

A muscular man's torso is the central focus, showing his chest and abdominal muscles. He is wearing blue jeans and a black belt. To his left, a brown bear is visible, looking down. The background is a dramatic mountain landscape with blue and purple hues under a clear sky.

Bearly

MARKED

MILLY TAIDEN

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BEARLY MARKED

BEARLY MATES

MILLY TAIDEN

 Latin
Goddess
Press, Inc.

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BEARLY MARKED

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MILLY TAIDEN

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<http://millytaiden.com>

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Kiera Wilson left her recent memory at the bottom of a cliff where she barely escaped death. She remembers her long-time friends but not the man who claims to be her fiancé. She doesn't have anything against getting to know him again, but her friends aren't so sure she was happy with him. **He's big and burly and kind of scary, but also hot in a growly way.**

Lev Pierce, alpha bear shifter, is not only alpha but CEO of a massive hotel chain where suddenly shifters are attacking others in broad daylight. **On top of that his mate is almost killed and no longer remembers who he is, not to mention his mother hates her. Everything around him is falling apart.**

Somehow Lev has to fix everything while convincing the love of his life that she truly loved him. As he delves into finding solutions, he discovers that someone is sabotaging his pack. **If he can't figure out who the culprit is in time, he is going to lose all that he loves, including his mate.**

*—For my amazing readers.
Enjoy some badass bears!*

ONE



LEV

Lev Pierce sat at his office desk, staring incessantly at his dark phone screen. No text messages, no calls, nothing from Kiera. The last time he saw her was twenty-four hours ago. After that, the contact between them went stagnant.

Since she was his mate, that simply wouldn't do.

The night prior, he barely slept. Thoughts of what happened to Kiera plagued his mind and made him toss in his bed the entire time.

Even though he *really* didn't want to show up to work that morning, he was the CEO of the company and the alpha leader of the Pierce Bear Clan. His people counted on him, and he would be a fool to let them down.

Still, Kiera never left his mind.

As a way to take control of the situation, Lev recalled their interactions the day she went missing. They woke up in bed together, as they usually did, and she made them breakfast. Then, she kissed him goodbye before departing for work.

After that, she disappeared. And he hadn't heard from her since.

"Shit," he mumbled, violently rising from his chair and pacing the expanse of his office. "Shit, shit, shit."

A knock came at his door. Despite the overwhelming urge to yell at whoever it was to fuck off and leave him alone, he bit down the words and forced himself to stop.

"Come in."

One of his interns poked her head in. Her name evaded him, lost in the haze of his mind. “You have a meeting in fifteen minutes, sir.”

“Tell them I can’t make it. I’m sick. I feel a tickle in my throat coming on.”

“Sick?” She furrowed her brows. “Then, why did you come in today?”

Shut the hell up, he nearly said. Yet, he forced a smile that disappeared as quickly as it came. “There’s too much work to be done. I promise I’ll stay put in my office.”

With a hesitant nod, the intern retreated and gently shut the door. The building energy in his body ... his bear begging for a chance to come ... wanted a quick release, so he contemplated throwing a vase or flipping over his desk.

Yet, he held himself back. Those weren’t rational responses. He had a reputation to maintain and a title to live up to. What were people going to say when they found his office reduced to shreds?

Sighing, Lev leaned on the edge of his desk and closed his eyes. Every time his phone pinged, he jolted upright and raced to see what was going on. He desperately wanted to hear something from the police, enforcers, or *anyone* who was willing to give him an update on Kiera’s whereabouts.

If not, he was bound to lose his mind sooner than later.

Eventually, he received a call from his brother, Nate. Certainly not the person he hoped for, but it was better than nothing.

“Hello?” Lev greeted flatly, ready to fling insults Nate’s way if this conversation proved useless.

“They found her, Lev.”

His mouth fell open.

“Dude, I ...” A commotion rumbled in the background of the phone call, all while Lev fished for his blazer and car keys. “They found her, but she’s not in the best shape. I-I don’t

know. I tried to ask questions, I did, but they aren't talking to anyone right now. Their priority is to stabilize Kiera."

Stabilize her? Lev paled. What happened to Kiera? What happened to his mate?

"Give me the address of the hospital," he whispered, storming through the halls as if the devil himself chased after him. "Now, Nate."

With a tremor to his words, Nate spit out the words. Thankfully, Lev knew the roads of their small town like the back of his hand, so he knew exactly where to go as he hopped into his Lexus and zoomed to the hospital.

Outside, the skies were gloomy, and the wind blew a harsh breeze. He hoped that wasn't a bad omen.

When he arrived at the hospital, he nearly left the car running in his haste to enter the emergency room and ask for his fiancé. His growing frustration with the front desk receptionist, who typed too slowly for his liking, dissipated quickly once Nate found him.

His younger brother wrapped his arms around him tightly, a glossiness to his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Lev. I'm so sorry."

"What happened?" Lev grabbed him by the shoulders and forced him to look at him directly. By then, Nate was on the brink of dissolving into a mess of tears. "What happened to her?"

"She's in a coma," he squeaked, bottom lip quivering. "I ... I talked with the doctors a little. They're coming in and out of her room and ..."

"Take me there. Take me to where they have her."

"I-I don't know, Lev. They might not let us go in."

"Fuck them. I'm her mate. I'll burn this hospital to the ground if they don't let me see her."

"Wait!"

Nate snatched him by the wrist, tugging him close.

“Don’t do anything that’ll make them send you to a psych ward, you idiot.” Nate sniffled, leading the way to Kiera’s room. On the way there, Lev picked at his hands and nearly tore off a painful hangnail by accident. “They told me they think it was an accident.”

“What the fuck happened? Why the hell is she in a coma?”

“She was in a car accident. It was raining, so they think she hydroplaned, and the car veered off the side of a cliff and ...”

“What?” Lev suddenly felt a horrible ache in his chest. His *fiancé* swerved off a damn cliff? “What ... What the fuck ...”

“Calm down, please,” Nate pleaded, cupping his face with his hands. “I-I kind of freaked out about you coming here, dude. I know how you get when something happens to Kiera ... and the worst possible thing *did* happen to her.”

“H-How is she alive?” Lev managed out.

“She shouldn’t be. Most people don’t survive accidents like that, but ... She’s strong. They found her, but she was barely breathing. And they airlifted her to the hospital.”

Once they found her hospital room, Lev held himself back at the door. He didn’t want to admit it, but he was *afraid*. The thought of finding his mate hooked up to a machine with tubes coming out of her nose and mouth terrified him to no end. In an instant, his knees buckled, and it took holding onto Nate’s shoulder to keep him upright.

You’re an alpha leader, Lev. As cynical as ever, the voice in his mind scolded him for the moment of vulnerability. In times of danger, you’re supposed to stand strong. Get yourself together.

Gradually, Nate opened the door to reveal the sight.

Kiera, pale and bruised, lay in the hospital bed with a heart rate machine beeping beside her. Balloons and flowers already trickled in, piling up on one of the bedside tables.

His heart seized in his chest, and there was no fight left in him to hold off the tears forming in his eyes. The love of his

life nearly died, and he wasn't able to do anything to save her.

Was this his fault? Could he have done something more?

"Please, don't blame yourself," Nate said as if sensing his thoughts. "This was a freak accident. It could've happened to anyone. Sit. It looks like you're going to pass out."

Nodding, Lev allowed his younger brother to guide him to the seat beside Kiera, where he carefully reached out for her hand. Cuts littered her delicate skin.

"Fuck," Lev breathed out, taking shallow breaths as his glossy eyes trailed Kiera's frail figure. "We could have lost her. She could have *died*."

"But she didn't," Nate replied, crossing his arms over his chest. He refused to look at Kiera directly, perhaps in fear that he was going to burst into tears before long. "And that's what matters."

"I'm not leaving this room."

"What?"

"I'm not going anywhere until she wakes up from the coma," Lev explained. "I want to be the first one she sees when she comes to."

"But ..." Nate frowned. "What about the business? And the clan? Mom isn't going to be happy about this, you know it."

"I don't give a fuck what Mom thinks about this," Lev snapped, gritting his teeth. "I'll work from this hospital room. When you have the time, drive back to my office and get me my laptop. Everyone will understand once the news gets out."

"Of course." Patting him on the back, Nate offered a small smile. "I'll support you through anything. You know that. I don't want you to lose yourself because of this. The doctors made it clear that she was going to recover. It might take a while until that happens, but they're not ruling her out."

"Why did this shit happen in the first place?"

Lev's voice trembled. He lowered his head until it rested against Kiera's hand.

"She and I were supposed to get *married*. We were planning our wedding."

"It's still going to happen, Lev. Once she recovers."

"Yeah," he huffed, shaking his head. "How long is it going to take? Weeks? Months? Years?"

"I have faith in her. In a few weeks, she'll be up and ready to take on the world like she always is. Don't worry."

"You're going to have to act as a liaison between myself and the clan," Lev deadpanned, which stole the smile from Nate's face. "Kiera's my number one priority right now, and I'm not leaving her side until she's discharged, so you're going to have to step up to the plate, bud."

Nate wrinkled his nose. "Shit. I've never been one to *lead*."

"Well, here's your chance to prove your worth."

His little brother averted his gaze. Instead, he glanced at the artwork on the walls that depicted a serene scene at the beach and another showing the canopies of an unknown forest. Calming images that contrasted with the brewing maelstroms in their hearts.

In the background, the beeping of the machine snapped Lev out of his thoughts.

"I told Mom already. And Josie. Mom ... You know how she is," Nate said.

"Yes, I do. I would have appreciated it if you hadn't told her at all, but there's nothing I can do about that now."

"That's not right. Kiera's going to be her daughter-in-law."

"Yes, but Mom acts like a raging bitch sometimes."

The thoughts of his mother soiled his mood even further. She never liked Kiera since she believed that Lev could do so much better than a nurse. What she didn't realize was that Lev

didn't give a damn about socioeconomic status or about the gossip of the other women in their clan.

For all he cared, they could burn in hell.

"She wants the best for us," Nate offered. "Most of the time."

"Yeah, well, what *she* wants isn't the best for me. If it were up to her, I'd be engaged to the daughters of one of her close friends." Lev chuckled dryly, shaking his head as he thought about the useless blind dates his mother used to set him up on before meeting Kiera. "I'd be miserable if I followed her orders."

"I'll get your stuff. I'll let you know when I come back. And Lev?" Nate stopped, one hand on the doorknob. "Take it easy on yourself, okay? We don't need another member of the family falling into a hospital bed anytime soon."

"Got it, kid."

Once his younger brother departed from the hospital room, Lev slumped in his chair. His eyes gazed across Kiera's still body. She was breathing, albeit weakly, and her skin lacked its usual soft glow.

"Why didn't I drive you to work yesterday?" Lev whispered as he rubbed circles into Kiera's skin with his thumb. "Why wasn't I with you?"

No response. Not even a stir.

Only the beeping of the machine.

TWO



KIERA

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Her eyes opened slowly, grimacing at the soft light that cascaded into the room from one of the windows.

Lifting a hand, she shielded her eyes, but the slightest movement caused a shockwave of dull pain to shoot through her body.

What the hell?

Was she in the hospital because she got hit by a truck or something? It sure seemed like it, but she didn't remember what had happened.

And she didn't recognize the guy slumped in the chair beside her. With a wince, she pulled her hand from his grasp, which was enough to jolt him awake.

"Kiera?" The man blurted it out quickly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and blinking a few times. "Kiera! You're awake!"

Her eyes narrowed, watching with immense confusion as the man bounced out of his chair and caressed her face. Who the fuck was this? And why was he *touching* her like this?

Clearing her throat, she pulled away from his touch. "Can I speak to a doctor or something?"

The smile fell from his face. "Baby, what's wrong? Why aren't you happy to see me?"

"I would like to speak with the doctor," she repeated, cold to his subsequent attempts of affection. "Please."

“Kiera, it’s ...” the man gestured to himself, placing a large hand over his chest. “It’s Lev. Your mate. We’re *engaged*.”

Taking her left hand, he pointed out the exceptional diamond ring on her finger. But that didn’t make any sense. She *wasn’t* engaged, not to her knowledge.

“And when did that happen?” Kiera asked.

Just like that, her comment sucked the life out of his eyes.

He shook his head, backing toward the exit. In a brusque motion, he opened the door and flagged down the nearest doctor, who was a bald-headed man with glasses and a clipboard under his arm.

A small smile flashed on his weary face as his eyes met hers. “Hello there, Kiera Wilson. How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” Kiera readjusted her position on the bed, annoyed by the tubes that ran along the expanse of her body. She felt like tugging them all out at once. “But I’m a bit confused.”

“Why’s that?”

“What’s this *man* doing in my room?” With an accusatory glint to her words, Kiera eyed the man who called himself Lev with suspicion and distrust.

In response, Lev ran a hand across his face. His hair was disheveled, and there were heavy bags beneath his eyes. Stubble covered the lower half of his face, and while he was attractive, Kiera wasn’t too thrilled to have a complete stranger in her hospital room.

“Doctor, I’m her mate,” Lev said, and Kiera visibly recoiled.

“I don’t know who you *are*. How is it possible that you’re my mate?”

“We’re engaged. And ... she’s been in a coma for a few days, and they told me that she was going to get better and she woke up just now, but she doesn’t remember me. Why? Why doesn’t she remember me?”

“Calm down, Mr. Pierce. I can handle the situation from here.” Then, the doctor turned his attention toward her. “Kiera, do you recognize this man at all?”

“No.”

“Bullshit,” Lev mumbled, and the doctor sent him a pointed look. “There’s a reason why I haven’t left this room in a long time. I’m not a nobody. I’m the love of her life.”

“Do you remember the accident that sent you to the hospital in the first place?”

Although she tried to piece together what happened, it wasn’t working. “No, not at all. What happened to me? It feels like I fell off a ten-story building.”

The doctor sighed, sending Lev an apologetic look. That irritated her. Why was *he* getting any sympathy? She was the one who was in the hospital bed.

“She must have lost a portion of her memory. How long ago did you meet Kiera?”

“About a year ago,” Lev replied slowly. Then, his breathing quickened. “Are you telling me she doesn’t remember the last year of her life?”

“This is likely a case of short-term amnesia. There’s a chance she’ll regain her memory in time, but for right now, there’s no need to place any unnecessary pressure on her. She’s already been through enough.”

“*What* happened?” Kiera asked, emphasizing the word. “Why isn’t anyone answering my questions? I have a lot of them.”

“You lost control of your vehicle while you were driving and hydroplaned off a cliff,” the doctor replied.

Kiera’s eyes widened. “And I’m alive?”

“Yes. It was a miracle. We’re very glad to see that you’ve returned to us, Miss Wilson. I’ll let your attending doctor know about this as soon as possible. How are you feeling in general? Can you move?”

“Well, sure, but most of my limbs feel numb. Can I walk? Can I do something?”

“No, she shouldn’t,” Lev intervened, shaking his head. “She might hurt herself.”

“You’re nobody to me. You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

A world of hurt flashed through his eyes with that statement, but she didn’t care. It was the truth. Why was she going to obey the orders of some man she had never seen before? She didn’t know how or why the hospital allowed him into her room in the first place, but she knew a few things for certain.

He wasn’t her mate, she wasn’t engaged to him, and that was that.

As the doctor made his way out of the room, Lev followed him. He begged for answers, pestering the doctor to no end, and she heard him in the hallways even after the door closed.

Kiera rolled her eyes. “Good riddance.”

When her attending doctor arrived, Kiera smiled warmly and stretched out her arms, satisfied to hear loud cracks as her elbows and wrists got some much-needed movement.

“Kiera, it’s so good to see you’re awake.”

“Doctor, what’s going on with that man who keeps saying I’m his mate? I don’t know him. And I’m not engaged to anyone, either, so I don’t have a clue what he’s talking about.”

“You’re suffering from amnesia,” she replied, scribbling notes on her clipboard. “He’s been here from the start. He hasn’t left your side and even took it upon himself to work from this hospital room throughout his time here.”

Kiera hummed. While that *was* nice, she wasn’t convinced. “That doesn’t change the fact that I don’t remember who he is. How do I know that’s the truth? What if this is all one huge elaborate lie?”

The doctor grinned, laughing softly at the suggestion. “Believe me, I wouldn’t be involved in something like that.

The only thing that matters to me is that you feel all right. It's important that we get you home so that you can start your recovery process. Not a lot of people have gone through what you have and survived to tell the tale."

Shrinking at the comment, Kiera nodded. "I shouldn't be alive right now, huh?"

"The chances of surviving a car wreck like yours were slim, but you beat the odds." The doctor placed her clipboard under her arm. "If you don't mind, I would like to run some tests to make sure that you're set to get discharged today."

"Today?"

"We planned on discharging you to your mate, but ..."

"Fuck no." Kiera grimaced, clapping a hand over her mouth. "Sorry. But no. I don't know him. How many times do I have to repeat this? I don't feel comfortable leaving with him, so can you call my friend instead? Her name is Dee, Dee Wixx."

"Certainly."

And as requested, her doctor pulled the right moves to ensure that Dee was the one who accepted her with open arms once she took the first steps out of the emergency room. They were wobbly ones, but Dee made sure she didn't fall.

"Oh, Kiera," she whispered, pressing her cheek against hers as they embraced in the parking lot. "I thought I lost you. What the hell is wrong with you? Why did you almost leave me like that?"

"Do you really think I put myself in the hospital intentionally?" Kiera quipped, pulling away. Then, a somber expression etched across her face. "Is it true? I hydroplaned off a cliff?"

"Yes. I nearly collapsed when they told me the news. Soon enough, everyone knew what was going on. The clans, Nate, Lev ..."

"Hold on." Kiera held up a hand. "Why are you mentioning Lev? And why the hell was he in my hospital

room when I woke up?”

Dee laughed incredulously. “You’re kidding, right? He’s your husband-to-be. Your mate.”

No, no, that didn’t sound right. That *wasn’t* right at all. Everyone kept telling her that this *Lev* guy was her mate, but she didn’t recognize him in the slightest. Was she going crazy? Did the car accident cause a large piece of her brain to fly out in the collision?

Dee shook her head, brushing off the lint that clung to Kiera’s clothing. “Whatever. I’ll explain everything to you in the car. Let’s head back to my place. Is that all right?”

Nodding, Kiera allowed herself to be ushered into the passenger seat of Dee’s car. Her friend hopped into the driver’s side, quickly turning off the radio that played cheesy radio tunes.

“Sorry, I forgot I had this station on.”

“What even *was* that?” Kiera asked, laughing at the lyrics she briefly heard. “It’s horrible.”

Dee shrugged, backing out of the parking spot carefully. “I don’t know. This station is playing the top hundred hits in the last year, but I don’t know *who* gave them the authority to say that these were the best of the best. You knew that one, right? You used to talk about how it made your ears bleed whenever it came on.”

A frown spread along her lips.

A tense silence filled the car. Dee kept driving.

“When you moved out to live with Lev, you left this place to me,” she explained, parking the car in front of a quaint little spot encapsulated with trees and colorful flora. “I made my own.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Right?” Dee unbuckled her seat belt, then leaned over to do the same to Kiera’s. “I should have prepared a little better. I don’t have any of your stuff. Do you think I should call Lev and tell him to bring some of your things?”

“No.” Kiera shook her head, making a move to exit the car. “He’s nothing to me, so there’s no need to bother him.”

“But ...” Dee trailed off. Then, she let the subject drop entirely. “All right. You’re exhausted, aren’t you? Good thing you’re my size.”

They entered Dee’s home, and Kiera was met with countless photographs plastered along the walls. Most of them were of Dee and her closest friends, which included Kiera.

Some of the photographs included Lev, with his arm wrapped around Kiera as they smiled wide for the camera. She stared at the images for a long time, brows furrowed

These events clearly happened ... so why don't I remember a damn thing? What is this amnesia doing to my brain?

Emerging from somewhere behind her, Dee sighed happily as she gazed at the same photo. “You and Lev are the cutest couple.”

“We’re *not* a couple.”

“Right, right,” she whispered before handing over a set of pajamas. “I fished through my bathroom drawers and found an unopened toothbrush that you can use.”

“Thanks, Dee.”

The more she thought about her lost relationship with Lev, the more her head throbbed. She didn’t want to linger on what she couldn’t remember.

But it happened, Kiera. The proof is right here in front of you.

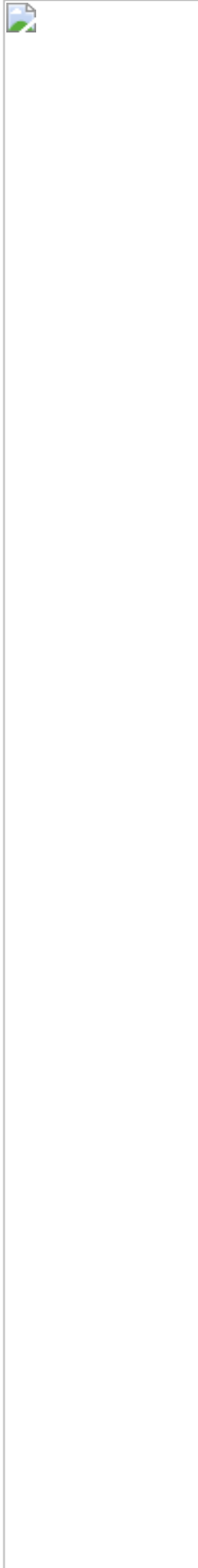
“Good night, Dee. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Kiera. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

In the guest bedroom, alone with her thoughts, Kiera dressed in her pajamas and quickly settled in bed. Late-night thinking was dangerous, even more so with the thoughts of a handsome man who claimed to be her mate.

THREE



LEV

*S*he doesn't remember you.

Lev winced. The bear inside him was restless, but he did everything he could to ignore the nagging feeling in his chest that refused to ease.

She doesn't even know you.

“Shut up,” he mumbled, tightly clenching one of Kiera’s shirts in his hand. “Shut the fuck up.”

This was only temporary, after all. So what? Amnesia wasn’t going to get in the way of the passionate love Lev felt for Kiera.

She wanted to stay a few nights at Dee’s house, which was fine. There was the reassurance he needed to know that she was in good hands. Dee wouldn’t let anything happen to her.

Still, there was a deep void in his chest that widened with each passing moment. He longed for the moment when he would lay with Kiera in his arms again, but that was taken from him the moment she stared at him with confusion.

If there was one thing about Lev Pierce, it was that he was a fighter. And he wasn’t going to put the boxing gloves down until he had Kiera by his side again.

So, he started strategizing, something that occupied his anxious mind as he gathered Kiera’s things in a small suitcase.

The doctor said that she, more or less, lost the memories from her last year of life, which included meeting him, dating

him, and getting engaged. That stung worse than a wasp attack, but he pressed forward. He never lost sight of the goal.

Lev planned on wooing her again. That meant earning her trust, getting close to her, and taking her out on the dates that made her fall in love with him in the first place.

The bear inside him roared desperately, craving Kiera's sweet touch to heal the aching wounds in his heart, but Lev's rational mind knew that wasn't possible. He wanted this to work, so he needed to ease his way into the situation methodically.

What if it backfired? Wrinkling his nose, he dispelled the thought as he dragged the suitcase to his car. *What if Kiera falls in love with someone else?*

“Shut the fuck up. Please,” he said, louder than all the times before.

That wasn't possible. Kiera was *his* and his only. He wasn't going to lose her to anyone.

As he made the drive to Dee's place, small things reminded him of Kiera along the way. The songs on the radios, the billboards he saw that Kiera liked to laugh at. He waited in traffic, tapping his fingers to the beat of a song when he noticed a small breakfast place that he had taken her to in the beginning stages of their relationship.

It was only fitting that he ordered a breakfast bagel or two, along with an iced coffee, to take along for the journey.

When he knocked on the door to Dee's home with a bag of food and coffee in hand along with the suitcase, he fully expected to be greeted by the little firecracker Dee, the woman with enough light in her eyes to illuminate the darkest nights. She had a heart of gold, especially considering that she dropped everything to house Kiera when she needed it the most.

Instead, Kiera answered the door. Although her eyes were wide with surprise, there was a mix of doubt there too. Uncertainty.

Lev swallowed hard, doing his best not to let that get the best of him.

“Hi, there,” he said gently, handing her the bag. “This is for you.”

“What are you doing here?” Kiera asked, slowly taking the bag from him, as well as the coffee once he offered it. “What is this?”

“Bagels. Cheese, eggs, and bacon are included. I know that’s how you like them. Plus, I brought some of your stuff over. You’re welcome.”

“How did you ...” However, the words caught in her throat. Then, she widened the door for him to enter. A flutter of relief filled his chest. This was much better than a door slam to the nose. “Dee left for work half an hour ago.”

“So you’re alone?”

“Don’t get any ideas.”

“Hey,” Lev said, raising his hands in defense. Grabbing the suitcase, he plopped it beside the door. “I would never do something that you aren’t comfortable with. You have my word on that.”

Her beautiful eyes narrowed. She wore a baby blue set of pajamas that hung loosely from her body, but Lev still thought she was the most attractive person on the planet. His bear roused, restless for the chance to get closer, but he reared the beast down.

“Do you have plans on staying?” Kiera plopped the bag on the kitchen counter and grabbed one of the bagels. After taking a quick sip of coffee, her eyes brightened. “I wouldn’t want to keep you if you’re busy.”

“I’ll always make time in my schedule for you.”

“That’s great, and all, but Dee told me that you’re the CEO of a big company. You’re a busy man.” As she chewed, she covered her mouth with a hand. “And I’ve got nothing to do today besides rest and recovery.”

