



NEW NEBRASKA
LESSONS
RH ROMANCE
CARA B. KING

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CHAPTER 1

Cecilia

My class was a bunch of vamps and fur freaks.

Oh, and a few obnoxious elementals too, skulking in the back row, flinging tiny electric zaps at each other from their fingertips. Which wasn't helping my current tension levels.

I'd sidled through the room and slipped into the corner, as far away from everybody else as possible, trying, and failing miserably, to blend in. Now I was shifting in my chair, my jumpy movements making it impossible to get comfortable. The wooden seat was slippery smooth under my jeans, no doubt having been polished by countless paranormal butts.

And now, my human one too.

On the wall beside me, someone had carved deeply into the plaster with what must have been a dagger—or claw—a message that was less than profound: *vamps suck*. Well, duh, of course they did. That was kind of their thing.

The air was robustly jumbled in scents. An earthy musk, like animal fur. Potent vapors of cinnamon blended with leather. Hickory, pepper. Dirt and rain. The odors weren't overpowering, or even unpleasant, but their combination didn't smell like any classroom I'd ever been in. And with the number of high schools I'd moved between over the years, I'd certainly seen plenty.

I curled a lock of hair to my nose and sniffed my lavender and coconut shampoo, taking comfort in the familiarity of my human scent. Hoping it wouldn't pulse too brashly for curious wolves. Or tempt thirsty bloodsuckers.

I sat waiting for several minutes, and it seemed like all the students had arrived, so when a tall, slender man in a crisply

pressed shirt and slacks strode into the room, I assumed he was the professor.

I sat up respectfully, pursing a smile and—

He walked right past the podium.

He moved gracefully, almost regally. And his suave, slim-fit clothes showed off a taut body underneath. I'm sure anyone would have agreed, he was incredibly handsome.

His scowl though. Never mind a bed, he looked like he'd gotten out the wrong side of the womb.

His phone buzzed, he pulled it out of his pocket, and somehow his scowl tightened even further as he read a message. That square jaw strained, harder than granite.

As he sat down in the corner opposite to me, I wondered not only what had bothered him, but what breed he was. Not a shifter, not with such a lean physique, and not a vamp, with his emerald eyes missing the usual scarlet irises. Unless the lack of color and angry face were due to not having fed for a while. I shuddered.

If he needed blood, I'd be happy to direct him to the nearest vamp café, but he wasn't getting it from me.

I was probably being unfair. Maybe he was just a pissed off elemental who knew something about this class I didn't. All I knew was my first days at New Lincoln University hadn't exactly been easy on my nerves. Being the only human student among thousands of potentially dangerous paranormals was a lot to take in.

Taking a deep breath, I focused my attention on the large whiteboard. I was here to learn, to get a diploma, and to take care of my mom. So that was what I was going to do.

I pushed thoughts of Mr. Scowly out of my mind, set a reminder to pick up my mom's medication, and waited. The clock said almost ten minutes past the hour. I wished the professor would hurry up, a large shifter in a black hoodie was growling something at a vamp a few seats down and it didn't sound like that was going to end well.

Finally, the door creaked open, and a guy who looked several years older than me hurried in. He fumbled his folder of notes and stopped to reshuffle them. Then he pushed up the glasses that had slid down his nose, giving me a moment to take in his startling presence.

He was huge. At least six feet five, with shoulders broader than the door behind him.

Breaking into a rush again, he rounded the podium. “I’m so sorry I’m late.” His rosy cheeks betrayed his fluster as he set down his notes and gave a sheepish smile. “Department meeting ran over.”

This mountain of a man was our professor? He wore black jeans, his thighs puffed out like muscly tree trunks, and under his scarlet and black checked flannel shirt swelled biceps and pecs. His size and clothing were such a contrast to his trimmed chestnut beard, adorable glasses, and unkempt, wavy hair. Like a nerdy lumberjack.

Assuming he was a paranormal, he had to be a shifter. My mind boggled at what massive sort of beast he might be when shifted.

Blinking and shifting in my seat again, I shook myself back into focus. It was time to study literature. From a teacher who looked like he could snap the whiteboard in two.

Clearing his throat loudly, the professor opened his notes and braced the podium with both hands, leaning forward slightly and scanning the students. Everyone had quieted down, even the growling shifter.

“Good morning, class. My name is Mr. Belanger—please feel free to call me Aaron though. I’m sincerely sorry for being late, but considering how many meetings get piled onto me,”—he paused, clearing his throat, and smiling wryly— “it was...just a matter of time.”

A few titters rippled across the class. The joke went over my head at first, then I got it. He was a bit young for dad jokes, but it made me smile.

His eyes scanned the classroom when they suddenly met mine. His smile wavered. His gaze tracked up and down my body and he froze. What was going on? Every muscle in his face and body had locked into a stunned expression.

His eyes held mine for several awkward moments before I blushed and looked away.

“Um, what... ah, let’s begin with... I mean, where was I?” His deep voice held a new tone, flustered still, and now almost confused.

I glanced back up and caught him looking again. This time, he looked away from me first, reaching for his notes and accidentally knocking his pen off the podium.

As he rose from picking it up, his gaze collided with mine yet again. But his expression was so much more intense now. Like he’d looked me over and had reached some serious conclusion. I wasn’t sure it boded well for me. I smiled nervously, praying he wasn’t humanphobic.

“Okay, we’ll be covering the treatment of the paranormal in classical literature this quarter. If you haven’t taken our intro lit class or placed out of it, you’re in the wrong room.” He started class from there, and as he got into the lecture, it became clear that lumberjack professor’s style was informative and interesting. But he kept glancing at me throughout.

Feeling someone else’s eyes on me too, I turned toward Mr. Scowly. Of course it was him.

Emerald eyes glared back at me, his scowl stronger than ever. He huffed under his breath, shaking his head, like the professor looking at me was my fault.

But it wasn’t my fault. Every time I looked up from my notepad, the professor’s gaze darted away from me, his expression still serious.

In contrast to the firm set of his jaw when he stopped to take student questions, Mr. Belanger’s cheeks turned a light shade of pink under his scruff when he looked at me. The

more he did that, the more I was sure he was uncomfortable having a human in his class.

Sighing, I breathed in deeply, determined. I was going to prove myself the best student he'd ever had.

CHAPTER 2

Osric

Bloody hell. What was going on with Aaron? He'd been fawning over some slip of a girl—a *human* girl, no less—ever since he'd bumbled into class.

Aaron had never shown any interest in girls. Not shifter girls. Not other breed girls. Certainly not human girls.

He never even checked them out. Or blushed over them. Or for fuck's sake, *stared at them with hearts in his eyes*.

I mean, I had always been sure he would've liked girls, if he were to like anyone in that way. He just never seemed to be bothered. His idea of a good time was burying his face in a book.

Me, I'd rather bury mine elsewhere...

Who was this little human, anyway? Why the hell would one of *her* kind choose to study at New Lincoln. It wasn't exactly a pleasant environment for that lot. It was barely tolerable for me at times, and I was a bloody Fae prince.

Humans. Pfft! Fragile creatures. Skin-covered skeletons rattling around the earth, wasting space, poisoning, guzzling, causing some fresh mayhem whenever it suited their pathetic little egos. And now my best friend seemed smitten by one. The question itching inside my mind was why.

She didn't seem like anything special.

I looked over at her again. She wasn't hideous, of course, but nothing special. Petit, svelte, some curves around the top and bottom, but not much to salivate over. Blondish brown hair, healthy enough, with a shine to it, pulled up, with a few locks tumbling free here and there. But the clothing. So tatty. A cheap-looking blouse in gaudy yellow and jeans that most likely cost the price of a latte.

Compare that to Aaron. Rugged, sure. But refined. Brains and brawn in spades. The finest shifter I've ever known. Certainly, the only one I cared to befriend. In the façade of a man, his gentleness and charm knew no bounds.

If his beast awakened though, one would be best advised to leave the vicinity. He was big enough in professor form, but the bear within... I've only ever seen him shift into a grizzly once, but what a magnificent sight. A monstrous creature, bristling in jaws, fur, and claws, swollen with muscle and swimming in malice. And giving zero shits about fear.

So what in hot fuck, had captured his attention in her?

Yet again, even as I was pondering this conundrum, Aaron's gaze fell to the girl, his words stuttering, like an awkward teenager. She was making him look undignified! How the hell was she doing it? Did she have a bit of elemental or Fae blood and had cast some sort of spell?

Closing my eyes, I focused my mind on her presence, scanning, searching, delving into the vibrations of her brain and body, her scent, her pumping heart, the thrum of her blood. Her own unique energy. I was sure that—

What the fuck? That wasn't right. There was no knowledge, no images released, no secrets revealed. No taste of her essence on my tongue. Nothing.

I tried again. Same result.

Opening my eyes, I could feel my jaw tightening, frustration clenching the muscles in my neck and shoulders, as I stared in disbelief at this little nobody of a human.

I couldn't read her. Where the windows to the soul should have been open, I'd found the latches locked and curtains drawn. I'd kindled nothing from her but blankness.

The lecture went on and the words washed over me. I felt too fixated on the human to give attention to anything else. Besides, I could ask Aaron to go over the lecture again. Even if I were a stranger off the streets, he'd have taken time to answer any question, with his enthusiasm for helping others. I was really bloody fortunate to call him a friend.

By the time class had finished, I'd decided the best way to get to the bottom of this was just to talk to her. The honor would be all hers.

After Aaron gave one more glance in her direction—I swear it was filled with longing—he hurried out again, no doubt off to one of his countless meetings. I rose from my chair, its feet scraping the wooden floor as I started to move towards her. My phone's vibration against my thigh caused me to pause. Oh, bloody hell. Again!?

I fished my phone from my pocket, swiping and tapping the screen to find I'd, unfortunately, guessed correctly. The message was short and sharp, as was often my mother's style.

This is becoming tiresome, Osric.

Sighing, I sat back down, mulling how best to respond. Then I reminded myself she'd not listen anyway, so what the hell.

Is it? I feel full of beans. At least with her, I could speak as a proper Brit.

The answer came back within seconds.

You WILL marry her. It is your duty. Or did you think being a prince was all larking around and never having to grow up?

I exhaled hard. Duty, duty, duty. Like a broken record.

I'm getting an education, Mother. Thanks to your friends' shoddy deal, one that is a damn sight easier to get here than back over there. Now, I'm sorry but I have to get to class. I'll message you later.

Slipping the phone back into my pocket, feeling it vibrate yet again, I sighed. More messaging wasn't going to resolve what she wanted from me. My very soul. Or at least, my future tied to a vapid socialite.

The human girl was up from her chair and moving towards the door. I decided I'd distract myself from one issue by figuring out another. I strode quickly, weaving between rows of chairs, cutting sharply in front of her, blocking the exit.

Her eyes, a pleasing shade of hazel rarely seen in Fae, flared wide and she took a step backwards, looking like a turkey that had been invited to Thanksgiving.

Her eyes focused on my face, lingering on the points of my ears, and they widened further still.

Yes, I was Fae. Have you never seen one before, human?

Her words were shaky, spoken in stutters, as she nodded towards the exit. "I'm sorry. Excuse me, I—I have to get going to my next class."

"Who are you?" I wasn't going to mince words.

She stared at me blankly, biting her lower lip. Was she one of these humans who struggled to form proper sentences? But then she wouldn't have been in this class. It was just a lack of manners.

"I asked who you are. Start with a name."

"I'm...Cecilia."

I smirked. Actually, quite a pretty name. "But of course, you are. Cecilia."

I moved aside momentarily to allow a bunch of blockheaded shifters past. Then, stepping forward, close enough to smell the coconut scent wafting from her hair, I continued my interrogation. Begrudgingly, I noted the pleasant slenderness of her neck and collarbone, the soft-looking, pale skin, which darkened a tad into a blush around her cheeks. She wasn't unbearable to look at.

"What's a human doing in this place? Little out of your comfort zone, isn't it?"

"I, erm, I'm working here. Janitorial staff. The classes are free," she replied, her voice still breathy. Then it took on a different tone. "Are you okay? I mean, is everything okay?"

"How so?"

"Just, it looked like you may have got some bad news earlier?" Her expression held genuine concern.

Interesting... "I'm fine." My voice was cold.

“Good. Well, if you don’t mind, I really must get going.”

Snorting at her delicious audacity—she clearly had no idea who I was—I figured I’d learn more in other ways. I stepped aside. “Well, off you go then...Cecilia.”

She sidled past sheepishly and out the door.

Curious little human. Nervous, but kind. Soft, yet assertive. Unreadable, and capturing Aaron’s interest. I wasn’t done with her yet.

CHAPTER 3

Cecilia

I exited the building into a sunny day and heaved a sigh of relief. I'd survived my first class at New Lincoln.

More than survived. Professor Belanger was an excellent teacher. He didn't look the part, with his size and attire, but he really knew his stuff. Although it worried me he seemed so uncomfortable having a human in his class. I reaffirmed my commitment to being the best student he'd ever had. I'd show him, and all my professors, that being the only human on campus bore no relation to how diligent I could be or how well I could do here.

And a bonus this morning: no one had tried to eat me.

Mr. Scowly though. What had he wanted? If you wanted to learn about your classmates, even your human one, why not ask politely? His attitude screamed, "The world is beneath my polished shoes and oh, why don't you polish them again while you're down there." Mr. Scowly with a side of cocky.

But with a face and body like that, I kinda understood it. He was as handsome as a movie star. His eyes radiated a unique sparkle, like emeralds held up to the shining summer sun. His attire and whole aura were so far beyond what I was used to. Suave and well-bred. There wasn't one sandy blonde hair out of place on his immaculately clipped and combed head.

Oh, and the subtle peaks of his ears clearly signaled his Fae race. Hello, surprise! I'd missed those under his hair at first. But when he'd come up after class, there they were, peeking out.

And it was such a surprise because everyone knew the Fae royal family in England had managed to negotiate their race's

own special status about the Nebraska Agreement. They weren't completely exempt from restrictions across the rest of the US, or the world, of course, but apparently, Fae had a much easier time than other paranormals. Some said that was due to their strong powers and the potential trouble they could cause human governments if provoked. Although others thought it was just because they had such fervent aversion to getting along with vampires, shifters, and elementals, it had been deemed there was no clear advantage to coercing and manipulating them to relocate to New Nebraska. And yet, this particular cocky Fae seemed to have voluntarily decided to study here. I wondered why.

Contrary to what I'd told Mr. Scowly, I still had a bit of time to get to my next class. So I decided to stroll through the main part of campus, enjoying the weather, feeling washes of warm gold on my face and neck, admiring the bountiful trees and the blooming flowers that fluttered and swooned from the wind's tender kisses. Birds warbled and chirped from among the branches, and I even saw an adorable little squirrel scampering and leaping directly above me, his cheeks puffed out with nuts. It made me smile as I sauntered through the warmth and greenery, drinking from the breeze.

My mom and I could be happy here. This was night and day compared to our last home, in a rundown town outside of Vegas.

Humming to myself as I strolled, I was in mid-text to my mom, making sure she'd seen the chicken dish and smoothie I'd left, and letting her know I'd be home late because of my first self-defense class that afternoon, when an angry shout jerked me to a stop.

I looked up and a chill washed over me.

A huge number of male students were swelling within the central square. It seemed to be two opposing groups, massing in clusters, posturing, and glowering behind their respective leaders, who stood with their faces just inches from each other, clearly on the brink of an all-out brawl.

There must have been at least twenty on each side. And they were steadily being joined by more. As their numbers surged, jostling, goading, they began spilling over from the square, across its connecting pathways.

Feeling my pulse quickening, I gulped. I could turn back, but I'd be late for my first Intro to Psych class. I'd just have to skirt around the side of the confrontation as best I could and hope they could hold on to their anger until I was safely past.

I walked closer, cautiously. The guys to the far side were all athletic, lean and very tall, decked out almost all in black. Black T-shirts. Black jeans or slacks. Even black dress shoes and vans, and a few black baseball caps. Black seemed to be a thing with them.

I was close enough to see the crimson in several of their eyes and their smug grins screamed vampire. Maybe a coven, with the similar attire.

The guys I was trying to sheepishly weave around were bigger, bulkier. Much gruffer looking. Stubbled faces, snarling, they had bodies boasting levels of muscle that ranged from huge to *huger*. Most of their bulging biceps and pecs were wrapped within the confines of tight T-shirts, which were mostly grey or white, sporting wolf's head logos. Jeans and heavy boots or sneakers completed their attire. I got close enough to one of them just to make out what was written under the wolf logo.

Central NN Lupines

As I suspected, they were wolf shifters, apparently from the same pack. A light sheen of sweat broke out under my hairline. Wolf shifters were as dangerous as vamps, maybe more, especially when defending their territory.

I knew I had to get far from this trouble, but my feet seemed to steer me otherwise. I found myself slowing. Morbid curiosity making me stop and listen to what was going on.

I made out a few veiled threats, a lot of growls. The real action seemed to be taking place between the two leaders.

And damn. I never thought that the two hottest men I'd ever seen would be standing right next to each other, glaring intently.

The shifter leader had a torso and arms practically carved from granite. His white T-shirt hiding nothing. His biceps looked thicker than my thighs. But with his wavy hair and amber eyes, reflecting lightness and sincerity rather than real evil intent, he looked more charming boy next door than paranormal thug.

His vamp opponent was so flawless looking, it made me do a double take. Seriously, how could anyone's face look so smooth? High cheekbones and alabaster skin. Sapphire eyes ringed with crimson and raven hair shining, his body was much less bulky than his counterpart, but nearly as tall and defined in muscle, the muscles were just more compact under his black shirt.

The noise from the shifter side had grown from a low grumble to a raucous mishmash of insults and threats. I couldn't hear what—

The shifter leader raised a closed fist up in the air. He held it there, and the wolf shifters fell silent.

Then he spoke, his voice husky, the volume raised high, as he glared into the vamp's bright blue eyes. "You sack of shit."

Smiling smugly, his tone sarcastic but gentle, the vamp replied loudly, "Always the wordsmith, Pup."

The vamps broke into laughter.

The shifter Adonis tensed and snarled. "At least I'm not old enough to be a rotting corpse. Keep pushing me, bloodsucker, and I'll make you one."

The vamp leader shrugged. "I'm younger than you think. And maybe you should respect your elders."

"I thought we had a deal, but it's off."

"Really? What do you care what I do with some silly little she-wolf who's hungry for vampire cock?"

“She could barely walk after you’d sunk your shitty fangs into her.”

He shrugged again, spreading his arms out, palms upwards. “It was consensual. I was thirsty. I left her enough juice to get home.”

Members of the vamp gang nodded their agreement.

The shifter moved until his nose was virtually touching that of the vamps, his arms and clenched fists tightening. “You fucking worm, you—” He paused as his nose wrinkled. He sniffed the air and turned away from the vamp.

The shifter’s face contorted in confusion as he lifted his nose upward, apparently using his scenting abilities to find something in the air. He stopped and scanned the crowd.

The vamp tilted his head, eyebrows arched. “You were saying?”

The shifter ignored him and turned in my direction. His eyes skimmed over the path I’d come from. Then he stared right at me.

The vamp followed what had drawn the shifter’s attention and did the same.

The hands of time felt tied. I stared back at them, at their matching looks of puzzlement. At least the vamp looked back to the shifter once. But his sapphire eyes returned to me, and oh my god, why were they both still staring!?

Yes, I was human, but others worked on campus—no reason to single me out! Nothing good could come of this.

I forced my feet to move, getting the hell out of there, hurrying through the crowd.

CHAPTER 4

Jaxon

Man, did I hate this shit.

She shouldn't even be in my class. Goddamn Mandy, thrusting her tits and ass out at me, in that tiny sports bra and booty shorts.

That just wasn't appropriate for the town's gym. There were kids next door trying to learn the basics of karate, for fuck's sake.

I sighed as she slinked towards me, her eager smile all cherry lipstick and flawless pearly whites her father had probably spent a fortune on.

"Hey, Jax! Are you gonna practice with me today? You can be rough with me, I don't mind," she said with a giggle, her eyelashes fluttering.

I'd hooked up with Mandy in the past because she was, admittedly, pretty hot and it was hard to curb the high drive of a shifter's libido. She'd practically been thrust in front of me by both our parents and tied up in a bow. Her personality, however, was far less sexy. I'd soon moved on, tired of putting up with all her sniping and gossiping about other girls in the pack. And not that it was a deal breaker, but my wolf didn't like her smell.

No matter how kindly I'd tried to let her down, she was still in pursuit. Her ego was incapable of accepting rejection.

I pushed a strong puff of frustration through gritted teeth. "I don't think practicing with anyone here will help you, will it?" I swept the room with an upturned palm, pointing at all the young girls, half-breed novices and humans who genuinely needed self-defense training. "This isn't a class for fighters of your level."

“But I want to be near you...” She stepped closer, her spotless white sneakers squeaking on the taut PVC matting. Feigning coyness, with her gaze shying away from me, she clasped her hands behind her back as she swayed her shapely hips. Her mouth opened wider, showing a tongue pink as bubblegum. She flared her tawny eyes, trying to draw me into them.

I resisted. Stepping back, I pointed to the furthest corner of the bleachers. “If you must be here, I’d rather you just sat and observed the class. There’s nobody in here who’s suitable for you to pair up with.”

Her pairing up with a newbie wasn’t actually a huge problem. But her bullshit bored me to tears. I was hopeful she’d get bored watching and skulk off soon after the start of class. This was the one sole hour of the day when I could get a little rest from my dad’s constant lecturing and bossing, and Mandy wasn’t going to ruin it for me.

Her smile reformed into a frown, and she huffed. “If you insist...teacher.”

She walked towards the corner, bouncing her peachy booty as much as she could. If only her soul had been as impressive as her ass. Then despite what my wolf thought of her odor, I probably would have given into my dad’s pressure, and she could have had her greatest wish: to become Luna of the pack.

I was never in the mood for Mandy’s shit, but today my nerves were especially raw. That vamp prick, Xander, and his coven of blood-guzzling shitbags, had taken one liberty too many. If it hadn’t been for campus security arriving with batons and tasers drawn...

I’d deal with him and his coven crew soon enough. I’d smack the smug off—

My nostrils quivered. That scent. The one from earlier.

I turned to see the human girl who I’d seen and smelled shortly before campus security spoiled the party.

Oh man. It was my lucky day

I’d found her. She’d come to me.

She was standing just inside the entrance, looking nervous. Her slender shape was lovely, even in the modest shorts and top she wore. She had the typical shyness of a new arrival in the class.

But her scent was far from average. As she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and her aroma carried through the room, I drank it in, savoring wafts of lavender, and the subtle salts and oil vapors from her skin. Sweet coconut was in the mix too, enhancing the sweetness of her natural scent. Like a macaroon dipped in a flavored chocolate.

How delicious. My wolf's ears pricked up in my mind, her scent drawing his attention just like it had earlier.

He whined softly and almost attempted a shift, testing my will just like when we were ten and he'd wanted to run with the pack even though I had to finish my dad's errands.

Chill, I commanded.

My wolf was normally only mildly interested in women, even other wolves, so when he whined again, I knew he had it bad. *I can take a hint, buddy. I felt it earlier today. I feel it now.*

I strode over, probably not hiding my enthusiasm very well.

“Hey, welcome to self-defense. I'm Jaxon, the teacher, but please call me Jax. And you are?”

She moved back a small step.

My grin faltered.

“Erm, hi. I'm Cecilia. And I'm not sure what to do with myself. I'm not even sure I'll be able to fit in, to be honest,” she said with a nervous smile, looking around the gym.

Glad to see her smiling, I kept my tone gentle, even as my heart raced. “Everyone who wants to learn is welcome here.”

“It's just, I'm new to town, new to campus. I think I saw you there today?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.” Of course she’d seen that, would have a few questions. “Just a misunderstanding. Happens here more than it should, but we work it out.”

“Oh, that makes sense.” She squared her shoulders, looking determined about something. “This is going to be my new home, at least for a few years. One reason I thought picking up a few defense skills was smart.”

“It is smart.”

“Thank you,” she said sincerely.

She had such an aura of kindness, despite the hesitation she’d initially shown when she remembered me from earlier in the day, a hesitation that had shown good sense. And she seemed so gentle, but still with obvious resolve and goals. My wolf panted with delight. And I couldn’t mask it. I was beaming, eager to welcome her, know her. Protect her like she was one of the pack.

I smiled and almost placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, but didn’t want to overstep. I would have preferred to rub her all over—my wolf wanted to cover her in our scent—that probably wasn’t happening anytime soon... “You’re going to be just fine, don’t worry. Have you done anything like this before? Martial arts? Any kind of combat training?”

Her lips parted into a broad smile, and she chuckled. “No, I’m pretty much hopeless at anything like that.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be here to see you’re okay.” I stuttered into the next sentence with a ham-fisted offer. My words were embarrassingly shy, I could feel myself fawning, yearning. “Well, maybe—perhaps, I should partner up with you, if you like, to make sure—”

“Hey, Jax, who’s your new friend? She’s so...adorably human.” Mandy had sneaked back over, her smile dripping saccharin, as she eyed the human girl, sizing her up.

Damn it. She did this every time another female got close to me. I was honestly surprised she hadn’t interrupted sooner. But this time I actually cared. More than cared. I sighed.

I kept my words and tone controlled, polite, desperate to keep my cool in front of Cecilia. “This is Cecilia, she’s—”

“Hi, Cecilia! Let’s be friends.” Mandy clasped Cecilia’s hand in hers and began pulling her towards the center of the gym, where the other students were now congregated, waiting on the start of class. “I’ll partner with her, she’ll need someone light, not a huge hunk of muscle like you,” she said, sticking out her tongue playfully.

Mandy was really testing my patience today. I hardened my voice the tiniest of fractions, adding enough of my alpha voice into it that Mandy’s wolf would notice but Cecilia’s human ears wouldn’t. “Be careful. This is her first class.”

“It’s fine, really.” Cecilia spoke up, smiling and reassuring me with her eyes as Mandy eagerly tugged her towards where the other students waited.

“Are you sure?” I called after her.

“I think it’ll be easier if I’m practicing with someone my own size anyway.” Cecilia rushed out over her shoulder.

At least she’d left me swimming in her scent. My wolf let out a soft growl, watching her move farther away with Mandy. I took a deep draw of air into my lungs, forcing my wolf to chill.

Class was already two minutes past start time. People were staring, waiting. Fine, Mandy and Cecilia could pair up, but any shit from Mandy, and she’d regret it.

“Careful,” I mouthed to Mandy as I walked by.

The class started and progressed well, I kept an eye on Mandy regularly, making sure she was behaving as we went through some basic block and strike techniques. The two girls seemed to be getting on just fine, but I knew my pack members, and Mandy was predictable in her unpredictability.

Though perhaps today she might actually be—

Thud! I turned to see Mandy standing with a palm placed over her open mouth, staring down at the mats. I couldn’t decipher the gleam in her eyes, but they were directed down.

To where Cecilia lay.

Knocked out cold.

My wolf howled.

CHAPTER 5

Cecilia

I came to, feeling warm, pressed against stone. No, not stone. A moving wall of muscle. Lots of muscle. Some guy was carrying me, cradling me against his rippling pecs.

My words muddled and eyes half closed, I asked, “What happened? Where am I?”

“Hey, you took a whack on the chin and got knocked out. We’re still in the sports center, I’m just taking you to the staff room couch to lie down for a bit. You’ll be fine.”

It was Jaxon. And his strong arms and sympathetic words were soothing, comforting me.

Ugh, my chin though. A dull ache pulsed all along my jaw. What the hell was wrong with that girl, Mandy? We’d been practicing, laughing, getting along just fine, and then suddenly, when she was supposed to block and kind of do a slow, dummy punch in response, she’d let loose with a full-on swing, and all I’d felt was a thump. Everything had gone black.

Clasping his large bicep—the skin was so smooth—I said, “Maybe the class isn’t for me.”

Jax nudged open a door with his knee and gently laid me on the couch, propping my head carefully with a pillow. It was firm but comfortable, and the couch’s cool leather felt good against my skin too.

He knelt beside me, stroking my hair softly, smiling with those beautiful, amber eyes. “The class is definitely for you. You were doing great. I should never have allowed you and Mandy to pair up. It’s completely my fault, I’m so sorry.”

I smiled weakly. “You didn’t do anything. It’s completely her fault. To be honest, I’m pretty sure nothing about what she

did was an accident.”

“Agreed.” His jaw clenched. “It wasn’t.” All traces of his smile were gone.

“Is it because I’m human?” I’d suspected she was wolf shifter too, with how friendly she’d been with him, and her strength, musky scent, and size. “Or, what’s her problem?”

“Don’t you mean *problems*? She has quite a few, I think,” he replied. I think he was trying to lighten the mood. His smile returned, his cheeks forming into dimples.

My vision had been blurry, but it was rapidly coming back to normal. Even while feeling like I’d been hit by a train, I still couldn’t ignore how ridiculously handsome he was.

“I don’t think I’ll go to class again, if she’s going to be there.”

He clasped my forearm with his velvety, warm palm, and stroked gently. “Oh, don’t you worry about Mandy. Before I dismissed everyone, I told her if she dares set foot in my class again, she’s going to regret it.”

Getting to his feet, he went to the fridge and took out a bottle of water, cracked the cap off, and helped me sit up a little to sip it. The cold water felt so good on my tongue and throat. I drank deeper, guzzling almost the whole bottle, until my stomach was filled with a satisfying bloat.

After around twenty minutes of chatting—during which he explained he was a sophomore majoring in kinesiology and entertained me with funny stories of him being a mischievous boy in a very serious pack—my head stopped spinning, my legs’ trembles calmed down, and I felt strong enough to stand.

“You’re so kind, but I have to go home and check on my mom. I’d better get up and hope I can walk okay.”

“May I help you?” He was being so sweet—weren’t wolf shifters supposed to be dangerous?

“Please.” I wouldn’t refuse a hand.

Placing a careful palm on my shoulder, and the other into my armpit, which felt heavenly, to be honest, he lifted me to

my feet effortlessly, showing no strain at all on his face. This guy was incredibly strong.

I took a few steps, slowly, waiting to see how my legs did. It was fine. Time to get home to my mom. “I’d better go. Thanks for everything.”

“It was my honor.”

What an adorable thing to say.

“Do you think you might give me a second chance? Next time, you and I partners, no Mandy, and no knock outs, I promise.” He pressed his palms together in a humble gesture.

“I’ll let the swelling in my jaw go down first, I think, but yes, I think I could be persuaded back.”

Especially if it meant I’d see more of his impressive body in action. I wasn’t going to try to kid myself about how much it appealed to me. I liked the look of his strong, controlled movements. A lot.

Smiling, he exhaled hard in relief. “I’m so glad about that.” He opened the door for me, gesturing for me to go first. “Oh, by the way, I think I should take your number, just so I can call and check up on you over the next few days.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary. I’ll be fine.”

“I feel responsible.”

I gave him my number, seeing no harm in it. It was on the gym’s enrollment form anyway. And he seemed genuinely charming. Just like the boy next door I’d thought him to be even when I first saw him facing off with the vamp. I just hoped he wasn’t a wolf in sheep’s clothing.



I creaked open the front door to our shoebox apartment. The door hinges needed some oil. And the apartment at least a hundred extra square feet.

Mom was there on the couch, watching some medical drama on TV. She smiled when she saw me, and motioned to get up, grimacing.

Striding towards her, my legs now back to regular strength, I pushed her softly, encouraging her to sit back down. “Hey, keep resting.” I gave her a hug. “I’ll make us something. Do you want me to heat up some of that chicken broth, and maybe a grilled sandwich, with grilled veggies?”

She shrugged, smiling apologetically. “I’m not very hungry, to be honest, honey.”

“Did you at least drink the smoothie?”

“Yes, but I didn’t get to that chicken breast thing.”

I tutted and chided her mildly. “Mom, you know we had an agreement, remember? You have at least one solid meal per day, whether you feel like it or not”

Mom sighed and nodded. “Ok, honey. Make what’s easiest for you. I’ll eat what I can, I promise.”

I cooked. We ate sitting on the couch, me watching and encouraging her to get the nutrition even if her appetite was running low. She’d never had a lot of energy, from what I could remember as a young girl, but she’d been in a slow yet steady decline over the past few years. And despite many trips to various doctors, we had no diagnosis. Just a bunch of pills that did little to help her.

Then the past few months had seen her less and less disposed to eat regularly. She must have dropped at least seven or eight pounds in the past month alone, and she didn’t have much weight to spare in the first place. It was worrying. Hence my insistence on making sure she got a good meal daily. I’d tried for two, but she just couldn’t manage it.

Placing her half-full soup bowl down on her dinner tray, she turned the volume down on the TV, and shifted in her seat, facing me. “How was your first day?”

I conveniently left out the professor who may be humanphobic, the scary gang confrontation, getting punched out, and giving my number to a wolf shifter. “It was really nice, Mom. I think I’m going to do great. My teachers are excellent. I’m going to get my diploma, and get us out of this closet.”

The university supplied off campus housing for its janitorial staff. One bedroom per staff member only, so I slept on the couch to give my mom more space to move in her sleep. To be honest, we'd had worse accommodations, including a few trailer parks.

Mom chuckled and sighed, looking around at the drab furnishings, all crammed into a space about twenty times too small. "Yes, this place is so small, you have to go outside to change your sweater."

"Sweater? You have to go outside just to change your mind," I replied with a wry grin.

We laughed. That was the salve we spread over our problems. When you laughed about them, they didn't seem half as bad.

"Mom?" I sat closer, holding her hand. The skin was colder than it should have been, so I warmed it by rubbing and blowing on it.

"Yes, honey?"

"I think this is a place we can settle. At least for the next few years, until you get better, and I get my teaching diploma. I have a good feeling, that everything's going to be alright."

She placed her other palm on top of mine. "I think so too. And I'm sorry for all the disruption you had, growing up. I know it wasn't easy, moving so often, all those different states we ended up in."

I exhaled slowly, breathing in again deeply. It was a little bit of a sore point for me, Mom having insisted on never settling in one place for so long. But even worse was that she'd never told me why.

"Maybe one day you'll tell me why..."

She looked away, a grimace telling of either shame or pain, or a horrible blend of both. "Maybe one day, honey."

I clasped her hands tightly, looking deep into her eyes. "Mom, look at me, please."

She did.

“Why not make today the day?” I asked gently but firmly.

As if trying to distract me, she rushed in with another apology. “I’m sorry you had to work so hard, we didn’t have enough to send you to college.”

I would never fault her for the money part. I hadn’t minded, even though I was starting as a freshmen now, at twenty. “You’re avoiding the real issue.”

“Honey, sometimes ignorance is bliss, trust me on that.”

“And sometimes it’s tortu—”

My phone rang. It wasn’t Jaxon already, was it? “Hold on, sorry.”

“That’s ok, honey.” She picked up the remote and raised the volume again. The drama had finished, and now the words of a TV chef chirped from the screen. Something about Alabama and fudge cake being inseparable.

I was looking at the unknown number on the screen, half-hoping it *was* Jaxon. I didn’t want to disturb my mom though, so I went into the bedroom, its paper-thin walls giving just enough privacy if I talked in whispers.

“Hello?”

There was silence, then a deep breath sounded on the other line.

“Um, hello?”

Goodness, was this a prank call?

“Ah, yes. Yes, hello.” A gravelly, manly voice responded. I wasn’t sure at first but then I recognized it. I’d heard it earlier in the day.

“Professor Belanger?”

CHAPTER 6

Aaron

Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.

I'd never been so nervous in my life. And as the most awkward and clumsy bear shifter to ever be, that was saying something.

I tugged at my shirt collar. My cheeks and neck felt like they were fresh out the oven, my forehead could have been used for frying eggs. My phone's smooth metal back was quickly filming in sweat, causing my grasp to slip.

I switched my phone to my other hand and wiped my sweaty palm on my khakis.

"Hello...? Erm, hello?" her beautiful voice echoed. The words were sweeter than birdsong, the syllables chiming delicately.

"Ah, yes. Yes, hello." That sounded like an intelligent reply, right?

"Professor Belanger?"

"Yes. It's me. I was hoping I could talk to you, if—I mean, if you have time, of course." Wow. I was killing it. In the worst possible way.

"Okay, sure... And erm, I think I know why you might be calling..."

"You do?" Damn, had I been *that* obvious in class?

"Yes, I think so. And I just wanted to say, don't worry. It's okay to feel that way."

"It is?" I fumbled at my collar, opening the top two buttons with shaky fingers.

“Yes, of course. I understand it’s most likely something new for you, something you probably haven’t had to deal with before. Believe me, I understand how you feel. This is all new to me as well. Sitting in your class, being honest...I kind of felt the same way as you.”

“You did?!” My heart began hammering. Holy crap! This girl was amazing. My bear’s sixth sense had seemed to pick up on something rare and profound, some sort of compatibility to us being mates. She felt the same way, she—

“Well, sure. I mean, me knowing I’m the only human in the class, in the whole university, actually, and you having to deal with teaching a human for the first time, it’s not so different, right? It was a new experience for me and for you, so I can understand how you feel, professor. But I want to assure you, I’m not only going to be as capable as your paranormal students, but even more. I promise you won’t have any problems from me, and I’ll work super hard. I hope you’ll give me a chance.”

My excitement shrank, her words pouring water on my internal fireworks. I’d gotten carried away and taken the wrong end of the stick with me. What an idiot. “Oh, yes—yes, of course, of course. And that’s very insightful of you, Cecilia. And I’m sure you’re going to be a great student. I...”

“And I’m so sorry that me being in class today made you so uncomfortable and distracted you so much. But I’m sure as the semester goes on, and you get used to it, you’ll not even notice me there.”

A gulp got trapped in my throat.

She took the silence as an opportunity to kill me further, in her innocent way. “Please, don’t give me being there a second thought.”

Not a chance. Somehow, I already knew the reality: when it came to her, there would be thoughts piled upon thoughts, a hundred stories high, now and forever.

I shook myself from the daze of listening to her lovely voice and made my position, at least partially, clear. “Cecilia,

to be clear: I had absolutely no problem with you being in class today, and I mean that very sincerely. In fact,”—I cleared my throat, exhaling slowly— “it was a wonderful sight, to see such a bright-eyed, beaut—nice young human lady, in my class. I think it’s great to see some human inclusivity, here in New Nebraska. It’s refreshing.”

Her tone brightened, audibly. “Really? Oh, that’s such a relief to hear. Thank you, professor. That means a lot.”

“Don’t mention it. Every student deserves to feel welcome, respected and appreciated. And also, possibly, I mean—it might be nice...” My words waved a little white flag. I couldn’t work up the courage.

“Well, I’d better get back to my mom. Thanks so much for your call, professor. It means a lot to me. See you next class?”

“Yes, see you then. Bye.” I tapped the end call button and released a long, pent-up sigh. Ugh, why was I so hopeless? I’d never cared to flirt back with girls before, so to say I had no experience wooing them, was an understatement. But I was going to change that for Cecilia. Learn how to do better for her. And I’d always been a hard worker.

I slipped my phone into my pocket, left my bedroom, and walked down the stairs to the living room.

My bear grumbled. I could sense his energy rippling across my chest and limbs, his primal desires coursing through my blood. He griped and groaned, his obsession with Cecilia so intense, even from that first sight of her, in class.

He’d never reacted to anyone that way before.

And it wasn’t just physical. He was a crazy bastard but had some sort of innate sense about the goodness in people. That sort of basic animal instinct to detect the light and the dark in those around us, was the only thing about him I’d learned to trust over the years. When he’d felt the pull to Cecilia, her light calling to him, he was roaring at me to do something, reach out to her, make sure she didn’t need anything from us.

He grumbled again in my mind, apparently thinking we might be of use to her in some way—how, I had no idea—and

he was clearly upset I wasn't racing over to her place to offer up our services.

I focused, empathizing with his frustrations, but asking him to calm down, rest, go to sleep. I had to keep him under control. He was just far too dangerous to allow outside.

And I would never risk any harm coming to her.

I'd have to be careful, with how obsessed he was with her. But there was no way I could stay away from her appeal. She was as beautiful on the inside as she was out.

I'd learned a lot from a letter of recommendation that had been in her file. A file that I'd happened to sneak a peek at that afternoon, during a small break, when I just couldn't get her off my mind. The letter had been from a high school English teacher, commending her for her exemplary schoolwork, but also for how she had helped tutor other students on top of a part-time job and taking care of an ailing mother.

My bear seemed to roll his eyes that it had taken me reading her file to sense something he already knew, and had figured out immediately—that she was a wonderful person.

He huffed as he realized I wasn't changing my mind about going to her, for now, anyway.

My housemate and best friend, Osric, was in the living room, reclining with effortless elegance on the couch in a black satin dressing gown and slippers, casually swiping and tapping on his phone, while a war movie on the widescreen TV popped and banged out sounds in the background.

Osric was a prince of the Fae and had no financial need for a housemate. In fact, he paid the entire rent for our three-bedroom penthouse himself, the deal being that I would cover the monthly bills instead. Even with the apartment being so large, the bills were a small fraction of my paycheck. The arrangement was about as good as I could have found in New Lincoln, especially in the Kings' Hills, where only the wealthiest residents lived.

Osric liked our living arrangements a lot, too. He'd proposed sharing a place not because he was on a limited

budget, but because he had limited patience for—well, for just about everybody, except me.

He enjoyed my company, and I his, though his prejudices against other races—especially humans—did test me at times. He had a good heart deep down though. He was just overburdened by the obligations of his birthright, being heir to the Fae Kingdom in England.

I often suspected he would rather have ditched it and been free to do whatever he wanted. Though he never went as far as saying it out loud.

I did wonder: what would he do, if free of obligation? Him studying here seemed to be a delay tactic, to stave off an unwanted marriage, but it was hard to read him otherwise. On top of a normal courseload, he'd signed up to audit my class this quarter, the university having no problem with him just auditing, even if we lived together. But he had no real interest in literature or any academic pursuit, so far as I could tell. Much more interested in following politics and the news, and also, the ladies.

His way with the ladies was something to behold. They were falling at his feet half the time. Vamps, elementals, shifters, even the occasional Fae in town, they seemed to just follow him home and had to be pushed out the door the next morning, his eyes looking a bit hollow after each encounter. It was a good thing our bedrooms were at opposite sides of the penthouse. All that noise would have been awful for my sleep.

If only I could charm Cecilia with such ease.

I sat in the recliner across from him, sighing loudly. Still staring at his phone, Osric reached over to the TV remote, and lowered the volume until the movie's raucous booms and shouts were reduced to a murmur. Not looking up, speaking from the side of his mouth, he asked with a dry tone, "So, how did it go with the little human? Have you decided on a date for the wedding yet?"

I tutted softly. "Don't be a dick."

Casually tossing his phone onto the couch beside him, he stretched and yawned, before asking, “No, but really. How did it go?”

I shrugged. “About as well as you can imagine.”

“That bad, eh?”

Sighing, I pulled and poked at the recliner arm’s luxuriant suede. “I have to be honest, my friend, this is no joke. I really like her. And my bear is pining for her.”

“Well, that’s quite a problem then.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Look, Aaron, old bean, I must admit, the girl’s easy enough on the eyes, and there is a certain,”—he waved his palms in circles, casually— “*je ne sais quoi* about her, granted, but have you given thought to the possibility you’re just smitten with her because she’s your first human student? That she’s just something new, different?”

“Nope. This is something else.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I’ve seen humans around downtown New Lincoln lots of times. It’s not like they’re an alien species to me, you know.”

“Of course, of course. And I did sense she might be a cut above other humans I’ve interacted with...but that’s not saying much,” he said with a smirk.

“That’s your mom talking.”

“Quite possibly, yes. But it’s me talking too.”

I huffed, not really agreeing. He wasn’t half as prejudicial and pretentious as he made himself out to be. It was almost a taught response. Not really him. Despite the Fae’s historical dislike of other races, he treated the vamp and elemental girls the same as the Fae he brought home. With entitled, yet polite, disinterest.

I shifted in my seat. “You know, the only thing that’s stopping me from getting her address, and going and sleeping

outside her front door, to be near her, as my bear is urging me to do, is the fact she's a student. And not only that, but my student."

"So, she's your student, so what?"

"So, it means it would be unethical for me to...be in any kind of intimate relationship with her."

Maybe I would have to wait on my plans of wooing till this quarter was over and she was out of my class?

Osric scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Oh, poppycock! This isn't the United States, dear chap." He sat forward, his eyes fixing on mine. "This is New Nebraska, for goodness' sake. Hardly the land of prudes. And anyway, I thought shifters had overwhelming urges for the carnal? You've been without it too long. Time for you to start exploring, and if this human girl is your first port of call, so be it."

He chuckled, picking up his phone again, to answer a text message. Probably one of his many female admirers. He was too spoiled for choice, too aloof. There was no way he could grasp my feelings for Cecilia.

"Pfft! You don't understand. You're just a playboy. Don't you ever want something more from all your fangirls than just sex? Something meaningful?" I knew he did. That hollow, empty look in his eyes after the girls left in the morning gave him a haunted look.

Osric's smile and lighthearted manner melted, his face grimacing, glum. "Something meaningful? Tie my heart to someone here, only to have it torn away by the beast of duty? When I, inevitably, have to go back to England and marry that empty-headed princess, Beatrice?"

I shrugged. "Well, you can always say no, can't you?"

His smile reappeared and he laughed out loud. "Now it's you who doesn't understand, old friend." Reclining back into the couch, he put the volume up on the TV and began watching the war movie, smiling, and mumbling to himself. "Oh my, what an odd couple we are. The prince and the professor."

I might not have understood Osric's situation, but I was completely sure about my own.

Cecilia's light was calling to both me and my beast.

We wanted to bask in it, as much as she would let us.

We both craved her, and I was going to do something about it.

CHAPTER 7

Cecilia

My second day was going well. I'd started my janitor duties super early, and my supervisor, a grouchy but kind old shifter granny, had let me get away early.

Now, one class down, I had a mid-morning break, and I'd strolled to the campus café for a cappuccino. Well, everyone seemed to call it the café, but it was actually a complex, housing a few different places to eat and drink.

Ground and basement floors held the coffee shop, called *Moonbucks*, while the second and third floors were home to a fifties-themed diner and sushi bar, respectively. The top floor, the one I would most definitely not be visiting, had a vamp blood café with a stand open 24 hours, but the real heart of the business, only opened after dark. A lucky thing for me, that vamps preferred to feed at night. The thought of crimson smoothies and cocktails reeking of iron made my stomach churn.

Anyway, the coffee shop part, which I was currently standing in, was the main hub for daytime socializing on campus. Students of all breeds were milling in and out, congregating in their separate throngs, making the most of the facilities, and with good reason.

Exorbitant tuition fees had financed some super cozy furnishings. Plush velvet and leather upholstery clothed fancy chairs and booths, while the mahogany tables, oak floors and stairs were shiny with varnish and polish. The walls were encrusted with exposed stones, to create a rustic impression, and the plaster surrounding them was laid thick, sumptuous like buttercream.

Soft wafts of air conditioning felt pleasantly cool against my forearms and neck as I looked at their china cups, arranged

upside down in tall stacks beside the enormous barista machine. The largest size was like a soup bowl. Why did anyone need that much caffeine?

I ordered a small one and looked around for a place to sit.

The entire ground floor was crammed. I guessed there might have been an open spot in the basement, but I wanted to look out the window, and enjoy the sun washing over green trees and grass. Oh well, I'd probably be able to find a decent place to sit outside. I asked for my coffee to go instead.

Resting my palm on the counter, I leaned forward to check out their freshly baked selection. Wonderful aromas were rising up from behind the glass. I hadn't been hungry walking in, not with thoughts of the vamp café, but the smells were massaging my stomach to the point of surrender. Buttery vapors of pastry paraded themselves past my nose, and I couldn't say no.

I got a Danish that reminded me of Jax: large, delicious looking, and much more tempting than I'd thought anything in New Nebraska would be.

Romance hadn't exactly been on my radar, moving here. But thinking about it more as I'd fallen asleep last night, I was sure he'd been interested in me, both before and after I'd been injured. It was more than him just being polite.

I had almost no experience flirting—I just hadn't had the time and we were never in one place that long—but I was in college now and settling here. I wouldn't say no to exploring something with someone just because they weren't like me.

Or, at the very least, being friends with them.

My phone chimed its first hello of the morning, from inside my bag. Fishing it out, I swiped the screen to find a message from the big guy himself.

Hey, how are you feeling? How's your jaw?

The swelling had gone way down overnight, and all that was visible was a mild rosy glow, that I'd covered with makeup. It was so thoughtful of him to be checking up on me though.

Hey! I'm doing great. It's much better, thanks. How are you?

My order came and I slipped the wrapped Danish into my bag, picking up the coffee and sipping through the plastic takeaway top's little hole, at the chocolate-dusted froth and bitter heat underneath. He fired back another message as I was about to make my way to the exit.

That's great to hear. Will I see you back in class next week? I've got a few holds I'd like to show you. You might not be able to escape. You might not want to...

He ended his text with a grinning emoji. He was flirting!

I liked it. Feeling a surge of excitement in the pit of my stomach, I replied.

We'll see. As long as you're gentle with me.

The reply appeared on my screen immediately.

I'll be a puppy, I promise!

Smiling broadly, I decided: I was going to his next class. Jax had promised Mandy wouldn't be there, and I believed him.

And I might even flirt back in person too!

As I walked towards the tall, broad windows on the exit side, and the booths that lined along them, I noticed that in the corner one, some places had opened up. A whole empty booth, in fact. I moved quickly, to grab a seat by the window before anyone claimed it. Being the only human, I'd most likely be able to sit alone too. Different breeds didn't seem to share booths, or much else on campus.

