



A SONG FOR CHARLEY

LONE WOLF GENERATIONS



ALICIA MONTGOMERY

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WWW.ALICIAMONTGOMERYAUTHOR.COM
FIRST ELECTRONIC PUBLICATION OCTOBER 2023

EDITED BY LAVERNE CLARK
COVER BY JACQUELINE SWEET
PREORDERSEPT30

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Prologue

A few weeks ago ...

Devon Hale was on top of the world. And why wouldn't he be?

He was the world's biggest rock star after all, selling millions of albums, winning tons of music awards, and of course, gaining the adoration of fans all over the world. Earning more money than the GDP of many small nations, he owned five homes on three continents, a collection of exotic cars, and not to mention, had his own music production company that only increased his wealth.

Anything he didn't already have, he could get at the snap of his fingers—even things that didn't have a price tag. His life was filled with the proverbial sex, drugs, and rock and roll, and he didn't know anyone who wouldn't trade places with him in a heartbeat.

But there were some days where he didn't feel like he was on top.

Like this morning.

“Fffuuck ...”

Nausea hit him as soon as he opened his eyes. Rolling over to the side of the bed didn't help, as the bile hit his throat. Nothing could stop the hot vomit from escaping his mouth.

“It's all right ... just get rid of—Jesus Christ, how much did you have to drink, Dev?”

The relief he felt once his stomach emptied was indescribable. In fact, the dizziness and nausea cleared enough for him to be able to swing his legs over the side of the bed and sit up straight. “Jeff ... thanks, man.”

Jeff Clary, his manager, stood over him, a trash can in one hand and a small towel in the other. “Feel better?”

Taking the offered towel, Devon wiped his mouth. “Yeah, man. Good catch,” he joked, eyeing the trash can. “You’re always in the right time and place.”

“Yeah, lucky me.” He grimaced in disgust, then placed the trash can gingerly on the floor. “Can you pull yourself together soon? We need you for sound check.”

“Sound ... check?”

“Yeah. Show’s in a couple of hours.”

Devon took stock of the unfamiliar surroundings—the modern bedroom furniture, white sheets and feather pillows, neutral color scheme. Generic, boring, and just like every other luxury hotel suite he’d been staying at the last couple of weeks on his tour. “Uh, where—”

“Cincinnati,” Jeff said drolly.

“Right.” The sheet covering the lower half of his body fell away as he rose to his feet. Thankfully, he still wore his briefs. Glancing around, he saw a pair of lace panties on the bed. “Did you—”

Jeff snorted. “How drunk were you last night, Dev? You had her in here for five minutes, then passed out. She went hysterical, thinking you’d OD’d or something.”

Devon scrubbed a hand down his face. “Fuck.” It was coming back to him. He’d polished off at least two bottles of champagne backstage at the after-party. Some hot chick sat on his lap. Then they stumbled out to his limo, and they finished off another bottle. Somehow, they got up to his suite and then ... “Is she—”

“Took care of it. Snuck her out of the back, gave her the usual NDA to sign, and a generous gift.”

“Thanks, Jeff.”

He racked his brain for her name—Chelsea, maybe? Or Christine? *Doesn’t matter.* She was just another piece of ass who wanted a piece of the rock star. And he was very happy to oblige. Women threw themselves at him all the time, after all. And she was hot—at least from what he could remember. Tall, leggy, blonde. He was pretty sure he wanted to fuck her, and the feeling had been mutual. Did he really pass out before having sex?

Reaching into his briefs, he rubbed his dick and then took a sniff of his fingers. *Definitely didn’t smell like pussy.* He shrugged. If it wasn’t

Chelsea/Christine, it would be any of the dozens of women waiting backstage.

“So? Can you pull it together, or should I make some excuses? Want an ibuprofen?”

“Nah, I’m fine. Just need a shower.”

His manager shook his head. “You’re probably the only person I know who can recover from a hangover faster as he gets older. I remember you used to get trashed after a concert, and not even a demolition team could get you out of bed.”

“Must be my good genes. Thanks, Jeff. Have the limo sent around, I’ll be ready in thirty.”

Jeff clucked his tongue. “All right. I got you breakfast, it’s waiting for you in the limo. I’ll see you at the stadium.”

Striding toward the bathroom, Devon pulled the glass door open, whipped his briefs off, and stepped inside, turning the handle to the coldest setting. Ignoring the icy needles of water as it hit his skin, he rested his forehead against the tile.

Physically, he was fine. Never better, in fact; not even a hint of a headache.

But there was something else messing with his head this morning.

The hot, pungent breath.

Glowing eyes.

Sharp teeth.

Run.

He slammed on the shower handle so hard, he thought he heard a crack in the tile. Grabbing the towel hanging from the rack behind him, he began to vigorously dry himself off.

Ever since he could remember, he’d been having the same nightmare once or twice a year. It was only in the last couple of months that they’d come more frequently. They became so bad the only way he could have a restful night’s sleep was if he was dead tired or trashed. So, he worked on his latest album night and day, then when that was done, had gone straight into rehearsals and preps for the tour.

Then when the actual tour started, the nightmares got worse. On stage, he’d never been better, but afterwards, only copious amounts of alcohol and sex could help him stave off the impending night terrors.

But if last night’s episode was any indication, maybe that wasn’t working

anymore. He'd turn to pills, but he wasn't going to go the route of so many before him, not when he was at the top of his game. After begging, scraping, and crawling his way to the top, he wasn't going to throw it all away.

He was Devon Hale. Superstar. Multi-millionaire. Rock god.

Not bad for a poor, orphaned boy who bounced around from one foster home to another for most of his childhood.

Leaving his suite, he followed the burly bodyguards waiting for him outside as they led him to the elevators and straight down to the garage where his limo and the rest of his entourage—an SUV with even more bodyguards—were waiting. His limo was empty as he liked it. He didn't like sharing his space and oftentimes, driving around was the only time he had to himself. There was a paper bag waiting for him in the seat—his breakfast of oatmeal and fruits, just as Jeff had promised.

As the limo made its way through the streets, he stared out the window, watching the Cincinnati cityscape pass by. In the early days when he was a struggling musician touring out of a cramped van with four other bandmates, whenever he passed through a new city, the same questions always bloomed in his mind.

Could this be the place he was born in?

Did he have family here?

Parents?

Why did you give me up?

But over the years, he'd stopped thinking of that. After touring through hundreds of cities and towns, there was just no point. Besides, he didn't need to know the answers to those questions anymore. And if he ever did find the parents who abandoned him at that train station when he was just five years old, the only thing he would have to say to them would be, *Look at what I am, despite what you did.*

Pushing those thoughts aside, he grabbed the remote for the small TV mounted overhead and turned it on.

"In breaking news," the anchor on the local channel began, *"the senate has decided to gather a special committee to form an inquiry into the so-called Supernatural Beings. The existence of these creatures, thought to be half-wolf, half-man, was revealed to the world a few weeks ago when hundreds of humans were kidnapped for their rituals—"*

Devon *tsked* and changed the channel to an entertainment news show. "Crazy shit."

These Supernaturals seemingly had taken over the news cycles all over the world. Like everyone else, he'd been fascinated about the events of that night, though no one really had any definitive information, except for eyewitness interviews from the people who were supposedly kidnapped by these creatures. But after a while, Devon had lost interest, mostly because it was taking away attention from his own tour.

Initially, his publicist had suggested some kind of PR stunt—maybe getting papped with some rising new starlet or starting some kind of scandal—to drum up some publicity for the tour, but Devon had vetoed that idea. He was Devon *Fucking* Hale, after all, and all his tour dates had sold out the moment they released the tickets. He didn't need any fake controversy or relationships to get bodies into his concerts.

The limo finally stopped outside the stadium, and as he stepped out, the familiar screams of his fans greeted him. The barriers that kept them away from the side entrance of the venue were placed far away, but he could still hear them shouting his name. He waved at them, making them screech even louder.

Ducking in through the entrance, he walked down the long, fluorescent-lit hallway, all the way to the backstage area. As he entered his private dressing room, he saw Jeff was already there, but he wasn't alone. He was talking to someone wearing a baseball cap whose back was turned to Devon.

Irritation irked him as Jeff knew better than to let strangers into his private space. Hands curling into fists at his sides, he strode over to the pair. He was about to tear his manager a new one, when Jeff glanced up.

“Oh good, you're here.”

“What the fuck, Jeff?” he said through gritted teeth. “You know you can't just let anyone into my dressing room, especially when I'm not here.”

“What? Oh, no, no.” he shook his head vigorously. “This isn't just anyone. Meet Charley, your new personal assistant.” He gestured to the person in front of him. “Edward's replacement.”

“Edward?”

“Yes,” Jeff said in a droll tone. “You know, your last personal assistant who quit two days ago?”

“Oh, *that* Edward.” Edward had been one of many PAs he'd had over the years. Many of them didn't last long due to the demands of the job, the long hours, and weeks on the road. Devon stopped trying to remember their names as he knew they would eventually quit anyway. This next guy would be no

different.

“Charley, this is Devon.”

Charley spun around. “Hello, Devon, nice to meet you.”

“I—” Devon stopped short, his gaze riveted on Charley’s face. Charley was not a guy at all, but rather, a woman. She was of average height making her noticeably shorter than his own six foot two frame, and her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail under a green ball cap. When she looked up, however, he froze as he found himself staring into her eyes.

The most mesmerizing light brown eyes he’d ever seen.

Devon had met a ton of gorgeous women over the years—actresses, singers, models, blondes, brunettes, redheads. When he first started in the business, he’d been awestruck by the beauty of all the women around him, and over the years as he gained fame, many of them flocked his way.

However, he’d never been *literally* struck—like being hit by lightning—until this moment as he stared into the depths of her spellbinding eyes.

They were the color of rich, luscious toffee.

Would she be just as sweet?

“Excuse me?” She blinked at him.

The fuck? Did I say that out loud? “I said”—he cleared his throat—“get me a latte, will you, sweet cheeks?”

Her jaw dropped.

“Almond milk, extra hot,” he added. “And next time, make sure it’s ready in my dressing room before I get here.” He brushed past her—a mistake, he realized too late, as he got a whiff of her perfume—fragrant and fruity, like biting into a juicy peach on a summer day.

Gritting his teeth, he marched over to his mirrored dressing table, casting his eyes downward to avoid glancing at Charley in the reflection.

“There’s a coffee shop just across the street,” Jeff said, clearing his throat. “Here’s your company card, whatever Devon needs, just charge it there.”

“Of course. Thanks again for this opportunity, Jeff.”

“Your resume is fantastic. I hope you stay with us.”

Devon waited for the sound of the door closing before he lifted his head.

“Really, Devon?” Jeff admonished as he came up from behind, meeting his gaze in the mirror. “You didn’t have to be rude, you know. Charley was highly recommended, and to be honest, way too overqualified to just be your assistant. She has a decade of backstage crew work under her belt and could have her pick of jobs with any tour or production company in the country, but

wanted a chance to work with you.”

Devon snorted. “She knows what she signed up for then.” He gripped the edge of his table as he stood up. “I just hope she stays longer than the last one.”

Jeff shook his head. “I wasn’t sure about hiring her since, you know, she’s a woman. And we know the last time—”

“I don’t fuck my employees, Jeff,” he reminded him. “It’s my number one rule.”

And one he never, ever broke. While Devon was known for being a manslut, he never screwed around with people he had power over. It was just too messy. But that didn’t stop them from trying.

“Tiffany was the one trying to sneak into my hotel room at the after-party.”

Tiffany had been one of his first assistants, who not only tried to get into this pants but had the nerve to attempt to sue him for sexual harassment when she was fired. They had settled out of court, but it was a painful and expensive lesson. Ever since then, he and Jeff instituted a rule that personal assistants—female and male—were off the clock and off the premises as soon as the show was over.

“I know but ...”

He spun around. “But, what?”

Jeff looked like he wanted to say something, but bit his lip. “Nothing. I just trust you’ll do the right thing and focus on the tour. Don’t get distracted.”

“Since when have I ever let my career come second?”

Fucking around didn’t get him to where he was.

Of course, some might say, fucking over *other* people did.

Devon had started his career with his old band, Speed Run, back when he was only nineteen years old. They had broken out of the indie rock scene and into the mainstream with a string of number one hits, but Devon had been the undeniable star of the group. He was both frontman and lead guitar player, not to mention, the sex appeal that oozed from his every pore caught the attention of people, and he played up the raunchy hot rock star image to his advantage. After a couple of contentious years with his bandmates, he finally left them and went solo, and his career skyrocketed.

Jeff shook his head. “Yeah, yeah. All right, you got thirty minutes till sound check. I’ll leave you alone.”

“Thanks.”

Devon wiped his hands down his pants and glanced up at the clock. He wondered how long it would take Little Miss Toffee Eyes to get his drink. He didn't even get a chance to check out the rest of her, and he wondered what her body looked like under that baggy shirt and jeans.

Focus, Devon, he warned himself. And not just on how big her tits might be.

He yanked his Les Paul guitar from the stand nearby and placed it on his thigh, then gripped the neck with his left hand. Strumming a few chords, he let the music fill his ears and drown out the world as he concentrated on the music.

Devon usually took this time alone to loosen up his hands and his voice before sound check, playing scales and humming along to warm up. Today, for some reason, a song had made its way from the deep recesses of his mind, inciting his fingers to play the chords of a song he thought he'd long forgotten—or at least one he wanted to. Despite himself, the melody came back to him, taunting him almost and goading him to strum and sing the words he hadn't uttered in years.

“First Feelings.”

Devon's fingers faltered, and a sour note screeched from his guitar right as he transitioned to the second chorus. He didn't need to lift his head to find out who had entered the dressing room. But he did anyway because he wanted to. “You know that song?”

Charley nodded and walked toward him, coffee cup in hand. “It was a single from your first solo album, right?”

His gaze fixed on her, unable to turn away. How could she possibly remember an old song that no one else remembered? It was the one single in his debut solo album that critics panned.

It was also the only song he ever wrote.

Despite his success and fortune, that song was his number one sore spot. While he was a talented singer, guitarist, and frontman, he really couldn't write for shit. The real genius behind Speed Run's hits was Kurt Chambers, their bassist. Ever since his first disastrous foray into songwriting, Devon never did it again and instead hired the best songwriters in the business.

“You know,” she began, placing the cup next to him. “Despite what critics said, I really liked that song when it came out.”

She was so close, he got a whiff of her sweet perfume, and his throat turned dry as a desert. “Y-you did?” Those enchanting eyes locked onto his

and sweat built on his palms.

“Mm-hmm. I’ve read your interviews and articles.” Her teeth sank into her luscious lower lip. “*Rhythm Magazine* ranked you number eight in their list of ‘Top 10 Musical Geniuses’ last year. You didn’t have any formal music education, but thanks to your perfect pitch, you basically taught yourself to play guitar and piano. ‘First Feelings’ was technically a good song, it just lacked ... something, you know?” Her fingers rubbed at her thumbs as if she were itching to do something. “It needed a little more ... warmth and emotion maybe.”

Devon blinked, and the spell of her perfume and entrancing gaze broke.

Who the fuck did she think she was, telling *him*—Devon Hale—about music?

Shooting up to his feet, he shoved the guitar at her. “Here, take this to the sound guys so they can hook it up.” Swiping the coffee cup from the table, he took a sip, then quickly spat it back. “Ugh. No, no.” He shook his head and tossed the coffee into the trash can. “They burned the coffee. Go back and grab me another one. Tell them to do it properly this time.” Without a second glance, he marched toward the bathroom, opened the door with a violent yank, and slammed it shut behind him.

Leaning back, he closed his eyes.

Why was his heart going a mile a minute? And there was a stabbing pain in his chest, too, like he was being clawed from the inside.

A maelstrom of emotions swept over him, and he ran toward the toilet, heaving the contents of his stomach into the porcelain bowl. Once he was done, he felt much better.

Trudging over to the sink, he washed out his mouth, cursing to himself internally. What the fuck was wrong with him today? Why did he let that nobody get on his nerves?

Fuck this shit.

He was Devon Hale. No one talked to him like that. He would tell Jeff to fire her by end of day.

“Murder is still a crime, right?” Charley Forrest huffed as she burst into the costume room.

Kevin Lopez, the tour's stylist, paused in the middle of steam ironing a white button-down shirt, then placed a hand on his hip. "What did he do this time?"

Trudging toward him, she opened her mouth, nearly letting out the fierce growl rumbling in her chest. She quickly snapped her mouth shut.

Not here!

Her inner wolf paced around, sensing her agitation. It was raring to burst out.

As a Lycan, Charley shared her body with a creature, who for the most part listened to her and behaved when in the company of humans. Normally it stayed quiet within her, and while she knew it was there, it remained mostly dormant. Recently though, it had a bad habit of making its presence known more, as if pushing Charley's boundaries, prodding at her and testing her control.

Not that she could blame it, considering what had happened recently. The wolf was probably still on edge because their enemies, the mages, had not only tried to kill all of their kind and bring on the apocalypse, but now their existence—which had been a secret for hundreds of years—had been revealed to the world.

Having no combat experience, Charley hadn't been part of the big battle in Connecticut herself. Though the Alpha of her clan, Lucas Anderson, had called all his Lycans back to New York, she had been assigned to stay back and protect their base in the city, a compound on the Upper East Side known as The Enclave. It was where their human members, including her mother, had been sheltered during the final battle. A few of them had been assigned there in case of a breach or if the battle turned sideways for the Lycans. And while she didn't get a chance to fight or free her she-wolf, it had been agitated and on guard the entire evening, right up until the moment they found out the mages had been defeated and everyone in her family who had been in the battle had survived.

"Hello?" Kevin waved the handle of the steam iron around, sending a puff of smoke toward Charley. "Are you okay?"

She plopped down on the couch next to him. "He wants me to go back to the restaurant and get him something else to eat. He says the pasta salad I got him was definitely *not* gluten free." She gritted her teeth. "I called the restaurant *three* times last night and once more this morning to make sure they prepared it with only gluten-free ingredients, using separate utensils to

prevent cross contamination. He takes *one* bite and tells me they used regular pasta, not the chickpea pasta he specifically wanted. How could he even tell? *Grrr!*” She pounded her fists on her thighs. “He wasn’t even gluten free last week. I saw him scarf down an entire pepperoni pizza.”

The stylist hung the steam wand up on its holder, then sat down next to her. “There, there, Charley,” he said, patting her hand sympathetically. “He’s probably having a bad day.”

“More like a bad couple of weeks.” She groaned. “I should quit, right?”

Kevin gave her a sympathetic smile. “Only you can answer that, sweetheart.”

Charley knew what the answer was—a resounding yes. Everyone on the tour gave her that same pitiful expression each time Devon berated her for the silliest things. Last week, it was because he had forgotten to plug in his phone, and so it was her fault she didn’t anticipate it and charge it while he was on stage. The week before that, his extra-hot almond milk latte was lukewarm—because he arrived late to the venue, and so it had been sitting there for almost an hour.

I’m too good for this job.

In the last ten years, Charley had built a career in backstage production in various regional theater tours, music shows, and other live events. She had started at the bottom as a production assistant, then worked her way up to stagehand, then to stage manager and was well on her way to becoming a producer.

With her resume, experience, and glowing recommendations, she could work on any tour or show she wanted, but when this chance to work on the Devon Hale world tour came up, she couldn’t pass on the opportunity. This was the big leagues, and even if she had to work as his personal assistant, it would be worth it.

At least, that’s what she thought at first.

I should have quit. She snorted. *Like yesterday.*

Yet here she was, weeks into this crappy job with her crappy boss. Actually, crappy barely covered the walking nightmare that was Devon Hale. In fact, she and her cousins Lizzie and Olivia had come up with the perfect nickname for him in their group chat—The Douche Hole—a combination of douchebag and asshole because one nickname wasn’t enough to cover what a total SOB he was.

Still, she stayed.

Her inner wolf let out a sigh and laid its head down.

Kevin clucked his tongue. "I don't know why, but he's got it in for you. What the heck did you do to make him act like the spawn of Satan whenever you're around?"

Charley cringed inwardly, thinking of her first day on the job.

Okay, so *maybe* insulting her new boss's songwriting skills wasn't the smartest thing to do. She was still flabbergasted she hadn't been fired right away. However, considering what Kevin said, and now that she thought of it, Douche Hole probably kept her around just to torture her after her insensitive remarks.

It was true, though.

"First Feelings" had all the technical earmarks of a great song, but it was just not quite there. If Devon had worked on his skills more, he could be a phenomenal songwriter with a string of number one hits.

And Charley should know. After all, she'd been working in the music business since she was ten years old and had been exposed to it all her life, much longer than he had been. While Speed Run was still playing seedy LA clubs, Charley had had her own hit TV show with a giant entertainment conglomerate, not to mention sold-out tours, merchandising deals, and several hit songs on the charts.

Back then, she'd been known as Charley Star, one half of popular teen sensations, The Wonderland Divas, along with Renée Rose. At the height of their success, they had been Spencer Corporation's biggest teen superstars.

But that was a million years ago.

Her life was different now, thanks to the choices she made.

Choices she had to live with.

Dismissing those thoughts, she turned back to Kevin. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Sure, sweetie." Kevin fished his phone out of his pocket. "So, crazy news about those Supernatural Beings, huh?"

"What?" Charley's spine stiffened. Though the existence of Lycans was no longer a secret, no one on the tour knew that she was one of them. It wasn't something she advertised. "W-what about them?" Her heart began to hammer in her chest. Did Kevin discover what she was? Would she be fired?

"Oh, you haven't heard the latest?"

Sweat built on her temples. "N-no," she stammered. "I mean, I hardly have time to read news when I'm running around the place getting Devon's

coffee order or finding the right kind of linen spray for his bedsheets.” The man was obsessed with peaches for some reason. “What is it?”

“The latest person to come out in support of the Supernatural Beings is none other than stage and screen darling and legend herself, Evie King.”

“What. The. *Fuck?*”

If Charley hadn’t been sitting down, she would have fallen over.

“I know, right?” Kevin shoved his phone screen in her face, and sure enough, splashed on the front page of a gossip news site was a photo of Evie King as she accepted her second Oscar.

AKA Broadway’s favorite composer and leading lady.

AKA everyone’s favorite animated princess, thanks to her hit animated princess movie and soundtrack.

AKA, one of the only EGOT winners in the industry.

And more commonly known to Charley as *Mom*.

“Can you believe it? It says she’s one of them—oh wait.” Kevin scrolled down the page. “Sorry, damn clickbait headlines. It just says she *supports* the Supernatural Beings as she’s the daughter of a Lycan and her husband is one, as well as her childr—hey!”

Charley knocked the phone out of his hand and shot to her feet. “Er, sorry about that! We should get going, show’s about to start.”

“What?” Kevin exclaimed, glancing up at the clock. “Oh fuck, I need to get this to Devon, but I have to do one more sleeve. Will you stall for me?”

“Of course.” She breathed out a sigh of relief as Kevin had seemingly forgotten his phone. Darting out the door, she made her way toward Devon’s dressing room. She itched to take her own phone out and read about what her mom had said to the press.

Well, maybe if you picked up last night, you would have known.

She gave herself a mental slap on the forehead. After last night’s show, she saw about ten missed calls from her mother and a text that said “call me.” But she’d been so exhausted, *and* the night before had been spent on the road in a bunk on the tour bus with ten other people, so there was no privacy to make a phone call anywhere. Then she had to get up at frickin’ *butt o’clock* in the morning when they arrived here in Phoenix to unpack their gear and get ready for tonight’s show.

Now she knew why her mother wanted to talk.

Stopping, she blew out a frustrated breath.

Great timing, Mom.

Of course, with the bad publicity the Lycans had been getting the past couple of weeks, Charley knew they could use all the help they could get. From a PR standpoint, it was a smart move to release a statement from someone as famous and well-loved as Evie King. Having her support would help humanize Lycans and garner support for their kind. Lycans were still everyday people who just wanted to exist peacefully alongside their human counterparts. Yes, getting outed sucked, but that was their reality now, and trying to hide their existence would be like attempting to put toothpaste back into the tube.

Charley flexed her fingers as she inhaled a deep, cleansing breath. “It’s going to be okay,” she whispered to herself.

She hadn’t been Charley Starr in over a decade, and few people remembered or even recognized her, not even her coworkers on this tour. Keeping her head down and not making any close friends at work helped.

But now, with her mother’s revelation splashed in the headlines across the globe, someone would dig up their connection, and there was a possibility that her carefully hidden identity would come out—both as a former teen superstar and a Lycan.

The timing of it all really sucked.

“Damn it.” Stopping short, Charley fished her phone out of her pocket. But before she had a chance to check it, Jeff burst out of Devon’s dressing room.

“Where the hell have you been?” he bellowed.

Oh fuck! “Sorry!” She hurried toward Devon’s manager. “Was that last dish okay? Did he eat it?” Douche Hole could honestly starve for all she cared, but it was still her job to get him fed.

Jeff blew out a breath. “Yeah, it was fine. But he needs to be on stage in two minutes!”

“Right.” Brushing past him, she marched inside the dressing room. “Devon, position. Now.”

Wearing nothing but leather pants, Devon rose from the couch with cat-like grace, brushing his loose blond locks with his fingers as vivid sky-blue eyes narrowed at her.

Charley groaned inwardly. His attitude toward her from the beginning should have shriveled up her ovaries and turned her as dry as the Sahara, but for some damn reason, one look from those blue eyes and she was wetter than a beaver’s pockets.

Devon Hale was a douchebag and an asshole, but also so goddamn *hot*.

“You’re late,” he said in the sexy, signature Devon Hale rasp that sent female fans swooning.

And whose fault was that, Mr. I’m-Gluten-Free-Now? But Charley could only bite her tongue. “Come on, you have to be on stage in sixty seconds.”

His hands motioned down his naked torso. “And how am I supposed to go on without my shirt?”

Charley could barely keep her eyes from the bulging muscles of his shoulders, wide chest, and his six-pack abs. “I—”

“I’m here!” Kevin burst through the door, shirt in hand. In his haste to get to Devon, he crashed into Charley, sending her staggering forward. She dropped her phone so she could grab onto the dresser to stop herself from falling.

“What is this? Fucking amateur hour?” Devon shouted as Kevin scrambled over and began to dress him.

“Calm down, Devon,” Jeff said. “The show won’t start without you.”

Devon ignored his manager. “Get it together, both of you.” However, he was only looking at Charley.

“Done!” Kevin declared, taking a step back.

“Finally.” Devon sent Charley one last glare. “Let’s go.”

She followed him as he made his way to the stage, reaching the wings just in time as the band finished the intro to the first song. A roadie handed him his Les Paul, and he stepped out on stage, the bright lights burning Charley’s retinas. The roar of the crowd was deafening as the first few notes from Devon’s guitar blasted through the speakers.

Charley held her breath as she waited, her eyes never leaving his tall, lean form as he approached the mic stand in the middle of the stage. The moment his sultry, low voice filled the air, every nerve ending in her body lit up.

At this point, she’d seen him perform live in dozens of concerts, and each time, she was so mesmerized by his voice, his playing, and his stage presence that she could barely keep her eyes off him. Devon had a way of making each song riveting, whether it was an energetic rock anthem or a sentimental ballad. Charismatic and electrifying, he knew how to read a crowd and played with them until they were putty in his hands. For those two hours on stage, Charley forgot all about the Douche Hole and could only focus on Devon and his music.

The man was truly a god on stage.

But, as soon as he finished his second encore and stepped off the stage, the spell was broken. As he did every night, he walked past Charley without a second glance as he made his way to his dressing room.

While illogical, she couldn't help but feel a stab of hurt in her chest at his snub. Once before, she'd even tried to get his attention by congratulating him on a great show, but he just brushed past her like she was invisible. She tried not to let it bother her—she was just his assistant after all. A nobody to him.

Besides, this was the moment she was off the clock. Due to an unusual clause in her contract, Charley's work hours ended exactly as soon as Devon stepped off the stage. Before and during the performance, she was on-call, catering to all his needs, whether that was getting his meals or handing him towels and water between songs, but once he was done for the night, so was she. Jeff had explained that all non-essential staff left as soon they were done for insurance purposes, but as far as she could tell, she was always the first one out.

Charley didn't question it as long as they cut her a check every two weeks—and to be honest, it was a pretty big one—but she had her suspicions why no one was allowed to hang around once the concert was over. She wasn't blind after all; she'd seen all the gorgeous women hanging out right outside the stage doors and the security team checking IDs and letting them in after hours. She was also not deaf as she'd overheard members of Devon's band and some of the roadies talking about those women the day after concerts, and not always in the most respectful way. Perhaps she was glad for the rules so she didn't have to get mixed up in that and she could just focus on the work. Besides, they were adults and could do what they wanted—including Devon.

But for some reason, thinking of him with all those groupies made her want to punch something.

Her wolf, too, let out an unhappy growl.

None of my business, she reminded herself—and her animal.

After grabbing her bag from the costume room and waving goodbye to Kevin—who was still putting away tonight's costumes—she made her way outside. Instinctively she reached into her pocket to fish out her phone to call for a car.

“Damn it!” she cursed when her hand came up empty.

She had dropped her phone in Devon's dressing room.

No one was allowed in there after a show, especially her, since she was

supposed to be off the clock. But she needed her phone to call a ride back to the hotel.

I suppose I could wait for Kevin or other people on the crew.

But Kevin could be another hour or so, plus, she needed her phone. Had she forgotten about the looming threat of the press finding out about her being a Lycan? She had to call her mom right *now* so she could get ahead of the news cycle. Her gut tightened, thinking about how Jeff—and Devon—would react when they found out. Would she even have a life or a job by this time tomorrow?

I'll deal with that when the time comes, but first, I need my phone.

Straightening her spine, Charley took determined strides back to the stadium. Perhaps she'd be lucky and Devon was already gone.

Or maybe off with some groupie at the after-party.

She ignored that hot stabbing in her chest and continued to make her way toward Devon's dressing room. Using her enhanced hearing, she listened for any sounds coming from inside. There were no voices or rustling of movements of any kind, though she did hear the spray of the shower from the bathroom, which meant Devon was in there.

I'll be real quick, she told herself as she carefully turned the knob and pushed the door open. Using her Lycan speed, she swiftly darted inside and toward where she dropped her phone by the mirrored dressers. Thankfully, it was right by her feet, so she crouched down to pick it up.

And now I'll just—

"You! What the hell are you doing here?" came the familiar low baritone from behind her.

Oh crap. Of course Devon chose that exact moment to exit the bathroom. *Huh, that's funny.* As far as she could tell, water was still running. Did he decide to just run out in the middle of his shower?

"I-I can explain." Slowly, as if Devon were some wild animal she didn't want to startle, she rose to her feet. "I left my phone—"

"I said, what are you doing here?"

Charley's heart slammed into her rib cage as she felt Devon's presence just behind her. *How did he move so fast—*

"Answer me." He had taken a step closer, effectively trapping her between himself and the dresser.

Lifting her head, she met Devon's sky-blue eyes in the mirror. "I dropped my phone here and—"

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he said in a low whisper that made the backs of her knees tingle.

“I-I know, but I need my phone to call a car and ...” She closed her eyes and inhaled a quick breath as Devon leaned forward. He was so close she got a whiff of his shower gel.

Clary sage. Lavender. With a tinge of leather.

“Do you like to break the rules, Charley?”

The way he said her name in that low, raspy voice of his made her shiver. She didn’t think he even knew it, since he’d only called her “Sweet Cheeks” that first time and “You!” since then.

Slowly, she opened her eyes, the reflection of his blue gaze catching hers in a magnetic stare. Her mouth turned dry as she realized he was bare-chested and only wearing a towel. His hair still hung in dripping ringlets around his face, indicating he had indeed been in the middle of a shower.

“I-I’m sorry, it won’t happen again.” She attempted to twist around, but Devon’s next move made her entire body seize up.

His arms trapped her on either side, caging her against the dresser, their eye contact through the mirror never breaking.

“Hmmm ... God, your perfume smells so fucking amazing. It drives me crazy, and I can’t think whenever I smell it.” Tilting his head to the side, he leaned in closer, his nose nearly touching the skin on her neck but not quite. “Peaches. Juicy and sweet. I could go in for a bite.”

I should push him off and get the fuck out of here!

Yes, that was the right course of action. He was her boss. This was sexual harassment. She was also trained in at least two forms of self-defense, not to mention, she could easily overwhelm him with her Lycan strength.

Knocking him into next week and running away was the right move.

Yeah, I really need to do that.

But then she caught that delicious scent again, and her brain fried. As if her body had a mind of its own, her hips pushed back so her ass brushed against the front of his towel.

Oh shit.

That was definitely not a banana in his pocket.

He spun her around with a low growl, lifting her up so she sat on top of the dresser. Nudging her knees apart, he pressed his growing erection between her legs.

“Tease.” The corner of his mouth lifted up. “But then again, you and your

sweet perfume have been teasing me all this time. You want this, too, don't you?"

"Devon—"

His head descended toward her, but to her surprise, he nuzzled at the spot under her ear. He let out another growl and pressed closer to her, the friction making her shiver. "Charley ... what are you doing to me?"

She could only answer with a whimper.

"I swear to God, you're some kind of witch. I can't stop ... I need ..."
His hands fumbled for his towel, and it dropped to the floor. "Say you want me as much as I want you."

"I ..."

It was so tempting, to just give in. She was pretty sure it would be epic hate sex between them.

But that was the problem.

She despised him.

He was hot and all, but she still had principles. The thought of having sex with this man who'd treated her like dirt these past weeks made the haze of desire clouding her mind evaporate.

With that sobering thought in mind, she planted her hands on his chest and pushed him away. Attempted to anyway, but he was like a rock wall—unmovable and solid.

Lifting her head, she met his blue gaze head-on. "We can't do this."

"Why not?" He didn't back off, but he didn't make any move to advance either. Instead, he licked his lips. "Say. Yes."

Despite herself, she let out a small sigh at the sight of his tongue running across his firm mouth. How would it taste? How would it feel?

"Devon ..."

"Charley ..."

He leaned his head in, sending her pulse skyrocketing. His mouth hovered over her lips so closely she could feel the warmth of his breath.

They couldn't.

She couldn't.

"No."

"No?" He lifted a sardonic brow. "You know a million girls would do anything to be where you are right now."

If he thought that would make her change her mind, well, he was dead wrong. Rage simmered in her, and her wolf, too, made its displeasure known

with a fierce snarl.

“Then go fuck one of them!” She gave him another push, this time mustering enough of her Lycan strength to make him stagger back.

However, he quickly regained his balance. “And how the fuck am I supposed to do that?”