“How are you feeling? Does anything hurt?”

He took a step forward which made Kiera take a step back. *Ouch.*

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to push.”

“No, it’s ...” Kiera swallowed, running her tongue along her teeth. “I’m all right. Thanks.”

“Would you like anything else?”

“You’re being too nice to me. I’m expecting a catch soon.”

“No catch, none at all. I just wanted to spend some time with you.”

Snapping her fingers, she pointed at him. “There it is.”

“I don’t consider that a catch.”

“Of course, it is. You’re buttering me up with a delicious bagel and iced coffee. Do you think I’m going to sing like a bird for you now? I still don’t know you very well other than what Dee told me about you.”

“Does that mean you know about the history between us?” Lev gestured toward the ring on her finger. “We’re engaged. Or we used to be. Before this happened.”

“I’m well aware.” Kiera placed her hand behind her back, concealing the bling. “And it’s strange. So much has happened in my life the past year, and I don’t remember a damn thing.”

“I can help you remember if you’d like.” Backing away from Kiera, he made his way into the living room, where he knew Dee kept the board games stashed away under the coffee table. “How about a card game? Or Monopoly?”

“Seriously? Is this a joke?”

“Not at all. What about a round of Blackjack? Loser has to disclose three facts about themselves. No holding back.”

Despite rolling her eyes, Kiera couldn’t fight the smile forming on her face. She took her bagel and coffee with her into the living room, where Lev slid out the card deck and performed a few fancy shuffling tricks that she giggled at.

Lev made sure to lose each round just so that he was able to explain a bit more about himself each time. And Kiera, perhaps suspecting what he was doing, sat back and allowed it. That went on for hours.

Then, she shifted gears and decided to watch cheesy romantic comedies that she laughed at but secretly enjoyed. Lev knew her down to her capillaries. She was his, but it was going to take her a while to realize that.

Playing board games and watching movies were what they did a year ago on their first unofficial date. Perhaps, doing the things that they once did together as a fledgling couple would help her remember. He desperately hoped so. Yet, he didn't mind the wait as long as she returned to him when things were said and done.

After spending the day with Kiera, he made his way home, full of happiness and contentment. Nothing was going to ruin his mood.

That was until he spotted a familiar car parked in front of his home. Then, as he stepped past the threshold of his house, he noticed a pair of feminine sneakers that didn't belong to him, Kiera, or his younger sister Josie.

A clatter came from the kitchen. "Lev, honey? Is that you?"

"What are you doing here, Mom?" Lev asked, entering the kitchen where he found his mother bustling around with pots and pans. It smelled good, but he wasn't in the mood to compliment anything associated with her. "What's this?"

"What? I can't make dinner for my son anymore?"

"If I wanted you to make dinner, I would have told you in advance. There's a reason why you're here," he said, flinging his keys on the kitchen island. "And I don't trust that it's a good one."

"Hush up, sit down, and relax," she replied, serving him a steaming hot plate of steak and rice with asparagus on the side. "Let your mother take care of you for once, will you?"

“Why didn’t you invite Nate and Josie?” Lev eyed the plate as if it were laced with poison. “If you wanted to make me dinner, the least you could do is invite my siblings along.”

“Well, I thought it would be nice to sit down with you and chat for a little bit. Wouldn’t you agree?”

His mother pointed to a collection of red and white wines he displayed in a cabinet.

“Open up one of those reds for me, will you? I need it. I’ve had a long day. You wouldn’t believe it.”

“Why are you here?” His fists clenched. “I appreciate the dinner, but I’m starting to think you’re planning something nefarious.”

“Nefarious? God, Lev, you’ve never had any trust in me. None at all.” Slamming her hand into the counter, she groaned. “You’re in a piss-poor mood right now. Is it because you saw that little girlfriend of yours? The nurse?”

“How the fuck did you ...?” Lev shut his mouth and exhaled deeply. His mother always managed to find out the small details of his life. “That’s none of your business.”

“It *is* my business, Lev. Especially since it pertains to the reputation of the clan. I mean, think about it. Why are you with her in the first place? She’s a nurse. A nurse and a CEO? I’ve never seen a more mismatched pairing in my life.”

“So you broke into my home to talk shit about my fiancé?”

“Fiancé.” A cruel laugh fell from her lips. “You’re still on that? She doesn’t remember you. And thank God for that. Maybe now you’ll realize that she wasn’t the one for you and move on.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Lev zeroed in on his breathing. In his mind, he focused on Kiera’s laugh, her smile, her dazzling eyes. It calmed the rage his mother incited.

“I never understood you, Lev. Really? I mean, you could have dated any woman you wanted. Any at all. What about Britney? Or Delilah or Suzy? All of them were great girls, and you never gave them the time of day.”

“The daughters of your friends?” Lev shot back, sending her a perplexed look. “Why the fuck would I want to date them? So that they can dig their claws into me the way you were never able to?”

“Watch your mouth, Lev.” She raised an indignant finger at him. “Do not talk to me like that. I’m your mother.”

“You don’t tend to act like one.” Taking a bite of steak, his face contorted with disgust. “Overcooked. You’ve lost your edge over the years, Ma.”

“Lev!”

He took his leave from the kitchen, leaving her to yell belligerently by herself. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with that. Matter of fact, he drowned her out completely.

She never liked his relationship with Kiera, but that didn’t matter to him. After meeting Kiera for the first time, she threw a fit and wailed about how she was nothing like the *pretty* girls Lev used to date.

What a bitch of a mother I have, Lev mused. Just my luck.

No one was going to stand between him and Kiera, not even the woman who birthed him.

FOUR



KIERA

Walking into the living room, Kiera was surprised to see pillows and blankets on the floor, creating some sort of tent. She skeptically walked around the couch and began to peer into the tent, only for Dee to pop out.

Kiera screamed and fell to the floor, and Dee rushed to her side.

“Oh, Kiera, I’m so sorry,” she began, holding Kiera’s hand while she breathed heavily on the floor. “I forgot that *you* forgot.” Dee paused. “Never mind, are you all right?”

“Yeah,” Kiera gasped, taking Dee’s assistance and standing up. She smiled. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Taking a deep breath, she observed the rest of the room. Candles were lit on the coffee table, string lights lined the opening to the broad tent, and the TV was on Netflix with the romantic comedy section ready for clicking.

“What is all of this?” Kiera asked, smiling.

“This,” Dee said with a large grin and led Kiera to the kitchen, “is your girl’s night.”

Kiera laughed. “Like we did in college?”

Dee nodded and smiled, holding up a finger. “Speaking of, guess who else is coming?”

“Who?” Kiera asked, grabbing a glass of water from the sink.

“Jayne!”

Kiera's eyes widened with excitement. "No way! She's in town?"

"Yes," Dee responded enthusiastically. "She's visiting her parents for a few months, and she can do most of her work from home now, even from overseas." She gave her a small grimace and nearly whispered, "I've heard that she might have to come home more permanently."

"Really?"

Kiera thought of the last time she saw Jayne. They were in college together and lived in the same hall. Jayne was packing her things early in the morning to study abroad in Spain for a year. Kiera hugged her goodbye and hoped to see her soon, but Jayne loved Spain so much that she decided to stay once the year was up.

Jayne never was all that good with money, though. She always seemed to be chasing it just to spend it, and while Kiera loved her friend, she wouldn't be surprised if that lifestyle had caught up with her.

Lifting the glass of water to her lips, Kiera surveyed the kitchen and saw popcorn, candy, and various other snacks lining the counters.

"Oh," Dee said, waving a hand at the snacks. "These are starters. I figured we would order from Little Dumpling later."

"Little Dumpling?" Kiera asked.

"It's your favorite Chinese restaurant; you always get the chicken fried rice with wonton soup."

"Let's hope I still like it," Kiera said mockingly. Dee laughed, quickly covering her mouth, and Kiera lowered the water from her lips. "It's okay," Kiera began. "It was supposed to be a joke."

"I know. I'm sorry," Dee apologized, grabbing Kiera's arm. "I guess I'm just not sure what the boundaries are with all that yet."

"It's okay," Kiera said, smiling at Dee. "Thank you."

“Of course,” Dee responded, laying her head on Kiera’s shoulder.

A knock on the door startled them, and Dee walked toward it joyfully with Kiera in tow. Dee opened the door and screamed with joy as Jayne walked into the apartment. Kiera’s eyes began to water as they huddled in for a group hug.

Once they pulled apart, Jayne placed her hands on either side of Kiera’s face.

“Are you okay? How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” Kiera said, chuckling as she lowered Jayne’s hands from her cheeks. “I just can’t believe you’re here.”

“Believe it,” Jayne said, holding up a bottle of wine.

“Jayne,” Dee remarked, “she can’t drink. She’s still recovering.”

“Right,” Jayne said, closing her eyes in embarrassment before glancing at Kiera. “I’m sorry.”

“Guys, it’s okay,” Kiera assured, walking into the living room. “I know it’s weird for everyone to adjust to, but really, I’m doing fine.”

“Okay, good,” Jayne said, following Kiera and gasping at the living room display. “This is so cute,” she exclaimed as she took a seat under the tent. “So,” Jayne began, motioning for Kiera to join her under the tent. “Come tell me everything.”

Kiera glanced at the tent and felt her heart sink. She felt grateful that her friends had gone through so much trouble to create this night, but guilt struck her. Not only had her life changed, but those around her were struggling to adapt to her new life void of memory.

Forcing a smile, Kiera joined Jayne under the tent and told her what the doctors said about the crash and the last things she remembered. Jayne listened intently, asking so many questions about what she could and couldn’t remember that Kiera felt like she was being examined again.

“Oh,” Kiera said. “Also, apparently, I’m dating some guy named Lev? I *was* dating him before the crash, and I guess I

still am?”

Jayne and Dee exchanged looks across the tent, and Kiera caught it. She cocked her head to the side and looked at them suspiciously.

“What?” Kiera asked.

“Nothing,” Jayne remarked, picking up the bottle of wine. “Do you mind if we ...” Her voice trailed off as she motioned to the bottle.

“No, please, please go for it,” Kiera said, forcing a smile as she thought of the exchanged look.

Kiera watched as Jayne took the bottle to the kitchen, popped the cork, and poured two glasses for Dee and her. She had a flashback to college, where Jayne was the party animal on their floor. Aside from her degree, her biggest goal was to get into the senior fraternity house for a party before she left for Spain. Due to her gorgeous figure and charismatic, wild personality, she had no trouble being invited after only a month on campus.

Jayne walked back into the tent as Dee hung up the phone with the restaurant. Dee joined the girls in the tent with her glass of wine, and they all laughed as the tent ceiling collapsed on them suddenly.

“Dee, what did you make this thing out of?” Jayne asked playfully.

“Sheer willpower?” Dee said uncertainly, tying up the sheet again.

“Tell me about Spain,” Kiera said to Jayne, desperately trying to get her mind off her recent hospital experience.

While Kiera and Dee listened, Jayne spoke of great adventures that involved going to the beaches and attending high-end restaurants. Jayne became excited as she told them about a guy she met named Mauricio. He was tall, dark, and handsome and rode a motorcycle, also known as Jayne’s adrenaline-filled dream man.

Kiera thought of Lev and his looks. His muscles barely fit into the outfit he wore yesterday, and his short hair defined his jawline perfectly. His eyes were dark brown with golden streaks, and they made her melt almost immediately once the initial fear had passed.

Lev had a way about him, a certain charm that had more to do with his character and the way he carried himself than just his looks. Kiera smiled to herself as she sipped her water, imagining herself in bed with him. She couldn't help but wonder what was under Lev's shirt, but she was sure it was some incredible definition of his abs.

A knock on the door startled Kiera from her thoughts. Dee brought the Chinese food inside, beaming with excitement as she handed the girls their orders. Kiera opened the box and smelled vegetables and chicken. The scent almost jogged a memory, but it seemed blocked.

She picked up a fork and dug into the dish, moaning as she tasted the delicious dish.

"Okay, you were right," Kiera admitted to Dee. "This is my favorite thing ever."

"Yes," Dee exclaimed, taking a bite of her lo mein.

Jayne covered her mouth as she took a bite of a hot spring roll. "Oh my God, this is on fire!"

The girls laughed as Jayne swallowed the steamy spring roll. Jayne made a motion with her hand toward Kiera and looked at her.

"So, what happened with Lev?" she asked curiously.

"What do you mean what happened?" Kiera asked with a smile.

"Like, did you remember him?" Jayne pried.

"No," Kiera admitted, taking a bite of the fried rice. "I actually spent the day with him yesterday."

Dee and Jayne exchanged another look, and Kiera turned her head to the side, looking at them with annoyance.

“Okay, guys,” Kiera said, putting down her food. “What is up with these looks? Is there something I don’t know about him? Is he bad for me, like, what is this secret exchange you two have going on here?”

Dee exhaled sadly. “We’ve just,” she paused, looking for the words. “You’ve told us some things about him that we don’t exactly appreciate.”

“Like what?” Kiera asked.

“Like you thought you shouldn’t marry him,” Jayne replied.

“Why?” Kiera asked, shocked.

“Because he’s kind of overprotective. I remember you saying sometimes you felt like he cared *too* much.”

Kiera picked up her food and ate slowly. Jayne had a habit of putting Kiera down, even when they were in college, especially if Kiera had something she didn’t.

“I mean,” Jayne said, talking through her bite of her next spring roll. “Maybe it’s time to move on from him, you know? You don’t remember him anyway. This could be God giving you a way out.”

“Jayne!” Dee exclaimed, glaring at her.

“What?” Jayne said, shrugging. “It’s true.”

Kiera kept her head down and stayed silent as Dee reached forward and touched her knee. Dee gave Kiera a look of sympathy.

“Look, we just don’t know if he’s the one for you,” Dee said softly.

“Did I say anything to you about him?” Kiera asked Dee.

“Well,” Dee pulled her hand back from Kiera’s knee. “I do remember you talking about his horrible mother.”

“How is she horrible?” Kiera asked, picking up her wonton soup and opening the lid.

“She makes terrible comments about you,” Dee replied. “And apparently, Lev doesn’t ever stand up to her to defend you.”

“That’s bad,” Jayne commented, pointing her chopsticks at Dee.

“We just don’t want to see you marry someone with so many doubts in the back of your mind,” Dee began.

“Dude, that’s a lifelong decision,” Jayne remarked. “You’re literally signing your life away to another person, and if you’re unsure about doing it, it’s probably a sign you shouldn’t.”

Kiera sighed and lifted a wonton noodle to her mouth, slurping the soup slightly. She tasted the soft, earthy flavor and, once again, thought about how right Dee was about this place being her favorite.

“What do *you* think is right?” Dee asked Kiera.

Remaining silent for a moment, Kiera thought of Jayne’s words. If she were going to leave him, now would be the time to do it. A break-up with no memories to grieve is an opportune one, but something about him was almost a magnetic feeling to her.

They were right, though. If she was unsure about marrying him and he didn’t defend her against his mother’s harsh words, maybe he wasn’t the one for her. Kiera remembered reading fairy tales as a kid, and the man always stood up for his princess.

Maybe it was childish, but she had always hoped to find a man to defend her honor, not smother her with over-protectiveness. She was fiercely independent and wanted nothing more than to have a man love her and let her be free to be herself at the same time.

“I don’t know,” Kiera said blankly.

“Well,” Jayne commented, finishing her beef and broccoli and sipping her wine. “Whatever you do, just make sure you put yourself first.”

“I will,” Kiera said, desperately trying to end the conversation with short replies to Jayne.

“Come on,” Dee suggested, picking up on Kiera’s discomfort.

Dee grabbed the remote and began scrolling through the romantic comedies. She stopped after four and handed the remote to Kiera.

“Here,” Dee said with a smile. “Your choice, anything you want.”

Kiera smiled and scrolled through the movies, seeing every picture of a man and a woman either in love or despising each other. She silently wondered if a romantic comedy wasn’t the ideal choice for the occasion, but after all this effort, she wanted to ensure the girls had a good time.

“Oh my God, yes!” Jayne said, pointing to the movie Kiera had stopped on. “I love that one. Play it.”

Rolling her eyes, Kiera selected the movie and pressed play. Every scene made her think of Lev as she ate her fried rice, craving any memory the food could bring back.

FIVE



LEV

Lev took a deep breath as he approached Kiera's apartment. He had spent the previous night turning in bed, wondering how he could convince her to trust him again. This was an incredibly unique situation, but she was too precious for him to give up, and he hoped their date today would help.

He decided he would do everything in his power to help her feel comfortable, remember who he was, and remember who she was. Tightly gripping the bouquet of roses he had bought for her, he knocked on the door and stared at the floor.

A moment passed as his heart sank. He wondered if she had changed her mind about seeing him. Last night, his thoughts included trying to think of what it must be like for her to have forgotten an entire year of her life. There was no way he could understand the struggle she was going through, but he could do his best to try.

Kiera opened the door quickly and smiled half-heartedly. His heart sank more as he saw the doubt in her eyes. He handed her the flowers and smiled, shoving the sinking feeling out of his mind.

"Thank you," Kiera said gently, walking into her apartment and placing the flowers on the counter.

"Of course," Lev said as he remained at the door, watching her walk effortlessly, gliding with each step she took.

He couldn't help but admire everything about her, even her stance, as she did her usual everyday tasks. The way she

carried herself was more than attractive; it was captivating.

She returned to the door and smiled doubtfully. Exhaling slowly, Lev looked at her.

“Listen,” he began gently. “I understand that this is a lot, and if you’re not up for it today, I understand.” He locked eyes with her. “But I’m not one to run off easily.”

Kiera stared at him skeptically before smacking her lips and looking into her apartment. “Yeah, let’s go,” she stated, closing the door behind her.

A sigh of relief overcame Lev as his heart started to relax, beating normally. She turned to face him. “Ready?” she asked with a sad tone in her voice.

“Absolutely,” Lev said, motioning for her to walk ahead of him down the stairs.

They walked silently for a few moments before Lev looked at her, putting his hands in his pockets.

“It’s starting to get kind of cold out here, isn’t it?” he remarked.

“Yeah,” she responded softly.

“I mean,” he began, “for Virginia, it’s pretty common, but even for the Shenandoah Valley, it seems to be getting colder earlier every year.”

Kiera nodded and rested her hands on her arms, warming herself. Lev noticed her stance and began taking off his jacket.

“Here,” he said, handing it to her.

“No,” she declined politely. “I’m okay, thank you, though.”

Pulling his jacket back on, Lev decided it was better not to push her. She would come to him in her own time if it were meant to be. As much as he wanted to force it, he respected her too much to make her uncomfortable.

They reached the café and walked in to see a beautiful array of string lights and autumn wreaths lining the walls. Lev

watched as Kiera breathed in the smell of freshly baked goods and smiled.

Memories of their first time eating here flooded his mind. It was springtime, and she wore a pink dress with bows tied on her shoulders. He remembered how her dark brown hair contrasted perfectly with the flowers growing outside.

Lev grinned as he ushered her to the register. She looked at the list of goods, and he leaned down to whisper to her.

“Try the chocolate croissant,” he said, then leaned away from her. “I’ve heard it’s amazing.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, talking to the man at the register. “I’ll take a chocolate croissant and ...” she trailed off as she scanned the menu, “a large black coffee, please.”

“Make that two,” Lev chimed in, handing the man his card.

Kiera looked at Lev bashfully and thanked him as he nodded in response. They walked to the bar’s edge and waited for their drinks while Kiera looked around at the small jars of honey lining the walls.

“You loved those,” Lev pointed out, approaching her. “You said you used them in baking, especially when making your famous oat muffins.”

“Oat muffins?” she remarked, smiling.

“Yeah,” Lev said, putting his hands in his pockets. “They were always my favorite.”

“Hmm.” She nodded and continued to explore the store.

The barista called out their orders, and Lev picked them up and walked back to her. He handed her the coffee and croissant and looked out the window.

“Do you want to see something?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said, smiling and sipping her coffee.

He led her out of the café and down the street. They turned through old Victorian houses to a sidewalk along the water. Lev watched as Kiera admired the orange and yellow leaves falling from the red oak and chestnut trees.

Lev grinned and remembered when she told him fall was her favorite season. They were sitting at a bonfire with his clan and roasting marshmallows. It was probably their third date, and she couldn't stop talking about the colors of Virginia in the fall.

“So,” he began. “What’s been on your mind lately?”

“Hmm,” she said, sipping her coffee. “Mostly trying to think of memories, especially when I was a kid.”

She shook her head and looked down at her feet, skipping every crack in the sidewalk as usual.

“I just ...” she sighed. “I keep thinking that if I remember enough, maybe the last year will come back to me.” She looked at Lev. “But it never seems to work.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Lev sympathized, staring at his coffee before looking over at her. “Want to talk about it?”

“I mean ...” She paused, pushing her hair out of her face.

The cold breeze hit Lev’s face, and her perfume wafted over him. He breathed it in and smiled, grateful that she agreed to come with him.

“It’s just my childhood, you know?” she began sadly.

Lev felt a twinge in his chest. He already knew this story and wished he never had to hear it again. Relaxing his shoulders, he reminded himself that this was all new to her, that opening up to him was a very vulnerable state.

“What about it?” he asked as if he didn’t know.

“Well.” She exhaled. “My stepfather never really wanted me. When my mom would leave for work, he would scream and yell and throw things, and most of the time, I just hid in my room because I was scared.”

Kiera went silent, and Lev didn’t pry. It was amazing that she was comfortable enough with him in the first place to even begin with such a story.

“And then I just ...” her voice cracked and trailed off.

Lev looked at her and noticed a tear running down her cheek.

“Hey,” he said, taking her arm gently. “Do you want to sit?”

She nodded, and Lev led her to the water’s edge on a small dock. They walked out and sat, watching a group of ducks swim in a circle, and Lev pointed to them, bobbing for food.

“See the way they dive down for food?” he said.

She nodded, wiping another tear from her face.

“I always love watching them do that. They look so dumb,” he joked.

Kiera chuckled and sniffled, wiping another tear. “I’m sorry, I just ...”

“No,” Lev interrupted. “Please, never be sorry. I want to know what’s going on in your head.”

Kiera sighed and looked at the water blankly. “My mom never believed me, you know? She ...” she struggled to finish the sentence and turned up her palms, searching for the words. “She always took his side.”

Lev felt anger burn in his chest. He had never met her mother, but thinking of the betrayal she had gone through angered his bear, and it was eager to come out and protect her. All he saw in Kiera was a bright light that could illuminate the ends of this Earth, something that should be preserved and respected, not doubted or pushed aside.

“Until one day,” Kiera began again, leaning back on her hands. “When she came home and saw him screaming, just losing his mind, telling me he had a friend that would love to buy me off of them so he could be at peace.” She looked at Lev with sorrow. “That’s when she knew I wasn’t lying, and the second she saw that she kicked him out.”

“I’m so sorry, Kiera,” Lev said, staring at her as she avoided eye contact.

“No, it’s fine.” She waved her hand, dismissing his sympathy. “It wasn’t her fault, you know? He was a smooth

talker, obsessed with himself, and he made her doubt her reality.”

Lev watched as Kiera took a sip of her coffee and reminisced about this conversation the first time she revealed these traumas to him. This was when he realized she would have difficulty trusting him, that she believed all men were capable of lying and scheming. He remembered how hard he tried to gain her trust and was willing to do it again.

“Here,” Lev said, breaking off a piece of his croissant and motioning to the ducks. “Want to feed them?”

“Can ducks even have chocolate?” Kiera said, slightly chuckling.

Lev pursed his lips and squinted, placing the piece in his mouth. “You know what, probably not.”

Kiera laughed and took a bite of her pastry, staring at the ducks bobbing in the water. “They really are stupid creatures, aren’t they?” she observed.

Lev laughed heartily, and she joined in. The sound of their laughter ricocheted off each of them and intensified with every chuckle. Soon, they were red in the face, and Lev’s abs hurt from smiling so much. Kiera wiped a tear from her face as they came down from the laughing fit. Silence filled the air after they relaxed, and Lev glanced at her. She met his gaze and smiled.

“Thank you,” she said, holding up her croissant. “I really needed this.”

“The croissant.” He motioned to the ducks. “Or the halftime show?”

Kiera laughed. “Both.”

“I am truly sorry, by the way,” Lev said, locking eyes with her. “About everything. Your childhood, how he treated you, the accident, you didn’t deserve any of that.”

“It’s not your fault,” she stated.

“But maybe I *could* have done something, at least about the crash.”

“Lev,” she began, placing her hand on his. “There’s nothing you could have done.”

Nodding, Lev finished his pastry and stood, extending a hand to Kiera, and she took it and stood with him as they walked toward the sidewalk. They strolled back to her apartment, talking more about her childhood and how she was processing it. Lev’s heart ached because she was reliving all of this again, and he felt a hopeless sense of powerlessness flow through him. He realized the only thing he could do was be there for her and listen instead of trying to fix the problem.

They reached her apartment door, and she turned to him, smiling. Opening her arms for a hug, he leaned in and wrapped her gently in his embrace. She squeezed harder, and he held her tightly, moving slowly from side to side as they used to.

“Thank you again,” she said softly, pulling her face away from the hug but remaining intertwined in his arms.

“You’re ...” Lev was cut off by Kiera’s apartment door opening.

Dee walked out and made an awkward face as she closed the door behind her.

“Sorry! I’m sorry,” she apologized, walking past them. “Have fun, kids. Kiera, I’ll be home at seven, and we can make that pad thai, okay?”