Approaching the booth, I placed my coffee down on the table and—

Oh, there was someone sitting there, tucked in the corner beside the window, gazing outwards to the grass. I just hadn't seen her because of the booth's high backing.

She turned and looked at me. She was beautiful. With ebony hair, rich, raven locks tumbling past her forearms, the

lush curls permeated by shining strands of ruby. She wore a white halter top with a sparkly flame pattern, and her fingernails were alive with a scarlet glow that no varnish could ever have given. Yikes, she had to be some kind of fire elemental. I picked my coffee back up, apologizing in a rush, turning to leave.

Lips breaking into a broad smile, she gestured to the seat across from her. "Please, there's plenty of room. Go ahead, I'd be happy for company."

I hadn't expected that. From my limited experience, elementals were usually either high-strung, surly, sneering, or some combination of all three. "Well, if you're sure?"

She scooped across closer to me, extending a hand, smiling, and chuckling. "I'm sure. I'm Vesta. A sophomore here. And there's no need to be afraid."

I looked at her hand, the fingernails' glow was somewhere between neon and red-hot coals. Was it even safe to touch her?

She seemed to be reading my mind. Laughing gently, she said, "It's okay, you won't get burnt, I promise."

I clasped her hand in greeting, the skin was surprisingly cool, and sat across from her. "Cecilia. A freshman. Nice to meet you."

"Me too. You're human, right?"

I nodded, popping the top off my coffee, nudging my lips into the foam, and enjoying its soft warmth. "Is it that obvious?"

She returned the nod and smiled. Sipping from her latte, also a small one, she clinked it back on its saucer, leaning forward and looking into my eyes. "Wow, your eyes are really pretty, by the way. Do all human girls have eyes as nice as that?"

I scoffed softly. "I think most have much prettier ones, to be honest. You haven't seen many human girls then, I take it?"

"Just the odd one here or there, working around campus or downtown. Of course, I saw lots growing up. Pre-agreement.

Before the world knew about paranormals and feared us. Feels forever ago.” She pursed her lips in thought. “And the few humans on campus I’ve seen, at least up close, are older guys. Visiting professors, mostly. What do you study?”

“I’m doing education. I’m hoping to—well, I mean I will, get my teaching license after I graduate.”

“Aww, that’s really nice. I’m sure you’ll be a great teacher. And it’s really nice to see a human student too. There’s way too much prejudice in New Nebraska, especially against you guys.”

“I have sensed just a bit...”

She grimaced. “That’s too bad. It’s like paranormals decided to look down on humans after the Agreement. But that just justifies human fears and the reason humans wanted the Agreement in the first place. I hope more humans come to study here. You probably know that while most of us paranormals can never leave, you guys can come in if you want. And we need more diversity, more positive interactions between each other.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. And she seemed genuinely kind. The tension in my shoulders and back eased, and I leaned into the booth’s squeaking leather upholstery. “Erm, and you’re a”—I didn’t want to call her anything that might have annoyed her— “a fire...”

Chuckling, she drank from her coffee and nodded. “I was gifted a special relationship with fire, yes. Like my mom and her mom before her. I’m a flame child, which is fairly rare among elementals. We have more control than your basic fire elemental.”

“Flame child? Wow, that sounds a lot more impressive than plain old human does.”

She shrugged. “It has its advantages. Want to see something?”

I hesitated. “Is it a safe something?”

She laughed. “Yep.”

“Okay then.”

She cradled her cup in both hands, staring intently at the coffee. Her hands glowed a fierce, bright red. I could feel the heat radiating from them, warming my cheeks and forehead. The liquid began bubbling, wisping coffee vapors into the air. Breathing them in, she sipped and giggled. “I don’t like lukewarm coffee.”

“Wow, that’s very, very cool. But doesn’t it—no, forget it, doesn’t matter.”

“Oh please, go on. You won’t offend me.”

“Well, that doesn’t hurt? Or feel weird at all?”

She shook her head. “Nope, just feels as normal as breathing. There is magic that can hurt though. It can drain you, cause pain, but I’m talking mega efforts and spells that take huge energy and focus.” Nodding at the cup, she smirked, saying, “I could do that a million times over without blinking.”

I couldn’t imagine having such power, literally at my fingertips. I was extremely glad Vesta was friendly. Her eyes, her vibe, held a genuine kindness. Kind of like Jax.

“So, what do you think of NLU then?” she asked.

“It’s more than a little strange, being the only human student, but I’m adjusting. It’s tough seeing everyone in their different groups, you know, when I’m always on my own.”

Reaching across the table, she squeezed my hand and smiled warmly. “Well, you’ve got a friend now. I definitely think we should hang out.”

I squeezed back. “Really? You’re not worried you’ll get hassle from the other elementals, for hanging out with me?”

She tutted and shrugged. “Probably, but they can go screw themselves. I’m friends with whoever I like.” She blew a strong exhale, rolling her eyes. “I get so bored with all the divisions, all the pissing contests around here. I refuse to be part of it.”

I liked Vesta. I wished more of the students thought like her. I was so glad we’d bumped into each other.

“So, who hit you?” she asked, her smile reforming into a look of concern. The question took me by surprise.

How on earth did she... “Hit me?”

Nodding, gently chiding, she replied, “Don’t give me that, please. The swelling on your chin, I can sense the heat coming from it, it’s out of balance with the rest of your face. Nothing can hide heat, and the stories it can tell, from a flame child.” She arched an eyebrow. “Least of all makeup.”

“Oh, oh wow. Well, it was nothing...”

“If someone hit you, it’s not nothing. Is someone harassing you? Some idiot humanphobe?”

Shrugging, I glugged a mouthful of froth and coffee. “I don’t think she’s any more humanphobic than most people on campus, but I’m not sure.”

“She? Who is *she*?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to stir up trouble. “I don’t want to cause any problems.”

Vesta nodded, her kind smile returning. “Don’t worry, I get it. I’m not going to do anything. I promise. You can tell me.”

I told her about the self-defense class, about what had happened with Mandy, being tricked into a false sense of security then getting unceremoniously whacked hard in the face.

Upon hearing the names Jax and Mandy, she nodded knowingly. “Ah, Jaxon Hemming, I see. And let me guess, he’s sweet on you, right?”

Well, he’d been super sweet when I was injured, but in a protective way. And yet, maybe he was sweet on me, like I’d been thinking earlier. I felt shy saying it out loud. “Maybe?”

She waved a dismissive backhand. “Of course he is, he’s got good taste.”

“Well, I suppose so.” If he liked me, then yes, why not, he did have good taste.

“The thing about him is, he’s one of the most popular guys on campus, and the Beta of his pack, not to mention the football team’s star quarterback. If you caught his eye, that bitch Mandy would have picked up on it right away. Everyone knows she’s a Luna wannabe.”

It made sense now. “Okay... She was jealous?”

“Mhm, to the max. And believe me, she’s not done yet. Not if he’s staying sweet on you.”

My heart thumped a little faster, adrenaline teasing across my stomach, spreading through my arms, turning them shaky. “Oh dear. I didn’t mean to make enemies.”

Vesta clasped my hand again, squeezing it tight, her wide smile revealing perfectly straight teeth. “Relax, Cecilia. You’re friends with me now. If she touches you again,”—she raised her free hand in the air and the fingers crackled, breaking into flames— “I’ll barbecue her ass.”

I breathed deeply, Vesta’s words helping to calm me. “Thank you, that makes me feel safer. But please don’t barbecue anyone’s ass unless you really have to.” And I thought of Jax, protective, super strong. He was on my side too. My social circle was still tiny, but it was growing.



I split my Danish with Vesta. Once our coffees were done, I was delighted to find out she and I were actually going to the same class, despite her being one year above me. It was a compulsory module for all students, on best practices for academic essay writing, which she’d decided to re-take, explaining that first time round, her love of partying had caused her to miss most of the info.

We walked from the café and through the campus, arms linked, best friends already. Reaching the building where our class would be held, with a little time to spare, we sat on one of the grassy embankments nearby, chatting, her fascinating me with campus facts that weren’t in the university brochure.

A guy in a white shirt and blue tie was handing out leaflets to students as they went in and out of the building. He approached us. His sandy hair, thick stubble and strong build said he was most likely a shifter. Being polite, I accepted one. Vesta was polite too, in the way she declined.

He flashed a toothy smile and said, “Services nightly at our temple downtown, dear sisters. Come, find your salvation, through purity.”

He walked on, and I looked at the leaflet. It said:

The Temple of the Pure Breed invites YOU!

Brothers, sisters, come join us in celebration and salvation!

All are welcome, who would be pure!

Service - 7pm nightly

Presiding Guide - Overseer Clyde Blunton

New Lincoln Central Temple

New Lincoln

“That’s the only place in New Nebraska you’ll find all the breeds under one roof, with the same beliefs, socializing, getting along,” Vesta said.

“Really? That’s great then. Maybe I’ll go along one night.”

“Yeah, great. That’s what I thought. I even went to a service one time, and thought it was something special. Until I quickly realized they were all fanatics.”

“Damn, really?”

She nodded. “The worst. They’re all in one congregation, all equal members, but any interbreed marriages, and any kind of relations like that, are strictly forbidden. Breed impurity is sin, apparently.”

Sighing, she plucked the leaflet from my hand, crumpled it, and it erupted into flames in her grasp. “When hatred is your unifying force, you know things aren’t going to go well.”

I made a mental note, about the Temple of the Pure Breed.

I added them to the list of things to be wary of in New
Nebraska.

CHAPTER 8

Xander

They were all oblivious to my gaze.

The little human and her fiery friend, who were relaxing on the embankment, enjoying the cool grass and late summer breeze.

And the Fae, who was doing his own bit of sneaky peeking, from a third-floor window, across the quad. Not just any Fae, either. The swaggering prince, himself. What was his name again? Oswald? Orville? Something like that, suitably pompous. My memory failed me. Though I *did* recall he had a reputation for a number of powerful Fae abilities. Ones that I, grudgingly, admitted were best not to be tangled with, at least not without my coven's support.

He was staring at the girl, drinking her in, as much as I was. Maybe more. He looked *starved* for her.

Did he also have a predatory compulsion towards her slight form?

But what could a Fae want with a human?

Perhaps she'd just caught his eye from a cock-stiffening perspective. Either way, he was a presence I didn't appreciate.

Anyway, fuck him. I put the silver-spoon fairy out of my mind and refocused on my fascinating new obsession.

I wasn't going to kill her.

I merely wanted to satisfy my curiosity about her taste, and why I couldn't put her out of my mind. I'd satisfy my thirst in the process.

She'd be safe. More than safe, with how every girl reacted to the very potent sexual pleasure my bite provided, when I wanted it to. Just being close to me seemed to trigger all sorts

of urges in both sexes, if I wasn't careful to suppress it. It disgusted me how my supernatural abilities seemed to call to them, especially women, making them beg, but it was useful. And I didn't abuse my powers, unlike some.

I always kept the girls safe. Whether they were paranormal or human.

Though mistakes with prey did happen... Thankfully, the last one to die by accident had been a felon. A convicted rapist, no less. Not the sort of scum to be noticed missing by the authorities, or anyone, in fact. I always drained to the brink of death with food like that, leaving them only enough to scrape through. Served them right.

This girl though. I'd just get a decent taste. Then maybe I could get her out of my mind. Or maybe she'd want to continue in some sort of arrangement? I'd never thought long-term before.

Hmm... I had the frightening realization I might be as starved for her as the Fae was. My fangs were dying to get in there, into the soft, ripe flesh of her neck. I was salivating at the thought.

Ever since I'd noticed that fucking fur baby, Jaxon, looking her way, then sniffing her scent out, in the park's square the day before, a taste of her had lingered on my tongue. I had caught her scent in the air too, drawing it in and holding her essence in my mouth. Innocence, flowers, and sweet blood. They blended into a bouquet I'd never tasted the comparison to.

Such innocence, it almost overwhelmed the palate.

The two girls rose and walked into the main building. The Fae disappeared from the window almost immediately after.

Leaving the library roof, I climbed down the same drainpipe I'd scaled earlier, finishing with a purposeful leap into a puddle of muddy water.

The grimy liquid splattered across my boots and I smiled.

I wasn't afraid of getting my feet dirty. Nor my hands.

And when it came to this girl, I was quickly learning I'd do almost anything to get what I wanted.

CHAPTER 9

Cecilia

I was in the library, doing a bit of self-study, towards the end of my third day of work and classes. It was so peaceful in here and I was alone in this corner. Not another student in sight. Just a bespectacled, Fae librarian—one of the few Fae I'd seen on campus besides Mr. Scowly—using her magic to float discarded books onto a cart before trundling her overloaded trolley between the countless shelves that towered so tall and swollen with knowledge.

All that paper bunched in one place, all that ink and binding, it gave off a subtle but placid odor and feel. As if the books were ramparts, shielding me from any idiotic or violent onslaughts that might be encountered outside.

Yesterday, when I'd met Vesta, she'd recommended the library as a refuge, a place where the university management rigorously enforced best behavior and standards of respectful silence.

The librarian pushed the trolley past me again, its wheels needing a dab of oil. But apart from those steely squeaks, and the low hum of neon lighting above, there was enchanting silence. No phone bleeps and rings either. What bliss.

As I turned another page, my phone vibrated. I turned it over, in case it was Mom, and found a message, but not from her.

It was Jax.

Still okay? I really hope so. Can't believe you got injured on my watch.

My heart picked up and I typed out a quick reply.

Yes! Nothing hurts now. All better. Thanks.

He responded immediately, just as he had yesterday.

I'm so glad you're not hurting anymore.

Another message pinged, right after.

And I was thinking, next class seems far away. You want to get in some basic defense techniques sooner?

My heart raced at the thought of seeing him again soon. My cheeks heating, I replied without allowing myself time to overthink it.

Thanks for the offer. When were you thinking?

A single word question came back.

Saturday?

Hmm...

Can we wait and see how my mom's doing? If she's not feeling so great, I won't feel right leaving her alone. Keep you posted?

Once again, his reply was almost instantaneous.

Absolutely, your mom should always come first. Let's see on Saturday. And if she needs anything I can help with, please ask, ok? Talk soon.

I still couldn't believe he was part wolf. When he talked to me, he was nothing like a pack hunter, a predator. And not nearly as intimidating as he'd seemed when I'd first seen him squaring up to the vamp, but even then, he'd had a charming look about him. It was so confusing, a lot to get my head around.

Another thing that had me confused: Professor Belanger.

In our second class this morning, he'd been stumbling over words again, looking at me awkwardly, seeming distracted. Was he truly not as comfortable with me being in class as he'd insisted?

I gazed off into the distance, distracted by my thoughts.

Beyond the books, the lofty walls were gapped by broad floor-to-ceiling windows, through which I could see the sun

ambling its way to the horizon, preparing a hazy bed of magenta, apricot and indigo to take a well-earned sleep.

Another half hour of study and I'd head to the dining hall and pick up dinner. What would Mom like? Unfortunately, I didn't have time tonight to cook, but food was free for me at the dining hall, and I'd find her something good. Maybe one of their enchiladas would—

A large, scruffy face peeked out from behind the nearest shelf.

Professor Belanger!? I jerked back in my chair, letting out a yelp.

“Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.” The words came out in a strained whisper.

“Professor?” I whispered back. What was he doing here? Didn't he have an assistant to come for any books he might need?

Sidling forward, he placed a huge hand on the chair across from me, gesturing to the table with his other. “May I join you?”

I nodded. Maybe we could clear up what happened in class this morning. I spoke in the lowest volume I could. “Of course, sir.”

“Sir?” He tested out the word in his mouth, as if trying to decide how he felt about my formality. He sat and the wooden chair creaked under his large frame. His biceps swelling under his shirt, hunched shoulders bulging, he could probably karate chop the oak desk we were sitting at and split it right in half.

I suppressed a small chuckle at the image.

“Sir,” he repeated and furrowed his brows. “Hmm... First, I'm really sorry to disturb you.”

I looked around. The librarian was nowhere to be seen, but I kept my whispers to a minimal sound. “That's okay. Were you getting some books out?”

His cheeks pinkened through his scruff. “No, I—well, not really. That was the second thing I wanted to say.”

“Of course. Yes?”

“I was just going to offer, I mean, since you’re the rare human to study at NLU, I was...”

He cleared his throat, muffling the sound with the top of his fist. Then he tugged at his shirt collar a bit, wafting it back and forth twice.

His unconscious action sent air drifting toward me, carrying a pleasant scent.

It was him. And he smelled good. Really good. Like oaky wood and forest dew.

“Yes?” I asked again, and shifted closer to him in my seat, hoping to set him at ease.

“Well, I was thinking I might take you,”—he swallowed, his forehead now joining his cheeks at the pink party— “out to dinner?”

“Dinner?” My jaw dropped. Was he trying to overcome his humanphobia?

“Yes, if you’d like to? There’s a great steak place downtown. We might, you know...”

“Oh, that sounds nice. But I get free food from the dining hall and was going to take some back for my mom. We always eat dinner together.”

He straightened up in his seat. “No problem, I’d love for your mom to come too.” He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose a fraction. “And if you guys don’t like steak, there’s an awesome Mexican place on the same street. You have to try the quesadilla to believe it. What do you think?”

I closed the book I’d been reading. Talk of my mom had me wanting to get back and check she was okay. “That’s so kind of you, professor. I really appreciate it, really, but...my mom’s not doing so well, and I don’t think she’d be up for going out to eat. I can barely get her to eat at all, half the time.”

Grimacing, he smacked his forehead with his palm, almost making a comedic dunce slap gesture. “I’m so sorry, of course

your mom isn't well. How insensitive of me. I wasn't thinking."

I felt myself making a face. I hadn't hinted at or told anyone except Jax my mom wasn't well. And that had literally been only minutes before. How did he know about—

"So, how about we get some takeout? My treat, of course. I know the best Chinese place in town. It's not too far from here, actually. We can bring your mom a nice surprise?"

That did sound nice, and it might be an appealing change for her. But I wasn't sure how appropriate this was, bringing my professor home with me. And she might not have enough energy for an unannounced visitor. "Well, I'm not sure..."

"You don't like Chinese food?"

"Oh no, I love it. That's not a problem—"

"What's your favorite Chinese food?"

"Hmm, probably crispy shredded beef?"

"Really? Then you *have* to try it from this place." He leaned back and did a chef's kiss, with such eagerness it was adorable. "You'll literally be addicted. I'm serious. You'll literally have to check in to shredded beef rehab, after you try theirs, for real."

Okay, he was really selling this meal and making me feel at ease, like I'd been trying to do for him earlier. "That good, eh?"

"The best. And don't get me started on the special spring rolls. Why do you think I work this job? For fun? My spring roll habit won't let me quit."

I muffled a laugh. "Well, if it's that good then..."

"Shall we?"

"Okay, but my mom won't eat much, so maybe we shouldn't order a mountain of food."



Professor Belanger had ordered a mountain of food.

My mom was propped up on cushions, beside me on the sofa, nibbling at a small plate of chicken and cashew nuts, with a large spoon of fried rice and three prawn crackers on the side. I was surprised to see her actually enjoying it.

Or maybe it was the company. She seemed to have taken a real shine to Professor Belanger, or Aaron, as he'd insisted we call him.

Plunging my fork into the carton of shredded beef again, enjoying the delicious, salty, chewiness, I thanked Aaron for his kind gesture, and confirmed this was indeed highly addictive food he'd introduced me to.

“See? I told you. Just make sure you never eat it three days in a row, or you'll be hooked bad.” He flashed an adorable smile, before shoveling another spring roll into his mouth, crunching, and gobbling the large piece in two bites. He was a big man, with a big appetite, that was for sure.

It seemed he had a big heart too. He was so gentle and charming with my mom. I hadn't seen her so relaxed in ages.

Her plate was surprisingly clean when she laid down her knife and fork, signaling she'd finished. Just a scattering of fried rice and half a prawn cracker left said she'd found a stronger appetite than usual. I was very pleased to see her eat well, and her smiling brightly, eager to talk with one of my professors.

“Aaron, how long have you been a professor?” she asked, shuffling slightly against her cushions.

“Only two years, ma'am. I did an accelerated program, and I'm only twenty-eight. I got my PhD in Canada, they let me stay to finish it there despite the Agreement, then I applied to NLU, got accepted.” He dabbed his mouth with a napkin and stifled a burp into his fist. “Please, excuse me. So, yes, then I came here. At the moment though, I'm just an assistant professor. They only tend to grant full professorships to people with at least ten years teaching experience. In reality though, it's often a lot more.”

“Well, you seem like a very capable and dedicated young man. I’m sure you’ll get there,” my mom said, giving him a serious yet kind look. She seemed really impressed with him. It had to be the nerdy vibe and the PhD. The safe, sensible type of guy moms always took a shine to. “Do you have any family close by or are they all in Canada?”

“My parents had me late in life. I’m an only child. And because of their age, they got an exemption to stay there.”

“Oh, I hope you don’t get lonely here.”

“No. I have a close friend I live with. And I like making new friends too.” Aaron glanced at me and his cheeks tinted.

“Hmm... I have to say I’m glad Ceci has such a good friend in her teacher, considering some of the students here are known to be less than friendly.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ll be doing everything I can to make sure her time on campus goes smoothly, believe me.”

My mom smiled and yawned. “I so appreciate that. Now, you’ll have to excuse me. I think all that wonderful food you so kindly brought us has pushed my sleep button.”

She began rising from the couch and both Aaron and I lurched to help her, but she shook her head. “That’s fine, I can manage. Please don’t fuss.”

Standing and hugging her, I gave her a kiss on the cheek, and she thanked Aaron again for dinner, before ambling off to the bedroom, creaking and clunking the door behind her.

That left us alone. My stomach full, I clinked my fork down on my plate, leaning back into the couch, feeling relaxed. “Thank you so much. For everything. I can tell this evening meant a lot to her. You just made her very happy.”

He gently placed his plate on the table, and leaned back into the recliner, his thick, long legs branching out far, his arms hanging over the sides, as he struggled to fit within the chair’s frame. His size made him look like he was perching on a kindergartener’s seat, but that was all we’d had for him, in our tiny apartment.

“I’m sorry that chair’s far from ideal. Thanks for suffering it while we ate. I’m sorry we didn’t have another option.”

He shrugged, waving his palm in dismissal. “Nah, it’s nothing really. Perfectly adequate.”

I loved his politeness just as much as I loved his sense of humor, both of which made him seem older than his late twenties. I wasn’t sure how much longer he planned to stay, but I felt bad for him having to hunch over the way he did, especially after being so generous with the food. “Now that mom’s in bed, you could sit on the couch? It’ll give you a lot more room to move.”

“That sounds like it might be nice.” He stood and was over beside me with two careful strides. He sat close.

I shifted back a bit so I could turn to face him. “So, you’ll laugh, but I was kind of still worried you were...maybe a bit bothered about having a human in your class. I don’t think I was right about that though,” I said, nodding at all the empty bags and boxes of Chinese food he’d paid for.

He seemed fascinated with a spot over in the kitchen, avoiding my gaze for once, as he answered. “Well...I am bothered, but I—I mean, not in the way you think.” His cheeks were changing color again as he stuttered out the words. A small rumble, almost like an animal would make, escaped.

He looked horrified, like he’d just barked at me or something.

But I wasn’t afraid of him, despite his size and how close he was. In fact, I felt safer with him sitting over here. And then I processed what he’d just said.

I gulped. “You mean, you’re bothered in... another way?”

He nodded, cheeks pink and glasses halfway down his nose. “I think you understand what I mean?”

I did. I was finally getting it. Feeling flustered, I nodded.

He looked deep into my eyes and seemed to be searching for my approval, for my acknowledgement that I was okay with him liking me. Professor Belanger liked me!?

I nodded again and he scooted so close his muscley thigh grazed mine. His woody scent and giant shoulder—bigger than my head—nudged my side like a pleasant-smelling pillow.

He twisted a bit to look back into my eyes. “Is this okay?”

Hadn’t I told myself just the other day that I wasn’t going to say no to exploring something with someone here just because they weren’t like me?

I mean, I hadn’t been thinking they’d be a professor. That wasn’t the sort of difference I’d meant. But there was no denying how appealing Aaron was. He was everything you could ask for in a man. And now that I’d let myself truly think of him this way...

“I don’t know, I’m your student.”

“I know, it’s not really appropriate. But things are a bit different here in New Nebraska and I know you’re twenty, a few years older than most freshmen. I may have checked out your student file,” he admitted and bit his lip.

Now I knew how he’d known about my mom earlier.

“I promise to address our relationship with the administration. I’d really, really like to get to know you better though. If you’d like that?”

“Yes, I would like that.” I wouldn’t let fear dictate my future.

He placed a palm on my leg. His hands were huge and clearly so strong, but his touch gentle.

My heart was beating fast now.

He turned towards me a bit further, so we were fully facing each other, even as close as we were. His gaze dipped down to my lips and he let out a strangled sound. A small growl.

That’s right, he had an animal in there.

My words came out breathy. “Do you mind... that is, would you mind me asking what kind of shifter you are?”

He pulled back a bit, but left his palm on my leg. “I don’t mind at all. You’re always free to ask me whatever you’d

like.” He paused and took a deep breath.

The silence caused a shiver to skate along my spine.

“A bear. I’m a bear shifter.”

“Oh.” I relaxed and closed the distance he’d created between us.

“Not like a cuddly bear shifter.” His expression was as serious as I’d ever seen it.

“I’m not scared.”

He seemed relieved, but still pensive. I just wanted to get closer to him, now that I was embracing how we clearly felt about each other.

I’d never kissed a guy in my life. I’d always been curious, but had never found anyone special enough, anyone I could trust. All the boys at my previous high schools had considered a kiss permission to insist on more. And they just moved right onto the next girl. I didn’t want that. I wanted something serious, even back then. But Aaron wasn’t a high school boy.

And even though he was older—or maybe *because* he was older and because he had some animal instincts too, like to care and protect—my own instincts told me he felt the same way I did and saw things the way I did too.

I moved my head closer to his. Our lips were virtually touching.

Suddenly, every glance he’d made the past few days, every word he’d spoken, made so much more sense. And they made me like him even more.

Adrenaline made my voice shaky, and I was whispering, just in case the words somehow made it through the apartment’s thin walls, to my mom. “You really care about me?”

He nodded, his gravelly voice going low, softer. “I really do.”

I gave in. Our lips pressed together, and he placed a hand behind my head and the other on my shoulder, anchoring me

to him.

I felt myself melting in his powerful yet tender embrace. His beard brushed my cheek and his soft mouth rubbed against mine. Our tongues explored gently, with a tentativeness on each of our parts.

It was truly a heavenly first kiss.

He slowly drew his head away. “Wow.” His voice was full of awe. “That was amazing.”

“It was.” I squeezed his hard bicep.

“So amazing, made me a bit hot.” He gave a self-conscious chuckle as he wiped a light sheen of sweat off his forehead.

I leaned forward, wanting a bit more, as he whispered, “We shouldn’t keep going. Your mom’s in the next room. I wouldn’t want to disrespect her.”

He was right. “Maybe just one more kiss, a quick one?”

Holding me tight, he gave me heaven again. It was more heated this time, his tongue exploring, his body temperature rising even more. I felt his heat seep into me. Then he withdrew, leaving me gasping, tingles running down from my scalp, across my whole body.

We both smiled then giggled like kids. I cuddled into his embrace. Feeling small against him. Safe. “Don’t laugh, but... that was my first kiss,” I admitted, hoping it wouldn’t put him off.

“Don’t laugh...it was mine too,” he said, planting a strong kiss on my head, holding me closer.

I couldn’t believe that—that he’d waited all these years for a first kiss—but his sincerity was easy to read. Professor Belanger. Aaron. He’d turned my world upside down tonight.

CHAPTER 10

Jaxon

Friday night was a great night for football.

At least, it would have been, without my dad and his obnoxious cronies sitting in the crowd. I'd been hoping they wouldn't turn up. Wishful thinking for the first game of football season.

Our eyes met across the field and throngs, and we exchanged stony nods. Whenever he came to a game, his gaze always cut into me, drawing me back to it magnetically, more powerful than any knock from the opposition, or even the roar of fifty thousand cheering football fans.

No matter how hard I tried to fight it, I craved his approval. He was my Alpha. I didn't like a vast number of things about him, even despising some of his traits, but I couldn't deny my compulsion to try and please him. And I frequently did, on the football field.

Less so in pack matters. The cold, calculating cruelty and stubbornness of his wolf made that task considerably more difficult. The pricks who buzzed around him like flies, his bootlickers, Cletus, Lester, and Brock—the Three Stooges—only encouraged him as well.

The game would be starting soon. Against our closest rivals in the paranormal college league, too. The New Omaha Chargers. I blew a hard exhale, double-checked that my shoulder pads felt the right level of tightness, and picked up my helmet off the bench. I reminded my wolf he wasn't invited to take part. Shifters were immediately banned if they even changed partially during play. Same for vamps or elementals found using supernatural powers or magic of any kind. Fae too, not that any of them played. That was beneath them. Arrogant bastards.

The air was balmy, the sky a steadily darkening dome of azure. Hot dogs, beer, and popcorn were being guzzled and munched in industrial-sized quantities. People were having a great time already, relaxing, unwinding with friends and family.

As for me, I was steeling myself for sweat and pain.

I was readying my helmet when an uplifting sight in the crowd caught my eye. Cecilia, sitting with the new friend she'd told me about, Vesta. I'd texted Cecilia again this morning, making sure her first week had gone well, and she'd told me it had, and a new friend had made all the difference. I was glad she'd found a flame child friend, to keep her company, and more importantly, make sure she was safe.

Though my wolf kept insisting that was our job. I could feel his panting, primal delight at the sight of her in the stands.

And she sure did look happy. No wonder, it was probably her first ever football game in New Nebraska. Nothing beat the atmosphere of—

Some huge, scruffy faced guy in the row behind her was brushing spilled popcorn off her shoulder. She was laughing, beaming fondly at him, like they were best buddies. My wolf's contented panting turned into a low growl. Then a fierce one, at what I saw next.

That scumbag, Xander.

Several rows across, surrounded by coven members, he was sprawling in his chair, laughing, flashing that shitty grin of his. Staring at Cecilia. Then his focus changed, peering towards me. I scowled back at him as he smiled smugly, mouthing some words over the crowd's loud bustle while giving me a thumbs up.

My senses were so heightened, I made out Xander's words without any trouble.

Break a leg, fur baby.

My wolf went berserk, snarling, barking, straining to get out from under my skin. If I shifted, my game was over and I'd be in deep shit with the coach, the guys on the team and

my dad. Focusing on my breathing, I closed my eyes and commanded my wolf to back down. He did, grudgingly, growling.

“Hey, Jax! Kick some ass out there! Go Sentinels, yay!”

Dammit. Mandy, who was the cheerleading captain, had skipped over to say hi, pompoms and tits bobbing.

I nodded, my lips pursed, trying to simultaneously ignore my dad’s gaze, Xander’s provocation, and Cecilia’s apparent flirting with some guy, while about to have one of the most important games of the season. I did not need to deal with Mandy’s shit on top of all that.

“Go Sentinels. Mandy, you’d better get back to your team. I’m about to go on, it’s about to start.”

Her beaming smile’s brightness was competing with the floodlights. “There’s still a couple of minutes. I only wanted to wish you luck, you meanie.” She did a seductive twirl and pompom flutter, ending it with a shake of her hips and a bouncing jump. “You like our new outfit design? I think it’s kinda cute, don’t you?”

No doubt a vast number of men in the stands agreed. I couldn’t care less. I looked back at Cecilia. That guy was giving her a shoulder massage now. What the fuck!

“Yeah, yeah. It’s very nice.” I rattled my helmet. “Okay, that’s me onto the field now.” If I didn’t get myself lost in the game straight away, distracting my wolf, I feared he’d soon run rampant from frustration.

I slipped on my helmet, the foam inside pressing snugly but comfortably against my skull and ears, and tapped it hard on the top twice, checking it was securely on, tugging at the front grill to make sure the same. “Okay, cheer for us hard—”

“And your dad ordered me to come over too, of course,” she blurted, looking away from me with that fake coyness I hated.

“He what?”

She shrugged. “He said you hadn’t fucked for a month, and it was no good for you.” Her voice dropped to a husky whisper as she stepped close. “He said he thought I’d be the right one to help you with that. On a permanent basis.”

Damn you, dad. Sticking your snout in, micromanaging my sex life. I’d already drank my fill of Mandy’s aura, both in bed and out of it. Her vapid, ambitious, and backstabbing character would never be what I’d choose for my Luna. Never.

I looked across at my dad and his dickhead lackeys. They were all staring, smirking.

Saying nothing, I went on to the field and joined my team. Determined to shatter the New Nebraska record for touchdowns in a game.

I did.

But every time I ran circles round them, every time I nailed the pass and upped our score, it wasn’t the roar of the crowd I heard, or the slaps on the back from my teammates I felt.

It was my wolf, whining for Cecilia.

CHAPTER 11

Cecilia

Someone seemed to be following me.

I'd noticed it a few blocks back, as I was turning away from the football stadium, after saying goodbye to Vesta. I felt eyes on me.

Aaron had gone over to chat with another professor after the game, and I'd visited the ladies' room. We'd somehow managed to lose each other in the post-game surge of celebrations—Jax and his Sentinels had steamrolled the Chargers—and there was no answer from Aaron's phone, so I'd decided to make the short walk home alone. It was only around fifteen minutes if I walked fast.

And boy, was I walking fast now. The dusky evening shades had darkened, the sky now lit by a perfect crescent and sparkles swimming in a pitch-black sea. The breeze had strengthened too. I tugged down my cardigan sleeves and pulled the neckline's soft cotton tight around my upper chest and throat, clutching it in place as I moved faster, looking behind me every so often.

Approaching the New Lincoln Aquatic Center, I flicked my head round, trying to catch whoever was on my tail. A blurry figure darted into an alleyway. There was no doubt now.

Someone was there. And they were tall, and bigger than me.

I rocketed from a stride to a hurried pace, halfway between power walk and jog.

I could have called Jax, but I'd have been home well before he could come, and anyway, by now he was probably being hoisted up in the air and sprayed with champagne by his

teammates or however it was paranormals celebrated. It was better just to move faster and get behind a locked door.

Hauling ass for the next few blocks, checking quickly for traffic, and crossing the intersection, I saw the familiar top of my apartment block looming from behind a graffiti-covered wall. Not long to go. I looked back again, almost tripping on an uneven flagstone, I was moving so fast. Nobody there now. Maybe they'd gone looking for somebody less vigilant to harass. I turned back around and—

Thump! I smacked right into a chest.

Staggering backwards, gasping, I was confronted by a pale-faced guy with jet black clothing and slicked hair just as dark. His cobalt eyes burned fiercely bright, tinged in scarlet, like gemstones from a far-flung planet. He was the coven leader from the park confrontation.

Perfectly handsome. Devilishly so. And a bloodsucker.

My mouth and throat turned to sandpaper as my heart began to thump. I looked around, searching, ready to cry out to the nearest person I saw for help. But there was nobody, just a sidewalk bathed in hazy streetlight and shadows. Everyone was on the other side of town, celebrating the winning game.

“Good evening,” he said with a thin smile. The words oozed out, lazily, his expression casual, self-assured.

“You—you're a...” My words trailed off and I gulped, looking around again, praying for an NLPD cruiser to magically appear on the street.

“...a Capricorn? How ever did you know?” he asked, raising his eyebrows to form a look of mock surprise.

He stepped forward, and I instinctively moved back. He kept moving towards me, slow, slinking, his stare burrowing into my eyes, flitting to every point of my face, my hair, ears.

My neck.

I pulled my cardigan tighter, shivering.

His tongue peeked out between his lips and his expression melted into one of bliss, like he'd just eaten a decadent

chocolate.

He moved faster now, corralling me away from the streetlight's glow, bullying me, spreading his arms wide to stop me dodging past. He tilted his head, appearing perplexed I was even trying to resist.

Cornered, I nudged against a nearby wall, the sudden thud of rough brickwork into my back making me jump.

There, in the shadows, his eyes shone even brighter. "You're really very pretty, you know."

I was frozen to the spot, shaking. I could see the tips of his vamp teeth, poking from his mouth.

Surging forward, all but smothering me, his fangs grazed my earlobe, coursing shivers across my body. He hissed softly, deeply into my ear, "Cat got your tongue, my love?"

I stammered out a reply. "I'm no—I'm not your love. Leave me alone. I'll scream, I swear."

His mouth was hovering near mine as he replied, the words spoken huskily, every syllable excruciatingly slow. "Oh, please. Promise you will."

"I'm friends with Jaxon Hemming, and a flame child. You'd better get lost, or you'll be in big trouble. Don't you dare touch me!"

Stepping back a fraction, he tilted his head again, looking confused once more.

"And a bear's coming too!" I threatened.

At that, he snickered, fluttering his fingers across the air, as if playing an invisible piano, then bringing them to his mouth, mimicking a scared child. "Ohhh, scary stuff. Sounds like I'd better watch out."

Then, bizarrely, he went down on one knee, extending a hand of invitation. "Come, my love. Enough of this false resistance. Everyone feels the draw. Back to the coven house with me. Let me show you a heaven fiercer than any hell."

I managed to get more oxygen into my lungs, and focus on my breathing, slowing it down a little. God only knew why, but he seemed to want consent for whatever depraved action he had planned. And I wasn't going to give it. "No, thank you. Get lost! You can't just behave like this!"

Suddenly, fangs grown fuller, he lunged, straight at my—he stopped, still as a statue, an inch from my jugular. I tried to scream, but only a strained gurgle came out.

"You've got quite the resilience. Brave too, in a funny sort of way. I can see why that spoiled little Fae Prince is smitten."

"What?" What on earth was he—

"Hey, what the hell are you doing?!" A voice bellowed from behind us.

The hulking frame of Aaron stood on the sidewalk, his fists clenched and face red with anger. "Get away from her, right now."

I'd never been so glad to see anyone in my entire life.

The vampire sighed like a child who'd been told playtime was over. Walking over to within a few feet of Aaron, swaggering under the streetlight, he asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm the guy who's telling you to get out of here, now."

"Oh, yes, of course, from the stadium. And you must be a bear. Her bear." The vamp chuckled, looking over at me. "She your property, is she?" He turned back towards Aaron, moving his hands in lazy circles, vampsplaining. "You know, big guy, has nobody ever told you, sharing is caring?"

Aaron moved closer, squaring up to the vamp, dwarfing him. He looked like the baddest nerd on planet earth.

"Get going. I don't want to see you near her again. Go on. Move."

The vamp tutted. "That's a bit greedy, isn't it, big fella?"

"I won't tell you again." He pressed aggressively against the vamp, towering over him, his mild manner engulfed in malice. "You don't want to see me angry."

Smirking, the vamp shrugged. “I don’t want to see you now.”

“Fuck. Off.” The words were shocking, coming from my gentle bear.

Rolling his eyes, the vamp relented. “Fine, whatever.” He turned around and began sauntering down the street, shouting behind him as he went.

“I’ll see you around, my love!”

CHAPTER 12

Osric

Aaron was in quite the tizzy.

He'd battered through the front door of our penthouse with such savage force, I'd had to check the hinges were still properly attached.

While I was checking the door, he threw his shirt off and started pacing back and forth in the living room, hands on hips and face all a fluster. He was snarling and grumbling and spitting out considerably more curse words than I'd ever heard from him before. "Fucking vamp! Crazy, bloodsucking bastard!"

His Olympian physique was glistening in sweat. And I had to admit to being a tad envious of all the muscle. Fae weren't inclined to bulkiness, no matter how hard we suffered at the gym. We made up for it in other ways though.

"Damn, I'm fucking hot." He wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

"You certainly are, luvvie." I nodded at his chiseled torso and licked my lips, trying to inject a little levity into the drama.

He huffed. "Don't, I'm being serious. My bear is raging. I can feel him clawing at my insides, trying to get out."

That jangled my nerves. I had no desire to deal with that colossal, unpredictable grizzly, nor for him to rage rampant in our penthouse. There might be nothing left of it, or me, if he did. Keeping a calm manner, I spoke softly, saying, "Well, just breathe, old chap. Breathe deeply, focus, let's try to calm him down."

I walked to the kitchen, the whole floor plan was open, so we didn't lose eye contact, and I reached for the medicine

cabinet. Well, booze cupboard, as some might have called it. “How about a drink, to soothe the nerves?”

Aaron nodded. “Just one. The last thing we need is him getting drunk.”

“Agreed.” I perused the packed cupboard, and its two dozen bottles of all shades and shapes. “I’m afraid I’ve forgotten what your poison is.” I picked out a bottle of particularly expensive single malt Scotch for myself. Aaron drank so rarely, and was usually such a sober and sensible chap, I couldn’t remember what he liked.

“Whatever you’re having, it doesn’t matter.” He strode to the southern wall, which was floor-to-ceiling glass. He stood staring out pensively over the Kings’ Hills and the glittering lights of New Lincoln.

“Scotch it is then.” I tinkled some ice cubes into two crystal tumblers, squeaked the bottle’s cork free and poured a generous measure into each glass.

I walked across and handed one to him. “Here, it’s strong, so best to sip—”

He guzzled it in two clinks of ice against crystal and gasped in satisfaction. “Thanks.” He handed it straight back to me and resumed his pacing of the living room’s length.

I clunked his empty glass on the counter and tipped a mouthful of my own whiskey. The spirit’s smoky vapors wisped, pleasing my nose, as the liquid did the same in my stomach, filling it with a warm, reassuring glow.

I hoped the alcohol was having the same sedative effect on Aaron’s grizzly.

“Any better?” I asked.

Aaron sighed. “A bit, yeah. Thanks. He’s still pretty wound up though.”

I gestured to the couch. “For goodness’ sake, at least have a seat. All that pacing back and forth can’t be helping. At the very least, you’ll wear a hole in the rug.”

Nodding, he sat, but in far from a relaxed fashion, perching on the edge, brushing his palm across his head repeatedly, messing up his already disheveled hair. He sighed and exhaled strongly and far too quickly, again in succession, almost like an animal panting.

I stood across from him, hoping talking things out calmly might avert a potential catastrophe.

“Okay, so, just breathe, in and out again, but focus on slowing it down.”

He looked at me and tried to match my next long inhale. And long exhale. We repeated the exercise a few more times and at least he wasn’t panting anymore.

“Now, you were saying something about a vampire?”

“Yeah, yeah. He’s a coven leader. I’ve seen him around campus.”

“I see. And what exactly happened?”

“Okay, we were at the game and—”

“Game?”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “The football game. *American* football.”

“Oh, of course, of course. The game. Yes, how silly of me.” Two groups of meatheads fighting over a scrap of inflated cow leather. How thrilling. “Please, continue.”

“We were at the game, Cecilia and I—”

“Cecilia?” Her name shone within the sentence, slapping my ears alive, honing my focus. Cecilia. My growing infatuation with her was so deeply and profoundly confusing. And undeniable. “Oh, uh, who’s that, again?”

“The student, the girl, I’m—you know, extremely interested in. Devoted to. Keen on, if that helps your British brain wrap your head around it.” He really was very worked up tonight.

“Oh, yes, I think I do recall you mentioning her.” Only every bloody day this week and nonstop when he wasn’t

working or on the phone with her since he'd had that first kiss of his mid-week. "So, what happened?"

He made a harsh sound of annoyance, his bear still very close to the surface. He growled out, replying with decidedly more sharpness than I was used to. "I'd tell you, if you'd just shut up for two minutes."

"Of course, I'm sorry. Please, go on." I gulped more whiskey, feeling it burn its way down my gullet.

"We separated briefly, after the game was done, so I could chat with a colleague, and she could visit the bathroom. I lost her after that." His voice brimmed with regret. "A lot of people were celebrating, taking selfies, falling over the place drunk, clogging up the exits. I couldn't get through the crowds quickly enough and ended up leaving through a different exit. My phone had run out of juice too, so I couldn't call her. I spent ages looking for her." Face contorting into a grimace, he hung his head.

I placed a hand on his shoulder. The sweat-filmed flesh radiated intense heat into my palm. "Not your fault. Those things happen. And then?"

"Then I eventually decided she must have gone home alone. So I went along the route that runs quickest to her apartment."

"Okay..."

"I found her being harassed by that vamp son of a bitch. It looked like he was trying to enchant her, get her back to his coven, no doubt to use her, in the worst possible ways."

The image of that sweet, silly little human being preyed upon by a pasty-faced fang fucker, stirred a surprisingly strong level of anger inside me. I'd never felt such a need to punch something or go find her, to make sure she was okay myself. I washed down more whiskey, maintaining my calm façade. "And did you kick the living shit out of him?"

He shook his head, and pressed his index finger into his lightly haired, granite slab of pectoral muscle. I really was bloody envious of his chest, compared to my smaller and

hairless one. “That’s *his* way, not mine. I got the bloodsucker to back off and leave though, by threatening him.”

I drained the remainder of my drink, catching two fragile ice cubes between my teeth, saying through crunching mumbles, “So, he left her alone, and you escorted her back to her apartment?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, so...”

“I suggested I keep watch outside, sleeping in the hallway, in case he came back.”

“And she wasn’t agreeable, obviously?”

“She said the building had secure communal entry, and her own door had a solid lock, and she didn’t want her mom to think anything was up and get sick from worry. She assured me not to worry either, and said she’d call the NLPD if she heard any strange noises.”

“Sounds sensible enough.”

“Except, I think maybe she was scared if I stayed—kept worrying—my beast would come out.”

“Oh, I see. She said that?”

“No, but I got that vibe from her. She was trying to calm me down.”

The girl’s instincts were clever. “I see. Well, not to worry, the vamp in question probably toddled off and found someone less trouble to have his fun with. There are a surprising number of girls willing for that sort of thing, after all.”

“I suppose so. But I don’t know, I should’ve insisted on staying outside her apartment. Just in case. I think I should go back. I’ve got a bad feeling maybe he’s still skulking around the area.”

I motioned towards his chest. “And if *he* makes an appearance?” I signaled right at his glistening muscles, which had started pulsing a bit, making my point absolutely clear. “Can you guarantee the outcome?”

Aaron said nothing, the flash of fear in his eyes giving the answer. The grizzly within him was wildly unpredictable, and we both knew it.

“Look, if this girl is precious to you, as my most valued friend, then, by default, she’s precious to me too.” I placed my empty tumbler on the living room table. “I’ll pop over and have a scout around the area. If there’s a vamp lurking,”—I tapped my temple twice—“you know I’ll pick up on it one way or another.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite sure.” Also sure were the niggles of doubt at the back of my mind. This couldn’t be good for the habits I’d picked up this week. My stalking was going to jump up a level, to right outside her home.

“And if you do find him lurking?”

“I’ll tell him to leave. Permanently.”

He gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “I’ve already done that. That won’t be enough.”

“Relax, I’m sure once he’s introduced to Juniper, he’ll see things my way.”

“Who?”

I chuckled. He’d never actually seen Juniper, despite our friendship—a friendship strong enough that I even frequently sat in on his classes of my own accord, to stave off boredom and loneliness. I thought at some point in the past, I must have shown him, but apparently not. In any case, I tended not to summon her forth, not unless absolutely necessary.

“Watch this.” I opened my hand and focused on my palm. It began to smoke, then billow, the fumes resembling something between gunpowder and burning metal. Electric crackles coursed through my veins, popping, and fizzling from the tips of my fingers, the sensation feeling like a fleeting bout of pins and needles.

The smoke wisped away as quickly as it had spewed out, and I now clasped a weapon like no other. Drawn from the

void, coated in the runes of the Fae royal bloodline, both blade and handle gleamed translucent green. It spiked from my grip, a large dagger, a foot of razor menace, curved like a scimitar, glinting intermittently from the glowing runes badged across its surface.

“Damn, is that a real ethereal blade?”

“Bravo, bravo. Only an educated man would know that.” This was one of the many reasons I liked Aaron so much. I brought it closer to him so he could take it all in, turning it to show off the runes, and the exquisite, rich, green hues. “Meet Juniper. Her keenness never dulls, she can never be broken, she cuts through any earthly material with ease.” I turned from Aaron briefly, pointing the blade horizontally, fencing style. “And I am the only being in existence who can wield her.”

“Absolutely incredible...I don’t think you should kill him though.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry, old chap. That would be a last resort, indeed. No, I’ll just slice off a sliver or two of vampire flesh, if need be.”

I tensed my hand, and the blade melted to haze, then smoke, which sucked itself back inside my palm, until no trace of the weapon remained.

“Relax, rest. Convince your bear to sleep. Juniper and I are on the case.”



I found the so-called secure communal door slightly ajar and sauntered straight in.

The apartment’s hallway was rather underwhelming. A blinking neon strip for light and a carpet covered in suspect stains. The university, like most private organizations in New Nebraska, clearly valued profits over their workers’ quality of life.

Treading stealthily, keeping my senses alert for the presence of vampires, I used the stairs then walked down towards the door number Aaron had given me. As I’d

promised him, I wouldn't knock or otherwise disturb the girl, but instead scan for possible threats.

The door was coated in faded red paint, a tad scratched and chipped, but with no obvious signs of anyone trying to tamper—oh, hold on now. Trying the handle, turning it painfully slowly so as not to cause noise, I found it felt slightly rickety, loose. As if someone had been interfering with it. Yet the door was still locked.

And I sensed an aura of note. Not human, definitely. Perhaps vampire, or something else, it wasn't entirely clear. The energy lingered around the doorknob, trailing off out an open window across the hallway. I looked out, seeing the drop was a good forty feet, with no obvious way to scale up or jump down. If someone had entered or exited via the window, it was no human.

I'd patrol the vicinity and see what else I could find. I reset the communal door's lock and closed it behind me. Sighing, sucking in the cool night air, I began a leisurely stroll around the block.

