cold. Van’s hands brush down my arms, and he growls again. “You’re too cold.”

I step forward, closing the gap between us, until my face is pressed against his chest. “No shit, Sherlock.” I don’t care about how weird this might be at this point, every boundary between us dissolving — I’m fucking freezing while he runs like a furnace, and there’s nothing that could stop me from trying to absorb that warmth. His arms wrap around me, holding me tight, and I melt into him.

“I have a lot of questions,” he says quietly, his deep voice a rumble against my ear, “but that can wait until we get you sorted. The way I see it, there’s only a few options and you’re probably not going to like any of them; they all involve me stripping you naked, but I promise I won’t make it weird, I just want to get you warm.”

“Shower,” I murmur into the fabric of his shirt. “If it’s an option, I choose that one. Don’t bother with the rest.”

“Hmm, alright,” he rumbles, lifting me into his arms again. “That was my first choice, too.”

Six

VAN



There's a lot that I'm holding in right now. My shifter wolf, for starters. The urge to run on four paws and hunt down the fae that threatened Ellie, that *marked* her, is almost overwhelming, and I have no doubt that if they were in front of me right now my teeth would be around their neck in a heartbeat, tearing the life from them. I've never killed anything more than animals for food before, but I know I'd do far worse, far more monstrous things, to keep her safe.

Ellie's skin is so cold; icy enough for me to be truly worried. It's a warm day, but the shock of what's happened to her — if it is anything like I read in that article — has obviously pushed her body to the limit. She must have been swimming when the fae appeared, and for all that I don't follow the religions of my wolf ancestors, I send a brief thanks to the moon goddess Lykaia for bringing Ellie back to me.

*I could have lost her.*

The panic at that thought sits just under the surface of my skin, waiting to bubble forth, and I hold her tighter against me as I carry her through my bedroom and into the adjoining bathroom. Her teeth continue to clack together as I set her down on the tiles, making sure she's steady on her feet before I let go. "I th-think maybe I'm in shock," she says, shaking uncontrollably. "I just can't st-stop shaking."

"We'll get you warm, and then reassess from there, if it hasn't stopped, okay? Can you undress yourself?"

She shakes her head. "Not with this ice pack. And..." her mouth remains open, though she shakes her head, looking truly vulnerable as her eyes fill with unshed tears. She closes them for a moment, swallowing hard. "Are we

even safe here? Am I putting you in danger?”

I put my hands back on her shoulders, and she opens her eyes once more, the look of anguish on her face tearing at my chest. “We’re safe, I promise. There’s a protection spell, an elvish ward, in place over this entire vineyard here. I can explain more about how that works later, but all you need to know is that no one can come through the perimeter if their intentions to *anyone* here are bad. Now let me take care of you; you don’t need to worry, alright baby?” I see her take in a shaky breath at my use of her old pet name, and I swallow back the lump in my throat. “You’re safe, and I’ll take care of the rest.” She nods, shoulders sagging.

“I don’t like being w-weak, but —”

I cut her off with a growl. I can’t help it; I feel half-feral, my wolves clawing for freedom. “You are not weak. You are so fucking strong, Ellie. Alright? But I can help you right now; I can take care of you. I want to. Not because I think you’re weak, but because you deserve to be treated like a fucking queen.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll keep my clothes on,” I offer.

She looks at the shower, her eyes lifting to focus on the two large ceiling-mounted rainfall shower heads. “Don’t be silly,” she says quietly, “you’ll get c-completely soaked. Besides, if I have to be n-naked, you should be too. That should be the rule.” She flashes me a wan smile, but I don’t miss the fatigue in her eyes. She’s exhausted.

“Okay.” I’m not about to argue with her; when the woman of your dreams tells you to strip naked, you strip. I unbutton my shirt quickly, tossing it in the corner, then remove my belt, pants, and underwear. I can feel the weight of Ellie’s gaze, watching as the smooth downwards drag of her eyes suddenly snags as she reaches my cock, making it twitch involuntarily at the knowledge that she’s seeing me like this — in my real body — for the first time.

I clear my throat and step around her, brushing her long wet hair over her shoulder so that I can untie her bikini top. She says nothing, but I hear the way she sighs at my touch. I allow my fingers to linger against her neck longer than they need to, before running my hands down her spine to reach her bikini bottoms, dragging them down her legs in one smooth movement. She kicks them away, and I take a moment to admire the sight of her gloriously curvy ass. “Come on, in you go,” I say softly, ushering her into the

large doorless shower.

I use the small retractable shower head to gauge the temperature of the water, making sure Ellie's burnt hand is out of the range of the overhead showers before switching them on. Ellie gasps as the hot water hits her, closing her eyes and tipping her head back, groaning in relief. She keeps her hand with the ice pack against the tiled wall, held in such a way that the water doesn't run down her arm to burn her further.

With her eyes sealed shut, I take the opportunity to properly look at her. Perhaps I shouldn't be taking advantage of the situation this way, but I can't help it. Seeing her stark naked, wearing only the *pounamu* I gave her, makes my heart ache and my cock grow hard, while the long column of her neck, exposed in that way, has saliva pooling in my mouth with the instinct to *bite*. I watch the water running in rivulets down the valley between her breasts, over the curve of her hips and that fucking biteable round ass of hers, and the knot at the base of my shaft begins to swell. I'm not getting soft again any time soon, that's for sure.

"If you want some time to enjoy the warmth, I'll wash first," I tell her. Maybe I can distract myself, at least a little, by focusing on washing my own body.

She nods, humming in assent. "Sounds good. Give me five minutes, just like this. This shower is amazing."

I wash quickly, still sneaking glances at her every now and then. I catch her doing the same; each time she gives me a shy smile or a little laugh, running her uninjured hand over her body, washing away the last of the sand that had clung to her legs and feet.

"I already feel so much better," she announces. The uncontrollable shivering has stopped and her skin no longer looks sallow, though her fatigue is still evident in the slant of her shoulders and the tiredness in her eyes.

"I can tell. I'm glad you're not shaking anymore. You had me worried."

"I had me worried too." Her throat clicks with an audible swallow, her eyes and lips growing red, the way they always have when she's about to cry. "Thank you. I..." She licks her lips, glancing away, her free hand wrapping around herself, and she looks so forlorn standing there. The urge to comfort her is overwhelming. "Thank you, Van. I didn't have anywhere else to go."

That's the second time she's said that today, and I think about her life on this island; the few friends that she has here, all in their late-sixties and seventies, other than Cameron. I imagine her at home in her garden, alone in



her tiny house, filling in the hours of each day by herself, and I wonder if she's been as lonely as I have been these past few years. Perhaps she's been even more so than I have; until recently, I've always had a large pack to rely on at the very least.

I step forward, soap in my hand. "Let me wash your back for you." Really, it's just an excuse to touch her, to let her know that I am here, to stop her from wrapping her arm around herself as if it is the only thing physically holding herself together. She melts under my touch, sighing as I dig my thumbs into the tight muscles of her shoulders.

"Oh, that's good."

She's always loved massages. The memory of her laying out on her stomach across my bed in Bluewater Bay comes to mind, making me smile as I remember the way she'd wiggle her ass at me, blatantly hinting that she wanted a back rub.

"I'll give you a proper massage, later, if you like."

"Hmmm, yes please, I'd love that."

I don't know what we're doing here, right now. The incident with the fae has pushed us into a level of intimacy that I've been secretly hoping we'd get to soon, but hadn't expected us to reach yet. I worry that it's just the day's events influencing her judgement, that the bubble we're in right now will burst. That she hasn't actually forgiven me.

"Van?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you have a spare toothbrush? I know that's a weird request but..."

"I've got one. You want it now?" At her nod I step away, out of the shower and over to the vanity, ignoring the fact that I'm dripping water everywhere in favour of retrieving her a new toothbrush from the three-pack I picked up from the local store on the day I flew in. I spread toothpaste over it, before returning to the shower. "What made you throw up? Was it —"

"It was just the shock of reading that article, and," she waves her hand around in an all encompassing gesture, "the whole thing."

I hand her the toothbrush. "Which you'll explain to me when we're done here."

"Mhm. Thank you." I step back, giving her a bit of space to clean her teeth while I wash my face. It feels so domestic, and there's a tightness in my chest because *I want this with her*. I want the boring and the mundane, the daily routines, cooking dinner together and eating it on the couch. I want a

life with her. No other woman has ever made me feel this way, nor have I ever let anyone else know me the way Ellie already does. It was always meant to be her, even when I couldn't have her.

When I open my eyes after rinsing the soap off, she is blatantly staring at my body, teeth biting at her lower lip, not an ounce of shame or embarrassment on her face at being caught. My feelings are unmistakable — it's not like I've got anywhere to hide my rock hard dick — so I throw caution into the wind and don't bother to turn away as I lather soap over it, pulling back the foreskin, washing turning into more of a show for her as my grip tightens, my hand sliding up and down my cock with practised ease while we stare at each other.

She grins, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "I thought you said you were going to behave."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Oh no, not at all. I just wish I didn't have to hold a freaking ice pack like this," she adds, nodding towards her outstretched arm. "I'd be inclined to come and help you, otherwise."

It's a good reminder that there's other shit going on that we need to deal with, as much as I'd love to fuck her right now. "I can wash your hair."

She gives me another shy smile, eyes full of warmth despite the fatigue, and turns her back to me, her eyes closing once more as she steps under the spray again. I hold her by the shoulders, gently manoeuvring her to where I want so I can lather shampoo through her hair. She hums appreciatively as I massage her scalp, leaning into my touch, so much so that she ends up pressed against my front, my erection pressing against the small of her back.

*Fuck.* If the circumstances were different, I'd have her up against the wall in a heartbeat. I do my best to ignore the sensation of her body against my cock, even though each small movement of hers leaves my balls aching more and more, the drag of her skin against the head enough to make me want to explode. "*Ellie,*" I warn as I tilt her chin back so I can rinse out her hair, "are you trying to tease me?"

Her eyes are closed, her head leaning back against my chest, but her full lips curve in a playful smile. She is gloriously beautiful. "Maybe," she admits softly.

*Now is not the time* my mind warns, and it's enough to make me stop for a moment. This isn't some random hookup. This is Ellie. Our lives have been intertwined since I was six years old, and I already know how much of a fool

I've been for letting nine years pass by without her. I'm not about to do anything that will mess things up further, not when I don't know what's going through her mind right now.

"What's changed?" I ask. She opens her eyes, searching my face, turning around so she can properly look at me.

"I'm so tired of not really living," she whispers. "This thing between us scares the shit out of me. I have been so afraid to get hurt but... no one has ever made me feel alive the way you do, and I..." She bites her lip, frowning.

I brush the hair back from her face, running my fingers down her jaw. "And you what?"

"I don't want to waste any more time. What if there's no more time? What if —"

"There's time, Ellie. None of them are getting anywhere near you. I promise."

"I don't even know what *they* are! And nothing is promised, Van; you know that as well as I do. Tomorrow isn't promised."

"Ellie —"

"*Evander.*" She sucks in a deep breath, her expression intense. "Do you want me or not?"

I don't know how she can even ask that. "I want you. Of course I want you. I —"

"Then have me. *Please.*"

I don't have words, too stunned to say anything. What we *should* be doing flies out the door in the face of my intense desire for her. Instead, I reach out and trail my hand down the column of her neck, over her clavicle, down further still to cup the soft mound of her breast, her nipple hard against my thumb. She gasps, though it quickly turns into a moan, and my other hand grasps at the back of her head, fingers tangling in her hair as I lean down to claim her mouth in a bruising kiss. Her mouth parts immediately and our tongues meet with joint groans, the press of her lips just as demanding as mine as I lift her into my arms, her legs wrapping around my waist automatically. My hands grab at the flesh of her ass as I press her against the wall, out of the stream of water, doing the very thing I told myself I would not do, the *thud* of her makeshift ice pack echoing as it hits the floor behind me.

I break our kiss, bending to nip at her neck with a growl. "I want nothing more than to bury myself in you and stay there forever," I tell her, grinding

against the hot wet heat of her pussy, her hips rising to meet me halfway. “But your hand...”

“If you say you’re going to stop there Van, I swear I will...” she trails off on another moan as I kiss her neck, and she cants her hips, digging her ankles into my backside in an attempt to draw me closer.

“You’ll what? What will you do to me, Ellie?”

She whimpers, kissing along my jaw. I groan as she takes my earlobe between her teeth, biting hard. *Fuck.*

“It’s what you’ll do to me,” she whines, the nails of her good hand scraping down my back. “I swear I’m going to combust if I don’t come soon—”

She breaks off in a sharp inhale as I lift her higher, my mouth on her breast, nipple under my tongue. I kiss my way across to her other breast, revelling in the softness of her skin against my lips, scraping my teeth against her nipple, making her buck against me. I drop down to my knees, bringing her with me while lifting her legs over my shoulders, pausing with my mouth hovering over the soft mound of her pussy. She looks down at me, lips parted and breasts heaving with each breath, our eyes locked as I kiss one thigh, and then the other. “I did say that I’d take care of you, baby. I’m not about to break that promise now. You want to come? You’re going to come, right on my tongue.”

I want to remember this moment, the way she looks at me with those big brown eyes of hers, expression a heady mix of lust and reverence and anticipation, the way her body feels in my hands, the press of her heel against my back, her thighs against my ears, the scent of her arousal thick in the air, the evidence of it clear from the milky wetness dripping from her core.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” I say as her hands land on my head, her fingers brushing back strands of wet hair from my forehead.

“So are you.” Her voice is barely more than a whisper, audible over the sound of the running water behind us only because of my wolf hearing.

*I’m going to worship you.* I don’t waste any more time, licking a stripe from cunt to clit, the taste of her bursting on my tongue, ripe and sweet all at once. She cries out as I focus my attention on her sensitive nub, her thighs tightening around my ears as she grinds against me. The sound of her breathy moans guide me, every gasp another lesson in what she likes best. My lips closing around her clit to suck, a guttural moan from her my reward. *Yes, baby.* Both of her hands clutch at fistfuls of my hair, the burn on her palm

forgotten, and I don't stop until she's trembling, on the brink of an orgasm, pulling away at the last moment, making her cry out in outrage.

I chuckle against the lips of her pussy, kissing lower, opening my mouth so that my tongue — far longer than a human's — can extend, spearing her cunt with it, licking her from the inside.

“*Evander!*” she cries, eyes wide even as she bears down on me, her clit grinding against my nose, giving her the friction she needs. I watch her reaction as I drag my tongue back and forth within her, focusing on the rough patch of her G spot as she continues to buck against my face.

It's too much. I drop one hand from her ass to reach for my cock, jerking it roughly, seeking my own release. I see the moment she realises what I'm doing, her mouth hanging open, eyes wide, her entire body trembling.

She comes with a cry, throwing her head back, her cunt pulsing around my tongue. It's enough to send me over the edge, groaning against her flesh as my balls tighten and my hand works me through my orgasm, shooting ropes of cum across the tiled floor.

“Holy *shit*,” she breathes shakily as I lick my way out of her. I tongue the folds of her pussy reverently, drinking every drop, my wolves sated with the taste of our mate on my lips. I stop only when she pushes gently at my head, placing a lingering kiss on her thigh, before releasing her shaky legs from my shoulders one by one. I kiss her stomach, breathing in the smell of her skin, loving the way her hand drags through my hair in a gentle caress.

“Better?” I ask.

“Better,” she sighs with a satisfied smile. “So much better.” Her eyes dance over my face, lips twitching, and I already know the question she's about to ask. I beat her to it, letting my tongue loll out to its full extended length, twice that of a human's.

She covers her face with her hands, shoulders shaking with silent laughter. “What the *fuck*, Van?” she finally manages, wiping at her eyes. “What the fuck is that *thing* in your mouth?!”

I get to my feet, towering over her, grinning like an idiot. “You weren't complaining when I used it.”

“How does that even work? I — it didn't feel any different when I was kissing you!”

I shrug. “It has more stretch than a human tongue, that's all.”

She shakes her head, leaning forward to kiss my chest, and I wrap my arms around her, tracing circles on her damp skin.

“Hmm, you smell so good,” she murmurs, peppering my skin with kisses, her fingers running down my stomach, and lower, until they dance over my now fully-swollen knot. “I want to do more with you,” she says, “sooner rather than later.” My cock jerks at her touch, a final bead of cum leaking from the tip, which she gathers on her thumb, smearing it over the head. “I knew about this,” she adds quietly, squeezing my knot enough to make me hiss with pleasure, “but none of those websites mentioned the tongue thing. That’s a *whole* new definition to the term ‘*eaten out*’.”

“It doesn’t freak you out? The version of me you knew before... there was a lot that I had to hide,” I admit.

There’s a small frown on her face as she looks back up at me, but she shakes her head. “That would make me and my pointy ears hypocrites, don’t you think? But I do want to talk about it. About you, and me, and us.”

“Yes,” I agree. “We *definitely* need to talk about you.”

“Hmm.” She wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me down for a kiss, and I find the fact that she’s tasting herself on my tongue incredibly sexy.

“Fuck, Ellie,” I growl, biting gently at the skin of her neck. “I want to fuck you, but if I fuck you, I will want to knot you, and to do that I want us to be horizontal, at least for the first time. Besides, I think you’ve been holding up incredibly well, but I can tell you’re exhausted.”

She sighs, not even bothering to deny it. “Let’s finish up in here, then.”

I’ve got one leg in my pair of grey sweatpants when Ellie asks, “Do you have a comb I could borrow? If I don’t brush this now, it’s going to be a knotty mess.”

My lips twitch at her phrasing — amongst wolves *knotty mess* means something else entirely — but I nod, pulling on my pants before going to grab her a comb from the bathroom, leaving her to pick out a t-shirt to wear from my single set of drawers. I’ve already explained to her that I’m still unpacking, hence the sad state of my bedroom, all blank walls and nothing but a big bed, a nightstand, and a dresser to fill it.

When I return, I stop in the doorway as she spins to face me, wearing a ridiculous grin on her face. “Seriously?” I ask, looking her up and down. In nothing but my black t-shirt, which hangs down to mid-thigh, she looks both

cute and sexy, but the slogan on the shirt is ridiculous.

“You’re the one that owns this!” she laughs, holding out the fabric as if to emphasise the text that reads *THIS IS MY HUMAN COSTUME*.

“Lacey gave it to me as a joke.”

She laughs again, shaking her head. “That sounds like something she’d do.” Her smile falters a little. “You said she flies in next week, right? Does she know that we... bumped into each other again?”

“Is that what we’re calling it now?” I joke, and she rolls her eyes. “I know, I know, this is serious. I told her last week that I’d seen you again and that I’m hiring you. She’s going to buy into the vineyard at some point in the next six months, she just needs to settle in first. So out of courtesy I wanted to let her know that I’d hired you but also as her brother... Ellie, you were her best friend for so many years. She loves you. Like me she feels incredibly guilty and sorry about the way things worked out. But she said she’s really looking forward to seeing you again, if that’s what you want.”

Ellie nods, turning to look out the window, her voice thick as she says “I want that.”

I hesitate, not really knowing what else to say, this sudden change in the conversation an immediate mood killer, for all that it’s important stuff to discuss.

“We’re in an awkward place, aren’t we?” Her voice is quiet as she continues to stare out at the sea view. “There’s *tons* that we need to talk about and work through, and other stuff that maybe it would be nice to just tiptoe around for a while longer. But then there’s all this shit that happened to me today, and on top of that, this insane chemistry between us that we are obviously terrible at ignoring.”

“I don’t think the chemistry is a bad thing.”

“I agree; it’s a *wonderful* thing. And I... I feel so comfortable around you, Van. I know you feel the same. It’s so easy when we’re together. You’re still the same, you know? There’s so many years between us but that core personality...”

“You haven’t changed,” I agree. “We haven’t changed. We’re still *us*.”

“I read your letter this morning, obviously. It feels like *way* longer ago than that; this day honestly feels like it’s gone on forever just because of what’s happened, but I appreciate everything you said. I cried. A lot.”

“I thought you might,” I admit. “I didn’t want to make you cry but I...”

“You had to say all of that, I know. I get it.” She lets out a rueful little

laugh. “Maybe I should write you a letter.”

“Maybe you should.”

She shakes her head again, and I cross the room, wrapping my arms around her. She leans back, into me, lacing her fingers with mine and bringing the back of my hand to her mouth, kissing gently. “Maybe I will one day. Right now I don’t feel like there’s time. We should be talking about what happened at the beach today.”

“We should. But to do that, we need to talk about you first.” I trace the outline of her ear, so different from a human’s. “I’m embarrassed that I didn’t pick up on this.”

“Don’t be; I’ve become an expert in hiding it in the last two years.”

“Why?” She tenses at the question, and I rub her arm. “Why don’t we get something to eat, maybe open a bottle of wine, and then talk about this.”

“Sounds good. Let me brush my hair first.”

“I’ll comb it for you. Your hand is still burnt. Here, sit with me on the bed. We’ll get this done, bandage up your hand, and then get some food.”

She’s quiet as I brush through her hair. I plant a kiss on her shoulder once I’ve finished, and she lets out a shaky exhale. “Thank you,” she whispers.

“Give me a moment, and I’ll grab something for your hand.”

I manage to dig out an old first aid kit from one of the boxes I’m yet to unpack, and thankfully find a cream suitable for burns and some bandages.

“It’s not actually that sore anymore,” she murmurs as I wrap her palm. “It’s only a dull sting.”

“It will probably be fine by the morning then. I think we’ve established that the purpose of it was to mark you. I’d say it’s some sort of magic that isn’t meant to cause permanent damage, just something for them to track you with.” She shudders at that, her lips pressing into a thin line.

“I’m going to lose my appetite if I keep thinking about it.”

“We’ll eat dinner first, then.”

We’re halfway through our meal — leftovers from the vineyard’s restaurant that I already had stashed in the fridge, paired with a chardonnay — when Ellie clears her throat, and finally begins to explain things from her end.



“So I didn’t know I was a non-human until the Unravelling occurred. I woke up that day and freaked the fuck out, just so you know. It didn’t come from Mum — she never changed. Since I’ve never known my dad, I still have no idea *what* I am. But to wake up and realise you’re not even the *species* you thought you were, *that* is a really, really, really *colossal* mindfuck.” She stares off into the distance, and I can tell she’s reliving the memories of those first few chaotic days post-Unravelling.

“I have to admit, I did think it was strange when you asked me if I’d known I was a wolf prior to the Unravelling. I can’t even imagine what that would be like to have your identity shift in such a way.”

“It’s been incredibly lonely. And — I don’t know how much you remember, from what I used to tell you — but there’s so much emphasis in Māori culture on your *whakapapa*, your genealogy, on linking yourself back to your ancestors and your ancestral land. As much as I love it, secretly it was always a sensitive thing for me, even before the Unravelling, because I’ve only ever been able to recite one side. To have my understanding of what my father’s *whakapapa* might even contain fundamentally shift... it really messed me up.” The tremor in her quiet voice tugs at my heart, and I reach out, rubbing her back.

I take another sip of wine, considering how best to tell her what I know and what I can guess, based on today’s events. “You *are* mostly human, Ellie. My guess is that the non-human blood you have is from *many* generations back.”

“You can tell that? Do you know what species?”

I put my fork down, twisting in my seat to fully face her. “I’m ninety-nine percent certain you’re part-fae.” Concern and confusion flit across her face, and I quickly explain further. “I know you haven’t heard of the fae before, in terms of confirmed non-human species. There’s still a lot of species that have managed to keep their existence secret from the general human population so far, even though we’re two years past the Unravelling.”

She nods, eyes still full of worry, and I wish I could ease some of her stress.

“Fae are... secretive. They have their own form of magic that’s *different*... it’s almost like it has a strange quality to it. And they’re one of the species where all of their kind are fairly capable, magic-wise, as far as I understand. I really don’t know all that much about them; I’ve only met a few in my life, but I do know that they’re organised into multiple sub-species.” I

pause, letting her process all of that. I'm going to have to tell her that it was a fae that attacked her — but she needs time to deal with the news of what she is, first.

“How are they remaining a secret, even now? If I'm part-fae, surely that must imply that some fae live on this side? Or are they pretending to be elves or something?”

“They're using glamour, if they're here. Their own personal magic, to hide themselves.”

“But... what *are* fae, then? Are they... I don't know... legends have been around for centuries, about werewolves, right? And here you are,” she gestures towards me. “There must be some legends about these fae, then? But I've never heard that name before.”

“They're what people would call fairies,” I reply. “The fair folk. Fae. There's a bunch of names, but they all mean the same thing. I even searched ‘New Zealand fairies’ just before, to see if there are any local legends — because those are often based on real encounters, even if the facts get muddled — and there's old Māori legends, apparently. I skimmed one and it seemed surprisingly accurate, in terms of what fae may look like.”

“Of pale-skinned people with fair hair, that lived in the mountains?” At my nod, she continues. “Yeah, I've heard those myths. So... fairies. You're telling me I'm part-*fairy*?”

I nod again. “I think so. I'm not saying you're descended from one of those mentioned in your old legends, but it's interesting that there are stories that seem consistent with others around the world.”

We lapse into silence, eating quietly. I get lost in my own thoughts, worrying about how best to protect her, until Ellie touches my elbow, drawing my attention back, and I realise I've been staring into space for a few minutes. “Sorry,” I mutter.

“It's fine.” Her hand lingers on my arm, those big brown eyes of hers so trusting when she looks at me, and my chest feels tight. I'm not letting her out of my sight, not until I can guarantee her safety. I take her hand in mine, and lift it to my lips, kissing the backs of her fingers. Her sweet scent fills my nose, my eyes never straying from her face. *My Ellie*. She takes in a shaky breath and I can smell the fresh tang of her arousal, but she's always been a practical person, steering our conversation back on track. “So you don't know a lot about them? The fae?”

“No. The species I know the most about are the same ones that have been

fairly open with humans since the Unravelling. The fae...” I bite my lip, hesitating. Ellie sees, and the crease between her brows grows deeper.

“You have to tell me, Van. You have to tell me *everything* you know.”

“The fae are the real reason why the Unravelling occurred. Or at least, that’s what everyone is saying. It’s definitely what my mother believes.”

Ellie sets her wineglass down. “So the whole ‘*the human population got too big and we just couldn’t keep up the glamour*’ thing isn’t true?”

“Yeah, that’s complete bullshit.” She shakes her head as I continue. “Think about it this way; the size of the human population had no impact on glamour, because the glamour didn’t change humans, it changed *us*. It didn’t change how humans perceived our bodies, it *changed our bodies*. It transformed everyone who stepped into this realm. My dick didn’t have a knot!” She covers her smile with a hand. “It’s true.”

“I know it’s true; I remember your penis from before. It was very nice, but I’m not gonna lie, I quite like this new version.” A blush spreads across her cheeks.

I flash her a grin. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“So, what you’re saying is that the glamour concentrated on the non-humans in this realm. It had nothing to do with humans.”

“Yes. It had nothing to do with humans in terms of how it functioned, other than the fact that its sole purpose was to hide us from them.”

“But then... you just said that these legends were based off true encounters, and if the glamour changed everyone’s bodies... how does that work?” I go to answer, but she jumps in with another question. “Were you human, back then? As in, could you transform into a wolf? Could you see in the dark? Or was that glamour all-encompassing?”

“It wasn’t quite all-encompassing. I couldn’t see in the dark back then, not like the way I can now, because the reflective lens in my eyes that enables that process is a *visible* thing — you’ll see it when the sun has set, if you haven’t seen a wolf in the dark before. It makes my eyes appear to glow, when a source of light hits them.”

“Like a cat.”

I grimace. It’s a common thing, I’ve found in the past two years, for humans to compare us wolves to their *pets*, because it’s what they know — it’s the only frame of reference many humans have when discussing animalistic features. I understand it, but it doesn’t mean I like it. “Like a *wolf*,” I say to her, and she blushes further, looking sheepish. I clear my

throat, continuing on. “So the glamour took that reflective lens away... it gave us human eyes, and the shitty eyesight that came along with it. No offence.”

“None taken.” Her mouth twitches, holding in a laugh.

“I could smell just as well as I can now, though. My hearing was just as good as it is now. My wolves were there with me, in me.” She frowns at this, and I make a mental note to explain *that* to her later. “I could transform, *if* a counter-spell was used — specifically one that removed the glamour on me for a certain period of time. Mom is an expert in that sort of thing, so she often put one in place whenever there were no humans around. Then I could shift, or turn into a werewolf under the full moon, and in my regular form I looked like *this*. There’s a reason why, at the time, my almost-billionaire father chose a quiet Northland town surrounded by forests and the ocean for his vacations down-under, rather than one of the hotspots for the wealthy.”

“Oh my god, and then I showed up almost every fucking day, every year. Were you guys meant to be doing wolf-things the whole time?”

“Not the whole time.”

She groans, dropping her forehead to the counter. “No wonder he hated me.”

I growl, and her head snaps up at the sound, our eyes meeting. “I don’t know what his fucking problem was, Ellie, but you never deserved the shit that you put up with from him.” I still haven’t told her about the orders he gave, nine years ago.

“I was intruding.”

“You were our guest. And we loved having you there. For us kids, seeing you was the best part of every vacation in New Zealand. My mom would say the same, I’m sure. And we still took off the glamour plenty; you probably never realised that we never once saw you on the days surrounding the full moon.”

She is silent for a moment, mouth open, tongue darting out to lick her lips. Out of nowhere, she jabs my arm with her finger.

“Hey!”

“You told me I was crazy, when I told you I’d heard *howling* in the night. That was you!”

“That was *Lacey*, being an idiot.” Lacey had wanted Ellie to *know* that last summer, but I’d stalled, afraid that telling her would scare her off. I should have known better.

Ellie pouts. “To think, I could have seen werewolves. Bloody hell. I *knew* I heard something.”

“So this is how local legends used to start, about cryptids. People like us would use a counter-spell, someone would let loose a little too much, next thing you know there’s a sighting, or someone hears something odd in the night.”

She shakes her head. “Crazy. There used to be sightings of a black panther in Southland, I think...”

“Werecats.”

“Werecats.” Her eyes are round as she processes this information. “That’s insane.”

“Hm.” I have a feeling that there are many, many more things she’s going to find insane in the next few days, and it makes my stomach twist with worry that it will be too much, that at some point she’s going to run screaming for the hills.

Her fingers drum against the marble countertop. “So back to me... you say you think I’m fae, which is a fairy. With wings?”

“No wings. That would be sprite, or a pixie.”

“*Okaaay*. Next question: why are they the reason the Unravelling happened?”

I take a moment to think about the simplest way to explain this. “The fae have been using their magic to antagonise the old houses and clans that currently hold all the power in the First Realm. That’s been going on for centuries, but it’s ramped up in the last few years. Every house and clan is led by members of the magic class — witches, wizards, et cetera — because magic rules the world in the First Realm, even more so than wealth does. It’s the collective magic of *all members* of the magic class — regardless of house or clan or species — that kept the universal glamour in place here in this realm. It was a collective spell, first created over a millennia ago, that powered the glamour.”

“That’s what always surprises me,” she says, touching her ear almost shyly. “How this glamour was able to make everyone look human without any mistakes.”

I nod, reaching out to push her damp hair back, tucking it behind her ear. “They suit you, you know,” I tell her.

“What, the ears?”

“Yes. You are *stunning*, Ellie, and I hope you know that.”

She shakes her head, deflecting the compliment, and nudges my leg with her foot. “You were telling me about what the fae did to make the Unravelling happen.”

“I’m not the best source of information, but from what my mother has told me, it was decided that protecting everyone from the fae was more important than keeping us all hidden any longer. Choices had to be made, in terms of how much energy was expended upholding the glamour versus protecting the two realms.”

I can see the gears turning in Ellie’s mind, her big brown eyes searching my face. “Is it political, then? As in, a power struggle?”

“It seems that way.”

“So the fae are the bad guys?” She frowns when I struggle to answer. “Are they evil? Is that what came after me today? Was that deer...?” She’s jumping ahead now, her theories on the right track, and I wish I had kinder answers for her.

“If you were to research fae right now, you would find that many legends say they take the form of a deer. And that’s because they often do. Their magic often has a green cast or glow to it, or at least, the Unseelie fae have that green magic, and they are the ones that I think came after you today.”

She leans her head against her hand, her food forgotten. “They *are* the bad guys, aren’t they? And I’m one of them. And they’re after me.”

“We need more answers, but it seems like that’s the case. Not all fae are... sinister. But some are. Others seem really benign.”

She shakes her head slowly. “And appearance-wise? The ears are like mine?”

“The point on the ear is more pronounced — their ears are much longer. But that makes sense, given that you are not anywhere near full-blooded fae.”

Her lips purse in thought. “Do they use mushrooms?”

“Mushrooms?”

“Mushrooms. Big white ones that glow green.” She makes a circle with her fingers, using both hands. “About this size?”

There’s only one reason why she’d ask such a specific question. “When did you see this mushroom? Today?”

She hesitates, shifting in her seat. “No...”

“Ellie.” It’s an effort to keep the growl out of my voice.

“It was in my garden, on the day you visited for the festival.”

“*Ellie*. Fuck! Before or after I was there?”

“Before.”

There’s an iciness in my veins again, that horror, that dread, that something could have happened to her without me even knowing what was going on.

“Don’t tell me I should have told you; you had just appeared in my life again out of nowhere and —”

“I’m not doing that. I’m not doing ‘*I-told-you-so*’s, okay?” My jaw is clenched, muscles so tense I have to actively focus on relaxing them. “I smelled fae in your garden that day.”

“That’s what had you freaked out? I figured that maybe you smelled the mushroom. I didn’t know what it was, so I panicked and threw it and even my trowel away, and then tried to forget about it.”

“Because *that’s* the smart thing to do.”

At my sarcastic tone she shoots me a hurt look, and my wolves growl with displeasure. *Idiot. Don’t upset her.*

“I’m sorry. I really dislike hearing that you’ve potentially been in danger for weeks and I haven’t known about it.”

“Maybe I’ve been in danger for months. Or years! That lady in the article went missing over a year ago. So she would be part-fae, too, right? Why would these fae want me?”

“I don’t know, but I can’t imagine it would be good. I’m hoping we can find out more information tomorrow.”

“But we’re safe here?”

“Yes.” It’s a damn good thing that I organised the ward on this place in my first week here, otherwise I don’t think my wolves would let me get a wink of sleep tonight, knowing the potential danger Ellie is in.

“I can’t stay here forever, though. I have to go home at some point.” She gasps. “The chickens! They need shutting away for the night!”

I rub my forehead — her birds are *not* the priority here — and she puts a hand on my shoulder. “I know that sounds stupid,” she explains, “but they’re my pets. I feel bad I completely forgot about them.”

“I’ll call Cameron and get him to shut your chickens away in their coop. He can pick up some clothing for you too, and bring it here. Do you still keep a spare key hidden outside like you used to up north?”

“Yep. I do. It’s under the pot of pink daisies on the left-hand-side of the house.”

“That’s... terrible, security-wise. But good in this situation. I’ll call Cam

shortly.” *And order her a lockbox for her house.*

“He won’t be in danger?”

“I can’t see why. I don’t think they’d have any use for an orc.” She frowns at me, and I shrug, trying to appear more casual about this whole thing than I feel. I don’t want her to worry unnecessarily, but I *am* worried. “If he doesn’t want to go to yours, I’ll get him to come here and stay with you while I go and get your clothes. I think the best option for us is to contact the local witch I used for the vineyard and seek guidance on what can be done to ensure your safety, but in order to do that, you’re going to need pants tomorrow.”

I’m rewarded with the tiniest of laughs, though I hear her heartbeat pick up again. “So, this witch, who is she? I didn’t even know there was one on the island.”

“She keeps to herself, for the most part. She’s an elf. She only moved here recently, from what she said. A couple of months or so.”

“And she can put a *ward* around my house?”

“She can definitely do that. I’m hoping she can take it a step further, and put one around you, specifically.”

She doesn’t look convinced, and I don’t blame her. “Here’s the thing, in this realm, up until the Unravelling, human science explained most phenomena, right? And that science is correct, too; I use it when I turn grapes into wine, because there’s an exact scientific process to getting viticulture right. *You* apply science when you garden. But when we’re talking about people from the First Realm, you need to suspend your preconceived notions of what’s possible. I turn into a wolf, like that,” I snap my fingers. “If I want to shift, I think it, and I’m a horse-sized wolf in a second flat. Under the full moon, I’m different again, a huge beast. That’s magic working right there. This all exists outside of the completely logical science that makes sense in *this* realm — we non-humans exist outside of that.”

Ellie shakes her head with dismay. “There’s so little information out there, and I get why that may be, but it doesn’t make it easy for someone in my situation who is trying to figure stuff out.”

“I thought I heard that the government here was quite good in assisting those like you that had woken to... *differences* in anatomy that they didn’t know about, or did I hear wrong?” I ask, hoping to shift the conversation slightly. I want to hear more about her.

“No, you’re right. There was a lot set up, at first, but I missed the boat



with all of that. At the time I was too scared to admit it to anyone else other than my mum; it was easy enough to hide the ears behind my hair — this was right smack bang in the middle of me purchasing my land, by the way, including getting the bank involved for a mortgage, and at the time there was all of that talk worldwide about whether non-humans should have the same rights as humans, including rights to own properties in this realm. Remember?”

“How could I forget?” I say, a touch of bitterness in my voice. Those first few months post-Unravelling had been messier than predicted for those of us that choose to live among humans here in this realm, to say the least. Thankfully, enough non-humans already held positions of power pre-Unravelling — world leaders, billionaires in CEO positions, lobbyists with immense influence — so when the glamour fell away, there was just enough stability among the chaos.

Ellie rubs my arm in sympathy. “Sorry. Of course you would know.”

“It’s okay.” I try to think of a safe topic to discuss. She’s clearly exhausted, and I don’t want to cause her more stress. “So, do you know many people on the island?”

“Mainly people from the gardening club, and Cam. Other than that, just the regulars at the Saturday farmers’ market. That’s why...” she trails off, blushing.

“Why what?”

“Why it’s been so lovely, seeing you again. Actually having someone my own age to talk to.” Her laugh is self-deprecating, and a little sad.

“Because you can’t get that here?”

She shakes her head. “It was only a month after the Unravelling that I moved out here — like I said, I was in the middle of purchasing my land when *everything* happened — so the timing was pretty atrocious for me. I was scared to even leave my property, at first; there was some pretty threatening rhetoric online back then, and I dreaded every grocery shop or visit to the post office. All I could think about was running into someone that *hated* non-humans and my ears being spotted.”

I hate that she’s been so isolated through all of this. I reach out, taking her hand, and she gives me a sad smile as she continues.

“I lived in a camper van on my land and worked on the garden while waiting for the tiny house to be sorted — it wasn’t new, but it took a few weeks to organise delivery to the island, and then it needed renovating. I was

too busy, too stressed about my ears and what that meant, and time sort of flew by... The design firm I was at was letting me work from home after my move to the island, so next thing I knew it had been over six months and I hadn't really been in touch with any of my friends from the mainland. Most of them I'd met at university after I moved down from Northland, and we were already beginning to drift apart anyway."

"The Unravelling was just the nail in the coffin?"

"Yeah. You know what it's like when you start working, and everyone is suddenly too busy to catch up. Once you're not in classes together or seeing each other regularly around campus, it's easy for half a year to pass by. At least, it was for me. I did a lot of overtime at the firm I started with — I wanted to progress quickly."

"It sounds like you did, with your credentials."

She shrugs. "It came at a price. And I guess, maybe there's a bit of jealousy there, when it comes to not seeing my old friends often. They're at different stages in their lives. Happily married. One of them has a baby. Not that I want kids *yet*, but it's that whole 'seeing everyone else get their fairytale endings and all you've been doing is kissing frogs for almost a decade' *thing*. I know that makes me sound like a shitty person."

I shake my head, frowning at her. "It makes you *a* person, with feelings. I'm not going to judge you for it, but now I have to ask — am I on your list of frogs?"

She rolls her eyes, her fingers momentarily tightening around mine. "*No*, Evander, you're definitely not a frog in this story. Anyway," she moves on, preventing me from asking anything further. "I *did* have another, wider group of friends, but I'd met them through my ex." She winces, and I have to force myself to keep my expression neutral. I'd stalked her social media once, in a weak moment some years ago, and had seen pictures of what I assume is the man she's talking about. Of course she had a life and relationships in the last nine years. I'm fine with it.

*We're not*, my wolves snarl, and it's hard not to agree with them.

Ellie continues. "When we split it just got awkward, since they were all his friends first. So, yes I have a few friends my age, but I've thrown myself into work so much that I barely ever bother to make the trip back to the mainland to see them, and I feel really guilty about that."

I understand the guilt that comes from not keeping in contact with someone all too well, and now that Ellie is here in front of me, I feel a fresh

wave of gut-churning shame over the past nine years. *You have to explain it to her soon, I think to myself. She needs to know why you couldn't reach out to her.*

But now is not the time. Ellie is quiet now, her shoulders slumping, mouthfuls of food growing smaller and smaller until she's barely picking at it.

"Are you okay?"

"Not really," she replies with a weak laugh, and my stomach flips.

"You're not... regretting anything, are you?"

Her big brown eyes grow wide as she sits up straight, making direct eye contact for the first time in a while. "No! No, I... I could never regret anything with you, Van," she adds, her cheeks growing pink. "My nerves are shot from all this fae business, that's all."

"You feel frazzled."

"Yes. You know that feeling, after the adrenaline runs out, and you just feel ridiculously weak? That's me right now."

She yawns, and I stand, picking her up off the stool and cradling her in my arms. She acquiesces without complaint, melting against my chest as I carry her to my bedroom. "I do have a guest bedroom," I tell her, "but I'd feel better if I can be near you tonight."

She hums, eyes blinking slowly, the tension running out of her as the events of the day catch up, despite the fact that it's not yet six in the evening. "It's okay. I want to be near you too. As idiotic as that is."

"Why is that idiotic?" I fold back sheets and blankets, and deposit her in the centre of my bed. The shirt she's wearing rides up, revealing the curve of her hip on one side and a glimpse of her inner thighs, but I resist the urge to reach out and touch her there. She's far too exhausted for anything remotely sexual right now. Her eyes flutter closed with a sigh as she burrows into the pillow beneath her head. "Ellie?"

"Hmm?" She blinks up at me owlishly. She looks ridiculously small on the bed since it was custom-made to fit my werewolf form; both wider and longer than a California King, it dominates the room.

"Why is it idiotic that you want to be near me?" I don't know why I'm pressing the question. I know what she's going to say, and I know it's going to hurt. It's like a scab that I can't help picking.

"Because you broke my heart," she confirms, her voice a small murmur against her pillow as she rolls onto her side. "And you might do it again. And

I shouldn't trust you but..." She yawns again, and her eyes remain closed.

"But what?" I tuck the blankets over her, not expecting a reply.

"I want to believe in us," she whispers, lancing my heart.

Seven

## ELLIE



I drift back to consciousness, slowly becoming aware of the comforting scent of fresh sheets and spice, the cosiness of the softest pillow under my head, and the buttery linen that wraps around my limbs. Behind me, the warm body that curls around me shifts, pulling me tighter against his chest, and I press back against *him*, not wanting to wake up, not wanting this dream of mine to end the way it always does. I want to stay in this lull of half-sleep forever, where I can pretend that Van is with me and not somewhere halfway across the world, living a life without me in it. I love these dreams, and I hate them. I hate the moment when I wake and he is gone, and my heart breaks all over again, no matter how many years fly by.

It's the moon — just over the first quarter phase, or *Huna*, in the *maramataka* — that wakes me fully, the light streaming through the large windows, casting everything in a silver glow. I listen to the waves crashing against the shore, the sound so loud, so close, and know I'm not in my house. The body behind me shifts again, his erect cock pressing against my backside, his hand on my breast, his lips against my hair.

“Ellie.” His voice is deep and molten, licking at every part of me, and tears form in my eyes, the lump in my throat keeping me from speaking. *It's not a dream, then.*

Van lifts his head, his hand cupping my face, thumb swiping at the tear that falls. “You're crying? What's wrong?”

I shake my head, unable to form any coherent words. Instead I turn my body towards him, wrapping my hands around his neck, pulling him down for a kiss, hard and insistent, hoping that alone can convey how I'm feeling; that I need him desperately, that I never want him to leave, that he cleaved his

way into my heart long ago and I never truly recovered from it. He growls against the slide of my tongue, kissing me back with the same fervour, returning all the passion I give him tenfold, one big hand cradling my head, another sliding under my back, trailing down to grasp at my backside, fingers digging into my flesh. *I love you*, I think, my newly-woken state leaving me open and raw, *I love you, and I will want you forever*.

His cock presses hard against my thigh, and I shift again, onto my back, my legs opening wide for him as his naked body covers mine. I'm still wearing the same shirt from yesterday, nothing underneath, no memory of coming to bed. *He must have carried me here*.

He breaks our kiss to look me over, and his pupils — blown wide — shine in the moonlight, utterly inhuman. *Just like a real wolf*. "Are you okay?" he asks, hands brushing the hair back from my face.

I nod, kissing the palm of his hand, not trusting myself with words just yet. Instead I pull him to me, kissing along his jaw, his stubble rough against my lips. I continue to trail kisses down his neck, breathing him in, my hands splayed across his back. "I thought it was a dream," I whisper against his skin. "I've had it so many times before, and every time I wake and you're not there..."

"I'm here. I'm here." His next kiss is bruising in the best way, his tongue curling over mine, his teeth nipping at my bottom lip with another growl that sends a fresh jolt of heat and need straight to my pussy, and I moan against him, desperate.

"Need you," I gasp as his teeth scrape my neck, something he always loved to do that now makes *so much sense*. "I need you inside me. Need you now."

"Here, get this off." He tugs at the hem of my shirt and I lift my arms automatically as he pulls the fabric over my head, his lips closing over my nipple as soon as it's thrown aside. I whimper against the sensation, jerking as his hand grasps my pussy, his thumb brushing over my clit, his finger already dipping into the wet heat of my core. I cry out, my hips rising to meet him, encouraging him to sink in further.

"*Fuck*," he breathes against my skin, dragging his stubble over my other nipple in a torturous tease. "Fuck, you are so wet." He pulls his hand away and I keen at the loss of his touch, even as he lifts his finger to his lips and sucks it clean, so lewd that I find it obscenely hot. "You are so wet, and you taste so fucking *good*." He bends his head once more to bite the flesh of my

breast and I hiss, the sensation sending another jolt straight to my clit. “The things I want to do to you.” His voice is so deep that I feel it in my bones, feel the snarl of the beasts within him, and the utterly insane thought of fucking him as a werewolf flits through my brain for a moment, making me gasp, making me *drip* for him.

“Do it all,” I cry, tugging at his hair, trying in vain to pull him towards me so that he can sink his cock inside, my body achingly hollow. I cry out in frustration as he does the opposite, his lips trailing a path down my stomach, his hands pushing my thighs open wider for him. He leans back, looking down at me with those glowing eyes, surveying every inch of me as if I am a work of art, biting into his lower lip, those sharp canines on full display. He looks like a god; too perfect, too handsome to be mortal. The outline of his muscled body is thrown into relief in the moonlight, the deep vee below his abs and arrow pointing directly to his cock, which juts out thick and erect, precum beading at the tip.

“You are so unbelievably beautiful, and *dripping* wet,” he says. *I could say the same for you*, I think as his thumbs trail down the inside of my thighs, skimming over my outer folds. “Such a pretty pussy.”

“Such a tease,” I moan, moving to close my legs only for him to push them open once more, holding me down by my knees. “I told you, I need you inside me!”

He slides further down the bed, bending his head until his breath is feathering over my clit, agonising and titillating all at once. “And I will be, baby, just as soon as I’m done here. You come first, that’s the rule. You come on my tongue, and then you come on my cock.”

The first swipe of his tongue against my clit leaves me breathless, and the press of two fingers makes me wheeze as they slide home, curling against my inner wall. “*Oh!*” I moan as Van sucks at my clit, the first tendrils of an orgasm already building within me, my legs shaking as he settles into a pace with his tongue that hits just right. “*Yes,*” I watch him, his luminous eyes never leaving my face. “*Yes, yes, please, please, don’t stop.*” His fingers match that steady pace, pressing into my G spot, and I am so, so close —

His lips close around my clit once more, *sucking*, sending me over the edge with a deep groan, and I feel myself gush, wetter than I’ve ever been before, his satisfied moan ringing out as his tongue licks at me, as if I am a meal and he a starving man.

The stubble on his chin glistens with moisture as he raises his head,



licking his lips with a satisfied grin. “Still want more, baby? You still want my cock?”

“Yes. How is that even a question?”

His laugh is a deep rumble as he moves over me, smirking as he leans in to kiss me with those wet lips. I taste myself on him and he moans into my mouth, his tongue sliding over mine once more. “So fucking hot,” he murmurs, kissing my neck, making me shiver. He leans back, kneeling between my thighs, working his hand over his fat cock. “Are you okay with me knotting you tonight?” he asks quietly, his free hand rubbing up and down my thigh. “I want to make sure you’re happy to do that, because I know it’s... different.”

My stomach flips at the thought, my eyes focusing on the knot at the base of his shaft. “Yes,” I breathe, reaching out to touch him there, my fingers dancing over the swollen red flesh. He sucks in a breath, biting down hard on his lower lip, and I mirror him, chewing on my own lip.

“I’ll be coming inside you, if I knot you.”

I shiver in anticipation. “I want you to come in me. I have an IUD.”

“Good.” He presses the smooth head of his cock to my pussy, rubbing it through my juices, his eyes watching me for my reaction as he rubs it over my sensitive clit. I take in a shuddering breath, a moan caught in my throat, and eyes gleam with satisfaction. “I’m going to fill you up,” he declares, and hell, maybe I have a few unexplored kinks, because the thought of that alone makes me groan.

He notches the head at my entrance, rocking ever so slightly, the shallow thrusts teasing me. “I’m going to fuck you so good.” He slides in further, though not far enough, the girth of him a pleasant stretch that makes my toes curl. When he pulls back out in a slow drag, he pulls a moan from my lips with it. “You’re going to come around my knot, and I’m going to come in you so hard when this tight cunt of yours squeezes me.”

The next slow press of his cock makes me gasp, his cock filling me all the way, until his knot sits snug against me. “Ah, that feels so good,” I tell him as he stills, loving the stretch, the fullness, loving the sight of this god of a man joined to me. My Evander, my wolf. He leans forward, his arms caging me on either side, and I press my hands to his chest, running them over his pectorals and down over his perfectly sculpted abs.

This isn’t the first time he’s fucked me, but it feels new. It *is* new; this body of his so familiar in some ways and yet so different than before, when

glamour hid the real him, the sheer size of him alone almost overwhelming. As he lowers himself to his elbows, I wrap my arms around his back and stretch up to kiss at his shoulder, at his chest, at the base of his throat. I kiss every part of him I can reach, carding my fingers through his thick hair, revelling in the feeling that he is truly here in my arms.

“You are so tight,” he rumbles, and I intentionally squeeze my walls around his girth, grinning as his eyes flutter backwards with a groan. “*Fuck me.*”

I laugh, giddy with euphoria in this moment. “That is exactly what we’re doing, although if you want *me* to fuck *you*, I probably need to be on top.”

“That can be arranged.” That’s all the warning I get before he’s hooking his legs around mine in a way that allows us to roll with ease, the world spinning for a moment until I am righted atop him. I sit up, grinding down on his cock, watching him hiss with pleasure as I roll my hips, feeling every thick inch of him. “Look at you,” he murmurs, those shining pupils raking over my body. “Such a goddess in the moonlight.” His hands sweep up the curves of my hips, grab at my waist for a moment, then move further to cup my small breasts, dwarfing them. He curls upwards in a sit up, putting those glorious abs of his to use, one hand now digging into the back of my head, grasping a fistful of hair as he pulls my mouth down to his for a kiss. It’s a messy slide of tongues and oh so fucking hot, his hands moving to my ass, his fingers digging into my flesh, his grip guiding me, helping me to fuck him. With a snarl he pulls away from my mouth to latch onto my neck with his teeth, biting hard enough to sting but careful enough not to break the skin, the pain somehow enhancing the pleasure. The sudden friction of his thumb on my clit is enough to set me off with a cry. I practically howl through my orgasm, head thrown back, a wolf at my throat, my pussy clenching rhythmically as he continues to thrust up into me, fucking me through it.

“*Ohhh,*” I moan into his mouth as he kisses me once more, my ears ringing in the aftermath, my pussy dripping wet around him, the insides of my thighs coated in my release.

“So beautiful,” he murmurs against my lips, lifting me up by the waist, pulling free, the sudden emptiness a shock that makes me gasp. He lowers me to the mattress beside him, turning me onto my side and lifting my leg. I am a spineless doll, his for the taking. His body moves flush against my back, spooning me, his cock finding my entrance and sliding in with ease and a satisfied sigh from us both. He wraps an arm under my head, while his other

hand finds my clit, and like this there's very little work to do for such a great reward, his constant thrusts and that toe-curling circling of my clit bringing me back to the edge quickly.

"Baby," he grunts, the slap of his flesh against mine a more urgent beat now, the constant pressure of his dick drawing a continuous stream of gasps and sounds and curses and grunts of *fuck yes* from my mouth. "Baby, look at me." I turn my head, looking at him over my shoulder as he rises on his elbow, leaning over me so we are face to face, our breaths mingling, my body so close.

"Ellie," and there's something in his voice I haven't heard before, not a snarl, not a bite, but a *command*, his tone holding me in the sweet agony of anticipation. *Alpha*. I'm not a wolf, but it doesn't matter, my body responding to him all the same.

"Come."

The order slams into me, and with it I come again with a scream, eyes locked with his, as he grips my hip tight enough to leave bruises, snarling as he thrusts one last time. His knot breaches me, filling me beyond what anything has before, the sensation a blinding hot dichotomy of pleasure and pain, my cunt spasming around him, around the swelling flesh locking us together. I *feel* the hot spurts of his cum within me, feel him fill me as he promised, the sheer volume so much more than that of a human. He buries his face against my neck, grunting, my pussy still convulsing around his knot, the aftershocks of my orgasm leaving me twitching and gasping, every brush of his fingers across my oversensitive clit making my legs jerk. I whimper as I feel his cock give one last twitch, the last of his seed spilling forth as he slumps into the mattress behind me, his nose buried in my hair.

My heartbeat thunders in my ears, but above that, there's no sound but our panting breaths and the waves crashing on the shore below. For the first time, I take in the view out the window, the curve of the bay a black silhouette in the distance that cuts through the ocean, the water illuminated by the moon.

"Ellie, are you alright? How are you feeling?"

I sigh, leaning my head further back against Van. "I feel..." *full, stretched, stuffed, well-ridden*, "wonderful," I whisper. "Amazing."

His hand caresses my thigh, my hip, my waist, before curling comfortably over my breast. "You're not too sore? I didn't hurt you?"

"I'm perfect. You?"

He huffs against my hair, and I feel the drag of his lips as he kisses my head, followed by the sound of him taking a deep breath, inhaling my scent. “Fantastic.”

“Hmmm.” I reach back to rub his hip, feeling deliciously drowsy. “How long does this usually last for?” I ask quietly, referring to the knot holding us together. “I’m in no rush — I really like this — I’m just curious.”

“Twenty to thirty minutes, I think,” he murmurs. “I wouldn’t really know more than that. The knot never fully swells unless it’s locked inside a person.”

“Does it change from partner to partner, then? The timing, I mean.”

“I’m not sure.” He swallows with an audible click of his throat. “I’ve never knotted anyone before.”

“Oh?” There’s that flutter in my chest again, my heart betraying me as always. *It doesn’t mean anything. Don’t get ahead of yourself.*

After a pause, he explains. “Knotting a human prior to the Unravelling would have required a very permanent relationship, to justify revealing our secrets and removing glamour and... I never wanted that with anyone I met in the past nine years. As for wolves; it’s for breeding, that’s its purpose. It’s the knot that triggers ovulation in wolf females, did you know that?”

“No! Does that go for both shifters and werewolves, then?”

“Yeah. They still have regular cycles too, but if they’re knotted, they’ll ovulate again, and wolf sperm cells live a few extra days compared to humans, so,” I feel, more than see, him shrug behind me, “accidents happen. I never wanted to risk it.”

I glance back out the window, at the moonlight reflected in the water. “Does the moon impact you, at all? Other than when it’s full, I mean.”

“It does.” His teeth scrape my ear, making me shiver. “This week, leading up to the full moon... I apologise in advance if I struggle to keep my hands off of you. Though, to be honest, I think I’d struggle regardless of the phases of the moon.” He cups my breast, thumb running back and forth over my nipple, and I clench my pussy around his knot, making him grunt.

“I’m not going to complain if you do this to me every day,” I tell him, turning my head to kiss him once more, a slow glide of lips and tongues. Nothing has ever felt as intimate as this moment here, tied to him, bathed in moonlight as we stare into each other’s eyes.

Van’s hand wanders down my stomach to rub over my clit once more. My leg jerks involuntarily, and I suck in a breath at the sensation. “Too

sensitive?”

“A little,” I admit. “Is that okay?”

“That’s fine, baby. I just don’t want to leave you hanging if you want to come again.”

I laugh at that, wiggling my backside against him, feeling the pleasant tug of that thick knot within me. “I’ve come five times in the past 24 hours, I’m good. Better than I have been in a long time.”

“Huh, I only counted four. Or did you —”

“Get your letter and then masturbate to thoughts about you? Yeah, I did that.”

Van barks out a laugh, jostling the bed and us both with the force of it. “I’m not ashamed!” I declare. “I’m not!”

“You shouldn’t be. Besides, I’ve been jerking off to thoughts of you daily since we met up again.”

“Oh, lovely,” I grin, looking over my shoulder at him. “We’re even, then.”

“We’re perfect.” He leans in, placing a kiss at the corner of my mouth.

Minutes float by, and I bask in his scent, rubbing his shins with my feet and placing kisses on the bicep that acts as a pillow for my head. Van snags the blankets from the bottom of the bed with his foot, pulling them up over me just as I begin to grow cold.

“Now I get why you said you wanted us to be horizontal for this part.”

“Hmm. I’m going to get a ledge built into the shower.”

“Like a seat? For knotting?”

He shrugs. “Why not?”

“*Why not knot?* Now there’s a slogan.”

His laugh rumbles behind me. “You’re cute.”

I close my eyes. In the distance, a *ruru* calls repetitively, its distinctive ‘*more-pork*’ sound reminding me of home. We used to hear the small owls all the time in Bluewater Bay, especially in the forested area surrounding the Livingston’s mansion. Van must be thinking the same thing, because he murmurs, “I missed hearing those little guys. It’s good to be back.”

“You’re happy then? With the move here?”

“How could I not be, when you’re here? But yes, I’m happy. I avoided coming back for so long partly because...” he takes a deep breath, not bothering to finish when we both know what he was going to say. *Jenny*. “But being here feels like both a fresh start and like I’m coming home.”

“A lot of your childhood was here. I mean, two months out of each year is fairly significant.”

“It is, and they were always the best months, too.”

I curl my fingers over his, squeezing tight, mimicking the squeezing sensation in my heart. “Welcome home, then,” I whisper.

He kisses my head again. “Thank you.”

Sometime later, he whispers in my ear, “I think my knot is finally going down. That’s got to be some sort of record — the clock says forty-five minutes.”

“Hmmm.” *You were timing it?* I want to ask, amused at the idea that this might be the wolf version of a dick-measuring contest, but the words never make it past my lips, drowsiness sealing them shut. Instead I lie with my eyes closed as he traces circles on my skin, leaving me cognisant of every touch, every shift, every press of his deliciously warm flesh against mine. Strong arms pull me closer against him, and I breathe deep, enjoying the tranquillity of this moment. *So much has changed in so little time.*

It’s my last coherent thought before sleep drags me under.

I wake with a gasp. The light in the room is still dim, the stunning view all dark ocean and deep purple sky, stars winking out of sight one by one, and the moon shining orange and magnified as it sets over the distant Auckland City.

Van’s cock is still inside me; we must have both fallen asleep before his knot came free. It’s flaccid, but growing harder by the second, a grunt of surprise from him telling me he’s also waking up. *Better get some cranberry juice in the morning or I’m going to be screwed.*

I wiggle experimentally, letting out a small “Oh,” as his dick swells from half-hard to completely stiff, the sensation of being *absolutely filled* from the inside making my clit ache with need. Van’s hand lands on my hip in a firm grip, his fingers digging into my soft flesh.

“Ellie.” His breath is hot on my neck, his lips following a moment later, his hand running from hip to waist to breasts. He cups and squeezes and tweaks, until both my nipples are hard against his calloused fingers and I’m moaning at the wet, slow glide of his dick, in and out of my core. I am hyper-

aware of his knot with each press of it against the lips of my pussy, eager to be stuffed full of it once more, my hand reaching back to dig my nails into the flesh of his muscular thigh.

“Oh, *fuck*,” he groans against my neck, picking up the pace. He thrusts hard, making me cry out, the continuous *slap slap* of our flesh ringing out in the stillness of predawn. I push back against him, impaling myself on more of his cock, and he bites at my neck. “I need to fuck you, and I don’t want to be gentle,” he growls. *Wolf*.

“Yes.”

“On your knees, then, baby.”

I’ve never moved faster, his cock sliding out of me with a rush of fluid from our earlier coupling. I’m too horny to care about how much I’m dripping all over the sheets, getting into position, ass up and head down against the pillow, offering myself as prey for the growling wolf behind me. He slaps my ass, making me gasp, pleasure shooting directly to my core. *He remembers that I like that.*

When I look back at him over my shoulder, he’s grinning, sharp teeth on display, eyes entirely inhuman, and I shiver. “Do that again,” I demand, not quite recognising the husky-voiced vixen that seems to have taken control of my body. “Slap me. Fuck me. I’m yours.”

“Oh, Goddess.” His dick presses ever so slightly inside, another slap landing on my other ass cheek, making me cry out because it feels *so fucking good*, and when he slides home I practically sob with relief at being filled again.

He doesn’t waste any time, gripping my hips, slamming into me again and again, his heavy balls — bigger than a human man’s — swinging forward to hit my clit with each thrust. At this angle he hits my G spot just right, and my toes curl at the force of it all, all this frantic fucking. I love that I do this to him, love that I bring out the wilder side of his nature.

As if on cue, he leans forward, his body covering mine, his large hands resting over my small wrists. “You were made for me,” he says, grunting with the force of each thrust, the sounds we’re both making obscenely loud. “You were made to be mine.”

“Yes!” I cry.

“*Mine.*”

“Yours!”

With a roar and a final thrust his knot pushes into place, setting off an

orgasm that rips through me hard and fast, leaving me shaking and panting against the bed, moaning incoherently. My cunt pulses around him, his hot cum filling me once more, making me wonder how much fluid can actually fit inside. *Evidently quite a lot.*

Slowly, carefully, he manoeuvres us back into our original spooning position. My heart races, thunderous in my ears. I'm wide awake, and when his hand curls around to finger my clit, I lean into the sensation despite the sensitivity, the words out of my mouth growing more and more incoherent until I'm coming again, spasming around his knot, squeezing it tight and making him hiss against my ear.

When I've caught my breath, I turn my head towards him. "Feels good?"

"You coming around my knot? *Yes.* It's indescribable. If I could spend the rest of my life just buried inside you here, I'd be a happy man."

"I'm so happy, right now." I say it without thinking, the admission a little more vulnerable than I planned on being. It's one thing to open your legs to your ex, it's another thing entirely to open your heart up again, but here I am, doing just that.

"I am too," he says without missing a beat. "Being with you is the best, baby."

I pull his arm tight around me, pressing my nose to his skin, breathing in the scent of him. It's shocking, just how many memories can rise back to the surface from a familiar smell alone. Now in the aftermath, with the urgency between us settled for the moment, the haunting questions come to mind once more. *If being with me is the best, why did you stay away for nine years?*

When his knot pulls free for the second time I finally make my way to the bathroom, dashing across the room with my hand cupped between my legs in a desperate attempt to catch the flood of cum, his laughter following behind me. After a quick rinse in the shower I fall asleep in his arms, my head on his shoulder, my leg thrown over his.

Dawn has come and gone by the time I wake once more, and the room is bright in the light of the morning. This time I straddle his lap, and he rises on his knees, fucking into me while I hold on for dear life, my arms flung around his neck and his grunts hot against my ear. He cleaves me in two and pulls



me apart, every whisper of “*Mine,*” and “*That’s it, baby,*” and “*So fucking beautiful,*” a hook that sinks into my heart just as he sinks into my flesh. When I come around his knot it is with his lips on mine, a moan into his mouth, his tongue against my teeth.

The aftermath is for slow kisses, for staring into his amber eyes, for learning the lines on his face that weren’t there before. There’s a scar on his shoulder, jagged and silver against his olive skin, and another on his right arm, an old puncture wound. “Seth bit me on his first shift,” he murmurs lazily as I draw a circle around it with my finger, his voice betraying just a hint of melancholy at the mention of his estranged younger brother, still connected to his father’s pack. “It was my fault for getting in the way.”

I lie atop him, his hand stroking my hair, listening to the *tui* sing outside the window. I laugh as I recognise the odd sound in the middle of it’s song, and Van pauses his gentle touches. “What is it?”

“Listen. Can you hear the beeps, like a car unlocking? They mimic everything they hear; your *tui* birds here probably listen to people’s cars all day with all the visitors coming and going.”

His chest shakes under me in a silent laugh. “Why did you have to point that out? Now that’s all I’m going to focus on every time they sing. And they sing every damn morning.”

“You’re lucky. You have lots of *harakeke* flax on your property, and they’re all in bloom. The native birds love them.” I yawn, pressing a kiss to his chest. “I put a lot of native trees and plants into the garden design for you. Lots of flowering ones for the birds and the bees. *Mānuka, kōwhai, ngutu kākā.*”

“I saw that in the plans.” His hands roam down to my buttocks, skimming over my flesh, reaching between my thighs to touch where we remain joined. “There’s a joke to be made here about the birds and the bees, I’m sure, but I’m too tired to think about it.”

“Hmm.” I close my eyes, relaxing against him, enjoying the warmth of his body. I’m too awake to snooze, and as time passes the worries from yesterday begin to creep in, licking at my brain.

“Tell me what’s going on in that mind of yours,” Van requests quietly, and I lift my head, wide-eyed.

“Can you read minds?”

His lips twitch. “No, but I can hear better than you can. Your heart rate began to spike.”

I am speechless for a moment, and I'm pretty sure my heart rate just spiked even more. "There's so much I don't know," I whisper. "It terrifies me."

"I will answer every question you have as best as I can. And I will keep you safe." He brushes a lock of hair back from my forehead. "If there's something I don't know, we can find out the answers together."

There's that twisting, bruised feeling in my chest again. "I haven't relied on anyone in a long time," I tell him, not exactly sure what I'm trying to say, or how to say it. *I want to trust you. I'm so scared to trust you. I need to trust you, I don't have anybody else.*

He stares at me for some time, far longer than comfortable, really, and when he says, "I know," I'm almost certain he's seen through my flimsy defences, to the crux of the matter, to my heart that wants so badly to be mended by the very same person that tore it to pieces. Am I scared about the fae that seem to be after me? Yes, of course, but I'm equally as terrified by the way I'm falling so quickly again, this hope in my chest threatening to take flight, to take me too close to the sun where I could very well get burned.

There's a lump in my throat and a sting at the back of my eyes as I lay my head down once more, listening to Van's heart, the steady drum of it strong against the backdrop of crashing waves and birdsong. His arms wrap tight around me, even as a traitorous stray tear pools under my cheek, cool against his hot skin.

"I'm not going anywhere," he tells me, and I make a conscious choice to accept it as truth.

Eight

## ELLIE



We agree to meet Nerilina, the elvish witch Van used for the vineyard’s protection spell, at my place at noon. The ride there is a short but tense trip; we take Van’s car — a brand new black Porsche SUV worth a few years of my income combined — and I spend the entire time with my heart in my mouth, watching the roadsides for any sign of fae. Every time I glance at Van his jaw is clenched, and he grips the steering wheel with white knuckles. It’s a relief when we round the final bend and see a petite woman waiting for us at the gate, Van pulling in to park directly behind her little Japanese import on the road. I *feel* when her magic rolls over us; my lips part with a sharp intake of breath, and I play with my hair self-consciously. Today I’ve twisted the front strands and pulled them back behind my head after Van encouraged me to ‘wear my ears out’ for the first time. It feels strange after keeping them hidden for so long.

“That’s her, then?”

“Yes, that’s Nerilina.” He squeezes my hand reassuringly. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

“I still think I should be paying for this,” I tell him.

“Not happening.” He climbs out of the car before I can argue, and I roll my eyes, although I do have to admit that he does have the spare cash for it and I don’t. I just feel bad that he’s already spending money on me this way. This isn’t a new feeling; it surfaced every summer once I was old enough to truly comprehend the level of wealth the Livingstons had compared to everyone else. It’s hard not to feel like you’re using someone when you’re benefiting from their generosity without being able to give anything more than home-baked goods in return. I don’t like feeling like I can’t reciprocate,

but when it comes to Van, it's going to be impossible to ever match the dollar amounts he's willing to spend on me.

I suppose, in some way, it's the power imbalance that I don't like. The feeling like I need to owe someone, even if I know they would never think that way. Do I enjoy the luxurious showers in Van's bathroom, sleeping in a bed bigger than my entire kitchen and living area, and eating expensive foods? Of course I do. I'm never going to turn any of that down, but a small part of me will probably always feel guilty for it.

I feel guilty about today too, given that we were supposed to be working on the garden at Lost Moon. Van says it's fine, but I know just how much he wants to get sorted in the next three weeks alone so that the vineyard is in a better condition for the slew of Christmas parties booked from mid-December onwards. His plans are highly ambitious, and there's not that much wiggle room for delays, so it's frustrating to me that something so far out of my control has derailed everything and inconvenienced us both. Then again, we probably wouldn't have fallen into bed together so quickly had events not pushed us to the extreme, and I'm not going to start regretting that.

I'm nervous as I approach the small elf, who stands even shorter than me, looking so delicate that I get the sense that a strong breeze would just knock her right over. She tucks a strand of her red hair behind an ear that looks similar in shape to my own, and the sharp violet gaze she wields in my direction makes me falter for a moment, reminding me that looks can be deceiving. *Maybe she doesn't even look like this at all. Maybe she's just like all those witches in fairy tales, who hide their true appearance.* Van's hand lands on the small of my back, heavy and reassuring, letting me know that we are facing this together.

"Evander." I've seen enough elves in interviews on TV over the past two years to not be surprised by the softly lilting accent, nor the almost-seductive tone of her voice. It seems to be a very elf-specific thing; the sexy voice, the jewel-coloured eyes, and the delicately pointed ears that curve upwards, slightly longer than mine.

"Humans will probably start mistaking you for an elf," Van had said, when we'd discussed the fact that I should just rip the bandaid off and stop hiding my ears, and I'd scoffed at the idea. I looked nothing like any of the elves I'd ever seen. "I know," Van had added with a laugh. "But humans tend to make assumptions about what they know, which is really very little."

"Just because I am the teensiest bit fae doesn't mean I'm not human," I'd

grumbled back. “*So be careful about how much you criticise everyone, because I’m one of those ignorant humans you’re talking about right now.*”

“*Fair enough.*”

Now I found myself shaking hands with the elf witch, while Van made introductions. “Ellie, this is Nerilina. Nerilina, this is Ellie Harding.”

“Hi. Thank you for coming out here at such short notice,” I tell her. The words *lovely to meet you* stick on my tongue but don’t come out. I’m relieved to be meeting her, but I wouldn’t call it lovely. There’s nothing lovely about this situation I’m currently caught in, with fae stalking me for seemingly sinister reasons.

“You’re more than welcome. Your situation is an interesting case, and I quite like jobs out of the ordinary. There’s only so many love potions one can brew before things get dull.”

I laugh, feeling my shoulders relax. With her full lips turned up in a smile, she seems a lot friendlier and less intimidating than she did a moment ago. This close, I can see the flecks of dark blue in her pretty violet eyes, sitting large in her pale face. “Love potions are actually a thing, then?”

“Well they’re not really for *love*,” she whispers conspiratorially. “More for treating erectile dysfunction and other things. Not that you need to know; wolf males are notorious for their high libidos. If anything, you’ll have the opposite problem as the full moon approaches, now that *someone* has found his mate.”

I’m speechless, my cheeks flaming red as Van clears his throat beside me. “Can we please focus on the task at hand?”

Nerilina aims a closed-mouth smile at Van. “Alright then. Shall we get started?”

It’s only as I’m following the witch through my front gate that I fully process everything she said. *His mate?*

**V**an insists on stalking around my property’s perimeter, looking for any sign — specifically, any scent — of fae, so Nerilina and I make small talk while he wanders off, shoulders squared with determination. She lives on the less-populated eastern end of the island, on a five-acre block of land that she and her vampire wife recently purchased. Her laugh rings out like a bell

at my reaction to the word *vampire*, and she tugs at the chiffon scarf draped around her neck to show me the puncture wounds beside her throat. “It’s really not that bad, Ellie. Vampires have a way of making the whole feeding experience very pleasurable for their partners.”