“They’re practically lined up outside!” She waved her hand wildly toward the door. “All of them ready to drop to their knees at the snap of your fingers.”

For a brief second, his blue eyes flickered with a familiar, eerie glow.

Glowed?

What the fu—

“I can’t!” He trapped her again, but this time his hands slammed against the mirror behind her with a resounding crack. “Tell me how I’m supposed to do that when I can’t stop thinking about you! I haven’t fucked anyone else since you walked in that door.”

The confession was so raw and out of left field that it took her brain a second to process his words. “You can’t ... that’s not ...”

“Whenever I see you, all I want to do is rip off every piece of clothing you have on and lick you from head to toe. I want to make you come with my fingers, my mouth, my cock. I want to know what it’s like to be inside you and—”

“Devon, stop!” This time she put all her strength into shoving him away, sending him crashing against the wall.

Oh shit!

For a second, her heart completely stopped as she stared at his prone, naked body on the floor. When his eyes flew open and he made a motion to sit up, Charley dashed outside, her pulse pounding at a mile a minute.

Everything was a blur as she made a beeline for the outside. The minute the cool, fresh air hit her lungs, she slowed her pace but didn’t stop walking. She had to get away and put as much distance between herself and the stadium.

And Devon Hale.

Idiot. I’m the biggest idiot in the world.

They almost kissed. But even before that ...

Warmth pooled in her belly, thinking of how close he’d gotten. His smell. That bulge under his towel.

And the things he said he wanted to do to her.

His confession about not sleeping with anyone else.

She shook her head.

No, that wasn't true.

There was no way he hadn't had sex with anyone else all this time.

He was Devon Hale, for God's sake.

He was a superstar, not to mention, a normal, red-blooded man who screwed anything that moved. Nearly every guy in the business was a horny motherfucker who said and did anything and everything they needed to get into a woman's pants.

Honk! Honk! Hooooonk!

"Oh fuck!"

Her hands slammed down on the hood of the car that nearly collided into her. She'd been so lost in her own thoughts, she didn't notice she'd walked right into the parking lot where the concertgoers were now making their way out.

"Sorry!" she shouted at the irate driver who stuck his head out the window, screaming expletives at her.

Weaving through the maze of cars, she found her way out of the lot, onto the lone road leading away from the stadium where cars were lined up bumper-to-bumper toward the on-ramp leading to the highway.

She continued walking, unsure what to do or where to go. Her thoughts were consumed with what had happened. Humiliation flooded her, not because Devon's action made her feel dirty, but rather, she knew that she'd wanted it too. That despite the terrible things he'd said to her these past weeks and how he'd demeaned her, she wanted him.

Wanted his smell, his touch, his mouth.

And she *did* want to know what it would be like to have him inside her. God help her, she wanted him so bad, that if he offered again, she wouldn't have the strength to say no.

That's why she couldn't go back there. Because she'd lose the last shreds of her dignity to Devon Hale.

And so, she could never see him again.

Ever.

Chapter 1

Present Day

“Whoops! Pardon me!” Charley quickly sidestepped the two stagehands carrying beam lights crossing her path. She gave them a salute as she made her way through the chaotic backstage of the USA Music awards at LA’s famed Darby Theater. The ceremony had gone on commercial break, so now the people behind the scenes were scrambling to set up for the next set of presenters, awards, and of course, performers.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she arrived unscathed to her destination—a door marked with a star-shaped sign that read, *Renée Rose*.

“Ten minutes, Renée!” Charley called as she popped her head into the dressing room backstage at the USA Music awards.

Her current boss and best friend Renée Rose, however, was not alone. The pop superstar diva was wrapped up in the arms of her new fiancé, Arch Jones—who also happened to be Charley’s cousin. She stifled the urge to roll her eyes.

Renée blushed as Arch smiled at her sheepishly. “Thanks, Char, I’ll be right there.”

“Stage right,” she reminded her, then closed the door. “Honestly, just get a room,” she said aloud with a cluck of her tongue.

Charley had had to endure their sickeningly sweet PDA for the last few weeks, ever since she signed up to be Renée’s personal assistant for the remainder of her tour. Frankly, it was getting old, catching them like horny teenagers all the time. Before this, she’d walked in on them while they were

making out in a limo—right before a red-carpet appearance too.

Still, in her opinion, it couldn't have happened to two better people. Renée had gone through some shit the last couple of months with that crazy stalker who not only broke into her house but tried to kidnap her. Arch, on the other hand, was a workaholic who probably hadn't done anything for himself since the seventh grade. Now, they were both deliriously happy together and were engaged as well as expecting their first child.

Charley gave herself a mental pat on the back. After all, they met because of her. It was by chance that Renée had called her a couple weeks ago, seeking her advice on the stalker problem. Charley had been enraged that someone was trying to hurt her friend, and so she called on Arch for help. Arch was VP of Operations for Lone Wolf Investigations and Security, which was their family-run firm. He agreed to meet with Renée, and she signed a temporary contract with Lone Wolf to run her security and catch her stalker. Sparks flew between them, and as they say, the rest is history.

Of course, it also helped that Renée and Arch were apparently True Mates, fated to be together. Charley had heard of the concept, as her parents and her dad's siblings and their partners were True Mates. But none of them spoke in detail about it. It was just something that they all accepted.

It didn't matter to her anyway—she always considered Renée as her best friend and sister, and now she would truly be part of Charley's family.

“Hey, Char-char!”

She turned toward the source of the voice, the corner of her mouth tugging up. “Yo! Adrian!” she said in her best *Rocky* impression.

The “Adrian” in question was a fellow Lycan and one of Renée's bodyguards, Adrian St. Vincent. He had joined them sometime in the last two years and so he and Charlie had never interacted previously. Even though Lone Wolf was essentially a family business, Charley had been on back-to-back touring shows, so she hadn't met him until she herself joined Renée's team.

“So, tell me, are you ever gonna get that drink with me?” He flashed her a smile and winked.

With his blond hair, chiseled body, and All-American good looks, Adrian was incredibly hot—and he knew it. They'd gotten along since she came on board, but things had become flirty in the last few days. Charley suspected he was angling for something more than just something friendly, and truth be told, she was tempted. He seemed like the type of guy she could have a lot of

fun with, without the messy complication of a relationship.

Her wolf huffed, scratching at her to show its displeasure at what “fun” with that other male could mean.

Oh, shut up.

The she-wolf was indifferent to most men, but whenever she thought of Adrian in anything more than a friendly way, it made its disapproval known.

Charley, however, ignored its protests. Her dry spell had gone so long at this point, the government could probably declare it a full climate emergency.

Of course, she did have her chance a few weeks ago—

Nuh-uh.

She completely shut *that* thought down.

“Well?”

Adrian’s voice thankfully snapped her out of her thoughts. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea ...”

Despite her earlier lamentations, she was fully aware that they would not only be working closely for the next couple of weeks, but her father and uncles were technically Adrian’s boss. So, he was either stupid or liked to live dangerously trying to get her into bed.

“Look,” he said, lowering his voice and leaning toward her. “It doesn’t have to be just the two of us.”

“Who else are you thinking of bringing?”

“Hmmm ... how about him?” He nodded behind her.

Charley swung around. “Who?” Her gaze bounced around, trying to find who Adrian was referring to, until it landed on the tall, imposing Lycan lurking in the corner with that grim look on his face.

“Blake?” She stifled her chuckle. Eli Blake was the last person she could see going out for friendly drinks with colleagues. Even in his well-fitted suit, he looked menacing, which made him the perfect bodyguard.

“Yeah. Don’t worry, I’ll warn him you might already be taken.”

“Is that so?” She smirked at him. “Mighty confident of you.”

He placed a palm on his chest. “Why, I don’t know what you’re implying, Char-char. I simply meant I wasn’t sure if you already had a boyfriend waiting for you back home. Or maybe someone else you’re interested in?”

“Oh, ha ha. Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“I would, but you can tell me later at this cool rooftop bar on Sunset that’s supposed to have an amazing view of LA. Whaddaya say?”

“Tell you what. If you can get Blake to come out, I’ll join you. I’ll even

buy the first round.”

As far as she could tell, the menacing Lycan only worked and slept. He never even joined in on team dinners, and as soon as his shift was done, went right back to his hotel room and ordered room service for most of his meals.

He laughed. “Challenge accepted. I’ll get him there.”

“And exactly how are you going to manage that??”

“I’ll find a way.” He winked at her. “See you later, Char-char.”

“Ha!” She waved him off. “Go on, I need to get Renée in position.”

The audacious flirt blew a kiss at her, making her laugh. Despite finding him attractive, Charley had already decided nothing would happen between her and Adrian as she didn’t want to risk their working relationship or compromise the team with personal stuff. Truth be told while being a PA—again—was not the next step in the career path she had hoped for, she rather liked working among other Lycans.

When she did backstage work, she always had to be careful never to reveal her true nature to anyone. Keeping her wolf under control wasn’t a problem, but she still needed to let it out every few weeks or so. In her previous jobs, she would have to strategically plan her off days so she could find a forest or National Park near their next stop, telling anyone who asked that she would be “hiking.” Then there was the fact that as a Lycan bound to the New York clan, she needed permission to enter any other clan’s territory. That usually wasn’t a problem as she knew which cities and town she would be in a couple of weeks in advance, but it was definitely a pain in the ass.

But now, working with a Lycan crew, she didn’t have to worry about things like that. And thankfully, despite her mother’s public support of the Lycans, very little changed in Charley’s world. A few articles mentioned Charley Star being a Lycan as they figured out her connection to Evie King, but since it had been over a decade since she was last on stage or screen, no one really cared about her or could connect that Charley the PA was a former teen star. Thank God she’d heeded her lawyer’s advice to route all her contracts through a corporation in Delaware and then to a company in the Bahamas so no one would be able to find who she really was.

Checking the time, she saw that it was seven minutes until Renée’s set, which meant she had to start walking now to get her in position. Of course, Renée’s door remained shut, and there was no sign of her.

Hopefully those two weren’t up to some hanky-panky in there.

She raised her hand to knock on the door, but froze when she heard a

familiar, low baritone from behind.

“Well, well, look who it is.”

Charley’s heart slammed into her chest.

Oh God, no.

It couldn’t be *him*.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered, not moving an inch.

“Last time I saw you, I asked you the same thing,” Devon replied.

She swallowed hard, his presence looming behind her. It felt like forever since she’d last heard his low, sexy voice.

“You’re not on the performer roster.” She turned to face him, but kept her gaze on the collar of his shirt, trying to avoid his eyes. “You’re not even up for an award tonight.”

“I was a last-minute addition. The producers had been begging me to do a surprise appearance.” He glanced up at the name on the door. “Renée Rose? Really, Charley?”

She gritted her teeth at his patronizing tone. There were some people in the industry who saw Renée’s kind of music as commercial pop trash, just because it appealed to a wide range of people. And of course, many people sought to tear her down because she was a successful woman in her own right. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get her—”

“You’re going to ignore me, is that it?” His jaw tightened, hands stiffening at his sides. “After you just left me without so much as a goodbye?”

“As I told Jeff in my resignation email, I had to deal with a family emergency.”

“Lies,” he bit out. “You’re a coward, Charley.”

She sidestepped him, her patience running thin. “I don’t really care what you think, Devon.”

Not anymore.

As she made a move to pivot away from him, his hand snaked out to grip her forearm. An electric shock blasted up her arm at the contact. It took her a second to recover, but she lifted her gaze to meet his vivid sky-blue eyes. “Let go of me, Devon.”

“Don’t walk away from me, not like this.” Though his tone sounded menacing, it was tinged with desperation.

Still, she didn’t like the way he was giving her orders. “I don’t work for you anymore, so leave. Me. Alone!”

“I—”

Before he could finish his sentence, the dressing room door opened, and Arch stepped out. His wolf’s dominant vibes choked the air around them, filling it with thick tension.

“Sir.” Arch’s surprisingly cool and calm tone belied the rage of his animal brewing beneath. As the oldest of the cousins, he’d always been protective of the young ones as was his wolf. “I suggest you take your hand off her. Now.”

Renée, who had been behind Arch, reached out to put a hand on his back, trying to soothe him.

“Or what?” Devon replied in a defiant, smug tone. “And just who the hell are you anyway?”

“Please,” Renée began as she peeked around Arch. “Let’s just—”

Charley tensed as she saw the expression on her friend’s face change from composed to furious as soon as her gaze landed on Devon. Understandable, seeing as Renée was the only person in the world who knew what really happened between her and Devon.

Renée stepped around Arch. “You stay away from her!” she hissed at Devon.

Charley tugged her arm away from Devon’s grip. “It’s okay, Renée. Everything’s fine.”

Devon’s blue eyes blazed, but he didn’t make a move to touch her again.

“It is *not* okay. Stop harassing her.” Her nostrils flared as she sent him a death glare. “She doesn’t have to listen to you, not anymore, Devon.”

Devon’s mouth curled up into a sardonic smile, his sapphire blue eyes sparkling. “Hello, Renée.” His tone was nonchalant as if they had bumped into each other on the street. “I heard she was working for you now.” He glanced back at Charley. “And I thought you’d left for better opportunities.”

Arch didn’t bother to rein back his wolf as his eyes glowed with rage. “Listen here, you ass—”

“He’s not worth it, Arch,” Renée said, her nostrils flaring. “Leave, Devon,” she spat. “And don’t you ever let me see you talking to her again.”

Devon smirked, then stole another glance at Charley. “I don’t come on until later, since you know, they’re saving the best for last. But, still, thanks for warming up the audience for me, Renée.” With an arrogant snort, he turned on his heel and strode off casually.

“Who the fuck was that?” Arch’s hands balled into fists at his sides.

“No one important,” Charley huffed.

“Devon Hale,” Renée said at the same time.

“Devon ... Hale?” Arch’s face turned from confusion to recognition. “The rock star?”

“Yeah. The Douche Hole.” Renée scampered over to Charley. “Are you okay, Char? What did he say to you?”

“It’s nothing.” She shrugged away Renée’s hand. “You have to be in position in two minutes. C’mon!” Hooking her arm into Renée’s, she dragged her to the stage right area, Arch following closely behind.

“Break a leg.” Charley managed a smile—a pained one, but a smile nonetheless.

“Thanks. But listen—”

Before she could say anything else, Charley turned and strode off, knowing Renée couldn’t follow her. Her chest tightened with each step, and she looked around warily, wondering if Devon was still lurking about.

She quickened her pace and headed back into Renée’s dressing room. Slamming the door closed behind her, she sank down to the floor and buried her face in her hands.

What. The. Absolute. Fuck.

Charley thought she’d never have to see Devon Hale again. Leaving the tour had been an impulsive choice, but what else could she do?

After that concert in Phoenix, she somehow managed to get back to her hotel room. She had packed up her bags and emailed her resignation letter to Jeff while in the back of the cab on her way to the airport before blocking his and Devon’s number. After sleeping on the airport floor, she’d taken the first flight out to New York the very next day. Thankfully, she’d been able to crash on a friend’s couch for a few days before she headed over to her parents’ house to let them know she’d quit her last tour.

Which was a whole other can of worms she just couldn’t deal with right now.

Lifting her gaze to the monitor mounted in the corner of the room, she watched Renée on the stage as she performed her set. She’d seen it a dozen times by now but was still awed by her friend’s voice, energy, and pure talent. Even though they had been partners back in the day, there was no doubt that Renée was the better performer between them, and she was glad for her friend’s success.

She didn’t regret her time as Charley Starr as she met Renée, plus thanks

to her mother's guidance and team of lawyers and financial advisors, she still made enough from investments and residuals that she didn't need to work. She only did backstage work because she still wanted to be close to the stage. Music was her life, and she couldn't imagine being away from it. In fact, she still wrote songs in her spare time, though, no one except Renée had heard them.

Well, perhaps she did regret one thing about her previous career—which was she had to end it.

You didn't have much of a choice, she reminded herself.

Pushing those thoughts away, she glanced back up at the monitor. Renée's set was almost over, which meant she would be coming back to her dressing room to change into her gown. She—and Arch—would likely have questions about Devon she was not prepared to answer.

Hauling herself up, she quickly exited the dressing room, her heart hammering against her sternum as she prayed she wouldn't run into Devon again.

Which was a ridiculous thought. Devon had never just loitered backstage during any performance, and certainly not in a semi-public space like a music awards show. No, he'll be holed up in his dressing room, preparing for his set.

Yet, he somehow found her tonight.

Her heart skipped a beat, and this time, for different reasons. Though it had been weeks since she'd seen him, she still couldn't forget Devon Hale.

How close he'd been to her.

The feel of his breath on her skin.

The smell of clary sage, lavender, and leather.

Oh Lord, help me.

Charley pushed against the crash bar of the door leading outside and took a deep breath of the smog-filled air. According to her watch, there had to be at least another hour and a half of the ceremony to go. Renée would be sitting in the audience with Arch, waiting for the five awards she was nominated for. Part of her wanted to go back and watch from the wings or even the dressing room monitor as she was sure her friend would be taking home most of the trophies, including the biggest one, Artist of the Year. But, she didn't want to be in the same building as Devon and risk running into him again.

I have to go watch Renée.

She was about to go back into the theater when instead, an idea popped

into her head. Walking across the parking lot, she crossed the street and into the near-empty diner where she and the other people in Renée's team had lunch earlier that day. Just as she thought, the awards show was blasting from the small TV above the counter.

"One coffee please," she told the waitress, then perched herself on a stool closest to the TV.

Charley sipped on her coffee as she watched the awards ceremony, nodding her thanks to the waitress each time her mug was refilled. She wished the ceremony would just be over already so she could leave, but at the same time, she dreaded having to go back into the theater. Renée would understand if she left but would be disappointed, and Charley just couldn't do that to her friend. So, she stayed put, cheering as Renée picked up two of the four awards announced.

After an hour or so and about seven cups of coffee, there was only one more award left for Renée—Artist of the Year. But that would be revealed at the very end.

When the host announced a special surprise guest, Charley's body seized, knowing who would be coming onstage next. Sliding off the stool, she placed a twenty-dollar bill on the formica countertop and rushed over to the door, but before she could leave, the sound of Devon's sultry vocals made her freeze.

The last time she'd heard him sing was in Phoenix. Yet even through the tiny speakers of the diner's TV, it had the same effect as it always did, mesmerizing her, capturing her attention. As if her body had a life of its own, she stepped back and turned toward the television.

His handsome face filled the screen, blue eyes blazing with such intensity she could feel it all the way to her soul. Tonight, he was singing one of his classics, his very first solo hit which was about losing a first love. Like he did with any song, every word and tone were filled with genuine emotion, and it was impossible not to feel what the music was trying to convey.

I'm lost in a storm
When I'm without you.
Winds howling form
When I'm without you.
I—

Charley cringed as a sour chord from Devon's guitar broke her out of the spell. However, no one seemed to notice as the performance continued. She supposed it wasn't unusual with a live performance, but she'd seen him so many times on stage and he'd never made such a simple mistake.

Devon continued with the song, reaching the peak of the bridge, when all of a sudden, his hands dropped to his sides, and he sank to his knees. He let out an inhuman growl, and when the camera zoomed in on his face, she saw an eerie glow from his eyes.

Something was very wrong.

Charley barely had time to think as she dashed out of the diner and bolted across the street all the way back into the theater. Screams and shouts greeted her as she rushed back into the backstage area. Her gut urged her to head for the stage.

"Charley!" Adrian shouted as he blocked her path. "Stop! Don't go—"

But she dodged him and continued to make her way toward the main stage. "Devon!" She stopped short at the wings, letting out a surprised gasp.

Devon was nowhere to be found.

Instead, there was a brown wolf pacing the stage, teeth bared, eyes glowing bright even under the stage lights. From the size of it, Charley knew it was no ordinary wolf. Over six feet on its hind legs, a head over three times the size of a humans', and thick dark chestnut and blond fur, this wolf was obviously a Lycan.

The panicked members of the audience rushed out in all directions, filling the aisles as they trampled over each other to get to the nearest exit. The massive wolf's eyes scanned the crowd, then it let out an inhuman growl.

Instinct kicked in as she leapt forward. She thought she heard someone—possibly Arch—shout her name from behind, but it was muffled by the sound of ripping clothes and breaking bones.

Hers.

Charley had never shifted so fast in her life. Her gray wolf's huge paws landed on the stage with a loud thump, blocking the brown wolf's view of the people running away. It let out an angry bark, snapping its jaws at Charley's wolf.

The she-wolf responded in kind, snarling at the brown wolf and took a step forward. The brown wolf merely dug its claws into the floor in defiance. Charley's wolf let out a loud yip, and continued to move in closer. This time, the brown wolf began to back away, matching the she-wolf's pace.

Charley could only watch from inside her animal's body as it cornered the brown wolf. Her wolf was too busy trying to fend off the dangerous predator that it did not—or perhaps could not—notice what Charley could clearly see. As she stared deep into the other wolf's blue eyes, there was something there she could not ignore. Anger, yes, but also confusion and more alarmingly, fear.

Stop, she told her animal.

The she-wolf halted its steps.

It's scared. We need to get it to calm down or it might lash out.

Her wolf nodded in agreement, turning sideways so it was not facing the brown wolf head on. Then, it lowered to its haunches in a relaxed position.

The brown wolf tilted its head, and though it did not change its body language, it no longer bared its teeth.

The female wolf then slowly got up and approached the other animal with careful steps.

No! Charley warned her wolf. *We need to wait.*

But her wolf ignored her as if there was something it knew that Charley didn't. It continued its leisurely advance until it was inches away from the brown wolf.

Then it did something unexpected.

Leaning its head forward, it gently brushed its nose against the other wolf's neck. Charley braced herself for the other wolf to snap, but to her surprise, it did not make a move. Instead, it arched its head back, as if inviting the she-wolf to come in closer. When her wolf did, it took a big sniff. The scent of clary sage, lavender, and leather filled Charley and her wolf's nostrils.

Oh.

Before she could react further, the brown wolf shoved its nose into the she-wolf's neck. Charley jerked back at the intrusion, but her wolf welcomed the touch. It remained in place, letting the other wolf's snout nuzzle at them.

The most curious tingling sensation built up in Charley's middle. She couldn't quite place what it was, but it was ...distracting. In fact, it was so distracting that she didn't notice that the wolf nuzzling at her neck was slowly changing back into its human form.

The naked, human figure let out a pained moan, then slumped over, falling against the she-wolf's massive body before sliding down to the floor. She didn't need to look down to confirm who it was. His scent—his *Lycan*

scent—told her exactly who it was.

Quickly, she changed back into her own human form. “Devon!” Leaning forward, she checked his pulse, then brushed his messy blond hair away from his face. Though passed out, he was breathing, but his skin was hot, and his pulse was deathly slow.

“Charley!”

She felt something wrap around her naked shoulders—a tuxedo coat. From the voice and the scent on the clothes, she knew it was Arch.

Glancing up at him, she nodded. “Yeah. He’s—”

“I saw everything.” His dark eyebrows slashed together as he peered down at Devon. “Things are going to get ... messy real soon. St. Vincent! Blake!” He called over this shoulder. “Get him.”

Taking his phone out of his pocket, he tapped on the screen. “Hello, Astrid? Yeah, there’s a situation happening down in L.A....”

Charley got to her feet and tugged the coat around herself tighter, watching as Adrian and Eli picked up Devon to drag him off the stage.

Arch was not wrong. Things were definitely going to get messy.

Though, at that moment, she didn’t know *messy* wouldn’t even begin to describe it.

Chapter 2

Devon had barely opened his eyes when the most intense headache he'd ever felt in his life hit him hard. Intense white fluorescent lighting made him shut his eyelids tight.

It was like having a wrecking ball slam into his skull, then being hit by a truck before bouncing on the pavement a couple of times, then finally being flattened by a steamroller.

Fuck.

As the bitter acidic bile hit his throat, he scrambled up and spied the trash can by the bed. He barely made it in time as he spewed the contents of his stomach into the bin.

"Jeff!" He was still doubled over the trash can, dry heaving in between breaths. "Jeff!"

Usually, Jeff was already waiting for him when he woke up, especially if he'd had a particularly wild night of drinking and partying.

Though in the last couple of weeks, it had mostly been a lot of drinking, and not so much partying.

No, he preferred to go back to his suite after each show and drink by himself until he couldn't remember his own name. But it wasn't his name he was trying to forget.

Another wave of nausea hit him, and he emptied what little was left of his last meal into the trash can. When the world stopped spinning, he gave one last great heave, then pulled himself up off his knees and staggered back to the bed.

What the fuck did I drink last night?

“Jeff,” he slurred, lifting his head. He blinked several times in an attempt to clear his blurry vision. “Jeff, where are—what the hell?”

The room was unlike any hotel suite he’d ever stayed in. In fact, it looked nothing like any hotel room. It was entirely white and sterile, with bare painted walls, bright overhead fluorescent lighting, and not a single window in sight—just four walls and a door. The only furniture was the double bed he was on and a metal table with three chairs, two on one side and one on the other.

Where the fuck am I?

The realization that he had no recollection of what happened before he woke here sobered him up. He sat up straight, his headache and nausea completely gone. The loud clinking of chains made him pause. Glancing down, he saw his left foot manacled to a sturdy-looking chain fastened to a thick metal ring embedded in the wall.

“The fuck is this shit?”

Jumping off the bed, he attempted to reach the lone door across the room, but the chain only allowed him to make it halfway, stopping right where the table was. Grabbing the chain and tugging at it only confirmed that it was solid and he was, indeed, trapped.

I’ve been kidnapped.

But who kidnapped him? Some deranged fan? Terrorists? And where the fuck was his security team?

The sound of creaking metal and the movement of the door made Devon freeze. “Help!” he screamed. “Help me! I’ve been kidnapped!”

The door swung open, and a woman walked in—around early to mid-thirties, tall, with blonde hair falling in waves down her shoulder. She wore a black pantsuit and had a large tablet PC under her arm.

He tried to run toward the door, reaching out, but the chain kept him in place. “Please, you have to help me.”

She held up a hand as if signaling for him to stay silent. From the calm expression on her face, it was obvious she was not surprised to see him chained up like an animal.

Devon gritted his teeth. “Who the fuck are—”

“Shush!” After a quick glance around, she turned back to the door. “We’re all clear, Alpha.”

As soon as the tall, dark-haired man entered the room, the atmosphere quickly shifted, like the change in air pressure that denotes the arrival of a

thunderstorm. Devon wasn't sure why, but there was something about the man that made him uneasy. Despite his cool outward appearance, he sensed a powerful presence inside the other man and that if anyone made a wrong move, he would be ready to pounce.

Which was a ridiculous thought because the man looked like any rich Wall Street-type prick with his custom-made suit, Patek Philippe watch, and expensive cologne.

The man and woman made their way to the lone table in the middle and took the two seats on one side. "Have a seat, Mr. Hale." The man gestured to the seat opposite them.

"What the fuck is going on?" Devon's voice reverberated off the walls. "Who the hell are you, and why did you kidnap me? Do you know who I am? You're going to be in so much trouble when I get out of here! I demand you take these chains off *now*."

The man remained calm, but his eyes—one green, one blue—bore right into Devon. "You seem to be under the impression you're in charge here. I assure you; you are not." He once again pointed to the chair. "Now, sit. *Down*."

The strangest sensation hit Devon, like waves battering his body in the ocean. He felt compelled to sit down, and so he did.

"Are you the government? Police? FBI? Pentagon?" This definitely looked like some kind of federal detainment room, at least what Hollywood might think one looked like. "Even if you are, you know you can't keep me locked up like this. I have rights."

"We're not the government," the man began. "You're in New York City. In my territory."

"Why the hell am I here?" He racked his brain, trying to figure out his last memory.

L.A.

The USA Music Awards.

He was singing on stage and then ...

Nothing.

"Did you drug me?"

The man continued, ignoring his questions. "The reason you're here is because the Los Angeles Alpha didn't claim you as one of his. He says you're never been registered with them, and since you aren't a lone wolf, he wanted you out of his territory, and we gladly helped. So, which clan are you

with?”

“Clan?” Devon blinked. “I understood exactly none of what you said. Why don’t you explain it again, this time in English?”

His two captors looked at each other. “You really don’t know what you are?” the blonde woman asked.

He slapped his hands on top of the table. “Can we skip to the part where you let me go, so I can sue your ass for kidnapping me?”

Unperturbed, she asked, “What’s the last thing you remember, Mr. Hale?”

The question made him pause.

The woman took out her tablet PC and tapped on the screen. “Here, I think you should watch this.”

She turned the tablet toward Devon where a video played on the screen. It looked like raw footage from the awards show. The view was of the main stage while he was in the middle of his song. Seeing himself sparked something in his brain.

Devon had never performed angry before. He always made it a point to be calm and clearheaded before setting a foot on stage, to get into the zone. But seeing her after all this time sparked a rage in him.

He pushed the memory back and continued to watch. Though he’d seen videos of his performances many times, this one was like an out-of-body experience, since he couldn’t remember anything except for the fury in his veins as he sang.

When she left, he pretended that it didn’t bother him. Hid his frustration and anger. Drank himself into a coma each night, trying to forget her name, her smell, and those candy eyes. Then he heard from a contact that she’d found work with Renée Rose. He vowed to do whatever it took to see her again.

The loud, inhuman growl from the tiny tablet speakers jerked him back into the present.

“What the fuck?” He grabbed the tablet from the woman’s hands. “No ...”

It grew hot ... his body feverish ... he dropped to the ground as pain ripped through him, like claws tearing at his skin from the inside.

A knot formed in Devon’s gut as he watched, unable to look away from the horror. The camera zoomed in as the muscles underneath his face shifted and stretched, his mouth continuing to make the most feral sounds. His arms

and hands grew, torso stretching out as his clothes ripped away. Brown fur sprouted out from his naked skin as his body continued its transformation into a humungous wolf, its eyes glowing with an eerie light.

“No ...”

This had to be some kind of trick. Hollywood VFX magic. A deep fake or AI or whatever shit they did with videos these days.

The gigantic wolf—probably over six feet tall on its hind legs—paced the stage, snarling and snapping at the panicked audience as they screamed, all of them scrambling over each other to get away from him. That seemed to agitate the wolf even more, and it reared back, ready to pounce.

From out of nowhere, a gray blur came leaping in, blocking the brown wolf. Devon’s heart leapt into his throat, a strange sense of déjà vu washing over him.

“Hey!” he protested when the woman yanked the tablet away from him and placed it face down on the table. “I want to see the rest—”

“I think you’ve seen enough.” She caught his gaze, staring straight into his soul. “You know what you are.” Her eyes let out the same eerie glow he saw on the screen earlier.

He swallowed hard. “I’m a-a ... one of them.” A Supernatural Being.

“One of us.” The man’s eyes glowed too.

“And everyone saw this?” Devon asked.

“The broadcast was cut short,” the woman began. “But the show’s control booth recorded everything. Thankfully we were able to obtain and destroy the entirety of it, but what was broadcast to people’s homes—up until the point you shifted into your wolf form—that footage is all out there.”

Fuck.

What would happen to his career?

What was going to happen to me?

“You didn’t know, did you?” This time, that man’s tone had changed, his expression losing some of its severity.

“I ... no!” Nausea walloped him, and the world spun. His hands gripped the edges of the table as he took deep breaths. “I can’t be ...”

“Unfortunately, that video says otherwise,” the man said. “You are a Lycan.”

“How ...”

“It usually means one or both of your parents is a Lycan, depending on the circumstances.”

He shrugged. “Never knew my biological parents.”

“Ah, a closed adoption then?” The woman rubbed her thumb along her chin. “You might be able to get the courts to open your records.”

“If they had any records to open. I was abandoned as a child at a train station with no ID or birth certificate.” The bitterness coating his tone had nothing to do with the bile he’d recently spewed. “I grew up in foster homes.”

“Makes sense you wouldn’t know then,” the man said. “There’s one case I personally know ... she didn’t know she was a Lycan, never even shifted until she was an adult. Her wolf had been latent most of her life, and it wasn’t until she made contact with us that she found out.”

“Okay, so I’m one of you.” Devon pushed down on the table and stood up. “Now get me out of here. I want to go home.”

“Not so fast.” The man raised a palm. “We can’t just let you go, Mr. Hale. There are rules to follow. Things you should know—”

“Are you planning on keeping me here then? That’s kidnapping.”

“Technically, it’s unlawful detainment,” the woman quipped.

“Still against the law.”

The man’s expression turned dour once again. “We could still keep you here. No one saw us take you. You don’t even know where you are in New York.”

Now, that made Devon laugh aloud. “You *could*. But people are going to ask questions. Who do you think you kidnapped—excuse me, detained? Some Joe Schmo off the street? I’m Devon *Fucking* Hale, you dumbasses. First off, when my manager realizes I’m missing, he’s going to go ballistic. He’ll tear the world apart looking for me, not to mention, so will my fans. You can’t just make me disappear out of thin air without millions of people asking questions. Between my people, the press, social media, and the Internet, eventually, someone will figure out I’m gone and that it was your kind who took me.”

“You’re one of us,” the woman reminded him. “And therefore, under our —”

“I’m not done.” Though neither of the two gave any indication that they were affected by Devon’s threats, he continued. “Tell me, once someone finds me—and they will, because either my people or my fans will put pressure on the authorities to investigate—what do you think it will look like for you—for Lycans? Think of all the nasty things I’ll tell my millions of

fans on social media, and how that will spread quickly.” He shook the chains around his foot for emphasis. “Then people will know what monsters Supernatural Beings really are.”

The air in the room changed again, but Devon knew this time it had shifted in his favor. And from the way the man and woman looked at each other, he could see that it was dawning on them that they fucked up. So, he pressed on. “If you let me go now and stay away from me, then *maybe* I’ll consider not pressing charges. But if you don’t, then you can be assured I’m gonna burn you all down. I don’t care what it takes.”

“Sit down, Mr. Hale, you’ve made your point.” The man’s nostrils flared, then he looked at the woman. “We need to talk in private.” He quickly stood, the metal chair’s feet grating across the concrete floor, and the woman followed suit.

Fucking finally. “You better not take too long,” he called as they made their way out. “The longer I wait, the less inclined I’ll feel to be merciful.”

The door slammed with an ominous *bang*, but it did not bother Devon one bit. He had them by the balls.

He sank back down on the chair and scrubbed his palms down his face.

He was a Supernatural Being.

What did that even mean?

He wasn’t fully human. He could turn into a giant wolf, apparently. But how did that work? Was that something under his control? Would he change at random? Or with the moon phases?

