

WREN MICHAELS

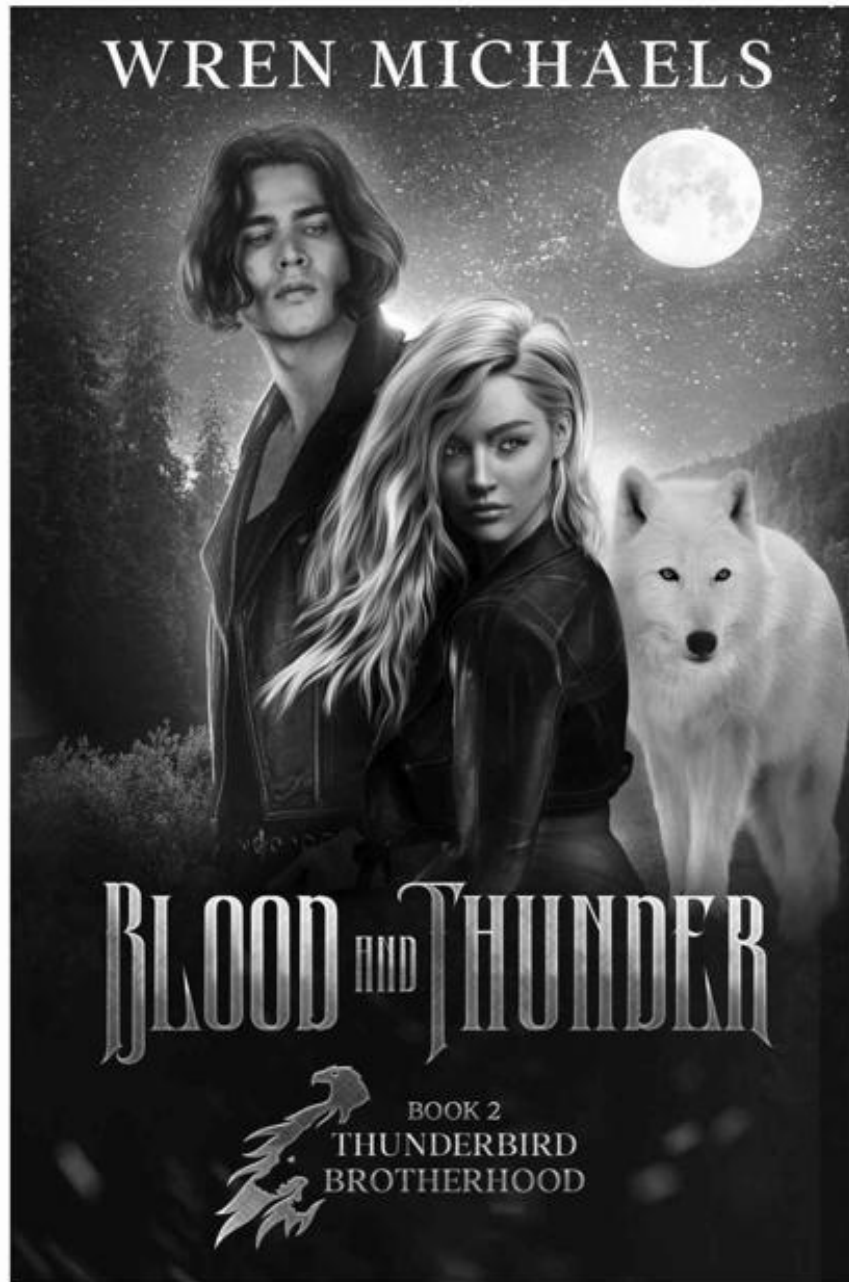


BLOOD AND THUNDER



BOOK 2  
THUNDERBIRD  
BROTHERHOOD

WREN MICHAELS



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BROTHERHOOD

MYSTIC OWL

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BLOOD AND THUNDER

By

Wren Michaels



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*To all my Renegades, thanks for sticking by me!*

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Addyson Owings is the best at what she does—working as an investigator for the Southwest Supernatural Society, where crimes come in all shapes and sizes. But when her ex shows up after seven years, partnering with her on a serious crime, she's faced with not only figuring out why a family was killed without a single mark on their bodies, but also with the lingering attraction to the man who broke her heart.



Cooper Braxton plans to get his woman back. He has one weekend to help solve a complex crime that combines the world of paranormals and humans while also convincing Addyson to give him a second chance. His success rate is high, and he doesn't plan to lose now.

But when a traitor takes a kid as a hostage, Cooper and Addy must overcome their past while saving the innocent, stopping a killer, and trying to salvage any chance of their happily ever after.

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# 1

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DEATH HAD A WAY OF CHANGING A MAN. SUDDENLY, everything they never got to do in life came to the forefront of their mind. Time mattered, and there wasn't enough of it to achieve their hopes and dreams, to love their family, to leave a mark on the world.

Tag ran a hand through his hair and stared at the white caps riding the waves. Like his future, they seemed just out of reach from the edge of the cliff he stood on.

When his cousin, Ridge, arrived with his new mate, he thought he was simply bringing her over to meet the family, not drop the bomb on him that she could somehow predict the future after they got *hippy* with it—a future where Rowtag Aktoon no longer existed.

*Sure, Kane gets a baby, and I get the grim reaper.*

Tag blew out a hard breath and folded his arms. Maybe she was wrong. It had been nearly a month since Makoa's prophecy, and so far, nothing had happened. Reseda, his brother Kane's mate, had shown no signs of pregnancy, despite their effort to fornicate in every corner of the forest, the beach, their cabin with the windows wide open, and behind the longhouse.

To Makoa's credit, she didn't exactly specify when these prophecies would occur. Maybe it was far, far into the future. Tag nodded, and a smile twitched on his lips the more he thought about it. "Yeah, way far in the future."



Tag held his smile the entire walk back to his cabin, easing the burden that had gripped his soul for the last few weeks. Halfway there, a scream rang out, followed by Reseda waving something in the air, Kane trailing behind her. Tag kicked into a run and chased after them to the longhouse.

“What’s wrong?” Tag shouted, the door slamming shut behind him as he barreled into the house.

“I’m pregnant!” Reseda cried out, holding the stick in the air with two pink lines. Kane beamed, curling his arm around his mate.

“Really?” his grandmother, Maquinna, gasped, clutching a hand to her chest.

A wolf whistle shot out from Dominic’s lips as he clapped his hand on the back of Nodin’s shoulder. “Congratulations, my love, you’re going to be an uncle.”

Tag’s heart stopped before plunging all the way to his stomach, crashing into a pool of acid that splashed back up to his throat. It forced a wheeze-cough to burst from his lips. The entire room held its collective breath as their heads turned to stare at him with the sudden realization of what their good news meant.

“Oh, shit!” Kane’s eyes widened as he walked over. “Brother, this doesn’t necessarily mean...”

“Tag!” Maquinna scurried over and clutched him close to her chest. “Kane’s right. We don’t know for sure what Makoa dreamed will actually come true. This could be a coincidence.”

Tag narrowed his eyes. “You, who said there’s no such thing as a coincidence, that The Great Spirits have a reason for everything, just uttered those words?”

Maquinna pulled back and her smiling face fell, heavy with worry. “Well, we can’t be sure of anything. It may not mean what you think it does. We don’t know what The Great Spirits have planned or why. We simply can’t jump to conclusions at this point.”

Tag tossed her a placating nod. “Sure.”

Reseda clutched him by the shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Tag. I wasn’t thinking. I should never have blurted that out. I completely forgot...”

Tag clasped a hand over hers and forced a smile. He genuinely liked Reseda and knew she would never have meant to hurt him in her excitement. “I know. It’s okay. At least now it’s more than just a ‘what if’, and I can prepare myself mentally.”

Reseda shook her head. “Look, take it from someone who’s already been dead, you can’t mentally prepare for that.” Her eyes about bugged out of her head. “*Dios mio!* I didn’t mean it to sound like that. I just meant—”

With a shrug, Tag twisted out of her hold. “It’s fine. I’m happy for you guys. I really am. May the baby favor you and not this guy.” Tag punched Kane in the shoulder and made for the door.

“Tag, wait, please.” Kane grabbed him by the elbow. “We’ll solve this together. I promise. I’m not going to let you get killed.”

“Be careful of promising things you cannot control, brother.” Tag sighed and pushed through the door. He had to get out of there before he let his emotions get the best of him in front of everyone. As much as he tried to play off that everything would turn out okay, a fierce wave of anxiety swelled in his gut.

Tag rounded the corner of the longhouse and collapsed against it, letting his body slide down until his ass hit the dirt. Resting his arms on his bent knees, he gripped the side of his head with his hands and forced down the wedge of emotion balling in his throat, threatening to cut off his air.

There was so much he still wanted to do with his life. He was barely twenty-two. It just wasn’t fair. He hadn’t found his mate. He hadn’t seen the world. He hadn’t done anything of value.

Sure, he was a Thunderbird, but it was always Kane or Nodin who got the glory. Of course, they had more experience.

They never let him do any of the more dangerous hunts or fighting. They'd always been there to protect him. But how could they now? And they shouldn't have to. Each of them had their own lives, their own families to think about. Kane and Reseda now had a baby on the way. Nodin just got the love of his life back, and Dominic surely wouldn't let anything get in the way of them having a life together this time. His cousin, Ridge, just found his mate, Makoa, the bringer of bad news, but at least they were happy together. And Denali and Nova, his other cousins... Well, he never really saw much of them these days since they were young and carefree like he once used to be.

No, he had to try and figure this out on his own.

If Tag was meant to die, then so be it. Everyone died, it just sucked that some were sooner than others. He needed to do something amazing with the time he had left. He wanted to leave a legacy, do some real good in the world like Kane and Nodin. Something to be remembered by.

"Hey," Dominic said, nudging Tag's knees with the toe of his boot. "Got a minute?"

Tag snort-laughed. "I don't know. Makoa wasn't real specific on the time of my death, so maybe?"

Dominic smirked. "At least you're keeping your sense of humor."

He shrugged. "What else have I got to hang on to?"

"Well, I have an idea." Dominic nodded his head toward the woods. "Take a walk with me." Dominic held out his hand, and he pulled Tag to standing.

Tag quirked a brow. "I'm certainly open to suggestions at this point."

The trees swallowed them, hiding their bodies and conversation in the shadows beneath the cathedral of leaves. Dominic tugged him to a stop deep within the tree line bordering the land between the wolves and thunderbirds. "So, I know this witch—"

“No.” Tag shot up a hand, cutting him off. “Anything but that. I’m not messing with dark magic so that when I die, I come back reincarnated as a wolf.”

Dominic rolled his eyes with a laugh. “Not all witchcraft is dark magic, you idiot. And there’s nothing wrong with being a wolf. Judgmental much?”

“It’s still taking some getting used to that the wolves and Thunderbirds bloodlines are entwined. When you’ve been conditioned to think they’re the enemy, it’s pretty hard to flip a switch over night. I promise I’ll try and do better.” Tag pursed his lips and leaned against the trunk of a tall redwood tree. “So, suddenly, you’re an expert on dark magic?”

Leaves rustled on the breeze, swirling around them as a raven launched out from one of the trees. They both jerked their heads and watched the bird soar into the heavens with a mighty caw. Panic seized Tag’s heart. Ravens were known symbols of mischief and mayhem, tricksters, and the last thing he needed right now was more of that going on in his life. Were The Great Spirits trying to tell him something?

Dominic cleared his throat. “Ev’s not a practitioner of dark magic, trust me.” He watched the raven fly off as he twitched his lips before returning his attention to Tag. “Winter, on the other hand, I can’t make any promises.”

“Who’s Winter?”

“Her coven leader.”

“Oh, so now there’s an entire coven involved? This sounds so much better.” Tag pushed off the trunk and started walking back toward the longhouse. “Thanks, but polite pass.”

Dominic shot after him and turned him back around. “Listen, I’m serious. Ev’s good with these things. She specializes in spirit walks. She’s in tune with the spirit world and can maybe help narrow down your untimely death, or even find a way to stop it.”

Tag huffed and turned to leave again.

“Tag, I mean it. You should at least give it a shot. What have you got to lose?”

“Oh, other than my life?” Tag stopped and thought for a moment. He was right. On one hand, what did he really have to lose when he was already sentenced to an unknown death in the near future? But what if *this* was the death Makoa had predicted? Maybe everything hinged on this one moment, this one decision.

“That’s just it...if you’re going to die anyway, might as well give anything a try. Ev owes me a favor. She won’t do you wrong—not on my watch—okay?”

“Why you doing this, man?” Tag lifted his chin and eyed Dominic.

“Because, contrary to popular belief, I’m not an asshole.” Dominic smirked. “And I love your brother. I don’t want to see Nodin cry over you. It will break my cold, dark, blackened heart. So, I will do everything in my power to make sure that doesn’t happen. Besides,” Dominic paused to ruffle Tag’s hair. “I actually kind of like you.”

Tag’s lips pulled to one side as he raised a brow.

“Good gods, not like that. You’re practically jailbait! Hello, did you miss the part where your brother is the love of my life? Just because I’m gay doesn’t mean I like everything with a penis.” Dominic rolled his eyes and walked off back to the tree line.

“I’m just giving you shit, Dom. So sensitive these days. You need to lighten up. It’s not like you’re the one who’s gonna die.” Tag winked as he caught up to him.

“We’re all going to die one day. You just happen to have a warning about when it’s going to happen. I could die tomorrow, or in an hour. Personally, I hope it’s during sex with a smile on my face. But we can’t all get what we want.”

Tag shook his head. “Visuals of you and my brother will now scar me for life, however short that may be.”

“Look, all kidding aside, even if everything is a coincidence, wouldn’t you feel better knowing that?”

“Well, of course, but what’s to guarantee Ev will be able to tell me that, and do I even really want to know for sure? I

mean, not knowing still gives me some kind of ignorance-is-bliss mindset that it may not be real. I think I'd rather live in denial."

Dominic sighed. "I get that. I do. But if you had a chance to stop it, wouldn't you want that?"

"What if stopping it causes some kind of cataclysmic event, there's a giant snowball effect, and everyone ends up dead because I was selfish?"

"Well, there's that." Dominic blinked. "Thought about this much, have you?"

A chuckle ripped through the ball wedged in Tag's throat. "Kind of the only thing I've had on my mind for weeks now."

Dominic nodded. "I suppose so."

"Look, of course I'd want to stop it. But I also don't want to endanger someone else. Messing with fate could have dire consequences, ya know?"

"True, but at least you'd know." Dominic shrugged and brushed his thumb along his nose. "There's no shame in wanting to know or wanting to stop it. You may be a Thunderbird, but you can also be scared, dude. It's okay to not want to die. I get taking it like a man, but your demise will break a lot of hearts. And maybe, just maybe, it's not what's supposed to happen. Perhaps, it's more of a possibility if certain things don't happen. But to know what those things are, you might want to see Ev."

They continued the rest of the walk back to the longhouse in silence as Tag ruminated on actually going through with the crazy plan. He owed it to himself to seek all possible avenues to try and save himself, didn't he?

"So, some witch will really be able to tell me about my future?"

Dominic smirked. "Only one way to find out."

Tag sighed.

"There you are," Kane said, clutching Tag by the shoulder as he emerged from the tree line surrounding the houses. "You

okay?”

Tag pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes at his brother.

Kane shot his hands up. “I don’t know what to do or what to say. But I know we’re going to do everything in our power to make sure Makoa’s other prediction doesn’t come true.”

“I told him about Ev.” Dominic tossed a nod to Kane.

“So, am I the only one who didn’t know about this Ev person? Were you all busy plotting the rest of my life while I wasn’t looking? Oh wait,” Tag said with a sarcastic laugh, “that does tend to run in our family, doesn’t it?”

Kane’s lips twitched. “Well, it’s always meant for good. I mean, look how Reseda and I turned out.”

A sigh broke through Tag’s shell.

“Look, we’ll all go with you. That way, we can make sure nothing happens to you,” Kane said.

“I’m not a kid, brother.” Tag hated the idea that everyone still treated him like he was some wayward teenager. That he wasn’t capable of more, of making his own decisions, of being someone outside of the brotherhood.

“No, you’re not. But that doesn’t mean I won’t always have your back until you take your last breath.” Kane eyed him down.

Tag looked between Dominic and Kane just as Nodin joined up with the rest of the Fellowship of the Rowtag.

“Et tu, Nodin?” Tag folded his arms.

“They made me promise to stay inside because they knew I’d sling you over my shoulder and force you to go. They wanted to at least give you a choice. So, be thankful.” Nodin shrugged.

Tag rolled his eyes.

“He’s so Alpha.” Dominic waggled his brows. “No offense, Kane.”

Kane smirked. “Oh, none taken.”

When Nodin stepped down from being Alpha and Kane took over, he had a hard time letting go of that internally. Tag guessed you could take the guy away from Alpha status, but you couldn't take the Alpha out of the guy.

“Okay, if going to see this witch lady gets this awkward conversation to stop, then fine, let's get this over with before things get any weirder.” Tag threw up his hands and walked back to the longhouse.

“Wrong way, buddy,” Dominic yelled out to him.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Ev's not from around here.” Dominic smirked and brushed his thumb along his nose. “We're off to Vegas.”

Tag's shoulders slumped. “Aw, hell.”





“NOPE. NO WAY. UH UH. NOT GONNA HAPPEN.” TAG SHOOK his head and stomped back to his cabin.

“It’ll be like a guy’s weekend and a mission all in one,” Dominic called out, running after him.

“You want to take me to some casino to see a two-bit witch who’s actually a showgirl fortune teller and have her tell me about my imminent death?” Tag pursed his lips.

Reseda popped up behind him and cleared her throat. “Former showgirl here. That shit’s a lot tougher than it looks. Well, the show part. I don’t know anything about fortune telling.”

Tag sighed. “No offense, Reseda. You were killer in that burlesque club, but you didn’t hold the possible answers to my life-and-death situation. And, hell, Teagan was hot. Oh, man... How the hell is Teagan, and Dahlia for that matter? What happened to them since the club shut down and your dickhead commander died?”

“The Dolls are good. Teagan and Dahlia are actually working private security detail now. They’re kind of like Charlie’s Angels—minus an angel since I’m a T-bird now. Marshall’s their Bosley.”

The Dolls were an undead super-soldier team hell-bent on wiping out all preternatural life on earth. Reseda had been one of them, until she and Kane got groiny and found out they were mates. And aside from Reseda being mind-controlled to kill them all for a while, she was a fun person to be around.

“What about the government task force?” Nodin piped up.

The government was the one controlling The Dolls, brainwashing them into exterminating the wolves, which wasn't a bad thing at the time, as it certainly had helped the Thunderbirds and their cause of keeping the wolves at bay, until the Thunderbirds got on their radar, as well. Then more chaos ensued with the revelation Reseda was actually part wolf, and all they had thought about the wolves was blurred. When Reseda turned into a Thunderbird after she and Kane mated, well... all hell broke loose.

“There's word they have someone who will take the helm now that Drake's been sent over the rainbow bridge. Rumor has it that it's Gotz, Drake's mini me—all the tiny-dick attitude at a fraction of the cost. The Dolls and Marshall are keeping watch for us. Which is why we need to keep the Mayan Pul Yah stone safe, so we can make sure they'll never be able to recreate The Dolls. We can't risk another task force trying to take us all out again.” Reseda clutched her stomach. “Those fry breads Maq made are calling my name. Let me grab a couple, and I'll be ready to head out with you guys.”

“No! It's too dangerous now with the baby.” Kane placed a hand on her shoulder. “Besides, someone has to stay here and protect Maquinna while we're gone.”

Reseda blinked at her mate. “You seriously do not expect me to become the little stay-at-home housewife while my mate tears it up in Vegas, do you?”

“That's not what I meant. I'm just saying you're not invincible anymore, and you have another life to think about besides yours.” Kane dropped his hand and ran it along her belly.

“Look, neither of you are going,” Nodin said. “I've already called Denali and Nova to meet us in Vegas. You both need to stay here and watch over grandmother and the wolves. Ridge and Makoa are on call and will fly in if you need backup. Plus, you have The Dolls at your disposal.” Kane and Reseda stood and blinked at Nodin. “You're the Alpha now, Kane. You need to protect the land, the families on it, and your mate. That is

your priority. Between Dom and me and our cousins, we'll protect Tag. Hopefully, it'll be a quick jaunt to Vegas, get the info from the witch, and we'll be back home before you know it."

"It's fine, brother," Tag added, turning to Kane. "I agree with Nodin."

Kane looked helplessly between Tag and Nodin, then back at his mate.

"He's right. As much as I hate to admit it," Reseda conceded. "You know I'm all about the action, but we can't leave everything unguarded. I know The Great Spirits protect your land, but what if something happens and we're not here? It could be disastrous."

"Okay." Kane sighed before narrowing his eyes at Nodin. "But if you find anything out, you let me know immediately."

"Of course." Nodin nodded.

"I'll make sure of it," Dominic said, clasping his palm along Nodin's arm.

"Thank you." He turned to Tag. "Be careful."

"It's not like I'm going to end up some pit boss's bitch with these guys hanging around me." Tag thumbed over his shoulder at Nodin and Dominic.

"So, does this mean you're going to give it a shot?" Dominic turned to Tag.

With a resounding sigh, Tag nodded. "I guess. I mean, if I really am meant to die, might as well get a weekend in Vegas marked off my bucket list."

Kane reached out and pulled Tag into a half-hug and clapped his hand to his shoulder. "Come back to us."

Tag nodded. "Will do my best."



Tag had never been to Vegas. Hell, he'd never been out of Canada. Ever. Dominic had a friend who owed him a favor, who just happened to be a pilot. Apparently, a lot of people owed Dominic favors, which was a little sus. He stared down his brother's boyfriend a little harder and vowed to keep a better eye on him on this trip. While, so far, Dominic truly had Nodin's best interests at heart, and he had helped them with the throw-down with Reseda and the government, he was still a wolf—son of the Alpha, to be exact.

While their viewpoints on the wolves had muddied a whole lot since Reseda and her mother entered the picture, there was a long history of war between their tribes that was only just starting to get unpacked. Tag liked to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, but his defenses still went up where the wolves were concerned. Not everyone thought like Dominic, who genuinely wanted to reunite the tribes.

A kaleidoscope of colors danced across the sky as they walked along the strip. It was near midnight by the time they arrived, but it could have been noon for all Tag knew. Light was everywhere, immersing everyone and everything in a melting hue of red, orange, and blue. Pulsating lights to drumbeats, dancing water to music, and people bumping into each other like in a pinball machine was enough for sensory overload.

*How do people live here?*

Tag shook himself out of the stupor that was enough to drive anyone mad. Maybe that's why people lost all their money—they were all sent subliminal messages through the strobing lights and music, promising to shut that shit off if they hand over all their money.

“So, where exactly are we headed?” Tag asked.

“Denali and Nova are supposed to meet us outside the casino up ahead.” Nodin pointed to a large set of buildings that looked like a circus tent in the front.

“Oh, hell no. There's a clown with a lollipop on their sign. And you want to put my life in the hands of someone who works there?” Tag blinked, spun around, and walked away.

Dominic and Nodin grabbed him by the arms and carried him to the front of the clown sign.

“So, I’m not the only one thinking this whole thing is kinda sketch?” Denali said, folding his arms as he leaned against the bottom of one of the clown shoes.

“Denali!” Tag shouted, his eyes wide as saucers, happy to see his cousin was there. Surely, he’d rescue him from this insane plan. “Don’t let them take me in there, man!”

Nova chuckled and shook his head. “I have to go with Tag and Denali on this one. What the hell are you thinking, Nodin?” He glanced up at the giant, horrifying clown towering over them like a nightmare.

Dominic looked over his shoulder with a laugh as he stopped at the bottom of the clown sign. “Oh, ye of little faith.”

“Nodin, I swear...” Tag started as he watched Dominic walk between the giant clown feet and disappear. “Wait... what?”

“After you, brother.” Nodin fanned his arm toward the spot where Dominic had vanished into thin air.

Tag shook his head. “Just when I thought this day couldn’t get any worse.”

“Well, I thought that was pretty cool. I’m down,” Nova said as he leapt through the void and vanished like Dominic.

“And this is why Nova would be the first one killed in a horror movie.” Denali sighed, shook his head, and dove into the apparent portal after his brother.

“You used to be a lot more adventurous,” Nodin said, clutching Tag’s shoulder, easing him forward.

“Well, yeah, I was a young, dumb teenager who thought he was invincible. Now I have a death sentence hanging over my head. It changes a person.” Tag shirked out of Nodin’s grip.

Nodin pursed his lips and stared at Tag.

“Okay. Okay. Fine! I’m going. But I don’t have to like it.” Tag shook out his shoulders and sucked in a deep breath as he jumped on the concrete foundation holding up the stupid-ass clown. “You better not be filming this.”

Nodin threw his head back with a laugh. “Just get your ass in there.”

Energy radiated along his skin, surging with a heat he could only describe as sensual. Air ripped from his lungs in a gasp, which rang out as more of a moan of pleasure than pain. Tag snapped his eyes open and blinked himself back to reality, or a new version of it, as he glanced around at the site before him.

Two giant figures loomed toward the night sky, arguing in pantomime with each other. Dressed in black-and-white striped outfits, their bodies coiled elegantly, rising above each other yet tethered to the ground, the bottom half of the male a circus tent, and the bottom of the female a carousel.

“What the hell is this place?” Tag looked around.

The male figure tipped his hat as he twisted around, bending down with a loud creak that vibrated through the air around him as he came face-to-face with Tag, a ludicrous smile blazing over his wide lips. “Welcome to Bizarre Bazaar.”

The statue stood upright, back to arguing with the female, and Tag shook his head, unable to determine if that had really happened or if he’d imagined it. It was like he’d never moved.

Hordes of beings wove themselves around their small group, some passing by like zombies, lured in and fixated on their next hit of whatever they were here for. Laughter surrounded some as they indulged in their secret passions behind masks, anonymous to the world. Some faces drowned in morose expressions, lost to their addictions or unable to find one, he couldn’t tell.

Dominic fanned his arms in front of him. “Bizarre Bazaar is a paranormal playground full of entertainment and debauchery. It’s merely one section of many on the strip that is

only accessible to the paranormal.” Dominic held out a mask. “Better put this on.”

“This is for protection from identification, for you and for them,” Nodin said, slipping his black raven mask into place.

“Have you been here before?” Tag stared at the white owl mask in his hands. “Birds. So very subtle, Dominic.”

He shrugged. “Would you have preferred an elephant?” Dominic slipped a fox mask into place.

“Dude, this place is awesome,” Nova shouted, spinning around as he took in the scenery before him.

“If you like nightmare inducing freak shows, then yes,” Denali growled and lowered his falcon mask into place.

“Aw, come on, man, why did I have to get the stupid wolf one? Someone trade with me!” Nova waved his mask above his head.

“Suck it up, buttercup.” Dominic forced the mask onto Nova’s face, snapping it into place. “Keep the illusion alive, or we’ll all be dead.”

“Seriously, what the hell is this place?” Tag stared at a circus train car with iron bars guarded by a man that looked like he’d eaten an orc for breakfast, then started shifting into one. Ornate scrolling carvings outlined the top of the cabin, glowing in an orange hue from the flickering light of four torches.

“Holy shit!” Tag jumped back and bumped into Denali. “What the hell is that?” Tag pointed to a large rodent perched on top of the car. Red and blue veins spiderwebbed through the sheer wings of the creature, each fold funneling into a razor-sharp claw at the bottom of both wings.

“For now, let’s just steer clear of anything we’re not familiar with.” Dominic smirked. “We don’t want to lose you to indentured servitude on your first night in the bazaar.”

A blur of movement caught Tag’s eye, and he whipped his head around. Laughter rippled through the air, tickling his skin, forcing a chuckle from his lungs that he didn’t grant

permission to leave his body. The woman circled around him on a unicycle, her face painted in a chalky substance like a cracked Victorian doll, both haunting and beautiful. Two caramel-colored buns stuck out from the top of her head, golden curls falling from each, dangling across her eyes. Her tattered, cream-colored corset put her chest on display, and Tag's eyes followed as she summoned him with a single finger in her direction.

"Let's not get distracted. We're here to see Ev. You can play with Madelyn later." Dominic patted Tag on the head with a chuckle.

"Or maybe not," Nodin said, shooting Dominic a glare. "The last thing he needs right now is to *play with* a succubus."

Dominic shrugged. "Let the dying boy have a little fun. When did you become such a party pooper, love?"

Nodin sighed. "Focus on the task at hand. Succubus time later, all right?"

"He really is a lot more fun when you're not dying," Dominic whispered into Tag's ear.

"I don't even want to know how many times you guys have been here." Tag shook his head and marched forward.

"Stick close. You don't want to get snatched up." Dominic grabbed Nova's arm, yanking him away from an enchanting muse that looked like a cross between a ballerina and a Mardi Gras float. "Keep an eye on your cousin."

Nodin and Dominic held out their arms, blocking the pack from walking into a parade of half-peacock women strutting through the crowd. A line of entranced men and women hypnotically followed them, their heads bobbing and weaving in rhythm with their feathers.

"Ya know, I regret talking trash about the giant clown on the Vegas Strip. He's not looking so bad right now. Maybe we should just turn back." Tag spun around but got clotheslined by Denali and Nova.

"We can get through this. We just have to be vigilant." Denali marched him forward.



They continued on their path, trying to stay close to Dominic through the sea of otherworldly creatures, patrons, and performers. A large red-and-white striped tent hovered above the ground, its doors pulled back like a gaping mouth ready to devour them. The low-hung sign draped in front of it warned *Cirque de Mystique*.

“Well, that looks foreboding.” Tag pursed his lips.

“Don’t worry, we’re not going in there.” Dominic smirked. Tag had learned to hate it when he did that. Nothing good ever happened after. “We’re going *there*.” He pointed up.

Tag’s gaze followed Dom’s finger up a winding staircase that wrapped around the base of a wide tree—only the planks weren’t attached to anything, simply floating in a spiral up and around the trunk. Tiny flickering lights lit the path upwards, that upon closer inspection, turned out to be thousands of fireflies. Soft billows of clouds shrouded the top of the tree from view, and Tag had no idea just how far into the sky it went.

“Because why not?” Tag threw his hands up and followed them up the stairs.



THE WINDING STAIRS SEEMED TO NEVER END. FLOATING candles replaced the fireflies the further up they climbed, each one flickering as he passed. The wooden steps moaned beneath his feet as a white mist thickened the clouds around them, cooling along his skin, and his mind numbed a bit to everything going on around them. He didn't know if it was the mist or sheer exhaustion from climbing all the stairs.

"It would have been a hell of a lot faster if we'd flown up here," Tag said, gasping a bit at the thinned oxygen. He'd flown much higher in his Thunderbird form, so why would the air bother him now?

"Sure, if you want to get struck down by a witch who casts spells first then reconciles later, go ahead and do that," Dominic said over his shoulder. "Remember, you're here to ask a favor, not roll up on their doorstep in all your stormy glory."

A platform emerged from the fog draped in red and white panels of velvet. A tall figure leaned against one of the poles holding up the tent, his head bent, a black top hat shielding his face, twirling something in one of his hands.

"Well, look what the dog dragged in." The man raised his head, and a half smile lit his lips. "You can't eat your lunch up here, Dom. We've been over this."

"Oh, Beck, so nice to see you too." Dominic let out a snort. "You remember Nodin. How could you forget that gorgeous face?"

“Your tastes and mine differ.” Beck narrowed his eyes.

“Your loss.” Dominic shrugged.

Beck rolled his eyes before parting the curtain and fanning his arms, allowing Dominic and Nodin passage through.

Tag stepped forward to follow. Beck flicked something out of his hand that looked like a playing card. It twisted and elongated itself in a flash of bright white light, and Tag walked right into some kind of invisible barrier.

“And just where do you think you’re going?” Beck crossed his arms and returned to leaning against the pole.

“I’m with them.” Tag pointed toward the curtain that now hid his brother and Dominic.

“What the hell, man?” Denali stepped up behind Tag and launched a fist into the barrier. The blast knocked him backward, and he tumbled down the staircase.

“Denali!” Tag and Nova shouted in unison, spinning around to go after him.

He shot a hand up. “I’m fine, but that fucker isn’t going to be when I get my talons on him.”

Beck simply chuckled from behind the barrier, twirling another card in his fingers. “You three have to wait your turn.”

Dominic popped his head through the curtain. “Put the ego away, Becks. They’re with me. Ev knows they’re coming.”

“Even more reason to keep an eye on them.” Beck flicked the brim of his hat.

“Let them pass, Beck,” a gravelly voice shouted from behind the velvet curtain.

“As you wish, Ev,” Beck said with a flourishing bow. He snapped his fingers and the barrier fell—and so did Denali, Nova, and Tag, who were all leaning against the invisible shield at the time, collapsing in a pile of arms and legs.

Denali shot up first, launching himself at Beck, slamming him into the pole with a single hand wrapped around his

throat. “Listen, asshole, we didn’t do a single thing to you. You want a fight? You got one.”

A gasping laugh answered him as Beck snapped his fingers again and Denali disappeared.

“Where the hell did he go?” Tag looked around.

Nova shot to the edge of the platform, looking for his brother.

“He needed a timeout. He’ll be perfectly happy with his bird ass sitting in the tree.” Beck coughed, cleared his throat, and went back to leaning along the pole, playing with that stupid card again.

Tag walked over to Beck, forcing a smile to his lips, attempting to diffuse the situation peacefully. “Listen, maybe if we just talk this out, introduce ourselves, we don’t have to resort to fighting first. We’re just here to see Ev with Dominic. I’m sorry our presence put you on edge.”

“Why are you apologizing to this jerk? He struck first!” Nova’s lip curled through his frustrated words.

Beck glared at him. “Maybe I’m tired of people using our gifts, exploiting us. Maybe your very shifter existence is a blight on the world of magic. Maybe I don’t need a reason at all.”

More shifter hate. Perfect. Tag knew this whole trip was a mistake from the beginning. Why he ever let Dominic talk him into this, he’d never know. Maybe being so close to death made his decision making questionable.

“If you did anything to hurt my brother...” Nova started, but the Denali’s screech pierced the air right before his talons clamped around Beck’s body. “Nevermind. Got any popcorn? This is going to be good.” Nova folded his arms with a smirk.

Tag shook his head. Why did everything resort to violence? While he totally understood where Nova and Denali were coming from, something traumatic must have happened for Beck to have such an attitude toward shifters. Still, it didn’t mean he had a right to take it out on ones he didn’t even know, let alone have any beef with.

Tag couldn't hold back a smirk as Beck dangled and squirmed in Denali's grip, his talons pinning his arms to the side so he couldn't do that magical snap. Denali would never actually injure someone just for being an asshole, but he didn't blame him for putting a scare into the guy.

"Put me down, you fucker!" Beck's words rang out through the cloud cover, and Tag could only imagine what moves Denali was doing on his body, probably something to put Beck into G-LOC, a G-induced loss of consciousness. Denali was famous for his massively intense and dangerous inverted flying maneuvers. He lived for the thrill of it, the speed, the agility, and the danger of the climbs, turns, and descents. If he wasn't a Thunderbird, he surely would have been a fighter pilot.

A shadow broke through the misty cloud cover and Beck flew through the air, bouncing as he tumbled along the platform before nearly rolling off the other side. He gripped one of the tent poles, dragging himself to a kneel.

"Well, that was fun. Can we go in now?" Tag asked, fighting the nerves stinging his stomach at the thought of going through with it. He needed to get in there before he changed his mind and abandoned this entire plan.

"What the hell are you guys doing out here?" Dominic poked his head back out. "There's a lot of screaming, and I'm not even involved."

Denali jumped from one of the support beams, his large boots landing with a thud as he brushed a hand through his hair. "Just taking care of a little business."

"Let's go. Ev's waiting." Dominic nodded toward the entrance to the tent.

Tag blew out a hard breath and shook out his shoulders before rubbing his hands together. It was now or never, but he preferred never because who wanted to go talk to a witch about his imminent death?

Tag slipped inside, Denali and Nova following close behind. Incense assaulted his nose and a cough puffed out of

his chest.

“Good gods, you could lick the patchouli off the walls in here,” Denali said.

Red velvet draped the brick walls around them that seemed to go on forever. Tag ran back and ducked his head outside, taking in the tiny tent entrance, before going back inside to the massive room and shaking his head. Several sofas covered in ornate throw pillows lined the walls. Soft yellow light from gas lamps flicked shadows along the carnival artwork lining the walls. The place was huge.

“Magic,” a creaky old voice said with a chuckle.

Dominic and Nodin parted, and an old woman he assumed was Ev stood between them, barely reaching their shoulders. Long, white, scraggly hair escaped a purple scarf wrapped around her head, tied in a knot on top. Her stout body hunched over, and she clutched to a cane like it was her lifeline. Her long, drab-brown-and-green skirting dragged along the floor as she hobbled toward him, slamming her cane into the floorboards with each wobbly step. A white rat rode her humpback shoulder, its head held high, staring at Tag with warning.

Her boot hitched on an uneven floorboard and her body teetered. Tag darted to her side, reaching a hand out to stop her from falling. “Here, let me help you—”

She lifted her cane and stabbed him in the chest with it, stopping him from coming any closer. “Death clings to you like a shadow.”

Tag’s eyes shot open, and his heart slunk to his stomach as she circled him, her once shaky steps evening out, becoming more precise and less unstable. Leaning in, she rose to her tiptoes and sniffed along his neck, releasing a gasp as she flung herself back, grasping at her chest as she bumped into a table behind her.

“Ev?” Dominic said, taking a step toward her, but she held her hand up, halting his progress.

She clutched her chest tighter and shook her head as she stared at Tag. “This...can’t be.”

Adrenaline fed his fingers and toes, and he didn’t know if he should run the opposite direction or help the old lady. “Literally dying to know what is going on.” Tag stared back at the crazy old woman, and a unique scent hit him. He sniffed the air, his nose twitching as he inhaled. “What’s that smell?”

“Probably mothballs.” Denali snorted.

