

ANDIE FENICHEL



SOUL
OF A
MONSTER

BROTHERS OF SCRIM HALL

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BOOK SEVEN

ANDIE FENICHEL



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BROTHERS OF SCRIM HALL

Havendoor, New York is a small out-of-the-way town. Surrounded by forest, it's the perfect place to build a castle and raise six spirited monsters to be extraordinary beasts.

Even though I was born different, generally I believe in law and order. However, by human rules, I shouldn't have searched for them. I damn sure shouldn't have taken them.

Don't be too quick to judge me.

If you had seen how eager those state institutions and foster homes were to be rid of those little boys, you'd have done the same thing.

Monsters, they called them—They were the monsters. I gave children who were born special a family and an education. I made them a home in Scrim Hall.

That was twenty-five years ago.

Maybe I kept them too safe, too separate. It's time I flew the nest so they can do the same.

You should know there are Vampires, Reapers, Demons, and people who shift from humans to wolves, phoenixes, and dragons. They're not like other men, because they are only partially human. You can call them monsters, but they are my children, and they are ready for the world to see the brothers of Scrim Hall.

~ *Wentworth Pettigrew*

SOUL OF A MONSTER

WENTWORTH

I forfeited my mating rights many years ago when I took a wife who was not my true mate. She died nearly a century ago, and I have filled the void of lost love by raising six monsters to be fine men. I'm no saint—I've also sown many oats with the lovely local women. Even so, loneliness crept deep inside my soul until a human interior designer invaded my home and my heart. I'm a monster descended from lions, but Isa doesn't run from my appearance. Though, she does run.

ISA

I was hired to decorate some new houses being built on the property surrounding Scrim Hall. I wouldn't have left New York City for anyone other than my dearest friend, Nina, but she asked, and here I am. While I'm admiring the magnificent home, I come face-to-face with a monster. No amount of warning could have prepared me for the allure of the beast living in the main house. I should want to get away, except something in his sad eyes lures me in. As much as I want this monster to be mine, the mistakes of my past send me running.

WENTWORTH

I can't force Isa to accept our mating bond. All I can do is beg her to give me one week to decide our fate. One short week to convince a stranger that I'm the only one, man or beast, who can truly make her happy.

CHAPTER ONE



ISA

The woods leading up to Scrim Hall are thick and hide much of the overcast sky. The drive out to Western New York was nice, but the reason for heading to the country is shrouded in mystery. I can't figure out why my grade-school friend, Nina, would call me to come from New York City to help with the interior design of her new in-law's home. I'm sure there are plenty of qualified designers living much closer.

However, Nina was there for me in my darkest hour and we have stayed in touch most of our lives. Then she met a man not long ago and didn't return to the city. To a New Yorker, it's insane to go live in the country, but love will make people do crazy things.

So more than anything, it's curiosity about the family who lured a lifelong city girl to the woods that made me drive across the state and meet with Nina's new family to talk about the houses they're building.

When the trees open up to a circular drive, the view takes my breath away. It's like I've been transported to England and the most beautiful manor house I've ever seen.

It's Sunday, and so quiet, I wonder if anyone is home. But the front door is wide open, as are all the windows. Perhaps someone decided to take advantage of the nice late-autumn day. Other than the lack of sunshine, it's unseasonably warm.

Soon winter will call a halt to opening up houses.

At the threshold, I peek into the foyer with its antique round table where I'm sure a vase full of flowers sits all spring and summer. A formal staircase with carved wooden rail leads the eye to a second-floor landing, and the crystal chandelier catches the light from the transom above the door.

"Hello?" I hesitate to step inside, but I was invited. When no one responds, I shrug and enter Scrim Hall. I like the idea of something hidden in plain sight. It appeals to my dramatic

nature. To the left, a set of double doors are open to a formal parlor. In a modern home, I'd call this a living room, but this place is a step back in time and this is most definitely a parlor. Queen Anne furniture and a grand piano in the front window serve as décor, as well as an ornate mantle around an enormous fireplace. It's breathtaking and I want to pick up every figurine and vase to see each maker's mark.

To the right of the door, the double doors are closed, but I'm all-in now and boldly open one side. Where the parlor is light and welcoming, this library is all business. Dark wood, floor-to-ceiling books, and an imposing desk in the center of the room. At the back is another fireplace and a large seating area with three leather couches placed for conversation and enjoying the fire on a cold night. There's even a fluffy cream-colored throw that makes me long to grab a book and settle in for a long read.

The door creaks behind me.

I turn and slam into the chest of... My heart jumps into my throat. I would hardly call him a man. My instincts say run, but something in his stark blue eyes and the set of his broad jaw force me to remain in place.

He's looking at me as if I might be a light snack before dinner, and his wide chest is rising and falling as fast as mine. Covered in light-brown fur, he could be a lion or a man. Is this what Nina meant when she said that the family is remarkable?

His nostrils flare as he breathes deep. A low growl follows. "Who are you?" There's a flash of warning in his eyes and his voice is low and rough.

My hands press against his wide chest, touching his white linen shirt. I snatch them away and step back. "I'm Isa Miller. Nina asked me to come."

When he lifts his hand, his fingers flex and dark nails emerge like a cat's, then retract. The pads of his fingers are rough as he touches my cheek and traces a path to my neck. Closing the gap between us, he lets loose another growl. "Mine."

Despite how low and filled with the beastly noises it is, I hear the word deep in my soul. It's hard to breathe with him so close. My need to touch him, to strip naked and give myself to him, is so strong that I close my eyes, hoping the wave of desire will pass before I act on my rising desire. I do my best to sound polite and formal, but have to keep my eyes closed. If I look at him, I don't know what I'll say or do. "The front door was open. I apologize for not waiting to be asked to come in."

The heat of him is more enticing than the blanket on the couch. Being wrapped in this monster should terrify me, but I'm too turned-on to be sensible. Juices pool between my thighs and a small gasp escapes my lips.

As soon as he steps back, I regret the loss of his body near mine. He clears his throat. "I should probably apologize, Miss Miller."

Looking at him, I see no remorse in his very human eyes. What I see is the same desire shaking me to my bones. "Isa." I swallow my fears over the connection of the previous moment and hold out my hand.

He wraps his rough palm around mine. The fur on the back tickles the pads of my fingers and all the naughty thoughts return. His lips turn up in a knowing smile. "I'm Wentworth Pettigrew. This is my house. Welcome."

Part of me wants to ask him what just happened and if that's how he greets all newcomers to Scrim Hall, but the wiser part of me knows that this is the father of Nina's man. "I'm a little confused, Mr. Pettigrew."

In jeans that show an ass that could drive a woman to madness, he walks around me to the desk. "You should call me Wentworth, Isa. From what I understand you'll be working on my sons' homes for some time."

The bulge at the front of his tight jeans makes my mouth water. I shouldn't even be looking at that part of him, but good lord, I'm only human, and he's something more. I squeeze my thighs together hoping for some relief.

He sniffs the air and his pupils dilate.

Can he smell my desire? Does he know I'm riddled with lust at the sight of him? Fuck, I hope not. I step back to the threshold of the library. "I have a room at the hotel in town. I'll just go there now and if you wouldn't mind telling Nina that I was here? I'm very sorry for barging in and bothering you."

An instant later, he's in front of me. I've never seen anyone move so quickly. "You do bother me, Isa, but not in the way you mean. You needn't run away. I'll take you to Nina. She and Anabelle are at Declan and Annabelle's house waiting for you." The fur on the back of his hand is soft as a rabbit when he brushes it over my cheek.

Unable to help myself, I lean into his touch. "What? Why?" I can't breathe, let alone form a coherent sentence. My body is on fire as if I'm some damsel out on her first date with a duke. *No*. I'm a fucking New York girl. I don't swoon over anyone. "That would be very helpful, Wentworth." Saying his name makes me think of screaming it as he brings me to orgasm. *What the hell?*

He closes his eyes. His voice is barely a whisper. "Will you say it again?"

"Wentworth." My pussy throbs without ever being touched. I've lost control of myself and being in control is kind of my thing.

Taking a deep breath, he groans on the release. "I'm usually a gentleman."

I take several steps back until the table in the foyer stops my escape. "Why don't you just point me in the right direction? I'm sure I can find the house if I know where to look. It's not like it's a set of lost keys."

While it's still deliciously obvious that he's turned-on by me, he doesn't move closer. Instead, he lowers his head and stares at the floor for a long moment. "Forgive me, Isa. I have not behaved as I would have liked. Honestly, I never thought you would walk into my life, let alone my home. It would seem that even as old as I am, some things will bring out the adolescent in me." When he looks at me, the ferocity is gone

from his gaze and while there's no denying this man is a beast of some kind, he looks more human.

I'm not sure I like him being a gentleman. The beast was so much more stimulating. I can't put it into words, but I've never felt so primal and it seemed right. "There's no need to apologize. I'm a strange woman who invaded your home. I should be the one to say I'm sorry. It's not like me to barge in. Well... perhaps it is."

His smile shoots another wave of want through my heart and my nipples tighten. "You will find the house in question past the helicopter pad on the other side of the trees." He points toward the rear left side of the house.

Shuffling toward the door, I can't stop staring at him. It's as if I'm afraid he might disappear. I need to see him again though I can't say why it's so important. Men are for pleasure; perhaps that's all this is. At the door, I stop. "Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?"

Those bright blue eyes of his widen. He cocks his head. "As lovely as that offer is, Isa, Sunday nights are family dinners. I'm afraid I can't skip my family coming together. I missed too many of those while I was away."

My chest hurts and I can't imagine why. I've been turned down before. Not many times, but it happens. "I understand."

I turn to leave.

"Would you like to join us for dinner?"

Looking over my shoulder, my gaze locks with his. I want to strip him naked and see if all of him is covered in that soft fur. That notion has me wet and wanting all over again. "I don't want to intrude."

"You wouldn't be. Half of the family is at the mountain cabin." His voice softens. "I would be very happy if you would join us."

My throat clogs, I nod, then hurry away.

CHAPTER TWO



WENTWORTH

I walk to the corner of the house and watch her make her way toward the construction site. She traverses the unpaved drive to Oliver and Britta's house in heels like it's something she does every day. My mind flashes to her trotting through the cobbled and uneven streets of Greenwich Village. I can imagine her going to appointments and lunches in four-inch heels and tight skirts.

Another wave of desire rushes through me. I need to get myself under control.

Amazed that this could be happening after having long ago given up, I head to the kitchen where Morris is rolling out dough.

The scents of molasses and cinnamon fill the air as well as something savory that might be chicken.

Morris has been my friend and butler for almost thirty years. He came after I found Oliver and brought him home. Between the two of us, we managed to raise six monsters to be fine men.

"Why do you look like you've seen a monster more fearsome than you?" Morris grins at his own joke.

"Maybe I have." Though I wouldn't call her a monster, I'm certain she can destroy me if she chooses to.

Morris covers the dough with a damp kitchen towel, washes his hands, and sits. "What's happened?"

"I just met my mate." I can hardly believe the words, even as I say them.

Morris smooths his hand over the white apron he's wearing "I thought monsters mate around the age of thirty, and you told me if they don't, then they don't mate for life, ever."

“That’s true as far as I know.” It’s what I was told as a boy. When I married a woman who was not my true mate at twenty-five, my mother cried because I had lost my one chance at happiness.

“I’m guessing the lady is not old enough to have been alive when you were thirty, which was over a hundred and forty years ago.” Morris never gets riled. He’s the calm in any storm.

“No. She’s human and perhaps in her late twenties.” She’s also the most fucking beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and it’s a miracle I didn’t take her on the floor of the library a little while ago.

One brown eyebrow lifts and Morris asks, “Is this the friend of Nina’s who I’m told will be helping to decorate the new houses?”

“It would seem so.” I can practically see all the objections stacking up in Morris’s mind.

“Hmm.” He stands and goes back to his dough. “I suppose you don’t have any control over this mating bond?”

“I could reject her or she me.” It happens from time to time that mates can’t work out their differences despite the primal pull to be together.

“I wonder what you have in common with a woman so much younger than you. What will you talk about?” Morris takes a cookie cutter and cuts out round cookies which he places on a sheet pan.

Talk? I hadn’t considered this. “I don’t know. I met her, nearly lost my composure, and let her run away. I see your point though. Perhaps no decisions should be made before I see if the lady at least likes me.”

“She ran away?” Morris stops cutting and stares at me.

“To the new house.” I point in the general direction.

Back to his cookie making, Morris puffs his lips out as if thinking something important and surprising. He doesn’t

whistle, but he looks as if he considered it. “She didn’t run when she saw you?”

“No.” In fact, she didn’t seem afraid of me in that way. Her fear seemed to come from within. She was undoubtedly aroused, but that might be the mating forces at work. My monster could barely be controlled.

“Interesting. Did Nina warn her that this is an unusual household?”

“I don’t know what she was told, but she didn’t know she’d be meeting someone of my species today. I could see that in her eyes. It’s not as if there are thousands of us like there used to be.” My parents were the last of the Pettigrew line to procreate, and I was their only child. Pettigrew is what I am, but I’ve been using it as a surname for so long, that no one realizes it. Plus, outside of Havendoor, New York, I keep myself hidden from human eyes.

Morris finishes cutting and placing the last row of cookies on the sheet and walks it to the oven. Once he has them in and sets the timer, he looks at me. “If Miss Miller is your true mate, perhaps everything does happen at the right time.”

“What do you mean? I’ve been waiting more than half of my life.” Not to be bitter, but after almost two centuries, it seems fate is cruel, even as the gift is before me.

Shaking his head, Morris says, “That’s not entirely true. You married and had a full human life with Eve. From what you’ve told me, you were happy. You’ve enjoyed the company of many women over the years since your wife passed. You raised six monsters who have now found their mates. Perhaps this is your time because you are ready to be claimed.”

I have never liked the idea of being owned by another. Though, I can’t say that I minded the pull to be near Isa. “I will think about it.”

“You look as if you want to rip my head from my neck. Perhaps you should go for a run and get out some of the beast before dinner.” Morris takes a dishcloth and wipes the marble counter.

With a nod, I go to my room to change.



ISA

“This is going to be a beautiful house,” I tell Anabelle as we walk through the shell of the great room.