I sensed more of the same energy, strong, but a bit foreign to me, in a spot that provided a perfect view into Cecilia's living room window.

That creepy fucker. Was it that vampire who'd been watching her or someone else?

As I tried and failed to figure out the energy source and suppressed an errant thought that I'd been watching her a tad creepily myself this week, my eyes took in a welcome sight: Cecilia. Safe and unharmed. She'd risen from the couch and was stretching. Wearing only a pair of sleep shorts and camisole, she arched her back, lifting her chest, then went to the kitchen for a glass of water.

My own throat felt a bit parched too.

Oh well. I would be as well sticking around and making sure whoever was interested in the girl and putting off such potent paranormal ability wasn't going to make a return.

It was going to be a long night.

The things I did for friendship. And for Cecilia.

CHAPTER 13

Cecilia

Soothing sun rays spilled across the couch, warming the blanket as I nuzzled my head into the pillow. I told myself just ten more minutes, then I'd get up. Or maybe fifteen. It was Saturday, after all.

I'd closed the living room's blackout curtain after getting a glass of water last night, so Mom must have left her door open, letting in the light.

I stretched over and checked the time on my phone. 8:15am. Mom was hardly ever up this early. I sat up, asking though half-open eyes, "Mom?"

No answer. I rubbed my face, yawning and stretching. I ambled to her bedroom door, knocking on the edge gently. "Mom? Did you sleep okay? You're up early."

I walked in. "Mom, are—"

She wasn't there. Bathroom was empty too. Strange. She'd barely ventured out of the apartment since we'd moved in, especially in the early morning.

Her phone was on the dresser. Leaving it behind wasn't unusual though. She complained all the time about how much cells disrupted society. Walking into the room, I picked it up, tapped the screen—the battery was dead. Testimony to how often she used it.

Where had she gone? I wasn't desperately worried, she was my mom not my child, but I did wish she'd woken me to let me know. I'd take a slight detour on my way to the library this morning, past the nearest café, *Marco's*, on the off chance she'd wanted an early morning Americano. Coffee was one of the few things she still enjoyed daily, and the instant stuff I'd

bought from the supermarket was crap, so it was possible she'd gone there.

I showered, dabbed on a little makeup, and tugged on some jeans that were tearing around my knees—they hadn't been when I'd bought them—and a fresh blouse. My cardigan's cotton sleeves were fraying around the cuffs, so I plucked a few stray threads as I sipped a quick cup of cloying, cheap coffee. If my mom had gone to Marco's, she'd be enjoying hers a lot more than me.

My phone chimed, a text arriving. It was my gentle bear.

Hey beautiful, how's your morning going so far? I'm so sorry for having to go away this weekend. Can't be helped. I'd rather be near you...

He ended his message with a sad emoji.

I almost responded back with one too.

I wished Aaron hadn't had to go to the conference in Omaha this weekend. But he was aspiring to full professorship, so he needed to be constantly increasing his knowledge, networking with other academics, and making a name for himself.

It's totally fine, you have to go to these things. I miss you too though.

His reply came back in less than a minute.

If you need anything, or anybody makes you feel unsafe, like you see that vamp creep hanging around, please contact me immediately. I'll send a reliable friend to help.

I looked out the window. Thankfully, with it being Saturday, the streets were already starting to get busy, despite the early hour. The sunlight and steadily increasing bustle made outside seem like another world from the shadowy, deserted place I'd experienced the night before.

I sent Aaron back a thumbs up emoji and quickly followed it with a heart.

Pouring the half-full coffee out and placing the cup in the sink, I brushed my teeth and hurried out the door. I was

looking forward to studying in the tranquil refuge of the library, but I knew my focus would be off until I saw my mom again, especially if she wasn't at Marco's.

And she wasn't. I even popped inside and asked the barista. Nobody matching her description had been in.

I reminded myself she was an adult and entitled to go out on a Saturday morning without announcing it to the world.

I just wished she'd left me a note.



Sirens screamed past me as I drew near to the central heart of the university. Three cruisers and a white van, all emblazoned in NLPD lettering and insignias. Their wails and flashing lights jarred my already fraying nerves.

Walking onto the campus' main quad, I was met by a swollen crowd of professors, staff and students, all mumbling, peering, taking videos and pictures with phones and upstretched arms. They were focused on the break in buildings between the library and science building. The alleyway, for lack of a better word.

Those same emergency vehicles that had flown by me were now parked in the quad, with the cops hurriedly yanking and affixing yellow and black tape, across the alleyway's entrance, ordering people to get back. It was like something out of a movie.

Campus security moved people along, shoving, and arguing with students, telling them there was nothing to see. But clearly there was.

An elemental student towards the front began levitating, obviously hoping for a better view. He floated too far forward, knocking into the police tape. His friends mocked his careless flying. A police officer grabbed him by the legs, dragged him from the air, and threatened to arrest him for obstruction if he didn't get lost, causing a whole bunch of his buddies to shout curses at the police in protest.

I decided I should go.

But the library's large oak outer doors were closed. I wondered if the librarian had locked them, or just wanted to keep out the crowd's noise. With all eyes fixed on the elementals, and their confrontation with the angry police officers, I moseyed up the steps and tried the iron ring handle, clasping and tugging on its rough, rippled surface, hoping my journey from home hadn't been wasted.

It hadn't. The latch clunked, the door creaked open, and I discreetly sidled inside. I walked through the outer hallway and into the library's main section. There were some muffled sounds of commotion coming through the windows, but my eardrums sighed relief after the racket outside.

Then a sickly feeling stirred in the pit of my stomach. Irrational, unfounded, but overwhelming: what if the incident in the alley was related to my mom?

Gulping, I looked over at the library's alley-side windows. I could take a peek, and probably see what was going on.

A powerful, trembling sensation spread along my chest and limbs, my neck turning icy, numb, as I shuffled closer, reluctantly, towards a window looking out beyond the police cordon, around halfway along the building's length. I was being totally unreasonable, letting anxiety take over my brain as I approached the glass, but something told me, something terrible said—

It wasn't my mom.

I let out a hard exhale.

It was a dead body, but not my mom. Thank God. Though someone had died. And I felt horrible at the whole situation.

Those feelings were made worse by the horrendous state the corpse was in. Whoever the victim was, they'd been carved up and defiled with a level of contempt, of brutality, that nobody could possibly have deserved. I had to look away, my system flooding with nausea. The Fae librarian was standing at the next window along, a somber look on her face. She turned towards me, and our eyes met. Her expression mirrored my feelings exactly.

New Nebraska had its own Jack the Ripper.



Studying was a challenge. I moved to a deserted corner, on the opposite side from the alley, hiding behind shelves of dusty, leatherbound tomes. But even after the crowd had dispersed and the muffled rumble of car engines had melted away, my mind kept getting drawn back to the horrors that had happened just feet from the building I was in. On top of that, I was running through scenarios in my mind, of what I'd do if my mom wasn't home when I got back. I wasn't sure who to ask for help or if there even was anyone who'd want to give it.

I wouldn't disturb Aaron yet, not when nothing had really happened other than my mom going out and me running into a crime scene, at the worst possible time.

A text interrupted my thoughts. From Jax.

Hey, how's your mom doing today? Do you think she'd be ok with you having a couple of hours self-defense practice with me later?

My mind wasn't in the right place for lots of texts back and forth.

That's so kind of you to offer, but it's not such a great day for it, sorry.

He replied soon after.

Is everything ok?

Nope.

Yep.

Everything from today combined with the fright from the vampire the night before blended together and hit me all at once. I felt panicky, threatened, despite the library's calmness. I wanted to feel safe.

I texted Jax again.

Actually, not really. I don't feel safe. It's so stupid, but I don't want to walk home alone.

Jax's answer pinged about three seconds after.

Where are you? I'm coming right now.

I replied.

Meet outside the library?

A thumbs up appeared. I hoped he'd come quick.

The police tape was still there, fluttering in the breeze, along with a shoulder-high steel barrier saying: *Police – Access Prohibited.*

In less than ten minutes Jax was there, muscles bulging in a tight T-shirt, a concerned look on his face. He jogged straight up to me and must have seen the worry in my eyes.

“You okay?”

I shook my head. “Not really.”

“You need a hug?”

“Please.”

He wrapped me in his arms and squeezed. I sighed, long and deep. It turned into a whimper. I tried to muffle it against his shirt, but he heard it. He tightened his grip and practically lifted me off my feet. At least with him here, nobody could hurt me.

“Want to talk about it?” He pulled back a bit, but left his arms around me.

I told him about the night before, about the crazy vamp, and worries over my mom today, staring at the police tape, the horror scene I'd witnessed in the alley.

He growled under his breath, and I could tell he was holding back his anger over the vamp, especially when I told him it was the same one he'd been arguing with in the park.

By the time I was done, his eyes shone with a mixture of compassion and rage, and they actually glowed a bit, with a yellow tinge, like his wolf was watching me too.

“Everything's going to work out, Ceci.” His tone was restrained, but confident.

Some of the weight I'd been carrying fell from my shoulders.

A gaggle of girls strolled near, stopping beside the police barrier, peering, pointing, and clucking like hens, flaunting designer handbags and heels. Their attention soon moved to Jax.

I'd seen them around campus. They were cheerleaders and friends with Mandy.

My eyes shied away as they whispered and smirked.

Turning and scowling at them, Jax pointed across the quad. "You lot, go. Now."

Their grins melted and they skulked off, designer heels clacking on the flagstones.

Maybe they were part of Jax's pack, with how quickly they responded to his authority. Or maybe it was just his strength and sternness. Whatever it was about his commanding presence, it was comforting. I was so glad he was here. I was glad I'd asked him to come.

"I was supposed to be studying all day, but I just can't focus. I need to get home and see if my mom's back."

"Can I come with you?"

"If it's not too much trouble?"

He clasped my upper arm, his strong touch surging tingles, reassurance throughout my body. "Of course not. Anything you'd ask would never be any trouble, okay?"

We walked back through the city towards my place. The afternoon sun was still out but fading. Distracted by thoughts of my mom, and visions about the murder scene, I made what small talk I could, complimenting him on his amazing football performance, his speed, the way he'd gotten straight up after even the strongest blows. He was modest, dismissive, not making a big deal out of it.

Listening to his soothing voice as we walked, I even developed some sympathy for Mandy, and her obsession over Jax. Who wouldn't be happy with him as their guy?

We reached the communal door of my apartment building. I unlocked it, and Jax held it open, beckoning me to go ahead.

At my apartment front door, I took a deep breath, praying my mom would be inside, sitting on the couch, watching TV. I put the key in the lock and turned the—the handle felt odd. Looser, like it had been fiddled with. I couldn't be sure if it had been that way in the morning, having been in such a rush. I stared at Jax in silence, then looked at the doorknob. He read my thoughts.

Placing a single finger across his lips, he gently moved me behind him, and slowly, quietly, opened the door, stepping inside with his face serious and fists clenched. I followed, hiding behind the V-shape of his back.

The good news: there was no intruder.

The bad news: my mom wasn't there either.

I gulped, fishing my phone out of my bag. "I think I should call NLPD. This isn't like my mom. Something's wrong."

He nodded. "Can I offer some advice?"

"Sure."

"If you call them now, when it's not even been twenty-four hours, they'll just ask you to wait for her and call back." He looked at me with kind eyes, as if he understood the desperation painted on my face. "It might even make them think you're just anxious, overreacting, especially after what happened on campus today. It's all over the news. I think there'll be a few girls on edge tonight, across the whole city."

That's right, I had to sleep alone in my apartment tonight, with a killer running around. "Oh, I—"

"Perhaps I should stay?" His confident manner stumbled somewhat as he tapped the couch arm with an awkward smile. "Uh, I'll sleep here, of course."

The couch barely held my small frame. Embarrassed, I said, "You might be sleeping sitting up. I'm sorry. I don't have a bigger space to offer."

“Don’t be silly.” He nodded at my mom’s bedroom door. “Why don’t you go to bed, and I’ll make do just fine here, I promise.”

I didn’t want to be separated from the feeling of safety he gave me, even by thin walls and a flimsy door. And it felt weird sleeping in my mom’s bed, when she could have been back any minute. “I should stay in here, and sit up, for when my mom comes back.”

“Sure, of course. How about a distraction while we wait? TV?”

“Good idea.” I switched it on and found a rom com on a movie channel. Jax watched it just as intently as I did, though he glanced over at me a lot and his eyes held that yellow glow I was beginning to think was his wolf. And as the movie changed to a drama and the hours went by, I found myself yawning then having to sleep.

Jax put a pillow across his lap, and I laid my head on it. Wrapping me in my blanket, checking I was warm enough, he lowered the TV’s volume. “Sweet dreams,” he whispered.

I soon drifted off, exhausted from the day’s strain.

Protected by the wolf.

CHAPTER 14

Xander

Who's afraid of the big, bad wolf?

A fair number of people, was the answer. Me, not so much. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here now, without my coven, standing outside this particular apartment.

Where the scent of a sexually aroused wolf shifter blasted from around the door.

And not just any wolf, either. No, Jaxon Hemming, heir to a furry throne, was drenching half the building with his horndog pheromones.

I hadn't known he was involved with the girl, not until now—she'd called them friends, not lovers—and I could have retreated and approached her later, when she was alone.

But there was no thrill in that.

Clenching my jaw, bracing in preparation for the inevitable, I rapped a rhythmic knock on the scratched wood and stood back. The look on his face was going to be priceless.

The door swung open to reveal the precious little human, her tempting features drenched in stress, as she blurted, "Mom?"

I looked myself up and down, feigning confusion. "I'm afraid not. Not unless you know something I don't?"

Her eyes flared wide, terrified. "You..."

I pressed both palms downwards, as if calming an invisible, riled up terrier. "I come in peace, my exquisite little orchid. I—"

Her voice rocketed. "Jax! Jaaaax!"

Keeping my own volume low, I said, “There’s really no need for that. I’m only here—”

He appeared at the door. His scowl fueled my smirk. His face was *so* serious, I couldn’t help laughing. “Jaxon, good to see you. This isn’t what it looks—”

Wham! He knocked me onto my ass with a vicious right hook. My facial muscles had been tensing, expecting it, but no amount of preparation could have removed the shock entirely. I shook my head, groaning, clasp my aching jaw to check nothing was fractured. My vamp bones had an extremely high pain threshold, but the fur baby had broken through it.

Moving into the hallway, he stood over me with his fists clenched. “Get up, you sack of shit. I’m gonna kick your ass all the way back to your coven.”

Still sitting, I leaned against the wall, raising my hands in surrender. The hallway carpet was giving off a distinct whiff. Piss with traces of white rum. Human, it seemed. There were public toilets all over New Lincoln, and yet some foul man had insisted on using this hallway instead. And they called us vampires gross. “I’m not here to do any harm. Just to talk. Sincerely.”

He scoffed, his scowl not easing one bit. “Sincerely? When have you ever been sincere, you walking hard on?!”

Rubbing my jaw, trying to massage out the ache, I laughed. “I plead guilty to the walking hard on charge. Really, it can’t be helped. I’m a vampire.” I shrugged. “But in this case, perhaps for the first time in my existence,”—my eyes met the girl’s— “I am sincere in my feelings, for the human.”

Jaxon grasped me by the shirt collar, screwed it tight against my neck, and hoisted me up with one hand, pinning me to the wall. I kept my hands up, palms facing outward, making no attempt to fight back.

He readied his colossal fist, drawing it back, the muscles in his arm swelling and twitching. “Her name is Cecilia. And she’s not interested in being your next snack.”

“She’s not a sna—”

Wham! This blow thudded into my nose. The searing pain spread outwards, across my face, and I felt a bit woozy, my feet stumbling. Jaxon pinned me even harder against the wall, readying another strike.

“I deserved that, for my errant behavior. But please wait. Let’s talk about this.”

“Talk?” Cecilia interjected.

Jaxon shook his head. “You’ve been asking for this for a long time, with all the shit you’ve pulled. I’ve been way too tolerant of you.”

I nodded, as best I could, with my bunched-up shirt and his malicious grip blocking the forward motion of my head. “You’re right. Absolutely.” I then appealed to Cecilia. “I apologize, sincerely, for my behavior last night. If I scared you —”

“Scared? Scared? I was terrified!” She was hiding mostly behind the wolf, looking sheepish—ironically—but her tone was sharp, bold.

“And I apologize, a thousand times, sorry. I didn’t think it would be such a long conversation. Girls just usually—well, they actually get attached—straight away. Not you though, dear Cecilia. Your resistance was both surprising and sublime.”

Wham! Another one on the nose. The pain was the sharpest I’d felt in decades, perhaps longer. I moaned.

Cecilia made a small sound of distress, as if sympathizing with my pain.

I looked to her, to her expression of concern. “Do you want him to hit me all day, sweet girl? I’d let him, for you.”

Stepping forward to stand beside Jaxon, her tone softening, but only slightly, she said, “Well, you would deserve it if he did, for behaving that way.”

I creaked another nod. “I would.” My hands still signaling a lack of will to retaliate, I stared at Jaxon. “And I would

suffer anything, for my sweet orchid. I'm not fighting back, so get on with it, if that's what she wants."

He tensed his arm, readied his fist, the pre-lunge grimace carved into his face. The tanned skin of his knuckles had turned bone white, he was clenching so hard, about to—

"Jax, wait." She placed a dainty palm on his shoulder and looked at me, nose wrinkling in confusion. "Why are you talking that way?"

"What way?"

"Like...you love me, or something?"

Now she was getting it. "There is no 'something,' queen of my heart."

Jaxon's grip tightened. "Shut up, you sleazy bastard. I know what you do with girls. It has nothing to do with love."

"It hasn't before. And anyway, you're hardly an angel yourself, Pup." I gave him a knowing look then turned to Cecilia, as much as Jaxon would let me. "Last time I was up this way, my love, there was another chap. Or has the wolf chased off the bear?"

"We're just friends." Cecilia patted Jaxon's back, like you would pat the back of a buddy, but as she left her hand there and gave his large muscles a squeeze, the gesture looked very loving. "Not that it's any of your business, you..."

"The name you're searching for is Xander, please." I jerked my head towards Jaxon. "If you only heard him address me, you'd think my name was shitbag."

"Suits you pretty well," Jaxon snarled.

"Anyway, we're just friends." She still had her hand on the pup, who seemed far from pleased at being called just a friend, then she narrowed her eyes on me, frowning. "And you're far too presumptuous, and you need to respect girls, and not scare the hell out of them, and another thing—"

"Friends, friends, yes, yes. I believe you. Thousands wouldn't, of course. And I am very sorry about that night." I really was. I needed to do better for this girl—my lovely,

sweet innocent—because my obsession wasn't going anywhere.

Jaxon released his grip, shoving me hard with both arms, the force sending me several feet along the hallway. “Nobody cares what you think. You apologized. Now fuck off, and don't come back. Next time I'll punch you back to Transylvania.”

I snickered. That was a good one, I liked that. But I didn't like having to leave Cecilia.

“Cecilia?” Boring my gaze into her, I channeled my seductive powers more intensely than I ever had before, in all my countless years on the planet. “Can't you and I be friends too?”

She looked at me, the frown faded, her eyes sad. “Tell me something.”

“What's that, dear *friend*?”

“Did you have anything to do with my mom going missing?”

She'd resisted my slickest attempt at charm, instead showing care only for her mother. This girl was *incredibly* special. Her question came out of left field though. “Your mom?”

Jaxon grunted, posturing for a fresh confrontation. “Answer her. I'll know if you're lying.”

“Yes, you have a talent for that, don't you.” I smoothed out my ruffled collar, pulling my shirt back down. “No, I didn't. I don't kidnap innocents. Am I lying?”

It gave me pleasure to see the pup grudgingly agree. “Fine. Now fuck—”

“But I do have access to a vast network of eyes and ears. Unrivalled within the city, actually, my coven happens to be. I could”—I tugged at a tiny flap of the hallway's peeling wallpaper lazily—“set them the task of finding someone. Uh, for a friend, of course...”

“You'd do that?” she asked, not masking the eagerness in her voice.

“I swear on my coven. I’ll do everything within my power to return your mom to you, safe and sound.”

She stepped forward and her eyes traced my face, as if checking it for my sincerity, but as her gaze lingered, I could sense she was also making sure I was okay after Jaxon’s blows. And her care made me crave her even more.

As for Jaxon, the poor pup, his eyes told me how badly he yearned for her too. I didn’t hate him for that. I gauged he was as helpless as me. How incredible this human girl was. A bear, a wolf, a Fae prince and now a coven leader, all drawn to her aura, like lovelorn little boys. Exactly what it was within her we all craved, I wasn’t clear on yet, but I’d delve deeper.

If only this Beta boy would get off his high horse and stop despising me for being what I was, for my way with the ladies, for my need of blood. The funny thing though, he wasn’t even that much of an asshole, compared to many paranormals I’d tangled with. And I had a feeling that finding Cecilia’s mom would go at least some way to smoothing things with both her and him, her wolf admirer.

I took some details from Cecilia, left the apartment building, opened my phone, and went straight to work. If that woman, Kathy, was to be found, I would be the one to do it.

And then I would reap the gratitude from her enchanting daughter.

CHAPTER 15

Cecilia

The dining hall offerings were especially unappetizing this morning. On a depressing Monday, to boot. I scooped another spoonful of cereal, the weary flakes drooping over the spoon's side, crying tears of skimmed milk back into the bowl, their sporadic splashes dotting the tabletop.

I clinked the spoon down and sipped from a Styrofoam cup of dishwasher tea. I was done with the cornflakes. Picking up a piece of toast, I crunched an unenthusiastic bite.

Putting the slice down on the plate, I sighed. It wouldn't have mattered how good the food was, I had little appetite. At least Vesta would be here soon. Yesterday, I'd told her about my mom disappearing, and she'd helped me and Jax search. She'd even insisted on meeting up again this morning before classes. Her fiery—no pun intended—determination to make sure I got through all this was so encouraging, a beacon in this dark time.

Just like the new guys in my life.

Jax and I had combed the campus for sightings of my mom and his gruff, hulking wolf pack asked around every business within his dad's vast network. Aaron had left the conference early yesterday—after he could tell something was wrong in my texts—and once he got back, and I trembled in his arms and told him what happened, he sent out email after email, making inquiries among the hundreds of staff and thousands of students. He'd also enlisted his best friend, who I'd yet to meet, who was apparently a super sleuth with status and magic most could only dream of.

Then there was Xander.

Having warily agreed to give him my number, he'd shared every single text and email update from his coven, forwarding them all to me on an hourly basis. He'd been so respectful and considerate of my feelings, though he did keep calling me his little orchid.

I didn't mind what he called me.

What he was doing was amazing.

And to be honest, I kind of liked his confident manner and unique, unwavering affection, now that I was mostly sure he didn't want to drain all the blood from my body.

His coven had been turning the city upside down, trying to find my mom. I didn't even know how she would have felt about that, a legion of vampires acting like private detectives for the sake of her safety. But at this point, I didn't care. All that mattered was her being back with me, safe and sound.

I sipped at the tea again. It didn't taste of much, but the warmth comforted my aching stomach.

Now, around half an hour before class, people were starting to spill into the dining hall. This was the peak time for students from wealthy paranormal families to be here. They didn't eat meals—grabbing a packaged bar or can of iced latte seemed the norm—but they used the tables and booths to sit in their little breed groups and chat and goof around before class.

Looking down at my janitor uniform and its bland, thick navy cotton, my name crudely sewn in white on my chest pocket, I felt a bit out of place among the designer clothes and shoes that were clogging the hall, declaring in brash brands their price tags. Why did people place so much importance on —

“Cecilia!” The voice was coated in sugar and stung my ears.

I looked up to find Mandy, her friends all huddled around her, all dressed as if going to a party, their hair, makeup, all immaculate.

“Hey!” She smiled in a way that would have put crocodiles to shame. “I've been looking for you. How's it going?”

“Not great. Actually, I’d rather—”

“How are things with Jax? With all the attention he’s been giving you, I should’ve expected to see you dressed in such a *trailblazing* way. I swear, you’re taking campus fashion to a whole new level of shabby chic. Isn’t she so brave, wearing the janitor look, and crushing it, guys?”

Her friends smirked.

I glanced again at my uniform and its cheap, gaudy design. I’d arrived an hour late on campus, having slept far too long after being out late searching the night before, and my janitorial duties had stretched into class time. I didn’t care what she thought though, my mom was missing, that was all that mattered. “Mandy, you know something? You might have a—”

“A Louis Chetton Guerrero? The limited edition? Girl, wow! Aren’t those on a mile-long waiting list?”

We all turned to see Vesta striding up to Mandy’s side. She was sporting a bottle of water and a devilish grin. I was so glad to see her.

Mandy’s confident look fell at the sight of Vesta’s dazzling black and scarlet tresses, her toned, strong limbs and her glowing fingernails, which started swirling in orange and red.

“Well, uh, I mean, yeah.” Mandy watched Vesta’s fingertips flare and fizzle. “I didn’t have to wait that long though—”

“Can I see?” Vesta snatched the bag from Mandy’s forearm, before she could say yay or nay. “Oh, this is so gorgeous. You’re so lucky. I’m super jealous.” She unzipped the bag and quickly began rifling inside. Then she clasped the inner label, frowning as she peered at it. “That’s weird. It says, ‘Made in China.’ I thought they were made in Italy, no? Oh, never mind, I’d better be careful, it also says, ‘Highly flammable: Keep away from naked flames.’”

Clutching the bag, her fingernails glowed again, until the air around us was filled with the odor of burning charcoal.

Mandy and her friends just stood there, mouths gaping wide. One of them gagged at the strong smell.

Vesta handed the bag back. “You’re so lucky. You’d better take good care of that.”

Mandy stammered out something, but I couldn’t make it out. The wolf girl couldn’t seem to come up with a thing to say.

Faces blushing, they all backed off with wary looks, and Vesta sat across from me, chuckling, and shaking her head. “Bullshit comes in many forms on this campus.”

She reached across the table, and I took her hand, clasping it with both of mine. “Thank you. I didn’t want to waste precious energy on her today.”

Vesta squeezed back. “That’s what friends do—”

“Isn’t it though?” Xander said, plonking himself down on the spare seat beside me. Where the hell had he come from? Was that a vamp thing?

And how had he found me here?

“Friends *lean* on each other.” Scooting his chair in close, he leaned his toned arm against mine. He bent his head in. “Hello, my little friend.” His breath caressed my ear. He was dangerous. His presence next to me, the scent of leather and cinnamon, the gorgeous face. I liked it. My mom would have been appalled, but I liked it.

Vesta’s bottle of water was unopened, the plastic’s cloudiness telling it had not long come from the fridge. Xander slid his hand across the table, over hers, and leaned in, drawing near to her face, their noses almost touching. I was waiting on a fiery response from her, when Xander asked, “May I wet my tongue, my lady?”

Her expression softened and she let Xander pluck the bottle, crack its top, and guzzle. He handed it back to her, saying, “How refreshing, thank you.”

I’d only known Vesta for a short time, but she didn’t strike me as the type to act coyly. And yet, she placed a hand over

her giggling mouth and replied, “You’re welcome, uh...”

“Xander, please. Delighted to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“And you are?”

“Vesta.”

“Ve-sta.” He slowed the syllables, rolling them over in his mouth. “A firecracker, for sure.”

She returned his warm gaze.

Was I jealous? A little. Maybe. But I also got the impression Xander couldn’t help teasing and charming whenever he got the chance. And the way she’d responded... was this what he’d meant when he said girls just attached themselves to him?

Leaning back, he slipped an arm over my shoulder and planted a soft kiss on my temple. “But nobody can compare to my precious orchid.”

“You’re particularly powerful, Xander.” Vesta shook her head, like she was clearing it of fog. “I’m usually able to resist vamps better.”

“Thanks. I can’t really help it. At least, all of it.” He shrugged.

“It’s impressive.” Vesta snatched up her water and took a chug herself.

“I love that you don’t feel what she does.” He said to me, nuzzling into my neck. “That when you love me, it won’t be because of that.” A fang tip skimmed across my collarbone.

I shivered and goosepimples bloomed along my skin, but I wasn’t afraid of him.

His arm around me squeezed my shoulder and it comforted me. I wasn’t sure why he’d chosen me to be the focus of his attention—I hoped it wasn’t just because I hadn’t fallen at his feet like apparently other women did—but whatever the reason, I was glad of his presence.

I looked at Vesta, my cheeks warming.

She was beaming, her eyebrows nudging upwards suggestively. “Looks like you’ve got a powerful vamp crushing on you. Lucky you.”

“Not luck, dear Vesta.” Xander wagged his finger slowly. “A commandment from the universe.” He stroked my hair carefully. “She’s everything I could’ve wished for.”

Vesta practically swooned. I was happy my flame child friend seemed to approve of him, but still wasn’t sure what to make of this new relationship, no matter how Xander referred to it or me.

“Now, you said you’d been speaking with NLPD about your mom.” His tone turned serious. “I’m not hopeful they’ll be much use—I suspect they couldn’t find their own asses with two hands—but it can’t hurt to have them aware of the situation, I suppose. In any case, they’ll be putting all their efforts into trying to find the campus killer. I heard he’s struck again too. On the other side of the city.”

“He did?” I shuddered.

“Yes.” His single word reply was solemn and there was a pause in our conversation, filled with the chatter from tables around us. “Another young girl. Made ugly work of it.” He hugged me closer.

I tucked my head into his chest, thinking of another poor girl, left in a state like I’d seen at the library.

“Don’t worry, I’ve always got either my own or other trusted eyes on you,” he murmured into my hair.

I kept forgetting it was dangerous out there, more so with a killer running around. I never thought it would be a relief to know a vamp was watching out for me, but it was. And I had a feeling he was right about how helpful the police would be. When I’d spoken to the officer on the phone, she’d said she would fill out a missing persons report, and ‘add it to the list.’ I’d asked how many missing persons ended up being found alive and well, on average, and she’d ignored the question and promised to keep me posted with any updates. I got the

impression someone disappearing was hardly a rare event in New Lincoln.

“You’re coming to my apartment tonight, right?” I pulled back and asked him. All the guys were supposed to be there, including Aaron’s mystery friend. We were going to regroup and figure out our next steps if nothing turned up today.

“Yes, my love.”

“I’m sorry I can’t make it.” Vesta frowned. “Let me know what else I can do.” Her family lived close and had an event she had to go to. So it would just be me and a collection of paranormal hunks tonight.

It could have been worse. I just hoped they wouldn’t argue.



They were arguing.

It had stemmed from something they all agreed on, which was that me sleeping alone in my apartment wasn’t a great idea, but they all had strong opinions as to why I would be safer going to each of their places instead.

Oh, and Aaron’s best friend and roommate had turned up. Imagine my surprise when it turned out to be Mr. Scowly. But he wasn’t scowling anymore. In fact, he looked a bit sorry for himself as his gaze met mine.

As the others grumbled, rolling their eyes, insisting, dismissing, and generally talking over one another in the living room, Mr. Scowly—whose name was in fact Osric, and who was, unbelievably, a Fae prince, according to Aaron—strode over and gestured toward the kitchen. “May I speak to you?”

“Of course.” I held no resentment over his previous arrogance, especially if he was here to help look for my mom.

We moved over a few steps, away from the arguing. “Cecilia, I’m so sorry.” He spoke softly. “About your mom. About not doing more.” His eyes were filled with regret.

“It’s not your fault.” I knew it wasn’t, whatever he was referring to.

“That night when I came here to scout around the area.” He looked over at Xander, clearing his throat, his face showing disdain. “That was the same night your mother disappeared. I can’t help feeling that, if I’d only been more vigilant, it wouldn’t have happened.”

I reached out for his hand. “Is this okay?” I asked as I clasped his cool hand in mine.

“Yes.” His arrogant scowl had been replaced with sincerity since the moment he’d walked in the door, and now he looked even more serious as I touched him. His face wiped clean of his usual indifference, and replaced with something akin to humbleness, he looked ten times more handsome than he already was.

“You’ve got nothing to feel sorry for.” I squeezed his hand. “We don’t know what happened. If my mom left of her own free will, which I really hope she did, then you couldn’t have done anything anyway, okay?”

His hand shifted in mine. The skin was so smooth.

“Don’t feel bad.”

He turned his palm and gripped my hand, then graced me with a smile for the first time ever.

“You know, smiling suits you,” I said, trying not to blush. “Makes you look approachable, like someone who’d be nice to speak to.”

He chuckled. “Perhaps that’s why I don’t smile very often. It’s often easier to have people keep their distance.”

“Well, I hope you won’t want me to keep my distance? I hope we can be friends.”

He brushed my cheek with his free hand, the other still gripped around mine. “I’ve never been a great fan of humans, but perhaps in your case, an exception can be made. I might even find another smile.”

“I’d like that. And erm, you’re a prince?”

He cleared his throat. "I am."

"Should I call you, Your Highness?"

That broke out an even bigger smile. He shook his head. "Osric, please. I came to New Nebraska to forget all that."

"Osric it is then." I nodded at the guys, all standing with hands on hips or flailing them up in frustration, arguing over where I would be safest. "What's your opinion on all that?"

"I think if you stayed at our penthouse, Aaron and I would give you plenty of protection, and you'd have a king-sized bed to sleep in. I know Aaron would love to have you stay."

"You'd be okay with that too? Me staying at your place?"

"You need to be safe." He sounded sincere, but let go of my hand and I couldn't read his emotions. Was Osric truly okay with me potentially staying in his home? His behavior toward me was night and day from class. But was he only tolerating me or helping me because Aaron wanted him to?

I didn't want to be a burden. And my mom might need me here.

I'd made up my mind. "Um, guys?" I spoke up, causing the bickering to die down.

"It's very sweet of you all, wanting to keep me safe in your homes, but I'm going to stay here, in case my mom comes back. I'd never forgive myself if she got back here only to find an empty place."

Aaron shrugged. "Okay, then I'm staying too. I'll sleep on the floor, I don't care. I don't want you staying by yourself."

Jax and Xander nodded, looking in agreement for once. "Us too," Xander spoke for them both.

"I don't think there's enough room. It'll be a bit cramped. If more than one of you insist on staying." I yawned. "Why don't I stay in my mom's bed. Aaron, or Jax, since I know you well enough, you could take turns sleeping in there beside me, for a few hours, and you could swap over. I'm sorry it's far from ideal."

Xander's chuckle was light, smug. "I think sharing is a great idea, my little orchid. And not just for this night, but every night, and day, to come."

I was too tired to think over exactly what he meant. "Okay then. I'm off to bed."

I shuffled over to Aaron and he seemed to sense my intentions since he bent down so I could place a kiss on his cheek. "Thanks for everything."

"You're welcome, sweet girl. I wish I could do more." A soft growl rumbled under his words.

I left a hand on his arm, but stepped back so I could address the others. "Thank you, all. So much. I don't know what I would do without you guys." I blinked hard as tears filled my eyes.

"Come here, Ceci." Jax held out a hand and I accepted it. He pulled me into the circle of his embrace. As Jax hugged me, Aaron moved behind me, his heat warming my back as he rubbed my shoulders.

Time seemed to slip away for a moment as I took comfort from them both.

"I could use a bit of love too." Xander huffed.

"Here's a bit of love for you." Osric reached over and smacked him up side the head.

Jax pulled back from me and laughed.

"Can't you tell when a girl needs a moment?" My gentle bear snarled.

"I was only joking." Xander held up his hands innocently in front of his chest.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to his sense of humor." Jax gave Aaron and Osric a resigned look.

Them playing around a bit was a nice distraction. Them getting along would be nice too. I'd never felt as cared for as I had in the past few days, and I wasn't going to push any of them away.

If anything, I wanted to draw them all closer.

As I was getting ready for bed, I heard Jax pipe up from the living room, “What exactly were you getting at, vamp, with the sharing?”

Xander sighed, so loudly I could hear it from the bedroom. “Look, Jax, dear Jax, we all have an undeniable attraction, a powerful drawing, to the magnetism of this wonderful girl, Cecilia.”

My cheeks heated, thinking of them feeling that way and hoping it was true.

There was a pause, then Xander continued. “And we both know that includes you too, fair prince, so no point in denying it.”

Was he talking to Osric?

“Share?” Aaron asked, his tone skeptical.

“Yes, share. That’s what grownups do, after all. Isn’t it? The other alternative being that of lions, gorillas, even damn kangaroos: we fight each other, possibly to the death, and the last one standing claims the prize.”

I was horrified at that thought. But what were they talking about? Sharing me... as more than friends? Romantically? How would that work?

“Then sharing is the best option, agreed?” Xander asked.

More silence filled the apartment, as if the guys were thinking, and my own heart was fluttering at thoughts of each of them, and all of us together, raced through my mind too.

Someone mumbled a few words, too quiet for me to hear, and then Osric spoke up, loud and clear, “I’m heading back out to search.” The front door opened and slammed closed.

Wondering what possible sharing could be done, and among who, was too much to process right now.

So, I went to bed and fell asleep, longing to be held by one of the guys in the other room.

CHAPTER 16

Aaron

I woke to a sight so sweetly erotic, my cock swelled and filled, becoming so hard it was almost painful.

From my spot on the bedroom floor, with a couch cushion propping my head, I had the perfect spot to see Jax and Cecilia cuddling on the bed, on their sides, her back to his chest, their legs tangled among creased sheets.

Cecilia's top barely hung on by one flimsy shoulder strap, the material bunched up to just below her breasts. Jax was massaging her pale, smooth stomach in gentle circles, letting out low growls of pleasure. Cecilia was squirming with every touch, especially when his hand went low, biting her lip then relaxing her mouth into a smile of pleasure.

She sighed and moaned softly.

Her eyes were closed, but she was clearly waking. Her butt wiggled back into his hips, and it was the most wickedly innocent thing I'd ever seen.

My cock throbbed, somehow growing thicker.

I should have been jealous, but I wasn't. I enjoyed watching. I clearly enjoyed it a lot, if my cock had anything to say about it.

And that wouldn't have been the case if I didn't respect Jax. Not only was he the finest college quarterback in all of New Nebraska, and only a sophomore at that. But he also had a reputation for being fair and reasonable to everyone—not a pushover—and being extremely protective of his pack and vulnerable people in general. On top of dealing with what was widely known to be an overbearing and difficult Alpha. His own father. I couldn't help but admire him managing everything so well.

My bear sensed a mellowness to his wolf, a calmness that was unusual for a Beta and future pack leader. It made me far more comfortable about his intimacy with Cecilia. I'd be happy to share a friendship with someone like Jax, and if it was the only way for us all to be with Cecilia and make her happy, perhaps I could learn to share her too. And enjoy it, like I was now.

Sharing wasn't so uncommon amongst paranormals. Especially amongst vamps and shifters. I already knew I wanted something long term, who was I kidding, something forever, with Cecilia. And as long as Jax felt the same way, I think I'd come to accept a sharing agreement between us. Strong shifters shared strong females. Sometimes a Luna had multiple mates. Of course, it was a bit odd for two shifters of different breeds to share. But that was fine with me. I'd been odd my whole life.

And maybe having a strong wolf around would go some way to making sure my unruly bear never got out of control again. And hopefully ensure that my bear never harmed Cecilia—I struggled to see that happening anyway—or harmed any other innocent again.

That day I'd maimed a poor girl during one of my first shifts, would haunt me for the rest of my life. Since that day, I'd made every effort to keep him under my skin, so he couldn't hurt anyone else. I didn't always succeed of course. Something Osric owed his life to, that night we'd met.

Anyway, Jax and I sharing, I could come to terms with. And if that vamp was right, and Osric was interested in my girl too—and she returned his feelings—I'd welcome Osric into our little family as well. My best friend had a lot to offer all of us.

I still wasn't sold on the vamp though. That would take more time. Unlike Jax and Osric, his sense of honor was quest —

“What the fuck!?” Jax jumped out of bed, shaking his arms, which were shifting back and forth between fur and skin. “Ahh! Shit. Stop it!” He seemed to be talking to his wolf.

He finally settled down and mastered his animal, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he brought his breathing under control.

I raised an eyebrow. “Good morning. Everything okay over there?” And here I’d thought he’d help me protect our girl, but he was struggling to sort his own shit out. Maybe I’d been wrong.

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” He threw up his hands in frustration. “I haven’t had a problem controlling my shifts since I was running around chasing my first rabbit. I just feel really strong all of a sudden. My wolf really close to the surface.”

“Um, everything okay, Jax, really?” Cecilia leaned across and ran a soothing hand down his chest.

“Yes.” He pulled her into a tight hug, a little whine escaping that I was sure was his wolf, followed by a grumbled sigh. I was relieved by his response, but he still looked a bit unsettled to me.

“Sorry, I’m sweating all over you.” He pressed a kiss to her hair.

“I don’t mind.” She squeezed him tighter.

“I just got really hot all of a sudden.”

Hot? Excessive sweating? Hmm. That had happened to me too, after getting closer to her, emotionally and intimately. And we all seemed to sense there was something unique about Cecilia...

“Do you feel unnaturally hot?” I asked. “And strong, more than usual?”

“Yeah. Yes. To both, I guess,” he answered, giving me a curious look.

I climbed up off the floor. Being in just T-shirt and boxer shorts, I could see the carpet’s rough fibers had tattooed pink patterns on the backs of my legs. I was going to ask for longer in the bed next time. Jax had kicked me out after checking in with his pack late last night and coming to bed after me. I

knew he'd been out late with Cecilia the night before, so I'd let him.

"I had a similar experience, the other night, after Xander left and we kissed goodnight."

"You did?" Cecilia asked.

"Yes, that's why Osric went to check up on you. My bear was going wild, I was burning up with heat. I barely kept him from bursting out. I couldn't guarantee his behavior, so Osric kindly volunteered."

"I can confirm that." Osric strolled up to the open door with a glass of water. He raised it, looking at Cecilia and saying, "I had an awfully dry throat, I hope you don't mind?"

She gave him a soft smile and shook her head.

Osric's eyes traced over every bit of delicious skin she had on display and lingered where her bare thigh rested against Jax's. His gaze turned hot.

I guess I no longer had to doubt whether my good friend was interested in my sweet girl. And it seemed he might have a thing for watching her with another guy too?

"Thanks again for coming over that night." Cecilia looked down shyly and peeked up at Osric through her lashes.

He inclined his head.

"You went to all that trouble, just to hunt for little old me? I'm flattered, gents." Xander stuck his head around the door with a cheeky, fanged grin.

Ignoring the vamp, I focused on Cecilia. "This might sound crazy, but it might be that you're somehow, and I have no idea how, strengthening our animals? The physical contact, the emotional turmoil, or something else? I don't know. I need to be sure of something though. May I hug you?"

"Yes. You never need to ask for a hug," Cecilia replied, though she looked a little nervous as she climbed off the bed and into my arms. I squeezed, feeling her warmth against my body.

“Okay if I get more intimate?”

She gave her response by running her hands up under my shirt.

Which in turn raised my own temperature. By a lot. My bear began to growl, gripe, then roar, his muscles knocking my insides, swelling under my skin, unmistakably stronger than usual.

I let go of Cecilia and stepped back, wiping sweat from my brow. I was extremely worried now. My bear was strong enough already, hard enough to keep under control. I didn't need him getting even more powerful. Maybe I'd lose control of my shifting, or I'd shift and never shift back again? I breathed deeply, my words shaky as I said to everyone there. “I think you're amplifying our powers. We're not just drawn to you romantically.”

She gasped.

“We're all crazy about you, yes. But it's something more. Something potentially dangerous...”

I looked around the faces, everyone had a look of confusion. Even Xander's smug grin had been wiped clean off.

I'd never give up Cecilia, and my bear wouldn't either.

But what the hell was going on?

CHAPTER 17

Xander

“Oh, to be young and in love! I do envy you, dear boy.”

Persephone, my oldest and wisest aunt—she was very wise, with the exception of the one piece of advice she’d given me to woo Cecilia—had stopped by my place. She’d wanted to check on my quest to win Cecilia’s heart.

In a blouse and skirt of midnight black, she was perched primly on my couch, with her long legs crossed, her foremost foot dangling in a lace-up ankle boot, bobbing, as if tapping to a tune only she could hear.

We were both at the one place we could be ourselves, without other paranormals to judge: Bloodhaven. Our coven-owned, small skyscraper in New Lincoln’s city center. The outside was gleaming glass and steel, blending in with the neighboring banks, hotels, and luxury apartments. While the interior harkened back to a bygone age from Eastern Europe. The floors were cloaked with Turkish, Persian, and Azeri carpets. The walls wore thick coats of ruby and garnet and flaunted crystal lighting and fine art.

Above the recreation and feeding hall levels, every coven member had a room or suite, the size and location directly tied to their family line and status. An antiquated system, I hadn’t been able to get the coven to shake.

As their leader, I had the penthouse. Aunt Persephone had half of an entire floor beneath me, able to visit me at her leisure, by way of a private elevator.

But I’d barely been home since meeting Cecilia after the game. So I hadn’t caught up with my aunt since I’d first told her of spotting my little human.

I sighed, easing into my high-backed chair's plump upholstery, gazing out across the city skyline as it shadowed, drenched in a stunning sunset. Persephone was several feet across from me, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"That's the problem, aunty. I don't feel that young anymore. I feel like I've spent far too much time gallivanting, pursuing fun, pleasure, not thinking of the future."

She scoffed, sipping at her Bloody Mary through its steel straw, before replying, "Oh don't start that, please. Not young. What are you, then? A creaking old vamp? Shall I fetch you a walking aid? You're hardly over a hundred."

I picked up my can of Bloodweiser from the side table and tipped a mouthful. The cool fizzles of frothy, booze-laced crimson soothed me. But my deeper concerns wouldn't be that easily fixed.

"Well, I certainly hope I look as good as you when I'm"—I reminded myself Persephone was a little sensitive about her age—"would you like a top up?"

Tawny eyes sly, nodding, she broke into a grin, the fangs peeking flawlessly under black lipstick. "Oh, go on then. And a bigger splash of vodka this time, please."

Taking her glass, I walked behind the bar and refilled her highball, plunking two fresh ice cubes into the ruby froth, stirring its potent vodka vapors gently in with the straw. I grabbed a fresh can from the fridge, choosing a Blood Light, just for a change, and returned to our seats with drinks in hand.

She sipped hard on the straw, ending with a satisfied gasp. "That's nice. You're a good lad to your aunty. Now, tell me all about how it went with your little human tease, after the game. Did you take my advice? For your first meeting?"

"I did."

Her tone heightened in girlish excitement. "Oh, I bet she liked that. What girl wouldn't? The thrill of the shadows, the intrigue, the romantic gesture of appearing from nowhere, to surprise her, entrance her with that beautiful, fanged smile.

She must have been thrilled to bits, ready to fall into your arms.”

Cracking the fresh can, I glugged at the foam to stop it spilling over the rim. “Uh, well, not exactly...”

Persephone frowned, jerking her head back slightly. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it turned out, she didn’t appreciate my attempts to charm. She, uh, told me to get lost, in fact. Quite emphatically.”

Her eyebrows raised as she squinted, saying, “She told you what? Is there something wrong with this girl?”

I shrugged. “That’s the thing, aunty. I think there’s everything right with her.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never met anyone like her. Getting to know her—after I’d mis-stepped that night—she’s amazing. Generous. Caring. And someone who can resist my powers, refuse even my strongest attempts. She can challenge me, accept me for who I am, unconditionally. I mean, vamp girls don’t respond to my abilities either, of course, but that’s not the same.”

Female vamps jumped into bed with me from time to time, but it was my athletic body, sizeable cock and coven leader status they wanted. I’d come to hate that just as much as all the other girls who craved me for my unnatural abilities.

“You’re saying she won’t fall under your spell? An ordinary human? Surely not.”

“I’m serious. I hope to introduce you to her, so you can see for yourself.”

“Yes, I hope so. I’d love that. Though I’m still skeptical about all this resistance talk. After all, when it comes to the ladies”—she peered into her drink with a wry expression, clearing her throat gently— “you *are* an elemental, Xander.”

I raised an eyebrow, sensing I was being led. Okay, I’d bite. “I’ve not a bit of elemental ancestry, aunty...”

Face deadpan, she sat forward. “Oh? Are you sure? I thought you were a... *neck-romancer*?”

I groaned, but couldn't help laughing too, shaking my head. “When are you going to stop telling such awful jokes?”

She laughed too. “I'll stop telling them when you stop laughing.”

We drank more, watching the sun disappear and the skyline gradually come alive in lights. Her disbelief about Cecilia resisting my supernatural charms was understandable. I was still coming around to the idea myself. Heaped on top of that was the disconcerting prospect that had been touched upon in Cecilia's apartment this morning.

The real possibility that she might well, somehow, be unwittingly able to strengthen paranormals' powers. The bear inside Aaron, the wolf inside Jax, and who knew what she might do to the Fae's abilities too. It hung heavily on my mind. I could never throw away my feelings for dear Cecilia, my precious little orchid. Never, in a thousand years.

But my powers' current level was burdensome enough. A tiresome compulsion to entice and seduce. And for both sexes, but especially women, for them to respond, even when I didn't want them to, craving my attention. What if being close to her, either exclusively or shared with the others, would end up with my powers growing fiercer, even to the point where I no longer had any control?

“And it gets even more complicated, I think.”

“How so?”

Clunking my can down, I sat forward, meeting my aunt's eyes. “This is going to sound crazy, but please hear me out, okay?”

She placed her drink down and rested her chin in her hand, focused. “Very well. Go on.”

“I don't think she's just a regular human. I've seen and heard with my own eyes, what looked like her...amplifying, strengthening, the beasts of two shifters. One of which I know

for sure is no pushover, no weak-minded fool to be toyed with. I'm pretty sure the other shifter hosts a powerful beast too."