A growl bubbled up from Tag’s chest without him realizing it. “Don’t be an ass. It smells like crisp white snow, fresh, almost sweet, like candy.” Each breath filled him with a tingle that shot straight through to his toes. He’d never smelled something so wonderful in his life. His fingers twitched at his side as he fought the ravenous craving welling up in him.

“Uh huh, whatever you say. It smells like old lady perfume and muscle rub. But if that turns you on, go with it.” Denali folded his arms with a grimace.

Another growl rumbled in Tag’s throat as he sneered at his cousin, then caught himself and stepped back. What the hell was he all upset about? The sudden burst of anger took him by surprise. Tag shook his head and cleared his throat as he turned his attention back to the old witch.

“You have to go. You have to get him out of here.” Her hand trembled as she pointed at Tag, spinning around to hide behind Dominic. “He can’t be here.”

Dominic curled an arm around her, shielding her from Tag. “You’re the only one who can help him. Please, Ev.”

She shook her head, her dangling charm earrings whipping her in the cheeks with the fierceness of her rejection. “I can’t. It’s not safe for him here. It’s not safe for me if he’s here. You don’t understand.”

“Then make us understand, Ev. There’s been a prophecy. Someone’s seen his death. You’re his only hope to clue us in if this is an inevitable thing or if there’s something we can do to stop it.”

Ev's chest convulsed at Dominic's words, as if she'd been punched or shot. "No," she gasped and continued to shake her head.

The old witch's reaction to him had him shook, and if he didn't believe Makoa's prediction before, he certainly did now. Maybe there really was a shadow of death clinging to him. Fear gripped his heart, and he swallowed over the wedge of air now stuck in his throat.

The white rat on her hump leaped into the air, its body twisting and turning, elongating into a black cat by the time it hit the floor. It sniffed the air before weaving in and out of Tag's legs, brushing its face against his jeans.

"Traitor," Ev hissed at the cat.

"Well, at least someone likes me." Tag dropped to a crouch and stroke the cat's back, scratching his ears.

"No!" Ev dove for the cat, snatching him from Tag's hands. "You'll scent him!"

Tag blinked at the improved agility and speed of the old lady. "What?"

"Well, someone's suddenly spritely for her age." Denali stepped up and his lips curled to the side.

"Maybe it's the magical muscle rub Tag smelled." Nova chuckled.

"Tell us what's going on," Nodin pleaded to the witch. "He's my brother."

"Ev?" Beck rushed in through the curtain, knocking Tag to the ground and pushing Dominic away. "What's wrong?"

"Beck, not now. Please." Ev swallowed hard, holding up a hand to ward him off. "Get out of here before you get sucked into this."

"Where you go, Ev, I go. You know that. I'm not leaving. Something has you freaked the fuck out. I could feel your energy surge all the way out there. What the hell is going on?" Beck looked around the room, glaring at everyone. "Did



anyone hurt you? I'll kill every one of them if they laid a finger on you."

Tag shot his hands up. "We didn't do anything. She touched me with her cane and started freaking out."

"Beck, you have to get out of here." Tremors ricocheted through Ev's body, the air around her shimmering, blurring.

"Hold it together. You're coming unraveled. What's got you so worked up?" Beck slid a hand along the woman's cheek in an almost seductive caress that triggered a growl in Tag's chest. He hitched back, startling himself, shocked at the response.

*What the hell was that?*

Ev threw her head back as a guttural cry shot from her lips, her body convulsing as Beck held her.

"Everyone out. Now!" Beck shouted.

"What's happening?" Denali asked.

The sound of bones crunching replaced the shrieks, and a blast of white light blinded everyone in the room.

"She's shifting!" Dominic cried out. "Everyone outside, now! Beck, can you put up a shield?"

Beck shook his head. "It won't work on Ev, she's too strong. She'll break right through."

As they rushed toward the door, the snarl of a wolf rang out through the air. Tag glanced behind him, and a blur of white fur bounded after him. Before he could shift, the wolf leapt on him, taking him to the floor, the air forced from his lungs as he smacked the ground. A pair of violet eyes stared down at him, two large white wolf paws holding him in place. Three large scars cut across one of the wolf's eyes, the most beautiful Tag had ever seen in his life.

"Tag!" Nodin yelled, but Dominic gripped him by the arms from behind.

"No, you can't go in there. I have to deal with this." Dominic stepped closer toward Tag, pushing Nodin behind

him. “Ev, look at me.”

The white wolf raised her head, a growl curling her lips as she bared her sharp canines. She pressed a paw deeper into Tag’s chest, cutting off his oxygen. He coughed beneath her, and her gaze dropped back to him, his heart pounding. He’d tussled with his fair share of wolves in his life, but this time, he didn’t want to, maybe because he knew she was old and frail. Maybe even some matriarch of a wolf line. Something was stopping him from hurting her, probably some spell she’d cast, a protection charm. He lay helpless beneath her.

“Ev,” Tag choked out, taking a chance he could barter with the witch. He had no idea what had provoked her to attack him. “I’m sorry.” A cough broke apart his words. “For whatever...I did.”

The wolf lurched back as she tilted her head, a whimper escaping her as she jumped off Tag and prowled in a circle, glancing around the room as if she were trying to find a way to escape.

“Ev, look at me,” Dominic continued, an almost Alpha tone to his voice that even rumbled through Tag.

The wolf stumbled, bowing her head as she struggled to refuse his demand, before continuing to pad around in a circle.

Dominic took a step closer to her. “Don’t make me do this.”

“Don’t you dare hurt her,” Beck almost growled. “I mean it, I will kill you if you touch her. I don’t care who you are!”

Dominic all but rolled his eyes, his attention never leaving Ev.

Tag inched his way to his knees, staring at the wolf, captivated by her violet eyes as she glanced at Dominic over her shoulder. A familiarity in them made his heart jump. But how come he didn’t have that when the witch looked at him in human form?

A low growl rumbled in her throat as she turned her attention back on Tag. She stalked her way back over to him. With hesitation, Tag crawled backward, his focus never

leaving the wolf's. Another growl emanated from her curled lips, sending a jolt of adrenaline through Tag's body, triggering his need to shift. He fought the transformation off, struggling to keep eye contact with her. If she attacked mid-shift, he'd be at his most vulnerable, and she could take him down with one swipe. But something in her growl, her tone, sent a vibration through him, as if she were calling to him.

She launched herself at Tag, taking him back to the ground, her mouth gaping as she buried her snout in his neck.

"Everleigh," Dominic shouted, diving through the air as he shifted and body-slammed the white wolf, rolling her off Tag.

"Tag!" Nodin, Denali, and Nova scrambled toward him, yanking him out of the way while Dominic distracted the white wolf.

"Dominic, I don't think she means me harm," Tag yelled, trying to break free from his brother and cousin's hold.

"Are you crazy, or did you miss the part where she tried to eat your head!" Denali said.

"I don't think she was trying to hurt me. I saw it in her eyes. She was just sniffing me. I think she's scared." Tag continued to struggle against them as they tried to get him out of the tent.

"Look, that old lady is bat shit crazy, and we are out of here," Denali said, dragging Tag by his arms.

"Do what the ugly one said, get the hell out of here," Beck echoed.

"No!" Tag heaved against their hold.

"What is wrong with you, Tag?" Nodin asked, clutching him by the elbow.

"I don't know. But there's something not right here. She was trying to tell me something." Tag's heart hammered as he replayed the look in her eyes in his mind.

The wolves' heads snapped at each other with gaping maws as they rolled across the floor. Ev gripped his neck in

her jaw, and Nodin sucked in a gasp, tightening his grip on Tag's arm. A shrieking yelp pierced the air.

“Dominic,” Nodin shouted, fear wavering his voice.

A burst of white light blinded the room, and everyone jerked back, shielding their eyes. As the flash faded, Dominic pinned Ev down by her arms, both panting for breath in their human forms. But the woman under Dominic wasn't Ev, at least she wasn't the same old lady they'd originally met. Beneath him lay a stunning young woman with the whitest hair Tag had ever seen and the most vibrant violet eyes, the same eyes he'd been entranced by with the white wolf. The woman snapped her fingers, covering both hers and Dominic's naked bodies with clothes after their shift.

“Everyone, meet Everleigh.” Dominic huffed out a breath as he brushed a hand through his tangled mass of hair, sitting back on his knees still holding her down. “My sister.”



EVERLEIGH'S CHEST ACHED, BOTH PANTING FOR BREATH TO return to her lungs and full of pain from knowing her mate was across the room and there wasn't a damned thing she could do about it, no matter how much she wanted to run to him. By the goddess, she didn't think he realized it yet, and she had to keep it that way.

Rolling her head to the side, she stared at Tag from the floor, the worry draping his face piercing her soul. *Please don't let him sense the bond. Please, goddess, please.*

Tall and lean, with the most amazing cheekbones she'd ever seen on a man, he was captivating. Long dark hair was knotted in a man bun at the back of his head with loose strands feathering along his shoulders. It was like he'd stepped right out of one of her dreams. His kind brown eyes called to her, the concern in them tearing at the hole already in her heart at not being able to go to him.

With a huff, she launched a punch to Dominic's stomach, and he rolled off her, clutching his gut. She scrambled to her feet, dusting herself off.

"Nice to see you, too, sis," he choked out, pushing himself to standing.

"You never listen to me!" She threw her arms up, clenching her jaw as she stared at the faces around the room, all of them filled with confusion. "He can't be here, Dom. Get him the hell out of here. I mean it. If you've never listened to

me before, do it this one time. You're right, he's going to die if he stays here. I'll be the one who gets him killed."

Dominic shook his head. "What the hell are you talking about?"

She leaned in and pointed a finger at him. "You know it was stupid to bring him here, let alone an entire group of Thunderbird shifters. Are you fucking insane?"

"We're desperate. You know we wouldn't have if we didn't absolutely need your help." Dominic pleaded with his eyes. She loathed him for it because he knew it would work on her every single time. She knew Dom would never willingly put her in danger. Hell, he was the one who'd helped her escape, so why would he put everyone in harm's way unless he was right and it was necessary?

Dom was the only one who'd ever really and truly saw her. He saw through the bullshit façade their father put on their pack. He saw through the beatings, the walls she'd put up to hide the fact her own father experimented on her like a lab rat. He'd held her at night when she cried in her sleep from the nightmares, never asking why, never needing to, only knowing she needed the safety of his arms. And despite all that, she had to force herself to ignore the heaviness in her heart from having to make him leave, along with her own mate. It sliced through her with a pain she'd never known.

She tossed a glance to Tag across the room, now huddled with the mass of other Thunderbird shifters, blocking her view. Good, the less she had to look at him, the better. If their bond snapped into place, all hell would break loose.

"What do you want me to do?" She ground her teeth, folding her arms, digging her nails into her skin to keep from trying to make eye contact with him.

"He needs a spirit guide. Can you do a spirit walk with him? He needs to find his path, needs answers if his imminent death is a fixed point in time or if it's something that can be avoided." Dominic looked at the group of men.

Everleigh dropped her arms. “What?” She shook her head. “No.” Stomping away from him, she walked over to a table covered in tarot cards and scooped them together, occupying herself so she didn’t give in to his request. “Out of the question.”

“Ev, please. I promise I won’t ever ask you for another thing as long as I live.”

She clenched her jaw as she looked at her brother. “Which won’t be long if I go through with this. You have no idea what you’re asking.”

Dominic grabbed her hands in his. “Then tell me, Ev. Dad can’t find you here. You’re safe from *her*. I’m just asking for an hour of your time. That’s it.”

Bile rose up her throat as panic bubbled in her stomach. “If I tap into the spirit world, there’s a chance *she* could sense it, Dom.” Ev hung her head as she realized this conversation would eventually come up if he pushed it. She’d held it close to her heart for years, so he wouldn’t worry about her. He’d suffered so much as a result of their father, too, she refused to be any more of a burden to him. But he had to know just how much danger they would be in if she went through with this. “Remember when I did your spirit walk?”

He gave a nod. “You saved my life because of it, Ev. That’s why I’m asking you to do this. Because of that night, I knew I couldn’t let Castos destroy my love for Nodin. I knew that what I felt in my gut, in my heart, was real. I’m just asking you to do that for Tag, give him a chance at life.”

He knew how to punch her in the heart. “That’s why I can’t do this. That night we did your spirit walk, *she* appeared in the spirit realm with me.”

“What?” His eyes widened to saucers. “She was there?”

Ev shrugged. “Not so much there in person, but her presence, her aura. I could feel her deep in my bones. Her brittle laugh and dark magic choked me. I know it was her.”

He gripped her hand tight. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“You had enough on your plate with dad and Nodin. You didn’t need another thing to add to that.

Dominic sucked in a deep breath and looked across the room toward Tag and Nodin. “You’ll be in there with one of the Thunderbirds. He will keep you safe. Plus, you’re no ordinary witch. You can hold your own, along with your wolf side.”

“That’s just it. I’m no ordinary witch. Why do you think she’s after me? I can’t take him to the spirit realm and endanger him there. I can’t.” She folded in on herself, trying to squelch the deep pain in her chest. “I can’t.”

“What aren’t you telling me, Ev?” Dominic clutched her by the elbow and tugged her toward the back of the room.

The worry in her chest manifested in her eyes as they pooled with tears. She struggled to contain them as she shook her head. “No, if I tell you, it makes it real. I can’t deal with this right now.”

She’d done just fine for ten years on her own, managing to not endanger anyone else, hurt anyone else, drive anyone else away. No, she had to keep to her path. She couldn’t let him talk her into this.

“Ev,” Dominic choked out. “Let me in. I can help you. You know I won’t leave your side if you need me. Are you in trouble? Did something happen? Do I need to put Beck’s head on a stick and sell it at the carnival downstairs?”

Ev rolled her eyes, forcing back a snort at his continued disdain for Beck. If he only knew. Beck was just a sweet, misguided kid with a teenage crush. He was the least of her worries. “Don’t, Dom. Just don’t. You don’t want to know, and I can’t get you involved. You’re safer if you just leave.”

“If it isn’t safe for you here anymore, I’ll find a new place. But you have to tell me what’s going on or I can’t help you.” Dominic’s voice grew harsh.

“This isn’t your fight, Dom. I don’t want you here. Any of you! You don’t understand.” She shirked from his grasp and gripped the table behind her for support.



“Then make me understand, Ev!” Dominic shot his hands in the air.

Clenching her jaw, she forced the words back down her throat. She loathed when Dom pulled Alpha on her, forcing her to do things against her will. She didn’t even know if he knew he was doing it, but when he got in one of his moods, it happened naturally just because of who he was.

“Ev,” he said, inching closer to her, his voice lowering and pushing against her skin like a vice. She gripped the sides of her head, battling his command, using everything in her—short of magic—to keep him from forcing the truth out of her. She swore she would never use magic again—on anyone.

She’d nearly killed him when her powers first awakened. Not even realizing she was doing it, he pulled Alpha on her and the energy inside her forced itself to protect her, defend her. The scar above his eyebrow reminded her what happened when she lost control. If her brother’s friend, Zax, hadn’t been there to pull him away, she would have killed him. Dom may wear a physical scar, but she would never lose the mental one in her heart from that night. Everleigh was a walking time bomb, not safe for anyone or anywhere. Until the coven had taken her in and taught her how to control her powers.

Unable to keep up the fight, she whipped around and shot to her tiptoes to glare at him eye to eye. “He’s my fucking mate!” she hissed, snapping her head up as the realization of those words hit her. There was no going back now. Saying it out loud intensified the aching need her body demanded she quench. The desire to go to Tag, to bond with him, felt like a palpable, tangible string being pulled taut between them every time she looked at him. Forcing herself to look away took every ounce of strength she had.

“Are you happy now? Does that make things all better to know I’ll be risking his life if I do this? This could very well be how he dies! If *she* or dad finds out I have a mate...they’ll use him against me.”

Dominic hitched back, his jaw dropping as he looked from Everleigh to Tag across the room. “You’re shitting me.”

She narrowed her eyes and all but shot lasers out of them at him.

“Holy shit!” He dragged a hand through his tousled hair and huffed out a breath. “Are you sure?” He looked back at his sister.

“Are you seriously asking me that? Did you question it when you saw Nodin for the first time?” She thrust her hands to her hips.

He pursed his lips and shot a glance to Nodin. “No. I knew instantly.”

“Exactly.” She folded her arms and leaned against the table, staring across the room at the huddle of testosterone, doing her best not to search the group for Tag.

“Shit,” Dominic said with a visible, hard swallow. “How do I tell Nodin?”

She launched a punch to his shoulder. “Oh, so glad that’s where your concern lies.”

“What? I get it. I’m just saying.” He thrust his arms toward Nodin. “Now I have to tell the love of my life that his brother is mated to my sister, who is a walking amalgamation being hunted by our father and a batshit crazy immortal witch, on top of him being prophesied to die at any moment. This just gets better and better.”

Everleigh tossed her hands in the air, grunting in frustration, and stalked to another corner of the room, far away from her dipshit brother. And hopefully far enough away from Tag that she could breathe, release the desire from her body building inside her at the thought of him. She had to get a hold of herself.

“Ev,” he said with a sigh. “We’ll figure this out. I promise. I’ve kept you safe for almost ten years. I won’t lose you now. Plus, we have help.” He motioned to the other side of the room.

“Oh, yes, a big flock of birds is going to solve all my problems.” She rolled her eyes.

“I’m just saying, you’re not alone.” He stepped closer to her. “Does Tag sense it? He acted strange after you shifted.”

She shrugged. “I don’t think so. But I think he knows something is different. I could feel it when we locked eyes. I don’t know if he can smell it like I can because I’m a wolf. But it’s only a matter of time the more we’re in each other’s presence.”

“He’s a little on the naïve side. Maybe he won’t catch on for a while, and we can get through this and leave before the bond snaps into place.” He cleared his throat.

“That’s not how this works. That’s not how any of this works.” She grunted. “Once we link through the spirit realm, he’ll know. We’ll be sharing a soul, dumbass.”

“Oh, right.” His lips jerked to a smirk. “Look, I don’t know anything about the witchy stuff, that’s your department.”

She huffed out a deep sigh and glared at the other side of the room. “Why the hell did he have to be so hot? Why couldn’t he look like Nodin?”

Dominic blinked. “What? Nodin is fucking hot. Why are you throwing shade on my mate?”

She shrugged. “Tag is way hotter than Nodin, just saying.”

“That’s because you’re mated to him. You only have eyes for him now.” He flicked her cheek, and she punched him in the stomach.

“Stop being a jerk. You’re an asshole sometimes.” She glared at her brother once more.

“Big brother’s prerogative to irritate the piss out of his baby sister.” She hated his smirk and itched to smack it right off his mouth.

“Ev?” Beck took a tentative step toward them. “Are we good? You want me to get rid of them?”

She forced a smile toward her friend. “It’s okay, Beck. Just give me a minute, all right?”

With a clenched jaw, Beck nodded and returned to the group, disappointment and confusion clouding his eyes. She hated it for Beck, because she would never be able to return the affection he had for her, especially now that she'd found her mate. She knew how that felt. She'd been there, ten years ago, yearning for someone she could never ever have. Which is why she'd done her best not to lead Beck on. But she understood he couldn't help how he felt, just as much as Everleigh couldn't so long ago.

A sensation tickled the back of her neck, spreading into a longing, a need to glance across the room and look for Tag. Their eyes locked, and she sucked back a gasp that launched her into a coughing fit.

Dominic patted her back. "You okay?"

She blew out a hard breath. "I don't think I'll ever be okay. Not until I'm done being hunted. Not until I'm no longer a freak of nature. Not until I know I won't endanger my family and now my mate."

Tag broke through the group and made his way across the room. Everleigh shot to a stance, half hiding behind Dominic. "Here he comes. Do something."

Dom threw his hands up. "What am I supposed to do?"

Ev pleaded with wolfy-dog eyes at him. She knew he could never resist her when she pulled that move out, and she used them like a weapon on him. A growl pitched in his throat before he slapped on a smile and held up a hand to Tag as he made his final approach.

"You may want to just hang here for a moment," Dominic said, glancing at Ev over his shoulder. "I'm not sure she's stable enough to be approached."

With a grunt, Everleigh pinched Dom's side, digging her nails in at his jab. Dominic jerked back with a smirk.

"I just wanted to make sure she was okay. I don't know what's going on. She was an old lady, then a wolf, now a beautiful young woman." Tag shook his head. "Is any of this real?"

A zap of adrenaline launched her heart into a wild rhythm at his words. He thought she was beautiful. Angry with herself at reacting to it, she forced her heart to slow and huffed out a breath.

The rest of the guys formed a semi-circle around Tag, all folding their arms, glaring at her. Their heated stares forced a growl to rumble in her throat. Dominic gripped her wrist, squeezing it three short times.

*They don't know what you are, Ev. They're confused and trying to protect Tag. Give them a break. Make nice,* Dominic said through their nonverbal Alpha wolf link.

“Dom,” Nodin said, sliding his attention between him and Everleigh.

“It’s okay, my love. She’s calmed down.” Dominic shot a smile to Nodin.

“I thought you only had one sister, Elara, the one Nodin was supposed to marry?” Tag blinked, looking between Nodin, Dominic, and Everleigh.

Dominic nodded. “She’s the only full-blooded sister I have. Everleigh is my half-sister. Different moms.”

“Ah, so Castos is not only an asshole but a cheating asshole.” Denali pursed his lips.

“Yeah, he’s not exactly father of the year.” Dominic shrugged before looking at Everleigh, his eyes softening, his love and concern for her evident.

She could always count on Dom through thick and thin, and she knew he only had her best interests at heart. The day their father turned on her, wanting to use her as a weapon when she started showing signs of just what she could do, Dom snuck her out in the dead of night when she was sixteen years old.

Everleigh swallowed hard and sucked in a breath. He was always taking care of her, always putting his life on the line for her. She looked between her brother and Nodin; their love was palpable in the room. She could do this one thing for him. She just prayed it was the right thing to do, because now she

had her own mate to protect and the bond hadn't even snapped into place. Yet she felt the pull, the need to be with him, save him. She just hoped she didn't damn him instead.



TAG STARED AT EVERLEIGH, HER VIOLET EYES REACHING OUT to him like a beacon. Never before had he been so captivated, maybe because they were such an unusual color. Long snow-white hair cascaded over her shoulders in thick waves. She stood head to toe in black, from her leather pants to her sheer top that clung to her like a second skin. A tiny black crop top gave her a bit of modesty under the see-through covering. Tag was thankful, or he'd need to excuse himself from the room for a while and handle some business. Her perfect pouty lips were painted in dark red that offset the thick black eyeliner that made her irises pop.

Tag's chest tightened the longer he looked at her, his heart squeezing with longing, an urgent desire to run to her, protect her, find out what had frightened her so much earlier.

"We've had to hide Everleigh from our father, which is why she's here at Cirque de Mystique. It's hidden in a fold of time, so he can't sense her on our plane of existence. She masquerades to her clientele as Madam Ev, which you saw earlier." Dominic nodded to his sister.

"Well, it was pretty convincing, right down to her medicated mothballs smell." Denali smiled, shooting a wink at Ev, that sparked a rumble in Tag's chest.

Tag jerked back in surprise and blinked at his outburst, and Everleigh's eyes widened. Shit, did he scare her? He didn't mean to. He didn't know where that spark of jealousy came from.

“So, what was with the whole she-almost-ate-my-cousin five minutes ago? Suddenly, all is five by five?” Nova folded his arms.

“Self-preservation. She sensed you were all shifters, Thunderbirds, and knows the history of our tribes. Natural instinct triggered her wolf.” Dominic’s eyes narrowed with a twitch, and Tag wondered if there wasn’t more to the story, especially since she came after him and none of the others.

“Uh huh, so why did she target only Tag then?” Denali leaned against one of the sofas in the room. Leave it to him to be no holds barred with the questions.

“He was the greatest threat at the time.” Everleigh stepped out from behind Dominic, clearing her throat. “I smelled the Thunderbird on him, and he was the one you were here to inquire about.”

Her voice was like a song in his mind, enchanting, inviting, and he longed to hear more of it. Tag shook his head. What the hell was happening to him?

“Plausible.” Denali tossed a nod. “So, are we doing this thing, or is playtime over? This place is creepy as fuck.”

“We’re done here. Ev needs to rest.” Beck slid an arm along her waist, trying to guide her out of the room.

Tag stalked through the room and stood toe-to-toe with Beck, glaring at him. He hadn’t even realized he’d moved until his breath whisked across Beck’s face. “Do not touch her.”

Dominic and Nodin eyed each other, then turned their attention back to Tag. He glanced around the room, taking in the surprise on everyone’s faces at his actions. He shoved back from Beck.

“You don’t scare me, little bird,” Beck said, leaning into Tag’s face.

Tag clutched a hand around Beck’s throat, whisking him away from Everleigh, pinning him to the wall behind her. “That was your first mistake.”



Adrenaline rode the swells of anger pulsing inside him. Red blanketed his vision, and all he wanted to do was eliminate the prey in his hands. Clenching his jaw, a heated huff of air blew through his clenched teeth as if something deep inside him held him back from it.

“Whoa!” Denali chuckled. “Damn, I didn’t know Tag had it in him. Little man’s growing some balls.”

“Uh, why is he flipping the fuck out? This isn’t like Tag. Did she put some whammy spell on him or something? He’s acting really weird,” Nova said.

“Tag,” Nodin said, rushing to him. “Put him down.”

Voices swirled around him, but none of their words made sense, like ambient noise that couldn’t penetrate his mind. His vision laid solely on the man in front of him, threatening to take Everleigh away.

A low growl emanated from Tag’s throat. “I don’t like this little punk. He’s trying to act like Everleigh is his for the taking.”

“Okay, while I agree—I’m not fond of the guy myself—Nova’s right, this isn’t like you, Tag,” Denali said, moving next to Nodin, reaching a hand for Tag.

Tag’s eyes flashed with rage at the thought of his cousins stopping him from ridding the Earth of Beck. He snarled at Denali’s touch, and his cousin jumped back. No one would take her away. No one would stop him from protecting her.

“Rowtag,” Nodin shouted. “Put him down.”

“You’re not the Alpha anymore, brother.” Tag slanted his head, looking at Nodin. “When I see a threat, I take care of it.”

“Shit,” Dominic said on a hard breath. “Ev...” He nodded toward Tag.

Everleigh bit her lip. “Tag, please. Don’t hurt Beck. He didn’t mean anything by it. We’re friends, and he’s just concerned about me.”

Tag’s head whipped toward Everleigh, the sound of her voice taming his anger to a simmer. Emotions battled inside

him for control. The animal in him demanded he remove any threat to her. But his mind opened to her words, soothing his lust for a kill, reminding him what he was doing was somehow wrong. “I still don’t like him.” He dropped Beck, and he slid down the wall.

“You don’t have to. But you may not hurt my friends. Do you understand?” She took a hesitant step toward Tag but pulled back and turned to Dominic. “We can’t do this now. He has to mellow out. It’s too much for him. He’s overstimulated.”

“You don’t have to talk about me like I’m not right here,” Tag huffed out. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“Actually, you kinda snapped, bro,” Denali said, shoving his hands in his pockets. “It even wigged *me* out a little.”

Dominic ran a hand through his hair, turning to his sister. “What do you propose?”

“We have to isolate him from the others for a while.” She took a visible swallow, and Tag ached to go to her and fix whatever was bothering her. “It’s late. Why don’t we just get some rest, and we can have a go at it in the morning.” She turned slightly toward Tag, a ghost of a smile on her lips, a gesture that warmed his heart.

“We can’t wait. What if something happens to him?” Nodin asked. “We need to do the spirit walk as soon as possible.”

“Trust me, if we do it now, it could be far more harmful for him. Something is riling him up, and if he’s not calm when we enter the spirit realm, it could end badly for him. He has to have a clear mind and soul, and right now, he’s far too aggressive for a spirit walk.” Ev shifted from foot to foot, tossing glances at Tag.

Something deep inside him rose, a need to calm her, a need to take care of whatever was bothering her.

Nodin nodded with a sigh. “Perhaps you’re right.”

Dominic placed a hand on Everleigh’s shoulder. “Are there still spare rooms available?”

She nodded with hesitation, tossing a quick glance at Tag that sent a flutter to his heart. “In the back.”

Denali jumped in front of Nodin, backhanding his chest. “Wait, now we’re spending the night? In this creepy circus? Are you kidding me?”

“We will stay.” Tag stepped closer to Everleigh, but she eased herself against Dominic. Worry sunk his heart low in his chest. Was she afraid of him? He thought back to his outburst with Beck and regret soured his stomach. He had no idea what had come over him in that moment. He needed the chance to make it up to her. The very thought of her being frightened around him pierced his heart.

“They can’t stay here, Ev!” Beck stepped in front of Everleigh. “Winter’s not going to like this.”

Tag inched forward. Everleigh’s hand stopped him before the growl ever left his chest. Tag shook his head. What the hell was wrong with him all of a sudden? He moved without thinking, without hesitation, and Tag had never been like that in his life. Maybe it was the freaky paranormal dimension they were now in, the creepy circus atmosphere seeping into his bones.

“Winter trusts my instincts. We’ll be fine for tonight. You need to make yourself scarce. I know you want to protect me, but I’m not a fragile flower, Beck.” She stared at him, and the longer they made eye contact the more Tag wanted to shred him. That irritated growl reappeared and rumbled low. Tag caught himself and cleared his throat as nonchalantly as he could muster.

“We don’t want to put you out, Everleigh,” Nodin said.

“It’s fine,” she said in a low and unsure voice. “Just for tonight.”

“I don’t like this,” Beck countered. “I have a bad feeling about all of this.”

“They will be gone tomorrow, after I do the spirit walk with Tag.” Everleigh glanced at him before turning toward the back of the room.

Something stabbed at Tag's heart, a worry, a sadness he didn't understand from her words. He shook his head and blew out a hard breath. This place really was starting to freak him the hell out like Denali said. Maybe spending the night wasn't such a great idea.

"Follow me, " Ev said, brushing aside the red velvet curtains covering the back door.

Soft yellow light flickered along the bricked hallway, casting shadows along the walls. As the flames danced inside the lanterns hanging from the ceiling, dark images crept alongside them, watching them as they moved through. Tag paused, and the shadow stopped, growing taller and wider before a pair of eyes flashed red and then vanished. Tag flinched, shaking his head. Swallowing hard, he pressed on, following the rest of the group down the hall.

They stopped at a set of large wooden doors. Everleigh turned and faced the group. "It goes without saying, what you may see back here never leaves this place. You are entering a sacred space, please respect it as such."

The group gave a collective nod before Ev turned and pushed through the giant doors. Candelabras hung on the walls of another long hallway with multiple wooden doors. Ornate scrolling woodwork lined the deep mahogany archways. It felt like they had stepped back in time to a castle or villa. A vague familiarity struck Tag, filling him with unease.

He stared at one of the doors, pulled to it somehow. A vision flashed through his mind: a pair of hands tied, a body jerking, struggling to break free of its binding, someone crying out, filling his ears as if he were the one experiencing it. Tag bent over, clutching his hands to his head, the image disappearing as quick as it came on.

"Tag?" Nodin dropped to a crouch beside him, laying a hand across his back. "What's wrong?"

Sucking in a deep breath, he blinked and raised his head. "I...I'm not sure. I think it was some kind of weird déjà vu. I don't know how to explain it."

Everleigh clung to Dominic as she stared at Tag, their eyes meeting, locking gazes. Another flash struck him, and the scene replayed over in his mind, only this time the person had a face—Everleigh's.

Tag blew out a hard breath, cleared his throat, and stood back up. Was it a vision of the future or a scene from the past? Was she tortured here? The very thought swept bile up his throat.

Everleigh spun out of Dominic's embrace and fanned her arms on either side of the hallway. "These will be your rooms. Pick one."

The group hesitantly stepped up to the doors. Nodin and Dominic shared one. Tag stopped at the one closest to him, and Everleigh sucked in a gasp. Tag slanted his head and eyed her.

She quickly looked away and stepped backward. "I'll see to it that food is sent to your rooms. Do not leave them for any reason until morning."

"As long as we're here, why can't we explore this place? It looks pretty cool. Is this like an ancient castle or something?" Nova said, glancing to the ceiling.

"If you wander, you may not come back. I will not be responsible for losing any one of you. I've given my warning. I suggest you heed it, but I am not your babysitter." She glared at her brother.

Dominic nodded. "Let's all take Ev's advice and just hang tight for the night. I think we can manage that."

"Fine," Denali said, opening the door to his room. "I'm out. See you freaks in the morning."

The others followed suit, entering their rooms for the night, locking themselves in. Tag reached for the handle of his room, and another vision struck him: Everleigh slammed up against a wall, her eyes closed in pain, her mouth twitching open as she released a cry that sliced through his heart.

He snapped his gaze to her, and her lips trembled on another gasp as she took two unstable steps backward before

turning on her heels and dashing down the hallway.

If Tag was right, she was in trouble, and he'd be damned if he left there without taking care of it.



EVERLEIGH REACHED HER ROOM AND SLAMMED THE DOOR shut, resting her back against it as she sucked in a deep breath. This was going to be harder than she'd even imagined. She had only caught glimpses, but whatever Tag saw, she knew it was going to be bad for both of them.

Did he sense her yet? She didn't feel any kind of bond snap, but then again, she'd never found her mate before, so she had no idea what it snapping into place would feel like. She only knew the pull to him, the aching need to touch him, to be near him, and the scent of him nearly overwhelmed her. If he was feeling the same, he hadn't revealed it.

Though his protective nature had manifested, and it might prove to be a struggle to contain. He didn't seem the possessive type, not even remotely Alpha, almost more of an omega. He seemed tuned in to her, so much so it left her breathless.

A knock on the door disturbed her thoughts, and she opened it a crack to find Dom on the other side. Opening it wider, she allowed him inside.

"We need to talk," Dom said, turning to face her as she closed the door behind him.

Sucking in a deep breath, she let it out in a long, hard release as she plunked onto her bed. "I don't know what I'm going to do, Dom."

"You've already witnessed his need to protect you. His need to make sure no one else claims you. He may not sense

the mating bond, yet, but it won't be long. All he has to do is get close enough to touch you, smell you up close, and it'll happen. But that's not the worst part," Dominic said with a sigh.

She shot up from the bed and paced the room. "I know. I'm trying to keep my distance, but what happens tomorrow when we have to touch to do the spirit walk?"

"Ev, he's a virgin." Dominic rubbed his hands along his face. "Nodin just told me, which explains a lot."

"A virgin? How does he know? Maybe he doesn't tell his brother every time he beds someone." She shrugged, trying to play it off. Because if he was a virgin, things just got a whole lot messier.

"You know the answer to that. You saw him out there, barely able to contain his rage at the mere sight of Beck touching you. He's pent up, and now that he can sense his mate, even if he doesn't realize that's what is happening, he's going to turn into a rage monster until you two get horizontal or vertical, or however you like it." Dominic smirked.

"Really? Males become an untapped rage monster because you haven't had sex yet? What is this, the dark ages?"

He shrugged. "It's just how we're made. Once we sense our mates, all these pheromones and adrenaline kick in and the need to claim them becomes our only thought. The need to protect and be with them rule our every decision. It's primal, you know we can't control it. It's part of our animal instincts. Even females can react that way."

She rolled her eyes.

"Okay, I'll just go see if I can find a succubus down at the carnival who can come up here and release some of his pent-up energy then." He stared at her.

She narrowed her eyes and just about shot lasers at her brother. A growl spawned low in her belly that rumbled up her throat at the thought of anyone touching Tag, let alone bedding him. "The fuck you will!"



Dominic spread his arms to her before folding them as he smirked. “My point exactly.”

“Shut up and go away,” she said, plunking back down on the bed.

“He’s already affecting you. There’s nothing you can do, Ev. Maybe telling him the truth will help both of you.” Dominic walked over and sat beside her.

She shook her head. “This is my problem, not his.”

“It’s both your problems once the bond snaps in place and you start keeping secrets from each other. Trust me.” Dominic sighed.

“And everything worked out just fine with you and Nodin. So, hush.”

“Doesn’t mean a lot of it couldn’t have been avoided if I had told him the truth from the start. We were both stupid, not willing to acknowledge our bond, then let the world dictate who we should be with, including our father. But we fight better together, not apart. That is the meaning of mate, soulmate. Two halves becoming whole.”

Ev stared up at her brother. “I’m scared, Dom.”

He brushed a hand along the back of her head. “I know. I’ll be right here for you. I won’t let anything happen to you. I’m not leaving until you’re safe again.”

“No, not of that. I mean I am, but that threat’s always loomed over me between Castos and her.” Tears pooled in her eyes before she realized they were there. “I’m scared of him.”

Dominic hitched back. “Who, Tag?”

She nodded, as one of the tears slipped past her hold and glided down her cheek.

“Why?” Dominic blinked. “He’s actually one of the sweetest guys I know. If I wasn’t mated to his brother, I’d probably have tried to work on Tag’s virginity problem.”

She pursed her lips and glared at him. “I don’t like feeling this way.”

Dominic tilted his head. “What way?”

Everleigh launched herself up from the bed and paced the room. “Controlled by my emotions.” She rolled her arms before raising them in the air. “All, flustered and hungry for him. All needy and aching for him.”

Dom snorted. “You act like you’ve never been horny before in your life.”

She spun to face him. “Not like this. You know this is different. This is unquenchable. The closer I get to him, the more I feel at ease. It’s not like me throwing down with someone for a quickie or something to scratch an itch.”

“Just tell me it wasn’t Beck.”

She rolled her eyes. “No! I would never lead him on like that. Please. You know I’ve been in that position before, I’d never do it to someone else. Beck’s sweet and protective. I like him, I’m just not in love with him.”

Dom’s lips popped to an O. “Oooh, yeah, you probably shouldn’t mention that in front of Tag. Even that’s liable to get Beck killed.”

She threw her arms up. “This isn’t funny, Dom! I’m in trouble here. I can’t function. I can barely think straight around him. I fucking wolfed out the moment I smelled him! I have to remain in control, if I lose myself...”

Dominic jumped up and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Listen, Ev, I told you, we’ll all help you through this. I will not let the big, bad witch get you. I’ve always protected you, haven’t I?”