Anabelle’s hair is dyed pink and her long waves fall to mid-back. Her bright eyes draw down. “I think it’s too grand for me. I’m not used to anything this fancy.”

“I think it suits you perfectly.” Still shaken from meeting Wentworth Pettigrew, I force my best smile.

“That’s what I keep telling her.” Declan Montgomery wraps his arm around his fiancée and kisses the top of her head. “You’re a queen and should be treated as such.”

Not a bad way for a man to think about his woman. My chest tightens. Jealousy is not an attractive look, so I bat it away. “I have so many ideas, I just need to know what you like and don’t like, and I’ll have some preliminary drawings and renderings ready in a couple of days. Then I’ll meet with an old friend in Syracuse to gather some samples for you to look at. In a few weeks, we should be ready to get going.”

“The doors are being installed tomorrow so we’ll be sealed up before it gets too cold or snows.” Declan is a big man with sad eyes and a soft voice. He oozes sympathy, which is very comforting.

Nina walks through the opening where the front door should be, sees me, and runs into my arms. “Isa! It’s so good to see you.” She hugs me tight.

I return the hug, glad to be with a friend. I hadn’t realized how alone I felt until the hug. “It’s great to see you too.”

“How was the drive out?” Nina breaks the hug and brushes her blond hair out of her face.

“It was long but fine. I stopped at the main house and met your future father-in-law. You might have told me what to expect.” It’s not that I’m angry, but a heads-up would have

made the first meeting less awkward. Well, maybe not, but scolding Nina keeps me from blushing too much.

Declan chuckles. “It’s impressive that you’re still here.”

After giving her soon-to-be brother-in-law a hard look, Nina says, “I’m sorry. You wouldn’t have believed me anyway. You see, all the men of Scrim Hall are—different.”

I look at Declan who is a very handsome large man as far as I can see. He’s nothing like the man he calls his father. “I don’t understand.”

Nina and Declan exchange a look and he shrugs. “She’s going to be here a while. Better to get it all out in the open now so there are no more shocks.”

With a nod, Nina takes my hand and looks me in the eyes. “Declan is a reaper. He may look normal, but he senses death and eases souls into the afterlife.”

If I hadn’t met a lion-like monster man half an hour ago, I would laugh this off. “Um, this has not lifted my confusion.”

Nina’s smile is warm and there’s nothing like the company of an old friend, but I’m beginning to wonder what I’ve gotten myself into. Nina says, “Noah is a phoenix shifter. All the men are creatures of some kind but none the same.”

“Should I be afraid?” I’m too stunned to know how to react. Wentworth was clearly dangerous, but I never felt as if he’d harm me. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

Anabelle wraps an arm around my waist. “No. You’re safe. Everyone in this area knows about the brothers of Scrim Hall. I’m not saying there’s no danger. Some people want to destroy what they don’t understand. You have nothing to fear from anyone in this family.” She sighs. “However, if this is all too much, we would understand if you wanted to back out of helping us with the house.”

My mind is reeling. “I’m sure we can work this out. If you don’t mind, I’m going to go check into my hotel in town. I think I need to process all of this. Will you explain to Wentworth that I won’t be joining you for dinner tonight?”

“Of course.” Nina threads her arm through mine, and we walk back toward the front of the main house. “I’m sorry. I should have explained some of this.”

“You’re right. I wouldn’t have believed you.” I probably would have thought my old friend had lost her mind. I avoid looking at the house despite how badly I want to catch a glimpse of Wentworth.

“If you can’t do this, no one will blame you. It’s not as if you knew an hour ago that monsters exist in the world. It’s a lot to take in.” Nina stands by my car while I get in.

“If you say they won’t hurt me, I believe you. I just need to think it all through.” I start the car.

“Of course.” Nina steps back so I can close the car door.

It takes everything in me to drive away from Scrim Hall without spinning my tires. I should keep going until I reach the interstate and head east to home. However, I can’t block Wentworth’s striking blue eyes or the warm musky allure of his scent from my memory. He smelled like leaves and fresh air. I could drown in that.

When I reach Havendoor, I stop at the inn and park. I said I would think about it, and I will.

The thing is, I’m not sure exactly what I’m getting into. I was so stunned, I didn’t ask enough questions.

When I get into my room, I text Nina.

What are the other creatures besides a reaper and a phoenix?

The three dots blink back for a long time.

NINA

Don’t freak out. I swear no one from this family will hurt you. A vampire, a dragon shifter, a demon, and a wolf shifter.

Shifter? Does that mean they look normal?

I think this is all a mass psychosis, and I've been pulled into it.

NINA

Haha. I wouldn't go that far, but they look like men most of the time. Only their father, Wentworth, is unable to look human.

I'll call you tomorrow.

I toss my phone on the bed and stare out the window at a very normal-looking town in Western New York. No one driving through Havendoor would suspect that an English manor house was nearby or that it was full of monsters. If they did, they'd go around.

So why am I still here? My body thrums with need in response.

CHAPTER THREE



WENTWORTH

When Nina told me Isa was not coming to dinner, I nearly ran out of the house to find her. If that meant going all the way to New York City, I was prepared to do that.

Oddly, I feel her close by. She didn't leave town. Then Nina confirms that Isa checked in to the Havendoor Inn.

Inside, the panic that had risen eases to a manageable level. I'm sure Declan knows something is wrong. He's the most empathetic of my sons, but he only watches and says nothing. He's also the most thoughtful, though Oliver is a close second.

After Sunday dinner it's become a tradition to sit in the library and talk. It's not been half an hour, but I can't sit still.

Noah says, "Is something wrong, father?"

"No. Why?" It comes out too sharp, but I feel as if I'm coming out of my skin.

Nina gasps. "Your eyes are different."

I look in the gold-framed mirror over the mantel. My eyes are several shades darker blue than normal and the pupils are tight slits, like a cat in the sunlight. "Hmph." It's nothing.

The good thing about being head of this household is that most of the time when I don't want to talk about something, I'm allowed my privacy.

Declan stares with his eyebrows raised. "Perhaps you need some fresh air."

"Good idea." The best I've heard in a long time. I practically run out the front door, only thinking of grabbing my truck key from the crystal bowl on the entry table at the last moment.

Before I have time to think it through, I'm heading down the road to town. The inn is part of the strip of buildings that lines one side of Main Street. Even parked across the road, I pick up her scent as soon as I open the truck's door.

Part of me knows I should stay away or call and ask her on a date. Still, now that I have her scent, I can't abide by human customs. I have to see her.

John at the front desk stands up when he sees me. "Mr. Pettigrew, can I help you?"

"I know the room, John." It's a lie. I don't know the room number, but I have her heart beating in my ears. I feel her nearness.

"Um, does the guest know you're visiting, sir?" John's fear is evident in the small shake in his voice and a bead of sweat drips down his temple despite the cool evening.

"I promise to knock."

Stepping in front of me, he holds up one shaking hand. "It's policy to call the room and let them know they have a guest. I realize you could push past me easily, Mr. Pettigrew." John swallows. "But if I don't call the room, I'll lose my job."

I've lived in Havendoor for nearly thirty years. John was just a boy when I arrived and he used to come to the house selling Scout's popcorn. I can't push him aside or cause him to lose his employment. "I'd like to visit with Miss Miller, John. Will you see if she's available?"

Letting out an audible breath, John steps behind the counter and picks up the phone. "Miss Miller, Mr. Pettigrew is here to see you. Is it alright if I send him up? Yes, thank you." He hangs up and looks at me. "Room 204, sir."

I thought the delay would annoy me, but she didn't tell John to send me away and the excitement of that is worth the wait. "Thank you, John."

John nods. "My pleasure, sir."

On the second floor, I turn right and stop at the door on the left. Her scent is like a drug and the door stands open an inch.

Closing it behind me, it only takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim room. The only light is from a small lamp on the desk.

Silhouetted in the window, Isa stares out at the wooded park and the community of homes beyond. “I wasn’t running away, though if I were sensible, I would have.”

“I’m glad you’re not running.” I want to close the gap between us and pull her against me, but I hold my place near the door.

Her hair falls in waves past her shoulders and her fingers are visible where they’re wrapped around her waist. Earlier, she’d been in a business jacket that covered the formfitting knee-length dress. It’s dark blue but looks black. “Why are you here, Mr. Pettigrew?”

Good question. Because I’ve lost my mind. “You know, I pride myself on having become civilized over my long life. I don’t lose my temper. I think things through. Impulsiveness is for the young, and I am not young.”

She turns and the lamplight catches the golden tones in her eyes. “So, you thought you’d just stop by and visit the hotel room of a woman you met for the first time a few hours ago?”

“No. I didn’t think.” My heart pounds so loudly that it’s difficult to hear past the noise. “Everything I thought I knew has been shaken by you, Isa.” I love the way her name feels on my tongue.

She sits on the chair near the desk, closes her computer, and pushes it back a few inches. “I don’t understand, and I have so many questions, my head is full.” She rubs her temple.

“I will answer anything I can.” I step closer but stop before I reach her.

“How will I know if you’re telling me the truth?” She stares up at me. Her hands tremble, and she clutches both together in her lap. “Please sit down. You’re making me nervous.”

Since there are no other chairs, I sit on the end of the bed. “I’ll never lie to you. I can promise you that, but believing it is

a leap of faith.”

Her gaze locks with mine. “You’ll answer anything?”

“If I can, I will.” Has someone important to her lied in the past? My cache of questions starts building. I hate that she’s nervous and uncomfortable. It’s too soon to hold her and make her see that I’m hers, but the urge to do just that is so strong, I have to fist my hands.

“What are you?” She’s direct, and it’s sexy as hell.

How do I answer? “I’m a man, though not human. My kind were called pettigrew, and long ago, there were many of us.”

“What happened to the others?” She’s a bit less confident, but still on point.

“Humans tend to clear away the things and people they fear or don’t understand. My people were not prolific enough to survive humanity.” Talking about myself doesn’t come easily to me.

“Then you are alone.” She looks at her hands and sighs.

“No. I have my sons and now their mates. I have Morris and this town.” Considering all things, I have quite a lot to be grateful for.

She looks up and her eyes are watery. “I don’t know why I let you in here. I don’t know why I didn’t run away when we met. Everything that has happened since I walked into your house feels like a strange dream.”

“Are you afraid of me, Isa?” My throat goes dry.

She shakes her head. “Not of you. Just. I feel as if I know you and I’m certain we’ve never met before today. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“I’m sorry. If I could be a comfort to you, that would be my greatest wish.” Leaning forward, I reach across and touch her cheek.

She takes my hand in both of hers and studies the light fur covering the back. Turning it palm up, she traces the lines like

a palm reader. “How old are you? Because you don’t look old enough to have raised the man I met today.”

The heat of her hand in mine surges through me and fills my monster with need. “I’m hesitant to tell you.”

“You said you would answer anything.” She attempts to pull her hand away, but I close mine and keep the contact.

“I’m one hundred and seventy-two years old.” I hold my breath.

A soft smile is her only reaction. “How long will you live?”

“I don’t know. My parents were both over five hundred when they were killed. There are some tales about pettigrews living a millennium or more.” Though the idea of living that long and watching more of the people I care about die makes my chest ache.

She brings my hand to her mouth and kisses my knuckles. “How lonely an existence to watch nations rise and fall around you.”

Her lips on my fingers are everything. I need this woman like I need air and water. She’s the element I never knew existed. “It’s not as if I was alive for the fall of the Roman Empire, Isa. Though, I did live in London when England ruled a great deal more than they do today and America was just a fledgling country.”

Grazing the tip of my thumb wither her teeth, she looks at me and fire lights her eyes. “I have a lot of other questions, but...”

My cock is at full attention and that “but” hangs in the air like an aphrodisiac. “Tell me what you need, Isa.”

She sucks my digit into her warm mouth, then lets it slide free. “I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you. I know we just met, and I think you probably have me under some kind of spell, but I don’t care. I need you.”

The ache in her voice breaks my heart and my control. With one gentle pull, I have her out of the chair and standing

between my legs. I cup her cheeks and graze her lips with mine. Fire pools inside my balls and a low growl escapes. “I don’t have that kind of magic. I can’t make you want me, but I can promise you my need for you is just as great.”

With a shrug of her shoulder, the strap of her dress slides down, and the swell of one breast heaves close enough to bite. “If we make love, will this yearning ease?”

I feel her desperation for relief, as it mirrors my own. “I don’t know.” I press my lips to the soft flesh of her breast and let my sharp teeth scratch her.

“Oh.” She arches her back. “Whatever that was, do it again, Wentworth.”

I suck the warm flesh as I lower the zipper at the back of the dress. It stops just above her ass, and I cup each cheek while I pull the garment until it falls to the floor.

No bra.

No panties.

All curves and softness are on display for me. She’s perfection.

I suck her nipple into my mouth, longing to taste all of her and hear her say my name again. Letting my canine scratch the tender tip earns me a long moan.

The scent of her arousal fills my nostrils, and I need to have her pleasure. “May I touch all of you, Isa?”

“Oh, god, yes.” She opens her stance a few inches, her head thrown back, and her hands gripping my shoulders. Her inner thighs are wet with desire.

“I’ve waited lifetimes for you.” I mark her other breast and slide my fingers through her wet folds.

CHAPTER FOUR



ISA

Everywhere Wentworth touches sets my skin on fire. When his teeth scratch me, the pleasure is more than I've ever experienced. I know there's more to all of this, but I'm too needy to want to ask more questions.

Kissing his way up my throat to press his lips to mine, I open for his tongue which feels rough and warm against mine.

His thick fingers slip over my clit, and my knees buckle.

It's only his grip on my ass that keeps me from collapsing.

When he takes those fingers away from my pussy, I almost cry out for more. He stands and lifts and pulls me tight. He is so much bigger than me, his straining cock rubs my abdomen.

Grabbing his ass, I pull him tighter. "I need to see you, feel you, Wentworth."

Taking me in his arms, he eases me onto the center of the bed and stands, looking down at me. His fingers deftly unbutton his shirt, revealing a broad chest covered in hair that I already know is soft and feels good against my skin. I could come just from imagining how that soft fur will feel against my entire body.