Devon barely had time to do anything but work and perform on his tour, so when news about the Supernaturals came out, he didn’t really pay much attention or read about them.

He closed his eyes.

I’m a Lycan.

Something about that statement felt right. As a child, he supposed it was natural to wonder where he came from and who his parents were. Why did they abandon him? Were they still alive? Were they bad people?

As he grew up and he knew more about the world, his thoughts turned bitter. His mom and dad were probably drug addicts. Or criminals. Or bad people. After all, why would they abandon him if they were good people?

Eventually, he stopped asking.

But now that he knew what he was, those questions about his parents came rushing back into his mind.

A strange vibration emanated from his chest. Almost like a rumble.

What?

It happened again, and it nearly sent him scrambling off his seat. Taking a deep, calming breath, he relaxed his body, trying to recall the events at the awards. There was something else that happened there. Something he couldn't remember ... only a scent that was familiar.

The vibration returned, this time deeper and longer.

His eyes flew open and landed on the tablet PC the woman had left behind. Glancing around to make sure no one was watching, Devon retrieved it and tapped on the screen, bringing it back to life. He played the rest of the video from where it had been paused.

The gray blur turned out to be another wolf. From its size, it was obviously a Lycan too. It cornered the brown wolf, backing it away from the audience toward the rear of the stage. They disappeared off camera, but Devon didn't need to see the rest as his memories came flooding back.

Light brown eyes peering at him from behind the wolf's massive furry face.

Ripe juicy peaches on a summer day.

The gray wolf was Charley.

She was one of them—*us*, he corrected.

Another rumble vibrated across his sternum as if confirming his thoughts.

He closed his eyes again, and despite being the only person in the room, for some reason, he didn't feel *alone*.

But if that was Charley, what did she have to do with all this? Did she know she was a Lycan too? Did she know what *he* was all this time?

Placing the tablet down, he trudged back to the bed and lay down, the rush of adrenaline running through his veins from his earlier confrontation with his captor draining away from his body. The fatigue settled into his bones, and he closed his eyes, slipping into what seemed like the deepest sleep he'd ever had in the last couple of months.

"Mr. Hale?"

Devon shot up like a rocket. "I ... what ..." He rubbed at his eyes, glancing around. The man and woman were once again across the room. Swinging his legs over the side, he realized the manacle and chains were completely gone.

In fact, there was no trace of it left, not even the metal ring where it was been fastened to the wall.

Shrugging, Devon rose to his feet and walked over to where they blocked the door. “I assume you’ve contacted my manager?”

“He’s waiting in the lobby,” the man said. “Fresh from L.A.”

“With the authorities?”

“Not yet,” the man said tightly. “But he does have an army of lawyers and publicists who have the police, FBI, and press at the ready.”

Devon couldn’t help but flash him a smug smile. “I told you so.”

The man harrumphed. “Before you go, Mr. Hale, there really are a few things you should know. We have rules we follow to keep Lycans and humans safe. We should sit down—”

“You can fuck right off with that,” he bellowed. “First off, you’re never going to see me again, unless you buy one of my concert tickets, which I assure you will never happen because I’m filing a restraining order against you the moment I leave here. Next, I don’t need rules.” He was Devon Hale, for fuck’s sake. “And I’ve got bigger problems right now.” Like what would happen to his career now that it was known he was one of them—a Lycan, he corrected himself.

Shit was going to hit the fan.

The woman cleared her throat. “Like you said, we can’t detain you, but we can train you. Help you. You don’t want to have another uncontrolled shift, plus, there are times you might not even be able to control it.”

“I’ll deal with it.” He waved her off. “My team will take care of it, and if they can’t, I’ll hire the best people in the world to help me with this shit.”

The man reached into his pocket and retrieved a small card, then handed it to him. “Here. You can call me anytime if you have questions.”

Devon looked at the card like it was poison, but curiosity got the better of him so he took it.

*Lucas Anderson
Chief Executive Officer
Fenrir Corporation*

Interesting.

With a huff, he folded the card in half and closed his fist around it. “I doubt it, but at least I know who to sue. Can I go now?”

The women gestured to the door. “I’ll lead you out.”

The man—Lucas Anderson—stayed behind as the woman led him down

a long hallway to a single set of elevator doors at the end. “Where are we exactly?”

“Fenrir Corporation Headquarters, Madison Avenue.” The elevator doors opened. “After you.”

“Nuh-uh. Ladies first.”

Shrugging, she stepped inside. “See? It’s just an elevator. No need to be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” he said as he followed her inside. The sleek elevator had no buttons or windows, but the familiar lurching feeling in his stomach told him they were moving. Devon shifted uneasily. “So, I know his name, but who are you, exactly?”

The woman’s brown eyes twinkled with amusement. “Wouldn’t you like to know. Since you think you’re so clever, maybe you’ll figure it out yourself. Or hire people to do it for you.”

The elevator slowed down, and the door opened, but before Devon could step out, the woman’s arm shot out to block him. “Won’t you reconsider leaving, Mr. Hale? Or at least agree to talk to us. Or perhaps someone from our kind talk to you so you can be prepared—”

“No. And please,” he began, his voice edgy. “I’ve never struck a woman in my life. Don’t make me break my rule now.” He stared at her arm menacingly.

She huffed out a breath and put her arm down. “Fine. Your funeral, buddy.”

Devon stepped out of the elevator, breathing a sigh of relief as he spotted Jeff across what appeared to be the lobby of any normal corporate office in New York. He was halfway across the room when he heard her call out something that made him freeze.

“No wonder Charley calls you The Douche Hole.”

He spun on his heel quickly. “You know Charley?” He rushed back toward her, urgency making his gut clench as the elevator doors started to close.

She smirked at him, whiskey brown eyes twinkling with malice. “And by the way, your music sucks!” She raised both hands to flash him her middle fingers as the doors closed.

Devon slammed a fist against the cool metal. “Tell me where she is! Hey!” *Bang, bang, bang!* “Is she here in New York? Open up!”

“Devon, thank God!” Jeff shouted as he grabbed his arm, pulling him

away from the elevator. “I’ve been worried sick.”

Slumping his shoulders, he turned to his manager. “Fuck, you look like shit.” Jeff’s hair stuck out at all angles and his skin was sallow, not to mention, the dark circles under his eyes were more pronounced than usual.

“Yeah, well, you don’t know the half of it.” To his surprise, Jeff pulled him in for a hug. “I thought something happened to you.”

Devon swallowed the lump in his throat as he returned the hug. He’d been with Jeff for so long, yet he never really considered that their working relationship had become a personal one too. After all, Jeff was perhaps the only person on earth who really knew Devon, warts and all. “Yeah man, I’m sure you’d be sad losing your ten percent.”

Jeff’s shoulders shook as he laughed. “Asshole,” he choked out as he disentangled himself from Devon. “We should go ... and we need to talk.” Jeff’s expression turned serious. “Do you remember what happened at the awards—”

“Yeah.” A knot in his gut formed. The next few days and possibly weeks were going to be hell. “Guess it’s time to earn that ten percent.”

Jeff huffed. “We’ll probably have to renegotiate that after this. But seriously ... are you hurt? Did they do anything to you? Dr. Martinez is already waiting at your penthouse, ready to examine you.”

“No. No doctors. I’m fine.” He glanced back at the elevator doors, which had remained shut. “Just ... get me out of here.” He never wanted to see this place ever again. All he wanted was to go home, sleep in his enormous bed at his Upper East West penthouse, then forget this entire thing ever happened.

Chapter 3

“Thanks so much for inviting me, I really needed this,” Astrid Jonasson-Vrost, Beta to the New York Clan and Charley’s cousin, said as she knocked back the last of the chardonnay from her glass.

Charley topped up her wine glass. “There’s more where that came from.”

“Not that it matters,” Astrid continued. “Damn, I really wish our Lycan metabolism let us get drunk. I should ask Julianna if she can sneak us some of her husband’s ‘special’ whiskey.”

“It’s been a tough two days,” Lizzie Martin, their other cousin, said sympathetically. “I know you’ve been swamped since the whole USA Music Awards show debacle. Glad you could come over for some downtime.” She sighed, eyeing the glasses of wine. “Ugh, what I wouldn’t give to be able to drink any alcohol.”

The three women were at Lizzie’s Upper East Side penthouse apartment, lounging outside on the balcony overlooking Central Park, enjoying the late summer evening.

“Oh yeah, I don’t miss that part of being pregnant with my True Mate’s baby,” Astrid said.

“Tell me about it,” Lizzie moaned. “Any kind of alcohol tastes worse than expired milk.”

Charley chuckled. “More wine for us, then, eh Astrid?”

“And I deserve most of it.” Astrid finished the entire glass in one gulp, then put it down on the table. “It’s been a tough couple of months, ever since Connecticut. God, sometimes I regret taking the position of Beta. We were doing great until your Douche Hole fucked it all up.”

“He’s not *my* Douche Hole,” Charley protested. “And I can’t believe you told her that name, Lizzie.”

Lizzie raised her palms defensively. “Sorry, it just came out. To be fair, Astrid did wake me up in the middle of the night to let me know what happened so I could make sure no one got any footage of you turning into your Lycan form.” Lizzie was Lone Wolf’s resident hacker and IT expert, but also as a hybrid—part Lycan, part witch—she had the power to control and speak with technology.

Charley chewed at her lip, thinking of what to say next without raising any suspicion. While it wouldn’t have been unusual for her to reach out to her own cousin, it had been probably years since she even sat down with Astrid, and they hadn’t been particularly close growing up.

But after what happened at the awards show, Charley had been desperate. She had to know what happened with Devon and what he knew about her. “So, um, Astrid, speaking of Devon, have you heard back from him?”

“Nuh-uh, and I hope I don’t have to.” Her cousin winced.

“You really just let him walk out?” Lizzie asked. “But he’s a Lycan. He broke the rules. Anyone else would still be locked away in the underground detainment facility at Fenrir.”

Astrid blew out a breath. “True, but he’s not just *anyone*. While I’d prefer he rot away down there or at the Siberian prison facility, he made a good point. We can’t disappear him and think no one will notice, unless there was some kind of magic potion or spell to make millions of people forget he exists. And being a latent Lycan, it’s not really his fault and there’s no way we can enforce our rules over him, since he doesn’t have an Alpha or clan to answer to.”

“He really had no idea he was a Lycan?” Lizzie asked.

“Apparently. He grew up in the foster system and never knew his parents. Charley, you never suspected he was a Lycan? You worked with him for a while, didn’t you?”

“No,” she replied. “I mean, it was all work.” Charley had been wracking her brain for the last three days, wondering if she’d missed any obvious signs. “Well, maybe one or two things.” She recalled seeing his eyes glow, but thought that had been a trick of the light. And then of course his scent—only Lycans had scents other Lycans could sense. But then she’d only smelled his that one time after the shower. “But nothing else. You know we can always sense when someone else is a Lycan, but I didn’t get any obvious signs of

him having a wolf.”

“Must be a latent thing.” Astrid chewed at her lip. “Lucas was sympathetic—you know, his aunt had been latent before the New York clan discovered her—but there wasn’t much we could do to hold him. Plus with our secret out, we can’t afford the bad publicity.” She cracked her knuckles. “Still, what I would do to have that rude asshole alone in a room ...”

“Douch Hole,” Lizzie reminded her. “That name truly fits.”

“It does.” She turned to Charley. “I don’t know how you managed to work for him all that time. And despite what people say, he’s not even *that* hot in person.”

“Really?” Lizzie asked. “I thought he was *pret-ty* fine. Did you see that naked ass from the footage?”

Charley’s wolf raised its head and let out a warning growl. Thankfully, neither of her cousins heard it, and she pushed her wolf deep down inside her.

Astrid giggled. “Oh, all right. He was damned sexy and even better looking than in pictures.”

“Don’t you have a True Mate and a kid?” Charley pointed out.

“Yeah, but I’m not dead. Anyone with a pulse would be hard-pressed not to think Devon Hale was insanely gorgeous. But I still love my husband and kid. Speaking of who,” Astrid got to her feet, “I should go. I’ve already missed Annaliese’s bedtime.” She sighed. “Thanks again for the invite, and good to see you, Charley.”

“Same.” Charley stood up and accepted Astrid’s hug. “I’ll see you around.”

“How long are you going to be in town this time?”

“Er, I’m not sure. We’ll see.”

“All right. Don’t be a stranger. See you soon.” She hugged Lizzie, then picked up her purse. “No need to walk me out, you girls relax and enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“Elevator’s already waiting,” Lizzie said.

“Thanks!” With a final wave, Astrid headed back into the apartment.

After a beat, Lizzie glanced at Charley and said, “So, any reason in particular you wanted me to invite Astrid to come over?”

Charley took a sip from her wine glass, meeting her cousin’s gaze over the rim. “What do you mean?”

“I mean ... she’s our cousin and all, but you’re acting all weird and skittish. Like you’ve been waiting to ask her all evening about The Douche

Hole.”

She shrugged nonchalantly. “I was just wondering. Besides you’re curious, too, aren’t you?”

“Yeah ...”

“So, now we know.”

Or rather, they didn’t know.

Which might be a good thing. Maybe Devon had moved on from the whole debacle and she would never see or hear from him again.

A tight knot formed in her chest at the thought.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Lizzie asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“You just seem like you’ve got a lot on your mind. You know you can talk to me, right?”

“We always talk,” she said with a chuckle.

“I know, but I mean, talk for real. And I can help with whatever it is that’s bothering you.”

“I know, Liz.” She reached out and gave her hand a grateful squeeze. “Having me stay with you is a huge help. Thanks again for offering. And please tell Wyatt I said thanks too.” The penthouse after all, belonged to Wyatt Creed, Lizzie’s fiancé.

“Of course, anytime. And we’re happy to have you, and I’m glad to have company since he left for London last night. This place seems empty without him.”

Charley whistled and gestured to the enormous balcony. “Yeah, must be real sad being alone here in this amazing—hey!” That sarcastic remark got her a pillow in the face. “Why you—” She grabbed her own pillow and attempted to toss it at Lizzie, but she was too fast and quickly scrambled to her feet.

“Reminds me of summers in at the ranch,” Lizzie cackled. “You’re just as slow now as you were—hey!”

Charley managed to lob another pillow at her, which hit Lizzie in the face. “I still have better aim!”

Lizzie smirked at her. “Yeah, yeah.”

“But, really, thanks for letting me crash.” She poured more wine into Lizzie’s glass. “I really appreciate it.”

“So, um, there was no space at your mom and dad’s?” Lizzie asked, her tone careful.

“Would you have wanted to stay with your parents?” Charley retorted.

“Point taken.” Lizzie sat down. “I know things haven’t always been great with you and Uncle Connor.”

“They’re much better now, trust me.” Charley leaned back on the lounge chair where she sat. Still, she couldn’t bring herself to be around her parents for too long. It just brought back too many memories.

The sound of crunching metal.

The smell of motor oil.

The pain.

And of course, the aftermath, when her life changed.

“Oh!” Lizzie shot to her feet. “Wyatt’s calling.” She pointed to her smart watch. “I should go take this. Hey, Wyatt! Yeah, one sec, I’m gonna run to our room. Charley, I’m heading inside.”

“Sure, I’ll stay out here for bit.”

“Okay, just close the door when you come in,” Lizzie reminded her, then bounded through the double doors leading back inside the penthouse.

Charley settled back with another glass of wine and took her phone out of her pocket. One good thing about having a girl’s night in with her cousins was that it distracted her from the compulsion to check the news alerts for anything related to Devon and the awards show incident. She told herself it was because she wanted to ensure her name and true identity hadn’t popped up in any form, though she knew that was impossible. Thanks to Lizzie’s powers, they were able to retrieve the rest of the footage from the awards show after the broadcast had been cut, and then erase it from the network’s hard drive and records, as well as removing any videos from the security cameras around the stage that showed Charley shifting into her Lycan form.

Unlocking her screen, she was about to tap on the notifications on her phone when a message popped up. It was from Adrian.

Hey Char-char, what’s up? You in NYC?

Yeah. You?

Landed a couple hours ago. Guess where I am and who I’m with?

Charley smirked to herself. But as she was typing out a snarky reply, a message popped up—this time, with a picture attached. Her jaw nearly dropped to the floor as she saw Eli Blake sitting in the corner of what looked

like a nightclub, sipping a drink while looking out into a crowd of people on the dance floor. Of course, he still looked like he was watching over a prison yard instead of relaxing at a nightclub, but that only cemented that fact that it was really him.

You owe me a drink, Char-char.

Holy <poop emoji>! You really did it.

I did. <wink emoji>

So? My glass is nearly empty. <drink emoji>You're not backing out of our bet, are you?

She shifted in her seat, trying to figure out what to reply. It had been a hard couple of days, and the only thing she wanted to do was to crawl into bed and forget the whole thing happened.

On the other hand, a distraction could be just what she needed.

Where are you?

Where else? Blood Moon.

Charley bit her lip. She hadn't stepped inside that place in years. Blood Moon was a Lycan-only nightclub in New York, or at least it had been until they were outed to the world. Apparently, now humans had been flocking there, hoping to get a glimpse of the Lycans.

All right. I'll be there in thirty.

I'll be waiting, Char-char. <smiley heart emoji>

She rolled her eyes, then put the phone back into her pocket. Finishing off the last of her glass of wine, Charley got to her feet.

Yes, maybe all she needed was a distraction for tonight.

Chapter 4

As Devon predicted, the shit, indeed, had hit the fan. He'd been in PR trouble before, especially during his earlier days in the business, but it was nothing compared to this. It had only been three days since the awards show, and things were not looking good, not even a little bit. There seemingly was no light at the end of this tunnel.

"Do you want to hear the good news or the bad news first, Devon?" Lauren Acton, his lead publicist asked.

Devon stared out at the magnificent view of the glittering Manhattan evening skyline from where he lounged on the couch in his penthouse's living room. His team of publicists and lawyers gathered here because Devon couldn't breathe—much less step outdoors without the press knowing about it. Dozens of reporters and photographers were camped outside his building.

"Devon?" Lauren repeated.

When he didn't answer, Jeff piped in. "Bad news."

"We can't do anything about footage. It's out there, and there's no way to spin it as anything else." The awards show was live, after all, with only a five-second delay. The video being spread around the mainstream news and Internet cut to just right before the gray wolf arrived. In any case, the entire world now knew Devon Hale was a Supernatural Being.

"You're telling me, despite all that money we pay you, you couldn't stop one measly video from spreading?" Jeff asked in a sarcastic tone.

"You know that's not the way the Internet works," Lauren retorted. "When something goes viral, you can't stop it. Devon, you have to admit this is a highly unusual scenario, no one could have prepared for you turning into

one of—” She quickly stopped. “For this to happen, I mean. It’s a highly unusual situation by any standard, and we can only continue to monitor the situation and make decisions based on what we know.”

Devon couldn’t help sensing that though her tone was careful and placating, there was something else underneath—fear.

Actually, ever since he found out what he was, he had sensed that emotion in everyone around him. It was difficult to describe. Of course, no one was ever chill or relaxed around him. Except for other well-known celebrities, normal people were often giddy, excited, awed even to be around someone like him. Besides he was mostly surrounded by people who worked for him, and because of the nature of his work, his employees were in a constant state of stress and anxiety.

Now, however, they all seemed to be afraid of him.

Really afraid of him.

Like, he could tear their throats out.

Which, to be fair, he could do now that he was what he was.

“We’ve been silent for too long, but I think it’s time we put out a statement,” Lauren continued. “Which is my good news—we’ve already crafted one, and all you need to do is to sign off on it.”

“That’s your good news?” Jeff rolled his eyes. “Fine, let’s read it.”

One of Lauren’s assistants handed a piece of paper to Jeff, who read it aloud, to which Devon listened with disinterest.

“‘Going through a tumultuous time ... recent revelation of my heritage ... blah, blah ... respect my privacy at this time.’ What do you think, Devon?”

Devon waved a hand. “Yeah, sure.” He grabbed his glass of bourbon from the coffee table and took a sip, holding back the urge to spit it out. It tasted fine, considering it was a thousand dollars a bottle, but for some reason, it gave him nothing but a quick, mild buzz that quickly dissipated. In fact, no matter what he drank—and he had already drunk every bottle in his penthouse—he could not even get tipsy.

Lauren nodded to her assistant as he retrieved the paper from Jeff, then cleared her throat. “Devon, have you thought about what we discussed earlier? About Lucas Anderson and—”

“No.”

“But—”

“I said no, and don’t make me repeat it.” The rumble in his chest was so loud, he wondered if they all heard it. “Don’t mention that name again.”

After his team dug up more information about the Supernatural Beings, as well as Lucas Anderson and his “clan,” they initially wanted to put focus on Devon’s detainment to deflect any negative publicity. While it was tempting considering they *fucking chained him up*, for some reason, he just couldn’t do it. Yes, they had been wrong to just transport him across the country, put him in a cell like some terrorist, and then basically make him disappear, but somehow, he couldn’t paint them—or anyone—as being the bad guys. After all, he’d seen that footage. There had been real danger of him hurting people—even if he couldn’t remember anything.

“All right, what do we do now?” Jeff asked the team.

“Just lay low and let us do our jobs.” Lauren got up and the rest of her team followed. “It’s a good thing you’re on a month-long break between tour dates. We can use this time to spin this your way. This is a bit premature, and I didn’t want to tell you yet, but my team is working day and night finding all the good things people have to say about you on social media. While there are those negative posts and videos from the anti-Supes, as they call the people against the Supernatural Beings, there is a growing movement of people who support the Lycans. You could very well come out of this with an even better career. I mean, Devon, let’s face it, there’s no such thing as bad publicity.”

“Yeah, fine,” he said dismissively. “You can all leave now.”

Everyone, with the exception of Jeff, filed out of the room. “What’s on your mind, Dev? You okay?”

“For the millionth time, I’m fine.” He took another useless sip of bourbon. “Did you find out about that other thing?”

Jeff sighed and sank down on the couch next to him. “Yeah, about that. I’m afraid aside from her mobile number that’s been disconnected and a P.O. Box in Delaware, I still don’t know where Charley is or how to contact her.”

One of the things he did as soon as he got out of that prison was to ask Jeff to track Charley down. He’d been tempted to do it since she left weeks ago, but he didn’t want his manager to ask any questions. After what happened at the awards show, however, he told Jeff about Charley being a Lycan and told him to track her down.

“And the PIs we hired?”

“Without a social security number, they can’t do much. We didn’t get one because she’d negotiated her contract so that she was hired through a shell corporation based in the Bahamas. We also don’t have a lot of pictures of her,

and she doesn't have any social media accounts. But, I did mention she was a Supernatural Being, so that might help them. I'm sorry—"

"It's not your fault." Devon's fingers curled so tightly around the glass he feared it would break. Placing it back on the coffee table, he got up. "It's fine, thanks for trying," he said as he walked over to the window.

"I'll keep you updated."

"Thanks, Jeff."

When he couldn't sense Jeff's presence inside the penthouse any longer, he pressed his forehead to the cool glass.

Where are you?

He scanned the city skyline again, afraid to close his eyes as when he did, the only thing he saw was Charley's face and her mesmerizing eyes. Her scent haunted him like ghost, following him wherever he went.

He didn't know why he was so obsessed with her. Really, he should forget about her. But he'd already tried that. Somehow, Charley had wormed her way so deep under his skin he couldn't get her out. Maybe, it was because they were both Lycans. That somehow, when they met, he recognized that in her.

In any case, ignoring her didn't work, and now he needed answers from her.

But that meant finding her first.

The woman with Anderson obviously knew who Charley was, which meant she was likely part of this "clan" they spoke about. There was very little online about Lycans, mostly speculation and conjecture from social media sites, forums, and the oddball conspiracy theorist channels on video sites.

However, Devon was able to piece together a few facts that sounded like they were true. First, that Lycans were divided into clans that claimed a certain geographic territory. Anderson had been the first "Alpha" or leader of a clan outed during the incident in Connecticut as he'd appeared before a Senate inquiry a few months ago. Also, from the shaky videos he'd seen online, they seemed to be able to "shift" into their wolf forms at will, but there was no explanation how they did. After seeing the wolf from the footage and the fact that he didn't remember how he turned into one, Devon decided not to even attempt it. Finally, he'd read about some kind of club or bar where New York's Lycans were known to hang out. Apparently, this place had been around for decades, yet it was only recently that people started

to notice its existence. The more wacky conspiracy theorists guessed magic might be involved.

What was the name of that place?

Devon swore he'd read about it today. Taking his new phone out of his pocket, he opened the browser to the tab he'd kept up with the Internet forum dedicated to Supernatural Beings. Scanning the New York Clan-related posts, he found the name.

Blood Moon.

It was in Midtown, not too far from Times Square. Thirty or so blocks from where he was right now, so he could easily reach it on foot. Frankly, he couldn't even remember the last time he'd gone anywhere without his entourage of bodyguards and assistants, much less walked to any place.

But walking wasn't the problem. He was supposed to lay low until this whole thing blew over.

You don't even know she'll be there.

Glancing back out the window, with the brilliant lights of the city before him, he made his decision.

Finding Blood Moon wasn't as hard as they said in the forums. There was no sign outside, nor any other indication what type of establishment it was, but when Devon turned the corner and saw the sleek black doors from across the street, it was like a beacon to him and he knew he had found it.

He observed the line of people snaking around the corner, watching as two burly bouncers check IDs.

Lycans.

Just by looking at them, he could tell what they were, but he wasn't sure exactly *how*.

Now the only problem was how to get in.

He would never be able to get past them while wearing the black hoodie, jeans, and sunglasses he had on. He had initially thought Blood Moon was some kind of dive bar, but it was obviously a luxury nightclub with a stringent dress code. Normally, dress codes weren't for celebrities like him, and if he wanted to get in, all he had to do was show his face. But that would mean everyone would know he was there and he'd be mobbed, not to

mention, those bouncers would likely alert Lucas Anderson.

How the hell am I going to get in without getting noticed?

An idea popped into his head.

Nightclubs meant VIP areas, which meant VIP guests. And from personal experience that also meant a separate entrance and exit for guests who didn't want to be seen, usually the delivery or service door in the back.

Hunching his shoulders and shoving his hands into the pockets of his hoodie, Devon crossed the street, rounded the corner to the back of the building, then slipped into the first alleyway. He took off his sunglasses and sure enough, spotted an unmarked door along the wall. However, there were no knobs or levers on the outside and an electronic lock protected it, so it likely could only be accessed with a keycard or opened from the inside. So, Devon found a shadowy spot between the overhead lights, leaned back against the wall, and waited.

A tingle ran up the back of Devon's neck, causing his entire body to tense. He wasn't sure how, but he could have sworn he heard the creaking of a lever before he saw the door open. Sure enough, two people dressed in what looked like white kitchen uniforms slipped out, chatting and laughing as they walked deeper into the alley away from Devon. His gaze, however, remained fixed on the door which was now slowly swinging back to its original position.

Heart pounding in his chest, Devon darted across the alleyway toward the door, which was now nearly closed.

I'm not going to make it.

A wave of nausea hit him, and somehow, he found himself right in front of the door in a split second. His hand shot out, his fingers sliding between the small crack before it fully shut. As quiet as he could, he slipped inside.

The smell of food, alcohol, and unwashed bodies assaulted his nostrils. His ears picked up the faint, but distinct thrum of a bass line, as well as the sound of voices. Holding his breath, he crept through the darkened hallway toward the source of the stench. He walked past the tiny kitchen area toward the source of the sound and eventually reached the main floor of the club.

It looked like any ultra luxury nightclub in New York—modern black decor, low, but elegant lighting, and of course, it was wall to wall with people, most of them bumping and grinding on the dance floor. There was a small stage at the edge of the dance floor where a DJ spun a mix of the year's hottest dance tune. Behind him on the LED screen, a picture of a giant red

moon loomed overhead, casting a crimson glow over the entire room.

This had to be the right place.

Devon pulled his hoodie over his head and craned his neck around. There was a VIP area to his right, though there were only two tables occupied. He scanned the dance floor, observing the groups and couples gyrating along to the music. Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the sea of people.

The scents around him mixed together in a sea of aromas—all kinds of perfumes and colognes. He found that if he concentrated, he could filter them out and even trace where they came from. A whiff of pine from a blonde woman behind him. Mint and bamboo from the bald guy dancing with a tall, muscled man dressed in leather. Honeysuckle from the petite waitress carrying a tray of drinks who walked past him.

There was definitely a different kind of energy in this place. That rumble from somewhere deep inside him returned, sending a soothing vibration across his chest. As he brushed against the bodies dancing across the floor, he could somehow feel a different kind of resonance depending on who he bumped into. Most of the time there was nothing, but once in a while, there was a rumble that told him someone was *different*. Or perhaps, it meant they were the same as him.

He continued wading through the dance floor, and as he neared the edge, he spotted a large crowd gathered in the corner.

Bar, he guessed.

A drink sounded like a great idea right now, even if he couldn't even get a buzz from anything. Maybe if this was a special Lycan club, they'd have something that could at least help him take the edge off.

As he made his way toward the front of the bar, that prickling sensation along the back of his neck returned. Drawing closer, he saw something familiar that caught his eye.

Or rather, *someone* familiar.

The scent of ripe peaches hit his nose even before he could confirm it was Charley.

She wasn't alone, however. A blond man stood next to her and held up a glass to which Charley clinked with hers. There was something familiar about him too ...

The low rumble in his chest grew into a growl as he recalled where he'd seen that man.

Backstage at the music awards show. Getting cozy with Charley as they

spoke. He blew a kiss at her before he walked away.

Devon stood frozen to the spot, watching as they drank and laughed. Then, the man put his glass down, leaned close and caught Charley's chin between his thumb and forefinger.

"Motherfucker!"

The vibration from deep within Devon turned into a full-on growl as his vision darkened, the red glow bathing the room turned into a deeper scarlet. A knife-like pain dug into his brain, then cleaved him all the way down his body as if splitting him in half.

He thought he heard panicked screams and cries over the din of the club, but he didn't pay it any heed. His body crouched low to the ground as his hands—no, they were now paws—landed on the ground. Another deep growl ripped from his throat, and this time, it sounded fully animal. He lost control of his motor functions, but his body propelled forward, leaping into the air toward the bar area, clawing everything and anyone in his way as he focused on his target. A pained cry rang over the din, but he didn't have time to look back as his continued his trajectory.

Everything happened in slow motion, and for Devon, it was like watching a movie play out. Or perhaps more like riding a runaway train. He saw Charley's face turned toward him, expression changing from confused to horror. She pushed at her companion, then jumped back herself. Devon's head slammed on the bar, and stars exploded in his vision. He rolled back, but somehow found his footing, landing on all four feet.

Four?

Devon turned his head toward his reflection off the shiny black surface of an overturned cocktail table. But instead of his own face, he saw a furry muzzle, large canine teeth and glowing eyes staring back at him.

That was him.

He was the wolf.

The wolf glanced around, hunting for its prey. A satisfied rumble reverberated across its chest, as it spotted the blond man just a few feet to his right, struggling to get to his feet.

"Devon, no!"

Charley.

Devon paused.

The wolf continued to stalk toward the other man, and visions of death and blood filled his brain.

No! he screamed. *We need to listen to her.*

But the animal ignored him, and he could only watch, helpless and trapped inside his wolf's body.

Chapter 5

“Devon!”

By now, the DJ had stopped playing, so Charley’s scream rang across the room, over the commotion of the people around them as they clambered over each other to get away from the rampaging brown wolf.

There was no time to think about what happened or how Devon got into Blood Moon undetected. Adrenaline pumped into her veins as she saw the brown wolf stalking toward Adrian.

“Stop!” Using her Lycan speed, she put herself between Devon’s wolf and Adrian. “Devon, change back.” Would he even know how to do that, as a latent Lycan?

The wolf let out a growl, its eyes lit up with a wild energy. Charley was sure this was the same wolf, but there was something different about it. At the awards show, she had sensed the fear and anxiety in Devon’s wolf. But now, she could smell its anger and feel the waves of rage emanating from the animal.

Something had set it off, but what?

“Charley, get out of here,” Adrian urged from behind her. “I can take him.” He placed a hand on her shoulder and attempted to push her away. This only seemed to anger the wolf as it took two steps toward them.

Charley gritted her teeth and dug her heels in. “No, I’m staying.” She was somehow able to calm Devon the last time, surely, she could do it again.

The brown wolf snarled, baring its teeth, foam forming at the edges of its lips.

She gulped hard, but put her unease aside. *He doesn’t know what he’s*

doing, she told herself.

If he was adopted and never knew his Lycan parents, as Astrid had told her earlier tonight, then that meant he didn't have any kind of Lycan training. She herself had learned how to control her wolf at her Uncle Jackson's ranch in West Virginia, along with her brother and other cousins. It was vital for every Lycan to control their wolves so as not to reveal their secret or accidentally harm others. Shifting in public or in front of humans was forbidden and was the one rule their kind stuck to because the consequences were severe.

"Devon, please—no!"

Charley barely had time to blink before a thick cloud of smoke exploded near the brown wolf.

Smoke?

The smoke cleared in seconds, revealing the brown wolf lying on its side on the ground, deathly still.

Devon!

Charley nearly tripped over her feet as she scrambled over to the wolf. She lay a hand over its rib cage, the rising and falling of its chest told her he was still breathing. A relieved sigh rushed out of her.

"What the fuck was that, Blake?" Adrian exclaimed.

Charley caught sight of Eli Blake, who stood just a foot away from them. "What did you do?"

"He threw something at it." Adrian tapped his shoe on something on the floor—broken glass. "Did you use a stunning potion? Where did you get it?"

Eli's lips pressed together, but the rest of his face remained expressionless. "Don't tell anyone."

It was the most words Charley had ever heard him speak.

"Please," he added.

His request was understandable, of course, because the witches strictly controlled the use of potions. Although Lycans were their allies, they didn't just hand over their potions to anyone, and there were rules to follow when using them. Eli likely purchased the stunning potion illegally.

Or stole it.

Adrian scratched at his head. "I'm not sure how we're going to explain this."

"You don't have to," Eli said. "It won't leave a trace."

"Does it have any side effects?" Charley ran her fingers through the

wolf's fur. Her she-wolf let out a sad yowl.

"None. He's just stunned."

"Good." How Eli got the potion was none of her business. Besides, there were bigger problems ahead. She glanced down at Devon's wolf. Someone had probably called the Alpha by now, as well as Astrid. The sound of sirens in the distance grew closer, which meant the human authorities were also now involved.

"He's already changing back," Adrian pointed out.

Sure enough, the wolf's body was slowly shrinking, its fur receding back into human skin. Like before, Devon barely moved or made a sound once back to his human form.