She nodded.

“I’m the one who talked Winter into allowing you to stay here, right?”

She nodded again.

“I got you away from dad, and I’ll keep you away from *her*.”

She sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly before nodding once more.

“Okay, we’ll get through this. I still think you need to have a conversation with Tag.”

“If there’s a chance he won’t recognize the bond, then I have to go that route to protect him. If I can save him from her, I’ll do whatever it takes. I mean, maybe this is how he was meant to die, ever think about that? That maybe as a result of our spirit walk, she finds me and kills him to get to me.” She raked her hands through her hair. “Maybe it’s me who kills him and coming here was a big mistake—that all of this is just the catalyst we could have avoided if you had just stayed your ass in Canada.” She hauled off and punched Dominic in the shoulder.

Dominic blinked. “Well, there’s that. But too late now, so we just take it moment by moment and deal with shit as it comes. Not much else we can do.” He stared at the door before returning his gaze back to her. “At the end of it, when it’s all said and done, you’ll be thankful for going this route and having your mate in your life, rather than living a lie and alone just to protect them. Remember, you were designed to be together, there’s a reason.” He pulled her into a hug before kissing her forehead. “Get some rest.”

“Thanks,” she whispered, easing from his embrace before closing the door behind him.

She changed clothes and curled up into bed, her head swimming with visions of Tag. With a grunt, she rolled over and pushed him from her mind, not allowing herself to even think about him and indulge in any kind of fantasy that would only break her heart.



Tag’s eyes blinked open at the whisper of his name. That voice, it both haunted and aroused him as it stroked his ears,

followed by the warm breath of her mouth. “Tag,” she said, as her lips nipped at his earlobe.

Long white hair drifted across his bare chest, and his fingers ached to run through it. “Ev—Everleigh?” he choked out.

“Rest,” she whispered, as she licked her way along his neck, stopping to suck on his flesh, grazing it between her teeth and tongue. “Let me take care of you.”

“What are you doing? What do you mean, take care of me?” He reached for her to push her up, but she gripped his wrists, pinning them above his head as she stared into his eyes.

“Does this not feel good?” She ground her hips above him, only a thin layer of cloth between him and her. *When did I get naked?* Had he missed that part? He swore he still had his jeans on when he went to sleep.

His eyes rolled back in his head as she raked herself across his hard shaft. “It feels incredible.”

She leaned in and hovered above his mouth. “Do you want more?”

“Yes,” he whispered before she claimed his lips with her own. Her soft mouth became hard as she pressed her tongue against his, melting into him, devouring him with her kiss. A groan like thunder rumbled in his chest as he broke free of her hold and flipped her beneath him.

He stared at her, taking in her stunning violet eyes, the eyes that looked deep into his soul. Gods, she was beautiful, like she was meant for him and him alone. He studied her, drinking her in before he crushed his mouth to hers, dropping his hips against her, grinding into her, matching the ferocity of their lips.

He reached for his t-shirt on the ground, shredding it to strips before wrapping her wrists in it, tying her together. “Now, you’re mine.”

A soft giggle floated through the air. “Wasn’t planning on going anywhere.”

“Oh, you weren’t, were you? Then why were you trying to run from me this afternoon?” He sat back, folding his arms, rocking against her.

Her head tilted back, and her eyes pressed closed. “I was trying to protect you,” she choked out between breathy moans as he continued to grind himself against her, desperately wanting to rip her panties off from between them. He ached for her, needed to be one with her, to feel complete.

“You don’t need to protect me. I’m protecting *you*. You are mine.” He reached between them to slide her panties to the side.

Her eyes shot open, and she slid, her arms still tied around his head as her legs wrapped around his body. She flipped him over before crawling off of him. “No, I’m protecting you. I shouldn’t be doing this.” A cold emptiness filled him, her body no longer against him. She glanced around the room in a frantic panic that shot worry into his heart. “We can’t ... we can’t do this. Not now.”

She raced for the door, but Tag caught her from behind, his arms clutching her hips, spinning her to face him. He slammed her against the wall, raising her arms above her head with one hand. Her eyes closed, and her face pinched as a moan popped from her lips the moment he ripped her panties from her body. Sliding his fingers through her silky, hot wetness, he pinned her with his chest. “No one will ever touch you again but me. No one will ever hurt you. No one will ever lay claim to you because you are mine.” He licked up the side of her throat, reaching her ear. “Do you want to be mine?”

Sucking in a gasp, she nodded.

“Say it,” Tag demanded, pressing himself against her harder.

She hesitated with a groan.

“Say it,” he growled along her ear, as he clutched her chin, holding her to him.

“Yes,” she whispered. She blinked her eyes open, and he claimed her pouty lips with his own as he sunk his fingers

deep inside her. His tongue muffled another moan as it ravished her to the speed of his fingers.

“Tag,” she moaned into their kiss.

Something rang in his ears, alongside her soothing voice. He ached to stay there, to remain consumed by her and for her. But something kept tugging at him, pulling him away from her, yanking him from the completion he felt in her arms.

“Tag,” Nodin shouted, shaking him awake.

Tag blinked and shot straight up in bed. He glanced around, his attention landing on Nodin in front of him. “What?”

“You were having a nightmare.” Nodin stepped back and stared at him.

Tag shook his head, clearing his thoughts. He struggled to remember the dream he’d been pulled out of. His heart raced as the memories of Everleigh’s lips upon his ran on a loop in his mind. “Pretty sure I wasn’t.”

“Then why were you shouting so loud all of us could hear you?” Denali said, pointing to the group in his room.

Tag blinked again. “Um, I was?”

Dominic quirked a brow. “Something about no one will ever hurt you. No one will ever touch you. Sounds like you were trying to protect someone, hence, nightmare.”

A sly grin overtook Tag’s mouth. “Trust me, it wasn’t a nightmare.”

The ghost of her body against him still launched shivers up his arms and a rush of heat straight to his dick. It felt so real.

Dominic looked at Nodin. “I see.”

“You guys thought I was in trouble?” He glanced around the room. “I appreciate the gesture, but I’m fine. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go chase down that nightmare.” He wiggled himself back under the blanket.

“It’s almost six in the morning. No point in going back to sleep. We have a lot to do today and a short time to do it. The

quicker we get this over with, the better for everyone involved.” Dominic stalked to the door, nodding to Nodin, who then yanked Tag from the bed.

“Whoa, dude, warn a guy.” Denali jumped back, throwing his hands in front of his face.

“What?” Tag spun around.

“I mean, I sleep in the nude too, man, but not in a strange place like this,” Nova said.

Tag looked down and found himself staring right back up at him. When did he lose his pants? He didn’t remember taking them off when he got into bed last night.

“Is Everleigh up?” Tag asked, looking around the room for his shirt which seemed to have gone missing right along with his pants.

“No, but you are.” Denali snorted. “Watch out, or you’ll poke your eye out.”

Nodin launched Tag’s jeans at his head. “Dominic went to check on her.”

Tag slid into his pants. “Okay, I’m right behind you. I just have to find my shirt.”

The guys exited as Tag glanced around the room, looking for his shirt. Something blue caught his eye. He dropped to a squat and picked up the material that looked like the remnants of his once whole shirt. The long strip hung from his fingertips.

“Fuck me, did that really happen?”



EVERLEIGH STARED AT THE CEILING, STILL TRYING TO CATCH her breath. She was in deep shit. How the hell she was going to manage a spirit walk was beyond her. She couldn't even manage to stay out of the man's subconscious while sleeping, what the hell was she going to do once they were linked at the soul during a spirit walk?

“Ev?” Dominic said over a knock. “You up?”

She rolled out of bed and padded her way to the door, opening it a crack. “I am now.”

Dominic eyed her and shook his head. “You didn't, did you?”

She spun around without answering him and walked away. Dom closed the door behind them and stood in the middle of the room with his arms folded.

“Don't. Don't even say it.” She held up a hand before she slid on a pair of leather pants.

Dom's smirk made her want to throw sharp, pointy objects at him. “I didn't say a word.”

“You didn't have to. I know what you're thinking.” She walked into the bathroom, slipped on a black crop top and walked back out. “I didn't do it on purpose.”

“I know, because you're mates. Dream walks only happen to mated pairs.”



She hung her head. How the hell was she going to get herself out of this mess? “How do you even know what happened?”

“I just came from his room. He was crying out in his sleep saying no one will hurt you and you are his. Then I come in here and you look like you just woke up from a sex bender. It wasn’t hard to put it all together.” He quirked a brow.

“Do the others know?” She looked at him, forcing herself to even out her speeding heart.

He shrugged. “It won’t take a rocket scientist to figure it out sooner or later. Especially since he woke up naked.”

“He did?” Her eyes popped wide open. Thoughts tumbled in her mind of him naked from their dream walk, the feel of him against her, looking into his deep brown eyes that made her heart beat faster and her soul ache for him.

Another knock at the door pulled her from her thoughts.

Dom turned to answer it but paused as he reached for the handle. “I really don’t want to go into details on either side, but did you mark him?”

She shook her head. “No. Besides, dream walks are different. We’re not linked through the soul like a spirit walk. We’re simply linked via the mind.”

Dominic nodded as he opened the door. “Tag?”

“Oh, hey, um, I thought this was Everleigh’s room.”

“It is. I was just rousing my sister from her beauty sleep to get things started.” He fanned his arm to usher him in.

Everleigh’s heart wedged in her throat at the sight of him, and suddenly she couldn’t get the kisses from their dream to stop looping through her mind. She stared at his bare chest and the way his abs funneled nicely into his jeans.

He stepped inside and raked a hand through his long dark hair. “I was just checking to see if maybe she had a spare shirt. I seemed to have lost mine somewhere.”

Everleigh's heart raced as she thought back to last night when he shredded his t-shirt to tie her up. She prayed the blush heating her cheeks wasn't visible. "Um, I think I have one or two of Dom's old ones here somewhere." She cleared her throat and headed to her closet, sucking in a deep breath to calm her nerves. If she didn't get control of her emotions and not succumb to the pheromones around him, they were going to be in even bigger trouble.

She pulled out a long sleeve button-down and handed it to him. "This should work."

His smile all but undid her. She barely knew the man, but he was adorably awkward and deliciously sexy in the same instance. How he pulled it off, she had no idea. He was a unique mix of endearing and sensual at the same time.

She stared at him, trying to get a read if he knew what transpired between them. He may still think it was only a dream, and if that was the case, she had to let him think that. But she had to find out just what he thought had happened.

"So, uh, what happened to your shirt?" She leaned against the dresser. He tilted his head in her direction as he rolled the sleeves to his elbow. A twinge hit her heart that sent a spike of adrenaline through her, and her knees buckled. She gripped the edge of the dresser for support, awkwardly trying to hide his effect on her.

A half smile twitched on his lips as he finished buttoning the shirt. "I'm not entirely sure, but I really hope it happens again."

Dom cleared his throat. "So, where are we doing the spirit walk?"

Goddess bless her brother for intervening, or she would have shredded the shirt for him. "We'll do it in the library, down the hall. I don't want to do it in the front room and risk other customers walking in. Beck will handle the front today." Everleigh pulled herself together, cleared her thoughts and stalked to the other side of the room, doing everything in her power not to look at Tag again.

“Well, that looks far better on you than it ever did on me,” Dominic said, giving Tag a once-over.

She had to admit he was right, but she wouldn't give either of them the satisfaction of saying so out loud. He wasn't helping with her effort to keep her thoughts from derailing.

Tag's lips twitched to a smirk as he tossed a glance at Everleigh that sent a chilling thrill straight between her legs, and damn if it didn't make her stop a second to catch her breath. This mating bond shit was no joke. She'd never had a guy who made her nearly orgasm from a simple smile. Today would be even harder than she imagined. She had to get her emotions and thoughts on lockdown, or all hell would break loose when she connected to him in the spirit world.

Another knock broke her vicious circle of thoughts. Blowing out a hard breath, she opened the door. “Winter!”

“Everleigh,” she said with pause. “Just coming to check on you. I heard there was a tussle last night.” Winter poked her head into the room, her line of sight directly on Tag behind Ev.

“Winter!” Dominic pushed in front of his sister and stepped between them. “I've missed you.” He pulled her hand to his lips and brushed a kiss along the backside of it.

Winter rolled her eyes. “Cut the crap, Dominic. You and I have never liked each other and will never like each other. The only reason you are even allowed in here is because of your sister. So, back the fuck up.”

Dominic dropped her hand and raised his in defense as he slowly backed away. “Always a pleasure.”

Ribbons of gold threaded through Winter's long black braids framing her stern face. “Beck tells me you are to do a spirit walk with that one.” She tossed a nod toward Tag. “Do you think it wise, Everleigh?”

“I don't have much of a choice. But you know I wouldn't do it if I didn't think I could handle it.” She had worked hard to earn Winter's trust and approval, and she didn't want to break that down at such a critical point.

“They cannot stay here. Once this is done, they must leave. The longer they are here, the more danger we are all in.” She eyed Tag once more before her attention focused on Dominic. “Especially that one.”

Dom shrugged. “It’s not me this time, I swear.”

“Hmph.” Winter stared him down and let out a huff. Clutching Everleigh’s elbow, she tugged her behind the door, almost to the hallway. “Does he know?”

“Does who know?” Ev arched a brow.

Winter’s lips pursed to a thin line as she quirked a brow back at her.

Everleigh huffed out a sigh. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. It’s not like we’ve had a chance to sit down and make life plans, ya know.”

Winter shook her head. “You’re teetering on dangerous ground. What do you think is going to happen once he realizes you’re his mate?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I’ve ever done this before,” Ev whispered louder than she intended.

“Are you sure he doesn’t suspect?” She tilted her chin back toward the room. “The way he looks are you...” She paused and looked back at Tag in the room. “He is hungry for you.”

Winter’s words both frightened and excited her. She already loved to find him looking at her from across the room, launching butterflies in her stomach. She hadn’t let herself feel that way about anyone in so long. But there was no way she could let it happen and pull him into her hell.

“I can always use magic, if it comes down to it.” Regret slipped off her tongue with the words. She hated the idea of having to resort to a spell to cloak the mating bond between them, but if she had to in order to save his life, she would.

Winter’s eyes narrowed. “And what happens when you send him on his way? Do you think *you* will be able to resist the call of the bond?”

On a physical level, the lure to him was like nothing she'd ever experienced. She felt it like a wholly tangible thing, a yearning that everything inside her wanted to succumb to. But on a logical level, she hardly even knew the guy, it's not like she was in love with him. Sure, he looked like he walked out of a wet dream, but that didn't mean anything. She'd been attracted to other guys before, hell, she'd been attracted to women before. It didn't mean she wanted to spend the rest of her life with any of them. The mating bond was outdated and a legend, supposedly your perfect match the powers that be picked out for you. *Like when did anything good ever come from someone else making decisions for you?*

"I've done my best to hide you these last ten years. I've come to think of you as my own daughter." She placed her hand along Everleigh's shoulder. "You know this is dangerous. I understand wanting to help him, but not at the expense of your life." Winter's bourbon shaded eyes glassed over as they burned bright, framed by her dark skin. "I have a very bad feeling about this Everleigh. Bad to my bones. I've heard the cries in my sleep and seen the blood in my dreams."

A gasp clung to Ev's throat. "Well, what if it simply means those things will happen if we don't do this, if we don't help him. It could be bad for all of us."

"And if he is meant to die? Are you prepared to see that in your spirit walk?"

Everleigh flinched. She hadn't thought about it like that. She'd been thinking with her heart not her head. She knew better. She knew that if his death was a fixed point in time there would be little she could do about it. Even magic had its limits, unless she went dark.

Would she be prepared to sell her soul to save her mate? Her wolf screamed yes, her witch said no.

Ev's nose twitched. "You're not a wolf. You don't understand."

Hurt creased Winter's eyes. "I understand more than you know, Everleigh. I may not be part animal, but love is a primal instinct we all share."

“The mating bond goes beyond love. I don’t even know the man.” She pointed behind her to the room Tag still stood in. “Yet, a part of me feels connected to him on a level I’ve never felt connected to anyone in my life. It’s innate. It’s like he’s a part of me. If I let him die, a part of me goes with him.”

“Is he willing to put you in that kind of danger?”

“I’m trying to keep him from having to make that decision.”

“By what? Hiding him from something he probably already knows, at the very least feels, but has no control over?” Winter glanced quickly back to the room before reconnecting her eyes to Everleigh’s. “How is that fair to him? Should he not have a say in his own destiny?”

“If any of us had a say in our own destiny, we wouldn’t be forced to have a mating bond in the first place. Yet, here we are.” Everleigh fanned her arm with a huff. “And now I’m almost a slave to it. What do I do?”

“You are smart. You will weigh the options and make the best decision for both of you. I trust you. I’m only telling you to be careful. This is new territory for you.” She cupped her hand to Everleigh’s cheek. “While I understand what you feel for him is beyond your control, you are my main concern. I will voice my opinion as such.”

Ev nodded. “I know you mean well.”

Winter snapped her fingers. Her once braided gold and black hair disappeared, now slicked back against her head. A black cowl framed her neck, black feathers ruffling along the edges. Her modest makeup was now gothic, thick black eyeliner making her hazel eyes pop. Black leather covered her body under a black corset that hugged her voluptuous curves in all the right places.

“I’ll be helping Beck up front if you need me.” A long sigh punctuated her words.

Everleigh nodded. “Thank you. For everything, Winter. I mean it.”

A soft smile graced her lips. “I know you do. You wouldn’t still be here if you didn’t.” She winked as she stalked her way down the hall towards the front parlor.

Ev let out a heavy sigh of her own as she turned back toward her room and the trouble standing inside. She thought she could handle this, why did she suddenly want to run far, far away?

“We ready?” Dom peeked his head into the hallway.

Ev nodded. “Yeah, let’s do this.” She sounded convincing in her ears, but the anxiety tying her stomach in knots said otherwise.

She forced a smile at her brother and Tag. Dominic headed down the hall to alert the others. Tag stopped in front of her, and she pressed her back against her open door to put some distance between them.

He bowed his head briefly before locking gazes with her. “I get this funny feeling I’m intimidating you for some reason. Let me please apologize for anything I may have done when I wasn’t myself. I truly wish you no ill will. I promise to keep myself in check. Okay?”

The sincerity that poured out of his words struck her straight to her core. *Ugh, he was beautiful and sweet. Why? Why did he have to be so nice?* It made her want to hate him, but instead, the tug of the bond all but yanked her heart to pieces.

Swallowing hard, she forced a smile. “It’s fine. I’m sorry too. Things are just tense, for many reasons right now. Hopefully, we’ll get you your answers and we can all get back to normal.”

He brushed a hand against his nose, almost hiding a smirk. “I get the feeling that after meeting you, I’ll never be normal again.”

She quirked a brow. “I’m not entirely sure how to take that.”

His lips continued to tug into a smile that all but dropped her panties. “Honestly, neither am I.” With a wink, he turned

and marched down the hall to join the other guys filtering out of their rooms, heading to the library.

*Shit.* She was done for. Her entire life was about to go up in flames, and at this point, Everleigh didn't even care. All she wanted was to have him smile like that at her for the rest of her life, however short that may be.





TAG'S HEART STOPPED AND STARTED FOR THE HUNDREDTH time. Maybe that's how he was supposed to die—heart attack. His mind spun the minute he got near Everleigh, and he couldn't figure out what his problem was, other than the heat surging through him every time he thought back to his dream about her. He still didn't know how the hell his shirt ended up shredded.

He shook his head, blew out a hard breath, and followed everyone to the library. He'd been on edge since the moment they landed in this place, and he couldn't wait to get this over and done with so they could get the hell out of here. But in that same thought, worry sat heavy in his heart, not for himself but for Everleigh, as the very thought of never seeing her again struck him like a punch to the gut. He didn't even know the girl, and the few moments he had spent with her she had attacked him, run away from him, then flirted with him in the hallway. If that wasn't mixed signals, he didn't know what was.

But, maybe, he was breaking her down, as he swore her cheeks pinked when he winked at her earlier, and suddenly his thoughts all drifted to what other parts of her pinked in that same instant. He may not be the hot girl magnet his cousin, Denali, was or even the brooding bad boy Kane was, but Tag had managed to turn a head or two in his time. Though he never went beyond kissing, as he hadn't ever been the type to commit to a relationship because of the need to keep his Thunderbird side a secret.

Still, he'd never found anyone who made his blood pump like Everleigh had. And since she was part of the magic world, maybe, if he solved his whole death problem, he could muster up the courage and even ask her out.

Tag watched her white hair bounce with every step, and he about tripped over his own damned feet when she glanced back at him over her shoulder, her bright violet eyes narrowing, studying him. *What the hell was it about her?*

They entered the arched doorway of the library. When she said library, he pictured a few books on a coffee table, but Tag looked around and his jaw dropped at the floor to ceiling shelves lined with books. Red velvet sofas and a couple of chairs squared the centered of the room.

“Why is everything red in this place?” Denali asked.

“Easier to cover up the blood.” Everleigh didn't miss a beat, staring him down like she fully intended to prove her point.

Denali smirked. “I think I actually like you.”

A growl rumbled low in his throat, and Tag clenched his fingers as he stared down his cousin.

Nodin cupped the back of Tag's neck and pulled him close. “Let's get this moving. It's better for everyone the sooner we get this done.”

Tag shirked away and glared at his brother. “What's your problem?”

“Just trying to prevent one.” Nodin nodded at Dominic. “Ready?”

Dominic eyed Everleigh who lined the floor in a circle of candles. “What do you want us to do?”

“You can all have a seat around the room. Rowtag and I will be on the floor in the circle.” She looked at him and the entire room disappeared. There was only her. She took up every edge of his vision and could have stared at her all day.

“You got any popcorn?” Nova asked, kicking up his feet as he body-slammed one of the sofas.

Nodin narrowed his eyes at Nova before returning his attention to Everleigh. “What if something goes wrong?”

Everleigh took a visible hard swallow. “We’ll be fine. Once the circle is lit, it cannot be undone except my me.” She gave Tag a look before turning back to Nodin and then Dominic. “But should something happen and it looks bad, get Winter.”

Dominic nodded before pulling his sister into a tight embrace. “Please be careful. I trust you, but I still worry.”

A soft smile lit her lips. “Aw, you do love me.”

“Just a little bit. You’re the only non-psycho sister I have.” He winked.

She turned to Tag and let out a deep breath. “You ready to see what your future holds?”

Tag forced back the rising bile in his throat as he realized what doing this really meant. Was he prepared to actually find out what was going to happen to him? It all sounded well and good when it was just a thought. But the reality of him actually being able to find out if he was going to die had him second guessing this entire venture. He stared into Everleigh’s eyes and a calmness settled in his soul, like a familiar blanket wrapping around him that he couldn’t explain.

He forced a jovial smile to hide his thoughts. “Let’s find out when I’m going to die.” Tag rubbed his hands together and dropped to a seated position in the middle of the circle.

“It’s not really like that,” Everleigh said, joining him in the circle. “It’s more of an abstract vision that will provide hints, feelings, and items of meaning in your life that will help you make a decision for your path.”

“I’m hoping it provides clues where I don’t actually die. I mean, we’re all going to die, but I’d like to have a little more time here before that happens.” A smile twitched on his lips the longer he stared at her. “To do things.”

He swore a pink hue tinged her cheeks before she cleared her throat, raised her arms up, and closed her eyes. Tag enjoyed flirting with her, like a game to see how much he

unnerved her. Maybe she felt nothing, but what did he have to lose if he was going to die anyway? Might as well take those leaps he never had before because of fear of the unknown.

“Don’t we need to light the candles first?” Tag looked at the yellow pillars lining them around the circle.

With a snap of her fingers, the light in the room vanished, and all that remained were the flames that danced along the wicks of the candles.

“Well, that’s a neat party trick,” Denali said, adjusting his hands behind his head as he kicked back.

“I can be pretty handy.” Everleigh smirked.

“I’ll bet you can.” Denali smirked right back, and Tag all but leapt out of the circle, jerking back as Everleigh gripped his wrist.

Tag stilled, his head jerking to look at her hand clamped on his body. Warmth surged through him, filling him with a sensation unlike any he’d ever felt before. His eyes locked on hers and a jolt struck his heart, stopping it for a clear second before it rampaged through his chest like a marching drum. A gasp escaped his throat before he could stop it.

He dropped to his knees, caught in her gaze. She locked her fingers with his on both hands and tugged him towards her on the floor.

“Clear your mind, Rowtag,” she whispered, and his eyes snapped shut of their own accord. “Join with me, let your spirit find mine in your mind. Join with me, let your soul take this journey with me,”

Soft drums beat in the distance, and he had no idea where they suddenly came from. The haunting whistle of a dulcet flute rode the thumping rhythmic beats. Tag’s body relaxed at the sounds curling around him, bathing him in comfort and tranquility.

Everleigh’s fingers tightened their grip on his hands, and his eyes popped open. He blinked himself out of his stupor and glanced around. The library had disappeared. A dark purple mist rose around them, rising higher as the echo of shamanic

chants broke through the stillness in the air. It sounded like his father's voice, singing to him like he did when Tag was a little boy, only it merged into a multitude of voices, chanting the lost songs of his people.

Tears pooled in Tag's eyes, his heart overflowing with such joy at hearing the songs from his childhood, of his family, as if they were singing just to him, crying out to him. A longing overtook his soul, his eyes aching to see the faces that matched the voices. He raised one arm, upturning his palm, as if to reach out and touch them, bring them closer.

Something tugged on his other hand, grounding him, not letting him take flight to be with his ancestors. Another soft voice filled his ears. Tag jerked his head towards it, finding a white wolf staring at him. He found comfort in its violet eyes, a connection, encouragement.

“Everleigh?” Tag whispered.

The wolf tilted its head, beckoning him to follow. It padded in front of him through the purple mist. The further into the unknown they went, the quieter the voices became, until they faded from his ears completely, leaving a hole in his heart.

Everleigh jumped up on a large boulder, and the purple mist transitioned to a bluish green light. Bright streaks of yellow rose over large rock formations in the distance, almost like a muted sunrise, breaking through the darkness. The sound of rippling water came from the direction of the sunrise, and Tag took a tentative step. Everleigh nodded her head, still perched on one of the rocks. With a hard swallow, Tag jumped up on the rock to join her.

A crystal river flowed below them, rippling with a slow current out into the distance. Light rose behind one rock formation in particular, illuminating the source of the water. It poured from a hole in the center of a triangular peak where a mighty tree vaulted upwards toward the sky, birds gliding through the air around it, almost as if they worshiped it.

“Do you feel it?” a voice whispered next to him.

Tag jerked his head toward the voice, finding only Everleigh next to him, still in her wolf form, but somehow, he understood her. “I’m not sure. I feel so many things, right now. What is this place?”

“This is the spirit realm.”

The voices of his ancestors returned, drowning out the ripple of the river below. Joy filled his heart once more. Pride swelled in his chest as he realized the birds circling the tree were Thunderbirds. The voices, the chants were coming from them, his family, his people.

He stretched out a hand, as if he could reach them. Taking a running start, Tag leapt to the end of the rock, attempting to change into his Thunderbird form to join them. Knots yanked his stomach taught as he panicked, his body refusing to shift.

“What’s wrong? Why can’t I shift?” He looked behind him at Everleigh.

“That is what you must learn on this journey.”

Tag turned his attention back to the tree with the circling Thunderbirds. “I want to be with them. I want to soar with them. I want to make them proud of me, show them I’m one of them.”

“Their song is beautiful, but mournful. It seems sad,” Everleigh said.

“They share my pain. They want me to join them, to be fully one of them, as I am not yet able to be.” Tag shook his head. “Don’t they know I already am? I’m one of them. I’m a Thunderbird. I don’t understand.” He turned around to Everleigh, only she had vanished. “Everleigh?” Panic notched his voice up an octave.

“It’s so inviting. Don’t you just want to go for a swim?” Everleigh appeared across the river from him, teetering on the precipice of another large rock formation.

“Everleigh, no!” He thrust his hand out to stop her. “How did you get way over there?”

Tag blinked and turned in a circle, the rocks morphing into trees around him. “Everleigh!” He spun, searching for any sign of her, but she vanished again. “Everleigh!” Barren branches wove together above him like a canopy of praying fingers closing in on him.

Worry weighed down his heart. He had to find her. “Everleigh!”

He darted from tree to tree, adrenaline feeding his legs and heart as it beat a frantic rhythm. *Where the hell did she go?*

Launching himself toward a branch, he climbed up, attempting to get a better look around. As he tugged himself further upward, a murder of crows swooped in among the branches, and Tag frantically slapped them away before a branch snapped against his chest, knocking him to the forest floor.

Pain exploded in his body as he smacked into the ground, a breath puffing from his lips. “What the hell is going on?”

The crows dove towards him, their squawking cries piercing his ears. Something pinned him to the forest floor, forcing his eyes wide open as the birds rocketed like torpedoes toward him, but extinguished into puffs of black smoke right before they slammed into his chest.

Whatever force held him to the ground eased off, and he scrambled to his feet. Tag whisper-choked her name once more, “Everleigh.”

“Why do you cry out for me?” A soft hand caressed his shoulder.

Tag tilted his head, Everleigh appearing at his side, a worried frown shading her face. “You...you vanished.”

“The spirit realm can play tricks on the mind. It’s hard not to let it suck you in, but you need to be strong. Take only from it the bits of knowledge you seek, or you may come out of it with more than you wished for.”

He nodded and looked around again, the forest vanished as if it had never been there, and the rock formations stood in front of him once more.

“Okay, this place is freaking me out now. What the hell?”

“Keep calm, Rowtag. Find your balance. Your fear is taking over your mind, controlling what you see. You must fight it, see what your heart wants you to see.” She pressed a hand to his shoulder and a burst of energy fired in his veins. He snapped his head toward her, and his heart hammered in his chest like a drum.

Everleigh’s eyes widened, and she yanked her hand back with a gasp.

“You felt that too?” He wasn’t just imagining it. There’d been a spark, a pulse of energy that flowed between them when they touched.

She shook her head, mumbling, and jumped away from him. “Let’s keep going. We shouldn’t stay here any longer than we need to.” Clearing her throat, she stalked in front of him to the edge of the rock.

Tag looked at her, really looked at her for the first time. Her long white hair floated on the gentle breeze, kissing her shoulder as she glanced back at him. The black leather outfit she had on earlier was now a simple white dress that hung off her body like it didn’t quite fit, a sleeve slipping over one of her shoulders, revealing a tattoo that looked like a bird from afar.

He pointed at her. “Hey, you’re not a wolf anymore.”

“What?” Her head tilted down as she gave herself a once-over. “Shit.”

“What’s wrong?” Tag said, inching closer to her, outstretching his hand. “You look beautiful.”

She spun around and faced him, eyeing his hand. “Tag, stop.”

“Why am I so drawn to you?” He brushed the back of his hand along her cheek and a gasp escaped her trembling lips.

Fire bled into his veins, heating him from the inside out. He turned his hand over and cupped her cheek, pulling her



face toward his. His body ached for her in a way he'd never experienced before.

"Tag, please," she choked out, her eyes pooling with tears. "I can't."

Pain tore at his heart to see her so upset. All he wanted to do was make it right, make her stop hurting, make her happy. "Why are you so sad? It burns in my heart, as if I can feel your pain. How can I fix it?"

"You can't." She choked back a sob. "Goddess, why is this so hard?" She jerked away from him and sucked in a gasping breath.

The mournful cries of the Thunderbirds in the distance rang out, as if they cried with her. Something inside his chest broke, his heart shattering, taking the last breath in his lungs with it. He hunched over, gasping. "They say I am lost without you. They weep because my path is clear, but I won't take it. I don't understand."

Another sob choked out of Everleigh. Tag ran over to her, clutched her in his arms and pulled her against his chest. Her body shuddered against him as she struggled to break free of his embrace before collapsing against him, her chest convulsing in sobs.

Tag cupped her cheeks and tilted her head, his gaze locking with hers. "Why do you weep like my ancestors?"

Her violet eyes became bloodshot as she shook her head once more. Everything in him turned to fire, wanting to envelope her, make her whole again, to wipe her tears, to burn down the world that made her sad. Swiping away her tears with his thumbs, he eased her face closer to his, their mouths inches away from each other. Her breath became his as he slanted his lips over hers, pulling her into a kiss.

A flash of light burst around them as he deepened the kiss, running his tongue over hers, desperate to reach the words stuck on it she wouldn't say. His lips buried her soft moans as one hand slid to her waist and the other fisted into her soft hair, clinging to her, pulling her flush to his body.

The cry of his ancestors rang louder in his ears as another flash of light burst around them and Tag, wide-eyed, jerked back from their kiss. A word tugged on his heart and buried itself in his soul.

Mate.

“You’re...my...mate,” he choked out.

*Holy shit, Everleigh was his mate!*

Everleigh gasped as tears streamed out of her eyes, glistening over her cheeks.

Her tears ripped through him like a devouring black hole. He couldn’t understand why she wasn’t happy about it. Sure, part of him was scared shitless at the thought, but the other part rejoiced, the innermost part of his soul that finally found its other half. Their kiss sealed it, confirming it was real.

But Everleigh stared at him, worry draping her face as it glistened with fresh tears.

“Why are you so sad? We’ve found each other!” Tag shook his head, unable to understand why she wouldn’t be happy. Pain seared his chest at the thought that she would reject him.

“Because, I’ll only get you k—” Everleigh stiffened in his embrace. “Oh goddess.” Her words stopped with a sharp intake of breath before her scream wrenched the air. “She’s here!”

A figure glided toward them, glowing white eyes flickering to red the closer it approached. A serpent slithered its way forward, pushing back the hood of the cloak as it struck out, revealing a withered old crone underneath. The serpent bobbed and weaved around her head, sliding over and around a crescent moon circlet adorning her forehead. It seemed to have a hole carved in the middle where something at one time had been inlaid. Confidence filled each stark step, an arrogance billowing around her aura.

Howls rode the breeze that brushed Tag’s skin like a livewire, their cries a warning of darkness and destruction to come.

“Tag, run,” Everleigh whisper-choked as she pushed him, barely budging him an inch.

The creature stood before them, her skin glowing in a hazy white light. Gold bangles sat high on her biceps and forearms, a blue pulsing light ripping through the metal like a heartbeat. Long salt and pepper ratty braids draped her shoulders, framing the stern face of the crone before them.

“You think you could hide from me forever, child?” the gravelly voice said. “The blood in your veins belongs to me. I have come for what is mine.”

Tag thrust Everleigh behind him. “You cannot have her. She is mine.”

“I belong to no one!” Everleigh growled.

The crone tipped her head back with a chortle before locking gazes with them once more. “If I can’t have what is mine, then I shall take what is made from me.”

“What the hell is she talking about?” Tag questioned over his shoulder to Everleigh.

Taking a hesitant step backward, Everleigh tugged Tag’s arm toward her. “I have no idea, but we have to get out of here.”

Her skirt, covered in cross bones and symbols, swayed between her legs as she stepped closer. “I will always find you, no matter where you run, child.”

“You can’t have her. You’ll have to get through me first.” Tag stepped forward. No one would take his mate from him, not when he just found her. The animal inside him screamed to protect her, fight for her.

The crone tilted her head and a smirk teetered on her lips. “As you wish.” The serpent slithered around the spikes and thorns of her headdress before striking out at Tag. Its body snapped like a whip, latching on to Tag’s bare chest, dropping him to his knees as his head rolled back, pain exploding on his face as he gasped out a gurgling breath.

Everleigh's scream pierced the air. The lights snapped on and the candles snuffed out. She shot up from the floor, knocking over the pillars. Wax dribbled onto the carpet as puffs of smoke rippled into the air after her. Gasping for breath, she dropped to her knees on the other side of the circle, a scream choking out from her heaving chest as she clutched her hands to her head.

Tag scrambled up from the floor, grasping at his torso to make sure it was still in one piece, the pain still fresh in his mind and burning against his flesh as if it had really happened. He rubbed the spot over his heart where the serpent sliced through with its fangs, and a drop of blood pooled on his fingertip. His eyes shot open, but when he glanced again at his hand, the blood vanished.

"What the hell was that?" Tag gasped, fighting for breath as he spun around to find Everleigh.

"Holy shit, you guys!" Nova bounded over to Tag. "This room was lit up like a fucking disco ball. What the hell happened?"

Tag swallowed hard and slid past his cousin, dropping to his knees beside Everleigh. "I'd like to know that myself."

Because the moment the serpent had latched onto his body, a barrage of images struck his head in a confusing montage; Reseda, Kane, Dominic, Nodin, Maquinna, Everleigh and Castos. The problem was, in the end they were all standing around someone.

That someone was a very dead Tag.



THE NIGHTMARE REPLAYED ON AN ENDLESS LOOP IN HER MIND, only it was no nightmare. She was there. In the spirit realm. The person she'd been running from all her life—The Crone Chac Chel.

Bile singed her throat. The image of Tag being killed before her very eyes wrenched her heart and soul, leaving her trembling. A piece of her died inside in that same moment. The prophecy was true, and it was all Everleigh's fault. As she feared, she would be the one to get her own mate killed.

Castos had drilled that into her head for so long—that she would one day get someone she loved killed because of her selfishness, because she refused to give herself up to save the lives of others. The guilt of his words ate at her soul then, but now she witnessed that happening before her very eyes. Her father's words sliced at her, gripping her to her very core. She *was* selfish. She should have sacrificed herself long ago. She could have helped so many people, her father, the wolves, her brother would never had to suffer because of her and her mate wouldn't be killed.

Dominic rushed to her side, clasping his hand along her back. “Ev, what the hell happened?”

Her fingers dug into her temples as she twisted up from the floor. “She was there.” The words garbled along her tongue, drenched in despair.

Dominic sucked in a gasp as he hitched back. “Fuck. Are you sure?”

Everleigh turned her head toward her brother and narrowed her eyes. “How can you even ask me that? Of course, I’m sure.”

“Would anyone like to let the rest of us in on what the hell is going on?” Denali jumped up and paced the room.

Tag blew out a breath and recapped what transpired in the spirit realm. Everleigh made note that he left out discovering that they were mates. Was it because she was the one who lead the crone to kill him?