I lean on my elbows, riveted by the sight of him stripping out of the tight jeans. Like his palms, his cock is free of fur, thick and beautifully long. The sheer size of him should be intimidating, but he makes my mouth water with his beauty. I let my knees fall open and shiver as he growls.

The bed dips with the weight as his knees meet the mattress.

I recline until my head hits the pillows. "I need you."

There's very little humanity in his voice. "I'm yours, sweet Isa." He slides his arms under my knees and presses my thighs wider with his shoulders. "You smell like heaven." As he slips

his tongue inside me, it reaches deeper than any human tongue could. Wentworth licks from there up across my clit.

Rougher, stronger, and longer than anything I've ever experienced before, I grab the pillow and muffle my screams as pleasure drives my hips against his face. At his second pass from inside me and through my folds, I nearly come. "What? How? God." I thread my fingers through his long hair and press him tight while pushing my heels against his shoulders.

Reaching along my ribs, he caresses as he licks and sucks. Gripping my nipple, he pinches while he sucks my clit.

I explode with pleasure. Shaking and crying his name, I don't know if I want more or need him to release me.

Wentworth gets to his hands and knees and crawls until his face hovers over mine. "You are magnificent, Isa." He kisses me.

The taste of my sex and his mouth stirs renewed desire between my thighs. I wrap my legs around him, and his cock rests big and heavy only an inch from where I need him. "I never come more than once, but I might." I arch my hips for more friction.

Brushing my hair out of my face, his smile is warm, almost loving.

No. Of course, it's not loving. This is sex and nothing more.

"Sweetheart, you will come again and again. I won't stop until I've wrung every bit of pleasure from you." His rough voice sends a thrill through me.

I don't doubt him; I already feel the stir of arousal returning. "I want to feel your thick cock inside me."

He growls low and the vibration rumbles against my belly.

Gripping tight with my legs, I rub my clit along his shaft. "Oh, Wentworth. What have you done to me?"

Cupping my cheek, he presses kisses along my forehead, cheek, and eyelids. "This is you, not me." He notches at my

pussy and presses inside an inch before waiting for my body to adjust. Another inch and he pulls back.

“So big. I might not be able to...” I can’t finish as he fills me with another inch, then backs away.

My juices drip along my thighs and ass as I long for him inside as much as out. I tip my pelvis up, and he fills me. I come and scream against his mouth.

As I catch my breath, he remains perfectly still, even as my body clenches and milks his cock. “How is this possible?”

Easing back, he presses deep and then does it again. “I promised to bring you all the pleasure you can stand, Isa. I never break my word.”

Every thrust brings the base of his cock against my clit and his balls rub my ass. The soft fur tickles. So many sensations all at once plus his chest fur against my nipples. I come apart a third time.

I’m still shaking from the aftermath of the orgasm when he slides free of my body, lies beside me, and pulls my back against his chest. His thick cock rests at the curve of my ass. “I’ve got you, sweet Isa.”

My body feels like rubber, but I still long to have him inside me. “Why did you stop before you came?”

“I can wait, and I wasn’t sure if you could handle more.” He kisses my shoulder.

It’s as if he’s issued a challenge. My pussy pulses, and my lower abdomen clenches for more. Pushing out of his arms, I rise to my hands and knees and lift my ass so that my pussy rises in his direction. “I need all of you.”

His growl rumbles low and deep “You’re playing with fire.” He sniffs the air, then that wicked tongue splits me with one long, rough lick.

“Oh, yes.” I lower my head to the mattress, bringing my ass higher for him and widening my knees.

Another lick. “You taste so good.”

I peek back.

Fisting his cock, he runs his big hand from base to tip and growls again. Gripping my hips, he pushes inside me with one slow, deep thrust. He touches places inside me that I had no idea existed before tonight. Again and again, he fills me, and my body burns for more.

His arm bands around my waist and his teeth close around the back of my neck, all the time, he fucks me hard and deep.

My orgasm begins like a whisper, then builds to an implosion of sensation.

Wentworth groans as his hot cum fills me and takes me into another wave of pleasure. Still, his cock remains hard and thick.

Another orgasm follows and he fills me again. He reaches between my legs, sliding his finger over my slick folds and circling my clit until I come again and again.

Gasping for breath, I collapse on the mattress.

He follows me down and pulls me to spoon him. His half-hard cock still nestled within my body as if we were made as one being. "You are everything, Isa Miller." He kisses my temple.

I should be sore. I should be crippled by so much pleasure and the size of him stretching me. However, I feel better than I ever have in my life. I could spend a lifetime in this bed with this beast-man wrapped around me.

A wave of terror rushes through me, but his cock thickens again and my fears disappear as passion pushes them aside. "What have you done to me? I'm not like this."

He gently pulls my leg over his and deepens the connection before pulling out and pressing in again. "This is special, Isa. You have to know." He thrusts deep, forcing a low moan from me. "This is more than anything before."

I'm trying to sort out his words. I want to understand, but I'm too far gone in the fog of lust and desire to do more than

hear the words. I reach around to stroke his hair at the back of his neck. I skim one finger around his ear and down his chin.

He purrs low and it rumbles along my spine.

Juices flow from my pussy and I shift to take more of him.

His cock touches a spot that shoots pleasure through me. I come hard and milk another orgasm from him.



In the middle of the night, I sneak out of Havendoor and head east. Nothing will ever compare to what I felt in Wentworth's arms. More than great sex, it was as if he had sewn himself into my soul.

The idea of giving myself to another man after the disaster my life became two years ago is just too terrifying.

A man of his word, he gave me all the pleasure I could handle before falling asleep with me in his arms.

Once I was certain he was sleeping deeply, I pulled on my dress, grabbed my purse, computer, and keys, and snuck out the door. I don't even care that I left my luggage behind. I had to get away.

I reach the city around eight o'clock, full of shame. I should have stayed and explained why I was leaving. Not that I think he'll care. He should be happy he had a good night of sex without any strings attached.

Brushing the tears out of my eyes, I slow as I reach the George Washington Bridge. There's nothing to cry over. It was one night and it was a fantastic night. No normal man could have given me that much pleasure.

"No man ever will. I'm ruined for normal men." I laugh, talking to myself even as the tears continue to stream down my cheeks.

The doorman parks my car at my Upper West Side apartment building.

Inside, the place feels cold and empty and so do I.

CHAPTER FIVE



WENTWORTH

The realization that Isa left me in the night comes at dawn. The scent of her lingers in the room, but it's distant, as if she's been gone for several hours. It would be nice to believe she'd stepped out for coffee, but that is a pipe dream.

She left her suitcase and clothes, only taking her computer bag and purse. Did she think I would lock her in a tower and keep her from leaving? I may be a beast, but I'm not a monster. I had hoped after the night we spent together and the way I feel, she'd know I'd do anything for her. If she'd stayed, I would have told her.

John is still at the front desk when I walk downstairs at seven with Isa's suitcase. "What time did she leave?"

"Just after three, sir." John avoids making eye contact.

It's not as if I've never used the rooms at the Havendoor Inn for trysts. For the past hundred years, I've seduced more women around the world and in this area than I can count. I drop the suitcase in my truck and stand in the open door.

"Wentworth, are you alright?" Mable calls from the entrance of her diner.

Mable White and I have been lovers and friends since she was a young woman. Now gray, she's still beautiful and has the kindest brown eyes.

"I hardly know, Mable." I shut the door and lean against the shiny copper-painted side of the truck.

Reaching inside the diner, Mable grabs her coat from the rack, pulls it on, and walks across the street. She leans beside me. "You know, you can always count on me for a friendly shoulder and ear."

I wrap my arm around her and kiss the top of her head. "I know, but this is not the kind of thing you'll want to hear."

She meets my gaze. Sharp as ever, she studies me.

Looking beyond her crow's feet and the deep lines around her mouth, I can still see the twenty-five-year-old spitfire who ran away with me to travel across Europe for a month without a care in the world. I have often wished that Mable were my true mate, but that was not how fate played it out.

With cock of her head, she says, "You met someone?"

I sigh and squeeze her shoulder.

"Your mate? After all this time?" Her gaze falls to the pavement. "Why aren't you happy?"

"She ran away from me, Mable. I should have gone slow. I should have let her know me before..." I curse and pull my arm away. I want to run. I want to beat my head against a tree. What was I thinking? The answer to that question is not flattering.

Grabbing my hand, she holds it. Her eyes draw down with sorrow and love. "Oh, Wentworth, that is not who you are. If she's your one true mate, she feels the pull to you as much as you feel it. She's probably scared and now quite alone."

I pull her into my arms for a hug. "I'm sorry, Mable."

"For what?" She laughs without humor. "You don't get to choose who you love."

"Without you and Morris, I would not have survived these last decades. I do love you in many ways."

"But I am not your mate." She sighs into my chest. "We've always known that."

The bell at the diner door rings and Mable extricates herself from my arms. She slips her hand through the crook of my elbow and we walk down the street. "Who is she, and why did she run?"

"You sure you want to know this?" I never want to hurt Mable.

She pats my biceps. "I'm not leaving town. Besides, I always knew one day you'd find your mate, and we would still

be friends. I've counted on the notion that we would always be friends, Wentworth."

"You believed in my mate more than I did. I never dreamed that at my age, I would find her. You're right about our friendship, though. That will never change." I squeeze her hand. "Her name is Isa Miller. She's an old friend of Nina's, and she came to help Anabelle and Declan decorate the new house."

We reach the end of the town center and turn back. "She got spooked because of what you are?"

I don't think that was it. She would have run when we met if my appearance frightened her. "No. I don't know why exactly. I woke up alone this morning. No note and she left her luggage as if I'd chain her to the dungeon wall if she stayed to say goodbye."

"Hmm." Mable narrows her gaze. "Might be it has nothing to do with you. If she's a good friend of Nina's, maybe you should ask her what might have spooked Isa."

She has a point. Or maybe I should get in my truck and drive until I find her. I need to find her, talk to her, beg her to come back, and let her know I'll do anything she needs to have her with me. "I'll try that."

We reach my truck and Mable kisses my cheek. "I'd better go back to work. Come by if you need a friend, Wentworth."

"Thank you, Mable."

Patting my cheek, she turns and crosses to her diner, where several townspeople are watching us through the window.

I drive home faster than is safe, and my tires screech to a stop near the front door. It's mid-morning and there are voices in the dining room.

Nina and Anabelle are laughing and Noah looks at his mate as if she's the reason the sun rose this morning.

They silence and look at me.

Noah says, "Father, is something wrong?"

Everything is wrong. I run my fingers through my hair and take deep breaths to try to lower my pulse. “I need to speak to Nina. Kitten, will you meet me in the library for a moment?”

I don't have endearments for all of my sons' mates, but Nina and Noah were taken prisoner by the same insane scientists who imprisoned me, and without Nina, I would likely still be a captive or worse.

Turning, I stride past the parlor, across the foyer, and into the library. I grip the edge of my desk and attempt to ease the madness of losing my mate within hours of finding her.

“Wentworth?” Nina steps into the room and closes the door. “What's happened? You look like a wild animal.”

She says it without fear because she knows I'd die before I'd harm her or any of my children.

I speak softly, but even so, the monster is close. “Isa ran away.”

She cocks her head and her blond hair shifts. “She's not at the inn?”

I shake my head. “No. She left early this morning.”

Blinking, she stares at me. “You were with her last night. Was she frightened?”

“Not by me.” I muffle the growl building in my gut. “At least, I saw no signs of fear.”

Nina walks to one of the club chairs in front of the desk and sits. “Tell me what happened.”

Sitting with my head in my hands, I'm not sure what to say. “She is my mate. I've waited over a hundred years for her and in one night, I sent her running away.”

“Did you tell her that she's your mate?” As silent as ever, Noah steps inside the library and stands with his arms crossed, leaning against the door.

“I would have tried to explain this morning, but she slipped out while I was asleep. She left her clothes and ran.”

My heart tears open a bit more. I look at Nina. “Why would she run?”

Nina lets out a long breath. “I shouldn’t say, but I can see you’re ready to run to New York City to find her, and I don’t think that’s the best idea just now.”

She’s not wrong. I could tear the planet apart looking for Isa. The monster inside me demands nothing less. “What happened to her?”

“Isa comes from a family as well-to-do as mine. Her parents died in a plane crash five years ago, leaving her alone. Three years ago, she met a man, Peter, and they were to be married. They had everything planned. While standing at the altar on a beach in Hawaii, he said it was a mistake and walked away.”

I want to rip Peter’s throat out, but the idea of her having married another man before I met her seems far worse. I’m too conflicted and furious to speak, but this doesn’t make me feel less desire to find my mate.

Nina looks from Noah to me. “I didn’t explain about you being different, being...not human. Maybe I should have, but she wouldn’t have believed me. It never occurred to me that she might be your mate, Wentworth.”

“No. I never believed I would find a mate. My time for that should have passed many years ago.” If the pain in my chest is what people mean when they say they’re heartbroken, I have been far too uncaring about the sensation. My claws extend, and I rake them over the place where my heart lives, hoping for a pain I can better understand.

Nina stays my hand. “No. Breathe. We will get her back. She’s just afraid. If she feels anything like I did when I first met Noah, she’s just as drawn to you as you are to her.”

“Why run then?” My voice is full of gravel.

“Peter broke her heart. She was devastated. I imagine she’s afraid you could do far more damage if she let herself love you.”

Noah crosses to the back of Nina's chair and rests his hand on her shoulder.

She takes his hand. "I'm going to get my phone and call her to make sure she's alright."

Yes. Finally, something useful. I want to scream for her to demand Isa come back. No. I want her to come back on her own. I clutch my head and nod.

A few minutes later, Nina is in the foyer. "Isa, where are you? Calm down and talk to me." Nina's voice is soft but direct, as if she's speaking to a child or someone who's been in an accident and isn't quite with it. "I can't understand you." There's a pause. "Okay. Just breathe. I'm on my way."

Unable to bear waiting, I burst into the foyer. "Where is she?"

Narrowing her eyes at me, she speaks to Noah, who's sitting on the steps. "Noah, can you fly me to New York?"

He stands and says, "I'll need twenty minutes to run a flight check and make a call to the heliport."

As soon as Noah is out of the room, Nina pins me with a serious look. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing." I need to get to Isa. My beast is clawing to get out, go to her, help her. "Nothing harmful. We made love. I assumed you understood that from our earlier conversation."

