

BLOOD SAVED

THE
HALFBLOODS



AMILLY
TAIDEN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLOOD SAVED

THE HALF BLOODS
BOOK 3

MILLY TAIDEN



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About the Author

Also by Milly Taiden

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Wolf alpha Atlas Silvers doesn't want a mate. He wants to run his pack. That's it. An easy, complication-free life. That peace is ripped apart by Half-Blood sisters, and Atlas doesn't like them much. More trouble than they're worth!

Enter Lilliane Longborn. She is everything Atlas doesn't want. She's trouble and complicated. She's beautiful, and he wants her more than he should. The Half-Blood is ... of all things ... his mate. What's a wolf to do? Let her fall victim to her vampire stalker?

Nope. Atlas is willing to put it all on the line for the woman he can't let himself want. He'll save her and send her packing. Easier that way.

Or so he would like to believe. Love is a powerful force, and soon, Atlas realizes he will never be able to let his fated mate walk out of his life. But it may be too late for them.



BLOOD SAVED

THE HALF BLOODS 3

NEW YORK TIMES and USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MILLY TAIDEN

—*For my readers.*

Thank you!

ONE



ATLAS

Atlas Silvers was pissed.
Not just angry. Not in a bad mood.
Full-on pissed. *Pissed off!*

He was used to anger. It was basically the way he went around the world, angry at everything and anything.

However, this was different.

It was so different that he couldn't even see clearly. His vision was clouded over, making the world around him fuzzy and blurry. Even the buzzing in his ears was deafening.

He shook his head and jammed his index fingers into his ears. He tried to pop them. Nothing. He rubbed his eyes and blinked them open. Nothing.

There was no change.

The anger was still there with no sign of easing. In fact, it was only getting worse. And the second the woman opened her mouth and spoke, Atlas knew he was done for.

“Are you just gonna stand there?” She narrowed her enticing, chocolate-brown eyes at him.

There was every chance he would never be the same again now that his animal had found her.

His mate.

Maaaaaate! his wolf howled so loudly, Atlas barely heard when the woman snapped at him again, finishing her jabbing comment. “Or are you going to do your *job*?”

Atlas growled low in the back of his throat. He didn't appreciate the woman's tone, nor did he think this was a particularly good time to be

rendered speechless. For the first time, his dick and his wolf were on the same team, and Atlas wasn't prepared to fight himself when there was already a battle happening.

His pack, along with the Greenlee and Blackwood packs, were fighting the vampire council. The manor house was on fire, and most of the vampires were dead and dusted. His mission ... the only fucking thing he had to do ... was to take Lilliane Longborn to a safe place until the vampire threat had blown over once and for all.

Atlas had taken the task because he wanted to get a good look at the woman who had run away from her sisters to marry a member of the vampire council. A vamp she didn't know. A vamp who would probably treat her like shit while he made her pop out vamp babies to solidify the vampire position in the world.

What he didn't expect ... was that the insane woman would be his mate.

It was a mistake. Obviously, his wolf was confused, and as soon as he took Lilliane to his cabin, where he was going to keep her locked in one of the guest bedrooms, the howling would stop. His wolf would know a terrible mistake had been made, and everything would be okay.

Atlas would be completely fine.

"Hello?" Lilliane snapped again. "Are you unwell? Can you even *hear* me?"

"I *am* doing my job, but only because of you," he snapped right back.

The woman sneered. *Fuck*. Even sneering, she was the most stunning woman he'd ever seen. It was those warm eyes. No. It was those full pink lips. Maybe it was the curve of her waist or her long brown hair snaking down her back in thick, lush curls.

She put her hands on her hips and tapped her foot at him. "Do you really think this is *my* fault?"

"Absolutely. Ever since you and your sisters came to town, it's been one thing after another."

"I hardly think that's fair. We lived in Longville a long time."

"I don't care. You three brought trouble to my life, and you've endangered my pack. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be setting fire to this place."

"If I had it my way, all of this would have been over *weeks* ago."

"Whatever."

Atlas lit the curtains. They caught fire with alarming speed. He took

Lilliane's hand and tugged her away. She didn't come willingly, but he could hardly leave her in a burning house. He would never hear the end of it from Nero and Reece.

"You wanna die, trouble?"

"Obviously not," she said, pulling her hand free.

As they went through the house, Atlas set fire to curtains, furniture, and linens. He hated doing it, but without the shelter of the manor house, the vampires wouldn't have any stronghold or base of operation near the three towns of Blackwood, Greenlee, and Silvers.

A touch of arson to save three wolf packs and a bunch of humans. Atlas couldn't remember doing something this bad before.

And Lilliane Longborn was to blame.

"Do you love him?" he asked as they ran toward the kitchen and the backdoor. This was a bad time to ask a question, but Atlas couldn't help himself.

"Love him?" she snorted. "Who?"

"The vampire you're supposed to marry."

"Of course, I don't love him. I love my sisters, however. I'm doing this for them. At least, I was trying to until they ruined everything."

"*They* ruined everything?"

"They sure did."

"You're as insane as you are hot," he said before he could stop himself. He wished he could take it back.

"Whatever," she panted, running behind him. "I'll find him again and fix all this."

Atlas stopped and turned to face her. His fingers were bunched into fists at his side. "Find him again?"

She kept running, passing him with vamp speed. He gripped her arm and pulled her to a stop.

"You would go back?" he growled. "Even after all this?"

"You don't get it."

"You're right," he shrugged, spotting the flames coming closer to them. "I don't get it."

Without thinking, he took her into his arms, slung her over his shoulder, and ran out of the house toward the others. Reece and Nero were there with the other two Longborn sisters waiting for them.

"Is it done?" Nero asked.

Atlas nodded and replied, “Yup.”

He didn’t know if his friends heard him over Lilliane’s shouts. “Cupid! Cupid! Cupid!”

“Stop shouting, you impossible woman,” he commanded.

“Not until you put me down.”

“I’m not putting you down. You’re coming with me, and I’m gonna make sure you don’t cause any more trouble for me and mine.”

Lilliane smacked his ass over and over. Each slap was accompanied by a series of “Lemme go. Lemme go!”

Valentine and Nero ran toward them, but Atlas didn’t stop. “What the hell is going on?” Val asked.

“She’s a pain in the ass. She ... argh!” Atlas stilled for a second. His spine straightened as his cock hardened. Already, having his mate in his arms was difficult. But the maddening woman *bit*. *His*. *Ass!* His body turned into one big flame of desire. It made him want her a little bit more.

Did Lilliane know she was his mate? Was that why she did it? To facilitate his slide into madness? Well, she wasn’t going to win. Making a show of hiking her up higher on his shoulder, he shook off the need to strip her bare and fuck her right here. He kept walking by their gathered friends and family. “She bit my ass,” he growled. “She actually bit my ass like some rabid animal.”

“You deserved it,” Lil snapped. “Put me down.”

“I’m gonna take you somewhere you can’t cause trouble for the next decade, d’ya hear me?”

“You won’t let him take me, will you?” Lilliane cried to her sisters.

Val suppressed her smile. “You’re in good hands, Lil.”

“Seriously? Traitor!” Lilliane continued to shout until Atlas walked her to his truck.

“I’ve got a feeling about those two,” Nero chuckled.

Val joined in on the laugh. “Same.”

Atlas pretended he didn’t hear them.

There was no way either Nero or Reece ... or their mates ... knew what Lilliane was to him. He would take that information to the grave, and even then, he might give the afterlife a serious talking-to for putting his perfect wet dream in his path.

Lilliane Longborn was all curves with long, brown hair and coffee-brown eyes. He would forever be haunted by the feel of her wiggling in his arms and

the shape of her ass stuck in the air right by his face. Even her teeth clamped on his backside would give him something to jerk off to for decades to come.

Yup. Atlas was going to keep Lilliane under lock and key until she learned to not cause trouble. What kind of woman sacrificed herself to a shitty life of vampire matrimony? She had to be insane. Lilliane ... and everyone else, including him ... would be much safer if she cooled down.

You know why you're taking her to your place? his wolf purred. *You want her for yourself. Admit it. Bite her ass right now. She did it to you first. Reciprocating is only fair.*

He ground his jaw down as he carefully set Lilliane in the passenger seat of his truck. That was a dangerous thought. Atlas had to keep his hands ... and especially his fangs ... away from Lilliane Longborn.

He ran the risk of accidentally mating her, and that was the last thing either one of them wanted.

TWO



LILLIANE

Lilliane's body was on fire.

Atlas was a big man. All tall and muscled with enough power to drape her over his shoulder as if she weighed nothing. His large palms didn't touch anything untoward, but that only made her angrier. At least if he was rough with her instead of oddly careful, she could hate him.

But Atlas smelled good, and his body felt like the safest place she'd been in days.

Weeks, even. Shit, if she was honest, being in Atlas's arms was the safest she'd felt in years.

This is what I get for being raised by a man who doesn't give a crap about me and sisters who see me as nothing but a burden.

Atlas was manhandling her, and she was halfway in love with him for caring in a really weird way. Did she want to marry a member of the vampire council? No. Fuck no. Did she want to marry Victor? Abso-fucking-lutely not. Did she have a choice? No.

Atlas was choosing to put himself in danger, even if he didn't fully understand that just yet. She would make him understand by being as annoying as she could be. She was the youngest of three girls. She knew how to be annoying, just like her sisters.

Lilliane crossed her arms and didn't say a word as Atlas drove. She hated him and needed out of the truck, but she didn't want to crash the vehicle. When he pulled in front of a massive and beautiful log home, she regretted her choice.

It would be impossible to run from such a wooden fortress. Atlas killed the engine and glared over at her. "Will you get in the house, or am I gonna

have to carry you again?”

She crossed her arms to hide her body's reaction at the thought of Atlas touching her. "I'm not gonna make this easier for you."

"Fine by me," he said.

Before she could even formulate a plan, Atlas was out of the truck, opening her door and swinging her over his shoulder again.

"I hate you," she said, wiggling like a worm in his arms. She stopped when she realized she was actually enjoying herself.

Atlas took a flight of stairs three steps at a time with his powerful legs. He opened a bedroom door and gently placed her on the floor. "Stay," he said, backing away from her like *she* was the captor and not the other way around.

"You cannot keep me here under lock and key," Lilliane sniffed, crossed her arms, and raised her chin. Usually, this got her what she wanted from her older sisters. Atlas didn't look impressed at all. In fact, he met her gaze head-on and growled, "Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"No," she repeated with more volume now. "And don't you say *yes* again, or I'll scream."

He smiled wide, showing off a row of perfect white teeth. If it hadn't been so predatory, it would have almost been sexy how he grinned at her. "Scream all you want, trouble. No one can hear you way out here."

"My sisters will come for me," she harrumphed.

"No. They won't. They didn't stop me from leaving with you for a reason. They're both busy with their new mates, and they have a life of their own now. You've done your best to ruin their happiness lately, not to mention all the vamps and headaches you've caused around here lately, so I don't think your sisters will be too keen on helping you. Again."

"You can't," she argued. Atlas had a point, but she couldn't admit that to him. It would give him too much power and too much satisfaction. Lilliane *was* the baby of the family, and she did rely on her sisters a lot. They were more like parents, given that they'd all been taken from their mothers and their dad wasn't exactly a hands-on kind of parent. She was spoiled, and she knew it.

That was exactly why she had done everything in her power to protect her sisters from the vampire council's nefarious plans. Better she sacrifice herself

than let her sisters suffer. It was Lilliane's turn to sacrifice.

Atlas had ruined her plan, and she hated him for it. Who did he even think he was, anyway? So he was hot in that grumpy way, but Lilliane didn't care. Not much. Nope. "You can't keep me prisoner," she growled, taking a page out of his book.

"Yes," Atlas snapped, taking a step closer to her. She had to crane her head back to look into his eyes.

"No."

"Yes, and don't you say *no* again," he said. It wasn't lost on her that he was repeating her words. Her fury continued to simmer.

"I really hate you," she snapped.

"Right back at you." He stared her down, daring her to continue this childish and insane fight.

Lilliane sighed and shook her head. If Atlas wouldn't be swayed by law and reason, she needed to level with him. As much as she could. She didn't have to tell him *everything*, but she could divulge just enough to get him to understand. "I don't think you get what I was trying to do. I had to save my sisters."

"By agreeing to marry a vampire you didn't know?" His snort was cut with a dry laugh.

"You wouldn't understand," she insisted, annoyed he wasn't even giving her a chance.

"You keep saying that, but you haven't even tried to explain it."

"I don't think you're smart enough to get it," she bit out only to bait him. Maybe if she was annoying and mean enough, Atlas would let her go. "That's why I haven't tried. What kind of man are you? Locking me in here like you have a right to do so."

"Oh, but I do have the right. I have every right."

She crossed her arms and threw her head back with a laugh. "Yeah? How?"

Atlas opened his mouth only to snap it shut. "None of your business."

"Of course, it's my business. You think it's totally okay to hold me prisoner, and you claim that my family won't even come to rescue me. Stands to reason you must know something I don't."

Atlas closed the very little distance between them. He gripped her chin between his thumb and index fingers. The second his fingers touched her, Lilliane gasped. His skin was hot and callused, and though he glared down at

her, his touch wasn't hard.

It was ... oddly gentle.

Confusing, infuriating man.

The brown of his eyes turned from hatred to something else in a flash. "Lilliane," he growled, sending a thrill up her spine, "listen to me very carefully. There is no safer place than this cabin. This is for your own good and the good of my pack. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

Lilliane wanted to rage at him.

She wanted to beat her fists against his chest and make a run for the door.

Her limbs refused to listen to her. All her senses were zeroed in on Atlas's fingers. The touch was searing and delicious. For a wild ... and honestly, probably insane ... second, she wondered what Atlas would do if she reached up and kissed him. His lips were right there, plumper than they had any right to be on such a hard and grumpy man.

"Touch me again, and I'll devour you," she whispered. It sounded more sexual than she had intended. Her voice was breathy, and her nipples betrayed her by hardening to points in her thin lace bra. One glance down the length of her body, and Atlas could tell.

She was conflicted. Confused by his touch and her response to it.

"Fuck," Atlas hissed, dropping his hand from her. He pointed a finger in her face and shook his head. "You keep that vamp siren bullshit to yourself."

"Fine by me, wolf boy."

He slammed the door with the words *vamp siren bullshit* hanging between them. Lilliane wished she had something to distract her so she wouldn't try to decipher what he meant.

Obviously, he couldn't mean he was attracted to her.

That was insane.

Probably as insane as trying to marry Victor to save her sisters.

THREE



ATLAS

Atlas spent way too much time in the woods, doing lap after lap of his territory. He started in the afternoon and didn't stop until the moon was high in the sky. Maybe he shouldn't have sent his best enforcers home to their mates, but it had been a stressful few months. They deserved it.

Especially since he might've unintentionally brought Lilliane to his place.

He had every intention of locking her in one of the cabins by the lake. They were used for visiting family members or rented for staycations by pack members. That wasn't where he took her, though.

Atlas drove Lilliane to *his* place.

"Probably to keep a better eye on her," he assured himself out loud.

Maybe that was true, but that didn't explain why he'd dumped her in *his* bedroom.

When Lilliane sat on his bed, he nearly rushed at her to kiss that damn pouty mouth. How was he going to survive keeping her around if his wolf was sure she was his mate? He should probably drive himself to one of those rental cabins, but then who would keep an eye on Lilliane?

She wasn't in any immediate danger. The few vampires that had escaped the fire weren't likely to return. They didn't have a base to stay out of the sun anymore. The vamps would be scrambling, and with any luck, they would have learned their lesson.

Don't fuck with wolves.

The moon was out in full force by the time he shifted into his human form on his back deck. His limbs hurt from running all day, and he was covered in sweat. He needed a shower more than he needed his next breath.

There was an obvious problem, though.

He was the dumbass wolf who had decided to lock his mate in his bedroom.

Thankfully, Valentine had been true to her word, and she'd brought over Lilliane's stuff. He grabbed the heavy duffel bag, and with a sigh, he climbed the stairs, gripping the strap so hard that it cut through his skin.

He stood at the door, listening carefully. The silence was loud, giving him no clue as to what Lilliane might be doing in his bedroom.

Atlas unlocked the door, half expecting Lilliane to rush him and try to escape. Once the door was opened, he was shocked to find Lilliane lying on her back on the bed with her head off the side, her long hair nearly pooling on the floor. She glared at him from her upside-down position but made no move.

From this vantage point, he could see her cleavage perfectly. Her breasts were just about ready to leap out of her top. His mouth watered as he imagined licking the soft skin of her bosom.

Instead, he tossed the duffel on the ground between them. It was a shit barrier, but he vowed not to take another step into the room. *His* room. Even if she was lying on *his* bed.

"You've got twenty minutes to shower and change."

She didn't move but laughed. "Seriously? You got me a change of clothes? What? Did my sisters pack for me? Giving you permission to keep me here?"

He shrugged. "It's for your own good."

"Keep telling yourself that, kidnapper." She twisted her body around until she was on her stomach, her eyes never leaving his. "Why did you lock me in *your* bedroom?"

"Only door with a lock," he lied. It was a dumb fucking lie too. When he took her to another bedroom later, she would find a lock and know he was a liar. She would probably give him shit about it.

Now, he didn't have a choice but to pretend part of his plan was always to keep Lilliane in his room.

"If you think you can have your way with me, you're insane."

He snorted out a harsh laugh. "I don't need to force anyone to have sex with me. I'm the alpha of my pack. There are plenty of women around here who would throw themselves at the opportunity."

"Good for you, wolf boy," she taunted. "But if you bring them back here, how would you explain the woman in your bed?"

“You’re annoying as fuck, Lilliane. Change, don’t change. Shower or don’t. I give zero fucks. You do what you want within the confines of this room while you come to your senses.”

“Whatever,” she rolled her eyes.

Atlas took a few steps into the room, and Lilliane hurried to nestle into the pillows as if his advance was a threat. He swore under his breath and hurried to the bathroom to grab his toiletries.

“You’ve got nothing to fear from me,” he said before slamming the door shut behind him. When he clicked the lock, he heard her say, “Right. Nothing to fear but the locked room.”

Atlas wanted to open the door again and make Lilliane see that she was safe with him. He would never hurt a woman. Never. Not even one who was apparently more than willing to sacrifice herself for her sisters.

He thought better of it.

He needed a break from the howling in his mind.

Atlas went to one of the spare bedrooms, showered, and jerked off to the idea of Lilliane in his bed. He slid on a pair of PJ pants and went to bed. He couldn’t find a comfortable position no matter how much he punched the pillows or tossed and turned.

By midnight, he had enough. He headed toward the kitchen for a snack. Maybe some carbs would help him crash for the rest of the night. As he slunk past his bedroom door, he heard something that made him pause.

A soft sob.

There it went again! A sob followed by small coughs and an incoherent string of words.

“Lilliane,” he whispered.

Before he could even think about what he was doing, Atlas unlocked the door and opened it.

What he found froze him to his core.

Lilliane was fast asleep. Her eyes were scrunched closed, and her feet kicked at the blankets with so much vigor that they were half on the floor. She sobbed again, and he flipped on the bedside lamp.

“Lilliane,” he whispered. “You’re having a bad dream.”

“No,” she gasped, eyes screwed shut.

Atlas couldn’t take it. He sat on the bed and cupped her face in one palm. “Hey, trouble, you’re having a nightmare. You’re okay. You’re safe.”

Startled out of her sleep by his touch, her eyes sprang open. They were

wide with fear and panic. He tried to move back, but Lilliane reached out to close her hand around his wrist. Tears fell down her cheeks, breaking his heart. He wiped one of the tears away.

“Hey, now, what’s happening?”

“Where am I?” she asked.

“At my place. I’ll call your sisters. They can be here in minutes.”

“No!” she cried, sitting up. Her fear was back. He hated seeing it in her eyes. He hated the smell of it lingering in the air. “Please. Don’t. They…” She closed her eyes and started to cry in earnest.

“Shit,” he hissed. Atlas scooted closer to her, and before he could stop himself, he enveloped her in his arms and ran his hands down her back. “It’s okay, trouble. I won’t call them.”

She wept in his arms, shaking through sobs and also trembling for reasons he didn’t know. He just held her, her tears wetting his bare chest. After a few minutes of silence, she pulled away from him, wiping her tears. She gave him a watery smile that broke his heart.

Who had hurt this woman? The second he had their name, he was going to destroy them. No one should be allowed to make his mate cry.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “I got snot on you.”

He waved her off. “It’s fine. Do you need anything?”

She hugged a pillow to her chest, and he was jealous of it. Why was hugging a pillow better than holding *him*?

“No. Sorry for waking you.”

“Do you…” He cleared his throat. Atlas didn’t *do* talking. He was rusty, at best. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

She laughed through a few more tears. “No. I wouldn’t torture you with my nightmares. Not any more than waking you up in the middle of the night.”

“I was already up. I was on the hunt for a snack.”

Her eyes sparked. “Snack?” she sniffled. “I could use a snack.”

Despite himself, Atlas grinned at her.

She gasped and dropped the pillow. “Holy shit! You know how to *smile*?”

He rolled his eyes and stood. “Impossible.” He walked out of the door and stopped at the doorway. “You coming or what?”

“You wanna cuff my legs together or something?”

“Trouble,” he sighed. “Come on. I’ll feed you.” He didn’t wait to see if she followed, but when the steps squeaked behind him, he grinned.

FOUR



LILLIANE

Good job, Lil. You wanted to be such a tough girl, and now look at what you've done. You are crying in Atlas Silvers's arms. After the stupid, sexy man locked you in his bedroom.

Lilliane wasn't just embarrassed. She was full-on devastated. There was another emotion pushing through, but she didn't want to think about how the only person to ever hold her during a bad dream was Atlas. The same man who locked her in his house.

How could he do both of those things? Was he trying to confuse her? It was working. She was confused and a bit relieved if she was honest. If ... when ... Victor found her, she would be telling the truth when she told him that she couldn't escape to find her way back to him.

Without meaning to be, Lilliane was a bit grateful Atlas was locking her in. He thought he was protecting his pack and every other person who lived in Silvers. Really, he was protecting her from Victor.

She should tell Atlas right away that she was only going to bring death and pain to his pack. She was selfish as ever to keep quiet, to put a bunch of people in danger because she was so scared and so weary of living with Victor breathing down her neck.

Victor was her nightmare. Even though she was locked in an alpha wolf's house, Victor haunted her mind. Lilliane couldn't actually remember the last time she hadn't had a nightmare. It was silly, really. She hadn't had them as a kid, with Valentine and Celestine looking out for her. But as a grown woman, she was plagued by them.

How long would the dreams overwhelm her? Maybe she would be okay just in time for Victor to find her.

“Come on,” Atlas said. “I’ll feed you.”

Lilliane considered ignoring him. She looked back at the bed and shook her head. There was no way she was going to sleep again tonight, not after a nightmare. It was impossible to fall back asleep. She was up for the day, even though she’d only gotten a couple of hours in before the nightmare.

A nightmare so loud and disruptive that even the wolf keeping her locked in his house had taken pity on her.

He held me.

Lilliane still couldn’t believe the gentleness of his embrace. He held her like he cared. Like he wanted to chase away the monsters in her mind. Like he would have climbed into her nightmares to make it better.

Not the usual captor behavior.

And she should know.

This wasn’t the first time Lilliane was someone’s prisoner.

With a shiver, she tried to shrug off the thought. Obviously, there were very few similarities between Atlas Silvers and Victor.

She padded cautiously behind him as she walked down the stairs, turning lights on as she went. He took a quick glance in her direction. He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. “Umm, is the dark ... an issue for you?”