Shivers rippled through her body, and Tag pulled her tight against his chest. Her mind screamed at her to push him away, keep distant and emotionally unattached from him. But her heart clung to the warmth and safety his arms provided. His energy blanketed her in comfort, and she feared ever letting go. Why now? Why did she find him only to have to lose him?

The library door whipped open, slamming into the wall behind it. “Everleigh!”

Startled, Everleigh pushed out of Tag’s embrace, fighting the longing and emptiness at no longer being in his arms. She cupped her hands over her nose, fighting back the emotions overwhelming her as everything twisted into an overwhelming spiral.

“I warned you this would happen.” Winter shook her head as she opened her arms, and Ev sprang for them. She was the closest thing she had to a mother. She had taught Ev everything she knew about her witch side. “I had a vision.” Winter squeezed her, pressing a hand through her hair before pushing her back, grabbing onto her arms. “Now that she has made contact, it will only be a matter of time before she’ll find you in this world. You are no longer safe here.”

Everleigh nodded. It was always only a matter of time. She thought if she stayed hidden, if she pretended to live an entirely different life, she’d escape her past. But in the end, the outcome would always be the same. Someone would end up hurt because of her, no matter where she went. “I know.”

Tag stepped forward. "I'll take her with me. We can provide her safety on our land. It's protected by The Great Spirits."

Winter's sarcastic laugh scraped at his heart. "Yes, that will indeed solve everything. Do you not know your all-powerful Great Spirits were the ones who put her in this position in the first place?"

Tag blinked and looked to Dominic and Nodin.

"Correction, it was our father who did this." Dominic pointed between Ev and himself.

"Did what?" Nova spoke up. Everleigh forgot the others were still in the room.

Dominic blew out a breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. "We have to tell them, Ev."

She shook her head. "No, this doesn't involve them. Just... everyone needs to leave." She pointed toward the door and stalked away from Winter's embrace before running a hand through her hair. The last thing she needed was more people involved. It would always be either her father coming for her or the crone. She'd just give herself up to the crone and finally end it all. "I'll figure something out."

"You know I'm not leaving you now that she knows where you are. The hell if I'm going to just turn my back on you when you're in danger." Dominic glared at her. "I found you a safe haven before, I'll do it again." He nodded at Winter. "Thank you for taking her in. We'll get her out today, so we don't endanger the rest of your coven."

Winter shook her head. "You think I won't fight for Everleigh? You are sorely mistaken, wolf." She tilted her chin up. "I do not have an alliance with shifters, but I will not turn my back on her. She is a daughter to me. You think her brothers and sisters in the coven wouldn't stand and fight for her? You have no idea what we can do."

"While I appreciate your gesture, she is actually my sister. And I won't have anyone else die as a result of my father and

his dealings.” Dominic clenched his fists. Nodin stepped up beside him, placing a hand along his back.

“You do not have a say or choice, wolf.” Winter turned to Everleigh. “None of you can go against the crone and possibly win. You need us.”

“Who is this crone?” Denali threw his arms up in frustration. “We kind of need to know what we’re up against here.”

“The crone is a very powerful witch. Some say she is ancient, immortal even.” Winter stepped further into the room. “Legend says, she has ties to the mother of the wolves.”

Everleigh wrapped her arms around herself, not wanting to relive the story. As much as she wanted to protect them all from it, they should know the truth, especially since it now seemed to involve Tag.

“Apparently, dear old dad struck a deal with her to try and end our tie to the moon cycle for shifting. But, in the end, Castos double-crossed her, and she’s been after Everleigh as retribution.” Dominic sighed, looking at his sister. “Everleigh being part shifter and part witch intrigued her, and she considered her payment for whatever Castos did to her.”

Everleigh glanced to Tag, something inside her demanding she look at him, go to him. Worry spread over his face, his dark brown eyes filling with fear. His emotions spilled into her, weighing down her heart. He didn’t deserve any of this. He didn’t deserve to be hurt by her.

Just one more thing her father always said, that she was unworthy of love because she didn’t care enough about others. But he loved her enough to help keep her from the crone, and in return, she should have been more willing to let him use her to fight the curse. Maybe he had been right all along.

“In dad’s defense, he did hide me from her. Tried to, anyway. We were on the run for a long time.” Everleigh shrugged.

“Uh huh, so he could experiment on you. He knew you were different. Thought your genetics could somehow lead



them to the anecdote to being slave to the moon.” Dominic shook his head.

“Dom, please.” Everleigh shook her head. She didn’t want them all to know what went on. A part of her still lived with the shame she thought she’d buried deep, compartmentalized. The guilt of not being able to help her dad find a cure. Maybe it was wrong of him to do his so-called experiments on her, but a part of her understood his dire need to find an answer for his pack. She was a freak of nature, a foot in two different worlds, belonging wholly to neither. She should have done more.

“What kind of experiments are we talking about?” Tag spread his attention between Dom and Ev.

Everleigh shook her head. Tag was the last person she wanted to have in on it. He didn’t need to get involved in that portion of her life. It was over and done with. Neither of them needed to relive it. It would only rile Tag up, especially with the mating bond. They had a bigger problem right now than dealing with an issue already well in the past.

“We don’t need to get into that. Right now, we have to focus on a plan. We need to get on the move before the crone makes hers.” Everleigh itched with anticipation, anxiety building in her. She paced the room, shaking out her arms, trying to ease the energy spiraling through her.

She had no idea just how close Chac Chel was to finding her exact location. The crone could tap into her mind in the spirit realm, but she hoped she was still hidden in this plane of existence, at least for a little while. It would give them a bit of an advantage.

“What does this crone want with Tag, then? He said some snake attacked him in the spirit realm and killed him. What does that mean for him? Is that going to come true? Is it a premonition?” Nova asked, stepping forward next to his cousin Tag. “Is that what Makoa was talking about when she saw Tag dead?”

A ball of emotion wedged itself in her throat, as she relived the memory of watching him die; the pain etched on

his face, the agony in his last breath, the emptiness in her soul as their connection severed. “I won’t let it happen. Take Tag and go home. You now know the answer to your prophecy and how you are to be killed. If you’re nowhere near me, then it won’t happen. Problem solved.”

“Ev,” Dominic pleaded, looking back and forth between his sister, Nodin, and Tag.

“I mean it, Dom. Just go. I’ve got Winter and the coven. Protect Tag at all costs. I didn’t die in the spirit realm, he did. He’s your main concern.” She hoped the words sounded more convincing than they felt leaving her tongue. If the crone sensed the bond between her and Tag, he could still be in danger, as Chac Chel could go after him to flush Everleigh out. But the more distance they put between them, the more likely the bond would fade, and the crone would only come after her. For once in her life, she’d do exactly what her father wanted of her. She’d make the sacrifice.

Tag’s gaze pulled her in and locked on to her. The fierceness in his eyes sent a blaze of fire through her to her core. Anger, fear, and lust swirled like a storm inside her.

“I’m not leaving you. That is final.” Tag stalked over to her and gripped her hand. “We’re in this together now. If I have to die to save your life, so be it.”

His words knifed her, and she hitched back. “Tag, no. You don’t even know me. You have to leave.”

“That’s not how this works. You feel it as much as I do.” Tag’s stern face radiated a power she hadn’t felt from him before. He dominated the air around her, smothering her in his essence, his life, his protection, his need for her.

As much as she tried to ignore it, deny it, refuse it, the connection to him seized her body, mind, and soul. She didn’t just feel it, it was an innate part of her.

“I can’t leave you, and I won’t.” He cupped his hand along her jawline, sliding it to the back of her neck as he tugged her closer.

“I’m trying to save your life, Tag.” His stubbornness infuriated her, mixing in with her own fear and possibly losing him whether to pushing him away or his life being taken by the crone. All the emotions tumbled inside her like a hurricane, spilling out through tears as they careened over her cheeks.

“And I’m going to save yours.” His hot breath whisked across her lips as he leaned closer. “You’re my mate.”

The weight of the word bore down on her soul, hook, line and sinker. It tore through her like a raging pulse of adrenaline, lighting her entire body on fire. The power of one word, the deep-seated meaning behind it, the inexplicable bond they now shared was the only thing holding her together. The way he looked at her, like she was his entire world now, made her want to believe it.

“Wait a minute, what did he just say?” Denali piped up.

“Uh, I think he just said Everleigh is his mate.” Nova’s shocked mouth curved into a smirk. “That explains a lot.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tag whipped around, still clinging to Everleigh, as he glared at his cousins.

“Just saying, you were all kinds of crazy jealous last night. I think your body already knew and just took over for you.” Nova shrugged.

“It all makes sense.” Denali nodded. “I was wondering what happened to marshmallow Tag. Turns out, there’s a raging jealous bastard in there somewhere.” He walked over to Everleigh and cupped her hand, pressing his lips to it in a kiss. “Just gotta know what buttons to push.”

A growl rumbled in Tag’s chest, echoing through the room as he thrust his arm out, his palm striking his cousin in the chest, sending him flying across the room. “Back the fuck off, Denali.”

Denali wagged his eyebrows. “See.” He thumbed over his shoulder at Tag. “Fucker’s in love.”

Tag jerked back and blinked.

Everleigh's heart sank a little at his shocked reaction to the word. It may not be love, but it was something deeper, innate, spiritual between them no one could understand.

"Yeah, but they just met," Nova said, fanning his arm toward them. "They can't possibly be in love."

"Doesn't matter. When you find your mate, your world changes. Your focal point changes." Denali shrugged with an aloof swagger as he made his way back to the sofa and plunked down. "So, I've heard."

Dominic nodded. "He's right, though. You just...know." He looked at Nodin and their intense stare gripped the room so much it was palpable.

Winter released a heavy sigh. "Are we done discussing the birds and the bees? We've got bigger issues at hand."

"Well, someone needs to get laid." Denali snorted. "I'll be your huckleberry." He tossed her a wink. "Or do you prefer women?"

"I prefer it to be none of your fucking business." She marched toward the door, sneering at Denali the entire time. "I have to let the coven know we are on watch until we have a plan. We'll be shutting our doors to the carnival. We can't trust anyone right now."

Everleigh nodded. "I'm so sorry, Winter. I really am."

Winter stared at her, unspoken words transpiring between them. The look in her eyes said she would be by her side no matter what. She was still displeased with her entire coven at risk, but like a pack, they stuck together and fought together as one, as a family. Winter nodded as she left the room.

"So, what do we do then?" Nodin asked Dominic before looking at Everleigh.

"I honestly don't know." He stared at Ev. "If we go back to the Reservation, we risk not only the crone finding us, but Castos seeing her. While the wolves can't cross the boundary onto your land, he'll know she's there by scenting her if she gets close enough to the border."

“Well, then we just keep her beyond the border and out of sight.” Tag nodded.

“I won’t be kept a prisoner. I’m not going to hide in a cabin somewhere in the woods for the rest of my life.” Everleigh huffed in frustration.

“Isn’t that what you’ve been doing here?” Denali fanned his arms out. “Granted, it’s much bigger than our place.”

“I’ve had a life here. Friends. A job.” Everleigh looked around at her home for the last ten years. “It was at least on my terms.”

“You wouldn’t be a prisoner. It would just be until we figured out how to get rid of the crone.” Tag said, slipping his hands under hers, tugging her toward him. “There’s lots of things I could show you.”

Nova and Denali snorted in unison. Tag glared at them, and their faces blanched as they glanced everywhere around the room but at Tag.

“I won’t put the rest of your family in danger, Tag. There has to be another option.” Everleigh sighed. “Besides, Winter’s pretty adamant about wanting in on this fight. I can’t invite my whole coven back to your place.”

“Yeah, having the entire coven on the land will definitely spark my father’s interest in something going down. If we’re to keep Everleigh a secret, they can’t all be there.” Dominic ran a hand through his hair.

“What about taking her to Ridge’s place, up in Alaska?” Nova asked.

“But then she’s not protected by The Great Spirits.” Tag sighed. “The only option is to take her back to the Res, and we’ll just have to place the coven with Denali and Nova at their place.”

“Why do we get stuck with the witches?” Denali jumped up from the sofa. “I’m not the one mated to them.”

“Because it’ll keep them close, but not close enough to arouse suspicion from Castos,” Dominic added. “It’s not a bad

idea.”

“So, before we just whisk the coven away, shouldn’t we bother to ask them if they even want to go?” Denali asked, stretching his arm along the back of the sofa as he crossed his leg at the knee.

Tag tilted his head and slid his fingers along Everleigh’s. “What do you think? Do you want to talk to them about it?”

While Everleigh appreciated him actually asking her, she hated to even be in this position in the first place. “By taking me in, you’ll be risking your own people. You’ll be forced to be on the run with me. Is that the kind of life you want to live?”

Tag stared at her, as if he were studying her. “The kind of life I want to live is with my mate. And we won’t have to run if we end this and fight. Aren’t you tired of running and hiding?”

“I’d rather run the rest of my life if it means saving yours.” She forced back the ball of choking emotions clinging to the back of her throat with every word. “The entire reason you are prophesied to die is because of me. You leave me here and you solve your problem.”

“You are not my problem. The crone is. And we’re Thunderbirds. We don’t run from our problems. We solve them.” He stared around the room at his family. Each of them nodded, answering his unspoken request of unity in his decision to stand and fight for Everleigh.

Her heart and mind warred with each other on a decision. In the end, she knew she would need their help, along with the coven. Maybe Tag was right, and it was time to stop hiding and live, for whatever short amount of time they had left. She would be by his side, her mate.

Winter knocked on the door as she let herself back in the room. “I’ve discussed it with the coven, while we are small, we are powerful and are in agreement to help.”

Everleigh nodded. “I’ve agreed to go back to the reservation with Tag and his family. They believe it’s in our

best interest to stick together, close enough to be able to be able to fight, but not so much that my father will sense something is up and add to the mix.”

Winter smirked. “We will be here to assist you, but we will not go with you. It’s been agreed upon that this is still our home, and we will defend it. So, I am sending Ember with you.” Everleigh sighed in relief. She loved Ember like a sister. Winter turned to the group. “Ember is my high priestess and emissary. She will be able to contact me in the event the crone shows herself or if Castos poses a problem. We will be at the ready.”

“Castos will not be a problem. We’ve been taking care of wolves for a while now,” Denali said, rising from the sofa, shucking off his jean jacket like his pride was wounded.

Winter’s lips pulled into a smirk. “I’m sure of such. But the fact remains, it would be a burden and not feasible for all of our coven to descend upon your reservation. So, we will remain, and Ember will send word when we are needed.” She tugged Everleigh into an embrace. “Be watchful and trust your instincts, Everleigh. They are more often right than they are wrong.”

Ev nodded and let out a hard sigh. “Thank you for everything, Winter. I will not forget what you have done for me.”

A terse smile lined Winter’s lips as she looked from Everleigh to the rest of the group. “Ember will portal you back. It will be less conspicuous and harder for the crone to track movement. Until we meet again, blessed be.” She gave a nod and left the room.

A piece of Everleigh’s heart left with her. She hadn’t been away from Winter and the coven in the last ten years. While the thought of being back out in the mundane world thrilled her, being back near her father brought with it a host of memories she wasn’t ready to deconstruct.

Then there was the thought of being caught by the crone. But surely, if she stayed where she was, the residual energy

from the spirit walk would be like a shining beacon, and she'd lead her right to the coven.

Everleigh knew she needed to leave, but the thing that frightened her the most right now was being alone with Tag. It was getting harder and harder not to submit to the pull of the mating bond. For both their sakes, they couldn't consecrate the bond, because the only way to ensure they would both come out of this alive was if they weren't a mated pair. For if Tag died, Everleigh knew deep in her soul, she was as good as dead, as well.





TAG PACED THE LIBRARY AS HE WAITED FOR EVERLEIGH TO pack. If he ran his hand through his hair one more time, he'd surely leave a bald spot. Anxiety needled him, and he needed to work it off. He stalked the length of the room faster, nearly taking out Dominic on one of his passes.

“Something vexes thee?” Dominic asked, leaning against one of the desks with his arms folded.

“Just wanna get out of here. What’s taking them so long?” Tag cleared his throat, hoping it would also take his memories of the dream he had and the experience in the spirit walk with Everleigh with it.

“You know, if you need to talk,” Dominic offered.

Tag nodded. “Thanks. I’m good.”

“Then why are you burning a hole in the carpet? Everleigh already tried that once. I think this room needs a rest.” Denali quirked a brow. “The best way to get rid of pent-up energy and anxiety is to punch something, i.e., a wolf.” Denali looked at Dominic. “No offense.”

Dominic’s lips pursed to a thin line. “Gee, none taken.”

“Or you need to bang it out with sex.” Denali smirked. “Either way usually works for me.”

*Oh gods, sex. Everleigh is my mate! Did she know Tag was still a virgin?*

*Oh shit, what the hell am I going to do if she wants to have sex and seal the bond?* While he didn't seem to have any trouble in his dream, if it came down to it in the real world, would he even know what to do? Would he freak out and not be able to perform? He wished he had a little more experience going into this other than some calloused hands and porn.

How could he even think about sex right now while their lives were at stake anyway? He berated himself for thinking with his dick instead of his head.

Tag snarled and clenched his fists. "Thanks for the pro tips, but how would you feel if you just found your mate and now there's an ancient witch out to get her and you're going to be killed as a result?"

"Fair point." Denali nodded. "But you know we've got your back. We'll handle this. We'll keep you and your girl safe. So, why do I get the sense that's not really what you're worried about?"

Tag arched a brow. Was it that obvious? Worry curled his stomach into knots. Shit, if they all knew he was still a virgin too, they'd never stop teasing him about it. "What makes you say that?"

Denali shrugged. "Just a feeling."

Nova nodded. "I think we can all sense there's more to this than you're sharing with us."

A sigh huffed from his lips. He had to change the subject or he'd either punch a hole in the wall or his cousin. The last thing he needed on top of everything else was to spiral out of control in rage. "I can't talk about this now. Let's just focus on getting everyone back to the Res and get some plans laid out. I don't want to leave anything to chance. Too much is on the line."

"You know we will, brother," Nodin said, stepping up next to him. "I've already called Kane and let him know we'd be on our way back shortly. He and Ridge have been doing sweeps and said everything's been relatively quiet. A few wolf

sightings, but nothing out of the ordinary. I think we'll be okay."

"What if taking them back to the Res is a trap? What if that's what Castos and this crone want us to do?" Tag paced the length of the room again, sweat beading on his brow like morning dew.

Dominic pushed off the desk, halting Tag on one of his passes. "How would they even know we're coming? I've hidden Everleigh here for nearly ten years, and Castos has never even attempted to find her. He doesn't even know this place exists."

"Are you sure about that? Maybe he just never attempted to communicate or go after her, but he still knows?" Tag shook his head. "I don't know. But something just feels off. I can't shake it. Like there's a shadow around us—a plague of darkness that is just waiting to strike."

"Did you bring something back with you from the spirit realm?" Nodin asked, gripping his free arm.

"I don't think so. But I've never done a spirit walk, so I'm not exactly sure how this all works. I mean, the only thing we really encountered was the crone, aside from seeing our ancestors around the tree of life."

"Well, there's not much we can do about a feeling at this point. We just have to press forward with the information we have at hand. We'll fill in Maquinna when we get back. We have extra back up with Reseda, Kane, and Ridge. Maybe we can even talk to Makoa and see if she's had any more visions that could clue us in on if things have changed since you've found your mate and done the spirit walk." Nodin smiled, but Tag could tell it was forced, as if he were trying to convince himself as much as Tag.

Everleigh cleared her throat as she entered the room. A pair of dark space buns followed her, belonging to a tall Asian woman wearing a white tank top and running pants. Tag assumed that had to be Ember. "Sorry we took so long. I wasn't sure what to bring with me. Don't know how long I'll be there."

Her words pierced Tag's heart. She wasn't planning on staying. He wasn't exactly sure how this mate thing worked, but shouldn't she not want to leave him? A heaviness hit him like a tsunami, and Tag leaned back on the edge of one of the chairs.

"Tag?" Nodin cried out, gripping his shoulder to help keep him upright. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know." Something burned beneath Tag's skin along his torso, and he ran a hand along the spot the serpent had bit him. Warmth bled into his fingertips, like a fever blazing through his skin. "Something doesn't feel right."

Nodin placed his hand on Tag's chest. "You're burning up."

"I'll be okay." Tag forced himself to straighten up, his limbs fighting off the numbing tingle surging through to his fingertips. Shaking his head, he cleared his throat and managed a step forward. "Are you ready?"

Everleigh reached a hand toward him but hesitated. Was she concerned? Tag had no idea how she felt about anything, but maybe once he got her alone, out of this place and onto the safety of the Res, they could have some alone time to talk things out. He hoped maybe she was just as confused as he was, and that with time they'd be able to work things out. Because the kiss they shared in the spirit realm still burned as hot through his body as the pulse along his chest from the serpent. Maybe he did indeed bring something back from the spirit realm, but he hoped it was his mate and not something from the crone.

Everleigh nodded toward Ember. "I think so. This is Ember. She'll be opening the portal for us to travel."

"Sup!" Ember tossed a nod to the group as she slid a pair of aviator glasses on.

Tag quirked a brow.

Denali popped up from the sofa and swaggered over to the group.

"Denali," he said, giving her a tilt of his head.

“Cool name.” She planted her hands on her hips.

Nova slammed into Denali’s back, shoving him into the wall. “I’m Nova.” He held out a hand to Ember, and Tag all but facepalmed himself. And Tag thought he was awkward around women? Nova was about as experienced as Tag, but Denali was supposed to be the suave girl magnet, the experienced one, the one the girls all fought over for a piece of.

“So, are those your real names, or like code names or somethin’?” Ember asked.

“Real names. They all have special meaning and are given to us by The Great Spirits.” Nova beamed proudly. “My name means new.”

“And his?” She tilted her head at Denali.

“It means great one,” Nova answered before Denali could get a word out, like they were vying for her attention.

“Is that so?” She arched a brow at Denali.

“I can show you if you’d like.” Denali winked.

Ember gave a half shrug and smirked as she folded her arms.

“Let’s just get this moving, okay?” Nodin thankfully broke in and stopped the conversation from turning into a pissing contest. Granted, Ember was beautiful, but Tag couldn’t keep his eyes off Everleigh.

“Please,” Everleigh agreed.

“All right, this may feel a little weird to some of you. Keep your hands and feet inside the portal at all times. Side effects may include dizziness, nausea, vomiting, hearing loss, temporary blindness, and penis shrinkage.”

Denali and Nova both jerked back with quirked brows.

Ember winked as she clapped her hands together with a smirk. “Tag,” she said, wiggling her fingers for him to step forward. “Clasp my hand. I’ll need you to picture the Reservation in your mind. Whatever you do, don’t let go.”

Tag nodded and blew out a hard breath. “Got it.”

The fleshy palm of Ember’s hand pressed against his forehead as she extended her other arm to the open space beside her. “Groovy. Close your eyes, continue to picture it. You may feel some slight pressure.”

“Okay—” Tag didn’t even get the rest of his sentence out and a tingle fizzled along his brow before something short of a sledgehammer smacked him in the forehead and he blew back into Nodin’s chest. Shaking his head, he lunged out of his brother’s arms and rubbed his forehead. “What the hell was that? I thought you said there’d be slight pressure.”

Ember shrugged. “Your mileage may vary.” She thumbed over her shoulder at the glowing circle of light floating. “Okay, everyone in!”

Nodin and Dominic stepped through first, followed by Nova.

Denali reached the edge of the portal but halted and turned to Ember. “You were kidding about the penis shrinkage, right?”

Ember winked and pushed him into the portal. Tag was beginning to like her.

“Shall we?” Tag offered Everleigh his hand.

“Um, you go ahead. I’m going to go in with Ember, make sure it gets closed okay behind us and all.” She nodded with a smile, adjusting her duffle bag on her shoulder.

“Of course. I’ll see you on the other side then,” Tag said, hoping his aloof reaction sounded more convincing than the words felt coming out of his mouth. With every passing minute, it felt like Everleigh drifted further away from him rather than coming closer together as a mated pair.

But he couldn’t focus on that right now. They had to get back to the Res, get their family settled, and come up with a plan to deal with the crone, protecting Everleigh at all costs. Then maybe if they survived all that, he’d at least try and take her on a real date.

He stepped through the window of bright light, unsure what exactly was going to happen. Pressure built against his body, digging into his skin like a warning sign that it was breaking the laws of nature or something. He itched to break free of the magic engulfing him, drowning his senses, choking him with energy. In the next instant, it gave way and he stepped into a swath of trees on the edge of the Reservation. His eyes focused on his favorite tree, the one he climbed nearly every day as a child, and a sense of comfort settled in his soul.

Then as a smile lit his lips, he dropped to his knees and puked into a pile of pine needles. Right next to Denali.



EVERLEIGH LOOKED AT EMBER BEFORE TAKING A STEP towards the portal. Ember stiff-armed her, blocking her from leaping in. “Hold up.”

Ev jerked to a stop. “What’s wrong?”

Crossing her arms, Ember slanted a hip and pursed her lips. “What the hell was that?”

“What?” Ev looked around, confused.

“You dissing your mate.” Ember quirked a brow.

Everleigh tossed her arms up. “Goddess! Does everyone know?”

“Look, I get you want to protect him, but that’s a big boy right there.” She nodded toward the portal. “You may think you’re saving his life, but you may just as well be damning him. You can’t withhold things now, Ev. You have to face the things you’ve buried under the rug and ignored. If you want to be on the winning side of history, he needs to know what you’re truly up against.”

A shiver tore through her body as the eyes of the crone flashed in her mind. Tag’s smile pushed through the memory, warming her from the inside out. The hope in his eyes, the curiosity in his crooked smile, and the heated touch of his lips turned the crone to ash in her head. “He’s special, Ember. I don’t know what it is about him, but this dire need to keep him safe grips me to the point I can’t breathe.”



“I get it. I really do. But if you want to keep him safe, giving him all the information and puzzle pieces may just do that. If he goes into a situation unprepared, half-cocked, not knowing what he’s up against, you really think that’ll benefit him?”

A choked sob burst from her lips and Everleigh worked to suck it back in.

Ember reached out and tugged Everleigh into a hug. “Give him a chance and let him make that choice.”

Ev nodded against her shoulder. “I’ll try.”

She eased Everleigh from her embrace. “Good. Now, let’s go fuck some shit up.”

A laugh popped from Ev’s throat through the wedge of emotion. They clasped hands and jumped through the portal.

Everleigh stepped into the swath of trees and spun around, adjusting to her surroundings. It almost smelled like home. The evergreen scent filled the air, muddled with the heaviness of earth and must. The dampness from a recent rain triggered memories from the last time she walked these woods ten years ago. The night Dominic took her away.

Sucking in a deep breath, she let nature fill her nose and lungs, a mix of comfort and fear settling in her bones. A part of her missed these woods, missed her pack, even though she had only been a teenager when she left. The bonds never really faded.

Loud groaning pulled her from her stroll down memory lane, and she glanced to the ground behind her. Tag and Denali clutched their heads, kneeling in the dirt.

“Looks like you boys got the queasies,” Ember said, stepping through the portal before circling it with her wrist and closing it with a snap. She looked at Tag and Denali. “It’ll get easier the more times you do it.”

“Fuck if I’m ever doing that shit again.” Denali clutched his stomach and dumped another heave into the pine needles.

Ember snickered. “Shifters are so funny.”

Everleigh narrowed her eyes at Ember.

Ember held her hands up. “What? I’m just sayin’, they’re all rough and tough and stabby, stabby, kill, kill, kill. But you put them through one portal, and they lose their lunch. It’s nice to see a guy get in touch with his softer side.”

Everleigh continued to glare at Ember.

“Fine!” She stomped over to Denali and flicked him in the forehead before turning to Tag and doing the same. “That should do it.”

“What the hell was that for?” Denali blinked and shot to standing. “Why do I suddenly feel better and want to eat about a dozen cheeseburgers?”

“She just eased your portal sickness.” She turned to Ember with a quizzical stare. “I think.”

Ember sighed. “Sure, just take away all my fun.”

Ignoring Ember, Everleigh sucked in a deep breath and made her way over to Tag. “How do you feel?”

“Been better.” Tag stood and brushed the dirt from his pants.

The chill in his voice pricked at her heart. Granted, she deserved it for the coldness she’d delivered to him earlier. But she was doing it because she cared about him, not to be a bitch. Ember’s words rang in her ears. Maybe she was right. Maybe they could have a few quiet moments here on the Reservation and find time to get to know each other and she could open up to him. She still didn’t like the idea of putting him in the middle of this, but she realized she didn’t have much of a choice anymore. And what Ember said was true, he deserved a chance.

A howl rode the crisp breeze in the air, and Everleigh stilled as the hairs on her arms pricked to attention.

Dominic appeared at her side, clutching her elbow. “Shit. Let’s move. Now!”

“What’s wrong?” Nodin and Tag yelled out together.

“The wolves sense a shift in the air. They felt the magic of the portal. That was the cry of alert. We have to get her away from the border.” Dominic grabbed her wrist and tugged.

“I thought I smelled traitor in the air tonight.” A voice called out from the darkness between the trees, and Everleigh glanced over her shoulder toward the sound. The familiarity of it left her in tingles. The dead autumn leaves crunched beneath his boots as he stepped into the moonlight. Dark strands of jet-black hair fell across his brooding brow, the rest pulled back into a half bun at the back of his head. Leaning against a tree, his black leather jacket creaked as he folded his arms and arched a brow. “Hello, Dominic. Long time.”

Dominic spun around, blowing out a hard breath. “Zaxton.”

Everleigh’s heart ramped up at the recognition of the name. Zaxton was Dominic’s best friend. Had things changed between them in the time she’d been gone? Dominic had shared with her that Castos considered him no longer a part of the pack once he chose Nodin. Then, helping Kane and Reseda sealed his fate. But she thought Dom still had some alliances within the pack. Her heart hurt for her brother knowing his choices may have cost him his best friend.

“Huh, I would have thought you’d forgotten my name. I guess I should feel honored.” Zaxton sniffed the air and his eyes widened as he pushed off the tree. ‘Holy Shit!’ He stalked his way toward them, but jerked back as he ran into the invisible barrier not allowing him to step foot on the Aktoon land. Maybe The Great Spirits were really protecting them.

“Zax.” Dominic held up his hands. “Please. I’m begging you. You have no idea what is going on. If we were ever friends, please, don’t do this.”

Zaxton blinked and laid his palm against the invisible wall between them. “You’ve got Everleigh with you.”

Tag snapped to Ev’s side and pushed her behind him. While she appreciated his protection, she hated that him stepping in for her was his first line of defense. They’d be having words about that later. She eased around Tag’s stiff

body, her fingers trailing over the edges of his muscles as they twitched in his forearm.

“Hello, Zaxton,” Everleigh said, taking a small step forward. Goddess, he looked almost the exact same as he did ten years ago. The moonlight glinted off his bright green eyes as they studied her, scanning her from head to toe. She’d had a major crush on him in her teen years, but he never looked twice at her, being Dominic’s baby sister. All those lost feelings of unrequited teen love smacked her chest like a sledgehammer. “Been a long time.”

“Fuck, Dominic. What are you doing?” Zaxton’s eyes just about bulged out of his head. “If Castos finds out...”

“We didn’t have much of a choice.” Dominic scrubbed his hands over his face.

Zaxton continued to look between Dominic and her. “Everleigh.” His whisper almost sounded like a choke. “I never thought I’d see you again.”

Everleigh swallowed hard. “Me either, frankly.”

“This reunion is wasting time. We’ve got to go,” Tag said, stepping back alongside Everleigh. He slid his fingers across hers, clasping their hands together. Zaxton’s eyes widened even more, and he slammed a hand on the invisible shield.

“Everleigh!” Zaxton cried out, before glancing back and forth over his shoulders. He stalked the line of the barrier until he lined up with Dominic. “Dom, what the hell is going on?”

“I no longer know where your trust lies.” Dominic’s sad eyes closed as he shook his head and turned around. Everleigh hated this for her brother. He’d already lost so much in his life, having to choose between two worlds—the love of his life and his pack. Then to lose his best friend in the mix, her heart broke for him.

“Wait,” Zaxton whisper-shouted, once again glancing over his shoulders, as if to make sure the rest of the pack didn’t hear them. It was the second night of the three-day moon cycle, so she assumed the pack was out patrolling in their wolf forms. “My issue is with you. Not her. I’d never hurt

Everleigh. You fucking know that. You know what she meant to me, Dominic.” He glanced back to her. “What she still does.”

Everleigh blinked and her heart twinged. What was that supposed to mean?

“We need to go,” Nodin said, leaning in toward Dominic’s ear. “If the others spot her...”

“I dunno, this is kind of getting good.” Ember held her hands up and arched her fingers. “Want to pet the puppy.”

Everleigh gasped. “Ember!”

“What? He’s hot. Just sayin’.” Ember thumbed over her shoulder at Zaxton. Denali stepped up behind her and growled, making Ember roll her eyes before turning back to Everleigh. “You can’t tell me you don’t think so, Ev. Clearly, you two have a past.”

Dread swam in her belly like a heavy little fish, overwhelming her, and Everleigh wanted to curl into a ball. “Zaxton was my brother’s best friend.” Everleigh swallowed hard. “Now is not the time.”

Dominic looked between her and Zaxton before he marched to the barrier. They stared at each other, the unspoken conversation with their eyes clouded the air with tension, thick with unresolved emotions.

“Dom, let me help, please.” His eyes filled with concern, and Everleigh felt it to her bones. Did he really care about her? “What happened between us has nothing to do with her. I’d never jeopardize her life, you know that. And in your gut, you know I wouldn’t jeopardize yours either. We may not be friends anymore, but that doesn’t mean I want to see you dead.”

Dominic took a visible swallow. “You breathe a word of this to my father and it will take them decades to find all your body parts.”

Zaxton rolled his eyes.

“Swear it,” Dom demanded.

“Fine. I fucking promise not to say anything to Castos. Give me some credit. This is why we’re no longer friends; you don’t even know me anymore.” The long strands of hair escaping his tie in the back swept across his face, shielding his angry eyes.

Dom let out a long sigh that sunk Everleigh’s heart to her stomach. “The crone found her.”

Zaxton about broke down the barrier, slamming his palms and chest against it. “Let me in. I can protect her.” He looked back at Dom before he darted down the barrier to where Everleigh stood. “Ev, please tell me you’re okay.”

Emotions balled in the back of her throat as she stared at him. *Goddess, was this even happening?* Did he really have feelings for her? Or was it because she was like a sister to him because of Dom?

A loud growl rumbled from Tag, and he stalked toward the barrier. Shit. “Tag,” she cried out, lunging for him, clutching his elbow to halt him. “It’s okay. He just wants to help. He isn’t going to hurt me.”

Tag whipped around. “I can smell his arousal just from looking at you. He is in love with you.” He stalked over to the barrier, thrust his hand through and clutched Zaxton by the throat. “She is mine.” Tag yanked him forward and Zaxton’s head slammed into the invisible shield in front of him with a growl. “You’ll do well to remember that, wolf.”

Zaxton’s body vibrated, and Everleigh knew he was about to shift.

“Tag! No!” Everleigh gasped and dashed over to Tag holding Zaxton flush against the invisible wall. Pulling on his arm, she forced him to drop Zax. “No, you’ve got it all wrong. I’ve always been like a sister to him.” Her eyes met Zaxton’s on the other side of the barrier, her lips trembling with the words she didn’t know how to move off her tongue. Confusion warred in his eyes with his worry. Hearing what Tag said made it all true, and her heart sunk in her chest. As if she needed more complications in her life. She refused to believe it. *Not now. Why now?*

“Shit.” Nodin ran a hand across his forehead.

Denali and Nova flanked Tag’s side. “What do you want us to do?”

“Nothing!” Everleigh said, louder than she intended. “Please, let’s just go” She turned and faced Zaxton. “Zax, just run. Please don’t make this any harder than it has to be.”

“I say let him help., We could use all the alliances we can get.” Ember shrugged.

Denali glared at her. “You just want in his pants.”

“And ulterior motives are bad because?” She stared him down.

“This is a nightmare.” Everleigh clasped her hands over her face.

“As opposed to a few minutes ago when everything was just peachy?” Ember said, slanting a hip.

Howls pierced the chatter in the air and refocused everyone’s attention.

“They’re coming. I have to tell them something. They’ll be able to smell her if you don’t get her away from here. I’ll do my best to cover her scent, but you meet me in a few hours, and we talk.” Zaxton glanced to Ev briefly before snarling at Tag, pushing off the barrier. “You know where.”

Dominic looked to Everleigh, and she nodded.

“Fine.” Dominic cleared his throat. “Thank you, Zax.”

“Oh, you know I’m not doing this for you. This is for Ev.” He glanced back at her and swallowed before he darted off, shifting back into his wolf form. Sleek jet-black hair covered him head to toe. But his bright green eyes looked back at her before he disappeared into the trees.

As the cover of darkness swallowed him, Everleigh released the breath in her chest and a cloud of dizziness hit her. She didn’t realize how much Zaxton still affected her.

Dominic grabbed her hand. “Let’s go. We have to run for it, get as far away from the border as possible. The longhouse

isn't far."

Tag grabbed the bag from her shoulder. "It'll be easier for you to run if I take this. Can you make it?"

Everleigh nodded and darted after her brother, Tag right behind them. The rest of the group took off behind them, weaving through the sparse trees lining the outer rim of the forest. Yellow lights flickered in the distance, smoke rising from what looked like a large wooden house. The trees opened up into a wide meadow, the grass browning with the turn to autumn.

Several houses spread out along the property, large stone paths cutting through the dying grass. They came to a halt in front of the main house in the middle. Everyone followed Nodin inside, but Tag caught her by the wrist, tugging her to a stop.

"Can I have a minute?" He asked, his voice seeming small.

She nodded. "Of course, are you okay?"

"I don't know." Tag stepped in front of her and dropped to a squat, looking up at her. "I'm really sorry, Everleigh. I don't normally lose my cool like that. I don't understand what is happening to me. I've been like a bubbling rage monster, and I can't control it." He dipped his head, staring at the ground. "I don't want you to think less of me. I had no right to act that way."