“I’ve read that.” Vampires are one of the species that have willingly volunteered a lot of information, partly because it’s been necessary for them to emphasise that *no one has to die* in order for them to eat. “How long have you and your wife been married?”

Her eyes twinkle with mischief. “Just shy of a hundred years. We were married in the First Realm, of course. It wasn’t possible for the two of us to have a ceremony in this realm, back then.”

“Oh, wow. And yeah, of course. Wow. That’s a long time that you two have been together,” I babble as internally I reel from that piece of information. *Holy shit, I thought she was my age, she looks no older than thirty.*

Van jogs back up to us. “I can’t smell anything out of the ordinary.”

“Well that’s a good sign, right?”

Nerilina shrugs. “I suppose it simply indicates no one has come here yet; although you indicated on the phone that there had been one incident on the property before? Why don’t we start there?”

It’s fascinating to watch Nerilina work. She finds nothing out of the ordinary in the flower bed where I found the fae mushroom, and so we all move to one of the grassy spots in my garden. Van guides me so that we’re standing a fair distance from her, and we watch as she closes her eyes, and loosely clasps her hands together.

After a couple of minutes of this, I tug on Van’s arm, pulling him until he bends low enough for me to whisper in his ear. “Is this it?”

He grins, shaking his head. “Patience,” he whispers in my ear, the brush of his lips making desire curl in my core. “Hmm,” Van murmurs, picking up on my shift in mood. “Soon, baby.”

It’s another ten minutes or so before a sapphire-blue glow envelops Nerilina’s body, her clothing changing before our eyes, and I realise she’s been cloaked in some sort of glamour all along, the simple pants and top she wore suddenly replaced by silver-spun robes and a delicate silver amethyst-encrusted diadem. Her eyes remain closed, but she lifts her hands, palms facing up, and suddenly, the entire world is blue.

I find Van’s hand, gripping it tight as I look around. On second glance,

it's not that everything has turned blue, it's that she's put us in a huge blue box. *A box of magic*. The ground glows with it, the magic extending to the four sides of my property's boundaries, where huge blue walls stretch into the sky. Far above, the box closes in on us, so that the sun and clouds above are filtered through this giant blue lens.

Nerilina begins to chant, low and monotonous, and elvish script appears to write itself in silver over the ground, extending out from her body like a huge mandala that grows and writhes, stretching as her voice rises in volume, extending up the magical walls, continuing until the writing encloses us entirely. There's a ringing sound, and a deep, near-painful pressure in my ears, and then with a *pop* it's all over, and the world is disorientating in its sudden normality. I stagger against Van as the pressure releases and he catches me before I can fall, lifting me into his arms. "Easy, it's alright. I've got you. It's always a shock the first time."

It's downright embarrassing how little I know about any of this, but I remind myself that everyone has to start somewhere. The shock of it all — of the last 24 hours — feels similar to that first day of the Unravelling, and I blink back tears against Van's neck while he holds me, until I'm composed once more, and nudge him to set me down.

"Alright?"

Nerilina's clothes haven't changed back, and she looks like an elvish queen, the oddest sight against the backdrop of my cottage garden, especially when one of the chooks — Phoebe, of course — runs over the back of her train, pecking at the lush fabric.

"Shit, sorry!" I jump into action, scooping up the chicken before she shits all over this living goddess' clothes. "Bloody hell, you've got no sense," I growl at Phoebe, shoving her back into the coop, earning me an indignant squawk. "One day you're going to peck at the wrong person and end up as a roast dinner, you know that?"

When I turn back around, Van is biting on his fist, shoulders shaking with silent mirth, and I feel a bit better, a bit more like myself, a bit more sure of things and a little less like I'm being buffeted around by all of these uncontrollable events.

I brush my hands on my jeans and give Nerilina an apologetic smile. "Sorry about that. Is that it, then?"

"That's it for the property. The process for *you* is a little more involved."

"Oh."



“Perhaps we should move inside, and I can begin.” It’s not a question, and I nod, swallowing back the stress that threatens to overwhelm me again. I walk ahead, Van following close behind as I leap up the stairs two at a time, only a slight tremble in my hand as I fish my keys out of my pocket and unlock the French door. I unhook the latch at the top and open it up fully, pushing the glass panes back until they sit accordion-folded at the other end. It’s the quickest way to make the small interior of my house feel larger; by opening the huge door, it creates the illusion that the living space extends out to the end of the deck. “Come on in,” I say with a forced smile, turning to Nerilina. “Can I get you anything? Tea, coffee? Or something to eat?” It’s force of habit that has me acting like she’s any other guest, even though I’m an adult I know for certain that Mum would tell me off if she ever heard I’d had a guest over without offering them any food or drink as soon as they set foot in the door.

“Oh no, I’m fine, thank you.”

I catch Van’s eye as he slips off his shoes on the deck and ducks his head in order to step inside, and he smiles warmly back at me. When he straightens to his full height, he looks far too big for this small space. It’s strange, having him in here, and for a moment I forget all about Nerilina, far too focused on watching Van examine my place. He reaches out to touch things carefully — a framed artwork on the wall, the wooden stairs, the tiled backsplash behind the small stove top — his lips turning up in a small smile, and his eyes seem strangely moist when he glances back at me. “When you said you had this place renovated *on the cheap*, what did you mean, exactly? Because it doesn’t look cheap at all. It looks amazing.”

My heart feels like it’s lodged somewhere in my throat. “Oh, Mum and I did it. We painted everything in here white, because it reflects light and opens up the space, and it highlights the beautiful wooden bench top that was already here. I re-did the stairs to the loft — that’s recycled *kauri*, that was a great find, I actually repurposed the wood out of —”

I’m cut off by his lips crashing against mine as he picks me up, hand fisting in my hair as he devours me with his lips and tongue, until finally with a growl he presses his face against my neck, whispering, “You are so fucking amazing, you know that?”

I cling to him, heart bursting. “Thank you.”

To her credit, Nerilina gives us some privacy, waiting patiently on the small wooden deck until we’ve both composed ourselves. I have a small fold-

out table built into the wall and I pull it down, offering her a seat opposite me while Van relaxes back on my oversized L-shaped couch that sits in the corner and takes up a fair bit of room. It's a beautiful brown aniline leather piece, and the one item of furniture I really splurged on.

Nerilina takes my hands in hers, violet eyes pinning me with a stare. "Have you ever had any incidents where you have created magic?"

I shake my head. "No."

She tilts her head, considering. "You *do* have fae magic; I can sense it, though it's... buried for the most part. I think that's why they want you. To access that."

"Why?"

"For power. To increase their magic by stealing yours; think of it like draining a battery. You are a source of magic, of power, that can boost their own. I would say that's probably why they're going after changelings like you."

"Changelings?"

"People with a small amount of fae blood. It's far more common than you think, especially these days. Not all of them have the physical characteristics you do that set them apart," she adds nodding at my ears. "Look, this is all just my guesswork from what I've heard, so don't let it panic you. Fae have very long lifespans, and one does have to wonder if this is what they've been planning for a few centuries; sow their seed — quite literally — far and wide, and in a few generations time, reap the harvest."

*Reap the harvest of their own descendants. That's horrific.* I try to pull my hands away, and she tightens her grip on my fingers, almost painfully so. "I have to protect you from them by creating a barrier around you, the same as I have around this place, and Lost Moon."

"Okay."

"It's easy enough to do, but it will take some time."

"We have all day," Van interjects. "Do whatever you need; we need Ellie to be safe, regardless of the location."

"You're alright with sitting here for a long period of time? If I had to take a guess, it would be somewhere around the three hour mark. There's a fair bit of weaving within you that I will have to do to embed my magic in a way that covers your fae magic from others while still allowing you to access it."

"Three hours is fine, if that's what's necessary. That said, maybe I'll go to the bathroom first?" I say, scrunching my nose, earning me a rare laugh

from Nerilina.

“Sure, go ahead. Perhaps I will go after you, just to be sure.”

I nod, rising from my chair, pausing as I pass by her. “I don’t access my magic,” I tell her. “If that’s what you’re worried about. You don’t have to protect it, since I don’t use it anyway.”

Nerilina stares at me for long enough that I grow uncomfortable, but I’m simultaneously frozen in place, unable to break away.

“Ellie,” she says at last. “There might come a time when you need to.”

“Thank you again,” I tell Nerilina as I walk with her to her car. The smile she gives me in return is the warmest expression I’ve seen on her face all day, surprising me as she pulls me in for a hug.

“You’re welcome. You’ve got my number; feel free to reach out if you need anything. Even if it’s just to talk about how humans perceive you. I have a feeling you’re about to get mistaken for an elf quite a bit.”

“I don’t... I’m not *graceful*,” I say, hoping she knows what I mean. When she laughs, nodding her head in agreement, I shrug. I am definitely not elf-like.

“Humans see what they want to see. There’s been a lot for everyone to come to terms with; if they see pointed ears and think ‘*elf*,’ what’s the harm?”

“That it’s not my identity to claim.”

“Hm. And how do you feel about claiming your fae identity?”

I’m highly aware of Van, hovering at the edge of the garden, as I say, “Not good.” That panicked weight that I’ve been carrying around for the past two years is still there every time I think about who I am; in finding some answers, I’ve really only more stress, questions piling up, and it eats at me inside. That same question that’s bothered me since the Unravelling — how can I be so proud to be Māori, but so fearful of this other side of me, of my other ancestors? — gnaws at my gut, the double standard making me feel so *whakamā*, so ashamed about it. Now that I know fae have been doing terrible things — kidnapping people, *draining them dry*, Nerilina said — it makes me feel even worse. I don’t want to be associated with that.

“Not all fae are bad,” Nerilina says sympathetically, appearing to read my mind. “Not all vampires kill humans. Not all alpha wolves are domineering,”

she adds with a pointed look. “The ones that aren’t make better leaders, in my opinion, but perhaps I’m overstepping, voicing my opinions about shifter packs.”

“You can voice them,” Van interjects, his hand landing on my shoulder. “But no one truly knows what goes on inside a pack, unless you’re in it.”

“And nobody really knows what’s going on with the fae, either,” she nods. “They guard their lands and their secrets fiercely. At least now you are safe from being taken against your will. They cannot harm you anymore; I want to reassure you of that. You are safe to move on with your life.”

Van and I watch her drive off. Once her car is out of sight, I lift the palm of my hand to my face again, looking for any residual signs of that fae mark I’d been left with yesterday. “She said she removed it all,” Van says, his thumb rubbing circles on my back.

“I know. I’m just checking, I guess.”

“I’m going to stay here tonight.” He says it in that authoritative tone of his that always means he’ll broker no arguments.

Still, “My house is very small. You’re going to have to sleep diagonally on the bed to fit. Not that I mind, but... wouldn’t your place be more comfortable?” His place *is* more comfortable, there’s no doubt about that, with its spacious rooms and heavenly showers, and the luxury-brand toiletries he uses without blinking an eye. “It’s not that I don’t want you here!” I add, face flushing under his steady golden gaze.

“I want to be sure you’re safe here, so that I know that on the days when I’m not with you, I can still relax. I don’t doubt Nerilina’s abilities, but seeing is believing. I’ll feel better having stayed here overnight, to test it. But also, I love your house. It’s very you. I want to see you in your element. I want to watch you go about your daily routines. I want to learn all there is to know about you.”

I understand the sentiment because I want to know everything about the man he is now, and I bite back the self-deprecating *I’m not that exciting* that sits on the tip of my tongue. “You’re welcome to stay anytime,” I say instead.

His thumb brushes the back of my hand, back and forth. “I don’t know about you,” he says softly as he lifts my hand to his lips, his breath hot against my knuckles. “But I slept so good last night — when we were sleeping, that is.” He smirks for a moment, before his expression turns more serious, more sincere, once more. “Despite everything else going on...

holding you in my arms last night...”

He doesn't finish his sentence, but he doesn't have to. I step into his open arms, pressing myself into him, breathing him in, squeezing my arms around him, fingers digging into his back, hoping he can tell how I feel, my voice trapped somewhere in my lungs.

Everything in the past twenty-four hours has been so rushed, finally, it seems like we can breathe. “I like having you here,” I tell him as he emerges naked from the bathroom in a cloud of steam, straightening to his full height and rolling his shoulders, his flaccid cock hanging thick between his legs as he steps further into the room.

“I like being here with you too, and I love this house and what you've done with it, but I *hate* the height of your tiny bathroom, sorry. I just spent five minutes either squatting or hunching to fit, and I still managed to bang my head three times.”

“I heard!” I can't help but laugh, grinning up at him from my seat on the couch. I'd heard the thumps, followed by his angry cursing; in the small space, sound travels easily. “It's not designed for giants, sorry.” I reach out an arm towards him. “Come here.”

The sun has long set, and the curtains and blinds are all closed. We're in our own small bubble here, Van's presence filling the space with a warmth I hadn't previously wanted to acknowledge that I'd been missing. I told him the other week that I've been thriving, and I have — for the most part. But *this*, having someone here to fill the silence, having someone that knows me the way he does... it's wonderful.

*It's happening too fast. It's too good to be true.*

I push those thoughts aside as he crosses the small room to me, taking my outstretched hand, his look of surprise quickly morphing to one of anticipation as I tug him closer yet, until he's standing between my knees. His cock lengthens as I run my hands up his thighs to grasp it, feeling it thicken and harden to steel under my touch. “You might be too tall for my shower, but you're the perfect height for this,” I tell him as I lean forward to place a kiss on his hip, humming in delight. Fresh from the shower, he smells clean, but as I drag my lips across his skin until they brush over his half-

swollen knot, I smell *him*, that undeniable male musk that never fails to make me wet, and I squirm in my seat.

“Ellie,” he breathes, his hand brushing through my hair, and I cup his heavy balls, loving the weight of them in my hands as I glance up at him. His damp hair hangs messy over his eyes, and they glint, gold and inhuman in the soft light of the lamp, stealing my breath with the intensity of all that they hold.

I turn my attention back to the task at hand, pulling back his foreskin slowly, until the full head of his cock is revealed, a deep dusky pink, the skin here oh so smooth. This morning I’d asked him about being uncut as we lay in bed, knowing now that it’s not so common in the States — something that hadn’t even occurred to me as a teen, given that circumcision isn’t the norm here. “*It’s a shifter and were-creature thing,*” he’d replied. “*More of a myth, I think, than anything based on truth, but basically the question is, what happens to your penis when you shift, if part of it has been removed?*” He’d laughed, a deep chuckle under my ear. “*No one’s willing to be the test subject and find out.*”

“*Did that make it interesting, then, at school, for you? In changing rooms, I mean.*”

“*In the locker room? No, it was never an issue. Or at least, no one ever dared to say anything to my face.*”

“*Well, I for one am glad your penis is the way it is, because I wouldn’t have a clue what to do with it, otherwise.*”

His booming laughter had been so great I’d bounced right off his chest and onto the mattress, tears forming in his eyes. “*More lube,*” is all he’d said in reply. “*We’d definitely need more lube for handjobs.*”

Given the fact that I have no lube in the house due to my celibate lifestyle these past two years, it’s a good thing that he is the way he is. I wrap my fingers around him just underneath the edge of his foreskin, pulling it back up over the head, feeling the hard ridge of the edge of the crown roll under my fingers, earning me a groan as I squeeze. As I pull it back once more, a bead of precum pearls at the tip, and with a sigh of pleasure I lean forward to lick it up, the slightly salty taste a burst of flavour on my tongue. I suck on the smooth head of his cock, loving the way he moans as I slide my mouth further over his shaft, curling the tip of my tongue over that little patch of skin just under his cock head, a particularly sensitive spot that always drove him crazy. “*Fuck,*” he whispers above me, making me hum around him in

joy.

*I've missed this.* It's an odd thought to have, but one that's true. I love giving head, I don't know why; something about feeling the rush of blood under fingers and lips, about the way you can make a man come undone so easily and so thoroughly, about the act of giving.

I push forward, until he reaches the back of my throat, my lips pressing against the edge of his swollen knot, my hand cupping his full balls once more, massaging them and loving the way Van becomes so vocal as I do so. My other hand squeezes around his inflated knot, and I focus on making a tight ring with my lips, dragging up and down over the head of his glorious cock, falling into a rhythm that leaves Van whispering profanities and praise in equal amounts.

My mouth begins to ache and I release him for a moment, continuing to work him with my hand while I press kisses to his hip, my tongue darting out to lick up the line of that deep vee that runs from hip bone to cock. I squeeze him hard, licking his cock head like a lollipop, smiling up at him as I do. My heart feels full as he whispers, "You are so perfect, with those pretty lips of yours wrapped around my cock," just as I suck him back into my mouth. Back and forth, my lips catch over his flared head, tongue pressed hard to the sensitive underside once more, and before long I feel the telltale signs of his impending release; that hum of blood rushing through his shaft, the way his balls draw upwards, tightening.

"Ellie," he warns. "Ellie, stop, baby, I'm going to come."

I turn my head in a way that allows me to look at him out of the corner of my eye, even with my mouth stuffed full of his cock. With his gaze locked on mine, I suck harder, letting him see the smile in my eyes, my devotion to him. He takes in a ragged breath, licking his lips, his chest rising and falling heavily. "Are you sure?"

I increase my pace in answer to that question, and he groans, hips moving as he gently thrusts into my mouth. Another drag of my tongue against that patch of skin, my lips tight over his head, and his cock jerks, the first jet of hot cum hitting the back of my throat as Van growls through his release, the sound reverberating in the small space.

He fills my mouth and I swallow each spurt eagerly, savouring the taste, though I struggle to keep up with the sheer volume of it, eyes watering as his cock hits the back of my throat again. The sound of him groaning my name in reverence is worth it, and I squeeze his knot *tight*, noting the strangled gasp

and the fresh jet of cum accompanying it. He finishes with a sigh and I pull back, cum leaking obscenely from the corners of my mouth as I gaze up at him.

“Holy shit, Ellie,” he whispers, slumping beside me on the couch. “Oh fuck, that was insane.”

I wipe at my chin with my hand, smiling as he melts backwards, his arm slung over his eyes.

“Maybe we should be looking into whether you’re part succubus,” he mutters, “since you just sucked the life out of me through my dick.”

My laugh is quiet and breathy as I shift, lifting his legs onto the couch before stretching over him, sliding against his naked body until I’m curled beside him, my leg over his hip, my head resting on his shoulder. His arms wrap around me, and I relax into his warmth.

“Perhaps we should just stay here on the couch tonight, then.”

“There’s probably more room here than up in your bed.”

“Probably.”

My eyes are closed, but I feel the press of his lips against my head. “I’m joking. We’ll make the bed work. Soon. I have to recover first,” I huff at his dramatics, “and then you’re going to sit on my face, and only then can we go to bed.”

“Van, I’m not —”

“Oh you will, baby.” He raises his head, looking at me. “You’re going to sit on my face, right now.” I shake my head, blushing at the idea, but he moves faster than I can anticipate, great big hands grasping me by the hips and lifting me effortlessly, sliding himself down the couch while simultaneously pulling me over his body, until my thighs are straddling his head, my short nightie riding up my waist, lacy panties on full display.

“Evander!” I’m giggling and squirming, horny and concerned all at the same time. “I’ll crush you!”

He bites the inside of my thigh, hard enough to leave red crescents in the wake of his teeth, and I feel myself grow wetter at how *feral* that is. “You will *not*. Is that your only objection to this?”

At my nod he grasps my panties with both hands, and a rushed, “I’m going to buy you another pair, okay?” is the only warning I get before he tears through the fabric as if it’s paper, pulling my panties to pieces and tossing the scraps away. His lips are on me in an instant, wet tongue curling over my clit, and I moan at the sensation, my legs widening on their own



accord, acquiescing to his demands to *sit on his face*. His hands grip my ass, pulling me even further against him, and I love the bite of his fingertips digging into the fleshiest parts of me.

I don't think I will ever get bored of the way he feasts on my cunt as if it's a meal, the way he fucks me with that monstrous tongue of his, the sound of his groans of pleasure as I ride him to my peak.

Later, when my thighs are shakingly weak and rivulets of sweat run down my boneless spine, multiple orgasms having been wrung from my body, I collapse against him. "I think we really are stuck here," I murmur against his skin. "There's no way I'm climbing those stairs right now."

**A** soft *click* pulls me from sleep. *That sounded like the door*. I bolt upright, blinking into the darkness as I process that thought, heart racing as memory and awareness floods back. *Van*.

Beside me, the depression in the mattress where he was sleeping is still warm, that blazing heat of his lingering beneath the blankets. I lay back down for a moment, but when it becomes evident that he's definitely not in the small bathroom directly beneath my loft bed, I rise, all thoughts of going back to sleep now out the window.

With the moon growing ever closer to being full, I can see well enough, the entire house painted in shades of grey as I climb down from the loft and find my phone, squinting at the bright light of the screen.

2.19 AM, WED 5 NOVEMBER.

*What the hell is he doing?*

*Shifting.*

As soon as I think it I know it to be true, and the frenetic energy he seemed to possess right before bed suddenly makes sense. *He needed to let his wolf out. He's mentioned before that it can happen*. After the blowjob I'd given him and his reciprocal activities, I'd assumed we were done for the night, only to be proved wrong when he'd picked me up like a doll and placed me on my knees on the couch's armrest, a broad hand between my shoulder blades gently but firmly forcing me down until I was on my elbows

on the couch at a ridiculous angle, my bare ass high in the air as the head of his thick cock nudged my entrance. Not the most glamorous position I've ever been in, but holy hell, the angle had hit *just right*, and I had to applaud him for his innovation given the limited space in my tiny home and my refusal to ever sit on any countertop or table for cultural reasons. He'd taken me hard and fast, my cries for *more* spurring him on, the circling fingertips on my clit making me come twice more before he unloaded into me with a feral roar, his knot swelling within me once again, filling me with that pressure that I have quickly come to crave.

*You'll have the opposite problem as the full moon approaches.* I shake my head at the memory of Nerilina's words. I'm not complaining; it's been precisely nine years since a man last fucked me so well and so thoroughly, and my added experience and knowledge of my own pleasure has made this time around with Van even more enjoyable. *And you wonder why no one else ever did it for you.*

I pull on an oversized hoodie and some leggings and head out into the cool air, leaving my phone inside — with the moon high in a cloudless sky, there's no need for a torch tonight. Slipping on the pair of sandals I keep just outside the front door, I venture down the stairs, my gasp loud in the quiet air when a huge black wolf steps out from behind the garden shed, its eyes glowing an eerie green-gold in the moonlight.

I'm shivering, and it's not from the cold air. "Hi, Van," I force myself to say, unsure what to do. Yesterday morning he explained to me the difference between shifters and werewolves as we ate our breakfast; that shifters take the form of a huge wolf, whilst werewolves are a cross between man and beast, walking upright on two legs, with clawed hands and feet, a body that resembles a person — for the most part — and the head of a wolf. Still, he hadn't explained what *I* should do when he shifted, and although I don't feel in any danger, I'm nervous that I might do something inherently wrong.

He approaches slowly, carefully, head lowered and tail wagging. As he moves closer, I spot details I couldn't make out in the distance; the intelligence in his eyes, the endearing patch of white fur in the centre of his otherwise pitch black chest, the sheer size of his paws, each one far larger than my feet. He stands taller than me at the shoulder, filling out the entire width of the garden path. I lift a hand as he nears, and he nudges it with his wet nose, making a very canine noise that has me letting out a breathy laugh in relief. "Hey," I whisper, scratching behind his ear automatically,

marvelling at just how soft his fur is, how absolutely fucking insane this is. This wolf *is* Van.

I've only ever known Cam as an orc. I've obviously had to deal with (or avoid, more like) my own physical changes that came with the Unravelling. Yet *this*, this somehow seems more extreme. Four hours ago this man had his dick buried inside me, and now he's essentially a giant dog.

"Feeling better?" I ask, staring into one reflective eye. His huge head nods, lips pulling back in a canine smile that's as unnerving as it is cute, and I blurt out, "My, what big teeth you have," before I can stop myself.

He makes a strangled barking sound that I can only guess is his wolfish version of a laugh as I cover my eyes in embarrassment. "I'm sorry, I'm such a dork."

"No, you're not."

I jump at the sound of his very 'human' voice, opening my eyes to find Van standing before me, two legs, handsome smile, and all ten fingers back again. "How did you...?"

"Like I told you yesterday, it's a form of magic," he replies. "The actual shift is fairly instantaneous."

"Oh." I'm still blushing as he steps forward, those big arms encasing me in his naked warmth, his suddenly erect cock a hard bar against my belly. "You're a beautiful wolf," I tell him, because it's true. "I should have known you would be."

He's laughing again, stooping to pick me up bridal-style, and I wrap my arms around his neck automatically. "The teeth scared you, huh?"

"It was a lot," I admit, because it's true, and I've never been any good at lying. "I mean, I did not expect to meet your wolf at two in the morning. Maybe warn me next time before you let him out to play?"

He grunts in acknowledgement as he climbs the steps to the house. "I couldn't sleep, and the more I tried, the more he clawed at me, desperate to shift, but I'll do my best to give you more of a heads up next time."

"Does he like me?" I ask as he sets me on my feet. I kick off my sandals and step back inside, breathing a sigh of relief as the warm indoor air hits me.

"Baby, my wolves love you," he says as he locks the door with a click, his movements pausing for a second as the words fall in the space between us, before resuming the task of lowering the fabric blind over the French door once more.

My heart and lungs and breath are all tied up. “Tell them I love them, too,” I whisper.

Nine

VAN



Ellie stretches out naked across her bed, the morning sun shining through the skylight above her illuminating her tanned skin, the reddish shades in her hair lit up as it curls over her pert breasts. I'm tall enough to watch her with ease from my spot in the kitchen below, where I stand frying fresh eggs and bacon in the pan.

"I wish I could take a photo," I say on a whim. "You're so damn beautiful. I want to remember this moment."

Her full lips part, the slightest hint of a blush suffusing her cheeks. "Why don't you? I don't mind."

"Seriously?"

Her eyes search my face, and I hold my breath, wondering what she sees when she looks at me that way. She *can* trust me — I will never do anything to hurt her ever again — but I wouldn't blame her for feeling otherwise.

"Seriously," she says after a beat. "I trust you."

I grab my phone from the countertop, swiping open the camera. She is perfect, staring at the camera lens as I snap a picture. "Spread your legs," I direct her, and her knees fall open, revealing those perfect pussy lips, my cum from earlier still leaking out, the sheets beneath her an absolute mess. Her chest rises and falls in exaggerated breaths, the scent of her arousal mixed with my own seed making my mouth water. I hit the off button on the stove; fuck food, I'd much rather eat pussy for breakfast. "Touch yourself," I whisper.

*Snap, snap, snap.* Fuck she is stunning, her fingers circling her clit, dipping into her dripping core before dragging the moisture back up, easing the glide of her fingers. She bites her lip, eyes never leaving my face, hips

canting rhythmically, mimicking the way I fuck her.

*Goddess.*

I set my phone aside. Her loft bed has an adjustable railing, to stop her falling six feet to the floor in the night. Smart, but it's in the way right now, and I snap the locks open, pushing it down and out of the way. My hands clamp around her ankles, dragging her towards me until her knees hook over my shoulders, her ass hangs half off the bed, and the taste of her is on my tongue.

I'm fully aware that we're living in a bubble right now, but I'm not quite ready for it to pop. I want forever with Ellie — there's no doubt about that — but right now, what I'd love is a few more days of just us, without the usual responsibilities of the outside world, to learn all there is to know about the woman she has become.

Sadly, the real world doesn't work that way. It doesn't matter how much money you have to your name if you burn your bridges and wind up with a reputation for being an ungrateful asshole, so I can't afford to blow off the appointments I have lined up this week at the vineyard — not when I'm trying to get into the good graces of the local community leaders. Ellie, likewise, has commitments she has to stick to; clients to keep happy, gardens to visit, and even an hour speaking at one of the universities in Auckland City this Friday.

"It's not that big of a deal," she says as we finally get around to eating our delayed breakfast. "It's only a small cohort — there's only thirty-odd students taking that Landscape Architecture course."

"It is," I tell her. "You're *the* lecturer for the day. That's amazing."

"Hardly. I'm just a guest speaker — they needed someone to talk about practical experience in the industry, that's all. It's amazingly nerve-wracking, is what it is," she adds between mouthfuls. "I kind of regret saying yes, but it's another string to my bow, and that's always been my philosophy when it came to building up connections in the industry. I didn't know anyone when I moved down to Auckland to study, so I said yes to all the extracurriculars that were design and landscaping related."

"That's a sound strategy. Did you..." I stop myself, but she looks across

the table at me with those big doe eyes of hers, and I know I'm too far gone with the question now to ask anything different. "Did you start your study straight after high school?" *Straight after I left you and New Zealand behind?*

"I started in the second semester that year, in July." The scrape of her knife against her plate sounds overly loud as I wait for her to say more, and her eyes remain downcast. "I was too much of a mess, the first half of that year."

I'd jeopardised her study, her plans, her future. "I'm sorry, Ellie."

I don't want to have this conversation. We *need* to have this conversation, I know, but I'd rather gouge my own eyes out than have to rehash all this pain, for both of us. I hate seeing her hurt, far more than I hate being the one that hurts. I can take the pain, but if I can spare her, I'd much prefer to do that.

She ignores my gaze, cutting her bacon into tiny pieces without lifting any of them to her mouth. "I can understand that grief affects everyone differently, and that it-it was such shocking, such heartbreaking circumstances." Her voice is small, subdued, careful. I watch her lick her lips as she considers what to say next. "I just wish you could have let me be there for you," she says finally, in barely a whisper. "You didn't have to go through that alone."

I reach out for her hand, and the knife clatters as it's dropped on her plate. "I didn't want to be alone. I wanted you."

"Then why —"

The pained confusion on her face makes my chest burn. "My father," I say in a rush, because if I have to do it, I'm going to make it fast. *Rip the bandaid off.* "He ordered us all to go no-contact with you. After Jenny's death, he wanted to purge his life, our lives, of everything related to this country, to ever being here."

Angry tears pool on her lower lashes, her face twisted in pain. "And what, you just listened to him? Here's the supposed *love of your life* — that's what you'd called me, once — and daddy just tells you 'no', and you go along with it?"

I hate being the target of her anger, especially because I deserve it. I *should* have fought against it; of everyone, I'd had the ability to. I could have broken free from the pack back then and chosen her. I was too much of a coward, too messed up to even choose my own mate, I didn't protect her, didn't accept my inevitable fate, didn't take the bait my father offered, didn't



deal with it for almost nine fucking years because avoiding it was easier than this, than facing her hurt. I've wasted so much time, and I *hate* myself for it.

Tears burn at the back of my eyes, and one look at Ellie makes the dam burst. I snarl in frustration and shame, turning my head away from her, staring out the window as I try to stem the burning sensation in my throat. *Fuck*, I'm a mess. It's fucking embarrassing.

"Evander," she whispers, moving around the table until she's standing between my legs, her touch featherlight on my face as she brushes away tears.

"I'm *so sorry*," I croak. "I should have been stronger for you. I should have broken off from the pack back then." Inside, my wolves whine, and I duck my head against her neck, shuddering against her shoulder, the most submissive, useless alpha that ever lived.

Her hands comb through my hair. "It was a wolf thing," she says quietly, figuring it out herself. "Van, when you say your father ordered you to, you really mean it was an *order*, don't you? Did you have any choice?"

I shake my head against her.

"Oh, oh Van," she sobs, holding me tighter, her mouth against my ear. "You had no choice."

"I should have left. I could have done it, I'm an alpha, I could have —"

"That *fucking bastard*," she snarls suddenly. "What a fucking *asshole!*"

Despite everything, I let out a small laugh against the skin of her shoulder. *Fierce little mate*. "I'll explain everything. Any questions you have, I will answer. I have so many regrets, Ellie. I wasted so much time."

"Shh, it's okay." She lifts my chin, and despite the redness around her eyes, her expression is open, trusting, *loving*, and I still don't understand how anyone can be so *good*. I'm not deserving of her, not her nor her forgiveness, but I'll take both. I'll take everything she offers me, because I love her, and now that I've been given this second chance, I'm never going to let her go again.

She kisses my eyes, my nose, my lips, my jaw, and when her lips brush my ear as she asks, "Do you still love me, Evander?" I feel as if my heart is being torn in two.

"I never stopped," I tell her, clutching her tight. "I never stopped loving you, in all those years. I tried, and I'm so ashamed to admit that. I tried because I couldn't see how... but I couldn't forget you. No one ever came close. I love you. I love you so much. I will spend every day of my life

making it up to you, I promise.”

Her lips press hard against my temple. “You don’t need to make anything up to me, sweet man. I love you,” she whispers. “I have loved you all my life.”

“You’re too good for me.”

“No, I’m not. I tried to forget you too,” she admits with a self-deprecating laugh. “I made so many bad decisions in my ho phase.”

I groan against her neck. “Don’t tell me that.”

“As if you didn’t go around doing the same.”

“Touché.”

“Hmmm. Look at me, Evander.”

I lift my head again, until we are pressed forehead to forehead, nose to nose, and all I can see are those big brown eyes I love so much. “Hey.”

“*Kia ora*,” she whispers back. It’s both a greeting and a wish, the literal translation meaning *be well*. She taught me that years ago, and I’ve never forgotten it.

I don’t have the words I need to express how I feel, right now, so I kiss her. Passionately. It’s a frenzied tangle of lips and tongues and teeth, but this isn’t about sex. This is me trying to pour my soul into hers, because the love I have for her transcends all else, and I want to bind myself to her forever. She owns me, heart and soul; my beautiful, perfect mate.

I lose track of who is speaking, the same sentence repeated back and forth between us like a mantra, a promise, a pact.

*I love you. I love you. I love you.*

I drive us both back to my place so that Ellie can collect her car. What I intend to be a small kiss goodbye turns into a ten minute make out session, her legs around my waist and her back against the side of her SUV as I grind into her repeatedly, feeling like a horny twenty-one year old again. “I really do have to get some work done,” she says breathlessly in my ear, even as her hands creep under the hem of my shirt, running over my back. I’ve already come twice this morning but my dick doesn’t seem to care, and it’s with great reluctance that I step back when she eventually pushes at my shoulder, setting her down on wobbly legs.

“Trust me,” she says with wide eyes and a smile that radiates happiness. “I want nothing more than to follow you inside and spend all day doing *that*, but I genuinely do have clients I need to get back to with updates to their designs.”

“It’s fine, baby.” I don’t miss the way she radiates when I call her that. It’s just like old times. It’s so easy, being with her. “I’ll see you tonight?”

“Yes,” she nods enthusiastically. “I’ll pack my bag for tonight.”

“Good.” There’s more of a growl in my voice than intended, and I watch her shiver in response. She likes it; so far she likes everything about me that makes me a wolf, all the things I never got to share with her *before*, and it’s a huge fucking relief.

It’s hard to watch her go, now that I know the fae were after her. My wolves don’t like it and urge me to follow, but I can’t do that. There’s wards in place, and the logical part of my brain knows she’s safe. I can’t turn into a stalker, can’t hover and follow her around all day, suffocating her with attention, as much as I’m tempted to. It’s too soon, and I don’t want to get it wrong this time around, so I stand outside my house, watching her car amble up the gravel driveway until it disappears out of sight.

It’s midday by the time I’ve showered, dressed in appropriate business clothes, and finally make my way into the office at the back of Lost Moon’s main building. Cassidy is there, diligently working away at her desk, having kept everything running smoothly in my unexpected absence.

“I was wondering if I’d see your face today,” she says in greeting. “Welcome back.”

“Thanks. Thank you for keeping up with everything while I was gone.”

“It’s fine — that’s my job, after all.”

“You’re not going to ask where I was?” I don’t know why I say this; I’m practically asking for trouble. Maybe it’s because Lacey’s still not here yet, I haven’t seen Cam for a few days, and there’s a part of me that wants to declare to every person that I see that I got the girl of my dreams.

“Oh, I figured it was something to do with the pretty garden designer you hired last week, since her car has been parked at your house for the last two days, and I literally just saw you two smooching up against said vehicle when I went for a walk on my morning tea break earlier — you know if the public takes the path that goes up over the southern ridge, they can see directly down to your house, right? Maybe we need to block it off with a gate? So yeah, I figured I’d just pretend that I don’t know what’s going on. I mean, it’s

none of my business.”

I rub my forehead, shaking my head. “I didn’t notice you up there.”

“Yeah, well, you seemed pretty preoccupied. I would say that maybe HR wouldn’t approve of this conversation or the fact that you’re engaging in relations with a contractor, but I am HR, so,” she shrugs, flashing me a dimpled grin, her cheeks flushed pink in her pale face. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

I settle down at my desk. “I appreciate that.”

She nods, busying herself with work. “I’ve booked in the building contractors to start next week, by the way. We were able to snag the better company in the end, the one with the large crew that could help do the gardens as well as having a few master builders for the renovations.”

“That’s great. I thought they weren’t available?” Finding labourers on such short notice has been one of our biggest issues, particularly because we aren’t on the mainland; even with bonus pay incentives and an agreement to foot the bill for Sunday to Thursday accommodation on the island for the workers, we’ve found that a lot of builders are booked up for months in advance.

“They weren’t, and then they turned up onsite for their next job, and the group that hired them took issue with *what* they were. Suddenly the work wasn’t needed.” Her tone is unimpressed, angry, and I feel my own mood shifting along with it.

“They’re non-humans?”

“Yeah.”

“And someone dared to discriminate against them that blatantly?”

“Someone with very deep pockets, apparently. This is what I’ve been told by Kaito and he didn’t sound happy about it.”

“And Kaito is...?”

“He’s the dragon shifter that owns the business — he’ll be onsite; he’s a builder by trade. His employees are a mix of different species. Only two humans, out of twelve total.”

“Is he going to try and recoup costs? He would still have wages to pay this week.”

“I didn’t ask. He’s... to the point, but I know everyone who has used him has raved about the work, so I feel confident in booking it in.”

I wave away any doubts she might have about hiring them; on paper the building firm looked great, and Cassidy and I were confident in our decision

to put them first on our list. What bothers me is that humans are still out there turning people away simply for being non-human. It doesn't help any of us if humans can get away with such blatant discrimination in these transitional years.

“Have you booked their accommodation yet?”

“That's what I wanted to talk to you about today. Kaito has indicated that he's interested in moving here, so he's looking to negotiate with you regarding a deal to cover part of his rent while the work is undertaken. For the rest, I've made tentative bookings for eight weeks, not including the Christmas break period. For the first two weeks I've had to find a bit of a mishmash of accommodation options because there's quite a few places booked out, the same in January, and you're going to be paying some ridiculous prices for all of this, but you've said money's no object so...”

“It's fine.” The accommodation costs are a drop in the bucket compared to my personal wealth. It's bad business sense, but this is a personal project for me, small-scale compared to the huge commercial properties where most of my fortune is invested, and the sooner the vineyard feels like *mine*, the better. I'm not doing any of this for the money — at least not in the short-term. I'm doing this because working outdoors on the vines, overseeing grape harvests, and creating great wines is what I truly enjoy. I know how lucky I am that I have the means to finance the lifestyle I want without any fear of ever failing.

I look out the window, staring at the ocean framed by fields of vines, all lush and green with spring growth. When I was considering buying this property, one of the photos I'd been sent had shown this view. I'd stared at it for hours, trying to imagine living here, questioning whether I really had the courage to move halfway across the world after being away for so long, especially knowing that my new, small pack would have to move along with me. Ellie was the decisive factor; I didn't know anything more than that she still lived in New Zealand, her social media profiles all private and not giving anything else away, but I'd stared at the picture of this view and imagined her here beside me, and as crazy as it sounds something about it had felt *right*.

“I've sent you an email with it all.”

Cassidy's voice makes me turn away from the window with the heavy sigh, the notification of her email already floating on my screen.

“I just found it.” I skim over her summary and approve the accommodation bookings, then move onto the next email, and the next; time

dragging despite it being only a half-day of work, my mind completely preoccupied with thoughts of Ellie. The photos on my camera roll are the biggest fucking temptation, my phone burning a hole in my pocket, and it takes all my self-control not to take a late lunch break, go home, and masturbate like a horny teenager.

I know what the problem is. *Claim her*, my wolves urge, and they mean more than knotting her, more than spilling into her at every opportunity. *Mate*, they growl, the same thing they've been telling me since I was twenty-one, when I was too naïve to realise what they were really saying.

*Bite her. Bind her.*

She's not a wolf, and the choice needs to be hers. It's far too soon to ask her to consider something so life-altering. A mating bite like that is permanent, broken only in death — there's no divorce, no backing out, and the scar is displayed on your skin forever. The moon is only a few days away, and the pull of it amplifies the urge, making my teeth and balls ache with the thought of it.

*Not this month.* It's too soon, I won't do it.

My wolves snarl at me, but I am the one in control here.

Ten

VAN



Every night this week has been a blur of sex and sleep in an endless cycle as Ellie and I make up for lost time. Tonight is no different, her body rolling towards mine as she wakes, and it's so easy to slide my dick home when she hooks her leg over my hip, her cunt still dripping from our last round. The moon is only two days away from being full, filling the room with silver light while it fills me with an absolutely feral need for her. I can manage it during the day, can stop myself from jumping her bones at every opportunity, but the nights are something else entirely. The entire room smells of sex, of her cunt and of my cum, and I fucking love it.

This is the happiest my wolves and I have been in nine years.

"Knot me again," she whispers as I roll us both so that she's underneath me, her fingers digging into my ass as I fuck her slowly. She feels amazing around my cock, and if I could, I'd stay like this forever, never leaving this bed, never leaving her body. I push myself to my knees, watching where we are joined, watching the way her body swallows me right up until my knot is pressed firm against her entrance. "Knot me, Evander."

"You have to come first." It's not a set rule, and she's already been knotted once tonight, but I love the feel of her climaxing around my knot, and I know there's less risk of discomfort to her that way.

She moans as I drag my dick backwards until there's only the tip left inside, my hands keeping her legs in a tight grip as she squirms with need. I love satisfying her, love pleasuring her, love making her orgasm endlessly, but there's also fun in seeing her this way, so desperate for release and comfortable enough to demand it of me.

"Van! *Fuck me.*"



I thrust into her hard and she groans, tipping her head back as one of her hands reaches for her clit, rubbing herself. “Yes, baby,” I tell her. “Make yourself come for me.” I love giving her pleasure, but there’s something about seeing her do it herself that drives me wild, and as she comes — her mouth open wide and her eyes locked on mine — I lose it with a snarl, fucking her in long heavy strokes. She groans as I knot her with a final thrust, and we come simultaneously as I fill her once more, my knot locking us in place as she rides her second orgasm.

In the quiet that follows I lower myself over her, rolling us onto our sides, our bodies still intimately tied. We fall asleep together, her face pressed to my chest, my arms around her, blissful in our own bubble of peace.

I hang back outside the lecture theatre doors, waiting for all the students to file in first before I follow them. I had to shift a meeting and take a helicopter direct from the vineyard to downtown Auckland in order to get here, but it’s worth it for the chance to see Ellie in her element, even if it meant using up one of the few flights Lost Moon is allocated each month within the local council’s bylaws. “*Honestly, you don’t want to sit through an hour of me talking about how to balance client requests with design theory,*” Ellie had told me last night when I’d mentioned that yes, I was definitely attending, but she’d radiated quiet happiness as she’d given me the location, and I know that me being here is more important to her than she let on.

The room is small for a lecture theatre, the tiered seating at a strangely steep angle, and I find a place at the back, well aware of the stares from students as I pass them on my way up the aisle. I’m the only wolf in attendance, but there’s a werecat across the room that wrinkles her nose when she looks my way, and a young mothman, his bright blue antennae flattening against his skull as I slip into the row behind him. “I mean no trouble,” I murmur, sitting one seat over from directly behind him, lest his antennae perk up and get in my way.

“You’re not in our class.” The hissed reply is quiet enough that his human peers can’t hear him, his head partially turned in my direction, so that I can just see the edge of one large red eye. His row is one of the few that have

been altered in the theatre for winged creatures, and the seat he sits on is backless. *An uncomfortable stool. Surely the university could afford something better than that for these kids.*

“My mate is your guest speaker for today.” It gives me a small thrill to use the word *mate*, the word carrying a lot more meaning among non-humans, despite the fact that I haven’t used the word in Ellie’s presence yet.

His black wings flutter in surprise, shining iridescent green and blue as they catch the light, a shower of glittery dust floating to the floor. “Oh.”

“Here she is now.” She’s beautiful, looking sophisticated in a simple white blouse and black trousers that hug the curve of her hips, the *pounamu* I gave her around her neck, and her ears still hidden behind her long hair. *She’s still afraid to be seen as non-human.* It doesn’t bother me, per se, but I do hope that in time she can come to terms with the fae part of her identity, and allow herself to stop hiding her true nature. The events of this past week haven’t helped, unfortunately. Although she now knows what she is, she’s terrified of them, and with good reason. It’s rattled me too; part of me had been afraid to let her come into the city alone today, and I’d been at war with myself over it, trying to decipher whether I was being logical or whether it was my alpha instincts to protect clouding my judgement. In the end I’d texted Nerilina to check that the magic protecting Ellie was in place, and had received a curt reply:

*Yes, Evander. She will be fine. Calm your wolves down.*

Ellie clears her throat, smiles at the class, and then her voice rings out clear through the room. “*Kia ora koutou katoa. Ko Ngāpuhi rāua ko Ngāti Hine ngā iwi. Ko Ngātokimatawhaorua te waka...*”

I watch Ellie recite her *pepeha* — her introduction in *te reo Māori*, where she recites her genealogy and her connection to her ancestral lands — with a confidence she didn’t possess nine years ago, the language flowing melodically from her tongue. She says she’s still a beginner, but this traditional introduction sounds amazing to me. I don’t understand anything beyond the odd keyword; she’s told me the names of her tribes, her canoe, her mountain and river and *marae* before, and I hear them as she speaks, but just like hearing anything once or twice in a foreign language, I can recognise those words but I’d be lost if I tried to repeat them back to anyone.

I know that for Ellie, getting to the stage where she can confidently recite this basic level of Māori language hasn’t been a smooth journey.

*“Between the little bits that Koro and Mum knew, growing up, and*

*language papers I've taken, I've got the pronunciation sorted," she'd told me over breakfast yesterday. "But you lose the language if you don't use it, so I keep taking these one-off courses, keep re-learning and re-forgetting te reo, and it's so bloody frustrating. I wish I'd been brought up with the language, but you already know how my family lost it years ago, when Koro was beaten by his teachers for speaking it at school, and both his parents decided he'd be better off if they only spoke English at home. His story isn't unique either; almost a whole generation of Māori had their own language wiped out because of those policies, and it makes me so angry every time I think about it. That's why it's so important that I do learn it, and why I feel so guilty every time I stop practising for a while, because I know it's vital to keep the language going. We need more people speaking it, not less."*

It's a sickening thought, to know what her grandfather went through, the impact of those old colonial policies wide-reaching in their harm. I see it in the way Ellie tears up when discussing these things, when she says that sometimes she doesn't feel 'Māori enough,' citing her mixed heritage and her basic knowledge of the language, despite the many cultural practices she *has* been brought up with, and despite the general understanding in this country, and specifically within her own Māori culture, that anyone with Māori ancestry is Māori.

*It will be our children one day, feeling the same way.* The thought is oddly jarring; it's too soon to think about kids, and yet it's not, not for me. I don't want them yet — I want years with her all to myself, but I *do* want them, and I do want them with *her*. *No one else will do.*

There's a certain kind of anxiety that comes with thinking about future offspring, at least for me; if we have a child afflicted with the same alpha makeup as myself and my father, I will be devastated. I still have to explain that all to Ellie, explain what really went on between my father and I, explain to her the risks that being with me might entail. *And any child with Ellie will have fae blood, too, and be at risk from **them**.*

I don't want to think about it, and push those thoughts aside. Ellie has switched to English now, a slide on the screen behind her outlining the topics she'll cover during her talk. I may not be interested in every aspect of the content — although on the whole, it is very interesting — but I'm fascinated by the way she commands the room.

She's magnificent in front of the crowd. Engaging and energetic, she has the small group hanging on every word, sharing anecdotes from her time as a

student, answering questions with blunt honesty, and I'm so fucking proud of her. Every now and then she looks my way, a smile in her eyes, and it's bittersweet, knowing I missed out on so much of *this*, of her life. It's pointless to think this way, I know that. We've discussed it, and as warm and forgiving and loving as Ellie is, she's also pragmatic. *"If I'd been with you these past nine years, I would have been so happy. I also wouldn't be me, the person I am now. Same with you. And I like to think you love me now, not just the Ellie of the past. Because I really like who I have become. I worked hard to get here. When it comes to us, I want to look forward. If you're serious about this being a forever thing, then let's stop picking at our old wounds. I think we've both done that enough in the last nine years."*

I hang back after her talk ends, watching her slowly get through the line of students waiting to speak with her one-on-one and the lecturers and university staff that have come to say hello. When a call comes through on my phone I step outside, and then remain there in the hallway, replying to a bunch of emails as I wait, pausing to listen when I hear the words 'non-humans' spoken.

"It's been a learning curve," a voice says, and from what I can gather it's one of Ellie's former lecturers. "Particularly with the gargoyles and vampires. We had one halfway through his degree when the Unravelling occurred, and... I feel terrible, but we couldn't accommodate him at the time. There were no clients willing to have someone onsite working during the night, university-wide there was nothing set up to support these students that suddenly turned to stone during the day."

"What happened to their study?" I can hear the concern in Ellie's voice, and take a peek through the round window set in the doors, watching the way Ellie plays with the *pounamu* around her neck, something she's started doing when she's deep in thought. "How many people were affected?"

There's no one else in the room apart from the woman Ellie is talking to, a small, older lady in her sixties, her demeanour relaxed as if she's talking to an old friend. I smile to myself; Ellie seems to have a knack for making those in the older generations adore her.

"Oh, across the university? Fifty, maybe? Fifty gargoyles, that is, which isn't many in the grand total of the student populace, but that's *still* fifty individuals," the woman answers. "They all had their study paused while the university tried to find a solution, and for most courses that was manageable — recorded lectures online, online learning and examinations at 8pm in

winter, 9.30pm in the October exams — but this is *landscape design*. Everything we do is set around daylight hours. So our particular student...” The lecturer shrugs her shoulders, shaking her head defeatedly. “This young man couldn’t complete the course.”

“There wasn’t any way to accommodate him?”

“Not back then. *Now*, maybe? I mean, we’d have to find a way for him to, since they put through that latest law about non-human access to education, but since then we haven’t had any gargoyles attempting to enrol in this course anyway, no vampires either, and he hasn’t come back. It’s a shame, he had a real passion for the subject, the same as you.”

“That’s really sad.” Ellie’s voice is forlorn. It *is* sad. It’s sad and disappointing, because I’m sure there were things that could have been done for that young gargoyle, but it’s a story I’ve heard time and time again since the glamour fell away two years ago.

“I know. Life was certainly less complicated, pre-Unravelling,” the woman says with a shrug. “Hey, it’s been lovely seeing you again Ellie. My parking is only paid until five so I have to go, but I’m really glad you were able to make it in for us, the students really enjoyed it and we’re all thrilled you’re doing so well with your own business.”

“Oh, thank you. It was lovely seeing you too.”

“Take care.”

I step back out of the way as the woman exits the door. She looks at me curiously, the kind of glance over I’m used to getting from humans these days as they register that *no*, I’m *not* like them, her eyes widening and then darting away as soon as we make eye contact. I doubt she’d be walking so fast down the empty corridor if I were human, but it’s not something I’m going to waste my time on contemplating.

“*Life was certainly less complicated, pre-Unravelling.*” Yes, it was, and that’s the comment I’ve heard time and time again, often used as an excuse, a reason why things aren’t set up to allow for certain species to participate in activities or aspects of society.

And it *is* more complicated than that. I’ve got plenty of privilege, and a lot of other non-humans do too. Non-humans that are wealthy or magically powerful enough to travel between the two realms hold far more power than humans do — the humans just don’t know it yet, or at least, they like to pretend they still hold the power. Humans are a very small minority within the First Realm, and non-humans as a whole have generally managed to

control the flow of information that humans receive. Physically, most non-human species are stronger in some way, whether that's through the use of magic or sheer strength, our senses are sharper, and many, including wolves, have longer lifespans. There's plenty of non-humans in positions of power in this realm, and although no one ever says so, I have an inkling that at least a few made their way to the top in preparation for the Unravelling, funded by wealth transferred by the old Houses in the First.

With my wealth fuelling my ability to make my life perfectly comfortable and meet all my wolfish needs, I don't really feel like *I* personally have the right to cry foul every time a human gives me a wary look, particularly when there's plenty of *human* minority groups that still face discrimination today, and still deal with the after-effects of racist or homophobic policies that once existed. Then I hear stories about kids like that gargoyle — about non-humans that may have been trapped in this realm for generations without a way to access the First Real, that may not have any money behind them, that may have lost their livelihood or been unable to continue their studies when the Unravelling happened unexpectedly — and that doesn't sit right with me. It's not that gargoyle kid's fault that he suddenly started turning to stone during the day. Like so many, he probably assumed he would live and die in a human-like body, living in this realm for his entire life.

So when a human in a position of relative power compared to the non-human — a lecturer compared to their student — shrugs it off as just another consequence of the Unravelling and then goes about their day without a care in the world, it makes me feel a little sick. *That's* the privilege that many humans currently have — the privilege to not care. It doesn't affect them personally, so to them, it doesn't matter.

The Unravelling *has* made things messy and complicated. We *are* all still trying to find our new normal. I still think those two facts are used as an excuse for bad behaviour a little too often, and I don't know how long we're going to keep telling ourselves it's just because we're in the transitional phase.

*But there's plenty of beings in the First Realm who wouldn't think twice about harming humans.*

I roll my shoulders at the thought, as if that action can dispel the uncomfortable feeling I get whenever I think about it. That fact has always existed. Some humans have, unfortunately, always fallen victim to those willing to prey on innocent victims. The Unravelling hasn't made any

difference to that, and I've been guilty of turning a blind eye to it all until now. *Until it affected me personally. Until Ellie was in danger.*

*It's complicated.*

I don't have the answers to any of this. I don't know if I ever will, and at the end of the day, what I care about the most is that my mate, my pack, and my family are safe. I know I'm not perfect. I don't always get it right when it comes to my own privilege. I struggle to find the balance between what I should feel responsible for, but I try to take care of the people around me, try to do right by my employees, and I donate to a bunch of non-human support charities.

I hope that gargoyle kid finds something else he can do.

I can tell by the way Ellie stares off into the distance, a furrow between her brows, that she's probably thinking about the same things. I step back into the room, smiling at her, comforted by the knowledge that at least she has never looked at me in fear, her expression morphing as she turns towards me.

"Hey," she says, her shoulders relaxing, her smile tired but happy.

"You did so well," I tell her, opening my arms, and she steps into my embrace immediately.

"Thank you. Thanks for coming along."

"Of course, baby." I kiss the top of her head, relishing the scent of her, soft and sweet. She sighs as she leans into me, brushing her lips over the fabric of my shirt. I hesitate for a moment, before deciding to ask, "Do you want to talk about what she just said?"

"Do you?"

*I'll take that as a no.* "No. I hear enough of those stories, I don't need to rehash another version of how the world is still adjusting two years later."

"Yeah, same," she mumbles, her voice muffled by my chest. "Now that it's over, I'm starving."

I smile against her hair. "I am too. What do you want to do? We could find a hotel room, stay here in the city tonight, go to a restaurant for dinner if you like. Or we could go home, grab a snack on the ferry, and find something decent to eat on the island."

Ellie looks up at me with those beautiful brown eyes of hers. "It seems like a waste to be here and just want to go home, but honestly, after that talk I feel like I stink from sweating," she admits, screwing her nose up. "I didn't bring a change of clothes over with me, and something low-key like fish and

chips on the beach sounds amazing right now. But maybe staying in the city could be fun...”

I grin at her. “You don’t stink. Trust me, you smell *amazing*. But if it helps with your decision making, I haven’t had fish and chips in nine years.” I’m not actually a huge fan of busy cities; they’re too noisy, too crowded, too smelly for my liking, and part of me hopes that she wants to go back to Motuwai.

“Well now, that just decides it, doesn’t it? We have to rectify that situation immediately.”

“Mmm, I think we do.” There’s a small raised platform just behind her, and I lift her onto it, so that we stand face to face, her breathy laugh making my chest feel too full as I lean in to kiss her in a slow, soft brush of my lips against hers. She sighs against me, arching her back, pressing her body closer, our tongues gliding together as the kiss deepens. “Let’s wander down to the ferry then,” I say, kissing along her jaw until I’m nipping at her neck, sucking on the skin there.

She shivers, her hand grazing the swollen bulge of my cock through the fabric of my pants. “Okay. We better start walking. We really shouldn’t be getting frisky right here. Let’s go back to yours and fuck in your giant bed. I want you to throw me around a little.”

I squeeze her ass. “Hmm. Alright.” It’s with reluctance that I let her go, taking her hand instead as she jumps off the platform, making me laugh. We head down the main hallway of the old, 70s-built concrete monstrosity that houses some of the smaller subject areas here, relegated to the outskirts of the university. My cock is still stiff, my balls aching, and the smell of her arousal driving me insane as I spot an empty study room. On impulse drag her into it, lifting and pressing her up against the closed door. Her bag drops to the floor with a thud as I grind my raging hard-on between her open legs.

“Evander!”

“What? What are they going to do about it?” I murmur against her ear, licking the shell of it. “We’ll be gone before security can even show up. You said you wanted me to throw you around.”

“I am not having sex with you in here when I just gave a ta — *oh... oh fffuck*,” she moans, hips canting as she grinds back against me, chasing the friction. I pull away slightly and she cries out in frustration, nails digging into my biceps.

I kiss her furiously, growling into her mouth, sliding my hand down the



front of her waistband, under the edge of her panties, down and into her dripping core. “Let me give you what you need,” I say against her lips, sliding my first two fingers inside her, curling them against her G spot. It’s reckless and stupid, I know, but I’m reliving the nostalgia of our younger years, back when I would fuck her in the backseat of my car, in a hidden sea cave at the beach, in her bedroom in that old bach she lived in while her mom was at work.

“You’re so bad, Evander,” she whispers, and when her teeth close around my earlobe I growl again, my wolves urging me to bite her. “I love it,” she adds quickly. “You make me crazy, and I love it, and I love you.”

The smell of her cunt drives me insane. She rides my hand, clit pressing against the meat of my palm, her mouth falling open and her gasping, shaky breaths filling the air. “That’s it baby,” I whisper to her, grinding my dick against her thigh. “Fuck my hand. Use me.” I don’t stop the rhythmic press of my fingers within her, knowing she’s close.

I hear the sound of multiple footsteps echoing from far down the hall, and decide it’s probably best if I help things along. “Baby, look at me,” I tell her, and her eyes open, full of lust and need. “You wanna come?”

“So close,” she moans. “I —”

“Come, baby.” I imbue my words with just a touch of that alpha magic, that ability to order those within my pack to do as I say, to control them completely. It shouldn’t work on a human, shouldn’t work on Ellie, but it did that first time I knotted her, and it works now. Her cunt spasms around my fingers beautifully, fluttering against my hand, her whole body gone stiff, legs trembling with the force of it. “Good girl,” I croon against her hair, dipping my mouth to swallow her moans with my tongue, kissing her as her orgasm fades.

I set her down on the shaky legs, withdrawing my hand, and lick it clean of her juices, savouring the taste of her on my tongue. She jumps as the sound of footsteps echo near the door, finally audible to her *mostly* human hearing, and I grin as I adjust my dick in my pants as best as I can, watching her hastily comb a hand through her hair and pull her clothing back into place. The door opens just as she’s picking up her bag, and I have to give her credit for her acting, despite the fact that we’re both breathless and a little more mussed up than usual. She greets the group of students with a chipper “*Kia ora!* We were just finishing our study so it’s free for you to use,” her smile wide as she steps past them.

I do my best to keep a straight face in front of the wide-eyed teens, who look to be in their first year here. I think we've gotten away with it, too, until I realise one has the scent of a wolf, and the young female removes her sunglasses, brows rising over amber-coloured eyes. "*Studying*, eh?"

I shrug, wrapping an arm around Ellie's shoulders, ignoring the quiet snickers as the girl tells her friends, "*He was totally finger-banging her in there; I could smell it on him.*" It's all too quiet for Ellie to hear, but she turns her head back towards them, aware enough that they're obviously gossiping about us.

"Oh god," she laughs, hitting me playfully in the stomach. "You're so naughty, making me do that! That girl totally knew what we were doing."

I chuckle. "I didn't count on there being another werewolf in the vicinity."

"She was a werewolf? How do you know the difference? I'm sorry if that's a really ignorant question."

"It's fine, you can ask. I can smell the difference between the two subspecies. I mean, I can scent every species, remember? I smelled fae in your garden."

"Ugh, that's right. So that girl, she could smell...?"

"She told her friends I was finger-banging you."

"*What?* How did she know?"

"Lucky guess? Process of elimination? She would have smelled you," I wiggle the fingers of my right hand in Ellie's face and she scrunches her nose, batting my hand away, "but obviously didn't smell any of my cum."

"Holy shit."

"You're just realising that most species have better senses than humans, and everyone knows what everyone else has been up to?"

"Yes. Fuck. Are you serious?" Her eyes are round with horror.

I shrug. It's just a fact of life when you're a wolf. Humans are far more precious about sex than almost any other species, though I don't tell Ellie this.

She glances up at me as we reach the intersection outside the university, waiting for the signal to cross. I can see her mind working, and I'm curious to know what her next question will be.

"Did your family... *oh*, that makes so much sense now. Oh fuck, I'm so embarrassed," she starts, and I laugh, knowing exactly where this is going. I'd been an irresponsible idiot that summer we were together, never using any

protection despite her not being on the pill until a few weeks into our relationship, instead pulling out and ejaculating all over Ellie every time, my wolves crowing with glee as I gave into the instinct to coat my mate with the most potent version of my scent. The look on my parents' faces when they'd first arrived at Bluewater Bay and walked through the door had been priceless, even if I was pretty embarrassed at the time.

"Evander, I cannot believe you did that to me, knowing what you knew. *You knew they would smell me smelling like you!*" she hisses, and across the street, a long-eared rabbit-person laughs quietly to himself. "The way your mum looked at me..." she continues. "Did you do that on purpose? Come all over me so they —"

"*Shhh*. What? *No*. That's weird." I bend low, whispering into her ear. "I hadn't been thinking about anything all those times except how fucking hot you were, and how good your pussy felt, and you know, *coming*. The scent of sperm is strong — if your little human nose thinks it is, you have *no* idea — and it lingers for a few days. It's just a fact of life, for wolves. You can't avoid it, growing up. Almost all mated pairs smell of each other constantly, and if they don't, you know there's usually a problem."

The signal to walk turns green and we cross, heading into a park, the grounds full of manicured grass and flower displays.

"Or that someone's on their period, so no sex?" Ellie asks a minute later, still on the same train of thought as before. "Or do wolf women not get periods?"

"They get them, just the same. But I would say, culturally, period sex isn't a taboo thing for us. I mean, typically you wouldn't with someone you just met, but..." I shrug. "From observations, it doesn't seem to deter the long-term couples I know. It doesn't bother me. I would absolutely fuck you through your period, but you have an IUD, right? Do you still bleed?"

She shakes her head, eyes looking up at me with awe. "I don't, but, you would still do that, even when it's a full on blood bath?"

"Absolutely."

Her smile stretches wide, eyes crinkling at the corners. "You really are the man of my dreams."

e walk hand in hand, meandering through the maze of streets that make up the inner city, heading gradually downhill towards the water. The city is almost overwhelming; too many scents, too many sounds, too many people for my wolf-senses. We spot a used bookstore, and I can tell immediately that Ellie wants to go in. The quiet space is a relief from the bustle outside, the scent of old pages lending a cosy air to the floor-to-ceiling shelves as we wander through the rabbit-warren, searching for the gardening section. We leave with three books — two for Ellie, and one for me, *The Wines and Vineyards of New Zealand*.

Ellie tells me about her day: she crawled out of my bed an hour earlier than I did, caught the ferry to the city, an Uber to a client's house in Ponsonby, a second Uber to another client in Remuera, before finally getting to the university an hour prior to her talk — time to catch up briefly with some of the university staff she'd known.

"Sounds exhausting," I say.

She sighs. "Yep. Every time I do this, I tell myself '*next time, I'm booking this city stuff across two days,*' and then I forget, and schedule everything into one day again."

"It's the ferry, right? It makes it seem like a *big thing* to come into the city, since it's by boat."

"Yeah, that's it. And it's in my head, because there's people that do this commute daily — it's only forty minutes! — but for some reason my brain thinks 'boat' and sees it as this big journey."

"Why leave paradise when you don't have to?" I shrug. "There's a reason why we both picked Motuwai as the place to live."

She nods. "I still pinch myself, about you being here."

I squeeze her hand tighter, lifting it to my lips. I breathe in the scent of her skin, so much more pleasant than the stink of the city. I don't know why the universe works the way it does. There's no sense, no rhyme or reason in the way people live and die — *in the way Jenny died* — but the way Ellie and I found each other again rings of fate, and having her here beside me is a gift that I will not squander.

We're almost at the ferry terminal when I scent another wolf, so it doesn't surprise me when we round the corner and come face to face with an amber-eyed teen walking in our direction. He's scented me too; his eyes dart between Ellie and I, wary. "Alpha," he says as we pass one another. I sigh and nod in greeting, but otherwise ignore the boy.

Ellie is quiet as we wait in line for the passenger ferry. When we climb aboard, I head for the back row that lines the large cabin wall. Settling into the seat beside me, Ellie pops her bags on the table in front of us and cuddles close, and I wrap my arm around her. “Everything okay?” I ask, sensing the change in her mood.

“I just realised how little I know about your culture,” she whispers, her breath warm upon my neck. “Like how that boy called you ‘alpha’ — how did he know? I’m just feeling out of the loop, and a little guilty that I haven’t bothered to ask more.”

“*Guilty?* Fuck, I haven’t exactly volunteered a lot of information. I should be the guilty one.” I pull my arm tighter around her, rubbing her thigh.

“Are there things you don’t want me to know?”

“No. Nothing like that. There’s just a lot to cover. It’s two cultures, too. That boy was a shifter, but there’s also my whole werewolf side, and both are quite different. I’ve held back on mentioning things because you’ve already been dealing with a lot.”

“I’m a big girl; I’ll tell you if things are too much for me to handle.”

I look out the window — passengers are still boarding — and this particular sailing has a stopover in Devonport, before heading to the island, which means we have at least an hour on our hands. “Alright. Let me buy us a snack each, because I’m about ready to eat my own shoe if I don’t get some food, and then I’ll tell you about shifters. We can cover werewolves over dinner. Sound like a plan?” She tips her chin up, and I give her a quick kiss. “You want a coffee?”

“Tea, please.”

I return five minutes later as the boat begins to pull away from the dock, with two takeaway cups in one hand and three muffins and two pieces of ginger crunch — one of my favourite Kiwi snacks — in the other.

“Oh, yum,” Ellie smiles, quickly taking the food from me and setting it on the table so I can sit down without spilling drink all over myself. The ferry sways from side to side, bouncing over the wake of another boat.

“Thanks.” I bite into a piece of the slice. “Mm, this is good. Not as good as your mom’s version, but it’s up there.”

“I’ll tell her you said that; she’ll be so happy.”

“Does she know about me, then?”

“She knows you’re back, but I haven’t spoken to her since last week. I’ve been *preoccupied*,” she adds, wiggling her brows suggestively, “every time

she happens to call.”

“Ah. What did she say when you told her I was back?”

Ellie sucks in her lips, before releasing them with a *pop*. “Well...”

I laugh. “Oh god, that bad, was it?”

“Her exact words were, ‘*That bloody bastard broke your heart, bubs, so you better not be spreading your legs for him again. I don’t care how rich or good looking that man is, it’s not worth it.*’”

“Shit. She hates me.”

“She doesn’t *hate* you,” Ellie laughs, patting my leg. “She’s just protective of me.”

“Mm. I don’t feel optimistic about my chances of getting in her good books any time soon.”

“You’ll get there. Eventually.” After a moment’s pause, she adds, “You were going to tell me about shifters.”

“I was.” I take another bite of my food, mulling over where to start. “So I said that boy was a wolf shifter. He knew I was an alpha because I smell like one. Being an alpha is biological in the sense that you’re either born one, or you’re not. It’s not dependent on sex, or gender, or sexual orientation; there’s plenty of female, non-binary, and trans alphas out there. There seems to be this prevalent misunderstanding among humans that it’s only cisgender males that are alphas, and I don’t know why.”

“So it’s an inherited thing? Because your dad is an alpha, too, right?”

“Yes, he’s an alpha. And no, it’s not actually genetic, from what they can tell. What I mean is that it isn’t passed down through direct lines. We *are* different, in terms of scent and strength and abilities, but you don’t inherit it from your parents. The best explanation that anyone has is that it’s influenced by the magic that exists in all wolves. Which is why — according to my mother — the only time my father has ever cried prior to Jenny’s death, was the day I was born.”

“Because he was happy?”

“Because he was devastated.”

Ellie’s mouth drops open, her brows creased in a frown. “I’m sorry, *what?*”

“He was devastated, because it’s unheard of for alphas to have children that are also alphas. So he and I are considered extremely unlucky.” I can see she still hasn’t figured out why this would be the case, instead stuck on the knowledge that my father was upset by my birth. “If you’re an alpha, you

only have two options in your future. You grow up, and you fight the current alpha, you win, and take over their pack — your pack, the one you grew up in — or, you grow up, fight the current alpha, you lose, and you leave your pack for good. I suppose there's a third option; fight your alpha, win, but have no support from the wider pack, so lose anyway, and leave everything behind. Ten points for guessing which category I fall into."

"You *had* to fight your dad? I know you did actually fight him, but you make it sound like it was inevitable."

"Because it was. Believe me, I tried. For *years*. We both tried, I think, despite our biology working against us. Do you remember what my dad and I were like together, when I was a kid? Pre-puberty? You were younger, so you probably don't."

"No, I do. I remember, he used to call you his buddy, and you two seemed really close. And then the year you turned thirteen, I was shocked."

"Because it seemed like dad and I hated each other."

"Yeah. And no one would tell me why. Which makes sense now."

"Mm. I loved my dad. I still..." I take a deep breath, swallowing back the bile that rises in my throat. "I still love him, despite everything. But after my first shift, when puberty really hit, everything changed. We couldn't get along. Everything I did antagonised him, and I *wanted* to antagonise him, even if I hated myself for doing it. You know, that's why I chose viticulture in the first place. What seventeen year old chooses winemaking as a career? I wanted something that would really piss him off; here's his son, with all the potential and expectations, and he's doing a fucking obscure degree about vineyards rather than pursuing an eventual MBA from Harvard. *That* was my decision making at seventeen — literally, how do I upset my father at every turn? It's not a good way to live, but it's a compulsion, when you're an alpha. You're constantly nipping at the heels of the leadership, and eventually, they're going to bite back. And when they do, you better be ready for it."

"That's... that's awful. There's nothing you can do about it? Surely there must be a way, some magic or..."

"There's nothing, Ellie. It's just a cruel part of shifter life. You see, if he wasn't my father, it wouldn't be so bad. If he were just some other wolf, it wouldn't tear me in two, the way this does."

Ellie is quiet for a long time, staring out at the ocean.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm just seeing things in a new light," she replies. "And worrying about

it all.”

“About what?”

“About what will happen to you, when you have a new alpha born into your pack.”

It’s something that bothers me too. I grind my teeth together, shaking my head. “It’s decades away from being an issue, at least.”

“What if…” she trails off, looking back out the window.

I can guess what she wants to ask, but is too afraid to say. “What if we have kids, and one of them is an alpha like me?”

She nods, and I wrap my arms around her, holding her close. “I have no answer for that, baby. It’s so unlikely. Please don’t let it worry you. We haven’t even had the *kids* discussion yet.”

She laughs, pressing her face against my neck. “We’ve been together five days. What the fuck are we doing, talking about kids?”

“Everything wrong, apparently.” With my hand under her chin, I tilt her head up to face me, running my thumb over her plump lower lip. “It still feels pretty right, to me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“So you haven’t had a full moon here in New Zealand yet? This time around, I mean.”

Ellie and I sit on the private beach below my house with our fish and chips dinner, complete with tomato sauce, slices of lemon, and deep-fried chocolate bars for dessert, laid out on greasy butcher’s paper on the sand between us. I pick up my bottle of beer, a small-batch IPA from a local brewery, and take a swig, shaking my head in answer to her question. “I flew in the day after the last one.”

The full moon rises tomorrow evening. The weather forecast for tomorrow is the same as it’s been all week: clear skies, low wind, pleasant temperatures. As much as I enjoy the sun, I’m thankful for the rain that’s due to roll in on Sunday afternoon — the grapevines are getting to the point where they need water, and it saves me from relying on the irrigation system, at least for the time being.