Probably due to exhaustion.

Fatigue was normal for Lycans shifting for the first few times. Charley recalled that first time she did it, she had passed out. Her cousin Austin had to carry her all the way home and she'd been out for a whole afternoon.

"The Alpha will send someone soon." She gestured to a nearby couch. "Let's secure him for now."

Adrian and Eli picked him up and placed him on the couch, then sat on either side of him while Charley perched her hip against the sofa's arm, eyes fixed on the entrance. Minutes later, Astrid walked into Blood Moon. From the look on her face, Charley could tell her cousin was not happy to see her.

"Well, hello again," Astrid drawled as she made her way to them, carefully stepping over the broken glass and weaving her way around the overturned furniture. "You know, when I said 'see you soon' and 'don't be stranger,' this isn't what I meant, Charley."

"Hey, Astrid," she greeted nervously. "You sure got here fast."

"Warlock express. It was a good thing Dad was staying over after babysitting Annaliese when I got the call." Astrid's father was a warlock who could travel long distances in the blink of an eye. "So, what—him?" Astrid's voice pitched higher when her gaze landed on Devon. "Really? Charley, are you freakin' kidding me?"

She put her hands up defensively. "I swear to God, I had nothing to do with this."

"He just showed up, *Al Doilea*," Adrian added, using the honorific title used for clan Betas. "Me and Charley were just hanging out at the bar when this asshole shows up in Lycan form."

Astrid lifted a blonde eyebrow at Charley. "Hanging out, huh?"

“Really, Astrid?” Charley said in an exasperated voice. “Don’t we have more important things to talk about?”

“Wha—oh, right.” The Beta blew out an impatient breath. “We need to get Devon out of here, quick. Dad’s busy outside administering the forgetting potion, so he can’t take us away. Do either of you have a car?”

Eli raised his hand. “Me.”

“Good. Let’s take him back to Fenrir.”

The two men helped carry out the unconscious Devon, and Astrid and Charley followed behind.

“So, you were on a date with Hottie St. Vincent, huh?” Astrid nudged her with her elbow.

“What? Hottie St. Vincent?”

“I heard a couple of the girls in accounting call him that. Sooo?” Astrid waggled an eyebrow suggestively. “Getting cozy at the bar, huh?”

“We were just having drinks. As friends.”

Heat crept up her cheeks. Truth be told, they were headed into the more than friends territory, and Charley was all ready for the ‘distraction’ Adrian was willing to provide. One moment, he was telling her an amusing story about his last job with Lone Wolf and then the next, he was leaning over, touching her chin, and was about to kiss her.

Until they were interrupted by Devon’s rampaging wolf.

“And what about him?” Astrid nodded at Eli. By now, they had reached the parking lot in the back of the building, and Eli was leading them to the truck parked at the other end.

“Who—Eli?”

“Yeah. You’re not double-dipping are you? I mean, nothing wrong if you’re all getting hot and heavy with each other.” Astrid winked at her. “Consenting adults and all that.”

Her and Eli? Now that made Charley nearly burst out in laughter. “You’re kidding, right? No way.” Still, she was curious about the mysterious Lycan. “So ... do you know anything about him? I mean, you are our Beta, and he’s a Lone Wolf on our territory. Surely you know about his background.”

“Hmmm, kinda? I mean ... no one really knows much about him.” Astrid lowered her voice and slowed their steps so they were farther behind the three men. “He was one of the wolves kidnapped by the mages for their ceremony at Lake Hope. When everything settled down, he asked to stay and work for Lone Wolf but didn’t express any interest in pledging to the clan. Lucas

allowed it because we'd lost so many good people and needed the help. Come to think of it ... I thought Lone Wolves didn't have last names?"

"Huh. You're right."

It never occurred to Charley either, even though most of her family had been Lone Wolves at one point. Lone Wolves were Lycans who, for some reason or another, didn't have a clan. They had some privileges, like being able to freely move between territories, but without the protection of a clan, and they still had to follow the rules. They also typically didn't have last names. "Maybe Blake is a second name?"

Astrid tapped a finger to her chin. "Maybe. Anyway, we should get going. It's gonna be a long night."

Astrid and Charley joined the three men and climbed into Eli's truck. Astrid sat in front, while Charley and Adrian sat in the back, Devon between them. The drive, thankfully, was quick, and soon they pulled into Fenrir Corp.'s basement parking lot entrance, then headed to the private elevators that would lead them to the special underground holding facility underneath the building.

Lucas Anderson was already waiting for them by the time they arrived. To say he was furious was an understatement.

"Put him in a cell," he ordered Adrian and Eli, pointing to the metal doors behind him. His mismatched blue-green eyes glowed with the power of his dominant Alpha wolf.

"What happened?" he asked Astrid.

"Lucas," she greeted. "You remember my cousin, Charley Forrest? She was at Blood Moon and was a witness to the whole thing and helped secure Hale."

"Good evening, Alpha," she said, bowing her head respectfully and placing a fist over her heart, as was the typical greeting to an Alpha.

"Forrest? Connor and Evie are your parents, right?" Lucas asked. "And Jackson is your uncle."

She nodded. "Yes, Alpha."

"He's a good friend." The Alpha's shoulders relaxed. "Now, tell me everything that happened."

"There's not much to tell, Alpha. I was at Blood Moon with some friends when Devon showed up. He was already in wolf form when he came at us."

"Came at you?" The Alpha's gaze narrowed at her. "So, you think he specifically was there because of you?"

“N-no.” Was he? How could he have known she was there in the first place? How did he even find Blood Moon?

“You sound unsure, Charley. Are you sure there’s nothing else you want to tell me?”

This time, Astrid spoke up. “Alpha, Charley used to be Devon’s personal assistant.”

“But I quit. A while ago,” she qualified.

“But she was also the one who got him to shift back after the awards show,” Astrid explained. “She’s the gray wolf in the video.”

“I thought that was one of Arch’s guys. What were you doing there exactly?”

The Alpha’s scrutiny had her wolf cowering back, and Charley tugged nervously at her collar. “I work as Renee Rose’s assistant, Alpha. Arch asked me to help while she was on tour, with the baby coming and all.”

“I see.” The Alpha seemed to believe her. “Thank you for your assistance. Astrid, why don’t you show Charley out and meet me inside?”

“Will do, Alpha.”

With that, he turned around and entered the metal doors.

Astrid gestured back to the elevators. “This way.”

“Wait.” A desperate feeling clawed at Charley. “Can I stay?”

“You don’t have to,” Astrid said. “We know you’re not going anywhere. I’ll call you if we have any questions.”

“Please, Astrid.” Charley wasn’t sure why, but she just couldn’t leave. Her wolf, too, ripped at her from the inside, urging her to stay. “I just need some closure.”

Astrid hesitated. “I guess it’s okay. I mean, you are kind of part of Lone Wolf. You can watch through the monitors via the camera we have in the holding room. Just stay out of the way, okay?”

“Sure.” Charley swallowed, ignoring the knot growing in her gut. “I promise.”

Chapter 6

“Get up!”

Devon’s eyes flew open, but he quickly closed them as he was blinded by white fluorescent lights. “Not again,” he groaned. A familiar headache pounded away at his temple.

“I said, get up, Hale.”

He opened one eye a crack.

Lucas Anderson stood over him, bi-colored eyes ablaze with fury. He kicked at the bed frame, the sound of the metal scraping on the floor making Devon’s teeth hurt.

“Don’t make me repeat myself for a third time.”

“All right, all right.” Thankfully, this time, the nausea had faded quickly. He sat up, then swung his legs over the side of the bed. “I’m up.”

“Do you remember what happened?”

Devon scrubbed a hand down his face.

Blood Moon.

Charley.

The wolf.

“I changed again,” he stated. “Oh *fuck.*”

“‘Oh fuck’ doesn’t even begin to cover it.” Anderson glowered at him. “Do you know how much trouble you’re in?”

“Whatever.” Devon huffed. “Jeff’ll have me out of here in five minutes.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple this time.”

“What do you mean?”

Anderson smiled smugly at him. “Your management team has been made

aware of your actions—and the consequences—and we’re currently negotiating with them.”

“Jeff’s here? Then what the fuck am I still doing locked up?” He looked around—really looked around this time—and spied the camera in the far corner of the room. “Is he watching? Jeff! Get me out of here!”

“Do you even care about anyone but yourself, you asshole?” Anderson asked.

“Are you stupid or something? We already did this dance.” Rising to his feet, he poked a finger in Anderson’s chest. “You. Can’t. Touch. Me.”

“Do that again, and you can say goodbye to that finger,” Anderson threatened.

Devon huffed. “Just get me the fuck out of here, and you’ll never see me again.”

“Not this time. You’ll be paying for your actions, Hale. For real. And it won’t just be a slap on the wrists.”

“Ha. My lawyers will have me out—”

“That’s not gonna fly this time. Not with what you did to the poor girl.”

Girl? “What the hell are you talking about?”

Anderson crossed his arms over his chest. “Let me refresh your memory. Last night, you snuck into *my* club and then shifted in front of a hundred people, without thought or care for anyone’s safety. This time, you hurt someone.”

Devon’s stomach dropped. “You’re lying.”

“We caught it all on the security cams. Including how you snuck in the back and then changed into your wolf in the middle of Blood Moon.” This time, Anderson poked his finger in Devon’s chest. “As you were tearing through the club, a young woman got in your way. You slashed her with your claws, causing life-threatening injuries.”

“I-is she okay?” He could barely manage to ask, as his throat had gone dry. While he was no saint, he’d never physically harmed anyone. Ever. The thought that he had done something like that, even accidentally, made him sick to his stomach..

“Amy—the girl—was hurt bad.” Anderson *tsked*. “It wasn’t pretty, what you did to her. She was partying with her friends, celebrating her twenty-first birthday too.”

“I didn’t—”

“I can show you the photos if you like.”

The air rushed out of his lungs as guilt gripped him like a python, wrapping around his body, making it hard to breathe. “No need.” He swallowed hard. “I’ll take care of it. Of her. She’ll have the best doctors. She won’t pay a single cent.”

“She’s already getting the best care possible right now. But I’m afraid this isn’t the kind of thing that just goes away by throwing money at it. She’s also one of ours—Lycan under my protection. Her father isn’t very happy right now, as you can understand. He wants you to pay for what you did to her.”

“I will. I didn’t know ...” He slumped back down on the bed, then ran his fingers through his hair. “I can’t remember ... I couldn’t control it.”

“We gave you a chance,” Anderson reminded him, “to let us train you so you could learn how. Now you’ll have to face the consequences.”

“Then what the hell am I doing here?” He slammed his fists down on the mattress. “Why not let the police deal with me?”

“Because you’re one of us, Devon. You will answer to the Lycan High Council.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“The High Council oversees all Lycan affairs, including meting out punishment for crimes committed that hurt other Lycans or threaten our safety. They’ll probably recommend you go to our prison facility in Siberia.”

Siberia?

“You’re looking at five years or so ... if you survive that long. Most wolves go crazy out there with the isolation and such.”

Devon shot to his feet. “And what makes you think I’m going to allow myself to be subject to your laws? You can’t just disappear me, remember?”

“Well, we could go to human court—Amy can press charges. I could sue you in civil court, and you’ll be tied up in trials and appeals for years. Meanwhile, what will that do to your career? Your reputation? And that’s the best-case scenario.”

“Best case?”

“The council might decide you’re too much of a liability, and then the consequences will be graver. They might recommend you be put down if you commit a serious crime.”

“Put ... down?” Like an animal. “That’s insane.”

“You have no idea what Lycans are capable of.” The threat in Anderson’s voice was evident. “How do you think we’ve managed to stay hidden for centuries? Our influence goes to the very top—and beyond. I wasn’t prepared

to go nuclear on you when all you did was shift in front of millions people on TV, not when our secret was already out. But you hurt one of our own, not to mention, put our kind in danger. And for that, I'll crush you if I have to."

"No ..." He swallowed hard and for the first time in his life, Devon felt powerless. Insignificant. "Just send me to jail ..."

"I told you, that's not—"

"NO!"

The loud crash of the door slamming against the wall as it opened made both men start.

"What the—Charley?" He blinked, wondering if he was hallucinating or trapped in a nightmare. A familiar rumble vibrated across his chest.

It was definitely her.

"What are you doing here?" Anderson shouted. "I told you to go home, Charley." He glanced up at the camera. "Astrid, get in here!"

"Please, Alpha." Charley hurried over to his side. "You can't possibly allow ... I mean." Her light brown eyes darted briefly to Devon. "Don't let the council put him down."

The tall blonde woman from the last time came rushing in. "What—Charley! You said you would stay out of the way if I let you stay. Alpha, I'm so sorry." She attempted to grab Charley's arm, but she evaded her.

"Alpha ... please," Charley continued. "He didn't know. He's a latent, just like your aunt was. And wasn't she able to learn how to control her wolf, even in adulthood? Please, can't we just teach him? If he can show the High Council that he can learn, too, surely they'll be lenient."

Devon couldn't believe what just happened. Why was Charley, of all people, defending him? He would have thought she'd relish the chance to see him suffer after what he'd put her through.

Anderson blew out a breath. "If you hadn't burst in here, Charley, that's what I was going to suggest. I got the idea from you, actually."

"M-me?"

"Yes." He turned back to Devon. "There's a facility. More like a ranch, really. Out in West Virginia. They mostly rehabilitate Lycans who have lost control of their wolves, but I think they'll be able to help you. I want you to go there and get the training you need. I bet if you talk to your people, they'll agree it's the best decision right now, for you and your career."

"West—you mean, the Shenandoah clan?" Charley said.

Anderson nodded. "I was trained there myself. It's one of the best places

for him. I can negotiate with the Lycan High Council to make it part of his conditions for release.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” the blonde woman—Astrid, apparently—said. “It’s the best deal you’ll get, Mr. Hale. Go for a couple of weeks, learn how to control your wolf.”

Anderson continued. “Meanwhile, we can work with your management team and publicist to craft a story so you can come out of this with your reputation intact. Plus, no one has to know about what you did to Amy.”

Devon curled his hands into tight fists. “And if I refuse?”

“Like I said, you can deal with the human authorities, the courts, and the Lycan High Council.” Anderson gestured around him. “By the way, the council’s facilities in Europe aren’t as nice as what we have here.”

“Some say they’re quite medieval,” Astrid added.

“And if they want to take you, you’ll find yourself ‘disappeared’ one day, and you won’t even have a chance to defend yourself. Their enforcers don’t care about authorities or rights of American citizens.” Anderson’s expression was dead serious. “You’re lucky you’re on my territory, Devon. No other Alpha would have even let you live for what you’ve done.”

Devon swallowed hard. “Can I talk to my people?”

“Of course.” He nodded to Astrid and Charley. “Let’s go so we can give Mr. Hale and his team some privacy.”

He stared after them—at Charley—as they left. He hoped she would turn around and look at him, but she didn’t. A twinge of pain plucked at his chest, but he supposed he deserved it. He’d treated her so poorly since the day he met her.

Yet, she defended him. Why?

Once the door closed, he let out a long breath, then buried his face in his hands.

What the hell was going to happen to him now?

Chapter 7

“That was pretty dramatic,” Charley said once she, Astrid, and the Alpha left Devon’s cell. “And doesn’t the Lycan High Council have that cool new facility in Switzerland? I heard it’s pretty nice.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” the Alpha bellowed, making Charley and her she-wolf shrink back. “I told you to go home.”

“Lucas, I’m sorry, it’s my fault.” Astrid put herself between him and Charley. “I said she could stay and watch through the monitors if she stayed quiet.” She glared at Charley. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Charley wasn’t sure either. But when she heard that Devon was going to be put down, something—her wolf, really—snapped inside of her. It urged her to go in there and protect him. “You can’t be serious about putting him down, Alpha. We don’t do that anymore, do we? I mean, unless someone did something real bad.”

Astrid slapped a palm to her forehead. “We were trying to scare him, Charley, so that he would agree to training. See, we knew he would just walk out the door again unless he saw real consequences for his actions.”

“What?” Slowly, it dawned on her.

It had all been an act.

“It was part of our plan,” Astrid continued. “To convince him into thinking going to Shenandoah was his only choice.”

“Oh shit.” Charley cringed visibly. “And I almost ruined your plan.”

“And for the record,” the Alpha began. “I said it was only *if* he committed a serious crime that he would have to be put down. Thankfully, Amy’s a Lycan, and she’s already healing well, though Devon doesn’t know about our

healing abilities. But if he had killed her—or anyone else—he would have to face the consequences of his actions anyway. However, I want to give him a chance to learn how to manage his Lycan side.”

“Lucas and I talked about this,” Astrid began. “His management team is on board, too, if only to save his reputation and prevent future mishaps. See, we already had things under control.”

“I see.” She looked at the Alpha sheepishly. “I’m so sorry, Alpha. I was just ... concerned. Please forgive me. Tell me how I can make it up to you.”

Her Alpha’s blue-green stare fixed on her as he rubbed his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “There is something you can do.”

“Anything.”

“You’ll go with Hale to West Virginia while he undergoes training and report back to me.”

“Anything but *that*.” Charley’s head ping-ponged from Astrid to the Alpha and back to her cousin. “Please, I’ll do anything else.” Being stuck with Devon Hale on a farm miles from civilization for a few weeks? She’d rather sleep on hot coals.

Astrid shrugged. “The Alpha’s word is law. And you did ask him what you can do to make it up to him.”

“I need someone to keep an eye on Hale,” the Alpha said. “In the meantime, I think it’s best we try to dig into his background—and find his real parents.”

Astrid massaged her temple with her fingers. “If they abandoned him at a train station when he was a kid like he said, it won’t be easy.”

Devon had been abandoned?

Charley had no idea. All Astrid had said when they were at Lizzie’s was Devon had grown up in the system; she assumed his parents had died or that they were unable to care for him, not that they completely abandoned him. Her chest tightened at the thought that any parent would just leave their child. Even though her own relationship with her mom and dad wasn’t so great right now, Charley knew they loved her very much and would never just desert her.

“Make sure it’s done,” the Alpha said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.”

Nodding to the two women, the Alpha walked ahead, leaving them behind.

“Do I really have to go and babysit him?” Charley moaned. “Can’t

someone else go?”

“Sorry, Charley.” Astrid patted her shoulder sympathetically. “Besides, when was the last time you saw Grams, Uncle Jackson, and everyone else? I’m sure they’d love to see you.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Charley bit her lip. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to see them—she did miss all of them and the ranch—unfortunately, Uncle Jackson and Grams would have a *lot* of questions for her, including the current status of her relationship with her father.

And of course, there was the fact that she would be spending the next few weeks in the Douche Hole’s company. She glanced back at the door behind them that led to Devon’s cell.

Maybe I’ll be lucky, and he’ll take his chances with the Lycan High Council instead.

Charley, of course, was not lucky, which was why she found herself in the back seat of a black SUV next to Devon Hale the very next day, making their way to the Shenandoah Valley in West Virginia.

“We’re almost there,” the driver said from the front seat.

“Thank you.” She glanced over at Devon, who sat on the other side of the back seat, gazing out the window. They had left New York City after lunch, and he hadn’t said a word during the entire four-hour drive over.

Not that she was waiting for him to speak or anything. In fact, she was glad she didn’t have to make small talk—or any kind of talk—with him. If he had been surprised to see her this morning when he showed up at Fenrir, he didn’t show it.

He was, however, miffed at the fact that he couldn’t take his entourage with him. Astrid had explained Uncle Jackson had agreed to take Devon on, but only him. He couldn’t take his manager or assistants or bodyguards. Charley was only there to track his progress and report back to the Alpha.

And so, Devon had no choice but to get in the vehicle with her. He’d been cold to her the entire time, but she didn’t exactly know what to expect. After all, he didn’t even want to be here.

It was pure torture, though, being in such close quarters with him, his scent teasing her nose, reminding her of that night in Phoenix in his dressing

room.

And if she were honest with herself, she'd thought about that and him more and more in the last few days. The feel of his body against hers, his warm breath, his hands, the words he said.

You want this too, don't you?

She was pretty sure the sex between them would have rocked her world.

Charley ... what are you doing to me?

Oh, he was doing it to her too.

Say you want me as much as I want you.

What would have happened if she hadn't run away?

"That song was wrong, you know."

Devon's low baritone startled her, and for a second, she wasn't sure if it was him talking or her imagination. "What?"

"That famous country song." He snorted. "Even I know that the Shenandoah Valley is in Virginia, not West Virginia."

And now she remembered why she hated him.

"A small portion of the Shenandoah Valley is located in West Virginia," Charley began. "The Shenandoah Alpha's house is at the very edge of the border between the two states, within Jackson County which is West Virginia. But half of the ranch stretches over the border to Virginia where most of the river and Blue Ridge Mountains are." She crossed her arms over her chest. "And as for that song, the lyrics weren't actually referring to a place, but to a state of mind, about finding a place where you belong. Your home." It was hard to stop once she started, so she twisted the knife in a little more. "That song is a masterclass in songwriting, by the way, but what would you know about that?"

Devon's expression fell, and his eyes darkened. He said nothing, but turned back to look outside.

Serves him right.

She, too, faced toward her window, watching as the outside scenery started to look familiar, excitement bubbling up inside her. Her she-wolf began to stir, and rightly so. This was a special place for the two of them. It was where, a long time ago, she and her wolf had discovered each other. Charley had shifted out here for the very first time and learned how to communicate with her wolf and work with it. Her time here, under Uncle Jackson's tutelage, had shaped who she was. It was also the last summer before her music career as Charley Star exploded, the last bit of childhood

she had before everything changed.

She snuck a look back at Devon from the corner of her eye. Her heart ached for him—or at least, for what he had been and what his childhood might have been like. He had no one to teach him how to be a Lycan, maybe not even show him any love or affection.

You're being ridiculous.

Charley shook her head. She knew nothing about him and how he grew up. Sure, many kids in the foster system had miserable home lives, but there were some who were taken in by good or at least decent people. Perhaps he'd been one of those kids and he'd had a secure, safe childhood. He just grew up to be an asshole because that's what he was.

The SUV stopped right outside the all-white, two-story country style home with a wraparound porch and balcony. She recognized the vehicles outside, including the classic Black Dodge Ram parked closest to the stairs. Of course, the people waiting outside were familiar to her too.

“Charley!”

Grams practically leapt at her and took her into a hug as soon as Charley stepped out of the SUV. Though she was white-haired and over seventy years old, Lily Forrest looked like a woman twenty years younger, with the stamina to boot.

“Have you been starving yourself?” Slim arms tightened around Charley. “You barely have any meat on your bones.”

“Grams—ugh, I can't breathe.” Still, she waited for her grandmother's embrace to loosen before she let go. “And I'm not starving myself, I'm a Lycan, and my metabolism is perfectly regulated.”

“I know, baby girl.” Grams stepped back, her smile as bright as the sun. “It's just ... I've missed you so much. You hardly visit.”

“You saw me when I was on tour down in Charleston.”

Lilly put her hands on her hips. “Three years ago.”

Charley smiled sheepishly. “It's great to see you.”

“You too, pumpkin.”

“Well, don't hog her now, Momma,” came a deep voice behind Lilly. “Hey there, lil' Charley.”

Charley giggled and cocked her head at the man standing on top of the porch steps. “I ain't little anymore, Uncle Jackson.”

“No, you're not.” Jackson Forrest hopped down the steps toward her. “But you'll still be a little girl to me. All of you—Lizzie, Astrid, Olivia, and

my girls of course.”

Her heart clenched at the sight of her Uncle Jackson. Except for the smooth cheek that lacked a wicked scar, he was a carbon copy of father—understandable seeing as they were identical twins. When Uncle Jackson embraced her, she took a deep breath—his scent, too, was slightly different from her dad’s. There were traces of coffee beans, but her father’s was more fruity than her uncle’s deep, earthy smell.

“It’s great to see you, lil’ Charley,” he rumbled in that deep familiar voice.

“Same.” She pressed her cheek on his chest. “And I’m glad to be here.”

“You’re always welcome here.” He was mussing her hair when he stopped, his body tensing. “So, you must be our guest.”

Charley twisted her head back. Devon had apparently gotten out of the SUV and walked around to their side. The expression on his face was inscrutable, but she couldn’t help but feel the hostile vibes emanating from him, which was seemingly directed toward Uncle Jackson. He must have felt it, too, because she sensed his wolf go on defense.

Letting go of her uncle, Charley cleared her throat. “Alpha,” she began in her most soothing tone. “This is Devon Hale. Devon, this is the Alpha of Shenandoah, Jackson Forrest and his mother, Lily. They own the ranch, and you’ll be working with the Alpha primarily for the next few weeks.”

He eyed the house. “Nice place.”

Devon’s tone, however, revealed what he was probably thinking—that he thought the house was a dump. Charley gritted her teeth. What did she expect anyway?

Uncle Jackson remained unperturbed. “Welcome to Shenandoah, Devon. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“I’m sure you have.” He glanced around. “Do you have any staff to take my luggage up to my room?”

Charley bit her tongue to stop herself from going off on him. “This isn’t a hotel, and you’re not on vacation, Devon.” God, she wanted to wring his neck. “You can bring your own luggage up to the house.”

“You’ll be staying in the attic,” Uncle Jackson instructed. “Charley, you can stay in the blue guest room. By the way, Jordan, Austin, and Jack are in San Francisco visiting Katie.” His wife and Lupa, Jordan, was originally from California before she moved to Shenandoah. Their middle daughter, Katie, was going to school there and had recently finished her PhD. “Momma

and I just came back, but they're extending their stay for another couple of days so you'll see them later in the week."

"Oh, good to know."

"Why don't you show our guest the attic?" he suggested.

"Sure." Brushing past Devon, she went to the back of the SUV, opened the trunk, and retrieved her duffel bag. "Grab your stuff and let's go. Try to keep up."

Charley walked ahead of him, relishing the sound of Devon grumbling and complaining as he struggled to carry his two giant suitcases into the house, then up the main stairs inside. She led him to the door leading up to the attic room. "Guest bathroom is down the hall. Your room's up there."

"Up there? There's more stairs?"

"It's an attic," she reminded him. "And by the way, could you for one second, not be a rude asshole? These people are here to help you."

"Rude?" he said, incredulous. "I didn't say anything rude."

"Yeah, but your tone was. And—since you're here to learn how to be a Lycan—let me give you your first lesson. When you enter an Alpha's territory, it's customary to greet them with respect and thank them for allowing you into their territory."

He shrugged. "No one told me what I was supposed to do. Besides, you didn't do anything like that. In fact, you looked really cozy with that guy."

"That—ew, he's my uncle. My dad's brother," she emphasized. "And so, I have an open invitation to come and go as I please in his territory. But generally, you're going to have to ask permission before entering another clan's territory."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't exactly have clan, do I? So how would I know who owns what territory?"

Her patience was now entirely gone. "Listen here, Douche Hole—"

"Douche Hole?"

"I don't work for you anymore," she continued. "In fact, you're here to please *me* so I can tell my Alpha you've been a good little boy and you can go back to your sex, drugs, and rock and roll lifestyle. These are good people—my people." She was snarling now, but she couldn't control herself. "If you hurt any of them or if you offend them—and if you make my grandmother shed one tear—I'm going to end you, you hear?"

Charley had been so distracted by her heated tirade that she didn't realize she had backed Devon up against the door, their bodies nearly touching. She

had her neck craned up, and if he bent down, their faces would be centimeters away.

His firm lips spread into a smile. “I don’t know if I’m turned on or scared. Maybe both.”

Heat unfurled up her neck and into her cheeks as she took a step back. “I—I—” She wanted to kick herself for sounding flustered. Straightening her spine, she smoothed a hand down her thighs. “Rest up, you’ll need it.”

“Is it because I’m going to need all my strength to *please* you?”

His low voice caressed her skin like soft velvet. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“Whatsamatter, Charley?” His sky-blue eyes twinkled. “All talk and no action?”

Bastard.

God, how she wanted to smack that smug look off his face. “This is your only warning.”

Turning on her heel, she walked toward the guest room, yanked the door open, and stormed in before slamming it behind her. Tossing her duffel in the corner, she threw herself on the double bed and buried her face in a pillow.

This was going to be a long couple of weeks.

Chapter 8

Devon watched Charley storm away, smiling to himself.

Fuck, he loved watching her get all riled up. In the time she'd been his assistant, he'd never seen this side of her. He'd seen her frustrated and try to hide her anger, but she never let it out, no matter how badly he treated her.

Except that last time, in Phoenix.

He'd seen a bit of that in her tonight—the fire in her eyes, the rage in her voice, and that damned sexy mouth so close to his. Her scent, too, somehow became stronger when she was mad.

This must be some new kink, because he wasn't lying—he'd been turned on by that display. His zipper was practically leaving marks on his rock-hard dick right now.

Though he could barely admit to himself, he couldn't remember the last time he wanted anyone like he did Charley. It was like a fire burning inside him, and the only way to quell it was to fuck her brains out. He was pretty sure the sex between them would be epic.

Yes, he didn't just want to have sex with her. He also wanted to feel her body pressed against him afterwards. To run his fingers through her hair and down her arm, and nuzzle at her neck to breathe in her delicious scent. Wanted to wake up next to her and—

What the fuck?

He was *not* a cuddler.

Get her out of your head.

Not wanting to be caught by his hosts with a giant erection tenting his jeans, Devon decided he should check out his room. When he opened the

door, he moaned aloud.

More stairs.

He grumbled to himself as he glanced up the long flight of stairs. Gritting his teeth, he grabbed his stuff and began the long, arduous trudge up. When he reached the top, he dropped his suitcase with a tired groan, then shuffled forward, surveying his surroundings.

Charley was right about one thing: this was no hotel. And this was barely a room. The attic space was clean but sparse. There was a twin bed in the middle, a side table with a lamp, and a small desk and chair by the window as well as a dresser.

“Fuck my life.”

Devon plopped down on the lumpy bed and covered his face with his hands.

I shouldn't have agreed to this.

But he didn't have a choice. Jeff and Lauren, not to mention his lawyers, had begged him to accept the terms Anderson had laid out.

“The videos are bad,” Jeff had said.

“Real bad, Devon,” Lauren had added. “The blood ... that poor girl. I don't think I'd be able to help you if those leaked out.”

“This is a good deal; you should take it,” his lead lawyer had advised. “It'll save you a lot of time and money and keep you out of legal trouble.”

“Look,” Jeff had continued. “You know I always take care of you, right? Just play by their rules for now, and I'll find a way to get you out of this agreement. We'll have you back on tour in no time, and this all will be a distant nightmare. Besides, how bad could this training be? Maybe it'll be like those ayahuasca retreats everyone's doing these days. Sit around, get high on psychedelics. Bang a drum or something. It might be good for you.”

And so, what other choice did he have? He could only agree as his team threw him to the literal wolves.

You're one of those wolves, he reminded himself.

Devon rubbed a fist over his chest, something he found himself doing a lot when he was by himself. He was alone, but ... not. It was like he knew there was someone with him—or something inside him.

His wolf.

Every now and then, he would try to find traces of it. He swore he could feel a rumble in his chest once in a while. The last time was yesterday when Charley burst into his cell at Fenrir, trying to save him.

That's what she had tried to do, right? She was saving him from being put down. He should be grateful to her.

"Fuck that."

Pushing himself up, he kicked at the bed. He was Devon *Fucking* Hale. He didn't need saving.

Should have fought harder to get out of this "training."

Right now, a million scenarios ran through his head at what he could have done.

He should have told Anderson, Jeff, Lauren, and his lawyers to fuck off. Deal with the consequences later. Surely, he had enough fuck-you money that he could retire from music. Buy a remote island and live there comfortably for the rest of his life, free of this Lycan shit.

Huffing, he walked over to the only window in the room. They were surrounded by so much greenery and trees and rolling hills. There were a few structures scattered around, mostly barns and pens. He couldn't see any neighboring houses either, but from what Charley had said, this place had to be huge. There might not be any other people for miles and miles.

His first instinct was to take a picture, but he remembered that he didn't have his phone with him. Another one of the "conditions" of his bargain with Anderson. There was a landline in the house, but he was allowed to call Jeff once a day, if only to prove he was alive and not being mistreated.

Devon leaned his head against the cool glass. When was the last time he'd been outside the city, much less the woods? Never. He hardly went on vacation, and when he did, he usually went to party and blow off steam at some cosmopolitan city like London or Tokyo, or hopped on his private plane to exotic beach getaways with whatever flavor of the month model or actress he was dating. It wasn't like any of his foster parents took him fishing or camping, not when the money they got from taking him went to whatever vice—usually drugs or alcohol—they were deep into.

A knock at the door jolted him out of his thoughts.

"Mr. Hale?" came the muffled voice that sounded like Lily Forrest—Charley's grandmother, apparently. He didn't see much resemblance, but maybe Charley took more after her mother's side.

"Mr. Hale?" Lily repeated. "Are you awake?"

Devon contemplated ignoring her, but recalled Charley's threat about making her grandmother cry. Taking the stairs two at a time, he reached the door and peeked out. "Yeah?"

“I just came to tell you dinner is in fifteen minutes,” she began. “Six o’clock sharp, every day. And breakfast is at seven, after morning chores are done. Lunch is usually two, depending on how busy it gets around here.”

“I’m not hungry right now. I’ll eat later.”

As her sharp eyes bore into him, Devon had a feeling Lily Forrest wasn’t just some sweet old grandmother type. “You don’t come to my kitchen for meal times, you don’t eat.”

Maybe Charley was more like her grandmother than he first thought.

“I see.”

Lily looked him up and down. “I hope so.”

Devon shut the door and trudged back up the narrow stairway.

He was here now, and there was nothing he could do about it. But that didn’t mean he had to do whatever inane “training” they were planning. Jeff had promised to take care of everything while he was away and do whatever it took so he could come back and resume his tour in a couple weeks’ time. Meanwhile, he just had to sit tight and hope this whole thing blew over, and then he could go back to his old life.

Thankfully, Devon had thought to pack some organic protein bars in one of the suitcases he brought, so he ate a couple of those for dinner. However, the delicious smells coming from the dining room—fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and apple pie—were hard to ignore. He wasn’t even sure if he was making that up in his head because how could he possibly smell it all the way up here in the attic?

In any case, he ate more of his protein bars, then went to bed, though mostly he tossed and turned for hours, wondering what lay ahead.