She laid a hand on his shoulder and forced a smile. "I appreciate your words, Tag. But it's the mating bond, not you. It's a part of you, sure, but it's your beast inside you that takes over and calls the shots. I get it. My wolf sometimes feels the same way and it's hard. But at least you realize it and that's a good start."

He looked up into her eyes and a jolt of adrenaline hit her heart, tingling through her body, breathing life into her limbs and heat to her core. Sure, she may still have residual feelings for Zaxton, but Tag ignited a fire in her. Both were dangerous territory right now, and she couldn't act upon either without endangering lives. But his act of almost submission to her on



his knees tugged her heartstrings tight in all the right places.  
*Goddess, this was hell.*

He rose to a stance and swallowed hard. “Something’s changing in me, and I’m not sure how to handle it. But I wanted to let you know, I’m trying.”

Her heart warmed at his profession. He was at least attempting to communicate with her, which was a good start. Now she just had to gather enough courage to do it back.



THE MERE THOUGHT OF THAT WOLF WANTING EVERLEIGH launched another wave of jealous rage through him, and the need to strike out welled up.

Tag blew out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. If he didn't get control of his anger problem, he'd probably be better off dead. The mating bond was no joke and gave new meaning to raging hormones. The slightest speck of jealousy sparked fire inside him, boiling him over the edge until he snapped, unfortunately this time with his hand around the throat of that Zaxton guy.

Irritation and anger stirred inside him, always just under the surface of his awareness. It lay in wait like a predator, ready to strike out at any moment. He hated it. He hated being that guy, the jealous prick, yet he had no control over it when it hit him. It was like something or someone else took over his entire being, shoving his consciousness to the side, blocking any reasoning out.

Tag clenched his fists at his side. Maybe once Everleigh sealed the bond with him, it would subside. Until then, he needed to talk to Kane about how he handled the rage issues before he and Reseda mated. That would be a good place to start.

He followed Everleigh into the longhouse. Kane waylaid him before he even got a foot in the door.

“Tag!” Kane gripped him by the shoulder, rolling him in to a half shoulder hug as he slapped him on the back. Releasing

him from the embrace, he clung to Tag's shoulders, looking him in the eye. "You okay?"

"For now." The words flew out of his mouth before he could change them. The surety of who he was, what he wanted to be used to fuel him. Now, death still shadowed his every thought, along with worry about the life of his mate, and the new monster living inside him he didn't know how much longer he could control.

Kane nodded. "Nodin and Dominic just filled us in on what happened in Vegas." Kane looked over at Dominic. "And at the barrier."

"Rowtag!" Maquinna wiped her hands on her apron and wrapped him in a hug. He had missed his grandmother and just being in her embrace eased the tension in his heart. She pulled back and cradled his face. "There's something wrong."

"Frankly, there's a lot wrong. What do you want to start with?" Tag replied.

Maquinna pursed her lips. "You don't look so well. Your skin feels hot like a fever."

Tag shrugged. "I'm gonna go with that's probably due to stress."

Everleigh looked at him, and he wouldn't deny it, the concern in her eyes made him feel better. Maquinna looked between them.

"Dominic says you are Tag's mate?" She said to Everleigh.

Everleigh stepped forward and extended her hand. "That appears to be the case. I'm Everleigh, Dom's sister."

Maquinna's soft smile warmed the room. "We are pleased to have you a part of our family."

Her brow furrowed. "I'm not so sure you'll feel that way much longer. I'm about to bring down a lot of hell upon your family. I didn't want any of this. I don't want to hurt anyone."

Maquinna cupped her hand and gave it a gentle pat. "My dear, I know you don't know us very well, but that's what we do best."

And that was why he loved his grandmother.

Tag sighed. “So, what do we do now?”

Dominic folded his arms and leaned against the wall on the far side of the room. “Ev and I need to go meet Zaxton. Hopefully, he’ll be able to keep us abreast of what Castos’ plans are. I don’t know if the crone has paid him a visit or where he’s at with searching for the stone.” He eyed Maquinna. “You still have it, correct?”

Maquinna nodded. “It is hidden.”

“Good.” Dominic pushed off the wall.

“Why don’t you all get settled in. Nova and Denali, you can have the two guest rooms upstairs here.”

“Well, home is only fifteen minutes away,” Denali said. “But if you’re making food, I can be convinced to stay.”

Maquinna chuckled. “Of course, I’ll cook for my boys.” She turned to Tag. “Will Everleigh be staying with you, Tag, in your cabin?”

Tag said yes and Everleigh said no at the same time. Their heads snapped to look at each other.

“I mean, I don’t want to encroach on Tag’s personal space. I think there’s just too much going on right now. It’s probably better for us to keep some space and clear our heads.” Everleigh wrung the strap on her duffle bag like a dishtowel.

Tag swallowed hard. As much as he hated to admit it, she had a point. Trying to figure out their mating bond in the midst of the crone situation, Castos, and his own imminent death just didn’t seem like a good idea.

“Yeah, she’s right. Probably better for her to have her space right now. Lots going on, and us being on top of each other would probably complicate things.” Did it ever. Suddenly, all he saw in his mind was a vision of him on top of her, claiming her, driving into her, sealing their bond, and he turned around to clench a fist and blow out a hard breath. He needed to head back to his own cabin and have some alone time of his own.

Everleigh sucked in a gasping breath, and Tag's head turned in her direction. *Did she feel it too?*

"Very well, Tag can show you to the spare cabin. It used to be Reseda's, so I can't guarantee what shape it's in right now." She chuckled.

"Where is Reseda?" Tag asked.

"Resting at her and Kane's cabin. It appears morning sickness has set in."

"But it's nighttime?" Tag arched a brow.

"I don't even know why they call it that because it's afternoon and evening sickness too. It affects all women differently. But it started shortly after you all left." Maquinna headed to the kitchen. "I'll make some tea Kane can take back to her."

"Take a few minutes to rest, then Everleigh and I need to go meet with Zax." Dominic slid an arm around Nodin's waist. "We all need a little bit of downtime to regroup."

Tag stepped toward Dominic. "I'm going with you."

"Probably not a good idea until you can get your rage under control." Dominic's brow furrowed. "We don't need another incident."

Dominic's words punched him in the gut. He was right, but it still hurt. He'd never been the kind of jealous person this mating bond was making him out to be. He prided himself on being a carefree spirit, doing what he loved, taking care of his grandmother, being a Thunderbird and protecting his people. He was no Alpha. He was no asshole. He was no caveman demanding a woman be his. But this thing inside him controlled his emotions, and he'd never felt more helpless in his life.

The thing he feared most was that he liked it when it took over. The rush, the rage burning free in his veins releasing, expelling from him was energizing. Succumbing to his beast side was like running wild, set free from a cage. And he didn't know if the next time it happened, even Everleigh would be able to stop him outside of using magic.

He lowered his head. Until Everleigh was ready to take the next step with their mating bond, there was little he could do. He'd never force himself on her.

"I'm gonna go get some air," Tag said, turning toward the door. "If you'll excuse me."

"Tag, wait," Everleigh yelled out.

He stopped outside the door and turned.

"Walk me to my cabin?" Her eyes sparkled under the bright white light of the moon. The violet shimmered like a gemstone, pulling him in, making him unable to look away as if under a spell.

"Of course," he said, taking her bag from her.

They walked in silence down the stone path to the far edge of the property. Tag let her into the cabin, dropping her duffle bag to the floor.

"This is it. It's not much, but it's cozy and safe. There's a bathroom, living area and bedroom. Maquinna serves meals at the longhouse, otherwise there's a tiny kitchenette in the back of your cabin." He handed her the keys and turned.

She grabbed him by the elbow, turning him back to face her. "Listen, Tag, can we talk a moment?"

He nodded. "Of course."

Their gazes met, locking in place, and Tag felt like he was drowning in her, swallowed by the feelings swirling inside. A quiver in his heart shot tingles to his fingers, itching to grab her and pull her to him, to kiss her, to drop her to the bed and claim her.

He jerked his head away, slamming his eyes shut as he blew out a breath. *Fuck, why hadn't he ever slept with anyone before?* He really needed to get to his cabin and work off everything burning up inside him.

"Hey, Tag, look at me," she whispered.

He forced his head to stay where it was, because if he looked at her like that one more time, he didn't think he could

remain a gentleman and not slam her against the wall like he did in his dream.

She cupped his face, forcing him to look at her and his heart dropped to his stomach. “Thank you.”

“For?” he choked out.

“Being you. I know you’re fighting this. I know you’re trying to do right by me. I can feel it. I can feel the bond swelling, growing, the unbearable need to...” she swallowed hard and forced out a breath. “It’s not that I don’t want to. Goddess, Tag, everything inside me is aching to be with you. I want you to know that. Ease your mind. I feel it too. But we have to control ourselves right now. Because if we seal the bond, she will find you. She will kill you. She will come for us. The magic that binds the mating ritual is so powerful, it’s like a beacon to magical beings. It not only binds us physically, but spiritually, and that is what she’s waiting for.”

“I don’t understand.” He shook his head.

“When we bond, when we unite, our powers become one. She will come for us.” Her eyes glassed over, and it pierced his heart. He believed what she was saying, the energy pulsing off her, hitting him straight in his soul—the part that already belonged to her.

He slid his hands along her waist, curling his fingers into her hips. The softness of her body beneath his fingertips was like heaven. “Won’t we be more powerful as one? Able to have a better chance at fighting her?”

“She will syphon both of our magic, Tag. She’s coming after me for my magic, because I’m a hybrid. I’m unique, and she wants it for herself. Imagine if she gets her hands on me after I bond to you, a legendary Thunderbird, made by The Great Spirits themselves. She’ll be unstoppable.” She feathered her fingertips along his cheek, forcing his eyes closed as the sensation tingled throughout his body.

“This bond is insane. I feel you everywhere, Everleigh. You’re already inside me. I don’t know what is happening.

How?” His lips parted as he closed his eyes, absolutely drowning in her touch.

“Tag, you’re making this harder,” she whispered, her fingernails dragging along his neck.

“Trust me, you’re making things a lot harder too.” He tilted his head back up and looked her in the eyes with a smirk.

He pressed his forehead to hers, sliding his hands from her hips to her back, pulling her closer. “May I kiss you? Just once?” His heart thundered in his chest, roaring in his ears, scared she would say no. “I want to know how it feels. I kissed you in my dreams and in the spirit realm. But just once, I want it to be real.”

“You dream of me?” she whispered, running a fingernail along his shoulder, launching a shiver through his body he had no control over.

“You were there, don’t you remember?” A cocky smile curled over his lips.

A gasp squeaked out of Everleigh, and she blinked.

“So, it was real. I knew it.” Tag cupped the side of her face, running his thumb along her lips.

“Sometimes mated pairs can dream walk,” she said, each word breathy and softer than the one before.

He quirked a brow. “But if we’re not mated yet, how did it happen?”

She shook her head. “I...I don’t know.”

He leaned into her, backing her against the wall, pressing himself flush to her body and another gasp escaped her lips. Tag slid one hand back to her hip, the other glided along her neck, his thumb angled against her jaw, his forehead still pressed her hers, their noses touching.

“Let’s see how it compares to a kiss in the real world.” Without waiting for a response, he slanted his lips over hers, pressing into her mouth.



Her fingertips curled into the muscles of his shoulder, and the twinge of pain blended with the heady adrenaline coursing through him from their kiss. A growl rumbled in his chest, shocking even himself as his beast responded, edging him onward. He teased the seam of her lips with his tongue, and she opened for him, meeting him with her own, sliding it against him, deepening the kiss.

What started soft grew needy and frantic as their mouths moved over each other's, their tongues matching stroke for stroke. Tag held her face in his hand, guiding her, claiming her mouth he wished was also her body. Pressing himself against her, the heat between her legs forced his cock to twitch.

She moaned into the kiss, and he buried it with his tongue, grinding his hips against her. But his brain yelled for him to stop, to pull back and listen to what she said. If they took things too far, it could be disastrous.

He eased himself from her mouth, sucking on her bottom lip before releasing her. They panted for breath in rhythm, and she locked eyes with him. She slammed her hands against his chest, and he went sailing backwards, landing on the bed.

“Everleigh?” he gasped. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to take it that far.”

“Shut up,” she said as she climbed on top of him and threw his arms above his head. In the next instant, she reclaimed his lips, her hips rocking against him, a groan rocketing up from his chest at the feel of her heat rubbing over him.

He slid one arm from her strangle hold on his wrists and wrapped it around her waist, curling his fingers into her flesh as he matched his hips to hers, surrendering to the heat and rhythm. *Damn, if it felt this good through clothes, what the hell would it feel like flesh to flesh?*

Every part of him ached to find out.

Her long white hair tickled his skin, and he freed his other hand from her hold to fist his hand through it, clinging to the back of her head. The emptiness he didn’t realize he had inside him filled up with only her, nestling into his soul, the missing

piece of him. The sensation of being whole flooded him with strength.

“Tag,” she said in more of a moan than a word, easing back from their kiss.

He swallowed hard, looking up into her shining violet eyes. Blinking, he eased them both to a seated position, because, holy shit, her eyes were really shining.

“Everleigh,” he whispered. “Why are you glowing?”

She sat back and stared at him. “I don’t know. I...feel weird.”

He quirked a brow.

“A good weird. Like, stronger. Like my magic has been boosted.” She looked at her arms, turning her hands over. “I don’t know what’s happening.”

He clutched his hands to her waist. “Your eyes, they’re sparkling, glowing, like a beacon. They’re breathtaking.”

“Maybe there’s something to this. Maybe we should consummate the bond.” She took a visible swallow, investigating her arms once more.

“I felt it too.” Tag looked at his arms, his tattoos emitting a radiant blue glow beneath his shirt. “We power boosted each other or something.”

“And that was just a kiss.” A soft smile lit her lips and heat shot straight to his dick. “How was it compared to the dream and spirit realm?”

“I’d give it a ten out of ten.” He winked.

“Are you scared?” she asked, and the question shocked him.

“Shitless.” He sucked in a deep breath. “But I know in my heart, we’re meant to be. So, whatever happens, I want to be by your side. I will fight with you and for you. I am your mate.”

A knock on the door broke the conversation, and a growl rumbled in Tag’s chest. Not from his beast, but from pure

annoyance. Whoever it was had horrible timing.

Everleigh must have felt the same way, as her body stopped glowing and her smile fell to sadness. “I’ll get it.”

She climbed off him and already the emptiness hit him like a tsunami, missing his other half.

She opened the door and Dominic stood on the other side. “You about ready? I just got a text from Zax. He wants to meet in fifteen minutes at our old hangout.”

Everleigh glanced at Tag over her shoulder and sighed. At least this time she was upset about having to leave. He was making progress with her, and a small smile lit his lips. “Go ahead. I’ll hang here and wait for you.” Which was the truth, with as hard as he was, it would be a very long and difficult walk to his cabin.

She gave a nod. “Let me get my cloak.”

She shut the door and walked over to Tag, climbing over his lap once more. “I promise it won’t be long, and perhaps we can continue this conversation when I get back?”

He couldn’t fight the smirk swelling over his lips which she leaned in and melted off with a scorching kiss. It took everything in him not to pull her back on top of him and forget this Zaxton person and every other trouble they had brewing. But he knew the sooner they took care of things, the sooner they could fully explore their bond, and each other.

“Thank you,” she said, dotting his lips with one more kiss.

“For?”

“Being you.”

“You’ve said that before.”

“And I’m saying it again.” Her smile turned serious. “Whatever happens, I’m lucky to have found my mate and that it turned out to be you.”

She eased off his lap and opened the door, taking one last glance over her shoulder.

Tag dropped backward on the bed and slung an arm over his face. If she continued to look at him like that, he wouldn't be able to wait for her to get back. He blew out a hard breath and slid a hand into his jeans.



THE OLD CAVE ON THE EDGE OF THE BEACH LOOKED THE SAME as it had ten years ago. It was Zaxton and Dom's hiding spot. They went there to chill when Castos got on them. No girls allowed, of course. But Everleigh spied on them all the time, hidden by her magic, just so she could see Zaxton.

The waves crashed along the sand, ebbing and flowing like no time had passed. She wondered what may have happened if she hadn't left. Would Castos have been able to find a cure with her blood? Would she have ever had a shot with Zaxton?

And as it turned out, her mate, Rowtag, had been right near her all along. Yet she had to go through so much to find him, in an alternate time fold in Vegas. Life was funny, or at least the powers that be were.

Dominic picked up a rock and skipped it into the waves. Everleigh did the same, only her fingers never touched the rock. She skipped it into the water, using her magic to let it ride the crest of the wave until it crashed into the sand.

"Cheater," Dominic said, rolling his eyes.

"What's the fun of magic if you can't use it?"

They turned and made for the cave, shrouded by washed up debris and a boulder the size of a minivan. Sliding past the large rock, they inched their way into the mouth of the carved out rocky cave and sat in the sand waiting for Zaxton.

Dom fiddled with a rock on the cave floor, apparently releasing some nervous energy she assumed was from having

to talk to Zaxton. She sincerely hoped they could work things out between them.

He raised a brow, throwing on a cheeky smile he always used to disarm her and pry into her life. “So, I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything earlier.”

She was lucky he did. If he hadn’t, she may have gone way too far with Tag. Her heart notched up a beat at the thought of that magnificent kiss. It was easy to get caught up in her feelings for him, the chemistry of it all. The skipping heart beats. The flirtatious smiles. The attraction and headiness was so thick it was palpable. But a part of her realized she didn’t even know him. Was it all pheromones from the mating bond? What kind of person was he?

He’d shown signs of a sweet personality and gentle spirit, aside from his raging jealousy streaks, which she chalked up to the same hormones from the bond. When he knelt in front of her, opening himself up to her, showing his vulnerability not only to the bond but to her, she had to admit it melted her heart. But would they have anything in common? Likes and dislikes? Was it all tied to a bond and nothing substantial that a relationship could sustain like normal people?

Of course, they weren’t normal people. She guessed that was why the powers that be had to pick someone for them, because they’d never find anyone on their own. Her heart hardened from conflict. The light and airy sensation of hope and euphoria from kissing Tag earlier dissipated with every passing second.

“What if the mating bond ties two people together who really aren’t supposed to be together?” She didn’t mean to bring it up, but the question flew out of her mouth before she could stop it.

“The universe wouldn’t put two people together if they weren’t meant to be.” He arched a brow. “Why do you ask? I thought maybe you guys had finally hooked up.”

She stared at him in shock. “What makes you say that?”

He smirked. “You were glowing when you opened the door. Like, literally glowing.”

She folded her hands in her lap, tugging at her fingers. “We shared our first kiss.”

Dominic raised his knee and draped an arm over it and drew up a smirk.

“It was actually pretty sexy the way he did it. He asked permission.” Her thoughts drifted back to their flushed bodies and the anticipation of the kiss. “And before I knew it, we were making out.” She ran a hand through her hair, brushing back the hood of her cloak.

“So, what’s the problem then?” He chuckled. “That’s what mates are supposed to do.”

“It was nice. Really nice. We definitely aren’t going to have a problem in that area. But I don’t know him. I just met him, and while I feel this insane attraction to him, I don’t like the idea of just jumping into bed with him. What if we end up hating each other? What if we have nothing in common? What if—”

“—Stop!” Dominic smiled and grabbed her hand. “You sound like you’re afraid of commitment more than Tag himself. You can’t think like that. Yes, you’ve only just met. But that’s the fun of it. Discovering who they are as a person, their likes and dislikes—their fears, their hopes and dreams. It’s all part of the excitement. Plus, the sex is amazing.” His eyes lit up like Christmas. “Oh, and you get a virgin!”

*Shit, she forgot about that.* He certainly didn’t kiss like a virgin. His lips fit her mouth and he devoured her. Heat seared her core just thinking about that kiss, his hard cock beneath her, the way she ground herself against him like a horny teenager, it was almost embarrassing, and he was the virgin! But the thought made her smile. She could take her time, show him things, and she loved the idea she’d get to be his first—and only.

*Only.*

The thought suddenly paralyzed her,

A shadow blocked the moonlight streaming into the cave, and her heart sped. Zaxton pushed through the rock and stood, half shaded from the cave, half bathed in moonlight. He took her breath away. His emerald eyes shone so bright they almost looked unnatural. Dark wisps of hair brushed over his face in the sea breeze blowing through the entrance of the cave.

“Everleigh,” he said, his whispered voice echoing through the cave. He opened his arms, and she scrambled up and fell naturally into his embrace. Suddenly, she was sixteen again. He used to hug her whenever he came looking for Dom, then he’d ruffle her hair. “Gods, it’s so good to see you.”

He tightened his hold on her, like he didn’t want to let go, and for a long moment, she didn’t want him to. Her fingertips curled into his shirt under his jacket, and she inhaled his familiar scent; manly, wolf, cologne and sweat covered in the scents of the forest.

“Good to see you too, Zax.” She eased herself from his arms, though a part of her longed to be back against his chest. There was a safety in the familiarity of it that she didn’t have with Tag.

*Yet.*

Zaxton brushed a hand along her cheek. “I seem to have gotten grease on your beautiful face. I was working on my bike.”

“You still have your motorcycle?” She blinked.

He nodded. “Hell, yeah. Like I’d give up my Harley? It’s like you don’t even know me.”

Her soft giggle floated through the cave. She couldn’t imagine anything else between his legs other than his bike. In a flash, she pictured herself between them, and a punch of guilt hit her heart. What the hell was wrong with her? She had a mate now, why was she thinking about Zax after ten fucking years?

“You just pictured the bike, didn’t you? You remember me taking you for rides?” A sinful smile lined his lips. A teenage dream come true and the envy of all her friends, she had taken



quite a few rides on the back of his Harley. He was only two years older than her, but back then it seemed like he was so far out of her reach.

“How could I forget,” she said, desperately trying to force back the cheesy grin she got every time he was around. It felt like she was that same stupid teenager again.

“While I love this stroll down memory lane, can we get down to business?” Dominic stood and leaned against the cave wall.

Zaxton crossed his arms, staring him down. “I want the truth.”

“I gave you the truth.” Dominic stared right back.

“From her,” Zax said, turning his focus to Everleigh.

“About?” She shook her head, confused. “Dom told you the crone found me. We’re on the run. The guys thought the best place for cover would be here, on their sacred land, protected by The Great Spirits.”

“The guys?” He narrowed his eyes. “You mean, your mate.”

She sucked in an unexpected gasp, the word sounding odd coming from his mouth. Forcing a nod, she stepped back, fresh with guilt over her reaction to Zaxton after all these years when she had a mate.

“I see. When did this happen?” He clenched his fists at his side.

“About forty-eight hours ago.” Dominic looked between Everleigh and Zaxton.

“The crone or the mate?” Zax narrowed his eyes.

“Both?” She wrung her hands before curling her arms around herself.

Zaxton’s eyes bolted wide open. “You’re fucking kidding me? How is that possible?”

Dom shrugged and shook his head.

Zaxton paced the entry way, running a hand over his hair, pulling more strands from the tie. He dropped to a squat and scrubbed his hands over his face. He seemed to have as much pent-up energy as Dom. Maybe it was testosterone or something, but all the guys seemed pretty uptight and twitchy.

“Fuck,” he said, dipping his head before looking up at Dom. “Well, that explains bringing her back to bird land.” His gaze drifted to the wall as he let out a huff and pushed back to standing.

“Has my father sensed her being back yet?” Dom asked.

Zaxton shifted his focus to Dom, his long hair sweeping over his face as he swung his head. “No. But everyone’s sensed the shift in magic out here. It won’t be long.” His gaze met Everleigh’s. “I covered her scent along the border as best I could.”

“How?” she asked.

He folded his arms, clasping his palms around his biceps that bulged through his jacket. “Sex and blood. Pheromones cover just about anything, next to cat piss.”

A knot wove its way through her stomach. Did he have an orgy at the barrier?

“Not mine, if you’re curious.” A smirk lit his lips, pitting a dimple in his cheek. “I called in some favors.”

“I don’t even want to know.” Everleigh shot her hands up.

Zaxton and Dominic both chuckled before looking at each other and stopping short.

“But thank you. I appreciate it,” she added.

“I want in, Dom. I *need* in on this fight.” He glanced to Everleigh. “We used to be family once.”

That knot tightened in her gut, and a piercing sadness hit her heart. Tag was wrong about him. He didn’t love her romantically. He still thought of her as a little sister. Part of her was relieved. Part of her was frustrated and angry that that was all she’d ever be to him. But why would she even care now

that she had a mate? Confusion messed with her head, launching it into an aching throb.

“Zax, I’d like for us to be that again.” Dominic took a tentative step forward.

Zaxton held up a hand. “I’ve got some things to work through. Let’s deal with this, then maybe we can talk.”

“Fair enough.” Dom nodded. “We need to head back. She’s not protected this far out. We don’t know if the crone will be able to sense her here, outside the Great Spirit border.”

“How did she find her in the first place? I thought you hid her in another time or realm!” Zax looked between them.

“She did a spirit walk with Tag. Whole ‘nother story. But apparently once they connected in that realm, it was like a bat signal to the crone, and she latched on to it.” Dom sighed.

Zaxton dipped his head and nodded. “I’ll keep the pack at bay as much as I can. But the minute something happens, if the crone finds her here, you call me, okay?”

“Agreed. And thank you.” Dom held out a hand to him.

Zaxton stared at it. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Can’t blame me for trying.” Dom shrugged.

Zaxton turned and exited the cave, Everleigh and Dom followed.

She reached for Zax’s elbow, stopping him short of his bike. “Can I ask you a question?”

Zaxton glanced at her fingers curling into his jacket before looking into her eyes. The green in them seemed to deepen, smolder even. “Always.”

“Have you...found your mate yet?” She forced the words out over the lump in her throat filled with emotion and nervousness.

Dom pushed off the rock he was leaning on as he waited for her and took a hesitant step forward, concern furrowing over his brow.

Zaxton did a double take, as if he had to make sure he heard her right. Clearing his throat, he slung a leg over his bike and settled in his seat. "I did."

For some odd reason, Everleigh's heart sank to her stomach. She didn't know what she expected him to say. Of course, he had.

"Did you know, from the moment you kissed them, that you wanted to spend forever with them?" She picked at a thread on her cloak, not wanting to look him in the eyes when he answered. But she needed more to go on than just Dom and Nodin's experience. Yes, she definitely had feelings for Tag. Yes, she definitely knew he was her mate. But something inside her continued to question things, no matter how sure she seemed to be.

"I don't know. I never got to kiss her."

Her head snapped up. "Why not?"

He paused, several heavy breathes the only sound in the air. "I rejected her."

Everleigh gasped and hitched back. "What? Why?"

His bike roared to life, and he revved the engine. His eyes locked onto hers, and the intensity in his stare stirred a tightness in her belly, forcing her to suck in a deep breath. "I'll see ya later, Ev. Be careful, okay?" He took a visible swallow and rode off down the beach.

Everleigh reached a hand toward him, jerking it back, concerned at the wave of emotion coming over her at his response. She didn't mean to upset him, and she worried that she just made things worse between her brother and Zaxton. Stirring up a conversation, that probably should have remained dormant, probably wasn't the best idea, as Dom's face spoke volumes, mirroring Zax's as he rode off. Something must have happened after she left for the coven, and she wondered if it didn't play a large role in the rift between them.

"Dom," she whispered.

He released a terse huff and shook his head. Clearly, he knew who it was, and she had every intention of interrogating

him about it.

“That’s a story for another time, Ev. Please, I beg of you, just let it rest for right now.”

She gave a nod, but her heart ached for Zax and the pain he must have had to endure to reject his mate.

Longing tugged at her soul, and the urge to run to Tag and wrap him in her arms and never let go was all she could think about. The thought of having to reject her mate out of duty and love, while admirable, was unfathomable. Suddenly, all the worry and fear of being mated to someone she barely knew didn’t matter as much as the thought of not being able to have him in her life. She was just looking for it to be on her terms, her timetable, not someone else’s.

Digging deep inside herself, she realized her soul knew him. He was picked out of everyone in the universe just for her. That’s all she needed to know.

Dom held out his hand. “Come on. We’ve got to get you back on Aktoon land.”

Trudging through the sand, she gripped his fingertips, and they headed back up the trail from the beach. The rocky cliff above them was like a tower in the sky, a platform to see the world, hovering in place. It looked like a place she could get lost in, and she pictured herself sitting at the edge working on spells, the sea breeze rustling through her hair, the tranquility of the rolling waves her music.

She wondered if Tag liked to go there and watch the waves, and a smile lit her face. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad here after all. Her head tilted up to look at the cliff again, only this time someone stood there. The breeze billowed their dress, flaring it around them majestically. They held onto a long staff, the moonlight shimmering off them like a halo.

“Shit!” Everleigh gasped as realization settled upon her. “Dom, we have to run. She’s here!”

The crone’s head jerked in her direction and the glow around her body intensified. Everleigh dropped to her knees,

clutching her head as a voice throbbed through her skull. *Give it back to me.*

Everleigh's mouth burst open, a terse grunt choking out of her as the pulsing in her head rose with each word the crone spoke into her.

"Everleigh!" Dom dropped to his knees in front of her. "Tell me what's wrong."

She couldn't form words in her mind, much less push them off her tongue as the pressure built and built until she swore her head would explode.

Dominic glanced up, realization dawning on his face, and he scooped Everleigh into his arms. "We've got to get you back to the Aktoon land. The barrier isn't much farther."

*I have come for what's mine.* The voice repeated in her head, each time rising an octave, the frequency jarring her from the inside out. Something warm trickled from her ears, soaking her shoulder.

A cry burst from her lips as she dabbled her fingertips in the liquid pouring out from her skull. A river of blood trailed from her nose, painting her lips and chin.

"Fuck, Everleigh!" Dominic's wide eyes told her all she needed to know. She was dying. "Hang on." Dominic's soft skin vibrated beneath her as his body morphed and shifted to his wolf form, his fur pricking at her already too sensitive skin. Throwing his head back, he howled into the night air, a cry of panic and pain to anyone who would listen.

Tears crashed over her cheeks, the salt from them mixing with the acrid coppery taste of the blood along her lips.

"Give me back what belongs to me." The crone appeared behind Dominic, and Everleigh sucked in a gasping choke.

Dom snarled, snapping at the crone with his gaping maw. Everleigh fell to the sand as he completed his shift, and he leaped at the witch, only to be blown back as she cast her hand forward, a flash of light knocking into him mid-air.

Everleigh scrambled to her knees, one hand clutching her head, the other outstretched toward crone. “Leave him alone. It’s me you want.” She snapped her wrist and bright flash of light curled out from her hand like a whip with the head of a wolf at the end, its jaw open, razor teeth bared as it struck at the crone in surprise. A visceral cry pierced the air as the crone vanished, and Ev sucked in a deep breath, like she’d been held under water for too long, a burning sensation scraping her lungs.

“You think you can beat me? Foolish child. You cannot use against me what is mine!” The crone shouted behind her, the anger in her timbre rattled Everleigh to her bones, as she turned and found the witch behind her.

The roar of a Harley in the distance perked her head up. Zaxton. He must have heard Dom’s cry. Sand kicked up around the wheels as he raced back down the beach. Zaxton leaped off the bike while it was still running, shifting in mid-air as he dove at the crone, taking her to the ground behind Everleigh.

“Zax!” Everleigh shot to a stance, watching him tumble with the crone in his claws and jaw, only for her to disappear. He heaved for breath, blood dripping along the sand where his body lay whimpering. “Goddess, no! Zaxton!” Everleigh darted to him, covering his front leg with her hand, holding pressure on it to stop the bleeding.

Everleigh snarled, eying the crone as she stood on the beach, her angry eyes glowing red as storm clouds swirled above her, angry waves crashing behind her like a tsunami.

“I don’t know what you want! You want me? Fine, you have me. You’ve found me. But leave them out of this.” Everleigh marched toward her, throwing her arms out to her sides, power thrummed through her limbs, her hands glowing in bright blue energy. “Is this what you want?” She launched energy ball after energy ball at the crone, who simply absorbed them with a laugh.

“So feisty, I would expect nothing less.” The crone stared at her, a smirk on her lips.

“Everleigh, no!” Zaxton and Dominic cried out together.

As Everleigh raised a hand to strike again, something clasped around her like a vice, lifting her into the air. “Dominic! Zaxton!” she cried out. “Put me down. I have to save them!”

*They’ll be fine. Nodin and Denali will get them.* The words popped into her mind, foggy, yet clear, as if in a dream. The voice was so familiar, it hummed through her, warming her, comforting her.

“Tag?” She finally looked up and realized she was in a set of talons, soaring through the air and her eyes shot wide open. “Holy shit! Are we flying?”

A chuckle rumbled through the giant bird, and he tilted his head. Deep russet eyes looked back at her with adoration and concern. Tag’s eyes. He may be a giant Thunderbird, but his eyes didn’t change. A calmness settled in her soul. *Yes, we’re flying. I’ve got you. We’re going back to the cabin, be there in a second.*

“How can I understand you?” she blinked. “I mean, it’s kind of muddled, but it’s like I know what you’re saying more so than hear it.

*I’m thinking it’s the bond, it allows us to talk. That’s how Nodin knew you guys were in trouble. Dominic’s howl. Nodin heard it, and while he can’t speak wolf, he understood the cry. We got there as soon as we could. I’m so sorry I didn’t get to you sooner. He sucked in a sharp breath. You’re covered in blood. Please tell me it’s not yours.*

Wind rustled through her hair with every flap of his wings, thunder growling in the sky behind him, sending a chill to her bones. Damn, he was powerful. He even made a fucking bird look sexy.

“Part mine. Part Zaxton’s. He tussled with the crone, and she injured him.” A sob tore through her chest. “Goddess, I pray he’ll be okay.”

They dipped low as they descended and his talons opened, rolling Everleigh into the grass in front of her cabin. Tag



swooped back into the sky, like he was doing a perimeter check, before diving back toward her, shifting back into his human form as his feet touched the earth. It was seamless, elegant, and sexy. He stood there, shirtless, his jeans slung low over his hips as he jogged toward her, sliding to his knees when he reached her.

“You’re stunning,” she said without thinking. Like all filters left her and the first thing in her brain made it past her lips. “I mean, thank you.”

He forced back a smirk twitching on his lips before his eyes widened and a growl rumbled through his chest. “You’re hurt. Gods, Everleigh, you have blood all over you.” He brushed her lips with his thumb before clutching her in his arms, cradling her against his warm chest.

“I’ll be okay,” she responded as he curled his fingers into her hair and pressed his lips to her head.

“You should never have gone with Dominic.” Another growl underlined each word.

Pushing away from his embrace, she narrowed her eyes. “We had to see Zax. How were we to know she’d show up so soon?” She stood up and fought the urge to cuddle back up in his arms. Mate or not, she wouldn’t stand for someone telling her what she could or couldn’t do, should or shouldn’t have done.

Tag stood and slid a hand along her arm. “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant that I should have gone with you. It was too dangerous to let you go outside the barrier.”

“What, now I’m some fragile doll you have to take care of?”

His eyes widened. “No! I mean, I don’t want you to get hurt or even worse, killed. I’m trying to do the right thing here and give you freedom, but it tears me up inside to think I left you unprotected when I could have been there with you to help you fight her off!”

She swallowed hard. “You left me unprotected? Like I can’t defend myself?”

He fanned an arm toward her. “Well, you *are* bleeding.”

“That’s not the point!”

“It kind of is.” He quirked a brow.

She snarled at him, itching to punch him in his beautiful mouth and kiss it at the same time. They stared at each other, fury and desire fueling between them like a swirling storm. They definitely had some things to iron out before they went any further with this mating thing.

She knew he had a point. It was kind of stupid to have gone outside the barrier, but she needed to see Zaxton, and definitely didn’t want to leave her brother alone with him knowing things were tumultuous at best between them.

That same thought punched a hole in her heart, and she understood where Tag was coming from. He just wanted to protect her, keep her safe because he worried about her, not because he was trying to control her. Still, she wanted to make that clear between them from the start before she tore his clothes off and sealed the hell out of this mating bond, because if that’s how he looked when he rescued her, all gallant as fuck and gorgeous with his brooding brow, a cocky smirk and bared chest, she’d be throwing herself off cliffs for the rest of her life.



NODIN AND DENALI SWOOPED IN, DROPPING DOMINIC AND Zaxton to the ground. Dominic had returned to his human form, but Zaxton remained a wolf.

“Is he badly hurt?” Tag asked, his gaze darting between Dominic and Everleigh.

Everleigh dropped to her knees beside Zaxton and placed a hand over his injury, coming away with it coated in his blood. “He’ll heal faster in his wolf form. We tend not to shift until the wound closes. But I can accelerate the healing a bit.” She glanced down at him. “Zax, I’m going to charge you with some energy that will help you, okay? It may sting a little. So be prepared.”

A low growl hummed from him, and Everleigh held her hand to his leg, a blue hazy light pulsing around her fingertips.

“Holy shit!” A voice rang out from behind him, and Tag swung around to find Reseda. Kane stepped up alongside her. “Are you dead?”

Everleigh tilted her head. “No, he’s not dead, just gravely injured.”

“Not him.” Reseda pointed. “You!”

“Me?” Everleigh’s eyebrows shot to her hairline. “Pretty sure you can see I’m alive.”

Realization dawned on Tag, and he turned to Reseda. “Wait, you used to do that, didn’t you? You had the power to

heal before you and Kane mated and you became a Thunderbird.”

“Yes,” she said in more of a whisper than a word. “How is that possible if she’s not dead? You mean, you weren’t healed by the Pul Yah?”

“What the hell are they talking about?” Everleigh said, finishing with Zaxton. She rose to her feet and walked over to them.

“Reseda was killed and brought back to life by the Mayan Pul Yah stone. The same stone Castos has been after to use with his pack, giving them the power to change at will.” Kane slid an arm along Reseda’s waist.

Reseda nodded. “It gave me healing ability as a result, while it took all of my humanity and emotions away. Kind of a double-edged sword if you ask me.”