Ellie pulls the edges of her cardigan, worn loose over her shoulders, around herself a little more, and I spot the goosebumps on her legs. After we got back from the city we took her car from the island's ferry terminal to her place, where she showered and changed while I watered her garden and shut the chickens away for the night. "Here, come sit with me," I tell her now, offering her my hand. "I'll be your heater."

"Yeah, I should have worn leggings. I keep forgetting that even though the days are warm, there's still that springtime chill in the air when the sun starts setting." She sighs as she settles between my legs, leaning back against my chest as if I am a living armchair, and I wrap my arms around her middle. "It's a good excuse to cuddle up with you, though."

I grunt, my lips pressed to the top of her head, breathing her in. I am utterly addicted to her scent. "You don't need an excuse, and you know it."

I pass her a piece of crumbed fish, and grab one for myself. "This is nice," I tell her. "It reminds me of when we were growing up."

"Yeah, it does. Fish and chips on the beach, and you'd always buy extra items off the menu, and then make me take all the leftovers home."

"I used to worry about you," I admit. Her mom had been an early-childhood teacher in nearby Whangarei for as long as I could remember; unqualified, and therefore paid less than those that had been to teachers' college. Between the mortgage on Amaia Harding's home — a place she had inherited from extended family on her mother's British side, along with the debt — and the cost of raising a daughter by herself, money had been tight for the two of them. My mother had given Amaia money over the years, I know that much, but from what I gathered it was only ever in emergencies — a broken down car, a busted hot-water cylinder — and it had made my father loathe Ellie's presence around us kids even more, cementing the idea that she did nothing but take from us.

"I was fine, but I appreciated the treats you gave me. We always had enough food in the cupboards, but there was never any money for extras — no takeaway dinners, no lollies or chocolate, no week-long trips on a chartered superyacht."

I groan. "I'm still pissed that I missed out on that trip." That was one of the years that I had been away for college, my exams falling too close to Christmas to bother to make the trip out. The photos had looked amazing — dolphin watching and swimming off the bow of the boat — and the petulant child in me, forever angry at my father, had felt like I was being punished,

having to watch it all play out from afar.

“I wasn’t supposed to be on it. Weston was so pissed off.” Ellie laughs, a dark edge to her voice. “My mum had an accident — I don’t know if I ever told you — she fell down the stairs and broke her leg, and that’s how I ended up on the boat. Your mum was all *‘Ellie’s living with us for the next month while Amaia recovers,’* and I swear, the vein on the side of your father’s forehead looked like it was going to burst.”

The growl that rips from my throat is louder and more menacing than Ellie has heard before, and she freezes in my arms in a perfect prey animal response. I take a deep breath through my nose, squeezing her arm gently in apology. “I don’t know what the fuck his problem was,” I tell her.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not.”

“It’s *not*,” she admits. “But being upset by it doesn’t change anything. It’s not worth my energy. Besides, we’ve already established that your family wanted to do wolfy things every summer and couldn’t every time the human showed up. Maybe that’s got something to do with it.”

“You’re too forgiving, Ellie.”

“Maybe.” She turns her head, planting a kiss on my arm where it frames her body. “But then, it’s a good thing I wanted to give us another chance, right?”

“Mmm. Alright, you can be forgiving.”

“You’ll forgive me for it?”

I snort at her terrible joke, curling around her small frame, pressing my lips to her shoulder. “I love you.” I whisper to her.

I can’t remember the last time I was this content, this happy. It’s different from the last time we were together; there’s no more need for lies, for secrets, no more questioning about when to reveal my inhuman nature to her. The Unravelling took care of that, at least, and sure, it’s a messier world we live in now, but it’s freeing to look in the mirror every day and see my true self staring back at me.

“I love you too.”

We eat the rest of our dinner in silence, seagulls gliding in to land before us. Ellie tosses them a particularly burnt chip, and all hell breaks loose, three of them fighting over it, the cacophony drawing in even more birds. “Now you’ve done it,” I tell her, counting at least fifteen, the bravest ones pacing the sand just out of reach.

Ellie merely shrugs. “Tell me how a werewolf transformation works.”

I toss another chip to the birds, chaos erupting in front of us. “It’s fairly straightforward. The full moon begins to rise, and I begin to change. By the time the moon is fully above the horizon, I am in my werewolf form. I can speak in that form. I am very much myself, I just look a lot bigger, and more terrifying.”

“Do you have to see the moon to change?”

“No. I could be down here on the western side of the island, where the moon won’t show above these cliffs until hours later, and I’ll still be a werewolf.”

Ellie twists her body, looking up at me over her shoulder. “Really? Your body just knows that it’s time to change?”

“Something like that. Nobody really knows the origins of werewolves, but in werewolf mythology, my people say it was a gift from the moon goddess, giving us a strength and speed and power that is unrivalled, with the body and mind of a man and the head of a wolfish beast, but because she is bound up in the sky, we only access our gift on the nights when she shows her full face.”

“I like that story.”

“Hmm. If you talk to an elf, they will say it is *their* moon goddess, who cursed my kind to be monsters, so it’s all a matter of perspective.”

“Those elves should mind their own business.”

I smile, brushing my hand over her cheek, the pang of nerves rising in my gut for a moment before I push it away. Ellie has been comfortable with everything I’ve shown her so far. I’ve shifted in front of her a few times, and after the initial shock in the dark she’s been more fascinated than anything. If she’s willing, I’d like her to meet all the different versions of me. “Would you like to see me, tomorrow night, under the full moon? I won’t be offended if you say no, but I thought I would put the offer out there.”

Her heart thuds a little faster in her chest. “I’d like that, yes.”

Eleven

## ELLIE



I pull up at the gate in front of Cam’s house, winding my window down to punch in the access code. He made it clear after I was done working on his garden last year that I was welcome to stop by anytime, and after multiple reminders I started doing just that; popping by on short notice, usually after the Saturday morning markets, or in times when I was feeling like too much silence at home was doing my head in.

The gate slides open slowly, and by the time I’m parking in front of the huge, custom-built house, Cam is already standing in the open doorway, leaning casually against the frame. I give him a wave as I grab the basket of leftover produce from the backseat, as well as the bouquet of flowers I picked specifically for him this morning.

“I come bearing thank you and apology gifts,” I say, handing over the items. I’ve been racked with guilt over the fact that not only did I hide my non-human status from Cam, but that I didn’t even end up being the one to tell him the truth about me. Van had explained it all to him on the night of the fae attack, when Van called and organised for Cam to go and take care of my chickens after I had already passed out in Van’s bed.

“Oh, aye? You don’t need to apologise lass —”

“I really do.”

“No, you don’t.” He levels a serious look at me, stepping aside to let me pass through the huge door. I slip my sandals off, entering the serene space in bare feet. The house is minimalist in design, made to blend in with the natural surroundings; open plan with huge windows that show off the cliff-top sea views. It’s not hard to get a sea view when you live on a tiny island, but just like Van’s house, Cam’s sits on prime real estate, and the irony isn’t lost on

me that for how poor I grew up, I sure seem to find myself befriending insanely wealthy people. Cam was, pre-Unravelling, a very successful commercial property agent in Scotland, and the commissions he made from selling properties that were valued in the hundreds of millions was more than enough to allow him to retire early. Now here in New Zealand, he's finally allowing himself to work on his true passion: art.

"Is that a new piece you're working on?"

"Aye, it's just the initial sketch. I'll be painting it on a very large canvas soon."

He's insanely talented, the 'sketch' looking stunningly detailed in the book left open on the table. The figure in question is a human man, standing tall and proud, handsome with red hair and blue eyes, and an expression that is so familiar...

"It's you," I say, working it out. "That's you, isn't it?"

"Aye," he says with resignation, his mouth turned down in a frown around his tusks. "If there's anyone that understands what it's like to have a significant identity shift in adult life, lass, it's me. Life in this realm was simpler in a human body; I can understand full well why you'd hide the ears and continue on as you're always done."

"I know, which is why I feel very guilty for not telling you sooner." I follow him into the kitchen, feeling tiny within the orc-sized space, the countertop coming up to my chin. He shakes his head, his salt-and-pepper hair dragging over his shoulders, and begins unpacking the basket of vegetables into his refrigerator.

"My ex wife is a human, did you know that?"

"You've mentioned it before." I stare at his broad back, the fabric of his white tee strained around the bulk of his muscle.

"Aye, well. She knew I was an orc. I would never have hidden that from her, but it was always hard to judge the right time to tell someone. You had to know you could trust them completely, because the consequences of humans knowing were significant, back then. So I told her after some time together, and found a witch that could do the counter spell so she could see it for herself — that was Van's mother, Bronte Livingston, who did the spell — and Màiri saw me and said she didnae care, she loved me *regardless*. Those were her words, and that should have been a red flag, aye, but I was too enamoured by her to care."

"You never expected the Unravelling."

“There was talk, from time to time. Weston — Van’s father — he always kept his ear to the ground. The shifters have a big network, all those alphas keep in contact with each other, even between realms... there’s something to be said about their pack mentality. But aye, I never really expected it to happen in my lifetime. It seemed like a far off concern; my family had lived in Scotland for four generations at that point. Four generations cut off from our clans in the First Realm, living and dying as humans; why would it be any different for me? So when it all happened...” He shrugs his huge shoulders. “There were many cracks in my marriage already. The Unravelling just busted a hole right through it.”

He packs away the last of the produce, turning to me when he’s done.

“Thank you for the veg, lass. And the flowers. But I dinnae want to hear another word from you about feeling guilty, alright? Like I said, I understand.”

He’s never told me anything about what contributed to the breakdown of his marriage before, and part of me wants to ask more, but I can tell now isn’t the time. Instead I tuck my hair behind my ears, making a show of it. “Well, here they are. Fae ears.”

His dark eyes search my face for a moment. “You look beautiful,” he says softly. “And for what it’s worth, I doubt anybody here on this island is going to care. And if they do, you can send them to me; let’s see if they’re brave enough to air their ignorant complaints to an eight foot tall green man.”

I wonder if this is what it’s like to have a dad. His arms come around me in a warm hug, huge hands patting my back as I blink back rogue tears. “Thanks, Cam.”

“Nae bother, lass. Now, tell me more about how you’ve been getting on. No more fae bothering you?”

“No more, so far.”

“Good. They’d be truly daft, were they to attack a wolf’s mate, but then again, crazier things have happened. We’re quite lucky to have that witch living on the island; makes it handy, at least, to get things sorted.”

That’s the second time someone has referred to me as Van’s mate. The word seems to hold a certain amount of significance that I’m clearly ignorant of, and I add it to the ever-growing list of otherworldly-related things that I have to ask Van about. I probably should be a little more embarrassed about the way Cam so casually mentions it. *I bet orcs can smell all the sex scents too. For fuck’s sake, there’s no escaping it, is there?*

I'm quiet as Cam makes us both a cup of tea. Handing me my drink, he gestures for me to follow him into the living room, where I curl up in one of his huge armchairs, sipping my hot earl grey.

"It's the full moon tonight," I say out loud, thinking about Van, sex, and the fact that he's become noticeably *feral* in the way he fucks me in the last twenty-four hours.

"Aye, I know."

"I'm going to stay at Lost Moon tonight." Is it weird that I'm mentioning this to Cam? Probably. This post-Unravelling world is still so confusing, and I keep feeling like I'm missing vital pieces of information. It doesn't matter how much Van tells me, or how much I search on the internet; it's like trying to look at the ocean floor when your head is above the water — even on the clearest days, everything you see is distorted, the slightest ripples shifting the picture, and you never really get a full idea of what it looks like unless you dive underneath. I feel that way about all of this non-human stuff; I don't have the full picture. I'm scared I never will, but then again, I don't know if I really want to, either.

"He asked you to?"

"He asked me if I wanted to see him as a werewolf. I said yes." I definitely want to see Van in that form, to meet that wolf, the man-beast. I get a thrill every time I think about it, even if I am thoroughly confused by the way desire curls in my core at the idea of seeing him that way.

Cam gives me a look that I can't quite interpret, until he says, "Did the lad warn you that he'll likely want to lie with you, in that form? They're horny bastards, the lot of them, those werewolves."

I choke on my mouthful of tea, spluttering, liquid shooting out both my mouth *and* nose. "*What?*"

With my mind reeling from the impromptu sex-ed talk from Cam, it's mid-afternoon by time I finally make my way to Lost Moon after stopping off at my place to pack a bag for the night, adding in a few extra items that I hadn't initially thought to bring — a torch, some old-school woollen blankets I found in a thrift store, and baby wipes, since I've found those are always handy for cleaning things up after particularly messy sex. I cringe again at the



memory of Cam's voice saying the words "...considerable amounts of cum, even more than an orc."

"He didn't need to tell me that!" I cry to myself as I pull into Lost Moon's road, horrified and horribly curious all at once. He was very clinical in his description of things, although he never said *how* he has this knowledge, leaving me wondering how the hell he could be so certain of details. *Stop that train of thought before you start thinking weird sexual things about Cam.*

It's Van that I want to think about. Van, who never mentioned anything about being sexual while he's in that form. He *would* have said something, if he wanted me that way. *Or maybe he's too afraid to ask, too afraid he'll scare me off.*

He's not going to scare me that easily. Every time I ask myself the question — *am I really going to go there tonight, and have sex with a shifted werewolf?* I find myself answering *yes, probably*. The chemistry between Van and I is electric, and as strange as it is to admit it to myself, the idea of him fucking me as a werewolf turns me on. Even if part of my brain wants to deny it as *too weird*, my pussy doesn't lie, and the dull, needy ache to be fucked is ever present, the gusset of my freshly-changed panties already in danger of being wet through.

*What will it feel like, to be on my hands and knees, and Van as a beast behind me?*

If the nervous thrill I feel in my chest is anything to go by, I'll love it.

Everyone says we need to adjust to the new normal, and this *is* the new normal. *I'm not going to feel bad about it.* It's worse, in my opinion, to be like Cam's ex and not accept these changes. This is who Van is. This is who he always *was*, and he was never allowed to show me. I get to see all of it now, and that's a good thing, an amazing thing.

I could mull over the moralities of it all day, going in circles and getting nowhere, and it's almost a relief when I round the final bend before Lost Moon and find myself having to slow due to traffic, simply because it's a distraction. "What the hell?" I mutter, shocked by the huge line of cars parked on both sides of the road as I approach the vineyard. A car pulls out of the entrance, only to drive along and park at the next available spot on the street, and I cautiously turn onto the driveway.

The carpark is full, as is the reserve carpark, a paddock of land that Van has told me would only ever need to be used if the vineyard hosted a big

event, which I'm certain he said wasn't happening until the start of the corporate Christmas parties mid-December. There's a young woman in high-vis gear that approaches my car, waving, and I wind down the window.

"Sorry, the carparks are both completely full, you'll have to park on the road!"

"Oh, no," I reply, "I'm heading down that drive." I point to the coned-off driveway that leads to Van's house.

"No, you can't, that's private property. You have to park on the road." I feel for this girl and can forgive the snappy tone she takes with me; she can't be older than eighteen, and has no doubt been given the shittiest job of the day, redirecting traffic rather than waitressing. A car drives in behind me, and a moment later it honks rudely.

"I'm Evander's girlfriend," I tell the girl. She blinks, looking confused, and I sigh. "Mr Livingston? The new owner? I need to get to his house. Please let me drive down there."

"You're Ellie."

"I'm Ellie, yes."

"They said to let you through."

"Great!" I wonder who the hell *they* is, and what this means, given the fact that I'm currently a paid contractor to Lost Moon. Probably that there will be a shit-ton of workplace gossip about me fucking the boss. *Just wonderful*. "I'll move the cone myself and put it back," I tell the girl just as the car behind me honks again. "Good luck dealing with those guys," I gesture with my thumb.

"Thanks," the girl pouts.

Van isn't at his house, and the place is locked, so I trudge up the hill in search of him, cutting through the fields of grapevines. The crowd here today is insane, people spilling out of the grove of olive trees surrounding the outdoor bar and into the vines themselves. I weave through group after group of people picnicking on the lawn, and climb the stairs up onto the deck, finally spotting Van's profile. He's looking delicious as always in his tailored pants and well-cut shirt, the sleeves rolled up to just above his elbows. No tie, and the top few buttons are undone, showing off his deeply tanned skin. He's

clean-shaven today, dark hair styled back, and a Rolex on his wrist. Sexy, sexy man.

Even from across the deck I see the way his nostrils suddenly flare, his head whipping around, gold eyes narrowing in on me in an instant from where he stands under the shade of the overhanging vines that climb over the deck's awning. *Predator*, my mind registers, even as my body reacts, desire coursing through my veins.

I'm drawn to him like a moth to a flame, ignoring all the patrons around us. He excuses himself from the table he's been talking to, setting down the bottle of wine he's been holding, and I realise I'm interrupting a wine tasting. "Sorry, I didn't realise you were in the middle of —"

"It's fine. It's fucking insane here today." There's an element of aggravation in his voice, spoken low in my ear, that surprises me. I thought he'd be happy with the crazy amount of business, but his frown says otherwise, and I allow him to guide me through the restaurant and down the hall, aware of the unusually curious stares, all focused on Van, as we pass by. Entering his office, he closes the door after us, running his hands through his hair as he paces.

"Are you okay?"

"No." He takes a deep breath, his brows drawn down in a deep frown. "They're all human, this crowd today. Every single one of them. I should have just closed the whole place for the day, but I didn't anticipate there being this many nosey fools."

"What's wrong with being human?" I can't help the immediate defensiveness that rears its ugly head; Van's never spoken this way before, but I've heard that kind of disdain before in the voices of some non-humans I've met over the past two years.

Van's shoulders slump, the look on his face one of disbelief. "*Nothing*. Nothing, except that they're all here to see the *monster*." He gestures to himself with a jab of his thumb.

"The full moon. Oh my god."

"Yes, the fucking full moon. Word has definitely travelled fast about me, it seems. Everyone wants to see a wolf on the day of the full moon, and because they're customers, I have to put on my best smile and serve them all even though I currently feel like I'm *crawling out of my own skin*." The last half of his sentence is spoken with a growl that makes my knees weak, and he groans, tipping his head back. "*Ellie*, I can smell your cunt from here and it's

not helping.” I see the way the bulge in his pants thickens as he stands there, uncomfortably trapped beneath the fabric of his pants, and I can barely repress the urge to fall to my knees and free that beautiful cock of his.

*Well, fuck me.* “Why are you out there working?” I ask. “I thought you had the day off, and even then, you’re not usually front of house. I know you’re super qualified to do wine tastings and customers get a kick from having the owner run them but...” I trail off, feeling weird about the point I was about to make. I was about to say he didn’t have to do that, the whole *you can pay other people to do that for you, you’re rich enough* schtick. Which he can, obviously. My mind practically shut down the other day when he told me he now has over a hundred million USD invested in commercial properties worldwide — that’s how he’s used the twenty million dollar trust fund his mother gifted him when he was twenty-one, investing and selling and investing again, advised by Cam, choosing carefully and maximising profits each time. It puts all of this at Lost Moon into perspective, because this little vineyard really is just *child’s play* for him, a ‘passion project’ as he says, even though the size and scale of this business is far, far larger than I could ever dream to own.

Me telling Van that he doesn’t have to serve customers himself just because he’s a wealthy, successful man... the temptation to say *you’re above that...* that would make me a total hypocrite, going against all my values.

Van seems to pick up on at least some of my sudden internal dilemma. “I *like* being a working part of the vineyard. I like running the wine tastings, usually. I did have the day off today, because working publicly on the full moon, without glamour keeping my body controlled, is a bad idea. I just didn’t anticipate having *four times* the amount of patrons than on any other given Saturday, and I just bought the place, so I can’t go turning people away, not when there’s outdoor space they can enjoy. It’s not like I can say to them that we’ve run out of wine, we’re a *vineyard*, we have an endless supply. Besides, ninety percent of the crowd here today are locals from the island. Their opinion matters.”

He’s right, but it feels like all these people are taking advantage of the situation. Van’s a person, not a spectacle. He’s not the entertainment here; the wine is. “What time are you set to close this afternoon?”

“Four.”

“And the moon rises at eight tonight, right?”

“Just after eight.” He takes a seat on the couch that lines the back wall of

the small office, elbows on his knees, massaging his head. Cam told me this morning that for a lot of werewolves, the last half of the day before the rise of the full moon is excruciating, their senses working on overdrive despite their bodies not yet transforming; things are too loud, scents too strong, movement around them too triggering. The crowd outside is too much even for me, and I'm not about to grow a tail and an extra two feet in height.

"I'll work. I've done waitressing before, back when I was a student. I can't do wine tastings because I don't know what I'm talking about, but I can do the rest. You stay here in the office. Don't go back out there."

"Ellie, you can't."

"I can. Tell me what I need to know, Boss, and make it quick."

He doesn't even fight me on it, which shows just how bad it is. "Okay. Talk to Tevita; he's the bar manager for the day. He'll get you an apron. I owe you big time for this, baby. I can't believe—"

"Shhh, it's fine." I step between his legs, cradling his head against my chest, and he groans, biting gently at the curve of one breast. "Let me take care of it, and then tonight I'll take care of you."

"What?"

"Don't *what* me. I know what you werewolves are into," I say, only half joking. "Don't think I haven't noticed how the moon has been affecting you."

He huffs against my cleavage, his tongue darting out to taste my skin. "Thank you."

The crowd at Lost Moon begins to thin not long after I start helping out. I hear the odd '*Where did he go?*' and '*Do you really think he turns into a monster?*' as I pass by tables, but by time four o'clock rolls around, there's only a handful of groups that we need to usher out. I help Tevita phone a few taxis to come pick up the drunk stragglers, and then head out with him to comb the grounds for any leftover glassware. We chat about our backgrounds — he was born in Tonga, but grew up in Auckland — and how strange things have been since the Unravelling occurred. Basically, it's the same conversation I have with new acquaintances all the time; these days, it's the Unravelling we all talk about, rather than the weather.

"So, you're designing the new outdoor stuff here?"

“Yeah. We’re getting the contractors in next week to start.”

He nods, placing another empty glass in the cardboard box we’ve been carrying between us. “And you know Evander... personally?”

Tevita has a very likeable air about him, and I can definitely see us becoming fast friends. Still, I can feel myself blushing. “Ah...”

“Forget I asked.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I’ve known him since I was three. His family used to holiday in my hometown up in Northland.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. He only just arrived back in New Zealand, so we’ve been reconnecting.”

“*Reconnecting*, eh?”

I duck into the neighbouring row of vines so he can’t see how red my face has gone. “Something like that!” I yell out, and hear him laugh from the other side.

Once I’ve cleared my current row — there were just a few napkins, blown about — I rejoin Tevita. He reaches for another wine glass, fallen on its side under the curling tendrils of a grapevine, his sleeve rolled up, revealing the traditional tattoo on his forearm. When he stands, he nods at something over my shoulder.

“There’s the boss. Hope he’s feeling okay, he was looking pretty tense before.”

I turn to see Van cross the deck of the outdoor bar, a fair distance away from our spot halfway down the first block of vines.

“He’ll be fine, he’s a big boy.”

Tevita snorts, and I cringe. “I didn’t mean it like that!”

“Sure, babes. Has he got any brothers?”

My laugh is loud, and I see Van’s head turn in our direction. I wave to him, and Tevita nudges me, warm brown eyes crinkling with his smile. “You go see your man, and I’ll finish up here. Thanks for your help today, we were slammed with all those unexpected customers.”

“You won’t be hanging around too long, right?”

“Nah, he made it pretty clear we had to all be gone by six. Fair enough.” He pauses, concern flitting over his features. “You’re gonna be okay here, eh? I hate to ask, but with the moon, I mean, you hear stories...”

Anticipation skitters up my spine. “I’ll be fine. No need to worry about me.”

Twelve

## ELLIE



Van has the same idea as me, it seems. After dinner, I follow him down the path that cuts through the forested area at the back of his house, a small fantail flitting around us, chirping happily and catching the tiny insects we disturb as we walk. The track is part stairs, part well-trodden gravel, and through the gaps in the trees you can spot the ocean, the view magnificent as we make our way down the steep hill. For a short distance the foliage of the native trees — *ponga* ferns, *nīkau* palms, *mānuka*, and huge old *pōhutukawa* with gnarly roots that curl over the path — block out the sunlight completely, but then the canopy ahead opens up, trees thinning out to reveal a grassy clearing on the bank above the golden sand.

I love this little beach. It's west-facing, which means there's views of Auckland City in the distance, but more importantly, it makes for beautiful sunsets. It's private too, not only in the sense that it's single access point is at the back of Van's house, but that the small bay is bookended by huge, bush-covered cliffs that jut far out into the ocean, making it seem like we're in our own little magical world.

Van sets down my duffel bag — which he insisted on carrying for me — and I open up my old picnic blanket, laying it out.

“Someone's mowed this grass,” I say, looking around confused.

“Yeah, I did this morning. I brought the string trimmer down, after you went off to the market. I... well I'm sure you've already figured it out, I haven't exactly been hiding this,” he points to the outline of his dick, tenting the front of the sweatpants he'd changed into, “I had this idea that I wanted to fuck you out here on the beach, but I also wanted to avoid sand getting in places it really doesn't belong. So the grass needed cutting, in order for us to



be up here off the sand. No issues when the tide comes in, either.”

I laugh, slipping off my shoes and sitting down on the mat. “That’s actually really cute and sweet, how much thought you’ve put into this.”

“You think so?” He settles down next to me. “If Lacey told me she had some guy taking her on a date down somewhere in the middle of nowhere, at night, alone, I’d be concerned. Gives off serial killer vibes.”

I laugh louder, stretching out across the mat, laying my head in his lap. “If you were a serial killer, you’ve already had plenty of opportunities to murder me,” I say, grabbing at the length of his cock through the fabric near my face. I give it a hard squeeze, loving the way he grunts in response. “I think I’m good. Plus, the fact that I’ve known you my whole life kinda makes that argument redundant.”

“Hmmm.” His hand strokes through my hair as I pull down the elastic of his pants and stroke his cock, slow and steady, until there’s precum beading at the slit. I lick it away, his sigh above echoing my own, the head of his shaft deliciously smooth under my tongue. I love doing this for him, worshipping his beautiful dick, cupping his heavy balls, squeezing his swelling knot and making him feel oh so good. I lose track of time, aware only of the sounds he makes, the thrum of him in my mouth, the small jerk of his hips as he grows closer to release.

“Ellie, *oh fuck*, Ellie baby, I should be doing this to you. St-stop, baby, just for a minute.”

I let him go with a pop, looking up at him. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I just...” he breathes heavily, pulling at the hem of his tee, taking it off. He is so ridiculously sexy that it’s genuinely unfair, his tanned body so perfect that it for sure belongs on the covers of men’s fitness magazines and romance novels. “I have to talk to you.”

“Now?”

He looks up at the sky for a moment, and I turn my head, squinting as I look directly at the sun for a second. It hangs just above the distant land now, the sky orange around it. Sunset.

*Moonrise.*

“There’s about half an hour left,” he says. “I... I so desperately want to fuck you now, if you’ll let me.”

“Yes, of course.” I’m already dripping wet, and I’ve been aching for him all afternoon, the idea of *werewolf sex* taking over my brain. I stand up, stripping off my clothes, ignoring the chill of the evening air. He’ll warm me

up, I have no doubt about that. He stands too, kicking off his pants, and we stand there naked for a moment, staring at each other. “This is crazy,” I say, gesturing to our surroundings.

He shrugs. “No one will see us here. It’s like the good old days, when we used to hook up in that sea cave. You remember?” I nod. Of course I do. Accessible only at low tide, it had been one of our favourite spots to sneak off to, back home. He reaches for me, his lips parted, and it’s the first time I notice his canines are different. They’re even longer than they usually are. They look *sharp*.

*Oh.*

The smile he gives me is almost shy, but the teeth make him look more monstrous, and a shiver runs up my spine as I take his outstretched hand. “The werewolf change happens a little slower than with shifters. The moon is almost here, so I’m going to start looking a little different. Don’t worry, the head is the last thing to shift.”

“Okay.” I know I sound nervous now, and I’m sure he can feel the tremble in my hand.

“If you don’t want to, you don’t have to d—”

“I want to.”

“But after I change — we don’t have to do anything further. I don’t need that. It’s not some prerequisite for werewolf relationships, regardless of what certain orcs may or may not have told you.”

The laugh I let out is slightly unhinged as I stumble into his waiting arms. “How the hell did you know?”

“I can smell when my mate has been hugging people,” he growls, lifting me up, my legs wrapping around him automatically. His dick rubs against my clit, making me gasp, and I move slightly, the head of it finding the notch of my dripping entrance, our bodies ready to fit together perfectly. “I figured, from your comment earlier, that he’d said something.”

I moan as he lowers me onto his cock, the thickness of him a welcome presence. I will never, ever tire of being so utterly filled by him. Once again, I marvel at his strength as he simply holds me while standing unsupported, fucking into me slowly, a deliciously wet glide with every stroke. I kiss his lips and his mouth opens, our tongues gliding against one another, making me feel feverish, desperate, making me need *more*. I don’t know how much time passes like that, but I moan again as he falls to his knees, bringing me with him, laying me on the mat, our connection never breaking.

“I want to,” I gasp, hitching my ankles over his shoulders, wheezing at this new angle as he pounds into me, his fingers strumming over my clit, fierce determination in his eyes.

“Want to what?” he asks, his hips snapping forward with each thrust, the slap of flesh echoing in the air. “I need to hear you say it, baby.”

My whole body is taut, on the brink of an orgasm. “I want you to *fuck me*,” I demand. He pistons in and out, his pace relentless, his knot partially entering me each time, an added stretch that makes me groan with each thrust.

“I *am* fucking you,” he grunts, a wild look in his eyes. “Look how good you take my cock, how *deep* I can fuck you. But that’s not what we’re talking about here. I need to hear it from your lips. What do you want?”

“I want your werewolf!” I cry, picturing the scene, his beast fucking me, and I crest the wave of my orgasm, back arching, my cunt pulsing around him. My mouth hangs open, though I make no sound as he fucks me through it, slowing his pace so I feel every drag of him inside me, his hands pressing my knees wide apart so he can watch my body taking all of him.

He pulls out abruptly, and I whimper at the loss of it. “You haven’t come yet.”

“Don’t worry baby, I will. Turn over, on your hands and knees for me.”

I do as he says, and his cock slides home once more, his body covering mine. “I’m going to fuck you now,” he growls in my ear, and there’s something deeper, darker, about his voice that makes me shiver with anticipation.

“Yes.”

His teeth latch onto my neck for a moment, the bite almost painful, though he never breaks the skin. I groan, clenching around his cock, and he chuckles deep in my ear. “Good girl.” Then his hips are snapping against mine, rougher than he’s ever fucked me before, his balls swinging against my clit with every jerk of his hips, his hand fisting in my hair, holding me in place.

*Rutting.* That’s the best word I can think of to describe his frenzied state, the way he dominates me, his grunts in my ear, his teeth on my neck. Absolutely filthy, carnal fucking.

I love it.

Maybe later I’ll sit back and try and analyse why I take such pleasure from him using my body this way, but for now all I can do is let go and enjoy

the ride, his thick shaft driving into me at *that* angle, the one that makes me see stars.

“Yes,” I whine, legs shaking, and he increases the pace even more, the sound of flesh slapping obscenely loud against the backdrop of softly-crashing waves and singing crickets. His hands are on my hips now, pulling me hard against him with every thrust, the sound of his grunts absolutely feral.

“Come on my cock,” Van orders, his voice deeper, growlier than usual, and my body obeys like a well-played instrument, clenching around him, my cries echoing in the cool air. He’s coming too, in a torrent of heat that fills me, continuing to thrust at an agonisingly pleasurable pace, not stopping despite the sag of my body and the slide of my knees against the mat. His cum oozes out of me with every thrust, running down my legs, dripping on the fabric beneath us. He doesn’t knot me this time, which I find odd, until his hands move from my waist to the mat on either side of me, and I see instantly why he’s not stopping.

He’s changing.

The hands on either side of my own are larger, tipped with black claws, and I watch in fascination as the skin of his hands change colour, starting from the tips of his fingers and creeping, up, up, up, until the arms that cage me are a deep charcoal grey. I’m well aware that he’s still buried deep within me, and I’m surprisingly not horrified by this, all those little fantasies I’ve had suddenly playing out in real life, even as a little voice in the back of my mind says *what is wrong with you?*

His movements slow to a stop within me, a choked growl uttered from his lips, and his arms growing bigger, longer, thicker, hairier. *Not hair, fur.* Inside me, his still-hard cock thickens, stretching me in a way similar to his knot, except that it doesn’t stop. I groan, feeling the slight burn of it as I look up at the sky, now blazing fiery red on the horizon, the final edge of the sun dipping out of sight.

I’m on my hands and knees out in the open, and there’s a werewolf’s dick buried deep in my vagina. *And I like it.*

“Van?” I whisper, shivering at the ticklish feeling of his fur at my back. I haven’t turned to look up at him yet, the self-preservation part of my brain instinctually keeping my movements to a minimum. “Van, are you okay?”

There’s that choked sound again, and then a deep, deep rumble of laughter, the gravel in his voice making me melt. “You-you’re asking *me* if

I'm okay? When I just... lost all sense of myself and *changed* while still inside you? Are you insane?"

"Maybe," I answer, a flood of desire coursing through me at the sound of his voice, because it's *him*, my Evander, just bigger, *scarier*, and I don't know what that says about me that I'm not at all bothered by this turn of events.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No. I like the stretch. It feels a lot like your knot. Just... go slow when you do start moving, so I can get used to you."

I finally dare to look up at the huge body covering mine, and as I do, he moves, lifting his hands from the mat until he is on his knees, huge clawed hands on my waist, requiring me to twist my entire upper half to get a good look at him, buried deep inside me as he is. I wheeze as our movements pull at the connection between us — *he's so huge* — my brain automatically applying that statement to both him and his dick.

He is magnificent. I have no frame of reference for his size, except that I know he's bigger than an orc. Covered in a dense layer of short fur that grows thicker and longer around his neck, the outline of his muscular frame — the body of a man — is still obvious, and in the twilight I can clearly see his defined abs, his huge pecs, his strong arms.

And that wolf head.

He is... *handsome*, I decide. He doesn't look at all like his shifter wolf, apart from the colouring, though there's no patch of white on his black fur this time. His eyes are bigger in proportion to his face, wolfish muzzle just slightly shorter, and his mouth hangs open slightly, revealing those deadly sharp teeth. His wide-blown pupils glow yellow in the fading light from the sunset, though I know if I were to get a close look I'd see the same gold irises I am used to.

"Van," I say again as one clawed hand caresses down my back, the touch so achingly familiar, despite the light scratch of his elongated nails, making me feel restless. Making me need more, despite already being well-fucked and pleased. "I don't know if I'm supposed to like this, but I do."

He nods slowly. "That's good, because I love this. You look so fucking perfect here on your hands and knees, taking my werewolf cock." His hands caress my backside, the drag of his claws making my skin break out in goosebumps, and I moan, turning my head back to face the ocean. With a deep breath, I dare to push myself back ever so slightly, taking in more of his

monstrous cock.

“Oh,” I hiss, a shiver running down my spine. “Oh *fuuck*.” He remains still behind me as I rock forward experimentally, the drag of him against my inner walls making me cry out, and I don’t care if the whole world hears me. I rock back once more, a little more forceful this time, earning me a growly grunt from Van. I smell the salt of the ocean and the fresh cut grass, hear the rustle of leaves, and I’ve never felt so alive before as I arch my back and lift my face to the sky, to the first stars blinking into existence above. I am absolutely feral, impaling myself on his dick.

*I am fucking my werewolf.*

“This should not be possible, my little human, I should not be able to fit so well inside you like this.”

“I’m not human!” I cry, suddenly understanding, suddenly owning that fact. I can feel it, that fae magic Nerilina referred to, feel it around me in the earth and the trees, in the starlight above, in the moonlight that is beginning to fill up this world. It exists in every blade of grass below us, and in the pleasant stretch in my core as I fuck my mate. *Magic*.

“Is that so?” His breath is suddenly hot on my neck, his hands pressed to the tartan mat on either side of me once more, his long tongue licking a stripe up my spine. He surges forward within me and I cry out again. *It’s so good, it’s so damn good.*

“You want to be fucked by a wolf, little fairy?” he teases, his cock doing just that.

“I want to be fucked by *my* wolf,” I hiss in reply, shifting my hands until my fingers brush his. “*Fuck me*, Evander. I am yours, but darling, you are *mine*.”

“Yes,” he growls in agreement, sharp teeth grazing my neck, my shoulders. Hips thrusting, breath panting, teeth bared, he fucks into me, and when I reach to touch myself, he pushes my hand to the side with a growled “*Mine*.”

I whimper as the rough pad of his finger rubs circles over my clit, the drag of his claws over my labia adding to the sensation, the danger, the awareness of being taken by a beast.

“Mine to touch,” he rumbles. “Mine to pleasure. My mate. You feel so fucking good.”

“My mate,” I echo, so close to falling apart. “You are mine and I am yours.” I’m babbling now, incoherent, nothing but a bunch of firing nerve

endings as he slams into me, over and over. I can feel it, pleasure building once more. *It shouldn't be this good.*

“Let it go, my love,” he rasps against my ear. “I will catch you when you fall.”

I come so hard that I scream, voice hoarse, howling in the open air. He follows me, coming, and as I sag on my elbows I absolutely *feel it*, the endless stream of cum that fills me with such *heat* as his hips jerk and his body covers mine once more, his hot breath ragged above me. He stills, his clawed hand reaching between us, and I realise he's squeezing his knot, too large to fit inside me. I press my forehead to the ground, my ears ringing, body tingling, feeling absolutely spent, and when he pulls free I groan at the gush of liquid that pours from me. It's such a mess, but it's somehow erotic, and I laugh quietly as I flop down fully on the mat, rolling onto my back so I can look up at Van.

The tilt of his head, the slight frown, and the twist of his tall, tufted ears all add to the impression that he's concerned, and I reach out, my hand grazing his muzzle. “That was amazing,” I say, my chest still heaving with every breath. “I was just adding *fluid kink* and *monsterfucker* to my mental list of things I didn't know about myself at the start of this week. Are you okay? Do you need me to squeeze your knot?”

He huffs against my hand, mouth opening, tongue darting out to taste my skin. “I'm... in awe of you,” he says, and it's so odd, hearing his voice, deeper but still *his*, coming out of this werewolf. It's Van, I know it's Van, but it's still jarring, as if my brain can't quite keep up with what I'm seeing.

He lowers himself down next to me, and I curl against him, his huge arm under my head, wrapping around my body. I close my eyes, breathing in the scent of him, still the same despite the fur that tickles my nose. I am physically exhausted now and could easily fall asleep, but the cool air on my back makes me shiver as it hits the sweat on my skin and the release that coats both the inside of my thighs and my ass. Copious amounts of cum, indeed.

“You're cold.”

“It's okay. You're really warm. Like a big cuddly teddy bear.”

He rumbles at that description, and I lift my head to grin at him. He bares his teeth in a mock snarl for a moment, before it turns into a sharp-toothed smile. “I've been described as many things, but never a teddy bear.”

I can see that. I have no doubt that if I encountered him in the dark, not

knowing who he was, I'd run screaming. He's huge, monstrous, and I'm sure that he could be absolutely terrifying, if he wanted to be. Yet the more I look at him, the more I just see my Evander, especially in those expressive eyes of his.

I shiver again, my skin breaking out in goosebumps, and he reaches for my bag with his free arm, snagging it with a claw, managing to pull it close enough for him to dig into it one-handed. Out come the woollen blankets I packed. He arranges them over my body and part of his, and I immediately feel warmer as our shared body heat is trapped inside this cosy cocoon.

“Sleep,” he says, and I close my eyes, doing just that.

**T**he moon is high above us when I wake. I'm surprisingly *not* disorientated, awareness of my surroundings present from the moment I open my eyes, as if it's completely normal to wake up in the furred arms of a very large werewolf male, his huge wide-blown pupils glowing like reflective beacons under the moonlight, and the ocean waves crashing mere metres away from my head.

After staring at him open-mouthed for a few seconds, I lick my lips, blinking at the moonlit scene around us. The wind is just starting to pick up, and the ocean feels restless, the waves stronger than before. My brain snags on that thought for a moment... the ocean *feels* restless. I can *feel* it, or at least I can feel the tug of the current on *something* that lies beneath.

I shake my head. *Weird*. I'm obviously still in dreamland, at least more than I originally thought. “It's high tide,” I say out loud, hoping that by speaking, the last of that odd sensation will clear.

Van sits up, pulling me onto his lap, keeping me wrapped in the warm, well-worn blankets. His frame completely dwarfs mine — it already does in his regular man form, but as a werewolf he's *huge*. “Just after high tide, yes. The waves were at their highest just a while ago. I've been listening to them coming in all night.”

“Have you been awake the whole time?”

“Mmhm. I don't usually sleep under the full moon, not until near dawn, and not unless I'm in my bed.”

I snort, shaking my head as I have another epiphany. “I thought you were



just being rich-boy extra, with that humongous custom-made bed of yours.”

“No. It’s made for me in this size.” His large ears twitch, his lips moving in the same way as when he is a man — with that hint of a smile — and it’s the oddest thing to see on his werewolf face. He seems to change his mind about whatever he was about to say, instead lifting his huge clawed hand to my face. “How are you feeling?”

“Good,” I answer honestly. “I thought, maybe, I’d feel a little weirder about... you know...”

“Having sex with a werewolf?”

“Yeah, but I don’t.”

“That’s good.”

“I mean, it *is* you, right? When you talk about your wolf as if he’s separate, it makes me wonder...” I trail off as his eyebrows rise. “This is probably something I should have clarified well before taking the D.”

His laugh is loud, his whole body shaking with mirth. “It’s me,” he wheezes, and I mock punch his chest for laughing at me. “Taking the D, fuck, Ellie...” His laughter dies down, and his huge hand finds my chin once more, coaxing my face upwards to look at him, the claw of his thumb grazing my lip. “Baby, you took my cock so well. Are you sore?”

I shift experimentally. “Just a little.” It’s the good kind of sore, the kind when you know you’ve been well fucked. I shift again, feeling more semen leaking from me, and screw up my nose. These blankets are going to be a pain to wash. Van’s mouth stretches in that wide, toothy wolf grin, no doubt deducing my thoughts.

“It’s such an alpha male thing,” he admits, “but fuck, I love filling you so that you spend all day leaking my cum.”

“Marking your territory?”

“At least I’m not into *that*, Ellie. What would you do, if I said my kink was golden showers?”

“No. N. O. No thank you.”

His laugh rumbles in his chest. “That’s the dealbreaker?”

I tip my head back to grin up at him. “That’s the dealbreaker. Giant werewolf dick? Totally fine. Pissing on me... no thanks, you can quite literally piss off with that. Speaking of dicks —”

“— what a fantastic segue —”

“— is yours in its sheath right now?”

“Yes. It’s either erect, or it’s tucked away, in this form.”

I consider asking him to see it, but to be honest, even with the moonlight, I'm not going to see much against his black fur unless I get up and find my torch. Instead I lean into him, sighing contentedly, looking up at the full moon. "It's beautiful out here," I say after a while. The moonlight shines across the water, the trees and flax rustling in the wind, but even with the sound of the waves, there's a stillness that comes with staring at the starlight above, an understanding that we are so very small in the grand scheme of things.

"You're beautiful. I don't think I say it enough, just how stunning I think you are."

I've never been good at accepting compliments, even though I crave them. "My tits are small, and my ass is big. I'm a pear."

"You are delicious; sweet like a fruit, that's for sure. I love your tits, I love your ass. I love everything about you."

"I love you too."

His head rests atop mine. "I once thought I saw you in the distance, five years ago, in San Fran. Fuck, it was embarrassing, I chased this poor woman down in the middle of a busy street; I think she thought I was going to attack her. When I realised it wasn't you... it-it broke me. I went on the worst bender I've ever been on, just black out drunk for days on end. And it's idiotic, because I never scented you, and if it *had* been you, those no-contact orders would have kicked into action, but I wasn't thinking at the time."

My heart aches at his words. "I've done the same. I mean, not *chasing*, but I saw a guy once at a bar, and from behind I thought it was you. It was crazy; it'd been three years at that point, but when he turned around... the heartbreak felt like I was back at day one."

Van whines, sounding just like a sad puppy, and it sends me over the edge, a sob escaping my trembling lips. I curl into him, bring my face in his fur. "Damn it," I whisper. "I didn't mean to ruin the mood. I just... I missed you so fucking much. There was always a hole. A big you-shaped hole. I mean, not a werewolf shaped one, *that* was a shock," I laugh weakly. "You know what I mean."

He whines again. "I know what you mean." He nuzzles at my neck, his thick arms hugging me tight, claws digging into the woollen fabric of the old blankets. "This is what I hate most about being a werewolf," he says, as quietly as his body allows in this form, which isn't that quiet at all. "I want to be a man for you, now. I want to hold you, without worrying about claws

hurting your beautiful skin. I want to take you home and run you a bath and make love to you, and I can't because I'm stuck like this for another three hours, at least."

I shake my head, pushing an arm out of the blanket to run over his chest. His fur may be soft, but underneath there's nothing but a solid wall of muscle, absolute raw power. "You're perfect. When I say I love you, I mean all of it. Every facet of you."

"Even the shitty alpha bullshit, and the fucking wolf shifter rules that kept us apart for so long, and the fact that I'm still a mess about Jenny? You know I had the pool filled in, at my old house. Completely devalued the property, because I get so triggered by the idea of any other child...." He breaks off in another sad whine.

"Oh Van." He's so big that my arms can't actually fit *around* him in a hug, but I rub his huge shoulders. "I hate going to public pools, and I *hate* swimming at beaches when there's kids around because I can't enjoy it. I'm just constantly watching the children and panicking that the parents aren't looking, because of what happened. That's why I like going in the middle of the day when it's empty, except now I'm going to be freaked out that fae are stalking me while I'm in the water. So I get it. We can be a mess together. You are perfect for *me*, Evander. Give me all the mess, it only makes me love you more."

"I know I put on a brave face for you... but I was so fucking scared when you came to my house, after the fae got to you. And I keep thinking about what might have happened."

"But we fixed it, right? Nothing happened. Nothing is going to happen. You kept me safe, when no one else could have."

He's silent for a long time, and the more I stare out into the dark, the less I see the beauty of this place. Instead I fear the unknown, the monsters that might be lurking in the shadows.

"Van?" I whisper. He squeezes me tighter again. "What are you thinking? Say something."

"I'm thinking about how I will kill anyone that threatens you. About how I would tear their heads right off their shoulders."

I sit in stunned silence for a moment, because I'm pretty certain he's being completely literal right now. "Okay," I whisper, running my fingers through his fur. I don't know if my brain will ever properly reconcile all the different things I know about werewolves and wolf shifters and Van. I can't

imagine him killing anything, and yet he's told me, in horribly descriptive terms, that he likes to hunt for prey in both his wolf forms. "*It's satisfying, when you feel the snap of bone reverberate through your jaw, and the hot blood floods your mouth.*"

A shiver runs down my spine, and I shake it off. "Maybe we should head back," I suggest.

"Good idea. You can shower and sleep."

"What will you do?"

"Keep you company. I'll sleep after moonset."

"No hunting?"

He shakes his head. "There's not much to hunt on this island. Besides, when I entered the country, I had to sign a Department of Conservation form that they give to all shifters and weres, promising not to hunt native wildlife. They're going to do yearly surveys on the property to check I'm sticking to it, too."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"You *had* a paddock of tasty sheep," I joke.

"Why do you think I got rid of them? They had *names*; they would have been delicious, but," he shrugs one huge shoulder, "I always feel guilty if I eat the named ones. And people would have figured it out, if only one sheep went missing a month. It's too obvious. Let's not give these locals anything more to gossip about."

"Can you imagine, if one of them saw what we did?"

He shakes his head, helping me to my feet. "What was that word you used? *Monsterfucker*. That's one way to make the local news, for sure. Have your naked ass plastered across the front page while you're bent over giving a werewolf a blowjob."

"Honey, I think you imagined that. I didn't even get a good look at your dick."

He bends low, teeth scraping my shoulder, making me shudder. "Next month," he growls, breath hot on my neck, making my pussy ache all over again.

I slip into the clothes I wore yesterday evening — my phone reads 2:41 AM — and together we fold up the blankets, Van's tail wagging adorably as I step near him to plant a kiss on his stomach, which is as high as my mouth reaches when I stand next to his hulking frame.

I'm not paying attention to what's underneath when I begin to pack up the picnic mat, and it's only Van's snarl that has me looking properly at the ground, the scrunched-up mat in my arms forgotten. There's a large patch of mushrooms — a whole array of them: white, purple, spotted, smooth — directly under where I'd lain sleeping. I reach out and touch one, a green glow jumping from my fingers, setting off a chain reaction, a cascade of green light that ripples outwards across the entire patch, blindingly bright in the dark.

“*Fuck*,” Van swears.

I couldn't have said it better myself.

# *The Motunai Chronicles*

DECEMBER EDITION

## **The Wolf, the Vineyard, and the Bid for a Winning Garden**

*Reporting by Ben Smith*

Evander Livingston calls his newly-purchased vineyard, Lost Moon Estate Winery, his “passion project,” alluding to the ongoing renovations and refurbishment of the entire property. With the charisma — and looks — of a Hollywood superstar, I witness first-hand just how charming he is with customers when I meet him at Lost Moon for an interview.

The news of the purchase of Lost Moon Estate Winery by a wealthy American wolf has been the talk of the island since his arrival on Motuwai in early October. Whilst most have been excited to see what this means for the established vineyard, others have expressed concerns over their neighbour being a wolf, and what this means for people’s personal safety on the island, given the recent attacks on livestock across the country under the last full moon. Livingston tells me people have no reason to be fearful of him. “I can understand that people may be wary of someone new, especially given the fact that the non-human population here on the island is still relatively small. My goal here is to contribute positively to the local community. Us wolves do not pose a danger to anyone here.”

Livingston is no stranger to winemaking; having completed a degree in viticulture and enology, he’s spent the last few years

working on vineyards around the world, including wineries in France, Italy, and California, before deciding on Motuwai as the location for his own venture into the business. “New Zealand has always been special to me; growing up, I used to holiday in Northland every Kiwi summer. It’s good to be back.”

Livingston is tight-lipped about his family, but a quick internet search yields results. The eldest son of Weston Livingston, Evander is said to be worth upwards of 100 million US dollars. His father, who owns a tech company based in Silicon Valley, has a personal fortune valued at 1.1 billion US dollars (1.6 billion NZD).

Livingston is most excited about the garden project at the vineyard, headed by up-and-coming designer Ellie Hinewai Harding (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine), who was last year crowned the Young Garden Designer of the Year by the Landscape Design Institute. “We first broke ground mid-November,” Livingston says, “so it’s only been two weeks of physical labour, but you can already see so much taking shape.” Livingston appreciates the aspects of Māori culture that Harding weaves into her work, although Harding is quick to say that she is no expert in matters regarding te ao Māori, and is constantly learning more about her own culture.

Livingston says work is underway to change all signs around the vineyard to bilingual signage in order to help promote the revitalisation of te reo Māori. “It makes sense to get in line with all the other businesses already using bilingual signage. To me it’s an important way to show my respect of the indigenous people of New Zealand.”

Livingston plans on submitting the vineyard’s grounds into next year’s round of gardening awards. “What we’re creating here — and by we, I mean the whole team — is something for people of all ages and species to enjoy, and I think we’re at the forefront of saying ‘Hey, we can integrate all kinds of people here in this post-Unravelling world.’”

Walking around the vineyard with Livingston, where I am introduced to a multi-species building crew, and Harding (who, I discover, also has “a touch of non-human blood”), I can wholeheartedly say I believe in this vision, too.



Thirteen

VAN



“Do you think it’s a good deal, then?” I lean back against the countertop in Cam’s kitchen, and take another swig of my beer. He’s invited us over for an early dinner, and I’m using it as an opportunity to pick his brains about a few different properties currently on the market. There’s one investment opportunity here in Auckland that I’m particularly interested in, and I’m eager to snap the commercial property up before someone else realises how good the returns are on it.

He nods, his dark brows rising to emphasise the point.

“Oh, aye, it’s a good deal. I’m tempted to go in with you, if you’re looking for another investor?”

“At what split?”

The curve of his smile is just the same as it was pre-Unravelling, despite the fact that he now has tusks that curl upwards from his lower jaw, one on each side of his mouth, the sharp points reaching the top edge of his upper lip. “You know I don’t have anywhere near your fortune, lad. Twenty percent? I can put in that much, with the ROI on that one.”

“Twenty percent sounds good to me.” I’m happy to have him tag along on my investments; I owe a great deal of my success to his advice, and I still approach him when I’m unsure about a property market I’m entering into, like today.

I don’t know how Cam met my parents, all I know is that he’s been around since before I was born, and his advice regarding property investments has been instrumental in growing my parents’ wealth. Yes, my father is the CEO of a very successful company, but there’s a lot more to their personal fortune — and much of it is under my mother’s name. The

number that gets published in the media is an underestimate, and by quite a few hundred million dollars.

“Alright,” Cam nods again. “Do you want me to contact the agent, then? I’ve dealt with him before.”

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

“It’s nae bother. Cheers to another smart find; you’re getting good at this, lad.”

I raise my bottle in the air. “Cheers.”

“Ellie still out in the garden?”

“Yeah, look.” I nod towards the window, hearing her approach outside, and a moment later she walks into view, barefoot in the grass with a bunch of flowers in her hand. She spots us watching, and gives a shy wave that makes my chest ache at how sweet she is.

“I should have known she was fae,” Cameron muses, taking another swig of his beer. “Look at her, she’s a garden fairy if ever I saw one.”

“I know.”

“You’re going to take good care of her, aye lad? No fucking it up, this time.” He levels a serious look in my direction, and I’m reminded that for all that he’s my friend, he’s also taken on a pseudo father-figure role when it comes to Ellie. I look at him — properly look at him — because I’ve known him for years, and it seems as if he’s barely aged. Only his hair, now more grey than brown, gives away that he’s older than forty. Then again, like wolves, orcs age slightly differently to humans, often living to over a hundred and twenty, and remaining youthful until their last ten years, before rapidly declining. It’s only because I spent so much of my life in what was essentially a human body, surrounded by other ‘humans’ in this realm, that I still judge age by human standards.

“I’m never letting her go. She’s the love of my life.”

“Good.” He smiles, one huge green hand patting my shoulder. “It’s good to see you so happy, Evander. The both of you. I don’t know if you’re aware of just how much you two glow when you’re in each other’s company.”

I think about the way she captures my attention so fully every time we’re in the same room. The way she steals the breath from my lungs, makes my heart feel as if it will burst, makes my cock hard in an instant. This past month has been the best month in my entire life, despite some of the worries going on in the background.

“I think I have some idea,” I reply.

I'm making dinner — a simple linguine carbonara — when I hear the front door unlock. “Hey!” I call out. “I’m in the kitchen!”

“*Kia ora! E pēhea ana koe?*”

I pause what I’m doing, setting the wooden spoon down on the counter as Ellie’s footsteps echo through the house, rapidly doing my best to translate in my head. *Kia ora* is ‘hello’, that’s easy — I’ve known that one since I was a kid. *Koe* is ‘you’... *pēhea*...

Ellie steps into the kitchen, her face lighting up as she sees me. She carries a bouquet of fresh flowers from her garden in one hand, and what looks like a newspaper in the other. “Ask me that question again,” I request as she places them on the counter.

“*E pēhea ana koe?*” she says, slower this time, enunciating each word for me, the tone of her voice rising at the end in question.

My mind suddenly clicks. *How are you?* Of course that’s the question. “*Pai,*” I answer, *good*. It’s the one word I’ve learned so far that I can actually use in this context. She’s been teaching me, just a tiny bit at a time, while she studies the Ngāpuhi dialect of *te reo Māori* with her old study notes and learn-at-home books in the evenings. It’s been a nice activity for us both to enjoy; she says my willingness to learn has helped to motivate her again, and for me, learning the odd word has been incredibly helpful. In less than a decade, the prevalence of *te reo Māori* words used in everyday life seems to have increased tenfold — it’s on council signage, on the radio, and on television, with presenters interjecting Māori words into the middle of sentences while speaking English. It’s been one of the biggest — happy — surprises when returning to New Zealand.

It’s certainly beneficial for me to have some basic understanding of the language and Māori concepts in terms of operating a business within New Zealand.

Ellie crosses the room, humming as she wraps her arms around me, leaning into my bare chest. “Mmmm. *Ka pai*, well done. Are you actually good, though? Because *pai* is always my standard answer when anyone asks me that question; my mind goes blank and it’s as if all the vocab I’ve learned over the years has somehow been erased from my brain.”

“Hm, I’m good. Truly. Especially now that you’re here.” I lift her in my arms, her legs wrapping around my waist as my hands move to her ass, and

kiss her slowly, revelling in the scent of her, sweet and perfect and *mine*. When it comes to Ellie, it doesn't take much at all to get me hard, and as our tongues glide together she's already digging her heels into my lower back, using it as leverage to grind against my cock. I break the kiss reluctantly. "I have to stir the pancetta or it'll burn."

"Okay." She plants one last kiss on my cheek, murmuring, "You shaved," before sliding off me, running a hand back through her long hair as she goes to retrieve her flowers.

"I'm always shaving," I complain. "It's the one thing I miss about my old human body, not having to shave so damn often."

She makes a humming sound of amusement. "You know I like your face all the ways, clean shaven right through to your three-day-old beard."

"I know. Do you want a glass of wine?"

"Yes please."

"Any requests?"

She shakes her head, sniffing a rose, a dreamy smile on her face. "You're the expert. You choose one that pairs well with dinner; I always look forward to your reasons why. Besides, I know what you're like and I know you already have one in mind, and if I choose wrong you won't *say* anything, but the look on your face will say it all." I laugh in response, watching as she pulls a vase out of one of the cupboards under the sink — I bought her a collection of them, since she brings flowers over almost daily — and begins arranging on the far countertop, picking off leaves, trimming stalks, and sweeping up the odd ant that runs out from between the petals.

"Kind of like the look you gave me when I put chicken manure under your beanstalks," I retort.

"Just because grapevines like nitrogen doesn't mean all plants do!"

"I know, I *know*, I've learned my lesson. *Trust me.*" I hear her scoff as I give the pancetta another stir, and then grab the bottle of wine I have in mind out of the fridge. "Alright, we'll have a pinot bianco, also known as a pinot blanc. This particular bottle is the vintage I worked on, from that vineyard I told you about in Northern Italy."

"Really? You made *that* wine right there?"

"I helped, yes."

She grins at me over her shoulder, radiating happiness. "That's amazing." She means it too, and it strikes me that she's one of the few people that truly appreciates what I've chosen to do with my life.

I clear my throat, feeling overly emotional. “What’s that over there?” I ask, nodding towards the newspaper.

“Oh, it’s the article. In the Motuwai Chronicles.”

There’s something strange in her tone, and she certainly doesn’t sound overly enthusiastic about it.

“It’s that bad, is it?” I ask, feeling my gut twist.

“*Nooo*,” she says unconvincingly, placing her flowers down on the counter and walking over to where she left the newspaper. “It’s not negative about you or Lost Moon. It’s just... just read it, okay? I don’t want to mar your opinion. You look amazing, and the photos of the vineyard are beautiful. And your answers all sound great.”

“It’s the wolf issue, isn’t it?”

She hands me the paper, and I frown at the half-page photo of me, framed by text. I’ve already been expecting the worst.

I dislike journalists. I’m not a fan of interviews. I still remember what they were like in the wake of Jenny’s death, a swarm of lowlife scum, in my opinion, there to profit off the death of a little girl because it was somehow *newsworthy*, clickbait titles rolling out across media in both New Zealand and the States because she happened to be the daughter of a billionaire. As if that somehow made her death *different*. I’d made the mistake of reading the comments on one online post, of reading the absolute vitriol aimed at my family, comments like *a billionaire like him deserves to feel pain*.

Jenny didn’t deserve that, and it makes me feel sick that people celebrated her passing.

Ellie stands beside me, rubbing soothing circles on my back. “Overall I think it’s a good article. It’s really positive about Lost Moon. And you look very handsome in that photo.”

“Hm.”

I agreed to the interview with the young journalist from the island’s monthly publication because I didn’t really have a choice. You can’t run a business on a small island and claim to be community friendly, and then alienate the single grassroots publication from that same island. As I read through, I shake my head at his comments on my appearance, and when I get to the part where he comments on the concerns for personal safety I can *hear* my teeth grinding together.

When this kid had brought up the livestock attacks during our interview, I knew it was going to be a problem. I’d told him it was irrelevant — the fact

that a bunch of shifters from a scattered pack decided to be absolute fucking idiots and poach livestock from farms across New Zealand has *nothing* to do with me — but of course I've been lumped in with them anyway.

The rest of the article is okay, but I can't help but feel frustrated that a piece that's supposed to be focused on the vineyard instead starts out with a discussion on my nature.

"It paints you in a good light," I tell Ellie. "The *shifter danger* is bullshit. And it reads like a gossip column when it talks about my money."

"I know," she says sympathetically. "It's what I was expecting, even though I'd hoped it would be better. I mean, it could be worse."

"It could be worse," I agree. "Though that's a low bar, given the current state of news articles on wolves." *Livestock Attacks and Farmers Call for Action Against Wolves* seemed to be the only two headlines in every publication I came across in the week following the full moon.

"I..." Ellie begins, trailing off. She looks up at me, doe eyes full of sad acceptance. "I know it's a different issue, and maybe I shouldn't compare the two, but I know what it's like to see the public get the wrong idea about something and then get all up in arms about it."

"You've read a lot of racist comments online," I say, understanding what she's meaning.

"I'm not going to repeat the stuff I've read or heard people say about Māori over the years. It's not everyone, *obviously*; most Kiwis are good people, but I'm not going to lie and say racism doesn't exist here, when it does. And the people who are like *that* often make a lot of noise. Anyway, it's a bummer about the fact that he had to go and stick the wolf attacks in the Lost Moon article. If it weren't for that it would read as a nice piece, and I'd be sending Mum a copy."

"Definitely *don't*, not with that wolf comment; it's only going to reinforce her concerns." Ellie finally got around to telling her mother that we were together — and that I'm a wolf — last week, and I happened to hear the phone conversation. She hadn't realised quite how good my hearing was; it didn't matter that I was down near her front gate while she was up in her house, I was able to hear Amaia saying, "*Ellie, what are you doing? Werewolves are dangerous,*" and Ellie's voice rising as she argued back.

"Yeah, I won't."

I sigh, frustrated. Nothing is going quite to plan, right now. I miss my sister and her pups. Lacey's residency visas for herself and her sons have

been delayed *again*, and I have a feeling it's to do with the sudden anti-wolf sentiment here in the wake of the poaching scandal. Technically she could fly here at any time, entering New Zealand on a tourist visa, but that would start a ninety-day countdown to get her residency approved. At this stage it doesn't seem wise to risk that, especially now that we are in December and the government agencies will all be closing for two weeks over the Christmas and New Year break.

It's not the only thing that's been bothering me. There's been a definite increase in humans giving me a wider berth since the full moon attacks, reminding me of the weeks just after the Unravelling, when I couldn't walk down the street without humans crossing the road or darting into stores to avoid me. And then there's Ellie's fae heritage, and what that truly means; although it's been three weeks since the full moon without any further incidents, I still have this underlying fear that the way Ellie's magic manifested might be more sinister than we are currently assuming.

The morning after last month's full moon, Nerilina had met with us down on the beach, examining the patch of mushrooms that had sprung forth out of nowhere. She'd watched Ellie interact with them, watched the way they glowed green from Ellie's touch, and had concluded that Ellie's magic had manifested in response to my own and the power that ebbed with the full moon. *"She feeds off you,"* she'd told us both. *"You two are an interesting case for sure; I've never seen someone use a wolf's magic to amplify their own... then again, this is fae magic that we're talking about, and arguably that's what they're doing with their own kind on a much wider scale. For the two of you however, it seems almost dyadic, which would make sense given your romantic attachment to each other."*

She hadn't been able to tell us what the purpose of the mushrooms were, what they signified, or what might happen in the future, and had been annoyingly nonchalant about the entire thing, shrugging and saying, *"Look, I'll do some research and be in touch, but I don't think it's harmful. You probably just engaged in some sort of fae sex ritual unknowingly. The moon rules all of us creatures in this realm just as it does in the First; that's the one thing we all have in common."*

Nerilina's explanations don't really cut it, as far as I'm concerned. I don't want guesses. I don't want assumptions that Ellie is protected. I want concrete answers, and it's beyond frustrating that I — that we — can't seem to find them. The fae have always kept to themselves, and those in the First



Realm's upper class are as tight-lipped as ever about what is actually going on. Nobody really knows how dangerous the fae are now — the threat has to be significant, for that to be the driving factor behind the Unravelling — and I'm terrified that Ellie might be drawn into this.

She won't be the only one, either. There must be plenty more changelings like her, and it makes me feel sick to think that there's probably someone else out there right now being stalked and taken by the fae. We already know that some have been kidnapped. *Human batteries* is the term Nerilina used, and something tells me she knows more than she's letting on.

Still, I'm selfish enough that I'm not going to do anything further about it. I'm not a superhero. I'm not interested in saving anyone else if it's going to draw more attention to us, to Ellie, and put her in further danger. I spent nine years longing for this woman, and now that I have her back, all I want is to live a normal life with her. So no, I'm not going to go out of my way to save other changeling humans that might be troubled by the fae, and I don't care if that makes me a monster. *I have to keep Ellie safe.*

With our moods soured, the sizzle of the frying pan and the odd *snip* of Ellie's scissors are the only sounds that fill the silence.

"How was your day?" I ask, doing my best to sound light-hearted.

"It was good. I got lots of work done. Mainly admin, but it was nice to catch up on things."

"That's good."

"I caught up with Ana and Betty for lunch too, so that was nice." She laughs, shaking her head as she tucks flower stems into her chosen vase.

"Were they fetishising wolves again?"

I can tell by the way Ellie giggles that the answer is *yes*. We'd bumped into the two old ladies while walking along one of the larger beaches two weeks ago, and they'd acted more like teenagers than women in their 70s at the sight of Ellie and I holding hands. Afterwards she'd received multiple typo-laden text messages from the two of them, demanding details.

"Betty asked if you have any great-uncles that are single."

My laugh is loud in the quiet kitchen. "You're joking."

"I wish I was!"

Ellie sets the completed arrangement on the dining table, returning to sweep up the mess of leaves and discarded stems. When she's done, I'm just about to add fresh pasta to a pot of boiling water, but she stops me with a hand on my arm, and reaches in front of me to turn off the stove.

“What —”

“It can wait,” she says, taking the pasta from my hand and setting it back down on the counter. “I think we both need to feel good this evening.” Her voice is quiet, but I know that tone, and I don’t bother disagreeing with her.

I let her pull me down the hall and into the bedroom, my heart feeling like it might burst in my chest from the way she looks at me, the way she kneels to pull down the waistband of my sweatpants, the look of adoration in her eyes as she pushes me to sit on the bed, kissing my thighs, my balls, my cock. Her mouth feels like heaven, the press of her tongue on *that spot* making me grunt, and when she drags her lips back and forth over the ridge of the head while squeezing my now-swollen knot with her hand, I tip my head back, moaning, feeling like I could already spill into her mouth. She knows it too, humming around me in amusement before releasing me with a *pop*, grinning up at me with those pouty lips from her position on the floor. She swirls her tongue over me once more, making my cock jump as she licks at the precum that leaks forth, before rising to her feet. I let her push me until I’m falling backwards onto the bed, watch her strip naked for me, watch her climb over my body until she hovers, poised above me like a queen on her throne, my swollen dick at her dripping entrance and her fingers on her clit.

“What are you waiting for?” I ask, caught in her heavy-lidded, lust-filled gaze.

“A kiss from my wolf.”

I sit up, lips crashing against hers as she lowers herself on me, the sensation of her hot wet cunt tight around me making me growl into her mouth. “You are the best, baby,” I whisper against her lips, running my hands over her breasts, tweaking her nipples and making her gasp as she rides me. She takes my hand and places it between us, her demands of “touch me,” and “faster,” and “Yesss, right *there*,” spurring me on, making me feel as if I could blow at any second. At some point I’m pushed flat on my back once more, her hands on my chest digging into me as she turns absolutely feral, chasing her pleasure.

My hands squeeze at her generous ass; I love the curves of her hips and thighs, love the way I can dig my fingers into her flesh, leaving my prints behind. “Fuck me Evander!” she cries, and I know she’s close, her head thrown back, her chest heaving with every breath. She likes it hard, my Ellie, and I know she started this, but I’m going to help her finish.

I pull her flush against me and roll us both, until I’m on top, crowding

her, pressing her wrists into the mattress above her head with one hand, fucking her like she begged me to. “Look at me, baby,” I demand, the alpha growl seeping into my voice. “Look at me giving you this cock. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Our flesh slaps together, my knot partially breaching her with every thrust, and she throws her head back once more as I feel the first telltale signs of her orgasm around my cock. My balls grow tight with the need to come in her perfect pussy. “I’m going to knot you, I’m going to fill you, and everyone will know you are *mine*,” I growl, my wolves chanting a chorus of *mate, mate, mate* in my head. I have the sudden urge to claim her here and now with the bite that will bind us forever — my teeth ache with it — and it’s only her orgasm, sudden and overwhelming, that has me maintaining enough sense to stop myself. Instead, I thrust my knot into her with a roar, filling her just as promised, coming hard, her wide-eyed gaze never leaving mine as we climax together. My knot swells within her, her tight pussy still spasming around it, and *fuck*, it’s the best feeling in the world.

“Love you,” she whispers, breathy in the aftermath of her release, her hands caressing my chest, my stomach, my ass, while I hold myself above her. Her eyes devour me, her hands worship me, and my heart is full.

I can’t sleep. Ellie lays curled up against me, head on my shoulder, a leg thrown over mine, and her breath an even cadence that only comes with deep slumber. She looks so peaceful, so beautiful, so perfect.

*What if I can’t keep her safe?*

I can’t shake this feeling that something bad is going to happen. I know it’s most likely my own paranoia — there’s no doubt that losing my sister has made me far more wary than I ever was before — but then again, I can’t tell if it is just my overactive imagination, or if I really should be listening to my gut instincts.

I’m not used to this. Usually, if there’s a problem I can’t fix, there’s someone who can, someone whose skills can be bought for the right price. I would willingly give every dollar to my name if it meant absolute certainty that Ellie was safe for the rest of her life, that any children we have one day,

any grandchildren, anyone at all, are safe from *them*.

*I can't lose anyone else.*

*I can't put my pack at risk.*

The memory of my father's voice in the wake of tragedy, empty and broken as it was, still haunts me to this day. "*You were supposed to put the pack first, and you prioritised that girl instead.*" Ellie is my mate. I have chosen her, and I will choose her, every day, for the rest of my life. I just hope that there won't be consequences to that decision that impact Lacey or her boys, and I fear that my decision to choose Ellie might put them in the path of danger.

I'm clearly not going to get any sleep tonight, so I slide out of Ellie's grasp slowly, quietly making my way down the hall, phone in hand. I hover, naked, near the door, torn between stepping outside and shifting, and doing something tangible that might lead to more answers. I open my text messages, scrolling down, finding the thread from seven months ago.

*Mom.*

She's the only other person I know that could help here. Nerilina may have the wisdom that comes with age on her side, but I trust my mother's knowledge of magic more. When she met and mated my father, she left behind the life she knew in the First Realm, left behind House Maheras and the other powerful witches there, but that doesn't mean she stopped practising magic altogether. She's the one that allowed us all to live as wolves, to know our true selves from the start, using counter spells against the glamour regularly so that even as a small child, I understood what I really looked like, and who I really was. I was able to meet my parents' wolves long before I ever had my first shift, was able to shift alongside my father's entire pack when the time came all thanks to her magic, my wolf wanting to challenge for the position of alpha even back then as a thirteen year old.

*Mom will know if there's anything else we should be doing.*

She will know, but I haven't spoken to my mother in over half a year, not since I broke away from the shifter pack, and it's just another *thing* that eats away at me.

She'd been out of town for the weekend when it happened. She'd known it was coming at some point. So had I, obviously. What I hadn't anticipated was the loneliness I'd feel at losing the relationships with other pack members — all three hundred of them — nor the betrayal I felt when I realised no one else was joining me except for Lacey, and by extension, her

two boys.

My mother, being a werewolf, is not bound by shifter laws. At least, not in the same way; I've never witnessed my father order her to do anything, and I don't think he could even if he tried. But she's his mate, his *fated* mate, and there's no denying that fact. They both bear the scars of their claiming, and I can't think of a time when she hasn't respected the decisions my father has made in his role as pack alpha. She was never going to be on my side. She was never going to do anything but stand beside her mate.