No one had told him what this “training” would entail. He didn’t think it was the wild drug-fueled retreat Jeff had tried to sell to him. That would be too good to be true. Maybe it was one of those hippie commune type deals where he was supposed to get in touch with nature and his feelings or his inner child. However, he couldn’t imagine Jackson Forrest leading a sharing circle where they talked about their childhoods. While Devon was no lightweight, Forrest was huge—nearly seven feet tall and as broad as a barn. He was probably in his late fifties, but like Lily, he didn’t look his age. He

should have been an MMA fighter, not a farmer.

So, what the hell was he supposed to do here?

Exhaustion finally caught up with him, and he fell asleep sometime around three o'clock. It was mostly a dreamless sleep, though, at one point, he could have sworn he dreamt of loud sounds—like a bell or loud banging, then possibly shouting.

When he woke up, bright sunlight streamed through the single window. As he sat up, his stomach made a loud noise.

God, I'm starving.

Glancing woefully at the empty box of protein bars, he got up and grabbed some clothes and his shaving kit, then trekked down to the bathroom. After getting showered and dressed in jeans, a gray henley, and Italian leather boots, he made his way to the kitchen, following the trail of what smelled like bacon, eggs, bread, and pancakes in the air.

When he entered the kitchen, he saw Lily loading up the dishwasher, while Charley was busy cleaning up the table. Sunlight from the window lit her up from behind, bathing her in an ethereal glow, and as she lifted her head to meet his gaze, he stopped short, lost in the depths of her candy-colored eyes.

He could have stayed like that forever, if his stomach didn't make an embarrassingly audible growl.

The corner of Charley's mouth lifted, and she quickly grabbed an empty dish, turned around to hand it to Lily, then busied herself with wiping down the counters.

"Good morning," Lily greeted nonchalantly. "Did you have a good beauty sleep?"

Devon answered with a noncommittal hum, then stalked over to the kitchen table. "Looks like it was a good breakfast." It took all his willpower to stop himself from sweeping up the crumbs of what looked like cornbread into his mouth and licking up the remains of the scrambled eggs in the lone serving dish on the table.

"It was." Lily closed the dishwasher, then perched her hip on the counter before folding her arms over her chest. "We start at five a.m. around here, Mr. Hale. Jackson tried to wake you up when you didn't show up this morning."

"And how was I supposed to know that?" Hunger made him snap at the older woman, but she hadn't exactly been holding back with her passive-

aggressiveness either.

Lily snorted. “If you had shown up to dinner, he would have told you last night and explained how things work around here. First bell is to wake you up at four thirty, second is a five-minute warning before morning chores begin.”

“Chores? What—”

“You’re finally up.”

Devon’s head whipped back to where Jackson’s large frame filled the doorway leading outside. “Yeah. Needed my beauty sleep.” He smirked at Lily.

“Yeah, well, don’t make a habit of it. I’ll let it go because this is your first day.” He took a menacing step forward. “Next time, I’m gonna haul your ass outta bed. Now, come with me.”

“Can’t I get some coffee first?”

The long, awkward silence told him he could not.

“Don’t try me, boy,” Jackson warned. “Now, come with me.”

“I’m thirty-four, I haven’t been a boy in a long time,” he gritted out. “You can’t order me around. You’re supposed to be training *me*, right? What the hell kind of place is this anyway?”

The atmosphere in the kitchen changed, and the air grew thick with tension. Jackson’s eyes glowed, and when Devon attempted to open his mouth to speak, a strange wave of energy washed over him. A crawling sensation of fear crept over his skin, and he quickly shut his mouth.

“Let’s go, Rock Star,” Jackson ordered, the last two words dripping with contempt.

Devon decided it was better to just follow and trudged behind Jackson as he led them out of the kitchen. They walked across the vast field for what seemed like forever until they reached one of the huge barns rising over the flat plain.

Sweat poured down Devon’s face, and his shirt stuck to his chest, not to mention, his three-thousand-dollar leather boots were now covered with mud and grass. However, he soon forgot his ruined footwear when the smell—no, the stench—hit his nostrils. “What the fuck is this shit?”

“Shit is the operative word.” Jackson gestured for him to enter the barn first.

There were already a few people inside, bustling about and hauling pails, pushing piles of hay aside, or sweeping the floor with long scrub brushes.

Jackson retrieved a pitchfork hanging from the wall and handed it to Devon.

“And what am I supposed to do with this?”

“Work.”

“Work?” He glanced at the others, then back at Jackson. “What do you mean, work?”

Jackson’s jaw hardened. “You’ll start with mucking the hay, and then—”

“Hold on.” He held up a hand. “I thought I came here to get lessons on how to control my wolf. Not”—he gestured around them—“being slave labor. Aren’t we going to do some shit where we get in touch with our inner child—er, wolves?”

“That’s not how this works.” Jackson’s eyes blazed once more, and he pushed the pitchfork against his chest. “Just do as I say, Rock Star. Or you can forget about lunch. Or leaving here for that matter.”

“You can’t—”

“Yes, I can.”

Though Jackson did not raise his voice, the glow in his eyes intensified, and the air once again turned dense and suffocating. Around them, Devon could feel the tension emanating from the other workers as they all stood stock-still, waiting for what would happen next.

Swallowing audibly, he took the pitchfork.

“Go over there to Johnny.” Jackson cocked his head toward the young, dark-haired man in the corner who had a substantial amount of hay stacked in the corner. “He’ll get you started.”

Grumbling, he strode over to the guy—kid really. Johnny looked like he was about fifteen years old, with his tall, gangly frame and boyish face. His eyes grew wide when they landed on Devon—something he was used to whenever someone recognized him, which was nearly always.

“Y-you’re—”

“Yeah,” he said, cutting the kid off. “I am.”

“I just wanna say, I-I-I’m a big fan, Mr. Hale,” Johnny stammered. “Can I take a selfie with you?” He peeked over at Jackson, who was talking to a white-haired man. “Later, I mean. When we’re done mucking.”

“Sure, kid. So, you’re the ‘mucking’ expert, huh?” He waved his pitchfork around. “Show me how to do this.”

“I’m no expert, I’ve only been doing this for a couple weeks.”

Devon blew out a breath. “What? You’re what—fifteen? Isn’t this child labor? Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“Fourteen.” His voice cracked. “And I am ... I mean, I’m a freshman at the high school in town, but I’m also doing my Lycan training with the Alpha on the weekends.”

“So, this really is training?”

Johnny’s head bobbed up and down. “Yes, sir.”

“And it helps you how?”

“Rock Star! Johnny!” Jackson bellowed from across the barn. “Stop yammering. That shit isn’t going to clean itself.”

The teen’s entire body tensed. “Y-Yes, Alpha.” Gripping his pitchfork, he pointed it to the pile of hay. “Uh, we should get started, Mr. Hale, sir.”

And so, for the next two hours, Devon and Johnny mucked out the manure-covered floors, dragged around pails of water, and scrubbed the floors. Every once in a while, Jackson would come over and inspect their work, correcting them or criticizing them on every little mistake they made.

While Johnny was eager to please and apologetic, Devon’s patience was running out. He was tired, starving, and his manure-covered boots were unsalvageable. The next time Jackson came over to point out a spot they had missed, Devon threw the scrub brush to the floor with a reverberating clatter.

“This is bullshit.”

“Actually, it’s sheep shit,” Jackson replied. “But please, Rock Star, tell me what’s on your mind.”

“What’s the point of all this? I thought you were going to teach me how I can turn into my wolf and back.” The rage simmering inside him was ready to explode, driven by his hunger and frustration. “You’re just using me for free labor. Or what—you get off on this or something? Wanna see the rich rock star knee-deep in shit, maybe sell a few pictures to the tabloids and make some cash? If that’s all you wanted, you should have just told me. I even know a few friendly paps who’ll split the bounty with you.”

Silence filled the barn as, once again, all work stopped, and everyone stared at them.

“Are you done? Good.” Jackson rolled his shoulders, straightening to full height. “First off, if you had the decency to show up to dinner last night, I would have explained everything to you. Next, I don’t care who the fuck you are, but you better give a fuck as to who *I* am. Here in Shenandoah, I’m the Alpha. You do what I tell you to do. I’ve been doing this since before you were born, boy, so don’t think you know better than me.”

“And what is it you do? How is this supposed to teach me anything?”

“Learning to control your wolf is a process. And this is part of that process. You need patience, this isn’t a one-and-done thing.”

“I don’t have time for this.” Maybe it was his hunger making him hallucinate, but Devon swore he could feel something clawing him from the inside.

Something big and scary.

His wolf.

Maybe it was time to let it out.

Closing his eyes, he gritted his teeth, trying to push the wolf out of him. But it didn’t seem to budge. How did it get out the last time?

Devon struggled to remember the two times he did change. Everything happened so fast, and it wasn’t like he did anything unusual. He did, however, recall feeling angry.

He was no stranger to rage, especially during his teen years. How could he not be angry with the cards life had dealt to him, bouncing around from one foster home to another, seeing other kids his age in loving, caring families while he only knew neglect. Thankfully, when he discovered music, some of that anger and resentment lessened, and when he became rich and famous, he didn’t even care to think about his childhood.

But now, maybe, he needed that anger back.

Devon mustered up all the rage he could and fed it to his wolf. He scrounged around within himself, searching for that anger. Finding it in all the dark corners of his mind, he directed it at everyone who wronged him.

At his parents, for abandoning him.

At the system, for ignoring him.

At his team for not protecting him, despite the obscene amounts of money he paid them.

At Lucas Anderson, for sending him here.

At Jackson Forrest, for treating him like shit.

At Charley, for calling him a Douche Hole.

For walking away from him.

For making him want her.

For being with another man and letting him touch her and kiss her.

“Holy shit!” Johnny shouted. “Your eyes!”

Devon could feel the animal inside him raging, ready to pounce. “Come on then.” He ripped off his shirt and paced around. “I can take you. I can take all of you!”

“You sure about that?” Jackson said, but he was already unbuttoning the top buttons of his flannel shirt.

“Let me, Alpha.”

Devon’s head snapped toward the tall, looming figure stalking toward them. He looked even older than Jackson, his pure white hair pulled back into a ponytail. With his snowy beard and serious expression, he looked like a grumpy Santa Claus.

“Are you sure, Noah?” Jackson asked.

Noah whipped his shirt off, showing off a muscled torso that was impressive for a man his age. “Yep.” He shed the rest of his clothes and shoes.

Devon snorted. “Think you can take me, old man? Better get back to the old folks’ home.”

Noah let out a snarl, then shifted into his wolf form so quickly, Devon barely had time to blink. The gray wolf stretched out to full height, letting out a loud roar in challenge.

“Come on,” Devon muttered under his breath. He closed his eyes and channeled his rage, feeling the wolf inside him start to expand and grow. He let out a pained cry as his skin ripped apart while claws ripped out from his hands. A ringing in his ears blocked out all sound, but when it stopped, he found himself inside his wolf’s body once again.

Tear him apart!

It lunged for the other wolf, teeth and claws at the ready. However, the gray wolf easily evaded Devon’s wolf and sent it tumbling into a pile of hay-covered manure.

The laughter from the onlookers only fueled Devon’s fury.

Get up! he urged.

Shaking its head, his wolf sprang back up, then turned to face the gray wolf. However, it was nowhere to be found.

Where the hell—

Devon’s wolf let out a loud yelp as pain exploded in their shoulder. Somehow, the gray wolf appeared from behind and attacked them, pinning them down. Its teeth sank deeper into their shoulder, blood gushing out in rivulets. The brown wolf attempted to kick off its opponent, thrashing its body and kicking its legs, but it only made the gray wolf hold onto them tighter.

“Yield!” Jackson shouted, “while you still can.”

Devon and his wolf let out a whimper and went still. The gray wolf quickly released them, then swiftly changed back into its human form.

As Devon lay inside his wolf's body, he observed the older man, expecting him to gloat. But he only shook his head at Devon and clucked his tongue as he put his clothes back on.

"Your wolf is wild and undisciplined." Jackson loomed over Devon as he lay there in his wolf form, the bite marks on his shoulder still bleeding. "Strong emotions trigger the change in the beginning, which is why we always start training our pups once they reach puberty."

Devon cried out in agony as his body began to contract, his shoulder still throbbing with pain. More blood poured out as his limbs contracted and his skin shrank down.

Jackson threw something over him—a towel—and continued. "But anger isn't enough. You have to learn to be one with your wolf so you control it, and not the other way around."

The pain was beginning to dissipate, as was the tension in his body. Before he knew it, he was completely human. With a groan, his hand gripped his shoulder, now slick with his blood.

"Devon."

Glancing up, he followed the source of the familiar voice—Charley—who stood at the entrance of the barn. She made a motion to go to him, but Jackson held up a hand, stopping her from proceeding. She didn't seem surprised seeing him on the ground with this shoulder ripped open, so she must have been there for a while. How much had she witnessed?

"Get up," Jackson ordered. "You're already healing, but you need to get cleaned up. Go back to the house, put on some new clothes—proper work clothes this time—then see if Momma'll give you some food before you come back here. Beg her, if you have to."

The bleeding had stopped, but the pain remained. Devon wanted nothing more than to just lie there and die a quick death. Still, his pride made him scramble up to his feet. Securing the towel around his waist, he began to limp out. He walked by Charley, who inhaled a quick breath as he walked by but didn't make a move to help him. He hurried along, ignoring the pain shooting up his shoulder.

Once he was far enough away, Devon cursed aloud, thinking of the long, painful slog back to the house. This wasn't what he signed up for at all.

"Devon, wait!"

Releasing a pained breath, he spun around, shocked to see Charley chasing after him. “What do you want? Did you follow me to gloat?”

She stopped a few inches from him. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up. Grams will never let you in the house like that.”

Before he could protest, she slung his arm around her and slipped hers around his waist. Despite the throbbing ache in his shoulder, Devon couldn’t ignore how his stomach flip-flopped at their closeness. He stealthily breathed in her scent, the smell of peaches calming him and the tormented creature inside his body.

Charley led him to the side of the barn, toward a trough and a pipe faucet, then gingerly helped him sit on the edge of the wooden tub.

It hurt to breathe, but he managed to speak. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

Huffing, she produced a cloth bundle from the pocket of her hoodie. “Here. I thought you might be hungry.”

The smell of fresh cornbread hit his nose before she even opened the bundle. Hunger took over, and he grabbed the slab of gritty bread, quickly scarfing it down. “Still ... warm.” He finished it all in two bites, then leaned over to open the faucet and drink straight from the pipe.

“That’s for the animals.”

“Don’t ... care.” He took a couple more gulps of the warm water before he felt refreshed. “Th-thanks.”

With a sigh, she dusted off the crumbs of cornbread from the napkin, then dipped it in the trough. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“Did what?”

“Challenged the Alpha. And then fought Noah.” She tsked, then squeezed the excess water from the napkin. “Only an idiot would do that.”

“I—ow!” Pain shot up his neck when Charley pressed the wet cloth against his wounds. “Gentle!”

“I am being gentle,” she hissed. “You’re just a big baby. Stay still.” Her fingers dug into his good shoulder to steady him.

Her bare hands on his naked skin sent a shiver up Devon’s spine. It was almost worth the pain. “Who was that old man, anyway?”

The corner of Charley’s mouth tugged up. “Noah? He’s part of the Shenandoah clan. And he also happens to be Lucas Anderson’s grandfather.”

He winced, and not because of the pain. “He’s tough.”

“Yeah. Used to be a Lone Wolf—that’s what we call Lycans who don’t

have a clan—but he found his way here. Apparently, he had a nearly feral wolf, but somehow, Uncle Jackson was able to help him. You know, he’s very good at that. Teaching Lycans—young and old—how to control their inner wolves.”

“By making them do shit jobs?” he gritted out. “That’s how I’m supposed to learn this Lycan thing?”

Charley’s expression darkened, and she released her grip on him. “His methods might be unusual, but they work. It’s barely even been a day, and you’re not even being serious about training.”

“Serious? About this?” He motioned to his wounded shoulder, which surprisingly, looked like it was a few days old. The skin had knitted back together, and it was mostly yellow and purple. “Look at what he did to me. I should sue him.”

“You’re such a Douche Hole.”

“You keep saying that. What the hell does that mean?”

“It means combination douche bag and asshole. Douche Hole. A person so vile, he needs two insults. In other words, *you*. D.H.” She emphasized the last two letters.

“Oh, ha ha. D.H. Devon Hale.” He snorted. “You should try comedy.”

She didn’t seem to find that funny as her eyes were ablaze again. “For once, why don’t you get your head out of your ass, take a good look at yourself and think about the consequences of your actions?” Her voice broke, but she continued. “You could have really hurt someone. Like *really* hurt them and caused permanent damage, and they’d have to live with those consequences. All because of something stupid you did that was preventable had you given a thought to something other than yourself!”

Devon had seen Charley angry a few times now, but something about this was different. Her voice trembled uncharacteristically, and he did not miss how her eyes had gone shiny with unshed tears. Her fingers were curled into such tight fists that her knuckles had turned white.

“Charley—”

She spun around. “Don’t, Devon. Leave me alone.”

Something itched at Devon from the inside—his wolf maybe? It was telling him to do something. But what, he didn’t know.

Charley was angry, but it wasn’t just about him.

There was something else going on with her—something he had never seen before from his former assistant. He was now in her world—not just the

Lycan part, but her family too. It dawned on him that despite all those weeks she worked for him, he still knew very little about her.

That itch—scratching—came back, and he knew it would not go away. Not until he found out what the hell was bothering Charley.

Chapter 9

Charley picked up her pace as she stomped away from Devon. She couldn't sense him going after her, but still, she wanted to get as far away from him as possible.

She wasn't sure what happened exactly or why she'd gone off on that tirade.

Well, she *did*.

And it had nothing to do with Devon at all.

After Devon had left with Uncle Jackson, she had felt sorry for him, knowing he hadn't eaten since the day before. However, she didn't want to interrupt his training, so she decided to wait for an hour or two before sneaking out of the house with some warmed-up cornbread.

Devon had just shifted into his wolf when she arrived at the barn. Because he was in the middle of a fight with Noah, Charley could do nothing but watch as the older Lycan defeated him.

Still, seeing him hurt had triggered something in Charley. Her wolf, too, had nearly burst out of her, trying to get at Noah. If Uncle Jackson hadn't ordered them to stay away, she might just have done something stupid, like interrupting a fight between two Lycans.

It had hardly been a contest. Devon was untrained and made the same mistake almost all novice Lycans did—rely on their emotions to change into their wolves instead of tapping into their relationship with them. The grind Uncle Jackson put his trainees through was part of how he taught that. Lycans drew strength from their animal sides, and so they had to learn how to work together and share their bodies in order to get through the drudgery of

ranch work. That was something all new Lycans training at Shenandoah had to learn on their own, including Devon.

Stubborn idiot.

He'd deserved to get his ass handed to him. Noah could have seriously hurt him.

But that's not why you're running away from him, are you?

No, Charley admitted to the small voice in her head. It wasn't.

Her purposeful strides turned into a sprint as soon as she spotted the main house in the distance. Grams was probably taking a nap as lunch wasn't for another hour or so. She thought of going to her room or maybe taking a cold shower to cool off, but instead, she headed to the living room.

Creeping in, she made her way to the old-fashioned upright piano against the wall. Framed photos crowded the top board—all the grandkids, of course. Austin and Katie holding newborn baby Jack during Christmas. The boys—Arch, Anthony, Cross, Gunnar, Cliff, and Jacob—in their superhero pajamas during a sleepover. Another one showed Olivia, Charley, Liz, and Astrid in ballet outfits. Then there was one of all of them piled together on the floor in sleeping bags in the old treehouse her uncles had built not far from the main house. Countless photos from her childhood, displayed proudly for everyone to see.

To her surprise, there was also a framed picture of Charley and Renee's first hit album. She couldn't help but giggle at the ridiculous outfits they were wearing. It was the height of fashion for tween girls at the time but definitely over the top.

Letting out a long breath, she sat herself down on the bench. The wood was cleaned and still shiny. Grams must polish it regularly even though the only person who played it—her cousin Katie—hadn't lived in the house for years. She opened the lid and tentatively placed her fingers on the ivory keys, then began to play and hum.

It was a simple melody, something she'd been working on in her own time. She glanced up at the album cover again, this time, smiling as she remembered all the wonderful memories of her time as Charley Star, most of them because of Renée. She'd been bugging Charley to write her a song the last couple of weeks, but she'd been noncommittal. However, reconnecting with her old friend had somehow sparked back that urge to make music again. A melody built inside her head, the notes weaving together, the words leaving her lips of their own accord.

I know sorry ain't gonna cut it
For leaving you behind.
You made me who I am today
Another best friend like you,
I'll never find.

Charley knew she should grab her phone from upstairs and record what she was playing. But she couldn't stop now, not when the creative juices were flowing so easily from her mind to her fingers. This song was about her oldest friend.

A song about the past.

About regret.

She'd only been seventeen, yet Charley had had more experiences than most girls her age: Hit show, gold albums, millions of screaming fans. She was on top of the world.

They had just wrapped up filming the latest season of Wonderland Divas. Renée had gone home to Atlanta, so Charley was alone with her costars. One of them was Tyler, who'd joined them this season. He was cast as Charley's love interest, and as these things went, the lines between fiction and reality had blurred for her. She had a major crush on him and was desperate to impress him.

A couple of the cast members were partying at a hotel suite, and Tyler somehow found a way to sneak in some alcohol. Charley drank some, and though she didn't get drunk, she pretended to be. Then Tyler suggested they take his brand-new car out for a spin. Two other cast members agreed.

Charley knew they shouldn't have let Tyler drive, not in his state. But peer pressure and her need to look cool in front of Tyler had gotten the best of her. Besides, Tyler hadn't drunk that much, right?

They sped down Sunset Boulevard, the arrogance and hubris of youth rushing through them, convincing them that they were invincible. The alcohol only fueled that feeling, of course. That's when the truck came out of nowhere.

The two passengers in the back suffered broken bones and concussions.

Tyler's spine was broken in two places. He would never walk again.

Being Lycan, Charley had survived with barely a scratch. And thanks to her Uncle Daric's forgetting potion, no one would ever know she was there.

But Charley would never forget.

Charley pushed down on the keys a little harder, as if that would make her memories disappear. Some days, she wished she had taken the forgetting potion too. The only other person who knew what happened was Renée. Since Charley couldn't tell her about being a Lycan then or about the forgetting potion, she made up a story about sneaking away from the scene of the accident and Tyler and the others being so drunk or possibly concussed that they didn't remember her there. Her friend had promised to keep her secret.

I wish I could tell you why.
Your friendship meant
the world to me
And I really did try.

Renée had been so understanding about the entire thing and why Charley decided to leave show business.

Her father, on the other hand—

“That was fantastic.”

Charley's fingers froze, and she quickly slammed the lid on the piano. She stood up, turning her head to face the intruder. “What are you doing here?”

Devon—who still only wore a towel around his waist—sauntered into the living room. “What was that? Who's it from?”

She glanced back at the framed album cover, then quickly turned it facedown. “No one you know.”

He cocked his head, blue eyes boring into her. “It's yours, isn't it? Why didn't you tell me you could write songs?”

“And when would I get a chance to tell you?” She planted her hands on her hips. “While I was scurrying around Cincinnati, looking for chickpea pasta? Or when I was picking up your green juice from that place in Malibu? Or—”

“You did try to tell me”—his jaw hardened—“when you said my song sucked.”

“I didn't say it sucked. I said it was missing something.”

He paced around, scratching at his chin. “You just made up that song now, didn't you? That was amazing. Don't you have a demo or something? Or an agent? How come you've never written for anyone?”

“I just ... I haven’t thought about it.” All The Wonderland Divas songs had been written by Spencer Corporation employees, and thus owned and controlled by them. Charley had been writing her own stuff since she was young, but she had never let anyone listen to them, except Renée

“You have to write for me.” He said it like it was a command, not a request. “Or teach me how to write like that.”

“Oh yeah? And why would I do that?”

“Because I need you.”

Charley’s heart did a little somersault. “E-excuse me?”

“I mean,” he began, clearing his throat, “I need your talent. I’d give you credit, of course. And you’d earn royalties each time the song is played. Think of the money you’ll get from streaming alone.”

“Not everything is about money, Devon.” She didn’t need his money thanks to her own residuals and investments, but she wasn’t about to tell him that.

But that did give her another idea.

“I’ll tell you what, Devon,” she began. “I’ll help you write a song, but you have to do something else for me.”

He looked at her skeptically. “And what is that?”

“You have to go through the training with Uncle Jackson. For real.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Do what he tells you—without complaining—so you can learn to control your wolf. Then we’ll work on writing songs here every night after you finish work.”

“That’s all?”

She chuckled. “You really think it’s going to be easy? After what you went through today?”

“Pfft.” He crossed his arms under his chest. “I can do the work. I just thought it was stupid.”

“Oh, and you’ll cut the attitude, too, D.H.” She smirked at him. “Think you can handle that?”

His silence indicated he was thinking of it. A moment later, he said, “Okay, whatever. Just help me.”

“Fine.” She held out her hand. “You have a deal.”

“Great.”

When he took her hand, the most delicious tingle went up Charley’s arm. Awareness of how naked he was fizzled her brain, and her gaze lingered a

little too long on his muscled biceps and chest. Her cheeks turned hot when she met his sky-blue gaze, the twinkling behind them telling her that he definitely knew she was checking him out.

“Okay,” she croaked, then pulled her hand way from his grip. “Get dressed and go back to work. We’ll meet here after dinner.”

“It’s a date.” The smile on his face made his handsome face light up.

She ignored the way her stomach swooped at those words and his grin. As she watched him saunter off, she had one thought in her mind.

I hope I won’t regret this.

Charley didn’t think Devon would last even a day, but to her surprise, he took his training seriously. For the next three days, he showed up on time in the morning for work and mealtimes, did whatever Jackson told him, and all without a single complaint.

And as she promised, they got together in the living room to work on his songwriting every night.

“I like that last one,” Charley said from where she sat at the piano, playing a sequence of chords. “But try it like this, and see how it sounds.”

They had also unearthed an old guitar from the storage shed—probably Austin’s at some point—which Devon used to follow along. As he sat on the couch, he repeated what he played, strumming out the chords. “How’s that?”

“Yeah, definitely better with that diminished chord.”

While she already knew he was a great performer, Devon really surprised her with what an amazing musician he was. He was a quick learner, plus he had some unique ideas even she hadn’t thought about. She thought this would be a painful process, which she was willing to go through if only to get him to take his Lycan training seriously, but she didn’t expect to actually enjoy making music with him.

“I still don’t know what was wrong with ‘First Feelings.’” Taking the guitar off his lap, he leaned it against the couch. “I thought I did everything right. I was there for almost every hit song Kurt wrote for Speed Run, and I just ... did what he did.”

“Maybe that’s the problem. The songwriting process is different for everyone. It’s personal, really.”

“How did you learn? Who taught you?”

“My mom, mostly.” She smiled to herself, thinking of how it all began for her—sitting with her mom at the piano when she was only six years old while Dad and Cliff roughhoused on the living room floor. “You know, she always said that to write songs, you really have to open yourself up. You have to be authentic. Raw, even. You must be true to yourself.” Something in her gut prickled as she thought back to Devon’s first song. “I think that’s it. That’s what your first song lacked. It didn’t quite feel like you.”

“And what am I supposed to feel like?”

Charley started as she felt his presence beside her on the bench. He had moved so fast, she hardly noticed, and she wondered if he did, too, because for a second, she saw the flash of surprise in his sky-blue eyes. This close, his scent was stronger, and despite herself, she took in a whiff. Her stomach did that swoop thing again.

Slowly, his head leaned down, and she found herself titling her head back slightly.

“Hello, hello.”

They both jumped back at the sound of Lily’s voice.

“Hey, Grams,” she greeted, quickly getting to her feet.

“I thought you two might want to take a break.” Lily raised the tray in her hands, which had two cups on it. “A hot chocolate break.”

“From scratch?” Charley asked.

Lily smiled knowingly. “As if I would make it any other way.”

“Let me get that for you.” Devon took the tray from her and placed it on the coffee table. “This smells wonderful, Lily.” He inhaled. “Cinnamon ... fresh grated nutmeg ... and peppermint?”

“Charley’s favorite,” she added. “I added some to yours, too, if that’s okay?”

“That’s great, thank you Lily,” he said.

“I hope I wasn’t interrupting,” Lily said. “You two sure are working very hard.”

Devon took a sip of the hot chocolate. “I hope it’s not too much trouble that we’ve been taking over your living room.”

“Not at all.” Lily strode over to Charley and placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “I miss hearing your voice and your playing. It’s nice to hear you making music again, Charley.”

“Again?” Devon’s brows furrowed together. “What do you mean?”

Oh no. “Grams, please—”

“Why, yes.” Lily took the frame with Charley and Renee’s album and placed it back upright, then nodded at it. “We’re all so proud of her.”

“Devon—”

But she was too late. Devon moved swiftly from the couch to the piano and snatched the frame away. His expression changed from confusion to surprise as his eyes darted back and forth from the album cover to Charley. “You ... this is you?”

“Was. It was a long time ago.”

“Oh, my God.” Devon looked incredulous. “I used to see your face on billboards on Sunset.”

“That was a long time ago,” she said sheepishly. She really didn’t want him to find out about her past.

“Are you wearing flared jeans? And neon hair ties?”

She retrieved the photo frame and hugged it to her chest. “That was the Spencer Channel stylist who put me in that outfit. I had nothing to do with that.”

“I’m just teasing, Charley,” he said. “I’m just ... this is incredible. Why are you working as a PA, then? You should have your own career, your own albums and concerts, just like Renée.”

“She was always the better singer and performer,” she admitted.

“But you were cuter, though. If I was a teenage boy and I saw you, I would totally have crushed on you hard.” He winked at her. “Charley Star.”

Charley didn’t know if she wanted to die of embarrassment or jump for joy at his confession. “Ugh, please don’t. I didn’t like that name they chose. I always thought it was too narcissistic.”

“But it’s true, though,” Grams interjected. “You are a star. And your mom gave you that middle name.”

“Your mother named you Star?” Devon asked.

“My second name is ‘Tala.’ Charlene Tala Forrest,” she explained. “In Filipino, ‘tala’ means ‘star.’ Mom’s grandmother had been some famous singer in the Philippines before she moved to the States with her husband, who was an officer in the US Navy.”

“Maybe she knew you would be a star someday,” Lily offered.

“What happened, though? Why did you stop performing?” Devon frowned. “You also never finished your show.”

“It got cancelled,” she said flatly. “Like I said, it’s in the past. Can we

talk about something else?”

Perhaps sensing her annoyance, Devon grabbed the guitar where he had leaned it against the couch. “I, uh, just remembered, I left the capo in my room. Let me go grab it, then we can continue.”

As soon as he was gone, Lily turned to Charley. “Did I interrupt anything?”

“No, Grams.” Charley sat back down at the piano. “It’s okay, we really needed a break.”

“You two seemed mighty cozy when I came in,” Grams said with a knowing grin. “You know, Jackson says he’s been really proving himself these past two days.”

“Good.”

“He seems really committed to learning about his Lycan side.”

“That’s great to hear.”

“Maybe he’s inspired ... by more than just songwriting.”

“Grams,” she said in a warning voice. “Are you trying to imply anything?”

“What?” She placed a hand on her chest. “I thought you said you were just making music together.”

She didn’t miss that gleam in her grandmother’s eyes. “It’s a strictly professional relationship.”

“Uh-huh.” Her gaze softened, then she took the frame clutched in Charley’s hands and placed it back on the top of the piano. “I meant what I said about your music, though. You shouldn’t have stopped.”

“Grams—”

“You were doing so well in your career with your TV show and concerts. Charley, I know you took what happened with the accident hard, but you should have continued with your music, at least.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

Lily placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Then how about your father? The two of you—”

“I said, no!” She slammed her palms on top of the piano, the discordant clatter of keys making her grandmother jump away. “I knew I shouldn’t have come here. Can’t anyone respect my privacy?” Her chest tightened, and her throat burned with unshed tears. She wanted to kick herself, seeing her grandmother’s disappointed face. “Grams ... I’m sorry ...”

Lily’s expression softened. “Charley, your dad ... you know why he’s the

way he is.”

She closed her eyes. “I do know.”

When her father, Connor, and Uncle Jackson had been infants, some Lone Wolves had tried to kidnap them. Lily’s husband managed to rescue Uncle Jackson, but they had gotten away with Connor. Nobody talked about what happened to him after, but at some point, he’d been rescued by a kind old man who had adopted and raised him, along with her Uncle Killian, Uncle Quinn, and Aunt Meredith. Connor didn’t discover that Lily and Jackson existed until he was an adult.

“He didn’t mean to push you away,” Lily continued. “He just has trouble with expressing himself because of what happened to him. Maybe I should have tried harder to find him.”

“It’s not your fault, Grams. Nobody blames you.” Still, her father’s childhood issues weren’t an excuse for his actions after the accident.

I expected better of you, Charley, he said. How could you do this? To her?

The anger she’d been holding onto all these years simmered. “If he has a problem expressing his feelings, then he should have learned to deal with his shit instead of taking it out on me.” Slamming the piano lid shut, she brushed past Lily and stomped toward the exit—and bumped into Devon.

“Charley—hey, what the—are you crying?” His hands gripped her shoulders. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” she choked, pulling away from his grasp. “I just need to be alone.”

She ignored his and her grandmother’s calls and dashed out of the house. The night air cooled her burning throat and lungs but did nothing to soothe her aching heart. She needed to be alone, to think, somewhere no one would find her.

And she knew just where to go.

Chapter 10

Devon stood in the doorway, still shocked. It wasn't the first time Charley had run away from him, but something about this time was different.

"You okay, Lily?"

The older woman was on the verge of tears. "I'm fine, Devon," she sighed. "Just ... could you make sure she's okay?"

He didn't need any persuading to go after her. Seeing Charley so distressed had sparked an urgent need in him to comfort her. So, he hurried out of the house, hoping to find her so he could find out what was wrong. But when he stepped out onto the porch, there was no trace of her.

Devon closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His nostrils twitched, picking up the faint scent of peaches in the air.

There you are.

On instinct, he followed the trail of her sweet scent. Or maybe it wasn't instinct.

In the last three days, Devon had felt the change in himself. He didn't feel so angry anymore—had he always had that rage inside him? Strangely enough, as he did the backbreaking work Jackson piled on him, the more he felt at peace. He was tired as hell, but it felt good. And he looked forward to his songwriting sessions with Charley so much that at the end of the day, the fatigue disappeared the moment he stepped into that room with her.

She was different around him too. Maybe it was the music. Maybe it was being here. Or perhaps she'd always been this way, but had never shown this side of herself to him. Or she tried, but he was too self-centered to see who she really was.