Everleigh blinked, staring at her. “I’m one hundred percent sure I’m not dead. But I’ve been able to use my healing ability all my life. It’s from my witch side.”

“Very interesting.” Reseda clutched a hand to her chin as if her wheels were turning.

A groan forced their attention to Zaxton and Everleigh darted back to his side. No longer in wolf form, he lay in the grass, his arm healing under a tattered mess of shredded muscle. “I’m gonna need a drink.”

“It’s healing, but it’ll take a little while for the muscles to stitch back together completely. At least I managed to reattach it.” Everleigh winced, and Tag stalked his way over to them, coming to a halt behind her.

He tried to remain calm, but the energy wafting off her toward this Zaxton guy pumped a jealous rage through his body, and it took every ounce of willpower to hold back a snarl. He understood they were friends, maybe even had some kind of history. He had to learn to trust their bond, if only it would let him. Every single part of him felt out of control, in chaos, a storm of mixed emotions tearing through him all at

once. This shit was no joke, and Tag felt like he was going to need a drink too.

Zaxton nodded. "I appreciate that. While I would normally let my more macho side decline your offer and heal on my own, I saw what that crone was capable of. In a matter of minutes, she incapacitated Dom, me, and almost Everleigh. We'll all need to be at full strength in order to take her down."

"Wait, how is Zaxton here inside the barrier?" Everleigh asked.

"When Nodin and Denali flew back in, they allowed him passage inside," Kane responded. "They knew he was no longer a threat."

"So, he can come and go now?" She looked at him as he walked off with Maquinna.

Tag nodded. "If he proves himself worthy, like Dominic did, we will allow him safe passage through."

"He just saved my life. I kind of think that would give him a lifetime pass." Ev punched her hands to her hips.

"Until he pisses us off and we block him again." Denali folded his arms.

"You, stay out of this." She pointed her finger at Denali.

He threw his hands up. "What did I do? I was just stating a fact. You know there's been a long-standing feud with the wolves and Thunderbirds. It didn't happen overnight, and it won't simply go away overnight."

Tag stepped forward. "Listen, we're all running on adrenaline and fear right now. We're back in the barrier, Zaxton's okay, and so is Everleigh. We're safe for the moment. So, let's take the rest of the night to get some sleep and we circle back in the morning to formulate a plan. We'll have to contact the coven and let them know."

Zaxton rotated his shoulder, gripping it with his other hand through a wince. "I'm not going anywhere. I won't leave her side until this crone is dead."

“You don’t get a say in that,” Tag said, stepping closer to him. All his defenses shot up, and anger sweltered like a fever beneath his skin. Something about this guy irritated the shit out of Tag. Everything inside him raged at his even being anywhere near Everleigh, like he was still some kind of a threat.

Zaxton marched up to Tag’s face, pointing a finger at him. “Listen, bird boy, I’ve known Everleigh since we were kids. You don’t know a damned thing about her. Do you know her favorite color is blue? Do you know she loves to read? Do you know her nose wrinkles and she makes this clicking sound with her teeth when she’s pissed off? Do you know that she loves animals and wanted to be a veterinarian before her life was pulled out from under her? You don’t know jack shit about her, so don’t tell me what I get a say in with her. You have no idea what we’ve been through.”

Tag clenched his jaw, yanking Zaxton forward by his jacket. Zaxton struggled against his hold, snatching a hand to Tag’s throat, both of them hitching back their arms to strike the other with their free hands.

He spoke like he was in love with her, and everything Tag sensed earlier about him was true. They had a past together. Tag couldn’t help it that she’d been hidden from him until now. He didn’t have a say in who the hell the powers that be paired him with, but because of their bond he felt like he had loved her all his life. The minute he realized she was his mate, it was as if a piece of his missing soul had been found, a part he didn’t even realize was empty until she looked in his eyes and everything felt whole.

He didn’t know anything about her, but he planned to find out. He wanted a lifetime of getting to know her, exploring each other together, finding out how they fit together in this world. But most of all, he wanted her to also want that with him, and if she didn’t, then what would their bond matter? The universe may have brought them together, but he wouldn’t make someone stay with him if they didn’t want him in return.

Ember appeared holding a bag of popcorn, chomping so loud everyone’s head turned. “What? This is better than Real

Housewives of Atlanta. Just sayin’.” She offered the bag to Denali who scooped some in his hands with a shrug.

Tag lowered his punching arm and growled, pushing Zaxton off him. “Maybe it should just be Everleigh’s choice who she wants to be with.”

He turned to stalk back to his cabin, but pain seared him in the chest, ripping through his body like a venomous poison. Clutching his hand over his heart, tremors ricocheted through his body, and his legs buckled beneath him, toppling him to his knees. He fell forward on his hands, forcing air in and out of his lungs, fighting through the stabs of pain tearing him up from the inside.

“Tag!” Everleigh shouted as she ran toward him.

A circle of people formed around him as a laugh rang out through the air. “A barrier by your Great Spirits won’t hide you long. All I want is what is mine. Until then, I’m taking something of yours.”

Tag garbled words as his chest constricted, fighting for breath to return to his lungs. A choked gasp broke over his lips as the witch’s snake slithered along her headdress, standing outside the wall of the barrier in front of them.

“No!” Everleigh shouted. “It’s me you want. I’ll go, leave him out of this.”

Tag struggled to thrust his arm toward her, desperate to tell Everleigh not to do it. He was already destined to die, and if it saved her life, then so be it.

*Don’t you dare think that way, Rowtag Aktoon. We’re both making it through this.* Everleigh’s voice filtered through their bond. The ferocity in her tiny voice made Tag chuckle, costing him a precious breath as he remembered he was dying. At least he’d go with a smile and the memory of their amazing kiss.

*You thought it was amazing?* She asked through the bond link.

*I think you’re amazing, the kiss was an added bonus. I’m just sorry we didn’t have more time together. I really wanted to*

*get to know you better. My favorite color is blue too. I love looking at the stars over the ocean from the clifftop. And I secretly love musicals. Don't tell Dom, or I'll never hear the end of it. We have a bet that if I listened to Wicked and I liked it, I'd have to sing a karaoke duet with him. I have no problem admitting I love musicals but have a terrible fear of singing in public. So, now I can die with my secrets told.*

*Tag! Why the hell are you telling me all this right now? Seriously, you should be thinking of something else!*

*No, I want to make sure my mate knows I see her. I feel her. I want her to know I want what's best for her, and I'm willing to share the best and worst of me with her. You should know a little bit about me before I die. At least have something to say about me at the funeral other than, he was a bird and liked to tie you up.*

*Tie me up?*

*I know you were there in the dream, Ev, don't deny it. A chuckle ripped through him, bursting into a cough as he struggled to suck in another breath through the slice of pain ripping through his chest.*

*Tag...don't move.*

*Don't worry, not really going anywhere.*

A flash of light blinded him, and he thrust his eyes shut to block it out. A pair of hands slammed into his chest, and he rolled onto his back.

“Everleigh?” he blinked, watching her straddle him in front of everyone. “Now’s probably not the time for that.”

“It is. Watch.” Her fingertips curled into his shirt, pulses of energy strobing through his skin, easing the pain to a dull ache. “Don’t talk.”

“You’re healing me?”

She thrust her head back, as if the pain leeches out of him and into her. A hiss left her lips through clenched teeth. He pushed himself up, brushing away her hand as sweat beaded



on her brow. “Stop! You’ll waste all your energy battling her for my life.”

“Tag, you don’t understand.” Tears careened over her cheeks. You have venom in your system. That snake bite in the spirit realm...it was real.” She ripped open his shirt, running her fingers over the two puncture marks on his torso. “That’s how she’s tracking us. Through the snake venom.”

Tag pressed his fingers along the wound, pulling back a mix of blood and an oozing golden liquid. “That explains a lot. I’ve really not been feeling myself lately.”

“Well, I’m sure a mix of the mating bond, hormones, and snake venom will do that to a person.” Everleigh pressed her hands back over the wound, the healing hazy blue light pulsing from her, penetrating his skin with a sharp coolness.

He eased her back, clutching her wrists in his hands, holding them tenderly but tight. “It will continue to infect both of us the more you try and heal me, Ev. It’s okay. Let her focus on me. It saves her from coming after you.”

Her head tilted up and they locked gazes. “You’ve never called me that before.”

“What...Ev?”

She shook her head. “You’ve always just called me Everleigh. Only those close to me call me Ev.” She hitched her shoulders, and a smile broke on her lips. “It sounds nice when you say it.”

“How do we get the venom out of him?” Nodin asked, squatting next to Tag.

“Only she can release it. The more I try healing him, the more it seems to replicate in his system.” She brushed her arm over her brow.

“It seems to have subsided, for now.” Tag rubbed his chest, the throbbing pain easing.

“The crone disappeared.” Zaxton chimed in, running a hand through his hair. “I tried to chase her down the barrier, but she vanished into thin air.”

Nodin held out a hand, easing Tag to a stance. “How do you feel?”

“I’ve been better. But I’m not seething with rage or burning with poison at the moment, so I’m going to call it good.” Tag shook his arms out, wriggling his fingertips, making sure he still had feeling in all his limbs. While he’d never been so scared in his life on the brink of death’s doorstep, Everleigh’s soft voice calmed him in the storm. He understood the bond a little bit more, how when your missing piece is by your side, you can make it through anything.

He stared at Everleigh, her black cloak in tatters, blood smeared in her hair and face, dying her white hair almost pink, and she was still the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He hoped they’d made more of a connection in the last few minutes, and he could provide her with the same security and comfort that she did to him when it mattered most. She was his world now, and he’d do all he could to prove that to her.

“How about you Ev, you holding up okay?” Tag asked, brushing a hand along her arm. Her return smile sent a wave of flutters through his heart.

“I think Tag was right earlier. We all could use some rest then regroup in the morning.” Everleigh rubbed her palm against her forehead, smearing blood across it. “And a shower.”

Tag nodded. “We appreciate everyone’s help, but let’s all get some sleep.”

Zaxton cupped her by the elbow and Tag did his best not to lose his shit again. “I’m not leaving, even if I have to sleep outside your door, Ev. We have no idea what the crone is capable of, especially if she attacks at our most vulnerable while we’re sleeping.”

“Um, you’re probably right.” Everleigh glanced back at Tag. *Is it okay if I come stay with you in your cabin, and I give Zax mine?* She asked through their bond.

Tag’s heart thrummed in his chest, nerves and excitement and a bit of fear crashed into him at the same time. *Of course.*

*I can grab your things for you and move them over.*

*It's okay. I'll get them. I want to shower first, then I'll head over.* She smiled.

*Okay. Just let yourself in when you're ready. I'll be in the shower myself.*

Dominic eyed them both. “Did you guys just have some kind freaky conversation with only your eyes?”

Tag chuckled and couldn't hold back the smile curling over his lips as he dipped his head. He loved the idea of their secret communication no one else could share. “Um, we seem to be able to communicate through our mating bond.”

A growl rumbled from behind him, and he found Zaxton standing with his arms crossed, shooting daggers with his eyes at Tag. He could understand where the guy was coming from now that he'd experienced the bond, the link to Everleigh. While Zaxton may not have that with her, they did have a past, and he clearly still had deep rooted feelings for her. He fought the envy simmering just beneath the surface, itching to boil over into rage. He would prove to Ev he could get control of his issues and be the mate she needed him to be.

“Zax, you can stay at my place.” Everleigh walked toward her cabin. Zaxton sported a wide grin as he turned and followed her. “I'm going to go stay with Tag in his.”

Zaxton's face fell like someone just took away his candy. And Tag smiled all the way to his cabin.



EVERLEIGH OPENED THE DOOR TO HER CABIN AND FANNED HER arm for Zax to enter.

“So, they have you stuffed in a box,” he said, walking around the one room cabin. “Quaint.”

“Look, it’s only temporary and at least it’s protected. I wasn’t expecting the Ritz Carlton.” She grabbed her bag and headed to the bathroom in a huff. Tag’s family appeared to be simple people, living off the land like their ancestors, one with nature, not one to spoil it by putting up a high rise or mansion. She appreciated that about them. Being a witch and a wolf, nature flowed in her veins, and she often heard its cries as a result of the careless and ignorant.

“I was only joking. I didn’t mean to piss you off, Ev.” He ran a hand through his hair, jerking to a stop as he cringed, clutching his arm against his chest.

Sighing, Everleigh dropped her bag and walked over to him. “Let me have a look. It should be almost fully healed by now.” Running her hands along his chest, she slid them along his shoulders, easing the jacket from his body.

Both of their breaths hitched, and he grabbed her by the waist, tugging her closer, each pull sucking the last bit of air from her lungs.

“Zax, what the hell are you doing?” Her heart hammered all the way into her throat, part excitement, part fear. He hovered so close she could count the tiny specks of stubble framing his jawline.

Staring into her eyes, he ran a slender finger along her cheek. “There’s so much I want to say to you...need to tell you. I don’t know when I’ll have another chance.” His fingertip trailed slowly across her lips before he cupped her cheek with his palm.

She locked onto his gaze, her breath panting in and out in shallow spurts. “You can always tell me anything. We’re friends, remember?”

He took a visible swallow, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. His jaw set firm, he narrowed his eyes, sadness and pain dulling them to a light green. “No, we’re not.”

“What?” She blinked. “What do you mean?”

He dropped his hands back to her waist, curling his fingers into her hips. “Remember when I told you that I never got a chance to kiss my mate?”

“Uh huh,” she answered in more of a moan than a word.

“I want to rectify that.” He leaned in, and time stopped right along with her heart. “Just one kiss.” His lips brushed against hers, soft and hesitant, waiting for her to respond. Goddess, they were softer than she ever imagined for a tough bad boy like Zax. But the gentleness in his touch and the breath whispering over her lips took her to another world. Suddenly, she was sixteen again. She never thought this day would come. Was this really happening?

She tilted her head and rose up to meet his mouth but as her lips pressed against his, she hesitated, Tag flashing through her mind. It all felt wrong, so terribly wrong.

Slowly, he eased his mouth back from the kiss, brushing his thumb along her wet lips. All the feelings she thought she had for Zaxton turned to ash, blowing away with the last taste of his kiss. Her heart wanted Tag. *She* wanted Tag. She reeled back her conversation with him outside moments ago, and everything inside her ached to run to him.

“I’m sorry. I just...” He stared at her, swallowing hard as he pulled back. “I just needed the closure.”

As she looked into his eyes, his words slammed into her like a baseball bat. “Wait, what did you say?”

He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand and stepped back from her. “You should go take your shower.” Scrubbing a hand down his face, he turned toward the door.

“Where are you going? What the hell did you just say to me?” She clutched him by the elbow and forced him to turn back around. As he swung toward her, the long strands of his hair whisked away, revealing his face, and a gasp popped from her mouth.

Tears.

His gorgeous green eyes were buried in a pool of them, but only one slid along his cheek.

“Zax?” She shook her head and wiped the tear away. “I don’t understand.”

“It was you.” He jerked from her grasp and launched a punch into the wall, his hand going right through before he pressed his head against the doorframe. “I rejected *you*.”

She stepped back, grabbing the back of a chair for support as her knees wobbled beneath her like Jell-O. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“We were young.” He huffed, clearing his throat. “I mean, gods, you were barely sixteen. I had just turned eighteen.” He turned back around and faced her, clasp a hand on the back of his neck. “One day you were Dom’s little sister. Then, out of nowhere—your scent. When I looked at you, everything changed.”

The words tumbled through her mind, not making any sense. Diving into her memories, she desperately tried to find one that she could use to rebut his confession. This had to be some kind of joke. Why would he be saying this, doing this right now?

Everleigh stared him down, desperate for more clarity. “But...we were never together. I don’t understand.”

He clenched a fist. “By the time it happened, Dom already had planned to get you to the witches. It all happened so fast. Castos was close to killing you for the secret of whatever is in your blood. Dom had to get you out quickly.” He hung his head. “I went to tell him you were my mate, and he wailed on me.” A soft chuckle bounced in his chest as he stared into space, as if he were reliving the moment. “He wanted to hit me, but he pulled every punch.” His gaze landed back on her. “I begged him to take me with you. Demanded that I move with you to the coven, that you were my mate, and I wasn’t going to leave your side.”

She continued to stare at him like he was an alien, her heart jackhammering in her chest. What the hell was she supposed to do with this information? What was she supposed to do about Tag? She knew in her heart that Tag was her mate. She felt it in their kiss, their dream, in the spirit realm.

Sure, she may have had some lingering feelings for Zaxton, but it was all from a childhood crush, wasn’t it? Because when she kissed Zax just now, it felt so very wrong. How could he be her mate too? She didn’t feel the zing, the pull, the tug, the heartstring she had with Tag. “I...No...This can’t possibly...I mean, if I was your mate, why didn’t you come with me to the coven?”

He shook his head. “Dom talked me out of it. He was right. I couldn’t live in the coven with the witches. Castos would know immediately about the bond between us if I up and left when you did, and he would use me to try and get to you. He could pull Alpha and then I’d be helpless. I had to stay with the pack, keep an eye on him and make sure he never picked up on your trail because Dom had his own set of problems with your dad, him trying to marry Nodin and Elara and that whole debacle. The further apart we were, the better chance you had at not being found.” He paused and dipped his head for several heartbeats before looking her in the eyes. “So, I had to reject you in order to save you.”

“What?” Tears welled in her eyes. The sadness in his words, in his gaze, in his trembling hands as he brushed the back of her head. *Oh goddess, what he had to go through.*

She glanced to the floor as a realization hit her. “I think...I always knew. But you never paid me much attention.” A light laugh trickled up her throat. “I was so stupid in love with you.”

He cupped both of her cheeks. “I knew how you felt. I just didn’t reciprocate out of respect for Dom. That is, until the bond snapped into place, and I couldn’t deny it anymore.” Stepping back, he folded his arms and looked at the ceiling. “Then the fucker stabbed me in the back. I guess respect only goes one way.”

“Why don’t I remember any of this?” She shook her head. “What happened between you two?”

He brushed back a lock of hair slipping across her face. “He had the witches wipe your memories, so that you didn’t know about the bond.”

“Wait, you’re telling me I knew? I knew you were my mate, not just a crush?”

He gave a terse nod. “Dom felt it was better if you never knew. We didn’t have time to seal the bond, so it was easier to wipe it. You had so many other issues, you didn’t need to feel guilt and the sadness. I had to be the bearer of that burden. He couldn’t risk you trying to come back to the pack for me.”

“He stripped you from my life? Without my consent?” Anger bled in her veins, and she needed to punch something, preferably Dom. Sparks tingled at her fingertips as energy swelled inside her.

“Whoa, Ev, you need to calm down.” Zaxton gripped her shoulders.

“Don’t tell me what I should or shouldn’t do!” Clenching her teeth, she seethed at the very thought of her original mate being ripped from her, forced to reject her because of everyone else in her life, Castos, the crone, and now because of her brother.

“Yeah, but, you’re like on fire.” He pointed to her hands, sparking with blue flames of energy.



She jumped back, shook her hands out and the flames died as she reeled her magic back inside herself. *Shit. How the hell did that happen?*

“Goddess, what is going on?” Stepping backward until she hit the bed, she stared at her hands, at Zaxton, then out the window toward Tag’s cabin. “I have to talk to Dom. I want answers.”

Zaxton took a hesitant step forward. “Ev, I didn’t come here to try and seduce you, nor to cause a rift between you and your brother. I came here to give you the truth, the answers you need to be able to move on. I came here for closure, for the both of us. You needed to know, and I need to get over you.” He looked over his shoulder towards the window. “You have a second chance at a mate. As much as it burns my gut to see you with him, you deserve to be happy. You deserve to know your past and still try and make a future. I came here to set both of us free.”

“I let you kiss me.” She shook her head. “I tried to kiss you back! How is that setting us free?”

“With that kiss, I closed the bond between us.” He blew out a hard breath. “With a little help from Ember.”

“Wait...what?” Her eyes widened like saucers.

“I know you were fighting feelings for both me and Tag. I saw the way you looked at me. But I also saw how you looked at him. Your bond is stronger with him. I don’t want to get in the way of your happiness, Everleigh.” He took her hands in his, rubbing the back of them with his calloused thumbs. “You deserve a happy ending. And I’m going to do all I can to give that to you, even if it doesn’t include me.”

Tears welled in her eyes and crashed over her cheeks. “Did you use magic on me to break our bond?”

He shook his head. “I’d never use magic on you, Ev. I used it on me. Ten years, I’ve longed for you. Ten years, I had hope we’d find each other and could reconnect. Fate has a real funny way of bringing you what you ask for. I just never thought there’d be another mate in the mix.” He shrugged.

“It’s not unheard of, but rare.” A laugh broke through his lips as he sniffled. “Don’t tell anyone I told you this but, Tag’s an okay guy. I’ve tussled with him a few times over the years. He’s strong and has a kind spirit about him, and he’s pretty dedicated to his family. If there’s anyone I’d like to see you with, it would be him, despite him being a bird.”

It all explained so much, the residual of the bond, why she had felt so conflicted about Tag, even after their kiss. Something continued to niggle at her from deep inside, and she had no idea it was a whole other mating bond, one swiped from her memories, but not from her heart. That explained why once they kissed, everything broke away. He released her.

She wiped away the last tear falling over his cheek. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just don’t say you saw me crying.” He pointed at her and winked. “I’ll deny it vehemently.”

A laugh bubbled up in her throat. “Your super-secret soft side stays with me.” She plunked down on the bed and crossed her arms. “So, how did you get Ember to agree to help you?”

A smirk lined his lips. “She wanted to pet the puppy, she said. So, I asked her if there was a way to break a mating bond magically, and she said she could do it, if I let her pet me in my wolf form.” He shrugged. “I figured it was a fair deal.”

Everleigh’s eyebrows quirked. “I’m not going to even ask you to elaborate on that one.”

“Better not to. She’s a very aggressive petter.” He winked. “I just had to kiss you for it to work. It takes your greatest desire and dissolves it.”

“Your greatest desire was to kiss me?”

His lips twitched to a smile. “One of them.” A long pause filled the air before he looked her in the eyes. “I figured it would be good closure for both of us. Once we kissed, we both felt the bond turn to ash. I could feel it in your lips the second it hit.”

“So, you don’t feel anything for me at all, right now?” A knife twisted in her gut, the anger of not having a choice once

again in the say of her own life. Everyone making decisions for her. *When would her life be her own?*

“It doesn’t quite work that way. I still love you, Ev. I probably always will. But the need to be with you, the longing, the ache, the tie to you...it’s gone.”

She stared at him, really seeing him for the first time. Everything she thought she knew about Zaxton Balder changed, like someone just lifted a veil. A lightness hit her chest, like a burden lifted, a heavy weight no longer weighing her down. He broke the bond to give her a choice.

He bowed his head. “Maybe I’m a coward, not wanting to hold onto that anymore. But I figured you didn’t either, especially when you have a new mate now. It wasn’t fair to either of you. And I’m not one for sharing, so that was completely out of the question.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “That could have been fun.”

He pursed his lips. “It could have landed him in the hospital. If I would have seen him touch you, I’d turn into a ball of rage and shred the poor bastard. This was the safest option for everyone involved.”

Her lips pulled to the side in a grimace. “Hm, when you put it that way.”

“I also think he senses it, our bond. Or did. That whole slamming my head into the barrier trick was a big clue. It messed with his head and heart, just as much as ours.”

Ev shot up from the bed. “That would explain a lot.” The moments of blistering rage that Tag displayed replayed in her head. They seemed to completely contradict the person he was outside of them, and her heart swelled as she remembered how he dropped to his knees and apologized to her for something he didn’t even realize was affecting him. He really was the sweetheart guy he seemed to be.

“Oh, goddess, Tag!” She slapped her forehead. “I’ve left him hanging. I was supposed to shower and then go to his place. Shit. He probably thinks I ditched him.”

“I’m sure he’ll understand once you explain things to him.”

“No.” She shook her head and paced the room, pressing her palm to her forehead as everything played on loop in her mind. “No, I can’t tell him.”

“You have to, Ev! He deserves to know.”

“I’m supposed to walk over there and tell him we kissed, but hey, it’s cool now, because we’re no longer bonded. Let’s seal our bond now and screw until morning.”

Zaxton raised a brow and stared at her like she had two heads.

She pursed her lips and glared back at him. “What?”

“Well, when you put it that way...”

She clutched her chest and paced the length of the room again. “Fuck. I have to tell him, don’t I?”

“You don’t want to start out your relationship with secrets, Ev. Learn from what we just went through.”

She clutched the corner of the wall and banged her head against it. “Really? Could things possibly get any worse right now?”

He threw his hands up and sighed. “Well, now you done fucked up. Never ever put something like that out into the universe. We’re going to have lava rain down on us from Mount Rainier or some shit.”

She peeled herself away from the wall and narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re not helping here.”

“Seriously, just talk to him. He knows we have history together. He’ll understand.”

Maybe he would. But Everleigh wasn’t quite sure she even did at the moment. All she knew was that she needed to punch the ever-loving hell out of her brother and somehow try and explain all this to Tag. Not necessarily in that order.

But first, a shower.

“Ev,” a choked growl broke through her thoughts, and she turned around.

Zaxton clutched his head, his fingertips digging into his skull. He thrust his head back, mouth wide open in pain. “No!” he shouted, ramming himself into a wall.

“Zax! What the hell is going on?” She stopped short as his head dipped forward and his hands fell away from his head. Slowing raising it back up, bloodshot eyes glared at her.

His eyes widened. “Run,” he choked out.

“What? Why? What’s happening?”

“I can’t hold him off much longer. Fucking run, Everleigh. Run!” He grasped his head once more, stalking toward her with labored, clumsy steps.

“I don’t...I don’t understand?” She leaned toward the door, glancing at him over her shoulder as red overtook the usual green color of his eyes. “Oh, goddess. Castos!”

“Now!” Zaxton roared as his body hummed, shaking with the preamble of a shift coming. She knew what that meant, he was forcing Zaxton to shift against his will.

“Fuck.” Everleigh whipped open the door and launched herself out of it, an ear-splitting howl right behind her as she scrambled down the path.

She didn’t want to have to resort to using magic on him. Magic always came with a price, consequences you’d least expect. She swore she’d never use it against someone she loved ever again. But she had to buy herself some time.

She stopped and whirled around to face Zaxton. Holding her hands up, she called the energy up from inside her, tapping into the flow, forcing it out through her fingertips. She mumbled a quick incantation and thrust her hands forward as a flash of light expelled outward, forming a wall between her and Zaxton.

Castos had found her and pulled Alpha on Zaxton. He now had a man on the inside. And there was nothing she could do about it.



TAG TOWEL DRIED HIS HAIR AND STARED AT HIMSELF IN THE mirror. *When did everything get so complicated?* A burning sensation skittered across his chest. The venom seared just under his skin, and he clenched his teeth. He thought back to his time in the spirit realm, focusing on the crone. His heart ramped up as the visions in his head flashed, bringing her face into view, along with the serpent. Right before it struck him, he remembered noticing something about the crone, but for the life of him, he couldn't remember what. It felt like it was something so important. But the thought remained just out of his reach, like a word you couldn't remember on the tip of your tongue, no matter how hard you tried.

Sucking in a deep breath, he forced his heart rate back down and slid on a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt. He left his room, walking out into his tiny little house. It had never bothered him much before, the simple life. He had everything he needed.

But now, what would Everleigh think? She'd spent the last ten years of her life in some fantastical castle in an entirely different realm of existence. How could she ever want to live here in a log cabin in the middle of the woods?

As much as he had wanted to find his mate, he never thought it would be under these circumstances. The pull to her was undeniable, like every molecule in his body needed to be close to her, joined with her to the point it almost hurt.

But who was she as a person? How could he remain mated to someone knowing he would just die on her in the end? It wasn't fair to her.

Everything suddenly turned on its head. He sucked in a choking breath, like a punch to the gut. As he gasped, something in his chest lightened, and breath returned to his lungs.

*What the hell was that?* He blinked, shaking his head, clutching a hand to his heart.

Everleigh. He no longer felt her.

“Everleigh?” He whipped open his door and darted for her cabin.

Across the open field, he saw a figure running toward him, her white hair whipping around her like a cloak.

“Everleigh!” Tag shouted, kicking up speed. “What’s wrong?”

“Tag!” She yelled back, reaching for him. “Run! Get Dominic! He’s not answering his cellphone.”

“I’m not leaving you, what’s wrong?” He just about reached her when a black cloud of fur blurred in the distance behind her. “Who the hell is that?”

“Zaxton,” she said, clinging to his hand, yanking him with her.

“Why is he chasing you?” Tag curled his fingers around hers and pulled her forward toward Nodin’s cabin on the other side of the longhouse.

“I think Castos pulled Alpha on him and has overtaken his will. We were talking and all of a sudden, he just changed, started yelling at me to run.”

“Fuck!” He snarled, glancing over his shoulder. “Go, run to Dominic. Nodin lives in the first cabin on the far side of the longhouse down the path. I’ll keep Zaxton occupied.”

She jerked to a stop and clung tighter to his hands. “He’s not himself right now, Tag.”

“I know you don’t know me very well yet, but trust me, I can hold my own against a wolf.”

“I have no doubt you can. But he’s got Castos driving his mind right now, and he’ll show no mercy.” She shook her head. “This isn’t like a tussle in the woods because they got too close to the barrier. He won’t stop until he’s got me.”

“Then I’ll just have to take out the trash.” Tag clenched his fists, the tattoos along his arms and chest glowing a bright blue as he called upon his Thunderbird spirit inside him to shift.

“Tag, please don’t hurt him. He’s not doing this of his own accord. Trust me, he would never willingly hurt me.”

“You don’t know that. You’ve been gone for ten years, Ev. A lot could have changed. Maybe it was a ploy all along, a trap to lure you in close and then take you when you least expected it.”

She shook her head. “No, you don’t understand. I know for a fact he wouldn’t hurt me.” Worry strained her face as tears welled in her eyes.

Tag looked back at the charging wolf. “I get the feeling you’re about to tell me something I’m not going to like.”

“It’s a long story and we don’t have the time. Just, please be careful.”

“I promise, I won’t hurt him.”

“No. I mean you. I don’t want you to get hurt.” She cupped his cheek and his heart raced up a notch.

A smile curled his mouth. “I’ll be okay.” With a running start, his tattoos glowed until the light enveloped him, shifting him into his Thunderbird form. Wind carried his wings, lifting him higher into the air as he soared across the open field between the houses.

The black wolf streaked through the grass, racing toward Everleigh. Tag swooped down, diving toward him, opening his talons to grab him when Zaxton flipped mid-air and turned on him, taking a swipe at him with his gaping jaw, knocking Tag out of the air.



Tag rolled along the ground, scrabbling for purchase in the earth with his claws. A blur of movement caught his eye as Zaxton darted toward him, leaping into the air as he dove at Tag once more. Slamming a wing down, Tag blasted the wolf backward with gale-force winds, head over tail, down the ridge of the meadow.

Tag took back to the sky, flying higher and higher as he circled, creating a storm around him like a shield, before he free fell back toward the earth, aiming for Zaxton, bringing the storm with him. A bolt of lightning crackled through the sky, striking the ground in front of the wolf's paws, forcing him to weave to the right. Tag struck the ground with bolt after bolt, directing the wolf's path away from Everleigh and back toward the open field.

The wolf stopped and stared at him, eyes burning red like they were on fire. A howl pierced the sky, ripping through Tag's eardrum like a sword. Losing his balance, he dropped from the sky and plummeted to the ground.

The wolf stalked toward him. As it reached striking distance, Tag eyed another face scrambling toward him.

"Time to go to sleep, puppy!" Ember returned, shouting, and a flash of light blinded Tag. Shielding himself with a wing, he thrust his head away.

A whimper escaped the wolf's lips as it shifted back to human form, and Zaxton lay, passed out in the burnt patches of grass.

"Is he hurt?" Everleigh stepped up to Ember.

"Naw, just napping." Ember leaned down toward Zaxton. "Bad puppy. Going to have to punish you later." She play-snarled at him and walked away.

Tag's eyes widened as he shook his head. Ember was quite...unique.

Everleigh dropped by Tag's side and laid her hand on his wing. "Are you hurt, Tag?"

He shook his head, realizing he was still in Thunderbird form. Shifting back, pain shot through his ribs, and he rolled to

his knees. “Okay, maybe bruised a little.”

“Let’s get you back to your cabin,” Nodin said, lifting him up by his shoulder, and Tag hunched over.

“What do we do with him,” Tag said, lifting his chin toward Zaxton.

“We’ll lock him in the cabin handcuffed until he wakes up.” Dominic heaved Zaxton over his shoulder.

“Where are you going to get handcuffs?” Everleigh asked.

Dominic quirked a brow.

Everleigh’s nose crinkled and she shook her head. “Forget I asked.”

Tag smirked. He hoped her aversion to cuffs was only because she pictured her brother using them, because he distinctly remembered she liked being tied up in their shared dream.

“Heaven’s, what happened out here?” Maquinna made her way to the scene, a woven blanket wrapped around her shoulders. “It’s nearly three in the morning!”

“Sorry, Maq,” Dominic said, swinging Zaxton around, almost taking Tag out with him.

“Watch it with the napping wolf guy.” Tag pushed Dominic out of his personal space before turning toward his grandmother. “Apparently, Zaxton’s being used as a pawn by Castos. Ember knocked his ass out, but we have to keep an eye on him.”

Maquinna cupped a hand over her mouth. “Will he be okay?”

“He’ll be fine,” Ember said, laying some Chapstick on her lips. “He might have a bomb of a headache when he wakes up, though.”

“Where’s everyone else? Still asleep?” Tag asked, wondering about Reseda, Kane and his cousins.

“Like rocks. Reseda’s taken to sleeping with a sound machine because of all the howling at night. Everyone else

snores.” Maquinna sighed. “Are you sure everyone’s all right?”

“We’re fine, Grandmother.” Nodin grabbed her hand and kissed the back of it. “I’m sorry we woke you. We all need to get some rest. It’s been a very long night.”

“Boy, howdy, has it,” Everleigh said, scratching her head, tugging her hand back like it was stuck to her hair.

“Come on, you still haven’t cleaned up. You can go to my place and shower there.” Tag nodded his head toward his cabin.

With a heavy sigh, Everleigh and Tag said their goodnights and made their way to Tag’s house.

“All my things are back in my cabin,” Everleigh said as she walked into his house.

“It’s late and you just need to get clean. I’ll bring them over for you in the morning. Tonight, I’ll give you a shirt to sleep in.” Tag grabbed a towel, washcloth and a long-sleeve button down for her to wear. The idea of her wearing his shirt made him smile, but something wasn’t quite right; it felt off.

“Thanks.” She took it and ducked into the bathroom to shower.

As Tag waited for her, he prepped the sofa for himself, planning on giving her the bed. Sitting on the edge of the sofa, the ache that once needled his soul seemed faint, almost quiet. The part that had burned like an all-consuming fire for Everleigh earlier turned brittle and cold. That deep-seeded need to be with her, claim her, become one with her was just... gone.

Worry soured his stomach the longer he sat and thought about it. Had something happened to their bond? They’d only known each other for a couple of days, maybe this was how it worked. Maybe the tug of the bond ebbed and flowed. Maybe it was dependent on his proximity to her. He had zero experience with mating bonds, and it was far too late to go to Nodin or Kane and have a deep brotherly discussion about it.

She opened the door, towel drying her hair, and a flutter hit Tag's heart. He'd never seen someone more beautiful in his life. The shirt hung low on her thighs, the top several buttons left undone. Heat welled up inside him, ziplining straight to his dick, and he had to force himself to look away. Maybe the bond was still there.

But it felt different. It was no longer like a hunger or driving need, but more of a desire to be with her. Tag swallowed hard and got up from his perch on the edge of the sofa.

"I'll take the couch. You can have the bed. It's just through that door." He pointed down the hall, then clutched an arm around his midsection as pain radiated out from the venom and tussle with Zaxton.

"Tag, you take the bed. You're injured and shouldn't be sleeping on the sofa." She marched over and tugged him toward the bedroom.

No, he'd feel like a dick. There would be no way he could sleep in the bed knowing she was stuck on the sofa. "I can't do that to you."

"Will you let me heal you then?" She quirked a brow.

"You can't heal the venom, remember? But maybe, if you're up to it, the ribs are a bit tender." He shrugged with a grimace.

A small smile curved over her mouth, and he pictured kissing them again, missing their taste. She stepped up to him, sliding her hands under his t-shirt and heat permeated his skin along her fingertips. A moan shuffled its way out of his mouth as his lips hung open, her touch drowning him in warmth and comfort.

"That feels amazing," he whispered.

"All better," she said, easing her hands away, leaving a coolness in its wake.

"I'm not so sure it is. I think you may have missed a spot," he said, pointing to a lower portion on his chest.

Her light laugh warmed his heart, and it was the cutest sound he'd ever heard. He liked her laugh. She had a beautiful smile and she needed to do it more. But he realized with all that she'd had to endure, smiling was probably hard to come by for her. He hoped he could give her a few of those moments with him while he had the chance.

She tilted her head and looked up into his eyes, finding them glassy. He cupped her hand. "What's wrong?" He stared at her with pause. "I mean, besides the obviousness of our situation." Tugging on her hand, he swung her arm slowly, playfully, working that smile back to her lips. "You gonna tell me what you wanted to, earlier?"

Her smile went from thin to worse as worry draped her face. "Tag..." she sighed and pulled him toward the bedroom, tugging him to sit on the edge of the bed. "We need to talk."

"Well, nothing good ever comes from that at the beginning of a conversation." He pursed his lips, and suddenly, he already knew what she was going to say. Their bond was broken. He'd felt it earlier. He no longer had that heartstring tying them together, that call from her heart to his that the powers put there for them to find each other. Something somewhere had gone terribly wrong.

"I don't want this to come out the wrong way, so please hear me out—" she started, but Tag placed a finger against her lips.

He shook his head, wanting to get it out before he heard it from her lips. The devastation of hearing her confirm it would do him in. At least he got to know what it felt like to have a mate before he died. "I already know what you're going to say. I feel it, Ev. Or more so, I don't anymore. I know our bond broke."