I read over the last texts I have from her again. Technically, I don't need to; I've looked at them often enough that I now know them word for word, and each time I look, I'm torn about whether I should reach out.

MOM

SUNDAY 4 MAY

Van, I just heard from Seth. Are you okay? Are you injured?

Van. Answer the phone, honey.

Van, I've spoken with your father. I know we all knew this was coming, but I'm sorry it had to happen this way. He was baiting you, you have to know that. He'd never actually make Lacey stay with Tyler after what's happened. He said it was time you split off. You're almost thirty, after all.

Please know that I hate this. I hate that it has to be this way. I'm so sorry.

Van, honey, pick up the phone. Please. I just want to hear your voice.

MONDAY, 5 MAY

Evander, I love you. I know this is hard. I know this isn't fair. I'm so, so sorry. You are still my baby boy, I want you to know that. I'm not holding anything against you regarding the fight — what happened is just shifter nature. I don't know how much contact you want with your father right now, but I am here if you need it. I'm going to stop calling and wait for you. Take all the time you need. I want to respect your boundaries. I'm proud of you. You're a good man. You're going to be a great alpha, I just know it. Love, Mom. xx

I never replied to any of them. I was too hurt, too overwhelmed, my body in shock from the onslaught of magic that came from assuming the mantle of an alpha. It didn't matter that my pack consisted of one woman and her pups; to my body it may as well have been a super-pack, one of the ones numbering

in the thousands, biology working the same as it does for all alphas. I couldn't deal with hearing my mother's voice, likely tearful and guilt-ridden. I've heard that tone enough already, since Jenny's death.

My thumb hovers over the onscreen keyboard as I debate messaging her now. I should, for Ellie's sake.

*Mom, I type out. I have a lot to fill you in on.*

Then I remember the last time I spoke to my father on the phone, when he called last month just to tell me that I'm wasting my time on Lost Moon. I remember the disdain still present in his voice, the realisation that I had at the time, that despite finally breaking free, despite not being my father's direct competition these days, things will never be okay between us. Too much damage has been done over the years for it to just be water under the bridge. And although I know that Mom has always kept out of shifter politics within the pack — that she's always been an outsider, despite being mated to the alpha — my pride won't let me go to her with my tail between my legs, knowing that she'll tell him all about it.

I hit the backspace button and close out of the app, dropping the phone on the table by the front door where Ellie and I always leave our keys. I stare at the spot for a minute, at my car keys piled next to hers. I do a slow turn, taking in the bouquets of flowers Ellie brings in daily from her garden, the houseplants she added to the kitchen windowsill, the throw on the couch that she likes to cuddle under every evening. Her multiple shoes, just inside the front door — flip flops, sandals, sneakers, gumboots — because she'll never step foot further into the house unless she's in socks or bare feet, a cultural practice that I've begun to adopt myself.

If I concentrate, I can still hear her steady breaths from here.

*I have to keep her safe.*

She fits into my life so easily. It's as if she's always been here, and I shouldn't be surprised, because that's how it was every summer, growing up. It's *simple* with her. It's fate.

*I have to keep her safe.*

I open the front door with a shaky hand, sucking in great lungfuls of the cool night air. It's not enough, my chest feeling tight, my heartbeat pounding in my ears, no matter how many breaths I take. With a growl of frustration, I let my shifter wolf free.

I run.

I run between the vines, zig zagging up and down the rows, paws eating

up the distance, breath panting in the cool air. I crest the highest peak on the vineyard, the scent of crushed grass and sweet night flowers, the lingering smells of humans and spilled wine, and the earthier smell of broken ground all filling my nose. I run through the paddock that I already think of as Ellie's garden, up and over the ridge, parallel to the road. I scent nothing but the grass and the flowers and the dirt and the sea and the tar on the road, and yet I still fear that the monsters worse than me are lurking just out of sight, waiting for the right moment to take my mate.

I howl at the moon, again and again. It is a call to a pack, but there is no answer. The pack I knew is gone; they stayed with the stronger alpha, and—

I stop, ears pricking, hearing the howling reply. It sounds *wrong*, a mere mimicry of a wolf, but when it sounds again I can hear the voice behind it, and I call back to her. And then I am running, running as fast as my four legs will take me, running towards my mate. She stands in a halo of light in front of the house, and I tear towards her, claws digging into the earth, breath panting, heart racing.

“Van.”

She is all open arms, and I am whining and wagging and licking at her, until I need more. I need to be *Evander*, the man, so that I can have her. She doesn't even blink when I change before her, simply wrapping her arms around my naked body, heedless of the mud and cut grass that coats my arms and legs.

“How did you know?” I whisper, voice hoarse. “How did you know to answer me like that?”

Her pupils are huge in the dark of the night, her hands cold as they caress my face. “Because I know you. Because I know what you need. Now come inside, and let me take care of you.”

“I should—”

“Shhh. *No*. Let me do this for you.”

She pulls me inside, leading me down the hall and straight into the shower. She strips off the oversized t-shirt from my wardrobe, leaving her naked before me.

I let her wash me, let her rub soap into my palms, my forearms, my back. I watch her kneel before me, her hands washing away the debris that clings to my legs and feet, and when she runs her hands back up my legs to grasp my cock, I snap. She gasps in shock as I pull her from the floor, pressing her back against the cold tiles, but the kiss she gives me is ravenous, just as

desperate as mine, her nails scoring patterns down my back as I slide home, deep inside her pussy, where I belong.

**M**y favourite part of owning a vineyard is the physical labour involved. Wolves aren't meant to spend all day sitting behind a desk; we crave the outdoors, the fresh air and open spaces, and the tasks that make you break a sweat. After sleeping in a little too long thanks to my shifted run in the night, I spend the morning working on the vines alongside some of my employees. It's repetitive work, training the young shoots back onto their wire supports, but with the warm sun on my back, a fresh breeze blowing in from the ocean, and good people to talk to, it's an enjoyable way to spend a few hours.

Ellie works onsite, too, and I occasionally catch her scent in the air, drifting down from the top paddock where she gardens alongside the contractors. The new garden space is already beginning to take shape, the amount of work achieved in a matter of weeks astounding, and I couldn't be happier with the way Ellie is running the project. She's a talented woman, and it's a fucking turn on.

I know she was worried about how she'd be perceived by staff, given her work and our relationship. Thankfully, things have been the opposite of what she expected; with the majority of the contractors being non-human — a mixture of shifters, orcs, werecats, a merman in his human form, and Kaito, the dragon shifter — they haven't been bothered in the slightest. As a general rule, non-humans are far more lenient towards workplace relationships, and with good reason. Fated mates — pairings triggered by scent and compatibility — are common enough across a number of species for no one to bat an eye when it happens in unexpected places.

As for the human staff on the vineyard, from time to time I overhear the odd whispered comment about our relationship, but so far it's all been fairly lighthearted, none of it malicious in nature, the obvious romance between Ellie and I fodder for those who love to gossip.

Like today.

“Are they chatting about us again?” Ellie asks, her eyes dancing between me and the two waitresses far behind me, her expression more amused than worried, though I can hear the slight edge of concern in her voice. I shrug.



They are, the words *so cute* and *I'm here for it* being thrown around, but it's nothing new, and I join Ellie on the picnic mat that she's already laid out under an olive tree, wrapping my arm around her waist as I place the platter of cheese and bread on the mat in front of us.

Being able to coordinate lunch dates with Ellie is another perk of this vineyard lifestyle. We meet for lunch every time she works onsite, usually at the vineyard, though we've also forgone food in favour of a quickie at my house a couple of times, too. "Do you want to go somewhere else? We don't have to sit out here, if you feel like you're being watched."

"No, it's fine. It's beautiful here today, with the view. If you're not bothered by it, then neither am I."

"Good. Nobody cares. They've all got that laidback Kiwi attitude to everything, us included."

She leans her head against my shoulder, relaxing into me. "Hmm, true."

I tilt her chin upwards and kiss her, burying my hands in her hair, sliding my tongue against hers, the little moan she makes going straight to my dick.

"Van," she whispers against my lips, and I growl in response.

"I'm just giving them something to talk about."

I'm finishing my shower when I hear the sound of my phone ringing from the bedroom, the tone of it telling me it's a video call coming through. A few seconds later Ellie pops her head in the door. "It's Lacey."

"Can you answer it? I'll be out in a minute." It's not like my sister is any stranger to seeing me nude — that's just a part of life when you're a shifter, you don't change into a wolf while wearing clothes unless you feel like picking up a thousand pieces of torn fabric afterwards — but I draw the line at ever answering calls in the bathroom.

As I towel off I listen to the sound of Ellie's footsteps padding down the hallway to the living room. "Hey!" she answers. "How are you? Hi boys! Uncle Van's just having a shower, but he'll be done soon."

I throw on some clothes quickly, giving my hair a perfunctory scrub with my towel. The only good thing about Lacey's delayed arrival is the fact that it's given her and Ellie time to reconnect over the phone, where the pressure is off, and I know Ellie's nerves about seeing Lacey again have eased

significantly because of it.

I head to the kitchen, listening in on the conversation as I grab another glass of wine for the both of us.

“Van said you’re not letting him take you on a date.”

“I’m letting him! I just said maybe a helicopter ride was excessive when there’s a perfectly good ferry we can catch.”

I hear Lacey’s growl from here.

“What?! What do you want me to do?” Ellie asks.

“I want you to stop feeling like you’re not worth the helicopter ride, or the fancy dresses, or the special restaurants, or whatever else it is that you have hang-ups about. Because the reality is, none of us are worth it, *or* all of us are worth it — however you want to look at it, we all deserve it the *same*. Yes, the vast majority of people in the world don’t get a chance to have these fun experiences, but *you do*. I think you are worth it, Ellie. Stop cock-blocking yourself from having fun. Evander has all this money, whether you like it or not. And he’s savvy, so he’s not going to stop making more money — I know he’s pissing around there with that vineyard and bleeding dollars from his eyeballs with the renovations but it’s *nothing* compared to the big numbers he deals with for his investments, and he’s going to keep investing, and you are going to marry him—”

“—Am I?”

“Yes of course you are, and he is *not* going to make you sign a prenup, because I know what he’s like, and he’d rather eat his own shit than entertain the idea that you two will ever be separated again, so you are going to be a very wealthy lady very soon. So *let him* take you on a *fucking* date that’s fancier than the fish and chip shop down the road. *I love you*, but you’re being stupid, Ellie. Ride in the damn helicopter.”

One thing I can appreciate about my sister is that when she wants to be, she can be incredibly blunt, and knows how to make a point. Ellie’s eyes meet mine for a moment, her cheeks flushed pink and her smile wide. She’s had plenty of summers putting up with Lacey’s sharp tongue, so I know she’s not at all offended by it now. “Alright. I will ride in the damn helicopter. Happy?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, here’s your brother. I love you too. I’m sorry about all the visa drama.”

“Same. We’ll get it sorted. Hopefully we’ll be lounging on the beach

together in no time, Van can be on uncle duties, and I can *relax*.”

I sit down on the couch beside Ellie, and she passes the phone to me. “Hey Lacey.”

“Hi, Van. I’m so fucking tired of this visa bullshit.” She looks it, too, with dark circles under her amber eyes. I feel a fresh wave of guilt at the fact that I left her in the States when I came over here; she’s been finding the last few months hard, even with a temporary nanny.

“I’ve already sent an email to my lawyer,” I tell her.

“Good. Thank you. *Boys!*” There’s a loud crash in the background. “Shit. Just wait a moment, okay?” Lacey drops the phone, so that all I can see on my screen is the ceiling, and I hear both boys crying.

“Everything okay?”

“FINE!”

“It’s not fine,” Ellie whispers in my ear. “She seems really stressed out.” She cuddles into my side, and I wrap an arm around her.

“The boys are a handful,” I murmur, kissing the top of her head. “Sorry.”

“You apologising for them, or for your future offspring?”

“Both. Kids are *years* away for us, but the boys will keep us on our toes plenty. Maybe we’ll get lucky, and our own kids will have your demeanour.”

“I can’t remember you being a problem child. All my memories of you are of you being responsible and protective, even when we were little.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the alpha in me. It’s an ingrained instinct.”

I can still hear crying in the background, and from the sound of it, it’s not going to let up any time soon. I’m pretty sure we’ll be waiting at least five minutes for Lacey to reappear. She’s been surprisingly relaxed about everything I’ve filled her in on regarding Ellie and the fae, but then again, she understands magic better than I do — she has the natural talent, the same as Mom, though she’s never shown any interest in using it. “*If there’s a personal ward attached to Ellie, then you have nothing to worry about, regardless of where she goes,*” was all she’d said in regards to the news that fae were stalking my mate.

“Lacey!” I yell into the phone. “Just call me back when you have the chance!”

“OKAY!”

I end the call, and toss the phone on the coffee table. “Come here.”

“What?” Ellie giggles as I pull her atop me, her legs automatically straddling my hips. I’m already growing hard, and I grind into her. She stares

at me, biting her lip seductively, eyes heavy with lust, before she pounces, lips crushing against mine, her hand grabbing a fistful of my damp hair.

“I love you,” she breathes as I nibble my way down over her jaw to suck on her neck.

“I love you too. You going to ride in the damn helicopter? You going to accept the gifts I get you, and let me treat you the way you deserve?”

“Yes, but for now, I want to ride something else,” she says, voice husky, deliberately rolling her hips.

I slap her ass, hard, and she moans, kissing my neck. “I’ll race you to the bedroom,” I say, unable to keep the growl out of my voice.

I never get around to answering Lacey’s second call.

Fourteen

VAN



“I like this outfit of yours,” I murmur in Ellie’s ear, smoothing my hands over the curve of her hips as we wait at the front desk. She’s wearing an olive-green jumpsuit that hugs her in all the right places, and the low neckline is an absolute tease for a man of my height. Her *pounamu* pendant hangs just above her cleavage, and I’m very much looking forward to peeling the whole thing off of her later.

I *did* get her in the helicopter, but for something far more important than a fancy date in the city. Today her *koro* turns eighty-seven, and rather than catch an hour-long car ferry and then drive a further three hours to the retirement village he lives in on the outskirts of Whangarei, we flew up here. We’re going to take him out to lunch down in Whangarei Basin, visit a clock museum — because apparently that’s what he wants to do, and when you’re eighty-seven you get to call the shots — then return him here. Ellie thinks we’re heading back to Lost Moon after that, but I have a surprise in store for her.

I hear the sound of a slightly shuffled gait and the squeak of wheels, and then Ellie’s *koro*, Hemi, enters the reception area, pushing his walking frame along, a helpful nurse hovering behind him.

“There’s my *moko*,” he grins, his weathered face lighting up as Ellie rushes forward to greet him. I watch them embrace, feeling a sad ache in my chest. He’s aged significantly since the last time I saw him nine years ago, and it’s a shock to see him so unsteady on his feet rather than the sturdy, solid Māori man I remember from my childhood. I step forward, offering my hand.

“It’s good to see you again, sir.”

Hemi scoffs, taking my hand in a surprisingly strong grip for a man of his age, pulling me in for a hug, his free arm walloping me on the back. “Don’t call me that, son,” he says, and memories from my childhood come flooding back, of Ellie and I helping him out in the garden at Ellie’s old house, doing odd jobs with him around the yard on the days that he visited her. “Look at you, eh? How have you been? I used to think you were a big unit when you were a teenager, but look at you now!”

“I’m well, thank you. And you?”

“Oh, I’m getting on with it, best I can. They make me use this silly thing.” He grabs at the walker, and I take a step back, allowing him to pull it into place in front of him once more. “I suppose it’s better than falling, eh? Thanks for bringing my Ellie-girl up to see me, I know it’s a hike. Was the traffic bad?”

Ellie shakes her head, her dark brown eyes — the matching set to her grandfather’s — wide as she says quietly, “We flew here by helicopter.”

“You did not!”

She laughs at his shock. “We did! I’ll show you photos when we get in the car. Come on, we’ve got a taxi waiting for us outside.”

**A** maia, Ellie’s mother, is slightly less enthused to see me again when we meet up with her at the restaurant. While she gives both Ellie and Hemi great big hugs and wide-mouthed smiles, she simply nods at me, and says “*Kia ora.*”

“*Kia ora, Amaia. It’s been a long time.*”

“Mmm. It has.”

She’s a beautiful woman — it’s where Ellie inherited her looks from, after all — and sitting together they look near-identical except for the differences in their hair and skin. While Ellie has a light golden tan, Amaia’s skin is a deeper olive in tone, and her hair is a dark brown that falls in curly waves, only slightly streaked with grey. She barely has any wrinkles, making her look at least a decade younger than her true age of fifty — impressive for a human.

We all sit outside, at one of the tables with a clear view of the marina that the Town Basin is known for. Amaia puts on a polite smile, but I can see the

strain in her eyes every time she glances my way as we eat, despite her father's jovial mood, and it has me wondering what bothers her more: the fact that I'm a wolf, or the history between Ellie and I?

When Ellie rises from her seat, offering to escort her *koro* to the bathroom, I eventually get my answer.

"Ellie told me you renovated the bach," I begin after a moment of charged silence.

Amaia nods. "I did."

"Do you get many people staying in it? It's a vacation rental, right? You live behind it now?"

Another nod. "Yep. I do."

I clear my throat, placing my glass of beer down on the table. "Amaia, if you're worried about me being a wolf, I want to assure you, I'm not dangerous. Not to you, not to your father, and certainly not to Ellie. I am not affiliated with any of those idiots that have been in the news recently, either. They're from a completely different pack."

"I'm not worried about that."

"You're not? Because, you seem—"

"I *want* to like you again, I just don't know if I can after what you did," she cuts in, the directness of her gaze making me feel like a young boy being told off, and I resist the urge to squirm in my seat like I used to do as a kid whenever she used that tone.

"I hope you can. I love Ellie, and I'm here to stay."

"See, you say that, but you also said that last time. I don't know if you remember, but I asked you, that summer, if you loved my daughter. I knew you were sleeping with her, and I knew she was head over heels for you."

"I did—"

"You *left* her, and you left her broken. It took her forever to put herself back together, and I was *really scared*, for a long time. She was eighteen, Evander. Eighteen, and you broke her."

I hate hearing how it was for Ellie, after I left. I'd been in the thick of shock and grief, confused and under the orders of my pack alpha, but I know none of that matters to Amaia. She's always had a close relationship with her daughter, and although Ellie was afforded a lot of freedom during her childhood, when it came to important issues, Amaia was always fiercely protective of her child.

"I know I should have handled things differently. I wish I could turn



back time. I need you to know I'm never, *never* separating from her again."

"You better not, because if you do, I will hunt you down and...I don't know." She runs a hand back through her dark curls, wearing the same pensive expression I catch on Ellie's face from time to time. "I want to like you, but when I think about how hurt she was, I still get..." She cuts herself off, sucking in a breath. "I get really mad. You have no idea."

Given her tone, I think I can take a guess. "I hope you can forgive me someday, because I am truly sorry. I've apologised profusely to Ellie."

"She's too forgiving."

"She is."

"She's got a big heart, my girl."

"She does. It's what I love about her."

Amaia purses her lips, her eyes growing teary as she focuses on the waterway behind me. "You have a big heart, too, Evander. I don't want you to think I don't see that. I've always seen that. You took care of my girl when you were both kids, and I see you taking care of her now. I do see it."

I don't have the words to reply, so I nod, thankful for the sunglasses that cover my eyes, especially when she adds, "I'm still devastated about your sister Jenny. I am very, very sorry for your loss; I think about your mother often, and I feel for her."

This is the trouble with reconnecting with people from the past; it all comes back to haunt you. I nod again, staring at my plate, unable to speak.

"And I see the way Ellie shines, in your presence. Her whole life, she's done that. Lit up for you. Part of me hates that, that my beautiful daughter is happiest when she's with a man — a *particular* man — but I see her happiness and I can't be upset about it, as long as you keep your fucking word this time and don't hurt her."

"Yes, ma'am. I will not...I won't hurt her. I swear it."

"Good." She sighs, shoulders slumping, head tilting to the side. "I'm done growling at you now. Can I give you a hug, instead? It's been too long since I last saw you."

I let out a small huff of relief. "Yes."

Amaia rises from her seat, coming around the table and hugging me around the shoulders. "You're still a good boy," she says, her voice and her scent transporting me back twenty years again, to when she'd pay me in the form of lemonade popsicles for mowing her lawn. "So, what's the plan? Are you going to give me some *mokos*, sometime?" she asks, and I snort out a

laugh in disbelief at the audacity of this woman, asking for grandchildren already, barely a minute after telling me off. She goes for the jugular, that's for sure.

"One day. Not yet. Ellie and I are enjoying being together as a couple. But one day, yes, I want children with Ellie."

"And they'll be...wolves?"

Her tone is cautious, and I pause for a beat, biting back the *Obviously*, that burns on my tongue. I have to remind myself that this is all so new for these humans, and they don't necessarily understand how things work when an interspecies couple has children.

"Yes. If we have kids, they'll be wolves. I myself am half werewolf, half shifter, so in terms of wolf forms, we won't know what that will look like in our children until they reach their teens. They might turn into a werewolf under the full moon. They might be able to shift. They might not be able to do either."

"They'll be shifter, werewolf, *and* human."

"Yes. And a little bit fae, obviously."

Amaia nods, wide-eyed. "And this fae stuff Ellie tells me about... you're keeping her safe, right?"

"I'm keeping her safe. I promise. I won't let anything happen to her."

"Good." Her eyes search my face. "Are you going to come up for Christmas, or do we need to come to you?"

"I'm invited, then?" I say, only half-joking, my heart beginning to race at the mere thought of returning to Bluewater Bay.

"Of course. You're family. We always loved having you kids over at Christmas." It had been a tradition that started the first summer we came here. My mother had connected with Amaia on the beach over those first few weeks of December, while us kids all played together in the sand. Amaia had invited us over for Christmas Day lunch, and my mother had apparently been ecstatic at having made friends with a local to the degree that we would spend Christmas Day together. We Livingstons always had our big dinner on Christmas Eve, so it really did work out well each year. It was always the same food: a stuffed chicken, roast potatoes and *kūmara*, fried bread, trifle, and pavlova for dessert. Hemi would attend, my mother would slip a wad of cash into Amaia's handbag to cover the cost of the meal, and we'd all sit around the outdoor table in the backyard of the old bach, wearing our paper crowns from the Christmas crackers.

“I haven’t been back to Bluewater Bay yet.”

“That’s why I’m asking. I know it’s going to be tough for you, coming back there. Travel is hard on Dad, but...”

“No, I’ll — we’ll come up. Ellie and I. And maybe, if Lacey is here by then, her and her boys too?”

“Yes! I heard you’re an uncle now. That would be lovely. The summers haven’t been the same without you lot around.”

*Nothing’s been the same since Jenny died.*

“I know. It would be nice if we could hit rewind and experience things again. That last Christmas together was a good one.”

Amaia nods, her hand rubbing my back. “It was. You kids brought a lot of fun along with you every year.”

It’s hitting me now just how much I’ve missed these people that were part of my life for so many years. Not just Ellie, but her mother, her grandfather, the other familiar faces that I’d see every year in Bluewater Bay. The old fisherman who lived three doors down from Ellie, and who would take us out on his boat from time to time, the owner of the single store in town that served as a fish and chip shop and corner dairy in one. These people who were so different from me and my family, so welcoming and friendly, and so completely unaware of *what* they were actually inviting into their homes and spaces. “I miss that time, back when life was simple.”

Amaia is very much like her daughter, in that she knows what I’m actually saying. “You miss your Jenny.”

*A sticky ice cream covered hand, reaching for mine as we crossed the quiet road and headed to the beach.*

*The sound of giggles as Seth chased her across the sand.*

*Her tiny voice, so certain as she looked up at me. “You’re going to marry Ellie some day.”*

I nod. It’s fucking lucky I’m wearing sunglasses. “All the time,” I tell Amaia. “All the damn time.”

I usually abhor the idea of shifting ever being used as a party trick to entertain humans, but when Hemi asks if he can see me turn into a wolf, I can’t say no. Amaia joins us in the taxi, and we cruise around Whangarei

looking for an empty park where I'm hopefully not going to get arrested for public indecency while stripping naked.

"That one there looks good," Ellie points, leaning further against me to peer out my window. "You can strip off behind that bush there." It's a tight fit in the backseat of the taxi, with Ellie wedged between myself and her mother, while Hemi rides in the front, and it's a relief when we're all able to climb out.

"Thanks for doing this for him," Ellie says quietly, taking my hand as we walk slowly behind her mother and grandfather. "You've made his day."

"I think *you've* made his day. And he wasn't even bothered by your ears, was he?"

"Nah, he wasn't. To think I stressed myself out by avoiding telling him all that time...God I've been so stupid."

"You've been cautious, and with reason. Don't beat yourself up about it."

In the end, Ellie had agreed to her mother telling Hemi a very mild version of the events regarding Ellie finding out about her fae heritage, and had also warned him ahead of time about my wolf nature. And now, the moment of truth is upon us.

"So he's gotta be in the nude, eh?" I hear him asking as I strip down quickly behind a large flax bush. "Why is that?"

"Because he'll tear through his clothes. He's big — *oh!* See?"

I step out slowly. Amaia takes a step back, face frozen in fear, whilst her father has the opposite reaction, pushing his walking frame forward, a huge grin on his face.

"Dad!"

"He's harmless, Mum." Ellie comes to me, and my tail wags, unable to help myself as she wraps her arms around my neck. "Thank you," she whispers, planting a kiss on my head.

Hemi is still shaking his head in disbelief, even as he offers his hand out for a sniff. I oblige, the man in me only slightly offended at being treated like a dog. "That really you in there?" When I nod, his mouth hangs open in shock.

My ears prick up as I hear the sound of children approaching, and I dart behind the bush again, shifting back and pulling my clothes on hastily, emerging just as the first of the five children appear, their frazzled mother following close behind. "Oh, that's why," Ellie mutters, turning to her mom as I finish buckling my belt. "He would have heard them from down the

street.”

“Crazy,” Amaia replies, frowning at me, and I don’t think I’m winning any *son-in-law of the year* awards, yet.

Ellie is quiet in the helicopter ride, as am I. We’re both introverts by nature that can turn on the charm when needed, and it’s not uncommon for us to have these quiet moments at the end of the day where neither of us have the energy to talk. She perks up suddenly as she realises that we’re descending much earlier than we should be. “Van, why are we landing?” she asks, her voice crackling through the headset I’m wearing. I glance out the window, spotting our accommodation in a clearing surrounded by a small forest on one side and the green rolling hills of farmland on the other.

“Because we’re not staying at Lost Moon tonight. Surprise.” I squeeze her hand. “I’ve asked Cam to go take care of the chickens, so you don’t need to worry about that. We’ll get picked up tomorrow morning, and be back by lunchtime.”

Her eyes search my face. “*That’s* why you insisted on staying at mine last night. When did you pack for me? While I was showering?”

I chuckle. “There’s no fooling you, is there?”

“Oh, I would say I’m feeling pretty fooled right now; I had no idea you were planning this.” I can hear the excitement in her voice, and watch the way her eyes fill with joy as she leans towards the window, pointing. “Is that...is that a huge greenhouse?”

“Not the kind of greenhouse you’re thinking of. It’s our accommodation for the night. A house made of glass. Apparently the stars look amazing from here.”

“Here in the middle of nowhere?”

I nod. The nearest town, population one hundred, is a half-hour drive away on gravel roads, according to the owner I liaised with. It’s as close to the middle of nowhere as you get in New Zealand, anyway.

We land and disembark, stepping out onto the freshly cut grass of the makeshift helipad — very similar to what we have at Lost Moon — and I sling the strap of the duffel bag I’d kept hidden behind the seats over my shoulder. When we’re at a safe distance, the helicopter takes off again, the

sound deafening without our headsets on, fading quickly as it flies out of sight.

And then we are alone.

Ellie is quiet as she walks ahead a few paces, following the mowed path that cuts through the field of wildflowers in the clearing. She stops, and I wait behind her as she takes in the view — the glasshouse surrounded by a cottage garden of lavender, herbs, and daisies, the huge barrel outdoor tub, the pond with a family of ducks floating in the centre of it, all set in the backdrop of native forest, green hills dotted with sheep rising behind that. “It’s completely private,” I tell her. “The owners live on the other side of that hill, and all of this is their farm. No one will bother us here.”

She turns to me, wiping at the tears on her cheeks.

“Happy tears?”

She nods, murmuring, “You did good,” into the front of my shirt as I pull her into my arms.

The glasshouse is almost unbearably warm when we first step inside, and we open every door and window we can. The sound of birdsong filtering through and the masses of indoor plants that fill the bright space make it feel as if we are completely outdoors, and Ellie spins around, taking it all in with a small shake of her head.

“I can’t believe you found this place,” she says, running her hand over the fabric on the bed. “It’s so magical.”

“You like it?”

“I love it.” She smiles softly. “You totally get me.”

“Of course I do. I know what you like.”

“Oh yeah?” She crawls onto the bed, laying back and patting the space beside her. “Why don’t you come and show me what I like, then?”

I pounce on her, kissing the long column of her neck, feeling her racing pulse under my lips and tongue, listening to her shaky exhale as I slide my hands underneath her and pull the tab of her zipper down. I take my time undressing her, inch by inch, kissing every bit of exposed skin, sucking on her nipples until they’re red and swollen and she’s writhing beneath me, then nip her stomach, her waist, her hip with my teeth.

I fuck her with my tongue, the taste of her as sweet as ever, my fingers working her clit, until she's coming hard, her hands grabbing fistfuls of my hair, her whole body tensing as she pulses against my mouth.

When she melts back on the bed I finally undress myself, sliding into her with slow strokes, watching the way her body takes all of me so well. I make love to her on the bed, taking my time with slow kisses and quiet *I love yous* and long, languid stares. "Knot me," she begs. "Knot me, darling."

"Not yet. Later, I promise." Instead, I pull out as she is coming again, and with a few strokes with my hand and a squeeze of my knot I come all over her, thick white ropes of cum coating her stomach and breasts.

"Yes, baby," she breathes, closing her eyes and relaxing back against the pillows. She watches with a half-lidded gaze as I clean the worst of the mess off her, before lifting her in my arms and carrying her to the shower. I take my time cleaning her, washing her hair, massaging her back — doting on her the way she deserves.

**T**he water in the barrel tub splashes around my hips, spilling over the edge, but I'm too occupied to care. Ellie moans, leaning over the wooden ledge while I fuck her from behind, my hands gripping her thighs tightly. Our flesh slaps together, the sight of her round ass driving me insane as I pound into her wet heat. She slides one hand underneath her to touch herself, and *fuck*, I find that so ridiculously hot. "Yes, that's it baby," I growl as her pussy begins to clench down on me. With a grunt I give one last thrust, knotting her, feeling her spasm tight around the swelling bulb while I shoot my load into her. "*Fuck*," I breathe, my knot locking us together, the best fucking feeling in the world. "Fuck baby, that was so damn good."

She moans again. "*Ohhh, fuck!* Oh, yes, it always is."

I wrap my arms around her, lifting her with me, and sink us both into the water. The position works just as I'd hoped it would, and I'm able to relax back on the built-in ledge in the tub, with her knotted and sitting in my lap, her back pressed to my chest. The water laps at her shoulders, and I run my hands all over her, unable to stop touching her body.

The sun dips below the horizon as she leans her head back against me in the hot water. "You need to get one of these tubs," she says, still breathing

heavily.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Exactly the same. I’m going to need to repeat this experience multiple times.”

I laugh quietly. “Where is this giant wood-fired bath going?”

“In the garden I’m designing for you.” She feels me freeze for a moment, and taps my thigh under the water, “*Not* the vineyard garden. A garden out the back of your house, overlooking the bay. If I plant a row of flax bushes on either side, and maybe a screen of *ponga* logs, too? If we angle those right, it will create total privacy. And it’s a freshwater tub system, not a spa, that’s what I love about this. No chlorine.”

I run my hand through her hair, massaging her scalp the way she likes, and she lets out a small moan, wiggling around my knot. The question I had for her dies on my lips, the sensation as she clenches around me deliberately making me groan. I run my hands over her breasts, playing with the stiff peaks of her nipples hidden just under the water until she’s squirming, her heart hammering away in her chest.

“Please,” she whispers, reaching back to clutch at my head, her fingers grabbing a fistful of my hair, her breath coming in short little gasps. I haven’t even touched her clit yet, and I can tell she’s already close, her hips rolling slowly under the water, pulling at the tie between us, cunt squeezing my knot at regular intervals, an expert at her kegels, and it feels so fucking good.

I drag my teeth along her neck and she whines, needy and tense. “Have I teased you enough?” I ask, biting down on her earlobe.

“Yes! Please. *Please*, make me come again.”

It only takes a few strokes of my fingertip over her swollen clit for her to fall apart again with a groan so loud I wonder if the owners hear it on the other side of the hill. I relish the feeling of her coming around me, holding her tight in my arms as she collapses back against me, completely spent.

My forgotten question comes back to me a while later, once her heartbeat has almost returned to its usual cadence. “You’ve been planning a garden for us?”

She hums and takes my hand, kissing my palm. “Maybe.”

“I would love that. Do whatever you need, whatever you want. That space is yours to transform, if that’s what you want to do. I know we haven’t talked about living arrangements—”

“I mean, it’s been about a month, right?” She says with a laugh. “And



here I am planning my big old veggie patch—”

“But that’s what I want. I don’t want to rush you. I want it to be on your terms. Still, if you said to me today that you were ready to move in together, I would say yes. I am saying yes.”

“I practically live there, anyway.” Her hand plays with the surface of the water, sending ripples through the reflection of the fading sunset colours. “From the outside, if we were just a regular couple, the idea of moving in together so fast would be crazy.”

“We’re not a regular couple.”

She shakes her head. “We’re definitely not. I can’t even remember my life without you in it, you know? My memory only starts at age three, anyway. *You* are literally my very first memory.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. My first memory is being on the beach, and you know how when the tide is right out, there’s the sandbank that creates the little paddling pool? I remember sitting in that, and you were with me.”

“We were looking at hermit crabs.”

She gasps. “You remember too!”

“I mean, I remember multiple days like that. It was your favourite activity that summer. I remember complaining to Mom, *why does that little girl want to look at crabs all day?* I thought you were weird. A weird little human girl.”

Her laugh is loud in the quiet evening air. “And now we’re here.”

“And now we’re here.” I hesitate, almost nervous to voice what I’ve been thinking, the past few weeks. She notices, giving me a soft smile over her shoulder, the rub of her hand on my thigh reassuring.

“My parents are fated mates,” I begin. “For a long time, I was very bitter about the idea of fated mates. Deep down I knew the truth about their pairing, but I refused to acknowledge it. I told myself that, for my mother, it was the excuse, the lie, that she needed to tell herself to justify why she’d left her old life and all the expectations that come from being a werewolf female in *her* family, to be with my shifter father. It’s not an excuse, and I know that. She’s bound to him, and he to her.”

Ellie is quiet, her hands moving slowly through the water in a figure-eight, over and over again. “Why were you so bitter about the idea of it?” she asks eventually.

“Because... because the first time I saw you again — when I came back

from college, I mean, nine years ago — my wolves knew, then. They *knew*. And it fucking tore me apart that I couldn't have you, when my father gave those orders." My chest aches now, just thinking about it.

"Knew that..."

"That you and I are fated mates, Ellie." I curl myself further around her, feeling the pull of our tied bodies as I move my limbs, tucking her against me. "You're mine. You always have been, you always will be. And more than that... I am yours." I sigh, planting a kiss next to her ear. "I should have told you earlier, but I've been too nervous."

"Why?"

"Because... I don't want you to think that this devalues our relationship. That it's just biology, or instinct."

Her hand reaches back to caress my cheek while I rest my chin on her head. "I don't think it devalues it. It's comforting to hear it. I know that it was too soon for you to reveal all the wolf stuff *that* summer — and I don't know how I would have reacted, to be honest, the Unravelling was a really big mindfuck to wrap my head around — but part of me really wished I could have known. I used to hope," she adds, her voice dropping to barely a whisper. "I used to hope you'd come back to me, somehow. Even when I was in other relationships. When I was feeling like being particularly cruel to myself, I used to live out little scenarios in my head, of us." She shakes her head with an ironic little laugh. "You weren't a wolf in those daydreams. I could have never imagined all of this. The reality is far better than what I dreamed up. If I'd known, I'd have known my hope wasn't misguided."

My voice is thick when I say, "I'm sorry, baby."

"I don't need you to keep apologising," she says quietly. "I just need you to love me today, and tomorrow, and forever."

"I do, and I will. I always will."

She relaxes against me, and we sit in comfortable silence as the first stars appear. I kiss the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her like I always do, enjoying the peacefulness of this moment.

"So, are you going to bite me?"

I exhale loudly, leaning forward to bite her shoulder, *gently*. Not hard enough to break the skin. "Did Lacey say something to you?"

"Only because I asked. After I looked up a whole lot of stuff."

I groan. "Ellie, why would you do that?" Searching on the internet is the worst when it comes to non-human stuff; most of it is misinformation or half-

truths anyway, and I can only imagine what might have come up when searching about mating bites. “Did you see a lot of gruesome images?”

“Yep.”

“*Ellie.*”

“You’ve been calling me your mate for weeks, every time you’re balls deep in me. So I wanted to know, and since you weren’t forthcoming—”

“You didn’t ask—”

“Because I was too chicken! I didn’t want to rock the boat, and mess things up.”

I run my hand over her shoulder, in the space where yes, I will bite her some day soon. “It wouldn’t have messed things up, but I understand. You’re right, I haven’t said anything myself, for the same reasons. What did your research find?”

“Like you said, a lot of gruesome images. That bite is *deep*, eh?”

“It’s meant to scar, so yes, it’s deep.” I draw a circle on her shoulder with my finger. “The shape of it, since it’s both the upper and lower jaws biting down, is supposed to mimic the outline of a full moon if you do it right, especially with the way the scar heals silver on the skin. And my teeth are sharper than yours, even if they don’t look it right now.”

“Hmm, they always look pretty sharp to me. My question is, am I supposed to bite you too? Because I read one blog that talked about a bond that’s formed, and I panicked a little over the idea that maybe I couldn’t fulfil this part of wolf culture, or...” She shrugs. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re wrong,” I parrot back to her, and she pouts at me over her shoulder. I let out a huff, once more running my hands over her body, enjoying the experience of bathing outdoors with her. “I’m definitely getting one of these tubs.”

“*Van.*”

“I know, baby. I’ll answer the question. The bond that you’re talking about exists, but it looks different for every couple. Remember, most wolves never even meet a fated mate, so the idea of claiming a mate with a bite isn’t even on their radar. But for those that do have a fated mate, usually at least one of the partners gets bitten, and the same magic that allows for wolf shifters to change forms and for werewolves to transform under the full moon comes into play. The bond is different for everyone, but there’s no going back. There’s no divorce, no option to part ways in the future. And for most, the bond manifests in a way where you can sense each other’s feelings.”

She runs her hands over my arms, but doesn't say anything.

"Penny for your thoughts?" I ask, and she glances back at me out of the corner of her eye. "I can tell something is still bothering you, baby."

"Do you ever wish I was a wolf?"

I sit in stunned silence for a moment, Ellie frozen on my lap. "No." My voice is stern, absolute. "No. Ellie. Don't...*please* don't ever think something like that. You are perfect the way you are, and I don't give a *fuck* what anyone else might ever say about it."

"Okay."

"I've had wolf women before—"

She makes a distressed sound, but I continue on.

"—No, you need to hear it, I've had wolf women and *none* of them smelled half as good, none of them, *none of them* have cut it. I don't want to taste another cunt, I don't want to fuck anyone else, I *won't* love anyone but you for the rest of my life. My life begins and ends with you — it always has. And you, you are *perfect* just the way you are." My knot loosens enough for me to slip free, and I lift her gently, turning her to face me. "You have to know that, baby."

"I'm not perfect. All this fae drama, and—"

"*Ellie.*" I can't quite keep the growl out of my voice. "You're perfect *for me.*" I kiss her fiercely, possessively, sliding my fingers between her legs, into her cunt, and even underwater it's slick with her arousal and my seed. "You are my *mate.* My *fated* mate. My mate in every single way." I wrap my free hand around the back of her neck, pulling her through the water to me, until my teeth are at her shoulder once more. *Claim her*, my wolves howl, both our heartbeats thundering at a rapid pace.

It takes a lot of control, but I kiss her shoulder, gently, reverently. "I'm going to bite you, right here in this spot, but not tonight." I slide my hand free from her pussy, release her neck, and hold her by the waist instead as I suck on her neck, kiss along her jaw, kiss the corner of her mouth. "It takes time for the wound to heal. That's why. Besides, it would be irresponsible to do it in this place, in the middle of nowhere with no reception, just in case."

"What? Just in case you hit an artery or something?" She laughs nervously, her eyes growing wide as I shrug.

"I haven't heard of that happening, but...you've seen the pictures, you said. It's not some delicate little vampire bite. When it happens, even between werewolves, the teeth shift momentarily."

“Like wolf teeth in a human mouth?”

“Well my mouth isn’t human, even like this. I’m not human at all, even if I mostly look that way. But yes, wolf teeth, because it’s my wolves that bite you, when I claim you.”

Her eyes search my face, her hand rising to caress my jaw, fingers running over my stubble. I know my pupils will be shining with reflected light now, the *tapetum lucidum* membrane in my eyes allowing me to see in the dark, like all other nocturnal animals. “It doesn’t bother you that I’m not human?” I ask, mirroring her own question.

She shakes her head. “It doesn’t bother me at all. *I see you* for what you are. I see your wolves. I know you’re a wolf, not a human, and I see that, and I love you. Most of all, you’re my Evander. And you’ve always been that, to me. My Van.”

“You’re my Ellie.”

She nods, tilting her head up to kiss my cheek. “I am.”

We eat dinner in our robes by candlelight, feasting on slow-cooked lamb and potato au gratin, with brandy-laced orange chocolate mousse, bite-sized pieces of mille feuille, and a baked cheesecake for dessert. It was all left in the fridge for us, and the only thing we had to do was turn on the oven to reheat it. “What are your thoughts about this place?” I ask her, sipping on my glass of pinot noir. She grins, eyes turning towards the glass ceiling, where the moon now shines above.

“I think it’s amazing. Thank you for bringing me here.”

“I thought it was more you rather than some fancy Michelin star restaurant.”

She nods. “You know me.”

“I do. My down to earth Kiwi girl. I’ll have to take you to Paris someday, though.”

She grins. “I’ve already been.”

“A group tour staying at backpacker lodges and visiting the knockoff version of Moulin Rouge does not count.”

She laughs. “It was a good way to tour Europe on the cheap! It’s practically a rite of passage for young Kiwis to do one of those trips. So

*excuse me.* Your snobby rich boy persona is coming out again.”

I grin back at her. “My apologies.” I look around at the glasshouse, thinking about possibilities. “But seriously, you like this setup here?”

She scrapes her spoon over the plate in front of her, gathering up the last of her dessert. “I do. *Why?*” She sounds so suspicious that I laugh.

“I’m thinking of replicating something like this, but in the South Island. Somewhere we can go for vacation, for skiing trips in winter, that sort of thing.”

There’s a flash of emotion that flitters across her face, and I can’t quite place it until she says, “I’ve never even seen the snow, Van. Poor girls don’t learn how to ski; that’s a rich person’s sport, at least in this country.”

“You’re not a poor girl anymore.” I say it without thinking, and I wait with bated breath to see whether I’ve fucked up. Money and wealth is a sensitive topic for most people, but even more so for Ellie. We’ve been skirting around any talk of this for weeks, but it’s bound to come up at some point, especially if we do think about moving in together.

“Are you saying that about my own money, or because I’m now with you?”

“I feel like this is a trap question, and I’m scared to answer.”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s not a trap. It’s just a question.”

“Both is the answer, then. Because that’s the reality. You’re never going to want for anything again in your life. It doesn’t mean that you’re suddenly going to be some trophy wife — that is not you, and I don’t want that for you. I’m not your sugar daddy, and you’re not a sugar baby — that dynamic isn’t for us, Miss *I can pay for it myself* martyr that you are,” I add, thinking about the things she’s insisted on paying for when we’ve been out together. “But you can do the work that you do because you *enjoy* it, not because you need to pay the bills. And maybe... you might be interested in helping me run Lost Moon? I don’t know, it’s up to you.”

There’s a crease between her brows that I would love to smooth out. We’re supposed to be enjoying the night, and I’m kicking myself for leading us down this track of conversation. “I definitely want to talk about Lost Moon, as in, what our life will look like when we move in together, because I have ideas...”

“I already knew you would. You’re a smart businesswoman, and I would love to hear your thoughts.”

“*But*, I don’t want to get distracted from the conversation when you just

called me a *martyr. Evander*,” she frowns at me, and I guess this is the day I get told off by two Harding women, “I don’t think I’m a martyr. I just like to feel like I still have power, and letting you cover *all* my expenses feels like I’m giving that away. Especially when you decide that you’re going to do so without asking me first, like that time when you started waving your credit card around in the supermarket.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think about that when I offer to pay. All I think about is the fact that my bank account probably has a few extra zeros at the end of it, and so it doesn’t hurt for me to buy your groceries.”

“Yeah.” The despondent tone in her voice tells me she’s not convinced.

“What is the solution, here? Because we’ve already established we love each other. We’re mates. You want me to bite you and claim you and bind you to me forever. I assume you’re moving in with me.” I see her nose scrunch at that. “No? You’re not going to? What was all that in the bath, then?”

“No, I *am*. I’m moving in, obviously. It makes sense practically; I’m not going to make you come live in my tiny house with your feet hanging off the end of the loft bed and you whacking your head on the bathroom ceiling ten times a day for the rest of our lives.”

“Good, because you had me worried there for a second.”

“It’s the assumption that bugs me. You *assume* I’m moving in with you. You *assume* I want you to pay for my things.”

“It’s an assumption based on fact and reality. As you just said, it’s being practical.”

“You know what they say about people that assume? You make an ass out of you and me.”

“I know.”

She takes another sip of her wine, swirling the dregs of it around in her glass, the furrow still present between her brows as she looks at me again. “Don’t get me wrong. I love being here. I love using your fancy shower and having a soak in your big bath with the luxury French soaps. I love all the food and wine and all those creature comforts. *However*, I want to feel like my money has value, too. That I can *contribute*. I know I don’t have as much, believe me, *I know*, but... I want to feel like *I* have value. That’s the crux of it.”

“You do have value. You are the most valuable thing to me. By far. *You*. You’re the treasure. And your value has *never* been tied to money.”

“I don’t think you really get what I’m saying.”

I stop myself from saying that I do. My ego doesn’t have a place here. “Explain it to me again.”

She buries her head in her hands, groaning. “I just want to feel like I have equal power in this relationship, that’s all. When I go to pay for something and you step in front of me with your fancy credit card and tap the payWave before I can, it doesn’t make me feel powerful, Van. It has the opposite effect. I need to feel like your equal.”

“You are my equal.”

She stares at me, hands still pressed to her cheeks. “Says Mr *I assume you’re moving in with me.*”

“I assumed that because of our earlier discussion. But I hear what you’re saying — you want to make the decisions.”

“I want to make the decisions *together*. I’m pretty sure that’s how most successful relationships function.”

“Well, here’s a red flag for you, I’ve only ever been in two relationships — us, nine years ago, and us now.”

She opens her mouth only to close it again with a small shake of her head, her eyes sparkling in the candlelight. “That’s not a red flag. Not to me.”

“No?”

“No,” she says softly, rising from her seat and stepping around the table until she’s standing between my legs. “It makes sense to me, my *mate*.”

“You are my better half,” I tell her, pulling her onto my lap. “We are partners. I’m not going to get it right, all the time, so tell me when I fuck up. Just know that I absolutely see you as my equal. Your power has nothing to do with money, baby. And you have so much power over me, I don’t think you even realise.”

Her robe falls open as she wraps her arms around my neck, pulling herself over me until she’s straddling my lap. She kisses my forehead, her pretty tits a mere inch from my face. “I think I have some idea, because you have that same power over me.”

“Well see, we’re equals.” I run my hands over the curve of her waist and hips, down to her ass, my dick already hard again. It’s impossible to not get turned on by the sight of her, by the feel of her body in my arms. I press a kiss to the curve of her breast. “Now, tell me what you want to do for the rest of the night. You’re the boss.”

She huffs out a laugh against my hair, her hand reaching between us,



slipping inside my loosened robe to stroke my cock. “I don’t want to argue. *This* is what I want.”

“Here?”

“Why not?”

I pull the front of my robe open, then slide my hands back around her waist. She’s dripping wet, the smell of her arousal and my cum from earlier thick in the air, and she sinks down on my cock with ease.

She’s perfect. “You have all the power, baby,” I tell her, meaning every word as she rocks herself on me. Her wet heat feels like heaven around my cock. “You hold my heart in your hands, every moment of every day.”

*Fifteen*

## ELLIE



The thing about the countryside is that it *seems* peaceful, but it's often noisier than the suburbs at dawn. I wake to a sound I recognise instantly, and beside me, Van groans. It's still fairly dark, but through the glass panes of the magical little house we're in, I can see the shape of the hills in the distance, black against the slightly lighter sky.

"What the fuck is that noise?" Van grumbles, eyes still shut. I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing and slide closer to him, his arms coming around me, holding me tight. I breathe in the scent of his skin, planting soft kisses on his chest while my hand drifts down his stomach, following the trail of hair to his groin, my fingers curling around his morning wood. I don't think I've ever seen him soft first thing in the morning; the man is a machine in terms of his ability to get and stay hard. The ache in my pussy this morning is testament to that for sure; I probably shouldn't have begged him to knot me for a third time last night, but past me was feeling particularly needy, and she was definitely not thinking about making practical choices.

I think he's fallen back asleep, but then the loud series of cries pierce the air again, and he *growls*, the utterly inhuman sound rumbling under my ear. "Seriously, I'm *this close* to running out there and murdering that thing, whatever the fuck it is, deranged creature yelling at this time of the morning."

"I'm surprised you don't know. It's a peacock. Or, peafowl, as in plural; it sounds like multiple peacocks and peahens."

"*What?*" He sounds so unimpressed, and I smile against his skin.

"Yeah. They're noisy fuckers when they get going, that's for sure. I had a client who keeps them on his private island, and I had to stay for a week, working on the garden there — it was too tricky to commute back and forth,

because the only transport is private water-taxi or helicopter. I could never sleep past 5AM even though I didn't start work 'till nine. This farm must have some, for some reason."

"You had a client that owns an island? Here in New Zealand?"

"Yeah. He's loaded, and I say that knowing I'm currently lying in the arms of a man who owns over a hundred mil in assets. He's another billionaire with a bolthole in New Zealand, same as what they used to say about your parents. It's in the Hauraki Gulf too, only another half hour sail from Motuwai. It's pretty tiny, but the land is quite elevated, so you don't feel like the ocean is going to swallow you up. Staying there is what got me looking at island properties for myself; I would have never considered Motuwai if it weren't for that job."

He grunts, his hand squeezing my butt. "Well I'm glad that you did. Saved me having to track you down."

"How were you planning on doing that, by the way?" He doesn't answer immediately, and I occupy myself by staring up through the glass ceiling at the purple morning sky, watching the stars disappear one by one. When he still hasn't answered after a minute, I poke him in the stomach, making him grunt. "Hm? How were you going to find me?"

He lets out a resigned sigh. "Hire a private investigator." At the look I give him — which I'm exaggerating, because I do like teasing him, sometimes — he adds, "I know, I know, like a creepy stalker. That's why I'm glad I didn't have to; meeting you again by chance was much more convenient, even if it was a hell of a shock."

"*You* seemed completely calm, *I* was the one in shock."

"Mmm, you didn't see me when your scent first hit my nose, down where I was parked on the street. I seriously almost doubled over with it, it was only Cam's presence and other folks around that stopped me."

"Oh, Van." Just hearing that makes me feel all emotional again. I cling to him, burying my face in the crook of his neck. His stubble has doubled in length overnight, as it always does, and rasps at my lips as I kiss his jaw. He moves suddenly, rolling over me, the thick length of his dick heavy against my leg as he bites my neck with another growl.

"Well I'm awake now. How are you feeling this morning?"

The wonderful thing about Van is that I know he's not going to be offended by the truth. "Like my pussy needs another soak in that bath, this time with those lavender epsom bath salts I saw on the vanity counter."

“That bad, is it?”

“It’s not *bad*, it’s never bad. Am I sore? Yes. Does it stop me from wanting your dick? Nope, but I’m trying to make smart decisions this morning. Besides, if I give her a rest now, she’ll be good to go for another few rounds tonight.”

The rumble of his laugh warms my soul, as does the kiss he plants on my forehead. He pushes himself up out of bed, and I watch his perfect ass all the way until he disappears through the bathroom door, into the only room in here that isn’t built out of glass. “Give me five minutes,” he says, his voice slightly muffled through the half-closed door. “I need this boner to go down so I can take a piss, and then I’ll fill that tub up for you again.”

I pull the blankets up until they’re tucked under my chin, burying myself in them. “Thanks baby, you’re the best.”

“**T**hey really did put a lot of thought and care into this area; they must have hired a designer for it. I wonder who,” I say as I sit on the wooden bench beside the tub, looking around at the pretty little garden, the lime path that leads from the glasshouse to the bath, the way everything is set to centre the pond in the view. We’re both in fresh robes, slides on our feet, and Van kneels beside the tub, stacking kindling and wood methodically in the tub’s firebox.

“I imagine so. It’s quite a professional setup, in terms of booking this place.”

“You didn’t find it on the regular Bachbooker site, I’m guessing?”

He shakes his head. One thing about growing up knowing a billionaire family is that I’ve always had this interesting insight into how the ultra-rich live, and the existence of exclusive credit cards, venues, travel options and accommodations that most people don’t even realise are out there.

“I don’t even want to know how much you spent on this.”

“Good. Don’t ask.” He flashes me a wolfish smile, the kind that never fails to make me swoon.

“You’re so fucking handsome,” I say, and he snorts, flicking the lighter stick on and holding the flame against the newspaper he’s shoved in amongst the wood. “Seriously, honey,” I continue. “I think you’re the most beautiful

man alive.”

The paper catches, the kindling crackling a moment later, edges of the split wood already starting to turn black. “Thank you baby,” he murmurs. His eyes are full of humour as he glances up at me. “You’re still the prettier one of us two.” His expression softens into something more thoughtful. “Certainly the prettiest girl I ever met.”

I watch him manage the fire until he’s satisfied that it’s going to stay lit. It’s one of the things I really appreciate about Van; I may tease him about his ‘rich boy persona’, but he’s actually very down to earth. He gets stuck in just like anyone else. He never hesitated to help *Koro* and I garden, back when we were kids. He used to build driftwood fires on the beach for us, where we could enjoy the crackle of the wood and watch it burn lavender and blue from the salt of the ocean. Running a vineyard involves physical labour if you’re going to work as an actual winemaker, and he has the callouses that prove that he’s out there regularly, pruning vines, setting up irrigation, maintaining soil health, and all the other physical tasks that come along with the job. I know he’s been doing that for the last few years too, at various vineyards around the world.

He’s a good man, and I’m obsessed.

I move closer to the firebox, shivering as the warmth hits me. It may be the beginning of summer, but at dawn there’s still a definite chill in the air. Van fills the tub again with fresh hot water, while I stand warming my hands by the fire. It’s cheating, really, to have a hot tap on a wood-fired bath, but this is a luxury accommodation setup, so I get it. I can’t imagine the average rich-lister being patient enough for the tub to heat to the desired temperature by the firebox alone — that typically takes 3 hours for a tub this size, and, as Van’s father used to repeatedly say when we were kids, *time is money*. The fire here is really for the aesthetic, to maintain the illusion for guests that they’re living an outdoorsy, adventurous life — something that’s likely far from the truth for most of them.

“What time is the helicopter picking us up?” I ask as I strip off my robe, leaving it on the platform edge of the bath and sliding into the steaming hot water. “Ooooh,” I groan, the water lapping just below my collarbone. “The temp is almost too much, but it feels so good once you get used to it.”

“That’s what she said.”

I slap Van’s leg playfully, getting a good view of his swinging balls and thick, flaccid penis as he steps into the bath, sinking in to his shoulders beside

me. The water smells like lavender, thanks to the bath salts, and the whole situation is divine, the sky above now a pretty purple with orange accents on the horizon where the sun is approaching.

“We’re here ’til ten. So we still have four hours. Plenty of time.”

“That’s good.” I relax back, sitting on the built-in bench, and close my eyes, listening to the chorus of morning birdsong and the quiet trickle from the creek that runs both in and out of the pond here. I listen to my own breath, and that’s when I feel it.

The magic.

“Van,” I whisper, keeping my eyes closed. My first instinct is to panic, but I remember what Nerilina told me last time I saw her — “*If you do feel it, lean into it, examine it, and don’t be afraid to draw it out.*”

Van must realise what’s happening, because he silently takes my hands in his under the water, and I sigh, relaxing.

*Feel it.*

This magic of mine feels warm, but not in a comforting way. It’s almost electric, full of energy, full of *life*. I try not to think about what I’m supposed to do with it, and instead focus on drawing it out, from this place deep inside my mind that I never knew existed before, from the part of me that is completely inhuman.

I don’t know how long I sit here like this, examining it, testing the boundaries of this magic in my mind, but eventually Van squeezes my hands gently. He’s held them the entire time. “Baby, open your eyes.”

The sun is up, hanging low above the hills, but that’s not what catches my attention. I gasp, gripping Van’s hands tight as I see my reflection clearly in the still water.

“It’s okay, it’s okay Ellie. It’s fine. You’ve partially shifted, that’s all, it’s the same magic I use all the time. I could feel it, baby, when you did it. It’s the same. It’s the same, alright?”

My heartbeat is thundering in my ears as I stare at the pair of *antlers* poking out from the top of my head. They’re not really antlers at all though. They’re branches, complete with the odd white blossom blooming. I make a panicked whining noise as I watch one of the blossoms open, petals unfurling before my eyes. “What the *fuck?*”

“Ellie, listen to me.” There’s that growly alpha tone in his voice, the one that makes me automatically obey. “You are fine. *Don’t* panic.”

“Okay.”

“*Breathe.*”

I take in a deep breath as Van holds my gaze with his own intense stare, the exhale only slightly shaky.

“That’s it,” Van coaches me. “That’s it, baby. It’s just magic. You control it.”

“I don’t feel in control right now.”

“*You control it.*”

I relax further under the weight of his alpha growl. It’s not quite an order, but his voice is filled with enough command to make me feel as if he, at least, has control of the situation. “*A dyadic magic relationship,*” Nerilina had said to me, describing Van and I, and how our magic interacts. “*You both give and take from each other.*” It explained, Van had mused, why he was able to treat me like another pack member in terms of his alpha magic. If it were anyone else with that power over me, I’d be terrified, but I know he’ll never abuse it.

My eyes drift back down to the reflection in the water. “What am I supposed to do, Van? I don’t want these things on my head!”

“*Ellie. Stay calm.*”

It’s hard not to be alarmed, the whole thing giving me flashbacks to those first few days of the Unravelling, when I felt so out of control, so terrified of the change to my body, so horrified by the riots overseas and the mass panic here in New Zealand and the non-stop *Breaking News: The Unravelling* banners that scrolled across the TV screen. There’d been nothing but news coverage for a week, the utter confusion around how society would continue to function knowing there was a whole *second world out there* playing out in real time. The fact that a number of well-known people — two government ministers, multiple news reporters, local celebrities, sportspeople including beloved rugby players and Olympic legends — had all turned out to be non-human had shaken regular New Zealanders to their core, and the reactions of everyday folk, ranging from fear to outright aggression, had cemented in me the need to keep my newly-discovered nature hidden.

“I’m trying, but I don’t want to look like this.”

“And you won’t. Not permanently. We’re going to shift you back, right here, right now, as soon as you calm down enough to be in control, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Do you want me to help *make* you calm down? I can use my alpha bark.”



I shake my head. “No. No, just... just give me five minutes.”

“Okay. You tell me what you need, baby. I’m right here. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

I nod again, taking another deep breath, sinking into the water until it’s up to my neck, floating my way closer to him. I go to hug him, making another distressed sound as he says, “*Careful*,” and ducks his head out of the way of one of these fucking *things* stuck to me.

“Shh, baby, you’re okay, let me hold you like this,” he murmurs, helping me move carefully until I’m straddling him, my head tilted to the side over his shoulder so that the antlers don’t catch. They’re not huge, but they could definitely poke out an eye, and I’m horrified by the thought.

“I feel like a freak.”

“I turn into a wolf, and I turn into a werewolf. Am I a freak to you?”

“No.”

“You’re not a freak, Ellie. You aren’t entirely human, but that does not make you a freak. There are over three billion non-humans in the First Realm, did you know that? And millions more in this world. None of them are any different than you and I — we’re all people, despite all the differences.”

“I know.”

“Good. I know it’s a shock to see yourself physically change. I felt the same the first time I turned under the full moon. I didn’t think I would find it strange — I’d already been able to shift for a few months at that point — but there’s something more monstrous about that werewolf form that bothered me when I looked in the mirror, and I guess it was also the looks I got from pack members, too. I should have known, back then, that they’d never back me as an alpha, being the werewolf mutt that I am.”

The sound of his voice is soothing in my ear. “They’re idiots. You’re the best alpha.”

He sighs against my neck. “The point is, I knew this would happen to me for years before it did, and it still took some getting used to, so go easy on yourself.”

“I’m scared for other people to see me this way.” I feel hot and cold all at once, and it’s got nothing to do with the bathwater. It’s pure terror in my veins, stress clawing at me from the inside at the realisation that I am once again back at square one, knowing *nothing* about myself and my true nature.

Van’s hand rubs comforting circles on my back. “No one else ever needs

to see you in this form, but if the time comes that you choose to look like this in public, I will be by your side.”

“Thank you.”

“I know how capable you are, and how you can take care of yourself, but I do love taking care of you, baby. People think being an alpha is all about violence and aggression, but it’s not. It’s about protecting and caring for your people.” He plants another kiss on my shoulder. “You take good care of me too, and I always appreciate it.”

I think back to the other night, to waking to the sound of Van’s wolf howling alone in the night, to the utter despair I’d sensed within him, and the way I’d thrown inhibition to the wind and howled back, calling out to him on instinct.

*It’s give and take.*

I know I can’t really believe the certainty in his voice today. He’s afraid of what my magic means too, because there is so much unknown around it. But in this moment his assurance is exactly what I need. “I love you,” I whisper. “Thank you.” I run my hands over his back, feeling the strength of him under my fingers, all that muscle and raw power a promise that *I am safe*.

“Mmm. Love you too. And for what it’s worth, I think you look fucking badass in this form.”

I shake my head, forgetting the antlers just long enough to catch the edge of Van’s ear. “Only you would say that,” I tell him as he moves his head out of the way with a small smile.

“No. For starters, in the First Realm people know antlers equal fae, so you have that going for you.”

“You’re saying people are going to be scared of me.”

“In a good way.”

“There’s no *good way*, Van! I don’t want to be *scary!*” I feel lighter though, with him talking me through this. I peel slowly back from him, and stand in the tub. The water comes up to my waist, and I wait for it to still.

The reflection isn’t perfect — it’s a tub of water, after all, not a mirror — but as I stare at myself I try to see what he sees. I tuck my hair behind my ears, and with the pointed shape of them, combined with the dark brown branch-antlers, there really is no denying that I am fae.

Van rises to his feet, stepping behind me, peering over my head at our joint reflections. “You look beautiful, Ellie.”

Standing there naked, my breasts exposed to the cool air, I can almost see that I do. If I was looking at someone else, I would absolutely think that about her, that she is some beautiful ethereal creature, someone that looks like they're one with nature. I'm not quite there with myself — the shock of it is too soon — but maybe it's not as bad as I initially thought.

"You said you know how to make them go away."

"Yes. Sit back down, and relax, the same as you did before when you first tapped into your magic."

"That's easier said than done," I grumble, but I do as he says, letting out one more big sigh as I slide back into the water. I close my eyes, smiling briefly as I feel Van reach for my hands.

"Feel for that magic, just as you did before."

It takes time to clear my mind, to focus on nothing, but once I do, I can feel it. *There*. Now that I've done it once, it seems as if the path to it in my mind is clearer, like muscle memory, I guess.

"You've got it," Van says quietly, the deep rumble of his voice filling me with warmth.

"You can feel this?"

"I can, yes. Now all you have to do is push it back. That's it. Put it back away."

*Push it back.*

It's surprisingly easy to do, that magic sliding back into its spot, buried inside my soul. *So strange.*

"You did it."

I keep my eyes closed, because I can feel something else, some other magic, and now that I've noticed it, now that I've dug it out of its hiding place within me, it feels uncomfortable, like a lump under the skin. "There's something else here," I say. "Some other magic that isn't mine."

"Probably Nerilina's protection ward. Don't touch it."

"Okay." I pull away from it all and open my eyes, relaxing in relief as I touch my head and find nothing but my hair there. "Oh, thank god." I'm laughing, shaking my head, the stress floating off my shoulders. Van gathers me up in his arms, spinning me around in the tub, heedless of the water spilling over the sides.

"I'm proud of you."

"Thanks. I'm exhausted and the day hasn't even begun." I feel drained; this has been far too much thinking before breakfast.

In the distance a peacock cries out, and I lose it in a fit of laughter; a ridiculous emotional release for an equally ridiculous morning.

After returning to Lost Moon and confirming with Nerilina that we'll meet in the evening to discuss the latest developments, I decide to spend the rest of the day working with Kaito's team on the vineyard's garden. After all, gardening is the one thing that usually helps clear my head. The smell of fresh plants, the breeze in my hair, the hum of bees and insects, the reassuring way that nature just continues to go about its business every day, regardless of what's going on in the world — all of that calms me, connects me, makes me feel centred.

Even so, today I'm still riding that wave of restless, frenetic energy, and planting out rows of native flax and hebe in Lost Moon's garden hasn't done much to settle that feeling. I'm hoping that seeing Nerilina tonight will help me to relax a little, but at the same time, I'm not holding my breath.

Three weeks of solid work by the twelve-person team on the garden space has transformed the first third of Lost Moon's huge paddock from an uneven, grass-covered block of land to one with real structure. I always love this part of the job. There's nothing more satisfying than seeing your designs taking shape, a basic parcel of land turning into something beautiful and functional. There's still a huge amount to be done, but we're tackling the land in three stages, meaning that we can complete and open up the first acre to the public in time for the holidaymakers' rush just after Christmas.

I finish patting down the soil around the final plant and stand, stripping off my gloves with a sigh, catching Kaito's gaze as I do so. The dragon shifter's dark purple wings move ever so slightly from where they sit folded against his 'human' back, but I'm not familiar enough with dragons to know what that body language actually means. Even so, his green reptilian eyes are thoughtful as he stares back at me. I'd never met a dragon-shifter before working with him, and had assumed that the term dragon *shifter* meant he appeared fully human most of the time, so it had been a surprise to me when he'd shown up with huge wings and a pair of lilac horns sprouting from just above his temple, his glossy black hair falling around them.

I have seen him without both the horns and wings; he makes them

disappear in order to drive his car or operate a piece of machinery. It makes him look almost entirely human, bar the emerald eyes with their striking vertical pupils, but other than that he remains in this half-shifted state — sometimes with the addition of a long purple crocodile-like tail — and it's something I've been meaning to ask Van about.

Kaito's wings make that same small movement again. "Something has been bothering you today," he says conversationally.

"I grew antlers this morning."

The verdant stare doesn't change, and if it weren't for his filmy inner eyelids blinking once over his green eyes, I'd think that he'd suddenly turned to stone.

I shrug when he doesn't react any further, pulling my gaze away from his unnerving stare to look out at the ocean view instead. "So there's *that*."

"Was it done on purpose?"

"Sort of? I was pulling out my magic, and pulled those out of my head, I guess." I give a self-deprecating snort, and when I glance back, the ever-present crease between his brows has deepened.

"And clearly you mastered shutting that magic back away."

"I wouldn't call it mastered. Van helped. A lot."

"Hn." He stares again, his pupils moving just enough to indicate that he's looking me up and down. "I don't know what the fae want with ones like you, but there was another kidnapping last night."

"*What?*"

"Not here. In Australia — Mount Isa."

"Mount Isa? The mining town?"

He gives a curt nod. "I have a friend there who sent me some video footage that's doing the rounds. The higher-ups have been doing their best to keep it out of the news cycles. Do you want me to send it to you, or to your mate, or neither of you?"

"Both. Both of us, please. What do you mean, the higher-ups are keeping it out of the news?"

"I mean exactly that. Even that article you found — Evander shared it with me, on my first day here — that's now been pulled. They don't want people to know that unsuspecting changelings are being taken."

"But who are *they*? Who doesn't want us to know?"

His reptilian stare is transformed by a wry smile. "I think you should ask your mate that question. He's a descendant of one of them, after all."

“I didn’t think it was ever going to be relevant to get into detail about all of the werewolf politics around Mom’s side of the family. Obviously I’m sure we would have talked about it eventually, but —”

Van’s interrupted by the girl working behind the counter at the fish and chip shop, her voice shrill as she rattles off another order ready for pickup. “Three chips, two kūmara chips, four crumbed snapper, two deep fried moro bars, two hash browns, two hot dogs, one beef burger, one sausage, and one pineapple fritter!”

I poke his arm. “That’s us.” It’s a huge order, because Van is having one of his *big meal days* as I’ve come to think of it. It’s to do with how much magic he expends, either through shifting or other means, and I guess the events this morning left him feeling hungry. Using my magic hasn’t made *me* any hungrier, but then again, I don’t have the fast metabolism that wolves do. Even when he’s not having an extra hungry day, he still eats more at each meal than any human I’ve ever met.

“I don’t know why they don’t just yell out the name it’s under,” he grumbles, getting up from the plastic seat beside mine to collect the two boxes of paper-wrapped parcels.

“You feedin’ an army, mate?” one of the other customers jokes, his muddy gumboots and black singlet screaming *typical Kiwi bloke*.

“Not quite.” I can tell Van is stressed by the forced slant of his smile, his usual charm not quite present. The video footage Kaito sent us was disturbing to say the least; taken on one of the CCTV cameras within the bowels of a huge Mount Isa mine, it showed a deer with glowing green eyes appearing in the dim corridor, before charging at a man who would easily pass for a human apart from the pointed tips of his ears. Both had disappeared in a flash of green and blue light, with the entire encounter lasting mere seconds. When slowed down, the flash of light appeared to be a spinning circle. *Portal magic* is what Van had called it. A door through to the First Realm.

I pick up the conversation again once we’re both seated in Van’s car. The chip shop is only a quick drive to the nearest beach, and Van hits the ignition button while I summarise. “So, basically, your mother’s grandmother is a really powerful witch, as well as being the head of this werewolf clan.”

“Yes, she’s the head of the Maheras House.”

“They’re all werewolves?”

“All the Maheras? Yeah, what else would they be?” I shrug, and he continues, looking over his shoulder as he reverses out of the tight carpark. “Werewolves make up the majority population in the city where they’re based. Their society — like everywhere in the First Realm — has mirrored life here in this realm to a degree, with technology et cetera, but politically, the Maheras still act like feudal lords. They’re matriarchal, did I ever tell you that?”

“Who are?”

“Werewolves.”

“All werewolves?”

He nods. “It’s why, in general, werewolves and shifters don’t mix.”

“Ah. They’re not a fan of the wolf shifter boys, I take it?”

Van pulls out onto the main road. “Something like that. It’s not to say that werewolf men aren’t powerful or aggressive in their own right — most other species can’t tell the difference between a werewolf and a shifter, on first glance — shifter or were, the physical build is almost always the same.”

“Big and buff, right?”

“Yep. If you watch werewolves interact however, you’ll see in general — and I know I’m talking in very binary terms right now and it doesn’t fit everyone — but in *general* male weres defer to women more often, when it comes to the final say. For shifters, it’s not gender, but pack hierarchy that matters. And although anyone can be born an alpha, the reality is that on average, there’s more male alphas out there in the shifter population. About 75%, last I heard. So there’s a bit of a conflict there, in terms of cultural expectations between the two different subspecies of wolf.”

I take a moment to process what he’s said, and trying to apply it to what I’ve seen of wolves. “How does that work with your parents?”

He shrugs. “Do you feel like I boss you around? That I don’t see you as an equal? Because I’m a shifter alpha. I have the alpha bark, and we know it works on you. I’d never abuse that, you know that, right? I’ll never use it on you unless you want me to. I should have... I should have asked for your permission, before I ever tried using it on you but —”

“It’s okay,” I laugh. “I’m not ever going to complain that you have the ability to make me come with your voice alone, and I needed it that first time you knotted me. I trust you completely. I know you won’t abuse it. Maybe if we didn’t have the history that we do I’d be worried, but I know you. You’re not someone who is going to abuse your position. And I know we’re equals.”