Pointing at my chest, she stalks toward me. "She's hysterical. Isa doesn't get hysterical. She's the strongest person I know. What did you do?"

I shake my head, thinking of any moment when I was with her that she was unsure. "I went to see her at the inn. She told John at the desk that it was alright to let me come up. She implied that if we made love, it would relieve the tension building when we were together. She said she wanted me and took off her clothes. Nina, if you think I would force myself on anyone, you don't know me at all." I'm not successful in keeping the panic from my voice.

Nina closes her eyes and lowers her finger. “I’m sorry. I know you would never intentionally harm her. If she’s your mate, she might be afraid for the swell of feeling she’s experiencing for a stranger.” She heads up the steps. “I’m going to get my purse and coat. You’d better get whatever you need. I assume you want to come with us.”

My throat clogs. “I want to help Isa.”

Morris steps into the foyer with my hooded coat in hand. “I took the liberty.”

“Thank you, Morris.” I take the coat.

As I go past him toward the back of the house and the helipad, Morris grips my arm. “Go gently, Wentworth. She ran away for a reason and even if that reason is misguided, and no matter how much you need her, she had her reasons and needs you to understand them.”

“Yes.” I don’t have the words to tell him or anyone how scared I am that she might reject me. I steady my heartbeat. “I have lived this long without a true mate. I can survive longer. However, if she can be mine and be happy, I will do whatever she needs to make that happen.”

Morris gives me a rare smile. He releases my arm. “Safe trip, sir.”

CHAPTER SIX



WENTWORTH

As we reach the more populated areas and lower altitude, I pull my hood over my head and the elongated sleeves down so the fur on the back of my hands is mostly hidden.

I'm glad for the lack of conversation in the helicopter. It gives me time to calm my beast and think through everything I know about Isa.

Noah talking to the air traffic controller pulls me out of my head. Several minutes later, we land a few blocks away from where Nina says Isa lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

As much as I want to run on all fours and roar from the closeness of my mate, I hold my beast at bay and the three of us walk at a clip through the busy streets.

The doorman at Isa's building is a middle-aged man with gray hair peeking from under his black cap. He sees Nina and smiles. "I'm so glad you're here, Miss Dunkirk. I've been worried about Miss Miller since she arrived this morning. She looked unwell. I parked the car for her, but she insisted she didn't need a doctor."

Nina shakes his hand. "Thank you, Miles. I think she's only upset, but I'll call you if we need assistance."

"I'll be here if you need anything." Miles tips his hat and swipes his key card over the elevator door lock.

Nina presses the button for the fifteenth floor and leans against the highly polished wall.

Clearing his throat, Noah stares at me. "Father, I can see that you're anxious, and I'm sure your instincts are telling you to take care of your mate."

I can see where he's going with this. "I will let Nina handle it until Isa asks for me." *If* she asks for me. She may reject me,

and I'll have to accept that outcome. My skin aches like a high fever and my heart fills my chest painfully.

With a nod of approval, Noah turns his attention to Nina. "What if she won't open the door?"

Nina sighs. "I'll ask Miles to unlock it, but he won't like doing that. Still, he's worried and I think I can talk him into it."

When the elevator doors open, I catch the scent of Isa. Moving ahead of Nina, I follow the scent to the door marked 1522. She's so close now. I could beat the door down. Noah could do the same with very little effort. Drawing in my panic and need to be with her and help her, I turn the knob and the door opens. "It's not locked."

It takes all my strength to stay in the hall and let Nina and Noah go inside ahead of me.

The monochromatic kitchen, living room, and dining room are quiet. Every surface and the air smells of my mate but I hear soft whimpering from behind the door to the left. I point. "In there."

Nina looks at me and her eyes are soft with affection.

I swallow hard and nod to let her know I can control myself.

She strides to the door, goes in, and closes it behind her.

Gripping my shoulder, Noah says, "It's going to be alright, Father. Just hold on a while longer."

I nod and step to the door. Crouching, I wait and listen.

Nina says, "Isa?"

There's a low whimper.

The bed creaks. "Isa, tell me what happened. Why did you run away?"

"I can't." Isa's voice is so small and lost.

I want to do something, but I know it's better if I stay here for now.

“Okay. Relax.” There’s a long silence, then running water.
“Drink this.”

The sound of a glass clinking as it’s set on a table.

Noah steps to lean against the wall across from me. “Nina will take good care of her.”

“I know.” And I do know, but my instincts are to rush in and hold her until she understands that we were meant to be together and nothing will change that.

The sheets rustle. “Is he here?”

Nina says, “Yes. He’s in the next room.”

“Is he angry?” Gone is the voice of the strong siren from the night before.

I don’t like hearing my mate doubt herself or me, and have to fight the growl building in my chest.

ISA

I unlocked the door after Nina called and told me she was coming. I thought I'd have a few more hours to pull myself together, but honestly, I'm not sure I could have done it even with the extra time. It's as if my insides are being twisted into knots. The farther away from Havendoor I got, the worse the feeling became.

Miles took my keys, and I ran to the elevator. Still wearing my dress from the day before, I crawled into bed and can't stop crying.

Knowing Wentworth is here makes me nervous and happy at the same time. The tightness inside me eases. I figured he would be furious when he woke up alone. Or maybe he would go on with his day and not care at all. He got what he wanted. It was what I wanted too.

Nina pulls me into a hug. "No. He's worried about you but not angry. Do you want to talk about why you left so quickly without your luggage or saying goodbye?"

Pushing away, I think about the panic that struck me and the way I tiptoed around to get out without waking him. My cheeks heat with shame for being such a coward. "When Peter left, it nearly drove me mad with questions about what I had done wrong. Then I wondered how I couldn't have known he'd had a change of heart."

"He should have talked to you, Isa. None of that was your fault." Nina is the kindest person I know. She takes my hand and squeezes it gently.

"Maybe it wasn't but I had my part to play in it." I pick up the water and take a long drink. A sob escapes and I swear I hear growling from the living room. My heart skips a beat.

Nina says, "Don't worry. Wentworth won't come in without an invitation."

“Peter should have talked to me. He shouldn’t have waited until all our friends were on an island in the Pacific. Maybe there were signs and I didn’t want to see them.” My tears seem limitless.

“I see your point, Isa, but I’m never going to take Peter’s part. He did a terrible thing to someone he’d claimed to love.” She looks at our joined hands, then into my eyes. “Sorry, but none of this explains why you ran. Did you think Wentworth would keep you from going home if that’s what you wanted?”

“No. He was kind and a more than generous lover. He’s wonderful.” The last words tremble as my fears flow back like the tide.

Nina hesitates. “Is it because he’s different?”

I hate that she would even think this of me. I shake my head, unable to get words out. Swallowing several times, I finally say, “No. He’s beautiful.”

Her shoulders relax. “Then what?”

I take a deep breath. “I loved Peter but it was nothing compared to this feeling that swamped me the moment I met Wentworth. Peter’s betrayal sent me into a year of therapy and self-doubt. If Wentworth leaves me, he could ruin me for life.”

A warm smile pulls at Nina’s lips. “I understand. I feel the same way about Noah.”

“You do?” Is that even possible? Can anyone know the way I’m drawn to a man I barely know and who’s more than a man?

She nods. “The creatures that live at Scrim Hall are not like other men in many ways.” She lets out a breath. “There are some things that are not my place to explain, Isa. Go take a shower and put on something clean. If you feel up to it after that, I’ll have Wentworth talk to you.”

The sense of him just outside my bedroom door washes over me like a warm blanket. My fear increases, but at the same time, a sense of calm fills me. “A shower would be good.”

Nina smiles and stands so I can get out of bed. “I’m going to order you some soup from the deli down the street. Call me if you need anything.”

A little dazed, I head for my bathroom. At the door, I stop. “Thank you for coming, Nina. You’re a good friend.”

“This is all going to be alright. One way or another, and I’ll help you in any way I can.” Nina slips out the door, leaving me to shower.



Not bothering to dry my hair, I pull on leggings and a baggy sweatshirt that covers my ass. It has a sherpa-lined hood and on the front is a cat and the words “Fluff You.” Not exactly classy, but it’s my go-to when I want to relax, and I need some comfort right now.

Rather than speaking to Wentworth in my bedroom, I pull up my big-girl pants and step into the living room.

The smell of Goldman’s chicken soup makes my stomach growl.

Across the room, Wentworth is crouched, staring at me as if he’d been lying in wait for his prey. His blue eyes are sharp, and his pupils are wide. Hands on his knees, his claws flex and then retract from his fingertips.

I can’t look away. He’s so beautiful and fierce. It’s as if we’re frozen in time.

Noah clears his throat. “Nina and I are going to go for a walk. Call if you need us.”

“Make sure she eats some soup, Wentworth.”

Never taking his gaze from me, Wentworth says, “I will see that she eats.”

My front door opens and closes. The air feels heavy, and I’m flooded with guilt. “I shouldn’t have run.”

In one smooth move, he stands and steps toward me. I should be afraid. He's not a human, but I'm not afraid of him, only of what he could do to me when he betrays me.

When he's two feet away, he stops. "I'm sorry you were not comfortable enough with me to stay and explain your concerns. I'm also sorry that I eavesdropped on your conversation with Nina."

A short laugh escapes me, despite all my emotions over the last few hours. He doesn't look the least bit sorry for listening to my private conversation. "I should have at least said goodbye. I panicked. I don't understand why I want you so intensely."

His growl begins low inside him but stops abruptly. "You need to eat something, sweetheart. After that, I will tell you about monsters and pettigrew in particular. I will try to explain things."

I could cry again just from the sound of his tender voice and the way he looks at me. I sit at my kitchen counter and eat the soup that Nina has already put in a bowl for me. "Do you want some?"

He shakes his head and watches from the end of the counter. It's as if he's keeping a careful distance between us.

I eat half and push the bowl back. Swiveling the stool to face him, I ask, "What happened to me that made me so...so...horny?"

The first hint of a smile tugs at his lips. He pushes away from the wall, comes to me, and offers me his hand.

My heart pounds as I place my fingers in his palm and follow him to the couch. "Did I say something funny?"

"No, but your honesty is delightful." He sits and pulls me next to him. "Monsters are different from humans. Monsters, like many beasts, mate for life. My sons are all at the age when most monsters will find a mate."

I cringe and hold up my hand for him to stop. "I don't like that word. It implies something ugly and frightening."

This gains me another smile that goes directly between my legs.

CHAPTER SEVEN



WENTWORTH

I push aside the warm scent of her sex and what it's doing to me. "Shall I say creatures instead?"

She nods. "That's not accurate, but it's better."

It's impossible to love her more, but I do. "Most creatures, specifically males, find their mates around the age of thirty years old. So, it's understandable that my sons have all found their mates recently. I believed their hesitance to go out into the world would keep them from finding the one person who would complete them and make them whole. A few years ago, I left home in search of mates for my boys. I found Oliver's mate and set things in motion for Britta to go to Scrim Hall. After that, I was captured by a group of scientists determined to find the secret to mon—I mean creatures' long lives and gifts. If not for Nina and Noah, I would likely still be their captive."

She brushes a tear away. "You told me that you're far older than thirty. Why didn't you find a mate long ago?"

"When I was a very young man, I fell in love with a human woman who was not my mate. I married her, and we had a good life together in England. She lived to be seventy-one and died in my arms."

"Oh, Wentworth. I'm so sorry." She doesn't bother to wipe her tears and takes my hand rubbing the back with her thumb.

"It was a long time ago, sweetheart. Eve had a good life and we were happy. I was well past the age when mating happens and assumed I'd missed my chance for that kind of love. Honestly, I willingly gave it up to be with Eve. However, I never let myself get too close to another woman in the decades since." I hold my breath.

"Because you didn't want to watch another woman you love die?"

Staring into her hazel eyes, I draw a shaky breath. She may reject me, but she has to know the entire truth. “I think it was hope that kept me from attaching myself to anyone in that way.”

“Hope?” She swallows, and I long to kiss her throat. “Hope kept you from finding love again?”

I nod. “Hope that you were out there somewhere, and I might find you.”

She gets up, wrapping her arms around her middle, which brings the giant cat sweater up and when she turns away, her perfectly round ass is on full display under black spandex. She walks to the window, and I’m glad it’s the kind that doesn’t open as she puts both palms and her forehead on the glass. “I don’t understand. What do I have to do with anything?”

“I don’t want to scare you.”

“Too late.” Her breath fogs the glass. “Can you just say it plainly?”

I stand and drag my fingers through my hair. “The moment you walked into my house, I knew you were my one true mate, Isa.”

“No.” She looks at me and backs herself into the corner where the windows looking out over New York City meet a wall holding a large-screen television. “I can’t be. I’m human. I’m a bad choice. I swore off serious relationships two years ago.”

What am I supposed to say to that? My chest tightens painfully. I’ve waited half a lifetime for her, and she is perilously close to rejecting our mating bond. “I understand.” The only answer is to give her all the information I have and let her make her choice. “Will you sit, please?”

She skirts around the room and sits at the opposite end of the couch. “I’m sorry if I’ve made you angry, Wentworth. I don’t want to hurt your feelings. Last night was wonderful, but sex is all I can offer you. My emotions are not available and love...” She makes a scoffing sound.

When Eve died, I was brokenhearted, but she'd grown sickly and frail. I knew the end was coming. Even so, it tore something inside me that took years to scar over. This moment hurts more, and I barely know Isa. "May I explain a mate's bond to you?"

"Will it make me understand this need inside me?" She draws her knees up and wraps her arms around them. Curled in a ball, she looks very young and vulnerable.

"I think so."

She nods and looks at me with hooded eyes.

"When I was a boy, my mother explained it to me. She and my father were both pettigrew. They met in the tunnels underneath Paris and had lived all over Europe. They loved the highlands where they could run together." I wish they were here now with a better explanation than I can give. "We don't know each other and since you're a human, you have never heard of creatures and their mating bonds. I should have told you from the beginning, but at first, I was surprised, and honestly, I thought I could wait and get to know you. I wanted you to get to know me as well."

"I'm the one who offered you sex, Wentworth." She blushes the sweetest pink.