His mind was still blown that she was *the* Charley Star of Spencer Corp. fame. She'd been so young at the height of her career, and so it made sense he—and everyone else—didn't recognize the teen star in the adult woman she was.

Devon followed the trail across the field to the line of trees at the other end of the property, passing a large pond on the way. He blinked, realizing that even in the dark, he could see clearly, and despite the long hike over, he was hardly winded at all.

Charley's scent—something he learned was unique to Lycans—led him to what appeared to be a house built up on top of a large oak tree. Focusing his hearing, he tuned in to a rustling up above. Glancing around, he found the ladder leading up to a hatch built underneath, which he began to climb.

"Hello?" he called out as his head poked through the hatch. "Charley?"

Sure enough, he saw her familiar figure sitting in a corner, hunched over with her arms wrapped around her legs. She lifted her head, then scowled.

"What are you doing here?" Unfurling, she got to her feet and dusted herself off. "I told you to leave me alone."

She didn't make a move to leave or stop him, so he climbed up into the tree house, the floor hatch slamming loudly as he let go. "Charley, what's wrong? Talk to me."

"Who the hell do you think you are, coming here after me?" Waves of anger—but also melancholy—radiated off her. "Just leave me the hell alone." When she tried to brush past him, he blocked her way.

"Not until I know you're okay."

"I *am* okay," she said through gritted teeth.

"No, you're not. Why are you upset at your grandmother? Are you mad she revealed your secret to me?"

"It's not a secret."

"Oh yeah? Why are you hiding behind the scenes, Charley?" His hand reached out, gripping her shoulder gently so she couldn't turn away. "Why are you wasting your talent, running around getting me lattes, when you could have an amazing career as a songwriter? Do you know how many people would kill to have talent like yours?"

Her eyes went wide as saucers. "You don't know anything about me!"

"Then tell me about you." His other hand came up to cup her cheek, and the contact of their bare skin sent the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. "Weren't you the one who told me about being authentic and raw? And

true to myself?”

“This is not the same thing.” She brushed his hand off.

“Isn’t it?”

Her lips pressed together. “You want to know about me? Fine. Remember how our show got cancelled? The Wonderland Divas?”

“Yeah.” He recalled reading about it, but didn’t really pay much attention to that sort of news. He wasn’t part of her fan demographic, plus he would have just been starting his career with Speed Run at the time. But he did recall a detail about her show. It was all over the headlines of the mainstream news. “You had ... there was a car crash right? One of your costars was hurt bad.”

“Paralyzed from the waist down.” She gritted her teeth. “I was there. We’d been drinking, and then Tyler crashed into a truck. My family—the clan—covered it up, made it look like I wasn’t even there. Since I walked away from it unscathed, they didn’t want me exposed as a Lycan.”

He saw the range of emotions pass across her face—anger, sadness, and lastly, guilt. “It’s not your fault, Charley. You weren’t the one driving. He was the adult and should have known better.”

“But he didn’t deserve what happened to him. To have his future taken away from him like that.”

“It’s sad what happened to him, but it still isn’t your fault.”

“That’s not what my dad said.” Her bottom lip trembled. “He was so angry at me—not just because of what happened to Tyler, but because I’d risked exposing us as Lycans and risking my mom’s career, which had meant everything to her and, therefore, to him.”

Her mom’s career?

A sob escaped her lips, so he didn’t have time to ask her more. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him.

“He didn’t let me explain,” she hiccupped against his chest. “He just screamed at me, at how irresponsible I was, and I was raised better. That he never wanted me to pursue music and I was too young.” Her fingers gripped at the fabric of his shirt. “That he should have fought my mom harder about not letting me go into show business.”

Devon held her tighter, unsure what to say. Her father sounded like a mean asshole, railing at her at a time when she was hurting with guilt over her friend instead of comforting her. But then again, part of him wondered if Charley’s father’s own guilt and fear were talking, that he had left his

daughter so vulnerable. Just thinking of her so helpless and lost made his chest ache.

“It’s okay, Charley,” he soothed, rubbing circles over her back. She returned his embrace, arms slipping around him. “It’s okay.”

He held her for the next few moments, refusing to let go. When her arms dropped to her side, he loosened his grip reluctantly. Her head tilted up at him, those light brown eyes capturing him, leaving him spellbound.

His hand moved up to cup her chin, and he began to lean down. She beat him to it, though, as she lifted herself up on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth against his.

Goosebumps raised all over his forearms as their kiss instantly turned fiery. There was no softness, no gentle preamble—just mouths and tongues and teeth clashing.

He backed her up against the wall, pinning her with his lower body, letting her feel his cock through his pants. She moaned and pushed her hips up toward him.

Trailing kisses down her cheek, he moved his lips to her neck, inhaling her sweet scent. He couldn’t help himself as he nipped at the soft flesh behind her ear. She let out a fierce growl, the sound going straight down to his groin, making him grow even harder.

He shoved his hands under her sweatshirt, pushing it up to expose her bra-covered breasts. Hooking his fingers into the cups, he yanked them down.

Fuck.

He sucked in a breath, his eyes greedily drinking in the sight of her naked tits. Large, but not overly so. His hands cupped the globes, and teased the puffy brown nipples. Leaning down, he sucked the hardened bud into his mouth. She arched her back, pushing more of her breasts at him.

He gave the same attention to the other breast, but it seemed she grew impatient as she attempted to grab at the front of his jeans. He let her open his fly and push his underwear and waistband down, then wrap her fingers around his erect cock.

The surprised breath she sucked in had him grinning to himself. He let her stroke him, allowed her to feel his length and girth and explore him, before pulling his hips away so he could kneel in front of her.

Her scent had somehow intensified, and he followed his nose to where it was strongest—right between her legs. He pulled down her sweatpants in one motion, the smell of peaches hitting his nostrils like a drug. With a soft

growl, he yanked down her panties, then changed his mind as he ripped them to shreds instead before diving in.

“Devon!”

She was delicious. He didn’t know how, but her pussy tasted sweet and tangy, juicy like her scent. He licked at her delicate folds, feeling her slickness bathe his chin and mouth.

Fingers threaded into his hair, grabbing at the roots and giving a hard yank. Snarling, he caught her wrists in his hands and pinned them against the wall as he continued his feast on her, teasing her wet lips and licking at her clit. She mewled, grinding her hips harder against his mouth.

“Devon, please, I need you.”

The words broke his brain, and he pulled himself up. He gave his cock a few strokes, then hooked his other hand under her knee, lifting it up. Her arms came around his neck, pulling herself up so he could point the tip of his cock at her, but then he paused.

“It’s okay,” she whispered in his ear as if guessing his thoughts. “I’m safe. We both are. Lycans can’t—”

He didn’t bother to let her finish as he impaled her on him, both groaning as he sheathed himself in her, her legs wrapping around him.

Fffuck.

He couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t make a sound, fearing that if he did, he would somehow wake up, and this would all be a dream. Charley moaned and then gave him a strong squeeze with her inner muscles. That jolted him out of his haze, and he began to move.

She gripped his shoulders tight, bringing her hips down to meet his every thrust, bouncing on his cock. With a savage growl, he caught her mouth once again, snaking his tongue between her lips to devour her, tasting her sweetness. She mewled against his mouth desperately, pushing against him urgently, as if their skin-to-skin contact wasn’t enough and she wanted to get even closer.

Each squeeze of her sweet pussy pushed him closer to the edge. He didn’t want this to end, wanted to feel like this forever—be inside her, her muscles gripped around him, her body completely and utterly his. But it was all too much. The sensations were dizzying, and he could lose control at any moment.

“I’m coming,” she cried against his lips. “Devon, oh God!”

Just when he thought she couldn’t get any tighter, her orgasm made her

walls squeeze him in a death grip. At this point, he just didn't have the power to stop himself; he would have had a better chance of pushing a waterfall up than to stop his orgasm.

Devon buried his face in her neck, inhaling as much of her sweet scent as he could as he let go, the orgasm hitting him like a ton of bricks. He kept going, thrusting into her as he came, his body shuddering as he emptied his balls into her. She, too, shook with her own pleasure, her tight pussy milking every last drop of come from him.

He wasn't sure how long he held her against the wall after they both came. All he knew was that he didn't want to let her go. He wanted to be like this forever, inside her, her limbs wrapped around him. He'd been waiting for this for a long time, and he didn't want it to end so soon.

Charley let out a whimper and unwrapped her legs from around him. Reluctantly, he let her down. Cupping her chin, he leaned down to kiss her, though his mouth landed on a cool cheek instead of her mouth.

"Devon ... we shouldn't have done that..."

He froze.

She regretted having sex with him.

"I mean ... thi-this isn't why you're here," she stammered. "You need to ___"

"It's okay, Charley." Planting his palm on the wall behind her, he pushed himself off her, then reached down to pull his pants and underwear over his softening cock.

"Wh-what?"

"You're right." He let out a chuckle, trying to sound flippant. Then he made the mistake of staring down at her big light-brown eyes. It left him feeling exposed, like she knew everything about him just by looking at him. "This was just sex. Fucking. Scratching an itch." He didn't miss how she flinched at his frank words.

She swallowed and nodded, then pulled up her own pants and pushed her bra and shirt over her naked breasts. "This won't happen again."

"Uh-huh." He took a step back. "I'll head back to the house first."

She nodded. "Take a shower as soon as you get home. If Uncle Jackson or Grams smell you, they'll know you have my scent all over you. I'll clean up before I go back to the house."

Fuck. He did smell like her. "Fine." Spinning on his heel, he walked over to the hatch and climbed out of the treehouse.

She was right, though. They shouldn't have had sex, no matter how much he wanted her. He had his life and his career to go back to. His endless days and nights of women, alcohol, and rock and roll. Well, he would never enjoy alcohol again, apparently. And the rock and roll would always be there.

As for women ... just the thought of having sex with anyone else right now made his skin crawl. His wolf, too, made its presence known, raking its claws at him.

“Oh, fuck off.” He kicked at a rock, sending it skidding across the grass.

It growled at him.

Devon stopped short.

It was there.

His wolf.

Communicating with him.

Sonofabitch.

“Oh, so now you show up?”

He didn't know how to explain it, but he could feel his wolf lay down and sulk.

Ignoring his wolf, he turned his head back, watching the treehouse. He waited for a moment, wondering if he would catch a glimpse of Charley.

Well, fuck this shit.

He would finish his training, then go back on tour. He had a whole life waiting for him at the end of this. Eventually, he would forget about Charley Tala Forrest.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he hunched over and began the long trudge back to the house.

Chapter 11

“Would you mind grabbing my baking pans, Charley?”

Charley didn't look up at her grandmother from where she sat on the porch couch, writing in a notebook. “Which ones?”

“I'm not interrupting you, am I?”

She'd been trying to write down the song she'd played the other night for Renee, but it seemed she'd lost the tune and the words.

Just like she'd lost her mind last night when she decided to have sex with Devon.

Worst part of the whole thing was she guessed correctly—the sex between them had been mind-blowing. Even now, she couldn't stop thinking about it. His hands ... his mouth ...

His thick, hard cock.

There, she said it. Devon Hale had an amazing tool.

She'd heard of the term *dickmatized* before, but she didn't think it was true. But even now, her pulse raced, and heat shot straight to her core thinking about it. Her pussy throbbed, wanting it—

“Charley? Did you hear me?”

Lily looked at her hopefully from where she poked her head out of the front door. Charley didn't miss how puffy her eyes were or how hard she gripped the doorjamb. “Sorry, which ones again?”

“The special ones, under the cupboards. I just can't be bothered to crawl down and root around in there for them anymore.”

“Sure thing.” She put the notebook aside and got to her feet. As she passed by her grandmother, Lily reached out, then retracted her hand.

“Is there anything else, Grams?” Unable to look her in the eye, Charley focused on her forehead.

“I ... n-nothing.”

Nodding, she ducked into the house, guilt weighing heavily in her. She’d hated how her and Grams had ended their conversation the night before. Charley couldn’t help it—her father was such a touchy subject. She understood that Lily was just trying to help, perhaps inadvertently blaming herself because of the trauma of Connor’s childhood from being separated from them.

It’s sad what happened to him, but it still isn’t your fault.

Devon’s words rang in her head, one of the other things she couldn’t forget about last night.

Maybe guilt was a family trait.

“You okay, lil’ Charley?”

Charley looked up at Uncle Jackson from where she was kneeling under the kitchen cupboards, trying to retrieve Grams’s baking pans. “Yeah, I’m fine.” Stretching her arm, she felt the edge of the metal dish. “Ah, gotcha!” She slid the pan out and held it up. “Do you mind?”

He took the pan and laid it out on the counter, then helped her up. “Thanks, Uncle Jackson.”

“You’re welcome.”

Having a parent with a twin could sometimes be unnerving, but today, Charley only felt annoyance as she saw her father’s disappointed face looking down at her through Uncle Jackson.

“Is there anything else?” she asked in a challenging tone. If he wanted to start shit with her for making Grams sad, then he could tell it to her face. He may be her uncle, but she was also an adult, not some kid he could chastise.

“Nothin’.”

“Good.”

“Whatcha up to today?” he asked suddenly.

“Not much. Helping with dinner.” There really weren’t many chores to do these days as Uncle Jackson already had enough help on the ranch, even with the fall calving season in full swing.

He gestured to the two large cooler bags sitting on top of the kitchen table. “Do you wanna come and help me bring supplies to Gunnar?”

“Gun—oh.”

How could she forget that Gunnar Jonasson, her Uncle Daric and Aunt

Meredith's youngest son, had been living out here now? It was strange to think of her outgoing and fun-loving cousin living by himself in a cabin in the woods, when the last memory she had of him was when he opened that club in Greenwich Village with Bastian Creed and Knox Vrost. But since the accident—

“Well?” Uncle Jackson said.

“Uh, yeah, of course.” She picked up one of the cooler bags. “Let's go.”

“I need to stop by the pastures, if that's okay? Have to check on our pregnant heifers.”

“Sure thing.”

Charley followed him out into the field, toward the pastures on the south side. When they got there, she regretted going on this errand, because of course Devon was there, keeping watch over the herd with the other ranch hands. She'd recognized him immediately, even though he looked nothing like Devon Hale the rockstar, not in his flannel shirt, corduroy jeans, work boots and wide-brimmed hat. He was talking to one of the other men, but then turned to her, and their eyes crashed into each other.

She quickly looked away, embarrassed at being caught. She hadn't seen him since last night as after helping with breakfast this morning, she ducked out and told Uncle Jackson she had to go into town because she wasn't getting cell reception and Lucas Anderson needed a status report. That last part was true so she didn't feel too guilty lying to her uncle. She contemplated leaving and going back to New York, but she doubted that would fly with the Alpha, so she decided to come back after lunch at the local diner. A very long lunch, where she ordered half the menu.

God, he looks incredibly yummy, a voice inside her head said.

Stop thinking about his cock!

I didn't mention his cock. You did. But it was yummy too.

Charley groaned.

Dickmatized indeed.

But, all she could do from now on was fantasize about Devon Hale because she was never going to see it again. She did the right thing, telling him they shouldn't have had sex. He was supposed to be here learning about his Lycan side, not banging her against the wall of her childhood treehouse.

But he didn't have to agree with her so quickly.

It was just sex. Fucking. Scratching an itch.

She cringed. Okay, that stung a little, that he would dismiss her so

quickly. But what did she expect? He was Devon Hale, rock god. If they'd had sex that day in Phoenix, she would have found herself discarded—possibly fired—just as quickly. It was just sex, blowing off steam.

Charley thought she felt eyes on her, but she refused to turn her head to confirm if it was Devon looking at her. She didn't know if she'd be relieved or disappointed if it wasn't.

Ugh, when are we going over to Gunnar's?

Charley hurried over to where Uncle Jackson was talking to one of his senior ranch hands.

"... and poor Rosie's just about ready to pop, but she seems uneasy," the older man—Avery, she recalled—said.

"Everyone else in her group gave birth already, so she's mighty late," Uncle Jackson said. "Maybe there's something wrong with her. We better go check."

"Uncle Jackson? I hate to interrupt but"—she held up the bag in her hand—"Gun—"

"Charley," he warned, subtly nodding at Avery.

Ah, right. No one was supposed to know Gunnar was here. "Er, that errand?"

"Right, I forgot. Sorry, Charley, this'll only take a sec."

"Why don't I take the supplies over myself?" she suggested, not wanting to stay out here even a millisecond longer.

"You sure?"

"Yeah." She took the second bag of supplies from him. "Just tell me where to go."

"All right. Go back to the main road, keep walking for about two miles or so, then you'll see the path veer off to the right by the big weeping willow. Just keep going for another mile or so, and you'll see his cabin."

"No sweat." She slung the bag over her shoulder and tightened her grip on the cooler bag. "I'll see you back at the house for dinner."

Thanks to her Lycan strength and stamina, she easily made the three-mile trek with the two heavy bags without breaking a sweat. She climbed up the porch steps and dropped the bags on the floor. Raising her hand, she was about to knock when a curious sensation washed over her, like she was being watched. She turned her head to glance around behind her, but didn't find anyone.

Shrugging, she knocked on the door. "Gunnar?"

She heard shuffling behind the door before it opened.

“Uncle—Charley?” Dark amber eyes widened in surprise. “Is that you?”

“Hey, Gunnar. Uncle Jackson asked me to bring you your supplies.” She grinned at him. “It’s been a while. You look good.” Really, he hadn’t changed at all, except maybe that he cut his hair short. He used to wear his blond hair long like his father and older brother, Cross, but now, he had it cropped close to his head.

He smiled back, dark amber eyes twinkling. “So do you.” He opened his arms, and she stepped into them, breathing in his familiar scent—rich, dark chocolate. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s ... kind of a long story.”

“I have the time.” He gestured for her to come in. “Why don’t you stay awhile? I can make us some coffee.”

“Sure, why not?” she said and followed him inside.

The cabin was spacious, clean, and quite cozy. There was a sizable living area with a rug, couch, and a large flat-screen TV. Charley stepped on a squeaky toy as she padded over to the couch.

“Sorry, Annaliese left that there last week,” he said sheepishly. “It’s her favorite toy.”

“No worries.” She made herself comfortable on the couch as he disappeared into what she guessed was the kitchen. He reappeared moments later, two mugs in his hand.

“Black okay?”

“Yes. Thanks,” she said, accepting the offered mug.

“So,” he began, sitting down next to her. “What’s up, Charley?”

As they sipped their mugs of piping hot coffee, she relayed to him the events of the last couple of days—the important points anyway, from the time Devon accidentally shifted at the awards show until the bargain he struck with the Alpha.

“Ah, so we have *two* celebrities on the ranch.” He winked at her.

“Ha.” She waved a hand at him. “Care to meet him?”

“I’m more of a jazz and bluegrass guy, so I think I’ll pass,” he said with a chuckle. “But, how about you, Charley? How have you been?”

She shrugged. “Same old, same old.”

“Really?”

As her cousin’s golden amber gaze bore into her, she couldn’t help but feel like she was under a microscope. “Yeah.”

“Even with your dad?”

She winced. He knew about that, of course. Everyone in the family did.

Gunnar put his nearly empty mug down on the table. “You know, Charley, sometimes ... our parents just want to do the best for us. And we might misunderstand them, even with their good intentions. They really do love us.”

“I know. And I try, you know? To find the good intentions.” She had just been so angry with her dad. More than that, she’d been disappointed that her father had immediately thought she was the worst person in the world.

Glancing outside, she saw the sun had moved lower in the sky. “It was great catching up with you, but I should get back and help Grams with dinner. Why don’t you come with me?”

He shook his head. “Too many people.”

Charley didn’t know the exact story of why Gunnar came to live here a couple years ago. Only that there had been an accident at his club where a bunch of people had passed out. Apparently, he’d lost control of his powers, and the clan had to clean that up. She didn’t know the details exactly; as far as she knew, Gunnar had some limited powers of transmogrification—changing the form of matter—so she wasn’t sure how it caused a room full of people to lose consciousness. But then again, she wasn’t a hybrid, so what did she know?

“Everyone takes turns to come and have dinner with me once a week, though,” he explained. “And with Aunt Jordan and everyone else gone, I haven’t had much visitors, so feel free to drop by.”

Charley stood up. “I will.”

He walked to the door. “Nice seeing you again, Charley.”

She extended her arms and wrapped them around him, breathing in his comforting, familiar scent. “Same.”

He tensed, but quickly relaxed. “You should stop by the pond again before you head back to the house.”

Again? What did he mean? Was he out last night and did he see her washing off at the pond? What else did he see? She dreaded the thought that he might know about her and Devon.

“Yeah, sure,” she said. Maybe she misheard him. “I still have the same number, so ... text me or call if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Charley.”

With a final wave, she marched off away from the cabin. She considered

ignoring Gunnar's words, but curiosity got the better of her. So instead of heading back to the house, she turned east, toward the large pond near the treehouse.

It was just as she remembered it. Maybe a little smaller than she recalled, but then she, too, had been smaller when she first came here. Ever since she could remember, everyone in her family would spend their summers in Shenandoah. This very pond, in fact, was where her dad had taught her how to swim. Maybe that's why Gunnar told her to go there, as an attempt to remind her of the good old days with her father, when she was still Daddy's girl and she had looked up to him.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

Someone was definitely watching her.

"Who's there?" She turned on her heel, sensing movement somewhere behind her. "And why are you following me?"

Moments later, a figure emerged from behind the row of trees at the edge of the pond.

A brown wolf.

"Devon?"

It padded closer to her, its eyes never leaving hers. She thought of running away, but that was stupid. You never ran from a predator, that only encouraged them. And while she had never felt like prey before, this was close. As calmly as she could, she took a step back.

The wolf lunged at her, stopping inches before reaching her.

"Who the hell was that?" Devon snarled.

Charley froze. How the hell did he shift so fast? "Wh-who?"

"Don't play games, Charley." He leaned forward and sniffed at her. "Who. Was. That."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The man in the cabin."

"N-nobody." Why was she nervous all of a sudden?

"He didn't seem like a nobody."

"I-it's none of your business." He couldn't know about Gunnar, after all.

"Did you fuck him? Is that why you smell like him?" His eyes were wild now, all aglow with the power of his wolf.

Ew, gross. "N-no, we just ... we just hugged, okay?"

"No one touches you," he snarled. "No one but me—"

"Devon—" He cut her off by capturing her lips with his.

She tried to stop him, really she did.

Okay, she kind of pushed at him. A little bit.

Oh, fuck it.

Reaching up, she grabbed at his head to deepen their kiss. She didn't care. She wanted him again.

She was truly dickmatized.

A sigh of relief escaped her lips when her hands found him—already hard. She could barely wrap her fingers all the way around his cock. Veiny, and hard, and thick, it truly was perfect.

He groaned, moving his hips in time with her strokes. Pulling away from his mouth, she rained kissed down his shoulders, his chest, his six-pack abs, then kneeled down. Without hesitation, she licked at the bulbous head of his cock.

“Ch-Charley.”

She took him into her mouth, laving the tip with her tongue, swirling it around slowly. When he started to thrust his hips at her, she dug her nails into his hips in warning. Oh no, she was in charge here. He stopped.

Good boy.

She teased him at first, giving him little licks and kisses and caressing the underside of his cock with her tongue. When he seemed at the edge, she took as much of him as she could in her mouth.

“Ffuuuck!”

This power she had over him sent a thrill through her, at the same time, increasing her own anticipation. Her pussy was dripping wet now, begging for him.

“Stop,” he growled, pulling her off him. “Clothes off.”

She had never shucked her clothing off so fast. He dragged her down, laying her out on the grassy shore, then covered her body with his. He devoured her mouth as he nudged her knees open. She complied, spreading her thighs so he was between them.

Her eyes rolled back in pleasure as his cock pushed into her, filling her up. They sighed in unison once he was fully seated in her.

He moaned against her mouth. “So ... good, Charley.”

“Please, Devon.” She nudged her hips at him. “Fuck me.”

“Don't worry, baby, I'll give you what you want.”

Pulling her knees up, he gave her one deep thrust.

“Jesus!” He hit her deep, making her eyeballs roll back. “More,” she

cried, lifting her hips up.

He gripped her knees tight before he thrust again, setting a fast, hard pace that left the air trapped in her lungs. In that moment, the whole world disappeared, and her entire existence was Devon—his cock moving inside her, their skin slapping rhythmically together, his sexy growls and grunts, his hands roaming her body—pinching her nipples, rubbing at her clit, squeezing her ass cheeks.

He must have felt her impending orgasm, because he moved even harder, then reached between them to stroke her clit. Her body exploded in pleasure, her vision turning into a burst of stars.

She was ready to come back down to earth when she found herself flipped around, landing on top of his hips. Reaching up, he cupped her breasts.

“Ride me, Charley,” he said. “Show me how you ride that cock. Make yourself come on it.”

His filthy words fueled her, urging her hips to move. Bracing herself on his chest, she ground against him, back and forth, up and down, enjoying the friction between them. More than that, she loved looking down at him and watching his face twist in pleasure as she moved on top of him.

He murmured dirty, filthy words at her, which only made her ride him harder. His hands reached up to her shoulders, pulling her down so he could pop a nipple into his mouth. He bit at her gently, which only sent her spiraling into her orgasm.

“Fuck. Oh Christ. Devon. *Devon!*”

As her body tensed tight, he pushed up at her, thrusting his cock into her in a frantic rhythm.

“Jesus, Charley,” he grunted as she felt his cock spasm in her, flooding her with his seed, hips lifting her up so that her knees hovered over the ground. When he finished, he collapsed back down, and she fell on top of him.

She lay there for a few moments, unable to move. Closing her eyes, she tried to listen to the sounds around her. The birds chirping, insects buzzing around, the leaves rustling as a breeze came by. However, it was only the sound of his beating heart under his chest, slowly going back to normal, that she could focus on.

“Baby, you’re so beautiful,” he murmured against her ear as his hand stroked down her naked back.

A post orgasmic clarity washed over her.

Not again.

She sighed and shifted her hips so his soft cock slipped out of her. “We can’t keep doing this.”

His hand froze in place over her hip. “What are you saying?”

“You know I’m right.” Pushing up off his chest, she tried to get off him, but his hand kept her in place. “Devon ...”

His other hand cupped her chin so he could gaze into her eyes. “Why should we stop?”

“You know why.” She swallowed. “Listen, the sex was good—”

“It was fucking amazing, and you know it. Why shouldn’t we do it again?”

“That’s not the point.” This time, she shoved his hands away and got to her feet. “This isn’t why you’re here.” She found her pants and hopped into them.

“You should wash off.” He came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her. “You still smell like him. My wolf hates it. I hate it.”

“I’m not—Devon!” She brushed him away when he tried to rub his wrists on her neck. “H-how did you learn to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Scent marking.” She pointed to his wrists. Rubbing wrists against pulse points left traces of scents there, and was often a sign of affection between Lycans “You—never mind.” Spotting her bra on the ground, she picked it up and hooked it back on. “Now where’s—”

“Don’t you have anything else to wear except pants and shirts?” Devon had her shirt in his hands. “You’d look great in a sundress. And it’ll be easier access.”

“Easy access? For what.”

“For next time,” he said matter-of-factly. “I could just lift up your skirt —”

“We are not having sex again.” She snatched the shirt away from him.

“Sure.” The grin he flashed her said otherwise.

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “It was great, you know it. Why should we stop? And don’t give me this bullshit about learning to control my wolf—as you saw, I’m a quick learner.”

“I—” She couldn’t give him a solid answer. “You said it yourself; this

was just sex. A way to scratch an itch.”

“I don’t know about you, Charley”—he stalked closer to her, invading her personal space—“my itch hasn’t even begun to be scratched.”

God, this close, his scent was intoxicating—*he* was intoxicating. Why shouldn’t she just agree to this? It could be a summer fling, nothing more.

But she had a feeling it wouldn’t end well. Out here, things were simple, but he had his real life to go back to. He was Devon Hale, rock star. And she was nobody. They wouldn’t work, not in the real world.

Not that she viewed this going anywhere further than today. “I don’t owe you anything, Devon.”

His expression darkened. “I would never think I was entitled to your body, just because we had sex, Charley.”

“I didn’t mean that. I just ... it’s too complicated.”

“Only if you make it complicated.” He leaned down, titling his head. The pulse under his ear heated his skin, intensifying his delicious scent to her already sensitive nose. “Just so you know, you’re welcome to my body anytime.”

Her own pulse jumped at the offer, and her throat went dry. She attempted to turn away, but from this angle, she could only look down—straight at his cock, which was once again hard and bobbing against his abs.

Clearing her throat, she stepped away from him. “Go wash up before you come to dinner.”

“You know, what? I don’t think I will.” Spinning on his heels, he walked off, naked as the day he was born, whistling to himself.

“Devon! Don’t you dare!”

When he didn’t answer, Charley looked up at the heavens and let out a frustrated cry.

Stupid Douche Hole.

Chapter 12

“Stupid, stubborn creature.” Devon gritted his teeth at the only other female on this ranch who frustrated him.

Rosie let out an annoyed moo.

His hands balled into fists, wondering how much trouble he’d get into if he used the forklift to move the obstinate creature into the barn.

Of course, he could go ask Jackson for help.

I’ll take my chances with the forklift.

He’d seen Jackson Forrest angry, impatient, and irritated the last couple of days since he arrived here. Last night, however, he’d witnessed what was perhaps the most unnerving side of the Shenandoah Alpha. As Devon strolled in—dressed in his clothes, but without washing off Charley’s scent—Jackson had gone deathly quiet, but his eyes had turned murderous. Lily must have smelled it, too, because her jaw nearly dropped onto her plate.

Charley—who had showered and changed—gripped her steak knife and looked ready to hurl it at him from where she sat next to her uncle.

Needless to say, it was the most awkward dinner he’d ever had in his life.

He threw his hands up. “Why don’t you just go inside the barn, you stupid cow?”

“You ever heard of the saying ‘you get more flies with honey’?”

Devon cringed. After a deep breath, he composed himself, then turned away from Rosie the cow to face Jackson. “Should I get her some chocolates and flowers? Get on my knees and ask her to go inside?”

The older Lycan walked over to them with slow, deliberate steps. He placed a gentle hand on Rosie’s flank. “There, there, girl. I know.”

Rosie flicked her tail and stamped her feet.

“Pregnant heifers can be stubborn,” he said. “Very much like women.”

A strange sensation washed over Devon at his words as a vision of a pregnant Charley appeared in his head. It both scared and thrilled him, which was ridiculous. Charley had said she was safe, after all, which he concluded to mean she was on birth control.

Pushing those thoughts out of his mind, he asked, “So what do I need to do?”

“Listen to her.”

“I don’t talk cow, I’m afraid.”

Jackson smirked. “You don’t need words to listen.” He ran a soothing hand over Rosie’s distended belly. “I know. You’re not feeling too good these days. Soon, girl.”

“You seem worried,” Devon observed.

“She should have delivered by now,” Jackson said. “That’s not usually a good sign.”

“It’s not?”

“No. Might be something wrong with the calf.” His brows drew together. “Rosie, girl, you need to go back inside,” he said in a soft tone. “To keep you safe. And keep the baby safe.”

Rosie snorted, but when Jackson gave her a gentle push and murmured more encouraging words, she began to walk. The Alpha led her back into the barn, with Devon following close behind.

After securing her with the other cows, Jackson gave her a last pat on the head. “That’s my girl.” He nodded at the cameras mounted above. “Don’t worry, I got my eye on you twenty-four seven.”

After checking in on a few of the other cows and calves, Jackson gestured for Devon to follow him outside. “So, Devon,” he began as they walked out the door. “I was wondering if you’d like to do something different for the rest of the day?”

“Different? Like what? Help with the sheep? Or rebuilding fences?”

“No. Like, work with your wolf.”

Fucking finally. Maybe Jackson had forgiven him for having sex with Charley and announcing it at dinnertime. “Sounds good.”

“Come with me.”

He followed him out to the pasture, walking across the field until they reached a flat plain where the grass had dried out.

“So, you’ve been shifting into your wolf?”

“Huh?”

“I saw you yesterday.” His keen eyes bore into him like laser sights. “You took off so suddenly.”

“Oh.” So, Jackson knew he had followed Charley. “Uh, yeah.”

Even though he had initially agreed with her that they shouldn’t have sex again and he was resolved to forget her, his wolf thought differently. It had been sulking all day because she was nowhere to be found. She didn’t show up for breakfast or lunch, and it was worried something had happened to her.

When he saw her walking up to the pasture with Jackson, his wolf scratched at him, urging him to follow her. He didn’t really have much of a choice as he felt his wolf at the surface, ready to fight him for their body, so he ran off and followed her.

Then he saw her at the cabin, embracing that man before they disappeared inside for an awfully long time.

“Were you able to shift back easily?”

“Yeah. I think. I can’t remember how,” he lied. Of course he remembered, but he couldn’t tell Jackson he fought his wolf for control because he wanted to have sex with Charley again.

Jackson eyed him suspiciously. “But you’ve noticed the difference in yourself, haven’t you?”

He nodded. “I can feel it—my wolf. And when I talk to it, it talks back. Or communicates back, but I don’t hear words.” He could feel its emotions and hear it make grunts or noises, but never actual words.

“A few of us do, usually Alphas or Lycans who come from families of strong wolves,” Jackson explained. “Mostly I work with feral wolves—those who have lost control of their animal sides—or adolescent pups just learning. I’ve never worked with latent wolves before, in fact, you’re the only one I’ve ever met.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s not as common as you think as Lycans really are protective of their young, especially since it’s not easy for us to have young. Sometimes, we even take in pups born out of wedlock or affairs because we want to preserve our kind.”

“What do you mean it’s not easy for you to have young?”

Jackson shrugged. “No one knows for sure exactly, but birth rates are extremely low among Lycans. It’s rare for couples have more than one child

if at all, and a Lycan mated to a human will always produce human children. With some exceptions.”

Devon didn't quite understand what he meant by exceptions as he was too focused on what Jackson said about low birth rates among Lycans. Is that what Charley meant when she said “they” were both safe? That being Lycans meant they had some kind of built-in birth control?

A different thought entered his mind: Did that also mean his parents were both Lycan? And if Lycans really did protect and care for their young, why had he been abandoned?

Devon mentally shook his head, burying the hurt that had planted itself in his chest.

It didn't matter anymore, so there was no use to think about something he couldn't change.

Jackson continued. “I have to admit, it was interesting to see your progress, and we hadn't even sat down to talk about your Lycan side yet, which I usually have to do with pups. Do you now understand why you had to do all this work?”