Lilliane gulped audibly. She gave the smallest nod, too embarrassed. It wasn’t the dark, really. It’s what had happened in the dark.

Atlas flipped on all the lights in the kitchen. There were no shadows around her, and she took a deep breath, puffing it out slowly as more tension left her body. Atlas watched her from the corner of his eye, probably to make sure she didn’t book it for the door. He poured milk into a saucepan and took out cocoa, chocolate syrup, marshmallows, and whipped cream.

“You have the kitchen of a twelve-year-old,” she joked.

“I’ve got a sweet tooth,” he shrugged. He licked something from his thumb, and her breath caught.

Whoa. There went the last shred of tension from her dream.

There Atlas stood in nothing but a pair of PJ pants that were slung way low on his hips. His hair was tousled, making it obvious her nightmare had disturbed some deep sleep. He was making the most loaded hot chocolate she’d ever had, and it did something to her inside.

“The sugar will be good for the shock,” he explained when he swirled way too much whipped cream over her cup.

Who is this guy?

He sipped his drink and sighed. "I don't wanna pry, but..." He took another gulp, wincing at the heat. "Do you want your sisters here?"

She shook her head and licked whipped cream from her cup. "No. They don't know. It's not like they would've noticed, anyway. When it got really bad ... I..." She stopped. This was too much. She was going to say too much.

"Lilliane?" Atlas asked. "What happened when your dreams got bad?"

"When the dreams were bad, I was already gone. It's..." She shook her head.

"Is that why you left?"

She shrugged. "Part of it." This would be the right time to tell him. To warn him that someday soon, Victor would be back. But as soon as she told Atlas, he would kick her out. She had nowhere to go, and Victor would find her. She gasped at the fear in her chest.

Atlas was at her side in a second. He cupped the back of her neck. "Hey, trouble. You okay?"

She nodded, but he could feel her trembling. There was no hiding it.

"Wait here."

Atlas disappeared into the living room. She sipped her hot chocolate as odd sounds streamed in from the other side of the house. He came back with a thick white throw opened in his arms. He wrapped it around her shoulders and led her to the living room and onto the couch. There was a fire crackling in the fireplace, and the TV was on with a bunch of streaming services. He handed her the remote.

"Watching something might help you fall back asleep," he explained. He sat on the other side of the couch, far away from her. He looked so at ease, sipping his hot chocolate, bare-chested.

"Aren't you scared I'm gonna run off?"

He shook his head. "It's dark out. I've got you wrapped in a blanket with a hot drink and every show you could wanna binge. You're not going anywhere."

"I do this under protest," she said, picking a reality TV show she was obsessed with.

Atlas groaned at her choice, but he didn't leave. He came back when he took their empty cups to the kitchen. He stayed as the fire died.

And when Lilliane fell asleep, he didn't move when her head landed on his shoulder.

FIVE



ATLAS

W *hat the fuck am I doing?*

Atlas couldn't believe his own actions. What the hell was he doing, holding Lilliane after she had nightmares, making her hot chocolate, and letting her control the TV before she fell asleep on his shoulder?

This wasn't who he was.

But what the hell was he supposed to do? His head was full of his wolf's howl to claim her.

Mate.

His heart beat with that word when he was near her.

No wolf could handle hearing their mate crying in the other room. He wanted to make it better. He wanted to make the tears stop and destroy whoever made her cry in the first place.

It could be my fault.

The thought was gutting. There was a chance Lilliane was crying because he had basically kidnapped her. What an asshole he was. *Fuck.*

So he dried her tears, made her a snack, and bundled her up. Maybe he was an even bigger asshole for prying into what gave her nightmares. He was relieved it wasn't about him. The mere thought made his chest hurt.

All he wanted was to get Lilliane back to sleep. In the morning, he would drive her to one of her sisters. He would make this right because this was just wrong.

Atlas looked down at the woman sleeping on his shoulder.

He didn't want to let her go, though.

What happened tomorrow night when she had a bad dream? Would her

sisters leave their mates' beds to comfort her? Lilliane would probably pretend it hadn't even happened. Wouldn't it be better for her if he kept her?

Maybe he should give her the choice. Explain that she was his mate.

He shook his head. No way. He couldn't do that.

Just like he couldn't move. Not when Lilliane was finally asleep. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. If this was where his mate was sleeping, it was where he needed to be. He couldn't fight her nightmares for her, but when she started to struggle in her sleep, he rubbed her back until she settled back into a peaceful sleep.

This was the only place for him.

"UMM? ATLAS?"

He blinked his eyes awake. He stiffened when he remembered where he was ... on his couch with his mate's head on his lap.

Right next to his morning erection.

Fuck.

He tried to move away from her, but there was every possibility she'd noticed. "Yeah?"

"I fell back asleep," she gasped, sitting up.

He rearranged his PJ pants and looked at the clock. "It's almost seven. You had a good six hours."

"That's six hours more than I usually get." She stretched before moving the throw pillow.

Atlas knew he had to bring it up. What he had done. Taking her like that. He cleared his throat as he made his way to the kitchen. If he was going to have that conversation, he would need coffee.

He began prepping the grounds and cups. Lilliane joined him, sitting at the counter.

"So," he sighed. "Listen, I need to apologize to you. I really shouldn't have taken you like that. Your sisters said it was okay, but I wanna make it clear that I'm not usually out there kidnapping women. I'll take you back to your sisters. Whatever you want."

She toyed with her hair. "Actually ... can I stay here?"

He nearly dropped the coffee carafe. "What?"

“I know that you took me, but I get why you did it. But ... I don’t want to be a cockblock for my sisters, and I’m a bit of a mess. No one wants to deal with me during the honeymoon phase.” She gave a sad smile and shrugged. “I get that it’s a lot to ask...”

Atlas could point out that he had properties. Empty properties. He could set her up in one of them.

Mate.

Maybe he could keep her here. Not for any nefarious reason. But if his mate had nightmares and felt like shit about who she was ... his own behavior had definitely not made it any better ... then he would help her through it.

He didn’t have to mate her. Or tell her what she was to him. He could be there for her, and when she was better, he would send her on her way. She *was* trouble, and he didn’t need his life to be any more complicated.

“You can stay here,” he said. “I don’t mind.”

“I’ll give you your bed back.”

“It’s fine. All yours.”

“Thinking of locking me in again?” she teased.

“Fuck, Lilliane, I never should’ve done that. Fuck, what you must think of me.”

She rolled her eyes and hopped off the stool. She stepped right up to him. She was so close he could count her eyelashes. “I slept for the first time in months. What do I think of you? You’re a confusing man, Atlas.” His heart rammed against his chest as she said his name. “You are sweeter than I would’ve thought.”

“Don’t spread it around.”

She grinned. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone it took me only a few hours to wear you down from captor to friend. Your secret is safe with me, wolf boy.”

He barked out a laugh, surprising them both. “You’re a formidable foe, trouble.”

Lilliane rolled her eyes. “You can stop calling me that.”

“No,” he sighed. “I really can’t.”

“Then you better get used to wolf boy. Though, judging by that morning erection, I should really change it to wolf man.”

His eyes nearly popped out of his head. “Did you really just say that?”

“What? I was surprised. I never sleep, and then when I do, there’s an

erection in my face. Well done, by the way. Your wolf ladies must be really happy.”

He blinked at her as she left the kitchen, glancing back at him over her shoulder. His heart stopped. She had to know how beautiful she was. How sexy that look-back was.

Lilliane was trouble, all right. And he'd just invited her to stay.
In his bed.

SIX



LILLIANE

Lilliane showered in Atlas's bathroom. Used his clean towels to dry off. The sandalwood and pine scents that always lingered on him were everywhere in the room. After spending a night on his lap ... a glorious nightmare-free sleep ... she would forever think of that aroma as *safe*.

Yup. The man who took her to his place and locked her in was safe.

She didn't know why or how, but she just *knew* down to her toes that Atlas wouldn't hurt her. Maybe it was because she'd been vulnerable, and instead of taking advantage of it, he had made her feel better.

He apologized.

Lilliane tried to think of Victor apologizing, and the very thought made her laugh. Men like Victor didn't say *sorry*. Even if they were wrong and terrible and real assholes.

Atlas was grumpy, but he wasn't an asshole.

He made her hot chocolate and let her drool on his lap. Oh, god. That lap. Hard with muscle yet comfortable. When she woke up with his morning hard-on right in her face, she wanted to laugh. Instead, she had stared at it a bit too long before waking him. Immediately, she could tell he was uncomfortable with her proximity to his erection.

Embarrassed like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Lilliane understood it was morning, and as a virile young man, Atlas would have morning wood. It wasn't because she was touching him. Nope.

At least he was going to let her stay.

Lilliane knew she had to tell him. Be honest. The longer she waited, the worse it would be. She was bringing all kinds of trouble to the wolf alpha. She should have the decency to tell him.

Maybe she deserved whatever Victor would do to her when he found her again. He would probably want more than a marriage now that she had thoroughly embarrassed him by running away not once but twice.

Shivering at the thought, Lilliane decided to wear an oversized sweatshirt as a tunic paired with black leggings. It was warm and comfortable and had the added bonus of being sandalwood and pine-scented because the sweatshirt was only oversized for one reason.

It was Atlas's sweatshirt. She took it from the closet and hoped he wouldn't say anything.

She made her way down the stairs and found him sitting at the kitchen table with a laptop and a few stacks of papers. He looked up at her, his eyes lingering on her legs ... or so she thought.

"You're making yourself comfortable, I see," he said, glancing back at his computer. "Stealing my clothes now?"

"I wanted something comfy," she explained. "Are you working? Am I bothering you?"

He turned down the laptop screen with a sigh. "Just going over some pack accounts. Boring stuff."

"An alpha does the books? I can't imagine Reece doing the books."

He chuckled. "Same. He's good at other things. Your sister is with a good man."

She nodded. "She tells me all the time how good he is. At first, I thought she was trying to convince me because there was something wrong with him, but now I see she's just completely in love with him."

"Being with your mate will do that," he said almost reluctantly.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," he flipped the computer back up.

"No. It's a mate thing. I'd like to understand."

He heaved out a heavy sigh. "They're mated. They are linked, connected, and bonded. All in these permanent ways. Mind, body, soul. A mate is so much more than love."

"It sounds a bit scary." She pulled out a chair and sat next to him. "Like it could swallow you whole."

"I guess that's right."

"Isn't it dangerous to let someone have that much power over you?" She thought of Victor and what he expected of her. "I don't think I would ever be okay with being mated. No offense," she quickly added. "That's so

insensitive. You must want to meet your mate.”

He licked his lips, avoiding her gaze. “Sometimes, a mate will die or leave, and it leaves the wolf ... broken. Madness sets in. I won’t mate my mate.”

“You’ve met her, then!” she gasped. “Oh!”

“How do you figure?”

“You said *I won’t mate my mate*. That sure sounds like *I don’t want to mate her even though I know her*. Oh, my god. Do you have a dud? I mean, I love my sisters. They’re amazing and beautiful, and I gave up my life for them. Maybe yours just doesn’t measure up. Is she boring? No personality?”

He barked out a laugh. “No. She is most definitely not a dud. She’s...” He took a deep breath and shook his head. “She’s sexy as hell and too smart for me. She’s bold and loyal to the people she loves. Even if it puts her in danger. She’s incredible.”

Huh. “Men. I don’t get it. It sure sounds like this girl is amazing. You’re obviously attracted to her, *and* she’s smarter than you?” She giggled. “You actually like this girl. Bold? Loyal? You’ve got a weird kink, Atlas.” She poked his arm teasingly.

“It’s a wolf thing, I guess. I’m an alpha. I expect loyalty, but I also lead my people with that in mind. If I act like an asshole to them, they won’t be loyal because they want to be. That’s flawed to me. I try to be a good alpha who deserves his people’s loyalty.”

“You’re very principled for a man who kidnapped me.”

He blushed dark red. “Fuck,” he hissed. “I know. Not my best moment.” He sighed and met her eyes. “I really am sorry. You can press charges if you want.”

“Your buddies with the sheriff,” she pointed out. “But ... honestly? I need to ... tell you something. It’s a good thing you took me. I would have gone back to him.”

Atlas stilled. “You said you don’t love him.”

“And I don’t. I couldn’t. But...” She sniffled. “He can kill my sisters. And me, but he can kill my sisters. If I don’t marry him, he’ll kill them.”

“Lilliane, you need to explain that to me a little more. Why would this powerful vampire be after *you*?”

“I don’t know. We never leave the house, but I snuck out once. Went to a bar. Danced with who I thought was just a cute boy. Turns out, Victor is a vampire council member, and he’s old. Like, *old-old*.”

“Centuries?”

She nodded. “Yeah. He’s got a seat on the international council. And for some reason, he has it in his head that he needs me in his life.”

He narrowed his eyes. “But why?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, we met at the bar, we danced, and okay ... we kissed. I let him drive me home. We kinda dated. Not really. He thinks we did because he sent me flowers and letters. I hid it all from my sisters because it kinda felt...”

“Like you had a stalker?”

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Yeah.”

His hands were fists on the table. “Did you let him drink from you?”

Lilliane’s face flooded with shame. “He said only once. And then he would leave me alone. It was stupid, but I wasn’t sleeping because he would tap at my window. I thought he would leave me be. But after that night, he started to threaten my sisters. If I didn’t meet him outside after dark, he sent ... warnings. I left because it would just be safer. My dad was in on it, you know?”

“Why didn’t you tell us any of this?” he asked, his voice quiet and cold.

“Because Victor told me he would kill...”

“Your sisters.” He sighed. “Do you believe he would?”

“He used his position in the council to get my father a seat. He dangled power in my father’s face. He told my father if he made me marry him, he’d take my father to the top.”

“Your dad is an asshole. I should hunt him down and...” He cleared his throat. “Sorry. Go on. Please.”

“You went full alpha there,” she said, trying to catch his eye.

He avoided it. “Yeah.”

“For little old me.”

“A powerful vampire is fixated on you, and he’s tasted your blood. That’s a lot to take in, trouble. I’m just processing.”

“I’m putting you and your pack in danger just by being here, but if you ask me to go, I honestly don’t know what will happen to me. And it’s not fair that I’m asking this of you, but please ... help me?”

“Lilliane,” his voice was rough. “You don’t even have to ask. He won’t touch you ever again.”

She blinked back tears. “But...”

“No.” He shook his head. “No. You don’t argue with me, not on this. He

won't touch you again. We'll have to warn your sisters."

"What? Why?"

"Because Nero and Reece are my friends, and they'll help protect you."

"This is way too much of a problem. I did this to myself. Maybe I should just go. Disappear."

"He would find you. You're not going anywhere, trouble. Your place is right here with me."

"But I'm nobody to you," she sighed. She hated how pathetic she sounded. How fragile. But she was so sick of running, and here was the first person she felt safe with. It cracked her open like an egg.

"Don't. Don't you ever say that. You're family." His eyes burned bright with conviction. He blinked back a powerful emotion she couldn't name and cleared his throat. "Family to my best friends."

She nodded, grateful for the wolf bonds her sisters had made.

It had brought Atlas into her life. And in another life ... one where she got to choose her path ... she could've fallen in love with Atlas Silvers.

SEVEN



ATLAS

Atlas felt sick.

A vampire had tasted his mate's blood.

The words were like poison, making his stomach clench. The only thing that eased the rage was to remember Lilliane was in his house. She was sleeping in *his* bed. Sure, he wasn't in it with her, but she was still with him.

Fuck that vampire.

Victor could try to get near to Lilliane again. He wouldn't get too far before Atlas ripped him limb from limb for giving his girl nightmares and for keeping her away from her sisters.

Lilliane said he had gone full alpha, and she was right. He would always go full alpha where she was concerned, and he wished he had told her then. He wished he could've been honest and told her the truth.

But after everything she said, why would it matter? She was clear: she would never be mated.

Atlas didn't need to add pressure on her. She already had one paranormal fuckwit messing with her; she didn't need another.

He would do right by her. He would protect her and make sure she had a good life safe from Victor. But he wouldn't expect her to know what she was to him.

"But I'm nobody to you," Lilliane bit her lip, tears lined her eyes.

Atlas had to grip his chair to keep from reaching out to her. "Don't," he called out, wishing he could hold her and whisper it in her ear. "Don't you ever say that. You're family," he slipped.

Fuck. Quick. Recover!

He cleared his throat. "Family to my best friends."

She nodded and stood from the chair. "I'll go call my sisters."

"I'll meet with Nero and Reece, but first, you and I need to agree on something."

"What?"

"You have to promise me that you will never go back to him again. You are not to be sacrificed for the safety of others, do you hear me? You are too damn important to be his pet. Promise me."

She sniffled and crossed her arms. "I don't think that's a fair thing to ask me. I can't promise that. If I need to protect my sisters, I will."

"There is a wolf shifter between you and the vamp who would come for each of your sisters. More than that. There are three wolf packs between you and your sisters. I promise you, Lilliane, with all that I am, that fucker will never lay another finger on you."

He stood and closed the distance between them. It was a bad idea. He shouldn't do it. But he couldn't help himself. He cupped her face in his hands and looked deep into her eyes. "If I make that promise to you, promise me you will never go to him. Because it would be willingly made, Lilliane. You have an army to defend you now. Promise me."

She inhaled deeply. He could hear the rapid rhythm of her heart. "I promise," she whispered.

"Fuck it all, trouble. You're a handful to have around." And with that, he sealed his mouth to hers.

She gasped into the embrace before melting against him. "Fuck," he said, pulling away just enough to keep his forehead against hers. "I shouldn't have done that."

"No, no. It's good. It's ... fine. It's good. Because ... actually..." This time, she kissed him.

Atlas crushed her in his arms, holding her as close as he possibly could. He parted her mouth with a lick of his lips and sipped at her. It was agonizingly good.

It could never happen again.

That's why he didn't break the kiss. He wouldn't. Couldn't. As soon as it was over, it would be in the past. There would be no more kisses from Lilliane Longborn and all her trouble.

She curled her fingers into the hair at the back of his neck, and Atlas was hers. There was no way around it.

She was his mate.

He was hers.

And that could never be.

He slowly eased their pace and brushed her lips one last time.

“Probably best we don’t do that again,” he said, voice rough.

“Bad idea.”

“No. It’s not that. I can’t be distracted.” He cupped her face again and kissed her forehead. “You’re very distracting.”

He left her there and got in his truck without another word. He drove right to Nero’s place. His friend was sitting on the porch, rocking in a chair with Valentine.

“I’m not surprised to see you,” Val said, laughing. “Did my little sister chase you right out of your own house?”

“Why *did* you take her there, of all places?” Nero joined in on the laughter. “Is she your mate?”

Atlas stilled. “What?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Val said. “Celestine and I have been talking about it, and it would only make sense that she’s your mate. You know, because of Celestine and Reece and me and Nero. Three alpha friends, three sisters. Would fate really leave it two out of three? I don’t *think* so.”

“Val really wants her sister to have an alpha mate that will keep her out of trouble,” Nero explained. “But we are curious. Is she? Your mate?”

Atlas wanted to point out that Nero had suddenly become a “we.” Would that happen to him if he told Lilliane the truth?

“Does it matter?” he answered.

“He’s your friend,” Val said. “You tell me why he won’t answer. Is it because she is or because he doesn’t want to hurt my feelings?”

“Val,” Nero chuckled benevolently. “Easy, love.”

“Well?”

“I’m starting to see a family resemblance,” Atlas joked. “Do me a favor? Don’t tell Lilliane.”

Val nodded. “Okay.”

“Really?” he laughed, disbelieving. “You won’t fight me on it?”

“Oh, no. I won’t do shit. You shifters are always fighting your attraction to your mates, and it only gets you in trouble.”

“She might have a point,” Nero added.

“Lilliane has been through a lot. The last thing she needs is for a wolf to drool all over her. She is a vibrant young woman who deserves to follow her

own path.”

Val leaped out of her chair and clapped her hands together. “Oh! You like her! She’s your mate, and you already like her! That was some mate talk right there. You aren’t telling her because you’re…”

“Val,” Nero cut in. “Let the man get there himself.”

Atlas shook his head and blew out a breath. “Can I count on you not to say anything to your sister?”

“I won’t say a thing until I need to.”

He huffed. “Valentine.”

“She might need to know one day. Don’t you think?”

“No matter what happens, it should come from me.”

“Yeah. It should. So? Why don’t you do it?”

“I have my reasons. Respect that, please.”

Val frowned. “Fine. But I don’t like this.”

“Why are you here, anyway?” Nero tugged his mate onto his lap and rocked them.

Atlas was jealous that Nero could just hold his mate. Simple. Easy. No vampire fucking it all up.

“We need to talk.”

As if on cue, a phone rang. Val pulled out her cell phone, and she looked up at them, confused. “Lilliane is calling me.”

“You might wanna get that,” Atlas said. “Nero, let’s go for a run.”

Nero kissed Val’s cheek before they walked into the woods.

EIGHT



LILLIANE

It took Lilliane a long time to actually call her sisters.

Atlas had been gone quite a while before she used their chat app to video call both at once.

“Why is Atlas over here like a kicked puppy?” Val said as soon as the call was connected. “What did you do?”

“Oh? Did I miss something? What’s happening?” Celestine cried.

“First of all, fuck you both for letting Atlas carry me off like that.”

“What?” Val said. “We thought he could be your mate.” She went on to explain her two-out-of-three theory.

“You’re nuts. You both thought that?” she asked.

Her sisters both nodded in their tiny little boxes on her phone. It was hard to tell if they were lying. She would have to take their word for it. “As we speak, your mates are with Atlas. He’s going to tell them some stuff. Stuff that I probably should have told you a long time ago. But ... I didn’t. So. Here it goes.”

Lilliane unloaded. She told them everything and her sisters were livid. Legitimately livid.

“How dare you try to protect us against our will,” Val screamed.

“We’re your big sisters! We should be protecting you!”

“But I was the one who brought Victor around. I never should’ve done that. I knew he was a vampire, and I knew how dangerous they are. But I was careless. I put you in danger, and...”

“So that means you need to suffer all alone forever?”

“That’s crazy, Lil. You should’ve told us.”

Lilliane shook her head. “But you had new loves in your lives. I just...”

Dad was causing trouble, and there were the murders. I really didn't want to add to all the problems. I thought I could handle it."

"Oh, Lil," Val gasped.

"Seriously, Lil, you're kinda breaking my heart. I thought you were being really selfish, but you weren't." Celestine wiped a few tears from her eyes.

"I do feel a bit vindicated. I did say that something fishy was happening, but I won't say *I told you so*. Because I love you, Lil, but fuck! I told you so!"

"Nice, Val," Lilliane grumbled.

"You don't get to keep secrets like that from us. Do you understand me?" Celestine insisted.

"Exactly! You need to tell us if Atlas is your mate," Val added.

"Is he?" Celestine squeaked.

"No. I'm not his mate. It's some girl. He's really into her, but for some misguided reason, he won't tell her. I'd told him that I would never want to be mated ... no offense."

"Totally offense taken," Val laughed. "Besides, being mated to Nero is the best thing that's ever happened to me. I don't have a man in my life; I have my soul mate and a whole town to take care of. It's amazing. I love this town."

"Yeah, what Val said," Celestine nodded. "Don't knock it till you try it."

"No, thanks. Not after everything with Victor."

"Well, I'm sure Atlas will come to his senses eventually," Val shrugged. "Just keep bugging him about the mate thing. You know, remind him how much he likes this girl and how lucky she would be to be his mate."

"I guess I can do that. To thank him for taking care of me and all this vamp mess."

Celestine laughed. "Yeah. I'm sure that's what you'll do to thank him."

"Celestine," Val cried. "Enough. Let's talk later."

The call was ended, and Lilliane had the weird feeling her sisters were going to call each other and gossip without her.