I paused, letting her take the information in. She was nodding slowly, mulling it. "I see. And you feel that too much close contact with this girl might have similar effects on you?"

"Exactly. And I—"

"Well then, what's the problem? It sounds like the closer you get to her, the stronger your powers of seduction will be. And, in turn, she'll like you even more, no?"

I shook my head. "I don't think my abilities will ever work on her. They haven't until now, not even channeling every ounce of them."

Persephone looked confused. She shrugged, reaching back for her drink, taking a lingering sip, and then placing it back down. "I'm sorry, dear boy, but I fail to see the problem. And in any case, I'm still not convinced this isn't all some misunderstanding, or just your lust blocking out your logic. I've never heard of any human, in all my *considerable* time on this planet, being able to do the type of thing you're describing."

In fairness to my aunt's skepticism, Osric, the Fae pretty boy, had apparently been doing extensive research on the subject, searching old Fae texts in the library, making inquiries with his royal contacts back in England, and so far, had come up with nothing. It seemed there was no record of this ability-strengthening phenomenon existing in anyone, much less a human.

"But what if she really is different? What if I get too close to her, and then girls are all over me, even more? Cecilia could never put up with that, and I'd lose her for sure." Just the thought of it made me grimace. "And right now, that's my greatest fear."

Smiling kindly, she reached forward, clasping my hand in hers. It was extra cool, from holding her drink. "My darling boy, my greatest fear is tooth decay. But it doesn't stop me from using them."

“So you’re saying I should just go for it?”

She squeezed my hand and nodded. “Of course. You’re the leader of the largest and strongest coven in New Lincoln. And I know the position was thrust upon you after your parents died. I know the crown hangs heavy on that young head of yours, and that you probably curse it at times.”

Looking at her in silence, my eyes confirmed the truth of what she’d said.

She turned my hand over, tracing along the lines in my palm, as if reading their unique story. “But the Fates put you in this place, whether you want it or not. If you cower in fear, afraid of things that may or may not happen, what hope do those beneath you have?”

“True...”

Jabbing her index finger downwards twice, she said, “There’s a whole building full of vampires who look to you for guidance, for strength. Do you want them to think you’re afraid of taking a human lover?”

“Well, no. I’m not afraid, not exactly...”

Leaning back into the couch, she said, “And anyway, it sounds like your biggest problem will be getting her to like you more to begin with, no?”

“That’s actually coming along nicely, but not in the way you’d think. She responds to my gestures, just ones other than trying to directly seduce her.”

“I see. Such as?”

“Her mom’s gone missing, and I’ve had teams out looking for her, inquiring all over the city, checking everywhere for her.”

“That’s nice of you.”

“I want to help my love, any way I can.”

She nodded. “Good. Any progress?”

“Maybe. One of the young grunts apparently saw a woman of her mom’s description yesterday. But I’m not sure. She was

seen with some big shot elemental, a guy who mixes in certain select circles. It doesn't ring true to me. I've got people looking into it further though."

Persephone held up her drink, beckoning me to clink it with my can. "Well, let them look, and think no more of it tonight. Cheers. Here's to one hell of a party coming up."

I clinked my Blood Light against her glass, sighing. The damn coven party on Saturday. I wasn't in the mood for it, being far too distracted by Cecilia and possible conflicts with the guys over her. Especially Jax, who still seemed to hate me.

My face must have betrayed my feelings.

"And don't give me that look, dear nephew. It's the biggest gathering of the year, and you *have* to be there."

Leaning into my chair, I drained the can dry. I'd be there. But my mind would be with Cecilia and with the guys too, hoping we were on the way to forming a coven of our own. Hoping that they'd accept my proposal and form a life together.

I loved her, to the very depths of my soul in such a short time, and respected them all already. I approved of them to share her love. Could they approve of me too?

CHAPTER 18

Jaxon

Aaron and I were sharing, but not with Xander.

Just the day after Xander floated the idea, Aaron and I seemed to be interacting as one with Ceci, being there for her when the other couldn't, texting and chatting like longtime friends, meeting up in the early evening for a walk with her, each of us holding one of her hands. And, of course, we were both by her side in the continuing search for her mom.

After another day with no progress on that score, we'd decided to try and cheer Ceci up with pizza and a funny movie. It had actually been Osric's idea.

Ceci sat in the middle of the small couch, Aaron and I on either side. Aaron had an arm around her shoulders and was absentmindedly stroking her hair. I had a hand on her bare thigh, as she ate and relaxed in shorts and a tank.

Without giving much thought to it myself, I stroked up and down her soft skin.

She sighed, leaning her head against my shoulder while she reached over for Aaron. He gave her his free hand and twined their fingers together. She nuzzled into me.

Just like earlier in the day, all three of us were connected in a way that felt natural.

I never thought I'd be in a relationship where I shared my girl with a bear, but it worked. Really well.

I wasn't sure why Osric was sticking around though. He looked miserable, over in the corner, by the kitchen. He was Aaron's best friend, of course, and was going out of his way to assist Ceci, but he was also his usual standoffish self. He stood looking pensive, nibbling a slice of pepperoni pizza, staring through the TV rather than actually watching it. Maybe his

thoughts were in another place. Perhaps England. Aaron had mentioned something about him being betrothed to someone there. Logic said he should've been happy about that, his life lined up in a fairytale way most could only have dreamed of, but I wondered if Xander was right: Osric wanted Ceci too.

I reluctantly pulled away from her and plucked another slice from one of the pizza boxes piled on the coffee table, separating it from the main part, drawing long strands of hot cheese upwards and catching them in my mouth. The salty pepperoni and thick mozzarella were so well baked, the textures and tastes satisfying as I ate. Through chews, I said to Osric, "Thanks for the pizza. I'll get it next time."

My words snapped him from his trance, and he looked at me, neither smiling nor scowling. "My pleasure. Glad we're all pepperoni fans."

Actually, pepperoni wasn't my preferred topping. But Ceci had declared it her favorite, and I'd wanted her to have it. The ease and speed at which Aaron and Osric had agreed told me they felt the same.

I guessed if Osric was sticking around, that would be fine.

He must have been a good guy, if he was Aaron's best friend.

My real concern was Xander, who had texted Ceci earlier, saying he was spending time with his aunt, in their spooky skyscraper, and wouldn't be joining us. I wasn't sure Xander could ever earn my trust. He'd led that girl from my pack on. Though to be fair, she'd seemed obsessed with him. And he always made it clear to the girls he wanted nothing serious. Just sex. And their blood. Gross.

But he'd been going out of his way to help in the search for Ceci's mom, and I appreciated that. I'd also never seen him act such a fool for any girl, the way that he did with Ceci.

I put thoughts of the vamp out of my mind.

"Another slice?" I asked her and leaned forward to separate a piece.

Ceci looked at it with hungry eyes. “Well, I shouldn’t, but I can’t resist. Such a treat having pizza from the best place in town.”

Balancing the piece carefully, I put it on a napkin and transferred it into her hands, mindful of not dripping cheese and greasy pepperoni on the couch. Though if it had landed on her creamy thighs, I’d have been happy to lick it off. My wolf sighed contentedly at the thought.

She took hold of the triangle and wolfed down the tip in one huge bite—I was an expert on wolfing and her game was good—rolling her eyes and sighing in pleasure. “Oh, that’s good. Thanks, Jax.” She turned her head. “Thanks again, Osric, you’re so kind for getting it.”

His emerald eyes flared wider, delving into hers. Almost full of longing.

But his response was cold, even a bit snooty as he shrugged, saying, “You’re very welcome. Humans are so easily pleased. It’s only a circle of baked bread with cheese and meat sprinkled on top, after all. I didn’t give you a diamond tiara.”

She stuck her tongue out playfully. “Not yet. I’ll put it on my Christmas list.”

A thin grin appeared on his face, and he took another bite himself, before speaking, his focus directed toward me and Aaron. “So, as I told Xander when I bumped into him earlier on today, I’ve been looking into this possible thing, this phenomenon that you chaps are convinced might be occurring between you and our little human pizza muncher.”

Aaron, who was tearing into the final slice of the whole pizza he’d polished off himself, replied, “Thanks, anything?”

Osric shook his head. “I’m afraid not. I’ve scoured every ancient Fae text in the campus library, and even in the public library downtown. Nothing. I’ve made extensive enquiries among my mother’s egghead royal advisors and the answer is always the same. No such phenomenon has ever been

recorded. Not in England, not in New Nebraska, not anywhere.”

Aaron’s brows furrowed as he mulled the news. “Okay. Well, what can I say? It’s not been recorded, but that doesn’t mean it’s not a real thing. I know something’s going on when I’m near her.” He kissed her forehead, lingering there as she reached out to put a hand on his chest. “Now that I care for her, even more, just this kiss has me feeling wired, my bear stirring in ways he’s never before. Jax, what do you say?”

I wiped my hand on a napkin and returned to massaging Ceci’s thigh, devouring the softness, stroking my palm up and down gently, relishing the smooth skin. Ceci hummed and pleasure lit her eyes. My wolf pranced happily inside me. More dynamic, excitable than he should have been, and stronger too. I couldn’t deny it. “I agree. My wolf only feels this way when I touch her. It’s not just that she’s his mate.”

Ceci’s eyes widened when I said that.

“I don’t care what any experts or dusty old books say. This strengthening thing she’s doing, it’s real.”

Osric swallowed the last bit of his pizza and began washing his hands under the kitchen tap. He’d only had two slices. Fae seemed so modest in their eating habits, or was it just him?

“Very well, the boffins back home in England would disagree, but then what do they know?” Drying his hands on a dish towel, he met Ceci’s gaze, saying, “After all, they haven’t shared a pepperoni with this one.”

Osric let his joke land then jolted back, as if a thought had just physically struck him. His face went ashen. “Oh goodness. I’d forgotten what happened when I tried to get a read on Cecilia before.”

“What do you mean?” Aaron asked.

“The first time I saw her in your class, I had an inkling something was different about her. I couldn’t read her, get the measure of her soul, her aura, the same way I always can with

others. I must say, I found it both surprising and confusing at the time.”

“Well, there you go then,” I said. “She might not be affecting your powers in exactly the same way as ours, but she’s having some effect on you.”

He grumbled, bobbing his head side to side, as if not wanting to accept the obvious. “Possibly. But then, I usually only ever read paranormals...”

“Whatever, in any case, I can’t deny my heart what it wants. I’m not pulling back from caring about you.” Aaron cupped her cheek in his baseball mitt palm and kissed her on the lips as she took a break between pizza bites.

“You’re so sweet. You’re more delicious than any pizza.” She wrinkled her nose and kissed him back.

I cleared my throat theatrically, sliding my palm across her bare shoulder, squeezing. “What about me?”

She leaned forward. “You guys know that after today, I won’t play favorites.” She gave me a shy look, but pressed her lips to mine.

The kiss was quick, but her soft mouth set my wolf scrambling at my insides, growling in excited delight at our first kiss with her. I managed to calm him, reassuring him there would be more to come. We weren’t going anywhere and she wasn’t either. She wanted me just as much as the bear.

Ceci finished her slice, but when I offered her more, she patted her abdomen and groaned. “Oh, I couldn’t. I’m stuffed. We can put it in the fridge and heat—”

A bleep and vibration lit up her phone screen. She reached forward and picked it up off the table, swiping and tapping. Her smile melted away within seconds.

I placed a gentle palm on her leg. “Are you okay?”

Still staring at the screen, she whispered in a strained voice. “It’s an email. From my mom.”

CHAPTER 19

Cecilia

I read the email silently to myself, and then again, out loud to the guys:

Dear Ceci

I'm so sorry for not getting in touch sooner, sweetheart. I know you must have been very worried, and I can't say sorry enough about that. Things are just very, very complicated, and it's hard to explain what's been going on. Just know that my health is better than ever, I am absolutely fine, and someone is taking care of me extremely well.

I can't come home right now, but I'm thinking of you every day, and hoping that you're taking care of yourself and being careful no matter what you do. I'm also confident that your new friend, Professor Belanger, is looking out for you and making sure you're alright. Make sure to save up a little from your paycheck, so you can treat him to a banquet of Chinese food. And don't forget the special spring rolls he loves so much.

I won't be able to speak on the phone or reply to this email, but I promise I'm doing great, and I will be in touch again soon. I'm sorry I can't tell you more just now, but we'll see each other before you know it.

Deepest love and kisses,

Mom

xxxx

Along with her knowledge of Aaron, it was those four kisses at the end that made me certain it was her. When we'd left handwritten notes for each other, she'd always ended them that way.

I replied back immediately, in case she was still at her email:

Mom, I love you too. I wish you'd tell me more about what's going on. Please come home soon. Ceci, xxxx

I didn't even know if she'd read it, but I had to hope.

I read her email one more time and my shoulders sagged, relief flooding and soothing my whole body.

My mom was okay and in even better health than before, according to her. But the mystery was like something from a spy novel. And this was my mom, not a secret agent!

Still, I was so glad to hear from her. I found myself staring at the phone for several long moments, the apartment silent. Osric had muted the TV as soon as the email came in.

"This is great news, right?" Aaron asked gently.

I put my phone down, turned, and hugged him. We held onto each other as I continued to process the fact my mom was okay. She was alive and swore she was well. And though I wouldn't stop worrying or thinking about what could possibly be going on, I could breathe again. For the first time in days, it didn't feel like my chest was locked in a vise. I lifted my head from his shoulder and gave him a deep, lingering kiss.

Aaron responded immediately, matching my enthusiasm, moving his lips, scratching his scruff on my chin.

I'd meant it as a brief kiss, but I didn't want to pull away.

He seemed to sense that, and his strong hands stroked down my back, squeezing my body close to his.

Jax let out a soft whine behind me. "Uh, sorry about that." He sounded embarrassed, like his wolf had come out on his own.

I finally drew away from Aaron and turned to look at Jax, then back and forth between them. “Thanks for being so supportive and sweet through all of this. Both of you.” I squeezed each of their arms. “The two of you have been amazing. I’m the luckiest girl.”

Aaron kissed my forehead, his cheeks reddening, body heat rising. “Anything for you,” he said, his voice hoarse. Then a cheeky grin broke out across his square-jawed face. “And I won’t forget what your mom said about the spring rolls.”

Laughing, I turned and kissed him again. It was rougher this time, his scruff scraping more, and his tongue delving, his mouth stretching mine wider. My head was tingling, the joyous feeling spreading across my limbs, down into my stomach, making something deep within me pulse. Before it could turn into something more, I forced myself to stop. This wasn’t the right time or place. And we had an audience.

Jax I was okay with, but Osric?

I took a deep breath and faced Jax. “You’ve been there for me since this all started. I won’t ever forget.”

“I’m so glad your mom is okay.” Jax brushed a lock of hair away from my face and reached out for a hug.

Still on a high from the moment with Aaron and needing my wolf too, I plunged myself into his arms, feeling the hard muscle of his pecs press tight against my chest.

“Hell of a hug,” he murmured against my shoulder.

“You’re getting a kiss too,” I teased.

We shifted enough for our mouths to join. Jax’s tongue met mine so tenderly. He worked my lips with such gentle care. In the final seconds though, there was an animal edge to it all, rougher nips of my lips, a strengthening growl reverberating in his chest. Before we could get carried away—and risk his arms shifting again—I reminded myself about this not being the right time and pulled away. His eyes shone with the yellow of his wolf, but he gave me a gentle look of understanding.

“That was a hell of a thank you.” Jax leaned in and rubbed his nose against mine.

“You deserve it and more.”

But I couldn't forget about Osric. I owed him a lot too. He hadn't made a sound or moved a muscle since turning off the TV. I guessed he must've been watching this whole time...

Taking a deep breath, trying to compose myself, I stood. My cheeks were flushed and my body humming from my good news and celebrating with my guys.

I still couldn't believe I could call Aaron and Jax both mine, but they were. Of course, our kisses had just made that pretty obvious. But they'd made their intentions clear to me earlier today too and they couldn't have been getting along better. If this was what *sharing* meant, it was more than fine by me. Just like I'd told myself since first meeting them, I wouldn't push away something special or second guess myself.

Smiling broadly at Osric, I opened my arms. “You've done so much to help too. May I hug you?”

He still didn't move an inch. And his usual cool confidence vanished. His eyes darted between my open arms then Jax and Aaron. “Uh, yes?”

“Go on,” Aaron encouraged. “You've earned a thank you. She wants to give it.” It was like he was coaching his friend, but I wasn't sure why that was needed. What was going on with Osric?

Osric slowly opened his arms to me. But I had to do all the work, pressing against him, and wrapping my arms around his waist. His torso was just as firm as my two guys, but leaner, not nearly as large. He finally closed his embrace around my shoulders. But he hugged me so gently, and his arms rested so lightly on me, there was a hesitancy to it, making me wonder if he'd reverted back to being wary of humans.

I felt too shy to give him a kiss on the cheek, so I just rested my head on the cool, neatly pressed cotton of his shirt. He nestled his nose into my hair, sighing, breathing

contentedly, inhaling deeply. Making me rethink the hesitancy he'd just had.

"I think you really like my shampoo." I joked.

He jerked free, clearing his throat quickly, straightening his shirt collar, and leaning back against the kitchen counter.

"I was only teasing." I blushed.

His tone turned cool, almost business-like. "Well, no thanks needed."

"I really appreciated all the help. It was a lot more than you needed to do, as Aaron's friend."

"I'm very glad your mother seems well. It must be quite a relief."

Osric and I had suddenly seemed to take several steps backwards in our relationship. Gathering myself, stuttering slightly, I replied, "Yeah—yes, you have no idea. I—"

"I'll still be spending my nights here with you though, if that's okay?" Aaron spoke up from the couch, seeming to understand I was floundering. "A killer on the loose, your mom not here. I'm not happy about you being alone." He flipped open the last pizza box, revealing an untouched pie. "Jax, I already know you're staying. Osric, you're welcome too. If that works for Ceci." He gave his best friend a knowing look I couldn't decipher.

Osric shifted his stance in an almost nervous fashion. "You know I'll be around..."

"We'd be happy to have you." Aaron spoke with such sincerity, it almost sounded like he meant something else. I glanced toward Jax, but he didn't look confused like me. Jax looked like he understood Aaron's meaning. "Besides, you're good to have around. Trust me on that, Jax. A few pizzas are nothing to a prince, just wait."

"Wanted for my wallet, hmm?" Osric's vibe swung a little lighter, and he gave a small smile. "As long as that grizzly of yours stays inside, where he belongs. A dump truck full of pizza couldn't satisfy that creature's appetite."

Aaron grunted and all seemed well between the two friends.

“Aaron’s right. I’m going to be right here next to you too, Ceci,” Jax said. “If that’s okay?”

“You know it is,” I said softly.

Jax met eyes with Aaron. “And I think it’s safe to say we both need to be near you, no matter how strong our beasts get.”

Aaron gave a firm nod. “Absolutely.” He looked at Osric. “And what do you say?”

Osric dropped his gaze again, thinking, then he looked up at me. “I can pop in from time to time.” He shrugged. “If my best friend’s determined to be here, I’ll need to make sure he’s got enough pizza to sustain his vigil.”

“And special spring rolls,” I said. “Don’t forget those.”

Osric rubbed his hands on his slacks. “Yes, of course. And there’s a good English pub downtown that delivers. I’ll introduce you all to some pub grub.” He glanced at his fancy wristwatch, almost too fast to have even seen the time. “I must be going though. Aaron, I’ll message you tomorrow. Jax, ciao.”

He hurried out the door, clunking it behind him, leaving so abruptly, not saying goodbye to me, I feared I’d done something to push him out the door. A shiver of disappointment ran through me.

At least someone wouldn’t make me feel bad for giving my thanks: Xander.

I’d make sure to give him a big hug and do something special to show my appreciation, next time I saw him. Aaron had assured me earlier today that I didn’t need to keep my distance from Xander. It was up to me. It seemed selfish to even think about being close to two guys, much less three, but Aaron had assured me relationships like this weren’t so uncommon among paranormals. Supplying the final bit of reassurance I’d needed, Jax had even nodded his head.

What would it be like to kiss a vampire?

CHAPTER 20

Cecilia

I was on a date with a vampire.

When Xander had come over the next morning and I'd tried to thank him, he'd insisted the best thanks would be accepting his invitation to dinner. Just the two of us.

Jax and Aaron had said it would be fine. And whatever issues Jax and Xander had, Jax at least seemed to trust Xander to watch out for me.

So here I was, in New Lincoln's priciest restaurant, a French fine dining experience, sitting across from super-hot Xander, the candles' reflections making him look even more deliciously unnatural as their flames flickered, dancing shadows across his pale, flawless face and into his red-ringed eyes.

Everything was so fancy. Crisp linen and crystal on the dimly lit tables. Gentle music drifting over the room. Every table was filled with couples smiling, whispering, clinking glasses and clasping hands between eating. The waiters were dressed sharply, weaving back and forth in black and white uniforms topped with bow ties.

"I feel a little out of place." I ran a finger down the intricate design on the silverware. "Thanks so much for getting me this outfit though." I looked around at the evening attire the other diners were wearing, glad Xander had been so insistent on taking me to a store I'd never have dreamed about visiting on my own. "You really didn't have to."

He'd asked me to pick whatever I wanted and seemed to hope I'd get more than just a dress and shoes, but I'd stopped him there. I'd gone with black, suspecting it was his favorite color. Now my body was gloved in a designer cocktail dress,

the fine fabric so smooth and soft against my skin. I kept taking occasional peeks at my heels under the table too.

“Oh, but I did have to.” Like James Bond—or more like a Bond villain—in his tailored black suit, Xander extended his hand across the table. “May I, my little orchid?”

I held my hand out to touch his. “You may.”

He squeezed my hand gently. “Only because your happiness is my happiness. And you look enchanting, by the way.” He, as well as Jax and Aaron, had certainly made me feel that way when he’d come to pick me up.

My cheeks heated. “Thank you. You look very dashing yourself.”

“Bonsoir.” A waiter appeared at our tableside, cradling a bottle of champagne as if it were a baby. Presenting the label so both Xander and I could see it, he said in a smooth, French accent, “I present the Hallinger ’66. The best on our list, as you requested, monsieur.”

Xander peered at the condensation-speckled bottle briefly, before nodding, and saying, “Mmm Bon Jovi, my good man.”

I couldn’t help but giggle. The waiter forced a confused smile.

“I’m sorry, he thinks he’s funny. That looks wonderful.” I looked at Xander. “It must be so expensive though. Are you sure?”

Xander scoffed, winking at the waiter, and nodding at the bottle. “Pop it, daddio.”

He bowed briskly. “Excellent, monsieur.”

After Xander did a taste and the waiter poured the froth and fizz into our long, slender flutes, we were on our own again.

This would be another first. I’d never had champagne before. I’d hardly ever drunk at all. Thankfully, the legal age for drinking in New Nebraska was eighteen, so at least I couldn’t be arrested for having a little fun.

“I’d better sip it. I’m not much of a drinker. Cheers.” I raised my glass.

Xander held up his too, gazing into my eyes. All of the joking demeanor drained from his face, and after an intense look, he clinked his glass to mine. “Cheers. To the start of something special.”

“Very special.” I raised my glass again.

He looked relieved by my response and tugged on his collar, in a show of vulnerability I’d never seen from him before. He cleared his throat. “I’m actually the opposite with this stuff.” He took a drink. “I could down bottles and feel slightly tipsy at best. It has a negligible effect on us vamps, unless its mixed with...well, anyway, no matter.” It was like he didn’t want to remind me what he was. “Anyway, to a great evening.”

“Yes.” I finally took a sip. The delicate, dry bubbles danced across my tongue. “It’s delightful, thank you. And I’m supposed to be the one thanking you today, but here you are spoiling me.”

“Spoiling special people is one of the greatest joys in life.”

I glanced away, suddenly bashful. Despite what Xander, and Aaron and Jax, kept saying, I didn’t think there was much special about me. But they kept showing me how much they cared about me and maybe being with someone you cared about was more than special and something to cherish.

I forced myself to look back to him and own how special he thought I was.

When a different waiter returned for our order, I picked out a mix of vegetarian and seafood dishes. Xander selected beef options, steak tartare and chateaubriand, requesting his main course cooked extra rare and the starter straight up raw. His food choices weren’t gross, just something that anyone, vamp, or non-vamp could have picked.

“Is that enough for you?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I just thought, maybe you’d need more... blood?” I fidgeted with my napkin.

“I get enough at other times, though...”

“Yes?”

“Well, I don’t want to turn you off with this talk, but—”

“You won’t turn me off. If we’re going to know each other, I want to truly know you.”

A look of peace and acceptance settled over his face, that mischievous Xander from the start of the evening even farther gone. “I’d normally have more blood with a meal, yes. The fresher and higher quality, the better. But I actually haven’t been able to stomach much other than the packaged stuff since I met you. I’ve had no desire.” He looked down and it was his turn to look bashful.

I decided not to press him on that and when our dishes came, he fed me a forkful of his. Everything was amazingly succulent and well-seasoned.

We chatted as we ate. The serious tone to our evening continued. He told me all about how his parents had both been killed when their private jet had crashed on takeoff in New York City, leaving him as leader of their coven while he was still only in junior high school. He was much older than me, but apparently young for a vampire, and traditional schooling was usually broken up and not rushed in their young life. Life experience meant more to vampires. I could still see the sorrow in his eyes as he talked about his mom and dad, and them being taken from him so suddenly. He seemed to view his top position as a burden, rather than a source of pride, having only one aunt who he said he could fully trust to advise and guide him in his duties.

His parents died a few years before the Nebraska Agreement and right before the world learned about paranormals. So Xander ended up responsible for managing that volatile time in history when humans first discovered powerful beings lived among them. There’d been protests and prejudice against paranormals everywhere, especially in New

York City. Then once the Agreement was finalized—and human and paranormal leaders around the world had agreed most all paranormals but the Fae would be relocated to Nebraska (with the humans already living there paid huge incentives to move out, though a few had stayed)—he'd had to handle the upheaval of a coven of several thousand vampires from New York to here. His responsibilities hadn't ended after relocating. After they got here, he set up and supervised all of their business interests, investments, and agreements with covens in cities and towns across the new state. My heart really went out to him, having such a responsibility to carry, with no choice, at such a young age—by vampire standards, at least.

Clinking his knife and fork down halfway through his main course, he dabbed his lips with a napkin, saying, “Oh, I was meaning to tell you something, but didn't want to get your hopes up, because in all reality, it's most likely nothing.”

“What's that?”

“Well, one of the young boys in the teams I had out looking for your mom. A particularly ditzy lad, unfortunately. He claims to have seen a lady fitting your mom's description, through a limousine window.”

I put my knife and fork down, the word ‘mom’ pinging, like my ears were radar. “What? Where?”

He pressed his palms downwards into the air. “Calm down, my dear orchid. This is why I wasn't going to mention it. I find that false hope can be far more damaging than no hope at all.”

“What did he say?”

“The boy said he saw someone who may have looked like your mom, sitting in a stretch limousine, the license plate of which indicated it probably belonged to a grand elemental, though I don't know which one yet.”

“Grand elemental?”

“Elemental elders, the ruling class of that particular breed. They practice the most powerful magic, act as judges, policy

makers—to some extent—and of course gatekeepers of knowledge.

I felt myself making a face. “My mom in a stretch limousine? With a grand elemental? That doesn’t sound very likely.”

“Exactly, not only are limousine windows heavily tinted anyway, but something else you need to know about vampire covens is people are always trying to get a bit higher up the pecking order. There’s a lot of backstabbing, double crossing, and”—he waved a hand in the air—“for lack of a better word, bullshitting, to gain favor with those above them. Vamp youth like the one in question are especially prone to it. And what better way to make a good impression with me than to insist he’d found someone it’s well-known I was eager to find?”

“So, you think it’s just made up, to get in your good books?”

Shrugging, he pronged a morsel of pink steak. “In all likelihood. I’ll speak to the boy personally though, to be sure. And he says he remembers part of the license plate too, so I have people making inquiries into that. In any case, your mom told you just yesterday she’s safe and healthy, and will be home soon, so don’t get stressed out over what’s probably nothing. If any solid information comes from it, you’ll be the first to know, I promise.”

I took another sip of champagne, feeling a little rattled by mention of my mom. As Xander had said, she seemed to be okay, she’d gotten in touch and would hopefully be back soon. “Well, just be sure to let me know straight away.”

“Of course, you have my word. I hope I didn’t upset you?”

He hadn’t, and his concern was touching. I actually chuckled at the contrast in our first meeting compared to the dinner we were having now. “Do you remember how much you scared me when we met?”

He grimaced, his pearly fangs poking out. “I do. It’ll never happen again.”

“Is that your normal way of hitting on girls?”

“I don’t normally hit on girls. I just appear and they usually hit on me. Whether I like it or not, it’s a part of who I am.” His tone was matter of fact. “You’re the first I’ve ever had that reaction from.” He gave a bemused smile. “And now, knowing you better, I’m so glad you’re different.” His face turned serious again. His focus was entirely on me, like the rest of the restaurant had disappeared. “It’s so refreshing and exciting. Like you’ve taken a hammer and cracked—no, smashed—the invisible dome of boredom and superficiality that was suffocating me.”

“I don’t know what to say.” I glanced down at my hands, finding them twisting nervously in my lap, over the feelings he kept sparking inside me. An innate feeling that even though he was so different than me, what we had really was special and we were somehow meant to be together. “Just next time you want a girl to like you though, be like this, sweet and kind. Not creeping up on them in the dark, okay?”

“Oh, there won’t be a next time, my beloved orchid, believe me. And besides, you have my aunt to thank for that disastrous introduction.”

“Your aunt?”

“Yes, Persephone. She thought there wasn’t a girl of any breed who wouldn’t swoon at that type of wooing. I uh, think she was a little mistaken.”

I laughed. “Just a little. This is the aunt you trust so much?”

He nodded.

“I hope she’s better at business dealings than dating advice.”

“Absolutely. Oh, that reminds me, if you want to meet her, why don’t you come to the coven’s campus party Saturday? I’d love to have you there. She’s already said she wants to meet you, and it’s going to be the party of the year.”

“Your aunt wants to meet me? I’d love that. What about the other guys though?”

I wasn't sure how they'd feel about a vampire party, especially Jax. And as for Osric, I'd have to let him know through Aaron. I didn't feel he would have wanted an invite directly from me.

"They're very welcome. Everyone's invited. Jax might, understandably, be wary of coming to a coven party, but please give him my word, there'll be no trouble. Only a great time. Besides, it's at the coven house, but there'll be all breeds turning up, for sure. What do you say?"

The waiter interrupted with dessert. I'd ordered something I couldn't pronounce with a lot of chocolate. Xander had a little plate of blood oranges, though there was no actual blood and I hoped he wouldn't be embarrassed to consume more of what he needed in front of me.

"I'll definitely come." I dug into my dessert. "And I'm sure I can persuade at least Aaron, probably Jax too. Let's see—oh, speaking of invites, the Sentinels are playing against the Stallions tomorrow night, in New Bellevue. If you came along and showed some support for Jax and his team, I bet he'd really appreciate it." I cleared my throat, but it didn't need clearing. "I want you guys to be closer. If..." I couldn't quite voice what I wanted, what we all seemed to be heading for. And I stuffed a spoonful of chocolate into my mouth.

The vivid colors in his eyes sparkled, his voice lowering. "Oh, I see. Well, I could be persuaded, I suppose. It'll cost you though."

He was being a mischief-maker again. And I liked it. I swallowed hard. "Cost me what, exactly?"

Carefully placing the two candles to the far edges of the table, he leaned far forward, his words wisping fresh citrus zest as I moved closer too. Our mouths ended up within an inch of each other. "Have a guess?"

I glanced down and could see his fang tips poking from under his lips. My heart started to race, and I replied in trembles, my words stumbled by adrenaline. "So, if I kiss you, you'll come to the game tomorrow night?"

He nodded.

I slid my dessert to the side and edged forward, my pulse thumping in my neck, my body trembling. Our mouths met and my jitters were replaced by a sense of rightness. His kiss was bold and showed no hesitation. He ran his fangs along my lips, pressing them just hard enough so there was a mix of pleasure and pain. It made me feel alive.

I drew back with a gasp, needing air. That had been nothing like kissing Jax or Aaron, but fired just as many sparks through my body.

Sitting back in his chair, his crimson-circled eyes wide, he whispered, “Go Sentinels.”

“Uh?” I’d totally lost my train of thought.

He winked. “Guess we have a game to go to on Friday.”

CHAPTER 21

Cecilia

Thirty minutes pre-game and the Stallions' stadium was buzzing and crammed to capacity, the crowd's bustle and chatter filling the fresh evening air.

Almost everyone was sitting, but plenty of people stood and waved placards and banners, chanting and swaying from too many pre-game beers, flailing giant foam hands with index fingers poking skywards, emblazoned with 'Stallions' and 'New Bellevue State.' Spectators streamed back and forth from the food vendors to the seating sections, jostling and weaving with arms full of hotdogs, nachos and popcorn.

The red and white of the home fans' clothing filled around two thirds of the stadium. Vesta was dating a Stallions' player and I gave a wave to where she sat with his friends in the home team student section.

The rest of the crowd, particularly where we sat in the visitors' section, wore the Sentinels' colors of black and gold.

Including me. I had on a T-shirt, scarf and cap Xander gave me. He'd turned up to the game with them gift wrapped, saying he'd enjoyed seeing me in black so much the night before, he thought I might like to support Jax wearing the right team colors. I'd changed in the restroom and chuckled at myself in the mirror. I looked like a proper, die-hard fan, and the shirt's cotton was so soft around my shoulders and chest, the cap's peaked visor looked pretty cool too. Again, I was getting spoiled. And loving it.

As Jax and his team made their way out onto the field, I stood then whooped and clapped. Xander and Aaron followed suit, on either side of me. Jax scanned the visitor's section crowd, then waved over to our group. I did my fangirl thing, waving back with both arms.

Osric was in the row behind us, directly behind Aaron. He didn't stand when the teams made their appearance. Instead, he stayed hunched over, glued to his phone, tapping rapidly, his face frowning and flustered as his neatly styled blonde bangs fluttered in the breeze. I hoped he was okay. It seemed such a pity that everyone else was having a good time, and there was him, a handsome prince, looking two levels shy of miserable.

I stopped my clapping and raised my voice a little, to compensate for the crowd. "Osric?"

It was like the rest of the world had disappeared. He wasn't hearing a thing. His focus remained on his phone. I decided to leave him be, as it was clearly something important. I hoped he'd be able to put his phone away and enjoy the game at some point.

"Family stuff," Aaron whispered. "Best to leave him to it." He gave me a soft peck on the cheek then looked over to where I was resting my hand on Xander's shoulder and smiled. He seemed quite a lot more comfortable with Xander now. Ever since I'd told him how Xander had treated me on our date, and a bit about Xander's family history, that Xander said would be okay to share with the guys. As I entwined my fingers with Aaron's big, strong, teddy bear hand, I leaned into Xander, enjoying the smoothness of his black suede jacket.

Resting there, plucking occasional handfuls of salted popcorn from Aaron's giant bucket, I noticed an interesting sight, around ten rows down from us in the crowd. There was a group, three guys and a girl, her in the middle and them sitting at either side, and one directly behind. Not unlike my own seating arrangement, except of course Osric was off in his own little world.

And they were very affectionate towards her too. You could see the way they lavished attention, stroked her hair, her arms, with the guy behind giving her a shoulder and neck massage. It looked so nice. I glanced back at Osric. His head was still buried in his phone screen. Not much chance of a massage there.

The girl and her three guys were decked in denim and shiny leather boots, their hair varying shades of orange, strawberry, and apricot blonde. The guys were athletic, about the same as Xander, maybe a little broader at the shoulders, and the girl looked strong too, like an Olympic gymnast. Her sleeveless top showed off biceps and triceps in a definition I could have only dreamed of.

“Tiger shifters,” Xander whispered in my ear. The vibrations of his breath sent tingles across my head and neck. He didn’t have to lower his voice, it wasn’t as if they would have heard. I got the impression he just liked pouring honeyed words into my ears, teasing me. I liked when he did it too. Holding Aaron’s warm, strong hand and leaning into Xander’s cinnamon, leather scent, I felt I could have purred too, despite not having any big cat within me.

“How can you be so sure?” I of course had my own wolf, my own bear, and I’d seen guys on campus who looked like they might have been lion or leopard shifters, but nobody had struck me as tiger. There was often something in the body shape, the hair, their eyes, that gave strong hints about which animal shifters housed within.

He shrugged gently, so as not to disturb my resting head. “You get a vibe.”

“A vibe?”

“A vibe.” Breaking into a cheeky grin, he said, “That, and half the ginger nuts I meet seem to be tigers.”

I suppressed a chuckle. “You are *rude*.”

Turning, he cupped my cheek in his palm. “And you are to die for. May I steal a quick kiss?”

I glanced at Aaron. Still clasping my hand firmly, he said. “You do what feels right for you.”

I sat up, pushing the visor of my cap skywards, and Aaron released his clasp. I ran both my hands through Xander’s raven locks, admiring the exquisite blend of scarlet and sapphire in his eyes. “Okay, but just a quick one.” I glanced around, still not used to this much affection, especially in public. “To say

thank you for my Sentinels gear, and of course for last night.”
“But I mean a quick one.” I wagged my finger gently.
“Behave.”

“Yes, my orchid.”

Our mouths met for a few thrilling seconds. The tips of our tongues teasing, one of his fangs pressed into my lower lip, as Aaron rubbed my back firmly, caringly in circles. I wasn’t getting quite as much attention as the tiger lady, but I certainly couldn’t complain.

I drew away, turning to kiss Aaron quickly, rubbing up and down the thick, soft hair of his forearms, bare in his own Sentinels T-shirt. His thick chest muscles quickly began giving off heat, expanding under the thin cotton too. I had to stop. This was lovely, but—

“Boo! Abomination! Offspring of sinners!”

I jolted upright, thinking the hate-filled jeers were aimed at me and my public kissing. I quickly realized that the commotion was happening on the field.

A group of fans—they weren’t wearing colors from either team so maybe not—had spilled onto the field, carrying placards that said things like ‘Impurity is Sin’ and ‘The Second Death Awaits Interbreeders.’ They were surrounding one of the Stallions’ players, harassing him, their faces contorted, spitting hatred. The other players from both teams, the coaches and sideline staff, and of course stadium security, were dragging and shoving the people, who actually looked to be protestors not genuine fans, barging them away from the player, who was clutching his helmet underarm, a look of bewilderment on his face. It was a real mess. Punches started getting thrown, causing deep grumbles and shouts of disapproval to rise up from the crowd.

I sat forward, shocked, the wonderful atmosphere had suddenly been tainted by whatever was going on in front of me. “What on earth? What are they doing?”

Osric’s voice came from behind, forceful, brimming with anger. “Flashing their arsehole credentials.”

I turned to see him standing, glaring, his feet fidgety, as if he wanted to charge down the concrete steps and join in the brawl. Aaron spoke to him, his words friendly, but firm. “Security has this, buddy. Take it easy, yeah? This isn’t our fight. Not this time.”

What did he mean this time? “Who are these people? Why are they doing this?” I asked out loud, for any of the three guys to answer.

Osric did, speaking through gritted teeth, his handsome face firmly masked in a scowl. “The Temple of the Pure Breed. They’re protesting that player being on the team.”

“Why?”

“Because, Cecilia, he’s half like you and half elemental. He’s a mixed breed. And they consider him unfit to play. Unfit to exist, in fact.” He opened his right hand and stretched his palm wide, staring into it. “I am exceedingly tempted to go down there, slice their signs into pieces and shove them up their arses.”

His words worried me, but how could he slice anyone with just his hand? I prayed Fae princes didn’t think carrying knives in their pockets was normal.

Aaron stood quickly, turning to clutch Osric’s shoulders with both hands, staring down into his eyes, his tone hard as granite. “Don’t even think about it. Security have got this.” He pointed towards the commotion, where the troublemakers were rapidly being corralled towards an exit, by a small army of bulky guys in black. “See? They’re already leaving. Sit down, old friend. Please.”

Osric took a deep breath and exhaled hard. “Alright, old chap.” He sat, his scowl softening and shoulders relaxing. “And I’m sorry, you know. You know how I feel about them.”

Aaron breathed what seemed like a sigh of relief. “I do, of course, and it’s fine. Good man. You want a cold beer?”

Osric nodded, regaining his regular suave composure. “Thanks, just one though. Otherwise, I’ll be back and forth to the bloody toilet all evening.”

Chuckling into my ear, Xander spoke in an especially low voice, the rumble of the crowd masking his words from the nearby Osric as he said, “I’m slightly disappointed. I’ve heard the prince is quite a fighter. It would have been nice to see—”

“No, it wouldn’t have,” I whispered back. It was my turn to scowl. I wasn’t angry, but Xander needed to have a bit more empathy for Osric. There was clearly something deeply personal there, between Osric and those religious maniacs. Whatever it was, I would try to talk to him about it later. If I could help, I would, especially after all he’d done for me.

The drama disappeared along with the temple people, and the fun atmosphere steadily built up again. The teams’ preparations had been delayed by the disturbance, and they were going through them now. As usual, Jax looked super hunky and ready to do some amazing feats on the field. His classic, V-shaped torso, was even more exaggerated by the bulky shoulder pads pressing tightly under his uniform. He was the wolf of every girl’s dreams. But they couldn’t have him.

Oh, speaking of girls that couldn’t have him, my attention was drawn to the lead cheerleader. There was Mandy, looking her perfectly groomed, dolly girl self. She didn’t seem to be trying her charms on Jax this time. Maybe she was finally starting to get things into her thick skull? But then again, it was very thick...

Clutching his helmet, Jax walked away from his teammates, towards the edge of the bleachers, on the Sentinels’ side. He was talking to four guys. The oldest and biggest looking one was clutching Jax round the back of his head, wagging his finger, like a lecture was going on. Jax was responding with arm flails, pacing back and forth with hands on hips. It looked tense.

Xander didn’t whisper this time. “Jax’s dad. The three cronies behind him are his capos. Oh, I mean business assistants.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve had dealings with all of them. Unfortunately.” Xander stood. “Look, you wouldn’t be mad if I went off for a short while, would you? I promise I’ll be back soon.”

“Sure. Be back soon though,” I said, smiling but also still concerned at what was happening with Jax.

Xander disappeared.

I kept watching as Jax’s unhappy family discussion continued. It didn’t look like it was going to end, even though the other players were checking their pads, their laces, starting to put helmets on.

And then, appearing from the top entrance of the section where Jax’s dad was, weaving down the steps like a black mamba in sunglasses, was Xander. One arm cradling the biggest popcorn bucket I’d ever seen, the other a six pack of beer, he slipped along the row and sidled into the seats belonging to Jax’s dad and his cronies. The ones they should have been sitting in, but had left empty, to go and get in Jax’s face beside the bleachers’ barrier.

Sprawling across two of the seats, his food and drink heaped on the third and fourth one, he cracked open a beer and reclined. I could see him throwing his hands up in the air, motioning for Jax’s dad and his friends to move.

What on earth was he doing?

They turned from Jax, shouting, and pointing for Xander to leave. Swaggering and grinning smugly, he waved a dismissive hand and chugged from his can. When one of the cronies approached him, nose to nose, it really did look like Xander loosed a beer belch right in his face.

Jax looked relieved at his father’s departure. The tension in his shoulders released and he put on his helmet, running across the field to join his team. The game started shortly after.

I couldn’t take my eyes off Xander. As soon as the game was in play, he stood, did a theatrical bow, poured the popcorn over the seats, and strode back up the steps, clutching the beers.

Before I knew it, he was sitting back beside me, laughing to himself.

“What the hell was that?” I think I spoke for myself, Aaron, and Osric.

He waved a casual backhand. “Just a bit of fun and games, so Jax can go play his.” He held up the cans. “Fancy a cold one, my orchid?”

CHAPTER 22

Osric

Why had I bothered coming to this party?

I walked up the front porch to Xander's coven house—the one they owned near campus, primarily for social gatherings—and stepped aside at the doorway as three chattering wolf shifters, members of Jax's pack, slurred booze-fueled bollocks and stumbled past me. One patted me on the shoulder, his whiskey-laced breath strong enough to knock over a horse, as he said, “Hey man, you're that prince, right? Have an awesome time, man.”

I didn't like uninvited touching, but I forced myself to respond. “Thank you.”

Meandering through the entrance hall, I walked into a sizeable main living space to find vamps and wolves getting on surprisingly well. Chugging beers and joking as they lounged on couches and chairs filling the huge area. There was even an arm-wrestling match happening on a monstrous dining table, members from both sides crowding around, laying down bets, chanting and table thumping, but with no aggression, no malice.

In the past day, Jax and Xander had agreed to a truce between their respective groups, deciding to combine resources and efforts in the hunt for the killer who'd recently been named by the press: Jack 2. His gruesome skill with a knife had claimed and carved up two more victims just the night before, after the game, both young college girls who'd been out at parties not dissimilar to this one. It was really something awful.

One of those parties had been at New Bellevue State and the other here at New Lincoln. Unless it was two different killers, he'd driven right from one to the other and made quite

the statement: nowhere was safe. So far, there was no rhyme or reason to the killings, other than that they were all young women. Three had been on college campuses, two downtown. But I suspected the police were withholding information. And there might even be more killings we didn't know about.

I hoped Xander had thought to add some extra security after Jack 2's spree the night before. Even though this house was more mansion than college house—nothing like the other two houses Jack 2 had struck in, with its high ceilings, plush décor and internal terraces spread over several floors—Jack 2 didn't seem like the discriminating sort. So far, I'd only seen a couple of cameras and two sober-looking coven members stationed at the front gates.

Where was Cecilia though?

I ventured to the patio doors and exited to sweeping green lawns, a basketball court, a swimming pool, and even a lake to one side. Near the lake's closest bank was a vastly stocked cocktail bar—regular and blood brands—carved deep into the trunk of a Giant Sequoia tree, its bartenders hurriedly shaking, pouring and mixing, trying their best to slake the never-ending thirsts of all the breeds who'd turned up.

Clever design for a bar. Though the tree probably didn't agree.

Why was I here again?

Oh, that's right. Aaron had convinced me to come, mentioning he'd be here with Cecilia.

And where was she? I thought it would be best if I went and found her, a human amongst hundreds of paranormal partygoers. The human girl that three of the most powerful paranormals on campus couldn't seem to keep away from.

Of course, I wouldn't have known of how close they all were to her if I hadn't been observing so keenly.

But, if I was being honest with myself, had I really been observing *them*? Or just her?

Shit, I didn't know.

Okay, who was I kidding, I did know. Maybe I was turning into a fool, my wits dulled by romantic inclinations, just like the others. I'd seen the effect Cecilia, or Ceci as they seemed to call her more and more, had on their behavior. They were beyond obsessed. Hopelessly devoted, one might have said.

I envied their freedom. I had no such privilege, bound by chains of duty. I believed in traditions and family, sure. But if it was my mother's version of that, it could sink to the bottom of that bloody lake for all I cared.

I nudged my way to the patio's small corner bar and ordered a double scotch with ice. I had to half-shout what brand I wanted as dance music from a DJ station bumped my ears and shoulders did the same against my body. Taking a gulp, enjoying the pleasant burn and peaty odor of finest Scottish whisky, I chuckled to myself.

Me, Osric, a Fae royal, a prince no less, heir to the kingdom, had chosen to hang out at a party hosted by vamps. My mother would have had an aneurysm. She always thought them a lower breed. Just one example of how stuck up she was. And the night before, I'd even been at a football game, sitting through the whole tedious thing without a clue about the rules of play. I'd endured it, as I was enduring this booze-guzzling rabble, for one reason only: Cecilia.

Okay, fine. I could admit it. Aaron hadn't needed to do much convincing. And my earlier musings were just denial and me coming round to the simple fact I couldn't stop thinking about her.

Not just that, she'd mesmerized me. I didn't know how or why, I just knew what my heart did when I laid eyes on her or heard her soft voice. Basically, any time I got any sort of reminder about how wonderful and caring this little human girl was. My whole soul, my entire being lifted and I felt like there was hope in my life. That happiness was something I could attain.

Not that admitting it to myself mattered. Nothing would happen. Cecilia would never like me. Not when she had Aaron, who was really the best bloke there was. And she had

Xander, who was pretty clever and witty and the best vamp leader I'd ever known. And Jax, who was one hell of a wolf, athlete, and boyfriend.

And nothing *could* happen. Especially with my mother's spies—information gatherers as she called them—being anywhere and everywhere. For all I knew, the cherry-cheeked chap who'd just served me my scotch could have been on her payroll.

My mother was hell bent on me returning to England, not after graduation either, but immediately. The text messages were now far more frequent. And her plans didn't include me making my own choices, least of all for a penniless human student slash janitor.

I glugged the scotch back, the ice cubes clinking as I drained the tumbler. I ordered another. Despite the growing swarm of partygoers clogging up the bar, the drink came swiftly. Slipping a twenty-bill tip inside the bartender's palm, I thanked him for his quick service.

I spotted Aaron's hulking frame over by the swimming pool, and made my way through the revelry, taking care to not spill my whisky as I weaved. The air was fresher the farther I moved away from the crowds, the vibrations of bass far less intrusive. Aaron was reclining in a rattan armchair that was struggling to accommodate his ample backside, his thick, long legs and bulging arms equally oversized for where he'd chosen to sit.

"Where's Cecilia?" I asked.

He pointed over to yet another patio, its floor a sweeping semi-circle of stained oak, where people were dancing and bouncing along to the DJ's music. In the throng, I spotted Ceci, shorter than almost everyone else and dressed more conservatively too, in a mid-length, flowing skirt and sleeveless top. She was dancing with Jax and Xander. They almost moved as one.