Her eyes widened like saucers, and she choked out a gasp. "Wh-what?"

"Earlier, before the Zaxton incident, I was waiting for you to come over. I'd just gotten out of the shower and was thinking about you, about our bond. One minute I was craving you, had this insatiable need to claim you, make you mine to

the point of madness and then, poof, it was like a light switch, and it had gone dark. Black, like ash blowing away with the wind.” He hung his head. “I don’t know what happened, or why. Maybe it’s because I’m dying and the powers that be want to give you a new mate. One that’s better for you, or at least will live longer.”

“No.” She shook her head. “No!” she said a little louder. “What?”

He bit his lip and held her hand between his. “But what’s funny is,” he said, brushing away a lock of wet hair stuck to her cheek. “You’re still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. You’re smart, sexy, talented, fearless...everything I could have ever wanted or asked for in a mate. And, for what it’s worth,” he continued with a shrug. “I still see that in you, not being your mate anymore. Which, at least I know that even though the bond isn’t there, I’m seeing you with my eyes and not just through the lens of a bond outside of my control.”

Everleigh stared at him with a dumbfounded look on her face. She shook her head as she curled her fingers over his. “Zaxton.” She looked away. “Oh, goddess, Zaxton!”

Tag blinked and looked around the room. “Uh, no, the name’s Tag.”

Another laugh bubbled up from her chest. “No, Zaxton broke the bond!”

Tag quirked a brow. “He did?”

With a sigh, she inched herself further onto the bed and clasped her hands together in her lap. Tag adjusted and sat facing her, his face quizzical, looking for answers. What the hell was she talking about? Here he was, pouring his heart out to her and she was yelling the name of someone else.

“I need to tell you something. Hear me out, okay? No more interrupting with your beautiful speeches.” She ran a thumb over his lips, a smile brimming her own that melted his heart.

He nodded, itching to kiss that thumb and pull it into his mouth. “I promise.”

“Zax and I go way back. He was Dom’s best friend. I’ve known him pretty much all my life.” She sucked in a deep breath before looking back into his eyes. “I had a ridiculous crush on him as a kid, all the way up until Dom took me to live with the coven.”

“I kind of figured as much.” Tag shrugged. “I saw how he looked at you. I could practically taste his desire for you at the border. It was palpable. It made me want to rip his throat out.”

She nodded. “Well, that’s because, I found out tonight, he’s my original mate.”

Tag swallowed hard as he processed her words. “Come again?”

“I didn’t know. I thought it was just a stupid teenage crush. But apparently when Zax turned eighteen, the bond snapped into place between us. I was only sixteen at the time. We never sealed it because it happened right at the time that he was helping me escape my dad.” She bowed her head with another long pause. “Dom had my memories wiped by the coven.” She lifted her head and anger spilled over her face as she narrowed her eyes, like she suddenly realized something. “That means that Winter was in on it! She never told me.”

“Hey,” Tag said, clinging to her hands, rubbing his thumbs over her skin. “We’ll deal with it, one thing at a time. Okay?” He lifted her chin with one hand to look him in the eyes. Regardless of their bond being broken, he still cared for her, a lot. It pained him to see her so hurt and betrayed by her own family and those she considered family. He vowed he would never do that to her.

She nodded, sucking back a sniffle as tears welled in her eyes. “Zax told me tonight. He never thought he’d see me again, so he took his chance to tell me. And in the process of doing so, took it upon himself to break our bond because he knew you and I were now mates.” She lifted her head and stared Tag in the eyes, so many emotions welling in them at the same time. “He went to Ember for help, and she gave him some kind of spell so that when he kissed me, it broke our

mating bond.” She took a visible swallow. “He wanted to release me, so I could be with you.”

Tag blinked and the reality of her words slammed into him. That bastard would be dead when he got his hands back on him for kissing her. A growl started low in his chest, but he caught himself as he replayed her words in his mind. He broke their bond so she could be with him?

“Tag, he must have also broken our bond, yours and mine.” She shook her head and tugged her hands from his to run them through her hair. “Magic has consequences. It doesn’t just happen and come for free. I swore I would never use it on people I love, as I hurt someone once with it, a consequence I was unprepared for. I only use it for defense now.”

“What about your healing abilities? Will there be consequences from that?” he asked.

“That’s innate to my blood, a part of me. That doesn’t come from a spell where I call upon other forces to help me. When you weave a spell or incantation, build a potion or borrow magic from nature, you’re taking something inside of you that’s not your own. It has different effects.”

He had a lot to learn about witches and their particular magic system. But he could kind of understand that, similar to the magic inside him with his Thunderbird; it was innate, something a part of him that was his own.

“Hey,” he said, guiding her face back toward his. “Look at me. I’m still here. Bond or no bond, I’m not going anywhere, Ev. We may no longer have some preternatural connection to each other, but I still think you’re one of the most amazing women I’ve ever met, and I’m still insanely attracted to you. I still get butterflies in my stomach when I look at you and when I hold your hand. I still have to control myself when I’m around you because I think my dick will rip through my pants when you smile at me.”

A giggle choked out of her as she swiped at a falling tear along her cheek. “What?”



“Ignore that last one. What I’m trying to tell you is, maybe we don’t need a bond.” He shrugged. “Unless, what you’re trying to tell me is, without a bond, you want to be with Zaxton and not me.” The words sliced at his heart the minute they rolled off his tongue. He hadn’t even thought that could be the case until the thought left his lips. An ache welled up in him at the thought of losing her already. But maybe it was for the best if he was just going to die anyway.

“What? No!” She shot to her knees and cupped Tag’s cheeks. “No, you idiot. I’m trying to tell you, I choose you!”

“Me?” He pointed to himself.

She nodded and bit her lip, and everything inside him wanted to lay her flat out on the bed and take her right there. That look did him in, bond or not.

“Yes! Because the minute he kissed me, I felt nothing for him. And if our bond broke as well,” she pointed between them. “Then why did everything inside me want to run to you. I thought back to our kiss the minute his lips left mine and all I wanted was to kiss you, was to be back in your arms, Tag.” That beautiful smile lit her lips and joy filled his heart at the sight of it. “It means, I finally have a choice. No one is telling me what to do, who to be with, making those decisions for me. My own heart is choosing you.”

Tag pressed his forehead to hers and yanked her onto his lap. She straddled him and draped her arms over his shoulders.

“I have something I have to tell you too, then, before we say another word.” Anxiety squashed the joy in his heart like a bug as he thought about what he had to tell her. Would she laugh? Would she gasp and run away? Would she think it was maybe a good and honorable thing?

“If you’re about to tell me you’re a virgin...” she whispered against his lips.

“Fucking Dominic told you, didn’t he?” A growl rumbled in his chest and Everleigh rocked her hips across his, making him forget everything he was about to say.

A smile curled over her lips as she hovered over his mouth. “You don’t kiss like a virgin. You probably don’t fuck like one either. But I like the idea of being your first, if you’ll let me show you the ropes.”

“We’re going to use ropes? For our first time?” He shrugged. “I’m down for it.”

Another laugh rolled off her lips just as she claimed his mouth with them. Her tongue demanded entrance and he gave it to her, sliding his alongside it, slanting his head as he deepened it. While they’d already shared kisses, both in dreams and reality, they’d been hesitant and unsure, timid, but pleasurable. All inhibitions left him as he fisted his hands into her hair, holding onto her for dear life as their mouths devoured each other.

She pushed him backward, never leaving his lips, her long hair draping over them as she deepened the kiss, a moan muffled between their mouths as he curled his fingers into her hips. Slowing her strokes, she dragged herself over his length, the friction driving him nearly insane, and he swore he was going to bust a hole in his jeans if they didn’t lose the layers between them.

Everleigh eased back from the kiss, panting for breath. “Is this what you want, Tag?”

“Yes,” he choked out. “So much yes. Do you?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“No!” He shot up, his eyes widened as realization dawned on him, he didn’t have any condoms.

“No?” she whimpered.

“I mean, yes to you. No to, I don’t have any condoms.” He ran a hand through his hair, getting it stuck on his stupid manbun and he yanked the tie from his hair, letting it cascade around his shoulders.

“Holy shit, that was so hot,” she said, staring at him.

He quirked a brow with a smirk. “It was?”

She nodded and bit her lip again. “Your hair is amazing.”

“Still doesn’t solve our condom problem.”

She snapped her fingers and a box of condoms appeared between them. “What’s the good of being a witch if you can’t use a little magic.”

“I thought you said all magic has consequences.”

“Everleigh!” Dominic’s voice roared off in the distance. “Did you steal my condoms?”

“They have to come from somewhere.” She shrugged, tore open the box and plucked one off the roll.

A laugh puffed from his chest as he ripped his shirt over his head, tossing it to the floor before leaning over Everleigh, pushing her against the pillows.

“Goddess, Tag...” she said on the wings of a gasp. “Your tattoos, they’re stunning.” A trail of goosebumps rose along his arms as she traced over his tattoos. The ink vibrated under his skin, a hum that fed adrenaline through him at her touch, like she gave them life.

He slid his arms under her hips and yanked her closer to him. Nervousness ran through him like an electric current, and he prayed she couldn’t feel him trembling beneath her. But he may never have this chance again, and fuck if he wasn’t going to give it his all at his one shot with his former mate.

She let out a squeal as her eyes widened. “Tag!”

He shrugged. “I may be a virgin, but I’ve watched a lot of porn.”

An electric tingle ripped through him as he stared at her spread for him. He didn’t know how long he’d last but the scent of her arousal ripped a growl from his chest, and he needed to taste her. Spreading her lips, he licked over her glistening mound and the honey spreading over his lips tasted like heaven. Her breathy moans drove him on as he circled her clit with his tongue, and the sexy way her hips gyrated in front of him made the beast inside him ache to rip free.

The sound of her wetness as he slid a finger inside her made him almost come right then and there. She was so hot

and wet and the thought of it being because of him nearly sent him over the edge. He feasted on her as fast as he could, because as much as he wanted to savor his first time, there was no way he'd last much longer if it was this damn good just from eating her out.

He needed more, much more. More of her, more of life, more of everything. Tag would no longer roll over and wait to die. He'd no longer sacrifice himself. He had something worth fighting for, worth living for.

He had Everleigh.



EVERLEIGH'S TOES CURLED AS TAG SPREAD HER HIPS AND stared at her wide open before him. While she'd had sex before, she never felt so vulnerable, yet free. There was no longer anything binding her to someone, and still her heart chose Tag, her body responding to his touch as if it were magic.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” he whispered against her bare mound, his hot breath whisking over her slick folds. He slid a finger along the seam of them, brushing the tip against her clit, and her hips bucked with sweet pleasure. “And so wet. It's like silk.”

“And that's just from your kissing me,” she said coyly, gyrating in front of him, aching for him to continue on his exploration of her.

“I plan on kissing you more. How about I start here?” His breath tickled her wet skin before his tongue slid between her lower lips, pushing them apart as he flicked over her throbbing core.

“Yes,” she said in more of a moan than a word as he feasted on her, driving her to the edge with every flick and suck.

“I want to watch your face as you come.” He slid two fingers inside her, while continuing to run his thumb in circles over her clit. Pumping his fingers in and out of her, she clenched around his digits, and his eyes shot wide open. “Holy fuck.”

She winked and rocked her hips as he continued to work her, pulling another moan from deep inside her as he sped his fingers. “Goddess, I’m so close.”

“Come for me, Ev. Let me hear you, beautiful,” he whispered, staring down over her as his fingertip brushed over her throbbing clit, pushing her over the edge of her orgasm, and she arched her back, moaning his name so loud she prayed no one else heard it.

She clutched a hand to her heart, sweat beading on her brow as she tried to regain breath. He may be a virgin, but he definitely had magic fingers. Goddess bless porn.

He leaned over her, reaching for the buttons on the shirt, before giving up and just yanking it apart, ripping it off her, buttons flying across the room pinging into everything.

“Tag! Your shirt!” She gasped, eyes wide open.

“Wasn’t a favorite and buttons take too long. I’m a virgin, this is my first time, I’m afraid I won’t last much longer because your orgasm was sexy as fuck.”

Her chest heaved beneath him, and he dropped his gaze to it. With one hand, he cupped a breast, rubbing his thumb over her pebbled nipple. “Gods, they feel better than I ever imagined. So soft.” He dove in and flicked his tongue over it, pulling another moan from her lips as he grazed the nipple with his teeth.

She took the opportunity of his distraction with her breasts to work him out of his jeans, unbuttoning and freeing his swollen cock. The length of it shocked her and she gasped. “Holy shit, you’re huge!”

He tilted his head with a smirk. “You think so? I figured I was pretty average.”

“Oh no, no, well above average. I assure you.” She gripped the length of him, pumping him through her palm, and the guttural groan that roared out of him as he twitched in her hand just about made her come again.

“Holy fuck, that feels amazing!” He slammed both hands on either side of her head as he rocked his hips above her, her

grip on him tightening as she swirled the pre-cum over his tip. “Too amazing. You need to slow down if I’m even going to make it to putting the condom on,” he panted.

“One condom, coming right up.” She snapped her fingers and the condom sheathed itself over Tag’s length. “Quicker this way.”

“What about magic having consequences again? I don’t want my dick to fall off or something. I’m really liking sex.”

She laughed. “It’s a simple find and replace spell, like in a word document. It’s not a complex spell for malicious intent. We’ll be okay.”

He side-eyed her with a smile that would have melted off her panties if she’d been wearing any and he shucked himself out of the rest of his jeans before crawling back over her. “I promise, if I go quick, I’ll make it up to you in about thirty minutes.”

She draped an arm over her face and a hearty laugh burst out of her. It hit her then, she was completely falling for Tag, hook, line and sinker. The happiness of that thought filled her with joy she’d never known. Someone of her own choosing. Someone who was falling for her back of their own choosing. No bond. No magic. No pressure.

He positioned himself at her entrance, and she wrapped her legs around his waist as she looked into his eyes. “I’m falling for you Rowtag Aktoon.”

The look of shock on his face morphed into blissful pleasure as he sunk himself inside her before he realized what she’d said. A hiss burst through his clenched teeth as he pumped in and out of her, lost in the world of euphoria of losing his virginity. His rhythm beat in time with her heart, and she dug her nails into his shoulders as a surprise orgasm sprung up inside her when he reangled himself and hit her just right. The shock mixed with the orgasm ripped a loud moan from her chest, echoed by Tag’s as she clenched around him, and he shuddered through his orgasm.

He dipped his chin to his chest, fighting for breath as he held himself above her with stiff arms, his chest heaving. She brushed the hair from his eyes, and he raised his head to lock eyes with her. “I’d fallen for you a long time ago. Glad you finally caught up.”

She snort-laughed and punched his shoulder. He collapsed on top of her, pulling out of her before rolling to the side. “So, how was your first time?”

“I’d say it was a firm nine point five. I wish I would have stuck the landing a little better, but someone was distracting me with beautiful speeches.” He ran a finger along her nose before kissing the tip of it.

She snuggled against his chest. “Turnabout is fair play.”

He cupped the back of her head, bringing her to his lips before he devoured her mouth in a powerful kiss that would have buckled her knees if she’d been standing. Goddess, that boy could kiss.

“Give me thirty minutes. I just need to shut my eyes for a few.” He tucked her against his chest, draping an arm over her hips.

“You earned a good night’s sleep. How about a pleasurable awakening in the morning instead?” She pressed her lips against his chest.

“I’d like that very much,” he mumbled as he closed his eyes.



Tag woke with the chirping of the birds outside his window and the most intense pleasure he’d ever experienced. The feeling sucked the air from his lungs and shot his eyes wide open. He looked down to find Everleigh between his legs and his cock in her mouth.

“Everleigh?” he choked out.



“I told you I would give you a pleasurable awakening.” She slid her mouth back over the length of him and his eyes rolled back in his head as he gripped the sheets on either side of him.

Noises he didn't even know he could make ripped from his chest through panting breaths. This was so much better than his own hand. He had no idea it could feel this way. The sensation of her tongue as it slid up and down his shaft, the grip of her hand applying pressure, and her teeth grazing the head of his dick nearly made him blackout.

“Can you die of pleasure?” he said between panting breaths. “Because I think it's gonna happen.” She increased her pressure on his shaft, and the feeling intensified until his balls tightened and energy welled up from deep inside him, spiraling through him. “Ev, I'm gonna come.”

She didn't stop and before he could stop himself, his shot his load into her mouth and she sucked it down as he tilted his head to watch her suck him through his orgasm without spilling a drop. How many guys had she done this with? She was a fucking pro.

“Fuck me,” he said, slamming his head back on the pillow before draping an arm across his eyes.

“I think you'll need those thirty minutes you keep promising me before we can do that.” She crawled up his chest and curled against him.

He wrapped her in his arms and stroked her bare back with his fingertips as blood pumped back into the rest of his body from his dick. “That was amazing.”

“I'm glad you enjoyed it.” She traced a finger along his chest.

“I don't want to leave this bed. Can we just pretend the outside world doesn't exist today?” He rolled to his side and faced her.

“The sooner we deal with the outside world, the more time we can have to do this.”

“Why do you have to be smart and logical.” He huffed.

“Because I drew the short straw today. You can be smart and logical tomorrow.” She leaned over him and pulled his lips into a kiss that made him rethink everything. Damn his dick for not being able to go again quickly. She pulled back and stared down at him. “We have to talk to Zaxton and make sure he’s okay. We have to figure out if there’s a way to keep Castos from taking control over him. Usually when he pulls Alpha, it’s more of a command, but last night, Zaxton looked like he had a whole other person inside him.”

Well, that thought surely killed all sexy images in his head. “You’re right. I do hope the guy’s okay. I can’t imagine he’ll be too fond of waking up handcuffed to the sink in the cabin,”

She shook her head. “I know. As much as I don’t want to leave this bed, we should probably go rescue him.”

“Shower to conserve water?” Tag winked.

“Always thinking of Mother Earth. I knew I liked you.” She reached up and brushed his lips with hers.

He scooped her up in his arms, and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her to the bathroom and sat her on the counter while he turned the water on. A smile twitched on his lips. If he was going to die today, at least he’d have lost his virginity, gotten a blow job, and had shower sex in the last six hours. Might as well go out with a hat trick.



EVERLEIGH COULDN'T WIPE THE STUPID SMILE OFF HER FACE. She'd always gone for the bad boy, the rough and tough guy, like Zaxton. She had a type. But Tag turned that completely on its head. She had no idea she'd truly be attracted to the softer, sweeter, funnier kind of guy. He was timid yet carnal last night, and she'd never felt so free.

“You can wear these until we get your things from the other cabin.” Tag handed her a pair of joggers and a hoodie. “They’re Reseda’s.”

“Why do you have Reseda’s clothes?” She arched a brow as she slipped them on.

“I found them on the wash line outside.” He laughed. “I didn’t think you’d want me going to the cabin to get your things with Zaxton being in there alone. We might have had words.”

She appreciated him thinking of her. Rolling to her tiptoes, she cupped his cheek and pulled his lips into a kiss. He slid his hands along her waist, jerking her flush to his body.

“You keep that up and we won’t make it out of this cabin today,” he rumbled against her lips. “You’re making things hard on me. Very, very hard.”

She laughed into the kiss. “I promise to make it up to you.”

A growl purred across his lips as he nibbled on her bottom lip before releasing it. “I’m holding you to that.”

He released her and, for not having a bond anymore, the awareness of a hollowness inside her when she wasn't in his arms shocked her. She'd never had that feeling outside of the bond before with any of her previous lovers. Could she really be in love with him?

“You ready?” He asked, holding out his hand for her.

She nodded and slid her palm to his. “As I'll ever be.”

They made their way to Everleigh's cabin, holding hands down the pathway. Tag jerked to a stop, running a hand over his chest.

“What's wrong?” Everleigh asked.

He winced with one eye as he rubbed the left side of his torso. “Just feeling kind of hot right here.”

“The venom?” A pang of worry shot through her. She'd forgotten about the venom in the midst of everything else happening.

“Maybe?” He shrugged. “I'll be fine. Let's get this over with.”

She eyed him carefully, waiting for something to happen. She had no idea how much time they had left before the venom made its way through the rest of his body or what it would do. They had to research a way to get it out of him.

Carrying on, they pushed through the entrance of the cabin, and Everleigh walked to the bathroom door. “Zax?”

“Well, I see you wasted no time with the releasing of the bond,” Zaxton said, clanging against the pipe under the sink.

She squatted next to him, fiddling with the cuffs. “What are you talking about?”

“You reek of bird, Ev. I smell him all over you. And he smells like you.” He lifted a chin towards Tag, standing above her. “And all I got was this nifty pair of sex cuffs and a pipe to get off with.”

Everleigh rolled her eyes and huffed. “I'm not even going to justify that with a response. How are you feeling? Do you

remember what happened last night?”

“All I remember is talking with you and then Castos sending a message down the Alpha link, telling me to bring you back to him. I refused and the next thing I know, it felt like he was in my brain. Not just telling me something by pulling Alpha, but like he pushed me aside in my own body. He was fucking strong, and I tried to hold him back, but then everything went dark. I woke up kissing a pipe.”

“You told me to run.” Everleigh rubbed her brow. “You tried to fight him off. But he overtook you and you went after me. Then you and Tag went a few rounds before Ember put you to sleep.”

“What, did she blow dart my ass?” He quirked a brow.

“Sleeping incantation. You’ll probably have a headache for a little while.” She brushed away the hair sweeping over his bloodshot eyes.

“You have to let me go, Ev. I’m not safe with you guys any longer. If Castos can get to you through me...” He shook his head. “I need to get out of here.”

“You need to stay where you are. If you go back to Castos empty handed, he’ll kill you. We’ll take our chances with you here on this side of the barrier.”

“That’s stupid, Ev. I could be overtaken at any time and slit your throat. Don’t be a martyr.” Frustration narrowed his eyes, and the heat radiating off him could have seared her skin. “He’s using me like a weapon. I can’t be trusted with you.”

“We’ve got Ember. If something goes wrong, she can tranq you.” Everleigh wiggled her fingers, letting the magic flow through her and into the metal, moving the layers to unclick the lock.

“Yeah, and how long until my brain gets fried from her continually using magic on me.” The handcuffs fell to the ground, and Zaxton rubbed his wrists.

“Then we get a real tranq gun.” Everleigh shrugged with a smirk.

“You must be starving. My grandmother makes a big breakfast spread up at the longhouse, if you’re interested.” Tag offered him a hand to pull him up.

Zaxton stared at it, and with a nod, pursed his lips and grabbed it, while brushing back the hair falling in his face with the other. “I tried to kill you and Everleigh last night. I don’t understand why you’re being all nice with me.”

Tag let out a terse sigh. “Look, I know we’ve been at odds, but Ev told me what you did last night. I knew there was history with you two. None of us asked for any of this. You know how that works. All I wanted was what was best for Everleigh.” He turned and caught Everleigh’s gaze, and her heart fluttered all the way to her stomach. A real flutter. A real twinge of happiness that her soul felt, not because of something someone else told her it should feel, but because it was real, it was him. “That took guts, and I’m thankful for what you did. Breaking our bond was the best thing for everyone involved.”

Zaxton startled and stopped in the middle of the pathway back to the longhouse. “What do you mean by ‘our’ bond. I broke *our* bond.” He pointed between Everleigh and himself.

“Well, you know as well as I do that magic has consequences.” Everleigh stepped in between Zaxton and Tag. “Apparently, the spell Ember gave you also dissolved the mating bond between me and Tag.”

Zaxton narrowed his eyes. “So, you’re telling me, you two are no longer mated?”

Everleigh shrugged. “We don’t really know.”

Zaxton’s nose wrinkled. “But I smell you both all over each other.”

Heat rose in Everleigh’s cheeks, and she could have guaranteed she was glowing pink. “Well, turns out, we didn’t need a mating bond.”

Tag ran a hand along the small of her back. “We found out last night, we both actually have feelings for each other. It was

kind of a blessing in disguise, losing the bond. Because, as it turns out, we were already falling for each other naturally.”

Zaxton huffed out a terse laugh. “Can’t say I’m not jealous.” His gaze turned to Everleigh, and he brushed a finger along her chin. “I’m just glad she’s finally happy.”

A growl rumbled in Tag’s chest. Both Everleigh and Zaxton stared at him.

“Just kidding,” Tag said, throwing his head back in a laugh. “You set yourself up for that one.”

Zaxton and Everleigh chuckled, shaking their heads.

“Well, if it isn’t the three musketeers,” Dominic said, leaning against the door of the longhouse.

“Morning to you too, brother,” Everleigh said, a knot working its way through her stomach as she remembered what Zaxton told her about him wiping her memories. “After breakfast, you and I are going to have words. Lots of words.”

He arched a brow. “Lots of words?”

Her eyes narrowed. “All. The. Words.”

“Can’t wait,” he said, tossing a glare at Zaxton as he crossed his arms before turning his attention back to Everleigh. “Did you bring me back my condoms?”

“Keeping them. Thanks.” She held her head high and looked the other way.

Dominic opened his mouth but shut it before saying anything and pushed off the doorframe of the house. Denali sprinted out of the house, knocking Dominic in the chest.

“Has anyone seen Ember?” He blinked, looking around frantically.

Everleigh’s heart sank to her stomach. “Not since last night. Why?”

“Fuck.” He ran a hand through his hair. “She stole the keys to my bike.”

“I did not. I won them fair and square in strip poker last night, asshole.” Ember twirled the keys on her finger and smacked a wad of bubble gum. “You just suck at losing.”

“I was drunk!” He dove for the keys, hand outstretched, but Ember tossed them in the air, and they vanished.

She adjusted her space buns and rolled her eyes. “And that’s my problem because...”

“She owned you, bro,” Nova said, slapping Denali on the shoulder with a smirk.

“See.” She bowed and pointed towards Nova. “He got the brains in the family.”

Denali’s eyes narrowed as he raised his hands, arching his fingers toward Ember. Everleigh slid between them and held up her hands.

“Okay, folks. Maybe we should just switch topics.” She nodded to Tag, pleading silently for him to help her diffuse the situation.

Reseda wandered outside, holding a plate of bacon, chomping on a piece. “What the fresh hell is going on out here? And why am I not involved in it?”

Kane sidled up next to her in the doorway. “When are you not involved in it?”

“You be nice to me, or I’ll make you go on an ice cream and fried chicken run, again.” She poked him in the stomach, and he groaned.

Everleigh glanced around at the scene and stepped back, suddenly realizing this...this was what had been missing from her life for the last ten years. Family. Arguments. Comradery. The ease of it all, just being together. *Goddess, I missed it.* She missed being part of a pack. Her inner wolf rejoiced at the thought of this being her new pack, and a smile lit her lips.

She was home.

Squeezing Tag’s hand, she tilted her head and looked at him, wanting to share with him how happy she was in this



moment. But as she caught his gaze, his eyes glazed over, and his face drooped.

“Tag,” she said, shaking his hand. “What’s wrong?” Panic knotted her stomach. “Baby, look at me.” She brushed her hand along his face, but he stared off across the land, as if in some kind of trance.

Sweat beaded on his brow, and his hand turned clammy in hers. A gasp burst out of him as if something socked him in the stomach, and he dropped to his knees, clutching his chest.

“Tag!” she shrieked, dropping beside him to catch him. Nodin and Kane flanked her sides, each with an arm under him.

A snarl scraped her eardrums from behind her, and she tossed a glance over her shoulder. Zaxton’s eyes beamed red, narrowing his focus on her.

“Dom,” she choked out.

Dominic, anticipating Zaxton’s shift, launched into his wolf form and gripped Zaxton mid-air by the scruff, tossing him into the meadow. A growl ripped from Dom’s throat as he stood watch, blocking anything from getting to Everleigh.

Zaxton shifted back to human form, stalking his way back toward the group. A menacing snarl curled his lips as he stopped in front of Dominic, glaring into his eyes, as if they were having some kind of conversation.

“Won’t Dominic be affected by Castos as well?” Ember asked, readying herself to go after Zaxton.

“No, he broke from the pack to be with Nodin. Zaxton’s still part of Castos’ pack.” Everleigh swung her head back to Tag. “Tag, please, talk to me. Tell me what’s happening.”

“I’ll tell you what’s happening.” Tag’s lips moved, but the gravelly voice that came from them belonged to the crone. “Your time’s up.” Tag’s body lunged for her, gripping her by the throat.

“Ixchel, leave her be. It’s me you want.” Zaxton stepped up next to Everleigh, trying to pry Tag’s fingers from around

her throat.

“You?” Tag’s head flew back in laughter as the crone’s voice notched up an octave. “There is absolutely nothing I want from you, Castos.”

“Everleigh is mine,” Castos growled through Zaxton’s lips, gripping Tag by the shirt. “You lost the privilege to her the day you left.”

Everleigh’s head spun. *What the hell was going on? What did he mean the day she left?*

Kane and Nodin pulled Tag back from Everleigh, while Dominic, Denali and Nova worked to control Zaxton. Ember stepped up, holding her arms out to the side between them, ready to work her magic.

Zaxton ripped himself from his captor’s hold and launched himself at Ember, knocking her to the ground. “Not this time, little one.”

Denali took off after him, shifting as he lifted into the air, gripping a hold of Zaxton, tossing him like a toy down the hill. He swooped back in and scooped Ember into his arms and carried her off. Everleigh prayed it was somewhere safe.

If it came down to it, could Everleigh release her magic on Zaxton, let alone Tag? She had to stop them from killing each other, or anyone else, even if it was someone else controlling them. She prayed it wouldn’t come to that.

Zaxton prowled his way back, launching into a run toward Reseda. “It was you. You started all this. If it wasn’t for you.” Zax’s jaw opened wide as he dove for her.

“Reseda!” Everleigh shouted.

Kane dropped Tag and shifted, flying toward his mate. As Kane reached with his talons to scoop Reseda up, Zaxton’s jaw tore into his wing, slamming him to the ground.

“Kane!” Reseda screamed.

“Stop!” Everleigh shot to standing. “Everyone! I give myself up. Tear me to pieces, but leave my new family alone!”

“New family?” Zaxton’s head reared back as laughter pealed out of him. “These people will use you as they did me and mine. I loved you, Everleigh. You are my daughter, blood. But you will never be a part of them.”

“As if you didn’t use her, dad?” Dominic spat out. “Can we even call you that? You’re the first one to throw your family away to further your reach and power for the pack. It’s all about the pack. It’s all it was ever about—you making sure you stayed Alpha. You experimented on your own daughter, trying to find a cure for the tie to the moon. And to what expense? You lost both of us!”

“You would never be strong enough to be the next Alpha, Dominic. You always chose your own needs over the needs of the pack. You did me a favor when you left. After stealing my daughter from me, then choosing your Thunderbird lover over the lives of your pack, you are a disgrace to the wolves.” Castos growled out through Zaxton as he prowled around Dominic.

“Who is the disgrace, Castos?” the crone said through Tag. “You who seduce and steal to get what you want. You trash and bury those who desire retribution for your sins. No longer. Give me back what is mine!” Her screech pierced the air, and everyone ducked to cover their ears.

Zaxton dove at Tag, jaw wide, eyes bright red, a growl matching the fierceness of the crone’s scream.

“No!” Everleigh clenched her fist, magic spiraling through her body like a tsunami as fear and anger merged into a deadly mix, lacing the already potent energy with a fatal electric current. She raised her arms, palms up and released a scream so loud the earth trembled beneath their feet. The sound vibrations ricocheted through the trees, and the wildlife hiding within them scattered.

Everleigh’s body glowed, a surge of cool heat enveloping her as the power inside her folded in on itself, growing, kneading like dough, rising to the surface in an undulating pulse until she could contain it no longer. A flash of light burst from all around her body, blasting outward like a ripple from a

rock in a pond. The vibration tore through the air, knocking everyone off their feet. It shot outward and upward, reaching for the sky, and the great barrier around them shattered like a piece of glass.

Everleigh sucked in a heaving breath, collapsing to the ground in a heap of exhaustion. Her head throbbed, pounding in her ears like a drum.

Drums.

Like the ones she heard in the spirit walk with Tag. They called out to her, urging her onward with their song. The ancient cries of Tag's ancestors joined the drums, their sadness fueling her, as their chants grew heavy, agony ripping apart her heart as she realized what they were telling her.

She crawled over to Tag, laid out on the ground not breathing. "Tag!" She patted him down, taking his pulse, laying her head on his chest desperate to hear his heartbeat. "Tag, please! Wake up!" She cradled his head, brushing the long locks of hair from his eyes. "Baby, wake up, please! I figured it out!"

Her tears careened down her cheeks, falling off the tip of her nose onto his forehead. Leaning in, she pressed a kiss to his lips. His face paled, his lips lifeless and blue like the color of bruise. Her heart cracked, inside it poured out all the pain she'd been holding on to for the last ten years. All the shame, the loneliness, the betrayal, the fear, the emptiness bled out of her through her fingertips as she rose from the ground, not by use of her muscles, but by the air around her, commanding it to lift her, carry her, be subservient to her.

She stared at the people scattered on the ground around her as they trembled. With long, careful steps, her legs pressed into the air around her, walking through it and on it, hovering above the earth. The breeze kicked up around her, her white hair billowing around her like a cloak.

Zaxton lay on the ground, moaning, but alive, as he clutched both hands to his head, writhing. "Castos, you bloody fucker, are dead to me. I renounce you. I renounce the pack."

“Then you’ll suffer the same fate as my former son.” Castos stalked his way from the border of the forest up the hill to the longhouse where everyone scrambled to get up. “Everything I’ve ever done has been for you, for the pack, for our survival.”

Everleigh stared at Castos, her fingertips crackling with power just waiting to be unleashed. “Draining me of my blood. Forcing me to continually shift to feast on my essence. Making me think we were playing games as a child, but really you were testing me, finding all my abilities to exploit them. You were a monster, and still are. You would sacrifice your own flesh for your survival.” Everleigh spat the words out, each one releasing a piece of her darkened soul that had weighed her down for over ten years.

“What I’ve done has been all for you! All for the love of my pack. To keep them safe. To give them a fighting chance against the world around them. We’re hunted like dogs. We’re experimented on by the government. We’re defenseless most nights, and three days we’re allowed to fight back? Bullshit! I’m doing this to help us survive!” He yelled. “If you can’t see that, then you’re blind. You will never have to be a slave to that life because you’re an amalgamation, not wholly witch or wholly wolf. I can’t expect you to understand.”

“So, you chose to plunder others to advance your own cause?” the crone said, striding through the grassy field.

Castos’ breath hitched as he locked eyes on the crone coming toward him.

Everleigh glanced around, realizing the barrier had fully broken and no one was protected.

Dominic slung Nodin over his shoulder, leaning him up against the longhouse. He appeared to be breathing but knocked out.

Denali and Nova scrambled to their feet, shaking their heads, blood running from their ears and noses.

Denali slashed his arm across his face, staining his denim jacket red. “Come at me, fucker.” He lifted his chin toward

Castos. "I'll put you down."

"Castos, you piece of rotting shit." Reseda marched over to him.

"Reseda, what the hell are you doing?" Kane yelled out after her, reaching a hand for her as he spotted Tag laying on the ground. The agony on his face was evident. Who did he choose to go after?

"I've dealt with him before. Spiders scare me more than this hairball." Her eyes went wide, and she tilted her head toward Everleigh, nodding for her to go to Tag, like she was trying to tell her she was causing a distraction so she could help Tag.

"But, the baby!" Everleigh choked out.

"I'll be okay. Did you not notice, besides you, I'm the only one not laid out flat on the ground?" She winked and sauntered over to Castos.

"You didn't scare me before, Reseda. You really don't, now." He held his belly as he tossed his head back with a laugh. "You may have been able to take out some of the weaker members of my pack in your heyday, but have you met the rest of my pack?" Glowing yellow eyes appeared from between the trees, inching their way closer into the open field, surrounding Castos on all sides.

Reseda arched a brow. "It's hard to think we're actually related. You make it really easy to want to put a sharp pointy object right through your skull." She cracked her knuckles.

Castos shifted to his wolf form and leaped at Reseda, only to bounce off within an inch of her, rolling backward in the tall grass as he thumped into the ground.

"Oh, did I forget to tell you, somehow, I gained this new power of invincibility. Yeah, turns out we have a super baby growing in my belly. And she doesn't like being attacked. Self-preservation at its finest." She folded her arms. "Kind of nifty, don't ya think?"

Everleigh's eyes widened to saucers. "How is that possible?"

Reseda shrugged. “No idea, but I’m definitely going to use it while I have it.”

Kane growled. “Don’t needlessly put yourself or the baby in danger, Reseda.”

“Relax. It’s not like I’m out here mailing love letters to all supernatural creatures to come have a shot at me and see how much I can take.” She huffed and blew him a kiss.

“She’s going to be the death of me, I swear,” Kane said, returning his focus to Tag, still not breathing, laying stiff as a board.

The crone walked toward Castos, raising her hand to the side, and Reseda flew backwards into the long house, the door shut and locked behind her.

“Reseda!” Kane shouted and ran toward the house.

The crone’s head jerked toward Kane, her eyes glowing white as she snapped her fingers and Kane vanished.

“What did you do to them?” Everleigh marched toward her as her feet pounded back onto the earth, the fiery cool touch of her magic tingling her fingertips, ready to lash out.

“They are in the way. My quarrel is not with them.” Her eyes locked onto Everleigh’s. “Give me back what is mine. Or I’ll take it.”

Everleigh narrowed her eyes and glared at the crone, pointing to Tag. “Give me back what is mine. Or you’ll never get it.”

The crone’s lips tugged to the left. “Making threats you cannot fulfill. So much like your father, I’m afraid.”

The insult seared rage through her heart, and her magical energy sparked through her veins, her palms glowing in a bright white and blue haze. “Try me. I’m nothing like my father.”

Everleigh had no idea what she was doing. Ember was knocked out cold, so she had no way to get in touch with Winter. Something inside her swelled, maybe the years of running, of being scared, always looking over her shoulder,

being a pawn for everyone else and not having a life of her own it all boiled inside her like a raging inferno. It was time to learn to trust her own strengths.