"It's impossible for me to feel sorry for our night together. It was the best night of my life." I adjust my seat because my cock seems to think repeating that night would be a great idea.

"It was wonderful. You are wonderful." Her voice is soft and so sweet.

I sit up straight, determined to be honest. "When creatures became less common, they mated with humans and the DNA of all species scattered. Many humans have small bits of creature DNA that lies dormant all their lives. However, the genes can be activated when they meet their mate. The human does not become a creature." I say this quickly, so I don't send her running into the streets, thinking she's about to turn into a lioness.

Letting out a breath, she says, “You’re very beautiful, but I’m not ready for that kind of change either.”

My heart leaps at her praise. “The part of the gene that pushes forward is the need to be with their mate. Mates feel a pull that is very hard to resist and some get quite ill if they try. Some creatures go mad when rejected by their mates.”

She lifts her head from her knees. “I don’t understand.”

“Isa, sweetheart, I’m certain you are my one true mate. I have waited almost a century to meet you. But if you know that you cannot love me, you can reject the bond. I would not blame you. This is very foreign and I’m sure you’re overwhelmed. All I would ask is that you give me a week before you make the decision. Get to know me and let me get to know you.”

“Won’t that make it harder?” Her hand pressed to her chest, she’s pale, and her eyes are wide.

“I could lie to you and tell you that it won’t, but I promise you I will never lie. It may make it more difficult if you reject the bond later rather than sooner, but at least we will know that we tried.” My heart feels as if it might implode. The fact that she’s teetering on the edge of rejecting me sears pain through me.

Her pallor indicates the slim thread of our mating tugs at her as well. She looks close to tears and perhaps passing out. “Why do I feel so much?” She grips her chest. “I don’t want to feel this way. I swore I’d never let anyone hurt me again.” Tears stream down her face and she tucks into her knees.

Unable to stop myself, I go to her and draw her against me, holding her, telling her, “This is going to be alright. I promise. I will never hurt you. I will never be the one to break the bond. You hold all the power, Isa.”

She relaxes and wraps her arms around me, crying into my chest. “I don’t know what to say.”

My beast roars inside me. He wants to claim her for all time and give her the life we both deserve. It has to be her decision. “Don’t say anything, sweetheart. You need time, and

I intend to give you whatever you need. If you reject the bond, I will still always be available for you. If you need me, I am here. If what you need is for me to stay away, I will do that. Your happiness is all that matters.”

Still tucked against me, she snuffles and clutches my shirt. “I have pettigrew DNA inside my human DNA?”

“That’s what my mother believed.” I shrug. “She was a brilliant woman.”

“And those genes are why I feel as if I’ll die if you leave me?” She snuffles again. “So, it’s not real. It’s just a chemical reaction?”

“I don’t know what you consider ‘real’ but isn’t attraction a chemical reaction of pheromones and brainwaves? This is more intense but not much different than when humans meet and decide to date.” I indulge myself in touching her damp hair.

Her color is better, and her breathing has slowed to normal. “How long will you live?”

“Baring accident or homicide, several hundred more years.” I sigh. “Creatures don’t get sick but we can be killed.”

“I wouldn’t think you’d be willing to watch another woman die like your first wife?” She draws a long breath as if she’s taking in my scent.

My cock responds to the intimacy, but anything more than comfort will have to be at her initiation. “A human mate’s life is extended. Eve was not my mate and so our marriage didn’t change her lifespan.”

She shakes her head and pushes away. “I shouldn’t have asked. I’m not ready for all the details. I’m tired and confused.”

“You should sleep, Isa. I can come back tomorrow. Nina still has her apartment across town.” I stand and head toward my coat where it’s hanging on a hook near the door. My beast fights for me to stay and complete the bond. It has to be up to her. With a whimper, he subsides.

Before I reach the door, she grabs my arm. Her eyes are swimming as she looks up at me. “It’s too much to ask.”

I cup her cheek and wipe her tears away. “Nothing is too much. What do you want?”

“Will you stay here tonight?” She hiccups. “I mean. Just so I’m not so...” She clutches the shirt near her chest as if my absence would bring her pain. Maybe it did. “Will you stay on the couch?”

Hooking my coat back up, I pull her into my arms. “Of course. I never want to cause you worry or pain. If my absence is distressing, then I will always be by your side.”

“How is it that a beast is the best man I’ve ever met?” She snuggles into my body and yawns.

My ego grows tenfold as I lift her into my arms and carry her to her bed. I kiss her forehead and pull the blanket over her before leaving her already dozing.

In the living room, I call Noah and ask them to spend the night in NYC.

CHAPTER EIGHT



ISA

Why is knowing he's close by such a comfort? I barely know him and yet, having him in the next room makes me feel safe.

I've been independent my entire adult life. Money has never been an issue, but I still wanted to make my own mark on New York City. I created a thriving business after college and have done pretty well. Suddenly needing another person feels strange. Even with Peter, it didn't feel this way. I loved him, but I didn't need him.

After sleeping for several hours, I stare at my bedroom ceiling, wondering what Wentworth is doing in the next room. Is he asleep, or staring at the city skyline?

It was early when I went to bed, so now it's four in the morning, and I'm wide awake. I'm not as lost and crazed as I was when I ran from Havendoor. The pain of separation has gone away. I had a moment when I reached the city when I considered driving myself to the hospital to find out what the pain twisting my guts could be. Having never been seriously ill, I had a fleeting thought about being sick. Somehow, I knew it was the loss of my beast that created the pain.

Now that he's close, I'm physically fine but emotionally confused. I toss the covers back and pad into my living room as if I'm an intruder.

The lights of the city dimly illuminate my apartment and shine like thousands of stars. There's no movement as I inch closer to the couch.

"Are you all right, Isa?" Wentworth's low voice rumbles through the darkness.

"I'm... I don't know what I am. Is it silly that I just wanted to make sure you were still here?" I feel like a complete imbecile. I'm a grown woman who missed him when he was in the next room.

He eases up from lying to sitting. “Not silly. Come sit with me.” He opens his arms in invitation.

Unable to resist, I walk to the couch and slide in beside him. “You are very kind.”

Kissing the top of my head, he says, “You smell nice, and having you beside me is not a hardship, it’s a joy.”

Without his shirt, I cuddle against his furry broad chest and indulge in touching the ripple of his ribs. “Where were you born?”

“Under Paris. There is an elaborate cavern system where my people lived. There weren’t many of us by the time I was born, but a small community. Many died in a collapse there in 1860. I was nine.” He stiffens.

I hug him. “I’m sorry. Do you know what caused the collapse?”

“I don’t know. The memory is vague, but I can share it with you, if you want.”

I thought that’s what he was doing. “What do you mean?”

Combing his fingers through my hair, he relaxes. “One of my gifts is the ability to share my thoughts and memories and read them in others if allowed.”

“What?” I push back. “You can read my mind?”

Releasing me, his voice is soft and soothing. “Never without your permission, sweetheart. I’m only offering to share my memories, not look into yours.”

Why I believe him, I can’t say, but I do and cuddle back into his side. “Will it feel real for me?”

“Like a dream or an old memory.”

Wanting to know him outweighs my trepidation. “Show me.”

Holding me tight, a rumble that’s similar to a purr vibrates inside him. The room fades away.

The scent of stone and dust fills my lungs making me cough. Immediately, I realize this is not happening to me, but to the boy whose eyes I'm looking through. Wentworth's eyes, but it feels real and personal.

The tangy scent of blood shoots fear through me, and I cling to the broad back of my father.

Father's heart pounds, and he calls out the names of friends. "Falcor. Millicent." As he drags large stones from the pile, more fall from the ceiling and my mother takes me from his back. She shushes my crying.

As the dust clears, I glimpse a furred hand jutting from the bottom of the rocks. There's no movement. The smell of death stays in my nose, and I bury my face in Mother's neck.

More stones fall and Father backs away, listening for some signs of life.

I'm running through a field and joy floods me as others like me run too. There's laughter and bright sunlight as we reach the rocky side of the mountain and begin the climb. At the top, I roar with pure happiness and gaze out over the highlands.

Behind me, Mother smiles from where she sits near our home in a cave. She's building a fire for dinner.

I say goodbye to my friends, all boys of thirteen and fourteen like me. It's good to have friends again.

"Mother, should I gather more wood for your fire?"

Her expression is tight as she shakes her head. "Your father needs to talk to you, Wentworth. He's up on the ridge."

Loving the climb, I fill with excitement and make my way up to the ridge above our cave. The rocks dig into my hands, but I'm older now and have built up strong calluses for climbing. At the top, I stand beside him. He's still twice my size, despite how much I've grown. "You wanted to see me, Father?"

His sad smile makes my stomach lurch.

“Is something wrong?” Many of my friends rebel with risk taking and searching out the humans in the villages and farms. I never wish to disappoint my parents, so I stay away.

He places his hand on my shoulder. “We have to leave here, Wentworth.”

“Why?” My instincts tell me to defy him and say I’ll never leave Scotland.

“I’m sorry. I know you love it here, but we have been found out and given a few weeks to gather and leave the region.” He sighs.

“We can fight! I’m strong, Father. I can fight for our home.” I show him my muscular arm.

“If we did that, more would come to kill us.” His shoulders slump, and I don’t like to see him defeated.

“What do you need me to do?” I straighten to my full height.

He pulls me into a hug. “You are a fine son. No pettigrew could ask for better. We’ll go to London and live in that city until another open space becomes available for us. London will be our new home and perhaps we’ll go north to the wilds of Russia from there.”

“Why can’t we go to Russia now?” I’d been told it’s cold and there are miles of uninhabited space in that land.

“Winter is coming. If we are to live in that place, we must travel in warmer weather and prepare for the cold.” Patting my head, he turns and heads down the mountain. I give my beloved Highlands one last look and accept the inevitable.

Looking through the slit in my winter cloak, I spy a trio of young women.

Eve sees me and says goodbye to her friends. She sashays, flirting with me. Her blond hair is curled, bouncing around her face. Her blue eyes dance with delight. The curve of her hips and the low cut of her bodice drive me wild with

adoration. "What are you doing here? What if someone were to see you?"

"I needed to catch a glimpse of you, Eve. It's been three days." My heart yearns for this woman, even though I'm only twenty-five, and she's human. She isn't my mate.

Mother cried when I told her I was going to ask Eve to marry me.

We turn into a little-used part of the park and she takes my arm. "I'm happy to see you."

"Will you marry me, Eve?" I blurt it out, unable to hold back.

She stops. "You want to marry me?"

"Of course. I love you." I caress her soft cheek.

"But, Wentworth, I'm not your true mate. You can't marry me." A single tear falls and reaches my finger."

Rubbing the moisture into my skin, I'm swamped with love. "I reject my mating rights as a pettigrew and choose you, Eve. Tell me you'll marry me. I'm very rich and can give you a comfortable life, though not in society."

"I care nothing for balls and dinner parties. I love you, Wentworth. I'll marry you and live however and wherever you want." She hugs me tight, then checks that we're not seen by any wandering eyes in the park.

The same blue eyes look back at me from a face full of lines and wrinkles. The bedroom is lush with heavy curtains in a wood paneling. Outside, the highland air brings me none of the usual comfort.

Eve's breathing is harsh and slow, but she draws one shaking breath. "Maybe now you will find your one true mate, my love."

"I care nothing for anyone but you, Eve." I kiss her paper-thin cheek, wishing she had more time and knowing I should be grateful for almost fifty years with this amazing woman.

Mother and Father sit together across the room. Mother weeps softly, as they've grown to love my wife.

Eve's smile is wan. "You are too good to be alone all your long life, my lionhearted man. I pray that you will one day meet the woman whose soul is a perfect match for yours. Will you tell her about me?"

Tears cloud my vision. "Should I meet her, I will show her the wonderful woman you are and how our love survived all odds against us."

She closes her eyes and a tear pushes out. "Yes. Tell her about our love. She will appreciate that."

I wonder if that's true, but doubt I'll ever meet such a person at my age. It doesn't matter as I have had a full and perfect love. "I will see you in my dreams, my love."

My living room clears away the memories of Wentworth's life. Tears fall freely down my face and I hold him as his pain cannot have faded after a love so pure. "I'm so sorry."

He kisses the top of my head. "It's alright. It was all a very long time ago, sweetheart."

"But it feels like only a moment ago." I ache for him and all he's been through. The love. The loss. "What happened to your parents?"

Rubbing my back to comfort me even though these were his memories, I'm struck by how kind he is. "Father died in Scotland five years after Eve passed, when a hunter mistook him for game. Mother didn't survive the next winter. She couldn't bear life without him."

"And you have been alone ever since?"

He laughs. "No. I have traveled and had many friends. I adopted six little monsters and raised them as my own. I have no complaints about my life."

To have endured so much and still live in light and hope. Man or beast, Wentworth Pettigrew is a special person.

“I will give you the week you asked for, if you still want that.” I’m holding my breath, as if he might have changed his mind.

He pulls me into his lap and cuddles me close against his silky soft fur. “I want it more than anything, Isa. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m only agreeing to get to know you.” I poke one finger into his bulging arm.

“You didn’t say no or reject me outright. I’m very happy.” He purrs against my neck, which is far more erotic than I would have thought.

Rather than pull away, I let myself enjoy being in his arms.

CHAPTER NINE



WENTWORTH

I can't believe Isa is back in Havendoor and even agreed to stay at Scrim Hall. She's staying down the hall from me, in one of the guest rooms, but just having her under the same roof is enough to make all the panic of the previous day fade away.

However, right now, she's at Annabelle and Declan's house, going over what they want for decor. I stayed behind, wanting to give her some space and not be in the way. Of course, now I miss her, and I'm regretting my decision to get some work done in the library. I push a stack of bills aside.

Of the four houses under construction on the property, Declan's is the closest to completion. Silas and Lucinda are already living in the old gardener's cottage, with plans to expand.

As if I conjured him, the front door bursts open and Silas sprints inside. He sniffs the air like any wolf might and turns to see me behind my desk. "Father?"

"You're back. Are your brothers with you?" I stand.

Lucinda grins wide and passes her mate to hug me. "We're all back. As soon as Morris spilled the beans that you'd found your mate, we were in the cars and caravanning home."

As sweet as that sounds, I think I'd rather them have stayed away. "Since she hasn't accepted me yet, you might want to be less aggressive." I direct the comment at Silas.