Probably about her and Atlas.

Her sisters had brought up an interesting point. Two out of three sisters were an alpha mate's lady.

So why wasn't she?

She wouldn't mind being with Atlas.

The thought snuck in, and it terrified her more than any nightmare.

LILLIANE STOOD AT THE STOVE, stirring one pot while another nearly boiled over. There were too many things happening at once, but that was her fault.

She didn't exactly have the best kitchen ... and cooking ... skills out there. It was a little harder than she had thought. She felt silly, and hopefully, she would be done before Atlas came home. Really, she should clean up everything before he showed up.

No man would be impressed by the explosion that had apparently happened sometime between her cutting up tomatoes and browning ground beef. She blew hair out of her face, but some stubborn flyaways decided to stick to the sweat on her forehead.

"Damn you," she mumbled, pushing them away. The second she stopped stirring the paste, it started to bubble over again.

"What the hell is happening here?" a deep masculine voice scared her, and she spun around with a squeak.

"You're back."

He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. "What are you doing?"

"I was trying to make dinner to say thanks for letting me stay here, but..." She shook her head. "Apparently, I can't follow a simple recipe or cook. Sorry."

Atlas walked over to the stove and checked all the pots. "This isn't so bad. Lemme take over. Set the table."

Lilliane nodded and got to work, casting wary glances at Atlas. He looked at home in front of his stove as if he cooked there often. He probably did. "Do any of the female wolves ever bring you casseroles? Offer to cook for you?"

He chuckled. "No. I like to cook. It's usually meat, though. I'm surprised you found all the ingredients to make spaghetti."

"Ah. So no one tries to seduce the single wolf alpha?"

He laughed again. "That's a whole other story."

"It happens, then?"

Atlas shrugged. "Not really. Not in a while."

"Oh. Can I ask why?"

He was quiet for a minute, and Lilliane thought he would just ignore her

and pretend she hadn't asked the question. Finally, he sighed. "When I first became alpha, the whole town was obsessed with helping me find my mate. They all paraded their daughters and nieces and granddaughters and long-lost cousins in front of me."

"But none of them was the girl. The one you're secretly in love with," she teased.

"I'm not secretly in love with anyone."

"You're not? Sure sounded like you were really into your mate when you talked about it."

"I can't love her."

Lilliane frowned. "You can't love her? Is she with someone else?"

There was another long pause in which she convinced herself she was pushing too much. They weren't friends. Not really. Atlas had taken her against her will. Sort of.

Now that she had told him all about Victor and begged for his help, she should behave. Not stir trouble like only she could. He didn't deserve the intrusion, but she was so fucking ridiculous. If anything, she could convince Atlas to be with his mate. It could be the nice thing she did to pay him back for helping her.

"She isn't with anyone. Not really, but..." He sighed as he continued to assemble their meal like a pro.

"But?" Lilliane pressed.

"It's complicated."

"It usually is. But look, I don't know much about love or relationships. I haven't had enough experience for that. You just sound really into her. The way you talk about her?" She shivered. "I can only hope that one day, a man will talk about me like that." She nudged him with her shoulder. "It's kinda sexy that you're this big and powerful man who's all turned around by his mate."

"Stop," he groaned.

"What? It's sweet. She's lucky, but she doesn't even know how lucky she is. So, she's single? She isn't with anyone? You should just tell her. I'd want to know if someone was *that* into me."

"But you said you wouldn't want to be mated," he pointed out.

"Right, but this isn't about me. Does this mystery girl also have a problem with the whole mate thing? Is that why it's complicated?"

"Sorta."

“Well, then, you need to convince her that she needs to change her mind.”

He turned away from the stove and faced her. His arms were crossed, and his face was pulled deep into a frown. It struck her that even moody and needled by her, Atlas could still be drop-dead gorgeous. Whoever this girl was, she was luckier than lucky.

“You’ve got big, strong arms. You smell really good. You can apparently cook and rescue damsels in distress. Setting aside the whole grumpy thing, you’re actually kind of perfect. I honestly believe that you have a shot with her.”

“I don’t think so,” he said, turning back to the bubbling pasta sauce.

“I could help you.”

He stiffened and sighed. “I don’t need help.”

She laughed. It was drier than she had anticipated. “I said that for a long time. Do you know what happened? I basically sacrificed myself to a vampire lord, and then this wolf saved me by making me his kidnap victim.” She poked his hip and laughed. “Sometimes you just gotta take a shot, you know?”

Lilliane gave him her best smile, but already, the ugly bloom of jealousy was there, pushing her heart at the thought of her wolf man with someone else. Someone that wasn’t her.

NINE



ATLAS

Atlas was doing his best to focus on cooking. Lilliane had the meat in one pan, sauce in the other, and pasta in a third. He took great care to dump the meat in the sauce and stirred it all together. He tasted the concoction, and it wasn't half bad.

"Sometimes you just gotta take a shot, you know?" Lilliane said, bumping his hip.

His whole body was on fire, and it had nothing to do with the heat from the stovetop. He wanted to wrap her finger in his palm, put her on the counter, and eat *her* for dinner.

"You can't do garlic, right?" he asked.

"No garlic, please. Unless you want to give me some really painful blisters and a fever."

He nodded tightly and added more red pepper flakes. It would be spicy spaghetti, but there was no way he was feeding his half-vamp mate garlic.

"So?" she asked. "What do you say? I help you with your girl trouble?"

"I don't have any girl troubles," he mumbled.

"But you should tell her she is your mate. I'm telling you, any woman would be relieved. Tickled pink."

Any woman but the one woman I want.

The more Lilliane offered to help her, the more she talked about how lucky his mate would be, the harder it was to keep the secret. It was going to take all of his self-control to keep his mouth shut.

"Drop it, trouble."

She huffed out a breath. "You're ruining my plan," she whined.

"What plan would that be?"

“If I tell you, it won’t be a surprise anymore.”

“I don’t like surprises.”

“Why doesn’t that shock me?” she poked him again, making him stiffen. He reached out and grabbed her wrist. Through his thumb pressed against her tender skin, he felt the flutter of her heartbeat. It was too fast. Too quick. She was stressed about something.

Atlas looked deep into her eyes and tried to decipher what could be causing her so much worry. Of course, it was probably Victor. His mate had a vampire stalker. She *should* be stressed.

The last thing she should be worried about was his love life.

“Lilliane,” he said. “Leave it alone. I can’t be with her.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You know, you call me trouble for a reason.”

“Yes.” *Because you are trouble for my self-control. For my sanity. Because you are everything I never wanted to want.*

“Okay. Well, by definition, I need to keep going. I’ve got a troublemaker reputation to uphold.”

He shook his head and laughed despite himself. “You know what? If you want to figure out who it is, you go right ahead. The only issue is that you can’t leave this house because of your stalker. How do you think you can find her?”

She shrugged. “I have my ways.”

“Shit, but you are trouble.”

Lilliane beamed at him as she took the plate of pasta he handed her. “But you love it.”

His entire body went still. He did. He loved it. And if she kept on being herself, he could love her, too. It was too soon, though. Too soon and impossible. As soon as her stalker situation was dealt with, he would let Lilliane walk out of his life forever.

It was better that way. To keep her in the dark.

“I know,” she giggled. “But really, my heart is in the right place. I just want you to be okay.”

He nodded and settled at the table. “Eat your food, trouble. You need energy if you’re gonna drive me wild.”

She smiled at him, but she couldn’t know he was already half-wild for her.

AFTER CLEANING up the mess Lilliane made in the kitchen, they settled in the living room on opposite ends of the couch. Atlas lit a fire to keep the chill out of the air. It was that or cuddling Lilliane on the couch, and he didn't think she would be okay with that.

"I'm sorry we kissed," Lilliane said softly.

He muted the movie she'd picked and turned to face her. "What?"

"We kissed, and I'm sorry about that. I realize that you're into someone else, so you probably feel like you were unfaithful to her or something."

He shook his head. "I'm not with anyone, so I can't be unfaithful."

"But you love her. How can you love her and kiss me?" She shrugged. "You're a really good kisser, Atlas. The only person you *should* be kissing is her. Your mate. Whoever she is."

"Lilliane," he warned.

This was hell. Honest to god hell. It could all end if he just told her the truth, but then she would leave. Wouldn't she? It was too great a risk to take.

"What?" she asked. "I can say that, can't I? When we kissed?" she whistled. "I was all melty inside. If you want to convince her that being your mate is a good idea, all you gotta do is kiss her." She smiled at him, blinking fast. Her face was all pink and soft. Her lips were as pouty and enticing as ever.

Without thinking, he took her ankle and dragged her to him. Quick on the uptake, she straddled him into the couch. He cupped her face in his hands and growled deep in his throat as his cock began to harden. Lilliane closed her arms around his neck and smiled. "What did I just say? This should be for her alone."

"I should kiss her like this, then? To convince her?" Atlas kissed the corner of her mouth softly. Gently. He could barely feel it, but he pressed the other corner with a bit more force. She ground down on him with a moan.

"It's a good start," she purred.

He palmed her ass to bring her closer to him. She moaned when her core made contact with his erection. He hissed out a breath and bit into her lower lip before licking the sting away.

"Atlas," she shivered in his arms. "You really want to tease her into madness?"

He chuckled before capturing her mouth with his. He parted her lips with

his tongue and explored her. Their kisses were long and deep. Made impossibly hotter by their proximity. He wanted to keep Lilliane right here in his arms. Forever.

“See?” she was breathless. “Kiss her like that, and she’ll be yours. Guaranteed.”

“If that were true, would you be mine? Guaranteed?”

She grinned at him. “You want someone else, and I’m here because of my vampire stalker. It’s not exactly a great start to a love story, is it? Not even a good story for a quick hookup.”

He tensed but didn’t stop running his hands through her hair. He didn’t want to stop touching her for fear she would move back to her side of the couch. “Don’t know about that,” his tone was rough. Probably full of need. What did she expect when she was sitting on top of him like that, wiggling and tantalizing his cock.

“You don’t want me,” she laughed softly. “I’m not *her*. The one you want. The one you won’t let yourself have.”

Oh, how wrong she was. What would it be to tell her? To just tell her?

“She doesn’t want me,” he said instead.

Lilliane frowned. “What? She doesn’t want *you*? You? Super sexy. Tall drink of water. Grumpy in a really sweet way? Is she *okay*?”

He chuckled and continued to massage the globes of her ass. “She’s just fine, but she doesn’t want me.”

“That’s why you can’t be with her. I didn’t realize there was a choice in it. It’s not like my sisters gave it much thought. They got with their mates pretty much right away.”

“Of course, there is a choice. She doesn’t want me.” That wasn’t strictly true. Atlas didn’t know what Lilliane felt for him. Not really. Even though she was in his arms and grinding against his erection. This was physical.

Maybe that’s all Lilliane wanted. Physical touch. Release. Pleasure.

He could give her those things. If that’s all he could give her, he would. Sure, it might hurt him when she left for good, but Atlas could never forgive himself if he didn’t at least get one night with her.

“That makes me really sad, Atlas,” she whispered. “You’re a really good man. Tell me who she is, and I’ll talk some sense into her.”

He chuckled again. “Now *that* I’d probably pay to see.” With agility and care, he placed Lilliane beside him.

It felt like ripping off his own arm, especially when she had been so

willing, so pliant, so warm against him. But he couldn't fuck her.

One night would never be enough, and he couldn't kidnap her for real. Lilliane had called him a good man, and he was going to live up to her image of him.

Even if it killed him.

TEN



LILLIANE

Lilliane laid her head against Atlas's shoulder as the woman on screen gave a talking head about how much she loved two different men who were vying for her attention. It wasn't her favorite reality TV show, but it was in the top five.

Atlas didn't complain when she picked it. He clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes, laughing softly. "How can you watch this stuff and keep it all straight? So many people. They all kinda look orange and fake."

"Isn't it great?"

"Whatever floats your boat, trouble."

"We can watch a movie if you like."

He shook his head. "I don't remember the last time I watched a movie."

She turned to face him, eyes narrowed. "What? What did you spend your nights doing as a teen?"

"I'm a wolf," he shrugged. "Nero, Reece, and I would spend hours in the woods, running or hunting or just generally howling at the moon."

"Ah. I guess we had different lives. We couldn't really go anywhere. Our dad was really protective."

"I heard about his no-passport rule."

"Fucked, right?" she rolled her eyes. "My sisters and I watched a lot of movies. But they don't like reality TV like me. They get mad at the people, but I think it's fun. I can escape reality for a little bit into someone else's."

He motioned to the screen. "That isn't reality. It's scripted. You know that, right?"

She nudged him. "Don't ruin the magic, Atlas. That's just mean."

"Wouldn't want to be mean. I need something sweet. You in?"

“Yes, please.” She hugged her knees to her chest. “Do you need any help?”

“Umm, no. I’ve seen what you can do to a kitchen. You’re trouble in all kinds of ways. You stay right there and watch your show. I’ll bring you something.”

Lilliane watched him go. His back was so muscular that even as he walked away, she could track the rolling ripple on his shoulders. He was so *hot*. Now that she was his actual guest ... and also the woman who had begged for his help ... she could see all his qualities.

And there were a lot.

Lilliane didn’t know who this woman was who had declined his offer to be his mate, but the girl was absolutely insane. Who said *no* to Atlas Silvers? If he asked *her*, she might consider it. Especially now that she could see how happy her sisters were.

And how protective Atlas could be of some random lady.

Just imagining how protective he would be of the woman he loved made her stomach roll with jealousy. It wasn’t pretty. Actually, it was probably as petty as some of the people she liked to watch on her reality TV shows.

But this was real life.

In real life, adults didn’t hold out forever for the woman who had denied them.

Maybe, just maybe, if she kissed Atlas again, they could really lose control. Go all the way. It had been a long time since she’d had sex. She wasn’t the kind of woman to crave it, but being so close to Atlas for days on end, she could see how some women did.

If she got between the sheets with Atlas, she would probably crave him for the rest of her life. The jury was still out on how long that would be.

If Victor found her, he would probably kill her. He wouldn’t keep her around much longer, only to have her run away again.

She shook her head and sighed. There was no way Atlas would let anything happen to her. She didn’t know for sure, but she had a feeling he would die for her. Why? Probably a shifter thing she didn’t understand as a Half-Blood.

Maybe she could call her sisters and ask them if it was a good idea to sleep with Atlas, even if he was going to help her with her stalker problem. Celestine and Valentine would probably warn her against it. They would chide her for taking Atlas away from his mate.

A mate who didn't want him. Fuck that girl. She didn't deserve a man like Atlas if she couldn't see how great he was.

"I think I might've gone a tad overboard," Atlas said, coming back into the living room. In each hand, he held a bowl. He handed her one, and she burst out laughing. There were three kinds of ice cream ... chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry ... with slices of banana, chocolate sauce, whipped cream, chopped nuts, and cherries.

"Holy shit, Atlas. This is a meal. You don't just have a sweet tooth. I think this is an actual sugar addiction."

He took a huge mouthful, rolled his head back, and moaned. Her core zinged with interest. He looked so good with his head thrown back like that in sugary bliss. Jealousy squeezed her heart again.

Yeah. She was jealous of ice cream and obviously going right out of her mind for Atlas, the wolf man.

"You've got your reality TV. I've got my sugar."

Lilliane took a bite of her massive dessert and considered his words. "I guess that's true. I think I like your addiction more than mine, however."

He beamed at her. "I'll keep you in sugar so long as you're under my roof."

"I may never leave," she teased.

His eyes darkened, but before she could decipher why he would go still and quiet, he looked away. His jaw ticked, but he hid it with another bite of his snack.

"Hey, Atlas," she said after a long silence. "Thanks for taking care of me. It's not what you anticipated, I know. But I do appreciate it. If you want me to talk some sense into your mate, I will."

Atlas shook his head. "Her mind is made up. Maybe I just need to move on."

"Yeah," she munched on ice cream. "Maybe you do."

Maybe he could temporarily move on to Lilliane. She wouldn't mind being his mate rebound. In fact, she was pretty sure that's all she wanted.

ELEVEN



ATLAS

By the time Lilliane went up to bed, Atlas was out of his mind with lust. With desire. With a need to kiss her again. He thought making the biggest ice cream concoction would save them from talking too much.

Instead, he had to watch as his mate, the beautiful Lilliane, licked her spoon over and over. It didn't help that she was still dressed in his sweatshirt. It made him fantasize about a whole lifetime of nights just like this one.

He paced his new bedroom as he imagined Lilliane snuggling into his pillow. He couldn't calm down enough to be tired. He probably needed a good run in the woods, but there was no way in hell he would leave Lilliane alone and without some kind of guard. Not with her vampire stalker still out there in the world.

Atlas took a shower, jerked off to take the edge off, and slid on a pair of PJs. He hoped going through the motions would make him sleepy, but he just tossed and turned until the clock on the bedside table read 12:34.

He glared at it, but a sob made him jump out of bed.

He was at Lilliane's door before she could sob again. He should've knocked. He didn't. He barged into the bedroom and lay on the bed beside her.

"Hey," he said softly, rubbing her arm. "Lilliane, trouble, you're having another nightmare."

Her eyes flew open, letting free some tears. She blinked at him once before closing her eyes again. "Shit. I woke you up again."

"I'd have to be asleep to be woken." He pushed her hair over her shoulder and gave her a smile. "You wanna talk about the dream?"

"Nope. That asshole takes up too much of my brain space already."

He nodded. The second he laid eyes on Victor, the vampire would die. Atlas vowed that as he took in the sadness in his mate's eyes. "Do you want to go to the living room?"

She shook her head. "No. I should really try to get more sleep. It won't come. It'll be a huge waste of time, but I gotta try, don't I?"

Atlas continued to rub her back. With every stroke, she relaxed a bit more. "I'm gonna suggest something ... I could sleep in here ... with you. You fell asleep last night on the couch. Maybe it was the TV."

"It wasn't. It was definitely you." She avoided his gaze as she spoke. Almost like she didn't want to tell him what she wanted of him. If she only knew ...

"Should I stay then?"

Lilliane rubbed her eyes and sighed.

"Lilliane?" he pressed.

"Does it make me a huge loser if I say yes?"

"Not at all. Scoot over." He lay beside her, making sure not to touch her. "Just close your eyes, trouble. I'm gonna chase the monsters away. Sleep."

She smiled at him from his pillow. "You're a good man, Atlas Silvers. A really good man."

He could've argued with her. Just telling her what she was to him would've done the trick. But he didn't tell her. He returned her smile and closed his eyes.

If this was all he would get from his mate, then he would take it. Gratefully.

ATLAS WOKE as a ray of sunlit hit his face. He frowned and blinked his eyes open. For one second, he was confused about the warm body pressed against him.

Then he remembered Lilliane's nightmare and his offer to stay with her.

During the night, they had found each other in the middle of the bed. Their feet were intertwined, and Lilliane's head was on his bare chest, her hand right over his heart. One of his arms held her tightly to his side at her waist. They couldn't be any closer.

It was pure bliss.

He didn't want her to wake up, and he would love nothing more than to go back to sleep and stay like that for days. Weeks.

Fuck.

He wanted this to be forever.

"Oh," a soft gasp whispered against his chest. Blushing deeply, Lilliane lifted her head from his chest and looked down at him. Her brown eyes were still full of sleep, but her smile had all the mischief he usually did. "You make a good pillow." She poked his side and laughed, the sound throaty after a full night's sleep. "I actually slept! Again, I think you have magic powers."

He chuckled. "Nope. I just kept watch."

"But you slept, though, right?"

"Yup." He spent a little while watching her sleep, but that was way high on the creep meter. Especially when the woman he was watching sleep had a vampire stalker. "What time is it?"

Lilliane shifted to the other side of the bed and gasped. "It's eight! I haven't slept this late in years! Years!"

Atlas laughed again and stretched with a big yawn. "No wonder I feel so lazy. I should've been at work an hour ago."

Her eyes went round. "Shit. Is someone going to show up here to give you shit?"

"I'm the alpha. No one will show up here, but there will be a bunch of rumors about it."

"I'm making your life a lot harder, huh?"

"Nope. Not really," he assured her, turning to face her. "Don't worry about it. I'm a big boy, and I can hold my own with the town."

"You should go."

He didn't move. Not even when Lilliane sat up and stretched, revealing the smooth skin of her stomach as she did. He wanted to lick the skin, grip it, and mark her as his.

He huffed out a breath. Nope.

That wasn't the right thought to be having right now. Not when they were in his bed, and he was rock hard, desperate for another shower. His water bill was going to be through the roof for all the shower jerks he was having to take.

"I'm gonna work from home today. Need to figure out some stuff."

"Some stuff about my situation?" she asked shyly.

He knew she would hate it, but he was honest. "Yeah."

“Then the least I could do is cook you breakfast.” She hopped out of bed and skipped to the door.

He was right behind her. “Oh, no, you don’t. I don’t trust you in the kitchen.”

She gasped, trying to be shocked, but her giggle gave her away. “It might be a good idea not to trust me.”

He stepped in front of her as he took the stairs down. She laughed behind him.

“Is breakfast gonna be something as sweet as last night’s dessert?” she asked.

“Do you want it to be?”

She gripped her hips. “Probably not. These get fuller real fast when I go overboard with carbs and sugar.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. He closed the distance between them and gripped her hips. “These are amazing. Could do with a bit more fullness. Chocolate chip pancakes it is.”

“You’re a bad influence,” she whispered as he continued to hold her.

“Yeah. I’m getting that,” he growled back. “Make the coffee?”

She nodded. “As soon as you let me go.”

Atlas inhaled sharply. He didn’t want to let her go, but he forced himself to take a step back, going so far as to raise his hands in surrender.

Because this was it. The moment Atlas realized he was done. He was surrendering to his need for Lilliane ... for trouble.

Without even thinking about it, he leaned down, brushed her mouth with his, and swatted her ass playfully. “Coffee. Then we talk.”

TWELVE



LILLIANE

There was something different about them today.

Lilliane couldn't put her finger on it, but if she tracked back their time together, she was almost sure that their night sleeping in his bed had changed things.

More specifically, it was probably that she had been in his arms, using his chest as a pillow. Was it her fault his chest was the most comfortable pillow she'd ever had? It wasn't just taut and thatched with just the right amount of chest hair. The man could keep her nightmares away.

"Coffee," he said. "Then we talk."

Lilliane was shocked by his swat of her ass, but she squealed in delight and skipped to the coffee machine. "Any instructions I need to follow?"

"One scoop for every two cups. If you make twelve cups, you need six scoops of coffee grounds."

"Right," she said with a nod. "I can do that."

He chuckled as he began working on their chocolate chip pancakes ... without a shirt on. If they were a couple, Lilliane might joke that this was the best foreplay of her life, but they weren't a couple.

She didn't really know what they were.

Obviously, not a couple.

Not a captor and his captive.

Not a shifter and his mate.

A wolf and his guest? Could that be all they were? Would he treat any lady with her kinds of problems the same as her? The thought of Atlas in bed with another woman ... even if it was just to sleep ... made her jealous. Again.

It was a terrible emotion to have for a man that wasn't even hers. Whoever that mate of his was, she was losing out on the perfect man.

When he gripped her hips like he wanted to eat *her* for breakfast, her entire body had gone up in flames. Her core zinged again, just thinking of the look in his eyes.

He was a wolf, all right. There was no doubt about *that*.

They settled at the counter and ate their pancakes in easy silence. It was the most peaceful morning in her recent memory. "Insane how calmer I feel after two good nights' sleep." *And your presence. I'm pretty sure it's not the sleep. It's you.*

"Imagine how good you'd feel after a whole week of good sleep."