Jax was behind her, his hands on her hips, her skirt riding up a bit, but she still managed to look so sweetly innocent as she stared up at Xander in front of her. Xander stepped closer

and leaned in, almost resting his fanged smile against her neck.

They all moved their bodies in perfect time with the beat, but it was Cecilia I couldn't look away from. She radiated grace and ease, resting a hand on Xander's chest and the other covering one of Jax's, holding it to her. A look of joy and eagerness beamed from her face, like she'd never done anything like this before—maybe she hadn't, most likely she hadn't if Aaron's hints about her lack of experience were true—and was loving it.

Xander moved his mouth to her ear and nipped at it with his fangs and she lost her rhythm for several beats, melting into him.

Yeah, it was pretty hot.

I undid the top button of my shirt, needing a bit more air.

My gaze staying on them, I sat in the armchair beside Aaron, rubbing my free palm up and down the rattan arms' smooth woven pattern as I took another gulp of warming scotch. "Enjoying the party?"

Aaron chuckled. "I'd say you are. You're so busy gawking at Ceci, you're not even going to mention my upgrade?"

Turning, I saw that he'd gone for a smart casual outfit of navy and white; slacks, a sharply fitted long-sleeved shirt, and deck shoes. Stuff a lot swankier than he normally wore. I raised my glass in salute. "Oh yes, how nice. You do look very dapper this evening. Trying to impress anyone in particular?"

Snorting, he swigged from his beer bottle. "Maybe I realized I had to up my game a little?"

I laughed. "I think your game's been going quite well recently—if you count up all the kisses—don't you?"

He grinned, looking quite pleased with himself. "It has. But I'm hoping it's going to keep going well. And"—he nodded at my attire—"I didn't want to be outshone, in clothing terms, by some of my competition."

“Competition?” I looked down at my own neatly pressed outfit. Slim-fit slacks and long-sleeved shirt, Chelsea boots. “Well, I’m not your competition for what—who—you want. But I’d say you’ve got the edge on me in the style department. For tonight, at least.”

He wagged his finger at me. Beer was causing his words to subtly muddle, but only just. “I’d like you to be honest with me, okay?”

“Aren’t I always?”

He scoffed. “Good, then you won’t mind admitting you like Ceci. Just as much as I do.”

“Oh, come on. She’s nice enough, but I hardly speak to her. Hardly get the chance with your tongue in her mouth half the time. Not to mention your new throuple members, Jax and Xander. No, not throuple.” I looked upwards, stroking the chairs’ arms, searching for the right term. “Whatever three chaps and a girl are called.”

“You’re bullshitting. I see the way you look at her. Like just now. I know you, remember? You’re not hiding anything, at least from me. You’re always looking out for her, always going out of your way to help her. Why not just admit you like her? It’s not a problem if you do.”

I shrugged, knowing he wasn’t buying my bullshit, but I had to try. “Don’t friends look out for each other? She’s your girl now.” I looked over at Ceci on the dance floor. She was still getting lavished with affection by Jax and Xander. “All of yours.”

“It’s more than just being friends. It’s okay, you don’t have to hide it anymore.”

I took another sip of Scotland’s finest. The ice was starting to melt, the cubes reduced to fragile shells, and I crunched and chewed one. “What can I say? I’m spoken for, as you well know.”

“And if you weren’t?”

“I’d dance a bloody jig and do a somersault into the pool.” Reaching over, I patted the top of his hand. “If you know some

way of releasing me from my obligations in England, please do tell.” Leaning back into the armchair’s soft embrace, I tapped the pointed tip of my left ear. “After all, I’m all ears.”

Aaron sighed, running his fingertip along the beer bottle’s mouth in circles. “There’s nothing you can do about that? Nothing at all?”

He had a heart of gold, but there was no way he could ever comprehend the weight on my shoulders. That my mother would literally hunt me down and drag me away when she reached the end of her patience. “I’m afraid not. And anyway, *if* I were to be attracted to the fair Cecilia, and *if* I were to become involved with her, then I’d fear what my mother might do. Assuming she found out, which she most likely would.”

Aaron made a face. “What she’d do? Like what?”

“I dread to think. I’m being deadly serious though. She’s verging on the sociopathic, when it comes to her prejudices and protecting our family bloodline and standing in Fae society.”

“You mean—”

“But enough about me, old chap. Why don’t you go and dance with your quadruple? Go on, enjoy yourself.” I gestured with my whisky tumbler towards the spot where Ceci, Jax and Xander were drawing increasing attention for their dancing. “Looks like the other two are having all the fun.”

Aaron shook his head. “There are students everywhere. She’s a student, I’m a professor. Even with the university signing off on our dating—so long as another professor grades her work—I’d feel awkward, with everyone looking. I’d rather—” Gazing at Ceci, I heard a grumble rise from deep within his chest. A bear-like one. He stood, agitated, his cheeks flaring red.

“Are you okay, Aaron? That sounded like *he* was making his voice known.”

Aaron necked his beer, finishing it with a satisfied gasp. “Don’t worry, he’s under control. I’m not sure I am though.”

With that, he strode around the pool area to the dancefloor, into Ceci's embrace, where he leaned into her ear and whispered something to her. She nodded a "yes" to whatever he'd asked. The vamp and the wolf looked a bit dejected at the interruption, but she smiled at them both and kissed them. Then she let Aaron take her hand, still swaying to the music as he led her off into the house. Before they disappeared among the sea of revelers, I caught a glimpse of her leaning into him and looking up at him with such devotion.

I drained my glass dry. Lucky bugger.

Was it okay to be jealous of your best friend?

CHAPTER 23

Cecilia

I kissed Jax and Xander a quick goodbye on the dance floor then Aaron's large hand wrapped around mine. He gripped my hand gently, but enveloped it so completely, it made me feel safe as he led me away through the crowd. I couldn't help but stop for a moment before we entered the house, leaning into his solid warmth, looking up to catch his gaze and giving him a soft smile.

Once inside, on the main level, we passed so many partiers, including even what looked like a human or two. We kept going, up a flight of stairs and through corridors, until the thump of dance music dimmed, there wasn't a person in sight, and the party's laughter and noise reduced to a muffle.

Once we reached the top floor, he led me to Xander's study. I knew exactly where we were because Xander had given me, Aaron and Jax a private tour before everyone arrived. This was one of the rooms where Xander managed coven business. And even though it was accessed by a keypad, he'd shared the code with us.

"I guess I should've asked sooner, but it's okay if we have a quiet moment?" Aaron paused outside the door.

"I knew what you were up to the moment you whispered *let's go get a drink* in my ear but then didn't take me for one." I grinned, trying to show I was exactly where I wanted to be.

"You're thirsty?" He looked troubled.

"No, I want the same thing you do." I gripped his hand tighter. "I'd love a quiet moment."

Aaron entered the code and after he flicked on the overhead lights and we stepped inside, the door shut and locked with a click and a beep behind us.

I barely noticed the large desk, leather couch, and towering bookcases that I'd admired earlier, my eyes running over Aaron's large frame instead. I'd forgotten to tell him when he'd picked me up at my apartment, he looked great. His look reminded me of Osric's, except of course Aaron was twice the size and sporting scruff. And Aaron was Mr. Smiley not Mr. Scowly.

I slid forward, leaning into him. He stooped, understanding exactly what I wanted—as he always did—and I reached up, virtually on tip toes, so I could wrap my arms round his neck. He circled his arms behind my back, holding me close. Our noses grazed.

“I forgot to tell you, nice outfit.” I ran a hand over the smooth cotton covering his shoulder.

“Thank you.” His cheeks pinkened. “Not too much? Not really my usual style.”

“I love your usual look too. I hope you can tell, I love everything about you.” I peeked up to try to read how he'd react to that.

His arms and chest grew warmer through his shirt. “I feel the same.” His voice was gruff and he brushed a lock of hair behind my ear. “If I didn't think it would scare you away, I'd say a lot more.”

My heart started to beat faster. “I don't scare easily.”

He cleared his throat and his hands moved from my back to my shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze. “But I didn't bring you here to get so serious. It's a party. I was hoping we could have a dance?” He asked tentatively. “Sorry, there's no music. Let me...” He reached into his pocket for his phone.

“Why didn't you join us earlier?” I stopped his hand, encouraging him to leave his phone where it was.

He shrugged, his face showing a flash of sadness. “New Nebraska is pretty open, but I thought it best to keep my distance. I pushed things at the game. But I don't want anyone to think I'm taking advantage of you.”

“We know you’re not. That’s all that matters. But I understand what you mean. Let’s dance now, just the two of us.”

“No music?”

“We don’t need music, just each other. But I’ll hum. Let’s just do a slow one.” I reached up to wrap my arms around his neck again.

This time, he surprised me by scooping me up under my butt and lifting me into the air and forward, against his chest.

I instinctively wrapped my legs around his waist and held on. I rested my head on his shoulder and he held me so effortlessly, I loosened my grip and melted into him.

I sighed. “This is perfect. You’ll have to do all the work though.”

“I’ll do the dancing, sweet girl. Just relax and let me hold you.”

“Mmhmm,” I mumbled into his shirt and breathed in his woody scent.

I started to hum a slow melody and he swayed us gently. As we continued, and the rest of the party truly faded away, I realized this was exactly what I’d needed. A moment to rest and reflect on what was becoming one of the best nights of my life. I felt bad for thinking it, with that psycho killer still on the loose, and my mom off doing mysterious things, but things in my life were coming together. I could see a relationship with my guys now. It was so wonderful to see Jax’s Central NN Lupines not just at peace—or having a truce, at least—with Xander’s coven, but partying together, getting on so well.

I truly believed that anyone could get along in this world, if there was mutual understanding, tolerance and trust. It just took a bit of effort.

Xander had even introduced me to his aunt, Persephone, before she’d headed home when the DJ started, claiming she was too old to be cutting loose with the young vamps. We’d had a long chat before she left though. She was humorous and super friendly. She’d welcomed me with open arms, like I was

already a member of the family. She did the same for Jax and Aaron too.

There'd been only one low point to the night, besides not seeing Osric here. And that was when near the start of the gathering, I'd wandered over to the lake by myself for a few minutes and been met by Mandy. She'd sneered at my outfit and brushed past my shoulder, knocking me slightly to the side, commenting on how I'd never fit in with the pack, that they'd never accept me as Luna.

It bothered me so much because I wanted to be Jax's Luna, if that's what he needed me to be, in order to stay with me. I didn't even know what being a Luna would entail, but I cared for Jax just as much as Aaron and Xander, and somehow, we really seemed to be making this work. And all of us were happier for it.

I burrowed further into Aaron's strong embrace, trying to push away any doubts or worries Mandy had caused.

I kept humming and Aaron's massive size, combined with my weight, was causing the floorboards to throw out sporadic, woody croaks as he moved. It had a sort of squeaky melody to it, like the varnished oak wanted to join with my humming.

On a particularly loud creak, I stopped my music and we both burst out laughing. He loosened his hold on my backside, letting me slide down his body and my laughter turned into a moan. My breasts brushing against his hard muscles until my feet landed.

Towering over me, his shoulders so broad, a heated look flaring in his eyes, a flash of heat filled me too, reigniting all the sparks Xander and Jax had brought to life when we danced.

He bent his knees, stooping a bit again, and our bodies began moving in a slow, silent rhythm. No humming, no floorboards creaking this time, but our hearts supplied the beat. Eyes locked, we enjoyed each other's touch and warmth, as well as the unspoken emotions that rang so deliciously between us. No words were needed when we were so connected. Like our very souls were in tune.

He gripped me by the hips and drew me closer, pulling me firmly but gently into one of his thighs with his immense strength. Our scents mixed, making my heart beat faster. My breasts were pressed tight against his abdomen, as I looked up into his soft, sweet eyes. The firm press of my lower body against his leg felt heavenly.

Resting my head on his lower chest, I moaned, rubbing my whole body against his, feeling him hold me even tighter. “Is this okay?” I asked.

“You have no idea how okay.” Aaron’s shirt was damp with sweat, his bulging muscles giving off strong heat. “So very okay.”

I was worried about his grizzly losing control. “Are you sure all this close contact is okay for...*him*?”

Aaron cupped my cheek. “I can’t guarantee anything. But I wear the bear, he doesn’t wear me. And either way, I can sense he wants me close to you. Nothing’s going to stop me from being near you, ever, okay?”

“Yes, that’s *very okay*.” I repeated his earlier assurance back to him.

“Good.” He looked relieved.

I didn’t answer. Instead, like magnets pulled them together, our mouths met, his bristly jaw lightly tickling my cheek and chin. The kiss wasn’t rushed. He teased my lips and our tongues finally collided. The rub of skin, the sucking, our tongues writhing, it was so overwhelming. In the best way.

And since he’d said it was okay, I started rubbing the top of my thighs against Aaron again. Hard. Especially the apex. Pleasure burst through me with every delicious bit of friction. He was gasping, breathing heavily. I felt myself swallowing hard, stuttering in my words as I asked, “Wou—would you want to...” I wasn’t even sure what I was asking.

He replied equally shyly, saying, “I do. Let me do something for you. Just let me know if it’s too much.”

Whatever he was thinking. I trusted him to take care of me. In all ways, even though we were each other’s firsts for

everything. “Yes,” I whispered.

He gripped me by the waist and half spun and carried me to the couch where he sat and stood me up right in front of him, between his spread legs. His eyes met mine as he slowly inched up my skirt, brushing the fronts of my bare thighs with his palms until one of them gripped my hip and the other rested near my center, his large thumb meeting the edge of my panties.

A sigh escaped my lips as his thumb moved closer to where I wanted it. My hands fell to his shoulders and I shifted a bit until his thumb brushed right over my center. I could feel the dampness there starting to glue my panties to my skin and I started to squirm, seeking out pressure against his thumb.

His mouth moved to nuzzle one of my breasts through my top. When I let out a loud moan, he quickly moved the hand that had been on my hip to squeeze the other breast.

At the same time, his hand below moved over my panties in a hard rhythm and it was exactly what I needed. My hips undulated and he kept up the pace. Pleasure built steadily and finally released as my eyes squeezed tightly shut. There was a moment when there was nothing, no thoughts, just my body quaking. Having reached a pinnacle where everything was so intense, almost too much, yet peaceful and perfect.

And it had been perfection, being with him so freely and openly. I hadn't even been self-conscious. Just incredibly turned on, to be like that in front of him. I'd never come so quickly or hard by my own efforts in my life.

He slowed his movements but kept firm pressure. He breathed in hard several times, like he was trying to take in my very essence.

All the while, bliss continued to sweep through my body. It finally became too much. I shuddered, gasping, and fell forward, into him. He caught me and lifted me up so my legs rested on either side of him as I sat on his thighs.

I dropped my head to one of his shoulders and let my breathing settle.

He held onto my back and rubbed small circles, tangling one hand in my hair. He used it to pull my head back and look deeply in my eyes. “That was okay?”

“That was freaking amazing!”

He chuckled.

“Can I return the favor?” I started to pull back and look down to where I could feel his hardness pressing up into me.

He immediately drew me back and urged me to rest against him like before. “Not now.”

“But—”

“Maybe if you still want, later tonight—when Jax is around in case my bear gets out of control—we can back at the apartment. But only if you want,” he said firmly. “This was all about you.” He paused and drew in a long breath. “I love you, Ceci. I know my timing is awful. There’s probably a million more romantic ways and places to say it. But I love you.”

I pulled back to look him in the eyes. “I—”

“Don’t say anything. Not yet.” He silenced me with a kiss. His voice was still calm, but sweat was dampening his brow and I wondered if that was his bear heating him up or if he was nervous about what I might say. “Let’s get something to drink, go join the others. Then head home soon. How about that?”

“Perfect.” I smiled. “Let me just run to the restroom and text Vesta. I told her I’d meet her out by the tree bar after dancing. I should probably run out there. I haven’t really met her new boyfriend yet.”

“Sounds like a plan. Go freshen up and I’ll meet you down there.”

I gave him a tight squeeze and jumped off his lap, giving him a wave and an air kiss before skipping out of Xander’s office and to the closest restroom down the hall. I texted Vesta on my way and in no time at all, I was striding back outside, a bounce in my step, a huge smile on my face.

I sauntered over the freshly cut lawns to find Vesta and her guy, loving the cool evening breeze against my still flushed

cheeks as it swayed my hair and bounced my skirt from side to side in gentle billows. What a wonderful night.

Then, from behind, I heard a body rushing towards me, heavy breathing near my neck. Then a thump.

Everything went black.

CHAPTER 24

Aaron's Beast

I forced the shift as soon as I scented our mate's fear. It stung in the nose, a sourness in the air. Just a hint of it in the wind, mixing with her usual mouthwatering essence.

Surging forth, I burst into the gathering of drunkards. My body almost twice the size since I'd last shifted, my head felt too big on my neck. Turning it, I tried to catch where our mate's scent was coming from. Sniffing hard, thrashing my neck from side to side, my snout knocked into a vampire. He screamed and stumbled back, falling into a tiny body of water. The vamp tumbled into the little pool, steam rising up as he splashed. Aaron referred to it earlier as something like a hot bath or hot tub. In any case, I dwarfed it, as I did everyone around me.

I snorted, spinning back around. Vamps, shifters and elementals filled the area, screaming and shouting. They backed up from me, cowering, eyes bulging in their sockets.

Aaron's Fae prince friend inched toward me, his eyes wide with alarm, speaking in a soft voice, raising his palms up.

I growled.

Mate. Danger.

Mate. Danger.

It was all I cared about. She'd never smelled this way, even when in distress over her mother.

Someone must've caused this fear.

Rage. Violence.

I salivated over what was to come.

Aaron thought he had me leashed.

No. Never!

There was just never anything to excite my instincts.

There was now.

There! Our mate's scent was strongest there, by the woods. I bounded off in that direction, enjoying the feel of my claws racking through the grass, of my fangs filling out my jowls. It had been a long time since I'd been in this form.

The last time I'd fought a lion pride. *That* was worth coming to the surface for. To silence their ignorant ramblings. To leave their bodies bloody and fleeing like prey, as fast as their shredded limbs could carry them.

I'd attacked them as any predator should, with no fear. *No mercy.*

And the Fae prince that night, drunk and self-pitying, his mouth running faster than any gazelle. I'd saved him then. I'm not sure why. Such a weakling, thanking Aaron for it again and again. Though I'd learned the Fae had an impressive claw of his own. Maybe he was not so weak? And his loyalty had grown on me. Especially now he was looking after our mate—mine and Aaron's.

Her scent grew stronger. The sweet musk of her desire there with it, still lingering after she'd come so beautifully for us, letting us watch her shudder and moan. Aaron may have been at the surface to satisfy her, but I would be the one to save her.

I was heading in the right direction, racing around trees and barreling through bushes and plants, with such force, more than any other being could muster. Aaron and the wolf pup had been right, our mate was strengthening me, my power and control. And my limbs, my bulk, so much larger since I'd last shifted too, all thanks to our little human.

I burst out of thick undergrowth onto a dirt path. Scenting it, smelling our mate's essence stronger and stronger. I hammered the ground on all fours.

There was another scent though. Something I couldn't identify, but definitely male. Fury raged inside me. *A male*

wanted our mate? Another male had made our mate afraid. It didn't matter. Whoever was trying to take her was going to die. Nothing would take her from me. I would never be apart from her. Ever. She was mine.

Mine. Mine. Mine. Mine. Mine.

Okay, she was ours. I was forced to share everything with Aaron.

Ahead on the path, I saw someone. The strange scent carried in the air from his direction. Hooded and moving surprisingly fast, our mate slung over his shoulder. Her body hung limp, her limbs making no attempt to strike, to fight back.

I roared in fury.

Why didn't she move? If she was dead, I would rip his innards out and bathe in his blood while he screamed.

I charged harder, massive chunks of earth flying up as my claws raked, demanding greater traction, my immense bulk firing toward our mate.

He wasn't slowing. He'd only sped up.

I roared again, channeling every bit of my new size and strength into it, resulting in a volume loud enough to shake the forest. The strange scented one kept running, didn't even register it. How dare he ignore my voice. Once I'd caught him, I would make sure to burst his eardrums with my bellow.

He streaked off the path and into the woods. I wasn't far behind. Spindly trees snapped and tumbled like matchsticks against my shoulders. Sap and earth clumped my fur and claws, and even some splinters from the thicker trees had made it through, to stick into my skin, but their stings were welcome, a reminder that being free in this form was a bounty of sensations, *including pain*.

Through the crunch and rattle of trunk and bush, I bounded, meeting a stream. Its depth not a worry for drowning—at least not for me. But somehow the assailant had made it to the other side. He stood, facing me, though his face was covered in cloth. Our mate still hung limp on his shoulder.

The bold, full moon gave sufficient light for my leap across—

Crack! He'd lobbed a magic grenade into the stream. Electricity. I roared, hammering the night sky with my anger. The stream's surface crackled in threads of neon blue, weaving and popping, savage in their snake-like twists and turns. Our mate needed me though. I was going over.

I bounded down to the bank and leapt over the water, the electric stings clung to my fur, running across my underbelly, my cock and balls, searing unimaginable pain across my being.

He was going to die slowly, in a world of hurt. He'd dared to take our mate and then think he could fight me for her.

Die. Die. Die. Die. Die.

Once our mate was safe, I was going to take my time killing him. I was going to take pleasure from it.

I fired up the bank and he was there, apparently exhausted from the chase. Now he'd know who he'd awoken. Me. A monster.

The male prey still had our mate over his shoulder though. So instead of unleashing my normal instincts of slicing and ripping, I opted for a battering shoulder barge, hammering him backward into the brush. Our mate might be harmed, but not badly.

He folded under my force, being knocked flat into a bed of twigs and leaves. Our mate flew up in the air and I lay flat to catch her fall. Her tiny body flopped onto my back, and I carefully slid her onto the ground. I moved forward and nudged her with my snout, licking her cheek with the tip of my tongue, checking she was okay. A whine escaped me when her chest rose and fell with a shallow breath.

Then I turned my attentions to the prey who'd started this whole thing in the first place. Oh, how I'd savor his flesh—

The ground was empty. He'd somehow recovered from my attack.

He was gone.

And our mate was not moving.

Still not moving.

What was wrong with her? I roared into the night air.

CHAPTER 25

Jaxon

All hell was breaking loose over by the pool.

I couldn't see it at first, from my position just round the corner at the patio bar, but something disastrous had to be happening. Causing pitched screams, shouts and batters of furniture as partygoers fled, stampeding and stumbling in distress. This was no booze-sparked shoving match or even a full-on brawl. Neither would've caused my NN Lupines to react with the horror I sensed in their voices.

The DJ's music cut abruptly, and there was a cry for help and a loud splash. More screams. Then a growl that was neither wolf nor vampire grumbled through the airwaves. Something was on the rampage.

Mandy, who had been trying her best to paw at me, to entice me for the past ten minutes, against my irritated protests, must've glimpsed something. She jerked backwards, her smile reforming into a mask of terror as she clunked her glass on the counter and began running toward the side of the house, presumably to leave the party. Her chardonnay-guzzling sidekicks raced after her. But it was Mandy that surely had the fastest sprint in high heels the world had ever seen.

And then I saw why. I turned to find the biggest grizzly in existence, thundering its way across the lawn, guests of all breeds desperately trying to escape its path, flinging themselves onto the ground, cringing as it flew by, roaring, tearing up the grass with its enormous claws.

That was Aaron in beast form? Holy. Fuck.

Why the hell had he shifted though? Here, at a party where everything had been going great. And, more importantly,

where the hell was Ceci?

The bear—though its size was closer to bull elephant than bear—raced its way towards the wooded area of the coven house's grounds, crunching trees like toothpicks under its gargantuan body as it disappeared among the greenery.

It had been a good thirty minutes, but I'd last seen Aaron heading inside with Ceci. And Aaron and his bear wouldn't have left our mate without good reason.

I scanned the chaos, but Ceci was nowhere to be seen. I raised my nose, searching for her scent. It was there, faint, but there. Her unique smell, drenched in distress.

Osric came running toward me, his normal ice cool composure replaced by the flush of fear. There was even a tremble to his words as he planted a firm palm on my shoulder, gasping, "Jax, old boy, time to become a wolf. Go, get after him!" He squeezed my shoulder hard, his eyes showing a sincerity I'd not seen from the prince before. "And for goodness' sake, whatever you do, don't try to fight him."

Fuck. I looked around, everyone was visibly shaken. Xander too, his cocky demeanor had melted away as he flailed his arms up, shouting at me, "You're the one with four legs, aren't you? Get your ass in gear, Pup." His hand shook as he pointed toward the woods the bear had disappeared into. "He could be after Ceci. Where is she!?"

Before I had a chance to respond, Ceci's friend Vesta and her boyfriend, Finnian, came rushing from the direction of the lake. "Ceci never met me. At the bar," she said, her forehead beaded with sweat.

"Aaron's bear might be going after her, wherever she is. I'm heading now." I pulled off my shirt.

"I'll keep your scent hanging in the air, as a trail we can follow. We'll be right behind you," Finnian said. He was cornerback for the Stallions, and I knew him fairly well. He was a good guy, an elemental with powerful wind magic.

So, taking a deep breath, my exhale more than a little shaky, I finished removing my clothes as Finnian covered

Vesta's eyes, looking slightly awkward as I stripped.

Then I began my shift.

In order to chase after a monster several times my size.

Anything, for Ceci. And for Aaron, too.



I tore along the grass, the scent of both Aaron's beast and Ceci growing stronger in my snout the closer I got. Bounding through the bushes, past freshly felled trees—Aaron's grizzly had smacked them over like a tank—I launched myself over a deep-running stream that billowed smoke and reeked of burning electrical wires.

Once on the opposite bank, I fired up the hill as fast as all four legs could carry me. I wasn't sure—

There it was. The beast, a mountain of fur and malice. Panting, agitated, a behemoth drenched in shadows and moonlight, it was frantically licking at the face of Ceci, who lay among scattered leaves and soil, out cold. Or at least, I hoped only out cold.

A shiver skated along my wolf spine.

What the fuck had happened? The beast hadn't done this. It seemed desperate to revive its mate. Our mate.

I stood, panting from the sprint, my tongue sucking at the night air, trying to cool down and conserve my strength. Unsure of what the grizzly's reaction would be to my wolf.

And if I might be about to die.

Ceci groaned, her head moving a fraction, then she turned onto her side, coughing, mumbling a few incoherent words. I'd never been more thankful to hear anything in my life. Even though her near lifeless body stabbed at my heart.

The monstrous bear ambled slowly, whining, until its head nudged her side with surprising tenderness, as if to stir her from her slumber further.

I'd never backed down from a fight in my life, but I knew one thing: either as a wolf or in man-like form, I stood no chance against this creature, one-on-one.

At least shifted back, I would be far better equipped to revive and help Ceci, with my paws changed back to human form and my first aid training. So that was what I did.

Stark naked, but not caring a damn at that moment, I approached. My bare feet crunching on leaves and twigs alerted the beast, and it swung its giant head, staring, jaws open. Teeth as long and jagged as carving knives, it neither roared nor growled, but released a long, steady rumble, like a fucking Harley Davidson revved in its chest.

I was scared, which wasn't a familiar emotion for me, but I moved towards Ceci anyway, bound by the love of my mate. My palms raised up, gesturing surrender, I said in a soft voice, "Easy, big fella. I want the same thing as you." I pointed with my outspread palm at Ceci. "I just want to help her. Help our mate. Please, let me help her."

The beast was unimpressed. It remained where it stood, protecting Ceci with its savage arsenal of claws and fangs.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to remain calm. What in holy fuck was I going to—

"What happened?" Ceci's voice was shaky, but the words came out clear.

The creature raised its head and roared, sending birds fluttering from nests high above. The creature then returned to within inches of Ceci's face.

"Ceci, don't move. Stay calm," I said, fighting the urge to move, feeling distinctly uncalm.

"Jax," she replied, her voice strengthening but still shaking off the daze as she peered at me through the woods' shadowy hues. "Why are you naked?"

The fact she'd even noticed and asked caused some tension to release from my shoulders. *She was going to be okay.*

She turned her head to the beast, its grumble had softened, but the jaws were still partly open, the fangs no less menacing. With a trembling hand, she reached out, causing the beast to recoil a fraction and snort. Then it moved forward again, making no noise except heavy breathing. Ceci stretched further, her shaking fingers now grazing its snout.

Words stumbling, her fingertips stroking its fur warily, she said, “You—you won’t hurt me...”

The grizzly lowered its massive underbelly onto the ground, moving its snout closer, so she could run her whole hand over it. Then, showing a bravery I’d never have mustered, she started petting its massive jowls simultaneously, clasping and kneading the fur. “You’d never hurt me.”

I took a step forward, a twig crunching under the ball of my foot, and the bear’s growl resurfaced until I moved back to where I’d been. Ceci sat up slowly, making it to her knees, and actually began hugging the thing, whispering to it like it was some floppy-eared little spaniel. “Thank you for saving me. I owe you my life.”

My wolf was howling with jealousy inside. But I told him to be quiet. Monster or not, that bear had just saved our mate.

From who or what, I wasn’t entirely sure. But it was something awful. The way the stream stank, like it had been coated in black magic, the scent of somebody evil, it all lingered, murdering my nostrils and turning my stomach.

I heaved a huge sigh of relief as the monster began rapidly shrinking, retreating back into the human form I was infinitely more comfortable with: Professor Aaron Belanger.

He lay there, naked and shivering, with Ceci cradling him.

Xander, Osric, Vesta and Finnian came running up the hill, their jeans and slacks soaked and smelling foul from the stream. They all ran to Ceci, who was holding the gradually awakening Aaron. Fussing over her, they repeatedly checked she was okay, despite her insistence she was fine. Osric rested a hand over her heart and didn’t seem to want to move it.

There was a palpable feeling of relief that everybody was, more or less, unharmed. Osruc finally drew his attention away from Ceci and laid a towel across Aaron's lower area, saying, "Thank the gods you saved our below—thank the gods you're okay, old friend."

Then they all turned to look at me. Standing naked as a jaybird. Vesta's eyes bulged in their sockets, her irises glowing like hot coals, as her gaze came to a halt between my legs. "That's quite a..." She trailed off, still staring.

Smirking, Xander strode up and shoved a bartender's apron into my arms. "Good job, quarterback, now cover your quarter pounder."

CHAPTER 26

Aaron

I woke up shivering and aching all over.

Osric laid a towel across my lap and my body gave an involuntary jerk, causing splinters of wood that were embedded in my torso to jab into me and bite at my bare skin. My abs and privates were tender too, smarting from the shocks that the stream's surface had spat up at my grizzly.

I'd seen everything that'd happened since he'd burst to the surface at the party. I'd been a passenger, watching helplessly as the chaos unfolded and our mate's life hung in the balance. My bear had let me hear his thoughts too, something he'd never done before when shifted.

I felt a deep sense of shame that we—my grizzly and I—hadn't caught Ceci's assailant, and at the terror I'd caused to all the innocent partygoers. But my feelings were quite different toward that slimebag who'd tried to take our mate from me... I wished we'd beat that shitbag to a pulp.

My body spasmed again.

"Shh," Ceci murmured.

My head lay in her lap and her smooth arms cradled me, giving comfort. I was so relieved she'd not been hurt, so happy at her scent being free of distress, her warm smile looking down on me as I lay on a cold bed of leaves, twigs and earth.

"I should be the one comforting you." I tried to reach a hand for her, but my muscles gave out, exhausted.

She brushed my hair and kissed my forehead. Her lips felt softer than ever, her press so warm, caring. "Don't be silly. You saved my life." Her eyes widened and went distant for a moment, as if imagining where she might be right now, if we weren't here together. "I don't know exactly how I got here,

but I remember being knocked out, stirring once on the journey as someone carried me. There was something deeply evil about it all. I could feel it in my bones. Something awful would've happened to me if your bear hadn't arrived." Her hand trembled on my shoulder.

"I fear that too." I lifted my head from her lap, only for it to fall back down. "More reason I can't lie here all day. I—"

"You're not going anywhere. Rest," she said, gently but firmly.

"I'll do that," I replied, even though I didn't really have a choice—I couldn't get up right now. But there was nowhere else I wanted to be, even with pain lacing through my body. I'd do anything she commanded, to stay with her.

I wanted to cry, I was so happy she was okay, holding me in her arms.

Familiar faces were grouped nearby, the darkness around their bodies pushed far back by Vesta's upheld hand, which was wrapped in roaring flames and providing welcome washes of heat over my naked body. And Jax's naked body too. He looked about as well-covered as I was, in his tiny black bartender's apron.

I eyed him up and down, and his attire brought a welcome levity to the situation. "Glad to see you came dressed for the occasion, wolf."

Standing with hands on hips, he smiled wryly. "Look who's talking. But, ah, are you going to be okay, big bear?" His hands fell. "Seriously, you're one huge, intimidating motherfucker in your other form. But now, you don't look so hot."

"Yeah, thanks." I gave a weak chuckle. "Shifting takes a lot out of me. And between my bear's size this time and everything he did..." Even as I spoke, Ceci's smooth palm brushed my forehead, making me feel better. "But I'll be okay. Probably soon, with Ceci here, I can already feel myself getting stronger with her presence. I just need a bit more rest."

“Good, I’m glad,” Jax said. And as we looked at each other, an unspoken bond passed between us: we were together and here for each other in everything now, and our animals, like us, would do anything necessary to protect our mate. He turned his head toward the depths of the woods. “Right, everyone, I’m going to shift back and follow the scent, see if this scumbag’s still lurking about. He’s probably long gone, but maybe his trail will lead to a clue or two.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Wish I could help.”

Jax glanced down at the apron, which barely covered his guy bits, and was, of course, backless. “I’ll thank you all not to look at my ass as I leave.” He looked at Vesta with a raised eyebrow.

Vesta shrugged nonchalantly. “As if we’d want to.”

Everyone laughed, even her boyfriend, Finnian, and I sensed maybe Vesta had already gotten an eyeful this evening.

Jax turned, and within a few steps, had shifted back into wolf form. Finnian said he would go too, saying he could run quickly enough with the wind helping him to keep up, making sure their scent stayed as a trail for the others in case they found anything. Or anyone.

So off they went.

Xander stepped forward, stooped and nodded at my biceps and shoulders, which were crisscrossed in scarlet lines and riddled with large splinters that Ceci was now noticing and starting to pull out. “Quite a mess,” he said. “What did those poor trees ever do to you, professor?”

“I’m sorry, I—”

He laughed and stood again. “They’re only trees. I’m glad they didn’t hurt you worse. It’s not like either of you can file a complaint—oh, that reminds me. I know the NLPD couldn’t catch a cold, but I’ve given them a call anyway. It can’t hurt to have them aware of what’s happened.”

“It’s worth a try,” Osric said. His eyes fixed on Ceci tending to me, his face glowing in an emotional way I wasn’t used to seeing. He stepped closer to us. “That’s twice I’ve seen

you as *him* and twice I'd rather have not, but excellent work, old bean, saving the day like that. And no gallons of blood as a consequence. Quite remarkable."

"Thanks, buddy. But I'd gladly have one dead body lying here. I can't believe my grizzly let that guy get away." I looked up at Ceci. "I'm so glad you weren't hurt. My bear, he's doubled in size and strength, perhaps even more than that. You must have been terrified when...I'm so sorry for frightening you."

It had to be Ceci's mysterious power, her amplifying aura that had transformed my grizzly from abnormally sized to bordering on prehistoric proportions. I didn't give a damn, if that was the price of being near her. And I'd witnessed how tender my grizzly had been with her. He loved her, just as much as I did.

Ceci paused in her splinter-hunting and kissed my forehead again, harder than before, her lips lingering. "I wasn't terrified. Well, maybe for a moment when I saw the sheer size, the teeth of your creature." She stroked my hair. "But then I looked into those brown eyes and just knew he'd never hurt me. He's nothing like you, but he's a part of you, and I know you'd do anything you could, to keep me from harm." She paused and took a deep breath. "I hope you know, I'd do the same for you. To the best of my abilities. I hope you know, I feel the same about you, as you do for me."

"I do." I really believed that. And I finally had enough strength to reach up and cradle her cheek.

Vesta's hand was still burning brightly, the flames licking and roaring, creating a dome of light around us. Her manner was calm, but her words were sharp. "If Finnian and Jax end up dragging that son of a bitch back here, I can't promise I won't roast him alive for what he did."

Osric huffed, his cool, slightly swaggering attitude returning. "That would be satisfying, fiery friend, but I suspect he's far away by now." He looked at me, his face masked in thought. "Your beast wasn't able to stop him?"

“He certainly tried,” I said, sitting up, but still being fussed over by Ceci. “My grizzly hit him like a goddamn wrecking ball.”

Osric’s brow wrinkled. “Hmm. And yet, he was up and gone almost immediately. Sounds like this asshole recovered from what would’ve put most beings, regardless of breed, out for the count, if not into a casket.”

“Yeah.”

The prince sighed. “Then he’s no common paranormal thug or hapless pervert. Unless his bones are made of titanium, he seems to have powerful magic protecting him.”

I remembered the grenade he’d lobbed into the stream. The way it had transformed into a deadly flow of electricity. “That would explain the stream. He threw a bomb into it and coated it in electricity.”

“He could be an elemental,” Vesta said. “Though any electrics I’ve known have never bothered to make bombs from it.” She nodded at her flaming hand. “Why do that when you can shoot it from your fingertips just as easily?”

I was finally able to stand, and got to my feet with Ceci helping, both of us mindful of my towel keeping my academic secrets. “I want to apologize to all of you, for any distress my grizzly caused. I didn’t mean—”

A chorus of rebuttals coursed through the chilly night air. I couldn’t make them all out, but the consensus was that my beast, despite terrifying everyone, had done a great job in averting disaster.

“Thanks.” I glanced down in embarrassment but did feel proud he had been a force for good for once, considering how wildly unpredictable he was. Though maybe I was too hard on him. Last time he’d appeared, he had saved Osric.

When I looked back up, Xander’s grin was smug. “Though, I think we’ll need to book a new DJ for our next party. You scared the living shit out of our regular one. I don’t think he was expecting such a huge party crasher.”

Xander's words, and the thought of my grizzly saving Osric, flashed a memory into my mind. One from the last time my beast had broken free at a gathering of booze and dancing. Where the violence had been considerably more gruesome. And the victims had sported tattoos.

The same type of tattoo I'd caught a glimpse of just as my grizzly had floored Ceci's would be kidnapper. On the inner wrist, it was exactly the same design as before: three columns joined by a thin roof, like an ancient Greek or Roman temple, sitting under a white bird, perhaps a dove, with outstretched wings. It was a tattoo worn by followers of the Temple of the Pure Breed.

"Guys, I may have—" I didn't want to sound conspiratorial and decided to think it over before I talked more about it in front of Osric. I didn't want him unsheathing Juniper and storming off to do something stupid, like head to the nearest temple gathering and slash someone up. Besides, there were literally hundreds of thousands of temple members who had that type of tattoo, and probably plenty of wannabes too. In all likelihood, this was just some random nutcase who'd taken a shine to the design.

Jax returned, back in human form, his apron re-tied around his waist, closely followed by Finnian. They were only gasping slightly, after all that sprinting. Testimony to how good they were on the football field too.

"Anything?" Ceci asked. But the answer seemed clear.

Jax shook his head, pointing in the direction he'd just come. "There's another stream, a river actually, about two miles south. Far wider, deeper. The scent disappeared on the water's surface. But I'm thinking he must have crossed it. Assuming he did, with that fast-flowing current, he's an impressive swimmer."

Vesta's expression was hard as she welcomed Finnian with her non-flaming hand, clasping his tight. "I hope the bastard drowned."

Then Xander said what everyone was thinking. "This may or may not be connected to Jack 2. Let's not jump to

conclusions though. There are plenty of maniacs in New Nebraska.” He glanced around with a raised eyebrow. “And that’s just counting the ones gathered here.”

His expression of humor faded suddenly, and he stumbled to one knee, steadying himself against a cracked and crumpled tree branch—courtesy of my grizzly. Jax, surprisingly, was the first to aid him, steadying him by looping his head under Xander’s shoulder. “What’s up?” Jax looked down at Xander’s still sodden jeans. “The stream? Something from the magic?”

Xander waved a backhand, his words drowsy and his face pale. “The stream just reeks, that’s all. Who cares?”

“Tell the truth, vamp,” Jax said, a bit harshly, to be honest, but there was a gentleness to Jax’s actions as he gripped Xander around the waist.

“Okay, it’s my blood levels. I haven’t been feeding, can barely stomach the pre-packaged stuff. And nothing fresh... I don’t have appetite for any, except—” He glanced at Cecilia, forcing a weak smile. “I’m so glad my little orchid is okay. Now, Jax, and Finnian you handsome Stallion, would you help me walk for a few minutes, make sure I don’t fall over in that fucking stream? I feel fit for a coffin.”



We were all back at Ceci’s apartment, minus Vesta and Finnian who, after being assured Ceci was well protected, had left for the night.

NLPD had been and gone, taking statements, showing more than a little disbelief at the corroborating accounts and physical evidence of my gigantic grizzly saving the day. I’d still neglected to tell them about the temple tattoo. I wanted to think it over more before making Osric aware. He could be so hotheaded. I really wouldn’t put it past him to rush off to the nearest temple hangout. I didn’t want to see him in a New Lincoln courthouse on multiple charges of murder.

As Xander had said anyway, the NLPD couldn’t catch a cold. If anyone could get to the bottom of this, it would be the same people who’d been out searching for Ceci’s mom—us

and our friends and network. The people who cared enough to delve deep and give every single effort for the sake of a loved one.

After the police had left and Xander's on call doctor too—who'd confirmed Ceci was okay and patched me up—we all insisted we were staying the night, including Osric.

"I'll have a wander round the apartment building, keep my Fae senses on alert for anything suspicious and then find a space to sit or sleep on the floor." He grabbed the key off the counter, getting ready to leave. He turned toward the door, but then pivoted sharply and strode straight over to Ceci.

Her eyes widened and she squeaked as his arms launched themselves around her.

She returned the hug immediately. They held onto each other for several moments. Silence filled the apartment.

Finally, a soft sigh left her lips. When she pulled away first, and went up on her tiptoes to reach his face, he even leaned forward, meeting her halfway as she kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Osric."

He started to say something then cleared his throat and looked down at her with such intensity, as the apartment stayed silent, no one else saying a word. He looked at her like I had felt myself looking at her earlier—like he never wanted to look away from her or be apart from her again. "I'm so glad you weren't hurt tonight, Cecilia."

"I feel the same about everyone." She gripped his shirt collar with both hands. "You all put yourselves at risk to come after me." Her gaze was just as intense as his, but there was a tremor in her voice.

"We'd do it again." His arms tightened around her. "To make sure you're safe, like you are now. I just—" He pulled away. "You just stay here with the others. Get some rest."

"Okay." A flash of sadness washed over her face. But she recovered quickly, schooling her features, probably resigned to his retreat. "Thanks for taking a look around while the rest of us get some sleep," she said, following him to the door.

“No problem. Lock up behind me,” he said. And she did.

Xander stirred on the couch, where he’d sat down to get some rest. His words came out a bit loopy, but it sounded like he’d said, “Looks like Osric has finally joined the fold.”

Ceci shook her head. “I don’t think—well, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She blushed. “And stop worrying about him,” she scolded Xander. “You’re supposed to be resting. Now, who’s sleeping in the bed with me?”

Jax, Xander and I all glanced at each other, knowing we all wanted to.

It was slightly childish, but we resorted to rock, scissors, paper, to decide Ceci sleeping privileges. She chuckled at us, especially at me. It was my suggestion. For a good reason. A professor of mathematics had enlightened me about averages versus random choices, using that very game as an example. And how to win nine times out of ten.

As a result, the winner would be best out of four and I was two up. Looked like I’d be having a nice—

Xander’s cell phone beeped, taking him out of the game momentarily, for which we were all standing. He held his palm up in a silencing gesture as he listened intently to the caller. “Mhm. I see. Oh shit.” His face drained of color. Not that he’d had much to begin with. “Okay, thanks. Good job, Timon.”

Tapping his phone, he slipped it back into his pocket before sinking back down on the couch, sighing. “Well, the plot thickens, like so much blood soup. That was one of my street captains with news.” He shuddered.

Ceci sat beside him, stroking his hand, clearly worried about his weakened condition and probably whatever was upsetting him now. “What do you mean? What’s happened?”

“A girl from the party. My party. A freshman. A mixed breed. Vamp and human.”

“And?” I could feel my patience boiling over. “Spit it out then.”

His tone was taut with irritation. “And she’s dead, that’s what. The police got an anonymous tip off, she was found carved up about an hour ago, in her own dorm room. Someone sneaked through the window.”

Ceci clutched Xander’s hand. “Carved up? Oh no. You mean like...”

Xander nodded. “Jack 2.”

“Are they sure it was him?” Jax ran a hand through his hair, starting to pace.

Xander leaned back onto the couch. “I’m afraid so. And it gets worse.”

Ceci’s voice stuttered as she asked, “Ho—how could it possibly be...”

Xander’s eyes, sapphires tinged in scarlet, were strained with the sort of worry I hadn’t seen from the vamp before. It got worse as he looked at Ceci.

“The dead girl had a note pinned through her chest...with a kitchen knife. It read something like: *This is in place of the one that got away.*”

We all gasped, but he wasn’t done.

“And *We’ll meet again, sweet party girl.*”

CHAPTER 27

Cecilia

As soon as Xander spoke those bone-chilling words from Jack 2's note, the guys hurried me out of my apartment, barely giving me time to pack a bag.

We ended up at Aaron and Osric's place. It was a luxurious penthouse with breathtaking views over the Kings' Hills and the city, but I was too creeped out, my nerves too jangled to fully appreciate it.

In the early morning hours, we finally went to bed, but I mostly tossed and turned.

Even sleeping on Aaron's luxurious king-sized mattress, with his tree branch arm wrapped around me and Jax's large body nestled into me from the opposite side, the solid weight of his leg pressed against mine, I didn't feel fully at ease. Or even fully safe. My worries over what could have happened, what fate would have befallen me, swirled inside my mind, causing me to doze off in brief bouts only to wake yelping, clutching at Aaron and Jax for reassurance.

Jack 2, the evil serial killer, who'd already slaughtered several innocent girls, wanted *me*. And he would have succeeded too, if not for the intervention of Aaron's bear. The thought pooled nausea in the pit of my stomach, turning my forehead and neck clammy, damp with sweat.

NLPD had returned after the note had been found. Thinking there was a small risk of Jack 2 tracking me down to Aaron's place, they'd stationed two detectives in an undercover car outside. Jax and Xander also had several of their biggest, strongest looking guys standing vigil in and around the penthouse, four of them keeping lookout from the massive, wrap-around balcony, and another group patrolling the posh suburban streets surrounding the apartment building.

I sighed. If nothing else, this crisis had brought vamps and wolves together in a way I'd never have imagined, especially after seeing their stand-off, that first day on campus. But at that moment, it gave me little comfort.

In fact, nothing seemed to.

My throat dry, I decided to go get a glass of water. I gently slid from under Aaron's arm and scooted downwards out the bed, so as not to wake either him or Jax. They'd definitely earned a good night's rest. And I'd woken them with my restlessness several times already.

The luxuriant carpet's fibers were soft, spongy under my bare feet as I carefully opened the bedroom door and padded into the main living room. Open plan and at least ten times as big as my whole apartment, it was circular with a slightly sunken center, the two levels divided elegantly by a series of small steps.

The dimmer lights were turned up fully, for security reasons, I assumed. I looked through the balcony glass and saw wolves and vamps standing staring out over the hills' dark shadows, towards New Lincoln's hazy orange and neon glittering. One vamp was smoking a vape pen and a shifter was clasping a coffee mug in two hands. I was so grateful for them, but also felt a bit guilty they were having to do watchmen duties for my sake.

Also, lying asleep in the center of the largest couch, was Xander. He'd been offered a guest room but had insisted the couch was fine, as it was closest to the bedroom where I was. I felt bad about that, especially as he wasn't feeling at his best. I would have been perfectly happy with him sleeping next to me if the mechanics of sharing one bed with three large guys had been more practical. It might be nice try it with an even bigger bed though, one day.

If I survived the coming days.

Forcing myself not to dwell on that thought, I walked to the nearby kitchen.

Tucked in the corner of the open-plan layout, it was magnificent, everything shiny steel and gleaming glass, spotless tiles and counters topped with state-of-the-art cooking technology and utensils. The coffee machine looked like it had been developed by NASA. I opened the cupboards as quietly as I could, searching for glasses. Taking a tumbler in hand and turning the tap, I misjudged the strength of the water pressure, and it came hissing out, hammering the steel sink loudly with its solid torrent.

“Hey,” I heard Xander mumble from the living room. “Can you get me a Bloodweiser out of the fridge?”

“Hey, sorry for waking you. I don’t think they’ll have vamp drinks. I’ll check.”

Sitting up and leaning back into the couch’s leather embrace, looking a bit better than he had in the woods, he replied, “I had Timon pick up a six pack. It’s the only bloo—it’s all I seem to get any pleasure from drinking just now.”

I swung open the heavy fridge door, found a few cans—he’d had three already—and brought him one, sitting beside him and sipping my water. Its cool flow over my tongue and throat was welcome.

He cracked open the can and sucked at the scarlet foam, guzzling for a few seconds before nodding at his drink. “Thanks, my orchid. I needed a few of these. Especially after all that madness earlier. You want a sip?” He held the can closer to my face. I caught the strong iron-rich whiff of beer and blood mixed.

I forced myself not to pull away and shook my head. I wanted him to have what his body needed, but drinking blood would never be for me.