Griffin stomps in. "We'll behave, Father. We just want to meet her."

It can't hurt to have Isa see what she's getting into. After all, love me, love my family, and this one has nearly doubled in the last year.

Finn and Marina walk in grinning. Finn says, "She smells lovely. Will you introduce us, Father?"

“Yes. Right now, Isa’s working over at Declan’s, but she’ll be joining us for dinner.” It’s not easy to keep my excitement tamped down. I want them to know her. I want her to love them as much as I want her to love me. It takes all of my years of growth and wisdom to keep cool.

Morris steps in. “Welcome home.”

“Snitch.” I narrow my gaze at him.

He waves it off. “I was just first. You don’t actually think anyone in this family can keep a secret?”

Oliver slides down the stair banister. “I can keep all the secrets. However, I don’t know about this one.” He grins wide enough to expose his elongated canines and gives Morris a nod of support.

By the time Isa returns with Annabelle and Declan, the rest of us are in the parlor and Finn is telling a story about flying above the clouds with Marina and how a small jet tailed them for three miles before he lost them in the Adirondacks.

“Who do you think it was?” Oliver asks.

“No marking on the plane, but they were clearly looking for one of us who can fly.” Finn stops talking and stares at Isa who is wide-eyed on the threshold.

I stand and put a hand on her lower back. “Isa, the rest of my family has come home. You already know that Oliver is a vampire, Declan a reaper, and Noah a phoenix. I’d like to introduce you to Griffin, he’s half demon, and this is his mate, Julia.”

Isa shakes Griffin’s hand without so much as a flinch. “Nice to meet you.”

Always charming, Griffin smiles. “The pleasure is mine, Miss Miller.”

“Isa, please.”

Silas is already out of his chair. “I’m Silas. I’m a wolf shifter.” He takes Lucinda’s hand. “This is my mate, Lucinda. We live in the cottage. Have you seen my gardens?”

Smiling, Isa shakes both of their hands. “I’ve only seen a small portion of the gardens. Perhaps you will give me the full tour tomorrow.”

With all joy and happiness radiating from his wide grin, Silas agrees happily to show off his best work.

I shift Isa’s attention with a touch of pressure on her back. “This is Finn and his mate, Marina. Finn is a dragon shifter.”

“It’s nice to meet all of you.”

Finn asks, “How did it go over at the house, Declan?”

Not waiting for Declan to gather his thoughts, Anabelle screeches. “So great! Isa is wonderful. She understands exactly what we want. I can’t wait to show you all the samples she brought. She’s going to Syracuse in a few days to get some more for the kitchen and the main bath. Oh, and we have such a wonderful plan for the fireplace to be indoor and outdoor, overlooking the river.”

While I’m happy to see the excitement in my future daughter’s face, I’m drawn in by how much joy Isa derives from pleasing her client.

Lucinda is more reserved emotionally. She clears her throat. “I wonder if you wouldn’t mind taking a look at our cottage, Isa. It’s small, but we’d like to expand it without destroying too much of our garden. We’re a bit stumped about how to do it.”

“I’d be happy to take a look.” She steps an inch closer to me.

It’s small and maybe I shouldn’t make anything of it, but any shift in my direction from Isa feels like a sign in my favor. “Isa and I are going for a walk so that you all don’t overwhelm her on the first meeting. We’ll see you at dinner.”

Isa relaxes against my hand, still on her lower back. “It’s wonderful to meet all of you.”

A minute later, we’re walking along the path that heads beyond the trees and out of sight of the house.

Smartly, Isa wore sneakers for this visit to the wilds of Western New York. “They’re very nice.”

“You were overwhelmed, and I don’t need to read your mind to know it. I could feel the tension rising inside you.” I take her hand and kiss her knuckles.

Not pulling away, she grins. “I’m an only child and my parents died five years ago. I’ve been mostly alone a lot of my life. A room full of people all focused on me as if I’m some kind of savior is intimidating, to say the least.”

I’m an idiot. “I’m sorry. Maybe this is too much for your week with me. I can take you to our cabin. It will be private.”

“The cabin half your family just returned from?” She laughs.

I join her. “I suppose they might follow, but I can ask them not to.”

Shaking her head, she smiles. “No. This is fine and I can work a little. It’s a good distraction and makes all of this seem less outrageous.”

“Whatever you want, Isa. You are in control and you always will be.” I long for her to relax here and feel at home.

The way her cheeks pinken and her lips quirk up on one side is adorable. “I’m always in control?”

“Are we speaking about sex now?” My cock thinks it’s a great topic to bring up.

A few flakes of snow fall. For the region, we’ve had very little snow so far this year. The temperature is dropping.

Isa shivers, and I wrap an arm around her.

She melts against me as if we were made to walk together with our bodies touching. “I wouldn’t mind if you were in control from time to time.”

I’m unable to stop the low growl of my beast. “When you ask, I will gladly take control of certain activities.”

She hums as if the idea is delicious.

The property crests and snow starts to cover the trees and grass. The edge of the lake is in the distance to our right and the land has been excavated for the house Noah and Nina will build.

“This is beautiful. It’s like a postcard.”

She feels perfect at my side. Stopping, I take in the view as it must look from her perspective. “I’m glad you like it. When I first saw this property and the house, I knew I wanted to stay here. Then I wandered for many years, always coming back here to be at home. The people in the area accepted me, and I have done what I can to take care of them as well. I do not need to hide in Havendoor.”

She wraps her arms around my middle. “That must be a big relief after living on the outskirts of society for much of your life.”

“This is home.” I think about her fancy New York City apartment. “It lacks the bustle of a metropolis, but I love it here.”

“I can see why.” She shivers again.

No good can come from wondering if she could be happy in a provincial town, so I don’t ask. She’ll tell me when she’s ready. “Let me get you back to the house. The temperature is dropping more quickly than I’d expected.”



Lying in bed, thinking about Isa down the hall is driving my beast half-mad. In reflection, I’m thrilled with how the day went. She did some work. We spent time together and learned more about each other. She seemed to like being touched by me and being close to me. My sons were on their best behavior which means there were no physical battles during dinner and only one good-natured wrestling match on the front lawn after the meal. The snow always brings out the monsters’ desire to play. I don’t blame them. I wanted to run, but couldn’t bear to leave Isa.

I sit up as her scent reaches me. Across the room in an instant, I pull the door open in time to see her lifting her hand to knock.

Wide-eyed, she gapes at me and scans down to the boxer briefs I'm wearing.

My cock goes hard in an instant. "Are you alright?"

She checks the hallway. "May I come in?"

I'm an idiot for leaving her outside for an instant. I step aside. "Of course." My room is the last door at the far right side of the house and by far the largest suite. My bed is a California king with four dark oak posts. I had the heavy drapes removed years ago when they went out of style, but the furniture is still early American. The chairs near the hearth were reupholstered a few years ago with tan leather.

She looks around, taking in every piece of furniture and decor. In a tiny pair of silk sleep shorts and a tank top, she makes my mouth water. "Very masculine. It suits you."

It could use a few pillows and some color, but I never gave it much thought until now. "You're welcome to add, subtract, or change anything you want."

She runs her hand across the top of the dresser and along the brass hardware on the drawers. "Is this an original turn-of-the-century piece?"

"Yes. And it's only had one owner." I give her a wink.

Walking slowly, she inspects every item. She opens the door to the bathroom and sighs. When she turns toward me, she's smiling. "Lovely. You have good taste."

"I'm glad you approve. I had the bathroom redone about eight years ago." I lean on the end of my bed and wait for her to get comfortable enough to ask whatever she came here for. My beast wants to break free and dive inside her and my cock agrees with the sentiment.

It has to be her decision, and I need more than a late-night visit to know what she wants.

CHAPTER TEN



ISA

Maybe I should have stayed in my room, but knowing Wentworth was just down the hall turned me inside out. I need to be near him and long to touch him. Fear was the only thing holding me back and I don't like to live in fear. "Did I wake you?"

"No, Isa. I was awake." He crosses his thick arms over his chest and watches me as if he might pounce.

Even so, I have no fear of him. Some deep, maybe ancient, knowledge tells me that this man/beast would never hurt me. In fact, I think he'd die to protect me. The only question left for me is how will he protect me from heartbreak?

"You couldn't sleep?" I lean against one of the lovely club chairs near the fireplace and look at my magnificent beast. His hair hangs loose around his face and his fur is ruffled from the bed. His nose twitches as if he's catching my scent and knows I'm aroused by his state of undress. I can't think of anyone who wouldn't be turned-on by his beautiful body. He's a man, but so much more. His thick cock is outlined under black boxer briefs, and I can make out every long inch of him. It's nice to know I'm not the only one affected by being in the same room.

His gaze never leaves my face. "I was thinking about you, so no, I couldn't sleep."

My heart does a little stutter step. "What were you thinking?"

A wicked smile tugs at his lips and shines in his eyes. "That I like having you in the house and how hard it is to keep my beast tamed. I thought it was a good day as well."

Wait. What? "What does that mean? The part about your beast."

Pushing away from the bed, he uncrosses his arms. His nails push out and retract at the ends of his fingers, and I'm fascinated by the fact that he has both human nails and cat claws for a moment. Then he steps closer. "I'm a man, Isa. I'm also a beast, a pettigrew. They are the same and yet separate. If I had been born a few million years earlier, I would have been a wild animal, and that instinct still wars inside me, as it did my parents. Evolution hasn't fully tamed me."

He stops a foot in front of me, and I touch his chest. "Would you want to be tame?"

Lifting his arms with a shrug, he traces his finger along my jaw, then across my bottom lip. "It's foolish to wish for things that are not possible."

My lips part at his touch, and I can't hold back drawing in air as heat pools between my legs. "I wouldn't want you to be tamed."

He cocks his head. "No?" Sliding his hand down my shoulder sends heat through me like a bolt, and the strap of my pajama top slides down.

Shaking my head, it's hard to put together coherent thoughts with him so close. "I like your wild nature."

A growl builds low in his chest, and his cock jumps. Cupping his shaft, his tongue peeks out and runs across his long canines. "What made you walk down the hall and knock on my door, sweetheart?"

"I didn't knock. You opened the door before I had the chance."

"Your lovely scent let me know you were here." He rubs his thumb along the side of my neck.

It's hard to speak with his caresses stirring my desire like a warlock with her cauldron. "I was going to ask you to hold me a while."

"I'd be happy to hold you." Releasing his cock, he draws me close and wraps his arm around my back. Cupping my head, he cradles my cheek to the center of his chest. "I was thinking how much I'd like to run with you on my back one

night. I wonder if you would like the speed and wind of a good run.”

Shaking with need, his warm, woody scent surrounding me, I want more than to be held. I slip my arms around his waist and let my fingers graze just under the band of his underwear. “Perhaps we can try that tomorrow night and find out if I like it.”

“Isa?” There’s a low warning in his rough voice.

“I need you, Wentworth.” I grip his ass and pull him tight.

No longer low, his growl fills the room. He cups my ass with both hands and pulls my legs around him.

I clutch his neck as he carries me to the bed and covers me with his body.

His thick fingers caress my legs and over my hip and he devours my mouth. His long rough tongue slides against mine, demanding and asking at the same time.

Clutching the top of his boxer briefs, I push them down. I need to feel all of him and even the thin satin of my sleep set is too much of a barrier. Arching my back, I rub my pussy along his half-exposed cock. He stimulates me more than any man, and my juices have soaked my shorts.

I need more and break the kiss. One hand on his chest, and he immediately backs off. He stands at the side of the bed, his eyes now dark blue and hooded.

Stripping naked in two quick moves, I roll to my stomach and lift my ass for him. “I need all of you, Wentworth. I need the man and the beast.”

Growling, his hands grip my thighs and his tongue splits my pussy.

I scream into the mattress as my body tightens, and his tongue dives inside me, reaching places no human tongue could.

Nothing can compare to that strong, slightly sandpapery feel as he laps and sucks, coaxing my body to do his bidding. Still, it’s not enough. “Please.”

A moment passes where he stops touching me, and I worry that I've asked too much, been too demanding. His hands grip my hips, and his thick cock notches at my slit. He presses slow and steady until I'm screaming his name and coming around his thick shaft.

"You're fucking wonderful, Isa." His voice is rough as he holds still while my body jerks with the aftermath of an earth-shattering quake.

I rise to my knees and reach back to circle his neck. I turn to accept his mouth, then rise and fall over his cock.

Breaking the kiss, he pushes my hair aside and clamps his teeth on the back of my neck.

I come again and can hardly catch my breath before his fingers find my clit to tease a third orgasm from me.

Still holding me with his teeth, he growls, lowers me to my hands and knees and pounds into me.

Slamming back, I lift my hips for more of him. His shaft touches that place that drives my pleasure higher, and he fills me with his hot cum. My body erupts with rapture, and I milk every drop from him.

As if I'm made of the finest crystal, he maneuvers me so that my head rests on his pillow and he holds me, kissing my neck where he bit and licking away any slight pain. He kisses my shoulder. "I should have pulled out, but you felt so good."

It never occurred to me to have him not come inside me. "It was wonderful and I'm on birth control. You said you don't get diseases." I leave the rest unsaid.

"Making love with me cannot harm you. I don't know if birth control would be effective. However, until we both accept the mating, I think you are safe from pregnancy." He licks behind my ear.

My body stirs to life again. "Then why pull out?" I grind my hips back against his already stiff rod.

Cupping my breast, he pinches the nipple and purrs. "The first time we were together I was careless with you. I should

have asked permission. I should have taken better care.”

“You have my permission.” My skin tingles back to life as he toys with my other nipple, sending electricity down to my clit. “You make me crazy with lust, Wentworth.”

That wicked tongue slides along the side of my neck. “You do the same to me, my Isa.”

Barely recognizing myself, I turn toward him and shove him onto his back. Straddling his lap, I impale myself on his cock and cry his name. Like a rubber band pulled too tight, I’m ready to snap as I ride him hard and fast.

When I lose my rhythm, he grips my hips and steadies my pace. We are like one perfect machine driving to the ultimate goal. His body, my body, together in perfect harmony. My orgasm begins low and spreads through me like wildfire. Cresting and falling with each rise and fall of my body. Straining to gather breath, the world narrows to this moment of pure rhapsody. Impossibly, the pleasure grows larger, and I explode as Wentworth fills me once again with hot seed.