"Oh, my god. A whole week? Can't remember what that even looks like. Do you know how much I get done in the dead of night when I can't sleep?"

He shook his head. "What do you do?"

"Super important stuff. I stress-clean while bingeing ..."

"Reality TV," he finished for her with a grin.

She nodded. "Yeah. I also paint and draw and do a bunch of things that are on self-care lists."

"Do they work?"

"Not really. I like to paint, so I always end up actually caring about what I'm doing and not relaxing. I zone out, but not in a sleepy way. In a, *I care about this painting* way. Does that make sense?"

"It does. It makes a lot of sense. Do your sisters know about your sleeping problems? Not the nightmares, but the insomnia?"

"No. How could I tell them? They would've been on me like a dog with a bone. I would've folded and told them eventually. I guess even *that* was silly. They are really understanding. I didn't expect that of them."

"What did you think would happen?"

"They would chide me," she shrugged. "It's so hard being the youngest when your sisters are actually your parents because you don't have any parents. It wasn't so bad with Val. She's my best friend. But sometimes, she would get Celestine's messages across."

"Good cop, bad cop parenting," he guessed. "Val was the good cop who chased you across the country to make sure you were safe."

She sighed. "I'm lucky, right? To have sisters who love me so much?"

"You are," he agreed cautiously, somehow sensing she was laying down a trap.

“That’s what got me in trouble. I was so scared of disappointing them that I made things worse. I *had* to do it, Atlas. You know that, right? Victor would’ve killed them. He still might try.” She lifted her hand to stop his interjection. “But I do agree that Celestine and Valentine are safe now because of their wolf mates. I do see that. I just ...” She dropped her head in her hands. “I am so embarrassed.”

“Why?” he asked, pulling her head up. “A vampire with centuries of life experience with more power than you zeroed in on you. You did nothing wrong, Lilliane. He has power, and he abuses it in gross ways. It’s despicable. Hateful. No one in a position of power should take advantage of it. Victor knew what he was doing. He saw your weakness was your sisters, and he used it to get his way. If your weakness had been sugar, let’s say, he would have used *that* against you.”

“That’s nice of you to say.”

“Don’t you believe it?”

“I guess. But it’s hard not to hate myself a bit.”

“You are way too hard on yourself, trouble. Way too hard. You don’t deserve any of this.” He cupped her cheek in his palm to turn her head toward him. “You were his target. Even if you had told your sisters, they would have been vulnerable.”

“Because they wouldn’t have met you wolves,” she said.

“Yeah.” He pushed her hair off her shoulder. “Fate plays a big part in shifters finding their mates.”

“Are you saying it was fate that put me in Victor’s path? So my sisters could find their mates?”

“And in the process, save you from Victor.” He shrugged. “Why not?”

“You’re a romantic, Atlas Silvers. A mushy, hopeless romantic. Don’t worry,” she giggled. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“Good. You’re the only one I’d been romantic with, anyway. No one would believe you.”

She snorted at the serious glare of his eyes. He licked his lips and leaned closer, quieting her laughter.

Atlas’s words echoed back as he continued to lean down toward her mouth.

You’re the only one I’d be romantic with.

And then, her wolf man kissed her.

THIRTEEN



ATLAS

Y eeesss!

Atlas couldn't believe he was kissing Lilliane. Again. It wasn't the first time he forgot that he wasn't supposed to want her.

Her lips were so soft, so warm. Her kisses were sweet. The sweetest thing he'd ever tasted, and he couldn't stop himself from deepening the kiss, tilting her head back to get better access to her mouth.

"Fuck, sorry," he hissed, easing back from her.

"No," she was breathless. "Don't. That was some kiss."

"I shouldn't do that. There's an unfair power balance here."

She frowned and moved a square of pancake around her plate. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're relying on me to keep you safe. For a place to stay. And I sorta took..." He let the rest hang. He really shouldn't have reacted like that to his mate, saying she would go back to the vampire.

It had been all protective instincts.

Some jealousy.

"Well, you've made up for it, so stop beating yourself up about it, okay?" She smiled at him warmly, and his insides clenched.

"You're sweet," he whispered.

Her smile turned mischievous. "Coming from you, I'm gonna take that as the highest compliment."

"You should," he said.

They continued to eat, grinning at each other like the kiss had meant something. Like it could ever mean anything.

Lilliane pushed her plate away and crossed her arms. He grinned at her.

That was usually a sign that she was up to something. “What?” he asked. “You wanna say something?”

“I’ve got a shifter question. Is that rude?”

He shook his head. “Go ahead, trouble.” *Please let it be about anything other than mates.*

“Is it possible for a shifter to have feelings for someone who *isn’t* their mate?”

Of course, she would want to talk about mates. She was relentless. It was dangerous and adorable. “Some shifters never find their mates. They still fall in love. Get married, have kids. All that stuff.”

“Oh. So, not everyone gets the chance to meet their mate?”

“No. It’s not rare, exactly, but...” He shrugged. “They still live happy lives.”

“What happens to shifters that find their mates but lose them?”

Atlas shook his head. His little troublemaker. He knew what she was trying to do with this particular line of questioning.

“Depends.”

“On what?” she pressed.

“Well, if they mated...”

“The bite when she orgasms,” Lilliane said matter-of-factly, uncrossing her arms. His whole body went rigid as the image of Lilliane coming on his dick while he bit into the tender skin of her neck overtook his brain.

He cleared his throat. “Y-Yeah ... exactly. If they haven’t mated, it’s not so bad.”

“Not so bad?” she repeated, crossing her arms.

“It’s not the pain of losing a mated mate.”

“But still painful.”

He hissed out a breath. She was trouble. *Trouble.* “No.” He rubbed the back of his neck.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re lying.”

“How could you know?”

“Because,” she shrugged. “I know you.”

He chuckled. Spoken like a mate. Even if she didn’t know she was. *Trouble, trouble, trouble.* “Do you now?”

“Yeah.” She uncrossed her arms to put her fists to her waist. “You like sugar a little too much. So much, in fact, that I don’t understand how you don’t have a pesky and stubborn 10-pound gut you can’t lose. But you’re a

shifter with an insane metabolism.

“Oh, which is why you eat barely-cooked steak like it’s going out of style. When you’re full, you sigh and push your plate away while smacking your gums. It is adorable and annoying all at once, which is super confusing, but whatever. When you lie, you rub the back of your neck.” She grinned wide and pointed to where his hand was.

On the back of his neck.

He pursed his lips at her, pretending to be unimpressed. He was still rubbing his neck, so she didn’t buy the lie. “I know you, too, trouble. You prefer skipping to walking, but only in the morning. By late afternoon, you do this gliding thing. When you cook, you destroy the kitchen, but you’re so determined that you do it anyway. Why?

Because you don’t like the idea that you can’t do things. You’re loyal as hell and sweeter than you’ve got a right to be. When you sleep, you rub your feet together and moan. And when you cut your pancakes, you stick your tongue out the corner of your mouth.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “*You know me.* As you just proved with all that.” She circled her hand between them. “So. Now that you’ve admitted that I do know you, I know that you are actually in pain because you’re not with *her*. Your mate. I think that’s why you’re grumpy. Not with me, for some reason.

“I don’t see that side of you, but you do know my sisters find you grumpy, right? Everyone in town talks about it. Grumpy and aloof and too concerned with pack business to have a life. You’re not going to work today to spend your time with me. Is this the first day you’ve taken off since you became alpha? To be with me?”

Slowly, her smile slipped.

Atlas watched as Lilliane put the pieces together, not sure if he should be happy or get ready to run for the hills.

She leaped off the chair and covered her mouth. “You took a day off. To be here with me. You cook for me and sleep in my bed...”

“*My bed.*”

“And chase the nightmares away. You vow to protect me, a nobody...”

“Again, you’re not a nobody.”

“But, *of course*, you would do all that. Breaking from your usual self because you’ve met your mate and you are in love. Hard. Deep.”

He took a deep breath and met her gaze.

“With me.”

Atlas exhaled slowly. She looked mad. *Very* mad.

“And you let me figure it out on my own?” She scrunched up her face. “What the fuck, Atlas?”

“You’ve got every right to be angry...”

“Angry? Wolf man,” she shook her head, “you just basically had me deliver my own *I’m in love with you* speech. I feel robbed,” she barked out a laugh.

His jaw dropped as she laughed. “You’re mad because ... of that?” He laughed, too. “You watch too much reality TV.”

“Right?” she rolled her eyes. “It’s terrible. Why didn’t you tell me? Didn’t you learn from Nero and Reece?”

“I’ve got my reasons.”

“Hmm,” she crossed her arms again. She was onto something. All he could do was watch in fascination.

This woman was his mate. Fucking lucky asshole that he was. How did he even begin to deserve someone like her?

“Your reasons. It’s got something to do with Victor, doesn’t it?”

“You’re already dealing with one stalker; you don’t need another.”

“Atlas, wolf man, I need you to understand something. I don’t think that you kidnapped me or took me against my will.”

“I did, though. For all we know, you’ve got Stockholm syndrome.”

“Wow. Okay. Well, you’re gonna make me say it.”

“Say what?”

“When you brought me here, I was relieved to have a reason why I couldn’t leave. You saved me, Atlas. You didn’t take me away from anything other than mortal danger.” She took a few tentative steps toward him. She cupped his face in her hands. “That’s a hell of a way to make me fall for you.”

He gulped. “Fall for me?”

She leaned down and kissed his forehead. “I just might, wolf man. I just might.”

Lilliane kissed his forehead and grabbed their plates before retreating to the kitchen. Atlas shook his head. “What the hell just happened?”

He didn’t know what Lilliane intended to do now that she knew the truth, but he knew what *he* wanted.

Her.

FOURTEEN



LILLIANE

HOLY SHIT!

Holy. Shiiiiit!

Lilliane took the plates into the kitchen. Her legs shook as she stood at the sink washing the dishes. She needed a second to clear her mind.

How was this even possible?

How could this happen? To *her*?

“Lilliane,” Atlas said. When she turned toward him, he was leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed and wolfish eyes studying her carefully. “Wanna share what’s on your mind?”

“Nothing’s on my mind,” she squeaked.

He chuckled. “Oh, yeah. Nothing. I didn’t just drop a bomb on you.”

“You didn’t,” she pointed out. “I said it.”

He nodded and closed the distance between them. He cupped her face, tipping it back. “Trouble, I didn’t want to find you. I really didn’t. It terrifies me to love someone as much as I love you. I’ve known you two days. Imagine what it’ll be like after two months. Two years. Two decades. Being loved by a shifter, being a mate, it’s this massive thing that takes over who you are. Takes over your life.”

Lilliane placed her hands over his to pull them down to her heart. “Atlas, stop for a second.”

“That’s just it. Once I’ve started, I won’t be able to stop. I don’t want to be another Victor.”

She smiled sadly. “Atlas, wolf man, you are one silly guy. You’re not a Victor. There is no comparison between you two. No competition. Nothing. I couldn’t even begin to put you in the same category.”

“But I took you.”

“Away from danger,” she finished for him. “Let’s not forget that part. You think this is fate, Atlas. And...” Her eyes widened. “When you were talking about *your mate!* You said she’s sexy and too smart for you. You think I’m...”

“Incredible,” he finished for her. “I get you, Lilliane. You were willing to sacrifice yourself for your sisters. That’s the kind of loyalty I understand. I’ve been doing that for my pack for years. And you make it look so easy. It’s incredible, trouble. Just incredible.”

“What do we do now?”

He shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“Well, now that I know we’re mates, what happens? What do shifters do when they meet their person?”

“They spend time together.”

“We’re already doing that.”

“Usually because it’s just better to have them around. Sometimes because there are vampire stalkers out there.”

“Right. So, does that mean I can stay here?”

He shrugged. “You can try to leave.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, smirking at his forceful response. “You wouldn’t let me leave, huh?” She was teasing him, but he wasn’t amused.

“No,” he answered. “That makes me like him, and that’s why I’m... This is bad.”

“I agree,” Lilliane nodded. “It’s really bad that you keep comparing yourself to Victor. You would keep me here to keep me safe. You’d stop me from leaving because you know it would only be to save someone I love. I’m not gonna go anywhere, for the record. Not when you’ve got all the sugar in town *and* the only bed that’s nightmare-free.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Why did you ask me what we were going to do if you already knew?”

“Because I’ve got a feeling you’re gonna be really broody about swinging me over your shoulder to bring me here. Even though I’ve said that it’s okay. I wanted *someone* to do just that. I obviously didn’t think it was going to happen. I gave up on life that day I went to Victor. I didn’t think I would ever ... find love.” She shrugged. “And now you’re here, and I’m your mate, and I see what that means for my sisters. So I kinda get what it means for us.”

“Ah, you do, do you?” He took a few steps closer to her.

“Yeah. I’m starting to get why, after barely any time together, we’re so attuned to each other. I still can’t believe I slept last night.”

“You’ll sleep even better tonight,” he whispered in her ear. “Because if you think I’m gonna sleep in another bed now that you know the truth...” He whistled out a breath. “You’re in for a surprise.”

“It is your bed.”

“I’m only ever gonna see it as *ours* now,” he said before nibbling the column of her neck. “Even when you leave.”

She pulled away from his embrace. “When? *If*.”

He smiled at her. “It’ll take some getting used to that you wanna be here.”

Lilliane giggled and covered her face. “Oh, god. You know what I just realized?” She laughed more, too giggly to answer him every time he asked what was so funny. “I ... I ... I was jealous of your mate. The way you would talk about her. Me. I was jealous of myself.”

Atlas shook his head with a disbelieving smile. “Huh. Imagine that.”

“For two days, I felt like the woman was insane. It also made me feel really guilty for wanting you.”

“Oh, trouble, I don’t think you understand *want* the way I do.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sure, I do. Look at you. You’re still not wearing a shirt. You spend most of your days without a shirt on, and it’s insane. Because I have to look at you and not go up in flames.”

He chuckled, cupped her face, and ran his thumb along her lower lip. “You slept in my arms, trouble. Your breasts on me, your hand on my thigh, your mouth...” He ran his thumb along it again, tracking the movement with hooded eyes.

“This mouth is made to be kissed. I’ve wanted you since the moment I laid eyes on you. It almost killed me to believe you wanted another man. But you’ve never been his.” He brushed her lips with a kiss. “I nearly came when you walked in wearing my shirt. God, Lilliane. The things I want to do with you.” He shivered at the thought. “But not yet.”

Lilliane nodded. “Yeah. Probably best we pace ourselves. There’s a stalker out there. That’s what we should focus on. Not ...” she caught his glance, “not *us*.”

“We’ve got all the time in the world,” he agreed with a nod. “Lilliane, I have to stop touching you.”

“Ah,” she was the one nodding now. “Yeah. I get it. We need to focus. Touching is ... distracting.”

“Hmm.” He licked his lips and took a step away. “The levels of trouble, Lilliane. You’re all of them.” He kissed the top of her head and left the kitchen.

Moments later, when the shower kicked on, she giggled. “Oh, wolf man.”

FIFTEEN



ATLAS

Atlas leaned against the shower wall with one hand while the other pumped up and down his hard shaft. The image of Lilliane was in his mind as he groaned out his release.

This was getting tedious.

It was the tenth shower he'd taken in three days.

Having Lilliane around was amazing, but fuck. He could barely string two thoughts together from wanting her so much. He could barely be in the same room as her before his cock went hard.

He would stop hanging around the house now that they had the mate conversation.

It would be easier to deal with that way.

If he was around her, he would want to kiss her, touch her, and take her on every surface in his house. He couldn't save her from Victor if he was too busy fucking her like the selfish prick he was.

He quickly finished his shower and shook his head at his reflection. Last night, he had arrived home just in time for Lilliane to go to bed.

"You don't have to sleep in here if you don't want to," she had whispered, nervously shuffling on her feet.

"No way." He closed the distance between them, took her into his arms, and carried her to the bed. He laid her down gently before sliding in behind her, curling around her body. Through the thin sleep shorts and tank she wore, he could feel all her delicate, soft curves. His body was too aware that his mate was right there in his arms.

Lilliane squirmed, her ass grinding against his groin. He hissed out a breath. Why did he have to keep his hands to himself? Oh. Right. She had a

stalker, and if he was too busy spending every waking hour worshiping her body, she would be in danger.

When he saved her, he could have her. Then he would deserve her.

Lilliane squirmed again, and he had nearly lost ten years off his life. “Please, Lilliane, stop squirming.”

“Oh,” she gasped, no doubt feeling his cock hardening against her ass. “Right. Sorry.”

“Hmm.”

She was motionless and quiet for two seconds. “Atlas? Are you asleep?”

“No. Why?”

“I need to move.”

“Why?”

“Because I know what’s *right* there, and the reason I’m squirmy is because I really want to turn around and kiss you and maybe touch that thing that’s poking me. But you spent the day away, so I think maybe you’re mad at me. Maybe you don’t want to kiss me?”

“I spent the day making a plan to save you. When the prick is out of your life, you can kiss me all you want.”

“Then why must we snuggle?”

He chuckled. “Because I can’t resist you, Lilliane. Any reason to touch you.”

“Then touch me.”

“No. After. Later. When we know each other more.” He couldn’t tell her that she had to wait until he deserved her. She wouldn’t like that. She would talk him out of it. He had no doubt about that.

“But we already played that game, remember? We know each other. Really well. We’re mates, and we seem to get along. Why can’t we see if we’re sexually compatible? That’s really important when choosing a life partner,” she added with a teasing voice.

“Trouble,” he groaned. “Go. To. Sleep.”

“I can’t sleep. I’m wired.”

He’d had a feeling *wired* might mean *horny*, but he had been the one with the hard-on. It was silly to point out he was wired, too.

“Can you tell me when you can’t kiss or touch or do other fun grown-up things?”

He chuckled. “Because you call them ‘grown-up things.’”

“What would you have me say?” she giggled.

“Hmm. Tell me the things you would want me to do.”

Her breath caught. “Dirty talk? Oh, no. Never.”

He turned her so she could face him. “No dirty talk. Tell me what you want me to do. When we can.”

Her eyes were wide, her lips parted. Her desire scented the air. She was almost nude, in his bed, and smelling like the sweetest thing he’d ever imagined. “Atlas ...”

“Tell me.”

“You would kiss me and peel me out of my clothes. And then you would slide into me ...”

“Whoa, foreplay, Lilliane. You skipped a couple steps.”

She grinned. “Yeah? What was I supposed to say?”

“I would peel you out of your clothes. Really take my time, and then I would kiss my way down your body until I reached your pussy. I would kiss it until you screamed my name. Maybe I’d make you come twice. Maybe I’d tease you with my fingers. Bring you to the edge, but pull out just before you come again. *Then* I’d slide into you. Slow ... real slow.”

“Atlas,” she gasped, her eyes shut, her breath fast. “You are killing me.” She opened her eyes, and he watched as she slid her hand down her shorts and shivered as she undoubtedly touched herself. “Say it again?”

“What are you doing?” he asked, sitting up. Trouble. She was trouble, and she was going to kill him. This is how he was going to die ... of want. He would die of want for Lilliane Longborn in his own damn bed.

“I’m doing what you won’t do.”

He hissed out a breath, and before he could stop himself, he had rolled on top of her, pulling her hand from her sleep shorts. He lifted her arms over her head and pinned them in one large palm. His other hand trailed down the side of her body. He followed the same path on the way up, but he stopped at the hem of her shorts. He tugged them down, staring down at the soft, creamy skin he uncovered. Her mound was bare and already slick with her arousal.

He groaned at the sight of her. He released her hands but held her gaze. She understood and didn’t move. He pulled her tank top over her hand and dragged it slowly up her arms before tossing it over the bed.

“You’re so damn beautiful.” He thumbed her raspberry nipples and leaned down to capture one in his mouth. He licked his way across to repeat the gesture. He tongued the hard nub, twirling around it while one of his hands separated her thighs. His fingers parted her folds with ease. “Oh,

trouble. So wet. So fucking wet.” He paused, breathing deeply, before he came on the spot. “Shit.”

He couldn't stop himself.

He pinned her hips to the bed and dove for her core. He tongued her slit, and her taste exploded sweetness in his mouth. He groaned and took a long, slow lick of her. She bucked against him, crying out his name, but he held her down.

“This is what you wanted, trouble. You wanted me to touch you.” He flicked her clit as one finger slid into her. He curled it up, and she cried out again. “I'll touch you, make you come.” He had lapped and sucked at her clit until she came hard and fast, grinding against him and screaming his name.

Even now, playing it over in his mind to get himself off, he could remember the taste of her. He could've done it over and over, but Lilliane had been boneless. She fell asleep nude in his arms.

That had been one hell of a night, but he had snuck out of the house before she woke up, and he was just getting back in time for bed again. Hopefully, she wouldn't want a repeat performance.

Atlas went to his bedroom, but the place was empty. “Lilliane?” he called out down the hallway.

She didn't respond, but he could hear someone ... her ... moving around downstairs.

He found her in the living room, queuing up her reality TV shows. She was wrapped in a blanket and a few pillows were fluffed at her back.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I'm getting ready for bed.”

“You're not sleeping on the couch,” he said.

“Of course I am,” she answered. “I'm a guest here, and I can't keep you from your bed.”

“Trouble, what the fuck is this about?”

She glared at him. “You! I can't believe you! Seriously? You don't know why I won't go to your bed?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Last night was ... something. And this morning, you were gone. You didn't say anything. You left. And now you're mad I won't go to bed with you? Why? So you can touch me all over and disappear again? Why do *you* get to make the rules?”

He shook his head. Women. He really didn't get it. “Lilliane, trouble,

love, darling, you need to tell me what I did wrong.”

“You made me come. Best orgasm of my life. Then you left like it didn’t matter. Who does that?”

“I’m trying to stay focused,” he argued. It was lame even to his ears.

She crossed her arms. “And how is that going for you? Are you nice and focused out there? Or in bed, so hard you have to shower a billion times a day. I’m right here, Atlas. If you’re gonna be distracted, you know what to do.”

“Lilliane,” he growled. “Once I start ... I might mate you by accident. God knows I’ve imagined it enough.”

“You wouldn’t,” she said. “Because you care about me. You want it to be my choice.”

He shook his head. “I don’t have that much control, Lilliane.”

“Then I’m gonna sleep on the couch.”

He sighed and threw his hands up. “Fine. Suit yourself, but don’t think I’m gonna let you cuddle with me when you get a nightmare.” He was an asshole. A major asshole. He never should’ve said it, but he walked away.

He was so distracted he didn’t fall asleep. And when Lilliane cried in her sleep, he held her through it. When she woke up in his arms, she just closed her eyes again and held him tighter.

By morning, he was gone.

Again.

SIXTEEN



LILLIANE

Lilliane cracked an eye open, hoping that the wolf man was still in bed next to her.

He wasn't.

She blew out a breath and sat up in bed. He better be in the house, somewhere. No way he had left again. He wouldn't. In her PJs, she walked around the house, but it was no use.

"That motherfucker," she cried.

It was the second time she took a lap around the house, but her second search hadn't been any better. Atlas was gone. For the second morning in a row, he did something amazing for her and then vanished in the morning.

What was wrong with shifters, anyway? Maybe it wasn't that Atlas was a shifter. Maybe it was him.

Shit. Maybe it was *her*.

Who she was. How she came into his life. All of it. Maybe that's why he had a knack for morning vanishing acts. Why did he think it was this big moral thing to keep his hands to himself, anyway?

Her head spun with all of these questions. She was actually at a loss, but she knew two people with shifter experience. She could call her sisters. It would be admitting that *something* was happening between her and Atlas, and she didn't know if she was ready for that, but these were her sisters.

They would help ... *after* they were done teasing her.