Even with the issue of money coming to a head last night, I know that it's not really an issue with equality. The problems I have with him jumping in and paying for stuff are partly my own sensitivities around how I view my own worth, and partly his immense wealth and privilege blinding him to the fact that just because he has so much more, it doesn't mean he should assume that I need his assistance. But when it comes to being us, to being heard when we do voice our opinions, we're equals, and that's the most important fact.

It doesn't surprise me that he's thinking about the same thing. "With the money thing..." He glances at me nervously.

"Yeah?"

"I think it was easy for me to fall back into the pattern of how we did things the last time we were together, but back then we were already in very different positions in life, and that power dynamic was imbalanced. So I'm sorry I didn't think about the fact that yeah, it's fucking condescending to have someone elbow their way in front of you in the supermarket because they've decided to pay for your groceries."

I reach over, patting his thigh. "It's okay. Let's forget about it and move on. We've gone off on a tangent — tell me how it works with your parents when they're both supposed to be the boss according to their cultures."

"Honestly, I don't know entirely and I do not want to know what goes on behind closed doors, but they make it work. I'll be the first person to say I think my dad's an asshole when it comes to a lot of people, me included, but he worships my mom, and sure, they disagree on things and argue like any couple, but that fated mate thing binds them pretty tight."

Having grown up in a single parent household, I'd always watched Van's parents and the way they interacted with curiosity. I think about the tender moments I've witnessed between them — the small touches and knowing looks, and the way Weston always seemed to watch his wife with a sense of reverence that was reserved only for her — and I know what Van is saying is true. "He's devoted to her," I say, and Van nods.

"Yeah. Obsessed, devoted, all of that. You've seen them together, they're a tight unit. And they had to be from the start, because neither side was happy with the relationship — no one could deny that they're fated mates, but it only made it marginally easier for my father's pack to swallow."

I open my mouth to ask *would they have gotten together if they weren't fated mates?* but I stop myself in time, thinking through that question. Because if I ask that about them, when I know that Van and I are also fated



mates, what am I really asking? There's some things I'd rather not think too hard about. I love Van. I've always loved Van. Asking hypothetical questions like that won't make any positive difference, because it's not something that can be changed. The whole *fate* part of fated mates is pretty telling.

"Okay, so going back to your mum and these werewolves — Bronte left the Maheras clan when she met Weston?"

Van nods, flicking on the indicator and pulling off onto the winding road that leads down to one of the larger beaches on the island. "She left the clan and the coven." He glances at me, and I must look confused, because he explains further. "The big traditional Houses in the First Realm — the ones with all the power — each of those are a clan — huge extended families —"

"Like *iwi*? Everyone can trace back to common ancestors."

"Yeah, it's similar. And within each clan, there's a core group of witches, wizards, druids... whatever you want to call them. People that wield magic. They're usually organised into a coven, one within each House. Remember, in that realm, those with powerful magic also wield political power, it goes hand in hand."

"So not every werewolf is a witch or wizard?"

"No way. Definitely not. At the heart of the Maheras clan is the Maheras coven. And Mom was considered one of the stars of the coven, until she left when she mated my father. It was a huge controversy for Mom to *settle* for a shifter."

"Because marrying a dude worth a billion dollars is settling. *O-kay*."

Van shakes his head, pulling into the beachfront carpark of sorts; everyone parks on the grass bank overlooking the sand at this particular beach. The wind has picked up and the sky is overcast now, making the water grey-green in appearance, topped by white-capped waves. We choose to eat in the car, and Van cuts the engine while I start opening the first parcel of food, setting it down between us, precariously perched over the handbrake and drink holder.

"You have to understand, these people that live and die in the First Realm — especially those at the head of the old Houses that still collectively rule the realm — they don't see any value at all in this world. That's why the First Realm is the First, and this place is the Second."

"Nobody calls this place the Second Realm."

"Everybody on that side *does*. And that's the polite name for it."

"What are the other names?"

Van frowns behind his sunglasses, and I watch him take a piece of fried fish, tearing it into pieces so it can cool faster. He sucks the salted grease from his fingers as he stares out at the ocean. “Way back, people commonly called this realm *The Farm*. You still get the odd extremist groups popping up that would like the world to be that way. It’s why it doesn’t feel like a stretch at all to assume that when those fae are kidnapping humans,” he nods at his phone, sitting in the hands-free dock on the dashboard, “they are taking them to use, to *consume*, in some way or another.”

The skin prickles at the back of my neck, and I shudder involuntarily. “I take it that humans are the farm animals in this instance.”

He nods, picking up a bite-size piece of fish and popping it in his mouth, and I can’t help but focus on the sharp points of his canines as he eats. “Vampires have no choice. They have to feed on blood, and humans are their preferred flavour by far. And sure, they don’t drain them dry, these days. It’s all above board and consensual in every single instance, if you want to believe the propaganda.”

“You don’t think that’s the case?”

“I don’t see how it can be, Ellie,” he says, sounding so resigned. “I know this morning I said that we’re not freaks... and I meant that. I don’t want to sound contradictory. The vast majority of non-humans are perfectly normal, decent people, but there are bad people in every species — there’s plenty of monstrous humans, after all — and it’s naive to think some of these darker things aren’t happening out there. Which is why paying for these protection wards is worth it.”

“But you don’t have a personal ward attached to you, do you?”

“I don’t need one, baby. I can be just as monstrous as anyone who wants to harm me.”

I shake my head. “I think you should have one. I would feel better, now that you’ve told me all of this.”

He makes a dismissive tone.

“*Evander*.”

He smiles around another mouthful of fish. “Oh, I know I’m in trouble when you use my full name. The only other time you use it is when you’re begging for cock.”

“Well I’m definitely not doing that right now. *Jeez*. Sometimes I think back to three years ago and go *what the fuck*, life was *so simple* back then, and I didn’t appreciate it.” He eats silently, and I realise I need to explain that

point a little more. “I don’t mean life without you was great, I’m not wishing for that.”

“I know.”

“I just mean it was a lot less scary. It didn’t feel like there were monsters lurking under the bed. Now I think everyone has just grown numb to the idea that there’s this danger present.”

“They don’t know the half of it.”

“That’s what I’m beginning to realise. I don’t like this feeling, Van. I don’t like living with this fear constantly in the back of my mind.”

“It will get better. We’re checking in on things today, making sure you’re safe, we’re safe, and then we can go back to our day to day life knowing no one is going to be able to do anything untoward to you.”

I nod. That is what I want. The past few weeks, I let myself forget all about the fae trouble, and let myself get caught up in all the fun parts of our relationship — the reminiscing, the loved-up sex, skinny dipping in the ocean, and evening walks through the local nature reserves. It’s been wonderful, but...

“What about all the other people out there?” I ask. “All the other changelings like me?”

Van frowns, his eyes searching my face for a moment. “You know what they say, that you have to put your own oxygen mask on first. I’m sorry if that sounds cruel, but neither of us are in a position to worry about anyone else right now. It’s not our responsibility to worry about.”

“That doesn’t sit right with me.”

“I know. It’s just something you’re probably going to have to accept.”

I t’s all dense native forest here on the eastern side of the island, beautiful and ancient and, for the most part, untouched. As we drive up the long, winding driveway that leads to Nerilina’s house, we pass ancient *kauri* trees with huge, thick trunks, their branches covered in epiphytes and vines as they stretch up to the sky. The scenery reminds me of the forests back home in Northland, and I’m hit with a sudden longing for a different place and time, back when Van and I were both so young and optimistic, and still lived with the assumption that the universe would never hurt us.

Van takes a hand off the steering wheel to pat my knee reassuringly. “You okay?”

I shake my head. “I’m scared,” I admit, as the trees thin out and we reach the clearing where Nerilina’s house sits. I’ve been doing my best to stay calm all day, but it’s been hard. In the end, I barely had anything to eat for dinner, Van eating my portion of chips as well as his, the anxiety churning in my gut making my appetite disappear completely. And it’s been a fucking long day — it feels like what happened this morning actually occurred sometime last week.

Van’s huge hand covers mine. “It’s going to be okay.”

When we pull up, Nerilina is waiting for us outside her house. “How are you?” she asks, arms open, the scent of rosemary and thyme clinging to her as she plants a kiss on my cheek.

“Stressed.”

She clucks her tongue. “Well that’s not what we want, is it? Come now, we’ll drink some calming tea, and then we’ll take another look at your magic. It will be fine, I promise.”

Nerilina sets her teacup down with an air of finality. “We’re going to go sit outside, on the back lawn, to practise our magic today.”

“Okay.”

“Do you know why?” she asks.

I shake my head. “I know nothing.”

That earns me a roll of her eyes. “You know a lot more than you’re giving yourself credit for, given what you did this morning.” She gathers up our empty teacups, setting them on her kitchen countertop, continuing to speak as she moves between the surprisingly modern kitchen and dining area, tidying up. “There are many different types of fae — subspecies, you could say, similar to how wolves are divided into two very different categories. I’m no expert, but I think it’s fairly reasonable to assume that your fae ancestor was of the forest or garden variety.”

“So outdoors is better for practising magic?”

“For you, yes. It doesn’t mean you can’t practise it right here, sitting at my kitchen table, but my goal today isn’t to make things harder for you. I

want to see what happens when you have all the correct variables in place that make accessing your magic easy. Besides, the prior incidents of your magic manifesting all have two things in common: being outside in nature, and *him*.”

I look at Van, and he shrugs. “Makes sense. She’s always said your magic is intertwined with mine.”

“It’s because you two are soulmates. I felt it the first time I met you two together. It’s a very rare thing, what you two have. You should treasure it.”

“We do,” Van and I say in unison, making Nerilina’s lips turn up in a close-mouthed smile.

“*Cute*. Come on. Out with you two, down the hall and to the right, and you’ll find the back steps. I’ll be there shortly.”

I follow Van out and sit down cross-legged on the lawn, patting the space beside me. He sits, moving gracefully for a man of his size, and takes the hand I offer him. Nerilina joins us a moment later, sitting opposite us both, reaching for our free hands so that we form a circle.

I close my eyes automatically. “Alright,” she says after a moment. “I want you to breathe deep, into your diaphragm, into your belly. Hold it there for a moment, that’s right. Now release that breath slowly in five, four, three, two, one. And we will repeat.”

I don’t know how long we continue the breathing exercises for — long enough that all of my focus is now on my own breath, even the sound of her voice just a soothing presence in the background — but I feel the shift in the air, the shift in my *mind*, when we move into the core part of the session. “Ellie, I need you to access your magic, just as you did this morning. And remember, you control the magic. It does not control you.”

It’s even easier, now, to reach for that magic and pull it out. I can’t see it per se, but I can feel it, feel the soft green glow, the same colour as the *inanga pounamu* I wear around my neck, not that harsh, almost fluorescent glow of the fae —

“Ellie, *focus*.”

“Sorry,” I whisper. Van squeezes my hand gently, only a slight change in pressure, but enough to make me smile.

I reach back for the magic once more, pulling, pulling, and this time I can feel the moment my form shifts, the moment my body changes shape. It’s only antlers, but I feel the weight of them this time, sighing in my soul, because *this is me*.

*This is still me. This is me in my power.*

“Very good. Open your eyes.”

I do as she says, releasing their hands and reaching up to tentatively feel the base of my antlers. The bark is surprisingly rough under the pads of my fingers, and I shudder at the thought of any of these branches getting caught and snapping on something. I bet that would hurt.

“Definitely a garden fairy,” Nerilina comments. “No wonder you’re so good at your profession.”

“I’ve thought of that, just recently.” I screw up my nose. “Now I feel like a cheat.”

“Don’t be silly. You can’t cheat when you’re simply being who you are.”

I laugh nervously at her snappish tone. “Okay.”

“Ellie.” She leans forward, violet eyes wide and piercing in their intensity. “I know these changes and discoveries about yourself take some getting used to, but there is nothing wrong with you. It’s important you realise that.”

“I-I do.”

“Good. Alright. Grow a mushroom.”

“What?”

“Grow one, right here.” She taps the grass in the centre of our circle. “We know you can do it involuntarily. Grow one here, *now*. Intentionally, this time.”

“I don’t know —”

“You *can*.”

“*Oh-kay*.” I know I sound like a pissy teenager, but I can’t help getting a little defensive when she turns into a version of the grumpy teachers I had in high school. I sigh, touching the grass. Part of me wants to go, “*See, nothing happened!*” but I know I do actually need to try first.

I close my eyes, going back to that sense of magic that I have, now that I know where it sits within me. It’s strange to know that it’s been there all along, buried beneath layers of assumptions and fears about myself, and I pull at it with the intention of what I want to do, pulling that magic out and through my body, down my arms and to my fingertips. There’s more magic here, though, more than my own, because I *need* this additional magic to achieve what I want. I open my eyes, watching the caps of mushrooms push up from the earth, feeling the green of my magic and the gold of Van’s combined. Five mushrooms, pink and purple spotted things, form a tiny

circle. A *fairy circle*.

“Did you feel that, Evander? How she borrowed what you have?”

“Yes.”

I look between the both of them. “Is that a bad thing?”

Nerilina shakes her head. “No. It’s simply how you work. We already know you’re mostly human, and alone, your magic reflects that — it’s not that strong. However, you possess that fae ability to draw on the magic of others, and *that* is a powerful thing. Now, I don’t think you’re a risk to anyone, because anyone who has enough magic that’s worth stealing would also know how to block you out.”

I lean back. “Why would I be a risk? I’m not dangerous!”

“Anyone with power has the potential to be dangerous, Ellie.”

Van strokes my back. “So, she draws on my magic, specifically,” he says. “Is there any harm in that?”

“I don’t think so,” Nerilina replies. “Like I’ve said before, you two are soulmates, your magic is definitely dyadic — I feel you draw on her, sometimes, whether you realise it or not. You two are a unique case for sure, but I think the nature of your relationship has also trained the magic to be that way. You’ve both known each other for so long. I would be curious to know if there’s any incidents from your childhood where perhaps the magic came through.”

“That was pre-Unravelling,” I say. “I didn’t know a thing about any of this stuff back then.”

“I can’t think of anything, no. Seriously,” Van adds with a laugh, “I was shocked when I found out she wasn’t fully human.”

“Mmmhm,” I nod. It’s crazy to think that was just over a month ago, now. So much has changed in so little time.

Nerilina looks unconvinced, and turns towards Van. “I would *love* to talk to your mother and see if she observed anything between you two. If she’s as powerful of a witch as you say she is, I’d be willing to bet that she did.”

“No.”

I give Van’s knee a pat. The fact that he’s not speaking to his mother at the moment is a particularly sore spot for him. Nerilina had been so excited — and then disappointed — last time we met in person, when Van had told her that his mother was from the Maheras clan, but that *no*, she couldn’t speak to his mother about all of this.

“Well let me know if you change your mind. Ellie, is there anything else

you want to look at or discuss before we practise more?”

“Um...” I blank for a second, knowing there *was* something I wanted to check, but unable to recall it now that she’s asked. “Ahhh... *oh!* The ward.”

“The ward?”

“Is it still in place? On me, I mean. Because I think I felt it this morning, and maybe pulled on it, a little?” Nerilina frowns at me, her head tilted to the side.

“That doesn’t sound like the ward. It’s in place, but you shouldn’t be able to feel it like that. Here.” She takes my hands. “Show me what you’re talking about.”

I close my eyes, and can feel it almost as soon as I start searching; an odd shape of magic, black and gold and *wrong*. It’s an icky scab, a supernatural wound inside my head. “That’s not the ward,” I hear Nerilina say, but her voice sounds muffled, as if I’m underwater. I’m too focused on picking at this thing, lifting it away from where it’s tethered to me, cutting strands, severing... “Ellie, *stop*. Ellie!”

But I can’t. There’s something underneath, and I can’t stop pulling at this *thing* that doesn’t belong here.

*Snip.*

It dissolves away, undone, and I see what’s underneath for what *feels* like the first time.



# The Wolves, the Deer, and the Fawn

ELLIE



*Ten years ago*

The sky is orange with the setting sun, and the sea is so calm that I can see my toes perfectly even though I'm currently neck-deep in the water. All in all, it's a perfect evening, but the temperature is dropping now, and no amount of paddling around is going to stop the chill from seeping into my bones if I don't get out soon. I wonder briefly if Van gets sunsets like this, over in the US where he is. Probably not in the middle of his winter, and certainly not with ocean views like this one.

I've been holding out hope that he'd come back this year, even if only for a couple of weeks, but now that it's already New Year's Eve, I've come to the conclusion that he's not going to make the trip. Lacey had said he'd been debating it for a while there.

It's hard not to feel hurt, and it's even harder not to feel stupid. The last time I saw him I was fourteen, and it's been three long years without seeing him in person. Saying "*Hi,*" over Lacey's shoulder when they're on the odd Skype call doesn't count, and I can only conclude that he definitely doesn't care whether he sees me or not. I know he's busy with college, but he gets a bit of time off over Christmas, and he's rich enough that he can just jump on a plane and fly first class or whatever it is that gets you a bed and a shower and all the fancy meals and alcohol you could ever ask for.

"You're just a little girl to him," I say out loud, speaking to the empty ocean. I know it's true, too; I see the fourteen year olds at school and they're all so immature and annoying, and I think *surely, I can't have been like that?* But I'm pretty sure I was, so no wonder Van doesn't give a shit about

whether he sees me here in little old New Zealand.

I still miss him.

I spin around, the empty sand looking especially golden in this light, before turning back towards the open ocean. You'd think the beach would be busy, but it's completely devoid of people at the moment. It's that sweet spot where everyone else is partying it up indoors, pre-drinking before they come down to the sand to set off fireworks in the hours just before New Year's. There's a few different parties on tonight — Mum is at one of them, but I didn't feel like going with her — and even from down here, I can hear the low beat of the music coming from one of the houses at the southern end of the beach.

I look up at the northern cliff where, from here, I can only just see the corner of the Livingston mansion. I've stayed there all week, but Lacey told me this morning I had to go home, quoting her dad and his request for '*family-only time*'. I get it, though it still stings a little. So I'm down here, sulking and swimming alone because it's supposed to cheer me up, and instead I'm just staring at the sky and wondering if Van sees it too, and feeling like a moron for being obsessed with a guy I haven't even seen — and have barely spoken to — in years.

The sound of footsteps crunching on the shells that line the shore makes me turn my head, and I freeze. There's a deer standing at the water's edge, a deer with huge antlers and *glowing* green eyes, and I move backwards in the water, blinking rapidly.

*I'm seeing things.*

Except I'm not. It's definitely real, staring at me with those freakishly bright eyes, and panic rises in my chest because *what the fuck?*

The deer paws at the water's edge, and something in my gut tells me to *run*, because this is not a normal animal. It appeared out of nowhere, and I don't know how I know, but this, this thing is *bad*. I can feel it. I turn, beginning a frantic run-swim sideways through the water, my arms splashing wildly, sounding so loud in the calm evening air. I want to cry out but it's as if there's someone sitting on my lungs, and my voice won't work. I don't want to swim out deeper — *can deer swim?* — and I don't want to wade to shore where it can get me, but maybe if I can get over to the cliffs directly under the Livingston's house, I can climb onto the rocks there and wait for it to go away.

I glance back, and it's followed me, it's intelligent eyes looking almost

*amused.* “Go away!” I cry. This is some nightmare level shit.

***Come to me, child.***

I stop splashing, stop running, stop everything. I stand frozen in the cold water, because this deer just spoke to me, and —

***Come to the shore. You are coming with me, back where you belong.***

— I feel suddenly compelled to obey. There is a connection between this deer and I, and my legs move, stepping towards the sand, towards this creature.

***That’s it. You belong to —***

Something huge and black is streaking down the beach from the northern end, a fierce growl ripping through the air, breaking the trance I’ve been in, and I suck in a huge breath, falling backwards in the shallows, coming down hard on my hip, sharp shells digging into my flesh painfully. The deer stands frozen for a moment too long before attempting to turn and flee, but the black blur is on it. I thought it was a horse — it’s that size — but no, it’s a dog. *No... a wolf.* I watch, frozen in horror, as sharp teeth set in a strong jaw come down on the deer’s neck. I *hear* the snap of bone under that ongoing snarling. The wolf shakes its prey, tearing at the throat, and there’s blood, so much blood...

I scream.

“Silence!”

The wolf is gone. The wolf is gone, and a man, a man I know, but someone who is somehow *different*, is there. I can’t process this. It’s Weston Livingston, *naked*, but bigger, taller, bulky with muscle, with cold yellow eyes that stare down at me as if I am the worst scum. There’s blood all over his mouth, all through his *sharp teeth*, and I can’t make sense of this. Where is the wolf?

I look back at the broken deer at Weston’s feet and then quickly away again. I don’t want to see it. I’m frozen in place, until he takes a step towards me.

I scramble to my feet, voice caught in my throat as I run through the shallows, heedless of the shells and oyster-lined rock pools in my path. *Weston was that wolf.* It’s the most fucked up thought, but it’s all I can think of as I run, and I don’t want to be near this man that already seems to hate me. It’s going dark, and my feet sting and I know they’re getting cut up, but I run, run away as fast as I can, hearing him splash behind me.

There’s another figure sprinting towards me from the grassy bank. I

recognise Bronte, Lacey's mum, but she too seems different; too tall, too muscular. "Ellie!" she yells, and I can see her eyes are yellow too. "Ellie, let us help you!"

"No!" I cry in terror. *This is a nightmare. This can't be real.* I try to dart away, try to swerve, but she's too fast, catching me, and we fall to the ground together. The air is forced from my lungs with a wheeze as I hit the wet sand hard, made worse by the way Mrs Livingston crushes me. I'm winded, unable to even try to fight back, and she clamps a hand over my mouth just as Weston moves into view, looming over us both.

"I told you she was trouble. I always knew she would be. She's not human."

"Yes she is. Look at her!"

Weston *growls*, the most terrifying sound I've ever heard in my life. "Remove the glamour from her. Extend your counter spell, then tell me she isn't human."

Bronte's hand is still covering my mouth. She seems to hesitate, her freakish coloured eyes darting between myself and her husband, before she mutters something under her breath in a language I've never even heard before. She stares at me, eyes growing wide as she touches my ear with her free hand. "Impossible," she whispers. "She doesn't even smell of fae."

"She's a *changeling*, Bronte. It's obvious. Surely you've sensed it before. She's put us all in danger."

This time it is Bronte's turn to snarl. "Well you're the one who just killed a fae, so I'd say you've put us in danger more than anything." Her teeth look like his. Just as sharp. Just as *wrong*. This doesn't make sense. I know these people. I've known these people my whole life. My heartbeat thunders in my chest, tears blurring my vision.

"I didn't have much of a choice, now, did I? It was going to take her." His eyes — *not yellow, gold* — stare down at me. "This is the one and only time I save your life. Not that you're going to remember this."

"Weston —"

"You need to do it. She's too young to trust. She's not a mate, she's just a silly girl that has been hanging around us for far too long."

"She's a part of our pack!"

"I am the alpha! Since when have I ever said that she is one of us? Never! *You* decided this."

"She is a part of *my* pack. I love her like I love my own daughters. We

have known her since she was a *toddler*, Weston. We have cared for her. *You do not dictate me, shifter.* You can fuck off with your alpha bullshit, you may be my mate, but you cannot rule me.”

I don't understand anything they're saying, and I'm too scared to move. I blink through the tears, trying to focus, trying to *understand*. Their eyes both *glow* in the dim light, not like the deer, but like a cat's eyes do. It's their pupils, I realise, reflecting what light is left in the sky. *Like animals.* I whimper, and Bronte finally eases the pressure of her hand on my mouth. “Oh sweetie, I'm sorry. I just needed you to be quiet. We can't let the humans know.”

Weston crouches down, snarling. *Snarling like a wolf.* “Bronte, listen to me. I need you to wipe her memory. If you do not, I am leaving tomorrow. I will *order* the children to come, and they will, and so you will follow, because I know you, and you will do anything for your pups. I will sell this house, and we will never return again. Erase the memory, and we can forget this ever happened, and get back to this godforsaken vacation.”

“It's dark magic,” she snaps, and there's a growl in her voice too. “It is *forbidden*. And it's foolish, she's going to know in the future anyway.”

“You don't know that.”

“I had a *vision*.”

“Of *what?*”

“Of Evander *mated to her.*”

Weston Livingston has given me many cold looks over the years, but this is by far the iciest of all. “Then he is an even greater fool than I thought.”

“He is your son! I wish that for once, you could just switch off your alpha competitiveness and love him the way a father should. He doesn't deserve the way you treat him.”

“You think I like it? You think I wanted this! I didn't want *any of this!*”

“Calm down. People will hear.”

“Wipe the memory, Bronte. There is no other choice.”

Both of them look up suddenly, staring off into the distance. Their stillness, the alertness in their muscular frames, reminds me of predators. *Of course it does. He turns into a wolf. She must do too.*

*Does that mean Lacey does? And Van? And Seth and little Jenny?*

“What-what are you?”

My voice sounds so small, as small as I feel right now. Bronte looks down at me, her eyes filling with tears. “It doesn't matter, darling. You're not

going to remember any of this, anyway.”

“No —”

“Shhh.” Her hand is back over my mouth, Weston’s harsh grip taking hold of my arms, pinning me down. His hands feel burning hot. *I’m going to die.*

“Do it,” he says. “I have to deal with that corpse before anyone comes down here. Lucky the tide is coming in.”

I try to squirm, try to cry out, but I can’t. Warm light surrounds me, glowing gold, and then Bronte is saying something in that same strange language that I don’t recognise. She stops, bending to whisper in my ear.

“*Forget.*”

Sixteen



VAN



Ellie sits quietly, eyes closed, a small crease between her brows as she practises her magic with Nerilina. “That’s not the ward,” Nerilina says, violet eyes opening to frown at Ellie. Her look of confusion morphs to one of shock and disgust. “Ellie, *stop*. Ellie!” But whatever Ellie is doing, it’s too late. “*Shit!*” Nerilina curses, and my stomach drops.

Ellie’s eyes open wide, her face contorting in horror, and the most awful, keening wail comes out of her mouth. “Ellie!” I yell, reaching for her, and she scrambles back from me across the grass, mouth open in a soundless scream, tears already beginning to stream down her face. “What —”

“Dark magic, fucking *dark magic*,” Nerilina is cursing. “Ellie, sweetheart, it’s okay. Shh. It’s okay. It’s okay.” The elf crouches in front of Ellie’s sprawled form, gathering her up, giving me a stern look meant to hold me back. Fuck that. I get to my feet. Ellie is my mate, and I’ll —

Ellie whimpers, looking terrified as she catches sight of me, as if she is terrified of *me*, and I stumble backwards, confused and hurt and, “What the fuck is going on?” I snap at Nerilina, *snarling*, losing control of my howling wolves and losing my shit in the process. “What have you done to my mate?”

“I’ve done nothing! Someone put a block on her memory. They hid something they didn’t want her to see.”

“*What? Who? WHO?*”

“Shhh! Calm *down*, *wolf!* Your anger is not helping here.”

Ellie sobs louder, her body trembling, and I feel like my heart is being torn in two. There is nothing worse, *nothing worse*, than seeing a loved one hurt, injured...

*Dead.*

I suck in a deep breath, forcing myself to find any semblance, any tiny thread of calm to cling to, forcing myself away from *those thoughts* of a different time, of a tragedy that will *never* be repeated. My shifter wolf paws at me, desperate to get out, and I curl my fists, nails biting into my palms, shaking with the effort of holding him back.

“Ellie, baby,” I beg. “Ellie *please*, let me help you.”

“Van,” she sobs, reaching out a hand, and I rush to her, falling to my knees, gathering her into my arms. She buries her face against my neck, her fingers digging into my back, clinging to me, and I squeeze her tight.

“Baby, tell me what’s wrong so I can help you,” I whisper into her hair, and she sobs louder. “Ellie, baby —”

“Just give her time to compose herself —”

“Just mind your own *fucking business!*” I snap with a full on alpha growl, and any wolf in my own pack would have fallen to the ground, crushed under the weight of the order. As it is, Nerilina rises to her feet, staring down at me with pursed lips, and a moment later I shake my head, remorse hitting me in a wave that further churns my gut. “*Fuck*, I’m sorry, it’s my wolves, they’re very upset and —”

“I understand.” I can hear the hurt in her voice, but I hear the truth too. She does understand; I’m sure that in her five hundred years, she’s dealt with more than one short-tempered wolf. She looks us over, nodding to herself as she decides something. “I’m going to go brew Ellie a tea, something a little stronger than the one we had before. It’s *safe*,” she adds, preempting my response. “It will help her remain calm for the rest of the evening. She’s had a huge shock to her system. It will take me ten minutes, and that should give you two a little time out here alone, alright?”

“Alright. What-what do you mean, a shock to her system? Her heart is racing, is she in any medical distress or...” I trail off, panic clawing the air from my lungs.

“She’s fine, Evander. She’s going to be fine. She regained a memory, one that’s been buried for goddess knows how long. When this happens to someone, it’s as if they are *living* that memory, that moment, for the first time. That’s what I mean by her being shocked.”

“But what memory?” The logical part of my brain knows I’m being overly demanding, but I can’t stop myself, not with my wolves out for blood like they are. Neither of them are even coherent at this point, simply howling with pain and snarling with frustration and anger. I’ve already come close to

shifting once, despite the fact that it would be the opposite of helpful to take that form right now.

“I don’t know. I read magic, not minds. She will tell us. The tea will help. I’ll be out in ten.”

I nod, jaw clenched, clutching my mate tighter.

“I ’m sorry,” Ellie apologises for the tenth time as I lift her out of the passenger seat, kicking the car door closed behind me, the sound of the pouring rain loud against the garage door. The tea Nerilina gave Ellie was certainly *calming* — enough to make her sluggish and unsteady on her feet — and I barely made it out of there without snapping at the elf again for drugging my mate.

“Stop apologising.”

“But I scared you.”

I carry her through the internal door, into the house, down the hall and into our bedroom. “The situation scared me, not you.” I still feel scared, shocked, my nerves shot, my body drained — the same way Ellie looks right now. She fell asleep in the car the minute I started bumping down Nerilina’s long driveway, and the half-hour drive back across the island had given me time to process everything she’d described about the incident and her unearthed memory. I’d pictured it over and over again as the wind and rain battered the windscreen, not really seeing the road at all, only seeing the images in my mind, imagining my father’s pure black wolf tearing into a fae deer’s throat.

I’m not done processing, that’s for sure, but I’m no longer feeling so aggressive that I could tear things apart either. I bend to place Ellie on the bed, but she stops me with a hand on my arm and a weak, apologetic smile. “I’ve really gotta pee.”

I carry her through to the bathroom instead, setting her down beside the toilet. “I can manage,” she says, but I ignore her, undoing the buttons on her denim shorts and tugging them down her legs, pulling her underwear down a moment later.

“I’m not having you fall and crack your head open on the tiles.”

She sighs, resigned, as I help lower her on the seat. “This is so

undignified. Will you go, for this part, at least?" she laughs, pushing at my leg, and I acquiesce, leaving the room.

"You know," I tell her, once I've pulled the door closed behind me, my voice raised so she can hear from the other side. "I can always hear you peeing anyway, so I don't know why you're so concerned about where I'm standing while you go. It's a completely normal bodily function, and I hear everything."

"Oh my *god*, Van, don't tell me that! You're going to give me stage fright from now on!" I hear her snort, devolving into giggles, and laugh to myself under my breath. This is what I always want; to hear her laugh, to make her happy. I don't want this oppressive fear that's looming over us, this unknown. Just thinking about it has pure rage rising in my chest once more. *They knew. They fucking knew she was fae and in danger, and they said nothing.*

*It's not right*, part of me thinks, regarding my mother's choice to use her magic that way, even as another part of me understands why she did it. Ellie's description of the incident was understandably disjointed, at times quoting my parents, at other times getting lost in describing the scenery from her memory. I need to ask her to talk me through the whole thing again, to focus less on descriptions of the orange sky and cold water, and more on what happened, and then decide what to do about it. But first, I need to take care of her.

"I'm going to go grab something for you to eat, okay? Do *not* get up without me, you're still high on whatever she gave you."

"Yes, *alpha!*"

I huff at her sarcastic tone, and head for the kitchen. I return a minute later, with a bag of bread rolls and a pack of cheese slices which I leave on the bed. It's basic food, but something to fill her stomach, at least. "Is it okay for me to come in?"

"Yeah."

I help her stand, pulling her underwear back up her thighs, leaving her shorts on the bathroom floor. "You're going straight to bed anyway," I tell her as I prop her up against the bathroom sink.

"Oh, am I?" she asks quietly, lathering her hands.

"Yes, we both are." Our eyes meet in the reflection of the mirror, exhaustion clear on both of our faces.

"Okay."

I carry her through to the bedroom, dragging back the sheets and setting her down, pulling her shirt off over her head, reaching around her to fumble at the clasp of her bra. I used to think I'd get better at taking them off, but I still haven't mastered the damn things after over a decade of sexual activity. Ellie laughs breathlessly in my ear. "Quiet, you," I warn her. "I'm in a mood to just tear it to pieces."

"Mmm." Her hands reach behind her, brushing my fingers out of the way, unclipping the bra in one smooth motion. "Thank you for taking care of me."

I plant a kiss on her shoulder as I tug the bra down her arms, freeing her breasts, feeling the thrum of her pulse under my hands. My tongue licks at her skin, and it's not sexual... I just need to taste her, to scent her, to know she's here and real and safe with me. Her hands cup my jaw, bringing my lips to hers, her kiss soft and sweet. "Are you okay?" she asks, stroking my face, running her hands through my hair.

I should be asking her that. I should be the one holding it together, not the other way around, but I can't look in those big brown eyes and lie. She sees the truth, anyway. I shake my head. "No. I'm not."

Our foreheads press together, noses brushing. "I'm not, either, but we'll get there. Together."

I t's late, the room dark, by the time Ellie and I finish discussing everything she remembers. "Are you sure there's nothing else?"

She sighs, tucking herself further against my body. Her head lies on my chest, her nose brushing against my skin. "That's it. That's all of it."

*All of it* has given us a lot to think about. "I'm going to call Mom now."

"Van, no, it can wait 'til morning." She lifts her head, eyes finding the clock on the wall. "It's the middle of the night in California, isn't it? That's not fair."

"I don't care." I reach for my phone, scrolling through my contacts.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. I'm not going to be able to sleep until I talk to her about this. Besides, wolves are crepuscular by nature —" I see her confused expression and amend my wording. "We're semi-nocturnal, so it's fine. She'll forgive me."

“What are you going to say?”

“I don’t know,” I answer, pressing *call*. I hit the speaker and leave my phone sitting on my stomach, using my now free hand to smooth at the frown between Ellie’s brows. The call takes its time to connect and start ringing — it’s always slow with international calls. I whisper in the dark, “I thought you’d be happy that I’m finally going to talk to her. That’s what you wanted for me, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but —”

The ringing stops, the sound of my father’s voice grumbling in the background immediately setting me on edge. I hear my mother mutter “Who?” and then gasp.

“Van! Van honey, you’re calling!”

She sounds so excited, despite the tired rasp to her voice, and I’m rendered speechless for a moment, guilt hitting me heavily. I should have reached out to her months ago.

“Van?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Oh, *goddess*.” I hear her shaky intake of breath, echoing my own. Fuck. I hate, *hate*, making my mother cry, and even though I’m mad as hell at her right now for her past actions, all I want in this moment is to reach out through the phone and hug her.

“Evander,” my father barks, cutting in. “You’ve got fucking *impeccable* timing, son. It’s two-fifteen in the morning. I thought you could read a fucking clock.”

“Shh.” There’s the sound of a hand slapping against flesh, and I can see the scene in my mind, my mother smacking my father’s arm as they lie in bed. “He can call anytime. Van, honey, it’s so good to hear from you. I’ve miss —” her voice breaks, breath hitching, and that lump in my throat *burns*. “I’ve missed your voice. I’ve missed you.”

“Missed you too, Mom.”

“He must be calling for a reason,” my father mutters.

“Are you okay, Van?”

I pause. Am I okay? The short answer is *no*. Fae have tried to kidnap my mate *twice* — that we know of, who’s to say there hasn’t been more attempts? — I just found out my own mother performed forbidden magic and placed a spell on her, and Ellie’s disturbed by all of this, to say the least... Basically, my life is a mess. “Not really.”

“What —”

“I’ve got you on speaker. Ellie Harding is here with me.” I want to rip this off like a bandaid. “She’s part-fae, which I know you two know already. Today she was practising her magic, and in doing so, removed a spell that *someone* had placed on her, one that was blocking out a very specific memory.” It’s dead silent on the other end of the phone, so I continue. “Obviously, she was very distressed by what she uncovered. Again, you two would know, since the memory involves you both. I don’t —” There’s a growl in my voice, and I can’t suppress it. “I don’t like seeing my mate distressed. I don’t like knowing that she was in danger *for years*, and no one was protecting her. I *hate* that I was ordered to stay away from her for almost an entire decade, only to find out today that you both knew she was destined to be my mate. How fucking *dare* you do that to us, Weston!”

“Van, shh,” Ellie cuts in, sitting up, leaning over me, her hands on my chest, over my thundering heart. I suck in a breath through my nose, realising how much I’ve been snarling just now. I feel betrayed. I feel betrayed by them both, because my mother could have, *should have*, said something years ago.

The sound of sobbing is quiet through the phone, but loud enough for both of us to hear. I press the heels of my hands to my eyes, face screwed up, pain and anger blurring into one. Ellie is crying too, her head bent, tears landing on my bare chest. We’re a mess. We’re all a mess, and I know Lacey and Seth are too. None of us truly recovered after we lost Jenny. I don’t think we ever will.

“I thought my vision was wrong,” my mother says quietly, “because I saw other things too, that didn’t come to pass. I saw Jenny —”

“You don’t owe him an explanation, Bronte. Not at the expense of yourself.”

“Yes, I do. Van... after Jenny...” Her voice breaks off in another sob, and I hear her sucking in deep breaths. “*Van*,” she chokes out after a minute, “none of my visions made sense. Nothing made sense anymore. I’m sorry. I thought I must have been mistaken.”

I feel numb. “You could have told me, Mom. You could have told me that you thought she was my mate.”

“I thought,” my father growls, “I thought that if you really gave a shit about that girl, if she really was your mate, you’d leave the pack like you were supposed to. You blame me for those orders, but you were free to go at

any time in the past nine years, Evander. You were just too cowardly to do it.”

I sit up beside Ellie, seeing red. “We were *GRIEVING!* You wanted me to tear what was left of our family apart? Is that what you wanted? Because that’s what it would have done! Look at us now! I stayed to keep our family together!”

“I wanted to be free from the tension between us! It was supposed to get *better* between us, boy!” He’s snarling just as much as I am now, a continuous growl that filters through the call.

“You never said anything! You’re so fucking emotionally stunted, you could have spoken to me man to man, we could have *agreed* on a way forward. Instead you pulled bullshit stunts time and time again to get me to snap —”

“Well it worked.”

“Oh, it worked out so fucking well for you. How many children do you have left, huh? How many do you have that actually want to speak to you, or spend time in your presence? You pushed me away, you pushed Lacey away.”

“She knows I didn’t mean it. I was never going to make her remain with that piece of shit, I didn’t want her with him in the first place.”

“I don’t care what she *knew*. It still hurt her. It hurt her bad. You hurt a member of *my* pack.”

“Your pack that you’ve left abandoned over here while you’re there in New Zealand fucking some female; I should have known that’s why you picked some run down vineyard —”

“Ellie is my mate, and you will be *respectful* when you talk about her.”

There’s silence on the other end. I stare straight ahead at the opposite wall. I can see Ellie watching me out of the corner of my eye, and I am ashamed, to say the least. I didn’t want Ellie to see this side of me, the wolfish aggression, the snarling that my father brings out in me. She knew about it already, of course, but it’s different, witnessing it first hand. I had hoped to keep this part of me buried away, out of sight.

“This is what I know,” my father speaks up, his voice low, a deep rumble I would recognise anywhere. “I killed a fae that was coming after Ellie. A year later, my daughter dies.”

“It’s not connected,” my mother cuts in.

“We don’t know that,” he continues. “She died in a freak accident,



nobody knows how she got into that pool area, it was locked. That gate was *locked*. It should not have been possible.”

“There was no scent of fae, there was no fae. They couldn’t have crossed the ward I had in place,” my mother continues, speaking over him, her voice rising in pitch.

“You don’t know that, Bronte. *We don’t know*. We’ll never know. But what I do know is that the fae are vindictive, they are *known* for that. I hope, Evander, I truly hope that you never have to experience the pain of burying your own child. Do not come at me for making a decision to protect what was left of my family in the wake of that. I chose to protect the lives of my remaining children, and that meant getting out as fast as possible, and severing ties to what I deemed to be a source of danger. And that is what a good alpha does. They make hard decisions and stick with them.”

I’m having an out of body experience, I’m sure of it. “That was a bad decision,” I hear myself say, without fully processing the words coming out of my mouth. “It was the worst decision. Years of pain, for Lacey, for myself, for Ellie. That was the opposite of protecting us. And a good alpha doesn’t leave pack members behind.”

“She —”

“Don’t you *dare* tell me my mate was not part of our pack. She was. Every summer. She was under *your* protection, and you know how I know that? Because you *did* protect her. She was in danger and you made a split decision to *kill* on her behalf, and I have been thinking about that all evening, because *that* tells me more than any words ever will. You want to know how I know? Because I’m an alpha too. I know how you think, and I know how your *wolf* thinks. *He* thought Ellie needed protecting, didn’t he? I bet it’s been eating away at you, all these years, that you abandoned Ellie here —”

The call disconnects. *He hung up on me*.

I pull Ellie into my arms. She sobs, clutching at her chest. “Jenny...”

“Not your fault,” I whisper fiercely. “Not your fault at all.”

“But —”

“Ellie, *please*.” My face is in the crook of her neck, hers in mine. I’m shaking, I realise after a moment, my body crashing after the events of today. What I wouldn’t give to rewind twenty four hours, back to bed in that glasshouse, where I had naively begun to feel like we’d faced the worst of it already — that we could fully forget fae had ever come after Ellie, and move on.

I scoot backwards, Ellie still in my lap, until I'm leaning against the headboard, the back of my head hitting it with a thunk. Ellie cries silently in my arms, and really, I can't ask her to stop. Not between everything that's happened to her today and that awful admission from my father. He's not accusing her, he's not saying it's her fault. In fact, this is the closest in nine years to me understanding what the hell he was thinking with the decisions he made. But it's still terrible to think about, still horrific for someone to think that Jenny's death could be attributed to some sort of collateral that came from Ellie being fae.

*What if her presence puts Lacey and the boys in danger?* It's a hideous thought, a terrible, intrusive one that I've had before and refused to entertain. I refuse to believe it now. Ellie is part of my pack, just as much as they are, and beyond that, she is my everything. I can't — I will *never* — choose a life without her in it.

My phone starts buzzing, vibrating on the bed, and we both stare at the screen.

*Mom.*

Ellie grabs it, swiping to answer the call. "Hello," she says quietly, her voice still thick with the aftermath of tears.

"Ellie, sweetie, can I talk to you for a moment? To *you*. It's important."

"Yes. Van is here, but yes, talk to me."

I hear my mother's shaky sigh of relief. "Thank you." There's a long pause, and then a rush of words. "I have to apologise — I-I am so sorry, sweetie. I am so sorry about the memory spell, and the way you've found out, and... and us not being... us not coming back to New Zealand. I am sorry for not telling you what I knew."

"It's okay."

"It's really not, and I think you know that." They're both crying. Two of the women I love the most, bawling their eyes out. I lean my head against Ellie's. *This* is why I've avoided contacting my mother. Especially after I found Ellie again, I knew, I just knew there'd be tears like this.

"I'm..." Ellie begins, her breath hitching. "I'm devastated that I may have put... you all in —"

"You didn't," my mother cuts in. "That's what I have to tell you. I need you to know, *do not* carry guilt on your shoulders. Nothing is your fault, sweet girl."

"But I have brought danger, the fae have been after me again."

There's another long pause. "When?" Neither of us answer. "Evander, when?"

"Last month. The week before the full moon. Although I believe they were stalking her in the weeks prior to that."

"Why didn't you contact me?" I can hear the concern in my mother's voice, and it pulls at my own fears that what I've done so far hasn't been enough.

"There's an elvish witch here, living locally. There's protection wards in place."

"Evander, that's all well and good, but..."

I wait for her to continue. "But what?" I prompt, impatient.

"I don't know if you've heard. There's been an increase in these incidents in the past few months."

"I've heard."

I wait for her to say anything further, listening to the quiet, indistinct murmuring in the background. I can make out both my parents' voices, but not what they're saying, and in my mind I picture my mom with her thumb pressed firmly over the receiver end of her phone, blocking out their hushed tones, just like I've seen her do before. Finally, she speaks again.

"Evander, are you going to turn us away, if we show up on your doorstep twenty four hours from now?"

"Why would you do that, Mom?"

"Because you need me. And because I miss you so much, my sweet boy. But Van, honey, I'm sure this elf knows what they're doing, but I would feel better if you let me look at the wards. Let me help you. Let me help Ellie."

Ellie takes my hand. She's stopped crying, at least, though her eyes are red. She nods at me.

"You and Dad are a package deal, right? You can't just come on your own?"

"Not with fae involved. You know he won't stand for that. You have a mate, I'm sure you understand. These days we don't go very far without each other."

I do understand, and I can acknowledge that this is inevitable, anyway. I was never going to shut my mother out of my life permanently — therefore, I was never going to be able to shut Dad out forever, regardless of what has happened between us. There's a part of me that aches for reconciliation, too, though I don't know how possible that is. I'm *tired* of this aggression we've

had going on for over half my life; I'm tired of fighting against him. Yes, I'm upset, *deeply* upset and angry with him right now, and I've snarled and yelled and argued, but it occurs to me that this is the first time since I was a child that I have heard his voice and haven't felt that darkest urge within me to *shift*, to let my wolf take over and attack him.

The absence of that urge leaves me feeling so strangely hollow.

"Van?" my mother asks, drawing me out of my thoughts. "Will you let us visit, or not?"

"Yes, yeah, of course. There is an empty house, here on the vineyard. It's Lacey's. We've been waiting on her residency to come through."

"I know, she's kept me updated. She's been talking to *me*, at least, even if she refuses to speak to West. So your father and I, and perhaps Seth, if he wants to come along too... all of us will be there tomorrow night, if I can make this work. We have limited time before the full moon, so we need to get our butts into gear."

"Fine," I agree. After seeing Ellie so distressed today, there is no other choice. I'm not going to turn down an offer to keep her safe. It doesn't matter what it costs me personally.

"Bronte," Ellie says softly, her fingers digging into the flesh of my thigh. "I wanted to thank Weston."

My hackles rise automatically. She doesn't owe him her thanks, but she continues, unaware of my reaction. "He saved my life. He didn't have to, and he did, and I need him to know that I greatly appreciate that."

"He's here. He hears you."

"Good," Ellie says with an air of finality, and I am once more in awe of her quiet strength. She feels things deeply — she's been hurt, badly — and yet she forever takes the higher ground, forging a path through all of this mess.

"I'm going to say *see you tomorrow*, then," Mom announces. "I need to call ahead and inform our staff we want our plane ready for mid-morning. Van, I'll contact you before the flight — I might need your help arranging transport on the other end."

"I can do that."

"Thank you Van. I love you."

"Love you too, Mom."

“**W**hat time is it?” Ellie mutters as my phone buzzes for what feels like the time.

With my eyes still closed, I stretch out an arm, fishing around blindly on my nightstand until I find my phone. “Ten past eight.” I yawn, squinting at the screen. “Mom sent me an essay.” I scroll further, grunting. “Multiple essays.”

“Just her?”

“No. There’s a message from Lacey. Oh god, it’s a voice one. Almost two minutes.”

Ellie stretches, rolling over, wiggling her ass at me until I roll towards her and be the big spoon. “Play it. I wanna hear,” she demands.

“Alright.”

“Van,” Lacey’s voice begins. *“I just heard from Mom. Firstly, what the fuck? Secondly, she offered me a ride on the private jet, they’re flying out in four hours and I’m **scrambling**, because of course I said yes. I’d be a fool not to take up the offer with two young kids, so don’t judge me for that, we’ll just have to sort the residency stuff when we’re in New Zealand, I’ll enter on a tourist visa like Mom and Dad and Seth. Don’t tell me not to come, Evander, I know there’s fae shit going on — Mom has explained — but to be honest, there’s fae shit everywhere in the world right now and I’m sick of not even being in the same country as my own alpha. I’ll see you tonight. The boys will be bouncing off the walls with overtiredness, so be prepared for that. I’m thinking Mom and Dad can stay in my house with Seth, and the boys and I can take your guest bedrooms, for now? Obviously I can’t bring a nanny on such short notice, so I’m really going to need your help with them. Sorry in advance. Love you. Love to you too, Ellie, I know you’re listening to this! I’ve gotta go. See you in New Zealand!”*

“Oh wow,” Ellie says. “It’s all go.”

“Yeah. It is.”

Seventeen

ELLIE



We've just climbed out of the shower when Van's phone lights up with a message. He sits on his bed, naked, reading it. "It's Lacey. They're landing in twenty minutes, so I'd say an hour and a half from now, we'll hear the helicopter flying in."

"Really, that quick?" It's nine thirty at night, less than twenty four hours since we spoke on the phone to his parents, and good to her word, Van's mum has made the trip happen. She had to, really — the full moon is tomorrow, so the window for travel was small to begin with.

"Mmhm. They'll get processed through the airport really quickly; they have their own entrance for the VIPs, their own customs officers, their own immigration officials."

"The life of the rich and famous."

He frowns down at his screen. "I can't blame her for jumping on the flight with Mom and Dad. It's so much easier flying private, especially with pups. I wonder if she's spoken directly to my father yet, or still giving him the silent treatment."

I pull out a pair of underwear from my drawer. "Knowing Lacey, I'd say silent treatment. She's pretty stubborn, your sister."

Van snorts, and I'm sure he's thinking of at least ten incidents where Lacey has refused to do something he's suggested. I slide on my underwear, then head over to Van's drawers, pulling out one of his t-shirts. He gives me a curious look as I pull it over my head. "Your own clothes aren't good enough?"

I lift the collar of it to my nose, sniffing. "My clothes don't smell like you. I know you're the wolf, but I'm pretty obsessed with your scent too, just

so you know.” It’s true. If I could bottle his scent and wear it as a perfume, I would. Or maybe a hand cream, or something I could just sniff at all day secretly. The man smells *good*.

There’s humour dancing in his eyes. “What’s going on in that head of yours, right now?”

“Honestly, you don’t want to know. It’s borderline unhinged and stalker-ish.”

He laughs, deep and rich. “You know I’m just going to be thinking the worst of you now, right?”

I shrug. “Think away. I can change if you think it’s a bad look for me to wear your shirt. It’s just so *late*. I’m not even bothering with a bra.” At this point in the evening, all I want to be is comfortable.

“You never need a bra anyway, not with those perky tits. And *no*. Don’t change. I always want you smelling like me. Come here.” His dick has grown hard in the last thirty seconds, and he grabs my hand, pulling me forward into his arms. We haven’t had sex since our night in the glasshouse, which feels like forever ago even though it’s only been two days. Today we’ve been far too busy, scrambling to organise guest bedrooms and stock fridges, buying toys to entertain a toddler and a preschooler, doing everything we can to prepare for the arrival of his parents, his siblings, and his two nephews. The whole day has been stressful — just thinking about them coming here is stressful — but now we’re as ready as we’ll ever be, and all we have to do is wait for the guests to arrive.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.” His tongue is hot on my neck, his hands travelling up under the shirt to play with my nipples. “I’m going to make you come, and then I’m going to knot you, and it’s going to feel so fucking good. I don’t think you realise how much self-control I’ve exercised all day.” He takes my hand, leading it to his full, heavy balls, his teeth scraping my shoulder. “It’s almost the moon, after all. Last month I had you so many times in the lead up, and just knowing that fact and comparing it to this month has been torture.” His fingers shift my panties to the side, dancing over my clit, teasing, before sliding into the wet heat of my cunt, already dripping for him.

I kiss him hard. “You should have said something,” I say, running my lips along his jaw until I can latch my teeth on his earlobe. He groans, his cock pressing into my hand. With a growl he lifts me, tossing me on the bed, turning me until my head is buried in the pillows and my ass is in the air. I



yelp as his teeth close on my ass cheek in a quick bite, the rumble of his laugh followed by a long, languorous lick over my clit, that special tongue of his being put to *very* good use. Within minutes I am nothing but a quivering mess as he fucks me with his fingers, and when his tongue changes tempo, flicking my clit *just so*, I explode with a cry, cunt pulsing against his lips.

“You taste so fucking good.”

I can’t reply. I’ve lost the ability to speak, moaning into the pillow under my face. The bed dips around my knees as he moves, and a moment later the head of his shaft drags through my slick folds, over my sensitive clit and back again, before he presses the first inch of his dick into my core. I’m still wearing my panties — simply shoved out of the way — and his shirt, and something about that, about his impatience, turns me on even more.

“I’m going to fuck you like a wolf,” he declares, one hand on my hip, the other at the back of my neck. It is a promise and a warning; this man will fuck me hard and rough, exactly the way I like it.

“Yes please,” I breathe, gasping at the first solid thrust.

A second shower ensures I’m not dripping with sweat, but as I feel the familiar leak of bodily fluids in my fresh panties at the same time as I hear the sound of the helicopter approaching, I resign myself to the fact that my in-laws and their wolf noses are always going to know — and always have known — too much about my sex life, and I might as well get over it with now.

We step outside, walking hand in hand up the gravel driveway to the top of the hill, where the helipad is located. Despite the fact that today is *Turu*, the day before the full moon, I can barely see the face of it now, its usual brightness nothing but a muted glow behind the thick layer of clouds that smother the sky tonight. The lights from the helicopter as it comes in to land are, by contrast, blinding, the sound obnoxiously loud on this quiet island night. Van already mentioned that the vineyard will probably incur a fine for allowing a helicopter to land outside of the regulated hours, but he can afford it, and at this late hour, it was the only practical way of getting all of the Livingstons from Auckland Airport on the mainland to Lost Moon.

“You’re going to be good, right?” I ask, nervously playing with the zip of

my puffer jacket that I wear open over Van's t-shirt and my leggings. Gumboots complete the outfit. All in all, it's not exactly a fashionable choice for seeing everyone again, but they've already seen me wearing some truly hideous outfits during my childhood, so I'm not too inclined to care.

"I'll be good," Van replies. We stand well back of the mown 'helipad,' waiting for them all to disembark. I take one more step forward, waving my arms, and just as I thought, the motion sensor light on the side of the building near us switches on, lighting up the area well enough for me to see comfortably. Multiple pairs of glowing eyes blink in our direction, and a shiver runs down my spine in an involuntary prey response. Van's hand slides under my jacket, pressing against my lower back, his lips against my ear. "Will you be okay?"

"Yeah."

"It's a lot of wolves to meet at once."

I scoff, "Because I haven't grown up with these people." I can see Lacey's sons now, two little figures, eyes quite literally lighting up as they glance our way. Lacey keeps a firm hand on each of them until the helicopter lifts well into the air, and then they're let free, little legs tearing through the grass towards us.

"It's different, seeing people post-Unravelling," Van begins, but he's cut off by the children.

"Uncle Van!"

"Uncle Vanny!"

"Hey, my boys!" Van crouches, arms open wide, grunting as each child slams into him. He picks them up, one arm per kid, three matching wolfish grins on their faces. The boys are chattering away, each one waving a toy in Van's face, vying for his attention, and seeing him like this makes my heart ache in the strangest way. I don't want children *yet*, not for years, but just this glimpse of him with kids — little boys that have the same dark hair, tanned skin, and gold eyes — fills me with a strange sense of hopeful longing. *One day this could be us; this could be Van with our children.*

"Ellie."

I spin around, coming face to face with Lacey. She's taller now — *six feet!* — and her frame is more muscular, like all wolf women, but it's the same face that I always knew, the same smile. "Hey," I say, suddenly shy.

"Hey." Her eyes shine the same as her brother's, and her teeth are just as sharp. It is different, seeing people you once knew transformed, but that goes

for humans and non-humans alike. Age transforms people, life experience transforms people; no one is going to be exactly the same after nine years apart. I open my arms at the same time as she does, and we both laugh with relief as we hug. “Jeez, you reek of my brother,” she says quietly, scrunching her face in disgust, and I feel just as embarrassed as I knew I’d be, covering my eyes.

“Well, you’re gonna have to get over that pretty quickly.”

“Oh god, I don’t doubt it. Trust me, I know what wolf men are like, all they ever want to do is empty their balls into something.”

“Ten seconds,” Van interjects over the screeching laughter of his youngest nephew, who is currently swinging by the feet from Van’s hands. “It took you *ten seconds* to bring up our S-E-X life.”

“What’s S-E-X?” Ronan, the older of the two boys, asks.

“It stands for *Space Exploration*,” Lacey replies without missing a beat. “Your uncle is a real intrepid explorer. He likes deep caves and everything.”

“Lacey,” Van growls.

Bronte steps forward, interrupting them.

“Van.”

At the sound of his mother’s voice, Van sets little Ash down on the ground. “Hey, Mom.”

“Hello my darling boy.”

It’s weird, seeing Bronte, now that my ‘latest’ memory is of her *like this*, with her taller frame, lean with muscle, bright amber eyes set against the deep olive skin she and her children all share. Pre-Unravelling, her ‘human’ form was softer, shorter, her curves a little more pronounced, and her eyes had been green. She’s beautiful in either form, and the caring warmth in her eyes hasn’t changed one bit from when we were kids. I blink back tears as I watch her and Van embrace, especially because I can see it’s having the same effect on him as he kisses the top of her head. “*All boys love their māmā*,” is something my mum has always said, based off her observations of the little ones she teaches, and Van has always been a very clear example of that. He’s a mama’s boy for sure.

I know he’s still upset with her. Maybe I should be too, but at this point my life has been turned upside down so many times that I feel like I’m in a constant spinning motion, and I’m just thankful to be here, alive, and very much *not* kidnapped by some fae.

Bronte pulls back from Van’s arms, and her gaze lands on me. “Ellie, hi,

sweet girl.” Her face is wet with tears that she brushes back with her thumb. I step forward, into her warm arms, and between the smell of her and the small hum she makes, it’s like going home, nostalgia hitting me hard.

“Hi Bronte.”

I don’t say *it’s good to see you again*, or anything else that references the last time we saw each other, and neither does she. Jenny’s death is the elephant in the room, the shared experience none of us ever wanted, and something I’ve been thinking about all day. What Weston said — that he believes the fae has something to do with her passing — has been eating at me, but I haven’t, and won’t, say anything to Van about it. What can I say, and what can I do, anyway? I could let the fear and guilt of it all devour me alive if I dwelled on it for too long. I know Van has blamed himself over the years, agonising over the fact that he was supposed to be the one babysitting that day. It doesn’t do any of us any good. Nothing we ever do is going to bring her back, and so for now, at least, I’m going to cling to the numb feeling I woke up with this morning, the one that always comes after the initial shock.

I know it’s not necessarily healthy, but I simply don’t have the time or capacity for a breakdown right now.

“How are you?” Bronte asks, her hands clutching my elbows. She’s the same height as Lacey, and I’m accepting at this point that I’m forever going to be looking up when speaking to anyone on Van’s side.

“I’m... alright.” There’s not really a word to encompass how I’m feeling right now. She nods, seeming to understand. Her mouth opens to speak, but then her head snaps up, concern flitting over her face, and I spin around.

Van and Weston stand opposite each other, staring silently, while Seth flanks his father. Up until this moment, Seth still existed in my mind as a twelve-year-old boy, despite me knowing that he’s twenty-one, and it’s a shock to see him stand almost as tall as the other men, sharing the similar Livingston looks, but with Weston’s slightly paler tan and hair more brown than black.

To say the air is charged is an understatement. I feel like everyone waits with bated breath, asking themselves the same questions. Are these two wolves going to fight? Or will these two alphas finally be able to coexist?

“Look, Gramps!” Ronan cries, bouncing up to Weston and taking his hand, pointing down the hill. “That’s Uncle Van’s house! He makes *wine*! He’s going to take me to see the wine barrels tomorrow! Can we go to his

house *now*? Come on!” The little boy tugs on his grandfather’s hand, putting all his weight into it, and Weston’s expression transforms from stern to doting.

“Alright son, here,” Weston says, grabbing the boy by the waist and lifting him until he’s sitting on his shoulders. “Let’s go see your uncle’s house.”

“Pick me up! Pick me *up!*” demands Ash, arms raised towards Van, demanding to be carried like his big brother.

“Okay, I’ve got you,” Van says, lifting Ash to his hip.

“On the shoulders!” Ash is already climbing Van like a monkey, pulling on his neck, muddy shoes digging into Van’s shirt.

“Okay, okay, shoulders it is. Let’s go.”

Both alphas share a look, nodding in acknowledgement, turning in unison towards the house. From the back they could be twins, if it weren’t for Weston’s salt-and-pepper hair.

Bronte and I have been clutching each other the entire time, and I feel her sag with relief at the same time as I sigh. “Thank the moon goddess for small miracles,” she mutters, rubbing my back with a familiarity I didn’t even realise I’ve missed so terribly until now. “I think we’re going to be okay.”

“Van said he’d behave.”

“So did West. I made him promise. He wants things to get better, he really does.”

I nod. “We all do, eh?”

Bronte clucks her tongue. “*Eh*,” she mimics. “I’ve missed your Kiwi accent, and I’ve missed *you*, honey. So much. Lets follow them before they get up to no good. It’s been a long day.”

With her arm still in mine, we start walking. “You’re all forgetting the bags!” Lacey calls from behind us.

“You and Seth have two arms each, darling,” Bronte replies over her shoulder.

Grumbles from Lacey of, “Treating me like a fucking packhorse,” follow us all the way to the front door.

**A**fter an hour of tearing up and down the hallways in the house, bouncing

on ‘their’ beds — which we hastily covered in overpriced superhero themed covers this afternoon — and scoffing down a very late dinner, Ronan and Ash finally pass out, each one slumped on either side of Lacey, sandwiching her in place on the couch. I sit opposite her, on Van’s lap in the single-seat recliner, and Lacey shakes her head at me. “See? I told you they were full of energy.”

“They’re lovely.”

She looks down at them both with the same reverence I’ve seen on Bronte’s face a thousand times, every time she ever looks at any of her children. “They are.”

Empty plates and glasses litter the coffee table. Everyone was starving, and the food we stocked up on definitely didn’t go to waste. It’s past midnight — more like 3AM for these people, having come from California — and everyone looks exhausted. Van was right, I guess, in that it *is* different, seeing everyone post-Unravelling. I’m not used to *all* the golden eyes, or the sheer size of everyone. Van’s presence is always a lot simply because he’s so big, and while I find his charismatic energy and the raw power he exudes wonderfully, deliciously good, times that by four other adults and suddenly the large room seems very small and almost suffocating.

“So we’re staying in the other house?” Seth asks from his seat on the floor, looking to Van with the same slightly hesitant expression he’s worn all night. That’s the other thing that has been strange, observing them all together, now that I know all about the pack politics that are at play in the background. Van’s an alpha, *not* Seth’s alpha, but still someone instinctually intimidating to him, from what I can tell.

“Yeah. I’ll get you the key.”

“Wait,” Bronte interjects, before Van even starts moving. “Before we do anything else, let me check the ward on Ellie first. That’s the whole reason we rushed here, after all.”

Van glances my way, checking in with me silently, and I nod. “Of course. I hate being a burden.”

“No, not at all,” Bronte replies, moving to sit on the armrest of our chair, taking one of my hands in hers. I’ve avoided Weston’s gaze for most of the night, but I catch his eye now, and the memory of his wolf tearing through the flesh of the deer hits me again, making me shudder.

“Are you afraid of me?”

They’re the first words he’s said directly to me in nine years.

“No,” I answer, exhaustion making me more blunt than usual. “I was scared, on the beach ten years ago, and that feels like it happened yesterday, to me.” I shrug. “There was a lot of blood.”

“There was.”

I nod.

“You were lucky Bronte and I were going for a walk at the time. I don’t know what you were thinking, being out there alone,” he continues, his tone a mix of condescension and concern. “What kind of teenage girl swims by herself in the dark?”

“It was sunset, not dark,” I retort, feeling defensive.

“You know New Zealand is different,” Van jumps in, his voice more authoritative than I’ve ever heard it before, and his hand grips my knee firmly. “Was I happy to hear she was out there alone, when she told me what happened? No, of course not, but you can’t judge her sense of safety by your cultural standards and you know that. Small-town New Zealand is different.”

“Bad things happen everywhere, Evander, regardless of location.”

“Well obviously we all know *that*.”

Van’s statement hangs in the air between us all, oppressive and sad, and the room is silent save for the soft snoring of Lacey’s boys.

Lacey sighs, closing her eyes, head leaning back against the couch. “Can we please just get on with it, so we can all go to bed?”

“I’ve already done it,” Bronte says, releasing my hand. “It’s fine. We’ll practise more magic in the morning. Van, honey, get us the key to that house so we can sleep.”

I stand next to Van on the back deck of his house, sipping my tea and watching three huge black wolves prowl around the vineyard. Like us, they’re enjoying the morning sun, running up and down the rows of vines like massive playful dogs. Van pointed out who was who, but it was easy for me to tell, even without his explanation; both Lacey and Seth look similar to Van’s wolf in that they have a patch of white fur down their front, whereas Weston’s coat is all one colour. Both Ronan and Ash run barefoot through the fields, chasing and being chased by the wolves, squealing happily every time they’re playfully growled at or licked.

“It’s a good thing you’d already planned for Lost Moon to be closed this week,” I say quietly.

“Yeah. It’s fortunate timing, that’s for sure.” Van had arranged to close Lost Moon on this day weeks ago, wanting to avoid a repeat of the curious crowds in those final hours before his werewolf transformation. It just happened to work out that it’s also time to do the internal renovations of the buildings, and so Lost Moon won’t be opening for another eight days, allowing time for Kaito and his crew to transform the restaurant and entertainment space.

I rub the bare skin of Van’s back. He’s wearing my favourite outfit; grey sweatpants and nothing else. “You don’t want to join them?” I ask, nodding towards the wolves.

“No,” he answers with a shake of his head. “I don’t want to push it. Now that Lacey isn’t in their pack, you can see the tension in their interactions, especially because she’s protective of her pups. See, watch.”

He’s right. Seth steps just a tad too close to his sister, and she snarls at him, forcing him to backtrack up the row he just ran down.

“You don’t want to risk anything,” I muse, leaning into his warmth further. His hand settles on my waist as he gives a very non-committal hum, sipping at his coffee.

I can’t blame him for being cautious. This quiet truce between him and Weston seems almost too good to be true, and I feel as if we’re all on edge, doing our best not to burst this bubble.

I know Bronte feels the tension too, and does her best to counteract it with her relaxed demeanour. She is the balm that has held this family together for so long, and today is no different; she breezes through the vines towards the house as if it’s any old day, and not one where she’ll be turning into an eight-and-a-half foot tall wolf monster at sunset, waving to us with a grin on her face. She looks completely at home on the vineyard, dressed in casual white linen paired with leather sandals, her laughter ringing through the air as Weston runs at her, tail wagging, and for a moment I think he’s going to bowl her right over. He rears up on his hind legs and I hold my breath, letting it out in one big gust as she catches his huge front legs with ease, seemingly unbothered by the massive weight she must be supporting right now. Her husband’s huge wolf bares his teeth at her in what I can now confidently read as a wolf’s grin, his tail continuing to wag in a way that makes him seem endearing, and not the difficult man I know him to be.



“Wolves are strong, Ellie,” Van says quietly. “Relax. If there’s one thing I can guarantee you, it’s that he would *never* hurt my mother. He worships the ground she walks on.”

“Yeah. Wow.” I look up at Van, as if seeing him for the first time again. “I didn’t realise you were quite *that* strong, though.”

He shrugs. “There’s a reason humans panicked and banned us all from competing in their professional sports. I may think it’s wrong and that there has to be some better way to be inclusive, but I’ll be the first to admit that when it comes to physical activities, it’s not really a competition, from a wolf’s perspective.”

“Is it a guaranteed win?”

“You tell me. You think a human could beat me in a weightlifting competition? Or in track and field events?”

I nudge him with my hip. “Now you’re just fishing for compliments. I get it, trust me, I’m well aware of how big and buff you are.”

Bronte leaves Weston with the children, and joins us on the deck. “*Mōrena*,” I greet her. It’s how Mum used to always greet her, every Saturday morning on the beach.

“Oh, *mōrena*, Ellie! It’s such a stunning day.”

“It is.” The clouds from last night have disappeared, leaving the sky clear and the air still.

“I love it when the water looks like glass, like this. Sometimes I really miss waking up to these New Zealand mornings and the ocean views, with the birds singing, you know?” There’s a melancholy in her voice that breaks my heart.

“Yeah.”

“I’ve told West it’s time for him to retire.”

“What?” Van asks, turning away from the view of the playing wolves so that he’s fully facing his mother. “He’s got decades of work left in him — it’s not like we have to hide the slower ageing in this realm anymore.”

Bronte nods. “I know. But I’m sick of it. We don’t need more money. None of you children have shown any interest in taking over the company, and I think our priorities should be different. I see West with the pups and I think *I want that*. These seven months have been torture for me, not seeing any of you. I already lost one of my babies, I can’t bear...”

“*Mom.*”

I blink back tears as Van envelops his mother in a hug. “You haven’t lost

us,” he murmurs to her. “We’re right here. You can stay as long as you like, even if it causes me more headaches.”

“Headaches like what?”

“Ah, don’t worry.” He glances at me over his shoulder, and I shake my head, giving him a wide-eyed look, knowing exactly what headache he’s referring to. We had a *very* close call with his nephews this morning, who narrowly missed catching us in an extremely compromising position. I hadn’t even considered that the boys might come running in when Van had fucked me silently, spooning me, his fingers in my mouth to keep me quiet. We hadn’t spoken at all, at least not more than a few hushed whispers of “*Are you okay?*” and “*I love you,*” but I had known as soon as I woke that Van needed that closeness, that connection, that reassurance of the bond we have. We were still knotted together when footsteps had thundered down the hall, the tie tugging painfully at my vag when he’d scrambled to reach the blankets, throwing them over us both with only half a second to spare before the door swung wide and two smiley little faces greeted us. Van had bellowed for Lacey to “*Come and get your children ASAP!*” and she’d sprinted in, cracking up laughing when she realised exactly what was going on.

“I’m going to ask Lacey what happened,” Bronte says, glancing between us, a smile dancing on her lips, “though I think from the blush on Ellie’s cheeks I can take an educated guess. If we stay in New Zealand, we won’t be living here on your vineyard, don’t worry. I started looking into properties around Lake Wānaka.”

“Really? Billionaire land, huh?” Van asks, eyebrows raised. He’s right; from what I’ve read, Wānaka *is* the place where most billionaires choose to buy properties, if they bother coming to New Zealand at all.

“It’s a compromise. It’s in the South Island — as far away from Northland as we can go and still be in the same country as our children. And it really is beautiful down there; you remember the trips we took when you were a boy.”

“Yeah, I do. I want to take Ellie there, sometime, she’s never even set foot on the South Island. I’ve seen more of her own country than she has.”

A look of guilt crosses Bronte’s face when she glances back at me. “We should have taken you, when we went on those mini vacations away from the Bay.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“No, it’s not.” She pauses, golden eyes searching mine. “There’s so many things that aren’t fine, Ellie, and I really do want to apologise, for tampering with your memory the way I did. West and I were both very panicked that evening.”

“He seemed like he knew what he was doing.”

“He’s good at appearing calm and in control, yes. *Someone* takes after him that way,” she adds, nodding towards Van. “Both of them are very good alphas. Both of them would put their bodies on the line for anyone in their pack, I have no doubt about that.” Her voice drops low, to barely a whisper. “Van was right, the other day. That wolf down there has always protected you, even if the man within him was afraid to acknowledge it. I’m sorry that West has been so hard on you in the past, Ellie.”

“Did he know I was fae, all that time?”

Her expression is one of dismay. “You know, he never told me, until that evening ten years ago, but *yes*. He said he could tell from the first day he met you, and I don’t know how he could, or why he never said anything to me, but he’s ridiculously stubborn, that man, so...” she shrugs, huffing as if she can’t believe what she’s about to say. “He drives me mad, half the time. And I know West comes across as this very aggressive, very hyper-masculine male — and maybe he is —” she concedes, “but he’s... he’s...” she trails off, holding her hands over her heart, watching the big black wolf that stares straight back at her.

“He’s yours,” I finish for her, understanding entirely.

The wolf throws his head back and howls, just as she nods. “He’s mine,” she agrees, her fingers playing at the skin of her shoulder, where I can see the edge of a silver scar hiding under her shirt.

**B**ronte and I spend the morning sitting cross-legged on the lawn, practising magic until I’m able to shift between my usual form and one with antlers in the blink of an eye, and with Van by my side, she’s able to witness firsthand how I seem to draw on Van’s magic in order to fuel my own powers. Under her guidance, I have an epiphany, laughing when it hits me.