“Okay,” Kiera said cheerfully, rolling her eyes and smiling at Lev.

She broke from his embrace and went inside her apartment, waving at Lev before closing the door. Turning to walk down the stairs, he smiled as hope began to rise in his chest, thinking maybe she was starting to come back.

SIX



KIERA

Kiera adjusted her black dress, staring into her closet mirror. Lev had asked her out for dinner the next night, and after he sympathized with her yesterday, she decided to give him a chance.

She sighed and brushed her hair over her shoulder, wondering where she bought this dress and for what occasion. It was fancier than the others in her closet, and she wondered if it was for a fundraiser or a friend's birthday party.

A knock on her apartment door jolted her from her thoughts. She grabbed her evening bag and opened the front door to see Lev dressed in a suit. He looked her up and down and smiled.

“Well,” he said, grinning from ear to ear. “Don’t you look lovely?”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she responded with a smile.

Closing the door behind her, they made their way down to Lev’s car. He held the door open for her as she nodded thanks and slid inside.

The car smelled like it had just come from the lot, and the leather seats hadn’t a speck of dust on them. Kiera crossed her legs and glanced at the dashboard, lighting up with the Lexus symbol. She thought of how old and run-down her car was compared to this.

The door swung open, and Lev entered the car in a breeze. He buckled himself in and glanced at her.

“Have you figured out where we’re going?” he said with a smirk.

“Well, because I can’t remember anything.” Kiera buckled her seat belt. “No, not really.”

“You’ll know when we get there, trust me.”

Lev swung the car into drive and took off through the city streets. Kiera smiled as they left the city, driving west. Looking at Lev, she smiled.

“Are you kidnapping me, sir?”

“No, ma’am,” he responded, chuckling. “We’re going to Marshall.”

“Marshall?” she exclaimed. “That’s like an hour away.”

“Trust me,” he said confidently. “There’s a good reason.”

Kiera thought of her birthday a few years ago. Dee had taken her to a fancy restaurant in Marshall called Fire & Main, and Kiera had the best bison steak. She was blown away by the soft texture and overwhelming flavors.

“Are you taking me to Fire & Main?” she asked, rolling her eyes playfully.

Lev pointed at her, smiling. “I told you you’d remember.”

She couldn’t help but smile. During the past year, she must have trusted this man enough to tell him small, seemingly insignificant things about her life, and even though she didn’t remember any of them, he did.

“So,” Kiera began, looking at Lev, “you apparently know everything about me. What’s your story?”

“My story?” he asked, laughing. “What part?”

“Start from the beginning,” she said with a grin. “What was your childhood like?”

“Oof,” he said, furrowing his brows and balancing his elbow on the car window, his finger lightly touching his lips. “Well,” he started, “my father was always busy, rarely ever home, and it was mostly my mother and me growing up. We

were close back then, and my siblings ... well, they weren't mean, but I wasn't as close to them when we were kids as I am now."

Kiera thought of Jayne and Dee's comments about Lev's mother, and her heart sank. She wondered what comments his mother had made about her. Part of her wanted to know the details, but her other side thought it better not to ask.

"I was raised with high expectations. Hosting dinners and fundraisers with a wealthy family taught me much about how other people see us. Unfortunately, it went a little too far. My mother was always more concerned with what others thought about than what life was like behind closed doors. To everyone else, we were the perfect family."

"What would happen behind closed doors?" Kiera asked cautiously.

Lev paused before answering. "There was a lot of controlling behavior. Anything I could do that might threaten the family's image was almost a threat to her. Clean up, look nice, practice manners, and surround yourself with the *right* people."

Kiera nodded slowly. "And what would happen if you didn't?"

"Didn't what?"

"Surround yourself with the *right* people."

Lev got quiet for a moment and exhaled deeply. "She would try to convince me otherwise. Unfortunately for her," he turned to look at Kiera, "I've always made my own decisions."

Kiera's stomach turned. She felt grateful that he stood on his own and that his mother's opinion of her didn't affect him, but she couldn't imagine marrying a man whose family disapproved of her.

"There's something else you should know," Lev said seriously.

"And that is?" Kiera asked, her heart pounding.

“We,” he took a deep breath, “are a part of a clan.”

“Isn’t everyone technically?” Kiera chuckled.

“No,” Lev said darkly. “We are a bloodline of shifters.”

Lev glanced at her, and Kiera swore she saw fear flicker through his eyes. She furrowed her brows and stared out the windshield, trying to hold back laughter. She was sure this was some sort of joke.

“Shifters?” she asked. “Like, is that a type of job?”

“No, like shapeshifters.”

Kiera raised her brows and nodded slowly. “Okay, crazy,” she said, laughing.

“The first time you saw me do it was our fourth date,” he said. “There was a bar fight, and you got caught in the crosshairs. You were unharmed, but they needed to be dealt with.”

“So what,” she began. “You turned into a weapon? A fire alarm?”

“Kiera,” he said darkly, “I’m serious.”

Kiera’s heart raced. She tried to grasp the concept of shapeshifters existing in the human world. The shock blanked out her mind, and she turned to Lev, curious for more information.

“So, can you become anything?” she asked.

“No,” he stated, shifting in his seat. “We are a clan of black bears. My lineage started in Shenandoah ages ago, and we’ve dominated the valley for years. Only two other clans exist, and they’ve always paled in comparison to us.”

“Bears?” Kiera echoed slowly.

Lev nodded. “Bears.”

“So,” she said slowly, “can you just turn into one whenever you want?”

“Yeah,” Lev said, sighing. “I mean, within reason, and I don’t do it for fun.”

“Of course,” Kiera said, pretending to understand.

Their eyes locked, and Lev held out his palm to her. She cautiously placed her hand in his, feeling his hands grasp hers tightly.

“This was hard for you to hear the first time,” he said gently. “I understand it will be this time too.”

Kiera remained silent as Lev ran his thumb over the side of her hand. She wondered about his mannerisms when in bear form. He could kill her in one swipe if he wanted to, especially if he didn’t recognize her.

“One of your main concerns last time was if I would lose control and hurt you in some manner,” Lev stated.

Kiera’s head snapped up to look at him. “I was just thinking that,” she admitted.

“I am aware of my surroundings, even in that form. I would *never* hurt you, Kiera.”

Something about his tone struck a chord in her, and she felt a sense of security flow as he looked at her. Something in his eyes made her believe in him; he was being honest.

They turned at the exit toward Marshall and quickly arrived at the restaurant. String lights, heat lamps, and torches illuminated the outside of the restaurant. Lev put the car in park and opened the door for her, leading her toward the lights.

A waiter led them to the back of the restaurant, where Kiera saw a small table with a white tablecloth and roses on it. It was secluded from the rest of the tables and had a beautiful canopy of vines over it. She smiled and glanced at Lev, who grinned back excitedly.

They sat at the table, and a waiter approached them, poured their water, and walked away. Kiera glanced at the table and looked at Lev, confused.

“No menus?” she asked.

“Not tonight,” Lev replied, putting his napkin in his lap. “We’re having a full-course dinner.”

Kiera laughed. “You’re crazy.”

“What can I say?” he said, holding his hands up and shrugging. “I like good food.”

The dinner was exquisite. An elaborate spread of charcuterie, with duck, quail, and her favorite bison steak, made the night unforgettable; that and Lev’s terrible jokes and stories about his travels in the valley.

He spoke of his family lineage, how his parents still reigned as the clan’s alphas, and the battles they had fought to keep control of the land from the other two clans. Kiera became entranced and somehow began to believe there was magic lurking in this world that she had never noticed.

The concept seemed insane, believing a man she had recently forgotten, but his manner and charm were too convincing for this to be a lie. Lev even talked about adventures they had been on in the valley while he was shifted, and she craved to relive those experiences with him again.

The waiter brought the bill, and Lev signed it quickly, barely looking at the price. They walked back to the car, laughing at one of Lev’s jokes. He opened the door for her, and she slid into the seat comfortably, watching him walk around the car and grinning.

“All right,” he said, sliding into the driver’s seat. “Let’s get you back home.”

“Is it bad that I don’t want this night to end?” Kiera said sheepishly.

Lev looked at her with a slight grin and surprise on his face. “Not at all,” he responded, reversing the car out of their parking space.

A ringtone broke the mood, and the name “Mother” popped up on Lev’s car screen. As they entered the highway, he fished for his phone in his pocket and looked at Kiera.

“Not the right time for her to call,” he said, chuckling.

“No, it’s okay,” Kiera assured him, slightly curious to hear what she had to say.

“Are you sure?” he asked uncertainly.

“Absolutely,” Kiera chirped, hiding her panic.

He took the call, turned the Bluetooth off, and used his phone privately.

“Hey, Mom,” he said, looking at Kiera and mouthing, “sorry.”

Kiera waved it off as if it was no big deal and stared out the passenger window. She could barely hear his mother on the other end of the phone.

“No, I, uh, I just got done with dinner,” Lev stated.

Kiera heard mumbles and a friendly tone before Lev responded once more.

“With Kiera,” he said, exhaling and clenching his jaw.

Her voice turned sour on the other end of the line, and Kiera strained her ears, trying to make out any words. Anger and disappointment fueled her tone more as she talked incessantly. Lev remained silent and let her ramble on, and Kiera silently prayed he would speak up and go against her, proving Jayne and Dee wrong.

Unfortunately, the call continued for another five minutes. Lev said nothing as his mother continued to spew what Kiera assumed were nasty comments about her. She tried to distract herself by looking at the signs out the window.

A flashback overtook her mind. Kiera saw herself pacing in her room and felt her heart thumping. She remembered the phone pressed against her ear and threats thrown at her from the other end of the line.

Before she could make out what the threats were, she snapped back into reality, gasping for air quietly. Lev was too entranced with his call to notice, much to her relief. Every nerve in her body tingled, and she had the sudden urge to escape that car and get as far from Lev as possible.

“All right, Mom,” he said firmly. “I have to go.”

Kiera heard a sigh on the other end of the phone and another disappointed tone before Lev bid his goodbyes to her. He hung up and placed the phone in the center console, looking over at Kiera.

“So,” he began with a smile, “where were we?”

SEVEN



LEV

The car slowed to a stop as they approached Dee's place. He remained silent for a moment, observing Kiera's stature. Something in her had changed since the phone call with his mother, even after he tried to resume the date like normal, but he told himself she was only tired.

"Ready?" he asked, unbuckling his seat belt.

"Actually," she began.

He turned and glanced at her, knowing he should have trusted his gut. When said by Kiera, the word *actually* typically meant something was wrong. Trying not to make his feelings obvious, he kept his face blank and listened.

"I'll be okay going up by myself."

"Are you sure? Because I've seen some pretty sketchy people around here."

"Really," Kiera said, cutting him off. "I'll be fine."

Grabbing her evening bag and smiling half-heartedly, Kiera pushed the passenger side door open. Lev quickly caught her hand, his bear roaring in response to her touch, and she looked at him in surprise.

"Thank you," he said gently, rubbing his thumb over her hand.

"For what?" she said as she relaxed into the seat momentarily.

"Coming with me tonight."

He kissed her hand and let her go. She climbed out of the car and walked toward the entrance. Watching her walk away, he wondered what had been on her mind.

She didn't turn around to wave, much to Lev's disliking.

He rubbed his face in his hands and placed them on the steering wheel. This was one of the most challenging tasks he'd ever taken on, and he had fought numerous alphas of other clans.

Staring ahead, he sighed, re-buckled his seat belt, and shifted his car into drive. As he turned out from the street, his phone rang, and Nate popped up on his screen. Pressing the green answer button, he heard scuffling come through his Bluetooth.

"Nate?" Lev asked.

"Yeah, hey, man, we have a situation here."

Lev sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose, turning the car to the left. "What type of situation?" Lev asked, clearly annoyed.

"It's Ronan," Lev's brother said with a sigh.

Lev rolled his eyes. Ronan had a history of violent behavior at other hotels but always had a wild side. The clan's black sheep, Ronan, always wanted to do things his way. There was even a bet between some of the clan members over when he would go rogue. Lev refused to bet on it, but after witnessing his behavior lately, he second-guessed that decision.

"He's been missing clan meetings," Nate started. "Lashing out at the customers to the point that he's almost shifted accidentally, it's a mess."

Lev exhaled slowly. "How long has he worked at our Palm Springs location?"

"Uh," Nate stammered, "about three months now."

"And didn't we just transfer him from the Denver hotel?" Lev asked.

“Yeah, yeah, because of something similar, but ...” Nate shook his head. “It’s never been this bad, man.”

“All right,” Lev said, tapping his finger on the steering wheel. “Well, I can’t come out this week, and I have meetings in D.C.”

“We need someone with more authority here, Lev.”

“I’ll send Josie and a few enforcers from here. I’ll put them on a red-eye tonight. They should be in California by tomorrow afternoon. Can you wait that long?”

“Yeah,” Nate said. “I’ll try to ... I don’t know, take him out for drinks and hope he gets drunk and passes out.”

“What has he been doing specifically?” Lev asked, trying to gauge the severity of the situation.

“Growling, baring his teeth, I mean, the humans think he’s just a nutcase, but it’s to the point that words getting out from the clients.”

“All right, yeah.” Lev lowered the temperature of his car, battling the heat rising in his chest. “Let me get Josie and the enforcers on that flight, and I’ll give you a call.”

“Thanks, brother,” Nate replied.

“Bye,” Lev said, pressing the red button on the screen and ending the call.

Lev leaned back in his seat and groaned, rubbing his face with his hand. He wondered how much more could go wrong. Making a sharp right, he ascended one of the mountains close to Shenandoah, passing by three-story cabins lit with solar panels and lights.

He wheeled into their driveway, his Lexus bouncing on the gravel. The car rolled to a stop, and he closed his eyes as he parked.

“Everything is fine,” Lev said to himself repeatedly between deep breaths.

He opened his eyes and stared at the mansion. His family had owned it for decades, and each generation added a new

addition to the architectural monstrosity. Lev loved the estate, and it was where he would often find other members of the clan during the working day. He wanted to give her the life she deserved, but, as usual, the clan came first.

Grabbing his briefcase, he exited the car and walked in through the front door, locking it behind him.

“Josie!” he called out loudly.

“Yeah?” a voice called back from upstairs.

“I need you,” Lev declared, taking off his suit jacket.

Josie pranced down the staircase with a concerned look on her face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nate needs you in Palm Springs,” Lev said, rolling up his sleeves. “Ronan’s lost it again.”

Josie rolled her eyes and clapped her hands on her sides. “Why did Nate hire him? We knew this was coming.”

“I made that call,” Lev said, sighing. “I thought he deserved another chance. I guess I was wrong.”

Josie groaned. “Palm Springs? When?”

“Now,” Lev said firmly. “You, Tyler, and Ben are on the next flight, and I’m going to purchase your tickets now.”

“Well,” she said with a breath of optimism. “Guess I’ll enjoy the warm weather while I’m there.”

“Not too much,” Lev said. “We need Ronan back here for the clan to deal with.”

Josie understood his look and nodded thoughtfully before hurrying upstairs. She stopped halfway up and turned back.

“Hey,” she said in a whisper, pointing upstairs. “Mom’s in a mood.”

Lev rolled his eyes and nodded his thanks.

Set on ignoring his mother, Lev walked to the left wing and strode down the hallway to his office. Pushing open the double doors, he closed them quietly behind him, hoping not to alert his mother of his presence.

He sat at his desk and looked out over the valley. The lights of the small town of Front Royal glimmered, showing the vast size of the valley. The cell tower caught his attention, and he watched the light blink on and off as he zoned out.

A knock on the door broke his gaze. Assuming it was Josie, he yelled for her to come in.

“Sweetie?”

Lev closed his eyes and clenched his jaw at his mother’s voice. Mentally preparing, he inhaled deeply. Turning in his chair, he faced her and opened his laptop on his desk.

“Hey, Mom,” he said calmly.

“What’s going on with Palm Springs?”

Lev leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands in his lap. “Ronan’s lost it again, scaring the customers, almost shifting in front of them. Josie, Tyler, and Ben are on it, and I’m about to buy their plane tickets.”

His mother scoffed. “Why are you sending *them*?” she said snidely. “*You* should be the one going there. You’re the alpha.”

“Mom,” he said, holding out his hands. “They are perfectly capable of containing the situation.”

“*Containing?*” she mocked. “It needs to be dealt with. *Eliminated.*”

“Fine,” Lev said, starting to get irritated. “They are perfectly capable of *eliminating* the threat.”

She entered the office and closed the door behind her. As she walked up to his desk, Lev took a deep breath through his nose, preparing for whatever words were about to stab him.

“Does this have anything to do with Kiera?” she asked with daggers in her eyes.

Lev rubbed the bridge of his nose. “No, Mom, it has nothing to do with Kiera. Plus,” he threw his hands out to the sides, “Josie is the top enforcer; this is her job. It’s good for her to get the practice.”

“I don’t give a damn about what Josie’s job is.” his mother exclaimed. “What I care about is that girl warping your mind. You spend more and more time away from the clan and your responsibilities, chasing after a woman who doesn’t even remember who you are.”

“I’m not chasing after her, Mother. I’m trying to help her remember.”

“Sounds like chasing to me,” she mocked, crossing her arms and putting weight on her hip.

“Mom, what do you want?” Lev asked impatiently.

“I want my *son* to take his place as the alpha of this clan and be a good example to those he is in charge of, not hide behind the walls of a girl’s apartment, desperately trying to win her love.”

Lev stared at the ceiling and breathed deeply, tapping his thumbs together in his lap. He tilted his chin down and locked eyes with his mother.

“All right, Mom, is that all?”

“Don’t do that,” she yelled, pointing a finger at him.

“Do what?” Lev responded his eyes wide and hands out to the sides.

“Dismiss me when I am trying to do nothing but help you.”

“Help me?” Lev yelled, standing from his chair and leaning forward with his hands on his desk. “How is you standing here, screaming at me when I am trying to get my work done, helping me? How is talking about Kiera incessantly when there is absolutely no reason for you to hate her being a loving and kind manner of parenting?”

He leaned back, shocked at his response. His mother’s eyes began to water, and she shook her head, staring at the wall.

“You’re right,” she said softly, choking back tears. “I guess I’m just not a good mother.”

“Mom,” Lev began sympathetically.

“No,” She held up a hand and walked toward his office door. “You’re right. I’m nothing but a burden.”

Lev opened his mouth to say something but found it useless as she walked out and slammed the door behind her. He hung his head over his desk and sat in his chair.

Turning his chair back to the city lights, he leaned forward and placed his elbows on his legs. He thought of the night he brought Kiera to his office, and they made love overlooking the city. He smiled and shook his head. Even in the worst of times, Kiera could always light a positive feeling inside him.

He turned back to his computer and purchased the airplane tickets. His thoughts were clouded with memories of Kiera and possible explanations for why his mother hated her so much.

Another knock sounded on his door, and he breathed in deeply, preparing for round two.

“Yes?” he said, exasperated.

“Hey,” Josie’s cheery voice rang as she entered the office.

“Thank God,” Lev said lowly. “Thought it was her again.”

“Yeah,” Josie said slowly. “I heard you.” She leaned against the wall. “Let me guess, you’re not doing what you should be, and Kiera is ruining your life.”

Lev smiled and nodded jokingly.

“Yeah,” Josie continued. “Sounds about right. So listen, when we get there, what exactly should we *do* with Ronan?”

Lev scratched the back of his head. “I don’t know, Josie, kidnap him, banish him, burn sage on him, whatever you can to get him to calm down. Personally,” Lev leaned back in his chair, “I would like him brought back here, but if that doesn’t work, do what you think is right.”

“Okay,” Josie responded, turning to leave. “Hey, Lev?”

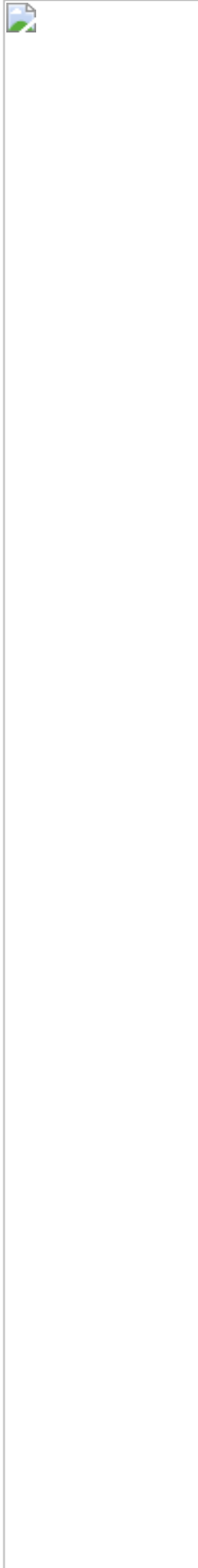
“Yeah?”

She turned to face him and smiled. “You’re doing a great job despite what she says.”

“Thanks, sis,” Lev said gratefully.

Josie exited his office quietly. Lev turned to his computer to go over finances and spreadsheets. Every few minutes, Kiera’s smile popped into his mind. He shook the thoughts and tried to concentrate, even if she was all that ran through his mind.

EIGHT



KIERA

The morning sun hit their balcony perfectly as Kiera sat outside with her coffee. She scrolled on social media until she got bored and stared out into the mountains. Only the tops of the peaks were visible from her apartment, but that was enough to give her a slight sense of wonder.

She thought of Lev and his clan. There were so many questions running through her mind. When did he know he could shift? Did he ever wish he was just human? Were there other shifters, or were they some odd exceptions to the rule?

Her coffee almost burned her lips as she took a sip, the warmth combating the cool autumn breeze. She ran her fingers along the handle of the mug, her mind so overwhelmed she blanked out entirely.

The noise of her ringtone startled her, and she knocked over her coffee cup on the table.

“Shit,” she said, rushing inside to get paper towels while answering her phone. “Hello?”

“Honey!” Her mom’s voice rang on the other end. “Honey, I’m on my way home.”

“Mom,” Kiera said, holding the phone against her ear on her shoulder. “I’m fine.”

“Kiera Wilson, you are not *fine*. You suffered a severe accident. I would have called sooner, but I haven’t had service since Rome. Dee’s message just came through about everything.”

“Yeah,” Kiera said, on the balcony and wiping up the coffee on the table. “How was the cruise?” she asked, desperately trying to detract from the topic.

“How did you know I was on a cruise, honey?”

“Dee told me,” Kiera informed her. “Just because I can’t remember the last year doesn’t mean other people can’t, Mom.”

“Honey, please don’t get snippy with me. I’m just worried about you.”

“Dee and Jayne have been taking excellent care of me,” Kiera assured her mother.

Carrying the damp towels inside, Kiera sighed. She hated that her mom was so worried about her, but she couldn’t do anything. Even if she did come home from her cruise, there would be no use, and her presence wouldn’t magically make Kiera remember.

“And what about Lev?” her mother asked.

“Lev’s here too,” Kiera said. “He’s just ... it’s weird, you know? I don’t remember him at all.”

“I can’t even imagine, honey. I am so sorry.”

A thought popped into Kiera’s mind. She and her mother had always been close since she kicked her evil stepdad out, and she could always count on the truth from her.

“Hey, Mom,” Kiera said slowly. “Did I ever mention anything ...” she paused, “*bad* about Lev to you?”

“Bad?” her mother asked. “About Lev? Honey, no, why?”

“I was just curious,” Kiera responded, playing it off. “Just trying to put the pieces back together.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” her mother said, almost in tears. “I’m on the next flight home, okay?”

“No, it’s okay, Mom,” Kiera said, feeling exasperated. “I know you’re busy.”

“I’m never too busy to be there for you.”

Kiera shook her head, though her mother couldn't see it. "I have Dee. I'm doing okay. You don't have to drop everything to fly out here and sit in an apartment with me."

She sighed softly. "Know that I would, okay?"

"I know, Mom. I love you. I've got to go."

"Call me more. I love you, too, sweetie."

The call ended, and Kiera sank into the balcony seat. Her mother coming home would only make things worse. While her unconditional love and support meant the world to Kiera, she felt overwhelmed as it was.

A leaf fell slowly from the tree above the balcony onto Kiera's lap. She picked it up and examined it, staring at all the crevices lining the stem. She looked at the mountains, turning the leaf in her hand and thinking about Lev again.

The breeze took the leaf from her hand, and Kiera watched it float into the autumn air. She wrapped her hands around her arms and walked inside the warm living room.

Kiera was about to sit on the couch and turn on a mindless show when someone knocked on the door. Thinking it was another one of Dee's online orders, she opened it to see Jayne standing before her, holding up two cups of coffee.

"Grande pecan praline latte?" Jayne said cheerily.

"Oh," Kiera said, taking the cup gingerly. "Hi."

"Hey, honey," Jayne said, wrapping her arms around Kiera.

Kiera felt a wave of confusion and slight annoyance flow through her as Jayne released her from the embrace. Being the people pleaser she was, she couldn't help but invite Jayne inside.

Jayne strolled into the apartment and took her place on the end of the couch. She set her coffee on the end table and totally ignored the stack of coasters sitting next to it.

Kiera sat on the other end of the couch and curled up under a blanket, smiling at Jayne.

“So,” Kiera began with a false sense of excitement. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” Jayne said with a smile, shrugging her shoulders. “I just wanted to check on you since Dee’s working today.”

“You’re so sweet,” Kiera said, sipping her latte.

They sat in silence for a moment before Kiera spoke again.

“How’s that guy you were seeing? What was his name?”

“Mauricio?” Jayne asked with a smile.

“Yes, Mauricio. Have you guys talked at all?”