“I think I do.” Charley had explained it that first day, but he hadn't really grasped what she meant until he had felt it himself. “I've been restless in the last couple of months. I had these nightmares ... I can't explain it, but I think I know what they were about now.” It was his wolf, reaching out from his subconscious. “I tried different things to block it out. Alcohol. Music. Sex. None of it worked.”

“Our wolves need to be let out once in a while. And they need physical activity that challenges them, at least, that's my theory.”

“I was tired that first day I came here, but over time, I didn't even break a sweat.” And Jackson had been working him like a horse, running all over the ranch.

“That's your inner wolf lending you its abilities—speed, night vision, keen sense of smell, and extra strength. It wants to work with you, you just have to let it.” Jackson began to unbutton his shirt. “Now, shift with me. We'll go for a run.”

Anticipation thrummed in his veins as Devon discarded his own clothes. Cracking his neck, he shook out his limbs to loosen them.

Let's do this, he told his wolf.

Though he'd shifted yesterday because he wanted to follow Charley, this time, he did so because he wanted to. He relinquished his body over to his

wolf, allowing it to break out of him.

Jackson's wolf—a mountain of an animal that was at least eight feet tall, with fur streaked with black—cocked his head at him before it set off, darting away into the trees.

Devon followed suit, pushing his wolf to catch up with the massive wolf. Unlike the other times where he felt trapped inside his wolf, this time, he still felt a sense of control. Like being a copilot, except he communicated his thoughts directly to his wolf. He could tell it to go here and there, or jump over a fallen log or go around it, but also, he could just sit back and enjoy the ride, allowing his wolf to navigate.

His inner animal enjoyed the freedom of running through the woods, smelling all the amazing scents, and picking up the various sounds of nature around them. As it was catching up with Jackson, Devon heard galloping paws coming up from behind. Soon, a familiar gray wolf pulled up next him.

Noah.

More wolves arrived to join the run—the ranch hands who he'd worked beside for the last few days. It was strange, but he could feel their joy, as if they were cheering him on. His wolf let out a playful yowl, acknowledging their presence.

When the scent of peaches hit his nose, he and his wolf nearly stumbled over a stray tree branch, but quickly managed to find their balance. Sure enough, Charley's wolf was up ahead, keeping pace with Jackson. She looked magnificent—both Devon and his wolf thought so.

They all followed Jackson as he led them through the valley, trampling through the woods, and racing up the steep hills. Adrenaline kept him going, his senses overstimulated from all the sights and smells around him. He was almost disappointed when he spied the ranch up in the distance as he wanted to keep going.

“Good run,” Jackson said as he changed back into his human form. They ended right back where they started, by the pile of clothes they had left behind when they shifted.

Devon's wolf made a few circles, refusing to hand over control.

Come on, he said. You've had your fun. Time to let go.

The wolf quieted down, and slowly, he regained control of their body. “Damn, I'm finally tired,” Devon remarked once he was fully human. “I could have gone on forever, though.”

“Yeah, I know that feeling.” Jackson tossed him his pants. “But you need

to pace yourself. You can burn yourself out, especially when you're in combat."

"Combat? When would you need—" Devon paused. "There was that news from Connecticut—"

"The mages." Jackson's jaw hardened. "Not the first time our kind tangled with them, but I'm hoping it's the last. Still, we need to be prepared. To keep our loved ones safe."

Both him and his wolf liked that idea. "I—do you think I could learn? To fight like you and Noah?"

"You want to learn how to fight?" Jackson looked taken aback.

"Why not?" His wolf agreed. "I don't wanna get my ass kicked by Noah next time."

Jackson smirked at him, then handed him his shirt. "All right. I suppose you can leave the barn mucking to the pups tomorrow."

Devon grinned at Jackson and put his shirt on. Finally, the Alpha was starting to like him.

"One thing, Rock Star." Jackson's hand landed on his shoulder, giving him a not-so-gentle squeeze.

"Yeah?"

The Alpha puffed his chest, stretching up to full height. "I realize you and my niece are both adults, and what consenting adults do on their own time is nobody's business. But," he leaned forward menacingly. "If I hear anything about you stepping out of line, I'm going to slit you from stem to sternum. Understood?"

Okay, so maybe Jackson still didn't quite like him.

"Yes, sir."

That was an easy promise to make—he had no intention of doing anything Charley didn't want to, not to mention, Charley didn't exactly want to do anything with him.

Not yet, he reminded himself.

Though she chose to ignore it, there was still something between them. An attraction that just exploded whenever they were around each other. He just had to show her and remind her how good they were together. Why shouldn't they explore this thing between them?

"Glad we understand each other." Jackson patted him on the shoulder. "Now, let's head back and get some grub."

As they made the long hike back to the house, Devon's mouth watered as

he wondered what Lily had cooked for dinner tonight. He hoped it was her fried chicken, but he wouldn't mind trying that meat loaf from lunch yesterday again.

Truly, he'd never eaten as well as he had in the last couple of days. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd had a home-cooked meal—his private chef not included—made by someone's mom.

Years, probably.

When he was starting out with his band, Kurt's mom would invite them over for Sunday dinner with the rest of his family. She would cook the most amazing meals—deep fried chicken, roasted meats, sausages, plus sides like mac and cheese, baked potato, and buttered rice. The mood at those dinners was always jovial, if not chaotic, as Kurt had come from a huge family with six siblings. It was the first time he'd seen what a real family was supposed to be like, and perhaps, some part of him envied his then-friend.

Devon took a deep breath as they drew nearer to the house. “Something smells amazing.”

Jackson laughed, then gestured ahead of them. “I thought we could all use a little something special for dinner after the hard work everyone put in this week.”

The backyard was usually quiet this time of night, but this evening, there was a buzz of activity as dozens of people milled about, laughing and chatting as a wireless speaker played some country tunes. Tiki torches lit the scene while picnic tables with red and white checkered tablecloths were set out.

The smell of roasting meat tickled his nose. “Is that barbecue?”

“Yep. And Momma's got all the fixings.”

A grill was set up on the side, along with a buffet table laden with all kinds of sides—mashed potatoes, biscuits and gravy, coleslaw, corn, and a bunch of other dishes he couldn't name but looked delicious. His stomach growled hungrily which prompted a laugh from Jackson.

“C'mon, you need to refuel after that run.”

Devon was so famished he was about to attack the food table, when the sweet scent of peaches caught his attention. His head followed the scent, trailing up toward the porch, where he saw Charley emerge from the kitchen wearing—Devon groaned inwardly—a light blue sundress.

“Hungry?” Jackson asked, then shoved a plate at him. “For food I mean.”

He swallowed. “Uh, yeah.”

It took all his willpower to tear his gaze from her, but he somehow managed it—perhaps imagining being “slit from stem to sternum” helped.

Not wanting to turn that particular image into reality, he decided to busy himself with eating, piling his plate with ribs, pork chops, and burgers and sides. He sat down at one of the tables with the other men and found himself having fun, just chatting and shooting the shit with them.

He’d forgotten what it was like to have a group of people to work alongside with, having experiences in common. For a moment, it made him miss his old band, and a pang of regret hit him at how they had broken up. It was something he’d never felt before, not even when he ended his previous relationships.

“Wow, she sure cleans up nice, huh?” One of the men—Jared Watkins—said, nodding toward the drinks table where Charley was standing, drinking a soda. She wasn’t alone, though, as another of the ranch hands, Rob Murray, was chatting with her.

Devon’s wolf bared its teeth as it watched the male get way too close to Charley. Rising from the bench, he said, “I think I’m getting thirsty.”

Stalking over to the table, he grabbed a bottle of beer from the cooler—which happened to be right between Charley and Rob. “Excuse me. Oh, hello.” He managed to sound casual, even though his wolf was ready to tear out the male’s throat.

“Devon,” Rob greeted. “Are you enjoying the food?”

“I am.” He licked his lips, but kept his eyes on Charley. “And you?” He focused his attention on the other man, trying to sense his wolf, but found none.

Human.

“Sure am,” Rob said. “I was just telling Miss Charley how I’ve enjoyed working here for her uncle.”

“Rob’s been here for three years,” Charley said.

“It’s a shame you haven’t visited in all this time.” Rob winked at her. “But maybe you can come back again. Or stay longer.”

“That would be nice,” she replied. “I used to spend a lot of time here when I was growing up.”

Annoyance prickled at Devon. “But your life isn’t here,” he said. “It’s back in L.A.”

She shrugged. “I don’t really have a life anywhere since I’m always touring. Don’t even have my own place, just a storage locker in Brooklyn

with all my stuff.”

“So, you’re going back on tour with Renee?”

“Maybe. I haven’t thought of it.” She looked at Rob meaningfully. “Maybe, if I find a reason to stay here, I just might.”

Devon’s head nearly exploded. “Over my dead—”

“Hey there, how are you younguns getting along?” Lily interrupted as she came up to them. She placed a hand on Rob’s arm. “Rob, looks like the ice is getting low. Would you be a dear and grab some more from the basement freezer?”

“Sure thing, Miss Lily.” He nodded at Charley. “I’ll be back.”

Devon curled his fingers into tight fists, fighting the urge to knock the guy into tomorrow for just breathing in Charley’s direction. “What the heck —”

“You looked good today, Devon,” Lily began. “Did you enjoy your run?”

“I—yeah. It was fun.” The anger seeped away, and the air felt lighter now that that asshole wasn’t around. Feeling more relaxed, he waggled an eyebrow at Charley. “Nice dress.” It was more than nice. She looked gorgeous with the linen fabric hugging her curves and the strappy shoulders and short length showing off her creamy skin and shapely legs.

Her nostrils flared. “Grams insisted I dress up for this.”

“Thank you, Lily,” he winked at the older woman.

Lily winked back. “You’re welcome. It’s one of mine. Vintage, as they say. I hope nothing happens to it. The fabric does tear so easily.”

Devon barked out a laugh at the implication.

Charley looked utterly adorable as she turned red from her delicate neck to the tips of her ears. Clearing her throat, she said, “Austin’s gonna be so mad he missed this. That cousin of mine can eat half a cow.”

“And Jack the other half,” Lily chuckled.

“They should be back tomorrow, right?”

“Yep. Flight should have left San Francisco now, it’s a red-eye,” Lily said. “And they’ll land around noon. Jackson and Noah will pick them up from the airport.”

Charley took a swig of her beer. “I should go and remind him that I want to come pick them up too.” Without even glancing at him, she sauntered off.

Devon’s watched her walk away, his wolf riding him hard, urging him to go after her.

Patience, he told his wolf. Something told him the harder he pushed at

Charley, the more she would resist.

Of course, he wasn't used to chasing after women anyway. They came to him, and if they didn't, well, there was always a line of others out the door, waiting for their chance to be with a famous rock star.

So, what do I do?

His wolf just shrugged, but gave no answer.

Devon was dead to the world, mired deep in an erotic dream about Charley, black lace lingerie, and ice cream, when loud knocking woke him.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"All right, all right!" he shouted as he swung his legs off the mattress and stomped down the stairs. "What the fuck—Charley?"

His mind short-circuited for a second as the literal woman of his dreams stood in front of him. He thought that maybe she'd changed her mind about sleeping with him, but when he saw the serious expression on her face, his arousal melted away. "What's the matter?"

"It's Rosie." Her teeth chewed at her bottom lip. "Something's wrong with her."

He checked his watch, which indicated it was three o'clock in the morning. "Why are you waking me up then? Shouldn't Jackson be taking care of this?"

"Yes, but he just left a couple hours ago." She wrung her hands together. "My aunt and cousins' plane was diverted to Louisville because of weather, and the airline said they wouldn't be able to get them on another flight until the day after tomorrow. There aren't any rentals or hotels either. So, he and Noah are making the eight-hour drive there and back to pick them up. Uncle Jackson called me and Grams because he got an alert from the security camera that Rosie was in trouble."

"Oh, Christ." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Let's go."

They raced out of the house and to the barn, then over to the pen where Rosie and the others were kept. The poor creature was laying on her side, grunting and mooing.

Lily, who knelt by Rosie as she massaged her belly, sighed in relief when they arrived. "Oh, thank God you're here."

“What’s wrong with her, Grams?” Charley asked.

“She’s ready to deliver, but I’m afraid it’s a breech birth.”

“Breech?” Devon asked.

“Calf’s facing the wrong way,” Lily explained. “Couldn’t see the hooves when I checked, only a tail.”

“What should we do?” Charley asked. “What did Uncle Jackson say?”

“Can’t reach him, must be somewhere with no cell reception,” she said. “It’s too late for him to turn back anyway. By the time he gets back here, she might already finish giving birth or—” Lily stopped short.

“Or what, Grams?”

Lily remained silent, but Devon could guess what she was going to say. The calf could be gone by then.

“No.” Charley covered her mouth. “We can’t let that happen. Where’s the vet?”

“Dr. Larson’s over in Henderson, so he won’t be able to reach here in time, either.”

“Surely there’s something we can do?” Devon offered. “Haven’t you had a breech delivery before? I heard the guys talking about pulling calves out.” He had seen a weird chain device lying among the tools in the shed, and one of the ranch hands explained it was a calf puller, used for difficult births.

“Normally, we can, but this one isn’t even presenting a leg or head, which means it’s a true breech.” Lily frowned. “I’m afraid I’ve never done one of these myself. If I attempt it, I could hurt both Rosie and her calf.”

“What do we do?” Charley cried. “We can’t just let them die.”

“I’m sorry.” Lily got up and walked over to her, placing an arm around her. “It might be better to just let nature take its course. Calves are precious, but we can’t lose them both.”

Devon glanced over at poor Rosie. He wondered if she understood what was happening, if she was scared, or if she knew her precious calf was going to die. Rosie turned her head and gazed up at him with those big eyes, like she was pleading with him.

And in that moment, something in him broke.

“We can’t let them die.” He curled his hands into fists.

“Devon, sometimes that’s just how—”

“No,” he said, interrupting Lily. “I won’t let them die.” He’d been around these animals for the last couple of days, and he’d seen how much they meant to Jackson and the ranch. “We have to at least try something. Lily, do you

know the process for breech births?”

She nodded. “I’ve seen Dr. Clark do it himself, and he explained it to us, in case Jackson ever needed to do it himself. He’s done it once before.”

“Good. You can tell me what to do.”

“You?” Charley asked. “You’re going to pull that calf out of Rosie?”

“Yeah.” He was already pulling up his sleeves. “What do I do first, Lily?”
God, I hope I don’t regret this.

Lily’s expression turned serious. “All right, we can give this a try. Charley, grab the supplies from the storage room and bring them here.”

“Right.” She dashed out of the pen.

“Now,” Lily said to Devon. “Let’s prepare Rosie.”

They cleared away the other cows so they could have room to work. When Charley returned, she handed him the “supplies”—arm-length plastic gloves and a massive bottle of lube. Had it been any normal circumstance, he would have made a joke, but this time, he bit his tongue.

“Okay, Devon, put on the gloves and lube up,” Lily instructed.

He did as he was told, then crouched and positioned himself behind the cow. “All right, I’m ready.” As he pulled up Rosie’s tail, the most unbearable stench hit his nose.

Holy fuck, being a Lycan sucked right now. His sensitive nose made the smell ten times more horrible.

“Devon?” Charley asked. “Are you all right?”

He was about to lose his dinner from earlier, but he couldn’t tell her that. “I’m fine,” he coughed, somehow managing to breathe through his mouth. “Okay, Lily, tell me what to do.”

Lily took a deep breath. “The calf’s head should be facing away from you, so its hind legs should be tucked under its body. You just have to reach for the legs and pull them out toward the birth canal.”

“Easy-peasy,” he said, flashing Charley a weak smile. His heart stuttered when she returned his smile.

“You can do it.” She placed a hand on his shoulder. “I know you can.”

“I hope you’re right.” He gritted his teeth. “All right. Let’s do this.”

Chapter 13

“**Y**ou did it.”

Devon lifted his head up from where he sat, back propped up against the side of the wall. “I did.” His expression was not one of arrogance, but rather, astonishment. “I delivered a baby cow.”

“A breeched baby cow.” She plopped down next to him, feeling the exhaustion setting in.

Charley herself was just as astounded as him, not just at the actual delivery of the calf, but that he even wanted and volunteered to do it. Death was a natural part of running a ranch, as she’d learned when she was a child, so she had no illusions that mother and calf would be able to survive without assistance.

But Devon ... she couldn’t forget the determination on his face as he fought to save both, or the pure relief when the calf came out and inhaled its first breath.

Before she could congratulate him, however, her phone had rung. It was Uncle Jackson, who was finally able to find cell reception on the road. She had relayed to him what had happened and assured him Rosie and her calf were fine. When she came back to the barn, she was glad to see that the calf was doing great and was already attempting to stand. However, Devon wasn’t there, but Lily told her he had gone out to wash up. She found him by the trough, the same one she’d taken him to that first day. He’d discarded his shirt, which had probably smelled like blood and afterbirth.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m great. I didn’t even throw up.”

Giggling, she nudged her shoulder at him. “That’s right. Looks like you can add this to your list of accomplishments.”

“Not throwing up?”

“I mean, calf obstetrician. I think it’ll be a great addition to your Wikipedia page.”

He laughed, then hauled himself up. “I washed off, but I think I need a shower.”

“Oh, yeah, you do,” she sniffed at him. “Ew. You definitely do.”

“Ha.” He held out a hand, which she accepted. A zing of electricity jolted up her arm and she stumbled forward. Steadying herself with a hand on his naked chest, she became all too aware of their closeness.

Her wolf rolled onto its back, showing its belly.

Oh my.

“Charley?”

“Wha—oh.” Taking her hand off him, she stepped back. “Um, we should go back to the house so you can clean up and get some rest.”

The rising sun painted the sky with blues and purples, and soon it would be light. They walked back in silence except for the sounds of the ranch coming to life surrounding them—bird songs, bleating sheep, a cock crowing as it woke up the hens, a dog barking somewhere in the distance. But for the most part, the silence between them was comfortable the whole way through, neither speaking until they reached the house.

“You go shower first,” she said as they reached the second floor of the house.

“Thanks.” He trudged toward the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Charley stood there, listening to the sounds coming from inside the bathroom—the rustling of his clothes, then the tap twisting as the shower turned on. She made a motion to head to her bedroom, but paused. Instead, she reached for the bathroom door handle.

Steam rose above the shower curtain, and the noisy blast of hot water covered the sound of her movements as she removed her clothing. Stealthily, she pulled back the shower curtain.

“What the—” Devon’s eyes widened. “Charley?”

Smiling at him, she stepped into the tub. “Hey.”

“Hey, what—”

She didn’t give him a chance to finish that sentence as she lifted herself

up on her tiptoes and kissed him. He tensed for about half a second before his arms came around her to press their naked bodies together as their mouths melded. She sighed against him, deepening the kiss.

“W-wait,” he said, pulling away. “We’re doing this, right?”

“Mm-hmm.” She pressed a kiss to his throat. “Well, I’d prefer we do it in my room so we can actually be on a bed for once.”

“Are you ... oh, that’s good,” he said as she nipped at his shoulder. “Are we having sex because I saved a cow?”

“Two cows. And, no, not exactly.” She paused, wondering to herself why she was here. “I just—”

“Shh, I don’t wanna know.” Cupping her face in his hands, he stared down at her. “I just want you to be sure.”

“Sure?”

“Sure about this. Don’t change your mind again and tell me this was a mistake.”

He refused to let her look away, as if to let her know how determined he was to get an answer from her. “Well?”

Staring deep into his sky-blue eyes, she tried to decipher what he was *really* trying to ask her. “I said we shouldn’t have done what we did.” Her hands covered his, and she turned her head to press her mouth against his wrist. “I never said it was a mistake.”

His pulse jumped under her lips. “Charley ...”

“You were right. I want you, Devon. I still do.” She couldn’t deny it any longer. This thing between them ...whatever it was, whatever he could offer now, she wanted it all. “And we’re so good together.”

Hauling her up against him, he kissed her again, then lifted her up and pressed her against the wall.

“Yes ... Devon ... oh!” She cried out as he entered her in one thrust. Her fingers grasped at his shoulders, steadying herself as she clung to him. “Please ... I need you.”

He thrust into her hard and fast against the wall, the steam surrounding them, turning the atmosphere hot and heavy. Their cries and moans and grunts echoed through the room, until finally, they both came hard, the hot water sluicing over their joined bodies.

Their breaths came in deep pants as they wound down from their orgasms before slowly returning to normal. Devon reached over to turn off the shower, then slipped out of her and helped her to her feet.

“This still isn’t a bed,” she said.

“You complaining? After coming that hard?” But he was grinning at her.

“Not at all.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, his eyes darkening. “I’m not done with you yet.”

They dried each other off, then snuck out of the bathroom and into Charley’s room. There was hardly any noise in the entire house, so Charley guessed Grams was still out in the barn looking after Rosie.

“We’re still alone—ooh!” She let out a laugh as he pushed her onto the bed, covering her with her body.

“I know. I have super hearing, too, remember?” He nudged her knees apart and then rubbed his cock against her.

She sucked in a breath. “Again?”

“Mm-hmm,” he murmured against her neck, before he pushed into her once more. He held her arms over her head, pinning them against mattress as he thrust into her. He whispered dirty words to her, pushing her toward the edge until she came again.

They made love two more times before they were finally exhausted and fell asleep. The sun had been peeking out from behind the hills when Charley had closed her eyes, and once she opened them again, it was high in the sky.

Oh shit.

Grabbing her phone from the bedside table, she saw that it was four o’clock in the afternoon. Grams hadn’t woken her—correction, *them* up. Her grandmother had likely peeked in on them or had noticed the attic room was empty.

“Charley,” came Devon’s sleep-roughened voice in her ear as his arms snaked around her. “I want you again.”

“I ... ohhh ...” It was so tempting, especially since his hand somehow found its way between her thighs and was now stroking her dampening pussy. “We should—”

The sound of a truck engine pulling up to the front yard outside made her freeze.

“Oh shit!” Charley jumped out of bed and ran to her dresser. “Get dressed. Uncle Jackson’s back with everyone.”

“What?” Devon raised his head from where he lay on the pillow. “Everyone?”

“He went to pick up my aunt and cousins, remember?” She found his discarded towel and tossed it at him. “Now go.”

Lazily, he got up. “Fine. But we’re not hiding this.” He gestured between them. “We’re consenting adults, not teenagers caught by our parents.”

She opened her mouth to protest, then remembered his words.

Don’t change your mind again and call this a mistake.

“We’re not hiding this,” she assured him. “But we’re still staying under my aunt and uncle’s roof. So please, get decent before you greet the Lupa of Shenandoah, so you can show your respect.”

“All right.” He kissed her temple gently. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Once Devon was gone, Charley quickly jumped into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, then combed her hair into a ponytail. After a quick check in the mirror, she raced down the stairs.

“Charley!” Jordan Forrest, Lupa of Shenandoah and Uncle Jackson’s wife, opened her arms to embrace her. “How have you been? It’s been so long.”

“Aunt Jordan,” she greeted, inhaling her familiar floral scent. “How was San Francisco?”

“It was great as always. Katie said to tell you hi.” She stood back. “You look ... different. Like, you’re glowing or something. New skincare routine?”

“Huh?” She touched her face. “What are you talking about? Besides, you’re the one who looks like she hasn’t aged a day.” Except for a few lines on her face, Jordan still looked youthful, with her slender frame, straight jet-black hair, and expressive brown eyes.

“Charley! Are you the secret guest?” Her cousin, Jack “Jacqueline” Forrest bounded in and jumped at her, catching her in a bear hug. “Pa kept teasing us about someone special at the ranch and that we had to keep it a secret.”

“Jack—ugh! Too tight.” She returned the hug, then let go. Jack was still Jack—a tomboy who wore combat boots, ripped jeans, and an oversize T-shirt. Her light brown hair was pulled back in a braid under a snapback cap. “Where’s—”

“Hey, lil’ Charley.” Austin, the eldest of the Forrest siblings, marched in, carrying three suitcases. “Welcome back.”

His resemblance to his father—and therefore, hers—would have been jarring if Charley hadn’t already been around Uncle Jackson for a few days. “I should be welcoming you back.” When he dropped the suitcases, she walked over to hug him. “How was—”

“Oh, my God, it’s y-you!” Jack squealed. “Y-you’re ... you’re ...”

Charley stepped away from her cousin, then turned her head toward the stairs, where Devon—dressed in his work outfit of corduroy jeans and flannel shirt—casually hopped down toward them.

“Lupa,” he said to Jordan. “Thank you for welcoming me into your territory. I’m honored to be your guest.”

“Mr. Hale,” she said. “I’m happy to welcome you, albeit a bit late. This is my youngest daughter, Jack.”

“You knew, Momma?” Jack said, pouting. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Of course she knows, squirt. Pa tells her everything.” Austin rubbed the top of her head as he brushed past her. “Devon Hale, right?” He held out his hand. “Austin Forrest, nice to meet you.”

Devon shook his hand. “Nice to meet you, too, Austin.”

Austin’s expression shifted from relaxed to perplexed, then he leaned forward to take a sniff at Devon. Then his lips tightened into a tight line as his head snapped to Charley.

“Well now, looks like I don’t need to make any introductions,” Jackson said as he strode in through the door with two more suitcases. Placing them by the stairs, he brushed his wife’s shoulder affectionately, then turned to Devon. “I heard what you did for Rosie. Thank you.”

Jackson offered his hand, then frowned at Austin. “Son?”

“Yeah, Pa?”

“Can you let go of Devon’s hand?”

“Sure thing.” He scowled at Devon, then let go.

Jordan rolled her eyes. “Sorry about my son. We just met Katie’s new boyfriend, and he’s still sulky about it.”

“He was a rude techbro dick, Momma.” Austin’s frown grew deeper. “And I don’t sulk.”

Charley cleared her throat. “You must all be so tired from your long trip, why don’t you get some rest? Devon and I will help Grams with dinner.” She walked over to Devon, and hooked her arm through his, then dragged him to the kitchen.

“Jeez, your family’s scary.” Devon flexed his fingers. “I’m pretty sure if I was human, you’d have to run me to the ER right now.”

“Sorry, they’re just ... overprotective.”

“Hey.” Spanning her waist with his hands, he pulled her close. “You’re okay with this, right?”

She was tempted to ask him what “this” was, but held her tongue instead,

not sure if she would like the answer or not. “Yes, of course I am.”

“Good.” He kissed the top of her head, and she leaned against him, inhaling his scent.

Her wolf lay down, contented and happy. She, on the other hand, wondered if the other shoe was about to fall.

“No, Devon, we are not naming him Roast Beef.”

“But I saved his life,” Devon said to Charley, exasperated. He gestured at the two-day old calf, prancing about happily in the pen, circling its mother. “Don’t I get naming rights?”

It was just after lunch, and they’d headed to the barn to check on Rosie and her baby. Both mother and baby were fine, and neither showed signs of distress despite the traumatic delivery. Uncle Jackson had explained that sometimes, cows rejected their calves, but thankfully, that didn’t happen, and Rosie and her baby were bonding nicely.

“There is no such thing as naming rights for cows,” she retorted. “And even if there were, Roast Beef isn’t an appropriate name.”

He scratched at the scruff on his chin. “All right, how about Brisket?”

She snorted and crossed her arms under her breasts.

“Chuck? Chuck is a real name.”

“Like Chuck Roast? Nuh-uh.”

“It’s a great name.” He whistled over to the calf. “Here, Chuck.”

“He’s not a dog.”

To her chagrin, however, the little calf toddled over to Devon and allowed him to scratch at its chin.

“Aww, you’re so cute, Chuck. See? He likes it.”

The boyish grin on his handsome face made her heart somersault. “All right, you, lunchtime’s almost over. You need to go back to work—hey!”

He was on her in an instant, pressing her up against the gate of Rosie’s pen. “I think we have some time.” His teeth caught her upper lip.

“Devon ... oh ...” His mouth at her neck did the most delicious things that made her core tingle. “We really shouldn’t do this here.”

“You’re right. The treehouse is closer.”

She laughed aloud and pushed him away. “Fine. Let’s go back to my

room.”

A slow grin spread across his lips as he pulled at her hand and led her out of the barn. “Yes. *Our* room.”

A shiver went up her spine at the way he emphasized *our*. Devon had moved into the guest room with her now, and she didn’t bother to protest. No one in the house batted an eyelash either. They just accepted the fact that Charley and Devon were now ... whatever they were.

She told herself not to think about that. When she decided to sleep with him again, she did it because she wanted to. And when he eventually leaves—which would be soon, if his progress with his wolf continued—she would have to deal with the consequences of her actions.

They were about to enter the kitchen through the back door when Devon stopped short. “There’s people in there.” His face drew down into a frown as he stepped in front of her. “I don’t recognize their voices or their scent.”

“Maybe Grams has visitors over.” She placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sure it’s fine. Let’s use the front door.”

“We should check who it is, just in case.”

Before she could stop him, he pushed the door open. “Who’s there?”

She shrugged. “Devon, I’m sure it’s—Mom?” She blinked a few times, making sure she wasn’t seeing things.

“Hello, Charley,” Evie King greeted from where she sat at the kitchen table. “No one was around, so we let ourselves in. Cliff went to look for your Uncle Jackson.”

Charley’s entire body tensed as she saw the large figure leaning against the counter, his tree-trunk like arms crossed over his wide chest. “Dad,” she greeted tersely.

“Charley.” His keen green eyes zeroed in on Devon. “Mr. Hale.”

Devon’s eyes went wide. “You’re not Jackson. You smell similar but not the same.”

Connor Forrest turned his head to show the deep scar that crossed his eye and cheek.

“Twins. You didn’t tell me your father and uncle are twins. And—” His gaze landed on her mother, and this time, his eyes nearly popped out of his skull. “You—you’re Evie King.”

Evie grinned. “Yes, I am.”

Realization dawned on his face. “Evie King is your *mother*? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s not a secret. If you read any recent articles about me, you’d have read about it. But what are you doing here?” she asked her parents.

Evie glanced sheepishly at Connor. “We’re visiting?”

She huffed. “Mom—”

“It was me.” Lily appeared in the doorway. “I asked him to come.”

Charley spun around to face her grandmother. “How could you?” she accused. “I told you; I don’t want to talk about this.” Anger bubbled in her, and not even Devon’s soothing hand on her arm could stop it. “Why did you call them?”

“Because both of you are being stubborn jackasses, that’s why!” Lily marched into the kitchen, setting herself between Charley and Connor. “I’m not going to wait around another ten years for you to sit down and hash things out. I might not even be around by then—”

“Hush, Momma.” Connor pushed himself off the counter, his expression turning dark as he stomped over to her. “Don’t say things like that.” The tension in the room was ready to explode.

“It’s true, baby.” Lily smiled at him sadly. “I’m not gonna live forever.”

Connor’s jaw hardened, but he didn’t say anything.

“Please.” Reaching out, she put one hand on Connor’s arm, and the other on Charley’s. “Please do it for me.”

Charley’s chest felt like it would explode any moment. “I ... I can’t ... I need time.”

Pulling away from her grandmother, she raced off, darting up the stairs to her room. The door slammed behind her, and she stormed over to the bed. She plopped down, her hands gripping the edge of the mattress as her rage and fury swirled within her.

How dare Grams interfere and call her parents like she was some petulant child? While she sympathized with her grandmother wanting peace in the family, this was none of her business.

A creaking from the rusty hinge on the bedroom door told her someone was coming in. She didn’t need to look up to see who it was. “Leave me alone, Devon, I need time.”

He walked over to her, then knelt in front of her. “Charley ... Charley, look at me, please?”

“I said leave me alone,” she bit out. “I need to think.”

“Like you’ve been doing for the past ten years? Or have you really just been running away all this time?”

Her head snapped up at him. “How dare you! You don’t know what I’ve been through.”

“And you don’t know what your father has been through,” he countered. “Face it. You’ve been avoiding your problems this entire time. You’ve let what happened to you ten years ago control your entire life, stopping you from being who you’re supposed to be. Now’s your chance to change things.” Sighing, he sat down next to her, planting his palms on his knees. “I understand what it’s like to be angry with your parents. Hell, I’ve been angry with mine longer than you have yours—my entire life. They abandoned me, for fuck’s sake. Left me to be raised by strangers who didn’t give a damn about me.”

She sucked in a breath then placed a hand over his. “Devon ...”

“I was fifteen when I ran away from my last foster home. Was living in the streets for a year when a social worker found me and put me in an alternative group home. I learned about music, picked up a guitar, then the piano. I was working at a fast-food joint when I met this punk kid, Kurt Chambers. And, well, you know the rest.” He turned to her, gripping her hands in his. “You’re angry with your dad for what he said, and I’m not gonna tell you how to feel. But, unlike my parents, he’s here now, and he obviously wants to patch things up. You don’t have to forgive him or anything, but maybe you should hear him out. Then maybe, just maybe, you can stop hiding backstage, and you can finally be who you’re supposed to be.”

Charley didn’t know what to say. While she hated to admit it, maybe Devon had a point. The anger and resentment had been going on for far too long—and she herself was partly responsible for that, for not talking to her father.

Grams was right, Dad and I are too stubborn.

After the accident, they didn’t speak for nearly two years. She thought things had gotten better in the last couple of months. She actually made time to visit them and spend a few holidays in New York, but only if she knew everyone was going to be around and she could easily avoid being alone her father.

If she were honest with herself, she’d felt some guilt, especially with the whole end-of-the-world situation when she realized she could have lost her dad to their enemies. Still, neither of them had truly sat down to talk about what happened that night. Perhaps it was time they did.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

Of course, he already knew her decision. “No, I should talk to them alone.”

“I’ll be here.” He squeezed her hand. “Whatever happens.”

Her stomach did a flip. “Thank you.”

She left him in the room, then padded down the stairs. She was about to head to the kitchen when she saw her parents sitting in the living room, chatting quietly.

“Can I come in?” she whispered as she poked her head in. She felt like a kid asking permission to enter her parents’ bedroom.

Evie smiled at her from where she sat on the couch. “Of course.” She held out her hand, gesturing for her to sit.

She took the empty spot between her parents. “Dad—”

“No.” He held up a hand. “I should go first. Momma called me and told me to come and fix what I broke or she was going to haul me down here, so that’s what I’m gonna do.”

She could only stare at him. Connor Forrest was a man of few words, so to hear that he wanted to talk caught her off guard.

He took a deep breath and continued. “Charley, believe it or not, I’ve thought about that day every day for the last decade.”

She ground her teeth. “I didn’t think you cared.”