Lilliane grabbed the house phone and dialed Valentine's cabin. Her sister answered on the first ring.

"What did he do?" Val asked instead of the usual *hello*.

"How did you know he did something?" Lilliane tried to keep the

laughter from her voice. Of course, her sisters would already know something was up. They were mated to Atlas's best buds. They had probably seen more of Atlas than she had!

"Umm, seriously? I know he did something because he was here at the crack of dawn to talk to Nero. What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Right, but something happened because that man took his first day off in a decade to spend the day with you, and then next thing I know, he's pulling my man out of bed before morning sex. I like morning sex. Now my whole day is ruined. So, spill. You owe me."

"TMI, sis. Jeez."

"Please," Val scoffed. "If you knew what mate sex was like, you would get it."

Lilliane wouldn't point out that she sort of had an idea ... Her sister didn't want to hear about *that*.

"Actually, this is weird, but that's kinda why I'm calling you."

"Because of mate sex?" Val asked.

"Yeah," Lilliane said. "Like, why are shifters weird about sex?"

"Umm, weird how?" Val pressed.

"Withholding it or whatever," Lilliane answered. "Is that a thing?"

Valentine was quiet for a few seconds too long before she said, "Atlas is withholding sex?"

Fuck.

"No. But he's being a bit stupid about it."

"Uh-huh!" Val squeaked. "DID HE TELL YOU?" Lilliane had to pull the phone away from her ear as her sister shouted. "DID HE?"

Her heart thumped loud and hard. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, don't play coy with me, Lilliane Longborn! Atlas is your mate. He told us last night, and I haven't been able to sit still. He told you, didn't he?"

"No. I guessed."

"Ah, Atlas. Definitely should've told you."

Lilliane considered this, but she also liked the way she had figured it out. She would never forget how the whole conversation had unfolded.

She just wanted a better end to it, like waking up next to Atlas.

"Lil? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. I just don't understand why Atlas is spending all his time out of the house."

“Because you’re his mate, and he has to protect you from Victor. Do you not know how he spends his days?”

“No. He leaves before I am awake, comes back just in time to...” She stopped short, but she had a feeling Val understood what she couldn’t say. “We go to bed, and he’s gone again by morning.”

“Do you not know what he’s doing? He’s been keeping Nero away from me all day. They’re locked in Nero’s office, finding all the ways to fuck with Victor.”

“What? No way. He leaves me alone all day.”

“Have you tried to leave the cabin?” Val asked, laughing.

“No? I haven’t really had a reason.” She was also scared of stepping a foot outdoors in case Victor was out there, waiting to nab her, but she couldn’t share that with her sister.

“Just try to leave,” Valentine’s words were undercut with giggles.

“Fine. Talk later.”

Lilliane went to the front door, and she hesitated as her hand wrapped around the handle. With a deep breath, she threw it open and peeked to the left and then to the right. Nothing. She put one foot out the door and tentatively slid her other foot forward, acutely aware that it was sunlight. Victor wouldn’t be able to surprise her out here, but she wouldn’t put it past him to hire human henchmen to do his dirty work.

She took another step and froze when a man stepped out from the woods. She pointed at him. “Stop right there! Tell me who you are!”

“Lilliane, everything is okay.” The tall man waved at her. “I’m a friend.”

“Oh. Who are you?”

“Jasper. I’m one of Atlas’s enforcers. There are a few of us wandering around the cabin. Do you need something? I’ll run out to grab it for you.”

“Why?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“Alpha orders. You can’t leave the house.”

She laughed dryly and shook her head. “Yeah. I need something. Tell your boss or your alpha that I need him here. Now. Right now.”

“Oh. Okay. Are you sure? I’d rather try to help before...”

“I will speak with Atlas.” She stood her ground, hoping Jasper couldn’t see her shaking with nerves. What the hell was Atlas playing? Why hadn’t he told her about the guards?

Once again, there were too many questions and not enough answers.

SEVENTEEN



ATLAS

For the fourth time in five minutes, Atlas's phone rang. It was Jasper again. It wasn't an emergency. They had a text code word for that. A call meant Jasper wasn't sure how to handle something.

Probably Lilliane.

He sighed and pushed away from the table. "Boys, excuse me."

Nero shook his head. "Sure. Not like we're here to help you save your mate."

"I helped you two with yours," Atlas clapped back. "It's only fair." He called Atlas back, and the poor kid answered on the first ring. "What's happening, Jas?"

"So, Lilliane tried to leave the cabin."

"Okay ... What does she need? Can't you guys handle it?"

"No. She wants to talk to you. In person. She's not letting up, Alpha. I feel bad."

He sighed. Of course, Jasper would feel bad ignoring a command from the alpha mate. It didn't matter that Atlas hadn't mated Lilliane. The pack knew who she was to him, and they were already deferring to her.

It was good, in a way. It meant she would fit right in, just like he thought. But it was also inconvenient as hell when he was trying to finalize the plan that would set her free once and for all.

Then he could mate her if she let him.

"I need a few more hours," Atlas said.

"She's upset," Jasper added awkwardly.

"Fuck. Okay. I'll be there shortly." He ended the call and went back inside Nero's office. "I gotta go."

Nero threw his head back with a laugh. “Mate causing trouble?”

“You’ve got no idea,” Atlas shot back over his shoulder on his way out again.

He drove a little too fast and pulled into his home barely fifteen minutes later. Lilliane wasn’t on the porch, but Jasper sat on the steps.

“She in there?” he asked.

Jasper nodded. “Sorry, Alpha.”

“No. You did good. This is on me. I shouldn’t have left. Learn from my mistakes, kid. Don’t leave your lady hanging.” Atlas opened the front door, and he was scarcely inside when Lilliane poked his arm.

“You! You left again! You left and left me with guards without telling me I have guards!” She poked him with more force each time.

“I’m trying to fix everything. That means being away from you. I already told you that you’re a distraction, Lilliane. I can’t be distracted and saving you at the same time.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Save me. See, I think that’s the issue here. You’ve got some savior complex bullshit. I asked you to help me, not go full secret agent.”

“Lilliane,” he sighed. “What do you want?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’m confused.”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m keeping my distance. This whole situation is a mess, and I know I didn’t help it any with ...” He broke off when she gave him a warning glare. She really hated it when he brought up how he’d taken her away over his shoulder. He couldn’t forget it, though. He would never forgive himself. “You’re confused, and I don’t want to complicate any of this for you.”

“Well, you’re doing a crap job.” She crossed her arms, and he couldn’t help but grin. *Here we go.* “Because if you really didn’t want to confuse me, you wouldn’t have gone down on me before disappearing. That’s confusing, Atlas. It is very, very confusing.”

“I’m only a man, trouble. I try to resist you, but it’s fucking hard. Even right now, I’m going out of my mind. All I wanna do is pin you against that wall and kiss you till you can’t stand.”

“Fine. Do it.”

His jaw dropped. Lilliane took a step closer to him. “Atlas, you just told me what you want, and I am telling you that you can have it. Me.”

It took all his self-control to shake his head. “No. You’re confused. You

said it ten seconds ago. This isn't the right time to tumble into bed together and muddy things."

"You. Made. Me. Come. On. Your. Tongue."

"Are you trying to kill me?" he growled.

"No. I'm trying to understand you. You're hot and cold. You know that, right? *That's* confusing."

"A mate is forever, Lilliane. If we go down this road, there is no going back for me. It'll be forever. You can't make that decision for yourself when you're locked in here while I try to end your stalker's reign of terror."

"Ah," she nodded. "There it is. You're doing it again. You're comparing yourself to Victor again."

"Lilliane," he hissed in a warning.

"What? That's it, isn't it? You think you're this big bad wolf for keeping me in here with your wolf guards. That's why you didn't tell me. Because you didn't want me to *feel* like a prisoner, but you still think I'm here against my will."

He shrugged and avoided her gaze, but she wasn't done.

"If I wanted to leave right now and go stay with Val, would you let me go?"

His jaw ticked. "Yes."

"But you wouldn't like it because I'd be with Nero on *his* land. Away from you."

Another tick. "Yes."

"Okay," she nodded. "Okay. That's *your* side of it. Now, you're gonna listen to me, Atlas Silvers." She crossed her arms again. "I *want* to be here. I *like* being here. I'm sorry I selfishly didn't think you were spending your days away from me to come up with some genius plan to get rid of Victor. That's on me, but it's also a bit on you."

"If you'd only told me, I would've understood. And do you know *why* I would have understood? Because if you said," she took on a deep voice and continued in a mock Atlas tone, "I am gathering my friends and pack to help save you from Victor, but I'll be back to cuddle you all night ..." She dropped her imitation of him. "I would have understood and not felt confused. Well, no. I am still going to be confused, but that's nothing *talking* won't help."

Atlas studied her for a few long seconds. "I wouldn't have said it like that."

“I wouldn’t know, would I?” she needled with a grin.

“That’s fair. I should’ve told you, but there are things…” His jaw ticked, and he stuffed his hands in his pockets, looking uncomfortable. “Things I don’t know how to say.”

“That’s the lone wolf in you. But I’m your mate, right? Doesn’t that mean that there is a good chance I will get you if you give me half a chance? A real chance. Not just having your wicked way with me before doing the walk of shame out of your own damn house.”

“I don’t deserve you, Lilliane. I won’t. Not until he’s out of your life.”

“He *is* out of my life. I’m safe here. With you. Because of you. You get that, right?”

“I’m doing my best.”

“Okay, so let me in.”

Atlas nodded. She was asking a lot. So much. Maybe even too much. If he let her in, she could destroy him. She was his mate, and she could walk away, taking with her everything he was scared to want.

Things he wanted with her.

More nights cuddled in his bed. Lazy days on his couch, making love slowly. Cooking for her. Making her hot chocolate when she had nightmares. Maybe a few kids, eventually.

He wanted it all.

“Atlas,” she said softly.

He nodded slowly and closed the distance between them. He cupped her face and licked his lips to keep from kissing her. “Lilliane, I’m going to Nero’s office. We’ve got a plan to get rid of Victor, and I’m doing everything in my power to end this once and for all. I’ll be back late tonight. If you’ll let me, I’d like to hold you while we sleep.”

“I’ve got some changes to that.”

He chuckled and teased, “You would.”

“You’ll be back for dinner. We’ll talk about the cuddling then.” She lifted herself to the tips of her toes and walked toward the kitchen. “I’ll cook.”

“Don’t you dare,” he called out, laughing. “You’ll burn the house down.”

She turned her head to blow him a kiss. “Have a good day saving my life. I’ll be in here earning my keep.”

Atlas sighed, shaking his head. There was no point in arguing with her. His mate knew what she wanted, and apparently, that was more time with him. He should say no. Keep his distance. But he wasn’t that strong. That’s

why, at 5:45, he walked through his front door to have dinner with his mate.

EIGHTEEN



LILLIANE

A quick glance at the clock over the stove made a few beads of sweat roll down Lilliane's back. She was running late. Atlas would walk through the door in a matter of minutes, and she was still hiding the evidence of her deception.

The brown *Tails & Syrup* carry-out bags were still on the counter, and she was busy putting their dinner on plates. Maybe breakfast-for-dinner was a silly idea, but she didn't know the town of Silvers very well. The only restaurant she knew in the area was *Tails & Syrup*, so she'd sent Jasper to pick up some food.

He was sworn to secrecy. Atlas didn't need to know she couldn't even make a pancake.

She stuffed the paper bags in the recycle bin when she heard the front door open and close. It was 5:45, and Atlas was fifteen minutes early.

Of course, he was.

Atlas carefully walked into the kitchen, dramatically sniffing the air. "Okay, there is no smoke. My house is still standing. That's a good sign. What did you do? Bribe one of the wolves to cook for us?"

"Nope. Not even close."

"Hmm. You bribed one of the wolves to get food for us so you could pretend you cooked?"

She pursed her lips at him. "What gave me away?"

He pointed to a carry-out box she'd forgotten in the far corner of the counter. He picked it up and sniffed the empty box. "Sausage?" he asked.

She pointed toward the dining room. "It's breakfast-for-dinner from *Tails & Syrup*. Kind of like our thing, don't you think?"

He grinned and pulled out a chair for her. “Yup.”

He sat beside her and helped himself to the feast she’d laid out. Pancakes, toast, waffles, bacon, ham, sausages, hash-browns, home fries, and a few other things.

“It’s way too much food, but I didn’t know what you preferred,” she explained.

“This is great, trouble. Basically, what I usually order. Jasper probably let the cook in on your plan.”

“Ah. Right. So now everyone will know that there is a woman in your cabin.”

“Everyone already knows.”

“They know I’m your mate,” she pointed out.

He nodded tightly and took a big bite of pancake. “I had to tell the enforcers, and there is literally nothing I can do to stop the rumor mill. I took a day off, and…”

“Three towns full of people immediately knew what that meant?” she offered.

“Something like that.”

“Shifter lives are wild,” she laughed. “But I’m happy to be here. Thanks for keeping me safe.”

“You know I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Because I’m your mate, and you’re in love with me.”

“Lilliane,” he warned. “You’re trouble.”

“And how was your day saving my life? Productive?”

“Very.”

“Are you gonna tell me what the plan is?”

“Nope. You don’t need to know. It’s being handled.”

“I don’t like it.”

He shrugged. “You don’t have to like it. It’s about time someone takes your safety seriously and protects you from things that would hurt you.”

“Is that why you’re keeping your distance? To protect me from you?”

He was quiet for so long that Lilliane thought he hadn’t heard her question. When she repeated it, he still remained quiet.

“Am I gonna have to guess what you’re thinking again? I’ve got a great track record, you know. I guessed the whole mate thing.”

“This is different.”

“Is it?” she argued. “I don’t think so. We know each other.”

He motioned to the dinner table. “Do we? You got all this to make sure you got what I like.”

“And this is what you usually order, so I guess that point is moot.”

“Jasper told the cook,” he amended.

“Ha!” she pointed at him, “you brought up the dinner fare to prove I didn’t know you. But I sent Jasper because I obviously knew he would get the right thing.”

“Not the same thing.” He laughed.

“So? Will you make me guess again?”

“Good luck,” he chuckled again.

“You’re scared *I’m gonna hurt you*. Because I’m a Half-Blood and not a shifter, you’re scared the mate bond won’t mean as much to me, and I’ll leave. Is that right?”

He hissed out a breath. “How do you do that?”

She shrugged. “No fucking clue. I just *know*. The thoughts just pop into my head, fully formed like I already know they’re true. Is that a mate thing?”

Atlas licked his lips and sighed. “Maybe. Probably. I never really thought what it would be like for you. How it would change who you are and what you want.”

“Okay. We’re not having this useless conversation again.” Lilliane stood and went over to him. Using all her strength, she pulled his chair away from the table. Confused, he just watched her work, only helping her by moving his legs. She straddled him on his chair and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“What are you doing?” his voice was rough, his eyes full of want.

“Look into my eyes, Atlas. Stop overanalyzing everything and spinning out about Victor. Take a breath and look at me.”

His jaw ticked, but he did as she asked. With a relieved sigh, he gripped her hips and rubbed circles with his thumbs. The tensions slowly eased out of his features as if her proximity alone made him feel better.

“What are we doing again?” he whispered.

“You *fear* I would walk away. Look at me, and tell me if that’s what you think.”

He licked his lips and met her gaze. He studied her face as his hands moved from her hips to her back, through her hair, and down to cup her ass.

Lilliane’s entire body was on fire wherever he touched her. It was hard to wait for him to speak. She wasn’t exactly a patient woman, but this was too

important. She didn't know what it meant to be a mate, but she couldn't see herself slipping out of Atlas's life without a warning. The mere thought made her shiver.

"Ah," he whispered, pressing his lips to her temple. "See, this is what I was afraid of."

"What's that?"

"Already, you can't even bear the thought of leaving me, can you?"

"Not really."

"You're sure it has nothing to do with Victor?"

She smacked his shoulder. "Remember what we're doing? What do you see when you look at me?"

Love. Happiness. Future. He saw all of it, and he was the one who shivered. She noticed and rubbed her hands up and down his arms.

"You feel safe with me," his voice was gruff, barely a whisper. "You wanna be here."

Her smile widened. "Finally. You get."

Atlas was still terrified, but she wanted to be there. In his arms. It was all he wanted now, and he was sure he would find a way to fuck it up. Later, though. Tonight, he would treat his mate the way she deserved to be treated.

NINETEEN



ATLAS

Atlas didn't want to let Lilliane go, but they could hardly eat dinner with her straddling him on his chair. Reluctantly, she stood and sat back in the seat next to him. He adjusted his erection as it strained against his jeans. Lilliane had to feel it against her thigh as she made him look into her eyes.

He was still dizzy from it. How was he supposed to keep himself under control when she did shit like that?

Look into my eyes.

It was insane, but it had worked. Somehow, as he took in her features, his wolf stomped his feet in his head, and he knew. He just *knew*. Lilliane felt safe with him, and she had no desire to leave.

He couldn't even add a *yet* at the end of that thought because his wolf wouldn't let him.

Lilliane really believed she wouldn't bolt from him as soon as this was all over. Even his wolf believed her. Shouldn't he? Was having some doubts normal? Didn't it go against everything a mate bond should be?

Truth was the mate bond didn't stop people from having doubts and feeling trapped in small towns. It wasn't a guarantee like it should be.

And Lilliane had a history of bolting.

They ate quietly for a little bit, but soon enough, Lilliane chatted with him, telling him everything she'd learned from him during the day while she snooped. "Do you have a problem with dryer sheets, by the way?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "What?"

"I did a load of laundry, but I couldn't find dryer sheets. Where do you keep them?"

Atlas shook his head. "I don't use dryer sheets."

She gasped. "What? Do you *like* scratchy sheets and towels? Dryer sheets are a must. I figured you were a bit of a wild wolf man who wouldn't have any." She grinned and pushed a slip of paper toward him.

He looked it over. "Fancy guest soap? Display towels? *Throw cushions?* What is this?"

"I made of list of stuff we need in here," she answered. "It's the basic essentials."

He snorted a laugh. "Is it? I worry what the full list would be."

"Oh, I'll need a few more days to draft the full list." She poked his leg with her toes under the table. "I'm kidding about the full list. You have a really nice place. It just needs a woman's touch."

Atlas stood and kissed the top of her head. "Whatever you want, trouble. I'll get everything tomorrow on my way home."

"Thanks. It was mostly a joke, though."

"Nope." He folded the list and put it in his pocket. "I'm on top of this."

"I could get used to this," she sighed, licking syrup from her fingers. "You know there's a rule about who does the dishes. The one who did the cooking sits around while the other cleans."

Atlas chuckled. "Is that so?"

"Yup," she nodded. "I don't make the rules."

"I'll call *Tails & Syrup*. Let the cook know I'm on my way to do the dishes."

She threw a balled-up napkin at him. "Ha. Very funny. You told me not to cook, so I had to improvise." She stood and gathered the plates from the dining room on her way to the kitchen. She was bent over the dishwasher, loading the dishes, when he joined her.

He couldn't help himself. He leaned against the counter and watched the curve of her ass looking delicious in a pair of blue leggings. "I thought I was supposed to be doing this," he teased.

She waved him off. "I was just busting your balls. You've spent the day doing stuff for me. I obviously wouldn't make you clean up."

He nudged her out of the way and continued loading plates and cutlery. Apparently, Lilliane had used every single dish in the house to serve their takeaway meal. It was endearing. Sweet. It was straight-up sweet, and that was dangerous. He could get used to this. He could get used to coming home to Lilliane, sharing dinner with her before cuddling on the couch.

“Are you gonna tell me what you’re planning with Nero and Reece?”

He shook his head. “No. Not just yet.”

“I can help, you know?”

“I’m scared you’d suggest we use you as bait like you did last time. It ain’t happening.”

She crossed her arms, but he was ready for her. He wouldn’t let that happen. She was too fucking important to be a trap. “It would work. Victor wants me.”

“Exactly. He wants you, which means that sooner or later, he’ll come here. He’ll find you, but we don’t need to make it easy for him. And when he comes even one inch too close to this town, I will...” He stopped short as he spotted the grin on her face. “Shit,” he hissed. “How did you do that?”

“Get you to spew your plan? All I had to do was ask.”

He pursed his lips. “Trouble. On so many levels. I am not saying another damn thing. Stop trying to trick me.”

“What about my sisters? Would they know the plan?”

“Nope. Absolutely not.”

“I don’t think you understand how relationships work,” she teased. “You should probably know that whatever you tell Nero and Reece goes straight to Valentine and Celestine.”

“Not a chance. The guys wouldn’t. We’re sworn to secrecy.”

“Well, sure. But that doesn’t include spouses. *Mates*, in this case. They share beds, homes, and lives. You can bet your ass that your friends are currently doing the dishes with my sisters, telling them everything about your plan. And I know my sisters, so they’re getting a lot more out of ’em. Like how you feel about me.”

“Ah,” he mumbled. “I guess I didn’t think of that.”

“So. My sisters will just tell me. Keep your secrets.” She bent down at the dishwasher again, and he licked his lips, watching her. “I’ll ask them.”

“Don’t you dare, Lilliane. I’ll tell you everything when it’s finalized.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “My sisters will tell me.”

“What if I ask you to wait? There are still a lot of things up in the air. I don’t want it to stress you out every time we need to change a part of the plan.”

“Oh,” she nodded, understanding playing across her face.

“Every time he’s spotted, every time he moves from one city to the other, do you want to know?”

She shook her head. “No. You’re right. I don’t want to know any of that. It’ll stress me out way too much, and I’ll be paranoid and a nightmare to live with because of all...” She sighed. “Well, you know ... the nightmares.”

He palmed her waist. “You don’t need to worry about the nightmares. I’ll be beside you every night. And if you need to sit up and watch those garbage shows, I can make you hot chocolate and hold you until you sleep.”

A smile pulled at the corner of her lips. “You do pretty much everything to protect me, huh?”

He made a big show of sighing. “*Now she gets it.*”

“Thanks for coming home for dinner.”

“I didn’t think how lonely it could be here all day. Alone and all that.”

“Right? My dumb sisters have work in their respective towns. They’re too busy to spend their days with me.”

“How about this,” he said, toying with her hair. “Tomorrow, I’ll spend the day here.”

“But what about the plan?”

“You let me worry about that, okay? I can stay on top of both.” He hoped that was true because he’d tried to keep away from being distracted, but it wasn’t working.

He needed to be around her. Remember what he was doing this for. So she would be safe.

So he would deserve the love shining through her eyes.

TWENTY



LILLIANE

Shifter relationships were complicated.

But maybe just relationships with grumpy lone wolves like Atlas were complicated. He was the most stubborn man she'd ever met, and as the daughter of Sylvester Longborn, that was saying something.

Atlas meant well by keeping away from her, by keeping his plans away from her. He meant well, and she fucking loved that he was keeping her out of it.

It probably made her weak. If her life was a movie, no doubt some people would be watching her struggle through this, shaking their fist at her for not being more involved in getting rid of Victor.

The typical annoying heroine with no backbone.

That wasn't fair to her, she knew. Because the truth was Lilliane was *exhausted*. She had already spent so long playing Victor's mind games all by herself that it left her bone tired.

Here was Atlas with all his shifter resources and wolf friends willing to help her with her vamp stalker issue. What was she supposed to do? Ignore him and walk right into danger as some kind of feminist martyr?

Nope.

Wrung out as she was, Lilliane wasn't in any shape to fight Victor. He knew how to manipulate her and twist her into a shadow of herself.

Atlas didn't look at her and see a woman terrified of the dark. He saw what she was, and his first instinct was to protect her. She *wanted* to be protected by Atlas. When he held her, she was whole again. It didn't matter that she couldn't sleep without him by her side because he *wanted* to be by her side. Not to control her, or possess her, or drain her like Victor wanted to

do.