“Pssh.” Jayne waved a hand. “No, he was fun for a few nights, but he’s no use to me anymore.”

“Ah,” Kiera said, sipping her coffee.

“How’s Lev?” Jayne asked quickly.

Kiera nodded, setting her coffee on a coaster. “He’s good. We went out for dinner last night, and he took me to Fire & Main.”

“Fire & Main?” Jayne echoed. “Very fancy. How much did it cost?”

“Jayne,” Kiera exclaimed, smiling.

“What? I want to know how much he thinks you’re worth.”

Kiera rolled her eyes and stared at Jayne doubtfully. “Okay, what is this *thing* with you and Lev?”

“What do you mean?” Jayne asked innocently.

“This hatred you have for him. I’m not dumb, Jayne.”

“I don’t hate him,” she declared as she picked up her coffee. “I just don’t think he’s for you.”

“Because I wasn’t sure if I should marry him?”

“Eh.” Jayne shrugged and sipped her coffee. “That and other things.”

Kiera's heart sank as she watched Jayne place her coffee on the end table, creating another circular stain that would take forever for Kiera to clean.

"What kind of other things?" Kiera asked quietly.

"He's just always been ... I don't know, *weird*."

"Jayne," Kiera said firmly. "Cut the shit. What are you talking about?"

"He's, like, weirdly protective. He's always talking about his mother, he has a *suspicious* amount of money, and he's gone half the time for work. I mean, don't you ever wonder what he's *really* doing when he's gone?"

"Well, I don't know, Jayne," Kiera began with an attitude. "I'm not sure what I think when he's gone because, as far as I know, I met him less than a week ago, and he's been here the whole time."

Jayne sighed and stared at Kiera with sorrow. "I'm sorry, honey. I just don't want anyone to use you."

"What do you think he's using me for?"

"Oh." Jayne waved another hand at Kiera. "You know, men, there can be a million reasons. Comfort, sex, validation, any of the above."

Kiera sank into the couch and grabbed her coffee, taking a sip and looking out the window. The flashback she had last night popped into her mind. While she wasn't sure if Lev had anything to do with the threats she received, it didn't seem highly likely.

"Oh!" Jayne exclaimed suddenly. "Did you hear about the bear that raided the Stop N' Go Motel last night?"

Kiera's vision blurred, and suddenly her vision shifted to a gift shop. The walls were made of large lumber logs and smelled like cedar. She glanced over one of the gift shop shelves to see Lev looking at a sweater with *Montana* written over it.

She shifted her gaze to a rack of trinkets. Scanning over them, she came across a figurine of a black bear holding a

bouquet of sculpted roses. She picked it up and chuckled, turning it over in her hands. She felt Lev walk up behind her and lean into her slightly.

“See anything you like?” he whispered enticingly.

She turned and showed him the bear with a grin on her face. “Doesn’t it kind of look like you?”

Lev laughed and took the bear from her, looking at it. “Well,” he began playfully. “I like to think I’m a little more ...” he tried to think of the right word, “*intimidating* when I shift.”

Kiera playfully slapped him on the chest. “Come on, I’m serious. Its face is so cute and innocent, just like your super-intimidating shifter form.”

Lev rolled his eyes and smiled, putting his arm around her. They walked to the counter, and Lev purchased the bear, handing it to Kiera, who beamed up at him. They exited the gift shop, and Lev sighed.

“So,” he asked. “How do you feel about a short ...” he spun Kiera around and caught her in his arms, pulling her close to him, “return to the room before dinner?”

Kiera threw her head back and laughed, leaning in to kiss him. When she pulled away, she saw the Rocky Mountains in the distance and felt Lev brush her hair behind her ear.

“Kiera?” Jayne’s voice shocked her back into reality.

“Oh my God,” Kiera said, standing slowly.

“What the hell happened to you?” Jayne asked suspiciously.

“I remembered,” Kiera’s voice trailed off.

“Remembered what?” Jayne pestered.

Kiera ignored Jayne’s questions and rushed into her bedroom. She rummaged through the clothes on top of the shelf in her closet, feeling for the figurine. Jayne entered her room with her hands out to the sides.

“Kiera, what the hell is going on with you?”

“Nothing,” Kiera said, moving to the storage containers under her bed. “I just remembered I have to find something for my mom when she gets back.”

“And you had to find it right this second?”

“Yeah, she’s coming home soon,” Kiera responded, trying not to sound annoyed.

The apartment’s front door closed, and Dee walked into Kiera’s room, surveying the mess she was making.

“Whoa,” she commented. “What’s going on here?”

“I don’t know,” Jayne said with a sigh. “But I have to get my nails done. I’m going to be late.”

“Oh, okay,” Dee said, frazzled. “Well, thanks for stopping by.”

“Anytime,” Jayne said lovingly. “Bye, Kiera. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Kiera held a thumbs-up motion over her bed before continuing to rifle through old notebooks and keepsakes.

“Kiera,” Dee said as the apartment door closed, “what are you doing?”

“The bear,” Kiera said, standing and staring at Dee’s blank face. Kiera sighed. “There was a bear, a little figure holding a bouquet of roses. I think Lev got it for me when we were in Montana.”

“Montana?” Dee asked. “But that was ...”

“Yeah, last summer, I know.”

“You remember?” Dee asked, astonished.

“No, I mean yes,” Kiera stammered. She sighed and put her hands on her hips, looking at the ceiling. “I remember little bits and pieces, but this is the only clear one so far.”

“Okay, well, that’s good,” Dee exclaimed happily.

“Do you know where it is?” Kiera asked, concerned.

“Well, no.” Dee paused. “But if it were anywhere, it would probably be at Lev’s place. You were pretty much living there

before your accident.”

“Lev’s place,” Kiera said, nodding.

“Yeah,” Dee stared at her with concern. “Do you need anything? Like a coffee or ...”

“No, please, God, no more coffee,” Kiera said, walking out of her room and putting on her coat.

“Kiera, I’m not sure you should be going out right now,” Dee stated, following her to the door.

“Dee, listen,” Kiera said, taking a deep breath. “I love you, you’re my best friend, and I know you’re concerned, but this is the first solid thing I have as a connection to the past year. Please let me go find it.”

“Okay,” Dee said, nodding.

Kiera pulled her in for a hug and held her tightly. Dee squeezed in return before pulling back and smiling at Kiera.

“You always were a stubborn one,” Dee remarked playfully.

“Guess not much has changed,” Kiera said, hastily exiting the apartment and blowing Dee a kiss.

NINE



KIERA

Kiera called a car, not quite ready to drive yet. When the Uber arrived, she climbed in, enjoying the warmth inside as her driver confirmed the address. She dug through her bag to find her phone as he pulled away from the apartments, scrolled through the recent calls, and pressed Lev's name. The phone rang for what felt like hours before he answered, his voice low and husky on the other side.

"Kiera?"

"Hey," Kiera responded cheerfully. "Hey, I have a question for you"

"Kiera, I'm glad you called," Lev said, cutting her off. "There's been an issue."

"Issue?" Kiera asked, her heart sinking and racing simultaneously.

"Something with one of the hotels. Unfortunately, I'll be out of town for a bit."

"Oh," Kiera said, trying to mask her disappointment. "Yeah, well, I'm sorry to hear that."

"No worries, I appreciate you calling."

"Yeah, of course," Kiera said sadly.

"Take care of yourself, Kiera," Lev said firmly.

"Yeah, you ..."

Her goodbye was cut off by Lev hanging up. She slowly lowered the phone into her lap and stared out the window.

Thoughts whirled through her mind quickly and uncontrollably. Why hadn't he asked her to go with him? Where was he going?

She thought of what Jayne had said in her apartment earlier when she asked if Kiera had ever wondered what Lev *really* did when he was away. Worst-case scenarios flowed through her mind. What if he was seeing someone else? He did own hotels all across the country, and he had many locations to go to if he did want to see another woman. Or could he be living a secret double life somehow?

Kiera shook the thoughts from her head and reminded herself not to spiral. Leaning forward, she apologized to the driver and asked if he could pull over. He did, and she tipped him for his troubles before grabbing her purse and heading back to her apartment with a weight on her heart.

The apartment door closed behind her, and Dee came scrambling around the corner, throwing on her coat.

"Hey," Dee said, surprised. "I thought you were going to Lev's."

"No," Kiera stated sadly, "he had to go away for work or something."

"Oh," Dee said, reaching out to rub Kiera's arm. "I'm sorry, honey. I'm sure he'll be back soon. He always is."

Kiera nodded slowly. "Yeah," she responded, exhaling. "Where are you off to?"

"I totally forgot I have a cocktail hour with my coworkers," Dee said, making a disapproving face. "Nothing I love more than socializing with people I don't want to see but have to every day."

"Don't worry," Kiera said, reaching out and rubbing Dee's arm. "I'm sure it'll be over soon."

"Ha-ha, very funny," Dee said with a smile, passing Kiera and walking out. "I'll be back later tonight," she chimed, closing the door behind her.

Kiera stood in the apartment and noticed the silence waiting for her. She grabbed the remote, turning on her favorite show. Nighttime was the worst for her spiraling thoughts, and any background noise that could combat the silence always helped to soothe her.

Unfortunately, these thoughts were too strong to block out. She wondered why Jayne was so negative about their relationship. Granted, Jayne never had the best track record with men, and she almost seemed to resent anything with a penis, but that still didn't mean she shouldn't be supportive of her and Lev.

These thoughts probably wouldn't have happened if she had never heard Jayne's comments. It was as if Kiera's brain had activated a microchip of doubt.

Deciding she couldn't sit still, Kiera made her way to the kitchen, pulled chicken from the fridge, preheated the oven to 350 degrees, and lined a parchment sheet with tin foil. Cooking was one thing that could always calm her, and food usually helped ease any anxiety she felt.

Someone knocked on the door, and Kiera rolled her eyes. No one texted to inform her that they were on their way anymore; her apartment had become a focal point for impulsive visits.

She washed the olive oil and herbs off her hands and dried them on a hand towel, walking toward the door. She swung it open to see a gorgeous middle-aged woman standing before her.

"Hello," Kiera greeted the woman, stunned by her long brown hair curled to perfection and striking green eyes.

"Hello, sweetheart," the woman responded with a smile.

Something about her made Kiera uneasy. She couldn't put her finger on it, but this woman seemed ingenuine.

"Sweetheart?" Kiera asked skeptically. "Do I know you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey," the woman said unconvincingly, letting herself into Kiera's apartment.

She placed her bag on the coffee table and glanced around at Kiera's apartment, pursing her lips and clasping her hands. Kiera felt a sense of judgment flow off the woman as she closed the apartment door.

"Again," Kiera asked, slightly irritated. "Do I know you?"

"Oh, yes," the woman said, approaching Kiera with an extended hand. "Beatrix Pierce, Lev's mother."

"Oh," Kiera said, shocked as she shook her hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"Well, we've already met, darling," the woman said offensively as she turned to sit on Kiera's couch.

"Right," Kiera responded, sitting across from the woman, trying to keep as much space between them as possible. "Well," she threw her hands up and smiled. "How can I help you, Mrs. Pierce?"

"Oh, it's Ms. Pierce, please," Ms. Pierce said, dismissing Kiera's comment. "That man ruined my life. Better not to talk about him."

Kiera remained silent, nodding and clasping her hands. Something told her this woman wasn't performing a friendly check-up call.

"Anyway, listen, honey," Ms. Pierce leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, facing Kiera sternly. "I ..." she paused, looking away from Kiera, "I want to encourage you to take some time for yourself."

Kiera was at a loss for words. Surely this woman couldn't be asking her to leave Lev.

"Time for myself?" Kiera asked defensively.

"Yes, sweetheart, you see." She readjusted her posture on the couch, extending her arm on the back of the sofa and crossing her legs. "Lev is a very busy man, as you know, and a girl who has gone through such a traumatic event." She gasped and put her hand on her chest. "I just can't imagine what you're going through. You need more support than he can give you right now."

Kiera scoffed in shock. “You’re telling me to leave your son?”

“Honey, it’s not good for either of you,” Ms. Pierce repeated, trying her best to seem convincing. “He has a lot of responsibilities, and he’s a bit ... distracted by everything that’s happened to you.”

“Wow,” Kiera said, leaning back and crossing her arms. “Well, he’s free to leave any time he wants. He’s not sentenced to stay with me.”

“That’s the issue, honey. He won’t leave you. He’s in too deep. He feels somewhat responsible for your accident and wants to care for you, almost baby you, and it’s not healthy for anyone.”

“Someone once told me that the only two people who know what happens in a relationship are the people *in it*,” Kiera bit back.

“Well, it seems that way, darling, but sometimes an outside perspective can be helpful.”

“I never asked for your perspective,” Kiera said firmly.

Ms. Pierce stared at Kiera almost admirably as if she was surprised someone would stand up to her.

“Okay,” Ms. Pierce said, her tone changing from kind to evil. “I am telling you to leave my son alone. He’s got more important things to do than look after some charity case.”

Kiera scoffed, raising her eyebrows. “Charity case?”

“Honey, really, look at yourself and look at him. He’s a successful entrepreneur. He’s attractive, charming, and athletic. He’s in a different class than you.”

“Wow,” Kiera said, shocked. “Listen, *Ms. Pierce*,” Kiera said mockingly, standing from the couch. “I think it’s time you leave.”

Ms. Pierce stood and walked toward the door, stopping in front of Kiera. “Only if you leave as well, darling.”

She exited Kiera's apartment, slamming the door behind her. Kiera stood in her living room with her mouth open in shock, shaking her head. If Jayne was right about his mother, what else was true? More importantly, why was everyone in her life trying to convince her to leave him?

Returning to the kitchen, Kiera tried to shake the encounter from her mind as she prepared her chicken and put it in the oven, setting a timer on her phone to thirty minutes.

She returned to the couch and sat, shaking her head and looking out the window. Pressing play on her TV show, she tried to forget how appalled she was at his mother's nerve. A part of her was even slightly scared of her due to her brash and demeaning manner.

Thoughts of the threatening phone call entered her mind, and Kiera wondered if the call had been from his mother. As she replayed the scene, she snapped into another flashback.

The hospital walls were plain and white, with posters describing the human anatomy around the room. She was on the night shift, typing away at her computer, when Lev raced in, holding a child limp in his arms.

Kiera raced toward him and took the child into her arms, calling for a stretcher.

"What happened?" Kiera asked frantically.

"He got hit by a car," Lev responded, out of breath and in shock as he put his hands on his head. "It just happened, about a mile from here. He's been unconscious. I tried CPR, but ..."

He was interrupted by a team of nurses approaching with a stretcher, gently putting the boy on it and reeling him deeper into the emergency room.

"You did the right thing," Kiera said to Lev, touching his arm lightly before following the nurses to care for the boy.

Later that night, Kiera walked into the waiting room to see Lev as a nervous wreck, twiddling his thumbs and staring at the floor.

"Sir?" Kiera asked as she sat next to him.

“Yes,” Lev said quickly, glancing at Kiera with concern.

“He’s stable,” Kiera informed him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “He’s going to be fine. He has a broken femur, but other than that, he just has a few scrapes. Before we continue, I’d like you to sign this waiver as his legal guardian to authorize further care.”

“He’s not mine,” Lev stated. “I just found him. I was behind the car that struck him. I just grabbed him, put him in the back of my car, and called the police on my way over here.”

“All right,” Kiera said gently. “We’ll try to find his parents then. Unfortunately, because you’re not his legal guardian, I can’t give you any more information.”

“I understand,” Lev responded, standing and placing his hands on his head again. “Thank you, Miss ...”

“Wilson, Kiera Wilson,” she stated, standing and shaking his hand.

“Thank you, Kiera Wilson,” Lev stated kindly.

“And you are?” she asked, locking eyes with him.

“Lev Pierce.”

“Well, Mr. Pierce, you saved that child’s life tonight.”

“No,” he stated with admiration in his eyes. “You did, Ms. Wilson.”

He smiled before turning away from her and walking out the sliding doors of the emergency room. Kiera watched him walk away, and her heart fluttered. She secretly hoped he would ask her out, but that would have been the most inappropriate time.

The next night, Kiera entered the hospital for her shift and found roses on her desk. She stared at them skeptically, sure they were for someone else and misplaced. The other nurses assured her they were for her and teased her as she smiled and read the card.

To: Kiera Wilson

From: Lev Pierce

Any woman that saves a child in need deserves a dinner on me. Friday night?

His phone number was listed at the bottom of the card. Kiera sat at her desk and smiled, entering the number into her phone and typing a text. She typed and deleted multiple texts, nervousness rising in her chest.

“Charming, Friday night sounds like a plan, Mr. Lev Pierce.”

TEN



LEV

Lev hung up the phone abruptly, sitting in his car and rubbing his hands over his face. If he had kept Kiera on the line any longer, he would have had more difficulty explaining what was happening.

Josie had called him right before Kiera did with more news that made Lev's stomach turn. Not only had Ronan gone off the path, but more shifters in the hotel were acting out aggressively. Even some of the clients of the hotel that were shifters had similar reactions.

When Josie, Tyler, and Ben arrived, one of the guests had shifted completely; others were partially shifted, only growling and snarling. The humans at the resort called the police and fled, leaving their belongings behind ... the guest who had shifted caused over ten thousand dollars' worth of damage.

Luckily, no humans saw the shift, but Lev found it hard to be grateful for that when something much more severe was developing. Josie's theory was that something may have been in the food, which would explain why the employees and customers were having issues.

If word got out any further, business would sink at the Pierce Hotels all around the country. Lev realized he could go bankrupt if the situation wasn't handled immediately.

He turned off his car and stared at the entrance to the airport, his chest sinking. The last thing he wanted was to

leave Kiera behind right as she was starting to come around, but his livelihood was at stake in a way he hadn't expected.

The sun was beginning to set as he landed in California. He turned on his phone while waiting at the baggage claim, hoping Kiera would have texted him. Disappointment filled him when he realized the only messages were from his mother and Josie about more issues with the hotel.

The drive to the hotel itself was long and gruesome. LAX was the airport with the earliest flight, and it was about two hours to get to Palm Springs. The ride was filled with Lev fielding phone calls, texts, and emails between his various hotels. Not once did Kiera's name pop up on his phone.

Lev stared out the window at the palm trees and California sunset. He wondered what was going on in Kiera's mind and if she felt odd about him leaving town so abruptly. He thought it better for her to get used to him being occasionally gone now rather than later, but it still didn't feel good or right.

The car pulled into the long, winding driveway leading up the hill to the hotel. He put his phone in his pocket and squinted out the window as a horrifying scene occurred.

Two giant black bears were bellowing and roaring at each other directly in front of the main entrance. There was a crowd around them, primarily other shifters, Lev guessed, due to their growling and snarling at the fight with smiles on their faces.

He ripped off his coat jacket and ordered the driver to stop the car. Lev got out and stormed toward the fight, screaming as he extended his arms and tilted his chest forward, beginning to shift.

Hair sprouted from his pores, and his teeth grew eight times their size as his face formed into a snout. His back hunched over, and he was knocked to his knees, claws sprouting from the webbing of his fingers.

Entirely shifted, Lev let out a bone-tingling roar that shocked the crowd. He crept toward the two bears fighting and

slashed one in the back with his claws. The bear bawled and whipped around, trying to claw Lev.

Lev dove to the side and bit the bear on the ear, forcing it to the ground. He turned to face the other bear involved, bellowing at it fiercely. The other bear took the warning and grunted as it ran down the hill.

Lev turned back to the first bear and watched it shift back into human form due to its weakness. A woman lay in front of him with her neck bleeding.

He stared at the crowd and bellowed again, making them scatter across the parking lot. He grunted and looked down at his paw, scratched from the fight. He shook his head as he began to shift back.

His body contorted, and bones cracked back into place before he breathed heavily and stared at the entrance to the hotel. Josie came running out of the doors with a pair of sweatpants ready for him.

“Who’s that?” Lev asked, glancing at the woman on the ground.

“Customer,” Josie remarked. “I’ll have Tyler on it.”

“Save her if you can,” Lev said, grabbing the sweatpants and pulling them on.

“Of course,” Josie said, trailing Lev into the hotel.

“What’s going on with the partial shifters?” Lev asked, glancing at his hand.

“Lev,” Josie said, looking at his wound.

“I’m fine, answer my question,” Lev responded, making his way to the dining room.

“They seem to be in a state of limbo,” Josie stated. “Somewhere between human and bear.”

Lev sighed as he pushed open the door to the dining room. “Great.”

The room was in disarray. Tables were knocked over and ripped tablecloths lined the floor. The walls had scratch marks

and blood splatter on them. Lev ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head as he walked through the kitchen door

“What have you found, Tyler?” Lev asked as he glanced around the kitchen.

Tyler whipped around, surprised at Lev’s presence. “We’ve found something useful.”

“What’s that?” Josie asked, walking behind Lev.

Tyler held up a purple flower with budding flowers lining the stem. “Wolfsbane,” he stated. “Found this one stuck between the counters.”

Lev pursed his lips and clenched his jaw, taking the wolfsbane from Tyler. He twirled it in his hand as he remembered his first encounter with it.

He was around five years old and walking with Josie in the valley. They were collecting flowers for their mother and came across a bundle of wolfsbane. The color was so bright and appealing that Josie tried to eat it. Once she did, she began shifting uncontrollably, her eyes changed into blank spheres, and she could only snarl.

It scared Lev enough to run home and tell his mother, who gave him a sharp lecture about the dangers associated with the beautiful herb. Shifters’ animals can take over instantly if even one bite is ingested. Large doses can even turn shifters rogue with no control over their abilities or even kill them.

“Scope the kitchen for more,” Lev snarled. He pointed to Josie. “Contain those shifters out there, partial or not. I want them locked up.”

“Where?” Josie asked, throwing up her hands.

“There are over six hundred rooms in this hotel, Josie,” Lev growled, stepping close to his sister and towering over her. “Grab the emergency locks, install them on the doors so they have no way out, and lock them up. They need time to dry off.”

Lev turned to Tyler and looked him up and down. Tyler wasn’t the best at capturing or containing large crowds as he

was still in training, and this situation was far above his pay grade.

“As for you,” Lev said firmly. “Throw out all the food and order replacements. That food comes off the truck and directly to one of us, no middlemen. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Tyler said, turning and jogging to the fridge.

Lev left the kitchen as Josie walked toward the main entrance. He took a right down the hallway and into the manager’s office, slamming the door behind him.

He paced, putting his hands behind his head before screaming and knocking over the pile of papers on the desk. The sheets flew to the floor as he breathed heavily, fury rising in his chest.

Sitting in the desk chair, he reviewed a mental list of all his enemies. He wondered who he had hurt so badly that they would want to poison his customers. Lev thought of the other clans in Shenandoah. While worthy opponents, they would never leave the valley willingly to travel across the country.

He wondered if another hotel nearby had sent someone to poison them. It was a strong possibility, but Lev was in good standing with his opponents, even if they were his competition, or so he thought.

Lev turned on the computer and glanced at his hand again, opening and closing his fingers over the wound. Shaking his head, he typed in the password and began to check the registration database for any customers whose names he might know.

Most guests were random, probably families visiting the hot springs and golf courses nearby. He continued scrolling through multiple pages of names until he found one that surprised him: Beatrix Pierce.

He leaned back in the chair and folded his arms, glancing at the name. He racked his brain for any memory of his mother telling him she was going to Palm Springs. There was no memory of her coming to this location, but he did remember

her being away for three days about a week ago. She said she was meeting her friends in Denver for a spa retreat.

He scoffed and smiled in disbelief. Beatrix was manipulative, even abusive, but he never thought she was this reckless.

It started to come together in his mind. Her distaste for Kiera, her emotional explosion when he said he was sending Josie to take care of things here, and the Denver trip. He sighed and leaned forward.

Accusing his mother of this would be a severe misgiving if she hadn't been the perpetrator, and he needed to be sure before he took any further action. Clicking on the browser icon, he began scrolling through the online history to the week she was supposedly there.

The results appalled him. Pages about how long it took wolfsbane to take effect and the amount of wolfsbane needed to constitute a lethal dose clouded the screen. He chuckled and hung his head over the desk. She may have thought she was clever, but she had never been great with technology.

He cleared the history and stood from the desk, putting his hands in his pockets. A roar came from outside the office and startled him.

Racing out of the office, he saw Josie trying to contain a partial shifter about to take complete form. The shifter was much larger than Josie, and she had trouble holding him down. Lev ran toward the quarrel and pushed Josie out of the way as he punched the shifter in the face, knocking him out.

Lev turned to Josie and sighed. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she responded, climbing to her feet. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"Where's Ben?" Lev asked.

"Uh." Josie rubbed the back of her head, wincing. "He's outside."

"You got this?"

“Yeah,” Josie said confidently, waving Lev out the door. “Go. He should be right out front.”

Lev made his way down the grand hall to the front door, and Ben was outside on the phone, speaking to what sounded like the police.

“Yes, of course,” Ben said, turning to face Lev. “Absolutely, sir. If I see anything, I will call you. Yes. Thank you. Bye.”

Ben’s shoulders relaxed, and he breathed out, putting his hands on his hips.

“Cops?” Lev asked.

“Yeah,” Ben responded, sighing. “Yeah, but all they know is there was a bear sighting in the parking lot. No reports of shifters.”

“Ah,” Lev said, waving his hand downward. “If anyone says they saw a shapeshifter, the police will think they’re crazy.”

“Not if enough people report it.”