I collapse on his chest.

Holding me, he whispers words I don’t understand but they feel loving.

Still intimately connected, I doze, with Wentworth gently running his fingers through my hair.

“I love you, Isa,” he whispers against my hair, waking me from my liminal state.

Arching my back brings me eye to eye with him. “No, you don’t. This is sex not love. At your age, you should know the difference.”

He brushes strands of hair from my face. “I do know the difference, sweetheart. I love you.”

The fact that I can’t say the appropriate response even if I want to should send me running from the room, but I lay my cheek on his chest. “Thank you.”

Against my ear, his heart thumps a perfect steady rhythm, slower than a human heart.

He pulls the blanket over us, slips from within me, and holds me in his warm embrace.

I want to tell him that my heart is his. It would be so easy to say the words, but once I say them, he'll know how deeply he can hurt me. I can't be that vulnerable again. "I'm sorry."

As his lips press against the crown of my head, I know this is a different kind of man than I have ever met before. "You have no reason to apologize. My love does not come with conditions."

Impossible. Everything good comes with a hitch. His soft purring lulls me to sleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



WENTWORTH

Waking up with Isa is perfection. She used me as her pillow for what was left of the night. At dawn, I tucked her into my bed and dressed for a run.

I reach the far west edge of our property and a giant wolf steps from the woods, shaking snow from the trees. A moment later Silas shifts into a man. “Good morning, Father.”

Snow still falling, and the land is transformed from the way it looked yesterday. Fresh and white, it feels renewed. “It’s a good day for a run.”

Shifting from foot to foot, he stands beside me, seemingly oblivious to the snow and his unclothed state. “Nothing like a run in the snow.”

“Don’t let me keep you from it.”

“Don’t worry, Father. She will accept you.” Silas has never been one for giving comfort. Perhaps finding Lucinda has changed him.

I’d love to say I’m sure he’s right. “I will accept whatever Isa decides. It’s all I can do to ensure her happiness.”

Letting out a long sigh, he nods. “I have faith that it will work out for you. You deserve to be happy.”

Before I have time to tell him I have been happy being a father, he shifts into a wolf, rubs his head on my leg, then howls, and runs into the woods.

When he’s out of sight, I run back to the house, anxious to see my mate.

I feel her before I see her. The house is still blocked by the row of trees, some of which were burned a few months ago in an attack by the radicals from Research for the Betterment of Humanity. They misguidedly thought they could capture me

and my sons all at once. The attempt failed and their operation was shut down.

My heart beats faster, and her mind is just at the edge of mine, without me trying to find her. As I enter the back garden, Isa is standing on the patio, bundled in a coat, hat, and gloves.

She turns as if she senses me as well. A slow smile brightens her face.

I run through the snow where the path is hidden and don't stop until I reach her.

"I knew you were here before I saw you." There's wonder in her voice but no fear. Her cheeks are red from the cold, and she's adorable in a puffy white coat that reaches her mid-thigh.

I want to scoop her up and take her back to bed. "I sensed you too."

"Is that normal?" Worry seeps into her tone.

A short laugh escapes me, and I shrug. "I don't know. I've never had a mate before. My parents seemed to communicate without words, but they never mentioned this."

Her giggle is like music to me. "I guess for now, we'll learn as we go."

Taking her hand, I walk her through the snowy path. "Your being here is more than I could have ever dreamed, Isa. Thank you."

Unsuccessfully hiding her blush, she says, "This is beautiful."

"Silas will be glad you think so. He's been keeping this garden and expanding it since he was a teenager." I'm proud of all my sons, but Silas has perhaps come the furthest in his life.

"I can't wait to see it in the spring."

My heart nearly stops. "I long for that as well."

Stopping, she looks around and fidgets. "I mean, if I'm here. I mean, I'm sure the gardens are lovely in the spring."

She turns and starts back to the house.

Catching her in only a few steps, I wrap my arms around her. “Don’t run, sweetheart. I know what you meant. There is no pressure for you to decide about our bond.”

“Not even after last night?” She relaxes against me.

“Last night was perfect, but does not define our status. You may share my bed every night, Isa. I will never send you away or deny you anything.” Her hair smells of roses, and I breathe her in.

“Wentworth,” she says, sighing my name. “I want to tell you about me, the way you told me about yourself.”

Not sure I understand, I move to face her. “Are you saying you want to share memories or tell me a story?”

“You said I can show you my memories the way you showed me yours. I want to give that to you.” Her eyes dampen, and I wish I could take away the pain behind them.

She takes my offered hand. At the back of the house, there’s a small masculine parlor that at one time I thought I would use for privacy. However, I never took to staying away from the madness of six wild boys, so the room was rarely used. It boasts two windows that face the side garden and woods beyond. The path to the greenhouse and Silas’s cottage is wide enough to be noticed, with wolf tracks disrupting the even snow.

Isa takes her boots off and sheds her outerwear, then runs her hand over the ornate mantle. “Is this baroque?”

“I had it brought here.” Sitting behind the piano in the corner, I play a few bars of Mozart while watching her inspection. “We rarely come in here.”

“Why not?” In white leggings and a long red sweater, she’s a good match for the maroon fabric on the chaise where she lounges.

“It’s too small for the entire family. Sometimes I play here, but the piano in the parlor is a finer instrument.” Crossing to

her, I lie next to her sweet body and wrap one arm around her waist.

“I like this room. It feels as if we’ve stepped back in time.” She runs her fingers along my jaw before combing them through my hair. “Let me share something with you.”

Pressing my forehead to hers, I open my mind.

Raw pain rushes through my heart. It’s so strong that it takes a moment to realize the pain is Isa’s and not my own.

A man in a police uniform stands in the doorway. “I’m sorry, Miss Miller. If it’s any consolation, I don’t think they suffered. The plane went down fast and they wouldn’t have felt anything.”

Wracking sobs draw painfully against my ribs. “I...thank you for coming to tell me.”

I close the door without saying goodbye. As I turn, I glance at my diploma lying on the coffee table. Stumbling through the living room, I make it to my bed before the tears and sorrow render me immobile.

The sun sets and rises and sets again.

Someone’s in the apartment. I hope it’s a robber who kills me and ends this pain.

“Isa?” Nina’s soft voice tries to crack my sorrow. Her arms wrap around me, and I cry against her hair.

I don’t know how much time has passed. “How did you know?”

“It was on the news this morning. I tried to call you.” She brushes my hair from my face. “Come on. Take a shower and I’ll make you something to eat. We need to make arrangements. I’m sure there are a few voicemails that need attention. Your phone has rung ten times just since I’ve been here.”

“I can’t...” My body aches. My heart is dead.

“Your parents were wonderful people, Isa. They deserve to be cared for now, don’t they?” Nina’s eyes are filled with tears, but her voice is strong.

Resigned, I head for the bathroom.

My gown is a perfect fit. Everything is perfect. The breeze from the Pacific Ocean brings the scents of Maui into my suite. People are bustling around, getting ready for the wedding, but I’m too blissful to pay much attention.

Peter and I will have a good life with three or four children so they’re never left all alone. It’s all going to work out.

Isa jerks out of my head. Wiping the tears from her face, she sits up. “I’m sorry. It was too much.”

Drawing her into my arms, I kiss her hair. “Thank you, sweetheart. I know that was very difficult. I’m sorry about your parents. I would have been honored to meet them.”

Still crying, she laughs. “I think my father would have loved you once he understood you. Mother would have adored you immediately.”

“It’s all going to be okay, my love. I promise. Just relax. You don’t have to share everything all at once and if some things are too painful, we can leave them in the past.” I would do anything to take her pain away.

“How do you live with all the things you showed me? Why aren’t you sad all the time?”

Lying back, I hold her close. “Those things happened many years ago. My skin has grown thick over all the years.”

She closes her eyes. “It must be nice to be wise.”

I could lie here with her for an eternity. “It’s nice you think that. But I’ve made many mistakes, some recently.”

“Like what?”

The last three years feel like one big error in judgment. “I left my family, thinking they needed to be independent of me. I believed they would never venture out and find mates if I didn’t push them. Once I felt a small victory of finding Britta for Oliver, I let my guard down and was captured, tortured, and made to do things I’m not proud of.”

“What things?”

“They drugged me so that I would have sex with their experimental subjects. Many times, I failed to resist.” More than anything, I wish I could change those memories.

“Did you hurt those women?” Her voice is sharp.

“Physically? No. I tried to be gentle. I found most of them since gaining my freedom. Some were in therapy and some had moved on. One is missing. I don’t know what happened to her.” I’ve hired a private investigator to keep looking for the missing woman.

“I don’t know what to say. It wasn’t your fault. You were as much a victim as the women were.” The fact that she doesn’t pull away means so much.

“That is exactly what Morris said.”

“Is Morris your therapist?” She smiles against my chest.

I laugh and hug her tight. “Morris is my friend, butler, conscience on occasion, and indeed my therapist when needed.”

“Except for ‘butler,’ Nina is that for me. She has always been there when I needed her. She’s pulled me out of all my darkest places.” She sighs. “I don’t know how I can ever make reparations for all she’s done.”

“Friendship is its own reward.”

Her head grows heavy, and she’s breathing slowly and evenly.

Closing my eyes, I don’t think I’ve ever been happier in my life. She’s too young for me. She can’t possibly understand what being my mate would be like. I don’t even know what’s to come. It’s been a long time since the future felt exciting.

The door opens and Morris steps in. He pauses, bows, and walks back out.

I close my eyes and send thoughts of easy days in Scotland through the bond between me and Isa. At least I can ease her dreams for the moment.

CHAPTER TWELVE



ISA

Nothing can compare to napping in Wentworth's arms. Every day we take some time in the small parlor together. Sometimes we nap and then he plays the piano for me. He also played the violin. I'm no expert, but he's amazing. I'm happy, and I've never slept so soundly in my life.

It's the fourth day of my week to decide and I just want to stay on the chaise all day with my beast. My stomach growls at the idea, so we head to the dining room for lunch.

Finn's expression is intense when he enters. "Did you walk through the gardens at the cottage?"

Wentworth cocks his head. "No. We've been inside all day. Perhaps it was Silas or Lucinda."

Finn shakes his head. "They went to town earlier this morning to have breakfast with Lucinda's mother."

They both look concerned. I ask, "With so many people living on the property, isn't it common to see a few footprints?"

Wentworth's frow furrows. "Those gardens are private. Silas built them to be secluded, and we all try to respect that by staying out unless invited."

Their worry makes my pulse speed. "Should I be afraid?" I can't imagine anything or anyone risking being on this property with the creatures' abilities.

With a warm smile, Wentworth pats my hand. "No. We'll find out who it was and make sure there's no danger."

Finn's brows rise. "I'll see what I can find and Griffin can track. We'll wait for Silas to come home before we disturb things. I called him, and they're on their way."



Despite the large family, most of the time, it's just Wentworth and me in the house. However, I'm alone, wandering around the library, looking for something to read. I feel a bit like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*. Though I'm not quite as excited as she was. I need something normal to distract me from all the newness of Scrim Hall.

I bend down to read some titles in the corner behind the steps that go up to a second-story walkway.

The door opens and closes.

Looking over, I expect to see Wentworth or Morris.

A woman with gray hair pulled into a bun stands just inside the library. "Miss Miller?"

I stand but don't get closer. The woman's eyes are void of emotion.

She scans the room. Her mouth is pulled into a smile that reminds me of one of those scary old porcelain dolls. Stopping when she sees me, she points. "There you are."

"Who are you?" My instincts put me on high alert. Something is wrong here.

"My name is Doris Washington. I've come to rescue you," she says flatly.

"I don't require rescuing, thanks. You can go." I inch over to the mantle. Wrapping my hand around the fire iron, I stay behind the couches.

Those dead eyes narrow. "You don't know what you need. That monster has you under his spell. He's poisoned you. Did you know they stole my memories? That beast drank my blood and poisoned me just as he has poisoned you. If you don't come with me now, they'll destroy you."

"Why would they do that?"

The window at the front of the house opens and three men dressed in white to match the snow climb through.

Doris laughs. “They’re trying to take over our world and mate with our women to repopulate their kind. They’re vile beasts and must be destroyed. The other women are too far gone, but you can still be saved if you come with me now.”

“How about if you all turn around and leave before you get hurt, and I’ll tell the owner of this house it was all a failed break-in?” I move around the couch but keep the wrought iron shaft low and hidden behind my leg.

Her laugh is so creepy, my stomach churns. “They all went to follow those tracks. The infected women are down at that new house. You have no choice but to come with me now before you’re the someone who gets hurt.”

Temper rising, I watch Doris but see the three men moving to surround me as they close in. Where is Morris? “You may force me out of here, but I’m going to bash a few heads before that happens.” I lift the iron and smash it into the first man to reach me.

He lifts his forearm but I still make enough contact to hear the sickening break and grunt of pain, a sound that satisfies me more than it probably should.

Swinging my weapon around, I go for the second, but the third grabs me around the waist and hits my hand so hard, I drop the weapon. I scream.

The door flies open. Morris tackles Doris to the hard floor. “You people will never learn.”

Cold metal presses to my throat.

Morris freezes.

Pushing him away, Doris staggers to her feet and attempts to pat her ruined bun back into place. “We don’t want to kill her, but better dead than imprisoned by the monsters.”

“No.” Morris holds up his hands. “Don’t hurt her.”

I want to punch Doris in her smug smile. “They thought they could take something from me. But Research for the

Betterment of Humanity restored my memory. I know everything.”

Morris cocks his head. “The only way to get vampire-removed memories back is with vampire elixir, and it works best if it comes from the same vampire who took your memory. I would guess they brainwashed you with lies to fill those empty spaces, madam.”

“More lies from an infected human. I pity you.” She picks the lamp up off the small table near the door and bashes Morris over the head. The converted seventeenth century vase shatters into a million pieces.

“No!” I scream, hoping someone will hear. Horrified, I watch Morris collapse to the floor and lay motionless.

As if we’re friends going to lunch, Doris smiles. “Time to go, my dear.”