“What is it?” She’s excited; I can tell by the way her face lights up.

“Bloody hell, it’s so obvious,” I say, holding my temples. “I can’t believe

I didn't think of it before."

"What?" Van is more impatient, more nervous about this, and has been ever since I regained that memory.

"The mushrooms have been freaking me out, because I thought... I thought I was creating *life* from scratch, which is really fucking weird. And maybe these fae can do that, and grow whatever plants, I don't know, but the mushrooms that I'm growing, they're already *there*, in the ground. I'm activating the dormant spores. I can feel them in there, in the soil; I can feel the spores, and the mycelia — the root structure of fungi — and my magic helps them grow. What my magic does is *transform* them, and that's why I'm getting the crazy colours and the glowy green thing going on." I sigh, looking between Van and Bronte. "You guys probably don't give a shit, but for a plant nerd like me this is very exciting."

Bronte's grin is wide and sharp, and I feel my cheeks grow red.

"You already knew this, didn't you?"

"No," she replies. "I didn't know the mechanics of it, but I knew it had to be something like that, because you're right, we can't create life from *nothing*. You can transform things. You can revive some things, *small things*, like a wilted flower. There are a lot of rules around this topic."

"Is there anything I need to know immediately?"

She shakes her head. "I don't think so. I am curious about the mushrooms — have you heard of the term '*fairy circle*' before?" I nod, and she continues. "The fae keep to themselves, but even humans have stories about fairy circles being doors to another world."

That kills my excitement. "Like opening a portal to the First Realm."

"Yes — *don't panic*, Ellie! Your heart just skipped a beat! Sweetheart, it's fine. Portal magic is normal and *useful*, it's the only way to get through to the other realm, after all."

"But what if I accidentally open up a hole and fall through!"

"You *won't*. It takes years to master. If it was easy to make portals, everyone would have been coming through, and you can guarantee humans would have known about us all much, much earlier in history."

I look at Van, and he gives my knee a reassuring squeeze. "I don't want to learn that," I tell Bronte. "I'm all good, just being *me*, as I am right now. I don't need to be a witch. I don't need to be some sort of magical fairy. I'm really happy just the way I am, me and my gardening — that's the skillset I want to hold on to."

“Mmm, sure.” She’s not convinced. She leans forward, deliberately tucking my hair behind my ears. “You have fae blood, darling. You don’t have to practise magic as a job, you don’t have to join a coven, you don’t have to call yourself a witch, but you should learn to wield magic safely.”

I know I look unimpressed. It’s a *lot* to take in — quite a lot, to have my identity change so significantly, especially when I sometimes already feel fragmented. The journey of reconnecting with the parts of Māori culture that colonisation tore from my family over generations is an ongoing one, forever two steps forward and one step back, and there will always be a huge question mark in the space where my father should be — other than his initials, all I know is that he is, or was, part-fae and “*looked Pākehā*,” according to Mum. And it’s not just that, it’s the idea of having to put so much effort into *another* thing, having to add something else to my already full plate. I’ve already been leaning on Cam for favours too often in the past month — the amount of times I’ve had to ask him if he wouldn’t mind going around to my place to take care of the chickens is embarrassing.

“Anyway,” Bronte announces, rising to her feet, “that’s enough for today. We all need to take it easy, since we’re all going to be up all night.” She gives Van and I both a look that makes me die a little inside, because yes, my mother-in-law just insinuated that she knows *exactly* what I’ll be doing to her son *in his werewolf form* come nightfall.

Beside me, Van laughs silently, his shoulders shaking until I push him over and kiss him to shut him up.

The morning bleeds into a lazy mid-afternoon, and Nerilina comes by, taking a walk around the perimeter of the vineyard with Bronte, both witches talking and testing magic.

As the hours drag on, all the wolves — now back in their non-shifted states — grow more and more snappish with each other, until even Bronte becomes short-tempered. It’s a breath of fresh air when Cam visits, simply because he gets on with everyone, even Weston. It doesn’t seem to matter to anyone that he sided with Van after the pack split, and despite the fact that he only met Lacey and Seth briefly when they were children, Cam has everyone laughing with his good-natured stories.

Van surprises us all with the news that he paid the restaurant chef and a handful of staff to come in for the evening — with the promise to the humans that they would be leaving at least an hour before moonrise — and we all sit down to a huge four-course meal on the vineyard deck, Nerilina and Cam joining us.

“So, Evander and Ellie are taking the beach tonight, is that right?” Seth asks, and the look he shoots me tells me *exactly* what he thinks about that. “So they can have their *privacy*.”

Beside me, Van growls.

“*Easy*,” Bronte says. “Seth, don’t be a little shit-stirrer. We’ve already discussed where everyone will be for the moon, so there’s no need to bring it up again.”

“I wish Lacey had been more organised and found a sitter so we don’t have to take turns watching the boys,” he complains. “Can’t we just leave them, anyway? They’ll be sleeping the whole time. I can’t think of anything worse than being a werewolf stuck watching TV in the middle of the night.”

Lacey’s growl rips through the air as she scowls at her younger brother. “We had less than twenty-four hours to get organised! I’m *sorry* I couldn’t ask my short-term nanny to come live halfway across the world on a single day’s notice! Besides, Dad can remain a *man* the whole night, I don’t see what the problem is, *he* should be watching the boys.”

This time it’s Weston’s turn to growl. “That’s bullshit Lacey, and you know it. You think my wolf is going to put up with not shifting the entire full moon?” The sound of his growl, in particular, sends a shiver down my spine, and beside me, Van grows still.

“Dad, it’s one night,” Lacey argues back.

“I’ll stay!” Cam says, the deep timbre of his voice cutting through everyone else. He turns to Lacey, who looks at him with wide eyes. “I’ll stay the night, lass, and take care of your pups. It’s nae bother. Like you said, they’ll sleep through, anyway.”

“Oh, no... you don’t have to.”

“It will help everyone, aye? It’s only one night. I remember what it’s like, when they’re wee ones and your sense of freedom is impinged so heavily. This way you dinnae have to worry about them at all.”

“I’m staying too,” Nerilina declares. “Just in case. Ellie’s magic manifested last full moon; she’s my client, so I’m staying on site in case support is needed.”

I see Bronte purse her lips momentarily before shrugging. “I really think that’s unnecessary, but if you need to…”

“I need to.”

“Alright.”

The sun is dipping dangerously close to the horizon by the time Van sets the keyless lock on the final restaurant door, alarming it for the night. Everyone else has disappeared, and he turns to me, palming the front of his sweatpants, not even bothering to hide the thick bar of his erection. “I’m going to come in my pants if I don’t do something about this. Seriously. I don’t think I can walk down to the beach right now. It’s because I haven’t bitten you yet — it’s fucking with my mind and my dick.”

It’s tempting to laugh at the frustrated expression on his face, though I don’t. I know that he’d planned a quiet weekend for us off the back of our romantic getaway — a weekend where we barely had to leave the bed — and instead the past two days have been hectic. “Where are the security cameras around here?”

“Everywhere.”

“Come on, there must be a blindspot somewhere.”

He thinks for only a second before lifting me, tossing me over his shoulder. I yelp in surprise and he smacks my ass, the whole thing screaming *primal caveman*. He carries me around the corner, down the deck stairs and into an outdoor gazebo area with fabric walls on three sides. It’s overflow seating for wine tastings, and he sets me down on a bench seat. “I don’t even know where my parents are.”

“If you can’t hear them, they can’t hear you, right?” I’m already pulling down his waistband, releasing him, hot and swollen and leaking precum. “Oh Van,” I say, pulling back his foreskin and pressing my lips to the underside of his fat crown, before licking over the head, tasting him. His breath releases in a shaky moan that extends when I take him into my mouth, sucking hard.

“Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*”

I squeeze his balls, making him hiss, feeling him strain within my mouth. He really is close already, the coming of the moon making him desperate to spill, and I yank down the front of my strappy singlet, exposing my breasts.

“Come on my tits,” I demand, knowing this kind of thing appeals to his wolves, and to him. He wants me to smell like him; I’ll fucking smell like him, then.

He grunts, thrusting into my hand as I drag my grip up and down his cock, his foreskin moving with my fingers, my speed increasing until he’s doing nothing but panting heavily, pupils blown wide and reflective, canines suddenly longer, sharper, each grunt more of a growl. I use my free hand to squeeze his knot, thick and engorged at the base of his shaft, and he jerks with a moan.

I’m dripping wet in my panties by the time he explodes with a grunt, thick spurts of cum coating my chest. I squeeze him through it all, until every creamy white drop is spilled, and then lick him clean.

I stop when I realise that the fingers stroking my face now have *claws*, and I watch with awe as the man I love transforms before me, becoming *more*.



*Eighteen*

## ELLIE



Van's body transforms, growing bulky and monstrously tall, all fur and muscle, his clothes tearing apart and falling away in the process. *Every* part of his body grows in size, his penis surging forward and upwards, bumping me in the forehead like a blunt weapon, making me squeak in surprise. I blink up at it in shock once he's done changing forms; from my seated position, the huge thing hangs over my head like a freaking tree branch.

*I can't believe that fit inside me.*

In this dim light it's hard to make out details other than the sheer size of it; it's *girthy*, extremely so, adding to Nerilina's theory that my fae magic may have aided in our coupling during the last full moon. My gaze travels down his thick shaft to the pair of massive, heavy balls that now hang directly in front of my face, and my fingers itch with the urge to reach out and touch them, but I'm interrupted by the clawed fingers that graze my chin with a soft touch. I smile as Van gently tilts my head up, and I crane my neck, staring past his dick and up at his wolf head instead, leaning back in my seat until the table behind me bumps my spine.

"Hi Van."

He smiles at me, all teeth, and takes a step back, crouching on his haunches so that it brings his face level with mine. "Hello, baby." The deep gravel of his voice drips down my spine, making me shiver involuntarily, and humour dances in his gold eyes.

I reach for one of his huge hands, holding it with both of mine, lifting it to my mouth so I can kiss each claw-tipped finger. "I love you," I say softly.

"I love you too, Ellie. My mate."

“Is that Van talking, or the wolf?”

“All of us. We’re all parts of the whole, my sweet mate.” His chuckle is the deepest, darkest rumble I’ve ever heard. “I’m still the same guy you jerked off two minutes ago, if that’s what you’re asking.”

My laugh is breathy against his palm as I shower it with kisses, staring into his beautiful eyes. He is huge and monstrous... and for me, he is my gentle giant, lifting his other hand to brush through my hair, to oh so carefully pull my top back up over my cum-smearred breasts, to stroke my skin with the edge of a claw, reverence clear in every careful movement of his. I have never felt more safe and loved than in this moment, with my big werewolf caring for me.

“Would you like to go to the beach?” he asks. “If you’ve changed your mind, I can take you back to the house, and you can shower and relax, and I will see you in the morning. I am happy either way, baby. The choice is always yours.”

To me, it’s a no-brainer. “Take me to the beach.”

The howls start up just as Van is about to take us down the track that leads to the shore. We’d waited until his dick had retracted into its sheath to start moving for this very reason — his family are all around and would most likely spot us as we headed for the beach. I wrap my arms tighter around his neck on instinct as he turns back towards the sound, staring up at Lacey’s house on the hill. The silhouettes of other werewolves are easy enough to spot in the dim light, and it’s the strangest feeling, to be held so lovingly in the arms of one, while simultaneously feeling a little scared of the others.

They howl again, and this time Van tilts his head back, answering. His call is beautiful and eerie, and as I stare up at the moon, orange and magnified as it rises above the land, I have one of those odd moments of clarity. *This is my life now.* It’s enchanting and strange and sometimes a little bit terrifying, but I wouldn’t change any of it, not when there’s magic like this.

When the howls die down, Van takes us through the forested track, the gravel crunching under his huge feet, the sound loud in the still night air. There’s no waves at all, the water gently lapping against the shore as we

emerge from the trees. He takes us to the same grassed area as the last time we did this, overlooking the sand, and sets me down on my feet before crouching down himself, until he is on his knees in front of me. He's so huge that in this position he's still the tiniest bit taller than me.

"What's it like, when you change?" I ask, shivering as he helps to peel my top off over my head. I tug down on my leggings and my underwear, steadying myself with a hand on his meaty shoulder as I kick them off. He's silent, and I can't quite decipher the look on his wolfish face. "What?"

"Look at you. So beautiful. So delicate. So trusting. I don't deserve you."

I shake my head. "Don't be silly. You deserve me," I tell him as his hands settle on my waist, tugging me forward. "Don't say things like that. I love you. You're a good man. Wolf. *Wolf-man*." He snorts against my skin, his wet tongue darting out to lick a stripe across my collarbone.

He licks lower again, his rough tongue curling over my nipple, making me jolt. "Wait, what are you doing?"

"Hmmm," he rumbles, clearly not bothered by the taste of himself on my skin. He continues to lick at me, alternating between my breasts, until I'm breathing heavily and squirming in place, held tight by his vice grip around my middle, the tips of his claws just grazing my skin. I squeeze my thighs together, feeling the glide of wet arousal, but I'm desperate for some real friction.

"*Evander*, you're such a tease." He is, especially because his cock has risen back out of its sheath, and now strains, long and impossibly thick, against his stomach. With the moon hidden behind the cliff above, I can barely see more than the shape of it, and I can't touch it either — he holds me so that I am too far back, the magnificent, beautiful thing too far out of my reach.

He rumbles again in amusement, tipping me backwards, laying me out on the cool grass. This time, when I sense magic, I understand it's coming from within me, and from this bond that he and I share. I feel the grass beneath me, and the trees that surround us because *I* connect to them; I feel the ocean because I can sense the life hidden within its depths — the seaweed that grows lush on the ocean floor, forests of it stretching out past the bay, out into the open sea. I grin, giddy with possibilities, as an idea pops into my mind.

"What are you thinking? You look devious." Van trails his huge hands down my hips to my knees, pausing there, my skin prickling from the gentle

scrape of his claws. I know he wants to spread me open for him, and I want that too, so I appreciate his patience as he waits for my answer.

I tap the ground with my right hand. “Look. How about some mood lighting?” I activate a series of spores — in a line, *not* a circle — and ten little mushrooms pop up beside us, glowing green. I squeal with happiness, clapping my hands, because *it worked*. “Look! Fairy lights! Get it?”

He shakes his head. “I get it.”

I can’t decipher his expression, but the way his ears flatten back against his skull is a clear tell. “You’re not happy? We can stomp on them, if you’d rather —”

“No, Ellie... No. It’s fine.” In the soft light from the mushrooms, his pupils gleam bright green, his ears swivelling back around to face me. “It’s good that you’re learning to do these things.”

“It scares you, doesn’t it?”

He’s quiet for a moment, huge jaw hanging open. “Yes, baby. But I’m always going to worry about you; that’s my job as alpha, and... it’s probably PTSD too, if we’re being honest.”

I begin to sit up. “I’m just going to squish these now and —”

“No, baby.” He presses me back down gently. “This is a great idea. You want to be able to see — so let’s keep the lighting. They’re beautiful, and you made them — that’s impressive. Please don’t let my initial reaction ruin this moment for you.”

I feel bad. I feel awful for him, that he’s experiencing this sort of anxiety around the fact that I have these question marks hanging over me regarding my magic, my abilities, my *safety*. I already knew he felt this way, but it puts it in perspective when your eight and a half foot tall werewolf lover manages to seem terrified of potential dangers.

Still, I know Van, and I know how stubborn he can be. I’d happily crush these stupid mushrooms into the dirt if it’s bothering him, but if I do so now, *that* is going to bother him more, and he’s going to feel bad for making me feel bad, and we’ll end up getting caught in a useless, stupid, cyclic argument. I take a deep breath, choosing the easy path, reaching out to run my hands down the fur of his thickly muscled arms. “Okay. We’ll keep the mushrooms.”

“Good. Now, where were we? You asked me a question before — what it feels like to change under the full moon.”

“Yeah,” I say, sucking in a breath as he bends over me, long tongue

licking a stripe down between my breasts to my navel. “What are you doing?” I giggle, as he licks at my side, a spot he knows I find extremely ticklish.

“Lightening the mood. And worshipping you.” He licks again, this time in a line heading south, and my legs fall open. “You asked what it felt like to transform.” Another lick, at the inside of my thigh. “It is like taking your first breath.” *Lick.* “It is your entire focus narrowing down to one point, one thing, one moment. The blood rushing in your ears, the stretching of your skin.” His muzzle hovers over my pussy, hot breath feathering over my most sensitive areas, and I feel as if I will come out of my skin if he does not touch my clit soon. “The scent of your mate, if she is nearby.” I whimper, and his lips curl back further in a feral smile. “And always, the presence of the moon, whether you can see her or not.”

“I can feel it,” I say, breathless. “The moon.” *Te Rākaunui, the full moon.*

“I know you can.”

The tip of his tongue traces a path over my outer folds, his glowing eyes staring at me with all the focus of an apex predator. I am frozen, prey within his trap.

“*Ellie,*” he growls so deep that the sound reverberates within me. “You are my moon.”

Tears prick at my eyes. “You are my *world,*” I whisper.

He holds me on the precipice for a moment longer, a space between breaths. Nothing exists but us.

*Lick.*

I fly apart under his tongue, his luminous eyes twin moons in the dark.

“**A**lrigh, let’s do this,” I announce, feeling sufficiently recovered from the orgasm Van gave me while eating me out. He lets out a wolfish snort of amusement as I push myself up from the grass, rolling away from his warm body. After I’d been rendered both speechless and boneless, he’d curled up on the ground around me, folding his limbs over me and keeping me warm, and my skin prickles from the cold, nipples pebbling as soon as I’m out of his little air pocket of warmth. That’s fine; I plan on getting my heart rate up again shortly, anyway. “Lie on your back, and let me get a proper close-up

look at this beautiful monster dick.”

He’s silent, but does as he’s told, watching me with a hooded gaze as I kneel beside him, grasping his huge penis with both hands. It rises out of the sheath at the base of his groin, the skin on his shaft the same dark charcoal grey as the rest of him, thick veins running up the side, but the crown that peeks out from under the edge of his foreskin is dusky pink and glistening with precum. “This doesn’t look too different from your day-to-day penis, to be honest,” I say, my fingers tracing over his huge knot, only partially swollen, two thirds of the way down his shaft. “The placement of this part is a bit different.”

“There’s some sort of science behind the knot being there, in this form.”

“Breeding?”

“Something like that.”

I pull his foreskin back until the entire head of his cock is free. “I like this colour combo.”

He snorts again. “Are you going to narrate the whole process?”

“I’m not going to be able to in a minute, with my mouth busy.”

He grunts as I pull his foreskin back and forth in a series of smooth motions. “You don’t have to. If this is too strange for you, I understand.”

“Stop telling me that,” I say quietly. “You are the love of my life, you are my soulmate. If the universe didn’t want me to suck on this right here, it shouldn’t have made us fated mates.”

“I don’t think you *can* suck on it, baby, unless you’re able to unhinge your jaw.”

I glare at him over the top of the pink crown, because damn him, he’s right. “I can do *this*,” I say, and lower my head to his cock, latching my lips around his frenulum, that triangle of skin just under the crown, the most sensitive part of him by far, and much larger in this form. I suck hard and he hisses, his hips jerking and dislodging my mouth momentarily. Fresh precum oozes out, and I keep my eyes on his as I lick him like an ice cream cone. I repeat the process again and again, alternating between kneading his huge balls and his knot with my free hands, the salty taste of *him* on my tongue, until he’s gasping and leaking in a continuous stream.

“Point taken,” he rasps, his barrel chest heaving with each breath.

“Good.” I release him, “but I wasn’t really planning on using my mouth that much, anyway.” I get to my feet and take a wide step, straddling him over his stomach. “I’m going to need some help here.”

His hands wrap around my waist once more, helping to support my weight as I line the head of his cock up with my entrance. It was easier, last month, when he was already inside me, and the stretch happened that way. I'm dripping wet — I have been all evening, but especially after he used his tongue on me — but no amount of lubrication is going to hide the fact that he is *huge* in this form.

I close my eyes for a moment as I lower myself just enough to feel him there, pressing in. I tap into that same feeling as I did last month — that sense of magic, that sense of the moon, that acknowledgement that I'm not entirely human.

“There she is, my fae goddess,” he rumbles as I feel the weight of my antlers settle on my head, my skin prickling with the sensation of my magic. He pulls me down further, until the head of his cock is seated inside me, filling me with the same stretch that his fully engorged knot usually provides. I moan, eyes still closed, taking in deep lungfuls of the salty ocean air as I rock myself lower again. I can feel the magic within me, my body opening for him like a flower, my form changing inside to fit his huge size.

Long, slow strokes up and down, stretching me wide, the edges of his cockhead dragging deliciously against my G spot each time. We move together, my eyes open now, hands braced on his massive chest, fingers digging into fur. I can feel the weight of the antlers on my head, can see the green glow in my eyes reflected in his, and I know this is the least human I have ever been. It's so intense, this connection between us, that it's almost too much. I brush my fingers over my clit, tentatively at first, and then with more intention, and the prick of his claws at my lower back where he grasps me, the *power* I feel, riding him like this, drives me to a frenzied state. “Yes, fuck me,” he snarls. “Take your pleasure. Ride your wolf.”

I cry out, head thrown back to the stars and body tight, *squeezing* around the thick girth of his cock as I come, riding the waves of it as he fucks me through it. Even as the last flutters of my orgasm die away he keeps thrusting upwards, keeps making me moan, rivulets of sweat dripping down my back, and I am lost in the hedonism of it all. His teeth are bared and his eyes focus on the place we are joined, and I know he is watching the way my body takes his fat cock, the way I stretch around him as he sinks into me, all the way down to that huge swollen knot.

“Can I... can I...” he begins, panting hard.

“Yes,” I reply, knowing what he needs. It's what I need too — to be taken



by the wolf, to give over all control, to be dominated. I love riding him, but we both know I *love* being fucked hard, I love being underneath, love feeling the weight of him press above me.

He lifts me off of his cock, and I feel so hollow without it. “*Please,*” I beg, falling to my hands and knees, shivering as I feel the heat of him behind me, the brush of fur, the heavy weight of his wet dick as it rests against my backside for a moment.

“Shh, that’s it baby,” he rumbles as he pushes back inside my cunt, and I groan at this new angle, it’s so fucking *good*. He runs his clawed hands up my back, leaving goosebumps in their wake, before they’re pressing into the grass beside mine, the heat of his chest against my back, his teeth grazing my ear in a way that makes my whole body light up in anticipation of what’s to come.

“Ready?”

His voice is so *deep*, melting me, and when he slides one hand between my legs, his knuckles brushing my clit, I know I’m done for. “Yes.”

“Hm.” His teeth bite down ever so gently on my shoulder. “What was that? I didn’t quite hear you.”

What a *lie*. I push myself back on his cock, hard and fast, taking him deeper than before. “I’m ready. Don’t tease me.”

“Mmmm.” His mouth presses once more to my cheek in a wolfish kiss, his cock dragging slowly out of me, until only the very tip remains inside, and I wait with bated breath.

The first thrust makes me groan, low and guttural, as do the second and third, and it’s almost too much as he sets a brutal, urgent pace, but I love it, love the sounds that he makes and the thumping pressure within me, the stretch just shy of being painful. “So fucking *good,*” I moan.

“That’s it,” he growls above me, knuckles grazing over my clit in a continuous rhythm, the pressure within me already close to bursting. “Moan for me baby, let me hear it all. I want to hear you scream.”

My arms give out, and I drop down to my elbows, the slight change in pressure, the heel of his hand now grinding against my clit, and the never-ending wild fucking make me whine, my whole body taut, on the cusp of release once more. I can feel the swelling of his knot with each ruthless stroke, and I rock back as he shifts forward, slamming myself against it.

“You want my knot?” he growls. “You want me to give you that? To tie you to a werewolf?”

“Yes!”

“Then come!” he demands with his alpha bark, and I cry out, giving in to the sensation, feeling my cunt constrict around him, and explosion of pure bliss, wave after wave drawn out by the now-slow cant of his hips, the delicious slide of him inside drawing out almost every last pulse of my orgasm until —

I scream as he thrusts suddenly, his knot locking into place within me with such pressure that I see stars, and I’m coming again with an absolute *gush* of release, squirting, despite the burning edge to this pleasure now. He lifts me back against him so that I hang in the air, his arms around my middle, clawed hands rough on my breasts, and every inch of me is alive with the knowledge that I am his, that I am so thoroughly impaled on his cock as he spills into me. He keeps coming, growling, filling me with an impossible amount of that liquid heat, his dick throbbing with each spurt, the most insane, toe-curling pleasure I have ever known.

Head spinning, ears ringing, limbs heavy, I’m only vaguely aware of the way he oh so carefully moves us, until he’s lying flat on the grass once more, my head resting on his chest, his furred body hot against my back as I lie like a starfish against him. The tips of my antlers only just brush fur under his chin, the sensation odd. I’ll withdraw them soon... but my head is far too much of a wonderful, foggy mess right now.

“Holy shit, Van,” I say breathlessly, my heartbeat thundering in my ears, moaning again as his hand strokes through the dripping wet folds of my cunt once more, his claw grazing the point where we are so tightly joined.

His chest heaves with each panting breath, the rise and fall a subtle shift beneath me, like the push and pull of the ocean on a calm day. I reach back above my head, stroking through the thick fur at his neck, smiling when his rough tongue licks at my fingers. “You always say it, but *this* is the definition of filling me up,” I murmur, my other hand tentatively settling over my lower belly, the slight cramps I’m experiencing a good indication that my body has definitely been pushed to its limit. That knot is locked as tight as anything could ever be, making me feel so utterly sexual, and all warm and fuzzy at the same time. I definitely have a bit of a cockwarming kink, I’ve realised; it’s one of my favourite things, to be knotted and filled by him for long periods of time, and I do love falling asleep at night around his knot.

“Do I get a prize?” he rumbles.

I snort, and we laugh together, his free arm wrapping around me, the

jostle of the movement making me groan at the pulling sensation deep within me, my legs twitching when he strokes my clit once more. He doesn't stop, and I don't tell him to, giving in to the sensation.

"Here she comes," he says, and I don't know if he's referring to me or the moon, only now clearing the tops of the trees above us, as I shake apart once more.

I t's getting closer to dawn, and the weakest of the stars are beginning to fade from the sky above. "No extra mushrooms," Van comments approvingly.

I hum, snuggling further into him, pressing my lips to his chest, and even those tiny movements cause more fluid to leak out of me. There's a definite puddle on his fur between our bodies, and I really hope we don't run into anyone before the night is over. I lost count of how many times we actually fucked tonight, but I'm officially done, and I'm loving this part because the warm cuddles are utterly delicious.

"Don't sleep yet, baby," he says, the gentle tone he takes with me a strange dichotomy with the deep dark rumble of his werewolf voice.

"I know." We need to get moving soon, and trudge up the hill to the house. "Give me five more minutes."

I love feeling him laugh underneath me. I love the way his heartbeat sounds, so low and steady, under my ear. I love the tingling feeling that follows every time his sharp claws drag across my shoulders. "I love you," I whisper.

"I love you too, my brave Ellie, not even afraid of a monster."

"I'm maintaining the snuggly teddy bear comment from last full moon," I reply, giggling as he huffs, his hot breath ruffling my hair. I lift my head to look at him, pulling myself further up his body so that I can kiss his muzzle. I reach up, touching one of his ears, fingers exploring the tufted points. On instinct I scratch behind it, and the rhythmic *shush* sound of fur dragging against the grass tells me his tail is wagging again, his eyes now half-closed, my blissed-out wolf.

The moon hangs low over the water now, and the glow of it against the still ocean is so bright I almost miss the ripples in the surface when I glance

up. But my brain snags on something out of the corner of my eye, and I jerk, freezing as I spot it, just beyond the edge of the cliffs.

Not it. *Them*.

“*Fae*,” I whisper, fear lacing my voice, and Van explodes with movement, picking me up, cradling me to him, snarling in the direction where I was staring just a moment before. The instant he spots them his snarl intensifies, lips pulled right back to reveal all those sharp teeth, his growling barks and the sudden snap of his jaws terrifying in the violence that he promises.

I’ve never seen fae in their true forms before, but I know what these two are immediately. They’re out on the water, appearing to stand above it, but I can see the green glow around their feet, as if they’ve created a platform from their magic. I can’t see details from here, only that they look ethereal in their flowing garb, their pale hair silver in the moonlight, and their eyes shining that eerie fae-green, with antlers — like mine — rising from their heads.

There’s a shimmer of blue in the air between them and us, stretching over the water from cliff to cliff, the faintest hint of silver script appearing for a moment. “Oh thank god,” I breathe, though Van’s violent snarling doesn’t stop. “They’re outside the ward. Van, it’s o —”

***Child***, a voice speaks, cold and cruel and commanding, and my words cut out in a whimper. Van continues to snarl and snap, but the voice is louder, the voice is *in my head*, and I can’t escape it. ***Child, you belong to us now.***

*No!!* I want to cry out, because *it’s happening again*, but it’s as if my body is no longer my own. I can think, I can think that *this isn’t right*, but I can’t move my hands, my legs, my mouth. I can’t control this magic I’ve just discovered.

The magic is controlling me.

***You’re coming with us.***

*No!!!!*

But I can feel it, the moment they make me do it. They make me take *my* magic, and *his*, make me steal Van’s power, that *alpha* control that he can wield over others. “***Evander***,” I speak, though inside my head I’m screaming, fighting, clawing for freedom. The sound is filled with that order, his ability to give alpha commands suddenly a weapon against him. “***Stay.***”

His snarling stops, a choked, horrified noise coming from his throat. My body moves like a marionette, jerky in his arms. “***Put me down and let me go,***” my voice speaks, ordering him.

He drops me, his wolfish face one of complete horror, and as my body rises from the ground, gait ungainly as I step away, he screams. “NO! ELLIE!”

*Van! No! NO!* But I’m helpless, unable to do anything, trapped inside my own mind as my steps even out, as whoever is commanding my body gains full control. I’m stepping down from the grassy bank, onto the cool sand, still completely naked.

***Come with us.***

A wolf’s howl splits through the air as my feet touch the water, and I can hear the desperation in Van’s cry. The howling continues, breaking my heart while my legs wade through the shallows, the water ice cold. I am waist-deep when the sand beneath me suddenly drops off and I gasp, sinking until water laps at my chin, my toes barely touching the ocean floor. It’s freezing, but I can’t do anything. I have no control. This is a living nightmare.

*I’m going to die.*

***Swim.***

Nineteen

VAN



I howl, desperate, distraught, and unable to fucking move. “HELP ME!” I scream, watching Ellie, possessed by the fae, wade deeper into the water. I throw my head back and howl again and again, my heartbeat thundering in my ears, until I cannot tell when my howling begins and the others end.

I stop calling with a choked sob as I hear the scrape of paws thundering down the track, but I am still frozen in place, unable to do anything except fall to my knees in despair. The wolf that runs up to me is my father, whining as he circles me, stopping to follow the scent of my mate. My own shifter wolf claws to be set free, though he is trapped until moonset, and even this werewolf is so full of pain and aggression that the man in me struggles to speak the words I need to say. “Out there,” I hiss.

He is a man in an instant, his hand on my shoulder. “Get up.” It is an alpha bark. It does nothing.

“Move!” he barks again. He’s trying to break the fae spell over me, to free me. I snarl. Can he not see that it isn’t working?

“*Mate,*” I growl, though it turns into a sob when I see her head dip under the water. *She’s going to drown. She’s going to drown just like Jenny did.*

There’s more paws scraping through dirt, more wolves, snarled explanations over the top of my head, and then I am watching my father’s wolf run into the water, leaping through the shallows. In that form he can swim far faster than a human. I am not religious but I pray now; *Goddess, keep her safe. Let him save her in time.*

I can still see her. She’s just past halfway now, halfway to the end of the cliffs, to the place where the wards end. Her arms glow in the moonlight as she swims slowly towards them, and I’m reminded that although she grew up

playing in the shallows constantly, she's not actually a strong swimmer at all, barely ever venturing deeper than her neck. All my nightmares are coming true at once as I watch her out there, her tiny form so small in all that water.

I have no idea how they've gotten to her like this, but it's clear that they can't physically pass through the ward, and instead they wait for her to come to them.

I try to move once more, to fight the power these fae have over me, *snarling* against it, my teeth bared as I give everything I have to *push* away the order. I broke free from my father. I can break free from this —

I cry out when it is Ellie's pain that is fed back through to me, back through the same channels the fae are using to control us both, making me stop immediately. I slam the ground with my fists in frustration, because *I can't do anything*. Those *fuckers* have set this up so that if I break free from *them* I am hurting Ellie, tearing apart the natural connection we have through our joint magic, and I cannot do that to her. I cannot do that to *me*. I whimper, claws pressed to the ground, head bowed, defeated. It's only the thought of her, my poor mate, trapped and alone out there, that has me rising again, standing on two feet, lifting my head to find her out there in the ocean.

For the first time I register my mother's presence, growling in her wolf voice through spell after spell, a continuous chant, the sky lighting up in a flash of gold, the ward shimmering with the strength of it. There's another voice, higher pitched, yelling spells in anger. *Nerilina*. I afford them the quickest of glances, see both with their hands outstretched, bodies glowing with their auras, but I don't have time to watch them. I have to watch Ellie. I have to know that she is safe.

Another werewolf approaches, ears pinned back against his skull. *Seth*. He looks out at the water, growling continuously. "They could control a whole pack, like that, through an alpha like you."

I look at him in horror. *My pack*. "Lacey —"

"She's safe, she's safe. Your orc friend bundled up the pups as soon as you raised the alarm. Lacey's running beside the car, back to his place. I saw her leave. She's safe, brother. Your pack is safe."

The growl that rips from my throat is anger directed at myself, the most useless, irresponsible alpha. *I forgot about my own pack*.

I should never have let Lacey come here. I should have told her to stay with my father's pack; I have no business being alpha, I —

"Van! Look. He's got her."



My eyes are on the water again. I see my father shift from wolf to man again so that it is his two-legged form that approaches Ellie, stopping her mid-swim, pulling her against him. She struggles, fighting him, limbs flailing, the water churning around them. They are so close to the edge of the ward, and I am terrified they're going to get dragged out further.

The sound of my mother's voice intensifies, so loud now, and I realise she is screaming in her mother tongue, the glow of her magic lighting up the entire bay. There's a roaring that comes from the land behind us, the crack of huge wings snapping in the air, and the next moment the shadow of a dragon, black against the night sky, soars overhead. It roars again, covering the span of the bay in mere seconds, the purple scales on its belly glinting in the eerie light. *Kaito*.

The witches are screaming, the dragon is breathing fire, and I am yelling until my throat is raw. It's madness, and in the middle of it all is my mate, still trapped in the water, still trapped by the fae. I can see her struggling against my father, fighting him, and I whine, knowing that the man who I have fought with for so long is now the only person capable of keeping her here in this realm.

Kaito's great dragon flies up and through the ward before swooping down towards the fae, a huge stream of fire burning from his throat. At the same time the spells my mother and Nerilina weave come to a head in a blinding flash of light, the shock of it reverberating like a sonic boom, echoing against the cliffs, the sound of it deafening. I gasp, because I am *free*, and I lurch forward, bounding down the bank, crossing the sand to the water's edge and splashing into the sea.

I cannot swim in this bulky form, but I wade as far out as I can, waiting, watching my father — now a wolf once more — swim back, my mate draped across his back. The fae are gone, the night silent once more save the crack of wings as the dragon continues to circle overhead, and the only light is that from the moon, now hanging low on her descent towards the horizon.

I whine as my father approaches, Ellie clinging to his fur. "Van," she croaks, sliding off my father's back and into my arms, and I cradle her, whining, licking her face, more wolf than man in this moment as I return to shore, falling to my knees again at the waterline, curling around her. She is crying, sobbing into my wet fur, and I can do nothing but cry alongside her, whimpering in the night.

"Evander, we need to get her dry, or at least warm, before she becomes

hypothermic.” Nerilina’s voice is calm and collected as she approaches. I don’t answer, and she places a hand on my shoulder, pushing me. “Evander!”

I snarl violently, teeth snapping dangerously close to her hand, but she holds her ground.

“Evander, son, listen to the witch. Take your mate home.” My father’s voice is an authoritative bark, and I snarl at him too, not hearing the words, my wolves choosing violence. I don’t have words. I can’t speak. I’m not in control here — instinct and pain are all that is driving this body right now.

It’s Ellie that brings me back, just enough for my wolves to *think*. “Van,” she whispers through chattering teeth. “Van, baby, *please*. Please take me home.”

I rise. I will do anything for my mate. I take huge strides, breaking into a run, eating up the ground beneath me. *Take me home*. Home is wherever she is, but I will keep her safe, safe and warm, and I crest the hill, cross the lawn, leap onto the back deck that overlooks the bay. Other wolves are hot on my heels, and then the footsteps of a man following me down the hall, directly behind me, as I duck through the door of my bedroom, barely fitting through the opening. I snarl at him as he follows me into our private space.

“I’m borrowing clothes, son. Get her into the shower. Warm water.”

He’s not my alpha, but I listen anyway. *Get her warm*. I have to hunch in the bathroom, have to kneel to fit under the spray of the shower, and it’s her shaking hands that adjust the temperature, but the water that falls from the ceiling is warm, and I hold her tight, breathing in her scent, the only thing keeping me calm. I want to tear those fae apart for daring to touch her, and it’s *not fair* that I couldn’t do a thing to stop them.

“Evander.”

Ellie’s hands are still so cold as she lifts them to my muzzle, her eyes full of concern, and it’s only then that I realise I have been growling the entire time, my lips pulled back to reveal all my teeth. I stop, panting heavily, staring into her eyes.

“Are you... are you there?” she asks, eyes welling with fresh tears. “Or are you all wolf right now? It’s okay if you can’t, but if you *can* speak, I would love to hear your voice.”

Finding the words is like searching through fog, but I get there after a moment. “I’m here.”

She sags in relief against me, pressing her face to the side of mine, her hands stroking behind my ears. “Thank fuck for that,” she says. “I was so

scared I'd broken you somehow."

"Broken me?"

"With the mind control..." Her voice wavers, her chin wobbling. "With the fae, with what they did to us."

In this form, my hand is as big as her head. I cup the side of her face now, and her eyelids flutter closed. The more she speaks, the easier the words come for me, too. "No, baby. I'm fine. I'm fucking furious, is what I am. *I'll kill them.*"

Brown, bloodshot eyes open, searching my face, and I wonder what she can see in it, when I am like this. "Evander, they got to my *mind*. They got to you, because of me. They got right past all those wards... they could do that any time! What's to say they won't take over my body right now? Or in the middle of the night? What if they have me grab a weapon, or make you..."

"Ellie, stop. *Stop*. We're going to fix it."

"Everybody said we were safe, and we weren't. And I'm not convinced there's a fix." Fresh tears well in her eyes. "Van... I'm so scared, and... I don't want to keep putting you and your family in danger if there's no guarantee of safety. I can't do that to you."

I can't breathe. "What are you saying?"

She shakes her head, face contorting with pain. "Don't make me say it."

Good. I won't. "Do you love me?" I demand.

"Yes," she sobs. "You know I do. You're the only one. You're the only one for me."

I grip her shoulders tight, only just maintaining enough awareness not to harm her with my claws. "Listen to me. We will find a way. We will find it, together. I swore to you, that day that you showed up here with that mark on your hand that I would protect you, and I swore it knowing full well that it was the fae behind it all."

"But your family —"

"They can go. They can all go. Lacey has a three-hundred-strong pack she can lean on. She can go back with the rest of the Livingstons. She doesn't need me. But *you*, you are mine and I am yours, and where you go, I follow. It's not even a choice. You are my love, my everything, and *that* is not changing. You hear me?"

She nods, still crying, but I can see the relief in her eyes.

"We —" I begin, but my words choke off as I feel it, the sudden drop in energy, the rapid change, so different from when I shift because I have no

control here. It's the moon that holds the power over me as I shrink, shaking and groaning, my blunt, clawless hands now pressed to the tiled floor, the water hitting the bare skin on my back.

Ellie drops to her knees beside me. "Van!" Her hands are everywhere — on my back, running over my shoulders, my neck, my face. I rise to my knees and pull her to me, pressing my forehead to hers, feeling the flesh of her body against mine. She's *here*. She's here with me, not drowning in the fucking ocean, and I need... I *need*....

She kisses me violently and I growl into her mouth, tongue lashing hers as her nails score down my back. I need to be inside of her just as much as she needs me; I need to *own her*, because she is here and she is *mine*. Her body arches against me as she uses her grip around my neck to pull herself up, legs wrapping around my waist, and I am gripping her thighs, spreading, lifting, spearing into her with a roar, her cries echoing against the tiles. This is not lovemaking for either of us, this time. It's a brutal fucking, it's staring into each other's wild eyes, the desire to claim one another as mates overwhelming. I can sense her need, her desperation to *bite*, and I grunt in surprise as she opens her mouth to reveal wolf's teeth, perfectly sharp, a mirror copy of my own just after the change.

*Fae magic*. She takes what is mine and makes it hers.

"Do it," I urge her, throwing caution to the wind. My wolves howl in agreement; how can we not complete the bond now, when she is so ready? I thrust into her again and again, capturing her lips in one more bruising kiss. "Do it, Ellie!" I growl, extending my neck, offering her my left shoulder, my wolves howling *Yes!* "Claim me, my mate."

She strikes with all the fierceness of a she-wolf, biting hard, and I groan against the combined agony of it, the fucking *pressure* in my balls, and the insane pleasure of the tight wet heat of her cunt. The instant her teeth release me I grab her by the hips, pulling her down hard on my knot as I thrust upwards, her bloodied mouth opening in a silent scream as it locks into place, and then I am biting her, teeth sinking into flesh, the iron tang of her blood flooding my mouth as she lets out a loud, guttural moan that reverberates around us. I'm coming, spilling into her as she contracts around me, the pain of our bites subsiding into a fog of bliss as our bond is complete, our souls exhaling with joy and relief as *finally*, we are as we were always meant to be. The feeling of love and overwhelming happiness pours through the bond, bouncing between us, my wolves chanting *mate, mate, mate*, and I lick at her

wound, suck at her neck, her jaw, her mouth, tasting my own blood as we kiss in a slow glide of lips and tongues.

I've lost all sense of time, but at some point I realise the running water now stings at my wound, and I feel the echo of her pain through the bond. I'm still on my knees, Ellie still impaled on my knot, but I'm able to shuffle over and reach the tap handle, shutting off the shower.

She trembles in my arms and I feel the echoing shake in my own bones. We're both physically exhausted, our nerves pushed to the limits, our bodies desperately craving rest. "Hold on baby," I murmur, and though she doesn't speak, I feel her trust in me pulse through the bond. Carefully, I rise, carrying my mate to our bed, and lower myself backwards onto it. "Sleep," I whisper as I drag the blankets over us, though it's an unnecessary statement; her head is already growing heavy on my chest, her limbs draped over mine.

I should stay awake. There's questions to ask, assurances to seek, but as exhaustion pulls at me, I can't keep my eyes open.

My parents are both in the house. I can hear their voices coming from the living room, but my mind won't focus on the words they're saying. "You guys need to wake me if anything happens!" I call out, and it's the last thing I can manage before passing out.

Twenty

VAN



Ellie is still in my arms when I wake, and her beautiful brown eyes are the first thing I see. “Hey,” she whispers, her gaze dancing over my face. Feelings of *relief* and *love* wash over me through our new bond, though there’s an underlying layer of anxiety to everything I can sense from her, too.

“Hey,” I croak, my throat dry and my voice still thick with sleep. The mid-afternoon sun shines directly on us now, warm against my skin, and the house is silent.

It’s a lot later in the day than I expected it to be. “How long have you been awake?” I ask, running my hand over the curve of her hip. *Mate*, my wolves say, and I agree. *She’s ours now, forever*. It’s a comforting, cosy feeling that is short-lived; the terror of last night creeps in, making my wolves whine. The bond between Ellie and I is too fresh, too new to shield her from any of this, and she shakes her head in response to my feelings, tears already forming in her eyes, her face contorting with pain before she buries her face against my chest. She can’t control the bond yet, either, and I’m hit with all of the things she’s struggling to say; oppressive fear and guilt, her love and need for me, stress, and a little bit of embarrassment tucked in there too. We’ll never be able to share proper *thoughts*, as such, but most wolves in a fated pair say that sharing feelings alone is enough to deduce what the other is thinking, and just this lets me know plenty.

“Oh, *Ellie*,” I say, my voice breaking on the last syllable.

The dam breaks, and she cries into my chest with huge wracking sobs that echo in the room. I hold her tight, nose buried in her hair, allowing myself to feel it all — the fear that steals the breath from my lungs, the weight of the unknown, and the desperate need to be together, to *never* let this happen

again.

She cries, as do I, and inside me my wolves claw, chanting a futile *we'll kill them. We'll kill them all.*

I'm concerned about how silent the house is until my brother — in his shifted form — runs past the bedroom window just as I'm climbing out of bed. He grins and wags his tail, and I wave him on as Ellie hastily pulls the bedsheets up over her exposed breasts. "Meet me out front in ten!" I call to him as he dashes away.

We need to figure out our next steps, to find out what the fuck is going on with the fae and how we can prevent this from ever happening again. I don't want to live with this hanging over our heads for all time. Ellie deserves better. *We* deserve better.

But first we need to be clean.

"I'll wash your hair," I declare as we step under the warm spray. Ellie's hiss of pain is loud, and pink-tinged water runs down the drain as the dried blood from her shoulder washes away. I get it, the water fucking hurts with the way it stings the bite she gave me, even with the shower on the softest setting. Still, there's a strong sense of pride that swells in my chest as I think about the fact that my mate bit *me*, and she bit me *first*. It's enough to make me slow down and take my time as I lather shampoo into her hair, because this is the morning — or afternoon — after our permanent mating, and Ellie deserves to be treated like the goddess that she is. The little moan of pleasure that she lets out as I massage conditioner into her scalp makes me ridiculously happy. So many people forget that there's more to an alpha's instincts than blood and violence; there's the urge to care for one's pack members too, to provide for them, to see to everyone's happiness. Those instincts are only heightened with one's mate, and *fuck*, do I love serving, and servicing, Ellie.

She wraps her arms around me as I wash my own hair, the need to be physically close overwhelming in the way it bounces between us through the bond, until it feels like both of us want nothing more than to shed our skins and melt into each other, as if there's some way to permanently become one being. Even so, the sense of urgency rises once more as we dry ourselves,



hanging over us both as we dress in clothes that won't irritate the wounds on our shoulders. For me that's simply sweatpants, for her it's a strapless dress in a summery print, and I help her brush through her wet hair, leaving it hanging loose down her back.

Seth is already in the kitchen waiting for us, back in his two-legged form, shirtless and helping himself to a microwave meal. "Hey, lovebirds," he says, eyes darting between us before he grins at Ellie. "You got him good; that bite on his shoulder is *deep*. It looks like he was bit by a wolf, not... *you*."

"*Me*," she replies, mimicking his tone, her nose scrunched and a pink flush in her cheeks.

Seth shrugs. "I didn't think you had it in you, that's all. You bit an *alpha*."

"She bit her *mate*," I growl, and Seth takes a half-step back from Ellie. The logical part of my brain registers that I'm acting a little more protective, a little more aggressive than I usually would — my brother is a pup and a flirt at the best of times, and right now he's only being himself, relaxed around family — but my wolves and I have no patience for any of that today. I shake my head. "She had wolf teeth, for a moment. Her mouth was like any wolf just after the full moon."

Seth frowns, crossing his arms and leaning back against the counter behind him, his cheerful mood vanishing. "Yeah. Mom said."

"Mom said *what*?"

"She said she could feel Ellie drawing on your magic pretty heavily... you know how she can sense things. Her exact words were '*I guarantee you there's a mating bite on Van's shoulder and it's every bit like a wolf's*,' so..." He shrugs. "She's got theories about what the fae are up to, after seeing it all first hand."

"Where is she?" I ask, but I'm almost certain I know the answer to that question, and as Seth walks over to the table, returning with a handwritten note, it's all the confirmation I need.

*Van and Ellie —*

*Just a quick note to explain. We didn't want to wake you, so:*

- *We have left Seth on patrol here.*
- *Your dragon friend is on-site and has reassured us he is not leaving until he speaks with you. He has his construction crew with*

him up at the restaurant.

- Nerilina has gone to check on the ward she put around Cameron's house.

- Lacey and the boys will stay with Cameron until you decide what is best for your pack.

- West and I are going to the First Realm. I'm going to go directly to my grandmother. The Maheras House will be invested in this issue, given the fact that this goes beyond just humans being stolen and is now about fae using changelings as conduits to control other species. If it can happen to a shifter, it can happen to a werewolf, I'm certain about that.

- I think it will be enough for the Maheras to do something more about this fae problem that has been escalating in the past few years.

- We will sort this out. The ward itself was intact last night, but Ellie inadvertently created a way for the fae to get through to her — a channel via the plants she connects to. I could sense it as soon as I got to the beach. I feel terrible that I didn't think to warn Ellie not to do that. I underestimated her magic, and I'm so sorry, my darlings.

“Seaweed,” Ellie mutters, frowning down at the page.

“Seaweed?”

“I connected to it last night, all the way out in the ocean, when we were...” She clears her throat, eyes wide as she remembers Seth's presence, and her embarrassment and guilt is obvious through the bond as she fidgets with the *pounamu* around her neck.

“Why seaweed?” Seth asks, wearing a shit-eating grin. “Has that got some magical pussy stretchi—”

I don't let him finish, a growl tearing from my throat as I step between him and Ellie. I can already guess *exactly* where that line of questioning is going.

“*Easy*, brother,” he says, wide-eyed and hands held up in a gesture aimed to placate me.

“*No*.” He doesn't get it. He doesn't get what it's like to have a mate, to have her and lose her, and then to find her again after *years* only to watch her get ripped from your arms while you can do *nothing*. My wolves are out for blood, and right now they don't care about the source.

I like to be the nice guy. I like to be the reasonable alpha.

Right now I am neither of those things. I am *this close* to losing my shit. “I’m sorry, alright? I won’t tease your mate.”

Ellie’s hand tugs at my wrist. “Van, can we just finish reading this? And Seth, *don’t* push him. Not today. We’re not in the mood for it.”

Ellie sounds exhausted. She *feels* exhausted, and as I turn to face her she simply lifts the letter, holding it out to me. *Right*. There are more important things to focus on.

- *When I return, we will work on training Ellie to prevent this from happening ever again.*

- *Until we get back, DO NOT practice any magic. That includes in the bedroom... so don’t get carried away.*

I cringe, and beside me Ellie makes the same face.

- *Stay on the vineyard grounds. It’s a beautiful place, so not a terrible location to be trapped.*

*West is hurrying me along. This is our way of fixing the mistakes we made ten years ago. We should have handled the fae situation back then differently.*

*I don’t know how long it will take for us to return — it could be a few days, possibly longer. You know how my family likes to make things difficult. Take care darlings.*

*Love,*

*Mom xx*

Ellie leans into me now, wrapping her arms around my waist. I hug her back, bending to kiss the top of her head. “This is why I avoided everything for so long, after the Unravelling,” she murmurs into my chest. “I just had a feeling that the ears were trouble, that *I* was trouble, so I tried to hide it and ignore it, and hoped that it would go away. And now look; no good has come from me being non-human.”

I brush my hand through her hair, the strands almost dry now, as I consider my reply.

“I disagree.”

She glances up at me, and I can tell from the look in her eyes just how much she needs to hear this. “You’re perfect,” I start, but she’s already shaking her head. “No, listen to me,” I say, the alpha growl entering my voice unintentionally. I *need* her to understand this. “You are perfect. You are not

the problem here. You are not *trouble*. The situation is shit, but that is not your fault. You have to know that.”

She nods, burying her face against my chest, and I hunch to whisper in her ear. I want to ease her worries. “A lot of good has come from you being non-human. No human could take a werewolf cock the way you do.”

She snorts, jabbing me in the stomach with her finger, muttering “Not in front of your brother.” I ignore Seth’s mumbled “*Heard plenty last night anyway,*” and tilt her chin up towards me once more, kissing her lips, her cheek, her forehead.

“I wish you could love yourself the way I love you,” I tell her.

“It’s just the fear, Van. That’s all it is. Those fae are terrifying. I had a gut feeling, all this time, that there was something scary out there and there *was*.” Her eyes close, and I brush the tears that run down her cheeks with my thumbs. “I hate that I’m crying again,” she whispers.

“I’d be worried if you weren’t,” I tell her quietly, trying to be reassuring. “It’s been a crazy twenty-four hours. You’re allowed to feel a little delicate. I know I do.”

“Ellie.” Seth’s voice is as serious as it ever gets, and she snuffles as she looks at him. “You should definitely listen to him, because he’s right. This is what makes Van a good alpha. He leads with his heart. He cares.” The look he gives me makes me feel bad for snarling at him earlier. I’ve missed this, missed the sense of camaraderie with my brother that burned away when he chose to remain in my father’s pack. When he didn’t choose me.

I’ve missed *him*, even if he can be a little immature from time to time.

“I know,” Ellie replies as she leans into me further, the warmth of her love washing over me through the bond.

I had hoped that once my sister was here in New Zealand, that we’d ease into pack life. Having my pack members thrust headfirst into fae-level danger wasn’t something I’d planned for.

“*Van,*” Lacey growls at me through the phone as soon as she answers the call, “don’t you *dare* blame yourself for this, okay? Those fae assholes are the ones to be upset and angry with, not you.”

I lean back against the couch, Ellie tucking herself against my side, and

stare out at the ocean view, focusing on the spot where the fae were last night.

“I blame myself for not protecting you, and I *am* to blame for that. I sat on the beach howling without a thought towards —”

“I’m going to stop you right there, because your mate was in the *water* in the *dark*, and unless Ellie has secretly become an Olympic-level swimmer in the past decade, we all know how fucking dangerous that was for her. A fated mate supersedes the pack, we all know that. We’ve all grown up watching Dad choose Mom over anything else. *Don’t blame yourself*. Besides, it’s offensive that you think I can’t protect my own pups. I’ll fucking rip their throats out before any fae come within ten feet of my boys.”

I sigh, rubbing my temples. “I didn’t mean —”

“I know you didn’t. I just... I need you to not worry about me, alright? I’m fine. Last night was a fright, but I’m fine, the boys are fine. We’ll stay here until you have everything sorted. Just focus on you and Ellie. How is she doing? I should have asked that first, is she doing alright?”

Beside me, Ellie nods. “Tell her I’m okay.”

“She’s okay. She’s shaken, but feeling better.”

“That’s good. I was thinking that she must be, based on what Mom said.”

Ellie and I exchange a look. “What exactly did Mom say? Because Seth mentioned something similar.”

“*Van*, come on. What do you think she said? Did Ellie actually bite you? Mom made it sound like that was one hundred percent a thing that she *heard* during your *claiming*.”

Ellie looks mortified, burying her head in her hands at the confirmation that yes, my parents definitely overheard all of *that*.

“Yeah, Ellie bit me. *First*.”

“Wow, that’s brave. Congratulations. I’m happy for you guys. It’s been a long time coming.”

“It has.”

Lacey is silent for a moment, and I wonder what she’s really thinking. I know she’s happy for us, of course. She’s always loved Ellie, *always* maintained that Ellie was part of the pack — an argument that she had with our father on more than occasion — but I can imagine it must be hard to watch a solid, happy relationship at its beginning when her own marriage has so recently come to an end.

“I should go,” she says quietly. “Cameron is outside with the boys right

now. He's been great with them, but I shouldn't take advantage of the situation. He's not the babysitter."

"I've already messaged him and he said he's fine, but are you sure he doesn't mind? It's a relief to me, to know someone else is there with you, but if it's been too much of an inconvenience I could look into alternative accommodation for you and the boys, possibly in the city."

"It's been fine. He's been... a perfect gentleman." I don't miss the hesitation as she speaks, but she continues before I can ask anything of it. "He's more than happy for us to stay, there's plenty of room here, and he said he enjoys the company."

"I think he gets lonely."

"Everybody gets lonely, Van. Anyway, I really do have to go. Give Ellie my love. Keep me posted if there's any news."

The line goes dead before I can even reply, which is pretty typical of Lacey. As soon as a conversation drifts remotely close to the topic of her feelings, she escapes. She wasn't always this way, but the last few years have been tough for her.

"She sounds happy enough to be there," Ellie murmurs.

"She does." I send Cam another quick message of thanks. I owe him big time for all of this. Once I'm done, I get to my feet, pocketing my phone. "I have to go talk to Kaito," I announce. He'd sent me a brief text while we were sleeping that simply said *I was already awake when I felt the huge shift in magic coming from the direction of the vineyard, and I'm never one to step away from a good fight. I hope your mate is well.* I need to thank Kaito in person, but more importantly, I need to talk to him about what exactly he saw from the air last night.

I offer Ellie my outstretched hand. "I don't want this to come across as overbearing, but I'm not letting you out of my sight *at all*, so you need to come with me."

She raises her eyebrows, giving me one of her *are you serious?* looks. "Do you think I *want you* to let me out of your sight right now? Because I don't. Seriously, the only reason why I'm not completely shitting myself with fear right now is because you're mister super-strong wolf man."

She takes my hand, tugging on my arm until I bend down so she can kiss me.

"You're a good alpha," she says, and I can feel just how much she means that, absolute conviction radiating out from her through our new bond.

I don't feel like I deserve it, but I kiss her forehead, and murmur my thanks, anyway.

A single day of renovations has turned the vineyard's outdoor bar area into a chaotic mess, with stacks of wooden planks and piles of old furniture strewn across the deck. Ellie and I sit on the wooden stairs facing the ocean, sipping beers stolen from the bar, watching the sunset and the huge purple dragon currently flying laps over the property.

"I underestimated him," I say to Ellie as the crack of wings echoes off the hills. "He's going above and beyond, for us." With Lacey over at Cam's place and my parents in the First Realm, there's only Seth staying in the second house on the vineyard. Kaito offered to stay here, too, to help keep an eye on things in case a huge, fire-breathing dragon is needed on short notice so I've given him the last free room in the house on the top hill.

Ellie nods in agreement, her eyes trained on Kaito as he flies out towards the ocean. "He's a decent guy. He might come across as cold at first but he's got a good heart, that's for — oh *shit*, is that a drone?"

"Where?" I ask, but I've already spotted it, flying over their garden paddock near the road. "It's *private property*," I growl. This isn't the first drone that's flown over Lost Moon since I moved here. More like the tenth. It's illegal for them to do so without permission, and it's really starting to piss me off, because I know it's all humans wanting to catch footage of wolves and other non-humans as if we're entertainment.

"They're filming the dragon."

They are, and as Kaito takes a sudden turn mid-air, it becomes apparent that he's well aware of it, too. His jaws open wide, a huge stream of fire spitting forth, incinerating the small amateur drone. Ellie gasps, her mouth hanging open as a wave of heat washes over us.

"They're not filming the dragon anymore," I say, and as oddly happy as that makes me, I'm also a little concerned about the grapevines taking that much sudden heat from above.

"That's *insane*." She sounds like she's in shock, which is to be expected, though it doesn't surprise me at all when she immediately switches to more practical matters. "I *think* the plants will be okay," she says, echoing my

thoughts, “but we need to talk to him about that. It’s not worth the risk of burning leaves.”

“I agree.”

“Someone’s going to be missing their drone,” Ellie muses, her eyes still following Kaito as he flies higher above the vineyard.

I take another sip of my beer, considering it. “What are they going to do about it? Go to the tiny Police station on this island that isn’t even manned half the time? Complain that something has happened to their drone while it was flying over private land illegally, filming people without their permission?”

“Mmm,” Ellie hums. “Hopefully they’ve learned their lesson.”

“Hopefully.”

The sun dips below the horizon, and we sit in silence as Kaito lands in the empty part of the paddock, shifting back into his usual form.

I watch Ellie out of the corner of my eye as she swirls her bottle of beer around absently. She’s been so calm for someone who went through so much less than twenty-four hours ago, and I worry for her. “What’s going on in that mind of yours?”

“I was thinking about your father,” she replies immediately. “He didn’t let me go last night once he got to me, even though I was kicking and throwing elbows and clawing at him, and without his help, I would have swum right through that ward. That’s the second time he’s saved my life from the fae.”

She glances up at me, her hand landing on my knee. “How are you feeling, Van? About your dad? It was so busy the night they flew in from the States, and then again yesterday. I feel bad for not asking sooner.”

I wrap my arm around her waist, drawing her closer to me. “Don’t. I’ve seen the way you were watching Dad and I together, like a bomb might go off. I know you care about it.”

“I care because... I just want you to be happy. Whatever that looks like, when it comes to your relationship with him, I’ll support it.”

“Thank you, baby.” I stare out at the fields surrounding us, my tongue feeling particularly heavy. “I don’t... I don’t feel aggressive towards him anymore. My shifter wolf doesn’t want to fight his.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah. It is.” It’s tempting to change the subject, but Ellie asked, and she deserves to know. “What happened between us was violent, but now that it’s



done and we're in two separate packs, it's as if he's just any other alpha. I'm not looking to cut him out of my life anymore."

"I figured as much."

I let out a sigh. "It's one thing to know on paper how inseparable fated mates are, once bitten, but to experience it firsthand... you and I..."

I can't quite find the words, but Ellie nods, turning her face to kiss my shoulder. "Now you know just how inseparable we are, and how it's therefore impossible to maintain a relationship with your mum, if you were to cut out your dad."

"Right. That's why I didn't reach out to Mom for so long... but even if they weren't fated mates, I think I'd be ready to speak to him again. Especially after what he's done for us. You're right; he saved your life. I'll be forever grateful for that."

"And he's helping today." Her lips press together in a thin line as she stares out at the ocean again. "Do you think they'll be able to do it? Find some help? Or put a stop to this? Or..."

"I think my mother knows what she's doing. As for my father... he has enough sense to follow her lead, in this instance. The Maheras werewolves aren't exactly his greatest fans."

"Because he's a shifter? Or because he's with your mum?"

"Both. And because he went on to father a bunch of *halfbreeds* with her," I explain, not quite keeping the snarl out of my voice. Among regular folk in the First Realm, half-and-half wolves are seen as an oddity, but the werewolf elite are another matter entirely, and look down at us with barely-disguised contempt. I can still remember the first time I was ever called a *mutt*, and the cold, sick feeling that came with hearing the slur. It wasn't a stranger that said it to me either, rather one of Mom's many brothers — my own uncle.

"If they're not a fan of him, they're really not going to be a fan of me, then," Ellie muses.

That's true. I'm not going to deny it, but I'm not going to confirm it for her, either. "Hopefully, we won't have to go to them, and you won't need to interact with many of those weres. But they'll help us. It's in their best interests to. Mom's right; the ability to use changelings like you to control others is concerning."

"It was *your* alpha ability that I used — that's what they took advantage of. So maybe it only applies to shifters? I can't tell if it's because you and I are already bonded, though, or if it would work on another alpha. And I don't

know if it was *me* using the alpha bark, or the fae *through* me..." Her eyes are full of worry.

"Are you wondering if you could control me now?"

"I don't want to test it, Evander," she whispers. "Please don't ask me to."

I roll my shoulders, shrugging off the uncomfortable feeling at the back of my neck. "I won't, not right now. And if you can, I think that's something we should keep to ourselves. Besides, we're not supposed to use any magic right now." If she can use my alpha bark, the implication would be that she could essentially control my — *our* — pack. That's pretty disruptive to everything shifters are ever taught about pack hierarchies.

"Maybe it's because I'm always borrowing from your magic," Ellie muses. "Maybe it's an extension of that."

I lean my head against hers with a sigh. "There's no way to know without testing it, and I'm not inclined to do that anytime soon. Maybe we're a unique case, but even so, the fae are still kidnapping people. They've been doing it for centuries... it's about time those First Realm leaders started caring about it."

Ellie shakes her head. "And to think, I thought the world was pretty safe here, pre-Unravelling."

A wolf's howl rings out in the crisp evening air. It's Seth, beginning the night shift of active patrol here on the vineyard.

"Mmm. *Ignorance is bliss*, they always say."

**G**iven the fact that she's not a wolf, it's unsurprising that Ellie's wound heals slower than the one on my shoulder. While mine is a pink scar after three days of taking it easy, Ellie's still has a nasty looking scab covering it, and my guess is that it's probably going to take another week before it starts looking closer to being healed. Between that, and the fact that we've been advised not to leave the vineyard, it makes for a slow few days waiting for my parents to return. Everything feels tense, we're all a little on edge, and time seems to elongate, each day dragging far more than usual. Ellie and I sleep restlessly each night, waking often, though at least when we can't sleep there's other things we can do together; the quiet touches in the dark always ending the same way, with my knot buried deep inside her.

There's gardening that could be done, but we're both healing, and Ellie's wound could still reopen if she overexerts herself. Instead, we've spent the greater part of three days picnicking in various spots around the vineyard, eating our way through the restaurant's stores of food and drink, and doing our best to relax despite the situation.

"How much wine and cheese do you think we've consumed in the past few days?" Ellie asks now, laying back across the picnic blanket we're on, her head resting on my thigh. We're in the lower field, hidden among the grapevines, in our own little pocket of peace.

I snort, taking another sip of the merlot in my glass, a special reserve vintage from Lost Moon. "A decent amount." Wolves can drink a fair bit more than a human, given our quick metabolism, but with the general feeling of being *trapped* on this land, even I've been pushing it. Still, if there was ever anyone to be trapped with, it's Ellie. "More?" I ask her, holding another piece of brie to her lips.

"Mmhm." She opens her mouth, taking the bite, but before I can withdraw my hand she captures my finger with lips and teeth, sucking, her eyes full of mischief.

I almost take the bait, but the words *careful, you'll have to suck on something else if you keep that up*, die on my lips as I hear the noise of paws thumping against grass nearby, and realise that one of the shifters onsite is nearing us, running another lap of the vineyard. I look up just in time to see a white wolf dash past the end of the row, head turned so that her yellow eyes catch mine for the briefest moment.

To keep the number of people here to a minimum, I put all vineyard staff that were supposed to be working this week on paid leave, so the only others remaining on-site are the contractors working on the restaurant renovation, and Seth. My brother has been gracious enough to do every night shift so far without complaint — a testament to how serious the current situation is — patrolling the vineyard from sunset to sunrise in his shifted form, and I've been surprised and honoured by the way the four wolf shifters in Kaito's crew have rallied around Ellie and I, despite all being from different packs. Between them all, there's always a wolf on duty, running around the perimeter of the vineyard. It's a huge reassurance, easing that feeling that we need to be constantly watching our backs.

There's work I could be doing in the office, but I can't pull together the motivation to care. Ellie is the same; she could be designing gardens for her

other clients, or working on specific aspects of the vineyard's garden design, but after the near-miss on the weekend, what we've both needed most is time with each other. Between the shell-shock of the fae attack and the intensity of our fresh bond, we're emotionally spent, and there's a level of desperation to our lovemaking that hasn't existed before. We've both joked about how much therapy we're going to need... but we also both know it's the truth — we're going to have to work through this stuff with a professional at some point.

I don't like the panic that I feel when I close my eyes and remember how helpless I was on the beach, and the self-loathing that's lingered in the back of my mind since Jenny's death has returned in full force. It doesn't matter that I know that *factually*, none of this was my fault. Based on the advice we were given, we thought we were safe down there on the beach, and the way the fae manipulated our minds is not something Ellie and I could have predicted.

I know this, and yet I still hate that I couldn't protect her. Protecting one's pack, and serving them, providing for their needs... those are the fundamental principles all alphas are instinctively driven towards — it's what is expected, it's what must be done. I *hate* failing, and I failed at this.

Ellie, of course, can sense some of this through the bond. I have more experience practising magic than her in terms of *shifting*, but I'm no expert, and although I've begun to block her from feeling some of my darkest feelings, there's still a lot that slips through. It's not that I want to hide it from her, but she's the true victim here, and when I see my perfect, empathetic mate tearing up because of the way that *I* feel, I hate it. It's not fair to put that on her.

"Hey, Van," she says quietly, pulling me out of these thoughts, and I know I've done it again. "I love you." Her hand brushes over my shirt, until it rests over my heart. "I hate that you're sad."

I shake my head. "I'm..." I can't finish my sentence. *I'm fine* is such a blatant lie, and she knows it.

"It's okay to be sad," she adds. "I didn't mean that it's not. I am too. And I'm frustrated, because this is supposed to be a really wonderful time for us, just after our mating bites."

I nod, gently sliding her head off my lap, before laying down beside her, moving until we're face to face, our noses touching, our breaths mingling. I stare into her eyes, tracing the shape of her face with the back of my hand,

committing this moment to memory. This woman is my everything, and I could spend every moment of the rest of my life worshipping her, and die a happy man. “Oh, *Van*,” she whispers, feeling what I feel, pressing her lips against mine, her tears salty on my tongue.

I want to pretend that there’s nothing else but this; the smell of crushed grass mixed with her scent, the soft rustle of leaves as wind moves through the vines, the blue sky above us. I wrap my arms tight around her and hold her against me, her face pressed to my neck, her fingers digging into my side, her hold on me just as desperate.

“I’m never letting you out of my sight,” I whisper fiercely. It’s over-the-top, I know, but it’s how I feel right now. Until I can be *certain* that no harm will ever come to her, I am going to be by her side every minute of every day, and it’s a sentiment I’ve echoed multiple times already this week.

“I know,” she whispers back. After a moment’s pause, she adds, “Thank you. I always feel so safe in your arms.”

I don’t voice the words I’m thinking, that she wasn’t safe. She was *in my arms*, and my size and strength and teeth all meant nothing when it came to those fae.

“It’s not your fault, you have to know that,” she whispers, lips pressed to my cheek. When I don’t answer, she pulls back, concerned brown eyes filling my vision. “Evander, listen to me on this. There’s nothing you could have done differently. You did everything right.”

*There’s nothing I could have done.* That’s the problem. I just hope there’s something that *can* be done so that it never happens again.

“Thank you for understanding,” Ellie says quietly.

I nod, tacking the final bedsheet above the window frame, creating a makeshift curtain spanning the wall to wall windows in the bedroom. It was too late to order in proper supplies when Ellie finally admitted to me what’s been bothering her the most during the nights — that she felt like the fae were watching her from out in the ocean, the moonlit view now more ominous than calming to her in her half-asleep state.

“It’s fine.” I step back, checking that there’s no gaps between the different fabrics. It’s lucky we bought so many spare sheets for Lacey and her

kids, and that the pin tacks were easy enough to find in the box of miscellaneous stationary the previous owners had left in my office, something I've been meaning to organise for a while. Sure, there'll be a few holes in the wall now, but it's nothing that can't be fixed, and it's worth it if it's the difference between Ellie feeling safe or exposed. "I only wish you'd told me sooner."

"I didn't want to be a pain."

I turn to look at her. She's sitting cross-legged on the bed, looking small on the huge mattress, wearing nothing but her lace panties. "You're not being a pain."

"You just used a whole pack of thumb tacks to stick a bunch of superhero and monster truck themed sheets across your bedroom; come on, admit it, that's a pain-in-the-butt thing to do." Her eyes grow moist, voice catching. "But I appreciate it so much," she adds in a whisper, face twisting in a way that tells me she's fighting back tears.

It breaks me to see her cry; it always has. "I didn't use the whole pack," I say, shaking the cardboard box, the rattle of a single thumbtack sounding overly loud in this space, and she snorts, rolling her eyes just as I'd hoped she would. I toss the box on my set of drawers and strip out of my clothes as she climbs under the sheets. "Lights out?"

"Lights out," she confirms. "I'm drained."

"Same." I switch off the light, but don't yet move towards the bed. As always, it's fascinating to watch her in the dark, her pupils expanding to wide circles, eyes suddenly unfocused in their blind searching.

"Van?"

"I'm here." The sheets rustle as I settle in beside her, pulling her to me, until her back is flush against my front, my hand cupping one of her soft breasts. She makes the perfect little spoon. "I have you," I whisper against her hair, her sweet scent filling my nose. "I'm here."

"I know."

I listen to the waves crashing against the shore, debating whether to say anything else to her.

"Ellie."

"Hm?"

"I'm glad you told me that the window was bothering you, because it's okay to need to do something different in the wake of what happened... if it brings you a sense of security, there's no harm in it. With everything that's

happened, you have to give yourself grace to do what you need to, so you can get through it one day at a time.”

She rolls over, pressing her face into my chest. "Is that what your therapist taught you?"

"No," I sigh. "Just... life."

I know she understands what I really mean, that it isn't life, but death that has dictated so much of my last nine years. She tilts her head upwards, kissing my jaw, running her lips across my stubble.

“Ellie,” I whisper.

“Hm?” I can feel her limbs relaxing against me, her heart rate slowing as she falls asleep.

“It’s our room.”

“Mm?”

“The bedroom. It’s our bedroom, baby. It’s ours, not mine.”