“We have it under control for now,” Lev said. “Ben?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I need you to put a detail on someone for me. Tyler can be involved but keep Josie out of it for now. No one but you and Tyler knows about this.”

“Okay,” Ben said with concern. “Who’s the target?”

“I need you to watch Beatrix,” Lev stated firmly. “Watch how she moves, where she goes. Track her phone calls. I want to know everything.”

Ben looked shocked as he nodded and agreed to Lev’s request. Lev looked at the sky, the bright constellations peering down at him. He wondered where Kiera was at that moment, if she was doing all right, and if she still trusted him.

ELEVEN



KIERA

Kiera lounged on the couch in her pajamas, scrolling through her phone. She'd had breakfast already. Dee was at work, and she had no idea what was going on with Lev. She felt heavy and dull, the day stretching empty and intimidating ahead of her.

She opened and closed her solitaire app three times before dropping her phone on her stomach. *What am I doing? I'm a grown woman. Am I really going to let a car accident and a little amnesia get to me like this?* "This is ridiculous," she said into the silence.

She'd stayed inside long enough, letting everything just happen to her. Lev taking her out, then suddenly ditching her, and Dee taking care of her. It was time for her to decide something for herself.

She needed to get out of the house and clear her head. *I'll go to the hospital and visit some of my patients. I need to fill out the paperwork for my official leave anyway.* She'd gone to the trouble of renting a car in case she needed anything while Dee was at work. She might as well get used to driving again.

She dressed, picking out a set of scrubs in her closet decorated with penguins on the pants. She washed her face, brushed her teeth, brushed her hair, and put it up in her usual twisted bun. *Not bad at all,* she thought, smiling at herself in the mirror and adding a little light makeup.

By the time she was outside, car keys in hand, her mood had noticeably lifted. Her chest felt light, and she was

energized. With a bag in hand, she had a plan. For the first time since the accident, her life felt normal.

It wasn't like a trip to the cancer ward was going to cheer her up, exactly, but it would be a bit of normalcy, a chance to do something for someone else. To help instead of needing help. *This is going to be good for me.* Her life didn't need to revolve around some guy.

She got in the car and pulled on her seat belt, then she pulled out into the street that led to the main road. It was strange to think that she'd been living a whole other life. The missing year felt like a story everyone was telling her.

How could things have changed so much, so fast? She'd never thought she'd have a whirlwind romance like that, moving in with a guy within months of knowing him. Lev must've been really something special. *Or you got really gullible in the last year.*

She shook her head. She had to trust herself, her own judgment. Right? Dee seemed to like him, and he'd been wonderful so far. But then, there was his overbearing mother, the fear she felt remembering her ... and Jayne wasn't so sure she'd been happy.

Maybe I felt like I couldn't tell Dee since she liked him so much. Maybe things started out well, but we'd been fighting, and he was trying to make it up to me. She stopped at a red light and realized her heart was racing.

Or maybe, I need to calm down and stop thinking. Isn't the point of this to get out of my head and away for a bit? She did a few breathing exercises, calming herself down.

She turned on the radio, flipping the stations until she found a 90's genre. She wanted something she could sing along to and relax with, not a reminder that she didn't know any of the songs that had come out this year.

The scenery she drove by was gorgeous, the trees all shades of autumn colors. She saw gold leaves, deep red leaves, burnt orange leaves, and everything in between. Virginia really

was where she was meant to be. She hated the idea of being somewhere that didn't have all four seasons.

She pulled onto the highway, her usual route if it wasn't rush hour. It saved her five minutes. With a sudden lurch and a loud noise, the car swerved a little beneath her. She fought for control, flipping on her hazards and cruising to the side of the road as soon as she could.

She got out, her peaceful mood ruined, wondering what had happened. "Oh, for the love of ... are you kidding me?" She had a flat tire. For some reason, the damn thing had just burst.

She went to the trunk, but there was no sign of a spare or even a car jack. "Ugh. What kind of rental company doesn't pack a spare? That is just too strange!"

She twisted her bracelets around on her wrist, resuming her breathing exercises. She wished Lev was here, and then she wondered where that thought even came from.

Calm down, Kiera. Even if a hunky bear guy can lift a car without a jack, he'd still need the spare. Someone will be able to help you.

She called the rental company's roadside assistance and settled back into the driver's seat to wait. At least she had Mariah Carey and the Backstreet Boys to keep her company. She got back out when she saw the AAA truck pulling up behind her.

"Thanks for coming," she said, giving the mechanic an embarrassed half-wave. "I have no idea what happened."

He smiled at her, weathered face creased and cheerful. "Not to worry, ma'am, probably just drove over some glass; it happens all the time. We'll have you back on the road in a jiffy."

"I appreciate that." He was just trying to make her feel better, she was sure. It had to be annoying to get called out for a flat, something that she could fix herself if she was at all properly prepared. She watched him jack up the car, feeling awkward with nothing to do.

She wasn't sure if it was a jiffy or not, but she was back on her way within fifteen minutes. She thanked him profusely, and he laughed her off again, loading her trunk with a new spare and a jack while he was at it. "Have a safe trip, ma'am," he told her as he drove off.

The rest of the drive passed without incident. She pulled up to the hospital, found the space with her name on it, and parked in the familiar space.

The second she got out of the elevator on the seventh floor, she was greeted by a chorus of voices.

"Kiera, what on earth are you doing here?" asked Amy, the receptionist. Amy was friends with all the nurses and generally the one with the news.

"Aren't you still recovering from that accident?" Rita asked, eyes wide as she hung up a chart. She was always a worrier.

Clara, a fellow nurse, hurried around the desk to grab her in a hug. "How are you? We've all been worried."

She hugged Clara back, a little overwhelmed by the attention. "Hey, sorry, I'm all right. I haven't been texting much."

"Of course, I'm sure you've got enough on your plate." Clara stepped back, looking her over. "You eating well?"

"I'm fine," Kiera said, laughing. Things here hadn't changed too much, at least. "I'm just here to fill out my leave paperwork. And I thought I'd visit the patients."

Amy shook her head, smiling. "That's Kiera for you, working even when she's got amnesia. Go ahead. I'm sure they'll be thrilled to see you."

"Hope you feel better soon," Rita added.

Her first visit was to Rose Hayes, a woman with lung cancer who had been in and out of oncology for several years. She looked more tired than she remembered, but she greeted Kiera with her usual cheer. "Kiera, what a lovely surprise.

They told us you weren't going to be in, that you were in some kind of accident."

"I was, but I wanted to come and visit all of you. You know how I like to keep busy." She sat next to the old woman, happy to chat.

Rose patted her hand. "Well, I'm sure Lev's taking good care of you."

It was the same story everywhere she went. All of the patients asked her about Lev and had nothing but wonderful things to say about him. The children asked when he would next be coming and asked her to tell him they missed him.

"He sponsors events for the children of the ward, you know, and not just Christmas," Rita said while checking little Beth's blood pressure. "Birthdays, Halloween, even just because. He'll have food and performers come."

Amy lit up when Kiera asked her about him. "Mr. Pierce has been wonderful, a real blessing. He's donated all kinds of things. New equipment, but also games, video game systems, books for a little library, blankets, and clothes. He says you give him all of his best ideas," she'd said with a wink.

"What's that building out there?" Kiera asked Clara when she caught her in the hall, pointing out the window. It had been bugging her all day. It definitely hadn't been there a year ago.

Clara glanced out the window. "That's a new housing area, Rainbow House. Parents can stay there to be near their children while they're getting treatment."

That was wonderful. They'd been wanting one for ages. Kiera had to repress a sigh. "Let me guess, Lev paid for that too?"

Clara laughed. "Got it in one."

Kiera didn't remember any of this. He certainly hadn't mentioned it. No one had. Was that a good thing or not? *If only my stupid brain would let me remember. Is he good for me or what? Is this real generosity, or is he just trying to butter me up?*

As nice as it was to visit her patients, she really had to get that paperwork filled out. She went into her office and flicked on the lights. It looked more or less how she remembered: a kitten calendar on the wall, a fern on the bookshelf near the window, a jar of candy for emergencies, and her portable radio for when she was filling in patient notes.

There were a few things she didn't recognize. The coat draped over the back of her chair was new. There was a designer label sewn inside, and it was the softest thing she'd ever touched. There was also a photo of her and Lev, him hugging her from behind, both grinning like crazy.

She almost felt like she could remember when they'd taken it. It was a park near the hospital. She recognized it. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift ...

Lev had come by the hospital with lunch, a surprise. A Reuben and black and white cookie from her favorite deli. It had been a beautiful day; they'd eaten at the park. When they'd finished, he'd taken her hand and said, "I have something to tell you."

"Well, go ahead then. Don't keep building up the suspense," she said lightly. He'd licked his lips. He was nervous, really nervous. She almost never saw him like that.

"You're the most beautiful, funniest, most caring woman I've ever met. You're the one for me, the only one I can ever imagine being with." His eyes shined in the sun, the honey in them warm. "It's like you were made for me."

He was a shifter. Could it be? Was she understanding him right? "What are you saying?" she asked breathlessly. The hope had fluttered in her chest like a trapped bird.

"You're my fated mate," he'd said, and she'd nearly burst into tears right there. "Nothing and no one will ever come between us. You're my destiny, Kiera, and I will always put you first, no matter what. I love you."

She'd laughed, crying from happiness. That actually happened, apparently. "Oh, Lev. I love you too. Are we really meant for each other? Are you sure?"

“Of course, I’m sure. I know what I’m feeling. I’ve never felt it before, and I never will again. You’re the only one for me, Kiera Wilson.”

He’d kissed her and pulled her into his lap. She remembered thinking, *This is what home feels like.*

TWELVE



LEV

Lev arrived in town two days later. After the chaos at the hotel, all he wanted to do was see Kiera's face. He couldn't get her out of his head. Guilt wrapped around him like a snake, constricting his heart each time he thought of her without him. He had let her out of his sight once, and he saw what had happened as a result.

He thought back to the hotel and his mother's presence there. Usually, he'd block out her aggression with stoicism. Figuring she would throw her tantrum regardless and then leave him be. What if he was making a grave mistake?

His mother never cared for Kiera. She didn't bother to hide it either. But what was he supposed to do? Condemn the woman for being a bitch? Because she was at his hotel? A sinking feeling threatened to collapse his certainty.

Lev's mind played the conversation he had with his managers on repeat. His mother had been there only days before the outbreak. Could this just be more than a coincidence? Or was this all just unfortunate timing?

He had viewed the security footage himself. There was no doubt she was there. She was also too eager to send him out of town. She was beginning to look more and more suspicious.

Lev put his car in park in front of Kiera's building. Walking up the short set of steps to her apartment building, he hated that he had to see her here. His mate was supposed to be safe at home. *His* home. His bear huffed in agreement.

The door opened, and it was like he had stepped into the sun. Kiera's long brown hair was styled in a braid. She peered at him through her tousled fringe. Her green eyes held a glimmer of the spark he used to ignite.

Her joy was restrained by hesitancy. A small smile crossed her lips as she played with the colorful bangles she wore. The habit was so familiar it made him long for her trust.

"Hi," she said shyly.

"Hey."

"Oh, um ... come in," Kiera held the door open for him. "When did you get back?"

"I just got back, actually," he said, walking into the living room. "I came straight here."

"Why?" she asked.

"For you. I couldn't stand not being able to see you."

Kiera blushed as she bit her bottom lip to restrain a small smile. Despite the situation, he enjoyed the challenge of winning her over again. He would do anything for her. He was sure she still felt their bond when she looked at him like that. If everything went according to plan, after today, she would be a few steps closer to reestablishing some of her memories.

Lev had been patient and understanding. Allowing her to move out of their house. He thought it wouldn't be a permanent arrangement, but it was starting to feel like one. Somehow, he had to show Kiera who she had been, who they had been. Then, just maybe, they could finally get back to their lives.

"Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?" he asked.

"Tonight," she repeated, glancing at the clock on the wall behind her. After a few moments of contemplation, she turned to him, "sure. Where are we going?"

"To our ... I mean ... my house. I'm not much of a cook, but I have an amazing chef." He gave her a wink.

“How do you know he’ll make something I like?” she asked playfully.

“Because you’re the one thing in this world I know best.”

The honest statement softened her eyes. For a moment, she looked at him; he was the man she was in love with. Lev clenched his fist, resisting the urge to hold her. His palms ached to feel her skin beneath his. Their separation was slowly eating away at his control. He could sense a small part of her reaching out to him through the fog, like a mirage. Each time he thought he was getting closer, the earth crumbled, turning to dust in his hands.

He knew that people with amnesia recalled their memories when looking at things or places that were emotionally triggering to them. This was the perfect excuse to bring Kiera home. It would make sense that the best place for her to rebuild her memories would be in the place where most of the memories had been made.

They had spent months together creating their home. Everything from the layout of the furniture to the colorful paintings on the walls, she had picked out. Every room was the perfect blend of them. It was their sanctuary. Her sunshine and his earth created an Eden for their future.

Lev was sure that being there would bring back the memories stolen from her. He had spent time planning this night while he was away. Everything was going to be perfect. He would cook her favorite meal, and maybe she will feel comfortable enough around him to let him in.

He wasn’t daft. He realized that, though he knew Kiera, he couldn’t understand what she was going through. Between him and what he wanted stood what she would decide. What if she never regained her memory? Would she be willing to create new ones with him?

“Just give me a minute to get my purse, and I’m ready to go,” she said.

Lev waited as Kiera grabbed her things. Once she had them, he led her outside to his car. He opened the door for her,

making sure she was comfortably seated before he closed it and went to his side. His heart began to race. This would be the first time she'd entered their house since the accident.

Since Kiera had been gone, their home had stopped feeling like one. Without her, that home was a shrine to what they once had. A carefully preserved body waiting for a soul to animate it. Whoever had put a pause on their happiness would pay. It was funny how it was hard to truly appreciate someone until their presence was gone.

Lev pulled out and began their journey. The comfortable way she nestled into his passenger seat caused him to smile.

"You can put your feet up on the dashboard. If you want," he said

"How did you ... oh, right, why wouldn't you know something like that." She gave an awkward laugh.

"I'm sorry I had to leave. Normally, I wouldn't have left you, but there was an issue in one of the hotels I couldn't avoid."

"What type of issue?" she asked.

"A couple of the staff, and even some of the guests, were losing control of their animal sides. You can imagine how dangerous that could get, especially for the humans inside."

"Is that why you didn't take me with you?" she blurted out.

Lev could sense her hurt. With his shifter senses, her heart beat and scent were apparent enough. He would have known even if he didn't know Kiera so well. He didn't mean to make her feel less important. He honestly wasn't even sure she would want to go with him, given her condition. Another part of him knew he wouldn't have let her go with him either way. It was too dangerous, and she was still healing.

"Would you have come if I asked?" he probed.

"Yes," she said without hesitation.

The knowledge was a spring in the desert. It brought life to the dry wells in his heart.

“I didn’t take you because it was dangerous,” he said. “Truthfully, I wanted you to go with me, but that was only because I selfishly wanted you by my side. But honestly, you’re not ready. This is already a lot for you. I couldn’t risk putting you in danger.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking a small pause. “Did you find out what was wrong with them?” Warmth filled her eyes as she leaned forward.

“Mostly. We found the cause of the strange outburst. Someone was sneaking Wolfsbane into the food and drinks. We had our entire food supply inspected, so it’s clear now. We still haven’t found the person responsible, though.”

“How are you going to make sure it doesn’t happen again?”

“Regular testing. Now that the threat has made itself known, my entire staff will take precautions.”

She nodded, satisfied with his answer. Lev sat on his omission, letting it fester in the background of his being. He knew he was lying to her by not informing her of his mother’s piece in this puzzle. However, he didn’t want to risk upsetting her before he knew the full extent of what he did or did not see. He would rather tell her facts instead of filling her head with suspicions.

They arrived at his house. Turning on the porch lights, Lev led Kiera through the front door. Her eyes scanned the large mansion sitting in the center of lush greenery. She had always loved how their home looked like it was tucked into the nature around it.

Lev showed her to the living room. This was one of the most used rooms in the house. He would sit next to her most nights, working while she read. It was those things he missed most, finding comfort in the presence of each other.

Kiera stopped in front of the couch, picking up the thick Afghan that hung across it. She stared at her old friend, confusion causing her to frown. She rubbed the material between her fingers before placing it back down.

Lev was entranced. His senses focused on every expression that crossed her face. Noting every sigh and arch of their brow.

Kiera was meticulous as she took in the pictures on the walls. Snapshots of their life showed her what he could never express in words. She lingered by some longer than others. Occasionally a smile would pass her features.

“We were happy,” she remarked.

“We were,” he replied. “We have some time before dinner is ready. We could look through the rest of the house to kill time.”

“I’d love that,” she said.

Lev showed her each room, giving her time to explore the various items that called to her. The closer they got to their room, the more his heart rate increased. He hadn’t been in that room except to grab clothes since the day she had gone missing. He’d started using a guest room, not ready to face their space without her. When he had to come home without her, he avoided that space like a plague. Now they would confront it together.

“This is our room,” he said, holding the door open.

She blushed, looking at him from the corner of her eye before walking in. The room had scattered pieces of clothing across the master bed and carpet. She walked to the vanity. A half-empty cup of tea sat on the edge along with a dog-eared book. Behind it was a small pile of bangles. Kiera smiled, picking them up to get a closer look.

“Why didn’t you clean?” she asked.

“When I found out you were missing, I threw myself into the search. It was days before we found you.” He looked around the room. “I haven’t come in here since. It didn’t feel right without you.”

“The other day, I remembered something,” she looked him in the eyes. “But I’m not sure if it’s true or not. You said I am your mate?”

“You remembered.” Hope filled his voice.

“Yes. So, it’s true?”

“It is. We were supposed to be mated soon ... but then you went missing,” he said.

“Oh,” she replied, taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

Lev sat next to her, offering her his hand. He didn’t want to risk scaring her, but he couldn’t sit there and watch his mate struggle. He would keep his hand extended, waiting for when she was ready to grab it.

Kiera slid her small hand into his, offering a piece of herself to him. He squeezed her hand, letting her lean her head on him as they sat beside each other. Lev allowed hope to fill the quietness.

But the moment was broken when the chef came to inform them dinner was ready. Lev led them to the dining room, his eyes on Kiera the whole time as she took it in.

She looked over the food with excitement in her eyes. Lev needed to remember to thank the chef for taking his last-minute request. He wanted to have a bit of everything she liked. Lev enjoyed the way her face lit up as she tasted each morsel. It was more than worth the effort as far as he was concerned.

“Everything tastes amazing, thank you.”

“I’m happy you like it.”

“More like you knew I would,” she joked. “I’m catching on to your game, Lev.”

“At least it proves I pay attention,” he said. “You should have seen the number of times my brother put himself in the dog house by forgetting details.”

“What would he forget?”

“Their names. Where they worked. You name it, he forgot it,” he said, laughter erupting from his chest.

“He must have caused so much trouble.” She laughed with him.

“Are you kidding? My sister practically made a business out of sneaking him out of the house to get away from the angry mobs.”

“Smart girl,” she said. “I always wanted siblings. Growing up as an only child can be boring.”

Lev’s heart skipped a beat. He wanted to tell her his family was hers. But he knew it might be too much. She was still digesting the fact that she was his mate.

After dinner, he took her to the fireplace. He had set up a small dessert and wine station where they could continue their night. He guided her down amongst the pillows and handed her a glass of wine.

“Here’s to you,” he said, clinking their glasses together.

She took a sip. Her cheeks blushed. She looked at him; her desire was palpable and caused him to inhale the intoxicating scent of her need. Her lips parted, and he gave in to his bear, who urged him to claim her.

Lev grabbed the back of her head, leaning forward slowly. But when Kiera clutched at his shirt and leaned into him, he gave in, crushing his mouth to her. Their kiss was hot, longing driving him to deepen his rapture. She moaned into his mouth. A husky call that made him want to bury himself inside her.

He pulled back before his control wore too thin. She looked at him, her eyes low and hazed.

“I miss you, Kiera. But I’m willing to wait until you’re ready to be with me.”

THIRTEEN



KIERA

She had spent the last few weeks at Lev's house. *Our house*, she scolded herself. It was a concept that still felt foreign. Like she was walking between worlds. Dreams and reality existed silently beside each other.

Though she saw proof of her life, it was still hard to think of it as something tangible. She had loved a man enough to build a future with him, and she remembered nothing. All she had was in front of her. Could that be enough to continue what she started with him?

While Lev had been out working, she spent her time looking through things she vaguely remembered. The clothes, accessories, books, and décor were all things she was instantly drawn to. Her skin carried the memories of fabric slipping on and off her body. Flashes of joy, sadness, lust, and rage scattered, searching for the images they had been broken from. These items were hers, but something was missing when she held them.

Other things, like the pictures on the wall, left her bare. The woman in those photos was carefree and happy. There was a fullness in her life Kiera had always longed for. Now this dream hung like a curse, reminding her of what she had lost before she ever grasped it.

A dull throb sprouted in her temple. She placed a timid finger on the sensitive flesh. Every time she allowed her thoughts to sort through the pieces, she came face to face with a migraine. It would start as a subtle throb that would grow

into a head-splitting pounding the more she worked to remember.

Kiera yelled in frustration. Every day she tried to remember. She stared at pictures and asked Lev questions, and still, there was nothing. The little she managed to remember left her more confused than before.

And there were some things that made her question if there was a reason she couldn't remember. Like, ever since she met Lev's mom again, she didn't feel right around that woman. Could there be more that she didn't understand when it came to the past year?

Why did she even do this to her? Did she think Kiera just wasn't good enough for her son?

She went into the kitchen to make tea. The cabinets had all her favorite combinations. Putting the teapot on, she looked at the coffee cup. Her blush mug sat next to his wooden one. The contrast made her smile. For every bit of softness she brought, Lev cradled it with his protective hardness. It gave her room to find her feet, offering steady support when she asked.

She realized that her initial impression of him barely scratched the surface of who he was. His large, imposing frame and handsomely rugged looks were only one element of the man. Each day he proved how much he loved her. He took his time, giving her the space she needed to start understanding who she was and who they were together.

This must've been hard for him. She noticed the sadness that crossed his eyes when he thought she wasn't watching. She longed for who she was, his mate. The carefree version of herself she was trying to get back. But what if she never did?

Lev had consistently told her to take the time she needed. He never rushed her or made her feel like she was anything other than herself. She was starting to understand why she fell in love with him. When they were together, the weight she carried was lighter. He made her feel important.

In these few short weeks, this was the most comfortable she had felt since she woke up. Kiera looked forward to seeing

his face at breakfast and hearing about his day at night. She felt the pull each night that begged her to uncover what he felt like between her legs.

She knew he felt it too. She thought about their kiss the first night she came here often. It caused her heart rate to rise. He kissed her as if she would slip through his fingers. Completely possessing her mouth. If he had continued, she would have followed the tempting lure of his arms.

The whistle of the kettle refocused her. Checking her phone, she rushed to set up her cup. She was supposed to be meeting Jayne and Dee for a Zoom call to catch up. She was excited to speak to Dee, but Jayne was starting to raise some red flags.

Lev wasn't anything like what Jayne had warned her about. He treated her with genuine care and love. Kiera was sure that if he was some creep, she would have figured that out by now. People couldn't pretend for long. Something would have slipped by now. So, the question was, why would Jayne lie?

Now that she thought about it, Jayne never really had anything positive to say about their relationship. All of their conversations would end up being a list of her *concerns* about a man it didn't seem like she knew much about. On the other hand, Dee seemed happy about their relationship. She believed they were made for each other.

Kiera's stomach sank. It was the same feeling she got whenever she remembered Lev's mother. It had to mean something.

Her phone vibrated, signaling her meeting. Kiera walked to the kitchen table and opened her laptop. For now, she would continue to collect information in silence. After all, the best person to trust was herself.

The screen filled with light, splitting into three windows.

"Long time no see," Dee said. "So, what's it like being back home?"

"Dee!" Jayne scolded.

“What? There’s no use beating around the bush. How else are we going to get any of the juicy details.”

“Juicy details? Do you mean all the reading I get done? Sure, I’ll spill,” Kiera said.

“Are you kidding me? All that time and all you’ve done is read books?” Dee’s eyes widened, her disbelief and disappointment clear.

“Leave her alone. You know it’s probably easy for a man like him to be distracted by work,” Jayne said.

“He has a pretty consistent schedule,” Kiera said, testing the waters. “He makes sure he’s home every day by seven, so we can have dinner together.”

“How sweet, him taking the time out to do that now,” Jayne snapped, taking the bait.

“You have been getting closer,” Dee exclaimed.

“Yes, we have. It’s been nice getting to know Lev ... again,” she laughed.

“So, what’s your verdict? Are you going to stay with him forever after a few weeks?” Jayne asked.

“I don’t know about forever, but right now, everything seems like a dream.” Kiera kept her voice light.

“You’ve been, okay?” Dee asked, concern in her eyes.

“Yeah, I’ve been great,” she said. “It’s starting to feel like home.”

“Ooooh ...” Dee teased.

“That’s such great news.” Jayne’s smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“We have to go out for drinks to celebrate your milestone.” Dee’s face flushed with excitement.

“I’m down! Come and meet us in town tonight. It’s been so long since we’ve gotten to hang out,” Jayne said in a much lighter tone.

“Let’s do it. Where are we going to meet?”

“My house,” Jayne said cheerfully. “I just got this killer blender.”

“Perfect, I’ll be our mixologist,” Dee said. “May as well put that venture to use.”