Luckily, I had a perfectly good and honest excuse. “As you know, I’m not much of a drinker.”

But Osric seemed to be. At least, at the moment. The balcony doors slid open, allowing in a cool waft that washed over my face, and he sidled in, a large crystal tumbler of what looked like whiskey or rum in his hand.

His normal aloofness faded, replaced by slurred words and slightly glazed eyes, he sat in the recliner across from us and said, "Hello, you two. Ceci, everything okay? Can't sleep?" He tapped the side of the glass. "Would you like a stiff drink? Might help."

He'd never called me Ceci before. The name pinged in my ears. It sounded nice coming from his lips, even if he was saying it a bit tipsily.

"No thanks, I'm good. Are you okay? You seem..."

Taking another gulp of liquor and clinking ice, he said in soft, muddled words, "I'm perfectly okay. Everything is just dandy."

Well, I was no skilled lie detector like Jax, but I knew when someone's nose was growing.

Xander sipped his Bloodweiser, asking, "Any news?"

Osric sighed, shaking his head and patting the phone shape pressing through his slacks. "I've been scouring every news channel, even bloody blogs and chat forums. Trying to find out any clue as to who this little rat might be, and why he's after Ceci."

"And nothing? Nothing at all?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Just one thing, an unverified piece of information, but repeated enough I believe it. All the victims have been either humans or half breeds. Something those blockhead cops neglected to make public." He leaned forward in his chair, fingers fidgety around his glass. "They should have said. Arseholes. People like Ceci could have been more on guard. I don't trust these bozos to protect her."

Xander clunked his can on the glass-topped coffee table beside him, stretching and yawning. "Good work. There's a lot of protection here besides the cops though. Try and take it easy uh...prince."

Osric snorted and necked his drink, draining the tumbler dry. "I'll take it easy when the bastard is locked up in jail, or preferably taking his last breath, with Juniper's kiss gracing him from ear to ear."

Xander and I looked at each other in confusion. I asked, “Who’s Junip—”

“Hey,” came Aaron’s half-awake voice from his bedroom’s direction. He and Jax were both up, dressed in just their boxers. Both their chests—chiseled and huge—were quite the sight, especially next to each other. Normally I’d have feasted my eyes and had an internal drool, but my worries, and Osric’s sad manner, weren’t really conducive to that. Just last night, in Xander’s office, I’d thought I was having the time of my life and now look at things... My life was in imminent danger and the guys could be putting theirs at risk too, standing by me.

“My wolf woke me up, knowing you’d left.” Jax rubbed his puckered eyes open.

“Mine too,” Aaron said. “He knows when you’re not near and he grumbles like hell. Especially now that he’s speaking to me more.” He looked between the three of us. “Any news?”

“It seems Jack 2’s been targeting humans and half breeds,” I replied, repeating what Osric had told us, the words sending a shiver up and down my neck.

“Is that so?” Aaron grimaced and his hands tightened into fists at his sides. “I should’ve known, I was going to—” He glanced at Osric and gestured to the empty glass in his hands. “I hope you’re taking it easy on that stuff.”

Osric waved a dismissive hand. “Okay, dad. I am a grown up in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Aaron walked to the far side and plonked himself down on another couch. “Yeah, and we both know what happened last time you drank way too much.”

Osric sighed, walked to the kitchen, squeaking the cork from a green bottle and gurgling more amber liquid into his tumbler, plopping a handful of fresh ice cubes into it. Leaning on the kitchen counter, he raised the glass to Aaron. “I know all too well, old friend.”

Jax walked past him, opened the fridge and pulled out two regular beers, holding one out in offer to Aaron, who shook his head. Closing the fridge, he cracked the can and patted Osric

on the shoulder. “Sounds like there’s a story there. And since nobody can sleep...”

Osric nodded. “Fine.” He returned to his recliner. After another mouthful, he put on a mock teacher’s voice, saying, “Are we all sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin. Though there’s not lots to tell, I’ll warn you now.”

Xander pointed around the room. “Better than sitting in miserable silence. Go on, let’s hear it.”

“Fine. Okay, well, as you may or may not know, I am betrothed to something of a Fae princess, back in England—”

“A princess!?” Jealousy flared inside me, but I tried to tamp it down. I struggled to find more words to excuse my outburst. “Oh, how lovely.” I waved my hand for him to continue.

“Not lovely, dear Ceci.” He shook his head, looking a bit sad for himself. “Now, I had just been informed of my obligations that same day, about...how long ago was it now, old bean?”

Aaron’s eyes searched upwards. “A couple of years, about? Not much less anyway.”

Osric continued. “So, there I was, in a bar downtown, contemplating my future with an emptyheaded girl I had nothing in common with. Nothing, except of course, purity of race, purity of blood. When”—he tapped his pointed ear—“my Fae sense of hearing tuned in on a group of around eight or nine large men in the corner, slurring and babbling the usual bollocks people do after too much booze. Except this was far more sinister. Going on and on about purity, about how breeds should be bound to mate only with each other, and how humans in particular had caused a lot of—as they called it—sinful interbreeding, before the Nebraska Agreement. It was nasty stuff. They were the Temple of the Pure Breed’s purest form of shitbags.”

Jax released a soft beer burp, apologizing, but saying, “Oh man, those pricks. So their conversation was getting on your nerves?”

“More than a little, dear chap. After all, bear in mind, the whole reason my future had been so unfortunately set in stone, was because of archaic beliefs such as these. And I wasn’t in the mood to listen to them while I was trying to enjoy a peaceful drink.”

Aaron chuckled. “You were in some state. You almost fell over trying to get to their table.”

“You were there too?” I asked.

Aaron nodded. “I was, trying to have a *genuinely* peaceful drink with a couple of other academics.”

“Anyway”—Osric took another booze gulp—“I approached the gentlemen, and made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that I thought their beliefs were a steaming pile of horse shit. And that they should perhaps fuck off to another bar, one that was more suited to clientele of their bird-brained dispositions.”

Xander and Jax laughed. Aaron shook his head. I was curious to hear more. “What happened next?”

Osric shrugged. “As you might imagine, they didn’t take too kindly to my opinion.”

“So they...” I leaned forward, fascinated by Osric being the most open he’d ever been.

“Without warning, they shifted into a pride of bloody lions and proceeded to attack me. Sending the whole bar into chaos, smashing up the place as we began tussling, punching, kicking, headbutting, and so forth.”

“Oh my god! You fought them all?”

He cleared his throat, laughing. “Tried to. I was shitfaced drunk, and badly outnumbered. It looked like I wouldn’t be having to worry about my arranged marriage after all.”

“They were going to kill you?!?”

“Oh yes, dear Ceci, these temple fanatics are vicious, nasty bastards, and I’d insulted their religion. Unfortunately, the booze, as it tends to do, had sapped my fighting prowess considerably. I also had no chance to summon Ju—”

“Then how did you get out of it?”

He looked over at Aaron, saying nothing.

Aaron held his palms outspread, as if he didn't have a clear answer either. “My bear joined in. Incensed by the unfairness of the fight, or maybe because he just fancied kicking some lion ass, I'm not sure, but he insisted on bursting forth.”

Xander laughed loudly, but it ended in a rasping cough, before he said, “Oh dear, another party interrupted. Did any lions survive?”

Aaron's expression was sheepish. “They limped off, bloodied and badly wounded. All nine of them. My grizzly held back, I think to let them live with the shame, otherwise they would have been toast.”

“And, so, paying for the bar's repair bills, I got to know dear Aaron. And we've been friends ever since.” Osric tipped more liquor. “And I've had a special hatred for those temple pricks ever since, too.”

Aaron leaned forward, the couch's leather crinkling and squeaking under his weight. “Do you trust me, old friend?”

Osric scoffed. “With my life. Never doubt it. The professor and the prince, the eternal odd couple.”

Nodding, Aaron sighed hard. “Good. Because I'm about to tell you something, and if you even think about going out that door, I promise I'll knock you out cold. Okay?”

Osric, in fact, all of us, were intrigued. “Okay, deal. The door is off limits.”

“Glad that's settled.” Aaron's eyes focused on Osric, but they also swept across the room before he said, “The guy who tried to kidnap Ceci, the guy we assume is Jack 2...he had the same temple tattoo on his inner wrist that I saw on one of those temple lions, before he shifted.”

The room sat in silence, digesting the implications, before Osric said in a calm voice, “Okay, then I'll sleep, and when I'm sober, I'll pay a visit to the nearest temple tomorrow.”

Aaron's voice was harsh. “Don't even—”

“To investigate. Not to barge in all guns blazing.”

Jax agreed. “I’m going too. They caused all that trouble on the field the other night. I saw the hatred in their eyes and heard the shit they were saying to Lyndon from the Stallions. If Jack 2 is targeting humans and half breeds, it could well be he’s in one of their so-called congregations.”

Aaron blew a hard exhale. “Fine. Then I’m going with you. Xander?”

He nodded, but stood, glugging from his can and placing it down, sighing, and stumbling slightly. “Yes, of course, anything for my little orchid. But I’m afraid I might have to go and find some fresh blood. Those cans are okay, but they’re not enough. I don’t want to be weak if we’re out looking for that Jack 2 shithead. Especially if there’s a chance of more mad shit like there was earlier tonight.”

He was looking fragile, taking unstable steps, his face growing extra pale. “Where will you go?” I asked, worried he wasn’t strong enough to be searching round for his sustenance.

Bending and taking my hand, he kissed it, the lips firm, but noticeably colder than they’d ever been. “Don’t worry, queen of my heart, I’ll come up with something.”

Trembling slightly, I extended my bare forearm, looking down at my wrist and then up at him. “Well, why don’t you just take what you need from me?”

Xander’s eyes bulged.

Along with everyone else’s.

CHAPTER 28

Cecilia

“Are you serious?” Xander asked. His eyes had flared wide in their sockets, fixed on my wrist, as he swept a lustful tongue along his bottom lip.

I breathed deeply, keeping my arm extended, adrenaline rifling through my reply, my words coming out in trembles. “We—well, yeah...yes. You need it. It’s much easier this way. At least you know my blood doesn’t have any dangerous diseases or drugs in it.”

Sitting beside me, he clasped my hand from underneath, sliding his other palm up and down my upturned forearm, his fangs lengthening as he scrutinized the blue lines crisscrossing under my skin. His irises were glinting, the scarlet tinge strengthening. “You shouldn’t feel obligated. Not every girl is into—”

“She’s not into it.” Osric stood up, cheeks pink and words strident. “Ceci, stop this, at once!”

“Yes. Ceci, you don’t need to—” Aaron got out before Jax cut him off.

“Ceci! Why would you do this?” Jax rushed over to us, from where he’d been frozen like a statute.

“Xander needs it and would never hurt me.” I scooted closer to Xander on the couch. “Now sit down. And be quiet, all of you.”

They all looked properly chastised. Osric and Jax sank to the couch, Jax ending up right next to me, so I was pressed between him and Xander. Aaron was still sitting but inclined his head.

“You’re right,” Jax agreed, gripping my hand. “Can I say something though?”

“Yes, just don’t act like this isn’t my choice. I care for you all so much, but I’m not a child.”

“I’m sorry.” Jax dropped his head, looking miserable, and I worried he wasn’t going to say what he’d wanted.

“What were you going to say?” I leaned into him a bit.

Jax had a haunted look in his eyes when he spoke. “I’ve seen vamps drain people dry. Both paranormals and humans. Never Xander.” He assured quickly. “Though he has pushed things before. But that’s not really fair to bring up right now. He’s different with you. I know he might really want your blood—probably more than he’s ever wanted anyone’s—but he won’t hurt you.” He gave Xander a long look then glanced back at me. “Just eat or drink something, to keep your blood sugar up, yeah?”

“That’s a good idea.” I squeezed his hand. “I don’t want to take any unnecessary risks. But you guys all have to realize. I make my own choices.”

They all gave grunts of agreement, even Osric and Xander.

“I’ll get orange juice.” Osric stood again, teetering to the kitchen as he spoke. “If you still insist on helping our vampire acquaintance.”

Xander was licking his lips enthusiastically now as he massaged the veins in my wrist. He spoke from the side of his mouth to Osric. “Acquaintance? I thought we were on the way to becoming friends.”

Osric poured a large glass of orange juice and handed it to me, patting Xander’s shoulder and speaking in his ear, “So did I. But if you cause her any harm, I can assure you, you’ll have more blood than you ever wished for.”

“Guys.” Xander glanced at each of them with a sincere expression. “I’m glad you’re here for this. And I assure you, I will do everything I can, to never hurt our beloved. But if something horrible happens, and I do get carried away. I know one of you will stop me.” He swallowed hard. “Do whatever it takes.”

I shook my head, not even able to process that something like that might be necessary.

Unlike me, Osric nodded. “I respect that, vamp.”

Osric sat down again as I had a gulp of the sweet juice. It was thick with zesty strands, and they coated my tongue and teeth deliciously. I wondered if fresh blood tasted anything as good to Xander.

From the look of anticipation on his face, I suspected it did. His fangs had lengthened ever further, spiking out of his mouth, the tips sharp as needles.

I had a brief moment of doubt. I was still convinced Xander would never hurt me, just like Aaron’s bear. But I didn’t want any other lingering effects. “Erm, this won’t, erm...change me, will it? Like, I won’t turn into a...”

Xander smiled widely. “No, never, my orchid. Vampires are born from vampire parents. All that stuff about them being turned is just myths and legends.” His eyes took on that teasing glint they frequently had. “But there is a rumor if you drink someone else’s blood yourself, right before sunrise and do a little dance...”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “No, I’ll skip that part, thank you.”

He chuckled. Voice husky and jaws wide, he asked, “Are you ready?”

I nodded. “Be gentle, please.”

“Always, my orchid.”

Jax pressed tighter into my side as Xander’s head lowered toward my arm. Osric and Aaron seemed to hold their breaths, not making a sound.

Wanting to help but not wanting to watch, I closed my eyes as Xander’s mouth moved toward my wrist. I hoped it wouldn’t be too painful.

And it wasn’t. There was a brief prick, like an injection at the doctor’s office. The sharpness lasted less than a second, and was, in an odd way, a blend of pain and ecstasy all at once.

He fed. His hands clasp my wrist and arm firmly but gently, the soft press of his lips was all I felt from his mouth.

I opened my eyes. If I couldn't have seen that his fangs were still extended into me, I'd have sworn someone was just kissing the spot tenderly. And it sent out a feeling of tenderness throughout my whole body. Like he was kissing and sucking spots all over.

I closed my eyes again, squirming. Not from discomfort or fear. From pleasure. My heart was beating faster and my limbs trembling as I pressed my thighs together, trying to control the growing pressure beneath my sleep shorts. It wasn't helping that Jax was now wrapped around one side of my body.

Just as I was starting to feel a bit too flushed, and a tiny bit faint, the kissing stopped, and Xander said softly, "You can open your eyes, my darling."

Aaron breathed a sigh of relief.

Jax inched back again and took a drink of his beer. "That made me kind of hot," he muttered.

Xander's fangs had retreated, but not to their normal position, and his tongue and lips were ruby red, but apart from that, I'd hardly have known what he'd just done. I looked down to see two red spots on my wrist, no more than a millimeter in diameter each. Wow.

Aaron came across and gently wet wiped my wrist, but there was virtually no blood to be cleaned.

Xander's eyes and complexion bright, glowing with energy, he looked like the cat that had got the cream. Just, in this case, he was the vamp that got the blood. "How was your first feeding, my orchid?"

I didn't want to mention the excitement I'd felt, as I wasn't sure if that was normal or not, so I just said, "It was a lot easier than I'd expected. Quite easy, really. All that fuss for nothing. How do you feel?"

"Well, it's hard to put into words"—he kissed my hand and stood—"I'd say..."

He blurred. Everyone gasped, staring at the space he'd just been standing in.

“What the fuck? Where'd he—” Jax's question was answered by a knock of glass.

We turned to see Xander, grinning ear to ear, behind the balcony doors, standing between one of his coven members and one of Jax's NN Lupines, both of whom were smirking and frowning respectively.

Xander then waved, as if saying goodbye. He blurred again. This time he reappeared by walking out of Aaron's bedroom!

Mouth gaping, Jax almost dropped his beer. “I've seen vamps blur within a radius of a foot or two, but never anything like that. How in holy fuck did you do that?”

Xander flexed his biceps, bodybuilder fashion. They weren't anything like Aaron's, but they were noticeably buffer. “I feel like a billion dollars.” His gaze fixed on Osric, his eyes sly, words dripping honey. “And I look it too, don't I, Your Highness?”

Osric's answer made me jump in my seat.

“Yes, you do. Very handsome. Very handsome, indeed, old bean.” His eyes were playful, flirty, he was—he shook his head, as if waking from a trance. “What the fuck? Were you just...hitting on me?”

Aaron chimed in, making a face. “It wasn't just him. You looked ready to get down and dirty there.”

Xander held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. “Oh, shit. I am sincerely sorry, Osric.” Xander's grin disappeared and his face turned visibly sterner. “My powers of seduction have doubled. No, quadrupled. But”—he leaned forward and kissed my forehead—“I can also sense I have more control over them than before. Which is profoundly liberating. How can this be?”

“Ceci,” Aaron said firmly. “It's all about Ceci. This is what Jax and I have been talking about. She's strengthening our powers, the closer we get. You obviously needed intimacy on a

vamp level to feel it fully yourself. And you feel more control over your powers, too, you said?”

Xander nodded. “Yes, the blurring and the charming.”

“Jax, you feel more connected to your wolf?”

“I do. It’s hard to explain, but aside from him being stronger, I feel like we’re more unified, more in tune with his thoughts and vice versa. You’re the same with your grizzly?”

Aaron bobbed his head side to side, sighing. “More in tune, in terms of sharing thoughts, visions? Definitely. Stronger? You all saw him. More in control?” He exhaled through gritted teeth. “I’m not sure anything can do that where he’s concerned.”

“But still, there is this amplifying phenomenon going on,” Osric added. He sounded like the surprise of Xander’s extreme blurring had sobered him up a fair bit. “Ceci, do you feel any different when you cause these effects on others?”

I shrugged but felt like I had to emphasize something. “I don’t, but my mom did have us moving around a heck of a lot until recently, and over the years my curiosity’s grown over that. She never told me why. Now that I see this happening, I do wonder if it’s all connected: these amplifications, my moving from place to place so often, my mom going missing. I just don’t know.”

Osric’s glazed eyes were now showing keen, sober interest. “Fascinating. And very intriguing, Cecilia. I think there’s more to this story to be revealed.”

“Speaking of fascinating.” Xander picked up the TV remote, unmuting the news channel that had been playing on silent on the screen all morning. “This guy is quite a conundrum. Maybe the biggest in New Nebraska. I wonder what he’s been up to.”

It was a story about a major business takeover by New Nebraska’s largest corporation, Midas International. There was an image of their CEO, Bryce Harding, posted on the screen. Dressed in a tailored pinstripe suit and jade tie, his eyes and

hair a dark brown, he smiled with a square jaw swathed in stubble.

That hunk was a multi-billionaire? He looked far too young to be so rich. “Is he New Nebraska’s richest man?”

Sitting forward and staring at the screen, Jax said, “Most likely. I wouldn’t want to swap places with him though. Not for a gazillion dollars.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t know about him?”

“No. What about him?”

Aaron chimed in. “He can’t be touched.”

“Can’t be touched? You mean like he hasn’t, he decided not to...” I glanced downwards at my thighs.

The guys all laughed. Even Mr. Scowly Osric.

Xander explained, as he wrapped his arm around my shoulder and kissed my forehead again. “No, my little orchid. He’s not a monk. He’s not taken a vow of chastity.” There were more chuckles from the guys. “He can’t be touched at all. Suffers horrendous agony from even the slightest touch, so everyone says.”

“How awful? Never to feel touch, a hug or a kiss? Never?”

“Never ever.”

“Isn’t there a cure?”

Xander scoffed. “Orchid, you know—”

Aaron butted in again. “I, uh, think if there was a cure, this guy would have paid for it by now, love.” He shook his head. “Imagine having all that money, but in some ways, you’re the poorest guy in the world.”

The report ended and a new story came up. It was about Jack 2.

Osric clicked his fingers at Xander, poking his palm tip upwards in the air as he said, “Put the sound up, blur boy.”

The volume went up and the reporter, a very glamorous lady with long, platinum blonde hair, was giving an update on the killings, and what had happened at the coven party. She said that a letter had been sent anonymously to police this morning, thought to be from Jack 2. I nuzzled into Xander, and he held me close. The reminder of Jack 2 still being out there, prowling, hunting, sent a shiver across my body.

The letter's content was posted on the screen, and she read the words out in her soft, feminine chimes.

All I heard was evil emanating from the message.

I give praise to the Temple of the Pure Breed for their impeccable teachings. Their devotion to paranormal purity of breed inspires me, drives me forward always. I am blessed by the mission they have inspired me to undertake.

More sin will be washed away in the coming days. More sacrifices are sure to follow.

Including the one that got away.

The reporter then talked about how much good the temple did in the community, and that the letter shouldn't be seen as a reflection of any fault within temple teachings. She simpered a bit, saying the temple fought for the betterment of society, not the destruction of it. Having seen their behavior in New Bellevue and listening to Osric's story, I had serious doubts about that.

"Oh no. This guy thinks he's on a mission," I said, my voice quaking.

Osric met my gaze, his face and voice strong and sincere. "His mission will fail, Ceci. I give you my word."

Aaron and Jax said the same, in so many words. Xander brushed a hand through my hair, saying, "That fucker is going down. I wonder if he's got tasty bloo—"

"Jax!" A gruff voice shouted from the penthouse's reception area. "Arrivals!"

I heard the door creak open a fraction, and then a voice that made me jump to my feet.

“Ceci? Ceci?!? Are you there, honey?”

“Mom?” I called out.

CHAPTER 29

Cecilia

I scrambled to the front door, almost knocking into the bulky NN Lupine who was holding it open.

It was her. My mom. Thank God. I threw my arms around her. “Mom! I’ve missed you so much!”

“I’ve missed you too, sweetheart.” She squeezed me tight, her hold noticeably stronger than I was expecting. Kissing my cheek several times, she brushed her palm across the crown of my head.

I felt like a little girl again and tears filled my eyes.

Our embrace eventually ended and she stood back, beaming. “Honey, I’m so happy to see you safe and well.”

My whole body was wrapped in happiness, from head to toe. “Me too! You look so healthy, I can’t believe—”

An older man was lingering several feet behind her, near the elevator. Short in stature, his hair and beard were trimmed salt and pepper, he wore an expensive-looking three-piece suit. The jacket and trousers were neatly fitted cream, but the waistcoat shone in shamrock velvet. His chestnut winklepicker shoes were reflecting the corridor’s bright lights, and he leaned on a mahogany cane topped with the largest emerald I’d ever seen.

Was this the big shot elemental Xander’s scout had spotted? His dress sense was certainly grand. He even wore a fedora hat, cream, with a rich green band, to match his outfit. Clasp my mom’s hand—I wasn’t letting her out of my sight—I smiled awkwardly at the man. “Hi, are you...”

Bowing slightly, he took off his hat and dipped his head to reveal a balding comover, saying in a smooth French accent, “Pascal Fontaine, at your service.”

“Oh, nice to meet you, Mr. Fontaine.”

“Pascal, please. And you must be the delightful Cecilia.”

I felt my cheeks warming. He had a strident charm about him, but I wasn't going to trust him just yet.

“He's a good friend.” My mom squeezed my arm. “Aren't you going to invite us in? It looks like you've made some fancy friends too, while we've been apart.”

Osric was at the door and gave Jax's pack member the nod of approval for mom and Mr. Fontaine to come in.

If Osric thought Mr. Fontaine was okay, then maybe I could too, and not worry my mom had been tricked somehow.

So in we went, and I showed them into the living room, to be properly introduced to all the guys. I wouldn't be telling my mom I'd just let a vampire feed from me though.

My mom hugged Aaron tightly. “Professor, it's lovely to see you again. I knew you'd do everything necessary to keep my daughter safe and happy.”

“Just the *bear* necessities,” Xander quipped. The pun was awful, but under the joyous circumstances, it made me giggle.

Mom was a little sheepish with Xander. His fangs were still poking down further than usual after the fresh feeding, and his lips and tongue still glowed with an unnaturally bright ruby-colored vigor. She shook his hand rather than hugging him. “Hello, thank you for being by my daughter's side through these challenging times.”

Xander dipped his head at both my mom and Mr. Fontaine. “More than a pleasure, an honor in fact.”

Next was Jax to be introduced. Mr. Fontaine knew about him already though, reaching out to give him a firm handshake. “Jaxon Hemming, the Sentinels' star quarterback. I've watched you at a few games when I've managed to find time. Very impressive. I heard about that last game in New Bellevue too. Great job. Especially after those temple deplorables trying to ruin it with their hate.”

“Thank you, it’s an honor to meet both of you.” He glanced down at his scantily dressed body. “If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll put on something more appropriate.”

“I’ll do the same,” Aaron said and followed Jax.

That left Osric, who stood and smiled at my mom giving her warm greetings, then he bowed his head slightly at Mr. Fontaine, saying, “I think I met you once, when I was a child. You were a guest at my mother’s court. Or am I confusing you with someone else?”

“You have a sharp memory, dear prince. I was given the honor of attending your mother’s court on a number of occasions.” He sighed wistfully, his eyes searching upwards as if they were revisiting times gone by. “Ah, the rolling green hills and towering oaks of magnificent England. I should make time to go back there, one day.”

“You’re very welcome in my family home any time, Grand Master Fontaine.”

Mr. Fontaine shrugged and spoke in such a casually modest way, I couldn’t help but be endeared to him and trust him further, after Osric’s show of respect. “You flatter me, dear Osric. Please, call me Pascal.”

Jax and Aaron reappeared fully clothed, and Pascal reiterated his thoughts on his title. “Please, everyone, no titles. We are all equals in this weird and wonderful world, after all.”

“And I’m not calling you Grand Master every time I want your attention,” my mom quipped, cuddling into him and kissing him on the lips.

Oh wow, my mom had a boyfriend. Of all the bizarre and unbelievable things that had happened to me since I’d moved to New Nebraska, why did I find that the hardest thing to get my head around? She’d never even been on a date since my dad had died in a car accident, all those many years ago.

The sun was beginning to peek above the horizon, oozing hues of marigold and honey over New Lincoln and the Kings’ Hills.

“Why don’t we sit and have an early breakfast on the balcony?” Aaron suggested.

“Yes, that’s an excellent idea,” my mom replied. Then, she turned to me. Her eyes telling a hint of regret, she said, “And we can discuss some...long overdue explanations.”

Jax and Xander moved the dining table and chairs onto the spacious balcony, and I braced myself for whatever mysteries would be revealed.



The table was more than large enough to accommodate everyone. Aaron turned out to be quite the chef, filling the tabletop with plates of pastries, buttered toast, freshly sizzled bacon and sausages, a platter of poached and fried eggs, not to mention several pots of coffee and tea, billowing bitter and herby vapors as their steaming liquid was poured into cups, doused in milk and sweetened with sugar cubes. It was a delightful feast, and everyone, except recently fed Xander, dug in.

But my only appetite was for facts. Sipping at water, I listened intently to my mom and her new boyfriend—the concept was still odd to me—as they filled us in on vital information.

“I was so sorry to hear about what happened last night,” Pascal said as he crunched on a piece of toast, before placing it on his plate and reaching for his teacup. “I am so very glad that no harm befell you, dear Cecilia.”

Mom was sitting beside me, and squeezed my hand, kissing my cheek firmly, saying, “Yes, thank goodness you’re okay, sweetheart. I don’t know what I would’ve done if—”

I entwined my fingers in hers and looked into her eyes sincerely. “Mom, I need to know the truth. Everything.”

“You’re right.” She dabbed poached egg from her lips with a napkin. “Though we don’t think what happened last night had anything to do with the secrets I’m about to share.”

“Last night had to do with Jack 2.” I wrapped my arms around my waist and Jax, who was sitting on the other side of me, reached his arm around my shoulders and pulled me in for a hug.

“Yes, last night was Jack 2,” my mom replied, giving Jax a look of gratitude. “And that’s another matter. But there are things I’ve kept from you that no longer serve their purpose.” She drew in a long breath and exhaled in the same manner.

“I’m ready to hear them. I swear, Mom.” I straightened up, but put a hand on Jax’s thigh, hoping he’d leave his arm around me—I needed support right now—and he did.

“Okay, well, you and I appear to have an ability, a gift, or some might say a curse, depending on how you look at it. Let’s call it a gift, if used wisely.”

Everyone else remained silent and simply listened, sensing this was something I had to discuss with my mom alone. “What gift?”

“The gift of amplification. Being able to strengthen the powers of paranormals, through, erm”—her cheeks pinkened slightly—“romantic connections, let’s say. I think several people around this table know what I’m talking about...”

Jax nodded. Aaron and Xander mumbled words of agreement. Osric did neither, simply grunting into his coffee cup.

I felt awkward realizing that my mom somehow seemed to know I was in a relationship with multiple males, a vampire included.

“So, you have the same...gift?” I asked my mom.

“Yes, I do. My parents told me at an early age. They kept me away from paranormals as much they could. But someone who has the ability to detect our gift—which is very rare—sought me out. A particularly dangerous narcissist, and he made it clear that he wouldn’t stop until I had accepted his *love*. But it was slavery in a gilded cage he was offering, not love. I’d long feared that we might be kidnapped and forced into some kind of obligatory situation, to be used for our

abilities against our will. He was certainly capable of that, and worse.”

“So that’s why we moved so often, all those times?”

Mom nodded, her face contorted in sorrow, regret. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I just couldn’t take the risk. He was after me, but I worried about you too. I couldn’t bear to think about you being imprisoned and exploited. The normal way this phenomenon takes place is by consensual, erm, romance, but there are plenty of horrid males out there, females too perhaps, who would try to force it, for their own selfish gains. Not everyone is as nice as your friends here.” She looked at each of my guys and Osric, then over at Pascal, her eyes oozing love. “Or my new friend.”

Pascal cleared his throat, saying, “My lady, you flatter me, as always.”

“But why’d you let us come to New Nebraska then? If we have this amplifying power that only affects paranormals, and if you were scared of us being exploited, it seems the last place we’d be safe.”

Mom shrugged. “I’d tried to hide us in almost twenty of the regular United States, and he’d gotten close to finding us several times. In the end I thought maybe New Nebraska would be the last place he’d look for us. After all, like you said, it doesn’t seem logical for us to seek refuge here.”

A suspicion flashed through my mind. “Then are you amplifying Mr. Font—Pascal’s powers for him too? What’s to say he’s not just using you, like you’ve always feared?”

Mom jerked her head back. “Ceci, don’t be rude. It’s not like that at all.”

Pascal interjected, waving the comments away with his hand as if they were harmless fruit flies. “A perfectly reasonable question, Cecilia. And no, in my case the attraction is something deeper. For one thing, I must flatter myself—without wanting to blow my own trumpet—that my powers, having reached a near pinnacle, after many decades of dedicated study and practice, cannot be exponentially

increased in the same way as some of your friends here at this table.”

Aaron made a face. “With all respect to you, and to Ceci’s mom, you keep speaking as if you know things we haven’t told you. How—”

Pascal tapped his nose twice, knowingly. “Research, observation, allies. I have many—let’s say—friends in the city who keep me informed.” His grin was wry when he said, “But don’t worry, you haven’t had your privacy infringed to an obscene extent. Rest easy, professor.”

Aaron’s cheeks flared cherry red. “Uh, I see. Well, thank you for that.”

I was thankful too, especially after our special moment at the party before the chaos broke out. “So, erm, anyway, how did you meet each other?” I asked.

“Pascal had sensed my gift, my proximity to him here in New Lincoln. It seemed the weaker I’d gotten, the more my gift had called out, like a beacon to those that could sense it—one reason I decided to keep my distance from you when Pascal advised it. Anyhow, he knocked on the door, early that morning when you were still asleep.”

Pascal joined in. “The greatest morning of my life.”

She blew him a kiss across the table, Pascal caught the invisible kiss in a theatrical way, then placed his palm on his cheek. When he took it away, there was the smudged mark where a woman’s lips had just been. Smiling, he said, “It is as if your blessed lips were there themselves, my love.”

Xander, apparently still high and excitable from his rejuvenating feeding, clapped enthusiastically. “Bravo, Grand Master! Does that work on other body parts too?”

“Xander!” I chided him. I changed the subject briskly, glaring at Xander as if to remind him this was my mom, not one of the fangirls who lusted after him. “And your health, Mom. It’s so improved. This is from Pascal’s powers?”

“Yes, definitely. There was an instant attraction, the moment I saw him. I was swept off my feet. We only intended

to spend the day together, but time just flew by. Then the more we talked, the more we both became convinced it would be better if I stayed with him and kept my distance from you until I was stronger. And his energy has affected my blood in a way modern medicine never could have. In fact, what little my gift gives to his powers is returned to me tenfold. It's like I've been waiting for him my whole life."

I pulled away from Jax so I could lean over and hug her. "I'm so glad you're healthy again."

"And I'm so glad you've found the people that you're supposed to be with too." She looked around the table at each of the guys individually. While the others beamed and thanked my mom, Osric looked at his watch, intensely interested in the time all of a sudden. She continued, "I'm especially glad because it seems a part of our amplifying ability is we deteriorate faster than normal people, if we're kept away from who we're meant to be with. Think of it like soul mates who yearn and suffer without each other."

Xander stood. "So, what you're saying is"—he blurred, walking along the balcony wall, arms out like a tightrope walker—"you think that our merry bunch of guys"—he blurred again, back in his seat—"need to be with your daughter forever, for the sake of her wellbeing, and ours?"

I wasn't angry, but I wished he wouldn't show off so childishly. "I wish you wouldn't do that. But Mom, is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, dear. You've found four life partners who will not only keep you healthy and happy, but vice versa, for a very long time."

"Ah, I don't know—" Osric stood, excusing himself in a business-like manner. "That is, I'm sorry to rush off. I have one or two things to take care of." He turned to Aaron. "Don't worry, I won't go near the places we discussed last night on my own." Then he smiled at my mom and Pascal, saying, "It's been a pleasure to have you here, and of course, to see Ceci reunited with her mom."

And off he went, throwing his jacket on and clunking the door behind him.

I was slightly taken aback by Osric's exit, but I guessed I should've been used to his abrupt departures by now.

Was he upset my mom had assumed he was like the rest of the guys and romantically involved with me?

"Mom, so going back to the other matter. This...Jack 2. You know he's still after me, right?" I reached over for Jax's thigh again and Xander suddenly blurred in behind me, resting his hands on my shoulders, grounding me with their comforting weight.

Pascal sighed, nodding. "Yes, I have contacts in the NLPD, so we know about the note he left on the last victim. And we saw his pathetic message on the news too. It seems he's obsessed just because you're human and got away."

"And he's not giving up," Aaron said, standing and striding over to Jax, Xander and I.

"You're right." Pascal drained his teacup and looked into my eyes. "But he's forgetting one thing."

"What's that?"

"There's only one of him, and a whole army of us."

CHAPTER 30

Osric

I'd lied to my best friend.

Contrary to what I told him at breakfast, I'd raced to the nearest temple location.

At such an early hour, the doors were locked. But wood and steel meant nothing to my powers. If Jack 2 had been here recently, I would sense his energy. From inside the buildings, from upstairs or downstairs, even from within a good fifty feet radius of the surrounding vicinity. Because I knew exactly what I was looking for.

I hadn't told the others, but I'd sensed Jack 2's aura in the woods the night before. And it was the same damn one I'd sensed that night outside Ceci's apartment. It was strange and it was strong.

And since I was the only one who had this ability to detect him—and I had Juniper—my hope was to find and dispose of Jack 2 as quickly as possible.

I had to do this for Ceci. I couldn't be with her—not like her mother implied, and if her mother truly got to know me, I doubt she'd approve of me for her daughter anyhow—but I could protect her. And bringing Aaron or the others would've only slowed me down.

I felt nothing of Jack 2's presence at the first location, but I kept going, working my way through the list of temple meeting spots I'd made when researching the previous night. My search took me all over New Lincoln but I'd picked up on bugger all.

I drove to the one remaining location: their grand temple, right in the heart of New Lincoln. Below its domed ceiling and soaring, brownstone walls stood a robust wooden sign that had

been hammered and cemented among the flagstones, welcoming *All Seekers of Purity*.

Its double doors were swung wide open.

I parked and grabbed the ballcap and denim jacket I'd thrown in my car this morning, swinging myself out of my Porsche and throwing them on. I wasn't famous on the level of someone like say, Bryce Harding, but Fae princes weren't exactly a dime a dozen. To avoid being spotted, it was best to try to blend in. I tucked my Fae ears up under the cap.

Pulling its visor down to hide my blonde bangs, but not so far it looked conspicuous, I circled around the temple first, as I had the others. If Jack 2 had been inside recently, I'd know.

Nothing, so far.

Finally, back around front and near the doors, I caught a whiff of that energy I was searching for. But the aura was stale, lingering like the scant remnants of fumes from freshly dried paint. So stale, I couldn't even be certain it was him until I walked right up to it.

Hearing a booming voice echoing from within, I slipped inside and found myself in a large lobby. Beyond it, the grand temple itself. A two-level amphitheater that was alive with cheers, claps and shouts of approval. A sign in the lobby read: *Special Lecture Today by our Esteemed Overseer Clyde Blunton.*

Still not detecting anymore of Jack 2—only that he'd walked through those doors sometime recently, in the last few days was my best guess—I began taking photos of the fliers posted around the lobby as I listened.

“Thank you, all. It is my honor to speak to you as your overseer and provide guidance in these dark times. We must stand together. Because they”—he shouted out—“they hate what we have here! They hate the flawless logic of purity. They accuse us of being fearmongers, peddlers of racist ideologies!”

He paused. A wave of boos and angry shouts washed over the crowd, not directed at the overseer but in agreement with

him.

“But what would they have of us, of all our beautiful breeds? They would have each of us deteriorate, disappear into the void, into oblivion. Replaced with disgusting sorts of mongrels and halfbreeds. Worse than humans themselves. We must fight back!”

What hateful and empty-headed nonsense he was spewing.

Unable to tolerate his bullshit, and having finished taking photos of every scrap of paper on the walls, I raced back home to Ceci.



I arrived at the penthouse to a rather confusing sight.

Ceci was pressing her janitor’s uniform on an ironing board in the living room, her class notes all arranged in folders on one of the couches.

She looked up, set down the iron and raced over. “We were worried about you!” She didn’t stop until she was within inches of my chest, her arms fidgeting at her sides as if she wanted to reach for me. “Where were you? Didn’t you get Aaron’s texts?”

“Oh, yes.” I patted my pocket where my phone was. “I knew I’d be back soon enough.”

“You should’ve replied.” The words were accusing, but not spoken harshly.

“I didn’t know you’d worry. You were busy with everyone else.” I waved a hand around at the guys, as well various coven members and NN Lupines, who were sitting around the living room and kitchen, milling about, eating and drinking.

“I did worry.” Concern in her eyes shifted to a bit of sadness as she looked away.

She turned back to her ironing and notes. Surely she wasn’t making preparations for a regular college day, the next day? That was ludicrous, given the situation.

Aaron gave me a shrug, as if he'd given up trying to persuade her from acting like tomorrow would be just another day.

I walked over to her ironing and asked in a manner probably a tad too stern, "And what do you think you're doing?"

Jerking her head back slightly at my tone, she rolled her eyes. "I'm preparing my stuff for tomorrow."

"Why on earth would you be doing that?"

"Mom's safe, over at Pascal's place. I'll stay here if that's okay with you and Aaron. But I thought I should try and get back to things." She smoothed a hand over her uniform.

"Back to things!?! First of all, you do not need that job—"

"It pays for classes." She squared her shoulders, and glanced at Aaron, like they'd already had this argument.

"I'm sure Aaron has already told you we'll take care of anything you might need." I looked over to him and he nodded.

"I'm standing on my own two feet, for now. And besides, I'm not quitting without notice."

"I can't believe we're arguing about this! You know I've just been out all day, trying to keep you—well, anyway, there's no need to be putting yourself at risk when you're very welcome to stay here. *Permanently*. Where it's safe."

"Thanks for letting me stay. But I am going to campus tomorrow. Jax and his best men are going to be nearby me at all times, and Aaron will be meeting up with me every class break, and Xander and his coven captains will be keeping their eyes on everything I do. Not to mention the NLPD detectives and Pascal's secret friends will all be following me closely. Oh, and campus security are being extra vigilant too. Nothing can go wrong."

I harrumphed. "When people say things like that, that's usually when something does go wrong."

She clasped my hand in hers. It was a bit cold, but incredibly soft. It trembled a bit, showing nerves she was probably trying to hide. “Don’t worry, Mr. Scow”—she placed a palm over her mouth as if she’d betrayed a secret—“anyway, it’ll be fine. We’re all taking precautions. Don’t worry.”

“I am not happy about this.”

She gave a small smile. “It feels nice to be cared about.” She hesitated, as if she thought I was going to protest her saying I cared about her. “But I promise I’ll be careful.” She glanced around the room at all the guys there to protect her. “I appreciate everyone’s help. But I’m going to have to leave this apartment sooner or later.”

That was meager reassurance, especially after the fact she’d almost been kidnapped and murdered at a party with literally thousands of partygoers in attendance, including most of the same people she’d just listed as her guarantors of safety.

But still, she was so strong and so brave after everything she’d been through. And everything she’d said and done since I’d walked through the door was just one more reminder of how Ceci had found her way into my cold, unfeeling heart.

I guess I was thinking of her as Ceci all the time now, too.

“Fine, then I’ll be a janitor alongside you tomorrow. And your classmate, sitting right beside you.”

She snorted. “The prince is going to mop floors and clean toilets?”

“I’ll be the best bloody janitor New Nebraska’s ever seen.”

Tilting her head, she peered into my eyes. “You’d do that, for me?”

I felt heat rising under my shirt collar. My heart beating faster. “To stop you being butchered, of course. What of it?”

“I’m leaving at five sharp.”

“Don’t leave without me.”

“I won’t.” She gave that small smile again and I was so happy to see it.

She kept looking at me, like she hoped I'd say or do something else. But I couldn't. I let my usual mask of indifference fall over my face and turned back to the guys—but not before noticing Ceci's expression closed in on itself and every bit of lightness she'd had vanished.

A shiver coursed through me, like someone had just doused me with a bucket of ice water, and I hated myself for upsetting her. But what could I do? Keeping emotional distance from her was probably best for both of us. I'd just hurt her more if she really cared about me.

I forced myself to greet the guys and fill them in on what I'd been up to. After getting a reprimand from Aaron, and Xander's assurance he'd help me sort through the information in the photos, we all had an early dinner. I sat as far away from Ceci as I could and tried to ignore the pang in my chest. In the late evening, Ceci went off to Aaron's bed, with Jax following soon after.

As I finished up some more research on my phone in the kitchen, I heard a loud, high-pitched cry coming from their bedroom. Ceci! Was she okay?

I hurried into the hallway, right outside their door. But she wasn't in distress. I heard her moaning, and Aaron's voice following right after. "That's it, baby. Jax has got you."

My heart ached and my body trembled, more ice water drenching my body. I stumbled back, finding my way out of the hall, and retired to my bed, alone.

And even though I knew I had to be up at an ungodly hour, I laid awake thinking of Ceci. Just steps away. Being comforted and taken care of by her mates in a way I never could.

CHAPTER 31

Cecilia

(30 minutes earlier)

Jax reached behind his neck to yank his T-shirt off, his bicep bulging. The white fabric tugged free of his chest, revealing tanned skin and chiseled abs, with a dark trail of hair beneath his belly button. A happy trail that led right into the waistband of his jeans.

“What are you looking at, sweet girl?” Aaron whispered, nudging my shoulder playfully with his arm and leaning in by my side.

“Nothing,” I squeaked. Not my most articulate response. And Jax’s body definitely wasn’t nothing. But for once, Jax was shirtless when I was able to give it the attention it deserved. We were back in Aaron’s bedroom and getting ready for the night, after a day filled with the highs of my mom’s return and the lows of thinking about Jack 2 and Osric pulling away again.

I finally tore my eyes away from Jax’s drool-worthiness and glanced at Aaron. He clearly knew exactly what I was staring at and why. The heat in his eyes—reminding me how he’d looked last night in Xander’s office—fueled the flames that were awakening in my body. I should have been tired, but parts of me were coming alive and I itched to be closer to my guys.

Jax froze, noticing the intense look Aaron and I were sharing, and strode over to us. “Everything good? Ceci?” He pulled me right into his bare torso and hugged me tight.

“Right now”—I mumbled into his hard pec muscle—“everything’s perfect.” I rubbed my cheek into its warmth and sighed, feeling that what I’d said was true despite Jack 2

and what this next week might bring. “I’m exactly where I want to be. With who I want to be with.” I forced myself not to think of the two guys missing from the room right now. I wanted to be bold. I wanted to be free of fear and worry—there’d been so much of it recently—and take what I needed in this moment.

I pulled back enough to look up into Jax’s eyes. “I want you. Both of you.”

Eyes flaring with passion, Jax let out a harsh sound. Aaron growled, reaching for me too.

“Is that okay?” I forced myself not to look down, to keep being brave.

“You know it is,” Jax said as Aaron wrapped an arm around me, right next to Jax’s.

Jax took a deep breath and his brows furrowed. “But are you sure? You’ve been through a lot today. Hell, you’ve been through a lot since I met you.”

“Yes.” I reached up and smoothed out his worry lines. “I’m sure. I think it will help, I just want to relax and embrace this. With all of you.” I tacked on the last words quietly, not knowing if Aaron and Jax would truly understand who ‘all of you’ meant. They’d clearly accepted Xander into our group, even Jax had. But I still felt a pull to Osric. *I had to get Osric out of my mind.* He didn’t want me. “I want to take the next step. I’ve just never...” I swallowed hard. “This is my first time.”

I knew Aaron was well aware, but I wasn’t certain Jax realized the extent of my inexperience. Jax squeezed me tighter. “Thank you for letting us know.”

“You know it’s my first time too.” Aaron’s voice was rough, and I rubbed a hand over his shirt-covered chest.

“We’ll take things slow.” Jax cupped my cheek and leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to my lips.

“I hope not *too* slow.” I nipped at his bottom lip.

“You just let me worry about speed.” Jax tickled my ribs, making me squeal. “But you’re always in control—you can say stop, any time. Though if you’d let us, I’d like if Aaron and I could take care of you tonight.”

“That sounds perfect.” I liked that Jax wanted to take control.

“Let’s get these clothes off first.” Jax reached for the hem of my shirt and slowly drew it up over my head, leaving me in my plain cotton bra. He let out a low whistle and I gave a little spin, giggling. Jax’s earthy scent grew stronger, along with the yellow in his eyes. “We’re so damn lucky.”

“Agreed.” Aaron’s chest rumbled with a low sound, and he tugged me toward him and unsnapped my jeans, pulling the zipper down. He settled his huge hands on my bare waist and lifted me up, planting a kiss on my lips, then set me back down and slid my jeans over my hips and down to the floor where the fabric bunched at my feet.

I stepped out of them and found myself looking at Jax for direction.

“On the bed, beautiful.” He nodded over to Aaron’s large mattress.

I climbed up and rested on my back, braced on bent elbows behind me so I could watch as Aaron tore off his shirt, leaving him bare chested like Jax. I’d never get used to how dominating he looked that way, more like a jacked-up fighter than a professor. They both shucked off their jeans in quick, efficient movements, leaving Aaron in boxer briefs and Jax in boxers.

“So, so beautiful.” Jax prowled toward me, crawling up on the bed right over me until the heat of his large body hovered over mine. He was so hot that even though not an inch of us touched, I felt the warmth pulsing into me. Jax wiped a bead of sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. “We’re going to have to take this slow not just for you, but for us.”

“I understand.” I ran my eyes up and down his muscled length, wishing his boxers didn’t hide what I was most curious

about.

“We’re both still getting control over how...out of control you make us.” He kissed me softly on the side of my mouth. He kissed my cheek then moved to below my ear where he blew a hot breath. I shivered, pleasure fluttering through me, and he kissed the side of my neck. “Someday soon, when I’m more in control, I’m going to mark you right here.” He shifted down a few inches and latched on with his lips right where my shoulder and neck met. He sucked and wetness pooled in my center.

“A mark?” Aaron jerked where he stood at the foot of the bed, coughing to mask a rumbly sound from his throat. “Ah, sorry about that—it sounds like I’ll be marking you too,” he grumbled, like his bear had something to say, even as his cheeks pinkened with embarrassment.

“Are you good, man?” Jax looked over his shoulder.

Aaron took a deep breath. “Yeah, just hot. Nothing new. I should be fine. I’m glad you’re here though. My grizzly is certainly stirred up.”

“Yeah, I’ve got you.” Moving back to my mouth, Jax said, “I’ve got you both.” He kissed me again, much firmer than before, his tongue delving into my mouth. We each engaged in a battle for control. I lost, letting him plunder into me, when I felt Aaron’s hand skim up my stomach.

Aaron had joined us, laying on his side next to me. His hand continued its journey, finding my cloth covered breast and kneading it through the fabric. Jax moved down to my other breast, pushing aside the cotton and latching onto my nipple, tugging hard.

“Oh God!” I cried, my hands digging into Jax’s thick hair and holding him to my chest.

Jax released the bud with a pop. “Not God, baby. Just your devoted wolf.” He ran the tip of his tongue in a circle around the hardened peak. Aaron’s hand pushed aside the fabric on the other side and tweaked my nipple. I hissed and thrashed

my hips. Jax tugged my nipple into his mouth again and my lower body jerked off the bed.

“That’s it, baby. Jax has got you,” Aaron encouraged.