Atlas just wanted to love her for as long as she let him.

The silly wolf still believed, deep down, that she would leave him.

She would prove him wrong.

It didn't matter that she hadn't known Atlas very long. Her soul was at home with him, and *that* was all that mattered. Lilliane thought her dinner-for-breakfast idea was genius. Atlas loved sweet things, and it was the only sweet meal she could think of. So it wasn't creative, exactly. It was part of their love story, though. She had to build one moment after another to show Atlas that she was exactly where she wanted to be.

The next step of her plan was a bit more precarious. She didn't know how Atlas would react, but judging by the way he devoured her the night before, she had an inkling.

Once the dishwasher was on and they were sipping coffee on the back deck, watching the sun go down, Lilliane started her plan. She moved from her chair to sit on his lap.

"What?" she asked. "I'm cold." She wiggled as much as she could.

Atlas gripped her hips and settled her where he needed her. "I know what you're doing," he whispered in her ear.

"No clue what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh. So you're not sitting on my lap to seduce me?"

"What? No. You're basically a heater, and I'm freezing. Share the heat, Atlas."

He chuckled and closed her in the circle of his arms. "How's this?"

She nuzzled his neck. "Better. So much better."

He kissed the top of her head before laying his cheek against it. "Four days ago, if you would've told me we would be doing this, I wouldn't have believed you."

"I know. Same. I thought I would be locked in a vampire's dungeon doing weird sex stuff."

He stiffened under her, and she immediately realized her mistake. She eased back to look into his eyes. "He drank my blood, but we never did anything more than kiss."

"It's fine."

"I'm just trying to tell you that he didn't ... you know ... force me to do anything."

"Did you give him your blood willingly?" he asked between clenched

teeth.

“Well, no. Not really. He gave me a choice that wasn’t really a choice.”

“And for that, I am going to kill him.”

“When you’ve bitten me ... *mated* me ... do you think that killing urge will evaporate?”

“Why would it?”

“Because then you’d have tasted my blood, too,” she whispered.

“Jesus, Lilliane.” He stood, carefully depositing her into the chair before he started to pace.

“Well, it’s a fair question. When you bite me, there’s blood, right?”

“Is that why you want to be mated? Because you think it’ll make this better?”

She paused, now uncertain. “Wouldn’t it?”

His eyes were dark pools as he shook his head. His jaw was clenched so hard that she feared for his teeth. Didn’t a wolf need all his teeth? He should stop clenching his jaw so much, poor wolf man. “No.” He snapped out the word like she shouldn’t question it, but she wasn’t great at taking instructions. Not when she was on a mission.

“Why not?”

“Because when we’re mates...” He stopped short and sighed. “It’s not a reason to get mated, Lilliane. It won’t erase what he did to you or how insane it makes me feel. This fucker hurt you. Continuously. You see him when you close your eyes and when you sleep. I hate that *now*. I can’t even begin to imagine what it’ll be like when we’re bonded. Mated.”

He laughed dryly. “You think I’m this good man. Doing this to help you. Save you. Truth? You want the truth, Lilliane? I’m a selfish fucker. I want to erase him from existence for daring to breathe the same air as you. For tasting what keeps you alive. Because you’re *mine*, Lilliane. Mine. And I hate the idea he got to you first. Got to hurt you before I knew you existed. Before I got the chance to protect you. I don’t want to kill him to keep you safe. I want to erase him from the world. Maybe then, it can be like I never let you down.”

She heaved a heavy sigh, coming to her feet. She rushed to him and hugged him from behind. “That was the best *I-love-you* speech I ever heard,” she whispered. “Seriously, it’s alpha, but,” she shrugged, “that’s who you are. I’m kinda into it. It’s nice to know I’m not alone anymore.”

He pressed his hands to hers and laughed dryly. “Not sure you heard me

right.”

“I heard every word, Atlas. You think that wanting those things makes you bad?” She snorted. “I want them too. Does that make *me* bad?”

He pushed her hair back. “Not in the least, darling. Not in the least. There isn’t a bad thing about you.”

“Atlas, I want to let you take care of all of this for me. I’m so tired of running or trying to be strong, even when I’m scared. But it’s too much to ask. I know that. I also know you need to do it for me. Isn’t it funny how that works? It’s a mess. All tangled in what I want and what you want and what people looking in might think. My sisters...”

“I don’t give a fuck what other people think. Even your sisters. I care what *you* think, trouble.”

“Then let me think you’re a good man. Because you are, Atlas. You’re the best man I know. And what I am about to ask you is gonna shock you. Honestly, I know that, but I want you to consider it. Do that for me?”

He nodded, but his eyes were still dark with uncertainty. “What is it, trouble?”

“Tonight, like, basically right now, we are going to go upstairs, and we are going to have sex.” He spun her around his body to face her. His eyes were hard, but she wasn’t done. She ran her hands over his shoulders, his chest, landing on his face. “And just as I’m about to come, you will bite me. Mate me. Make me yours forever so that nothing can come between us. Not even ourselves.”

TWENTY-ONE



ATLAS

Make me yours forever so that nothing can come between us. Not even ourselves.

Lilliane's words echoed in his mind as he stared into her eyes.

She was serious. Dead serious. There was a determined glint in her gaze, and he didn't have to be a mind reader to know she wasn't going to change her mind. She had made the decision, and there would be no way out of this.

He still had to try.

"It's a bad idea."

"I think," she said, her hands roaming down his body to hook into his belt loops, "that I've proved quite perfectly that we *can* do this. That it is a *very* good idea. Besides, you said yourself that you can't sleep with me until I'm sure. I am telling you, Atlas, I want you to fuck me until the sun comes up. Mate me the first round or the second or just as dawn breaks, but you are not leaving this house without making me yours."

He huffed out a breath. "Fuck." He laughed; it was dry, but there was disbelief in it, too. "You are trouble. You really are."

"But you love it. So. What do you say? Shall we go upstairs?" She smiled at him innocently, like she didn't understand what was about to happen. She couldn't know. Even Atlas didn't completely understand what happened to two people once they mated.

And mated in a situation like this? When her mind wasn't clear, and his wasn't either, it all felt like it was wrong. Like this moment between them should be something soft and slow they could melt into. Not a mad rush from a threat. Her life was like that before, but he didn't want their beginning to be like that.

But if Lilliane asked, if she wanted it, he wasn't a good enough man to resist her. How could he? He had only known her for four days, and she was already in his system. Someone crucial for his survival.

"Do you even know what you're asking me to do? You want me to make you my mate now, tonight, just like that. But do you know it means we're basically married? But it's so much more than that. Do you get that I won't be able to live without you? This is a lifelong commitment, Lilliane. No more running. You've got to promise me you won't run. Not to him. No running."

She gave him a smile that was half sad and half victorious. "Do you really think I'll be able to live without *you* now?" She kissed his cheek like she loved him. It was sweet and tender. But did she really understand the implications of being an alpha mate? He should pump the breaks and go over everything with her.

"In case it isn't clear, Atlas," she said, cutting through his thoughts. "Let me remind you of something. If I'm your mate, you're mine too. What you feel for me, I feel for you."

He didn't even have it in him to fight her on that. If she felt even a fraction of what he did, maybe they had a shot after all.

Maybe she wouldn't run from him.

Maybe he would never have to live without her again. "Trouble," he groaned, pulling her closer to him. He brushed his lips against her forehead, down her cheeks, across her chest, up her neck. Her breath stuttered, and he pressed his mouth to hers. She melted in his arms, her nails digging into his back.

Her mouth was sweet, her tongue soft and curious, dipping in and out of his mouth. It drove him wild. He gripped her ass and walked her backward until he could press her against the wall. He caged her there and stepped back. His ragged breath sawed out of him as he took her in. He licked his lips, and his eyes roved her face, looking for any sign of ... what? Fear? Regret?

All he saw was love, so he kissed her again. This time, cupping her face gently. She tipped her head back and fumbled with his zipper.

They shed their clothes on the way up the stairs, hands everywhere, exploring each other. They ended up in his bedroom ... the one they were sharing ... and it smelled like her.

Now, his whole life would smell like her.

He should slow them down. They should take their time. But when he

caught sight of her naked body, all warm curves and silky skin, lying on his bed, he couldn't think *why* they should slow down. Atlas knelt between her splayed thighs, her head resting against the pillows and headboard. He leaned down to kiss her hipbone, licked his way up to her navel, kissed the curve of her waist, and nibbled the underside of her breast.

She stuffed her fingers in his hair, and she arched up, grinding herself against his lower body. The only thing between them was his briefs. Thin material, already strained by his erection.

He closed his mouth around her breast, alternating between nipping her tender nipples and twirling his tongue around them. He blew against the peaks, and she gasped his name.

She shivered and pressed herself closer to him, panting with want.

“God, you're beautiful, Lilliane. So perfect,” he said between licks of her flesh. He parted her thighs and inhaled. “So fucking sweet.” His eyes didn't leave hers as he licked across her core, tasting her sweetness. She was wet. So wet. So responsive. So sensitive. Already, her knees shook around his head.

He needed to feel her come, but it was too soon. The most relief he could offer himself was to dip two fingers inside her. She clenched down hard, gasping. He pumped in and out, making sure to graze that spot deep inside her that made her clench and gasp and say his name in a breathless way that made him feel way too good. She came hard, squeezing his fingers as he continued to tongue her clit. He licked and laved her through the aftershocks, relishing her ragged breathing.

He fisted his cock, his eyes burning into hers. His breathing was rough with want. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“Why do you keep asking me like you want my answer to be different? I'm sure, Atlas. This is what I want. *You are who I want.*”

“Thank fuck,” he growled and grabbed her hips. “I've never wanted anything as much as I want you right now.”

“I'm yours to take,” she whispered, arching up to kiss him. He positioned himself at her entrance and slid inside her in one smooth motion. They groaned together, mouths colliding with eager kisses. She was tight, almost too tight. He had to pace himself and ease his rhythm.

“Trouble,” he groaned against her throat. “If you keep moving like that...”

“Faster, Atlas.”

“Fuck,” he groaned. How was he not going to embarrass himself when she spoke like that? But he moved his hips in a different rhythm, tilting her hips. She gripped his hand, her eyes wild with pleasure.

“Oh, god,” she cried. He repeated the motion, watching as her already flushed cheeks turned brighter. He leaned over her, kissing her deeply. Her nails dug into his back, his ass, his scalp. She was everywhere. Touching as much of him as she could while he drove into her again and again.

“Can I come inside you?”

Lilliane clenched the walls of her core and smiled when he groaned. “I’m on the pill.”

His breath hitched. “They are not always efficient with shifters, and I don’t have condoms. I just wanna come inside you.”

“Yes.” She rotated her hips.

“You gotta be sure, darling.”

“Yes. Come inside me, Atlas. I’m yours. In every way.”

He bit her neck as her walls fluttered around his cock. “Yes,” she cried as her release took her over. “*Atlas! Yes!*”

He marked her. His teeth sank just as he peaked deep inside her. He groaned her name, holding her, staying inside her as long as possible. This moment.

Her core still fluttering, their breathing ragged, their bond branded into their hearts and souls.

This moment was something he wanted to remember forever. He kissed her, little pecks and deep pulls of her swollen lips. He nipped her collarbone and held her to him as he lay on his back. He pressed a kiss to her temple. “How do you feel?” he whispered.

“A bit drunk,” she whispered back.

He chuckled. “Drunk?”

“A bit woozy. That was good work, wolf man.”

Atlas ran his fingers where he bit her. The skin was pink and smoother. A tiny little scar. He kissed it softly. “Did it hurt?”

“No,” she said, and he believed her. “I don’t think I really felt it?” She asked like it was a question. “Is that possible?”

“Not sure, but I like the idea that it didn’t hurt you. Kinda the last thing I want right now.” He grinned at her. “Trouble, you’re my mate.” He couldn’t keep the wonder out of his voice.

She beamed at him. “You look pretty pleased with yourself.”

“Oh, I am,” he laughed. “This is the best moment of my life.”

She giggled and nuzzled his chest. “Wolf man, it’s only the start. You might find me annoying soon enough. My bathroom is always a mess. Products *everywhere*, along with my hair dryer, straightener, curling wand.”

“Sounds amazing. Can’t wait to help you organize.”

She threw her head back with a laugh. “It’s already annoying you, isn’t it?”

He tickled her hip. “You do remember you almost burned the house down, right? I am familiar with your mess.”

“Hey!” she protested. She playfully swatted at him. He caught her hand and used it to pull her on top of him. He grinned at her and moved his hips up. He laughed when her eyes widened. “Again? Really?”

“Darling, you told me I could make love to you till the sun comes up, and I have every intention of doing just that.” He slid in with ease and lost count of times she came before he let himself sink deep inside her.

Lilliane was his. *His*.

TWENTY-TWO



LILLIANE

The second Lilliane opened her eyes, she felt warm, safe, and loved. It was amazing.

Atlas was on his side, watching her with a small grin. “Sorry, I woke you. I was trying to sneak out of bed. I wouldn’t have left without telling you,” he quickly added when he noticed her frown. He kissed her shoulder and held her a little closer. “I have to go.”

She groaned, cracking one eye open. “But it’s barely dawn.”

“It’s almost eight,” he chuckled. “I can’t be late. Lots to do today.”

“Thanks for being here this morning when I woke up.”

He grinned, the warmth of it melting her heart. “Where else would I be?”

She nudged his side and snorted. “Really?”

Atlas rolled them over until her back was pressed into the bed. “Hush, trouble. I tried my best to resist you.” She giggled and stretched out against him, arching up to kiss him. He whispered against her lips, “Look how well that turned out.”

“I have no complaints,” she laughed again. She arched up to kiss him. “Atlas?” she wanted to tell him. He was her mate. They were basically married now, like he had said. But she couldn’t bring herself to say the words out loud, too scared he wouldn’t say it back.

It was silly, probably. Right? He had to love her. That was the whole thing with mates. Wasn’t it?

“Hey,” Atlas took her chin in her fingers. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I just don’t like the idea of being here without you.” It was as close to the truth as she could give him.

“Hmm,” he said. “Sorry, trouble. I’ll be back before dark. I promise.”

“Okay, wolf man.” She pushed him toward the side of the bed. “I wanna snooze more. Go work.”

He chuckled. “Yes, darling.” His chuckle turned into a full laugh when he spotted her face.

“I just realized how cold that sounded,” she said. “Work is basically saving my ass, isn’t it?”

“Yup,” he said, walking toward the bathroom, nude and perfect and still hard somehow. “But that’s quite a fine ass you’ve got, trouble. It’s definitely worth saving.” He shut the door before she could reply.

It wasn’t *I love you*, but it sure sounded like it.

LILLIANE TOOK HER TIME SHOWERING, but the sound of voices confused her when she turned off the hair dryer. She slipped on a pair of pink leggings with a white tunic before heading to the kitchen.

“Oh! Hi there!” she said to Nero and Reece. They sat at the dining room table, speaking in hush tones.

Her heart fluttered. Atlas had been leaving the house to meet the guys at his office. Yet here they were in his kitchen, probably because of her comment. *I don’t like the idea of being here without you.* Of course, he would’ve listened. That wolf man was something special. And he was all hers. She smiled to herself, still a little woozy from her night with Atlas.

Her head was full of light, hope, and happiness. She was lighter than she’d been in a long time, and it wasn’t a coincidence that it was happening in Atlas’s house. In his life. In his arms.

In the dining room, Nero and Reece smiled at her. “Valentine is excited about this development,” Nero said.

“She’s probably pissed I didn’t call her the second it happened,” Lilliane said.

“Yeah, something like that.” He laughed.

“Your sisters are coming for dinner,” Reece added.

“Bit of a family reunion,” Nero clapped his hands in excitement. “We’re not technically family, but...”

“All wolves?” she offered.

The guys exchanged a glance before laughing. “Yup,” Reece nodded.

“Where’s Atlas?”

Reece pointed toward the back deck. The look on his face was sober. Reece was always a bit aloof. It wasn’t the same way as Atlas. She understood the reasons why Atlas was the grumpy wolf he was. But Celestine probably felt like that about Reece, so it was all mate stuff. It was a line straight to your partner’s thoughts. That’s why Lilliane knew something was wrong the second she spotted Atlas pacing the backyard.

He gave her a smile, but it wasn’t as warm as usual. “I asked the guys to work here today.”

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong.”

She motioned to her neck where he bit her, marking her as his life partner. The love of his life. “This says you are lying.”

His grin quickly vanished. “It’ll work itself out.”

“This is about Victor, right?”

He gave a tight nod.

“Is there news? Do we know where he is? You look worried. Angry?”

Atlas closed the distance between them and ran his fingers where he had bit her. “Hasn’t this told you what I’m feeling?”

“You’re horny,” she sighed. “Again. Even though you kept me up all night. Keep it in your pants, Atlas. We have all night to do *that* all over again.” She raised a brow, daring him to contradict her.

“Hmm.”

“But you are worried and angry. It’s both. I’m right, right?”

He grinned again. “You’re right.”

“Tell me.”

Atlas sighed and closed her in his arms. “Nah, trouble. I’ll take care of it.”

“We’re partners,” she argued. “That means you should share your problems with me. Especially since I am the one who created the problem in the first place.”

“You know how I feel about that.” He pulled her hair over her shoulder.

“It’s not my fault that a vampire stalker fixated on me. I know. Thanks for reminding me,” she kissed him softly. “It’s very easy to slip right back into blaming myself.”

His jaw clicked, and she knew what he wanted to ask. He wanted to know how Victor got to drink her blood. He needed to know, probably. But Lilliane

didn't think it was a good idea.

It didn't matter anymore, anyway.

She was Atlas's mate, and that was it.

"We don't know where he is, but there's been a string of murders near Rochester, and we think it's him."

She recoiled, but he reached out and hugged her close. "How many?" she whispered.

"Trouble," he warned. "You're not gonna blame yourself for this, too, are you?"

He would guess her thought. Lilliane shook her head, not brave enough to lie out loud. She wouldn't tell him he was right.

"How many?" she asked again.

"Five. A sixth is missing but..." He sighed.

"Chances are, it's six. Is anyone going to stop him?"

"That's our plan," he said against her temple. "He won't hurt anyone again."

She nodded and wondered how she was supposed to live with six more lives on her head. If she hadn't gone off and fallen in love with Atlas, Victor would be locked in a vampire palace somewhere, torturing only her.

"Lilliane?" Atlas asked. "It's not on you," he repeated. "I'm here if you need me today, but your sisters are coming over. You can use the pool. Have a girls' day."

He wanted to keep her away from the house, and she understood why. She wished she didn't know about the six dead girls and the vampire who had been so close to owning her future.

A girls' day with her sisters felt foolish, but it was better than feeling like shit all by herself while her new mate tried to get rid of her stalker.

"I promise not to cook dinner. We'll get take out."

He pressed a kiss to her lips and said, "I'll cook."

He went inside the house, but Lilliane stood there, watching one of the enforcers do his rounds. She winced at the thought.

She really *was* trouble.

TWENTY-THREE



ATLAS

Atlas was exhausted. The day had yielded very few results. Even when he, along with Nero and Reece, left the house to do intel and recon work. There were enough guards around the house to protect a billionaire's hoard, but there were three alpha mates in there. Those three women had way more value than any wealth in the world.

What he hadn't really anticipated was having all three Longborn sisters in the same house when wine was involved. Lilliane was trouble on a good day, but when she was tipsy on pinot and sitting on the deck with her sisters, she was a whole other kind of mischievous.

He could see how Celestine and Valentine treated her a little differently. She was the little sister. They needled her, and she retaliated. All in good fun.

It was the most people and noise he'd ever had in his house. All thanks to Lilliane. She had brought life to his life, and they'd only been mates a day.

"You ladies need anything else?" Atlas asked them as he flipped the steaks on the massive gas BBQ on the far-left corner of the deck.

"More wine, please!" Lilliane called out.

"I think we've all had enough," Celestine pouted. "We should slow down."

"Why?" Lilliane asked. "I've only had two glasses."

"But it's sunny and hot. We haven't had any water or snacks to soak up the booze."

"Snacks, water, more wine. Got it," Atlas winked at Lilliane before leaning down to kiss her. He walked away, only hearing their conversation with his shifter ears.

"If women knew shifter men were like that?" Lilliane shook her head. "If

that was a known fact, shifter men would be in serious trouble.”

Val laughed. “I’ve met some shifters who are nothing like Nero.”

“I think you mean nothing like *Atlas*,” Lilliane shot back.

“Are you two seriously comparing notes on whose boyfriend is the best?”

“Mate,” Val corrected. “And yes.”

“That’s not very mature,” Celestine chided.

“Whatever. You know I’m right. If people knew about shifters, how some of them treat their mates, there would be a revolt.”

Atlas grinned. Sounded like his mate was happy.

Nero and Reece were in the kitchen, drinking beers and keeping an eye on the tablet tucked in the corner of the living room. It held a GPS locator one of their associates had stuck to a black SUV with dark-tinted windows in a town near Rochester.

They hoped it was Victor’s.

They needed eyes on him. The last thing Victor could be allowed to do was sneak up on them. Atlas wanted to be ready, and Nero and Reece agreed because they were sick of the vampires putting their lives and people in danger.

This was the last time.

Victor had threatened their mates, and they were just as invested in taking the vamp down. Keeping three alphas cool and calm when they didn’t always agree on the best strategy was hard. The only saving grace was their lifelong friendship. They’d been boys together long before they were alphas. Those bonds saw them through a few scuffles when opinions differed.

Atlas took the beer Nero offered before they clinked the bottle necks together. “The girls need water, snacks, and wine. In that order,” he added.

“A little tipsy?” Nero guessed.

“And bickering,” he added.

“This means we’re family,” Reece pointed out. “Brothers-in-law.”

“Ain’t that a thing?” Nero laughed. “Three friends winding up with three sisters. But it’s weird that if it wasn’t for all this vamp stuff, we never would’ve met them.”

“I don’t even want to imagine a life without Celestine,” Reece shivered at the thought and gulped down half his beer.

Atlas grabbed a few things and threw together some crackers, cheeses, deli meats, and slices of fresh bread. “What do you think? Keep our ladies sober a little longer?”

“You trying to outdo us?” Nero teased.

Atlas flipped him off before returning to the poolside. “I come bearing snacks.” He laid down the tray on one of the patio tables and kissed the top of Lilliane’s head.

Nero, holding a pitcher of water, and Reece, uncorking a bottle of red, joined them. They settled close to their mates, and chatter broke out.

“You realize this is the first family dinner of many, right?” Lilliane whispered to him.

“I like it,” he whispered back.

“Me too,” she beamed at him. “Are you gonna tell us all about your plans now?”

He shook his head. “Tonight is about hanging out and unwinding.”

“Are you trying to distract me?” she asked. He sipped his beer and didn’t answer her question. “That’s pretty much admitting you *are* trying to distract me.”

“Yup. Also need to unwind.” He gave her a tight smile, and her heart gave a squeeze. She left her drink on a table on her way to him. She sat on his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. “It was a hard day, huh?” she whispered.

He nodded. “This vamp is bad. Got back some of our background searches on him. There is very little, and what’s there isn’t good. This guy is untouchable and slippery. He’s very dangerous, Lilliane. And so,” he cleared his throat. “Fuck,” he groaned. “We need to talk about what would happen if he killed me.”

She stiffened in his arms. He hated to even put the idea out there, but they definitely needed to talk about it. “No. You won’t. You can’t *die*.”

“He is an ancient vampire with resources even I can’t match. We might be three wolf packs, but he’s got a few centuries on us.” He sighed. “I just wanna make sure all my bases are covered. If something happens to me, you need to stay with the pack. They will protect you. Do not leave the pack lands. There will always be a wolf to protect you on this land. In Greenlee and Blackwood, too.”