“Hey, it finally came in handy.” Kiera laughed

“Okay then, it’s settled. I’ll see everyone at my house at six.”

Kiera went into her room to look through some outfits. She hadn’t had a girl’s day in a while and was excited to update Dee on what was happening. She didn’t trust Jayne enough to tell them both. Not considering the strange way she’d been acting.

Kiera played with her bangles as she tried to work out the possibilities. What reason would Jayne have for not wanting them together? Did Jayne have a history with Lev? But how could she have when she had been overseas for years?

A familiar throb forced her to pull away from the thought. *I’ll just have to figure this out after girls’ night.* Besides, what better way to find out the truth than to let it come to you? Just like she had during the conversation.

It was time to start looking at the people around her more closely. She may not be able to remember the last year, but she hadn’t lost her intuition.

She picked out an outfit, a navy sweater dress, and paired it with brown boots. After a quick shower, she made herself presentable. Double-checking her appearance in the mirror, she gave herself a nod.

Kiera shot Lev a quick text letting him know not to expect to see her home because she was going out with Dee and Jayne. Thirty seconds later, her phone rang.

“You should take the driver. I’ve already let him know you’re on your way out.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Please, Kiera. Let me do this for you. I want to make sure you are dropped off and picked up safely.”

“I think you worry too much,” she said, picking up her purse and walking toward the front door.

“I think that if you refuse, I’ll just have to take you myself,” he threatened.

“Fine, I’ll take the driver,” she said. “Thank you.”

Kiera hung up. The driver was waiting outside, just as Lev had promised. *Damn, they work fast.* She said hello to the driver and entered the back seat. The ride to Jayne’s was smooth and quick. The gentle hum of the car engine brought a sense of nostalgia to her. As if she had taken this ride many times before. Kiera leaned her head back and allowed herself to enjoy the peace while she had it.

When she arrived at Jayne’s house, the girls were already prepping the drinks and snacks. She joined them, pouring her first glass of the night as she helped Jayne make sliders. Dee did what she did best and came up with a delicious margarita menu. Kiera felt like she was back in college again when the three of them would bullshit their way through exam week.

With the music and the drinks flowing, the girls fell into a lively pace of jokes, karaoke, and lots of games. Jayne seemed to have lost whatever edge she had this morning over chat. Now she was the same funny, kind friend she remembered her being during college.

The night flew by, and before Kiera knew it, it was half past eleven. She said bye to her friends, slowly making her way out of the building. The cold breeze made her wrap her arms around herself. She searched for the car through her tilting vision, but she couldn’t find it.

She thought the driver must have parked around the corner, so she walked the block. Her movements were clumsy and abrupt. The farther she walked from the house, the more her muscles tightened. She knew she should be afraid, but her emotions were buffered by the flow of alcohol.

Just as her foot contacted the curb, she was yanked back. Panic shot through her body, and she threw all of her weight forward. She almost slipped through his punishing grip, but

the man tightened his hold. Kiera tried to look back, but the man grabbed her hair, pulling her back into his chest.

Her screams were cut off by his hand covering her mouth. A black car pulled up beside him, and he dragged her toward it. Panic seized her. If they got her in that car, the chances of her making it out were almost nonexistent. Instincts kicked in, and she dug her nails into his wrist. She kicked her legs out and placed a foot on either side of the door.

Kiera locked her knees, applying as much resistance as she could muster. His hand slipped down her face giving her enough space to bite down. He yanked it away with a grunt. She screamed as loudly as she could, praying someone would hear her.

The man lifted her into the air, jerking her hard to release her legs from their stance. He shoved her, head first, into the open door. She held out her hands, trying to do anything that could stop him, and he fisted her hair.

A growl erupted. The cold, deadly sound froze the world around her.

FOURTEEN



LEV

Lev walked across the quiet parking lot. After deciding he would rather drive Kiera home, he called his driver to let him know he could go home for the night. The air became stiff, the hair on the back of his neck rising. Something was wrong.

There was a low rustle in the distance. He picked up his pace, and the sound became clearer. It sliced through the silence. Terror was evident. He knew that voice.

Kiera! his beast growled.

Kiera's screams propelled Lev's body into action. Within seconds, he was feet away from her. The scent of a bear assaulted his nose.

A large man lifted Kiera before shoving her forward into a car. The driver sat in front, nonchalantly waiting for his partner to finish their pickup. His vision went black. Who were they?

The scents were both familiar and foreign. His brain dragged through his catalog of neighboring clans. He growled, trying to place the scent, a deafening promise for blood. They would pay for touching his mate.

Lev closed the distance yanking him off of Kiera. The shifter's body flew, hitting the pavement with a blunt thud. The second guy exited the car, and Lev grabbed her, pulling her behind him. Fixing his gaze on his opponents, he kept his eyes from hers.

He felt the fear and relief warring inside her shaking frame. Every cell screamed inside his body. Wanting nothing more than to see she was okay, he fortified his resistance. He knew better than to tempt his bear. One look in her tear-stricken eyes would be enough to make him volatile.

He needed them alive ... for now.

First, the crash, and now this. This was starting to feel like someone was targeting his mate. He wouldn't allow this moment to slip through his fingers. The first guy walked toward them. The scent of blood consumed the space between them.

Both men moved in tandem, working to close him off. One from the left, the other from the right. Lev smiled. His muscles loosened, ready to react at a moment's notice. His senses heightened, extending beyond human capacity. Their footsteps vibrated on the pavement. Their heart rates increased as their eyes flashed. They were preparing to shift.

Lev had been waiting to get his hands on the person behind this. Since they didn't seem to be around, he'd settle for the two unfortunate lackeys who thought it wise to kidnap his woman. He guided Kiera backward, maintaining distance.

"Whatever happens, stay behind me and keep a wide distance. I won't let them near you," he promised.

"Okay," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The sound of snapping bones pulled at the fine divide that separated him and his bear. Lev felt his spine breaking and regenerating in rapid succession. His cells were on fire, burning away the traces of his human casing.

He leaned back on his powerful haunches, lifting his torso until he stood on his hind legs. Inhaling the stiff air, he was hit by another wave of familiarity. His mind struggled to piece together the hazy link beneath his rage. In their bear form, their scents were much clearer. Most likely, they had used something to mask their scent before coming here.

He growled at his adversaries, low and guttural. His final warning.

Lev's eyes shifted from one black bear to the other. The night did nothing to obscure them from his keen sight. The one who had been trying to shove Kiera in the car positioned himself in front of Lev as the other stood slightly behind.

From their stances, he knew who his largest threat would be.

The bear closest to him jolted forward, releasing a cry of his own. He was swift, so much so that Lev almost missed his partner's attempt to close the distance between him and Kiera. He intercepted the attack, shocking his opponent by meeting him head-on.

Using his front paws, he shoved the snapping jowls away from his throat. One. Twice. Three times. He threw his body behind the assaults. The bear rolled onto his back, kicking out his legs and swiping at his belly. Lev jumped back, avoiding disembowelment.

"Lev!" Kiera's horrified voice gripped his ear.

The second bear rushed toward her, and Lev changed course. Using his powerful thighs, he lunged, slamming into the attacker's side. They hit the ground, rolling from the impact. His bear was out for blood. Needing to eliminate the threat to his mate.

Filthy wretches. How dare they target what was his. His vision blackened, the pit inside him swallowing his consciousness. His body moved on its own, pinning the bear down. He pressed his face into the pavement. The crunching sounds beneath his paws drove him further. His opponent kicked out frantically, trying to escape his hold before the pressure caved his skull in.

"Lev, behind you!" Kiera shouted.

A sharp tug lifted Lev, throwing him to the side. He twisted midair, slashing out a meaty claw. His nails tore into fur and flesh as he regained his balance.

The first shifter positioned himself in front of his unconscious partner. Fresh blood began to mat the fur on his left side.

His opponent kept his distance. They half circled each other, their growls erupting through the darkness. His hesitation brought Lev satisfaction. He saw his stance change, shifting to his right to keep his left side ... and his now unconscious friend ... securely out of reach.

But his growls lacked true conviction. Good. Lev would make him understand the gravity of what he had just tried to do.

He was about to attack again, his bear desperate to finish them and ensure his mate's safety. That was when he spotted the small circular patch of white fur underneath his armpit. It was only visible when he moved. If Lev wasn't trying to determine who he was, he might have missed it.

There was only one bear he knew with a mark like that. His stomach knotted, forcing bile to rise in the back of his throat. The acid coated his tongue, burning the final shards of denial. They were from his uncle's clan. Which left him with two working theories, either his uncle was out to get him, or his mother was.

His gut told him it was the latter.

Lights from the buildings around them began to illuminate, along with the shadows of neighbors coming to check out the chaos erupting right outside their doors. He turned to Kiera, shifting before he hit the sidewalk.

He heard the screech of tires as the bitter odor of hot rubber filled his nose. They had taken their opportunity to escape. A fact which tittered on the edge of relief and respite.

He grabbed his shredded clothing and took Kiera by the hand, leading her to his car. She was silent except for the rapid drumming of her heart like a mockingbird's wings. She gripped his hand tightly, taking reassurance from his presence. Like she used to.

Quickly, Lev pulled on some loose clothes he had in his car. He knew that he and Kiera were still trying to get used to each other and didn't want his nudity to bother her.

It was only when they pulled away from the curb that he allowed himself to look at her. Kiera sat face forward, looking at nothing. Her brows twisted over her lovely eyes, a downturned expression that intensified inner turmoil. Her skin had lost some of its colors in the wake of her fear. Even still, he could see the icy fire that lay beneath.

“Are you all right?” he asked, putting the crook of his finger beneath her chin and turning it toward him.

“I’m safe now,” she replied, her eyes wavering beneath unshed tears.

“You always will be. I won’t let anything happen to you,” he said. *Not this time.* “Lay back and get some rest. We’ll be home soon.”

Kiera nodded and let herself sink into the seat. Lev picked up his phone. This attack had raised the stakes. If his mother was behind this, his whole life would change. Lev thought of every interaction he had ignored since they had met. All of the snide remarks and passive-aggressive attacks that he wrote off, telling both himself and Kiera it was just who she was.

Harmless.

“Yeah,” Nate answered.

“We have a problem. I decided to pick Kiera up from her girls’ night out and ended up in the middle of an attempted kidnapping.”

“Who was it?” he asked, his voice cool and calm.

“Get Josie. I don’t want to explain myself twice,” Lev said.

Without asking, the call went silent, and he heard muffled voices on the other end. The phone was shuffled around, causing pops of static to crack on the line. After a minute, the blurred voices sounded in perfect clarity on the other line.

“We’re alone, and you’re on speaker,” Nate said.

“Is Kiera okay?” Josie asked

“She’s safe,” Lev answered, silently hoping that was the case.

“What happened?” Nate demanded.

“Two shifters tried to take Kiera tonight. Bear shifters.”

“I bet they’re connected to the accident,” Josie stated, more for herself than to inform others. Lev could imagine the gears in her head turning.

“Don’t leave us in suspense. Who were those bastards?”

“I don’t know their names, but they’re from Uncle’s clan up north.”

“How can we confirm this?” Josie asked.

“At first, I wasn’t sure. They had masked their scents pretty heavily. However, I noticed a mark on one of the bears when we shifted. Josie, do you remember the enforcer we met, the one with the curious white patch on his fur?”

“Him?” she said, a sharpness to her tone.

“What the hell does Uncle’s clan want with Kiera?” Nate said.

“That is exactly what we’re going to find out,” Josie said.

“Until we know more, we have to be careful. No one mentions anything to Mom. This time, our enemies may be closer than we think.”

A silence hung between them. The understanding of what these next few days would mean to their family was a looming cloud. They all had a choice to make.

“No matter what we find, we’re here for you and Kiera,” Nate said, making his side clear.

“And we will find them, whoever they are.” Josie’s determination filled the phone receiver.

Hanging up, he checked on Kiera. Sleep had settled her features. Her body jostled softly as the yellow streetlights illuminated the contours of her face. Dark pink circles bloomed underneath her eyes. Her arms wrapped around her body protectively.

He was selfish.

He had ignored his mates' feelings, dismissing her concerns because he didn't want to see what was right in front of him. He allowed this to happen. If he could have just viewed his mother for what she was. Lev might have prevented everything if not for the task his father had left him.

Kiera deserved so much better.

He pulled into the driveway of his house. Lev effortlessly lifted Kiera. Tucking her safely against his chest as he made his way inside. He placed her on his bed, careful not to wake her. He stripped off her shoes and pulled the thick covers over her before heading downstairs to begin his planning.

First, he would have to figure out what he would be doing for the rest of the week. Typically, he would have told Kiera to stay inside the house until he got home. He quickly realized how stupid that was. His mother had the key to his house.

For the first time, his home made him uneasy. He realized just how much access to all the elements of his life his mother had. She could get in and out of almost anywhere without raising any suspicion because of who she was. No one would question her.

Why would she want to hurt his mate?

Lev was aware of how insufferable his mother could be, along with her tendency to think her authority should hold precedence over all others, which was the main reason very few people could tolerate her. What he couldn't understand was how any mother would risk hurting their child because they did not favor their mate.

He never thought of it as more than his mother's petty way of getting back at him for rejecting the women she tried to set him up with. He would have never thought she was capable of going to these extremes.

She was harsh but never cruel.

At least, that was what he told himself before the pieces began to pile up. Brick by brick, they formed a road that led straight to his mother.

No, he couldn't risk leaving Kiera alone anymore. Not until he was sure she was safe.

FIFTEEN



KIERA

Kiera lay awake in bed, memories constantly swirling through her mind. It was as if she was being rocketed back and forth between dimensions. When one memory would end, she would return to her bedroom, aware of her surroundings, until she dissociated again and remembered another.

She snapped back from one and saw her ceiling. Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm the constant switches in perception for a moment. The memories were primarily amazing, aside from when he would leave town without warning. The switching between that present moment and memories was beginning to give her a headache.

Her breaths didn't work. She was catapulted back to the night he proposed. It was the day after her birthday, and he told her he had planned a "part two" dinner. She went to his mansion near the Shenandoah, and he walked out to greet her, shirtless with sweatpants.

"What are you doing?" Kiera chuckled, admiring his incredibly toned abs in the moonlight.

"Well," Lev said, swinging a backpack over his shoulder. "My clothes won't do me much good until we get there."

"What are you talking about?" she said, leaning into him and kissing him passionately.

He dropped the backpack and swept her up in his arms, holding her tightly. She moaned slightly, kicking her feet gently in the air.

“Mr. Pierce, what have you done to me?”

“I’ve made your life *unbearable*.”

“Oh my God!” she exclaimed, rolling her eyes and slapping him playfully on his chest. “Put me down. Moment ruined.”

They laughed as he placed her down and kissed her again. Taking her hand, he led her to the backyard of his house, a steep hill leading deep into the valley.

“Ready?” Lev asked, taking off his sweatpants.

“Uh.” Kiera looked around. “I’m not having sex with you in the backyard, Lev.”

“Oh, Kiera.” He turned to look at her, his eyes beginning to glow. “You’re in for more than just one ride tonight. Step back.”

She took a few steps back as Lev stretched his arms to the sides, screaming as he shifted into a bear. In his completed form, he shook his head and bellowed, his roar shaking the ground.

Kiera had seen him shift a few times before, but a little piece of fear remained in her every time she saw him as a bear again. He shook his head and grunted, turning to Kiera and approaching her.

He leaned his snout down, and Kiera gently placed her hand on it as he huffed, his breath warm. He grunted and nuzzled up against her as she laughed, petting his coarse fur with her hands. Groaning slightly, he motioned to the backpack on the ground.

Kiera picked up the pack, sliding the straps onto her shoulders. Lev lay down and grunted, and Kiera turned to face him.

“Uh, no,” she said firmly. “Absolutely not.”

Lev grunted again, motioning her toward him with his paw.

“Lev, this is a terrible idea.”

He turned to glance at her with doubt and frustration. She rolled her eyes and threw up her hands. “Fine, fine, but if I fall, it’s on you.”

Lev purred, a sound Kiera didn’t know bears made, as she climbed on top of him and grasped onto the fur on his neck. He slowly stood, and Kiera laughed as she tried to maintain her balance.

Lev rushed her into the valley, running and dodging every tree in their path. She laughed, and adrenaline flowed through her veins as she glanced at the sky. A sense of freedom overtook her as she breathed in the fresh valley air.

Lev slowed near a waterfall, and Kiera gasped. Candles were set around a cloth with a picnic basket in the center.

“Lev!” she exclaimed happily, playfully hitting his side.

He grunted in response as he approached the blanket and lowered himself for Kiera to slide off. Her feet touched the ground, her hands over her mouth. A roar bellowed behind her, and she turned to see Lev shifting into human form.

She sidled next to him as he completed his transition. He stared at her with love, and Kiera felt her heart jump.

“Lev,” she said, handing him the backpack.

“Oh, just wait,” he said, cutting her off as he took the bag from her. “There’s more. Go investigate,” he said, motioning toward the cloth with his chin.

Kiera shook her head and grinned from ear to ear as she turned back to the site. She looked out at the waterfall underneath the stars. Lev couldn’t have made this moment any more perfect.

“Kiera Wilson?” she heard from behind her.

She spun around to see Lev on one knee, dressed in a suit. He held a small black box in his hand and had a wide grin on his face.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, walking up to him.

“When I first saw you, I knew I had to know you. You weren’t just another woman to me; you were someone eclectic and fascinating. You didn’t know it then, but my heart was yours from the moment I walked into that emergency room.”

He opened the box to reveal a large diamond ring with stones around the band and a gorgeous circular diamond in the center.

“I want nothing more than to promise you tonight that I will forever be by your side, support you, and love you under any circumstances. You are the world to me, and while a material object could never show my true appreciation, I’m hoping the dedication shows well. So,” he paused, taking the ring out of the box and holding it up to her. “Kiera Wilson, will you marry me?”

Kiera’s eyes watered, and she hugged Lev, crying into his shoulder. He pulled her in close and placed his hand on the back of her head, running his fingers through her hair.

“Lev, of course, absolutely I will,” she said through tears, pulling from the embrace and smiling.

He laughed and slid the ring on her finger, leaning in to kiss her. Her heart fluttered, and love overcame her as they embraced tightly. Kiera had a feeling that she had never felt; marrying him was the only thing that felt one hundred percent right.

Kiera snapped back into her bedroom and shot up in her bed. Her palms were sweaty, and her heart was racing. She stared blankly at her bedroom walls, catching her breath.

That same feeling of overwhelming love ran through her veins. She smiled and covered her mouth, her eyes watering as she realized how much he meant to her.

Laying on her pillow, she closed her eyes and smiled as a tear snuck down her cheek. Her mind drifted off into dreams of Lev as her body relaxed, feeling that certainty about him all over again.

RUBBING HER EYES, she stretched and yawned as her foot hit something on the bed. She glanced down to see Lev sitting at the foot of her bed with a food tray waiting for her. Her heart leapt in her chest, and she sat up, smiling.

“Oh God,” she said, laughing. “You scared me.”

Lev chuckled. “Not my intention.”

“Lev,” she said, reaching out her hands for his.

He placed the tray on the other side of the bed and scooted closer to her, taking her hands in his. She squeezed his hands tightly as a look of confusion crossed his face.

“I remember,” she started gently. “I remember how we met, the dates, the night you proposed, the waterfall, and the picnic. I remember seeing you shift into your animal form, all of the things you’ve told me.” She paused, looking at his hands. “It’s all come back to me, and I am so sorry, I’m so sorry that I ...” Her voice trailed off as her eyes began to water.

Lev pulled her in close, wrapping her in his strong arms and rubbing her back comfortingly.

“Don’t you *ever* apologize to me,” he said, his voice cracking slightly. “Kiera,” he said, pulling back and looking longingly into her eyes with a smile, “do you really remember?”

“Yes, Lev, yes, I remember everything,” she said, leaning in to kiss him.

He took her head in his hands and kissed her passionately as she pulled him down on top of her in bed. She darted her hands to the bottom of his shirt, lifting it over his head as a craving overtook her.

He pulled from the kiss, ripping the covers off her and knocking the food tray to the floor. He kicked off his shoes as

he climbed on top of her, placing his hands on her stomach underneath her shirt.

“Oh, Kiera,” he moaned, leaning down to kiss her neck.

She pressed his head against her neck and ran her hand down his back as she watched his muscles flex on top of her, pulling him in closer.

Lev ripped her shirt off and kissed down her chest to her breasts, sucking on them lightly as she let out a loud moan, placing her hand on the headboard. He glanced up at her and intertwined her hands with his, putting them above her head.

He continued to twirl her small, hard nipples with his tongue as she pressed her pussy against him, feeling his rock-hard erection through his pants. He moaned and reached down to unbuckle his belt, sliding it off and throwing it to the side, hitting the wall.

Kiera pulled off her thong and exposed herself. Lev looked at it as if he was hunting, his pupils dilated and breath heavy. She glanced at the girth of his cock, gasping as she remembered how much he filled her when he was inside her.

He licked his hand and reached down slowly, not breaking eye contact with Kiera. His fingers ran over her clit, touching it lightly as she craned her head back and inhaled sharply. He exhaled, excited to see her enjoying herself as he grinned.

Kissing her hips lightly, he moved down toward her pussy and lightly ran his tongue over her clit. He smiled and looked at her.

“Someone’s ready for me, I see,” he said in a husky voice.

“I’ve missed you,” Kiera said, reaching down and running her fingers through his hair.

“I missed you too,” he said, leaning down and licking her clit.

Kiera let out a loud moan, and her body jerked uncontrollably as his tongue stroked her clit with heavier pressure. Her back arched, and she reached out to grab Lev’s

large biceps. He wrapped his arms around her legs, holding her still as the pressure built inside her.

She screamed and pushed his head down onto her clit, reveling in the euphoria surging through her body. He moaned on her clit as her muscles relaxed, a sense of relief overcoming her as she giggled.

“Oh God, I forgot how good you were at that.”

“Well,” he said, kissing his way back to her lips, “allow me to help you remember.”

He brushed his tip against her and between her folds as he hovered over her, their lips barely touching. He slid into her and filled her as she gasped in shock at his size.

“Oh, fuck,” he moaned, staring at her and wrapping his arms around her.

“Oh my God,” she responded in a whisper as he slowly thrust into her.

Her pussy began dripping as he slid in deeper, kissing her neck and face. He touched his forehead to hers as they paced their bodies’ movements. Lev grabbed her hips with one hand, moving them perfectly to where his cock hit her G-spot.

Kiera screamed and pulled Lev’s head down against hers as he thrust faster. Her walls pulsed as she built to a climax. Lev grinned and breathed heavily as their bodies began to sweat, sticking to each other slightly.

“Lev,” she said through deep breaths. “You’re gonna make me come.”

“Come for me, my love,” he cooed, thrusting faster and deeper.

Her back arched, and her hands stretched to grab the bed sheets tightly as she reached a climax, feeling him grow inside her. He moaned and kissed her as he grew even larger.

She screamed, and every nerve in her body exploded as she came. He groaned, and his body shook as he busted inside her, filling her with his cum.

Their moans settled, and Lev leaned down, wrapping Kiera in his arms again. She lightly stroked her fingertips along his back, feeling the goose bumps form on his body.

“I love you,” Lev said softly in her ear.

“I love you too,” Kiera replied, kissing him on his cheek.

He leaned up, and they broke out in joyful laughter, staring into each other’s eyes. She placed her hand on his cheek and smiled, wondering how she could have forgotten moments like this.

SIXTEEN



LEV

Lev placed the last teddy bear on the hospital bed and grinned. Kiera would be starting her shift soon, and he had the perfect event planned. He walked to the common room and adjusted the projector as he connected it to his laptop, logging into his streaming app and picking out an animated movie.

He pressed play and paused it, then walked over to the table next to the couches in the main common room. Arranging the candy in the basket, he made sure to separate the ones with any type of nuts in them from the rest.

“Mr. Pierce?” a voice called from behind him.

Lev spun around and smiled, extending a hand. “Great to meet you all,” he said, glancing over the costumes and makeup worn by the group before him.

Lev led the group into the common room and gave them the instructions for the night. The kids would be coming in soon, ready for a much-awaited movie night. He had hired a group of actors to dress up as cartoon characters and socialize with the kids until it was time for them to go to bed.

The door to the common room opened, and Kiera stood before him, her mouth open in shock. She lifted her hands to her mouth and giggled.

“Lev!” she exclaimed. “What is all this?”

“Well,” he shrugged. “I figured the kids could use an extra fun night.”

Kiera glanced at the snacks and teddy bears lining the couches. She moved her finger as she quietly counted them.

“How did you know we had sixteen kids in pediatric oncology?” she asked.

“I did my research,” he said, leaning over to kiss her.

“Wow!” they heard a voice exclaim from the door.

Lev and Kiera turned to see the kids entering the room, laughing and running toward the couches. A little girl walked in and immediately recognized one of the cartoon characters, and she ran up and hugged them, the actor beaming with joy.

“Hey, guys, welcome!” Lev said happily. “Take a seat anywhere and grab a teddy bear. We’re going to hang out with our favorite characters for a bit and then settle in for the movie.”

Kiera looked at Lev with shock and admiration. “You are the best man I have ever known.”

Lev put his hand on her waist and grinned, hugging her slightly. One of the kids approached them, and Lev knelt, grabbed a teddy bear, and handed it to him.

“What’s your name?” he asked the kid softly.

“Kevin,” the kid said shyly.

“Well, Kevin, are you excited about the movie?”