“I do.” Jax stilled my movements by settling his pelvis right down on top of me. “I’ve got you, right where we’re supposed to be.” His massive erection pressed right against my center. And it was *huge*. How was that thing ever going to fit inside me? He rubbed it up and down, giving me a chance to fully appreciate its size. It was so hot and swollen, pulsing as it brushed my clit. Fissures of pleasure raced through me.

“Holy shit!” I exclaimed then burst out laughing. “Sorry, guys. Apparently, I like to curse, and lose the ability to articulate anything in bed.”

Jax chuckled. “I’ll teach you dirty talk, soon enough. Want to lose these too?” He ran a finger along the edge of my panties.

“Yes, please.”

Jax’s fingers crept under the edge of the cotton and goosebumps broke out along my skin. After a kiss from Aaron, they both worked together. Aaron helped rid me of my bra completely and Jax tugged my panties down and tossed them to the floor.

The room fell silent. Finally, a sharp inhale came from Jax. Then a half-groan, half-growl from Aaron. They both stared at me for a long moment, Jax’s eyes focused on where my legs parted. Aaron’s eyes tracked all over like a hungry predator. I resisted the urge to press my thighs together, wanting to keep being bold and brave. “You’re the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, Ceci,” Jax said, barely moving his eyes from my pussy and I almost laughed.

Aaron leaned in for another kiss as Jax reached down with his mouth for my breast again, biting the sensitive flesh. I gasped into Aaron’s mouth.

“I’m so addicted to you, baby girl,” Aaron breathed into me.

“Same.” I choked out when Aaron pulled away. “Same, same, same. I need more.”

Grinning, Jax trailed kisses over my belly and headed down, and further down, until he was right over my bare mound. He breathed in deep, not being shy about pushing his nose right against my inner thigh as he let out a low growl. “Oh, man. She smells so delicious.” He inhaled again. “Mine. You’re mine.”

Aaron growled, louder than Jax and louder than he had before, like his bear was even more riled up. “Mine?” Aaron grunted.

Jax glanced at him. “Ours. Cool it, big guy. There’s enough of this to go around.” He dipped a finger into my wetness and held it up to Aaron. “Here, take a taste. Then help me hold her legs open.”

Aaron grumbled, but actually licked me off of Jax’s finger as my eyes widened in half-disbelief and half-embarrassment. He hummed and his bear seemed to be appeased as he pulled up one of my legs, squeezing my inner thigh. Jax pushed my other leg to the side and dove his face right into my heat, licking a long line from my ass to my clit. He did it again and sucked my clit hard into his mouth.

“Oh God!” I cried out, even louder than before. I latched my fingers to Jax’s head and shuddered wildly.

As Jax kept up his efforts, he slid a finger between my folds and slowly worked it into my opening. He pushed it in and out, in and out, several times and tried to add a second. But even with my natural lubrication soaking us both, he met resistance. I could feel that both of his fingers barely fit.

He pulled off me. “Damn, you’re tight.”

“I’m sorry.” I started to close my legs.

“I didn’t mean it like that, Ceci. But Aaron and I are both pretty big—really far from your average size, to be honest—and we’re going to have to be careful. Maybe no full penetration tonight. But we’ll work up to it, sweetheart.”

I felt like I was letting us all down. “But—”

“There’s no rush. We have forever, baby.” Aaron ran a soothing hand over my leg.

“Forever,” Jax repeated.

“I want forever too.” I glanced between them, at their matching looks of openness. And adoration. They never hid how they felt about me. My bear and my wolf. “You guys must know that I”—the words were so momentous, the first time that I would ever say them out loud to them, hopefully among the million more times I’d say them in the rest of our lives—“you must know I love you both.”

Jax’s eyes flared with the yellow of his wolf. “We love you too. I love you too.” He clarified, as if wanting to make sure I understood it wasn’t just his wolf who wanted me. He crawled up my body to kiss me, pouring every bit of emotion that pulsed between us into the hold his lips had on mine.

When Jax finally lifted his head, Aaron caressed my cheek, his eyes surprisingly moist and glistening as he whispered, “Love you forever, baby.”

“Forever.” I stared into the beautiful depths of his brown eyes. “Come here.” My lips searched for his. Aaron met me halfway and we shared a kiss full of promises. His scruff rubbed my cheeks and chin as he whispered, “love you, love you, love you,” and my eyes filled with tears.

Jax butted in to kiss me one more time and I realized I could taste myself on his tongue. *Oh God*. Every other thought drained from my head as my desire kicked into another gear. I squirmed on the bed. “Great! Glad that’s all settled.” I tried to lighten the mood. “Now I want us to…” I didn’t even quite know what I was asking for or how the mechanics with the three of us would work.

“Aaron, why don’t you take those off”—Jax nodded at Aaron’s boxer briefs—“and let our girl have some fun with you while I get back to work down here.” Jax flashed a wolfish grin and scooted back down my body.

Aaron followed Jax’s direction and tugged down his briefs, revealing a massive erection. Aaron’s cock was rock hard, red

and pulsing, a thick vein running up the side to a bulbous head, a small bead of precum leaking from the tip, glistening in the dim light of the bedroom. I'd had the same thought when I'd felt Jax's length: that was supposed to fit inside me!?

Jax seemed to sense my thoughts. "Take it in your hand, Ceci. You'll get to know both of our cocks very well, soon enough."

I grasped Aaron's thickness in my small hand. I attempted to make my fingers touch, but he was too big.

"Good." Jax watched me exploring Aaron's sizeable girth. "Start stroking it up and down. Nice and firm." Jax kept watching. "That's it. I don't think it's going to take our big guy long at all." He gave Aaron a teasing smile and then he picked up where he'd left off on me, heading straight back to my clit. He sucked and circled the nub with his tongue as I stroked Aaron.

I grew even wetter and Jax worked two fingers into me again, curling them and pumping gently. Aaron grunted above me, sweat breaking out over his chest, as he pumped his hips into my fist and reached out with his huge paw of a hand to knead my breast again, unleashing a bit of aggression into it. I moaned and thrashed.

Jax scissored his fingers and started a faster rhythm with his mouth and in no time, I was quaking and pulsing beneath him.

One of Jax's hands moved off my hips and I saw it disappear down into his boxers to start jerking his own cock as he groaned into my pussy. The huge tip of his cock peeked out of his boxers, as engorged as Aaron's but even bigger.

The sight was too much. I moaned and moaned and my orgasm exploded out of me, hard and fast. Sensing I'd reached my climax, Jax slowed his rhythm on me and kept jerking himself, finally releasing a harsh exhale. He came right after me, squirting hot jets of cum across my abdomen.

Aaron was right behind, watching us both. His cock swelled and he tensed. Ropes of cum shot out and laced across

my chest. A deep animalistic sound tore from his chest. More cum spurted out and the final bit dripped down into my still moving hand.

The sounds of our ragged breathing filled the room. The air felt hot and thick with earthy scents.

“Holy Moly,” I said at last, smiling at my silliness. “That was perfect. I love you both so much.”

“Love you, baby,” Aaron murmured.

“Love you.” Jax collapsed into my side.

My heart swelled and the moment was truly perfect, even as I felt like something—someone or *someones*—might be missing.

CHAPTER 32

Xander

I was back on the same roof I'd watched Ceci from before, though things were quite different now.

This time, Jax stood next to me.

Chuckling at the turn of events, I shook my head as we observed Ceci and her friend Vesta, sitting on one of the central lawns, chatting between classes.

Jax glanced at me through his mirrored, aviator sunglasses. "Something funny?"

I shrugged. "Life is strange, isn't it? The amount of time we spent as rivals spying on each other. Now look at us, spying together." I waved a hand toward the people moving around the area surrounding the two girls. "And not just that." I cleared my throat, hoping that what I said next wouldn't piss him off. I still felt like an outsider with him—all of them—sometimes. "Protecting our beloved, *together*."

Leaning forward with his elbows on the moss-clogged brickwork, clearly trying not to stain his tight, light grey T-shirt, Jax unscrewed the top of his small water bottle and glugged deeply. He ignored my last comment and focused on my first. "I suppose it is pretty strange, yes."

He seemed to be avoiding my attempt to talk about our mutual relationship. "That's all you have to say?"

He turned, making a visor with his hand, staring up at the bright sky. "Damn, why's the weather turned so hot?"

"Hmm," I murmured. Still keeping my eyes on Ceci and her friend, I shifted up and sat on the roof's grimy balustrade, not giving a fuck for any smears or stains on my black jeans. A sharp fall to either death or severe injury lay in front of me. I was extremely comfortable with heights though. The rays of

the sun would be the only thing to strike the pavement below. “You know, the weather isn’t the only thing that’s turned hot all of a sudden,” I said. Luckily my black Ray Bans masked the envy in my eyes. “You, Aaron, and Ceci...”

Jax’s expression softened and I finally got a smile from him. Not a smug one though. It was a fond, faraway look. “Yeah,” he drawled.

“Yeah? An understatement, if I’ve ever heard one.” Tapping my boots together, looking at the ground far below, I laughed, having to force it out, my chest tight from the perpetual weight of worry that I’d never fully fit into our group. “I’m not deaf you know. I can tell a lot from the noises alone.”

He huffed, but there was amusement in the sound. “Should’ve guessed everyone could hear us.” Jax unscrewed his water cap again, crinkling the plastic in his palm as he drank. He then placed the clouded bottle against his cheek, appearing to savor its coolness. “When I catch this Jack 2 prick, I’m going to throw a sack over his head and leave him tied up in a sauna, to repay him for this.”

“Ohh, kinky boy.” I had no such trouble with the heat. I’d been sipping from a Blood Light, but the taste paled in comparison to Ceci. Time to try to get Jax talking again. “So, have you and Aaron, you know, both scored a touchdown yet...?”

Jax’s eyes were hidden, but his lips formed a wry smile. “A gentleman never tells. But I will say this. We’re going at a pace that’s right for her.”

I nodded. “Why rush a mate when you have so many years to share with each other, yes?”

“Exactly.”

“So, you haven’t...?”

He sighed, patting me on the shoulder. “Like I said, a gentleman never tells. Not that that would affect you, of course.”

I swatted his large hand away, hurting me more than him. “Well, I am getting better, don’t you think? I’m certainly a gent where Ceci’s concerned.”

Saying nothing, he nodded. I’d take that as begrudging agreement I was treating his mate—*our* mate, in my opinion—with the respect she deserved. His attention returned down to the lawn where she and Vesta sat.

They looked relaxed, though Ceci’s aura had carried this perpetual unease—quite understandably—ever since she’d been kidnapped.

With all the solid encirclement of security around her, no attempts had been made to harm her again. Indeed, only a fool would have tried, considering how many eyes and ears were dedicated to keeping her safe, but that didn’t affect Jax’s attitude. His focus was eagle sharp, and no doubt his wolf was ready to rocket into action at a moment’s notice too.

He finished his water bottle, and was about to toss it across the roof, but rather than call him a litterbug, I said, “Better hold on to that. We’ve a little while longer and I don’t see any toilets up here, do you?”

Jax smirked. “You think I’ve played football all these years and not learned to hold it? Kind of like your blood thirst, isn’t it? You can’t just indulge it in polite company every time it takes your fancy. You control it, right?”

Ah yes, my blood thirst, as Jax called it. Jealousy was one thing. And I’d certainly felt plenty of that when I’d heard the soft moans and groans from Aaron’s bedroom each of the past three consecutive nights. They’d started on Sunday and just gotten more vigorous the past two evenings, loud enough to bring Osric over to listen in the hall too.

But jealousy could be managed. It would fester and break my heart, but not right away. The thirst though. It would kill me much quicker.

Since the last feeding, and since I couldn’t stomach anyone else’s blood, my throat had become parched, my body weaker, skin paler. The strengthened powers of charming and blurring

remained, but I found myself with little enthusiasm for using them.

A second feeding from Ceci would fix things again. But it was too soon to ask, especially after what had been her first ever experience, and her being both generous and brave, as well as defiant in facing the overwhelming disapproval from the other guys. And I was still unsure about her feelings for me.

I decided to take my mind off that with some amusement. “So, the prince, the heir to the Fae kingdom, he’s been making good use of his feather duster, so it seems.”

Jax snorted. “I thought the uniform quite suited him. Not sure about that little cap though. I think Ceci forced him to wear it just for amusement.” He chuckled. “Certainly didn’t seem designed for pointy ears.”

“Poking up high out the sides like radio antenna.” I stuck up two fingers on either side of my head.

Jax grinned, his aviators’ focus firmly fixed on the two ladies below. “But I’ll say one thing for him. He’s not as arrogant as I first thought. And he’s clearly devoted to Ceci’s safety just as much as we are.”

“Hmm. Perhaps even more so. But then he’s so cold toward her.” I hated how Osric pulled away from her. I couldn’t decide if it was rude, aloof, or a blend of the two. If she’d run over to me when I’d gotten home, like she had with him on Sunday, I’d have scooped her up and showered her with love.

Sweat was starting to seep through the cotton around Jax’s impressive pecs. Mine had buffed out a fair bit since Ceci had first fed me, but they were still nothing like his.

His forehead was beading too. “Well,” Jax said, “Osric did all that snooping, taking pictures. I respect him for that. And considering his history with that lot, him keeping his cool, avoiding trouble, I admire him for that too.”

“As do I,” I replied, tapping a loose shard of brick with the heel of my boot, letting it tumble and smash on the ground.

Nodding down at the central quad's lawn, where Osric had just appeared in his fabulous janitor's uniform of drab navy and patent leather boots, having finished a shift with Ceci just a short while earlier that morning, I said, "Though it's rather harder to admire his fashion sense, of late."

Looking at each other, we enjoyed a rare moment of levity. The vamp and the wolf, sharing a laugh. It felt good. But when would that extend to sharing Ceci? *Really* sharing her, like Aaron and Jax were?

It troubled me.

Was it her or her mates that kept her from wanting more with me? Or was it something about me?

I sighed, shifted around on the roof's ledge and climbed off with weary movements.



"You need to feed again." Ceci strode over from the kitchen and stood in front of me where I sat slumped on the couch. "Why haven't you asked me?" She asked with hands planted firmly on her hips.

We were back in the penthouse, Jax, Aaron and Osric sitting in various places across the living room. But I was the only one almost napping, half laying on the largest couch that I'd specifically chosen with a snooze in mind. Ceci had commented on my paling complexion and lethargy as soon as we'd all walked in the door late that afternoon. I'd blamed it on being stuck on campus roof tops all day in the hot sun, with an ultra-serious wolf for company. She hadn't bought my bullshit.

"You need to feed again. You know it helped you so much last time."

I nodded, unable to argue with her reasoning. "It did. But..."

"What?" She sat next to me on the couch.

"I don't want to pressure you."

“There’s no pressure.” She clasped my hand, stroking it. The wonders of soft skin and smooth words moved me, destroying my protests.

“Well, maybe a bit of blood. If you’re sure?”

“I am.” She looked around at the other guys. Osric, the most vocal protestor last time, said nothing. He just sipped whiskey from a crystal glass, having changed from his darling janitor uniform into lounge pants and an open shirt. His eyes were on Ceci, but he wasn’t expressing disapproval this time. And she’d just been in the kitchen, snacking on bread pudding and chugging a glass of orange juice after dinner.

I was only going to get weaker. It wasn’t even really a choice. Whether she loved me or not, I couldn’t resist. I held her arm gently, as I had before. I felt my eyes filling with hunger as I stared at the veins in her wrists. I stroked her skin with my palm. My fangs began to lengthen as I moved my mouth—

“Will feeding in another spot be better?”

I froze.

She bit her lip. “Maybe my neck?”

My eyelids flinched shut. It was all I could do to hide the bloodlust on my face. I’m sure she saw my fangs extend further though, the desperation in my expression. And I’m sure she felt my hand shaking too. “The inner thigh,” I mumbled. “It is the best spot. The blood flow...”

“Then let’s try that? It won’t hurt any more than last time, will it?”

I shook my head slowly, as if in a daze. I couldn’t believe she was letting me do this. And that the guys trusted me enough to do this too. The inner thigh was the best spot for nourishment, but also one of the most dangerous.

She swung her legs up and leaned back on the couch. “Should I take off my sleep shorts?”

Before I could answer, Osric made a strangled sound in the back of his throat. Had his whiskey gone down the wrong

way?

“Yes, that would help,” I managed to answer.

Aaron got up from his chair and picked up a remote control, turning the lounge’s dimmer lights down low, until the entire open plan area was hazed in shadows and moonlight. “Just some privacy.”

Ceci scooted out of her shorts, leaving her in panties dotted with little red hearts. I wasn’t the only one sneaking glances at the adorable and erotic sight of her bare legs leading to that small scrap of fabric. A bit of her lower abdomen showed above too, where her tank rode up.

The room was silent, but heavy with anticipation.

Aaron stuck his hand in his pocket and discreetly adjusted himself before sitting back down in his chair. Jax said nothing but his heavy breathing spoke volumes.

I moved my face to beside her thigh and began kissing. Feeding from this area was an intimacy I rarely allowed myself. It seemed too personal, much more personal than I’d ever cared to get with most girls I’d fed from. I kept the kisses soft. Then I sucked, gradually harder and harder, each suck ending with a pop of skin and saliva. I forced extra venom into my fangs, hoping to dampen any pain.

Then I fed. Piercing into my orchid’s soft flesh.

She gasped, a sound of pleasure. My nose, just a fraction from the edge of her panties, easily scented her arousal blooming in the air, making this moment even more precious. My cock swelled against my jeans, quickly aching.

And the taste of her blood, exquisite. Vanilla and honey. Her life force was the sweetest, freshest thing I’d ever consumed in my entire, long life.

She grasped at my hair, clutching, her fingernails digging into my scalp as her body responded to the rhythm of my tongue and lips. She rocked gently and let out a low moan. Her blood nourishing me as she seemed to be feeding on our mutual desire.

None of the guys said a thing, but I felt their eyes on us. Jax took a step forward, reaching his hand out.

Ceci kept rocking and moaning.

When I stopped feeding, and closed the wound, she looked down at me. "I need more."

CHAPTER 33

Cecilia

As soon as I spoke the words—“I need more”—as I lay on the couch with Xander between my thighs, several things happened all at once.

Jax dropped to his knees and locked an arm around my waist. Xander hissed, his fangs lengthening even further. Aaron jerked up from his chair. And Osric choked on a sip of whiskey.

As quick as it all happened, in the next few moments, time seemed to stand still. The guys froze and eventually glanced at one another. Finally, Aaron nodded to Jax. Xander looked to Jax as well. Osric shot back the rest of his drink and crunched on a piece of ice.

Jax squeezed me tighter where my tank met the top of my panties and tenderly brushed back a few strands of hair that were sticking to my damp forehead. “More what, Ceci?”

“Tonight, I want everything.” I cupped his bristly jaw. “*Everything.*” Jax and Aaron had certainly been working me up to it. After our first night, they’d spent two more nights taking turns working me open and pleasuring me. Only letting me stroke their cocks, before distracting me with more hands and tongues exploring every inch of my most intimate places, even licking and caressing me around my backside, to my extreme embarrassment (and pleasure). I’d been good with not going further yet—some of the best moments were as we lay, out of breath, after we’d all come, wrapped together with me between them—but I was ready for more. “And I want to taste you tonight, too.”

Jax’s eyes flared wide, turning yellow. “That can be arranged, baby. But I have an idea. I think Xander should be your first.”

Xander gasped.

“I trust you to be gentle,” Jax said to him. “And to be honest, Aaron and I are larger than you. Not exactly great for Ceci’s first time.”

Xander’s red-rimmed eyes bounced between me and Jax. He straightened up and rested a hand on my thigh. “My orchid, are you sure? This is all up to you.”

“I like Jax’s idea.” I squirmed as Xander’s hand stroked higher.

“But you want me? Not one of your shifter mates? It’s okay if you want them.” He shrugged.

I hated the vulnerability in Xander’s eyes. Yes, Xander was a lot different than Aaron and Jax. But differences in life made everything more interesting and special, including our multiple partner relationship. I was coming to love Xander just as much as the guys I’d already told that to, but clearly, I needed to show him.

I sat up and crawled into Xander’s lap with Jax’s assistance. “Yes, I want you. I’d love for you to be my first. I know we haven’t talked about everything, but I think we all know—or at least hope—that tonight will be just the first of many more. For all of us. Together.”

“Beautifully said, my lovely orchid.” He leaned in and kissed me. His lips were urgent and our breaths became labored. His tongue pressed into my mouth and I tasted a hint of my blood mixed with what must have been his venom. The combination was buttery and metallic.

Jax rubbed a hand up and down my back. Aaron had come over to the couch and laid a large hand on my shoulder.

Xander finally pulled away from my lips. “It would be my honor,” he said solemnly as he glanced around the living room. “Let me go get some things to make us more comfortable.” He looked to Jax. “Will you take our beloved?”

Jax scooped me up into his arms and Xander blurred out of the room. I should have been expecting it, but I still laughed. I was happy it showed his restored energy too.

Xander blurred back moments later holding the comforter from the guest bedroom and several pillows. Aaron helped Xander push the coffee table to the side and Xander spread out the comforter over the rug in the middle of the living room, tossing the pillows nearby.

“Good idea.” Jax carried me over and slowly set me down in the middle of the blanket.

I sank to my knees and looked up at him. “I want to taste you first.”

Jax groaned. The earthy scent of his wolf grew stronger.

I reached for Aaron too. “Both of you. You’ve denied me long enough.” They both knew what I was talking about after distracting me so much the past few nights.

“Sweet girl.” Aaron dropped to his knees, cradled my face in his hands, and kissed me.

I didn’t let the kiss go on too long. “Don’t distract me.” I chuckled. I turned back to Jax, still standing in front of me and unsnapped his jeans.

“I’d better leave,” Osric spoke up from where he was still sitting on one of the couches, holding his whiskey. I’d almost forgotten he was there, he’d been so quiet.

“No need to leave on my account.” Jax gave Osric a respectful nod. Clearly Jax thought highly of Osric and he’d even told me as much today. I was overwhelmed by Osric’s actions too, especially the past few days. He’d been a loyal companion during my work shifts and classes, and I knew he’d been going out at night while the rest of us slept, to scout more temple locations, even farther away than New Lincoln, and other leads he was working on as well.

“I see no reason for you to go.” Aaron gave him a knowing look.

“Orchid?” Xander asked.

I couldn’t process all the reasons why, but it felt wrong to have Osric go. Even if he didn’t want to be with me, he felt like part of us now. This new family we were all forming

together. “Osric, it’s up to you.” I paused, taking in his somewhat startled and unsure expression. “But don’t leave because you think I want you to.”

He groaned and sank further into the couch.

I reached for the zipper on Jax’s jeans and slowly tugged it down, his massive erection fighting me along the way. I pulled down his jeans and boxers in one movement and Jax’s cock sprung free, rock hard and fully engorged. His large balls swinging underneath. I’d gotten a good look and feel of everything these last two nights, but even with years to come, I’d probably never get used to Jax’s size. He was even larger than Aaron, which seemed impossible. “You too.” I motioned to Aaron’s jeans with a smile.

Aaron tore off his shirt and quickly went to work on his jeans.

“I might as well get comfortable too.” Xander smirked and began undressing.

Worried I wasn’t going to do this right, I held onto the base of Jax’s cock and tentatively licked around the tip. Salty precum danced across my tongue and I grew bolder and sucked the whole head into my mouth.

“Oh man.” Jax’s hips jerked and his head fell back on his shoulders for a brief moment before he looked down at me again.

I pulled off with a pop. “Was that okay?”

“Okay? Try heavenly.” Jax’s fingers laced into my hair. “You’re doing so good, baby.”

I opened my mouth wide and took him in deeper than before, slowly working more of his length in and out of my mouth. He was so huge, barely half of him fit, even when he pressed almost all the way into the back of my throat. He hit my gag reflex and my eyes watered. He pulled out a bit and tenderly caressed my scalp as he moved in and out of me. More precum hit my tongue.

“Okay, okay.” Jax slid himself out. “Better give Aaron a turn before I blow and embarrass myself over here.”

Xander chuckled and idly stroked his erection as he lay on his side on the blanket. He was comfortably naked now and he was *gorgeous*. Not as muscular as my shifters, but lean and strong, a clearly defined six pack and neatly trimmed hair around his groin. His cock was long, but not as thick as Aaron's and Jax's. His eyes never left me as I turned my attention to Aaron.

I rested my hands on Aaron's hips and swallowed him down in one deep breath.

"Jesus!" Aaron's hands flew to my head.

"Our girl's picked up some skills pretty quick." Jax ruffled my hair.

I went to work, bobbing up and down, humming and enjoying Aaron's frantic breaths and low growls. Cum was leaking from his cock, strands of it mixing with my saliva and starting to drip down my chin.

"I'm tapping out too," Aaron wheezed above me, like he'd run a marathon, even though it must've only been a few moments I'd been stroking him with my mouth and tongue. "I want to last a bit longer for you, sweet girl."

I gave his cock one more lick and smiled up at him. "Love you."

"Love you forever." He pulled me up to standing and kissed me hard, his tongue meeting mine, and he groaned. "I can taste myself on you."

"Probably Jax too." I bit my lip.

"Good thing Jax and I are friends." He kissed me again then Jax, Aaron and I smiled at each other. Osric shifted on the couch.

"Come here, my orchid." Xander held out his hand and I knelt beside him. "Thank you for letting me be part of this *friendship* too."

I laughed, then immediately schooled my features, wanting him to know how serious I was when I said this. "Xander, you've been the most devoted suitor a girl could've ever asked

for. You're so much more than the humor and care you shower me with. You're the sun in my world, brightening everything up. I want forever with you too. I love you."

Xander's eyes widened and he started blinking. "Don't make me cry, my beloved." He reached for me and wrapped me up in his arms. He turned us so I lay under him. "I love you too. You're also my sun. My everything. I will prove my devotion to you every day. You'll never regret loving me, even with the mistakes I've made and my bloody past."

"You have nothing to prove, Xander. I love you just the way you are." I pulled his head down for a kiss and let my tongue explore, meeting his with my own and running mine over his fangs. "We all have a past and make mistakes. None of us are perfect. But we're better together."

Jax cleared his throat. "Ceci's right. You have nothing to prove to any of us, Xander. You already have."

"Thank you for the words." Xander nodded at Jax and they shared a look before he kissed me again. "It's my turn to taste more of you now." He moved down my body until he was right back at my inner thigh where he was earlier. He pulled off my panties, staring at my bare pussy a long moment, and his fangs extended again, thick, clear venom coating them and just when I thought he was going to feed again, he whispered, "this should help numb the pain."

He mouthed at my pussy and ran his tongue all over, finally pushing his long, coiled tongue inside me. I felt a slight buzz, beyond the pleasure of the strokes of his tongue, like his venom was sparking happy sensations all over the nerves, wherever it touched. He thrust his tongue in and out of me until the buzzing stirred up inside of me as well.

"Holy Shit!" I thrashed under him, feeling the combination of his venom and my juices starting to leak out of me.

"Holy Shit?" Xander breathed against my pussy lips.

"She says things during sex she never does otherwise. You'll get used to it. It's really cute." Aaron said as he sat by us.

Jax knelt in too. “Let’s get her really worked up and ready for Xander.” Jax leaned in, pulled up my tank top and helped me scoot out of it, then latched onto one of my breasts with his mouth. Aaron did the same on the other side and in an instant, they were both tugging and pulling on my nipples, bringing them into stiff, aching peaks.

Even used to their attentions from the past few nights, I couldn’t help the loud moans that fell from my lips. Osric cursed and I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye, then found he’d pressed a hand to the front of his lounge pants.

Xander reached over and grabbed a pillow. “Here, lift up, my orchid.” He slid it under my hips.

Jax and Aaron released my nipples from their mouths, but stayed close and ran their hands over me, lingering around my breasts and kneading the sensitive flesh, moist from their efforts.

“Ready?” Xander asked.

“Oh God, yes.” I wiped a bit of sweat from my brow. I’d been hot and worked up ever since Xander started feeding from me.

“Do we need a condom?” Aaron asked, and I was thankful he’d thought to ask.

“I’m on the pill,” I said, which Aaron and Jax already knew. And I knew Aaron was clean and Jax had been tested recently. “Xander, are you clean?”

“I am. I actually do this a lot less than you’d think. I mostly like to feed on the girls...” He glanced away with embarrassment. “But not anymore obviously and I was just tested.”

“Thanks for letting me know. I’m okay without one.” I answered honestly.

“I’ve never been bare with someone before.” Xander’s hand trembled as he stroked my lower abdomen. “Only you, from now until forever. Like Aaron said. I love you. You’re it for me.” He spoke the words slowly and seriously as knelt over me.

“Love you too, Xander.”

He held me gently by the hips, tilting them up a bit, and slowly speared his cock into me, entering me inch by inch until he met resistance. I was preparing to flinch, ready for pain. But when he pulled back and breached through in one hard thrust, there was nothing but bliss.

I sighed and melted into the blanket behind me, Aaron and Jax still running their hands over me, Xander frozen on top of me, buried deep.

“I’ll move now, orchid. Yes?” He panted.

“Yes. Yes, please.” With his venom masking any pain and all of Jax’s and Aaron’s efforts the past few nights to work me open, I was already adjusting to Xander’s thickness, loving the warmth and sense of fullness inside me.

He held a slow pace, but his strokes were firm and deep. He shifted a bit and hit just the right spot inside me. “Ah, oh, oh my—” my words came out in nonsensical gasps.

Jax certainly understood I was close though and reached down and started rubbing my clit, in just the way he’d learned I liked. Within another few strokes from Xander and with Jax’s firm and fast pressure, I was soon clenching my eyes closed, pleasure radiating out from my center and rippling out into my body. The orgasm seemed to go on and on, prolonged by Jax’s fingers pressed hard against my bundle of nerves.

“Holy Beejzus,” I mumbled as the last bit of my orgasm raced through me. My core clenched down on Xander and he shouted out as he came in hot pulses deep inside me.

He held inside me for a long moment then pulled out and collapsed on top of me. He somehow managed to keep some weight in his arms so I wasn’t crushed. Aaron and Jax had slid out their hands in time, but placed them back on my sides as I held Xander to me. We breathed in and out several times, our breath slowly synching. Eventually he lifted up. “Good? Yes, my orchid? I wanted to earn an A+.”

I laughed. “*Very* good. But Aaron’s the teacher around here. You’ll get no grades from me.” I didn’t want to cause a

competition among them. “And not to be greedy, but I could still use a bit more...” I trailed off, glancing between Aaron and Jax, knowing they’d get what I meant.

“Not too sore?” Aaron asked.

“No. Whatever’s in Xander’s venom... I feel great. I want this to be your first time too.” I reached for his hand.

Aaron’s handsome face lifted into a tender smile. “I think that can be arranged. But you need to move, vamp friend.”

“Working on it,” Xander said into my shoulder. Osric strode over to the kitchen as Xander dragged himself off me and rolled over to the edge of the blanket, grabbing a pillow to rest his head on.

Osric came back with a damp washcloth. “She might need this.” Osric gestured down to my thighs where traces of blood and semen were streaked across the skin.

“Thanks, buddy.” Aaron took the cloth and gently wiped the warm cloth between my legs. “Still good?”

I nodded.

How do you want to do this, love?” Aaron asked.

I looked to Jax.

“Why don’t you try it with Ceci on top?” Jax suggested.

Aaron got on his back, sprawling his big body out on the blanket, and I crawled on top of him, sitting right above his erection. It throbbed and poked against my cheeks behind me. I ran my hands up and down Aaron’s massive chest, enjoying the firm muscles and light scattering of hair. “What do I do?” I looked over my shoulder at Jax.

Jax was about to answer when Osric spoke up, his words rushed but clear, “Brace yourself on his chest with one arm and reach under you with the other for his cock. You can hold it still while you sink down.”

“Okay.” I turned back to Jax. “Can you help me hold him up? Sorry, Aaron, you’re really big and I need to focus.”

They both chuckled. “I don’t mind, man,” Aaron said.

I lifted my hips up and Jax reached under me and held Aaron's cock up as I braced both hands on Aaron's chest and slowly sank down.

Aaron cursed and let out a long, deep groan.

"Oh, oh boy!" I gasped. Aaron was much bigger than Xander and I was feeling every bit of it like this, as he slid up inside me. When I got to Jax's hand, he removed it and placed it on my back.

"What do I do now?" I asked Jax, wanting to get it right.

"Just move, however feels best to you."

"You'll tell me if you don't like it?" I asked Aaron.

"Sweet girl, I'm about ready to explode. I'm afraid Jax might have to finish this for me."

"No worries." I smiled and started to move up and down, raising up on my knees so I could pull off until just the tip of Aaron's cock was pulsing inside me. Then I slid back down, letting his girth stretch me open. I sped up a bit and suddenly Aaron gasped and tensed underneath me, his cock throbbing and filling me up with his hot release. I was about ready to smile at him again—and tell him he was right about coming so soon—when he pushed himself up, with his cock still inside me, wrapping his arms around me and burying his face in the side of my neck.

"Oh, that's nice." I stroked his hair as I sat in his lap, then froze when I felt his teeth dig into my skin. "Um, what—Ow!" I cried out as Aaron's teeth jabbed into where my neck and shoulder met. He growled and latched on, sinking his teeth in—or maybe his bear's teeth in—they felt sharp and much longer than Aaron's.

"My orchid, are you okay?" Xander crawled over.

Osrice stood up and sat back down quickly, seeming unsure of what to do too.

"Leave him alone. He's marking." Jax motioned Xander back to his pillow and nodded at Osrice.

Aaron finally released my neck. Licking his tongue over it, he mumbled between licks, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." His cock softening, but still inside me, he cradled my face in his hands and gazed into my eyes, a deep red flush staining his cheeks. "Can you forgive me, sweet girl? My bear took control. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, Aaron." And I meant it. Even though that bite had hurt a lot more than losing my virginity had, thanks to Xander's venom, it was nothing I couldn't handle. "Is this going to happen every time?"

"No," Jax assured us both. "Just this first time. With my wolf too, if you'll let him."

"Yes. I want your animals to have what they need too." I leaned over and kissed Jax, still in Aaron's embrace.

"And you didn't even come, Ceci." Aaron looked down and shook his head.

"Hey, that was perfect." I kissed him.

"And I'll take care of her now. Sound good, sweetheart?" Jax butted in, like he had a tendency to do, and kissed me again, right next to Aaron's face.

Aaron didn't seem to mind at all though.

I loved how well they got along with each other. "Yes. Very good, my wolf."

"Your only wolf and don't you forget it. Just stay like that then." Jax said and gently pressed Aaron and I back down until I lay right on top of my big bear's chest, my knees on either side of him, as Jax moved behind me and pressed his own chest to my back. Jax lifted my hips up and Aaron's cock slid out of me.

In the next breath, in one sure movement, Jax entered me from behind. He spread me wide open, but thankfully I was ready for his size between warming up with the other guys and Xander's venom still at work. Jax seemed so in tune with my body, reading every sharp inhale, every twitch of my hips and almost silent moans. He picked up a brutal pace, but I loved it,

especially when he pressed down with his pelvis and my clit pressed right into Aaron's rock-hard abs.

All the friction stirred up blistering heat in my core. And heat was coming off both my guys and my own body too. I shuddered as my second orgasm of the night swept through me then I moaned into Aaron's mouth as he reached up and kissed me. He held me tight as Jax leaned over my unmarked shoulder and bit right into the same spot Aaron had, but on the other side, with a vicious growl. His wolf's canines were out and easily punctured the skin. Jax thrust in and out of me several more times and came with another vicious sound, almost a howl.

Between my two shifters, with my vamp inches away, I felt so complete.

Except for one thing.

My eyes met Osric's and collided with the undeniable heat in his gaze.

CHAPTER 34

Jaxon

I was the happiest wolf in the world.

Ceci was with me and I was doing what I loved most: helping people improve their fitness and self-defense skills. Another instructor had asked me to sub last minute, so Ceci and I had come to the gym right after her last class. She was supposed to be hanging out in the back of one of Aaron's classes this afternoon, and heading home with him after. And while I knew Osric might get upset at the change of plans—he liked to have Ceci near him or Aaron (and Aaron's beast) as much as possible—I was here with Reccared, my most trusted lieutenant and future zeta of the pack, and Timon, Xander's tallest and strongest coven captain.

Young girls and women filled the room, wanting to learn how to defend themselves from creeps on the street. A skill that was even more in demand, under current circumstances.

Ceci wasn't taking part, because she'd worn a skirt to school today and the class was so full, but she was perched on the nearest row of bleachers, happily observing as I taught blocks, kicks and holds.

As I paused to have the students repeat my last movement, I caught her gaze. She waved and smiled at me. Warm bliss spread from my stomach, all across my body, surging tingles in my brain.

Man, I loved her.

I'd never thought anybody could have such an effect on me. But even the subtle twinkles in her eyes as she looked at me made my wolf howl with joy.

It had only been two nights since that earth shattering experience with her and the other guys, but the memory would

be forever etched into my mind, heart and soul. I knew Aaron and Xander felt the same. I couldn't believe the vamp I'd once considered my worst enemy was quickly becoming like family. All because of Ceci.

After pairing up the students and giving an example for them to follow, I told them to take their time in practicing their moves, to go through the motions slowly, focusing on their technique.

Then I strolled over to my beloved mate, each of our smiles growing wider the closer I got. Reccared and Timon sat at the top row, keeping watch over her and the room.

"Hey handsome," she chirped as I leaned in for a discreet kiss on the cheek. I'd have preferred to really show her how much I'd missed those lips since our make out session against a tree midday, but it wouldn't have been appropriate. The firm peck on the cheek she gave was still enough to get my wolf whining. *Chill boy*, I told him. *You have to be patient*. And, unfortunately, so did I.

"Hey beautiful," I replied, then nodded up at Reccared and Timon.

Ever since the NLPD had backed off on round the clock surveillance of Ceci, saying they were stretched too thin and Jack 2 hadn't made another attempt on her anyway, we'd made sure to have at least two or three of our strongest guys with her at all times.

"These guys are being super vigilant, I trust."

She reached out and clasped my hand. "Of course. They're awesome." Her touch sent a loving reassurance that vibrated throughout me. "Just wish Aaron, Xander and Osric could be here too."

"Hey, now. You asking for better company than this?" I flexed my bicep and she laughed.

"No." She rolled her eyes at my teasing. "I'm just so proud of you for doing this. I know the guys would love to see you teaching too."

“Yeah, maybe. And I could teach those guys a thing or two. You and Aaron certainly like taking direction.” I winked and she flushed and swatted my chest. Deciding to take a bit of mercy on her, I changed the topic. “Oh, by the way, please thank your mom and Pascal again for dinner last night. That guy can really cook.”

She chuckled. “You already thanked them about five times before we left. Osric had to push you out the door.”

I stroked her cheek. “Well, a good feast should be shown appreciation.” I glanced down her body and she blushed even more. There I was, teasing her again.

She threw it right back at me. “Oh, I don’t know, my hungry wolf. You could’ve had a second feast last night, but you turned it down.” She was teasing me, but she was right. With both her and Aaron yawning so hard when we got home, Xander and I had tucked us all into Aaron’s bed with only a few kisses and cuddles. Xander had even claimed a spot across the end of the mattress and we’d all slept like a pile of puppies.

We’ll need to order a custom-made bed, for sure.

Ceci tilted her head playfully. “But there might be a banquet coming your way—” The joy melted from her face, replaced by a grimace.

I knew why as soon as I turned around. Mandy. For fuck’s sake.

Striding toward us, her short skirt and crop top said come hither but her eyes said fuck you. Her giggling façade was gone, for once.

Even knowing what a bitch she was, I was still taken aback by her abrupt, rude outburst. “So little miss tiny tits is going to be Luna?”

If a male had said that about Ceci, I’d have knocked his teeth out. “You watch that mouth of yours, Mandy. You can only push a gentleman so far.”

“You thought I wouldn’t notice the mate mark on her neck.” Mandy nodded at my bite mark peeking out from

Ceci's shirt. "Your dad is never going to approve of some little"—she paused, her nose curling in contempt—"human as Luna. Alpha chose me, he told me quite plainly. I think he told you too, didn't he? At the Stallions' game? Or has this little slut fucked your brains out completely?"

Sitting down by Ceci, pressing into her side, I cupped her crown, gently massaging her hair, furious at the way Mandy was talking about her. "Mandy, you're a hateful, jealous omega if you have to stoop so low to get what you want. You need to cut this drama shit out. I pity anyone who ends up with you as a mate."

"What? Fuck you! You're not all tha—"

My wolf growled deeply, the sound rumbling from my throat, forming a semi-snarl as it escaped through my gritted teeth. "Stop. Or I'll forget I'm a gentleman, and I'll pull my alpha powers out too. Don't test me."

Mandy was seething, but stayed quiet.

"I've already told my dad. I don't want to be Beta." I tried to reason with Mandy, to get her to see I wasn't who she wanted anyway. "I don't want to be the type of shifter he is. I want to be one like my friend Aaron."

"But—"

I growled again, my stare making clear her mouth was to stay closed. "And my dad can like it or lump it, but my future is with Ceci and my new friends." I leaned forward and kissed Ceci's forehead. She wrapped her arms around me.

I stood to see Mandy scowling.

"I hope I've made myself clear. Now you can leave." I gestured to the exit.

Mandy turned, but said from the side of her mouth, "It's a public gym and a free class. I can watch if I want to." With that, she went to the opposite end of the bleachers and sat there, her face painted in hatred and misery. I'd almost have felt sorry for her, if she wasn't so goddamn annoying.

Ceci stroked my hand and nodded at the students, who had gone through their practices several times. They were glancing over, waiting for further instruction from me. “You should get back to your class. It’s okay. Reccared and Timon are here. Go do your thing.”

I went back to teaching, showing the students how to escape from various head locks and choke holds. More and more students ended up spilling through the doors. Mostly girls, some clearly half breed and another human too. No doubt encouraged to take part because of Jack 2. The girls were showing up late, throughout class time, making things a bit complicated, but it didn’t feel right turning them away, not when the city was in the grip of such fear.

Overwhelmed by the enthusiastic attendance and engrossed in teaching the defense techniques, I only realized after around half an hour that Ceci, Reccared and Timon had left the gym. Mandy was still there though. Her scowl had shifted into a smug smile.

Any time Mandy looked that satisfied, trouble wasn’t far behind. I called a class break and walked over to her. “What’s so funny? Where did they go?”

She pulled out my phone from under her hip, smirking. I’d left it in my jacket pocket, on the coat rails by the door. She’d fucking fished it out. I snatched it from her hand. “Don’t you ever touch my phone, you spiteful bitch.”

Even worse, the phone was open to my texts. There was a message from Osric and a few minutes later, one from Ceci. After another few minutes, Osric had sent a second message—this time a group one to me and Aaron. Then finally, there was one from Xander.

Snickering, Mandy replied. “One Zero Four Six. You really should be more careful when using your passcode. I have a habit of noticing these things, you know. I’d make a much better mate than your human.”

I snarled at her. “Shut up.” I needed to focus and read these messages.

Her voice was sickly sweet as I stared at my phone. “Wasn’t hard to convince her to run off. Especially when I used my own alpha powers on her. I’ve been practicing you know?”

“What!?” I growled, reading. The first message, from Osric, was simple enough.

Urgent, need your help. Meet at the corner of Hayes and First downtown.

The second message, from Ceci, set my nerves on edge, especially with Mandy’s mention of using alpha powers to influence Ceci’s reaction to it.

Mandy showed me Osric’s text. I’m worried about him. I’m taking Reccared and Timon downtown. Meet us there as soon as you can.

The third message, from Osric to Aaron and I—that had clearly come in after Ceci had left—was simple again.

Meet back at penthouse instead or call me.

The last, from Xander, had my wolf clawing within me, desperate to find Ceci. To protect our mate.

Aaron just told us Ceci’s with you this afternoon. Bring her back home asap. Whatever you do, keep her away from downtown.

I called Ceci, Reccared and Timon, but no one picked up. I frantically typed out a reply to Xander, cancelled class and raced downtown.

CHAPTER 35

Osric

“Okay.” Xander looked up from his phone. “I just texted Jax. He hasn’t responded but I’m sure he’ll bring our beloved back here. Don’t fret, uh... prince.” Xander seemed unsure how to address me at the moment and also, how to calm me down. “The wolf may be belligerent at times but he’s as capable as they come.”

“Then we should go. The two of us are enough to do this, right?” I stopped my pacing and motioned toward the penthouse’s front door.

I’d just gotten home from one hell of an afternoon. I’d been following up on one of the photos I’d taken at the central temple: an advertisement for Fell’s Butcher Shop downtown. I hadn’t initially prioritized that lead, because so many of the others had seemed more promising.

All week, I’d spent every spare hour identifying active temple followers, scoping them out at night, discreetly tailing them to their homes to see if I could detect Jack 2’s aura.

Unfortunately, none of those late-night visits had resulted in anything useful. I’d certainly read plenty of hateful, frustrated, petty little people. Tormented by loneliness, inferiority complexes and failed ambition. But none of them had been Jack 2.

Fell’s though had been distinctly more interesting, but only on my second visit.

My first visit, a few days ago, I went in and bought some cold cuts, but detected nothing. I’d popped in again earlier this afternoon, just to double check the place, and before I’d even stepped in the shop, the aura whacked my nose like I’d walked

into a lamppost. Jack 2 was in there, his ghastly essence lingering like vapors rising from a rotten corpse.

But as I was about to summon Juniper, march in there and skewer the bastard, I sensed something else. A presence even more powerful, fouler than Jack 2 himself. And the source both sickened and shocked me.

It was Fae. A very powerful one. At least equal in strength to me, and quite possibly—though it angered me to admit it—stronger.

It explained at least two things. First, how Jack 2 was able to perform abilities far greater than he was actually capable of; because this mystery Fae was supplying him with magic. And second, why Jack 2's energy had always felt so strange. With their auras side by side, easier to compare, I now realized Jack 2 was an elemental and most likely, a half breed. Seemed strange he was killing other half breeds. But if he was unhappy in his own skin, and using this Fae's abilities to help carry out his atrocious string of crimes, everything made sense.

I'd sent off a frantic text to Aaron and Jax to meet at the closest intersection downtown. In Aaron's text, I'd told him to leave Ceci on campus with Reccared and Timon. But after getting responses from neither, I sent another text to them both to just meet at the penthouse instead. I was worried that Jack 2 and the Fae would disappear on me again, but I couldn't take them down—not both of them together—on my own. It had made my throat dry and hands tremble even to think it, but I considered that Aaron's beast might be a necessary last resort.

Anyway, I returned home to find nobody but Xander. Then Aaron finally replied, sending a quick text mid-class, saying he'd be home soon and letting me know Ceci wasn't sitting in on his class this afternoon as planned, she was with Jax.

So here we were now, waiting for Aaron, Jax and Ceci to get home. We could leave Ceci here with Reccared and Timon, and the four of us should be able to take down Jack 2 and the Fae. But I didn't want to wait. I wanted to finish this, danger be damned. Even if it was just with Xander. The vamp was well aware of the risks and I was confident a coven leader

would have a solid level of skill in a fight. At the very least, I knew he'd fed from Ceci last night—before we all went to Pascal's for dinner—and should be able to blur behind an enemy and open their throat in the blink of an eye.

“So, Xander, this piece of shit tried to carry off and mutilate your beloved orchid. Are you ready to put him under the knife, or what?” I turned to him, trying to rile him up and convince him the two of us should go handle this.

Xander's usual cocky, jovial manner melted. His face stoney, he reached into his jean pocket and produced a knife handle. A quick button press saw a vicious-looking blade flick from its top. It was no Juniper, but it would work. Besides, guns were strictly banned in New Nebraska—humans were already afraid of paranormals and didn't want them having guns too—and somehow, they'd been able to enforce that.

Nodding, Xander retracted the blade, slid it back into his pocket, and simply said, “Let's do this.”

I placed a firm hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “Today, we remove a nasty chunk of evil from this world.”

He placed his hand on top of mine and smiled. “And we keep Ceci safe in the process. It means a lot to me, how much you care about her, Osric.”

It sounded strange, my name spoken alongside such words of appreciation, by a vampire. But it meant a lot to me all the same. “I do care for her, very much.” Much more than I could bear at times. Seeing her in ecstasy two nights ago, having to watch and not touch, had been agony. But I'd take anything of Ceci I could get. And I'd do anything for her. I patted his shoulder and nodded at the door. “Let's go kill those bastards.”

We strode to the door, this would be bloody, this would be —

Xander's phone vibrated in his pocket. He took it out quickly, tapped the screen and I read over his shoulder. A reply from Jax.

I really hope you get this fucking message! Ceci isn't with me! She left with Reccared and your guy for that street corner

Osric mentioned downtown. I'm heading there now. If you're not there already, get there NOW!

Xander's face expressing every bit of agony I felt inside, we raced out the door.

CHAPTER 36

Cecilia

I stood at the corner of Hayes and First, scouring the street for Osric. Reccared and Timon were on either side of me, doing the same.

Something tingled in the back of my mind, like I shouldn't have raced off so quickly from the gym and I'd even been influenced to leave Jax, after Mandy had shown me Osric's text. Had Mandy done something unnatural to get me to leave? Did she have some alpha ability, like Jax?

Either way, I was worried about the grumpy Fae prince. And I felt very glad to have Reccared and Timon close to me, as the street was far from bustling and the sidewalks were shadowy, only patched in late afternoon light.

The stores lining the street were mostly boutique, gingerbread brick and pastel paint, their window displays well-arranged and welcoming. There was a florist boasting vibrant bouquets of lilies, roses and orchids—I smiled inside, thinking of Xander's pet name for me—and an upscale bakery boasting a fine array of artisanal breads and pastries. Then, further down, beside a ladies' dress boutique, was Fell's Butcher Shop.