“But I don’t want people to die defending me.”

It was his turn to stiffen. “I fucking hate it when you say shit like that. Why should *you* have to suffer and be scared because he fixated on you? If he wasn’t a vampire, there would be cops and lawyers and all kinds of other people to help you. But he *is* a vampire. He is above human law. I haven’t

found his weakness yet, and honestly, I'm man enough to admit that he might win."

"Why are you telling me this?" her voice shook. "Is this what tonight is? Some kind of goodbye dinner in case things go bad?"

"No, of course not. We have steak dinners all the time. We take turns hosting, but I thought you'd prefer staying here."

"Well, he hasn't found me yet. I feel like even walking by a window is tempting fate."

He gave her a sad smile. She was making light of it, but he knew she was worried. She was scared and, no doubt, blaming herself for this.

"You're safe here, darling. I've got my eye on you." He kissed the crown of her head. "I won't let him hurt you. Let's enjoy our night. We're celebrating."

Her eyes sparked. "Celebrating, huh?"

"Yeah. We're mated. Seemed like a good idea to have a meal with our nearest and dearest. Have a few laughs and have something sweet to end the night."

She laughed. "Yeah? And what did you get for dessert?"

"A triple chocolate cake," he grinned. "But *you're* the sweet thing I want," he whispered in her ear.

TWENTY-FOUR



LILLIANE

When Lilliane woke the next morning, Atlas wasn't in bed. She didn't think for a second he left the house without saying goodbye. If she knew him ... and she thought she did ... he would be in the kitchen, making coffee or some elaborate breakfast that would no doubt be covered in syrup. The man was part sugar at this point.

She giggled to herself because it was a good description for Atlas. He was the sweetest, most caring man she ever knew. And to think he'd been an asshole in a very specific way in the first few seconds of their acquaintance.

She hopped out of bed and padded down to the kitchen in his tee. She did it to be cute, but she couldn't stop smelling it. It was like her own cocoon of Atlas. He grinned at her when she walked into the kitchen.

"Morning, trouble. How did you sleep?"

"No nightmares," she cheered. "But it's not like I'm asleep long enough to *have* a nightmare. My guy is pretty horny. On me twenty-four-seven." She giggled when he took her by the hips and kissed her neck.

"Is that right? That isn't how I remember it."

She threw her head back with a laugh as he nipped the tender flesh of her neck. "How do you remember it?"

"I'm just a man trying to get to sleep, and this hot little thing puts her hand on my chest and nuzzles it like she's trying to settle there. What am I supposed to do?"

She giggled. "Make love to me."

He chuckled against her mouth. "You asking, trouble?"

She tickled his side. "Guess I walked right into that one."

Atlas kissed the side of her head and laughed. "You in the mood for fruit

salad?”

“Sure. But is that sweet enough for you?”

“Oh, I’ve got fresh whipped cream and hazelnut chocolate drizzle.”

“How are you *this* buff and eat that much sugar?”

Atlas tilted his head back and howled like the wolf he was. Lilliane cracked up and shoved against his chest when he started sniffing her, tickling her sensitive skin with his morning scruff. *Bliss*. This was actually bliss. Never in her wildest dream did she think she would be this happy with a man, especially not so soon after meeting him. He was hers now, and she was his, and she wouldn’t change it for anything.

“Do you have big plans today? Any recon to do away from the house?”

Atlas shook his head. “No. Nero and Reece are taking care of that. Your sisters are hanging out together to cut down on manhours for the day.”

“Right. It’s not like Victor would be walking around right now.”

“Your sisters can come here if you like.” He washed his hands, took hers in his, and led her onto the back deck. He nudged his chin to an easel and stool. There was a little suitcase full of paints, and a long glass vase held a bunch of paintbrushes. “You said you’d like to paint. I figured you would like this. Maybe give it a shot. I know you don’t like leaving the house, but I can set up right there to do my work and watch over you. It’s sun...”

“Sunlight,” she finished for him in a whisper. “You bought me paint supplies...”

“I did. Is that okay? Did I overstep?”

She shook her head, her eyes watering. “This is so sweet, Atlas. I think this might be the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. I love it. I love *you*.” It slipped out before she had a chance to take it back. Her eyes went wide, but he smiled at her.

“Shock yourself there?”

She laughed nervously. “Maybe.”

“You know this means I love you, right? I’m not gonna say it enough, but I’ll show you every way I can, Lilliane.” He pushed her hair over her shoulder. “I still haven’t *said* it, have I?” He looked deep into her eyes as she shook her head. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her temple before whispering in her ear, “I love you, Lilliane.” She shivered at the words and closed her arms around him.

“Good. I mean, I knew. Why else would you do all this, right? But it’s nice to hear. It’s also nice that you love me so much that you surprised me

with paint supplies because I mentioned it once.”

“I listen.” He shrugged like it wasn’t the best thing in the world.

“You do,” she sighed happily. “Very sweet, wolf man. You’re not grumpy at all.”

He chuckled. “Well, not around you.”

“Can I ask you a question, Atlas?”

He wrapped his arms around her and tucked her under his chin. “Always. What’s on your mind?”

“My sisters have these roles in their packs. They help the townspeople with some stuff. Do you think ... when all this Victor stuff is over, and I can leave the house safely, do you think I could maybe, possibly have a role in your pack?”

“Of course, trouble. As soon as all this is over. And, just so we’re clear on something, it’s *your* pack too.”

“That will take some getting used to.”

“It’ll be okay when it’s all over.”

Lilliane appreciated that he said *when*. Not *if*. She hadn’t liked the pain in his eyes when he spoke about what would happen to her if he were to ... She stopped herself before finishing the thought. He held her tighter, sensing her tenseness.

“If you want company, your sisters can come by. Whatever you want to feel safe.”

There he went again. Making sure she knew she wasn’t here against her will. She couldn’t leave, but she wasn’t his prisoner. She knew, and he knew. But he kept reminding her, and Lilliane didn’t know if it was for her sake or his. Was he still comparing himself to Victor? She didn’t know.

She kissed him and ran her hands through his hair. “I’d like to paint out here if you actually don’t mind working out here. It kinda sounds like the perfect day.”

He laughed, the smile crinkling his eyes with pure joy. “It does, trouble. It does.” He pressed his lips to her ear again. “Maybe at lunch, I’ll make love to you in the pool.” He winked at her before returning to the kitchen. She watched him go, marveling at her own luck. If there wasn’t Victor’s shadow over them, it really would be perfect.

TWENTY-FIVE



ATLAS

Atlas stared down at his phone, breathing hard and shoulders tense. If there was a way to change the words on his screen, he would do it.

This wasn't good.

Across the deck, Lilliane's smile slipped as she noticed his tension. "What's up?" she called out.

"Nothing, trouble. Just needing a break, I think. You wanna take a swim?"

She frowned and looked at her painting. "It's not lunch yet," she teased.

He laughed because he didn't want her to know what he knew. It was cute, though. She would hold him up to his promise of making love at lunch. He could already see the determination glowing in her eyes.

It would be hard to stop her without telling her the news. He tossed his phone on the table and walked over to her. He picked her up off the ground, much like he had that first day they met. She giggled and tapped his ass. "No way you just did that," she said through peals of laughter. "Oh, my god, Atlas! Put me down."

"Nope. We're going for a swim. You don't have your phone on you, do ya?"

"What? No. Why?" he headed toward the pool, and she must've noticed because she started to laugh harder, begging him to put her down with no real conviction. "I'm gonna get wet! Put me down," she laughed.

"Oh, we're going into the pool, all right." He took a step into the pool. "Hold your breath, trouble."

And they plunged into the water. She held tighter to him, and he kicked off the pool floor until they broke through the water again, still holding each

other. She wiped her face, smiling at him. “You’re so dead. I can’t believe you did that.”

He chuckled and kissed her cheek. “You looked a little hot. Needed to cool down.”

“I did, did I?”

He nodded. “Yup. All that painting was causing a serious heat problem. I had to do my duty as your mate.”

“Ha,” she snorted a laugh. “Atlas, you’re hot as hell and very charming, but you don’t fool me. What’s wrong?”

He stiffened. “What do you mean?”

She rolled her eyes. “Seriously? When are you gonna get it? I’m your mate. I know you. You got a text, and then you got all tight and weird and quiet. You’re trying to distract me, but I can tell you’re thinking about something.”

“Another one of my tells giving me away?”

“But only because I’m your mate, and I know you pretty well by now. It’s here,” she pressed her hand to her heart. “I feel it here. Something’s wrong.”

He nodded. “We thought we found him in Rochester. We tracked the car, but it was just found burned up on the side of the road. Now, we don’t even know where he is or in what car. It’s a bit of a setback.”

“Oh,” she whispered. “So this is gonna continue for a little bit longer?” His nod made her sigh. “Okay, well, maybe we need to change our strategy. You don’t want to use me as bait, but there’s a reason we did it last time.”

His eyes darkened. “Yeah. The only reason is because I wasn’t there. It never would’ve happened if I was there. That isn’t happening again. Do you hear me, Lilliane? You’re the love of my life. Not vampire bait. He’ll find you, and we’ll be ready.”

“But you wanted to avoid that. If I…”

“Lilliane,” he growled. “No. You are not bait.” He looked away, his jaw clicking. “I just don’t like being caught unaware. It feels like he could just show up, and I hate it. This is not what being a wolf is. I’m the top of the food chain in my world.”

She sighed sadly. “Not in mine, apparently.”

“Yeah, well, now your world is mine, and being a wolf isn’t enough.”

“Fuck that,” Lilliane said with such fierceness it stilled him. “You are an alpha wolf, and you can pretty much do anything. You’re a wolf man. My wolf man. I don’t think for one second that Victor can one-up you. I don’t

care if he is a million years old and has more money and resources than your millionaire self. You have me, and you can walk around in the sunlight. Huge advantage. We will beat this. For our pack.”

His breath stuttered. “I love you, trouble, you know that? I really needed to hear that.”

“We’re a team. I might not be doing much to help with this whole thing that I started, but I can be useful. I’m a Half-Blood. I’m not half bad in a fight,” she added, making him laugh despite the seriousness of the moment.

He laid his forehead against hers and sighed. “I wish we hadn’t become mates right in the middle of this. I wish we could be in the honeymoon phase without all this hanging over us.”

“You gonna get mad at me again if I say it’s my fault?”

“Yup. Absolutely. It’s not your fault, darling.”

“You do call me trouble, though. We both know why.”

“Yeah, because you’re trouble to my sanity.” He held her close. Their bodies twined together as they treaded water.

She pinched his side. “You can say that, but I know the truth. You wish I wasn’t so high maintenance.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, *not* because being stalked is such a demanding thing.”

“Right?” she clicked her tongue. “That’ll teach me to be rebellious.”

“Led you to me, though. I’m really happy we met,” he whispered against her neck. She shivered in his arms, and he wished they were nude. Their wet clothes were definitely in the way.

“You’re just saying that because you get to have sex with me forever, and I’m pretty good.”

“The best,” he growled before kissing her deeply.

“You got bad news. You won’t distract me,” she said as he kissed along her neck, swimming them backward until he could push her against the wall.

He grinned against her mouth as he felt her melt against him. He distracted her for as long as he possibly could.

TWENTY-SIX



LILLIANE

Lilliane sighed and sat up, tugging the throw around her shoulders. “I can’t ever be naked around you,” she sighed again, shaking her head.

Atlas reached over and ran his thumb along her lower lip. “You’d be hella more convincing without that grin on your face, trouble.” He chuckled when she narrowed her eyes at him. “I should point out you weren’t nude. Just wet.”

She arched a brow at him, definitely grinning now. “Are you trying to start something again?”

“Nope.” He laughed, tugging her back down to lay on top of him. She giggled and struggled against him. “You still haven’t told me what happened,” she whined. “You got a text message three hours ago.”

“Really? How is it possible that you remember that after six orgasms?”

“Seven,” she corrected. “And as amazing as those were, they didn’t erase the morning from my brain.”

He chuckled. “Damn. Here I thought I could make you turn into mush. Maybe I should give it another shot.” He bit her lower lip playfully. Impossibly, her heart fluttered, and her body pulsed with interest. Whether it was her mate connection to Atlas or the man himself that made her into some kind of horny version of herself, Lilliane didn’t know. It didn’t matter because it wasn’t just fucking.

Even against the pool wall, even quick and half clothed, Atlas touched her like he loved her. Even fast and rough, she trusted him. She slid her fingers through his still-damp hair and held him close to her. Wild to think that she hadn’t even known this man existed only a week ago, and now, Lilliane couldn’t imagine her life without him.

She never wanted to part from him.

In no time at all, he'd replaced the loneliness of her earlier life with love and warmth and the kind of bonds she longed for. Atlas didn't just have the loyalty of his people, but he was lifelong friends with Reece and Nero. It was a good man who could be friends with two other alphas, supporting and helping each other out.

"You're kind of a badass," she whispered.

He chuckled. "Am I now?"

"Yup. There's no mate bias there at all."

"Why would there be?" He continued to laugh.

"Exactly. None whatsoever. But I know you're the best man in the world. Not because you're saving my ass, which, you know, thanks for that."

"Your ass is too nice not to save it," he teased.

"I am lucky to have met you. Lucky to be your mate."

"You've got it backward. I'm the lucky one."

"We're both lucky," she concluded. He wouldn't like it if she brought up Victor at that moment, but it hung over them, regardless. What would it be like to live her life with Atlas without the threat of Victor in the back of her mind?

Her mate deserved so much more.

"You got really serious and quiet," Atlas whispered. "Where did you go?"

"What happened, Atlas? In Rochester?"

He sighed and sat up, taking her with him so she straddled him on the couch. "I thought I got away with it."

"Not even a little bit."

"Victor might've been spotted in Longville." His voice broke as he said the words. "But the timeline is weird. He couldn't have been the killer in Rochester, but he'd definitely been in the burned-out car we found. There's a speed camera with him behind the wheel."

She frowned. "That's weird."

"Yeah."

"No. I mean, yeah, okay, it's weird that the timeline isn't lining up, but it's weird that Victor would be driving himself. He likes a power move."

"What are you saying?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure, but I honestly have never seen Victor drive a car. Ever. Especially not if it was close to daytime."

Atlas nodded along. "That's good to know. Does he have a brother or

someone who looks like him?”

“No. What’s the timeline?”

“By the time the fire department put out the car fire, it was already burning for two hours on some backroad. That was around 8:20 a.m. One of the last murder victims in Rochester was killed at 11:45 a.m., hours later.”

“Oh. So, presumably, Victor would have driven out of Rochester during the early hours, right before dawn. Set the car on fire, driven *back* to Rochester, killed someone in broad daylight, and then vanished.”

“And he was spotted in Longville that same night.”

“Which means he could totally have driven from Rochester to Longville after that 11:45 murder.”

Atlas nodded. “Yup. We have no clue if he is in Longville, but now we have to live like he is in Longville.”

“Why would he come back without any support? Most of the vamps went up in flames with the estate house. He’d be here all alone and without a human servant to tend to his needs. No. He wouldn’t do that.”

Atlas’s face tightened. “I don’t know. I’ve been reading about stalkers and how they escalate.”

“But, that would be for *humans*, though. Not for vampires,” she argued. She had made the mistake of looking up stalker laws and victim support. It had been depressing and terrifying. It was one of the reasons why she gave in to him, left her sisters, and moved into his castle.

Because there was already so little the authorities could do, but if the stalker was a vampire? That was a whole different issue.

Atlas snorted and shook his head. “We both know the fact Victor is a vampire makes it so much worse.”

“Darn. I was kinda hoping you wouldn’t think of that.” She shrugged when he tugged her hair playfully. “I thought I was a badass. A badass would clue into that.”

“I know. Can’t blame a girl for sliding into denial for a second.”

“No. I guess I can’t blame you for that. It’ll be okay, Lilliane. I promise, no matter how this plays out, that fucker will never touch you. I don’t even want him to talk to you. See you.”

“That’s possessive.”

“Protective,” he insisted.

“I know. Denial, remember? I’d rather tease you about being a tad possessive because of all the alpha shifter mate stuff than because you need

to protect me from a vampire stalker.” She shuddered and tried to push the thought away.

Atlas caught on to her shiver, pressed up against him as she was. “Hey,” he nudged her chin up to hold her gaze. “What was that?”

“Nothing.”

He grinned and ran his lips against her forehead. “Nope. That’s not gonna work for me. If you can feel that something is wrong here,” he pressed his hand to her heart, “then you know I’ll feel something here also.” He waited for her to speak, but she shook her head. “Darling, talk to me.”

“I don’t want to say it out loud. I’m scared it’ll make it happen.”

“Or I can help you think it through. Talk it out.” He gave her an encouraging smile.

She sighed, relieved. Her wolf man wasn’t just amazing in bed, but he said things like that and made her fall in love with him even more. “Well, I’m a bit scared that you’ll have to fight him.”

“Oh, I’ll be fighting him. There is no way around that, trouble. It will always end with me fighting him.”

“I really didn’t want you to say that.”

“I won’t let Nero or Reece fight this battle for me. You are mine to protect.”

“I don’t want you to die,” she sniffed, looking away. “We haven’t really had enough time together.”

“Yeah. That is why I wanted to wait until all this was over to mate you. It’s hard to think we could lose this, but we won’t.”

She frowned. “But you’re scared of it too.”

“Sure I am,” he admitted. “I’d be an idiot to be overconfident. He’s not the usual foe. He’s not another alpha or another shifter. Then there’s you.” He took a deep kiss from her. “I’ve never had as much to lose as I do now. It weighs a little heavy. I’ve never wanted to win a fight so much, and I’ve never lost a fight, either. I like my odds.”

“I love you, Atlas. With all my heart. So much that it scares me a little more than anything else we’re facing. I’m not sure I could live without you.”

“You won’t live without me.”

“Promise?” she gasped with a sob. It was terrible to ask him that. She didn’t want to be too demanding. Too emotional. But fuck it. This man was putting himself between her and a killer. If something happened to Atlas, it would be her fault. She would be responsible for her love’s death.

Yet, here he was, holding her, talking about odds.

“I promise you, darling trouble, I will come back to you. Life’s just getting good. I won’t let him come between us.” He took her hands and brought them to his mouth, kissing her knuckles. “I wanna marry you. Have a couple kids. Maybe more than a couple if you want. I’m thinking you should paint a mural on the community center wall. Maybe teach a couple art classes for the pack kids. I want to fall asleep with you every night until we’re old and the grandkids are sneaking into our bedroom for a pancake breakfast.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“So I’ll make it happen, Lilliane. I’ll give you everything you want. Even if it’s a promise that I will always come back to you.”

He hugged her tightly, holding her for as long as it took for her tears to subside.

TWENTY-SEVEN



ATLAS

Atlas didn't mind holding onto Lilliane while she wept. It broke his heart that she hadn't let herself cry much throughout all this. She'd been so strong for so long by herself, and now, it was all coming to a head.

He thanked his lucky stars that he could be here for her in all the ways that he would be able to.

With the possibility of Victor in Longville, Nero and Reece had driven over with Celestine and Valentine. They needed to finalize their plans, and keeping the three women together until all this was settled just made sense.

The honeymoon was officially over.

It was time to take care of the Victor problem once and for all. There would be more time later to kick up the honeymoon period again. Atlas would make sure of that. He was already forming a plan for *that*.

He just had to stay alive.

Atlas still couldn't believe how honest he had been with Lilliane. Admitting to his mate that he was scared probably wasn't his manliest moment, but from the look on her face, Lilliane didn't mind it at all. It was probably something like emotional intimacy.

Atlas didn't even know what those words meant before he met Lilliane, but between rounds of the best sex of his life, she told him all about their relationship. How they could make sure to never let the other one down. Or let things go stale or uncommunicative. Apparently, opening up and being terrifyingly honest with her made them closer.

Maybe it was. Maybe it was their mate bond. It could even be a combination of all three. All he knew was that since speaking the words out

loud to her, he felt better. Like, *a lot* better. He felt like himself again. Emboldened by their love.

“Whoa,” Lilliane’s laughter was shaky with tears, but she brushed them away. “I just cried my heart out in your arms. Not super romantic.”

He brushed her hair over her shoulder. “Oh, I don’t know about that. You can cry in my arms anytime you want, but I’m kinda hoping our life together has very few moments of tears.”

“Tears of joy only?”

He grinned. “Yup. That’s the plan. I plan on making you very happy.”

The doorbell rang again and again. The echoing sound was soon accompanied by a loud banging on the front door. She frowned at him, and he shook his head. “That’ll be the guys.”

“Dramatic.” She laughed.

“They wanted to be here hours ago, but I stalled them.”

She kissed his cheek. “Thanks. That couldn’t have been easy to do. Keeping them away.”

“They didn’t mind. That ...” he said, walking over to open the door, “is my friends being annoying.”

“Are you through having sex?” Nero asked, coming into the house and looking around like he was about to be attacked. “You’re not gonna rip me a new one for trying to fix your problem?”

Atlas rolled his eyes. “Mature as always,” he griped.

“You two idiots done getting acquainted with your body parts?” Reece added on his way in. Celestine slapped his arm, but she snorted. “What?” Reece asked his mate. “You didn’t rush into action. Only one thing would do that.” He grinned and crossed his arms. “Mate sex.”

“I don’t think I like this conversation,” Lilliane sang. “None of your business.”

“I don’t know,” Valentine shrugged. “It’s kind of sweet to know that sex with your mate is kind of a thing for them. Bodes well for the longevity of our relationships.” Val arched a brow. “Considering how ours started, it makes me feel all nice and fuzzy inside.” She blew a kiss to Nero, who returned the gesture, adding a wink.

“For real, though,” Val whispered into Lilliane’s ear. “Sex with a mate is something else, right? I have no other experience. So either my man is *gifted*, or it’s a shifter thing.”

“Shifter thing,” Lilliane answered.

“I take offense to that,” Nero piped up, making Val laugh.

“Actually, so do I,” Atlas crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes at his mate. He couldn’t help but smile when he looked at her, so the whole effect might have been ruined. Lilliane giggled and shrugged. “It was a compliment.”

“Hmm,” he nodded. He was enough of a dick to regret he hadn’t been her first, but he got to be her last, which in the end, was all that fucking mattered anyway. He pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. “I don’t think you know what a compliment is, darling trouble.”

“Aww,” Celestine sighed happily. “He calls her *darling trouble*. So sweet.”

“If they only knew,” Atlas whispered in Lilliane’s ear. “Love you.” He swatted her ass and then clapped his hands together. “Okay, we are now operating under the intel that Victor was spotted in Longville. There is no estate house there for him to use, so we don’t know where he’s staying. We’ve got people contacting all the hotels, motels, B&Bs, and AirBnBs in the area. We’ll find where he’s staying and surprise him if we can. Any news on that?” Atlas asked his friends.

Reece shook his head. “Longville and Blackwood are clear so far as we can tell. We’re still waiting to hear about Greenlee and Silvers.”

Atlas nodded. “That’s good. No other sightings?”

“None,” Nero said.

“Well, seeing as how we don’t know how good this intel was, this could all be for nothing.” Reece didn’t like this situation any more than Atlas did.

Lilliane cleared her throat and shifted uncomfortably on her feet. “I have an idea, actually.”

Atlas arched a brow at her. “Do you?”

She shot him an apologetic smile. “I don’t know if it could work, and I was going to run it by the other Half-Bloods in the crowd before bringing it up.”

“Ah,” he said. “Well? Come on, trouble, what’s on your mind?”