Kevin nodded slowly, and Lev stood, extending his hand. “Are you hungry?” Lev asked the kid.

Kevin nodded, and Lev led him to the snacks, asking about his allergies and favorite candy. Kevin held the teddy bear close to his chest as Lev offered him a chocolate bar. Kevin smiled slightly and dove into Lev’s arms, giving him a big hug. Lev squeezed him lightly and walked him over to one of the cartoon characters, introducing them.

The night was flawless. The kids loved the movie and spent most of the night laughing. The actors fulfilled their roles perfectly, staying in character the whole time.

Once the actors had left, Kiera and Lev began cleaning up the room and packing the projector. Lev came up behind her and wrapped his arm around her.

“Marry me,” he whispered in her ear.

Kiera laughed and spun around. “I already said yes to that one,” she said playfully, encircling her arms around his neck.

“No,” Lev stated thoughtfully. “Tonight, right now.”

“Now?” Kiera asked in shock, a smile crossing her face.

“Let’s go to Vegas,” he said, slightly swaying her back and forth.

Kiera laughed and covered her mouth, shaking her head. “You’re funny, Lev Pierce.”

“I’m serious,” he said, brushing her hair behind her ear. “I can have my jet up in an hour.”

Kiera’s face fell, and she stood frozen, her mouth open in shock. “Yes,” she agreed, shaking her head.

“Yes?” he echoed, beaming with happiness.

Kiera nodded. “Let’s go. Let’s do it.”

Lev kissed her passionately, and she squeezed her arms around his neck. He pulled from the kiss and took his phone out of his pocket, his grin remaining.

“Okay, I’m uh,” he stuttered. “I’m going to make some calls.”

Kiera covered her mouth again, laughing, her body vibrating with excitement. “Okay. I’m, um, I’m going to tell my boss I have to leave early.”

“Okay,” Lev said, accidentally backing into a wall.

He made an embarrassed face and left the room as he watched Kiera staring at the ceiling, grinning ear to ear.

THE VEGAS LIGHTS lined the sky perfectly as Lev took Kiera's hand in his, smiling.

“Are we really doing this?” he asked excitedly as they rode in the back of the rented limo.

Kiera kissed him. “We're really doing this,” she answered, laughing.

Their driver pulled up to a chapel, and Lev got out, opening Kiera's door for her and walking her inside.

It looked like a gorgeous cabin with vaulted ceilings and oak walls. String lights illuminated the chapel, giving it a warm glow. As they walked in, Kiera wrapped her arm in Lev's, surveying the empty pews.

The officiant entered the room, smiling and waving to them.

“Welcome,” he stated, holding a Bible in his hands. “How can I help you tonight?”

“Pierce,” Lev stated.

Kiera looked at him, surprised. “You made a reservation for our wedding?”

“Of course, I made a reservation for our wedding,” Lev said, rolling his eyes.

“Ms. Wilson, if you will follow me,” the man said, motioning to his right.

Kiera grinned and followed their host down the hallway as Lev made his way to the men's changing room. He put on his tuxedo and looked in the mirror.

The impulsivity was exhilarating, but Lev knew this was what he wanted. He wouldn't let anyone keep him from Kiera, not his mother, an arranged marriage, or her friend's opinions. He exhaled and glanced at himself, pushing his hair back slightly.

Walking out into the chapel, he adjusted his bowtie. The officiant walked out and stood next to him as the chapel doors opened.

Dee walked in, grinning from ear to ear. Lev smiled and walked down the aisle to greet her, hugging her.

“Thank you for coming,” Lev said gratefully.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Dee responded lovingly. “Also, the private jet was a nice touch.” She winked at him, and he grinned.

Dee took her seat among the pews as Lev returned to the altar. The music overtook the chapel, and Lev clasped his hands in front of him, standing straight and clearing his throat.

The women’s room door opened, and Kiera appeared. Lev’s mouth dropped. The dress was stunning on her, a ball gown with a corset and off-the-shoulder lace sleeves.

Kiera looked up and saw Dee in the aisle. Kiera covered her mouth and began to cry as she ran to hug her. They pulled away from the hug, and Kiera stared at her.

“What are you doing here?” Kiera asked happily.

“Every bride needs a maid of honor!” Dee responded, a tear sneaking down her cheek.

They embraced again, and Kiera glanced at Lev over Dee’s shoulder, mouthing the words *thank you*. Lev smiled and nodded.

They pulled from the hug again, and Dee turned Kiera to face Lev. “Go get married,” she said with tears in her eyes.

Kiera hugged her once more before approaching the altar and wiping the tears from her face. Lev took her hands in his and gazed into her eyes.

“How did you know I wanted this type of dress?” Kiera asked in a whisper.

“Someone sent me your Pinterest board before we got on the plane,” Lev responded with a grin.

Kiera smiled and looked at Dee, saying her thanks and turning back to Lev as the celebrant began the readings.

They listened to his words, exchanging giddy glances throughout the sermon. Their hands remained clasped as they

recited their vows and laughed happily.

They slid their wedding rings onto each other and gazed into each other's eyes lovingly. Lev felt a sense of excitement and gratitude flow through him as they were announced as Mr. and Mrs. Pierce.

He dipped her and kissed her as Dee cheered in the aisle. She held her bouquet in the air as he leaned her up and turned to Dee, laughing.

They exited the chapel with Kiera in the middle of Lev and Dee, laughing and talking about how he arranged Dee's flight. They stopped outside the chapel, and Lev turned to her.

"I'll never let you go," he stated with the biggest smile ever.

Kiera placed her hand on his cheek. "Me neither."

They kissed under the lights of the Vegas strip as Dee snapped pictures. Kiera and Lev beamed at each other and laughed as Lev hailed two cars to take them to their hotel.

They arrived at the luxurious Pierce Vegas Hotel. Kiera marveled at the beautiful lights illuminating the entrance. Lev got out of the car and walked around to the side, opening the door for her. Kiera stepped out, and Lev swept her off her feet as she laughed, carrying her into the hotel.

The staff cheered as Lev walked in, carrying Kiera in his arms. He smiled as he walked toward the elevator, and the doors opened, and he nudged the 50-floor button with his elbow.

He carried her into the penthouse lined with windows overlooking the entire Strip. She gasped and kissed his cheek as he put her down.

Kiera stared out the windows and admired the view as Lev walked up behind her, sliding his arm around her waist.

"Like what you see?" he whispered as he kissed her neck.

Kiera turned to face him. "I like this view better."

They grinned and kissed. Pulling apart for a moment, Lev looked into her eyes and felt a surge of energy in his chest. His inner animal was calling to him, beckoning him to mark her as his mate.

He wove his hand around her neck and through her hair, pulling her in for a kiss and walking backward, leading her to the bedroom. She smiled beneath the kiss and followed him, shoving his tuxedo jacket off him and throwing it on the floor.

Entering the bedroom, he closed the door behind them and unzipped her dress. She stepped out of it gracefully, pulling him in for another kiss. He felt his way up to her breasts, grabbing them gently and moaning in her mouth.

She unbuttoned his vest, fumbling with the fastenings. He ripped it off, and she quickly slid his suspenders from his arms. Ripping off the bowtie, it snapped and hit the floor. Lev scooted her to the bed and gently laid her down.

Kiera ran her hands over his flesh, and his chest felt heavy with his craving for her. His primal side was coming out, ready to mark her. She unbuttoned his pants and slid them to his ankles as he ripped his shirt off, the buttons flying and hitting the wall.

She rose from the bed and kissed his neck, working her way down his large chest and toned abdomen to his hard cock. He moaned, throwing his head back and looking at the ceiling as she took him into her mouth, licking him with her tongue as she slid it deep into her throat.

He gently pressed her head onto him and groaned with pleasure. He felt himself grow and harden more in her mouth as he watched her pink lips slide along him slowly.

She pulled back, and he lifted her, pressing her against the wall. He held her with one arm while using the other to feel her pussy. She was dripping, ready for him, but he wanted more.

He slipped two fingers inside her and pushed on her G-spot. She tightened her grip around his neck and her thighs tensed as he kissed her neck and brought her to climax.

She gasped for air, and he pressed his lips against hers, removing his fingers and grabbing her hips. He moved his dick perfectly into her, her juices lubricating him. They moaned, and he thrust quickly as she held his neck tightly.

Lev felt his primal side emerge as he looked into her eyes.

“Do it,” Kiera said through heavy breaths.

Lev felt a cold rush through his body as he leaned into her neck, taking her scent in as his dick hardened. She moaned loudly in his ear and clawed his back lightly, and he felt claws extend from his fingers as he grasped her thighs tighter.

“Kiera,” he said unsurely.

“I want it,” she said breathlessly.

Lev let his primal side emerge as he grazed his sharp claws along her thigh. She screamed in pleasure, and he felt her body clench around his cock. He thrust into her deeply, claiming her as his mate as they looked at each other and climaxed, their fluids mixing.

They touched foreheads, and Lev slowly let her down onto the floor. She stood before him and breathed heavily as she smiled.

“Oh my God,” she remarked, pushing her hair back.

“Oh my God is right,” he said, laughing.

Lev leaned in to kiss her and ran his fingers through her hair. She ran her hands up his chest and smiled as she looked down at her thigh. Lev ran his fingers over it lightly.

“Does it hurt?” he asked through heavy breaths.

“No,” she said, glancing at him. “Surprisingly.”

They smiled and kissed passionately as Lev wrapped her in his arms. They broke the kiss, and he held her tightly, confident that he had found the woman he was meant to be with for the rest of his life.

SEVENTEEN



KIERA

Lev's phone jolted Kiera from a nightmare. Lev had been kidnapped by rogue shifters and forced to leave the Shenandoah Valley. In her dream, she wound up alone in Dee's apartment, remembering everything and losing him again.

She placed her hand on her chest as she tried to breathe normally. Lev awoke and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close.

"Hey, hey, you're okay," Lev said, rubbing her back.

"I dreamed you left," Kiera said, shaking her head.

He pulled back from the embrace and lifted her left hand. "See that?" he said with a smile.

Kiera glanced at the wedding ring and smiled, shaking her head. "Yes," she said with a chuckle.

"That means I'm never going anywhere," Lev said, rubbing his nose on Kiera's lightly and scrunching his face.

Kiera laughed and lay back, glancing at the ceiling. "Oh," she began, "your phone rang."

"Ahh," he groaned and reached over to the nightstand to grab it. He sighed and placed it on the table, rubbing his face with his hands.

"I know that reaction," Kiera said, giggling.

"I have to call her," Lev said disappointedly.

"I know," Kiera said, rubbing her hand on his chest.

“Ugh,” Lev groaned again and placed the phone on his chest, putting it on speaker.

It rang three times, and Kiera silently prayed she wouldn't pick up. Unfortunately, she did just as Kiera had hoped.

“Darling?” his mother's voice echoed on the other end.

“Hey, Mom,” he said in his tired voice.

“Are you just waking up?” she snapped.

“Yes, Mom,” he answered coldly.

“Well, I need you down here now. I don't know where you are or what you're doing.”

“I'm in Vegas, Mom,” Lev said, glancing at Kiera and smiling.

“Vegas?” she asked angrily. “What for?”

“Checking on the finances of the hotel.” He looked at Kiera and shrugged as she chuckled.

“Get home now.”

“Is something wrong?”

“I've set up something wonderful,” she chirped. “You're set to marry a wonderful girl. Do you remember Melissa from the Trenton clan?”

Lev rubbed the bridge of his nose with his mouth open in shock. “Mom,” he said firmly. “I'm not marrying someone other than Kiera.”

“We've signed the contract, Lev. It's binding.”

Without another word, Lev hung up and glanced at Kiera. Her face had fallen solemnly.

“Hey,” Lev said, turning to her, “don't worry, that's not happening.”

Kiera heard the phone vibrate. “She's calling again.”

Lev took his phone and threw it across the room, hitting the wall and falling to the floor. Kiera looked at him with

shock, and Lev turned to her and put his hand on the back of her neck.

“Kiera, I want you,” he said. “I’m not marrying whoever the fuck Melissa is.”

Kiera placed her hand on his. “Okay,” she responded sadly.

Lev kissed her and lay back, staring at the ceiling. His eyebrows furrowed, and he glanced at Kiera, and she responded with a similar look, mocking him. Lev propped himself on his elbow in bed.

“She knew you were my fated mate,” Lev began. “The only way to break that bond is death.”

Kiera laughed. “What are you saying? That she’s going to try to kill me?”

Lev looked at her seriously. “She might have already tried to.”

Kiera’s face fell. “Lev,” she said, concerned. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” Lev said, running his hand through his hair. “We have to put an end to this.”

“How?”

Lev glanced at the floor for a moment, thinking. “We have to set her up.”

Kiera paused. “How?”

Lev looked at Kiera. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course,” Kiera replied.

Lev stood from the bed and picked up his phone, surprised it turned on. He scrolled through the calls and pressed a button. He kept the phone off speaker and leaned against the hotel room window.

“Mom, sorry, lost service,” he said surely. “I’ll be back sometime later today. I have to drop Kiera off at the Woodpecker Cabin in Shenandoah before coming back.” He

paused to let his mother speak. “Yeah,” he replied, turning to look at Kiera. “She’s going to stay there for the night.”

Kiera glanced at him and threw her hands up in confusion. Lev bid his goodbyes to his mother and hung up the phone, walking back to Kiera.

“You get Dee and fly back with her,” Lev said darkly. “I’m going to go fish for evidence. If we’re going to catch her in this act, we need to have all the information to back it up.”

“Catch her in what act? *Killing me?*”

“Of course, she won’t kill you, love, I would never let that happen, but I’m not going to wait around while she tries to destroy our relationship. Plus,” he paused, dialing another number on his phone, “you won’t be alone.”

Lev waited as the phone rang. Kiera heard Josie’s voice on the other end of the phone.

Lev said firmly, “We’re finally going to catch Mom red-handed. I need you to protect Kiera today.”

The plane ride with Dee seemed longer than the one Kiera initially took with Lev. Her mind spun through worst-case scenarios of this plan going awry. She and Dee talked sparingly, but Kiera’s stomach churned so much that she couldn’t concentrate on a conversation with her.

They landed in D.C. and exited the plane. They hugged goodbye, and Kiera could tell Dee sensed something was wrong, but Kiera couldn’t bring herself to speak of it.

She left the terminal to see Josie standing next to a black Escalade. Josie grinned and opened the door for Kiera.

“Escort for one?” she said jokingly.

Kiera rolled her eyes. “Hilarious, Josie.”

Josie put Kiera’s bags in the back of the car and slid in next to her as she asked the driver to take them to the address of Woodpecker Cabin. Josie took Kiera’s hand and glanced at her lovingly.

“Nothing is going to happen to you,” Josie promised. “But we have to stop her. This is the only way we can think of doing it.”

Kiera nodded and took a deep breath. “I couldn’t even tell Dee what was happening,” she stated, running her fingers through her hair. “It’s just so much.”

“You should,” Josie encouraged her. “It would be beneficial to have as many people on your side knowing your location.”

“Guess I should tell Jayne too,” Kiera said disappointedly.

“You don’t sound excited about that,” Josie said with a slight grin.

Kiera thought of Jayne’s terrible comments to her about Lev. Her mouth dropped slowly as she came to a terrifying realization.

Kiera turned to Josie. “She’s always tried to convince me Lev isn’t for me. She’s said horrible things, and I’ve always thought it was odd.”

Josie shrugged. “Maybe she’s jealous?”

“No,” Kiera said, remembering times before her accident when Jayne had told her Lev would probably have an arranged marriage at some point. “This morning, your mom told me she had an arranged marriage planned for Lev with some girl named Melissa,”

Josie laughed and cut Kiera off. “That would be a fucking disaster.”

“Regardless,” Kiera said, dismissing her comment. “Jayne told me he would probably have an arranged marriage before the accident, and how would she know that?”

“Well,” Josie said with an exhale. “My mom is known to use people for information. She’s done it with me. When I was sixteen, she planted a guy in my life to get my whereabouts and information about my activities. I wouldn’t be surprised if she somehow got to one of your friends.”

“But what would she have that Jayne would want?” Kiera asked.

Josie rubbed her first two fingers and thumb together, implying money. Kiera thought of the clothes Jayne wore, designer shirts and bags, constantly changing. She always thought it was odd since Jayne was a part-time waitress. Kiera had always told herself it was her parents supporting her, but now she had another suspicion.

Kiera dug her phone out of her purse and called Dee and Jayne on the phone. Dee picked up first, greeting Kiera cheerfully.

“Hey!” Kiera chirped back, hiding her panic.

“Hello?” Jayne’s voice echoed on the line.

“Guys, I need you to know something.”

“What’s wrong?” Dee asked, concerned.

“We’re pretty sure Lev’s mom has ulterior motives, and I might be in danger.”

“*What?*” Dee said, shocked.

“Oh my God,” Jayne said, sounding oddly cold.

“I’m going to a cabin in Shenandoah for the night.”

“Okay, are you going to be safe?” Dee asked.

Kiera glanced at Josie. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

“Is anyone else going with you?” Jayne asked.

Josie shook her head at Kiera. “No,” Kiera stated. “But it’s a secure location.”

“Okay,” Dee said slowly. “Can you check in with me every hour?”

“Of course,” Kiera assured her.

“Well, let me know, okay?” Dee said as she bid her goodbyes and hung up the phone. Jayne stayed on the line.

“Kiera, where is the cabin?” Jayne asked. “I want to make sure you’re safe.”

Kiera smiled and shook her head, looking at Josie. Josie rolled her eyes and nodded. Kiera gave Jayne the address, and Jayne acted surprised.

“Okay, well, I just wanted to make sure,” Jayne said coldly.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” Kiera stated, glancing at Josie again.

“Check in with me, too, okay?” Jayne asked.

“Of course, I’ll text you soon,” Kiera stated. Kiera hung up the phone and looked at Josie, sighing. Josie shook her head.

“You have very good intuitions, girl,” Josie praised, pulling out her phone.

Josie called Ben and Tyler and gave them the location, telling them to meet them at the cabin in an hour. She hung up and glanced at Kiera, placing her hand over hers.

“We got you,” Josie said with sincerity in her eyes.

Kiera nodded and looked out the window at the Virginia landscape, her heart racing. The only thing worse than Lev’s mother trying to kill her would be a betrayal from her friend.

After a moment of silently panicking, then pulling herself together in the back seat of the SUV with Josie, Kiera called Lev to tell him what was happening. The phone barely rang before he picked up.

“Kiera, are you all right?” he asked frantically.

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m with Josie. Listen, we think Jayne might be on your mother’s payroll. We’ve told her the cabin’s location, and we think she will show up.”

“Let me dig into her background and see what I can find. Is Josie the only one with you?” Lev asked.

“For now,” Kiera informed him. “But Tyler and Ben are meeting us at the cabin, and I’ll have all the protection I need.”

“Good,” Lev said with a sigh of relief. “I’m almost at her office. I need to focus and find the financial information on Jayne and any other plots my mother might have been trying to cover up.”

“Okay, be careful,” Kiera insisted.

“You too, love. Hey,” Lev said quickly.

“Yeah?”

“I love you, Mrs. Pierce.”

Kiera grinned from ear to ear, laughing slightly. “I love you too, Mr. Pierce.”

She hung up and glanced at Josie, who was staring at her with her mouth wide open.

“Mrs. Pierce?” Josie echoed with a smile.

“Yeah,” Kiera said, holding up her left hand. “We kind of got married last night.”

Josie screamed with excitement and hugged Kiera tightly. “Oh, I’m going to kill him for not inviting me.” She broke from the hug and nudged Kiera’s shoulder. “Welcome to the family, *Sis!*”

Kiera smiled and looked out the window again. She wondered if she was wrong about Jayne, and she silently prayed she was as they pulled onto the highway, quickly approaching the cabin.

They drove up a winding mountain to a small log cabin overlooking the valley. Kiera sighed as she stepped out of the car, looking at the house that would reveal everyone’s secrets.

EIGHTEEN



LEV

Lev hung his head in his hands and sighed. He glanced at the clock and rolled his eyes. His secretary had flooded him with financial statements at the last minute that were due by midnight.

He glanced at his phone. Josie had texted him two hours ago, informing him that Kiera was safe and they had arrived at the cabin safely. Lev had asked her to check in with him every hour, and she had missed the mark.

Closing his computer, he stood from his desk and walked out of his office, past his secretary.

“Mr. Pierce,” she began.

“Not today, Madeline,” he said firmly.

“But, Mr. Pierce.”

“Madeline,” Lev shouted, turning to face her. “I’ll get to it when I get to it.”

The statement quieted the secretary, and Lev took that as his opportunity to leave the building. He slid into his Lexus and turned it on, quickly putting the car in reverse.

He backed out of the parking space and headed to the cabin, speeding on the side streets of Front Royal. Digging his phone out of his pants, he pulled it out to see a text from Josie. All it read was *We need you, now.*

“Fuck,” Lev snarled, putting the pedal to the floor.

He dialed Josie's number, which rang once before going to voicemail. He threw his phone on the passenger seat and turned on the road leading up the mountain.

Lev pulled into the cabin driveway to see the front door wide open. He slammed the car into park, jolting himself back as he ripped off his shirt and got out of the vehicle.

He shifted immediately, letting out a roar. He dashed into the house and was met with a shifter fighting Kiera in his bear form. He growled, and the bear turned to him, bellowing.

Kiera yelled at the bear, calling attention to herself, and it swiped at her, and she dodged it, and the bear swiped again, clawing her arm and knocking her to the floor.

Lev raced forward and tackled the bear, pinning it to the ground. He bit its neck and shook his head, moving the bear back and forth limply.

A claw scratched Lev's back, and he turned quickly to face a tall brown bear on its hind legs, roaring at him. Lev stood and roared back, his fur shaking to the side from his volume.

He swiped at the bear's stomach, and it bit back, catching his shoulder. Lev took the bear's neck in his mouth and threw it against the wall as Kiera shouted at him across the room.

Lev drowned out the sound as he turned to ensure the first bear was dead. Once he determined it had stopped moving, he faced the brown bear and took one last swipe at its stomach, spewing blood on the floor.

The brown bear fell and smacked the floor, grunting as its life force drained from him. Lev turned to see Josie shifted behind him, standing in front of Kiera. Lev grunted and nodded, and he and Josie shifted back to human form.

Josie turned to Kiera, examining her arm. "These cuts are deep," she stated, glancing at Lev.

Lev ran to Kiera and touched her face lightly. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked, concerned.

"Yeah," Kiera said, her eyes rolling back slightly in her head.

“I need a tourniquet,” Josie stated. “Get something from the coat closet.”

Lev ran into the bedroom and grabbed a sweater, ripping off the arm of it with his teeth and handing it to Josie. She tied the sweater arm tightly around Kiera’s bicep and smacked Kiera’s face.

“Hey,” Josie said firmly. “Kiera, stay with me, okay?”

Lev glanced at the blood on the floor from Kiera’s arm. He could make out the muscles beneath her cuts, and his heart sank. Rage filled his chest as he looked at Josie.

“Who were they?” he asked firmly.

“Lev,” Josie growled. “We need to get her help.”

“Where are Tyler and Ben?” he asked angrily.

“They chased the others off,” Josie said, holding Kiera’s head up. “There were six of them.”

Lev ran his fingers through his hair and ran to his car to get his phone. He fumbled for it and dropped it between the seat and the center console, his hands shaking from the adrenaline.

Running back into the house, he looked at the bears who were on the floor dead. He approached Kiera and Josie, watching Kiera struggle to remain conscious.

“I’m taking her to Pierce Point,” Lev said, bending down to scoop Kiera up in his arms.

“I’ll take care of them,” Josie said, nodding toward the dead bears.

Lev nodded at Josie and exited the house, gently laying Kiera in the backseat of his car. He fell into the driver’s seat and set off for Pierce Point, the only hotel that no one knew of but his security.

The drive was only twenty minutes, and Lev talked to Kiera the whole way, asking her questions about herself and him, where she was, and her favorite movie. Anything to keep her awake was fair game.

He fished his phone out of the crevice of his car and called the staff at Pierce Point, telling them to get a medic on the scene immediately. He hung up and continued talking to Kiera, whose answers were getting more mumbled.

He screeched to a stop at Pierce Point, and the staff rushed to the car, pulling Kiera out gently. They carried her inside as Lev followed and placed her on the couch at the main entrance.

Eric raced over to her, a long-time friend of Lev's and one of the most renowned doctors in the country. He knelt before Kiera and opened her eyes, and they were slightly rolled back, and Lev's heart sank.

"Do something," Lev said as his voice cracked.

"I will, Lev," Eric said firmly. "Stand back."

Lev backed away and watched Eric ask Kiera questions. She barely whispered, and her head nodded to the side limply.

"Kiera, Kiera, hey," Eric said, touching her arm lightly. "Shit, get an IV," he yelled to the staff. "In the back of my car, go!" Eric turned to Lev. "What blood type is she?" he asked frantically.

"A-positive," Lev responded.

"Get a bag of A-positive now!" Eric demanded.

Eric began CPR on Kiera as Lev stood watching in horror. His eyes began to water, and he covered his mouth. If he hadn't come up with this stupid plan, she would be alive if he had brought her here instead. He hated himself for telling her she would be safe and not following his promise.

Kiera took a large gasp of air, and Eric stopped his compressions, kneeling to talk to her.

"Hey, Kiera, stay with me, okay? You're going to feel better soon," Eric said comfortingly.

The staff rushed in with the IV. They set up the bag and stuck a needle in her good arm, beginning the blood transfusion. Kiera turned her head slightly to the left and barely opened her eyes.