With a super fancy car parked outside. Not a stretch limo, but still imposing. A British model car like a Bentley or Rolls Royce, the luxurious kind that were both bulky and sleek, and had those broad shiny front grills and winged centerpieces sticking up from the end of the hood. The fancy car was midnight black with tinted windows.

Reccared whistled at the sight of it, nodding in appreciation. "That's a beauty. British classic. Fell's has some fancy clientele."

Timon chimed in. “And here he comes now.”

The store door opened, and a man stepped out. Hair a distinctive copper color, he was about six feet two inches, athletic, and dressed in a suit and tie. The Fae—I knew from the pointy ears, but he also shared the same effortless style and grace as Osric—was holding the door half open, talking to someone inside.

Our group walked toward him, and Reccared’s heavy boots scuffing on the sidewalk must’ve made the Fae aware. He turned, looked at us, and said something more to the person inside. Then he smiled and winked right at me with eyes as shiny as sapphires. He was as handsome as Osric, but the red-hued hair made him look extra striking. A suited and serious-faced driver opened the door for him, and he slinked inside. The car pulled away, leaving only a few other cars on the street. But not Osric’s Porsche, unfortunately.

But still, Osric was Fae royalty and that other Fae guy looked like part of the social elite himself. Had it been Osric he’d been chatting to? I walked faster, eager to see the scowly Fae prince and know he was okay.

Osric was going to get such a tight hug, I couldn’t wait—

Inside the doorway was a male—I didn’t know what breed—with crooked teeth and a smile to match. His cheeks were pock marked and his head was desperately clinging to remnants of charcoal hair. But his unpleasant looks weren’t what pulsed shivers across my bones. He had that same darkness about him I’d felt at the party. The same one held by my would-be kidnapper.

I staggered backward into Timon, stuttering, “It—it’s him. It’s Jack—”

Jack 2 launched forward with lightning speed, both palms aimed at Reccared and Timon. Green reeks of smoke billowed from his hands, engulfing their faces, sending their powerful frames sinking to the sidewalk in choking gasps. And Jack 2’s hideous face was inches from my nose.

He pressed a palm over my mouth, but no green gas came out. No words of mine either. It was like my lips had been dipped in super glue and slammed tight. I tried to scream but it was no good. Some magnetic type of magic was binding me, silencing me with terrifying force.

I attempted one of Jax's strikes—a solid jab to break someone's nose—but my hand bounced off Jack 2's face, like he had some powerful forcefield around him.

Grabbing me by the hair and shoulders, he dragged me inside the shop, punched me right in the gut and flung me to the floor, leaving me winded and disoriented as my head knocked on the hard tiling. "Glad you came to me," he rasped. "I was sick of tracking you down."

Then, with shocking ease, he grabbed both Reccared and Timon—who were gasping badly now, but thankfully still breathing—by their hair and dragged them into the shop, all the way behind the butcher's counter. He took a claw hammer from within his butcher's apron and smacked both of them over the head.

They were out cold. Dead even. God, I hoped not.

The killer was actually fairly slender, but whatever magic was assisting him was lending him incredible strength.

I tried to get to my feet, but I only managed to crawl to my knees before he slammed me back down, going to the front door and bolting it shut.

Then he turned to me, his full smile showing yellow, jagged teeth. "And such perfect timing you have." He raised his arms and electricity coursed across them, through his chest and down his legs as wisps of that strange gas circled from his fingertips. "I've just been given my weekly top up."

My heart was hammering. I was close to vomiting. "Please, please. What have I done—"

Pouncing, he picked me up by the hair and slapped me hard across the face. The sting was so sharp I stumbled to one knee. "What have you done? You're one of *them*. That's what you've done."

“I haven’t—”

“You have! My mom was like you. Weak. Tainting me, when I should have been a pure blood.” Dragging me up so my face was within an inch of his, his eyes pitiless and black as a shark’s, his breath reeking like rotting meat, he snarled, “Look what was done to me. A half elemental. When I should be a full. You humans are all the same. Guilty.”

He began pulling me toward the counter, then the store backroom door. I tried with all my strength to scream but the force around my mouth was like a vise.

“I’m going to have fun slicing you up. Just like mom.”

CHAPTER 37

Cecilia

Jack 2 dragged me through the back area of the butcher's shop. I tried to squirm free, struggling, kicking, straining my neck and jaw with muffled wails. But it was no use. There was no way to escape the ferocious strength of his grip.

We reached a chunky steel door and he swung it open, flinging me inside and clunking it shut behind us. We were in an enormous walk-in freezer. Full of carcasses of cows and pigs hanging on hooks, with steel tables lining the area's sides, piled high with what looked like frozen lamb and turkey legs.

Lying on the frosty concrete floor, dressed in my cotton blouse and skirt, I immediately began to shiver, my teeth chattering, as he stared, his grim smile and black eyes bearing down on me.

He waved a glittering palm in front of my face and my lips unlocked. I screamed straight away, as loud as I could.

He cackled, spit flying from his lips. "Go ahead. Scream all you want. These walls don't just keep the cold in." His raspy voice sank low. "In fact, it's much more fun if you scream."

From underneath his grimy, blood-stained apron, he produced a butcher's cleaver, and my heart went from hammering to making jumping jacks. "Please. Please, you don't have to do this. You can get help, you're not well. You —"

"Shut up." Inspecting the cleaver's square blade, he grazed a fingertip down its razor edge, his teeth forming a gruesome grin. "I've heard it all before. Seen it all before. Though"—he paused, his eyelids lowering into slits—"I've not seen *all* of you before, have I?"

He walked toward me slowly, and I scrambled backward across the freezing floor. Getting to my feet, I stumbled deeper into the freezer and looked around in vain for a way out. The only exit was the thick steel door at the front of the room, and he was blocking it, his cleaver raised high.

My skin was rapidly rising in goosebumps from both fear and cold. I forced myself to stagger toward one of the tables and picked up a frozen lamb leg, holding it as firmly as I could with both hands at the skinny end. The freezing meat was heavy, already numbing my palms, the ice stinging, but maybe I could bash him over the head with it and somehow escape this nightmare.

He pointed at my makeshift weapon and laughed, actually stopping in his tracks to hold his ribs he was laughing so hard. “What are you gonna do with that?”

“I—I’ll bash your brains in. This is heavy as a club.” My threat sounded empty.

The look in his eyes told me he felt the same. Lowering his weapon, he walked forward slowly and leaned his forehead far out, presenting it to me. “Go on then. Give me your best shot.”

It seemed hopeless. At the very least though, maybe I could buy some time until the guys found me. I could only pray they’d find me in time, or that Timon and Reccared would recover and come storming through the door.

The will to survive surging through me, I swung the lamb leg backward first, then hammered him over his forehead with it.

Completely unphased, he nodded slowly, lips pursed, as if giving his approval. “Not bad, not bad. Though you will have to break through the Fae magical barrier across my body. So, only a thousand more hits like that and you might manage to make me feel something.”

He pointed to my clothes. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Undress, right now. Or”—he raised his cleaver again, turning it in his hand—“I’ll slice them off. And I might

not be too careful when I do it.” Puffs of cold air wisped from his lips as he spoke.

Still clutching the frozen meat club, my teeth chattered. “I’m not undressing for you! You sick pervert.”

He chuckled from deep within his belly. “Good. It’s much more fun the hard way.”

He raced forward, knocking the lamb leg from my hands with ease, slapping me hard across the face. I yelped, the intense cold mixed with the crack of his palm radiating pain through my jaw. Before I could blink, he started slicing away.

I fought him as best I could, my arms and hands knocking into his cleaver. Every nick and slice into my flesh burned as he shredded my clothes off, leaving me standing in my bra and underwear. My body was now near to convulsing from the cold and pain.

The unnatural depth of his strength was too much. I’d only delayed him. And one of the cuts on my arm was deep, the skin flayed wide open.

“You’ve got no chance, my weak lamb.” He pointed a backward thumb toward the freezer door. “My friend filled me with enough power to kill ten paranormals like the two you brought with you. What chance has a skinny little human like you got?”

Brown ropes snaked from his fingertips, some sort of earth magic, and coiled around my body, until I was trussed up and unable to move. Rapidly freezing, with nobody to help me, I sank to my knees, then collapsed fully into a ball on the floor, my eyes filled with tears. Was my time in this world about to end? When I hadn’t even told all my guys I loved them?

His cleaver’s cutting edge was smeared in my blood. He began lapping at it softly, seemingly savoring the taste. I started screaming, uncontrollably. “Help! Please! Somebody, help!”

Stooping low, his grotesque face hovering around my ear, he hissed, “Save it, lamb. There are no more heroes left in this world—”

The freezer door battered open. Osric stood in the doorway, a large, gleaming emerald dagger, covered in glowing runes, clasped in his hand. His eyes darted around the room and found me, sweeping over my mostly naked body. His gaze lingered on where I was tied up and on the worst cut on my arm. He looked pained and then his face shifted into a mask of unbridled fury. His words were venomous as he pointed the tip of his blade at Jack 2. “And to think I was going to kill you quick.”

Xander charged in behind Osric, grasping a large switchblade, his eyes pooling in hatred as he took in the situation.

Jack 2 stood, gripped his cleaver harder, and smiled. “Now, this looks like a worthy challenge. Which one of you wants to die first?”

CHAPTER 38

Cecilia

Osric strode into the room, taking purposeful steps toward Jack 2 as he kept his magical blade pointed forward, his face not showing one shred of fear. “You touched my Ceci. You’re going to die screaming.” Osric’s words were icier than the freezer we were stuck in.

Xander said nothing, the jagged blade he clasped held low at his side, as he prowled sideways, as if trying to circle around and attack from the side.

Jack seemed to sense this, and began stepping slowly backward at an angle, his eyes flitting between Osric and Xander, until he stood between two huge hanging cow carcasses. The first two in a long line of frozen meat that stretched far back. “You fools. You want to die for some wretched little human? Is her pussy that tasty?”

Osric flinched, then shook it off. “You’re the only one who’s going to die.” He looked at me, his words softening. “This’ll all be over soon.”

Jack looked over at me, taking in my body collapsed on the floor, his smirk callous and cold. “He’s right about that.”

Then, with immense strength, Jack slammed the two frozen cow carcasses, sending them whizzing along on the rails holding their hooked flesh. Just as quickly, Osric let fly with a furious backhand, slicing his blade across the beef. His glowing dagger cut the frozen block in two like butter, leaving one half thudding at his feet and the other swinging around his head, which he easily dodged.

Xander blurred and reappeared beside me, retracting his blade, kneeling and taking off his jacket to wrap round my shivering body.

Osric charged at Jack. Jack lashed out with his cleaver, their blades clashing in furious chimes.

They raged at each other, both cat-like, nimble, blocking, parrying and lunging. Jack was barging the hanging animals with his shoulder, shoving them, trying to batter Osric, to stagger him and leave him open for a deadly cleaver strike.

But the Fae prince fought like a tiger. Dodging, weaving, cutting to ribbons the huge frozen chunks as they flew at him.

As the fight raged, Xander helped me sit up and tugged in vain at the bonds around my body, even springing his switchblade open again, trying to slice through them. They weren't physical ropes though, and Xander's steel knife did nothing. He held my cheek in his palm. "Orchid, these bindings will die when that monster does. Stay strong, have faith. I love you."

"I love you too." I wanted to do something to help him and Osric. "Take my blood."

"No. You're injured."

"At least take it from an open wound. Any extra strength might help you both."

Xander nodded and leaned in to suck from the largest slice on my arm, still leaking quite a bit of blood. After swallowing several mouthfuls, I felt his tongue work over it, trying to seal it back up. Then he turned, rising to his feet, knife ready as he blurred back behind Osric.

With all the cows and pigs lying in dismembered frozen chunks, Jack and Osric stood with their blades and glares fixed on each other. Osric's fighting skills were impressive, but Jack's body now crackled with various shades of magic—green, brown, blue—that covered him from head to toe. He hadn't one scratch, while Osric's shoulder, arm and cheek had been sliced deep by Jack's cleaver, seeping blood.

The monster flitted the cleaver from hand to hand. "Some nice little tricks you have there. My friend told me of a prince from his land who was unmatched, unbeaten." He took a deep breath, readying the cleaver again. "But today you're dead

meat. I'm going to skin you and hang you up on a hook. But not before I make you watch me fuck and kill your little girlfriend."

Osric looked shaken. Even a magical blade like his seemed unable to pierce Jack's protective magic. How much more could Osric take until Jack landed a deadly strike?

I called out, hoping the distraction wouldn't prove deadly. "Osric!"

Still with his weapon trained on Jack, his gaze turned to meet mine.

"If it comes to it, leave me. Save Xander and yourself."

Horror filled Osric's eyes as he shook his head. Jack seemed amused watching this exchange and chuckled.

My teeth chattering, about to pass out from the cold, I used my last ounces of energy to shout the truth I'd been holding deep inside for too long. "You have to. Because I love you! If this is the end, I need you to know. I love you."

Osric's mouth gaped, his eyes filled with happiness. Then a look of awe and relief flashed over his face too as his weapon pulsed with a new, brighter light, the runes flaring into a deep orange. With a smile, he returned his attention to the murderous scum in front of him.

Jack eyed the new glow from Osric's blade. "This fun has gone on long enough." Jack raised his free palm toward Osric's face.

"Watch out!" I shouted. "He shoots poison gas from—"

No sooner had I said that than green smog began to pour out of Jack's hand.

Holding his emerald blade up as a shield, Osric screamed some words in Fae language, the runes across his weapon's surface glowing, the light blinding.

The gas vanished.

And so did Jack's protective shield. I didn't know what had happened, but Osric's blade had suddenly doubled in size,

the runes dazzling, like they held a personal vendetta, sending Jack to his knees, shielding his face.

The killer's cool had melted, his arrogance gone. "Who the fuck do you think you are?!" he seethed.

"A prince of the Fae, fuckface," Xander said calmly as he blurred right beside Jack, raking his switchblade across the killer's arm before lancing it through his wrist, causing the cleaver to clatter onto the frosty concrete.

Grasping him by his apron collars, Xander began pummeling Jack's face with heavy, relentless blows. Xander glanced at me for a moment and after that, his strength only seemed to grow with each strike. He hit again and again. Jack screamed and wailed as Xander's fist hammered without mercy. Teeth rattled, blood splattered, and the ground around Jack soon became soaked in crimson.

As Xander battered and smashed Jack's face to a pulp, Osric ran to me, cradling me in his arms. The ropes had vanished, and he wrapped Xander's jacket tighter around me, trying to keep me warm. "I love you too, my dear Ceci. God, I love you." He pressed a kiss to my temple.

I still shivered, but I felt embraced in his love.

"What you just did, dearest." He brushed another kiss across my face. "Giving your love to me, making me finally accept it. It saved us." He took my hand, which was stiff with cold, and helped me hold it open so he could place the handle of his dagger—more like a sword now—in it. "This is Juniper, the blade passed down to me as prince, by my ancestors. Until now, I was the only person in the universe who could ever wield her. But her power is even stronger now and she calls for you."

He left the handle in my palm and folded my freezing fingers around it. The warmth from its glowing runes surged a sensational energy throughout my body, chasing away the cold and leaving me feeling like I'd slipped into a hot bath. "Juniper accepts you. *I* accept you. I love you. I never thought it possible. But, with you, everything is possible. Not only did your love save my life, but—"

I clasped his beautiful blonde hair, leaned forward and pressed my lips to his. His lips were so soft and warm, a stark contrast to everything around us. Not the best circumstances for our first kiss, but I felt every bit of the emotion pouring from him in his embrace and the firm, but gentle movement of his mouth against mine. I drew back with a gasp. “*You saved my life. Your Highness.*”

“Uh, guys. I hate to interrupt your moment, but uh, I may have gotten a little carried away,” Xander said.

Osric helped me to stand and I handed Juniper back to him. The blade wisped back within his palm, disappearing in a puff of smoke.

We walked over to Xander who hovered over the corpse of Jack 2. The killer’s face was unrecognizable, drenched in blood and broken bone.

Xander had beaten him to death.

“Could’ve just stabbed him,” I huffed. “Maybe I shouldn’t have given you that bit of extra blood,” I teased, leaning into his side.

They both look relieved at my ability to still joke, despite the trauma I’d experienced.

Osric patted Xander’s shoulder. “Looks like you went just far enough.”

“Yeah, he probably deserved more after what he did to all those girls.” I shivered, but this time from the horror of it all, my tone turning serious again.

“Ceci! Ceci!” Aaron’s voice rang out from outside the door. He and Jax burst in, their chests heaving. They’d already pulled off their shirts, looking ready to shift at any moment. They took in the scene and rushed over, basically pushing Xander and Osric aside, and wrapped me in their arms.

“Be careful! She’s injured,” Osric said.

Their arms loosened a bit. “I was so worried,” Jax mumbled into my hair. “Never scare me like that again.”

“Good job, Xander. Good job, old friend,” Aaron said to them.

“It was Ceci who saved the day.” Osric stepped into our huddle and squeezed between Aaron and Jax’s bare chests to nuzzle the top of my hair. “Making us fight like we never could have on our own.”

“We all make a pretty good team.” I melted into the guys around me.

“A good family,” Aaron said.

“Now give her some room.” Osric pushed at Jax and Aaron. “Like I said, she’s been injured.”

“Timon and Reccared have been hurt too.” I shifted in their embrace, trying to pull away.

“They’re stirring, they’ll be okay,” Jax assured me.

“It seems you’ve been hurt too,” Aaron said, motioning to Osric’s worst wound, a deep gash in his shoulder.

“We’ll get them patched up soon enough.” Xander rested a hand on Osric’s back as his red-rimmed gaze met mine, filled with love. “Time to go home, orchid.”

CHAPTER 39

Osric

“Knock, knock,” Jax said as he swung open the door to my bedroom, but he hadn’t actually knocked or even asked permission to enter.

The guys had been in and out all day, treating me and Ceci like invalids. Thankfully, their attention had been mostly focused on her. But they couldn’t go a bloody half hour without checking in.

And yet, I couldn’t be too hard on them. I’d been super clingy with our girl myself, and she’d been lying right next to me since Xander’s on call doctor had patched us both up.

It was now almost nighttime again, just over 24 hours since we’d dealt with Jack 2 and given our statements to the NLPD, and I was still processing the fact I’d almost lost Ceci and accepted what I should’ve embraced all along: she was my future. My sweet source of joy in life. *My everything*. I pulled her in closer where she lay against my side, her delicious coconut scent tickling my nose, her head resting on my bare chest.

“Kathy left some cookies.” Jax set a plate piled high with an assortment of chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin and snickerdoodle treats on the nightstand closest to Ceci. “Did you want more of Pascal’s chicken soup?” he asked her as he sat down on the edge of the bed, leaned over and brushed back some hair from her forehead.

“I just have a few scratches. Not a cold. I’m good.” She turned her face into Jax’s hand and kissed his palm.

“My orchid is a tough one.” Xander strode in and looked at her fondly.

Aaron was right behind him, holding a glass of orange juice. It was only the fourth glass of juice he'd brought today.

"Not sick!" She said, laughing at Aaron and scooting up on the bed until she was sitting next to me. All we'd done was eat and rest. Thank God she only had one bad cut on her arm and some bruises. Everything would heal and her spirit was already bouncing back.

Though she had woken up once in the dark last night in a panic. She'd simply asked me to hold her and told me we'd both be well in no time. Our girl was really something else.

"If you're not sick, why does Osric get you in his bed, all to himself?" Xander asked in his usual teasing manner.

"If I have to rest, so does Osric," Ceci said firmly and placed her small hand on my abdomen. "I know he keeps saying Faes heal quickly. But that shoulder wound was deep." She gave my lower abdomen an absentminded rub. My cock stirred and I forced myself to ignore it as I had been ever since we'd fallen into my bed last night.

Ceci looked up at Xander from under her eyelashes. "Sharing is not going to be an issue, is it?"

"No!" Jax, Aaron and Xander answered at once. Jax shifted on the bed, mumbling "damn, vamp, always stirring up trouble." But he said it in an indulgent tone.

"Okay, good." Ceci smiled and I suspected from her quick turnaround she'd known exactly what their answers would be and had been setting them up. "Then Osric and I need a bit of quiet time."

"Oh. Quiet time." Xander winked. "Of course, our beloved." He backed toward the door and blew her a kiss.

She blew one right back at him.

"We'll come by later to check in, one more time before bed." Jax leaned over and kissed her, then finally stood.

"Let me leave this here. Just in case," Aaron said, moving to set the glass of juice by the plate of cookies.

“Thank you, my sweet bear.” Ceci shifted over to the side of the bed to kiss him too.

They finally left us alone. Maybe now I’d get a chance to apologize for how standoffish I’d been with her since that first day in Aaron’s class and reaffirm everything I’d said yesterday in that damn butcher shop—

My phone buzzed on my nightstand.

Dammit. It was my mother. I’d been putting her off for days since we’d last spoken and she’d been calling on and off since this morning. My time was probably up. She might have even known some of what I’d been up to recently, with how much she liked to invade my life.

“Sorry for this,” I murmured to Ceci and settled her back against my chest before picking up the call. “Hello, Mum.”

“Osric. About time you picked up.”

“Apologies, Mother. I’ve been very busy.”

“Oh, I know exactly what you’ve been up to. Throwing yourself into danger. Making new friends. A very close friend, in particular. A certain human girl.”

I took a deep breath. “I know this may upset you, but—”

“I’m not upset at all. I read the police report from last night. And I’ve learned some interesting things about this girl on my own too. I think this Cecilia girl is good for you.”

“What?” That wasn’t what I’d expected. At all.

“Strengthening Fae abilities,” she said. How had my mother known about that? We hadn’t told the police. But she must’ve read between the lines or been up to her usual snooping. “I expect strong grandbabies in the future.”

“What!?” I exclaimed as Ceci chuckled under her breath.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. Ensuring a strong family line is our duty.”

“Okay, mum. We can talk about this another time. I’m very glad you’ve accepted Ceci in my life because she’s not going

anywhere.” I tightened my arm around Ceci and she snuggled further into me.

“Well, I don’t want her to go anywhere. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” My mother gave an indignant huff.

“Glad we’re finally on the same page. Now, please check with your advisors about that Fae I texted you about.” My mother had replied earlier she knew no one of that description and my sources were drawing a blank too. “And I promise to call you again soon but I need to get going.” Even with my mother not harassing me to come home or marry me off to some Fae she’d selected for me, I only had so much patience.

“Yes, yes. I’ll do that, and we’ll talk soon. Say hello to my future daughter in law,” she said. “Bye.”

The call ended and I groaned.

“Everything okay?” Ceci ran a soothing hand over my side.

“Yes, she can be a bit of a headcase at times. One of the biggest reasons I was keeping my distance from you. Even though I hope you know, I was falling so hard for you. From the very start, my dear.”

“I could sense the struggle. But I might make you pay for it.” She tickled me playfully. “I was falling hard for you too and didn’t really understand why you pulled away sometimes.”

“I might’ve been overthinking it. But my bloody mother had really messed with my head. About a lot of things. I’m glad she’s no longer trying to marry me off to someone else and doesn’t seem to want to break us apart. But even if she were or ever changes her mind, you’re my everything, Ceci. I’m not going anywhere. Ever. I hope you understand.” A tremor shook my voice at the end.

“I do.” She rubbed her cheek into my chest. “I’ve loved you just as much as the others, almost from the very start. It’s like we shouldn’t fit together, but we do.” She crawled up my body and kissed me softly. “We fit together perfectly.” She pulled back and looked into my eyes. “I love you so much.”

“I love you so much it hurts when I’m away.” I threaded my fingers through her hair and guided her lips back to mine. Our kiss went on for long, heavenly moments. Nothing rushed or urgent. It was like we both accepted we had all the time in the world. The rest of our lives together.

Our kiss grew more heated and her tongue rubbed against mine. I settled a hand on her hip and squeezed. She sighed into my mouth and I slid my fingers under her sleep shorts to cup the warm curve of her ass. She started to squirm then pulled back. “Can we do more? Will it be okay for your shoulder?”

“It’ll be fine. I want to be careful for you too. You could be bruised or hurting in a spot I can’t see.” I paused, thinking. “Why don’t you strip for me and we’ll go from there?”

She jumped up and shed her tank, sleep shorts and panties before I could even process all the luscious, beautiful skin she’d revealed. Then she was crawling back over me, pushing away the sheets, and tugging my boxers down.

My cock sprang free, already hard and aching for her. Her eyes widened and fixated on it and she ran her hands up and down its length. Then she moved in to take the tip of it in her mouth as she slid a hand down to my balls. “Oh, bloody hell,” I groaned. Her eagerness had my cock pulsing and throbbing for release. “Dearest, you best slow down before the show is over.”

“Oh.” She smiled and slowed her very enthusiastic efforts.

“I need to get you worked up too.” I tried to pull her up to me.

“I’m actually pretty ready to go...” She took a quick breath and bit her lip. “I’ve been turned on all day lying next to you.”

“Really?” I groaned louder. “Turn on your side, your back to me, and we’ll see.”

She scooted to lay on her side as I did the same, my front to her backside, my good shoulder under me, her head pillowed on my arm. Then I slid my other hand around her waist and down to her pussy. It was *drenched*.

She hadn't been kidding. Just to be sure, I thrummed her clit with my thumb and worked two fingers into her. She moaned and pressed her butt back into my erection. "Osric," she pleaded.

She was certainly ready now. I adjusted her top leg and slowly slid into her warm, welcoming heat from behind. She thrashed her head and turned her mouth to bite into the flesh of my arm. "Oh, Osric. That's perfect," she mumbled into my bicep.

I wrapped my other arm back around her waist and started a slow rhythm, focused solely on every little gasp and movement she made. They let me know when I was hitting just the right spot. I moved my hand down to rub her clit as I thrust in and out. She turned her head back around to look back at me and I captured her lips with my mouth. Then I pulled back to stare into her bright eyes, shining with her happiness.

I'd never had sex like this. So slow and intense. Not about me seeking the finish line or hoping my partner made it there too. But about our connection. A coming together, as one.

"Oh, oh. Goodness gracious." She shook and her whole body tensed against mine. "Ahhh!" she cried out.

Her pussy clamped down hard on my cock, squeezing it tightly. It milked my orgasm right out of me. "Ceci," I moaned as pleasure exploded through my body. I kept steady pressure on her clit and pushed into her one final time as we both sighed together. We lay like that for several moments.

"Osric, thank you." She captured my gaze again. Tears shone in her eyes.

"What are you thanking me for, dear girl?" I kissed her tenderly.

"For letting me in."

"In?"

"To see and love the real you."

“Always.” I found myself blinking back tears of my own. If only the rest of the world could see me now. A Fae prince brought to his knees by the heartfelt words of a little human girl.

CHAPTER 40

Cecilia

“Hey babe, ready for the big party?” Jax asked. He looked his usual super-hunky self as he stood waiting for me outside the library.

It was Friday, one week after the horrors of Fell’s Butcher Shop, and I was finally almost back to normal. All my cuts and bruises were mostly healed, and waking up in the middle of the night in a panic was largely in the past. It helped my beloved guys were always there, no matter what time I needed them. I felt like one of those Fae princesses over in England. Except I was the one who’d bagged the prince. And three other amazing catches too.

A lukewarm breeze blew through my hair as I walked toward Jax, smiling. I kissed him, squeezing his rock-hard bicep as I leaned into him. I’d learned this past week he really liked when I fawned over his bulging muscles. And so did I.

The sight of Jax’s welcoming, handsome face was a great way to start the weekend. “Well, it’s not really a party, as such,” I answered. “But yes, it’ll be a lovely celebration. I think I’m ready. Maybe I’ll even have a glass of champagne.”

Xander blurred behind me, his nose grazing my neck, his voice husky in my ear. “There are other drinks that might be tastier, my orchid.”

“I’ll leave all the Blood Light for you.” I turned and kissed him. “But I fed you this morning. You shouldn’t be thirsty.” I swatted his chest. “I obviously fed you too much, with all that blurring. You’re like a big kid sometimes.”

He brushed a lock of hair behind my ear, his red-rimmed eyes pooling with adoration. “Only sometimes? I really must try harder then.”

Jax laughed. He took my book bag, slung it over his bulky shoulder, and gestured toward the campus path that led away from the college, toward the downtown. “Shall we?”

“Aaron’s not joining us?” I asked.

“He’ll catch up on the way. And Osric’s actually already there. He wanted to greet people as they came in.”

“Well, that’s something different,” I said with a smile, thinking how much my prince had changed. “So, if it’s just us...” I held my palms outstretched by my sides. “Who wants left and who wants right?”

They each took a hand and we headed off, my smaller frame strolling between their taller ones. The leaves were beginning to change color, gently dropping from their branches, dancing and floating across the cobbled campus paths. It would soon be weather for thick sweaters and scarves. Luckily, I had four men to keep me warm through my first cold season in New Nebraska.

We passed the newly carved marble memorial to the girl who’d been treated so cruelly here by—I didn’t even want to mention that monster’s name—that sick demon of an elemental who Osric and Xander had handed out justice to. Bunches of flowers and cards of condolence were heaped around its base.

Stopping for a moment, I said a silent prayer for the girl. Jax and Xander squeezed my hands.

Jax looked over my head to Xander. “I’ll never forget what you did for our Ceci, my vamp brother.”

Xander replied without any attempt at witty quips. “Thank you, Jax. As of now, the wolf and the vampire are as one.” He leaned down and brushed my forehead with his lips. “Thanks to our beloved little human.”

I kissed both their hands in turn. “I didn’t really do anything. I was just...me?”

“And that’s exactly all you have to be,” Jax said. Xander nodded in approval.

Strolling on, I swung my arms playfully, more content than I could ever recall. You could always find something in life to get down about, but today was a day to remember good people and to honor and celebrate life. And family and friends.

We were headed to a dinner at Pascal's restaurant downtown—a fine dining establishment he'd opened years ago because he enjoyed cooking so much. He was hosting tonight's dinner all totally free, to say thank you to my four guys, and to all the wolves and vampires who had played their part in keeping me safe and putting an end to the recent reign of terror in New Lincoln and New Bellevue.

“How are Timon and Reccared doing now?” I asked.

Xander waved his free hand dismissively. “Timon is tougher than a pair of army boots. He's probably on his third Blood Light already.”

“Reccared is doing great too. It takes more than a dose of gas and a claw hammer to keep a NN Lupine out of action.”

That news made me smile so hard my cheeks hurt. “I'm glad. And I can't wait to see Mom, Pascal and Vesta. And Osric and Aaron, of course. My valiant prince and my sweet teddy bear.”

Jax laughed. “Let's try to keep the sweet teddy there all night. I about freaked when I walked in the other night to his grizzly on the floor, resting his huge head by you on the bed. I certainly don't want his beast inviting himself to dinner.”

“Oh, I don't know,” Xander said in a cheerful tone. “Might be interesting? Your wolf could challenge him to a steak eating competition.”

I chuckled. “That would be a certain loss for my wolf.”

“Hey now!” Jax protested with a smile. “Don't discount wolves in a bear fight.”

“Your wolf is mine as much as I'm his and I need to look out for him,” I said in a teasing tone, but I meant every word.

Jax's eyes flared yellow with his wolf and his smile widened.

As we kept walking, the sun lowered close to the horizon, bathing us goodbye in its honey hues.

Xander looked over his head toward Jax. “Enjoying the break from all that sweat and mud?” he asked him. There was no game today, it having been replaced by a memorial gathering for the victims of the terror the last few weeks and a candle-lit vigil planned for later tonight.

“I do love the thrill of the game,” Jax replied. “But”—he squeezed my hand—“nothing can compare to a Friday night celebration with the people I care most about.”

My smile was replaced by a frown and a sigh. Mandy was walking along the sidewalk toward us. Upon seeing Jax, her face contorted into a grimace, and she visibly gulped.

Mandy. I wasn’t a vindictive person, and I always tried to forgive people their mistakes. But her malicious behavior had almost cost me, Xander and Osric our lives. She approached and I scowled at her, making clear I wasn’t in a forgiving mood.

She tried to lift her lips in a smile and failed, her words shaky as she said, “Erm, hi guys. Having an evening stroll?”

“No thanks to you,” Jax said bluntly.

She winced. “I, well. I know you’ve been upset and talking to others in the pack. I—”

“Shut your mouth and listen.” Jax spoke through gritted teeth. His voice had changed, sounding gravelly. His eyes were yellow again. I wasn’t scared, but Mandy sure looked unnerved.

Not replying, she simply stood, her head hanging slightly, like a child being scolded by a parent.

“Your fucking bullshit almost cost people their lives, Mandy,” Jax growled. “Maybe you didn’t know what danger you were sending Ceci into, but that’s no excuse. You bully and manipulate and don’t think about others. Your obsession with being looked up to, being the one on top. Well”—he took in a deep breath, his words on the verge of snarling out—“I’ve not only talked to the other pack members, I’ve talked to the

athletic coaches. They're in full agreement with me. You're off the cheerleading squad. You're also banned from attending all Sentinels' games for the foreseeable future."

Her eyes flared. "No, you can't—"

"The hell I can't. And everyone in the pack knows about your bullshit now too, and the danger it put people in. I wouldn't expect your little bunch of followers to be quite so interested in hanging out with you after this."

"Jax, please." She looked up at him and begged, her voice actually sounding sincere. "It was just a prank..."

"Prank!?" Jax's canines elongated and Mandy took a step back. "You were messing with something you didn't even understand. Violating my privacy. Violating Ceci's free will and influencing her to leave just because you were jealous. Ceci was trussed up and almost sliced to pieces by a serial killer!"

I squeezed his hand. "I'd like to say something too," I said.

Mandy stayed silent. Like she knew she was at the end of a very short rope.

"I am angry with you, Mandy. Like Jax. But honestly, I just hope you've learned something from this. There's more to life than trying to claw your way to the top."

She didn't answer, just looked serious and a bit dejected, for once.

Jax wasn't finished. "And I've made a deal with my dad. I won't be Beta, but I'll still be part of the pack, keeping an eye on things. You really don't want to fuck around again. Keep your nose clean for a *long* time, and maybe, just maybe, things will get better. Understand?"

She nodded. I had to admit, even after all her cruelty and pettiness, I felt sorry for her.

"Now, we're done," Jax growled.

"Okay, okay," Mandy said, skulking past us and down the sidewalk. I hoped she'd find her way to a better attitude in life. But I wasn't optimistic.

The mood soon returned to a chirpy one as we got closer to Pascal's restaurant. I wondered out loud what delicious dishes he'd prepared. The guys took turns guessing, coming up with more and more ridiculous combinations, at least, ridiculous to me—like Xander's banana blood marrow foster.

As the sun began disappearing, and the sunset started bathing the downtown, its buildings' lights gradually turning on, Aaron's voice called out from behind us, "Hey! Sorry I'm late. Damn faculty meeting. You three look cozy though."

I hugged Aaron tight and kissed him, feeling his scruff brush my cheek. "Cozier now that you're here."

We all shared a four-way embrace, them being very careful not to squash my slender frame.

"I hope you'll be the teddy bear version tonight, buddy. Ceci, Jax and I were just talking. The other guy isn't invited." Xander gave Aaron a playful belly tickle.

Aaron laughed. "Don't worry, he's well under control. We've been getting along ever since he met Ceci in person. And that night this week he got to sniff her scent directly and that didn't hurt either. He'd never do anything to upset her, especially ruining this evening."

We got to the restaurant, a fancy looking place with chestnut wood and a massive front that had 'Pascal's' written in fancy gold lettering in a semi-circle across the glass.

The temperature had cooled but in a wonderfully refreshing way. I looked through the glass to see tables packed with happy wolf and vampire faces, drinking, nibbling, laughing. As Xander had predicted, Timon was glugging from a Blood Light. He put it down and continued his chat with Reccared, who swigged from a large glass of regular beer. Mom and Pascal were hosting, their eyes and mouths glowing with happiness, as waiters flitted back and forth, serving fresh drinks and bread, in preparation for the start of the feast.

Vesta and Finnian sat close in a corner booth, fawning over each other. Vesta saw me and waved. I returned the wave vigorously. And there, standing next to their table, was my

brave prince. Osric turned and his gaze met mine, his eyes bursting with love. Mr. Scowly was no more. He'd been replaced by a happy and handsome Fae.

We walked into the restaurant, and I hugged all my beloved family—my new, extended one. I thanked Timon and Reccared for their protection, and Pascal for putting on such a huge meal for so many diners. I squeezed my mom tight, feeling myself swell with happiness at how healthy she looked. And of course, I gave Vesta and Finnian a tight hug, and embraced Osric.

“Thanks again for coming to my rescue last week.” I looked up into his eyes.

“Anytime. Forever,” he said, his expression unguarded and warm.

I went up on tiptoes and gave him a lingering kiss on the lips. His cologne, a sexy blend of leather and citrus, washed over me and I pressed my body further into his.

“Dearest,” Osric groaned, pulling back. “We best stop. I’m getting worked up in front of your mother.”

“Well,” I whispered in his ear. “Just save it for later. You and the guys might get some extra dessert.”

He leaned in closer, rubbing his cheek against mine. “I’m always keen for dessert, where you’re concerned.”

I ducked my head and settled it against his chest as he wrapped his arms around me. Jax placed a hand on my lower back and Aaron stroked my hair. Xander blurred in behind Osric and rested his head on Osric’s shoulder.

Hearty conversation and laughter died down as food was served. We enjoyed dish after dish and mingled between courses. All of us together, my wonderful guys, my mom, Pascal, the NN Lupines, the coven, all the people who’d shown me such love and care, we shared the most special evening.

And all because I’d found love, extended family and bliss, in the least likely of places.

In New Nebraska.

EPILOGUE

Cecilia

(One month later)

“Holy Guacamole!” I screamed as my orgasm hit me. I moaned as pleasure kept pulsing through my body. “Oh, oh, for goodness sakes,” I mumbled at the tail end of it. After my release finally faded away, I burst out laughing. “Sorry, guys.” I panted and blew some hair out of my face. “Seems the silly sex things I say just keep getting worse.”

Jax grunted, still pumping into me from behind as I was on my hands and knees on the bed. The huge, new custom bed that Osric had ordered and we’d put in Aaron’s room where we all slept now.

I dropped my chest down to the bed with a groan as Jax thrust in and out of me faster, gripping my hips tight. Osric stood in front of me, having just finished in my mouth before I came, and he knelt and gently wiped off a bit of cum at the edge of my bottom lip, gazing at me with a tender expression.

“Fuck!” Jax shouted and I felt his huge cock jerk as his warm release filled me up. He pushed in hard one more time, holding himself there, his balls hitting the backs of my thighs, his cum dripping out of me. He slowly withdrew and collapsed to the side of the bed, reaching out to stroke my calf. “Love you, babe.”

I crawled around and melted into him, resting my head above his heart and looping an arm over the solid sheet of muscle of his lower abdomen, right near the part where it made that sexy V-shape. I found the energy to trace the line with my fingertips. “Love you. Love you all.”

“Right back at you, orchid. Up for more love?” Xander asked from where he sat propped up against the headboard,

already naked and sporting a full, angry-looking erection. He'd certainly been patient. But all my guys were. Well, except when they weren't, but I loved that too.

"Maybe we want to practice what we've been working you up for?" Jax looked down at me and rubbed my back, trailing his hand down to cup my bottom. I squirmed against him and he clearly sensed my interest in his suggestion. "Aaron, want to do the honors?" he asked.

Aaron strode over from where he was leaning up against the wall by the bathroom, his thick cock hard and red, and pointing right at me.

"Ah, Aaron is the second biggest." I looked between him and Jax.

"Size doesn't matter. It's all about how you use it, dearest," Osric teased and I loved witnessing that lighthearted side of him, which had become more present each day.

"But shouldn't I start smaller back there?" I shifted, propping a hand on Jax's chest.

"We've been working you open." Jax squeezed one of my butt cheeks in his large hand. "That last plug you had in when I took you in the bathroom a few days ago was nearly as big as him."

I blushed and nodded.

"I'll take care of you, sweet girl," Aaron said softly, but his actions were eager as he stalked on hands and knees across the massive bed and grabbed me by the hips. "And you know you're always in control."

I squeaked as he pulled me off Jax. "Control?" I laughed.

He settled me on my back and nuzzled under my ear. "My grizzly and I have been completely tamed by you."

I sighed contentedly.

"I'll help." Xander moved over to us.

"Let me get the lube." Aaron moved, reaching toward the nightstand.

“Oh, you won’t need that with me.” Xander smirked and knelt between my legs. He took a deep breath, like he was drawing my scent into his lungs. Then, while he was still smiling at me, his fangs lengthened. A drop of venom formed at each tip. “Trust me, my sweet orchid?”

“Always.” I spread my thighs farther apart.

He slid his hands under my butt cheeks and dove into my wet center, giving that well-worked area a few licks first, spreading around a bit of venom that tingled with pleasure and relieved a bit of the burn Jax had created. Then he tilted me up slightly and went straight for my untouched back hole, spreading more venom all around and using his tongue to work it into me. I lifted my head and watched what I could, turned on by the sight of my vampire between my legs.

When Xander pulled back with a grin, Aaron reached in and circled around where Xander had worked with a large finger, gathering up the venom. Then he pushed it right into me.

“Oh God,” I moaned and threw my head back.

“Hey, I thought you only called me God,” Jax joked.

“No, I’m one of her gods too,” Osric said in a super serious voice that made me chuckle.

Aaron slipped a second finger in and opened me wider. Xander gave me a knowing look as my eyes widened and my mouth fell open. Heat and need built up in me, and after several more moments, I called it. “I’m ready!”

Aaron slowly withdrew his fingers and nodded to the empty space beside me. “Vamp, want to get us started?”

Xander reached for me as he lay on his back and Jax and Aaron helped me sit down on top of him, holding his cock steady as I sank down onto it and it slid up into my pussy. I sighed and collapsed onto his chest, my breasts pressing into him.

“Okay, sweet girl.” Aaron knelt behind me, his legs on either side of Xander’s. He gripped one of my hips to keep me

steady and I felt the warm tip of his cock nudging at my back opening. “Deep breath now. Relax.”

I took a long inhale and slowly let it out, making sure to let myself open up back there as he pushed forward, easing past my tight ring of muscle. Then he was in. They were both in. And I was *so full*. “Ah, ah...” I moaned as sharp, intense pleasure filled me from each direction. “Ah, ah...”

“I think we broke her,” Xander smiled and leaned up to kiss my sweaty forehead. “Ready for more, our beloved?”

“Yes!” I breathed into his chest.

Aaron thrust in and out on the place none of them had been yet, nothing too fast, nothing too much. It was just right to make the heat and intensity ignite, quickly building me back up to another peak of release. He held deep for a moment, leaned over me and nipped into my shoulder, right over his mate mark—both his and Jax’s hadn’t faded and they said their animals would probably insist on another mark if they did.

Aaron moved again and every stroke pushed my pelvis down into Xander’s hard abdomen, creating delicious friction on my clit. After several more strokes, the pleasure burst. A string of nonsensical words came out of my mouth. Then, “I love you guys so much!” as I clenched around each of them inside me.

Aaron and Xander tensed and their cocks pulsed, one in my ass and one in my pussy, their orgasms almost happening at the same time. Aaron let out a long growl. Xander groaned underneath me.

“You just strangled my cock, sweet girl.” Aaron kissed my shoulder, over his mate mark again, and held himself inside me before gently pulling out.

“Like a vise.” Xander wrapped his arms around me as our breathing slowed.

“Wow. That was hot,” Jax said.

“Right?” Osric shifted his weight, near the side of the bed.

“Okay, time to get our girl cleaned up. Group shower? Whose turn is it?” Jax started to get up. Unfortunately the penthouse bathrooms only had a walk-in shower large enough for three of us, but that was still pretty large and impressive and Osric was already talking about plans to build a home with an even larger shower and tub that would fit all of us.

“My turn!” Xander shouted, almost in my ear, and I nipped at his own with my teeth.

“It’s definitely—” Osric’s words were caught off by the doorbell, a shrill ring echoing back into our bedroom.

I climbed off Xander and we all turned our heads toward the hallway. “Wonder who that could be?” I asked what we were all wondering. It was a bit late for company. And we’d already seen my mom and Pascal for an early dinner.

“I’ll go check.” Osric pulled on a pair of lounge pants.

As Aaron, Jax, Xander and I were in the bathroom getting cleaned up, in case we really did have company, Osric returned. “No rush, but there’s a police officer here. Wants to speak with all of us.”

“A cop?” Aaron looked perplexed, as did the rest of us.

“Yes.” Osric grabbed a shirt before heading back out to our law enforcement guest. “I can sense he’s a shifter too. A black jaguar. Pretty rare and very powerful.”

We finished getting ready and presentable enough—I wanted to throw on more than just pajamas if it was someone I didn’t know, and a police officer and strong shifter, at that. I settled on a pair of jeans and blouse. Then we walked out together to find Osric entertaining a really handsome man in the living room.

He didn’t look like a cop. He certainly wasn’t wearing a uniform. He was dressed in black jeans, a blue T-shirt and black leather jacket (though actually it looked like shiny fake leather and I knew some shifters didn’t like wearing the real thing). The colors complemented his raven hair and dark skin. And he was huge. Like bodybuilder, street fighter huge. As large as Aaron, but this guy looked nothing like a super sexy

academic. More like a super sexy superhero with his sharply defined jaw and the intense look in his dark eyes.

“I’m Detective Pierce. From the New Omaha Police Department,” he said in a deep voice. “But please feel free to call me Dagger.” He extended his hand to me first, tattoos peeking out from the sleeve of his jacket.

“Nice to meet you, Dagger.” I shook his large hand and we all introduced ourselves.

“Would it be okay if we sat down and had a chat?” he asked.

“Sure.” Aaron motioned toward the couches and Osric went to the kitchen to fetch drinks.

“So I know you guys were responsible for taking down Jack 2—thank you for that, by the way—and I have a case I think is connected. At least a bit. How much do you guys know about the Temple of the Pure Breed?”

We all glanced at each other, unsure of who wanted to answer.

“We know enough. A lot more than we’d like, unfortunately,” Aaron responded for us.

“Understood.” Dagger ran a hand through his thick hair. “So I think they’re wrapped up in some nasty business related to teens getting addicted to this new synthetic drug and showing up overdosed in New Omaha, and some other cities in New Nebraska too.” He took a deep breath. “And we know Jack 2 wasn’t working completely alone—he at least had that Fae supplying him with extra power, the one you guys mentioned in your statements to the NLPD. I know it’s a long shot, but have you guys remembered anything else that might help us find that Fae or another temple member who Jack 2 was close with?”

Jax, Aaron, Xander and I slowly shook our heads.

“Unfortunately,” Dagger continued, looking a bit disappointed by our response, “there are a lot of temple followers and we’re trying to sort the mostly harmless from the ones who may be up to something really dangerous.”

“I think I can help you with that last part, at least,” Osric said, returning with a tray of waters and whiskeys. After he’d served everyone a drink, he sat next to me, forcing Xander to scoot over with a huff. Then he turned to Dagger. “I’ve been following up on this powerful Fae fiend for weeks, with no luck in figuring out who he is. The NLPD were kind enough to share some correspondence they found between him and Jack 2. You’ve probably seen it too. And it appears, thankfully for us, the Fae didn’t really care as much about murdering humans and halfbreeds as he did about creating unrest around New Nebraska.”

“Yes, that’s my impression too,” Dagger agreed. “I just can’t figure out who may be behind all this new product on the streets. And if it’s related to that Fae at all. And I can’t get deeper into temple politics, beyond the obvious. Overseer Blunton and his wife, and the temple in general, aren’t very forthcoming about their leadership.”

“They’re not very forthcoming about a lot of things.” Osric clenched his glass of whiskey in his hand. “But I’m glad you care enough to dig. I’m sorry we’re not more of a help. What I can do is forward you some photos I took at their central temple location here in New Lincoln.”

“I’d appreciate that. Do you happen to know if anything in them points to any sort of connection with Bryce Harding?”

“The CEO of Midas? I checked out the leads in all the photos pretty thoroughly. And no connection to Harding. I mean, he’s a bit eccentric, like some of the temple followers. But he’s also insanely rich, and I think his introverted and harsh personality can be excused. That is when you take into account he’s probably never been touched in a pleasurable way in his entire life.” Osric took a sip of whiskey. “What would a guy like that be doing wrapped up in all this, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“The news station he owns—well, the news station that one of his businesses owns—has been doing a lot of pro-temple, biased reporting.”

“Hmm. Well, no connection that I know of. But I can still forward you those photos if you want to double check.”

“Doesn’t hurt. Thanks. I appreciate it.” Dagger stood and held out his hand.

Osric shook it.

Dagger turned to the rest of us. “Thanks so much to all of you. I’m really sorry to have called on you all so late. This case has been running me ragged.”

“It’s not a problem,” I assured him. “I know it’s a bit of drive here too. Feel free to call or email Osric anytime. We want to help if we can.”

Osric and Dagger exchanged information and we said our goodbyes to him and walked him to the door. He really seemed like a hardworking cop and a good guy too.

I hoped he would learn more about the drugs on the street in New Omaha, especially if it was affecting and hurting teens.

“Targeting kids? Shit people in the world,” Xander muttered as he shut the door.

I wrapped my arms around his waist. Aaron leaned into my back and hugged us both. Osric and Jax stepped in on either side, making our little group complete. “It just makes family and good people, joining together to do good things, all the more important,” I said.

My guys all murmured agreements and we squeezed each other tight, holding onto what was most important in this world. The happiness you find with those you love.



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