“Mmm,” she hums in agreement, her nose pressed to my neck. “Love you,” she murmurs, a moment before I feel her fall asleep completely, both in the physical weight of her growing limp against me, and in the bond. The connection between our minds gently fades in a way that leaves the imprint of her love, making my chest ache with just how *full* my heart feels.

“Love you too, baby,” I tell her, hoping she’ll hear it in her sleep.

# Motuwai Community Page



**James Smith**

*Member*



I just want to know why everyone keeps having their comments deleted??? Have admin not heard about Freedom of Speech??? There is such a thing as the Bill of Rights Act and under it we have a RIGHT to voice our concerns about behaviours that are threatening in nature to our community.

*Comments have been disabled on this post.*

**Ana Piwari**

*Member*

**James Smith** you should be ashamed of yourself banging on about freedoms in the same sentences that you're saying terrible things about good people. The owner of Lost Moon is a good man and the dragon shifter you're talking about is a sweetie, he mended my fence last week and didn't charge me a





cent. Admins need to sort this rubbish out.  
*Comments have been disabled on this post.*

## **Lost Moon Estate Winery** *Business Page*



Kia ora koutou katoa, Evander Livingston here. I'm the new owner of Lost Moon Estate Winery, and have had the pleasure of meeting many of you already. I wanted to address some concerns that I have seen discussed on this page.

The vineyard is currently closed to visitors because we are undertaking a much-needed renovation project. This has always been the plan. I purchased the vineyard with the intention of bringing it up to a standard that will benefit our local community by bolstering tourist interest. In turn, this will have a positive impact on the local economy. I have the support of the local Community Board in this endeavor.

Yes, there has been a dragon flying around above Lost Moon. While dragon shifters are not that common in this realm, they are people just like you and I. Lost Moon has sufficient airspace for him to stretch his wings and safely fly in his shifted state. As a fellow shifter, I understand the importance of finding safe spaces in which to change forms. I am kindly reminding the community that shifters have the right to exist in all their different states, including dragon and wolf forms. In regards to concerns around light aircraft, the Civil Aviation Authority has been informed of the use of the airspace above Lost Moon. In summary, we have done our due diligence to ensure that there will be no crossover of flight paths and there is no threat to helicopters or other aircraft.

On that note, please refrain from attempting to fly drones over Lost Moon. Yes, Lost Moon is a business open to the public, but it is still considered private property, and you must have written permission from myself before you fly over it. Please see the link here for further information regarding New Zealand's current laws around drone usage.

Lastly, I understand that there has been ongoing interest in what species I am and what that means for the community. While I am of the opinion that

non-humans do not owe anyone explanations further than all of the readily available information that is public, in the interest of keeping everyone happy I will explain a little bit about myself here.

I am a mixed species wolf, which means I am part wolf shifter, part werewolf. I can and do change into both a shifter wolf (at any time) and a werewolf (during the full moon only). Howling is part of our nature and an important form of communication among wolves.

I usually refrain from shifting outside of the confines of my own property as I understand that my wolf form may be intimidating to some people. However, if you do see a wolf about, please know we pose no danger to anyone. We pose no danger to livestock and/or other animals.

I am not the only wolf currently staying at Lost Moon. I would like to thank you all for respecting the privacy of my family and my guests.

I am the current Alpha of the only established shifter pack on the island. All inquiries regarding wolves on Motuwai can be directed to the email [livingstonpack@lostmoon.co.nz](mailto:livingstonpack@lostmoon.co.nz)

Ngā mihi nui,  
Evander Livingston

*Comments have been disabled on this post.*



**Casey Johnston**

*Admin*

We will NOT be accepting any more posts about the dragon flying around Lost Moon Vineyard, the werewolf owner, or the wolf howling you can hear.

Some comments have been extremely problematic and I want to remind you that this is a COMMUNITY page and these people are part of our COMMUNITY. The Unravelling happened two years ago and some of you need to get over it already.

*Comments have been disabled on this post.*

**Sammy Barnett**

*Member*



Admin please delete if not allowed. I have found a baby bird fallen out of its nest it appears to be OK but I'm wondering if anyone has the phone number for the bird lady?



**Casey Johnston Admin**  
**Carrie Ann** tagging you again, another bird for ya.

Twenty-One

## ELLIE



I'm sick of being sad.

It's more than that. Yes, there's been some wonderful moments in the last five days since the full moon. Van and I have had romantic picnics, drunk plenty of wine, binged movies on the couch, cooked dinners together. We've had moments of fun.

We've also been living under a cloud of anxiety, waiting for his parents to return, feeling stuck both literally and figuratively. In both werewolf and wolf shifter cultures, a mating bite is the equivalent of marriage — stronger, even, since there's no going back. We should be planning our future together, but it's as if we've been too scared to look beyond the next twenty-four hours, trapped in this awful limbo of waiting.

"Babe," I say from my seat at the breakfast bar, and Van glances at me over his bare shoulder, though he doesn't stop ladling pancake batter into the hot pan in front of him. I mentioned this morning about how much I love looking at his bare ass and joked that it would be great if he could just wander around naked all day, so now he's cooking breakfast in the nude, his body looking far too good in the morning light. I'm very tempted to drag him back to bed.

"Hm?"

"I want to talk about moving in together. I want to plan it with you, today. I know there's a lot going on, but I'm sick of worrying about all of that stuff. I'm not even going to mention *those people* by name. I don't want to think about what happened on the weekend; I want to think about next week, next month, next year instead."

The excitement that lights up his face tells me I've made the right choice.

I'm sick of being sad and anxious, and looking to our future is an easy — albeit temporary — solution. “You want to talk about moving in here?”

“Let's face it, I live here already, and I've totally accepted that,” I laugh. “And it's a wonderful thing; this house is beautiful, and living on a vineyard is like a dream come true. You know I love going to sleep and waking up in your arms. So yes, let's talk concrete details about moving in. And I want to help you unpack the last of your boxes, today. You have those fancy art pieces to set up too, don't you?”

“Yeah, they're still in bubble wrap in the garage.”

I stop myself from making a snarky comment on the fact that he has two small sculptures worth a total of *half a million dollars* sitting in *bubble wrap* in his garage. He told me he'd bought the pair at a charity auction — the most typical story of excessive wealth that I've ever heard. “Well, let's figure out where we're going to put them.”

“You haven't even seen them yet, what if you think they're ugly?”

“Darling, they're worth the same amount that I owe the bank on my mortgage. They could look like piles of *poo* and I would be displaying them, not leaving them sitting on the garage floor. To do anything else is a waste.”

Van's laughter echoes in the kitchen, and I grin back.

*I guess I did say it. Whoops.*

“I'll move them,” Van says, picking up the bubble-wrapped lumps off the concrete floor, one in each hand. “They're deceptively heavy; I don't want you to hurt your back.”

“What are they made out of?” I linger in the internal doorway to the garage until he passes me, and then follow him down the hall. He's wearing pants now — another pair of grey sweatpants — and the way his biceps bulge as he carries those things shows that they really must weigh a lot.

“They're bronze sculptures,” he replies, setting them down on the floor in the living room before sitting down on the shaggy white rug that dominates the space. I sit opposite him, the sculptures between us, curious to see what's underneath all that wrapping. He's been oddly vague about them.

“Can I?” I ask, reaching for the one closest to me.

“Yeah, go ahead. Start unwrapping.”

I pick and tug at what feels like endless strips of tape, but finally I'm able to unravel multiple layers of packaging, and the shape beneath is revealed. Made out of one solid piece of bronze, at first glance it looks like a dinner plate standing on a display stand. "It's... the moon. It's lovely." It's beautiful. It took a second for me to process what I was looking at; the shapes of the craters are all upside down, the version of the moon that the northern hemisphere sees, not the face of the moon that I'm used to.

Van nods. "It's the full moon."

"What's this one then? A crescent moon? No, it's the same shape, it can't be," I commentate as I tear into the wrapping around the second one. "Is it the Earth?"

"No."

"Is it a portal?"

"No. Just open it."

There's something about his voice that makes me pause for a moment; something tells me he's doing his best to hold back some pretty big emotions, and when I glance up at him he doesn't meet my eye.

"Open it, Ellie," he whispers.

I test the bond as I pick at the last piece of tape, and get nothing, which means he's purposefully blocking me from sensing what he's feeling. He only figured out how to do that yesterday — we hadn't wanted to try doing anything with *my* magic, including pushing the boundaries of the bond, but Van's been shifting into his wolf at least once a day and we figured it was safe enough for him to try and practise blocking. Once he figured it out, it became apparent that it's a fairly easy technique.

The final bit of bubble wrap comes away, and I tilt the heavy sculpture in my hands. "It's another full moon. Wait, it's the moon I know, it's the opposite to that other one."

"It's my moon and your moon."

When I look up at Van he's staring out the window, his eyes wet with unshed tears, and the sight of it combined with his words makes my heart ache for him, my own eyes welling. "My moon? When... when did you say you got these?"

"The week after I broke off from the pack. Shit timing for attending a function, but I had to go. And then these were being sold and I... It seemed like a sign. I had to get them."

"A sign," I echo.

“A sign to come to New Zealand. To find you. Nine years... I was so scared that you would hate me for what I did to you. That you would not want anything to do with me, but I had to try. I haven’t told you this, because when we first found each other again I didn’t want to put pressure on you. I didn’t want it to sound like I’d stalked you, because I hadn’t.”

“Yet,” I interject, my voice watery, thinking about how he’d had plans to hire a private investigator to find me, if he couldn’t track me down himself.

“Yet,” he agrees with a choked laugh. “But I came here for you. I love New Zealand, I really do, but you’re the reason why I’m here and not on some vineyard in France or Italy. There were other places that made more financial sense, but none of them had *you* there. And when I looked at this vineyard online, I imagined you here. It had been so long, and I only had the shape of you in my mind, the memory of the way you made me feel, the smell of your skin, but I tried to imagine you here and it felt right. And you know, this house is big enough for a couple of kids, there’s plenty of space to run around... this is what I was thinking when I bought this place. I was thinking of you, even though I hadn’t found you again yet. Even though I was still on the other side of the world, looking at the wrong moon.”

I’m bawling my eyes out now, tears streaming down my face, nose running, full on ugly crying.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry, baby,” he says, reaching for me, tears running down his cheeks too. “Come here, let me hold you, my mate.”

He tucks me into his lap, and I snuffle against his chest, listening to his heartbeat, feeling the bond settle between us again, his walls down again. We feel the same, when it comes to this, and I already knew we did. We’ll never be apart again.

He squeezes me tight, rubbing my arm. I look around the room, my head still tucked under this chin, and have an epiphany. This place already feels like home. *He* feels like home. He was right when he pictured me here, because I can see myself here too. I’ll make a new garden, move my chooks and my bees here. I’ll wake to sea views every day, and the rolling hills filled with grapevines. Wine and cheese in abundance, and happiness, too.

“We should get up soon,” I say quietly. “There’s still a couple more boxes you haven’t unpacked.”

Van’s sigh is heavy, and he grunts in agreement. “I have to warn you, there might be more tears, because one of the boxes is all of your stuff from Bluewater Bay — all the things that were left at my house nine years ago. We



can leave it for another day, if you like. Or we can just say *fuck it*, and deal with it all at once.”

“*Fuck it*,” I say, halfway between a laugh and a cry as I sniff loudly. “Let’s look at the box. Might as well.”

I t turns out the box in question has been hiding in the bedroom the whole time — Van pulls it out of the adjacent walk-in wardrobe, and we settle on the bed to go through it.

“Hold on,” I say, getting up to switch on the overhead lights. We still have the ‘curtains’ across the windows because we’re not pulling down and re-sticking the sheets up every night, and it’s only temporary until I know nothing bad is going to happen again — at least that’s the hope.

There are things in the box that make me feel emotional all over again, particularly the piece of bright crayon artwork on yellowed paper, of a garden filled with oversized flowers that each have smiling faces, the words *TO ELLIE LOVE JENNY XX* printed in a typical six-year-old’s handwriting. Van steps out of the room after we find that one, a hand covering his eyes, and as much as I feel the urge to follow after him and wrap him in the biggest hug, I give him some space to compose himself because I know that’s what he wants.

I wipe at my own tears and continue to pull items out by myself, setting aside a photo of Van and I at the beach up north, looking babyfaced in our swimming gear, his arm around my waist. I want to frame that one and maybe keep it here in the bedroom, as long as it’s not going to trigger any bad memories for Van. I take a closer look at it, staring at Van’s eyes, the light brown that they once were just as stunning as his gold eyes are now.

He was tall back then — at 6 foot 2, he still towered over me — but the pictures of him at twenty-one really do look so different in so many ways, and yet in every picture his personality shines through. *He’s still the same Van he always was.*

I pull out the final few items — old hair ties, a receipt that’s so faded that I can only *just* make out that it was once a movie ticket to the single movie Van and I went to as a *couple*, and a brown envelope, filled with...

*Holy shit.* My mouth drops open as the memories flood back, of getting

drunk in Van's bedroom in the middle of the night, of him sneaking away and returning with Lacey's Polaroid camera, and it's not that I'd forgotten per se, it's just that I'd put that whole night out of my mind.

Including the photos.

"Find anything else interesting?"

Van's voice makes me jump, and the pictures scatter to the floor. I watch Van's face as his eyes settle on them, the way they bug out in shock, both humorous and telling all at once.

"You forgot about those, didn't you?" I ask.

He nods silently, still staring at the photos. Of Van, still baby-faced at twenty-one, looking like a young model as he stares at the camera in a close-up shot. Another of him completely naked, stretched out on his bed, his hard cock in his hand and a daring look in his eyes. Of eighteen-year-old me in a similar pose, my legs spread wide. A close up of my lips wrapped around his dick. Another close up of us having sex, taken from his point of view, his knotless cock halfway inside my vagina. In the final one my stomach and breasts are covered in cum, and there's a hickey on my inner thigh.

Van shakes his head. "I had no idea those were there. *Fuck*. Ellie, I'm sorry."

I shrug. "It's okay. They've just been in this box the whole time. I forgot they existed, too."

"Imagine if someone had found them..." He frowns, bending to pick them up. "You weren't so *young* in my memories."

"Yeah, it's a bit jarring seeing those, to be honest. At the time I thought we were so mature, but looking at them now..." I laugh. "We were young. Legal, but *youthful*, and maybe a bit stupid with our risk taking. But look at your eyes in that one," I add, pointing to the close up of his face.

He holds the photo up beside his face, and brown eyes stare out of the picture at me. Both versions of the man are beautiful. "Do you miss them?" he asks. "Do you wish I was like that still? Human-looking?"

I shake my head. "No." Even so, my vision blurs. "I don't," I whisper, "but sometimes I miss the feel of that time, back when nothing had ever hurt us. We were so innocent. We were invincible."

Van sets the pictures back in the box and sits down on the bed beside me. His hands stroke through my hair, down my neck and back up again. "I was still hiding a lot from you, back then. And panicking about when I should tell you that I wasn't human, and how you'd react. Whether you'd accept me."

I like to think I would have accepted him immediately, but I know deep down it wouldn't have been that easy. It's one thing to have taken just a few days to properly process that he's a wolf — post-Unravelling, with my own body and identity changed — but back then I was young, naive, unaware. I don't think I would have taken it half as well. I would have come around, but it would have taken time. It would have been messy.

He knows it too. I can tell by the look in his eye, the wry curve of his full lips.

“Evander Livingston, I love you unconditionally, you know that, don't you? I love everything about you.”

“I know it.”

“Make love to me,” I request, my voice no more than a breathy whisper. My heart feels too full and too bruised, and I need... I need him to hold me, to keep all these pieces of me together. I need that *now*.

The press of his lips to my neck is soft, gentle, a contrast to the firm grip of his hands around my waist. I move, sliding off the bed and stepping between his legs, sighing as he sucks and licks and nibbles. Goosebumps break out across my skin, a shiver runs over my scalp, and my fingers dance over his ribs as I step closer to him. He sucks my neck some more and I laugh quietly, realising he means to mark me like old times, a hickey for everyone to see, as if the mating bite on my shoulder isn't enough.

“You are the best thing I have ever tasted,” he says with reverence, his hands pulling my body flush against him, his cock pressing hard against my stomach. My dress is pulled over my head and my panties torn in two, the lace standing no chance against my wolf's strength and urgency. I help him to tug his pants down past his knees, and then he is lifting me until I straddle him, my hand on the hot length of his erection, guiding him in place.

I stare into his eyes as he presses inside of me, a moan escaping his lips as I lower myself further, rolling my hips, feeling the stretch of him within me. I kiss him with fervour, and that's all we do for a long time; kiss and touch and fuck slowly, his thumb drawing languid, teasing circles on my clit, until my thighs are burning with the effort of rocking against him and my body is coated in sweat, until my pussy aches for release.

I reach underneath me to cup the weight of his heavy balls, his groan against my neck and the way they draw upwards in my hand telling me everything I need to know. “*Fffuuuck, Ellie...*”

I hum, gently kneading his balls at the same time that I clench around his

cock, squeezing his dick with my cunt as best as I can. He kisses me furiously, growling into my mouth, his hips jerking upwards with less control this time; one, two, three frantic pumps before he's pulling free, leaving me feeling hollow. It's short lived; he lifts me like a doll and lays me on my side, sliding behind and entering me again with a single deep thrust that has me crying out, and it's *so fucking hot* when he takes control like this. He rubs my clit in earnest, his hips thrusting relentlessly, and combined with the new angle I come undone within seconds, moaning incoherently as I pulse around him. Fingers dig into the flesh of my hip as he pounds into me, his other arm a tight bar around my chest, hand clutching my breast, our bodies slapping together until he knots me with a shout, the pressure of the swelling flesh inside me sending me over the edge once more as I am filled with the heat of his load.

In the aftermath there's no sound except the ringing in my ears, though I can feel just how heavily Van is breathing behind me as he curls around me, the way he always does when I am knotted in this position. Minutes tick by, and I close my eyes, enjoying the way Van's big hands roam all over my body, squeezing and touching and worshipping.

It's the middle of the day, but this morning has been draining, and I'm exhausted. "Sleep, baby," he whispers to me, and so I do.

**A**fter a late lunch we set ourselves up on a picnic blanket in the vineyard's olive grove, making the most of the fact that there's no guests as we sit under the largest tree. Now that I've given myself permission to do some forward planning, I switch on my tablet, bringing up the half-finished design I have for the large space behind Van's — behind *our* — house. It's a nice opportunity for me to ask Van for input too. He's no stranger to gardening himself, though his experience has always centred around the plants common on a vineyard. He's an amazing cook too, so it's nice to talk about what we can grow to eat.

"Is it worth growing garlic here?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Honestly, I hate to say it, but not really. In the last few years garlic crops have been hit really hard by rust. We can give it a go, plant them this coming winter for next year's summer harvest, but personally it's

one of the few plants where I'm happy to accept that it's just easier to buy from a supermarket."

Van lays back, stretching out across the mat, the entirety of his long legs ending up on the grass. We need a jumbo-sized blanket — or two — to fit him properly. His warm hand snakes under the skirt of my maxi dress, stroking my calf, his eyes deep in thought as he watches me.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing."

I don't think it's *nothing*, but since he's not giving anything away, I turn back to my design, sketching while Van continues to trace lazy patterns on my leg. I add in a second raised vegetable bed to the design, pulling up my running list of seeds I want to order, and continue to add in plants. "It'll be a proper food forest," I murmur, getting lost in the flow of designing. "Permaculture style, even more so than my current garden. Although, I want to try out some more traditional Māori techniques for growing *kūmara* and *hue*, but I have to research that first and see if it varies that much from the techniques *Koro* taught me. There's studies that have been done on the ancient gardens at Ihumātao, I should start there."

"Yeah? That sounds good."

I snort, because I know he has no idea what I'm talking about at this point, but it's cute that he's being supportive anyway. I appreciate the way he's willing to learn about *te ao Māori*, including the language. It's far more effort than any of my exes ever made.

I finish the sketch of another garden bed that I label *experimentation with trad. techniques*, and look over at Van. "What were you thinking, before, when I said about the garlic not being worth it?"

His eyes crinkle at the corners with his smile. "You're still stuck on that, huh?"

"Because I can tell there's something going on in your mind, and I want to know. It's going to bug me if you're keeping secrets." I look back down at my design, beginning to sketch in the shape of a moonflower vine, placing it near the outdoor tub. I want to smell those flowers when they open up every evening.

"I'm not keeping secrets, baby. I was thinking about that garlic, and wondering if your magic could be used in the garden. Do you think you could help it grow?"

I freeze, a wave of self-loathing washing over me that I know Van senses.

“See,” he says quietly, “that’s the reaction I was expecting, and that’s why I didn’t say anything earlier.”

“It’d probably be inedible. I’d probably poison us, putting magic in it. No one wants to eat garlic that glows *green*.”

“It wouldn’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

I *had* begun to wrap my head around the fact that I’m fae — knowing exactly what I am has been different to just knowing that I wasn’t fully human for the two years prior — but after they got in my head, after I sensed that cold evil, that complete disregard for my life other than as a tool for their own devices, it’s made me feel very icky about my own magic.

“I don’t think your magic will poison us, baby,” Van says in that same gentle tone, his hand still tracing paths on my leg. *Comfort, love, warmth*. He presses feelings at me until I’m coated in them, until they start to ease the ache in my heart.

But really, nothing is going to ease my worry better than talking to Van about it. “I feel like a bit of a cheat and a fraud, career-wise,” I admit, staring off into the distance. “How can I competitively show my gardens and say, ‘oh look, everything just *grows*,’ when it turns out I’ve probably been infusing it all with a bit of magic the whole time? I thought I was good at gardening. I thought *I* was good. I thought it was a skill I had worked towards, one I learned from *Koro*, and from my study. Something practised and *earned* and steeped in Māori tradition.”

Van’s hand stills on my thigh. “You are good at it. You always have been. I think we can say with certainty that you only accessed your magic *after* that first incident with the mushroom in your garden. You didn’t know magic existed. How could you have practised it? You didn’t. My magic helped to awaken yours further. You haven’t *cheated*. And even if you did use magic in your gardening, why should that matter? You’re putting too much value in other people’s opinions.”

“But what if all the humans in my line of work start to hate me? I don’t want to hide my ears anymore. I’m horrified by what those fae are doing, and it makes me feel gross about my own magic, but I know I am not them. I’m not associated with them. Your mum and Nerilina have both reiterated that there’s so many good fae out there.”

“Yes. There’s good and bad people everywhere. I don’t see a murder on the news and suddenly think ‘*every single human is evil because that one guy*

*killed someone.* You can't paint yourself with the same brush as them, baby. Don't do that to yourself."

"I'm trying not to."

"Good."

"But what do I even tell people? It was a huge step for me in that article, to admit that there's a 'touch of non-human blood.' Is that what I'm meant to say forever, when I know what I really am?"

"You're a garden fairy."

I stare at Van, trying to decipher the expression on his face. "Is that what you really think?"

He shrugs one large shoulder. "It seems like the most fitting description. It makes sense, in terms of what you can do. You are still mostly human, after all."

"I wish I had more info about my father, but whoever he is, he's probably already dead, or taken by the fae."

"It's likely that he was just as clueless as you as to your fae ancestry."

"True."

We lapse into silence, both of us staring out at the vineyard. "I don't have all the answers, Ellie," Van says after some time, "but I know that I love every bit of you, antlers and all. You are beautiful. Your ears are beautiful, and I love that you don't hide them anymore."

"I can just imagine *Sammy Barnett* from the gardening club gossiping about how I'm a cheat once she finds out. She's been bitter ever since my garden was picked over hers for the festival this year."

Van snorts. "Forget about her. Even if you had used magic in your garden, which I really don't think you did, it's not cheating to be authentically *you*."

"A lot of humans would disagree."

"Not a lot. Some. *Some* will disagree, yes, but they're wrong, because what they're asking is for you to diminish yourself, to be *less* than who you really are, for their comfort. The problem is with them, not you. I understand that you worry about that stuff, believe me, *I know*. But you and I... we have just as much right to exist and live and thrive and be happy doing what we love and what we're good at as the next person. Do it at your own pace, obviously — don't feel like you have to rush, but know that you are allowed to take up space. You don't have to step back just because some human might think so. You can be Ellie, and be that tiny bit of fae that you are, and just *be*."

And if anyone has a problem with it, they can talk to *me*,” he adds, snarling protectively around the last syllable.

As much as I like to think that I’m good at being independent when it comes to my career, the fact that he’s willing to be all growly, protective wolf over the issue turns me on, a spark of desire hitting me right in the pussy over his voice alone. He knows it too, giving me that sharp-toothed wolfish grin I love so much, and I can’t help but roll my eyes and laugh. “Okay, oh protective mate of mine, I hear you.”

“Good.”

He tucks his hands under his head, his white t-shirt riding up and exposing a strip of tanned skin and washboard abs as he closes his eyes, the dappled sunlight dancing across his face. I turn back to my design, tucking my legs up against his side and getting into the flow once more, my heart feeling a little lighter than before.

I’ve almost finished the draft when Van jumps up suddenly, giving me such a fright that my stylus slips, drawing a huge line right through the design. “*What?*” I snap, hand over my heart, my underlying anxiety about everything bubbling to the surface.

Van’s gold eyes glint as he gives me an apologetic smile, his hands tugging at the hem of his shirt, muscles rippling under his skin as he pulls it off over his head. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I just spotted a wild rabbit up on the hill. Those little fuckers girdle the vines and eat low-lying grapes, and you know if you leave one you’ll end up with ten more.”

My heartbeat is still thundering in my ears as I nod. “Multiplying like bunnies?”

“Exactly.”

As an avid gardener, I know just how problematic the rabbits can be. I’ve lost a few vegetables to them over the past two years. They’re introduced pests, and there *shouldn’t* be a population on this island — it would be costly, but easy enough to run a full extermination programme — but because half of Motuwai consists of urban suburbs, with cat and dog owners, and will therefore never be classed as ‘predator free,’ there’s not so much incentive for either council or the Department of Conservation to deal with the current population. And Van is right — an out of control wild rabbit population could be devastating to a vineyard’s crop.

“Do I dare ask what you’re going to do to our bunny friend?”

Van snorts, kicking off his underwear, adding it to the pile of discarded



clothes on the corner of the picnic blanket. I love that he's so unbothered by his own nudity — this week he's been particularly relaxed when it comes to stripping down, the fact that everyone here onsite at the moment is either non-human or very used to the peculiarities of shifters means that he's been free to run around in his wolf form to his heart's content.

"You already know the answer to that question," he tells me now, flashing me another wolfish grin, my breath caught in my lungs at just how handsome he looks in this moment. I can't think of a better view than my man's perfect ass, the vineyard and ocean in the background the icing on the cake. "It'll make a good snack," he adds before his body shudders, transforming in an instant, his huge black shifter wolf turning his head to look me in the eye.

"Go have fun," I tell him, feeling only a little bit sorry for the poor rabbit. It has to be done, and better for it to be over swiftly than caught in someone else's trap, or poisoned, the two common methods of pest control.

Van lopes away at an easy pace, ears forward and tail straight out behind him, and I watch with a strange sense of fascination as he nears the top of the hill where he spotted the rabbit, his body slowing, crouching for a moment before springing into action, a black blur against the green grass, darting over the crest of the hill, past Lacey's house and out of sight.

I watch for a moment longer, but when he doesn't reappear I assume he must have caught it. It's only when a strange, prickling feeling runs over my skin, making the hairs on my arms stand on end, that I realise there's something more going on.

*Magic.*

I can see it now, the faintest blue glow against the white stucco of the house on the hill, sweat breaking out on my palms. It will be Van's parents. It makes logical sense that it will be — we've been waiting for them for days now — but I still can't fight the fear that it could be someone else.

*Fae.*

It's the spark of anxiety from Van, sharp and bitter, that has me jumping to my feet in a rush. I leave my tablet abandoned on the picnic mat, ignoring my sandals in favour of running barefoot. I only take a few steps before I double back with a hissed, "*Shit, fucking idiot,*" aimed at myself, bending down in a rush to snag something for Van to wear in case he needs to shift back. It's his underwear that I grab since it's on the top of the pile, and I'm too panicked to muck around any longer, spinning around once more. I run

down through the olive grove and into the first field of vines that stretches up the next hill, clutching the long skirt of my maxi dress in one hand so that my legs are able to move freely. I'm not wearing a bra either because of the wound on my shoulder — it's been strapless dresses all week — and even though my boobs are small they still bounce uncomfortably with each stride, but I don't have time to slow down, so I just ignore it as best as I can.

There's a series of loud cracks that ring through the air behind me — wingbeats from some large creature — and I spin, spotting Kaito, still in his half-shifted human form, gliding towards me with his outstretched wings, allowing him to catch up to me within a matter of seconds. "I sensed the magic," he tells me as he lands with a small thump, still wearing his dusty jeans, hi-vis vest and steel-capped boots, having come straight from the renovation underway inside the vineyard's restaurant. "I'll come with you, just in case."

"Van ran over that hill — he was chasing a rabbit."

Kaito frowns over my head for a moment. "He'll be fine. Let's keep moving."

I start jogging again, Kaito easily keeping pace behind me, my chest starting to burn with the effort as we near the top of the hill. I wouldn't usually consider myself unfit — I spend a lot of time in the garden, and that's hard work — but I'm definitely not a runner, and I'm puffing by the time the top of the open portal comes into view. It's one of the strangest things I've ever seen, a tear in the very fabric of the universe itself, and a chill runs down my spine despite the fact that I'm sweating from the exertion. Kaito runs ahead of me in a flap of wings as we crest the hill, stopping beside Lacey's house, and my heartbeat thunders in my ears, my chest heaving with exertion as I take in the view. I peer over the top of Kaito's outstretched wing, his purple scales glinting with luminescence in the sunlight.

The land slopes away again on the other side, down into a gully of native bush. To my relief, Van's wolf is there halfway down the hill, his hackles raised, and even from this distance I can hear the low growl coming from him. He's focused on the pair standing just in front of the portal, neither of whom are his parents.

I stand frozen in place, the huge swirling portal drawing my gaze. It's blue is so bright that it's almost blinding, and the magic that emanates from it seeps into my bones, leaving me feeling cold. It's both mesmerising and terrifying all at once.

*It's like a black hole out of a sci-fi movie, except blue.* I shudder again, feeling the pull of it, as if it has its own centre of gravity and wants to suck me in. I resist it, but in the act of resisting, my own magic flares to life, antlers settling on my head. That alone draws the attention of the strangers, two pairs of yellow eyes suddenly staring back up at me despite Kaito's attempts to shield me behind his wing. *Wolves.*

The two women have the same tall, muscular build as the Livingstons, their glossy black hair tied back in identical ponytails, their matching outfits of what looks to be yoga pants and sports bras making them look like they've stepped out of a pilates class rather than what's essentially a different universe. I assume they must be werewolves rather than shifters — Bronte was seeking out her family, after all, but the fact that I can't see Van's mother is concerning.

*Where are they? Where's Bronte and Weston?*

My panic is short-lived, because the surface of the portal shimmers, rippling like water as two more figures step through hand-in-hand, and I breathe a sigh of relief as I recognise Weston's huge frame and Bronte's wavy black hair. For an instant the portal shows a glimpse of the other side — of rolling green hills and pink sky — before the entire thing begins to fold in on itself, growing smaller, the edges of it flaring brighter for a moment as it dies down to nothing. With Van's parents present, I feel confident enough to push past Kaito, leaving him behind me on the crest of the hill. I keep my eye on the group as I make my way slowly past Lacey's house and down to Van's side, feeling very much like a prey animal trapped in the gaze of hungry predators.

"Hey," I say quietly, reaching up to run my hand through the thick fur on Van's neck, his hackles still raised slightly. I'm still puffed, my heart beating rapidly, and my words come out stilted between big gulps of air. "I brought your undies... if you wanted to shift back."

He makes a huffing noise, a spark of electric magic running under my fingertips for a moment as he changes back, my *man* suddenly beside me once more. He pulls on his underwear in silence, keeping his eyes focused on the group below, the deep frown on his face betraying his uneasiness. "I should have brought your actual pants, sorry," I mutter under my breath. On Van, the black boxer briefs scream *male model* more than they do *alpha wolf and businessman*, but it's too late to worry about that now. Wolves are used to nudity anyway, and he doesn't seem that fussed. He catches my eye for a

brief moment, lip twitching with only the slightest hint of a smile, before he takes my hand, pulling me closer to his side.

“Thank you for thinking of it at all,” he says quietly. “The portal took me by surprise.”

The unknown wolves remain at the base of the hill where the portal was just a few minutes ago, but I return Bronte’s wave with a small one of my own as I press closer to Van, finding comfort in the familiar smell of him and the heat of his body against my side, despite the fact that I’m sticky with sweat. “Did you get your rabbit?” I ask quietly, peering up at him.

He shakes his head, his clenched jaw giving away how tense he is right now even as he slides an arm around my waist. “No. I guess it was its lucky day.”

I tilt my head in the direction of the strangers. “Do you recognise them?”

“One of them is my cousin Maeve. I’ve never seen the other wolf before.” His hand presses the small of my back. “We need to go say hello.”

“They’re not coming to us?”

“No. I’m the alpha here; this is my territory. They’re being polite by waiting for me to make the first move, which I appreciate given the fact that they’re weres and don’t necessarily follow the same rules as shifters.”

“You were growling at them before,” I whisper as we start walking. The grass here is freshly mown — Van drove around on the ride-on mower yesterday — and cut grass clings to my feet.

“Just a standard warning. Trust me, if they were a true threat you’d know about it.”

It’s still strange to think about Van in that capacity — that my loving, thoughtful partner is not only capable of true violence, but that there’s been situations in his life where it’s been required. I’ve seen first hand what Weston can do in his wolf form, seen the swift brutality in which he killed a fae, and yet I know that Van *beat* Weston in a fight.

After Van told me what had actually happened between himself and his father, I’d gone as far as to search for videos of wolves fighting online, some sort of morbid curiosity spurring me on as I tried and failed to picture it. I couldn’t find any videos of wolf shifters, but even documentary footage of regular wolves attacking each other was violent enough, and I found I couldn’t — and still can’t — quite reconcile the idea of *Van* wielding his teeth and raw power in such a way. Perhaps it’s because whenever he’s shifted around me he’s always been so sweet, all tail wags and canine grins,

despite his huge size. Growling at the wolves in front of us today is as aggressive as he's ever been in my presence, bar the moments on the beach after the fae attack when his werewolf was understandably snappish and inconsolable.

As we grow closer Bronte steps forward, a huge grin lighting up her face as she glances between us, her eyes lingering on the bites on our shoulders. While mine is still a messy scab, Van's has healed in a broken circle of raw pink marks. I can already tell that it really will look a bit like the outline of a silver moon, once the pink fades.

"You two look well!" Bronte is all smiles, her gold eyes filled with warmth as she runs a hand back through the curls of her long black hair. Weston remains close behind her, his hand on the small of her back, mirroring the way Van stands protectively beside me now. "How have things been here? No dramas?"

"No dramas," I reply, my gaze wandering over the group of them. Standing this close, I can see that both the other women are young, in their early twenties at most. The slightly smaller of the two — who is still *much* taller than me — smiles, but there's something about her that makes me feel odd in a way that I can't explain.

"Congratulations on your official union," Bronte adds, nodding at the wound on my shoulder, and I freeze with a goofy smile plastered on my face, because what am I supposed to say to that, and in front of these others, too? *Thanks, I'm really glad your son bit me while stuffing me full with his knot, it was so romantic in our post-trauma sex frenzy that I know you overheard.*

"Mom," Van starts, and there's an edge to his voice that immediately makes me think *alpha*; it's not quite a barking order, but certainly a show of authority for the newcomers. I'm just thankful he's sparing me from having to come up with a reply as he says, "Please tell me you have good news."

"We have *wonderful* news. Everything is going to be fine, and there's a relatively simple solution, where the cost isn't too great."

Weston huffs at this, raising a brow at his wife, and they exchange a look. I hear Bronte mutter "*Quiet, you,*" under her breath, and I suppress the urge to grin at the way she so easily put him in line. I don't understand her attraction to him beyond the physical, not with his cold demeanour and cruel tendencies, but then I see them together in moments like this and there's no denying the love and partnership between them.

There's no denying the *bond*, and now that there's a mark on my shoulder

and a connection between Van and I's minds, there's no denying any relationship between fated mates. It's entirely inevitable, I can see that now; magic and biology combined to make a pair destined to be together.

"Let's get the introductions out of the way first," Bronte announces, bringing me back to the present. "Ellie, this is my niece Maeve, and this is Lylia. Ladies, this is Ellie, my son's lovely mate, and of course Maeve, you know Evander already, but Lylia, this is my eldest, Evander."

Lylia smiles in that strange way again. "He clearly inherited a lot from his father," she comments to Bronte. "But I'm not surprised. We were all guessing your children would, back when you ran off with Weston. I mean this in a good way!" she adds, looking directly at Van. "In my opinion there's plenty of good that comes from being a half-breed. I would know, being only half-were myself."

Van's hand is still on the small of my back, and his fingers tense, digging into me at Lylia's statement. "What are you, exactly?" he asks, and there's a threat in his tone that I haven't heard from him before as his hand slides around my hip, tugging me closer against him. "You look like a werewolf, and I can't scent anything else from you. You're not a shifter."

"It's the glamour I wear," Lylia replies. "It stops the scent."

"It must be a pretty fucking strong glamour," he growls, and I can feel the slightly unhinged fury coming from his wolves, a sense that they are howling inside him washing over me. "That's powerful magic." This isn't the calm Van I'm used to. This is all alpha posturing, all shifter wolf, and my eyes meet Weston's for a moment, before he turns his gaze back to his son, observing with that cold gaze that never fails to unnerve me.

"*Evander*," Bronte warns, "Lylia's the only one that can sort this mess. We are *very lucky* that she is willing and able to help Ellie."

"What are you?" Van snaps, and this time there *is* an alpha bark behind it. It has no real impact on anyone present, but we all feel it, and for the briefest of moments I swear I see Lylia for what she really is.

*Fae.*

There's definitely a pair of antlers hiding under her glamour, my heart rate picking up again as I quickly glance at Van, fearing that he'll explode. His fingers are digging into the flesh of my hip now, hard enough to leave bruises, and I feel the tell-tale rise in magic running within him, running under the surface of his skin. *He's going to shift.*

"Evander, stop, you're hurting me," I say, the only thing I can think of

that might halt him in his tracks. It works. This bond between us is *strong*, and I feel the way his wolves yelp when they realise, remorse and guilt and concern rolling off of him in waves as his grip loosens, his breathing heavy as he stares at me with wide-eyed horror.

“I —”

I shake my head. “It’s okay. She’s here to help. We were just talking about good fae today, right? She’s good. She’s like me.” As I say it, I know it’s true.

Van’s wolves are still restless, pushing their distress at me. “*She’s going to help us,*” I say quietly, willing them to listen.

They do. Van composes himself, though his jaw remains clenched and his fists balled, nostrils flaring as he looks over my head at the women behind me.

“Alright then. Tell us how you’ll help.”

Twenty-Two



VAN



**K**ill the fae.

*They hurt Ellie! Shift already!*

*Our mate is in danger! Kill them all!*

“Evander, stop, you’re hurting me.”

Ellie’s pain cuts through the bloodthirsty haze of my wolves, and they both whine with remorse. I release my grip on her side, taking in big, gulping breaths. “I —”

“It’s okay,” Ellie says, not wasting a beat. “She’s here to help. We were just talking about good fae today, right? She’s good. She’s like me.” I hear the words that come out her mouth, but my wolves are so agitated that it’s far too fucking *noisy* in my own head. “*She’s going to help us,*” Ellie adds quietly, gripping my arms, and it’s the added weight to her words — not quite an alpha’s bark, but close — that cuts through the chaos, silencing my wolves.

I stare at her for a moment, wondering if she even realises what she just did. Behind her, the fae woman shifts nervously on her feet, drawing my attention, my nostrils flaring as I catch the sickly sweet scent that she’d hidden behind glamour, confusingly intertwined with the smell of a wolf. *Half-breed, that’s what she called herself. Half werewolf, and the other half fae.*

“Alright then,” I demand. “Tell us how you’ll help.”

The stranger — *Lydia*, I remind myself — smiles in a way that makes me think she knows exactly what’s gone on in my head. If she does, then she knows how dangerously close my shifter was to tearing her throat out.

Beside her, Maeve sighs, rolling her eyes, though I can tell she’s teasing

in an attempt to cut the tension. “You shifter males are always the same,” she says, daring me with her tone, crossing her arms. “Such bravado, and for what?”

I like my cousin; she’s one of the few werewolves from my mother’s uptight family that I can stand, and far more down-to-earth than her three sisters. “For protection,” I reply, taking the bait. “But you’re wrong; it’s alphas that you’re talking about. It’s got nothing to do with gender.”

“Oh, of *course*. My apologies.”

“What are you doing here, Maeve?” I ask. “Because as far as I was aware, you don’t actively practise witchcraft, and this is an issue steeped in magic.”

She nods, uneasiness flitting across her face for a moment. “I’m escaping, to be honest. I have to report back to House Maheras yearly; they think they’re *sending* me here to do their research, but they don’t realise how happy I am to be sent.” She shrugs. “Your mother mentioned that you were setting up on a pretty little island, and I thought maybe it wouldn’t be too bad of a place to live.”

*Report back on what?* I catch my mother’s eye, and she gives me the tiniest shrug, mouthing, “*Tell you later.*”

“Evander,” Mom says. “I can tell you’ve already figured it out, but Lylia is half fae; her mother was originally from the Unseelie Court, centuries ago. She’s an expert in fae magic, and has been House Maheras’ secret weapon for the past few centuries.”

“You knew there was a fae in the Maheras coven and you didn’t say anything?” I growl, unable to keep the anger out of my voice. “That information would have been helpful *prior* to the full moon.”

“She didn’t know, Son,” my father growls back, and as on edge as they’ve been, I have to reign in my wolves, particularly my shifter, to stop them reacting to the alpha snarl in his voice. “*Nobody* knew.”

“Van, why don’t we all go to your place to discuss the rest?” my mother suggests, and I’m about to argue that *no*, we’ve waited long enough for answers when I notice the slump of her shoulders, and the exhausted look in her eyes. *Of course*. All magic comes at a price — usually a simple one in my case, tiring you out if you shift a little too often, and requiring you to replenish with a decent sleep and a larger meal the next day — but opening a portal between worlds uses far more magic than the average shift, and I had forgotten how drained she must be.

With a sigh, I plaster a smile on my face, looking over at my cousin and

the half fae woman. “Sure, you can follow me. We can all have a drink and *chat*.”

There’s a knock as I’m throwing on a shirt, making Ellie jump. As soon as we returned to the house I brought Ellie with me to the bedroom so that I could dress, depositing her on the bed, because although us wolves are used to nudity, it still feels fucking weird to have serious conversations while I’m standing around in my underwear.

It’s Mom; I can tell by the scent that wafts in under the small gap in the door. “Come in,” I say quietly.

Mom closes the door behind her, leaning back against it, her eyes immediately landing on the bed sheets that cover the windows, and I watch her process that for a moment before she turns to Ellie and I. “Oh darlings, it’s been a rough week for you both, hasn’t it?”

Ellie nods wordlessly, and I can tell that Mom’s quiet, empathetic tone risks bringing my mate to tears. I’m so fucking *proud* of Ellie, and whispered as much to her as I carried her away from the portal. She’s been so brave already, running towards me when she sensed danger rather than running away, concerned for my wellbeing above her own, and as much as I’d rather she keep herself safe in those situations, I didn’t realise how grateful I would feel to have a mate care for my physical safety in such a way.

“It’s been pretty hellish,” I tell Mom, stepping into a pair of jeans. “It wasn’t fun waiting, not knowing how long you were going to be, and whether we’d end up safe.”

“I’m sorry it took us so long. My grandmother made West and I wait *four days* before granting us an audience; I usually like to lead with kindness, but goddess, she is a *bitch!*”

“Why the wait?”

“Because she hates your father. You already know that. She hates that I mated him, as if...” She trails off, running a hand back through her hair, looking between Ellie and I. “I love West with all my heart. I know he’s not perfect, believe me, *I know*. I love him,” she repeats, her voice dropping to a low whisper, “but you are both mated the same — you both know there’s no choice to be made when it comes to fated mates. It’s *inevitable*. It drives me

mad that my grandmother still chooses to punish me for a magic-influenced biological function that I had no control over. I met your father and that was that,” she adds, clicking her fingers for emphasis. “Game over, no other person would do. I *never* had any intention of settling down, and then suddenly I was going home to my mother and saying ‘I am so sorry, I’ve just met my fated mate while on my trip to the Second Realm, I know I’ve only been gone a week but I’m head over heels in love with this man, and he’s a wolf *shifter* to boot, and he’s already knotted —”

“Mom,” I interject, rubbing my temples. I’ve heard this story before. I don’t need to hear about the events that lead to my conception. “Can we do story time another day? There’s more important things to discuss than *that*.”

“Ellie doesn’t know the back history. There’s so much I wanted to tell her over the years and couldn’t. I’m so pleased you’re officially part of the family now, darling,” she adds, directing that last statement to Ellie.

“Thanks.”

“What happened after you were granted an audience?” I ask, redirecting the conversation back on track.

“Oh, that’s when we were introduced to Lylia — or re-introduced, I should say, because Lylia *was* my great-aunt Bethyl, thirty-one years ago when I last saw her. Fae have been hiding in House Maheras all along, and I was completely oblivious to it.”

“Wait, what?”

“When she drops the glamour, she looks entirely fae.” Mom’s eyes are wide and compelling as she speaks. “She’s half-were; she turns into a perfectly normal werewolf under the full moon, I have this on good authority, but without her glamour, in this form she looks fae, it’s uncanny. Her mother was from the Unseelie Court and mated a Maheras werewolf centuries ago — they were a fated pair too. I had no idea Lylia existed, because she uses glamour to hide her true face and her age.”

“And you said she was your *aunt*?” Ellie asks, her voice rising in a question.

“She was pretending to be my great-aunt, using glamour to fit in with the family at that time. She’s over three hundred years old. In truth, she’s really a much earlier... *relation*? One of my direct ancestors was a sibling of her father, so she’s from the same Maheras line as myself and Van, but of a far earlier generation.”

“Who is she pretending to be now?” I ask.

“Another Maheras family member — a young one. And she’ll age herself in terms of her glamoured body as this generation ages,” she adds, pointing to us, “and then when the time is up, she’ll disappear for a short time and reappear as a different family member again, and only the head witches will know about it.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s *fae*, Van,” Mom says, exasperation lacing her tone. “Like I said, she’s their secret weapon. Fae — high fae in particular — have much deeper reserves of power than us wolves.”

Ellie sits up straighter on the bed. “Is that what I am, then? High fae?”

Mom nods. “You’re descended from one of those subspecies. The Unseelie are in that group too, but Lylia doesn’t believe you’re directly related to them. It’s the Unseelie that are behind the Unravelling, the kidnappings, and so many issues in the First Realm, really.”

“Van mentioned once that there’s lots of different types of fae.”

“There are,” Mom replies. “There’s so many, and they really are very secretive; I don’t know if anyone other than the fae knows of all the different kinds out there. The high fae classification is an old one, and it’s fallen out of favour because it implies everyone else is *low* fae, but it relates to power levels I believe.”

“To magical abilities?” I ask.

“Yes. High fae just means powerful, which makes sense, given how Ellie’s magic has manifested. You have some powerful abilities, Ellie, when it comes to borrowing magic from Van. I think we’re close to you finding out what the full extent of your magic looks like, and that’s something that Lylia wants to help you with.”

“Can she be trusted?” I ask, the growl entering my voice unintentionally. Mom glares at me in response.

“I know people say there’s no such thing a dumb question, but darling, that was a dumb thing to ask. Of course she can be trusted; I’m not going to bring someone that could cause harm to you or your family *here*.”

I look at Ellie, and she shrugs her shoulders, before turning her attention back to my mother. “So, what happens next?”

“A proper, Unseelie-level protection ward, attached to you *tonight*, and powered by your own fae magic,” my mother answers. “And those fuckers will never be able to touch you or your mind ever again.”

“I have to apologise,” I begin as I pull out a chair, the legs scraping noisily against the wood of the outdoor deck. I smile, ignoring the way my wolves push at me, making their disquiet known. Opposite me, Lylia raises her brows as I take a seat beside Ellie.

“Oh? What for?”

“For the way I initially reacted to your presence. My wolves are instinct driven at the best of times, let alone after the full moon from hell. They’re having a hard time differentiating friend from foe at the moment.” Even now they stir, unsettled, but it’s nothing like the red fury of earlier.

“I understand. After all, I have a wolf too.” There’s something about Lylia’s smile — about the look in her *currently* yellow eyes — that belies her age. I’ve seen the same look on Nerilina’s face from time to time, in people from species that look perpetually youthful but are in fact ancient and — hopefully — wise. “It wasn’t completely the full moon from hell, was it?” Her eyes dart to Ellie’s shoulder and then back again. “You gained a mate.”

“I *claimed* a mate, she was already mine. And I was already hers, long ago. You’re right though; there’s things Ellie and I would love to be able to celebrate, but our happiness has been hampered significantly by the threat hanging over our heads. The fact that the fae were able to control her body the way they did, and harness my alpha bark... it’s incredibly concerning. We already had wards in place, and I mean this in the politest way possible, but I’m finding it hard to believe that what *you* can do is going to be any different, even with my mother assuring me otherwise.”

Lylia shakes her head. “It’s not what I alone can do, it’s what Ellie can do, what she *will* do. She and I are going to place the spell on her body together, one unique to high fae like us. Her own magic will maintain it from there for the rest of her life. It’s as simple as that.”

“If it’s so simple, why is this not common knowledge?”

Lylia leans back in her seat, her eyes roaming over the vineyard for a moment. I do the same, spotting Maeve over on a far field approaching a shifted wolf — *Seth* — caution radiating from the body language of each of the very different wolves. It’s always the same, I’ve found; it doesn’t matter that I’m half werewolf. To my mother’s people, I will always be a shifter first and foremost; an outsider, an oddity, and someone to be wary of. Maeve’s the most relaxed of the bunch, but her nervousness around *shifted* wolves is

obvious, a direct result of House Maheras' closed-minded policies and their unwillingness to mix openly with shifter packs.

"In the grand scheme of the human population there's not that many fae descendants like Ellie," Lylia says, drawing my attention back to our conversation, "and up until very recent times, these people were only occasionally abducted by the Unseelie. Now that the Unseelie Court is purposefully attempting to upset the balance of power in the First Realm, times are changing. It wasn't necessary for these types of wards to be common knowledge until now. And they only apply to the descendants of high fae."

"Have you done this for others, then?" Ellie asks.

"Yes. *Very* rarely over the last two centuries, and now in the past year alone, I've done this three times, all for humans like you who are mated to wolves. One was completely pre-emptive; when the couple came to visit Maheras lands I immediately picked up on the fact that their mate was part-fae and offered my services. The other two times I used this spell were after similar incidents to yours — attempts made by the Unseelie to take someone, which were thwarted. And this is a trend that is happening across multiple species; I've heard similar stories from every House within the First Realm."

That comment makes me remember something Mom said earlier. "My mother called you House Maheras' secret weapon."

Lylia nods. "It pays to keep a fae around, and in these circumstances," she gestures between Ellie and I, "House Maheras knows it's better to help rather than allow the Unseelie to grow more powerful; *every* fae changeling they capture makes a difference. And... every House knows this. *Every* House has at least one part-fae in their core coven — the orcs, the elves, the dragons, even the mothpeople. We're all in glamour, us hidden mixed-species fae, so people never know who it is. On that note," she adds, taking a sip of water, "all of this is highly confidential, and I have NDAs for you both to sign. You two and Maeve, along with the other couples I've helped, are the only ones in your generation who know what I really am. Everyone else thinks I'm twenty year old Bree Maheras, who has just recently been inducted into the coven."

"You're using Non-Disclosure Agreements in the First?"

"Signed in blood, and magically bound," she replies with a nod. "We're keeping with the times, Evander, more than you would think. Those medieval-style castles are just for aesthetics these days." She smiles at Ellie.

“You will have to get him to bring you through, sometime. It’s all very different to here.”

I don’t miss the way Ellie tenses at that comment. “Maybe someday,” she says with a polite smile, Ellie-speak for *never*. I don’t blame her one bit; I don’t like the First that much, even less now with the fae threat that has come from there.

We sit in silence for a moment, a gust of wind blowing from offshore, making the heavy-duty umbrella above us rattle precariously. The weather is changing, dark storm clouds on the horizon promising rain. “What does it look like, when you do this spell?” Ellie asks, her eyes also on the approaching weather. “Where does it take place?”

“It’s best done outdoors, after sunset.” Lylia holds her hand out to Ellie across the table. “Here, let me get a good read of you.”

If Lylia notices the slight hesitation before Ellie offers her hand, she doesn’t say anything. “Is it a form of palm reading?” Ellie asks.

“In a way,” Lylia murmurs, fingertips dancing over Ellie’s hand and wrist. “What is your name? Your full name.”

“Ellie Hinewai Harding.”

“Is Ellie short for something?”

Ellie shakes her head. “Not for me, no. My nan... my mother’s mum, she died not long before I was born. Mum was already *hapū* — pregnant, I mean — with me, and the name *Ellie* was a way to honour Nan. Her name was Ellen. It means *shining light*.”

“And Hinewai, what does that mean?”

“It’s *the female personification of misty rain*. The direct translation is ‘water maiden,’ but it’s more than that. Hinewai was — *is* — that light mist that falls.” As she speaks, the stiffness in Ellie’s shoulders melts away, and the underlying stress I can sense through the bond eases significantly.

I feel easier about this, too, and I know this is probably part of Lylia’s usual routine, the same way a therapist might ease a new client into a session with small talk, but I can’t deny that it works. “It suits you,” Lylia tells Ellie with a warm smile. “Sunlight and soft rain... Bronte told me you’re a garden designer by trade?”

“I am, I’ve always loved gardening.”

“That makes sense,” Lylia nods. “A lot of high fae do.”

“Do you?”

“No, not really. I can perform spells regarding plant life, but it’s not my



passion. My magic more closely aligns with the skills needed for conflict — both defence, like wards, and offensive measures.”

Ellie frowns, her free hand playing with the pounamu around her neck, and I place a hand on her knee under the table. She flashes me a quick smile. “I’ve always loved gardening,” she tells Lylia, “long before I ever knew I was fae. It seemed to skip a generation with my mum, but my Koro has always been an avid gardener, and he learned those skills from his parents, and they learned them from theirs... it’s Māori knowledge; many of the things that I do are techniques steeped in Māori tradition. It’s not *fae*. My family may have lost the language in Koro’s generation with those awful policies that existed when he was a kid, but there’s *knowledge* that we held on to; *mātauranga Māori*. It’s not just because I’m fae that I like to garden, that’s all I’m saying.”

Lylia nods. “Of course. And you’re right, your fae ancestry may not be of any true influence at all, in terms of what you like. That traditional Māori knowledge is yours, I absolutely acknowledge that. When I talk about your fae magic, it is not with the intention of erasing the other aspects of your heritage. I’m simply saying that your fae abilities do lean towards plant life. You *are* fae, and there’s nothing wrong with that, although I know that sounds very hypocritical of me when I choose to live my life cloaked in glamour.”

Ellie shifts uncomfortably in her seat. “But what do I even call myself? Humans don’t know that fae exist, and I don’t feel like it’s wise to go around telling everyone I’m *fae*.”

“Hmmm. Changeling? Fairy? Keep it generic, be purposefully vague. That would be my advice.”

“I said garden fairy,” I interject. “It’s a concept that humans will understand.”

“Yes! That’s a perfect descriptor. Plus it sounds harmless, and that’s what you want. At least, from what I know of you, that’s my assumption,” Lylia says, leaning further across the table towards Ellie. “You don’t want to appear to be a threat to anyone here.”

“I don’t. I mean, I *know* I’m not a threat. I don’t want to be perceived as one, ever. I just want us to get on with our lives, but new things keep happening, and I have no idea what I’m doing with regards to my magic.”

Lylia pats Ellie’s hand. “That’s where I come in. We’ll get you up to speed. *Tomorrow*. First, we have to make sure you’re safe.”

Both women fall silent for a moment. I take the opportunity to pour everyone a glass of wine, something I should have done at the start. I hold a glass of sauvignon blanc out to Lylia, pausing as she hesitates. “Or is it not a good idea, right before a spell?”

She shakes her head. “It’s fine. I’m still just as much werewolf as you; I won’t even feel a glass, and there’s hours to go before we cast.”

We each sip quietly as the wind picks up pace, whitecaps beginning to form out in the ocean.

“Have you always lived by the sea?” Lylia asks Ellie suddenly.

Ellie’s eyes grow moist, longing, deep sadness, and grief hitting me in the chest. *Her* grief. “Not always. I grew up in a beach town, only one street back from the beach, but I had to... I had to move away, years ago, when I came to Auckland for study. I’ve missed hearing the waves at night.”

“But you can hear them here?”

Ellie nods, tears overflowing. “I can. For the first time in nine years. But... what happened the other night with the Unseelie that tried to take me...” Her face screws up in anger as more tears run down her cheeks. “I don’t want to give them the satisfaction of making me fear something that I love. Because I love the ocean, and I love the beach, and I love *that* beach down there, but I’m so afraid that maybe they’ve ruined that for me.”

“They haven’t,” Lylia says decisively. “We won’t give them the satisfaction of that. That decides it, doesn’t it? We will go to the beach to perform this spell. You can take that power back from them. I will help you to do so, and trust me, you’ll know in your heart when it is done. You’ll feel the difference.”

“Okay,” Ellie agrees, wiping at her eyes as I stare out at the approaching storm.

The sound of the waves is deafening as they crash heavily against the shore below, sending saltwater flying into the wind, the smell of seaweed and ocean filling my nose from the moment we step out the door. Ellie’s hair whips about in all directions, calming only briefly while we trudge down the track to the beach, the forest canopy above a momentary protection from the brewing storm.

“I can’t believe the weather turned so quickly!” Mom says as gravel crunches beneath our feet, and I know she’s just making small talk to help distract Ellie. I’m getting a constant stream of anxiety through the bond, and I squeeze Ellie’s hand, giving her a reassuring smile when she turns those big doe eyes up in my direction.

“It’s going to be okay,” I tell her. She nods wordlessly, her mouth tight, and I recognise that look of grim determination on her face. She’s always been brave, always been willing to try something new, and today is no different.

We can’t see the sunset behind the thick grey clouds that have rolled over, and it’s already darker than usual. It doesn’t affect my vision at all, but I keep a tight hold on Ellie’s hand as we cross the grass clearing at the base of the track, and I guide her as she navigates the rocks that lead down to the sand, lest she slip. She flashes me a grateful smile for a moment before her hair flies in her face once more, her lips blowing raspberries in an attempt to clear it all. “I should have brought a hair tie!” she yells above the wind as I reach out, gathering her hair together, giving her momentary relief.

Lylia, now glamour-free, walks ahead of us, stopping only when the water rushes over her ankles with each huge wave. With ice-blonde hair, glowing green eyes, tall wooden antlers that continuously grow and drop blossoms, long pointed ears that are far more pronounced than Ellie’s, and pale blue skin that bleeds to a dark navy colour at her claw-tipped fingers, she looks nothing like she did before.

She looks just like the fae I saw under the full moon, the nightmares come to life to take my mate, and it’s been an effort to keep my wolves calm in the face of her true form.

Ellie and I linger above the waterline while my parents, Seth, Maeve, Kaito, and Nerilina all wait on the grass bank, a hodgepodge crowd of supporters, the irony being that none of them are from our pack. It doesn’t matter; all that matters is protecting Ellie, and as Lylia gestures for Ellie to join her, I pull her flush against me, pushing her hair back from her face once more. “You can do this,” I tell her. “You’ve got this. You are amazing. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She’s trembling as I kiss her, and it’s hard to let her go, to know I can’t help her here, that this is something she must do on her own. It’s not just any old spell; it’s a permanent change to her body, setting a portion of her magic

reserves aside to be used perpetually for the rest of her life. I know this is how the universal glamour used to be maintained, each person with enough magical reserves contributing to that huge spell that had existed for thousands of years, but it still worries me.

Lightning forks overhead, lighting up the sky as Ellie reaches Lylia. They grip each other's forearms, and Ellie lets her magic free, her antlers appearing, a mirror set to the fae woman in front of her. Her eyes are a luminous green as the rain begins to fall in heavy drops, a few landing first in a brief warning, dotting the sand and leaving miniature craters in their wake. Another flash of lightning and the echoing thunder heralds the start of the downpour, and within moments my clothing is soaked through.

Ellie doesn't seem to notice. The water that runs over her feet pulls at the skirt of her dress, glowing where it touches her. I feel the magic rise within her, feel her tug at my magic for a moment before Lylia steps in, redirecting Ellie's abilities. Ellie has to use her own magic for this spell; she can't rely on mine, though if I could, I'd give every ounce of magic I own, and never shift or transform again, if it meant she were permanently safe.

Lylia warned us ahead of time of what to expect — chanting in the ancient fae tongue, a quick surge in magic as the spell binds to Ellie's heart, then a significant drop in energy. No long, slow process here. Ellie's hair hangs heavy down her back, and like Lylia, the blossoms on her antlers continuously grow only to be torn away by the wind. Her cream dress is plastered to her body now, the outline of her breasts and the dusky pink of her nipples visible through the soaked fabric.

The sea surges around them as the magic surges within their bodies. It's the strangest feeling, sensing this through the bond — I am both witnessing this fae magic as an outsider and simultaneously experiencing it as someone so intimately connected with their mate's soul. I feel the moment it reaches its peak, the moment the spell binds. I feel the safety that this brings, and then the fall, the sudden loss of energy in my mate.

I rush forward, catching her before she tips backwards, cradling her in my arms. She blinks up at me, her face sheltered against my shoulder, and though she feels exhausted, the greater sense I get from her is *peace*. The storm rages around us, but she is calm and safe. For the briefest moment I can sense the spell within her, coiled around her heart, the taste of it on my tongue, the feel of it in my bones, and somehow I *know* the fae can never touch her again.

“This is becoming a really weird habit of ours,” Ellie says with a laugh, shivering as I pull her dress down her body. It falls with a splat against the bathroom tiles, and I tear through the fabric of her panties, too impatient to try and drag them down her legs as soaked through as they are. The shower is already running hot, and I usher her under the spray, joining her a moment later once I’ve removed my own wet clothing.

“Hopefully this is the last time I ever have to rush you into the shower because you’re wet and cold. I’d love to run you a bath instead, but I can’t stand seeing you shiver for a moment longer.”

“It’s fine.” She leans against me, and I lather shampoo into her hair and rub soap over her body, washing her quickly and efficiently. She’s exhausted, she needs to be in bed, and I just need to get her clean, warm, and dry.

She can barely keep her eyes open by the time I am tucking her in, her voice groggy as I add an extra layer of blankets over her for good measure. “You’re not staying in bed?”

“I have to talk to my parents. I’ll be back soon.” I kiss her lips, smiling as she hums against my mouth. “I’m so fucking proud of you baby,” I tell her. “You did so well.”

“Hmm.” Her eyes flutter closed, a warm contented feeling settling over her, fading as she falls asleep. I stay sitting beside her for a moment longer, my hand on her warm cheek, the sudden, overwhelming feeling of relief enough to steal the breath from my lungs, making the back of my nose and eyes burn in an all too familiar way. “*Fuck*,” I mutter to myself, pinching the bridge of my nose as I get to my feet. This isn’t something I need to break down and cry about; this is the *celebrating* part, or it should be. All I really want to do is crawl under the covers with her and hold her for the rest of the night. I doubt anyone would blame me for that, but I haven’t had many chances to speak with my parents since they came through this afternoon, and I know I won’t be able to sleep until I do.

I slip on pants quickly and quietly, but Ellie is already in such a deep sleep I needn’t have worried about waking her. I can hear the shower going from one of the guest bathrooms where Mom is softly singing to herself, but it’s the slide of the door that opens onto the deck and the increased volume of heavy rain hitting wood that draws my attention.

My father stands on the back deck, just under the small amount of shelter

provided by the eaves. He's naked, his clothes folded neatly over the back of one of the living room couches, and there's a pattern of scars on his lower back that I've never seen before, brighter silver than the other faded marks that mar his tanned skin. I recognise the new marks for what they are; in this form the pattern appears distorted, because they're scars he received while in his wolf form. *They're deep. I'm surprised a wolf got him like that, biting him on the flank. I wonder —*

The memory comes to mind with a jolt, and I can taste the coppery tang of his blood in my mouth once more, can feel my jaw closing around flesh in a definitive bite, can hear the yelp of the older, weaker alpha as I tore through skin and bit into muscle. I had been too far gone by then, too far gone to hold back like I'd intended, and with blood on my tongue my wolf had wanted victory, no matter the cost. Seth's voice had rung out as he threw himself between our bodies, reckless and stupid and *brave*, a young man among wolves as he cried "*Don't kill Dad! Please, don't kill him!*" with half a dozen pack members bearing witness to my brutality.

I had won. And in that moment, I had lost.

My father is no fool, and I realise now that he intended for me to see him this way, naked just before he shifts, so I can see the scars he bears, the marks of my teeth in his flesh. I bear the scars he's given me too, deeper, perhaps, in that you can't see them at all. Scars on my heart, hurt in my soul, and all the jealousy I've ever felt towards my siblings for their ability to just *be* around him without alpha instincts interfering burns in my throat.

"Son."

"Dad." I nod in greeting as I cross the room, step through the open door, and slide it closed behind us. "It's terrible weather for a shift."

Dad stares out into the dark, the sound of the storm menacing, all roiling ocean and great gusts of wind. "My wolf demands it. But it's your territory, so if I'm out of line, tell me now and I'll come indoors, *alpha*."

It's hard not to get my hackles up when he sneers that last word, but I shake it off and shake my head instead. "Do what you like. If you need to shift, I understand." It doesn't surprise me that he needs to; after five days as the only shifter among the company of full-blooded werewolves, I've got no doubt that his wolf is desperate to run free.

He still doesn't look my way when he begins speaking. "I used to hate my wolf for what he did to us, and for the choices that he made. You were my boy. I told myself that we would be different. We wouldn't be like those

other alphas, the ones that can't stand each other. The ones that fight so viciously that their mates fear it could be to the death. But then you hit thirteen, and those alpha hormones hit your veins... you had your first shift and your wolf was so *fucking* strong and I was so proud of you, and at the same time my wolf wanted that threat *gone*. And I hated him for it, for the way he'd make me snarl at you, for the aggression I never asked for."

I stare at him, frozen, heart beating wildly in my chest as he continues to look out into the black nothingness of rain that impedes even our vision.

When I remain speechless, I expect to hear one of his usual lines. *Got nothing to say, boy? Speak up, it makes you seem weak if you don't*. Instead, I hear his throat click with the sound of a heavy swallow. "I was the adult," he says quietly. "I should have fought my wolf harder for you, for my son. You were right when you called last week. I should have spoken to you alpha to alpha. We could have agreed on a way to split the pack. I fucked up."

This is as close to an apology that I've ever received from him. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; I wouldn't even know what to say, anyway. Not *it's okay*, because it's not. But...

I clear my throat. "My wolf doesn't mind your presence, these days."

He huffs. "Yeah? You're not pissing me off like you used to, either."

I guess sometimes I *can* be a little shit, just like Seth, because I can't hold my tongue in this moment. "That's some scar on your back. Must have been a pretty dominant wolf to get you that bad."

"Don't push it, *boy*."

The smile that briefly pulls at my lips fades. "I need to thank you," I say seriously. "For what you did for Ellie. For saving her twice over. And for footing the bill, with Lylia." House Maheras is charging a hefty sum, ten million US dollars, and the only person they're accepting that from is my father, and strictly from his personal wealth, *not* the wealth attached in any way to my mother. That I can't pay him back is a stipulation in the agreement negotiated between my mother and her grandmother. It's clearly not how they usually operate — Lylia made it sound like it was in their best interests to save every changeling they could — but more of a way to force my father to cough up some money, to make him feel some hurt for daring to steal one of their most precious daughters all those years ago. It may be barely anything in terms of Dad's full fortune, but it's still a significant amount.

He nods, meeting my eye for the first time. "Protecting her is the one thing my wolf got right, at least when it comes to anything regarding you.

Congratulations. I can see now that she's good for you."

Lighting strikes across the sky, blindingly bright. I hear, more than see, my father take a step towards me, and his hand settles cautiously on my bare shoulder. "You've done well, Van."

"Thank you."

Mom finds me while I'm in the kitchen, stacking the dishwasher and cleaning up the mess from our early dinner before the fae spell. With all the additional guests, we'd ordered takeout from the one Chinese place on the island. Seth had collected it, taking my car to go and pick up the huge selection of stir fry, dumplings, wontons, and soups.

"Thank you for putting us up for the night," Mom says softly as I hit the *on* button, the machine whirring to life a moment later. She's wrapped in one of Lacey's robes — I can tell from the scent of it — her own clothes sitting in the house across the vineyard. "I didn't fancy the walk to the other house in the rain after my shower."

I shrug. "It's no problem. Do you want some tea? Ellie makes her own herbal blend; I think you'd like it. I can't remember all the ingredients, but she can tell you the recipe tomorrow if you can't work it out on your own."

Mom rubs my back briefly with a sigh. "Tea sounds good, thank you darling." Lighting flashes again, brighter than it has been in the past hour, and the thunder that quickly follows rattles the windows. "*Goddess*," she hisses under her breath. "I hope your father comes back soon. I know he's a strong wolf but I don't like him out in this, not with the lightning strikes directly above us."

"He needed to shift," I say, wiping down the countertop. Even before speaking to him tonight I could tell that Dad needed to let his wolf loose; restless energy had been rolling off of him all afternoon. He was either on his feet or staring off into space, and I know from experience that his wolf would have been pawing for freedom. "I take it he didn't feel comfortable shifting while on Maheras lands?"

"It's less a matter of comfort and more of safety," Mom replies bitterly. "You know they think so little of shifters, as —"

"— as if we aren't two sides of the same coin," I finish, having heard



Mom say this a thousand times before. “I know. I’m sorry that most of your family are problematic at best when it comes to this stuff.”

“*You* shouldn’t be apologising,” Mom growls. “I get so fucking mad when they say shit about my babies. None of you are *lesser wolves*. You’re all *more*. You’re *both*, and you’re all *perfect*.” She waves her hand, dismissing the conversation, and I choose to ignore the angry tears that she wipes away quickly as I fill the kettle and switch it on to boil. “Now, where’s this tea you’ve offered me?”

I fetch it from the pantry, opening the tin and holding it out to her. “Smells good, right?”

“*Oooh* yes. Camomile, mint, lemon balm, lavender...” Mom shakes the tin, peering inside and the loose leaf blend. “Liquorice root too, does she grow that here on the island?”

“She grew everything in there.”

Mom smiles, doling out a decent portion into the teapot I’ve left on the bench. “She’s a talented girl, our Ellie. I’m making you a cup too.”

“I can see that. Thanks, Mom. Thank you for everything you’ve done in the past week.”

She shakes her head. “It’s what I owed you two, Van. It...” She makes a pained sound, running her hand back through her hair in that habit of hers. “It doesn’t even come close to making it up to you both. I should have handled things differently when it came to Ellie’s memory, and to you... I should have tried harder to convince your father to pull back on his orders when he decided to cut contact with Ellie. He was out of line.”

“Don’t apologise for his actions,” I say quietly. “They are his own.”

“I am his mate, Evander. And I am your mother. I didn’t quite get that balance right in the last decade. I should have backed my son more.”

I step beside her, my arm brushing hers as I reach for the boiled water, pouring it into the teapot. It hurt when she didn’t back me. It really fucking hurt. But we were all grieving, and I never took that step myself, never tried to break away from the pack earlier. I fucked up too. “I talked to Dad, just before.”

“I know. I could sense it through the bond.” Her fingers tap the marble counter. “Have you made peace with him, then?”

“I think so.”

“Good.”

“I hadn’t seen his scars, until just now.”

Mom hums, her eyes following an ant as it crawls up the wall, having escaped from one of Ellie's bunches of flowers. "Like I said, it's a balance between you two. I don't like to think about you doing that to my mate, just like I don't like to think about him being cruel to you. To know that you two are talking again, that you can stand to be in the same room as each other... that makes me breathe easier."

"Same," I say quietly, and I should stop there, but tonight seems to be the night for picking at my old wounds, and the compulsion to dig for answers is too great. "Dad's theory about Jenny — about the fae killing her," I begin, immediately regretting opening my mouth as her face crumples from those words alone. "I'm sorry. Forget I said anything. Seriously, forget I asked. I can live without knowing."

"No. It's... you have to say something," she whispers. "You can't keep it bottled up. You can't tiptoe around me, I don't want you to."

"Mom —"

"Evander, listen to the words coming out of my mouth. Don't start being a typical alpha and thinking you know what's best for me. I can answer your question. We discussed it with Lylia. She said it's impossible to know, and she wasn't just saying that to avoid taking sides. There's a possibility that fae could have made their way around my ward that day, but it's just as likely that it really was an accident." She picks up the tin of dried tea, staring into the container, but I can tell her mind is elsewhere.