“Lev,” she whispered.

“Kiera,” he said, starting to kneel beside her.

Eric held out a hand to stop him. Lev glanced at Kiera and nodded at Eric, silently agreeing to leave until she was back on her feet.

Lev shuffled to the manager’s office and sat at the computer, holding his head in his hands. He wiped a tear from his eye and sat straight, trying to distract himself by logging into his mother’s various financial statements.

Lev scanned through her payments and found \$10,000 a month paid to Jayne Roberts. He scowled at the computer and printed the statement. He pulled out his phone and dialed James, his mother’s financial advisor.

“James,” Lev said, hiding his emotional state.

“Lev, what can I do for you?” James asked happily.

“I need to know when Beatrix started paying \$10,000 monthly to Jayne Roberts.”

“Lev, you know that’s classified.”

“I don’t care, James,” Lev stated firmly. “My mother’s in trouble, and I need this information.”

James sighed, believing Lev’s lie. “All right, give me a second, and I’ll text it over to you.”

“Thank you,” Lev said, hanging up and turning back to the computer.

A second later, his phone dinged, and he opened it to see the payments beginning eleven months ago, a month after he started dating Kiera. He balled his fists and inhaled deeply, calming himself.

Lev found a file that held information on his mother’s computer. He logged into it and found secure emails between her and Jayne discussing Kiera’s hiding spot and daily routines. It seemed her college bestie was in desperate need of money and would sell out her friend for the right price. They

were planning for the right time to strike. Lev shook his head in shock and printed out every email he found.

An hour had passed when Eric entered Lev's office without knocking. Lev shot up from his desk, looking at Eric with pleading eyes.

"How is she?" Lev asked frantically.

"Better, she's conscious now," Eric said, smiling. "She has a bandage on her arm, no broken bones or concussion. She'll be fine in a few weeks. She had major blood loss and a deep gash, but nothing further."

Lev hung his head. "Thank you, Eric."

"You can take her to a room to get her more comfortable," Eric stated gently. "Take care of her."

"Of course," Lev said, closing his laptop and putting the printed papers on the desk.

Lev hurried into the common room to see a staff member helping Kiera stand, and he raced to her side and held her arm gently. Kiera barely said a word as they helped her to the elevator and took her to the penthouse suite.

The staff member and Lev led her to the bedroom and laid her down. Lev thanked the employee and sat in the chair beside the bed, pulling out his phone. He kept quiet as Kiera slept, checking her breathing every minute.

Lev had fallen asleep in the chair and then heard Kiera groan. He snapped awake immediately and rushed to the side of the bed.

"Kiera?" he asked.

"Hi," Kiera said weakly, turning her head to face him and opening her eyes.

"Kiera," Lev grabbed her good hand gently. "I am so sorry,"

"It wasn't you." She paused to cough and winced as she held her wound. "It was Jayne."

“I know,” Lev said firmly. “I found evidence of my mother’s payments to her. They’ve been going on for almost a year.”

“Sneaky,” Kiera said with a slight smile.

“Kiera, I can’t believe I let this happen,” Lev stated sympathetically.

“It’s not your fault.” She placed her hand over his and grinned at him. “You’re here now; that’s what matters.”

Lev walked to the other side of the bed and lay with her, carefully positioning his arms around her.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked cautiously.

“You never hurt me,” Kiera said with another cough. “Lord, that bear really took a toll on me, huh?”

“I don’t know who they were,” Lev stated, anger building in his chest again. “But they’re no threat to us now.”

“But Jayne and your mom ...” Her voice trailed off.

“Jayne and my mother will be dealt with accordingly,” Lev said firmly. “I’m going to confront them about everything, and they can’t deny it with the receipts I have of the transactions and emails of the plots from the accident on.”

“Plots?” Kiera asked.

“They were planning to kill you. They had your daily routine down to the minute. If my mother wasn’t related to me ...”

“No, don’t,” Kiera said gently. “There are other ways we can handle this.”

“I know,” Lev said, leaning down and kissing her. “But you don’t have to worry about that. You just rest.”

Kiera laid her head on Lev’s arm and settled into her sleep as Lev lay wide awake, counting every possible outcome of confronting his mother. Eventually, he ran out of ideas and drifted off to sleep.

NINETEEN



KIERA

Lev walked into his office the next day, gently assisting Kiera as they walked past Madeline to his door. He opened it and ushered her inside, guiding her to the comfortable chair in the corner.

“You okay?” he asked, gently placing his hands on her cheeks.

She placed her hands over his and exhaled. “Yeah, I’m fine, just nervous.”

“Don’t be,” he said as he kissed her forehead.

Lev exhaled and leaned on his desk with his hands. Kiera heard heels clicking on the tiled hallway leading to Lev’s office and braced herself.

Beatrix burst into the door, grinning at Lev, whose face remained stoic. Her face quickly fell, and she turned to lock eyes with Kiera. His mother smiled innocently.

“What’s all this, Lev?”

“All this.” Lev slid the papers toward her on his desk. “Is what you’ve been plotting for almost a year.”

“Plotting?” his mother asked, surprised.

“Don’t play dumb, Beatrix,” Lev said with his arms crossed.

“You will address me as mother, Lev Pierce,” she commanded angrily.

“Oh.” Lev chuckled. “I don’t consider you my mother anymore.”

Beatrix looked at Kiera and pointed a finger at her. “Is that because of something this little whore has said?”

“Whore?” Kiera growled, shifting in her seat.

Lev walked around his desk, holding the papers. He towered over Beatrix and pushed the papers into her chest. She stared at him in shock.

“Don’t you ever insult my wife again,” Lev declared.

“Wife?” his mother asked, looking at Kiera with wide eyes. “What do you mean, wife?”

“We’re married, Mom,” Lev said, returning to his desk chair and sitting. He grinned. “Oh, and we mated too. She’s marked.”

Beatrix’s eyes narrowed as she glared at Kiera before turning her attention to Lev.

“This is insane,” she began before Lev cut her off.

“What is *insane*,” Lev shouted, standing and placing his hands on the desk again, “is that you’ve been paying off Jayne Roberts to convince Kiera from the inside that I was no good for her. On top of that,” he continued, pointing a finger at her, “you poison the food at my hotel, cause an uproar of rogue shifters, and secretly emailed Jayne with your different plans to kill her!”

Beatrix scoffed, holding up the papers. “Oh, Lev, clearly someone is trying to set me up.”

“You’re banished from the clan,” Lev stated, crossing his arms.

“Well, you can’t do that,” his mother began.

“Without a clan meeting? Yes, we actually had one this morning. Everyone came and saw the same evidence that you are holding in your hands. We all voted, and everyone had the same vote. You’re out.”

“You would banish your own mother?”

“I would banish a *snake* who wishes harm on those I love,” Lev yelled.

His mother stood in shock, glancing at the papers. She shuffled through them silently as Lev took a seat.

“Lev,” she said with pleading eyes. “Where will I go? Would you throw me on the streets?”

“I hear Great-uncle Fred has built a nice life for himself since he was banished for something similar. I think you two have a lot in common,” Lev said, chuckling. “Maybe you should contact him and spend some quality time with those who still consider you a part of their family.”

Beatrix’s face turned red, and she threw an arm out, motioning to Kiera. “You would choose a lowlife nurse, a woman with no status or respect, over your blood?”

“I contemplated that, actually,” Lev said, pressing his fingers together.

Kiera stared at him with confusion and panic. She was worried about what he was about to say if yet another lie had been woven into this situation.

“While we are blood-related, Mother, unlike you, I don’t have evil running through my veins.”

Beatrix stared at him in disbelief before shaking her head. “Lev.”

“And,” Lev continued, cutting her off, “if you *ever* plan to hurt my wife, myself, or any clan member again, you will be sent to the shifter trials.”

“The trials ...”

“Where you will most likely be found guilty on all counts,” Lev stated firmly. “Let’s see, conspiracy to commit murder, defamation of a clan member, murder by wolfsbane, the list goes on.”

Beatrix stood tall and nodded at Lev slowly, tears welling in her eyes. She turned to Kiera and scowled before walking toward the door. She turned to face Lev.

“You’ll regret this,” she said darkly.

Lev stood from his desk and snarled at her, his eyes turning a deep brown. “Leave,” he commanded. “Run as far from this valley as you can. Don’t come back, and don’t contact any of us, one peep, and you’re done.”

Beatrix widened her eyes, and a tear slid down her cheek as she left, slamming the door behind her. Kiera let out an exhale of relief as Lev plopped into his chair, rubbing his hand over his face.

“Are you all right?” Kiera asked gently.

“No,” Lev said, placing his hands on the desk. “My mother tried to murder my wife ... several times ... and I just banished her.”

“Lev,” Kiera said, standing and walking toward him. “What can I do?” She placed her hands on his shoulders.

He put his hands over hers gently. “Nothing. I’m happy I did it. She deserved it, and now, we can be together in peace.”

Kiera smiled and leaned in to kiss him as they heard the front door to his office lobby open. Kiera stood behind him with her hands on his shoulders as she listened to a familiar voice echo through the hallway.

Jayne swung open Lev’s office door and stared at them in shock.

“Oh, I ...” Jayne stuttered.

“No, Jayne.” Kiera waved her in. “Come on in.”

Jayne closed the door gently and stood before Lev and Kiera, locking eyes with Kiera as she glared intensely.

“What’s going on?” Jayne asked suspiciously.

“Well,” Kiera said, walking around Lev’s desk and stopping in front of Jayne. “First of all, I love your Birkin bag,” Kiera said, pointing to the designer purse Jayne was holding.

“Thank you?” Jayne said suspiciously and slowly.

“Was that bought with the tips you made last week?” Kiera leaned in and whispered in Jayne’s ear. “Or with the ten thousand dollars Beatrix has paid you every month?”

Kiera leaned back and cocked her head to the side, staring Jayne down. Jayne’s mouth gaped in shock, and Kiera continued her interrogation.

“How *did* you get those shifters to come to the cabin?” Kiera asked, acting impressed. “I mean, I know Beatrix had a hand in it, but Jayne.” She paused. “I didn’t think you were so clever.”

“You set me up,” Jayne said, her face turning furious.

“*I set you up?*” Kiera said, laughing. “That is the boldest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“I was hired to do a job,” Jayne began.

“You,” Kiera said, pointing a finger sharply at Jayne, “were hired by a monster and became one yourself.”

Jayne scoffed and reached into her bag, pulling out her phone. “Let’s see what Beatrix has to say about this.”

“Oh,” Lev said from his desk with a grin, “she won’t answer.”

Jayne stared at Lev with confusion, and Kiera grinned, facing her. Jayne’s face dropped from fury into shock.

“She’s been banished,” Lev said, rising from his desk and walking beside Kiera. “And as for you.” He paused and whistled. “We have a little surprise waiting.”

They heard scrambling and men’s voices shouting from the hallway before the police busted into Lev’s door, ordering Jayne to get on the ground.

“You called the *cops?*” Jayne yelled.

“Well,” Kiera said with a chuckle, “we couldn’t banish you, so this was our next best bet.”

“Get on the ground!” an officer yelled.

Jayne whipped around and crossed her arms. "I've done nothing wrong," she exclaimed.

The officer turned Jayne and forced her to the ground, taking her hands and putting them behind her back. Jayne grunted and wailed as they handcuffed her.

The officer stood Jayne up as she glared at Kiera and Lev.

"You'll regret this," Jayne snarled.

"We've heard that before," Lev said with a smile.

"Jayne Roberts," one of the officers stated firmly, "you're under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder, and you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law." The officer ushered her out of the office and continued listing her rights.

An officer stayed behind and approached Kiera and Lev. "Thanks for the tip," he said kindly. "If you two need anything else from us, you let us know."

"Thank you, Officer," Lev said, extending a hand and shaking the officer's hand before the squad left the building.

Lev turned to Kiera and let out an exasperated sigh. Kiera placed her hands on his chest, and he wrapped his hands around her waist, touching his forehead to hers. She moved her hands up his chest to his neck and kissed him lightly.

"We're free now," she said with a smile.

"I know," Lev said with a chuckle. "What will we do?"

"Hmm," Kiera said, swaying from side to side while thinking. "We could go to the Caribbean, maybe Alaska, to go see the Northern Lights?"

"Oh God," Lev said with another chuckle. "I don't want to face any more bears, please, not Alaska."

Kiera laughed, and Lev kissed her, holding her close. He looked at her arm, seeing her bandage soaked with blood.

"Kiera," he said softly.

“I know,” she responded, turning his attention to her face. “We can go back, and Eric can fix it.”

“Right now,” Lev said, guiding Kiera toward his office door.

Kiera watched as Lev shut off the lights in his office. He nodded at Madeline.

“Thank you,” Lev said gratefully.

“Anytime,” Madeline said, smiling and shuffling papers.

“She was in on this?” Kiera asked, surprised.

“Everyone on our side was in on this,” Lev said happily as they exited the office.

Eric bandaged Kiera at Pierce Point in their hotel room, examining the wound before re-dressing it.

“It looks better,” Eric said confidently. “Keep the bandage on it and no sudden movements.” He turned to Lev. “I want to see her every week for a month.”

Lev and Kiera both nodded to Eric as he exited the hotel room.

Lev walked over to Kiera and smiled. “Want some help undressing?”

Kiera rolled her eyes. “Sex? Really?” she asked. “With my arm like this?”

“No,” Lev said, chuckling. “I just meant so you can be comfortable.”

Kiera smiled. “That I can go with.”

Lev helped Kiera undress and gently pulled the covers over her as he took off his clothes, leaving on his boxers. Kiera watched as he scooted across the bed and curled up next to her, wrapping a strong arm around her waist.

“So,” he said playfully, “the Caribbean, huh?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Kiera responded with a smile.

“Tell me what we’re gonna do there,” he said, playing with her hair.

“Well.” She exhaled and smiled. “We’re going to snorkel and see all of the beautiful fish.”

“Nice,” Lev said, kissing her neck softly.

“And we’re going to go for late-night walks on the beach and look at the stars.”

“Continue,” Lev said, kissing her again.

“And we’re going to get a honeymoon suite, and there’s going to be lots of chocolate, rose petals, and champagne.”

“Hmm,” Lev said, brushing her hair out of her face. “I think you’re forgetting something.”

“What’s that?” Kiera asked, smiling.

“A sunset boat ride.”

Kiera raised her eyebrows and smiled. “Lev Pierce, when did you become such a romantic?”

“From the first day I met you,” he replied.

They laughed and cuddled against each other as Lev turned off the lights in the room. He kissed the back of her neck gently.

“I’ll love you forever, Kiera Pierce.”

“Back at you, husband.”

They chuckled once more before drifting off to sleep, nestled in each other’s arms.

TWENTY



KIERA

Kiera crossed her legs and folded her hands in her lap as she stared out the car window at the sunset. Lev was taking her to a special event but wouldn't disclose any further information.

He reached his hand to her from the driver's side and smiled.

"Are you excited?" he asked, his face beaming.

"Well," Kiera said, taking his hand. "I would be if I knew what was going on."

Lev laughed. "You're going to love it." He kissed her hand gently. "I promise."

Kiera smiled and watched the road signs pass by. They were entering the town center and pulled into a parking lot near a gazebo that Lev had taken her to on one of their first dates. She glanced at him and smiled.

"Very smooth, Mr. Pierce."

"Thank you, Mrs. Pierce," he chimed.

Lev got out of the car and opened her door, assisting her to her feet. He put his hand on her lower back and led her to the gazebo.

Kiera gasped at the beauty of the location. String lights lit up the quad, and the pavilion was decorated with vines and flowers hanging from the top. She glanced at the crowd waving their hands in the air and shouting *Surprise!*

The biggest surprise was her mother standing in the middle of the crowd, who ran to hug her. Kiera broke into a sprint and embraced her mother tightly, tears streaming down her face.

“Honey, I’m so glad you’re okay,” her mother said, her voice cracking slightly.

Kiera pulled back from the hug, wiping tears from her face. “When did you get back?” she asked, chuckling.

“This morning,” her mother exclaimed, turning around. “Dee texted me and told me your reception was tonight.”

“Reception?” Kiera spun around to face Lev, who was grinning from ear to ear. “You didn’t.”

Lev nodded. “I did.”

Kiera turned back to her mother and laughed, hugging her once more. She glanced over her shoulder and saw that Lev’s entire clan was gathered among the crowd, along with Dee and Kiera’s coworkers.

She stepped back from her mother and joined the crowd, greeting everyone and smiling brightly. Lev followed suit, laughing with his clan members and speaking with the servers.

Kiera noticed a long table filled with rustic decorations. Jars of string lights were surrounded with flowers and greenery, and the plates were lined with gold initials of *K+L*.

She ran her fingers over one of the plates before Dee startled her from behind.

“So,” Dee paused, holding her hands behind her back, “what do you think?”

“It’s amazing, Dee,” Kiera said, hugging her tightly. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“Don’t thank me,” Dee said, pulling back from the embrace. “It was all Lev’s idea. I just got it ready. Hey ...” Her voice trailed off as she looked at Kiera with sympathy. “I’m so sorry about Jayne. If I had any idea ...”

“There’s no way you could have known,” Kiera said, putting her hand on Dee’s shoulder. “Really, Dee, none of that

has anything to do with you.”

Dee nodded sadly and brushed Kiera’s hair behind her shoulder. “I’m glad it’s over now.”

Kiera looked across the crowd and locked eyes with Lev, who smiled widely at her. “Oh, it’s just beginning,” Kiera said with a smile.

A clinking of glass quieted the crowd as Lev took a stand on the gazebo.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said happily. “Dinner is about to be served, and each of you has a name card on the table. Please take your seats, and the servers will be out shortly. Thank you.”

Kiera took her place at the head of the table next to Lev. She nudged him slightly with her shoulder.

“I can’t believe you,” she said playfully.

“Believe it,” he said, putting his napkin in his lap with a grin.

Everyone at the table laughed and talked happily. Kiera scanned the tables of all the people who were supportive and appreciative of their marriage, and she beamed with happiness. Lev leaned in to kiss her as the appetizers were served.

Everyone dug into the food before them, marveling at the quality. Kiera quickly realized these were appetizers she had seen at Fire & Main when Lev had taken her there. She chuckled and looked at her plate.

“What?” he asked, smiling.

“Could you be any more perfect?” she asked.

“Well, actually.” Lev stood and took his champagne glass, clinking it with his fork.

Kiera looked at Dee and smiled, rolling her eyes. She couldn’t contain the happiness building inside her and wondered how lucky she got to have a man like this by her side.

“This has been a very unique journey,” Lev said confidently. “I always thought I was unforgettable, but Kiera took my ego down a few notches.”

Kiera and the rest of the guests laughed, staring at Lev with kind eyes.

“In all seriousness, I have never met a woman like Kiera.” He glanced at her. “To know someone so strong, motivated, caring, and giving is something I thought I would never have, and not only do I get to know her,” he turned to her, “I have the privilege of loving her for the rest of my life.”

Lev raised a glass to the table, and everyone picked up their champagne flutes and raised them.

“To a love created, a love forgotten, and a love ...” he glanced at Kiera again, “remembered.”

“To a love remembered,” the table cheered, smiling as they took sips of their champagne.

Lev sat and clinked his glass with Kiera’s, smiling happily. Kiera grinned slyly and stood up herself. She shrugged.

“Well, I have to follow that with something.”

The crowd laughed as Kiera smiled.

“I had lost faith in love,” she began with a serious face. “I thought it was something for fairy tales and lonely nights that people created to give themselves hope. I didn’t know that I had been looking in the wrong places. And when I stopped looking, true love found me with a bouquet of roses and a request for dinner on a Friday night.”

She glanced at Lev and beamed as her eyes welled with tears.

“Lev Pierce,” she began, “apparently, you are unforgettable because the memories of you were strong enough to return. I could never be more grateful that you made fairy tales come alive again, even when my world seemed so empty. I love you. I love all of you. Thank you so much.”

The crowd cheered, and then they returned to their meal as the main courses arrived. Kiera was served her favorite bison

steak, and she moaned as she took a bite of it.

“This is amazing,” she said, digging into her meal.

“Only the best for you,” Lev chimed.

The dinner continued as the sun set over the distant Blue Ridge Mountains. Afterward, the stars came out, and a live band played near the gazebo.

Dee stood from her chair and clinked her glass. The crowd stopped and looked at her.

“Because Lev and Kiera decided to get married in Vegas, of all places,” Dee said, to which the crowd laughed, “I think it’s only appropriate that they are allowed to have their first dance in the company of family and friends.”

Lev and Kiera laughed as they stared at each other. The band changed their tune from upbeat to a slow, romantic song. Lev stood and took Kiera’s hand as he led her to the pavilion.

He twirled her around and pulled her in close, holding her hand in his and placing his other on her lower back. He stared into her eyes lovingly.

“So,” he asked, twirling her again and pulling her into his chest, “what do you think?”

“I think,” she smiled, “I am more in love with you than ever.”

“And you,” he said gently, kissing her, “are the most amazing woman I have ever met.”

They danced in silence, marveling at each other as the crowd swooned.

“I want you to know something,” Lev said seriously.

“What’s that?”

Lev spun her again and dipped her lightly as the crowd cheered. He brought her back up to standing, swaying with her slightly.

“I will *always* love you for who you are, for the work you do with children, the way you love your friends and the

deadpan jokes you make.” They both chuckled before their faces fell back to seriousness. “And I love how you give so much of yourself and still manage to give so much love to me.”

“Lev,” she said, kissing him lightly. “I will always love you. Even if sometimes you’re forgettable.”

They laughed as he spun her once more, and the band stopped playing. The crowd cheered, and she gazed into his eyes.

“And,” she exhaled deeply, “I love working with children, but I can’t wait for us to start our own family.”

“Yeah?” Lev said with excitement.

“Yes,” she replied.

He picked her up and spun her around as the crowd cheered again. He put her down and kissed her passionately, smiling as he pulled back.

The night was flawless. Everyone stayed until the moon rose over the mountains, and they bid everyone goodnight. Kiera hugged her mother tightly.

“Thank you for coming back,” Kiera remarked gratefully.

“I will always come back for you,” her mother promised, staring into her eyes. “And I am so happy,” tears formed in her eyes, “that you found a man who loves you for exactly who you are.”

“Well,” Kiera said, smiling. “I remembered what you told me.”

“You deserve someone,” they said at the same time, “that thinks the sun shines through you.”

Kiera nodded. “He really thinks that.”

Her mother placed her hand on Kiera’s face lightly. “I know.” She glanced at Lev. “I can tell.”

“Call me tomorrow?” Kiera asked.

“Always,” her mother responded, hugging her once more.

The guests left the venue, and the staff began to clean up. Lev turned to Kiera and smiled.

“Want to go on another adventure?” he asked with a smile.

“Another one?” Kiera remarked happily as she shrugged. “As long as it’s with you, I’m up for anything.”

Lev grinned as he led her to the car and took off for the Shenandoah. They drove deep into the valley and stopped his car in a large field. Lev began unbuttoning his shirt as he stepped out of the vehicle.

Kiera got out and watched him walk into the field, staring at the full moon. Lev stretched his arms out and began shifting as Kiera grinned. She had an idea of what he had in mind but would never let him know she was onto his plan.

Once he was completely shifted, Lev turned to Kiera and lay on the ground. Kiera grabbed the backpack from the backseat, walked over to him, and climbed onto his back. He bellowed loudly as he stood and raced into the valley.

Kiera glanced at the stars and smiled, feeling the warm summer breeze in her hair. She held on tightly to Lev’s fur as he slowed, walking to their waterfall where he’d proposed. Kiera smiled as the same blanket and candles had been set up for them.

Lev lay down once more, and Kiera climbed off his back. She walked around to face him and placed her hands on either side of his snout. He grunted softly as she pressed her forehead to his.

Standing back, she watched as he shifted back into human form. He grinned as he approached her and reached for the backpack.

“Ah-ah,” Kiera said, holding the bag from him.

Lev glanced at her in surprise. “Oh?” he asked with a grin.

“No,” Kiera said, placing her hands on his naked chest. “I think we should start on another adventure.”

She led him to the picnic blanket, and he sat as she climbed on top of him, wrapping her legs around his waist.

“I think we should add some more Pierces to the clan,” she said with a smile.

“Kiera Pierce, you scandal,” Lev joked, running his fingers through her hair.

“I’m serious. I want to,” she said with a grin.

“I do, too,” Lev said, bringing her in for a kiss.

The moon lit up their night as they embarked on their next journey, with love flowing through them like the waterfall roaring behind them. Kiera couldn’t help but feel this was one memory she would never forget.

The End...for now



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author

Hi! I'm Milly Taiden. I love to write sexy stories featuring fun, sassy heroines with curves and growly alpha males with fur. My books are a great way to satisfy your craving for paranormal romance with action, humor, suspense and happily ever afters.

I live in Florida with my hubby, our son, and our fur babies: Speedy, Stormy and Teddy. I have a serious addiction to chocolate and cake.

I love to meet new readers, so come sign up for my newsletter and check out my Facebook page. We always have lots of fun stuff going on there.

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<http://eepurl.com/pt9q1>

Find out more about Milly here:

www.millytaiden.com

milly@millytaiden.com



ALSO BY MILLY TAIDEN

Find out more about Milly Taiden here:

Email: millytaiden@gmail.com

Website: <http://www.millytaiden.com>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/millytaidenpage>

Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/millytaiden>

You can find a complete list of all my books by series and reading order at my website: [millytaiden.com](http://www.millytaiden.com)