They wrap me in a heavy blanket with my arms pinned at my sides and carry me into the woods. I try to wiggle away, but these men are too strong. Tossed over one’s shoulder and wrapped up like a burrito, my ribs ache as my captors trot through the snow. We reach a clearing, and I’m dropped in the back seat of a Hummer that’s been painted flat black.

“You must understand that these monsters have plans to enslave humanity, Miss Miller. I’m doing my duty just like any soldier. I’m saving you. You should be grateful.” The engine revs.

Pushing aside the voice of the mad woman, I open my mind the way I did when I shared my memories with Wentworth. Inside I scream as loud as I can. *They have me. I’m in a Hummer.*

A roar returns in my head. *I’m coming. Hold on.*

As we roll slowly through the woods, the vehicle bumps, and I’m so bound up in the blanket, I can’t move. My face is partially covered, and I can barely make out the snowy terrain. I want to tell Wentworth where I am, but I don’t know the area and it all looks the same.

There's a big bump and we reach a road. The truck speeds up.

Then we crash.

Twisting, I try to see what we hit.

Full of rage, Wentworth's face presses to the windshield. His fangs are fully extended, and he roars like a wild lion. His fist crashes into the glass, shattering it.

The driver steps on the gas and swerves as if he intends to shake Wentworth off.

Fury glowing in dark-blue eyes, Wentworth grabs the driver and pulls him from the vehicle.

A green and gold dragon swoops in and takes the man from him.

Doris's screams hurt my ears.

The men on either side of me open the doors and jump out. One clutching his broken arm, they both run into the woods.

Wentworth lowers his dripping fangs toward Doris. "You dare to touch my mate."

I wrench free of the blanket and push myself to the front seat. Touching Wentworth's cheek, I pet him. "Don't kill her. I know she deserves it, but killing will only bring the law here. I need you, Wentworth. They'll destroy you if you kill her."

Oliver appears like a blur. "Morris is alive. He needs a doctor to look at the gash on his head, but he's lucid. We've caught the two who ran."

The Hummer bounces as Silas jumps up. "Father, we know how you feel, but this is not our way. The police are coming. We reported a break-in, assault, and kidnapping. They can sort out the rest."

Threading my fingers through Wentworth's hair, I draw his gaze to mine. "Don't give them what they want. You are no monster, my love."

His eyes lose their rage and lighten in color.

Silently, Doris cries as the police sirens break through.

Wentworth takes my hand and helps me from the truck. His eyes burn, and he growls, "Climb on." He turns around.

Intimidated by the idea of riding my beast, I still can't resist the notion. I hold tight as he jumps from the hood. His body is so warm, I barely feel the cold as the trees blur by.

He runs on all fours like a cat, his muscles flexing and undulating beneath my body.

It's erotic and thrilling to feel his power and know I'm always safe with him. Opening my mind, I share all the love I feel for my beast. My reward is a wave of pure love flowing from Wentworth to me. This is a man who will never betray me. He jumped on a moving vehicle to rescue me. Sharing his thoughts and love for me, he bares his soul without reservation.

When he stops, we're in a dense part of the woods by a small shed.

I climb to my feet and shiver. "Where are we?"

Breath coming in long deep pants, he is still consumed by his beast. "It's an old hunting shelter."

As much as I want to be alone and tell him everything I feel and want, some things need doing. "I'll have to give a statement and Morris needs us."

"Yes." He stands up straight. "I needed a few minutes. The police that come will be local. They know me, but it might be better if I'm not involved. When the intruders are prosecuted, I can't be there. I'm sorry for that."

Rushing to him, I wrap my arms around him and press my cheek to his chest. His arms around me is perfection. I'm happy. After Peter, I never dreamed I would trust anyone. "I want to have a big family with lots of children."

His hands stop rubbing my back. "You're going to stay with me?"

"We have to work out how it will keep my business going, but I don't want to go back to loneliness when I can have this

kind of love. I want to stay with you, Wentworth Pettigrew. I'm your mate." I draw a long breath. "I want a lot of kids running around and never being lonely."

He lifts me from the ground and lowers his mouth to mine. Against my lips, he says, "As many as you want, my love." His kiss is slow and his tongue laps over mine, drawing a moan from me.

We melt a little snow with that kiss.

Climbing on his back, I feel his joy and desire. Mixed with that is the worry for his friend.

Back at Scrim Hall, he leaves me at the front door. "I won't be far."

My throat is tight with emotion. "I'll still be here." I watch him run into the woods.

EPILOGUE

8 Years Later, New Year's Eve

WENTWORTH

“Papa, can we run now?” Hunter is five and always wants to run. His siblings are just as rambunctious.

Sitting together as a family in the library with my daughter Eve on my lap is my favorite part of every day. Normally, the children would go to bed in an hour, and I would have Isa to myself. At least until one of them cried for water or some other made-up emergency. Tonight is special. On New Year’s Eve, we run. My sons and many of their children will run with us. Over the years, the family has grown.

“Not yet, Hunter.” I understand his excitement. Tonight is the first holiday run for him and his twin brother, Rider.

“I run,” Lainey says. She’s three. Her hair is brown like her mother’s, and her smile lights up the room.

Isa hugs Lainey tight and kisses her until she squeals with delight. “Not yet, my sweet. You have two more years before you’ll be running at night, baby girl.”

Expression very serious, my oldest child, Darius, looks the most like me. “Papa?”

“What’s wrong?”

“In school today, the reading was about the evolution of humans. If Mama evolved from apes, where did we evolve from?”

Isa looks on lovingly. She’s a wonderful mother, and from the additional scent, I would say she’s pregnant again. I’m guessing, from her unwavering grin, she already knows and plans to tell me soon.

Giving Darius my full attention, I admire his curious mind. “Well, that’s a good question. There are several theories. Some say God created us and some say we evolved from the beasts. I even heard once, that we were deposited on this planet by aliens.”

“What do you think, Papa?” Eve’s eyes stare up at me with total trust. She looks the most like her mother with hazel eyes and the cutest button of a nose.

“I think humans evolved from apes and pettigrew evolved from lions. It’s possible we evolved first and that’s why our numbers have depleted. Most families only had one child.” Looking around at the faces of my five children and thinking about the one growing inside Isa, I’m the happiest man alive.

Darius scrunches his nose. “Is it because Mama is human that there are so many of us?”

I shrug. “It could be. Maybe the blending of human and pettigrew is the next part of our evolution.”

From the doorway, Morris clears his throat. “The front yard is quite filled with family. I invited them in, but Silas insists it’s better if you come out.”

Eve wiggles free and runs with her siblings past Morris to the front door.

Isa stands. “Morris, perhaps the ladies would like to come inside.”

“They said they’ll watch everyone leave and then hoped for some New Year’s cheer in the parlor.” Morris grins and raises a brow.

“They already know you’ve prepared all their favorites.” Isa pulls the thick wool throw from the back of the couch and wraps it around herself and Lainey. “Let’s go watch your brothers and sister start their run.”

I wrap an arm around my wife and walk with her out the front door.

Lainey whines, and her bright blue eyes get teary.

Giving her nose a kiss, I say, “You’ll run soon enough, little one. And soon you’ll be a big sister as well as the auntie to all of these creatures.”

The grassy area in the middle of the round driveway is awash with the activity of so many children. Anabelle is expecting their first, but the rest of my sons already have been

blessed with babies who are ready to run. Silas's twin girls have already shifted and jump around, barking.

Isa slaps my arm. "I was saving it to surprise you later tonight."

I drag her forward and kiss her. "I've known for a few days. I can smell my baby growing inside you, my love."

Carrying a newborn, Nina joins us on the front step. "I can't believe your twins are old enough to run."

"Don't remind me." Isa gets a crease between her brows that I've learned means she's worried.

"We'll be back in an hour, and I won't let them out of my sight." I kiss her again and rush into the fray. Standing on all fours, I let out a roar.

Oliver's son jumps on my back with a laugh. "Gramps, I'm going with you." He's six, and so far, can't move like a vampire.

I look over at his father, who smiles and nods. One more roar and we run into the snowy woods.

The children were exhausted after the run. Hunter and Rider were already sleeping in my arms when we got back to Scrim Hall.

Once they're all in their beds and fast asleep, I'm ready to face the consequence of spoiling Isa's surprise.

I find her in front of the fireplace in our bedroom. She's curled up in an oversized chair, wearing a short black nightgown. Her skin glows in the firelight. She's perfect.

"Do I need to apologize?"

The way she laughs always fills my heart to bursting. "I should know better than to try to keep anything a secret from you."

I lift her so I can sit with her in my lap. I shrug then nuzzle her neck. "Your scent changes when you're pregnant. I can't

help my sense of smell, but I am sorry for spoiling your plans.”

“Are you happy?” Her hesitation means she’s nervous.

I move her so she’s straddling my lap.

The nightgown bunches, leaving her round ass exposed and her pussy tight against my needy cock. She rides the ridge and lets out a long moan. “Don’t distract me, Wentworth. Tell me if you’re happy about another baby after three years of believing we were done.”

“I’m extremely happy. If you bless me with a dozen children, I’ll be elated. When you’ve had enough babies...”

“Never.” Her eyes are bright with excitement and lust. “I love being a mother. I love watching our children grow and what you said tonight about this possibly being the evolution of pettigrew is the most exciting thing I’ve ever heard.”

Standing forces her to wrap her legs around my waist and she gasps.

I carry her to the bed.

Tearing the nightgown over her head, she gets on her hands and knees and lifts her ass to me. Her pussy glistens with delectable juices.

My mouth waters for a taste. “You like the idea of being the mother of a new species.”

“I do. If that species is a combination of you and me, I like it very much. Only love exists between us, so what we created can only be good.” She wags her ass back and forth.

Getting close, I breathe her in then lick her nectar. “So good, my Isa.”

On another moan, she lifts higher, begging for more.

I roll to my back, and slide in between her thighs. Grabbing her ass cheeks, I drag her against my face and devour her. I reach my tongue deep inside her, then lick her clit. Already swollen and sensitive, she pushes close while

pulling away, as if she's not sure which she wants. I suck hard, deciding for her as I press my finger inside her sweet body.

She screams into the pillow and comes fast and hard.

Before I can change position and slam inside her, she turns, lies on top of me, and sucks my cock into her soft mouth. Opening her throat, she takes most of me and grips the base in her fist.

“Isa, that’s so fucking good.”

She lets her teeth scratch my skin, driving me higher. Her hand pumps harder and faster while she tickles my balls and sucks.

Still so close to her most sensitive spot, I lap at her.

She lifts her ass away from me.

It's not far enough, with the length of my tongue, and I reach her hole and taste her again and again. Her body responds with renewed juices, and she lowers her ass for more. Never wanting to disappoint her, I wrap my hand around her thigh and thrust my finger deep while sucking her clit gently, then hard.

She loses the rhythm of the blowjob, but I don't care. Feeling her body tighten again is everything. As her pleasure rises, she gives up on sucking and shakes with the intense orgasm, then collapses before rolling to the mattress.

I lie on my side and hold her through the tremors. “You’re the most magnificent woman.”

“I need your cock buried deep inside me.”

“For fuck’s sake, Isa. I’m trying to be sweet.”

She lifts her knees and lets them fall open. “Be sweet later. Fuck me hard now.”

My beast is always happy to oblige a request like that. Keeping my weight on my elbows, I push deep and fast, filling her and drawing those deep moans from her sweet lips. Again and again, I fill her until I feel the tug of her body tightening around me.

The tingle starts at the base of my spine and spreads until I pour my seed into her and shake with a million lights.

I press my forehead to hers. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She kisses me, so soft it’s a total contrast to her demands of a few minutes before.

This is what I love. She’s all things. Tender wife, mad lover, and nurturing mother, all wrapped into one woman who is my perfect mate.

Rolling to my side, I pull her back against my chest. “I meant it when I said, I will be happy with as many babies as you want to give me.” I kiss the back of her neck, then nip her gently.

She wiggles against me, loving the feel of my teeth. “I didn’t think we’d have more when I didn’t get pregnant for so long after Lainey. I was happy with our family and felt blessed with five healthy, happy children.”

“And now?” My heart tightens with worry that this is more than she wanted.

“I’m so happy I could burst with it. I have no idea if we’ll have a dozen babies, but I know I have so much love to give, I’ll never be sorry for any of it. Coming here and meeting you was the best day of my life, Wentworth. At the time, I thought it was a crazy nightmare, but it was a dream, and I still haven’t woken up.”

I hold her close and breathe in the scent of her and our baby growing inside her. “You are my dream too, sweetheart. More of a dream than I deserve after so many years alone.”

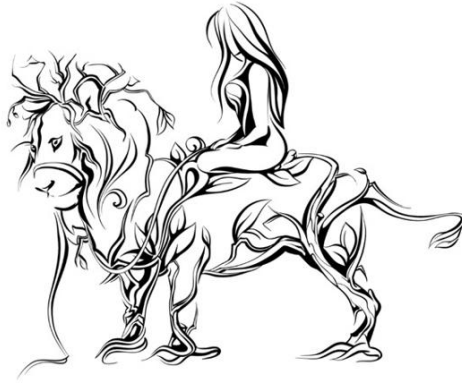
“No one will ever be alone in this family ever again.”

There’s a soft knock on the door. “Mommy?”

I laugh. “That much is certain.”

We both pull on pajamas quickly as that weepy call from the hallway likely means Lainey will be sleeping between us for the rest of the night.

Perfect.



Thank you for reading *Soul of a Monster*. I hope you loved Wentworth and Isa's story as much as I do. If you have only just met the Brothers of Scrim Hall and want to start from the beginning, now is the time to read [*Soul of a Vampire*](#).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Andie Fenichel (A.S. Fenichel) gave up a successful IT career in New York City to follow her husband to Texas and pursue her lifelong dream of being a professional writer. She's never looked back.

Andie adores writing stories filled with love, passion, desire, magic and maybe a little mayhem tossed in for good measure. Books have always been her perfect escape and she still relishes diving into one and staying up all night to finish a good story.

Originally from New York, she grew up in New Jersey, and now lives in Missouri with her real-life hero, her wonderful husband. When not reading or writing she enjoys cooking, travel, history, and puttering in her garden. On the side, she is a master cat wrangler and her fur babies keep her very busy.

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