"There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about my beautiful baby..." Her voice breaks on the last syllable, and she wipes at the tears that fall freely. "But we need to talk about her more; that's how we keep her with us. And that's... that's beautiful. Grief is painful but it's *okay* to grieve, it's a part of our life. It's unfinished love. It's how we hold her with us, every day. It shows us how special she was, because we feel so deeply."

"I know."

"I know you do, sweetheart." She wraps her arm around me, leaning her head against my shoulder. "It's harder for you men, with all that toxic masculinity bullshit to contend with."

"Yeah, I don't play into that, I mean look at me," I add, wiping at my own tears. "I cry often."

"Good."

I scoff at her answer, and she huffs in annoyance. "You *know* what I mean. I'm sorry that you're sad, but you're going to be when it comes to

Jenny, so it's good that you let yourself cry."

I wrap my arm around Mom's waist, and plant a kiss on her head. "I love you."

"I love you too, my baby. My firstborn. You made me a mama, and I am so thankful that it was *you*. You're a good man, Evander, and you deserve happiness and good things. And Ellie is perfect for you."

I pour out two mugs worth of tea, sliding one of the drinks along to Mom. "Careful, it's still too hot."

The house is quiet, and I focus on the sound of Ellie's even breaths down the other end of the hall. I left the bedroom door open for this reason, wanting to be able to hear her presence.

"It was tea leaves that first gave me visions of you and Ellie together," Mom says softly. "I was naughty, I read her cup once after she was done with it. I took it out of the dishwasher when she wasn't even in the room; she'd run back outside."

My mouth hangs open for a moment. "Doesn't that break a bunch of your rules?"

"Oh, it breaks a ton. But she was seventeen and pining after you badly, I could tell. I just had this urge to know; I wanted to know that she'd be okay. It was before I found out she was fae, but..." She shakes her head, picking up her mug and blowing on the surface. "Intuition is a powerful thing. I already had a feeling of..." She shrugs. "Anyway, I picked up her teacup and read those leaves. I saw that she would have one great love, and I saw that it was you, and I was so happy. I saw your mating bites."

I don't miss the sad tone in her voice. "But?"

"But I kept getting one year, and ten years, and this sense of that time being broken, separated. Of *two* relationships, but *one* love. I couldn't make sense of it at the time, but of course now I can look back and see. One great love, but two separate chances."

"You never thought to tell me?"

Mom takes a sip of her tea, eyes closing. The mug clinks against the marble as she sets it down again. "Around the same time I had visions of a teenage girl. She had long black hair and golden eyes. It was summer in those visions, a New Zealand summer. She was always running, always laughing. Running between two *pōhutukawa* trees with their red flowers in full bloom, across some grass and into a field of grapevines. She radiated happiness, and I was so sure she was Jenny. So after your sister's passing, I no longer put

any value in my visions. I no longer trusted them.”

*Intuition is a powerful thing.* A shiver runs down my spine as I get the sense that there’s something *more* to this conversation. “And now?”

“I trust them again.” She picks up her mug once more, sipping slowly, her gold eyes searching my face. “I always thought Jenny looked like you the most; she had pretty, delicate versions of your features. Just like this girl I saw.”

“Who is she?” My voice is barely more than a whisper, Ellie’s voice as she explained her ideas for the vineyard’s garden echoing in my mind.

*“I think we should plant two pōhutukawa here, on either side of the entrance. They’ll grow large in time, but there’s space. And they’re beautiful trees.”*

“I don’t know. We haven’t met her yet.” Fresh tears form in her eyes. “But we will, someday. I have no doubt about that now. Thank you for the tea, darling. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Mom takes her drink with her, leaving me alone with the prickling sense that I’ve just touched the future.

Twenty-Three

## ELLIE



It feels like forever since I stepped foot in my garden, when in reality it's been less than two weeks. The storm raged on for a full twenty-four hours before it finally died away, leaving a path of destruction across the island in its wake. We drive past fallen trees and through huge puddles, and when we cross the causeway Van slows down to manoeuvre around large clumps of seaweed that have washed up across the narrow two-lane bridge.

Thankfully the grapevines at Lost Moon didn't suffer too badly — there's a few torn and bruised leaves here and there, but it didn't hail, and that means the immature grapes made it through relatively unscathed. As we pull up outside my yard, I can already tell my garden is a different story altogether.

"Well this is a bit shit."

"I warned you that it wasn't exactly pretty," Van says as he kills the engine. He'd braved the wind and rain to come and check on the chickens for me yesterday, insisting that I stay home in the company of his parents and Lylia. I'd wanted to come along, but I also recognised the situation for what it was — an excuse for us to test ourselves, to check that between the bond and the recent traumatic experiences, that we could handle being apart briefly without either of us panicking. It had been fine; I could sense Van the entire time, and that had helped mitigate the initial stress I felt watching his car drive away in the heavy rain.

I step through the front gate and take off my sunglasses, as if that's going to help make the current state of things look better. It doesn't change the view. There's leaves and twigs strewn everywhere, my waist-high corn stalks are all leaning over at a 45 degree angle, and branches from the larger trees

have come down, crushing plants underneath.

“It’s a mess.” I walk up the shell path, Van following silently behind me, shaking my head when I spot a ton of green tomatoes that have all fallen off the vines, too small to even try ripening on a windowsill.

With his height, Van can see a lot more than I can, and he peers over at the stone fruit trees that line the fence, the blue sky reflecting in the lens of his sunglasses. “You’ve lost a lot of plums, they’re all green on the ground. Sorry baby.”

I cover my face with my hands, shaking my head, sighing out my frustration. “Fucking storm.” It happens. That’s the thing about gardening — freak weather events happen sometimes and ruin some of your crops. That’s just nature. You have to roll with the punches.

I open my eyes and look around again, slowly turning in a circle as I take it all in. The bees are out today, still landing on the roses despite their bruised petals. The birds are still singing, and the chickens are fine. The plants are all still standing, even if they’ve been pushed around a bit. I can stake up the corn, sweep up the leaves, gather up all the fallen branches.

There’s still beauty in this place despite the havoc wreaked by the storm. I meet Van’s gaze, and he reaches out, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “We can tidy this all up. You know what plants are like. They’ll bounce back.”

“I know they will.” You can tape up a split tomato stem and the plant will heal itself, and sure, there’ll be scars, but there’ll still be flowers and fruit.

Car doors slam, and I look down at the road, waving to Cam. Lacey is already busy unbuckling the boys from the backseat as a second car pulls up, and then a third, and a fourth. Out climbs Bronte, Weston, and Seth; Kaito, Lylia, Nerilina, and Maeve; Ana and Betty, too. They’re all here to help clean up, an impromptu working bee of sorts, and Van and I walk back down to the gate, hand in hand, to greet them. Everyone is chatting and laughing and making introductions. The sun is shining. The birds are still singing.

Everyone is happy.

I blink back the sudden tears, popping my sunglasses back over my eyes. “You okay?” Van asks, his fingers lingering on my waist.

I smile up at him. Storms come and go, but life goes on, and I’ve got the best person by my side to weather it all with. “Yeah. I’m good. Really good.”

“Can you sense it? It’s dormant, but it’s there.”

I take the dwarf sunflower seed from Lylia’s palm, holding it between my thumb and index finger. “I can.” We’d decided this morning that my garden would be a great place to continue my crash course in fae magic, given the fact that I do lean so heavily towards plant life. While everyone else is getting on with the clean up job, I’ve been listening to a lecture on the basic rules of magic for the past hour, and now we’re finally getting into the practical side of things.

I can sense the tiny spark that I need to trigger within the seed, and feed that my magic, yelping as it seems to explode in my hand, going from nothing to a fully fledged plant in an instant, four sets of leaves and a decent root structure suddenly sitting in my palm.

“Everything okay?” Van calls, and I glance up. He’s over by my tiny house with Kaito, tape measure in hand, trying to work out if there’s a way to move the small building off the land without destroying half the garden. If we can get the tiny house back onto the road, we can tow it to Lost Moon, where there’s room for it to sit next to the house as my personal office space. If we can’t move it — and I don’t think we can, not without removing half of the raised garden beds I’ve built — it doesn’t matter. It’s only that I’m really attached to the space, having renovated it myself, and I have plans for this garden that don’t involve *needing* the tiny house onsite.

I can see the frown on Van’s face from here. “I’m fine!” I yell back. Beside me, Lylia laughs softly.

“That was a little too much magic. You only need the slightest touch to start a seed off. Here, try again with this one. Pay attention to each part of the seed; you understand the science of plants, now I want you to apply that scientific knowledge alongside your magic craft.”

“Okay.” I slow my breathing, staring at the seed but no longer seeing it with my eyes, instead sensing the potential of it. I feed it the smallest amount of magic that I’m capable of doling out; the slowest trickle of energy. This time I can feel that first radicle as it sprouts, turning into tiny roots, the first shoot emerging as the taproot grows, seeking as if to dig itself deep into soil, the hypocotyl bursting forward in the opposite direction, the cotyledon opening, and then the first true leaves. The germination process should take days, possibly weeks, but takes mere seconds beneath my touch.

“Very good,” Lylia praises. “You’re a fast learner. Let’s plant a few seeds and you can speed up their growth — be intentional about it; pick the plants



you actually want in your garden. I want to see how far you can take them, so let's see if you can push a seed right through to maturity."

There's gaps in the garden beds where I've had to tear out crushed or completely snapped off plants. "Here," I mutter, more to myself than anyone else. "We'll replace the broken zucchini with a new one." I plant the seed as usual, only vaguely aware of Lylia peering over my shoulder as I find that spark once more, and out bursts the first shoot, cotyledon unfolding.

"Keep going," Lylia encourages.

I feed it more magic, the stem of the zucchini stretching, thickening into a stout vine, flower buds forming along its length, ready to burst open. Just a touch more magic and they do open, first two male flowers, then a female. I pick one of the males, pulling back the petals so I can dust the pollen-covered stamen over the female. "Might as well help it along," I shrug, explaining to Lylia. "Sometimes the bees miss them, and then the immature fruit dies."

She nods, yellow eyes blinking back sudden tears. "My mother used to do the same thing. I haven't seen anyone do that in over two hundred years." She clears her throat, tucking her black hair behind her ear. She's in full glamour today, and looks like any other young wolf. "I'm going to go get a drink. You keep going."

I watch her head into the house, still trying to wrap myself around how someone who looks twenty can actually be three hundred and five. The pilates athleisure look doesn't help. Maeve admitted last night that someone had shown them some local influencers when they'd been researching how to blend in, and that's how they'd chosen their outfits — based off some cookie-cutter minor New Zealand celebrities and their gifted activewear social media posts. I can't judge their research; I don't know anything about First Realm culture, and I'd be just as lost if I had to go through and live there tomorrow.

I move onto the next packet of seeds without Lylia, ignoring the others around me. Lacey's boys have been collecting sticks into piles, though I don't know how helpful they've truly been, and Weston has been clearing all the large branches, adding them to the mountain of garden waste at the back of the property. Everyone else has been weeding, harvesting, sorting, and throwing any unsalvageable fruit and veg to the chickens or adding it to the compost pile.

I get lost in my work, barely noticing the weight of my antlers settling on my head, nor the trail of blossoms I leave on the ground as I move about. My eyes are glowing again — I can tell from the way it is reflected on the surface

of leaves and flowers as I lean over plants — and as I work my way across the garden space, up onto the small hill adjacent to the side of the house, I see my shadowy reflection in the window next to me.

*She is beautiful*, is my first thought, seeing the blossom-covered antlers and the shining green eyes. ***You are beautiful.***

I am not human, not fully. I cross to the other side of the garden, and my vision grows blurry as I bend to plant the next seeds — a mixed lot of heirloom tomatoes — my tears falling on the leaves that burst forth. I feed them more magic, *more, more, more*, until they stand almost as tall as me, trusses filled with yellow flowers blooming, just waiting to be pollinated by the bees that will visit today. We'll be up to our ears in tomatoes, in pumpkins, in lettuce and spinach and kale and spaghetti squash. I still have more seeds, and I tear open new packets, bending, pressing, planting, growing new life, until I am surrounded by the lush greenery of my own creation, sobbing, because it *is* beautiful, because out of this terrifying magic comes beautiful things and beautiful moments. I am not human, not fully. I never was, and that's okay. It's more than okay. *You can take up space. You can be that little bit of fae, and just be.*

Van's arms come around me, holding me tight, and I press my face to his chest, laughing through tears as he ducks his head out of the way of my antlers. We stay like that for a long time, until my tears have dried and the sun has warmed my back. I could stay in his arms like this forever. After all, it's my favourite place in the world.

**M**y feet hang over the edge of the small wooden deck as I stare out at my garden, lit up with the gold evening light. Soft footsteps sound behind me, and a moment later a steaming cup of tea appears in front of my face.

"Thank you," I say appreciatively, taking the mug from Lylia's outstretched hand. Beside me, Van tenses, and when I look he's glaring at the drink.

"There's nothing weird in there, right? The last time a witch gave her tea I had to carry her to the car."

Lylia rolls her eyes, taking a seat on my other side. "It's straight lemon balm, surely you can smell that. Ellie, how are you feeling?"

I take a tentative sip, relaxing when it doesn't burn my tongue. "Good. Better, thank you." After my little meltdown in the garden, I'd suddenly needed a nap, and had barely been able to keep my eyes open by the time Van was carrying me through the doorway of my house, depositing me on the couch with a whispered, "*Sleep, baby.*" When I woke, everyone but Van and Lyliia were gone.

A bee flies past, landing momentarily on Lyliia's arm, and she smiles, gesturing to it. "I always wonder if they can tell what we really are." She watches it for a moment as it flies off. "Your tolerance for using magic will get better over time, Ellie, but until then, it's better to not push yourself to that limit. I intentionally let you go that far with it today, because you don't know where your own limit lies until you reach it, in terms of expending energy."

I nod, processing her words as I take another sip of tea, the slightly bitter taste less lemony than the scent. "Is that my limit, in terms of abilities?" I ask after a moment. I'm curious about her answer.

"Is that what you're thinking?" she fires back, eyebrows raised in question. I grin, and take another slow sip.

"I was wondering if you were going to do that. Turn the question back on me."

"Well, you're the only one who can answer it. And I think you already know the answer."

I do, a shiver running down my spine at the thought. The well of magic I can sense within me runs a little deeper, and I haven't hit the bottom yet. There's not too much more, but I can take from Van's innate magic too, and I have a feeling that his magic reserves are even deeper than either of us have realised... "Do..." I sigh, torn between needing answers and not wanting to feel stupid.

"Ask anything. I'm only here until tomorrow, so now is your time to ask questions."

"Do you think I could turn into a deer?" I already know part of what I do is considered shapeshifting — the antlers are a variation of what Van calls my base form, and when I have sex with him under the full moon, I'm shapeshifting there too, my body doing what it needs to intuitively to allow for me to accommodate my much larger partner. I just don't know how far the ability goes... or maybe I do.

"Do you think you can?" Lyliia asks, making me sigh. I hate being put on

the spot like this. I feel like I've been the centre of everyone's attention far too much in the past week.

"I think... yes," I admit. "But I'm not ready to yet. Maybe I won't ever try. I don't feel like I need to. I don't see what the purpose of it is."

"The purpose of it is to deceive. A way to fool others from a distance, or to befuddle them by catching them off guard. '*What is a deer doing here?!*' That sort of thing."

"That tracks," Van interjects, gesturing to me. "That's what happened to her both times she saw a fae deer. Right?"

"Right," I nod. "Yeah, both times I was very confused, and it definitely slowed me down a bit, in terms of trying to escape."

"Mhm. So you're right, in terms of you not needing to. But I think you can, and you may want to," Lylia shrugs. "Just for fun."

"But what if I get stuck like that?" That's the thought that keeps bothering me, that if I push my magic too far, I might get trapped in the wrong form.

"That's not going to happen." Van's voice is clear and decisive, and I turn to him. "If you ever shift, I will coach you through it. You know that's a common fear pretty much every shifter has, right? Usually the alpha's role in those situations is to talk you through your first shift. But the key thing to know is that you will always return to your base form — that's the form your body naturally wants to be in the most."

"I didn't know that about alphas."

"Yeah, well, you already know my case is a different one. Dad couldn't do that job for me, when it came to my first shift. The pack's second stepped in instead."

We stare out at the garden in silence, all three of us laughing when Phoebe suddenly runs past, clucking madly. "Crazy chicken," Van mutters under his breath.

"You know they're coming to live with us at Lost Moon, right?"

"They're going to live in the main garden, right at the back. You can design them a little barnyard area, and Kaito can build it. I don't want to hear clucking before dawn."

"That just puts them closer to Lacey's house."

Van shrugs. "She can deal with it. Collecting the eggs can be a job for the boys, it'll be good for them."

I grin, because I can picture showing the boys how to care for the chickens and collect their eggs. I wouldn't trust them to do it unsupervised,

but with an adult hanging around they'd probably love it.

Thinking of Lacey's kids reminds me of the other thing that I need to ask, and the all too familiar pang of anxiety runs through me at the thought of one more thing that might go wrong in the future. "Children," I say to Lylia, feeling hyper-aware of Van's presence beside me and the weight of his eyes on my face right now. "I'm not planning on having any children right now, but down the line... are they going to be safe? How does that work? Does my ward protect them?"

Lylia's gaze darts between us. "When you find yourself pregnant, reach out to me again. Any child within you will be protected, but once they're born, it's safest if they have their own protection placed on them. And it's really quite simple."

"You're not going to make me dunk a newborn in the ocean in the middle of a thunderstorm?"

Lylia throws her head back with a throaty laugh, the most relaxed I've seen her yet. "Goddess, no! No, not at all. I'll be quite happy to visit you, wherever you have this hypothetical baby."

"Okay, good."

"I think you're ready, Ellie. You have both Nerilina and your very capable mother-in-law to guide you in a lot of your practice, but the reality is that you learn your magic in time, as you use it. That's how it works. I can give you the roadmap, but you're still in the driver's seat."

"I figured as much."

Lylia's lips curl in a warm smile. "Then my work here is done — for now."

"It's a fitting sendoff," Lylia comments, hands spreading wide to gesture at the thick layer of mist surrounding the small crowd gathered to say goodbye. She nods at Van and I specifically. "I can't blame you for being worried this morning; you don't often see it this dense." The fog rolled in off the ocean not long after sunrise; Van and I watched its approach from the deck where we were eating breakfast, the cloud looking ominous as it neared. Both of us had been worried that it might have been something fae-related, and had gone as far as to contact Bronte, and then Nerilina — where Lylia

also happened to be staying. Reassurances from all three witches had calmed our nerves slightly, and as the fog had enveloped the vineyard without any accompanying incidents, intense relief had bounced between us through the bond.

“Thank you for helping me,” I say to Lyliia, tipping my head back slightly to look her in the eye. “I can’t even begin to express how appreciative I am.” I take a deep breath, looking out into the white nothingness, blinking rapidly. I’ve been so bloody emotional lately, and even though I know it’s justified, I still get frustrated that tears are always sitting so close to the surface at any given moment.

“It’s fine,” Lyliia says, touching my elbow. I haven’t seen her without the glamour since she helped me place the fae ward, but she drops it now, her appearance changing in an instant. She’s just as beautiful in either form, but it’s such a contrast from how she looked a moment ago that it’s still a little shocking.

“Your eyes aren’t glowing,” I blurt out, regretting it immediately since it’s not really that tactful. Her eyes are still bright green — the colour of fresh moss — but they don’t shine like they did the other evening.

“They glow when I’m actively using magic beyond a certain level. The same as you.”

“Would my ancestors have looked like you? I’m sorry if that’s a rude question, I’m just curious.”

Her smile is wry. “Trust me, when it comes to my appearance, I’ve experienced rude, and that’s not it. Besides, it’s completely natural to have questions about your own bloodline. And yes, they would have looked like this. They might still look like this — they might *still* be alive, you never know.” She lifts a hand in front of her face, turning it back and forth, her dark blue claws looking sharp. “It’s been nice to be able to drop the glamour here, even just for a short while. Usually only the mirror in my chambers sees me like this.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Less than it used to, but still more than I’m willing to admit to most people. Our family — the Maheras — they very much care about appearances. And I don’t just mean my physical appearance, although that falls under it. They care about how we are perceived. So anyone that steps outside the norm, anyone that doesn’t quite fit in with the traditions — with the magic, with the endless hunger for power — those people know they are

barely tolerated. Your mother-in-law is one such person, ever since she mated Weston. Me, on the other hand... as long as I keep the glamour up and play whatever role I am meant to at the time... I'm fine. Now, that brings me to my final question before I go: how are you?"

"Still a little scared," I admit.

She nods, petals falling from her antlers. "Of course you are. It will fade in time. I know you can sense the ward around you now. Trust in it; it will not falter. They cannot get past that. They cannot get to your mind. If they could, I would have been their prisoner long ago."

"That's a good point."

"There's easier targets out there." She lifts her eyes, looking at Van, who stands behind me. "To put it in business terms for Evander, your return on investment rate is far too poor to bother with, especially when you think about the thousands of unprotected changelings wandering about in this realm without any idea of the danger that they're in."

"Can't something be done for them?"

"It's in the works. Believe me, no one wants the fae gaining any more power. I think the fact that it happened so close to home — to the mate of a family member — is enough to move the needle in terms of the coven's willingness to step into human spaces to prevent these things. But it's not something for you to worry about, alright?"

"Alright."

"Good. Here, let me show you this. It's time for me to go home. I know you're not interested in this at the moment, but one day you may be." She waves her hand, and beside us a wide circle of mushrooms grow from the ground, all glowing green. When I look back at her, her eyes shine with the same magic.

"A fairy circle," I whisper.

"Exactly." She steps back, waving to everyone. Floating in the air above the circle, a blue portal begins to form, a quiet tearing sound echoing around in the fog, as if a hundred people are ripping bits of paper all at once. I shudder at the sound and the feel of it; it's like nails on a chalkboard, and I still find it really fucking creepy that there's a hole in the universe, right in front of us.

Van's hands land on my shoulders, squeezing gently, and he takes a step forward, until he's flush against my back. It's a small gesture, but I feel a lot better for it.

“I’ll see you in a few years!” Lyliia calls, waving one last time, her icy blonde hair reflecting the blue of the portal beside her. Then she’s stepping through, disappearing, and a moment later the entire thing fades in on itself, the mushroom circle withering and turning to dust.

Everything is silent for a moment. I look up, meeting Van’s eye. “That’s it then?”

He nods. “That’s it. Done and dusted.”

MUM

Koro thinks it’s a brilliant idea. He’s looking forward to the helicopter. And it will be a load off me to not have to worry about getting ready for Xmas if you’re taking care of it.

You sure? I don’t want to be a pain.

You’re not being a pain. Did you forget it was my idea lol? Your Koro has never been in the air before. I think it’s amazing if Van can organise it for us.

Perfect. I just checked with Van, everything is tentatively booked for you to fly down on the 23rd. He’s going to confirm it right now.

Thanks bubs. Love you. Xx

Love you too xx

I set the phone down and relax against the back of the couch, closing my eyes and enjoying the afternoon sun as I listen to the deep timbre of Van’s voice as he confirms helicopter flights and the accommodation booking for Mum and Koro. It wasn’t *really* Mum’s idea that they come down this way for Christmas — we’d been chatting on the phone and I’d hinted at it to test the waters of how she’d feel breaking tradition. I’ve never not had a Christmas at Bluewater Bay, but after everything that’s happened recently, I really think Van and I need a decent break from emotional turmoil before we



go up north. It's going to be hard for him when we do go sometime in the new year. It's still hard for me every time I'm up there, which is why I don't go that often. I can't look at the northern cliff where the Livingston mansion used to be — the new owner demolished the old house and built a new one in its place — without feeling that incredibly heavy grief.

"It's done," Van says quietly after his last call ends. "I hope your mother knows how much I appreciate that she's willing to come here for Christmas, especially because she's bringing Koro down too."

My eyes are still closed, but I lift my phone in one hand, wiggling it in front of me. "Do you want to read her latest texts? She's claiming it as her idea. So she's totally fine with it. I think they're both really excited." I open my eyes, squinting against the sunlight. "I don't know how many years Koro has left — I hope it's a lot, his problem is mainly his hip — so it means a lot to me that he's able to come here and see the vineyard and the garden project."

"And your garden."

"And my garden, yeah." I still haven't decided what exactly I'm going to do with my property, but in the meantime Van and I have arranged for my mortgage to be paid off courtesy of one of his many savings accounts. I'm not willing to destroy a chunk of my garden to tow the tiny house out — that idea broke my heart a little too much, so it's staying put. "I think I'm going to wait until the new year and then look for a tenant," I say out loud, weighing up options in my mind.

"With the height of that bathroom, you'll have to specify that they need to be under five foot six."

I roll my eyes, grinning. "You're not going to recommend it to any of your wolf buddies?"

"No, definitely not. Like I've always said, I love your house — it's very *you* — but I hate that fucking bathroom ceiling."

"This is my house now, anyway," I say quietly, looking at the pile of moving boxes stacked up near the doorway. It's been a week since Lylia left, and we spent all of yesterday sorting through my belongings and moving it all here. You'd think there wouldn't be much, given my small home, but once all the drawers were emptied and anything breakable wrapped up in newspaper, it still looked like a lot. I haven't started unpacking yet — we're still balancing our work commitments and getting Lacey and the boys settled into their house, but I think by this coming weekend I'll have it all sorted.

Van bends towards me, his arms caging me on either side, his face suddenly an inch from mine. “This is your home,” he agrees.

I press my lips to his. “You are my home.” I pull back, running my fingers over the day-old stubble he’s sporting. I’ve always been a tactile person, and I love the feeling of it. “Speaking of home, this home needs a Christmas tree. I want to decorate one with you this weekend. Start some new traditions together.”

I’m obsessed with his full lips and the way they curve ever so slightly when he’s amused but trying not to show it. “Are we getting a real one, or will that hurt your plant-loving heart?”

“Real! That’s the whole reason they’re grown anyway. You know as well as I do that proper plant care involves killing a great many living things — weeds, pests, seedlings when you’re thinning them out. There’s a farm down the road from here where you can pay a donation and go chop down your own pine. Can we do that?”

“Of course.”

With the sun hitting the side of his face, his gold eyes practically shine. He’s breathtakingly beautiful, my Evander.

“What are you thinking?” he murmurs, his lips brushing my cheek ever so softly. “I can see the wheels turning in your mind.”

“That I’m happy. I’m really, truly happy right now.”

He slides onto the couch beside me, lifting me until I’m straddling his big thighs. “So am I baby.” His lips brush mine, teasingly slow, curving as he chuckles against my cheek.

“What?”

“I’ve got some gossip you’re going to go absolutely feral for. I just remembered.”

My eyes are wide. “*What is it?*”

“Kaito is moving in with Cassidy at the end of this week.”

“*What?! They’re together?! Evander! You have to tell me this stuff!*” Van’s assistant, Cassidy, is gorgeous; tall and voluptuous, and one of the bubbliest people I’ve ever met. Her personality is the opposite of Kaito’s, but I’ve seen them interact before, and there’s *something* there — I can feel it.

“I *am* telling you! And no, they’re not together. I mean as roommates. They’re not *living* living together. His rental was only short term, until Christmas, and she’s had a change of circumstances recently and needed to rent a room out in her place, so it’s worked out that way.”

“Oh,” I slump, feeling strangely disappointed. “You got me all excited there for a minute.”

Van’s laugh is light and carefree. “I can tell.” His hand snakes under the hem of my tee, drawing lazy circles on my hip. “Who knows? You said last month that you thought there was chemistry between them, didn’t you? This could be the start of some great love story for them.”

I shake my head, smiling. “I don’t know. He’s so standoffish, and she’s... not that.”

Van shrugs. “Different things do it for different people, right?”

“Hmm. What is it about me, then, that does it for you?”

“Everything. Everything, baby. You’re fucking perfect.”

“**W**atch out Ellie, here comes the boss.”

I roll my eyes at Sophia’s teasing, and she throws her head back in a loud laugh, her long canines on full display. She’s one of the four shifters that Kaito employs, and I’ve gotten used to her beautiful white wolf running around the vineyard over the past few weeks. I’m going to miss everyone when we all take the two week break for the Christmas and New Year period.

With the restaurant renovations complete, work has resumed on Lost Moon’s garden, and the first stage is almost finished. It still looks fairly raw — the plants need time to grow into maturity — but I can see how beautiful it’s going to be. Even the couple of weeks over the upcoming Christmas period will do wonders for allowing the plants to settle into their new home.

*They’d settle faster with a little fae magic.*

I push aside the thought. Despite being much more comfortable in my own skin than I was just a few months ago — I’ve even tied my hair in a ponytail today, ears on full display — I’m still not sure how much magic I want to use in a professional setting. I’ve decided to front-foot it though, and have sent enquiries to the professional organisations responsible for awards, asking them for their views on the use of non-human skills in the creation of gardens submitted for consideration.

I’ve been weeding one of the earliest beds we planted, and get to my feet now with a groan, removing my gloves so that I can wave to Van without

scattering soil everywhere. He's in his full business gear — perfectly tailored suit jacket and all — having flown in from the mainland five minutes ago. I can still hear the helicopter in the distance, on its way back to Auckland.

I no longer feel weird about Kaito's crew seeing our public displays of affection — everyone here knows we're mated, and none of them give a shit. It's still a bit different when it comes to the human vineyard staff; the bite on my shoulder caused a fresh wave of gossip among the human employees on their return at the beginning of this week. I'd happened to be using the new vineyard bathroom two days ago when two of the waitresses had wandered in, their voices echoing as they continued their conversation about Van and I, oblivious to the fact that I was in the next stall over listening in to the whole thing. After hearing them say *"I heard it has to happen mid-fuck!"* and then a loud giggle followed by a *"God, I've got to find myself some good wolf dick,"* I decided to step out of the stall, their wide-eyed horror as they realised they weren't alone slightly tempering my ire.

*"Maybe you should save these conversations for somewhere outside of the work premises,"* I'd told them quietly, meeting their eyes in the mirror as I washed my hands. *"This is a public bathroom after all; I don't think it's a good look for staff to be talking about their employer's penis within earshot of our patrons. Don't worry, I'm not going to tell him, but FYI, there's a lot more to wolves than just their dicks."*

Van jokes about being fetishised by humans sometimes, but I know the fact that *everyone* seems to mention knots as soon as you bring up wolves makes him feel uncomfortable. I hadn't noticed it happening before Van walked back into my life, but now I feel like I hear it everywhere, our mating bites adding a new element to the whole thing.

There's no humans present now, and I hum against Van's lips as he bends to kiss me, his big hands lifting me off the ground in the process. There's a few whoops and wolf whistles from the group — just typical banter — and Van is grinning as he sets me down on my feet again.

"Why are you all still here?" he asks loudly, making a show of looking at his watch. "It's quarter past five on a sunny Thursday — go home already! You should all be at the beach right now!"

I see Kaito roll his eyes, but he begins coordinating the pack up. I'm pretty sure he's grumbling about the fact that they're supposed to be on until five-thirty, but no one else is complaining as they return their spades and other tools to the trailer attached to the vineyard's quad bike, parked just

outside the field. One of the young werecat apprentices begins to dig where I've marked out the area for the two feature *pōhutukawa* with a muttered, "The *boss* said we had to get them in the ground today," nodding towards me, and Van intervenes with a shake of his head, holding his hand out for the spade.

"Ellie and I will take care of it. You head home. Seriously. I've got some things to discuss with my mate."

Ten minutes later the last of them are trudging to their cars, all parked along the road that runs parallel to the garden area. I turn around to find Van stripping off his suit jacket, placing it carefully on the quad bike's seat.

"Are you going to shift?"

He shakes his head, unbuttoning his cuffs and rolling up his sleeves. "I'm going to dig these holes, and we're going to plant these *pōhutukawa*." He picks up the spade again, his white shirt straining across his broad back and huge biceps.

The metal blade makes a dull thunk as he spears the ground with it. We don't need a huge hole for such young trees, and I've got no doubt that with his strength, he's going to be done in only a few digs.

I can tell something is bothering him, and when he finishes the first hole I step forward, brushing back the lock of hair that's hanging over his forehead. He closes his eyes, his head tilting to kiss the palm of my hand.

"I'm impressed, you didn't even get a speck of dirt on your leather shoes." He snorts at that, gold eyes opening, showing some sort of emotion that I can't place. He's not giving me anything through the bond, either. "What's going on?" I ask quietly.

"I don't want to have kids right now. I don't want you to think that because of *this*, that I suddenly do. We're sticking to our five year plan."

I nod, even though I'm now thoroughly confused. "Okay... what has this got to do with digging holes?"

He moves onto the second spot, the spade slicing through grass and earth as he speaks. "You know Mom saw visions of us together... well, she had others. Of a girl who looked like me. Black hair, gold eyes, running between two *pōhutukawa* trees in bloom, on a vineyard. Mom said she thought the visions were of Jenny, back when she had them ten years ago."

A shiver runs down my spine at his words. I remember Bronte alluding to something, that night we called her after I unlocked my memory. "Did she talk to you about it again?"

I feel the moment Van's block on the bond falters, grief, confusion, hope, and a sense of *sacredness* all filtering through to me. "Oh, Van."

"She told me last week, after the fae ward. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner... I just needed time to process it. It's our daughter she's talking about. Our teenage daughter, running around here, *happy*." The heavy thunk of the spade continues, another pile of dirt forming beside the second hole. "I saw these trees just now and... I don't know... I just wanted us to be the ones to plant them. And I'm excited about this future, I really am. *Ellie*, we have a little girl... that's... that's amazing." His last few words are barely a whisper before he chokes off, wiping his wet eyes with his forearm before continuing digging. "But at the same time, I'm devastated that it wasn't Jenny, and I'm all torn up about it."

I blink back my own tears, moving to him, smoothing a hand over his back, my other hand reaching for the spade. "Let me dig some of this, then, since it's special."

"I know I'm being over the top about this."

I stand on the edge of the spade, using my weight to help push it further into the dirt. I don't have the raw strength that Van has; what he's done in a matter of minutes would have taken me three times as long, but I want to be a part of this. "You're not being over the top at all, honey," I say quietly, lifting the dirt out onto the pile, worms writhing as they're exposed. One more spadeful and the hole will be deep enough for sure. "It's important. Let's plant these for Jenny, and for us, and for whoever is yet to come."

The *pōhutukawa* are only waist-high right now, their buds mere days away from bursting into bright red blooms. They're often called *New Zealand's Christmas tree*, and to me summer doesn't properly start until the beaches are all lined with trees full of flowers, the ground underneath carpeted red with the fallen needle-like stamens. I love these trees, which is why I chose them for the entrance to this garden. When fully grown they'll form a natural archway here, and they're hardy — you can stomp all over their gnarly roots that grow out of the ground and they're fine — so there's no issues with future foot traffic coming through. Once they're mature enough they're the perfect trees for climbing too. Van and I grew up climbing these trees together every summer.

I crouch next to the hole as Van brings over one of the plants, tearing apart the plastic grow bag it's been living in. Together, we lower it into the hole, and then Van starts shovelling the soil back in around it.

“Do you know about *whenua*?” I ask, helping to spread the dirt around the tree evenly.

He frowns. “That’s the word for land, right?”

“Yes. It’s the word for land, and it’s the word for placenta. There’s a bunch of words that connect the body to the land and the people that live on it, in terms of *te ao Māori*. Like *hapū* — that’s the word for sub-tribe, so your very *very* wide family, and it’s also the word for pregnancy. The word for birth is *whānau*, which is also the word for family. Anyway, I don’t know if I’ve ever told you, but when a baby is born, you bury their placenta in the ground; you return the *whenua* back to the *whenua*. My *whenua*, from when I was born, is buried in Mum’s front yard, under the *kōwhai* tree. *Koro* buried it there, and it’s one of the reasons Mum will never sell that place, or at least that’s what she always said.”

I look up, smiling at him through the leaves as we finish patting down the soil. “I don’t think we’ll ever move from this place here... I mean, do you? I love it here.”

“I love it here too. It’s something we should decide together, but... I don’t want to move. I’ve spent my whole life being nomadic to a degree, and all I’ve ever wanted is to stay put. With you.”

It’s a relief to hear him say it. I love this little island. I look at the oldies who have lived here for decades, and I always think that’s how I want to be, still here, still enjoying the laidback lifestyle. I get up, moving back to the other hole, and Van grabs the second tree. “These *pōhutukawa*... they’re the perfect trees for that kind of thing,” I say, the *tikanga* around *whenua* still on my mind. “I want to plant one more *pōhutukawa* at the back of the house, that’s the spot that I’d been thinking about...”

“For *whenua*? For placentas?”

“I know it probably sounds strange to you.”

“No, it doesn’t. It’s your culture. There’s nothing strange about it.”

“I appreciate that,” I say. “But what about your culture? Is there anything I should know about? Any rituals?”

“Not for that, no. We can do things your way, when the time comes. I’m more than happy to.”

I start pushing soil back around the second tree. “I guess that means I’m ordering more *pōhutukawa*.”

“Yes, order away.” He’s quiet for a moment, kneeling beside me, his arm brushing mine as we add in the backfill. “We’re putting down roots, so plant

as many as you need.”

“Okay.” I pause for a moment, bare hands pressed to the soil. I can feel the life within this tree, and it’s sister that we just planted. I can feel the life in all the plants in this garden, and the sudden urge to give them a little more is overwhelming.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah. I’m just... Fuck it. I'm going to do it. Can I borrow your magic?”

"Of course. What for?"

"For this garden. What's the point of being a garden fairy if I don't use it? How different is it than using growth enhancers and fertilisers on the plants?"

He gives me a curious look, but he takes my hand, pulling me to my feet.

Individually, the plants really don't need much, just a wee nudge along. I tap into Van's power, combining it with my own, then feeding it to the two *pōhutukawa* beside us. Their flowers burst open, red blooms stretching higher and higher as the trees grow taller. I stretch out my magic further, feeling it catch gently against each plant, feeling them grow and bloom. It's fascinating to watch, to see each plant double in size, colours popping out of nowhere.

I finish with a sigh, feeling tired, but not so exhausted that I can't function. Van scoops me up regardless, and I don't fight it.

"Everyone's going to get a surprise tomorrow," I say as Van steps onto the newly concreted path that will eventually run through all three acres of garden space.

"A wonderful surprise," he says quietly as we follow the winding path along, "it's stunning, Ellie."

"Thank you for hiring me."

His laugh is a deep rumble, lips pressing to my forehead. "It was a good decision."

“Van?” I say, my voice echoing in the empty house. There’s no reply, no sound except the cacophony of birds singing their dawn chorus as I step into the kitchen, looking out the window. It’s not yet sunrise, the last of the stars still twinkling above in their final few minutes.

*He must have shifted.* He does this often enough that I've quickly grown



used to waking in the early hours to an empty bed. Usually I roll over and go back to sleep, but today I felt too awake to do so.

The air is still and crisp outside as I slip on my gumboots, closing the front door behind me with a gentle *click*. I don't bother calling out to Van as I head towards the first field of vines because I know he'll hear me walking through the grass. I've barely made it ten metres when, on cue, his joy and love surges through the bond, and a single bark rings out loud and clear across the vineyard. I search in the direction of the noise and spot him almost immediately, the black silhouette of his wolf standing out against the orange sky for a moment before he leaps away.

I keep walking forward, up through rows of grapevines, pausing when his figure — now a man once more — appears at the entrance to the next field. He's naked, his hair dishevelled and his smile wide as he walks barefoot towards me. He's beautiful in this dim morning light, pupils shining, canines sharp, muscles rippling under tanned skin with every movement, heavy balls and long, thick cock hanging between his thighs. That part of him grows thicker and harder with every step, rising as the knot I love so much swells red and hot, and need licks at my clit at the sight, my pussy already aching with the desire to be fucked.

I sigh into his open arms, and his skin is blazing warm against mine, though I squeak at the surprisingly cool touch of his hands. "I just washed them at the tap, sorry. I wanted to be able to touch you," he murmurs, doing just that, his hands roaming everywhere over my thin silk robe.

His heartbeat is slow and steady under my palm. I press a kiss to his chest, relishing the smell of his skin, male musk and sweet spice filling my nose. I know he's doing the same, scenting me, his nose and lips in my hair, his hands running under my robe now, a deep rumble of amusement reverberating in his chest when he realises I'm completely naked underneath the thin fabric.

I hum with pleasure as he presses a kiss to my neck, his fingers working the tie around my waist, unwrapping me like an early Christmas gift, the robe falling at my feet. I glance around, but the vines are at their peak growth right now, green and lush, creating a sense of privacy here within the field.

"This seems like an appropriate way to worship you," he murmurs against my collar bone, fingers circling my nipples until I'm moaning. "It's midsummer, the summer solstice," he adds as he kneels before me in the damp grass, pressing kisses to my breasts, my fingers scoring paths across his

scalp as he sucks a nipple into his mouth. The sun is rising now, bright light kissing the tops of the vines, making drops of dew glimmer like crystals. His hand dances around my lower belly, and I buck my hips, desperate for him to touch my clit.

“Oh, yes, it’s *Te Maruaroa o te Raumati*, that’s the Māori name for it. Today the sun sits with his summer wife.”

Thick fingers drag through the slick folds of my cunt, spreading moisture to my clit, making me jolt. Maybe it's the cool air, or the fact that we've never done this in such a public place, but I'm so sensitive right now, my thighs trembling as I rock against the meat of his palm.

His long tongue licks a stripe between my breasts as his fingers circle my entrance, pushing two inside me as he speaks. “The way you say that makes me wonder if there’s a winter wife.”

I suck in a shaky breath as his fingers press repeatedly within me, curling rhythmically, my clit trapped under his thumb. “Ah,” I gasp, “there is. Don’t go getting any ideas.”

His laugh is quiet, breath feathering across my skin. “Never. You are my wife in all seasons, baby.” His hand stills as the words fall between us, our eyes meeting, his shy smile a mirror of my own.

I shrug. “Well, you are on your knees.”

There’s humour in his gaze as he moves his right leg, planting his foot flat on the ground. “Down on one knee, isn’t it? This wasn’t the proposal I had planned, but since we’re here now... will you? Will you be my wife?”

I couldn’t smile any wider if I tried, my chest aching with how full my heart feels. “Of course. Yes. I already am,” I add, feeling the bond between us caress my mating scar as it sometimes does, the ghost of Van’s touch circling the outline of it. “Though we’re going to have to make up some sort of G-rated story when we tell people how you proposed, or is this sort of thing on-brand for wolves?”

He snorts against my stomach, pulling his fingers free from within me with a shake of his head. “I can’t blame you for thinking that,” he murmurs, gold eyes hooded with lust as he sucks his fingers clean. “But no, I think we’ll keep this version of events to ourselves. I don’t even have the ring yet.”

“I don’t need a ring, babe,” I tell him, running my hands back through his hair. “Don’t get me wrong, I won’t turn one down,” I laugh as he rolls his eyes. “But all I want is you. I want to call you my husband, that’s the fun part for me.”

“I know. You have me.” His voice is thick with emotion, and though we’ve gotten better at guarding our respective sides of the bond, he lets all his walls down now, nine years of longing hitting me, an ache I feel deep in my soul. I know *exactly* how he feels. “I...” he begins, but we’re both tearing up, lumps in our throats, words escaping us. I fall into his arms, our foreheads pressed together, our souls intertwined. He kisses away the tears that run down my cheeks, and I do the same to him, fingers tracing his strong jaw, listening to the rasp of his stubble under my nails, feeling the strength of his arms around me.

“You’ve always reminded me of the sun goddess, did you know that?” he says low in my ear as he slides inside me, my pussy clenching around his cock, my ankles digging into his back. With every thrust, he names me. “My sun goddess.” *Thrust*. “My sun wife.” He groans as I tighten around him again. “My *wahine Māori*. My high-fae lady. Let me see you in all your glory.”

Letting my form change, letting the antlers out and my eyes glow, feels like a deep exhale, a relaxation into my whole self. The pupils of Van’s eyes shine with the reflection of my magic, and around us the grass thickens, the grapevines moving like sentient beings, their tendrils waving back and forth as they grow at a rapid rate.

Van kisses me deeply, his fingers digging into the flesh of my ass, hips moving deliberately slow, every upwards thrust ending with his swollen knot kissing the lips of my pussy. I tip my head back as his teeth catch my throat, a growl rumbling through him that speaks of domination and worship in equal measure. I don’t think this is what Lylia meant when she told me that “*witches establish rituals around the solstices and equinoxes*,” but this feels pretty fitting, a tribute to the vineyard, like some sort of pagan fertility rite... or really, just the two of us *living*, seizing the day, enjoying the life we are building here together.

“I want you to ride me,” Van murmurs in my ear, and I nod, gripping his shoulders. It takes some manoeuvring, his big hands lifting me off him momentarily, but then I am lowering myself back onto his thick cock with a moan, my knees in the grass and Van flat on his back beneath me. His thumb works my clit as I ride him at an increasingly frantic pace, on the cusp of an orgasm, white petals from my antlers raining down around us. When his hips snap upwards, his hand on my ass gripping tight enough to leave fingerprints, I throw my head back with the guttural groan, my pussy pulsing around him

as I come. Van follows a moment later, one final upwards thrust locking us together with his knot. He bares his teeth, growling as he comes hard, spurts of liquid heat filling me as he continues to work my clit, drawing out my orgasm until it bleeds into another, my cry loud in the morning air.

In the aftermath I sag against him, breathing heavily, the beads of sweat on my back cooling as the gentle breeze touches them.

“Happy midsummer,” I whisper against his chest, breathing in the smell of crushed grass, fresh air, and *him*.

“Happy midsummer, my mate. My wife.”

I hum, lifting my head to look into his gold eyes, the colour so beautiful in the morning light. “My wolf in all seasons.”

“In all seasons,” he agrees, a hand brushing through my hair. “Forever.”

Epilogue

VAN



*The following October*

**M**y dick is so fucking hard right now.

That's not really a surprise, since it always is when I wake in the morning. I turn my head, pressing my lips against the top of Ellie's head, contemplating whether to wake her as her scent fills my nose. She sighs softly, peaceful in her deep sleep, and I grab my cock instead, dragging my foreskin back slowly as her breath feathers across my bare chest. *Let her have five more minutes.* My wolves disagree, prowling, demanding, wanting nothing more than the taste of her on my tongue, but I ignore them.

I look out at the horizon where the moon — so close to being full — hangs low and magnified, the bottom edge of it disappearing behind the New Zealand mainland that sits across the expanse of calm ocean. Staring at it makes my wolves writhe within me, both restless and desperate to be free, and yet I can't look away, my hand slowly working my cock as I watch it descend until the final orange sliver slips out of sight.

The fact that it's gone doesn't give me any relief, my body too aware that the full moon rises tonight. It's going to be a day of lust-filled thoughts in every moment that I'm not actively fucking my mate, and it's a relief when her breathing changes slightly, her hand drifting down my abdomen until her fingers are wrapping around my knot, squeezing tight.

I grunt at the sensation, my head tipped back against the pillow as my hand moves faster now, pulling and squeezing at my cock, Ellie's amused hum telling me that she's now fully awake.

That's all the permission I need, and I roll, sliding down in the bed so that

my lips can latch onto her neck, nipping at her skin, quick bites against her shoulder, her collarbone, and the small swell of her breast. “*Oh*,” she sighs, her legs falling open as I run my tongue back and forth over her nipple, and I waste no time in coasting a hand down her stomach to the soft wet heat of her cunt. I throw back the blankets, my mouth follows the same path, planting kisses down her body until the taste of her sweet pussy is on my tongue.

“*Fuck*, Evander,” she whispers, her voice still thick with sleep as I do just that, pressing two fingers into her so I can fuck her slowly while I suck on her clit. I fucking love hearing her whimper, love feeling the scrape of her nails on my scalp as her body grows taut, her thighs shaking until she comes with a cry, back arching like a bow, cunt clenching around my fingers. I keep licking her clit until she gently pushes me away, though I can’t resist biting her inner thigh in parting, leaving a red crescent on her skin.

She sighs happily, cheeks reddened and eyes hooded as she watches me lick my fingers. Her sighs turn to moans as I lift her legs until her heels are hooked on my shoulders, the first press of my cock into her dripping core driving me insane. I tease her with just the tip, holding her in place, grinning as she gasps. “*Van*,” she says breathlessly. “*Van*.”

I can’t take it any longer, sliding deep into her, until she’s flush against my knot. She’s so fucking wet already, and it’s the best feeling in the world.

“*Mōrena*,” I say, nipping her ankle with my teeth, smiling at the way she moans at the slow backwards drag of my cock.

“*Oh*, *mōrena*,” she replies, gasping again as I thrust a little harder this time. “*Oh*, this is definitely a good morning.”

“Damn, you beat me to it. That was going to be my next question. ‘*E pēhea ana koe?*’ And you were going to answer ‘*E pai ana!*’ as you come around my dick.”

She laughs, overwhelming love pulsing through our bond. Her legs slip off my shoulders and her arms reach out towards me, the gold of her wedding band glinting with the movement. “Is that how it’s going to go? Come here, I want to feel your body over mine.”

I do as I’m told, grinding into her, supporting myself on my elbows as her arms wrap around my back, her mouth latching onto my shoulder, right over the silver scar of the mating bite she gave me. My balls tighten in response, aching with the need to empty into her. “*Fuck* that’s good,” I growl, my thrusts relentless now, our flesh slapping together, the headboard thumping against the wall. “You going to come for me again, baby? Because you’re

making me fucking feral right now.” I pin her hands back against the bed, gathering her wrists together with one hand, bracing myself against the headboard with the other, slamming into her, my teeth bared in a snarl. Inside my wolves howl because she is *mine*, my mate to have and to fill, and all I can do now is try to fuck some of this pent up lust out of my system.

“Knot me,” she moans. “Knot me and I’ll come, please, *pleeease*.”

“You want my knot?” *Fill her. Satisfy her. Mate, mate, mate.*

“Yes!”

I could draw this out, edge her a few times, prolong the inevitable and prolong the ache for me. One glance outside at the blue sky tells me we don’t have the time; we barely have time for a knot this morning, but as she digs her heels into my ass, trying to pull me deeper into her body, I can’t think beyond my own need for pleasure. *Nothing* feels better than the tight squeeze of her cunt.

“*Evander!*” she demands, writhing under me. “I’m so fucking close! Fucking *knot me!*” There’s the hint of an alpha bark behind her words, enough to send a shiver down my spine, and a growl rips from my throat as I slam into her, knot and all. There’s a time for sweet lovemaking but this isn’t it, my growls and her deep groan filling the air as my knot swells within her, locking us in place, the rhythm of her orgasm mirroring mine as I empty into her. *My mate. My scent. My wife. Mine, mine, mine.*

When I’m spent, I relax into her with a sigh, the maddening lust momentarily abating, my pulse pounding in my ears, her heartbeat echoing mine as I kiss her forehead and release her wrists. She traces patterns down my back, her lips planting soft kisses across my collarbone, murmuring “*I love you,*” in her sweet, satisfied voice. I wish we could stay like this all day, but as the minutes tick by I can sense her nervousness build through the bond, the same as it has been all week.

I’ll be glad when this weekend is over, simply because then she’ll be able to relax.

“We’re going to have to push it now, to get ready in time,” she says as I roll us onto our sides. She hisses as I adjust us both, my knot pulling on her for a moment. “*Oooh. That knot better go down fast.*”

I huff. “You’re the one that begged for it. *And* almost ordered it.” The fact that she can use my alpha bark against me is a secret we keep closely guarded, and something we’ve only tested a handful of times.

“I know, but you’re the one that woke me up by eating me out.” Her nose



presses against my chest as she inhales deeply. “You started it.”

“Mmm. I needed it. I needed this.” I grab a handful of her gloriously round ass, squeezing it. “The moon is going to drive me insane today.”

She hums in agreement. “I know. And I’m not complaining, really. This was the best way to start the day.”

“A nice distraction,” I agree. “Now every time you get nervous this morning, you can just think about me fucking you senseless, alright?”

She laughs, lips stretched in a wide smile against my skin. “I’ll do that. And I’m looking forward to tonight.”

Ellie and I walk hand in hand between the two *pōhutukawa* that guard the garden’s entrance. They’ve grown significantly since we planted them last summer, and now stand over ten feet tall thanks to Ellie’s magic. They’re still young, with no significant trunk or branch development like you see in the old specimens that cover the New Zealand coastline, but I catch Ellie feeding these two her magic often, and I think she’s determined for them to grow into full maturity as soon as possible. She talks about wanting branches good enough to climb, and I know she’s thinking about our future, and the visions my mother saw all those years ago.

We step onto the concrete path that now winds its way through the entire garden. People are welcome to walk all over the grassed areas, to picnic in the spaces, to go through the children’s maze and visit the chickens at the back end. The path is wide enough for both strollers and wheelchairs to be used simultaneously and has access from the new adjacent accessibility car park so it means everyone can enjoy the garden.

“People really went to town on the poor daisies,” Ellie says, cringing as she points in the direction of the first major flower bed. “They’ve stripped it bare!”

“Luckily I know someone that can fix it.”

She makes an irritated huffing sound, and I don’t even need to look to know that she’s rolling her eyes behind her sunglasses. “Yeah, lucky I fucking *can*. I know the whole ‘*garden fairy*’ thing is a draw, but this is a bit ridiculous, especially when we stipulated that this weekend was not for picking.”

Though not officially stated anywhere, word about Ellie's abilities spread quickly on the island last summer, the fact that a *garden fairy* had infused this place with her magic suddenly becoming one of the reasons why people choose to visit Lost Moon. Ever since, one of the things we've struggled with the most is the sheer number of people secretly picking a flower or taking a cutting of a plant that has been infused with 'lucky magic.' I have no clue where that idea came from, but it has led to us creating designated Picking Days for guests, with the knowledge that Ellie will always need to go through after and fix things up.

Her magic is also one of the key draws for the festival this weekend. Her design here is amazing, but the excitement of the festival's committee members when they witnessed her using her magic firsthand during their private tour really cemented the fact that humans here love the cutesy idea of garden fairies. They have no idea how threatening fae magic can really be, and we're happy to keep it that way.

Staff already went through yesterday afternoon to tidy up after day one of the annual Motuwai Garden Festival, picking up the odd piece of trash left by visitors and recovering wine glasses that were left in inconvenient places — on a rock, on the side of the boardwalk, under a tree, and a surprisingly large number by the playground, or so I've been told. Ellie is the only one with the skills to restore the plants, though. "Just don't overexert yourself," I tell her, as I sense her pulling out her magic.

"I won't, but I'm going to have to draw on your magic, too."

"That's fine."

A faint ripple of energy flows across the ground, moving quickly away from us, and every plant in its path grows even more lush. In an instant everything is back to the way it should be. The over-plucked plants have flowers once more, the vegetable beds are filled to the brim, the fruit trees are green with spring growth, and there's colour everywhere.

"It looks perfect, baby," I tell her, rubbing her backside appreciatively. "The garden is stunning, just like you."

She looks beautiful, wearing her favourite green jumpsuit and her *pounamu*, strands of her long hair pinned back so that the delicate points of her ears are on display. There are still plenty of times Ellie wears her hair down these days, but it's never with the intention of hiding her fae ears anymore, and I'm pleased for her that she's finally completely comfortable in her own skin.

“You scrub up pretty well, too,” she says, her hands smoothing over my shirt to squeeze at my biceps. “Very sexy.” She grabs my left hand, lifting it to her lips, kissing my wedding ring. I don't usually wear it because I can't shift with it on or I risk losing a finger, but I wanted to wear it for her today.

I bend to kiss her, but the sound of footsteps approaching makes me pause, turning to look over my shoulder. Sure enough, it's Ellie's gardening club besties, Ana and Betty, walking through the olive grove towards us, each woman carrying huge totes filled with supplies. “We should go help them,” I say, and Ellie nods in agreement.

Ellie appears calm on the outside as we help Ana and Betty set up their volunteer table in front of the two *pōhutukawa*, but I can sense her heightened stress through the bond. She felt the same yesterday morning, and I know she'll calm down once the crowds start rolling through.

“I can't believe it's been a whole year since we last did this!” Ana says with a shake of her head, “And look how much has changed, eh Ellie?”

Ellie pauses, her hands full of festival pamphlets, and the smile she gives me is full of adoration. “I know,” she says quietly. “It's gone by fast.”

“It's been the best year,” I add, stepping closer to her, wrapping an arm around her waist. We may have gotten off to a rocky start with all of the fae drama, but since Ellie's fae-based ward was put in place everything has been smooth sailing; a short engagement, a late-summer wedding here on the vineyard, and an extended honeymoon over the winter months, once the harvest was over and the vines dropped their leaves.

“It has,” Ana agrees. “You know we take full credit for you two being together — we're the ones that broke the news a handsome wolf was in town.”

I shake my head and Ellie laughs, leaning into me. “*Sure*,” she says. “It's got *nothing* to do with the fact that we already loved each other years ago.”

“Oh you know she's just being silly,” Betty chimes in. “But it's wonderful to be here. It's a beautiful garden, Ellie, you've done so well. A beautiful garden for a beautiful couple.”

Ellie's cheeks are flushed from the praise, and I can feel the pure joy that surges through her. Part of what makes her so good at her job is the fact that she really does love it when others enjoy her garden spaces. She's always creating them with her clients in mind, thinking of things they wouldn't necessarily think to ask for themselves, and it's those extra details that make her designs so sought after. The garden here is a perfect example of that; half

of the things she added to the plan I didn't ask for but immediately loved, and I wouldn't change a thing about it now.

"I better go and check everyone is set for the day," I murmur in Ellie's ear, before planting a kiss on her forehead. The vineyard runs like a well-oiled machine these days, but part of that is because I regularly check in with staff, especially when we have busy events. "Once that's done, I'll come find you. It's perfect, Ellie, so stop stressing, alright?"

She grabs my collar, pulling me down for a kiss, humming with amusement against my lips. "Yes, alpha."

Three years on from the Unravelling, there's still a few things that humans could be doing better to accommodate non-humans — like not planning the Garden Festival on the weekend directly before the full moon — but we're getting there. It's mid-morning, and the entire vineyard is bustling with visitors, human and non-human alike. Cam's daughters are both visiting from Scotland, their statuesque frames standing out among the crowd in the garden, there's an entire cohort of moth people that have been touring the festival together, and there's plenty of wolves in attendance today, despite the timing of the event.

I've been waiting for two wolves in particular, and when I spot the car pulling into the designated parent park next to the garden, I send a pulse through the bond to Ellie to get her attention. She looks up from where she's kneeling next to a small moth child, and I gesture towards the side gate. By the time I cross the garden, she's already ahead of me — as are Lacey and Seth — Ellie's grin wide as she spots Sophia, our newest pack member, and her newborn.

"Oh my gosh, you made it!" I can feel the way Ellie is fizzing with excitement through the bond, and stand back, watching as Sophia carefully unbuckles the baby from his capsule, cradling the tiny boy in her arms.

Seth hovers, watching curiously, a grin on his face when looks across at me. "It's good to have another new pack member already. We're getting there."

By *getting there* he means we're now a pack of five adults and three children — and Ellie isn't even a wolf — but he's right, there is something

special about children being born directly into our new pack.

He joined us officially at the end of last summer, and in typical Seth fashion, waited until the day before my wedding to decide, once again causing tension to flare up between my father and I. In the end it had been fine; he's been a huge help around the vineyard, particularly in times when Ellie and I have been away, leaving Lacey in charge of running the place.

"Here, just watch his head," Sophia says quietly, passing her son to Ellie. Ellie's face lights up, and a huge amount of warm fuzzy feelings hit me a moment later.

Having worked on Kaito's crew on various vineyard projects throughout the summer and into winter, it wasn't entirely a surprise when Sophia asked me to join the pack. She was already six months pregnant at the time, newly-single, and an outsider in the pack that she had been with, as they were loyal to her ex. I couldn't say no; shifters need the social structure of a pack, and Sophia wasn't getting that where she was. Besides, taking her on is exactly how you build a large group — one person at a time — and Sophia has always been loyal and protective of Ellie, ever since the fae attack on the beach last year.

Lacey sidles up to me, her voice low as she elbows me. "Someone's got baby fever."

"Quiet, you," I reply, but I can't deny that there's something about seeing a baby in my wife's arms that makes me want to drag her back to the house right now with a very particular goal in mind. *Breed her*, my wolves chant, and I send them a very direct *Fuck off* back. I thought they'd let me relax once I claimed Ellie, but they only changed their tune. They'll get their way eventually, in three or four years. Ellie and I both have more things to do together first, before we add a kid to the mix.

"Do you want to hold him, alpha?"

The way Sophia says it makes it clear it's pretty important to her, and I nod. While Lacey has been helping her out a lot, this is the first time I'm meeting little Oscar, and it's time for the entire pack to step up and support them both. Sophia takes the baby from Ellie, bringing him to me while Seth busies himself by attempting to assemble the stroller, looking only mildly confused.

"Just watch his head."

"I've got him," I say quietly.

He is the tiniest, warmest little thing, gold eyes wide as he stares up at

me, the back of his head completely engulfed by my hand. He smells of milk and sweet baby scent, and he is perfect.

“Hey little wolf,” I whisper, and his face transforms, his wide gummy smile all joy.

“Oh my god, he’s smiling already!” Lacey coos, stepping close and leaning against my arm.

“He just learned to do that two days ago, and now he won’t stop,” Sophia says, her tone full of pride. “It makes the 2AM feed easier for sure, when you start getting that feedback. Isn’t that right, little man? You love smiling, don’t you?”

“I remember those days,” Lacey mutters.

I nod, remembering the teary voice messages Lacey used to send me in the middle of the night, back when she had Ash, her second son. Babies aren’t straightforward, that’s for sure, but it’s certainly easy to get caught up in wanting one in these moments, especially when his tiny hand latches onto my finger.

I lift my head and meet Ellie’s gaze, her eyes shining with happy tears as she lowers her phone. Knowing her, she’s just taken a hundred pictures.

“You want one of these?” I ask her, gently rocking the little baby in my arms.

She nods wordlessly, emphatically. “One day,” she whispers.

“One day,” I agree.

*My Wolf in the Garden*

## ELLIE



The crowds have dwindled down to only a few remaining groups, and with fifteen minutes to go until the festival is officially over for another year, I head down to the far end of the garden, gently reminding visitors of the time, that the full moon will be rising tonight, and that this property is owned by wolves. With the last group turning back towards the entrance, I stop to take it all in, shaking my head in awe. A year ago this place was an empty paddock, and now it's a space filled with flowers and fruit trees, sculptures and murals, vegetables and native shrubbery. There's spaces for everyone here to enjoy.

I slip off my sandals, carrying them in one hand as I walk on the grass adjacent to the path, feeling the earth and all the potential life within it beneath my feet. When I round the bend I spot Van in the distance, standing at the volunteer table, chatting to Ana and Betty. They smile up at him, and I can't help but stare at this gorgeous man, his white business shirt strained tight across his muscled back, his handsome profile the only face I've ever truly loved. I would recognise the way he moves — the shrug of his shoulders, the way his hand cuts through the air as he explains something — anywhere.

Tears prick at the back of my eyes. It's been exactly a year since he stepped into my garden, and every day since then I've been so grateful that he walked back into my life.

Van immediately senses my mood through the bond and his head snaps up, spotting me in the now-empty space. Though I can't see his eyes behind his glasses, I *know* that look, full of smouldering intensity. He says something brief to the ladies, and then he's heading my way with long, powerful strides,



desire burning through the bond. It ignites that same spark in me, and it doesn't matter that he fucked me well this morning; desire for him still curls through me, the anticipation of what's to come this evening making me feel restless.

He gathers me up in his arms without a word, lifting me, my legs wrapping around him, his lips crashing against mine, and he pushes his own desperate love at me, an exact mirror of what I've been feeling all day.

"You make my life so much better," I whisper fiercely against his cheek, letting out a half-laugh, half-sob when he tosses his sunglasses away and I realise there's tears in his eyes, too.

"We were made for each other," he agrees. "It was fate."

"It really was."

I draw the line at having sex in the garden when there's still people hanging around. Still, I let him drag me around the corner into one of the secluded, sheltered spots, and I don't protest when he presses me up against the huge mirror I installed against the rock wall that now runs the length of the garden. His cock is hard as steel, grinding into me as he kisses me, and I know we need to head back to the house soon. "You're all fired up," I say, hissing as he bites my neck.

"That's because you smell fucking insane. I need to be inside of you. Now."

He makes things *very* tempting, and I regret wearing a jumpsuit. It's the least accessible piece of clothing I own. "*Van*," I groan, the friction of his dick feeling so fucking good. "We need to go back to the house."

He *growls*, and I can hear his wolves behind it.

"Shift, then, and get us back there quickly. I'll ride you."

I've never seen a man undress so quickly, and laugh at the determined look in his eyes. The staff are going to find his clothes strewn everywhere, but I can tell he doesn't give a shit. "Your ring!" I say urgently, holding out my hand as I see his body begin to tremble, and he yanks it off his wedding finger, dropping the gold band into my palm. I slip it onto my thumb — it's still too loose, but it'll do for now — while I watch him shift.

Riding him is a quick form of transport, and I've done it quite a few times now. It's not that much different than riding a horse, though I've only tried that once, on a friend's farm as a teen. He lays on the ground and I straddle his huge back, scratching behind his ear as he huffs. "Wait," I say as he rises, pressing my knee into his side gently. "Look in the mirror."

I let my magic out, let the antlers grow and my eyes change. “Look at us,” I say, taking this moment in, my wolf in the garden, his fae lady on his back. I can sense the love and pride he has for me through the bond, and I smile at our reflections, meeting his gold eyes in the mirror.

“You’ve got to admit, we look pretty badass like this.”

His barking, canine laugh never ceases to amuse me, and I lean forward, planting a kiss on the top of his head between his ears. “Come on then, run us home.”

I could never have fathomed this life a year ago. It’s a thousand times better than I ever imagined.

I t’s still chilly in the late afternoon, even on a calm, sunny day like today, but the water runs hot into the huge outdoor tub, and my man — who runs even hotter — is already waiting inside it.

“I so need this,” I say, taking off my robe and hanging it on one of the hooks attached to the trunk of the huge *ponga* fern that stands over the bath. Van’s eyes roam over my body, despite the fact that he was staring at me naked only five minutes ago when he fucked me in the shower, pulling out at the last second and coming all over my stomach. Having a bath right now isn’t really necessary, but as I lower myself into the water I change my mind; it *is* necessary after a day on my feet, and my aching muscles are already thanking me. I settle back against Van, feeling his erection press against my ass, smiling as I tip my head back against his shoulder and close my eyes. The birds are singing — *tui* and thrush and grey warblers — and everything around us is peaceful.

“You did so well, baby,” Van murmurs, kissing the top of my head, his hands running over my breasts in a slow caress. “I’m proud of you.”

“I’m proud of us. It was a team effort.”

“It was all you, Ellie. Take the damn compliment for once, woman,” he says, his deep voice thick with amusement.

“Alright, *fine*. Thank you.”

We’re silent for a while, just enjoying the warmth of the water, the press and rub of skin against skin, and the stunning view of the ocean in front of us. The bath is nestled in our private garden at the back of our house, and I watch

a pair of bumble bees fly about, one of the plump little bodies disappearing entirely into a nasturtium flower. I haven't used any magic on this garden yet. Van calls it stubbornness. I call it *having fun*. I enjoy the satisfaction I get watching my plants grow from week to week, and although it's nice to be able to hasten the growth of things in the huge vineyard garden, I don't find it as necessary here. I might use it soon, though; I've ordered moonflower seeds, and I'm too impatient to wait for them to grow on their own. I want to smell them blooming in the evening air, see them open fully under the cover of darkness, so I'll be planting them and helping them along as soon as they arrive in the mail.

Van moves behind me, arm stretching out to nab something from the ledge of the tub.

"Wine?"

"Yes please."

It's Lost Moon's pinot gris, one of my favourites. I sip it slowly, enjoying the slight buzz by the time my glass is empty, grinning as Van refills it.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?"

"Never. I want you sober for the full moon. Here, I'll have it if you're already at your limit, you lightweight." I laugh, managing to take one large gulp before he plucks it out of my hands and downs the rest in a single mouthful. I splash him as sets the glass back down, and shriek as he grabs me with a mock snarl, his fingers prodding me exactly where he knows I'm ticklish. We lose a lot of water over the edge of the bath in the ensuing struggle to tickle each other, and somehow it ends with me sinking onto his cock, staring into his eyes as I straddle him beneath the water.

"My wife," he whispers, his lips brushing mine. "My mate. You don't know how crazy you make me. I am obsessed with you."

I kiss him hard, his tongue plunging into my mouth, and I *feel* the deep growl he makes all the way through to my clit. He fucks me hard, the way he always does before the moon, a thumb on my clit as we move together, and when he knots me I come around him, reaching under us to squeeze his balls. We drive each other crazy with lust, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

**M**y fingers are wrinkled prunes by the time we climb out of the bath,

slipping on our fluffy robes and walking barefoot along the concrete pavers, the sun hanging low on the horizon behind us. We heat up leftovers for dinner and eat on the couch — our usual routine before moonrise — not bothering to dress again as we fuel up for the big night ahead. We'll both be naked until sunrise, anyway.

I swing my bare legs across Van's lap, and he grabs at one foot, his thumbs massaging into the arch in the way I like. "Oooh, that's good," I say, leaning back, my robe slipping loose to reveal a strip of skin from head to toe. Van pushes the robe apart more, his gold eyes roaming over every inch of me.

"That really got me today, seeing you hold a tiny baby in your arms," I tell him, and his eyes snap to mine, a zing of excitement shooting through the bond.

His lips curl in a small smile. "Did it?"

"Oh yeah. Your big meaty arms holding Oscar got me good, right in the feels. It was *almost* enough to make me want to book an appointment."

"To get your IUD out?"

"Yeah. But... I still want a bit more time with just you, first."

He nods, his hand stroking over my breasts, and down to my stomach. "I like our five year plan, and I want to stick to it, but I'm not going to lie, there's parts of me that really like the idea of..." He trails off, a rare blush darkening his cheeks, my pussy aching with need because I *know* what he's going to say.

"Of what?" I ask gently, pulling my foot out of his other hand, spreading my legs, deliberately teasing him. He growls low in his throat, his voice deeper than before, and I know it's almost time. My mouth stretches wide in a grin, and his eyes, now reflective in the rapidly dimming light, are wild in their intensity when he answers.

"Of getting you pregnant. Of *breeding* you," he says, the rumble sending another jolt of pure lust through me.

"Yeah," I breathe, scooting back on the couch, out of his reach. "I think we both have that kink."

He lifts a claw-tipped hand, rubbing his lower lip. "We can always practise," he suggests with a shrug, those reflective eyes staring directly at my cunt.

"Yeah?" I ask breathlessly.

"Yeah."

I nod, getting to my feet, my heart hammering in my chest. We like *playing*, we've found, and I drop the robe completely, backing away towards the glass sliding door, feeling very much like prey and *loving* it. "You'll have to catch me first," I say, before wrenching the door open and breaking into a sprint, my bare feet thundering across the wooden deck and down the stairs, weaving through my garden, only once daring to glance back, squealing at the sight of fur and the flash of bright eyes.

I sprint around the back of the house, his growl loud as I yank the back door open and dart into the laundry. Another growl echoes through the house, and heavy, thunderous footsteps catch up to me by the time I reach the bedroom. I squeal again as huge furred arms scoop me up around the middle, sharp teeth scraping over my shoulder before I'm tossed onto a mattress that's big enough to hold a werewolf in his transformed state.

One huge hand pins my wrists, my werewolf's face mere inches from mine, his lips pulled back in a feral grin that's all sharp teeth. It's his eyes that I focus on, though, gold and glowing and *happy*.

"Hello Ellie," my husband greets me, eyes bright and tail wagging.

"Hi Van," I whisper, shivering in anticipation. The night is young, and my heart is full.



Want more?

Thank you for reading *A Wolf in the Garden*.

I have written a bonus epilogue called *Tying the Knot: A Van and Ellie Short*. It is sweet, spicy, and a bit of fun.



It is **free** to download, and you will be added to my mailing list (you can unsubscribe at any time).

[Download Tying the Knot](#)

You can find all of my social media links on my carrd. [Allegra's Carrd](#)

If you want access to monthly bonus content including exclusive SFW and NSFW art, behind the scenes updates, and exclusive deleted scenes and short stories, you can join my [Patreon](#).

In terms of social media, I am most active on [Instagram](#).

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## About the Author

Allegra Hall has spent her whole life writing stories in her head. For a long time they were about aliens, but more recently they've been about people (both human and non-human) in the Unravelling Monsters Universe. She lives with her husband, son, and cat in New Zealand.

When she's not reading, writing, or busy with mum life, you'll find her in the garden or at the beach.

If you want to keep up to date with Allegra's releases, please sign up to her newsletter or follow her on social media through this link: <https://allegrahall.carrd.co>