She took a deep breath and kept her eyes on him as if he could ease her nervousness by merely being close to her. “There’s an unspoken vamp rule that councils don’t attack other councils. Professional courtesy or whatever. So what if we declare ourselves a vampire council? The council of the Half-Bloods.”

“Oh, shit,” Val gasped, and the three sisters exchanged tense looks. “Do

you really think that could work?”

“I don’t know?” Celestine wrung her hands together.

Atlas frowned and pulled Lilliane closer to him. “*Would* that work?” he asked.

“I don’t know, really. That’s why I didn’t want to bring it up earlier. It could be worth a shot, though. We would be under our own authority *if* we were our own council. I’m not sure how most of them ... the full vamps ... would feel about recognizing our authority, but I’m hoping it would be just enough to keep them from threatening us. Maybe they would have enough power to get Victor to back off?”

The three wolves and three Half-Bloods were quiet while they took in this new idea. Atlas liked it. A lot. There was a lot of pride in his heart for his mate. “It would be worth a shot. How do we do it?”

“I have no idea,” Lilliane admitted. “It’s not like I know a bunch about vampire council business.”

“None of us do,” Val agreed.

“Dad never shared the details,” Celestine added.

“And with Victor...” Lilliane hissed a breath. “Well, you know what that was like. He didn’t tell me *anything*.”

Atlas’s jaw tightened. “Hmm. Yeah. How do we find out, then? Do you know any vamps who would be willing to share that kind of detail? How to create a new vampire council?”

“No,” Lilliane answered. “We weren’t exposed to many vampires, and we were basically locked in that house. Ladies? Any ideas?”

Her sisters shook their heads.

“This is good, trouble,” Atlas said. “Thinking outside the box.”

She grinned at him. “Oh? Is that an alpha mate thing?”

“Nope. That’s a Lilliane thing.”

“This is too cute,” Val fawned. “Too bad we gotta deal with this bullshit, though.”

Atlas agreed with her. But now, they had a good lead. A good plan. With every passing second, they were getting closer to a life without Victor. Closer to happily ever after.

TWENTY-EIGHT



LILLIANE

Turns out, getting vampire secrets ... like *how* to create new vampire councils ... wasn't that easy. The vampires were a secretive bunch, which wasn't a surprise to any of the wolves, but it was a bit of a surprise for Lilliane and her sisters.

Kept, as they were, completely separate from the vampire world for being Half-Bloods, they were really cut off. Lilliane liked the idea of having their own Half-Blood council because it gave them a voice, and it was pretty fucking clear that the vampires needed to be shaken up if one could go full stalker on one of their own.

"I don't know where else to look or who else to call," Celestine whined. "You?"

Valentine shook her head. "Nope. I really like this idea, Lil."

"Thanks." She blushed.

"No, really. This is good. Too bad we can't actually use it," Val continued.

"But I think that maybe there's another way to do it," Lilliane said, keeping her voice low. Atlas looked over at her, frowning. "What are you thinking?"

"Well, this might be nothing, but Victor said something once. Something about how vampires don't need to ask for power because they're already *the* power."

"Arrogant ass," Atlas grumbled.

She shot him a grin in agreement. "And then Atlas said something about how, in the vampire world, Victor is at the top of the food chain. He's not. Councils are. Sure. He's on them. Local and international, but that means he

still has to listen to his fellow council members.”

“Right,” Atlas nodded. “Kinda like all three of us do,” he added.

“You do what you want,” Reece jokingly accused Atlas.

“So do you,” Atlas shot back.

“But the point is, you work together for the good of all packs. If we *declare* ourselves a council, then we are a council. Vampires don’t ask for power. What if we just contact the international council and tell them that Victor is harassing us? Well, one of us, so all of us. You get it,” Lilliane waved her hand. “So, what makes a council? A collection of vampires.” She motioned to her sisters. “We’re three. That’s a collection. We need to have roles in this council. Probably a crest and a motto also.”

“Yeah,” Val said. “That’s not a bad idea. We can say that Longborn was our power seat but was burned down, and now, our new council seat is here.”

“It’ll give this house a protected status,” Lilliane explained to the wolves. “Victor wouldn’t be able to set foot here and do bad things without getting the council on his ass.”

“We all know that it might not be enough to stop this psycho, though, right?” Nero said.

Atlas shot an angry look at his friend, pulling Lilliane into his side. “Regardless. This is a good idea. It’ll keep any form of vampire councils from causing trouble for the ladies again.”

“That’s the main benefit,” Lilliane nodded. “It makes us our own authority.”

“I love it,” Val said.

“Ditto,” Celestine agreed. “So, what would our motto be?”

“Half the vamp, twice the fun.” Lilliane wiggled her brows. “They will hate it.”

“They will.” Celestine laughed. “And our crest should be the three of us. Maybe holding hands.”

Lilliane held up her finger. “Actually, I’ve been playing with a design.” She ran up to their bedroom, grabbed one of her drawing pads, and returned with a page faced toward her sisters and their mates.

“Whoa,” Atlas sighed, impressed. It made her feel about ten feet tall.

The drawing was a circle of three women and three wolves, each set by the other. Vamp, wolf, vamp, wolf, vamp, wolf in an endless circle. It was her, her sisters, and the men who loved them. It was the family and communities they were building.

“I love it,” Atlas said. “What do the other members of the council think?” Val dabbed at a tear. “I’m super pregnant right now, so that will make me cry.”

“OH MY GOD!” Lilliane screamed while Celestine shouted, “WHAT?”

“Oh. Yeah. I’m super pregnant right now. We wanted to wait until all this was over, but you made me cry with your dumb, beautiful drawing. So talented. I vote that Lilliane is our council leader.”

“I’ll be the treasurer.” Celestine nodded in agreement.

“I’ll be the secretary.” Val sniffled.

The group broke out in hugs as they congratulated Nero and Valentine for their good news. Lilliane hated that the happiest moments of her ... and her sisters’ ... lives were overshadowed by Victor.

“So, we are a council. Half-Blood Council.” Lilliane sighed and felt something change inside herself. This was going to work. It was all going to be okay.

Lilliane and her siblings focused their afternoon on making their new council as real as possible. During that time, Atlas and the other wolves continued their search for Victor. They focused most of their resources on the three packs’ lands, but they were vigilant. They were contacting wolves from across the country to warn them about Victor.

No matter where he ended up, there would be a wolf to stop him.

“Do you think we should have done this a long time ago?” Val asked once they had gotten the international council to ... reluctantly ... recognize their small Half-Blood Council.

“I hope not. That makes me feel too sad. They probably agreed because Victor is causing a lot of trouble for them right now. I can’t imagine that finding one of their oldest members is a stalker will go over well.”

“Don’t know about that,” Val argued.

“Well, they want to be all-powerful. A vampire distracted enough to cause this much trouble? Not a good leader. Shouldn’t be on any council.” Lilliane shrugged. “But maybe *you’re* right. Why would they care if Victor is a stalker or not?”

Val gave her a grave look. “That’s my point. It sounds like it was a little ... too easy.”

Celestine’s eyes went wide. “Do you think our father knew it would have been easy for us to be our own authority? As Half-Bloods? That’s why he kept us so hidden?”

Lilliane sighed. “Yeah. That’s what it’s starting to look like. I hate that. He really is terrible.”

“The worst,” Val sniffled. “I’m just so fucking happy that my guy is a good man. You know? I know Nero is gonna be an amazing father.”

“All our wolves are gonna be good dads,” Lilliane added. “Somehow, we got very lucky.”

“I think it’s more than luck.” Celestine sighed dreamily. “I think it’s fate.”

Lilliane thought her sister was right, but in the end, they would know if it was. If all six of them walked away, then it was fate.

If not...

Well, she didn’t want to think about that.

TWENTY-NINE



ATLAS

The house was a little crowded. Atlas was losing his mind, even though he knew that keeping all the Longborn sisters together was the only way to go. It had been a full week ... *seven full days* ... and Nero and Reece were *still* staying in two guest rooms with Valentine and Celestine.

It was nice to step outside and get some peace and quiet.

“You okay?” Lilliane asked, closing the back door behind her. “You’re so quiet.”

“Hmm,” he nodded. “Got a lot on my mind.”

“It’s a lot out here, huh?” She sighed, hugging him from behind.

“Just a lot of people. I needed some air. I can’t wait for all this to be over so we can actually start our lives.”

“Well, I didn’t want to say this in front of Val after her news, but...” she tapped on his shoulders until he faced her. “I think I’m pregnant,” she said. “But I’m on the pill, and we’ve only known each other for two weeks. I just...” She shook her head. “I can just feel it. Is that even possible?”

His throat bobbed on a hard swallow. “Well, you *are* a Half-Blood, and I’m a shifter.”

“Ah. Right. Those supernatural sperm powers.”

He nodded, unsure of Lilliane’s reaction. He couldn’t tell either way. Was she happy at the prospect of a child? *Their* child? “So,” he cleared his throat nervously, “some people say shifter sperm is resistant to the pill.”

She rolled her eyes and snorted. “Yeah, that’s not really how the pill works. Good thing I love you and totally want to carry your babies.”

“I figured. You asked me to mate you,” he whispered, his voice rough.

She nodded. “I knew what it meant.”

“I can get a test if you like.” He still couldn’t get a read on how she felt about this possible pregnancy. His own heart was about to burst from his chest.

Lilliane shook her head. “No. I can’t exactly leave the house to take a test, but I have a feeling. Is that weird?”

He shook his head. “No. Some women in the pack have known *long* before modern medicine could confirm. It’s a shifter thing. For wolves, anyway.”

“Might be a bit sooner than we would’ve liked, huh?”

Atlas kissed her forehead. “Maybe. Not really. If we wanted to wait, we shouldn’t have had unprotected sex a million times. You had to be insatiable.”

She poked his side and tried to stop giggling. “So. We might be parents.”

“I’d love a little mini trouble bossing me around.” Atlas was choked up by the thought of his little daughter, a tiny version of Lilliane painting the walls and demanding more chocolate chips in her pancakes. “Even a little boy.”

“An heir,” she whispered. “A little wolf to take over the pack one day.”

He kissed her palm before laying it to his heart. “Maybe. I love you, Lilliane. Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I’m very okay. I think I might even be a bit disappointed if I’m not.”

He nuzzled her and kissed her temple. “I’m on duty tonight, but I can make a good effort at getting you pregnant tomorrow morning. First thing when I get home.”

“You’re being so romantic. I might be pregnant right now.”

He chuckled and bit her lower lip, kissing away the skin. “Watch it, trouble.”

“When do you leave?” she asked, sobering.

“As soon as you let me go,” he answered. She tightened her arms around him, and he chuckled. “Then I won’t let you go,” she whispered.

“You gotta, darling trouble.”

“I know, I know. You’ll come back?”

“Every time, Lilliane. Every time.” He kissed her, tipping her head back to deepen it. He devoured her like they had all the time in the world. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she replied.

Before she could tighten her hold on him again, he moved away from her. "I'll see you at dawn. Be good."

She blew him a kiss, and he caught it on his way into the woods and out for his guard duty. Along with Nero and Reece, Atlas had laid out a lookout schedule, making sure to take shifts. It was one thing to ask the wolves to guard the alpha mate, but it would have been a big ask if they hadn't done the same as the alphas.

Power was all about balance. A give-and-take relationship. That was obviously something Victor didn't understand. That vampire was a terrible person, and Atlas would love nothing more than to destroy the creature. Keep Victor from ever hurting anyone ever again.

He did his guard duty, and for the first few hours, while the sun was still shining, his shift was quiet. Nothing happened, and he chased a rabbit to keep from boredom.

There was a shift in the air as soon as the sun started to set. Atlas couldn't put his finger on it, but it sure felt like the animals were quieter. He padded along the forest quietly, weaving through the woods. That's when he saw it.

A line of vampires gliding through the edge of the trees. By his count, Atlas thought there could be at least twenty vamps. He grinned to himself. The vamps might be fast, but they would be outnumbered with the pack protecting this land. Atlas howled loudly.

The vampires immediately knew the wolves were aware of their presence, and now, all of the wolves knew there were vampires on their land.

"Find out where that's coming from. Kill the beast for betraying our presence." The vampire was pale, and so much arrogance dripped off him that Atlas would've known it was Victor without knowing who he was.

With his wolf body moving quietly through the trees, Atlas tracked them. They were getting closer and closer to pack lands. *His* pack lands. The second Victor set foot on Silvers land, Atlas was going to lunge for him. The others would find him soon enough now that he had alerted them to the vamps' presence.

They were a few miles from Atlas's house when Victor stopped walking. He made a big show of sniffing the air, but judging by the tense set of the vamp's shoulders, his olfactory senses weren't as good as a wolf's. This made Atlas happy. He had the girl and the stronger power.

"I can feel her. She is near," Victor shouted.

Atlas rolled his eyes. For an ancient vampire, this guy was an idiot. How

could Victor feel Lilliane without sensing she was surrounded by one too many wolves to ever get close to her again?

“Before the moon is high in the sky, she will be mine. Forever. Whether she wants to be or not.” Some of the vampires exchanged bored glances, and Atlas kept that in mind for later. It might come in useful if bargaining was on the table for the vamps.

But hearing that vampire talking about *his* mate like that was too much for Atlas. He broke into a run, and no vampire would be able to stop him. He ran Victor right into the ground, pinning him. The vamp was quick to push him off. The other vampires made swipes and hits at him, but Atlas scampered away, playing with them.

This wasn't good.

Now, he was the outnumbered one.

He might have miscalculated the distance from his place. Or maybe he'd let his temper get the better of him. A few wounds in his side were making it harder to fight, but he wasn't going to let that stop him. Atlas gave as good as he could, injuring more than a few vamps.

Right when Atlas thought he was in real trouble ... and Victor managed to chomp down on his haunch ... the line of trees broke out in fur.

There were his friends. His brothers-in-law. His *family*.

The alpha wolves and their packs ripped into the vampires. The battle was long and brutal. Soon enough, it was evident that without a second wave of reinforcements, the two sides were too evenly matched.

Atlas shifted into his human form and stepped into the thick of the fight, right by Victor. “Yo, bloodfucker. You might not know that this land belongs to the Half-Blood vampire council.”

Victor stilled, and the other vampires muttered among themselves. A few subtly left, walking backward before scampering away. Atlas had expected this. Now, the odds were more firmly on their side, but he wanted Victor alone.

“You want to harm a fellow council member?” Atlas tutted. “That's what my mate is, you know. A vampire council member. You know my mate, I think. Or, at the very least, you tried very hard to know her.”

“Atlas!” Lilliane's scream ripped through the air. “What is happening? Why are you in your human form?”

He threw his hands up as her appearance made Victor glare with delight. “What are you doing here, woman?”

“I can’t let you fight this by yourself. We’re partners. A family. We fight together.” She patted her abdomen and smiled brightly at him.

“Your timing couldn’t be worse. I just told him we’re mates,” Atlas couldn’t stop from smiling. Victor looked about ready to blow a fuse.

“Well, it’s better that you know, Victor,” Lilliane said, tossing her hair back. “This is vampire council land, and any attack will only be embarrassing for any of you and your associates.” She arched her brow at the other vampires. “You really want to mess with me? Now that I am a council member?”

“Victor, maybe this isn’t a good idea,” one of the vampires said, edging backward. “I’m leaving.”

But Victor didn’t care that he was now alone in the woods on pack land, surrounded by wolves. Victor seethed. “You let that animal touch you?” Victor growled. “You let *him* fuck you?”

“Stop,” Lilliane screamed. “You don’t get to talk to me like that. I am not yours. I never was. You can’t manipulate me into leaving my family and keep me under threat of hurting them and expect me to be loyal to you or fall in love with you.”

As he listened to her, Atlas understood something. He was different than Victor because of the way he looked at her now.

It wasn’t love. There was no kindness in that vampire.

Victor looked at Lilliane like she was a piece of steak. Something he wanted to possess, devour, and forget. There was no kindness in Victor, but there sure was a lot of evil.

Atlas took Lilliane’s arm and tugged her behind him. He rolled back his shoulders and crossed his arms, daring Victor to speak to her again.

“Out of my way, wolf,” the vamp snapped. “This is between me and my fiancée.”

He chuckled and said, “She’s not your anything, vampy boy. You won’t be talking to *my mate* again.”

Realization sparked in the vampire’s eyes. “You bitch!” He lunged at Atlas, snarling. There was no doubt in Atlas’s mind that the vamp intended to make quick work of him.

Mistake.

Atlas gripped the vamp by the throat and shoved him back. “Nope.” He made sure to keep himself between his mate and Victor. “You don’t speak to her. And you sure as shit don’t go for her like that.”

“Do you really think you can stop me?” Victor laughed and lunged right for Atlas.

Her wolf man was ready, and he shifted into his animal, rolling out of the way mid-shift to avoid Victor. Swiftly, Atlas spun back and snapped at Victor’s legs.

Lilliane

THE SMELL of blood scented the air. The injury only served to enrage Victor further. He slashed at Atlas with his nails, suddenly long talons ... a sure sign Victor was an ancient vampire.

She really hadn’t known what she was getting into with Victor. Her dad was a vampire. She was half of one. Though she didn’t exactly have the best opinion of vampires, she couldn’t help but feel tricked.

Victor never told her he was one of the first vampires.

It was dangerous to mix with the ancients, and she never would have spoken to Victor if she had known who he was. That’s what he had wanted. To ensnare her. To hoodwink her. He had centuries of perfecting his game. She couldn’t truly be silly for falling for it, right?

Watching the man she loved ... her wolf man, her mate ... fight a vampire for her was painful. Terrible. Every time Victor landed the blow, she felt it in her soul. Accepting responsibility for this felt wrong. She would *never* hurt Atlas.

Ever.

Yet, here they were.

The fur of his neck was matted with blood. She wanted to join the fight, defend her guy, beat the shit out of Victor for all the pain he caused. But Atlas would never let her. He would find a way to get her out of there at every turn.

Victor didn’t fight fair, so she could understand Atlas’s instincts like they were her own. She knew the wrong move when Victor made it. A fatal mistake.

Atlas didn’t hesitate.

He ripped out Victor’s throat.

The dead vampire fell to the ground. Thick, nearly black blood oozed from his throat. Victor would never hurt her ... or anyone else ... ever again. Lilliane hugged her wolf close. "Let's go home," she whispered to him.

THIRTY



LILLIANE

Lilliane hugged Atlas tightly, her wet, slippery skin sliding against his. She tracked all of his injuries that were already healing. “I can’t believe it’s over,” she whispered in the foggy shower. The hot water filled the stall with thick fog, but they’d been in there a little while already, washing the fight from each other’s bodies.

We won.

Atlas held her closer. “It’s done. He’s dusted. It took a while for his body to disintegrate, but it turned to dust. He’s gone. It’s done.”

“Thanks for keeping me safe,” Lilliane whispered. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“I’m sorry I brought trouble to you and the pack,” she said.

“Nah. You brought life. You brought the future. If it wasn’t for you Longborn sisters fighting your father and the council, I never would’ve met you. I call you trouble because that’s what you brought into my life.”

“I thought it was because I’m high maintenance.”

He chuckled. “Well, there’s that. But it’s also because you’re dangerous to my concentration and self-control.”

“I’m not asking you to be in control, Atlas. That’s on you.” She kissed her way down his neck, down his muscular chest. She dropped to her knees, and he groaned her name. “What are you doing, trouble?”

“Earning my name,” she whispered before she kissed the tip of his cock. His fingers locked in her hair. “Lilliane,” he rasped. “Fuck, darling. So good.” She looked up at him, and he watched her hollow out her cheeks to suck him deeper. His grip on her hair tightened as he pulled her off his erection.

“Don’t want to come in your mouth.” He pulled her to her feet, pressed her into the shower wall, and kissed her throat. He followed the water drops down her breasts, twirling his tongue around one nipple, then the other. He tugged on the second, nibbling it while one of his hands parted her folds.

He found wet heat there, her slick arousal allowing one of his long fingers to press into her. She groaned and arched into him. “Atlas,” she cried.

“You’re safe, and you’re mine. It’s over. And I wanna feel you coming on my cock. Really celebrate that you’re mine.” He pulled his hand away, making her gasp in displeasure. He was quick to pick her up, wrapping her arms around his neck to press her against the wall.

His erection pushed against her. He ground into her, making both of them groan in anticipation. “Can I come inside you?” he rasped against her throat. He slid an inch inside her, just keeping the head in a teasing state. She clenched and arched against him, gasping when her efforts were only rewarded with another inch. “Atlas,” she gasped. “Please.”

“Gotta tell me, trouble. Can I come inside you?”

“Always, Atlas.” She clenched around him and grabbed his neck to kiss him. Her mouth parted for his tongue, and as he explored her mouth, he slid inside her with ease. He bottomed out, making them groan. “It’s so good, trouble. Always so fucking good.”

They moved together until Lilliane was completely lost to pleasure. Atlas knew how to move, where to touch, where to kiss, where to bite. Her core clenched down on his erection as he continued to drive into her. She held onto him, holding him close as she went over the edge, crying his name.

Atlas kept moving inside her through the flutters of her release. He took deep kisses from her mouth as he turned off the water, then wrapped them in a thick and plush towel before walking them to their bed. He sat on the edge of the mattress, careful of keeping her seated on top of him. On the bed, straddling her mate, Lilliane went over the edge again.

He drove into her again and again. His lips never left her skin. He licked and kissed every inch of her chest. He sucked one nipple and sent her careening into passion again. As she ground her hips into him, chasing the hot white pleasure burning through her, he growled her name.

He held her closer and ran his teeth along her collarbone. He bucked up, reaching deep inside her, and emptied himself. “Oh, Lilliane,” he groaned. “Fuck, trouble.” He laid his head against her shoulder and tried to catch his breath.

“This is it,” she whispered, looking deep into his eyes. “Our life can begin now.”

He grinned at her. “Yeah. About time, too.” He tilted her forward to press his mouth to hers. “You wanna have pancakes to celebrate?”

She giggled. “Yup. We should, but about that mural,” she whispered against his cheek.

He pulled away from her. “What about it? Do you want to start it tomorrow?”

She laughed. “Yeah.”

“I just want to make it really clear to everyone that the vampires can’t hurt us anymore. It’s all over. We can move on and think about the future.”

“Well, we vamps can’t hurt you because we *joined* you,” she pointed out. He pinched her hip and kissed her. “Is that how you think this went down?”

“Yeah,” she laughed.

“Hmm. Well, maybe you should paint the Half-Blood crest on the community center wall.”

She blinked at him. “On the outside wall?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Why not? It will show how strong our bond is.”

Her heart fluttered, and she held him as close as she could. “Do you think we can hold off on the pancakes?”

His eyes sparked with interest. “Is there something else you’d like to do to celebrate?”

Lilliane arched a brow. “You.”

Atlas threw his head back with a laugh. “Trouble. Darling trouble. My life will never be boring with you around.”

“Nope. But it’ll never be without love, either.”

He pushed her hair over her shoulder and bit into his lip. “I like that. Like that, but *love* you.”

“I love you, too, wolf man. Thanks for saving me.”

“You saved *me*,” he whispered before kissing her.

The wolf man and the Half-Blood. It wasn’t the love story Lilliane had expected, but it was the only one she ever wanted.

And more.

So much more...

The End.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author

Hi! I'm Milly Taiden. I love to write sexy stories featuring fun, sassy heroines with curves and growly alpha males with fur. My books are a great way to satisfy your craving for paranormal romance with action, humor, suspense and happily ever afters.

I live in Florida with my hubby, our son, and our fur babies: Speedy, Stormy and Teddy. I have a serious addiction to chocolate and cake.

I love to meet new readers, so come sign up for my newsletter and check out my Facebook page. We always have lots of fun stuff going on there.

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