“Not care?” His green eyes blazed. “How could you say that? You’re my daughter. I love you. From the first moment I held you in my arms, I loved you.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “All you cared about was Mom’s career. What would happen to her if the tabloids found out I had been in that accident.”

He raked a hand through his hair. “I know, baby, but that’s not all I thought of. I was just so fuckin’ scared, seeing that mangled car. I thought you’d been in there with those kids. And ... I know you’re a Lycan and all, but just for a second, I’d forgotten. All I could think of was that my baby girl was in there, and she could be hurt ... or worse. And I couldn’t do anything about it. I shouldn’t have let you go to LA in the first place. You were too young to start working in show business.”

“Dad ... I was seventeen when I got in that car. Practically an adult. And it was my choice to go into music.”

“You’re my baby. Still mine to protect. I hated you were off doing your own thing with your music and your own life. I was so damned proud of you,

but I was so scared that you didn't need me anymore. When you were born, I swore I would do everything in my power to protect you."

"You can't protect me from everything, Dad. That's not how it works."

"I know." When he reached out to cup her chin, she leaned against his warm palm, breathing in the scent of fruity coffee beans. "But I have to try. I'm your father, and I always will be."

"Dad," she sobbed and threw herself into his arms. The anger and resentment she'd kept over the years melted away. "I'm sorry ... I'm so sorry ..."

"Shh," he soothed. "There's nothing for you to be sorry about, Charley. You should be the one forgiving *me*. I'm so sorry."

Charley held on to her dad, letting her tears fall as she cried in his arms. So much time lost, so much resentment. She never wanted to drift apart from him ever again.

Evie's arms came around them, and she, too, was crying. "I'm so glad ..."

They held each other until Charley's sobs turned into hiccups. Her wolf, too, sighed with happiness as it had been a long time since it had felt its sire.

"Everything okay in here?" Grams asked as she poked her head in through the door.

Evie wiped away her tears. "Yes, Lily." She beamed at her daughter and mate. "Everything's fine."

Charley mouthed a *thank you* to her grandmother.

She replied with a bright smile and a nod. "Well now, why don't we get you settled in? Evie, Connor, you can have your usual guest bedroom, and Cliff can stay in the attic now that Devon's with Char—er, he's no longer using it."

Evie raised an eyebrow at her. "Devon Hale, huh?"

Charley groaned. "It's not what you think, Mom."

"It better not be," Connor growled. "You're still my little girl."

This time, she rolled her eyes at her father. "Yeah, yeah. Come on, you guys must be starving. I know I am. I'll help Grams reheat lunch."

Chapter 14

“Not bad, Rock Star,” Jackson said. “Need to work on your defense more. Fighting in our wolf form is similar to hand-to-hand combat. We can’t leave the vulnerable areas unprotected.”

Devon shifted back from his wolf. “Thanks. I’ll work on that.”

It had been a few days since Charley’s parents arrived and, for the most part, everything was back to normal on the farm. Jackson, however, also added more Lycan training to Devon’s day, devoting the afternoons to teaching him how to fight. Today, he had his first sparring session with one of the younger ranch hands, Vance, in the empty pasture just behind the pond.

“Good job,” Vance said. “You got me good with that paw in the side.”

“Yeah, but you still pinned me down.” Devon rubbed his arm where he could still feel the bite, though it was healing now. “Thanks for not taking it easy on me.”

“No prob.” Vance tossed him his shirt. “But don’t forget your promise.”

“Front row seats at my Richmond concert next month, backstage passes, and access to the after party too.” Devon grinned at him. “Don’t worry, I got you.”

“Thanks, Devon, my girlfriend’s gonna freak.”

“No prob.”

“I should get back home,” Vance said with a wave of his hand. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

After they said their goodbyes, fierce growls and snarls caught Devon’s attention. He glanced over to the other side of the pasture where two

humungous wolves were locked in combat. It was mesmerizing to watch how the two animals fought with such intensity.

Devon immediately recognized Charley's father's wolf, which looked like Jackson's except for the wicked scar down its eye and cheek. The other wolf, which was even bigger and bulkier with similar fur markings, was Cliff Forrest—as in *the* Cliff Forrest.

Devon shook his head. Charley did not only have an award-winning singer-songwriter as a mother, but her brother was a famous MMA champ. Or at least, he had been, until that scandal in Vegas a couple years back. Devon had actually attended the first half of that fight before his date had asked him to go back to their suite, so he didn't know exactly how that went down. The fallout of it, however, had been brutal, and Cliff never got in the octagon again.

"I don't think you're quite at that level, Rock Star," Jackson quipped.

As Connor's wolf chomped down on Cliff's shoulder, the sound of breaking bones made Devon's stomach turn.

"Yeah, no. I just wanna be able to protect myself. I have no plans on tearing anyone's throat out. Unless those fucking mages somehow come back."

Aside from training, Devon had also been getting lessons on Lycan history, including the most recent events. To hear that they had come so close to the end of the world had been disturbing to say the least, not to mention, Charley could have died, too, if the mages had gotten into The Enclave. Just thinking about it made him and his animal rage.

It was silly of course, since he hadn't even met her yet then. Still, he was glad that they were able to defeat the mages. Jackson said it was unlikely they would return, but that's what they thought the first time too. Devon wanted to make sure he would be able to help if they did somehow resurface.

"Come on," Jackson waved him over. "Connor'll tend to Cliff." Sure enough, the two men had changed back, and Cliff limped toward his father. "Let's go back to the girls."

Devon followed Jackson as they headed toward the pond. Charley, Lily, Evie, Jack, and Jordan had set up towels, umbrellas, and beach chairs by the shore, laughing and chatting as they drank wine and beers and ate snacks.

Devon's eyes immediately went to Charley—who looked absolutely delectable in her white bikini. "Hey," he greeted as he plopped next to her where she lay on her towel.

“Hey,” she said, giving him a peck on the cheek. “All done with training?”

“Mm-hmmm.” He spied the cooler of beers next to Jordan. “Want a drink?”

“Sure. But can you get me one of those sandwiches?” She nodded at the table next to the cooler. “Or two. I’m starving.”

“You had six pieces of chicken for lunch,” Jack said. “How can you be hungry? Even I don’t eat that much.”

Charley playfully stuck her tongue out at her cousin. “I’m a growing girl.”

Devon retrieved two cans of beer and two sandwiches, then sat back down next to Charley. He opened the tab and handed one to her. “Cheers.”

She tapped her can to his and took a sip—then spit it out. “Ew.”

Evie sat up from her beach chair. “Honey? You okay?”

“Yeah. Blech.” She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. “I think something’s wrong with this beer.”

Taking it from her hand, Devon took a sip. “Seems fine to me.”

“Are you sure?” She unwrapped a sandwich and took a bite. “It’s ... vile,” she said between chomps. “Hmmm ... this roast beef is something else, though ...” She happily took more bites of her sandwich.

Evie glanced over at Jordan, who lifted her sunglasses off her face to meet her gaze. The two women exchanged the most curious looks.

“Why don’t I just get you some wine?”

“Uh, no. I don’t think I can deal with alcohol right now.” She finished the last bite of her sandwich. “Maybe just some soda? And then grab me one of those cookies too.”

“Sure thing, babe.”

A loud whooping sound rang through the air, and a blur dashed across the field, then jumped into the pond. Austin’s blonde head emerged moments later, then he swam toward the shore. “Damn, can’t believe how much I missed this,” he said, as he stood over Jack. He then shook his head, sending droplets all over his sister.

“Jerk!” She covered herself with her towel. “Argh! Austin, I wasn’t planning on swimming. Hey!”

Austin scooped her up off the towel. “Too bad, squirt!”

“Austin? Nooooo!” she cried as Austin began to march her toward the shore. “Moommmmaaa!”

Jackson, who sat beside Jordan, sighed. “Austin, c’mon, your sister isn’t in her swimsuit.”

“She looks like she needs a dunk.” Austin sniffed at her. “Smells like it, too.”

“I hate you, Austin, and I’m gonna kill you,” Jack screamed.

Jordan could only shake her head. “I swear to you, despite living out here, my children were *not* raised in a barn.”

Jackson stood up and brushed the sand from his thighs. “I’ll go break them up. Austin! Put your sister down right now!”

“Austin really loves his sisters,” Evie said. “Remember when they were young and he would follow Jack around and would never let anyone near her? He was the same with Katie.”

“Yeah, he can be a little too much. He swears Katie’s boyfriend nearly falling over that cliff when we went hiking was an ‘accident.’” Jordan made air quotes with her fingers. “I’m sorry, Devon, if he’s been giving you a hard time.”

“You would think Cliff would be more protective over her,” Evie said. “Sorry about our sons.”

“And husbands,” Jordan added.

“It’s fine,” Devon said waving them away.

Cliff, indeed, had given him a quick shovel talk, but afterwards, the former MMA champ had actually been nice to him, and now they got along pretty well. Connor, surprisingly, never said a word about Charley and him the entire time.

Austin, on the other hand, definitely gave off murderous vibes whenever Devon was around. Last night after dinner, when he thought no one was looking, he caught Devon’s eye and made a cutting gesture with his finger, starting from his throat down to his crotch.

Stem to sternum, indeed.

“He worships the ground Jordan and the girls walk on,” Lily said. “Only natural, seeing as he was probably in love with you before his dad was.”

“If I’m honest, I probably loved him first too.” Jordan laughed, then turned to Devon. “You look confused, I’m sorry. Austin is Jackson’s biological son from another relationship. But make no mistake, I’ll maim anyone who says he’s not my son.”

Lily snorted. “That woman walking out on him was the best thing that happened to him.”

“Otherwise, he wouldn’t have married his True Mate,” Evie said, nodding at Jordan.

“A what now?” Devon asked.

“Oh, Charley hasn’t told you about True Mates?” Evie said.

“I hardly tell *us* about True Mates, Mom,” Charley countered. “It’s this weird soul mates thing, supposedly.”

“Soul ... mates?”

“Nobody really can explain it,” Evie said. “I’m human, see, because my mother was a Lycan and my father was human. But, Cliff and Charley are full Lycans because Connor and I are True Mates.”

“There’s no definitive science around it,” Jordan said. “Believe me, Lycan researchers have been trying to find out True Mates work for decades. But the theory is some Lycans and humans are just so biologically compatible that they can produce more young. On the first try, actually.”

“Don’t forget invincibility.”

“Oh yeah. I survived a blast when I was pregnant with Katie.”

“I’m still confused,” Devon shook his head.

“It’s okay, dear,” Evie reached over and patted his hand. “I have a feeling you’ll understand in time.”

The rest of the afternoon passed by lazily with Connor and Cliff eventually joining them. When it was time for dinner, they cleaned up and headed out. When they reached the house, however, there was someone waiting on the porch.

“Jeff?” Devon hurried towards his manager. “What are you doing here? I mean, it’s nice to see you and all, but I still have over two weeks until the tour starts again.”

“I know.” Jeff’s lips flattened. “But you don’t have to stay here. Not anymore. In fact, there really wasn’t a need for you to be here.” Glancing behind Devon, he said, “Isn’t that right, Miss Forrest?”

Devon whipped around. “Charley?”

She had stopped a few feet away from him, her brows furrowed together. “What do you mean?”

Jeff huffed. “I mean, your Alpha tricked Devon into coming here.”

“Tricked?” His gaze shot back and forth from Jeff to Charley. “What is he saying?”

“That girl you hurt was a Lycan too,” his manager began. “She wasn’t in danger at all, was she?”

Devon's stomach clenched. "Are you sure? How did you know?"

"I had her followed by a PI. She was already up and about the day after you left." Jeff glared at Charley. "My PI told me that you people heal quickly. But you already knew that. Devon didn't need to come here at all."

Disbelief coursed through him. "No ... Charley ... you didn't know, did you?" *Please say you didn't.* However, he couldn't ignore how he himself quickly healed from his wounds during combat training.

Her lower lip trembled. "It was for your own good, Devon."

"You lied to me." The tightness wrapped around his chest so hard, he couldn't breathe. "You knew all this time."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Was it all a lie then?" he raged. "Was sleeping with me a lie too? Something your Alpha ordered you to do?"

"No!" She tried to reach out to him, but he evaded her grasp. "It wasn't. I ... I'm so sorry."

"The fucking was pretty good," he sneered. "I gotta hand it to your Alpha, he chose his honeypot well."

"You Goddamn asshole!" Austin shouted as he lunged for Devon. Thankfully, Jordan had stepped in front of him in time. "You watch what you say about her," he growled as his mother pulled him back.

"I—" Charley's mouth clamped shut, and she closed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she whispered, "I'm sorry." She whirled around and marched off, shoulders slumped.

Ice spread through his stomach and a dull ache filled his chest as he watched her walk away. His wolf snarled at him, urging him to go after her, but he was too angry. He pushed his animal away.

"Were you all laughing at me behind my back?" The bitter taste of betrayal coated his mouth. "Did you have fun kicking the crap out of the rock star? Humbling me until I felt like dirt?"

"I'd be careful about what you say next, son." Jackson's tone was calm. "You had to learn these things, for your own good. That girl might have been a Lycan, but that didn't mean she didn't suffer." He glowered at Jeff. "And the next one might not be so lucky."

"Devon." Jeff gripped his shoulder. "Go get packed and then we can get outta here."

"No need." He pushed Jeff's hand away. "There's nothing here that I want."

Without a second glance at the others, he followed Jeff to the front of the house, where a black SUV was parked. He climbed in behind his manager and settled into his seat.

As they pulled away from house, Devon felt his wolf's claws scratching at him, trying to get his attention.

What?

It let out an unhappy yip, then snarled at him.

He tried to ignore it, but its protests only grew louder and stronger as they drove out the gates of the Shenandoah clan's property line.

"Shut the fuck up!" he growled, slamming his fists on the seat.

"The hell, Dev?" Jeff asked as he looked at him from the driver's seat. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Crossing his arms over his chest, he shifted in his seat. "I'm fine. Just drive." The SUV had turned into a bend, and Devon could see the house from his window in the distance. "I just want to get out of here."

He closed his eyes, hoping to get some sleep. Maybe he'd wake up, and this would all just have been a nightmare. He could go back to his life, his real life—in his mansion, his tour, the music, and women.

But was that his real life?

He felt like he swallowed razorblades as he attempted to swallow. These last few days in Shenandoah had perhaps been the happiest in his life. Now that he'd discovered his true Lycan identity, he felt ... free. And it wasn't just because of his wolf.

It was because of her.

Jackson had been right. He was out of control, and he could have hurt someone bad. Correction—he did hurt someone bad. The girl wasn't in any danger of dying, but the pain she must have gone through while healing must have been awful. Hell, he'd felt it himself.

Shit. He scrubbed a hand down his face. *I acted like an asshole.* To everyone—not just Charley, but also Jackson and his family who opened up their home to help him.

His wolf cocked his head at him, as if asking, *Well, what're you going to do about it?*

Chapter 15

U nsure where to go, Charley ran back toward the pond and all the way to the treehouse. She nearly stumbled as she tried to climb inside as her hands and legs were trembling and tears had obscured her vision. As the hatch slammed under her, she paced the floor, biting her lip and wringing her hands.

This was it, the other shoe dropping.

Had she forgotten she was part of the deceit that brought Devon here?

She'd deserved everything he accused her of. It was true; she did know about Lucas Anderson's lie and how he tricked Devon into coming here. Hell, she was the one sending the Alpha progress reports about Devon.

She just didn't think it would all blow up in her face like this.

"Stupid," she bit out, then plopped down on the floor and leaned against the wall. She hugged her knees to herself. She should have told him everything.

And I shouldn't have slept with him.

It was too late now. She let herself get too emotionally involved, instead of just keeping it to sex. The last few days with him had been like a dream, their days spent laughing and working and making music in the living room, and their nights wrapped up in each other's arms. Everything felt so perfect, even with her father, like they were making up for those years they had drifted apart. She had Devon to thank for that, too, as he was the one who'd convinced her to talk to her dad in the first place and held her hand through it all.

And now, she'd ruined it all.

“Charley, honey?” came Evie’s muffled voice from under the hatch. “Are you up there?”

Charley pressed her lips together, hoping her mother would go away. She just needed to be alone right now.

“I can hear her up there,” Connor’s low, rough voice said.

Damn it.

Sure enough, the hatch swung out, and her mother and father climbed in.

“I just want to be alone,” she said to them. “Please.”

Evie sat down beside her. “You shouldn’t be alone, honey. Not when you’re feeling like this.”

“What he said was true. I did lie to him.”

“Lucas Anderson ordered you not to say anything,” Connor pointed out. “And you can’t refuse your Alpha.”

“He doesn’t understand what that means,” she said bitterly. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I won’t ever see him again.”

Her she-wolf hung its head sadly.

“I wouldn’t be so quick to say that, honey,” Evie said. “It might still work out.”

“Didn’t you see how angry he was when he found out I betrayed him?” The pure look of hate on his face made her chest squeeze painfully. “I hate to break it to you, but it’s not going to work out. Ever. I’m never going to see him again.”

Evie placed an arm around her. “Honey ... you might not have a choice.”

“What do you mean?” She cocked her head at her mother. “Mom?”

Evie looked at Connor, who just shrugged. “You tell her, since it’s your suspicion.”

“Tell me what?”

Her mother blew out a breath. “I should have prepared you better.”

“You’re a wonderful mom,” Charley said. “You and Dad both did an amazing job raising me and Cliff.” Truly, she wouldn’t have been able to accomplish what she had without them. She’d learned to be independent at an early age because of the lessons she’d learned from them and the love they showered on her.

“Not just about that. I mean, we should have talked more about True Mates.”

Now she was confused. “What does that have to do with it?”

“When you were growing up, we all decided that it might be better if we

didn't discuss True Mates with you and your cousins," Evie began. "We wanted to give you all a choice and not have you tied down to the idea that you have to be with your soul mate, because it doesn't always happen. Many Lycans find love and happiness without being True Mates."

"Momma did," Connor interjected.

"See? It's possible to find someone without them being True Mates. We didn't want you guys being hung up on the idea and think you have to keep finding your mate. You shouldn't have to miss a chance at happiness and break things off with someone just because they weren't your True Mate."

Charley had always found it strange her parents and uncles never spoke about being with their True Mates or just brushed it off if they had questions. But she suspected it had something to do with Austin. She'd heard some stories—mostly secondhand accounts from Katie and eavesdropping on her mother, grandmother, and aunt's conversations. Austin had had a multitude of serious girlfriends over the years, but nothing ever led to marriage. He'd actually gotten engaged to the last one, a human girl, but he broke it off at the last moment. According to Katie, Austin couldn't get over the fact that she wasn't his True Mate. Since then, he'd avoided relationships.

But why were they telling her about—

Oh no.

"No." She blinked, looked up to her dad, then her mother. "Mom?"

"That beer tasted vile, didn't it?" Evie said with a weak smile. "That's part of being pregnant with your True Mate's child. Alcohol tasted and smelled like sewage."

Charley swallowed audibly, thinking about that one sip she had this afternoon.

"And I noticed you've been eating a lot." She smiled up at Connor, who nodded. "Your dad's still mad at me for making him go all the way to Queens to get me a whole tray of noodles in the middle of the night."

Her stomach turned. Wasn't it too early for morning sickness?

Evie continued. "I mean, there's a chance you're pregnant, right? Because you didn't use a condom."

Her father looked ready to murder someone, but aside from a barely contained snarl, he said nothing.

"Uh ... yeah." *Oh, my God, I'm an idiot.* She mentally slapped herself on the forehead. She always used protection with her other hookups, but she figured since Devon was a Lycan too, there was no need since they also

couldn't get or give STDs.

"You know you have to tell him," Evie said.

"Yeah." Her hand went to her stomach. She would never deny Devon his child.

A child.

She was pregnant.

She really was going to throw up.

"I don't know how I'm going to do this alone." Charley shook her head. "I don't even have anywhere to go."

"You know you're welcome to stay with us," her mother said, which was punctuated by an agreeing grunt from her father. "But I have a feeling once you and Devon get a chance to talk, you'll work it out."

"What makes you say that?"

"He loves you, it's so obvious," Evie said. "And you love him."

Love him? Devon?

Oh crap.

She did love that Douche Hole.

But there was no way he loved her—or not anymore. Not after she betrayed him.

Her wolf whined and hung its head low.

"We should go back to the house," Charley said. "I think ... I think I should go back with you to New York. Figure things out." She didn't want to stay here as everything would remind her of Devon. "Is that okay?"

Evie kissed her on the temple. "Of course, honey. We'll make an appointment with the Medical Wing of The Enclave too." The New York clan had its own clinic just for their kind. "You'll always have a place with us. Let's head back to the house."

Connor helped them up, then walked over to the hatch. He was about to grab the handle when it opened on his own. "What the fuck?"

"Charley?"

Her heart stopped, unsure if she was seeing things. But that was definitely Devon's head poking out from the hatch.

His sky-blue eyes lit up when their gazes met. "Thank God I went here first." He let out a relieved breath, then climbed inside. "Lily said you weren't at home. I thought I'd have to spend half the night looking for you."

"You were looking for me? I thought you left."

"I couldn't. I made Jeff turn back."

“W-why?”

He brushed the dust off himself. “We need to talk.”

Evie got to her feet. “We’ll give you guys some privacy. Connor?”

“We’ll just be downstairs, Charley.” He grunted a warning at Devon, then helped Evie into the hatch before following her.

Once her parents were gone, Charley stood up, her nerves on edge. “Devon, I’m—”

“Let me talk first. I’m sorry, Charley.” He closed the distance between them. “For what I said. I was just so shocked and angry. All those awful things I said about you...” He clucked his tongue. “I didn’t mean any of it.”

“I did lie to you. Or at least, I didn’t tell you the truth.”

“Anderson ordered you not to tell me, right?”

She nodded.

“He’s your Alpha; you needed to follow him. And truth be told, he was right to force me to go through this training, if only to protect me and anyone else I could have hurt because I was too stubborn and selfish to look past myself.”

The sincerity that shone in his eyes made warmth spread across her chest, and the pain she felt there earlier all but disappeared. “Devon ...”

“And if I hadn’t come here, I wouldn’t have learned to communicate with my wolf. I wouldn’t have found out who I really am.” He took her hands in his. “And I wouldn’t have found you.”

Her throat burned with unshed tears. “I-I thought you hated me.”

“What? No.” Bringing her hands to his mouth, he kissed her knuckles. “How could I hate you? I love you, Charley.”

She sucked in a breath. “You love me?”

“Of course I do. I love you, Charlene Tala Forrest.” Releasing her hands, he brushed a lock of hair away from her cheek. “I love everything about you. Your talent, your fierce independence, your tenacity. I could keep telling you every single thing I love about you, but that might take all night. But what I really want to say is that I don’t want to live my life without you.” Leaning forward, he brushed her lips with his. “You don’t have to say it back if you don’t feel it. Or if I’ve undone everything between us because of what I said, I understand. I’ll do what it takes to win you back.”

“Wha—” Her head was spinning so fast throughout his monologue, she could hardly think. “Of course I love you too.” Her fingers grasped the fabric of his shirt and pulled him down for a deep, long kiss.

“Charley,” he mumbled against her lips when they finally broke off. “I can’t believe ... I’m so fucking happy right now. Will you go back on tour with me? Not as my assistant, of course. I just ... I can’t be on the road without you. Just be with me. Keep helping me with my music. Or not—I don’t care, as long as you’re beside me.”

“I—oh.” Crap. She still hadn’t told him. “I don’t think ... that might not be a good idea.”

His face fell. “Of course. Renée needs you. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean ... you have your career of course, I didn’t mean to make fun of it. We can work it out. Or I can cut the tour short.”

“Cut your tour short? Are you kidding me? Think of all those ticket sales you’ll miss out on.”

“What about it?” He shrugged. “It’s just money. You, baby, are forever.” He kissed her again.

“Hmmm ...” She reveled in his drugging kisses before she gently pushed him away. “It’s not that. I think Renée will understand if I quit.” At least, she better, seeing as they were now in the same boat.

“Then, what’s wrong?”

“I, er ...” How was she going to say this? “Maybe sit down for a sec?”

His arms slid around her waist and pulled her close. “I think I’m fine. Go on. What are you trying to say?”

“So, remember what we were talking about by the pond today? About True Mates?”

His eyebrows furrowed together. “I think so? Something about soul mates and getting preg—” His jaw dropped.

“I think we’re True Mates.” Her inner wolf let out a yip of joy as if confirming her words. “And since we didn’t use protection ...”

“True Mates ...” He swallowed audibly. “And you’re pregnant. With my baby.”

“We’re not sure, but there are signs. My mom, and I think Aunt Jordan, recognized them.” Those knowing looks between the two women earlier that day made sense now. Perhaps that’s why they brought up True Mates in the first place. “And of course, we can confirm with a test, and if you want a paternity test—”

“No.” He cut her off with a kiss. “We don’t need a test. I *know* it.” A deep rumble emanated from his chest.

She gasped. “Was that—”

“Yeah.” The corners of his mouth turned up. “My wolf knows it. And it’s happy, too, that we’re having a baby. I ... I think that’s what it’s been trying to tell me all this time. That we were meant to be together.”

Her wolf answered back as a resonant rumble of its own spread across her chest. The flash of surprise on Devon’s face told her he felt it as well. “I love you so much, Devon.”

“I love you too. Don’t worry about the baby and the tour. We’ll figure it out.”

“I would definitely love to tour with you, but I think at some point, I’ll eventually have to settle down somewhere.”

“We’ll find a home. Together.”

Her wolf seemed to like that idea as it lay down and let out a contented sigh. Perhaps she had already found her home—Devon was her home, wherever he was.

Epilogue

A few weeks later ...

“Come in,” Devon called out as he heard the knock on the door of his dressing room backstage at Madison Square Garden. When it opened, his heart did a little somersault at the sight of Charley’s head popping in. His wolf, too, let out a happy yip, and he couldn’t blame it. Though it had only been hours since they last saw their mate, it had felt like forever.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” she asked sheepishly, her eyes darting to the other man in the dressing room. “Hey, Kurt.”

“Hey, Charley.” Kurt Chambers waved to her. “No, you’re not interrupting at all. We’re just talking shit.” He grinned at Devon. “As we usually do.”

“You’re the shit talker,” he joked. “Always have been.”

Kurt threw his head back and laughed. “Dude ...”

While he initially had some qualms about reaching out to his old friend, Charley had eventually convinced him to just do it. “You never know if you don’t try,” she had said.

And so, Devon did reach out to Kurt to apologize for everything that happened between them. His old friend had been surprised, but was receptive to his overture. They started chatting back and forth through text, but after a couple of days, they decided to meet up in New York as Kurt happened to be flying into town. Once they did meet, it was like everything was the way it was back in the day—before they were famous and they had their big blowout.

“What? You know half the stuff that comes out of your mouth is bull.” Devon smiled smugly at him. “And I know, because I’ve spent a lot of time around cow dung.” He winked at Charley.

“Please tell me you have pictures,” Kurt said to Charley. “I’ll pay you a million dollars if you have any evidence of Devon Hale shoveling shit.”

“Oh yeah, this is gonna be fun when we’re on the road.” Devon rolled his eyes. “I change my mind, let’s not get the band back together.”

He wasn’t sure whether it was him or Kurt who brought it up, but the idea of a reunion somehow popped up during their conversations. And so, after weeks of talks, negotiations, and reaching out to their other band members, they had agreed to a Speed Run reunion tour next year.

It made sense for everyone and would ease the burden of being a solo act for Devon. He had already cut his tour short so he could be home with Charley when she gave birth to their pup and for the months after. Kurt was here because they would be announcing the tour during tonight’s concert.

Devon gestured for her to join him on the couch. “Did you need something, babe?”

“Yeah ...” She held up a thick manila envelope. “I have that info for you.”

“Oh.” A tight sensation formed in the pit of his stomach. They had spoken about it in the last couple of days, but now it really was here.

“I should get back to my dressing room.” Kurt stood up. “I should get back to my dressing room.” Kurt stood up. “Charley, I really like those initial demos you recorded. Can we talk about those at our next meeting?”

In the last weeks, Devon hadn’t been the only one who reflected on past regrets. Charley had spent more time on her own music and had just finished writing a song for René. The pop diva had loved it and planned to record a new album featuring more of Charley’s works. Of course, Devon wanted his own Charley Forrest original song, so she and Kurt had sat down and discussed writing more songs for Speed Run’s reunion album.

“Sure thing, Kurt.”

“All right. See you guys later.”

As soon as they were alone, she spoke up. “Lizzie just handed it to me a couple minutes ago. I haven’t looked at it.” She covered his hands with hers. “And you don’t have to, if you don’t want to.”

He could only stare at the envelope, paralyzed. Once he opened it, there would be no turning back. “What do you think is in it?”

“Lizzie didn’t say exactly, but what else could it be? It’s information about your parents.”

Charley’s cousin was apparently some kind of hacker genius. She could find records that would have taken years to unseal by the courts or even get into systems and databases people wouldn’t normally be able to access. Lucas Anderson had asked her to dig into Devon’s past to see if they could possibly contact his clan or find out what happened to his parents.

His parents.

The people who abandoned him when he was a child.

“What if I don’t want to know who they are?”

“That’s okay too.” She smiled at him. “You already have a family. Everyone—my parents, Cliff, my uncles and aunts and cousins, we’re your family now.” Taking his hand, she placed it on her belly. “And you have us.”

“And I don’t need anyone else.” He leaned down to kiss her. “I hear a ‘but’ coming ...”

“But, I think you should open it.” Her fingers squeezed tight around his. “They’re your parents. Maybe ... maybe they had a good reason for abandoning you.”

He’d heard that all the time growing up, even thought of it himself. Still, the resentment had grown over the years, but he’d dealt with it. And of course, now that he was about to have his own family, it really didn’t matter did it? But still ... he thought of his own child, growing in Charley’s belly.

He sucked in a deep breath. “Let’s do it.” He paused. “But, will you look at it for me?” He didn’t know if he was strong enough to do this on his own.

“Of course,” she said, her light brown eyes full of love and understanding.

Devon’s heart beat madly in his chest as he watched Charley open the envelope and retrieve the first item—a yellowed clipping from a newspaper.

“‘Toddler Found Abandoned at LA Union Station,’” she read out. “Have you ever seen or read this article?”

“No, never.”

She continued to read. “‘A toddler was found unattended at Union Station early Monday morning, holding—’” She paused and gasped.

“What is it?” His heart jumped in his throat. “Charley?”

Her eyes widened. “D-Devon ...” Turning the clipping over, she lifted it up to his face. “Look.”

He squinted at the blurry picture on the printed page. There was a blond

toddler in a striped sweatshirt sitting at what looked like one of the old wooden benches in the waiting area at the station. “What’s that—” The toddler—him—held two small bundles in his arms.

“Devon ...”

Snatching the paper from her hands, his eyes quickly scanned through the article. “...early Monday morning, holding twin baby girls ... according to initial interviews social workers conducted with the child, the infants are his younger siblings.” All the air rushed out of his lungs. “I had ... have sisters. Is there anything else about them?”

“Possibly—wait.” Charley rifled through the rest of the contents of the envelope. “There’s something here ...” She fished out a couple more papers, as well as a photo. The excitement in her voice was evident as she cried, “Lizzie found her!” She glanced at the photo. “Do you want to see?”

His throat had gone dry, so he could only nod. His fingers trembled as he accepted it. “She ...”

“Looks like you,” she finished.

The photo showed a fresh-faced blonde woman in a graduation cap and gown, all smiles and eyes the color of the sky. Devon couldn’t tell if there was any resemblance, but if Charley said so, then it must be true. Also, the picture must have been taken a few years ago, because she had to only be five years younger than him, making her mid-to-late twenties by now.

Charley bit at her lip as she read through the rest of the papers. “Says here she was adopted by a couple in Nevada. Graduated top of her class in high school, magna cum laude from the University of Nevada. She’s a music teacher at an elementary school, lives just outside Las Vegas. Her name’s Stella Lennon.”

Stella Lennon.

His sister.

“What about her twin?”

A deep frown marred Charley’s face. “There’s ... hmmm ... nothing in here about the twin.” She shuffled through the papers. “Maybe they were separated? Lizzie says she’s still working on more. But Devon ... what do you want to do now?”

His fingertips rubbed at the corner of the photo, contemplating Charley’s question. “I ... I don’t know yet. It sounds like she had a good life. I don’t want to mess that up for her.”

“Devon.” She reached over to cup his face, her light brown eyes peering

up at him, mesmerizing him as they always did from the very beginning. “I want you to know, whatever you decide, I’ll be here. We can figure this out together.”

Closing his eyes, he turned his cheek so he could kiss the inside of her wrists and take in the delicious scent of peaches. The warmth of her love soothed him, like the glow of a fire on a chilly night. He knew that whatever happened in the future, with his parents or his sisters, he would never be alone again, never feel unloved and abandoned.

“Devon!” Jeff poked his head into the dressing room. “You need to be onstage in five.”

“Right.”

Charley stood up. “I’ll be watching you. We’re all here, cheering for you.”

Devon had invited everyone—Charley’s parents, Cliff, aunts, uncles, and cousins—to watch his concert tonight from his private VIP suite. Jackson, Jordan, Lily, and even Austin made the long drive from West Virginia to see him. “Thanks.” He rubbed his palm over her stomach. “I’ll see you both later.”

She kissed him. “Break a leg.”

The concert went off without a hitch, and of course, the audience went wild when Kurt came on stage and they announced the reunion tour. After a lot of coercing from the thousands of fans, he even picked up a bass and played one of their signature tunes.

At the end of the concert, however, Devon stood on stage alone with just his guitar and the mic as the audience clamored for a second encore.

“All right,” he said with a chuckle. “Just one more.”

The people cheered loudly, chanting his name. Usually, this adoration gave Devon a high that he never felt before, but now his hands shook from pre-performance nerves.

“Okay, so I wanna share something with you all.” He adjusted his guitar strap. “This last song, it’s really special. I’ve only done this once before in my life, and it didn’t turn out great. But then ... then someone taught me how to be true to myself. And so, I wrote this song.”

Pausing, he looked straight at the camera that broadcasted his face to the giant screens around the stage. He smiled at the camera, knowing Charley was looking at him right now.

“I don’t have a title for it yet.” He strummed the starting chord. “So, for

now, I'm gonna call it 'A Song for Charley.'”

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About the Author

Alicia Montgomery has always dreamed of becoming a romance novel writer. She started writing down her stories in now long-forgotten diaries and notebooks, never thinking that her dream would come true. After taking the well-worn path to a stable career, she is now plunging into the world of self-publishing.