The world stood still as she locked eyes with the crone. Wrinkles swallowed most of her eyes, and the weathered skin on her face was dried and cracked around the edges of her mouth. Long braids of hair swirled around her like a storm as the skies darkened. The electricity in the air made the hair on Everleigh's arms stand on edge.

“Give me back my love,” Everleigh said, thrusting both hands in front of her, unleashing a stream of white energy at the crone.

The witch waved her arm in front of her, repelling the blast without moving an inch. Everleigh blinked, and her heart sunk. She didn't stand a chance, but she'd go down trying.





DARKNESS SWALLOWED TAG. IT WAS LIKE BEING IN A COFFIN, buried alive and no one could hear you. He pounded on an invisible cage surrounding him to no avail. Everleigh's voice sounded like it was underwater, near but garbled, buried under the sounds of wolf snarls and screams echoing in the distance.

A bright light broke through the darkness, and he focused on it. The black around him peeled away in small bits, like granules of sand blowing in a dust storm and everything around him lightened to a cloudy gray.

He stood, staring into the bright light in front of him that, as it came closer, shaped into the sun. In front of him stood the tree of life, the one he'd seen in the spirit realm. Drums beat soft and he strained to hear them, and something black soared through the sky, bringing with it the louder beat of the drums and the voices of his ancestors crying out over them.

"I hear you! Tell me what I'm supposed to do! Am I dead?" Tag looked around. He should be worried, but a calmness settled in his soul, like it did at Everleigh's touch when they were still bonded. But she wasn't here now. Her voice remained a distant echo, buried beneath the voices of his ancestors and the drums.

He took a hesitant step forward and the drumming stopped, but the cries of his people grew louder, beckoning him forward. The sun faded as he walked closer to the tree. He tried to shift like he did in the spirit realm once before, still to no avail. He dropped to a knee and pounded the ground in a

furious rage. “Tell me, what am I supposed to do! I can’t leave Everleigh or my family. Help me, dammit!”

One of the Thunderbirds swooped down and flew by Tag, carrying something shiny in his beak. Tag arched a brow and watched the bird place the jewel into the hole of the tree. As Tag looked closer, it wasn’t a jewel but a rock, a polished stone that gleamed like opal but swirled with what looked like captured moon light. A brilliant flash of light blinded him, and he shielded his arms over his face. When he removed them, the sun had turned into the moon, bathing everything in a sheer white light. A person appeared in the moon, though it was no man, it was a woman. A beautiful young woman.

Tag tilted his head and stared at it. What did it mean?

He ran up to the block of stone that the tree grew out of and stared at his ancestors soaring around the tree, just like in his spirit walk.

A hand clamped on his shoulder. “What you seek is the hupał stone.”

Tag spun around, that voice so familiar joy overwhelmed him. “Father!”

A soft smile graced the old man’s lips. “Rowtag, it is good to see you, my son.” He gripped the back of Tag’s neck and pulled him forehead to forehead.

They eased back from their embrace and tears slipped over Tag’s cheeks. “Am I dead?”

A chuckle escaped his father’s lips. “Well, that depends on how you look at it. Your physical body, yes. Your spirit is alive and well, my son. But you don’t have much time, if you want to get back to your physical body.”

Tag arched a brow. “What do you mean? I can go back? This place isn’t real?” He looked around and fanned his arms to the Thunderbirds still soaring around the tree. “They’re not real?”

He nodded. “Oh, they’re very real. You’re just not meant to join them yet.”

Tag shook his head. “But, in the spirit walk, you told me that I’m not one of you yet. But I am! I’m a Thunderbird, dad! I got my tattoos shortly after you passed on.” He shucked out his arms, showing his tats. “I don’t understand.”

A soft smile graced his father’s lips as he cupped Tag’s cheeks. “You are floundering, like a lost cub looking for its mother.” He shook his head. “Your path has been obstructed because you haven’t taken an active role in your own life, Rowtag. You let your brothers overshadow you. You must find the security in here.” He pressed his hand over Tag’s heart. “You are meant to do great things, if only you would let yourself. Have faith, in yourself and The Great Spirits. They have chosen you for a reason. It is time to be a leader, no longer a follower. Nodin and Kane have their own paths, now you must find yours.”

Tag looked at his ancestors one last time before turning back to his father who had vanished. Spinning in a circle, he cried out for his dad. “Father?” He ran to the tree. “No! Come back! I need you.”

A voice trickled through the breeze. “You don’t need me, Rowtag, you need to believe in yourself. I love you and I believe in you. Now go!”

A hand thrust against his chest, hurling him backwards as his arms and legs flailed for purchase. The gray spiraled back into the blackness, swallowing him back up until the last speck was blotted out.

Tag’s eyes burst open, and he sucked in a huge gasp of air. Coughing, he rolled to his side, faceplanting in the grassy meadow in front of the longhouse. The tall blades of grass poked through his fingers as he gripped them, pushing up to his knees.

He thrust his head back, flinging his hair out of his face, and he glanced around. What the hell had happened? Nearly everyone was gone. His eyes focused on a swath of snow-white hair billowing in the breeze.

“Everleigh,” he choked out.

She stood surrounded by Castos and an entire pack of wolves on one side and the crone on the other.

Tag studied the crone, his eyes focusing in on her headdress. The serpent slithered along the crown, but something stood out to him underneath the snake's body. A hole. He remembered noticing that in his first spirit walk, and it dawned on him.

He shot to his feet and sprinted to the longhouse.

“Tag!” Everleigh screamed.

Everything in him wanted to turn around, let her know he was okay. But he didn't have time. He had to save her. He filled his mind with everything he wanted to say to her but couldn't.

*I'm here. I'm alive. I'm going to save you. Just hang on!*

*Tag? Holy Shit, is that you?*

*Everleigh? You can hear me?*

*Yes! Goddess, yes! How? I don't understand, I thought our bond was broken.*

*I'm not sure, but I may have an idea. I'll tell you about it later.*

Tag tried to open the door to the longhouse, but it was locked. He thrust his arms out beside him as he clenched his fists. The outline of his tattoos lit up in a bright blue shimmering light, and Tag closed his eyes, letting the power surge through his veins. Instead of tamping it down like he usually did, he let it flood him, flow through him and out into the ink along his body.

He slammed his hands against the door, and it shattered into a million pieces in front of him, blowing away with the breeze that suddenly kicked up a notch higher as storm clouds filled the sky. Thunder rumbled in the distance, electrifying Tag's skin.

“Grandmother!” Tag burst through the door and ran through the longhouse.

Maquinna wobbled down the stairs and into the living room. “Rowtag!” She threw her hands up and clamped her arms around him. “I thought you were dead!”

He gripped her shoulders, looking into her glassy eyes. “We’ll talk about that later. Right now, I need something. I need the Pul Yah stone. The one Reseda and Kane brought back. Do you still have it?”

She blinked. “What on earth for? You’re alive! We don’t need it.”

He shook his head. “I need it. Trust me.”

She pursed her lips. “You look just like your father. Nothing good ever came from that look.” Narrowing her eyes, she wandered off.

She pushed several bricks along the fireplace, unlocking a secret door.

“You have a secret door? How did I not know this?” Tag threw his hands up.

She came back and handed him a black velvet pouch. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I believe I do.” He winked and pulled her to him, laying a big kiss on her cheek.

“Finally,” she murmured on the wing of a sigh.

Tag tossed a glance over his shoulder at her, and she winked.

Maquinna was full of surprises. He planned a full-on question and answer session with her later if he survived this. He stopped, and a smile curved over his lips—*when* he survived this.

Stopping on the porch, he pulled the stone from the velvet bag, running his thumb over the smooth opal-like surface. It wasn’t just the Pul Yah stone, but the hupał stone, a moon stone.

Tag ran to the grassy field outside the longhouse to find Everleigh with her arms outstretched, fighting the crone, their

magics crashing together, rippling through the air. The wolves surrounded them on all sides, penning them in.

Everleigh dropped to her knees, her arms wavering as she fought to hold on. Why weren't the wolves attacking? They just stood there. Tag watched them, their eyes glazed over in pure white. The crone's lips moved so fast it looked like her lips were humming.

She was controlling the wolves. All except Castos, whose red eyes glowed bright against the hazy white light surrounding them all. Tag noticed Zaxton unconscious off to the far right. Tag had to move fast. He stalked over to the circle of wolves.

"Release them," Tag shouted.

The crone turned her head, a smirk curling over her lips. "Or you'll do what, little bird?"

"More than you thought I could. More than anyone thought I could." He held up the Pul Yah stone, and the crone's eyes flashed.

She pulled back her magic against Everleigh, and she collapsed to her knees, breathing, but exhausted. "Tag, what are you doing?"

"Do you trust me?" He looked into her eyes and without replying, the heartstring connecting them tugged.

"Yes," she whispered.

The crone held up her hand. "Give me what belongs to me!"

"I will. I will set you free. I'll set you all free!" Tag tossed the stone in the air. The crone lunged for it, but Tag called forth the power of his Thunderbird, igniting the tattoos along his body. Bright blue light shot forth from the ink, lasering in on the stone in the air. Piercing it, the stone bursting into a fine white dust that exploded in the air. The remnants drifted on the breeze, sprinkling over everyone in the meadow.

The wolves' eyes changed back from hazy white to their original colors. Shaking their heads, every one of them shifted

back to their human form. Some of them clutched their bodies, staring into the moonlight with awe at what just transpired. Tears streaked some of their faces at the realization of what this meant. Their curse was finally broken as they stood beneath the moon, no longer a slave to its power.

Castos knelt in human form in the field, his eyes back to their normal blue. He looked at his hands, then to the sky, then to where the crone, Tag, and Everleigh stood, wonder lighting up his face. “Everleigh? Chel?”

The crone gasped as the dust covered her, every speck that touched her melting her skin from ash to a golden tan. Her ratted hair turned to black silk, draping down her back in long waves, and her weathered skin pulled taut and youthful. She looked down at herself and a light laugh fell over her lips.

“Everleigh!” Tag choked out, finding her splayed on the grass, unconscious.

“Let me,” the crone said, dropping to her knees at Everleigh’s side. She brushed her hair from her face, placing a palm along her forehead. The underside of her hand glowed a brilliant white, and Everleigh fluttered her eyes open.

“What happened?” Her eyes connected to Tag’s. “Tag!” She scrambled to stand up and Tag rushed to her, sliding his arms around her, pulling her to his chest.

“How? You were dead.” Her fingertips feathered over his cheeks, as if checking to make sure he was real.

“Only mostly dead.” He winked. “Turns out, I was hurled back to the spirit realm. Saw my dad. Figured a few things out. It’s a nice place to visit, but I wouldn’t want to live there. Yet.”

A small smile ghosted her lips. “The stone. How did you know?”

“Well, that stone apparently has caused a lot of shit over the years. First with Reseda and her family, and then with you and the crone. Turns out, it pretty much cursed everyone. Including your father.”

Everleigh shook her head. “I’m not following.”

The crone walked over, a long white dress rippling in the light breeze. “I can fill in the missing pieces.”

Everleigh gasped. “But you...” She pointed to her, then to Tag. “This? Is the crone?”

Tag nodded as everyone filed out of the longhouse. With his arm slung around Reseda’s waist, Kane walked her down the path to meet them, followed by Maquinna and Nova. Denali carried Ember, who rubbed her head with a scowl, and Dominic slid an arm around Nodin, helping him limp toward the path.

The wolves, now in their human form, chattered amongst themselves, and Zaxton leaned against a far tree, his hands in his pocket, looking over the mass of people.

“Is this real?” One of the pack asked. “Are we really free of the curse?”

Castos glanced at the crone before nodding at him, worry still clouding his eyes. “It appears to be so.”

“You got what you wanted. Call off the pack.” Dominic stared Castos down.

Castos turned to the wolves gathered behind him. “Our business here is finished. We stand down.”

The pack looked among themselves as they took hesitant steps toward the tree line, but continued to survey the situation.

The crone stepped toward Castos. “They are free. The only business left here is between Castos, Everleigh and me.”

Castos marched over. “Ixchel, leave it be.”

“Ixchel?” Everleigh arched a brow, looking between them.

“She has a right to know, Castos.” Ixchel narrowed her eyes at him.

Ixchel’s fingers danced at her side, summoning the particles of the shattered stone back to a solid form. Palm up, she extended her hand to show Everleigh the stone now made solid again.



Reseda stepped up, her eyes wide. “Hold up, that’s the Mayan Pul Yah stone!”

Ixchel nodded. “Indeed, it has come to have many names, as have I.” She cupped Everleigh’s hands in her own. “I am Ixchel. You knew me as the crone Chac Chel. Your mate freed me, and the others from the curse of the hupał stone, also known as the moon stone.”

“As in, the Mayan Goddess Ixchel?” Reseda shook her head. “No way, are you serious? Like the goddess of the moon, healing, medicine, gestation, and love?”

Ixchel smirked, returning her attention to Everleigh. “Your father came to me, looking for answers. He wanted to free the wolves held captive by the moon.” A soft smile lit her lips as she glanced toward the sky, the moon beams haloing around her. “I am the moonlight. I am of the moon itself. It swells in my veins and in my soul. And this...” She held out the stone. “Is my heart.”

“A rock?” Everleigh quirked a brow.

“It is my essence. I put my heart into the stone and gave it to your father. It reversed his tie to the three-day moon cycle.” She glared at Castos. He bowed his head, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“Why?” Tag arched a brow, looking between them.

Ixchel released a sigh, looking over Everleigh’s shoulders at Castos. “I was in love.”

“Ew, with Castos?” Reseda jerked back with a grimace. “On purpose? Please tell me it was part of the curse, forcing you to love him. I think I threw up in my mouth a little.”

Kane elbowed her with a smirk, and she pursed her lips. “What? Tell me that’s not gross.” She fanned her arms toward Castos.

Castos rolled his eyes at her with a glare.

Kane shook his head. “Please, go on.”

“The stone allowed him to be free of the moon, change at will. I granted that to him, so he would no longer remain a

wolf. In those days, he was trapped in wolf form, except for the three-day moon cycle, when he would come to me, lay with me for three blissful days, then return to the woods in his wolf form until the next month. But I was foolish in giving it to him so he could change at will and come to me whenever he wished.” Her lips pursed to a thin line. “Because he vanished, with my heart in the stone.”

Everleigh turned and glared at her father.

“You misunderstand my motives. I wanted to share it with the pack. I used it to free us from the moon.” His face turned from its hard, maniacal glare, to a disconcerting warmth in his eyes. “We were finally able to be men. The stone did indeed reverse it, only now it kept us men, only allowing us to change to wolves for the full moon cycle. It left us defenseless, except for those three days.” Anger spread over his face once more. “She tricked me!” Castos snarled. “When I went back to find her, she was gone!”

She glared right back, an icy chill spreading over the entire meadow. “I left, because I saw your greed. I saw you used me. You didn’t want me. You wanted what was inside me, a way to lift your curse.” She stepped back, a light in her eyes softening her hard stare. “But you left me with a great gift.” Ixchel bowed her head and looked into Everleigh’s eyes. “He gave me you.”

Everleigh gasped and clutched her chest. “What?”

Tag slid his arms around her from behind, holding her tight to him as Everleigh’s pain spiked through their bond link. Overwhelmed with emotions, he ached to comfort her. He couldn’t imagine the war raging inside her at finally reuniting with her parents, let alone finding out their sordid past.

Tag pressed a soft kiss into the back of her hair. “I’ve got you.”

She squeezed his forearms clutched around her, and a warm tingle shot through their bond link.

“So, are you telling me, you’re my mother?” She reached out to her, pulling back a bit with hesitation.

Ixchel nodded. “Indeed. My most cherished gift.” Tears glistened in her eyes, shimmering like liquid moonlight. “I’m...so sorry. I never meant to hurt you. My mind and heart had a singular focus to get you back, whatever it took. I succumbed to the darkness, the betrayal. I let it overpower me, and the anger claimed me, ruling my thoughts and actions, and locking me in a cage inside my mind.” She bowed her head.

Everleigh’s heartrate ramped up, and Tag worked to help her bring it back down, running his hands along the length of her arms. He could easily relate to being reunited with a parent you long thought dead. He’d just seen his father.

Everleigh shook her head. “But, Castos said you were dead? You left me! I don’t understand!”

Castos stepped up next to Ev, and Tag growled, forcing him to step back. “She hid you from me. When I wanted to be a part of your life, she shunned me and left you.”

Ixchel bowed her head, sucking in a deep breath, turning to Everleigh. “With my heart gone, in the hands of the man who betrayed me, my emotions withered me into the crone. I ran, hiding from the world for a time, confused, angry—a vile disgusting creature. The longer I stayed the crone, the more my mind burned with vengeance, my single focus to get you and the stone back.”

Everleigh swung her gaze to Castos. “Why didn’t you just give the stone back?”

“The stone was stolen from me,” he paused before turning his attention to Reseda. “By your parents.” She jerked back, confusion spreading over her face. “They knew of the legend of Ixchel’s healing powers and used it to bring you back to life.”

Reseda folded her arms. “Well, looks like we’ve all got a share in some shady family history.” And here I thought I was done with the lies my mother told me. I’ll be sending her a strongly worded letter when she gets back from a trip to the states.”

“Your mom went to the states?” Dominic piped up.

“Some place in Vegas with a bunch of her friends.” She shrugged. “Old lady bingo. I have no idea.”

“Okay, getting back to the here and now,” Dominic said, redirecting the conversation. “So, let me recap, Castos did the dirty with the goddess, Ixchel, left and betrayed her. She ended up pregnant and had a kid. He found out, came back to get Everleigh, but Ixchel had disappeared. Castos found Ev and brought her back home and proceeded to experiment with her since he no longer had the stone.” Dominic folded his arms. “Did I hit everything, dad?”

“Castos is your father, as well?” Ixchel stared at Dominic with surprise.

“Unfortunately.” Dominic pursed his lips.

She shook her head. “I am sorry.”

“As am I.” Dominic sighed. “It’s a wonder I’m not into bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism.” A grin lined his lips. “Oh wait, I am.”

“I could have gone my whole life not knowing that about you and my brother.” Tag grimaced, desperately trying not to picture Nodin being spanked with a riding crop by Dominic’s hand.

Tag glanced to the tree line, finding Zaxton there. He shot him a salute, shifted into his wolf form and disappeared into the darkness. While he was happy he’d also been freed from the curse, the sadness in his eyes struck him with familiarity. Tag knew that empty, gray middle ground well, living there almost comfortably, not wanting to rock the boat in any direction. He had always been the one off to the side, just one of many moving pieces overshadowed by the rest of his family, much like Zaxton.

He hoped now that he was free, he would be able to find his own happy ending.

“What about the wolves? Our barrier is gone.” Panic hit Tag’s heart as he struggled to come to grips with the idea that The Great Spirits had left them unprotected now.

Ixchel turned to him. “The wolves were never really your enemies. Long ago, in the times before the curse of the moon, your tribes lived together in harmony. Now is the time to once again find that balance between your peoples. Protect each other. Work with each other, for there are forces far greater than wolves that lurk among the shadows in our world.”

“I’m still struggling to understand this. All my life, it’s always been us against the wolves. Since Reseda, and now Everleigh, everything is flipped upside down.” Tag shook his head.

“The two tribes were at war over the Pul Yah stone.” Maquinna stepped next to Tag. “Both not understanding why the other needed it, clinging to a thing of madness, warring with each other rather than trying to work together.”

Ixchel nodded. “The wolves are free and so is your tribe. It is up to you both to decide where your futures will go from here.”

“You can’t just go from hating each other to working together over night, though.” Tag scratched his head, looking at Dominic.

Dom shrugged. “Sometimes you just need the right motivation.” He winked at Nodin who sported a blush.

Though the idea of the wolves being able to transition freely now between their wolf side and human side freaked Tag out, he couldn’t imagine not being able to shift into his Thunderbird side when in danger or simply to take a soar in the skies. It put into perspective the wolves’ anger and resentment at having been locked into their forms because of the curse of the moon.

Maybe with a little more empathy and putting themselves in someone else’s place, they could have a frame of reference to build new traditions between the tribes.

But first, his priority would be his mate and what their own future would hold. He just hoped his still included her.



EVERLEIGH TOOK IN THE SCENE AROUND HER, UNSURE WHAT TO think or how to feel. Everything inside her just wanted to run from it all. Run to the cliffside, just jump right into the white cresting waves and leave it all behind. Start fresh. Start anew.

But in a way, she had a fresh start. She had her mom back. Her dad was still a monster, but at least she had answers now.

And with Tag, somehow their mating bond was restored. She didn't know how or when. But she was actually thankful for it. She had missed the link between them. You never know what you've got until it's gone. While she was thankful that she and Tag found out they were actually in love outside of the effects of a mating bond, the thought of the bond being back in place was a comfort, not the constricting life sentence she initially thought it was.

"So, uh...mom," Everleigh said with hesitation as she turned to Ixchel. "Do I call you that? Do I call you Ixchel? How does this work exactly?"

"If you are comfortable calling me so, I would like that. But I also respect the fact that you do not know me, and we must build a relationship. So, we can start with just Chel, if that is what you wish." She reached her hand out.

"I think baby steps are good for now. We'll see how things go." She stuck her hand out and slid it over Ixchel's.

Ixchel nodded with a smile.

“So, what happened to the pack?” Everleigh asked, staring at the group of them. She understood her father’s reasons for wanting to free them from the moon. It was his execution that left little to be desired.

“When Tag destroyed the curse holding in my essence, it released them from the spell, both the men and beasts from their tie to the moon. They are free.” Ixchel fanned her arm to the pack.

Castos walked up to her. “For what it’s worth, I loved you, Ixchel. But I was bound to my pack.”

Ixchel eyed him before giving him a nod. “We may share a child, now, Castos, but we will never share ideals. I freed them as you wished. I hope you will no longer use others to advance your goals, pack or personal.” She turned to Everleigh. “And I pray that Everleigh will be the best of both of us. She has the hair of the moon, bathed in the purest white light. And your eyes, they come from the night of the eclipse on the eve you were conceived, a mix of your father and me.”

“I’ve always felt stronger in my witch form than in my wolf one.” Ev looked at her hands, flipping them over as if trying to see inside them, what was running in her veins. “Though, I’ve never felt whole in any world.”

“If you come back to the pack, I can teach you more about your wolf side.” Castos tilted his head, and there was a sincerity in them she hadn’t seen since she was a child. “I know we don’t have the best history, and true, a lot of it came from being subjected to the curse messing with my mind. But I know I should have tried to fight it and be there for you.

As much as she would like to have her family together again, Castos had never been a father. And she had her new family now, with Tag. “You should have thought about it ten years ago, instead of experimenting on me. It all makes sense now—why you were trying to find out what was in my blood, how I worked. Because I’m Ixchel’s daughter, a part of her is in me.” She shook her head. “No. No, there’s way too much history there. I have the scars to prove it. I’m fine right where I am.”

“The scars,” Tag whispered and trailed a finger along the outside of her eye. “I saw that when you were in your wolf form. You had three scratch marks around your eye.” He arched a brow. “But you don’t have it in your human form.”

“Actually, I do.” Sucking in a deep breath, she waved a hand over her face and removed the glamor she’d woven like a mask. “I just don’t have the power to glamor it in my wolf form.”

Tag blinked. “Ev, you are beautiful no matter what. Scars or not. They’re a part of you and tell your story. Don’t hide who you are. They’ve shaped you into the person you’ve become.” He pulled her forward and placed a gentle kiss along her scars.

A smile settled on her lips. “I appreciate your kind words. And while all of that is true, I do it for me. Not for anyone else, nor to hide. I do it because I don’t want a reminder of a past I ran from. I do it because I don’t want to have to look at them day in and day out. I do it because I’ve moved past that part of my life and have no desire to see a reminder.” She dipped her head. “I hope you understand that.”

Tag wrapped his arms around her. “Very much so.”

“I never meant to hurt you, Everleigh. Despite what you and your brother think of me, I know one day you’ll understand when you have a family of your own whose survival depends on you, the lengths you’ll go to fight for them.” Castos turned to his pack. “I’ll always love you.”

She nodded, unable to say the words back to him. He was the only father she’d ever known, good or bad, it’s what she had, and a part of her still loved him, hoping somewhere inside him was a better man. Maybe he’d get the chance to show it to her now that the curse was fully lifted. But it would take work to regain any trust, and from the sorrow now filling his eyes, he knew that too.

“I hope someday I can be the father you deserved.” He touched her arm, and a shot rang out through the air. Blood ran in rivulets from his lips, dripping over her wrist.



Everleigh's eyes burst wide open as she screamed. "Dad!"

His arm thrust forward, reaching for her but he dropped to the ground, shock forever burned into his eyes.

"Dad!" Dominic darted to his side, dropping to his knees. "Dad!" he shouted again. He cupped his hands over his chest and started compressions, trying to revive him.

Everleigh stood there, frozen in time. Everyone around her moved in slow motion. The expressions of shock on their faces, wide eyes and opened mouths, gasps slicing through the remaining ripples of the bang from the gun.

She'd just watched her mate die and now her father. A gasp hitched in her throat, choking her as emotions balled up inside, aching to be let out in the sobs welling in her chest.

Tag clutched his arms around Everleigh and whipped her to the ground, throwing himself on top of her. Kane toppled Reseda to the ground next to her, covering her as well.

Nodin shifted to his Thunderbird form, rising into the air, the flaps of his wings powerful but time-delayed, as if Everleigh watched everything frame by frame like a movie.

Ixchel knelt beside Castos, running her hands over his heart.

"Damn, I'm a good shot." A voice shouted through the sounds around her, and everything suddenly sped back up to real time. "I didn't even have to use my scope."

"Who the hell are you?" Tag asked with a growl, still clinging to Everleigh in his arms.

"Oh, sorry, the name's Gotz, but you can just call me god." He winked.

"Of course," Reseda said, pushing her way out of Kane's arms. "Long time, Gotz. I'm surprised you took time out of your busy day of kissing ass to actually make it into the field."

He tilted his head with a smirk. "Jealous, Reseda? Just because you royally fucked up, doesn't mean you can't still come back to the unit. You can personally suck my balls and be my chamber maid."

“Oh, your balls finally descended. Nice to know. I’ll be able to chop them off now.” She huffed.

Tag jumped up and blocked Gotz from coming any closer. “Get the hell off our land! You’ve done enough damage here.”

“Oh, I’ve just begun, you preternatural prick. I’m not leaving until I’ve either captured you all or your blood is spewing at my feet.” He leaned in. “Want to be next? You and your wolf pal can try to run off into the dark, dark sunset together.”

Tag snarled, clenching his hands into fists. Before Gotz could say another word, Tag ripped the rifle from his hands, slammed him in the face with it and bent the gun into a horseshoe. “I said, get off my land.”

Guns cocked from every direction, and Tag dropped to his knees. Rifles jabbed at the back of his head.

Everleigh stood up and released an ear-splitting scream. Thrusting her hands in front of her, white light burst out of her hands, blowing back the troop of soldiers, their guns spiraling out of their hands, into the forest behind them.

Something twitched in her veins, a new ripple of energy, a source strange but familiar at the same time. Thrusting her hands upwards, she released her magic into the air, its shimmering white light rippling through the air, bouncing off the treetops and over the houses on the land in an arc. A hazy white dome enveloped them before it snapped and turned crystal clear, invisible.

With her magic drained, her knees wobbled, and Everleigh collapsed to the earth.

“Everleigh!” Tag clutched her in his arms. “What the hell was that?”

Ixchel smiled. “*That* was my daughter.”

Everleigh’s eyes fluttered open, but her limbs tingled, and her body felt like jelly. “What happened?”

Ixchel’s eyes glittered with pride. “Did you feel a new essence invade your own?”

Everleigh nodded. “Yeah, it was weird, strange but somehow I’d felt it before.”

“The Great Spirits gave you their power to reset the barrier.” Ixchel continued pressing her hands along Castos’ chest.

“But I don’t understand. Why would they choose me?”

“Because the first time it happened, they chose me.” Ixchel rose to a stance and walked over to her. “The power of the moon also flows in the veins of the Thunderbirds. My power also gives their powers life.”

Nodin, Kane and Tag all looked between each other, blank stares among them.

Maquinna walked out, her shawl wrapped tightly around her shoulders. “Ixchel,” she said with a nod.

“Maquinna. It’s been a long time.” Ixchel smiled.

“Indeed, it has.” Maquinna smiled back, friendly but a shade of wariness darkened her eyes. A smirk graced her lips. “The power comes from somewhere, does it not?”

Nodin shook his head. “We thought it came from The Great Spirits.”

“Partially. Your Great Spirits are your ancestors. I speak to them. I am of the dead and the living.” She smiled.

“We had no idea.” Tag shook his head, a dazed and confused look on his face. “It makes so much sense now. How in the spirit realm, our ancestors showed me what I needed to do.”

Ixchel nodded. “I speak to them. Just like I spoke to Castos just now.” She sucked in a deep sigh. “He asked not to be revived. He is ready to move on. He wishes to cause no more pain, and now that Everleigh and I are reunited and the pack is free from the curse, he wishes to be free as well

Everleigh swallowed hard and choked back a sob. While she wasn’t close with him and still hadn’t forgiven him for the things of her childhood, she had hoped they’d have been able to make strides in their relationship. He seemed willing to

before he was shot. But she did wish him peace and hoped his soul now had it.

A tear crashed over Dominic's cheek and Everleigh dropped to a squat beside him, draping her arm around her brother. "You were closer to him than I ever was. So, I'm sure this is harder on you."

He shook his head. "We had a strained relationship at best. He didn't like me for numerous reasons, but it's just weird, him being gone, you know?" He looked her in the eyes, his glassed over with tears. "Why is that?"

"I think we weep not for who he was, but for who he could have and should have been. It's hard to explain."

He nodded. "Yeah," he huffed and pushed himself to standing, offering her a hand to tug her with him.

Nodin slid an arm around Dominic's waist, tugging him against his chest. Dominic folded into his embrace, resting his head on Nodin's chest. Her heart rejoiced that at least Dominic had Nodin, the love of his life. He deserved someone who would love him for who he was and wanted to be.

She looked at Tag and she forced back a smile. What were the chances they'd end up with brothers?

"So, what happened to Gotz and his gang of goons?" Reseda asked.

"The barrier is resealed, so they cannot cross onto this sacred land. Like before, those without magic are unable to find this place. In the threads of magic, there is an essence that mortals naturally fear and stay wary of. It's like a natural deterrent or repellent, if you will." Ixchel brushed her hands across her dress.

"Well, there's that, at least." Reseda ran her hands across her slight baby bump. "I'll have to talk to Marshall and The Dolls, get intel on Gotz and what they've been up to."

"Marshall?" Everleigh asked, confused. "The Dolls?"

Tag smiled. "Long story, but they're old colleagues of Reseda's. I'll tell you all about it later."

“But one question,” Reseda added. “How come she didn’t get tats like I did when Kane’s and my mating bond snapped in place?” She leaned in and studied Ev for a long moment. “You’re not a bird, too, are you?”

Ev quirked a brow. “Not to my knowledge. And I have no idea about tattoos.” She shrugged as she looked to Tag.

Maquinna placed a gentle hand on Reseda’s shoulder. “My guess would be, your mating bond with Kane healed you, allowing your true form to come through once you were fully recovered from the effects of the Pul Yah stone. You were always meant to be a Thunderbird.”

“Okay, I want to know who wrote this script, because I have some editing tips!” Reseda shouted to the sky, as if talking to The Great Spirits.

Ev couldn’t hold back the giggle bubbling inside her. Forcing it down, she turned toward Ixchel. Her mom. It still felt weird for her to think it, let alone say it, and it would certainly take some time for her to really come to terms with the crone having turned into her mother. Winter was the only one close to being a mother to her. She had a lot to catch her up on.

“So, Chel...mom,” she paused with a smile, trying to get used to that word having a new meaning now. “What happens to us? You?”

Ixchel walked over and took her hand in her own. “You have a life here to discover. A mate who needs you, and a new purpose of discovering who you are in this world, rather than running from it.”

“Does that mean you’re leaving?” While she didn’t exactly have a closeness with Ixchel, she was hoping maybe they could at least start working on a relationship.

Ixchel nodded. “I need to take care of quite a few things on my end that have, well, gone astray in my time as the crone. But worry not, I’m only a heartbeat away. When you need me, I will come to you.”

Everleigh forced a smile. “Okay.” She squeezed her hand. “Thank you. It’s nice to not have you as the crone anymore.” She cringed. “This is really awkward. But, I’m just glad things worked out, I guess.”

“Me too, child. Me too.” Ixchel glanced around at everyone, gave a nod, then snapped her fingers over her head and vanished in a stroke of lightning.

Everyone headed into the longhouse, while Nodin and Dominic took the body to the pack for burial.

Everleigh pulled Tag to the side. “Can we talk for a minute?”

Tag’s lips turned up into a smile. “Of course.”

How would she phrase this without sounding crass or awkward? “Um, so, how did we...I mean, are we now officially...I guess what I’m trying to ask is...”

He leaned in and covered her stammering lips in a tender kiss, pushing her back against the side of house. Using his knee, he wedged open her thighs and pressed in against her, forcing a moan up from deep inside her. His hands slid under her shirt and caressed her skin before curling into her hips, arching them up against the friction of his knee. He almost ripped an orgasm out of her.

Easing himself from her lips, he pressed his forehead to hers. “We don’t have to have labels, ties, bonds. We don’t have to answer to anyone but each other. We’re whatever you want us to be.”

“I felt it. The bond.” She looked into his eyes and cupped his cheek. “I want it. I want the bond. I want us.” She swallowed hard, forcing down the rampant beating of her heart being so close to Tag and the desire to rip every stitch of clothing off his body. She desperately needed a release after all they’d gone through today. “I just don’t know how it came back. I thought it was gone. We both felt it gone, Tag.”

Leaning in, he massaged her neck with his lips, making his way to her ear as his hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs

rolling over her nipples through her lace bra. “I died, remember.”

Her breath hitched as the image of him lying dead flashed in her mind. But the swipe of his warm fingers over her breasts, the friction of his knee against her mound, his warm real breath against her neck proved that he was alive, here, and in her arms.

“Fresh start. The Great Spirits and your mother must really want us together.” He shrugged. “I remember laying there in the blackness and all I wanted was to hear your voice, to feel you one last time. My heart, even dead, wanted you and only you. We’re just meant to be.”

Warmth curled around the joy springing up in her soul at his words. She loved him. She honestly loved him. And she didn’t want to waste any more time not being with him.

“You want something.” He smiled down at her as he brushed his mouth back over her lips. “Tell me, anything, it’s yours.”

“I want my mate to make love to me. Mark me. Take me. Make me yours.” Giving into the feelings swelling inside her, she couldn’t hold back the smile bursting over her lips. “I love you, Rowtag.”

“With absolute pleasure.” Desire deepened the brown in his eyes as a growl rumbled in his chest, vibrating her fingertips as they pressed against his skin. “I love you, Everleigh. With everything in me, I love you.”

He picked her up in his arms and carried her to his cabin, kicking the door closed behind him.

THE END

## EPILOGUE



A SCREAM SHOT FROM EVERLEIGH'S LIPS AS SHE DARTED between the trees, rays of golden light breaking through the shadows. She tossed a glance over her shoulder, and he was still right on her heels behind her. Kicking up her pace, she leapt over a fallen stump and twisted in the air, throwing her hands up, casting a stream of air toward him and Tag bounced backwards, falling on his butt with laughter.

“You cheater!” he shouted, heaving for breath. “We both agreed not to use our powers.”

“Always keep your enemy guessing.” She crawled her way over before straddling him. Flexing her arms, she gave him a wink. “I am victorious!”

He reached up and tickled her and she collapsed on top of him in a fit of giggles.

She rolled off and curled up in his arms, staring up at the canopy of leaves above them. “I’ve missed these woods. So many memories. Good and bad, but after all that’s happened, I choose to keep only the good ones, the ones that remind me who I am, where I came from, who I’m meant to be.”

Tag squeezed her into his embrace and dotted a kiss along her neck. “I hope we can make many more, together.”

“Thank you, for sticking by me, trusting me, giving me what I needed when I needed it most.” She cupped his cheek and brushed his lips with her own.



A burst of light flashed in front of them, and Everleigh sprang out of Tag's embrace, both of them landing on their feet, ready to strike at whatever was coming at them.

Everleigh's heart hammered at the familiar sound of the whoosh of a portal opening. A pulse of relief flooded her veins as Winter stepped out, followed by Beck, carrying her cat, Felix.

Winter bowed her head, and Felix launched himself out of her hold, landing at Tag's feet, where he proceeded to rub against his legs. A laugh escaped Ev's throat. Felix had known all along who Tag was, as the memory of him doing the same thing upon their first meeting playing in her head.

"Greetings," Winter said. "I brought Felix for you. Ember's already transported the rest of your belongings to your new home."

"Thanks. I guess I didn't even realize Ember had gone back to the coven, yet." Ev arched a brow.

"Well, no, I would think not, as you've been busy..." she paused, tossing a glance at Tag. "...consummating your bond."

Heat rose to Ev's cheeks as she looked at Tag who sported a blush of his own.

"What's going on?" Dominic demanded as he hit the tree line, out of breath, Nodin right behind him.

"It's okay. It's Winter," Tag said.

Winter pursed her lips at Dominic and turned her attention back to Everleigh. "I shall take my leave—"

Ev caught her by the arm, tugging her to a halt. "No, Winter. A word please, before you go." She forced back the nausea bubbling in her stomach at having to confront Winter on the events of her past. She needed to hear Winter's side of the story.

"Okay, well, if it's all good here, I'm out." Dominic grabbed Nodin's hand and turned to head back.

"No. You stay, too. This concerns both of you." Everleigh's voice hardened as she let her anger fill her at what

Dom had done to her. While she understood, now, the reasons behind his actions, and that he was trying to protect her, she wanted to hear it from him on his own, along with an apology.

“Ev,” Dominic said, throwing his hands up. “Winter’s a very busy...witch.”

Winter’s glare could have melted the polar ice caps.

“I know what you both did. I want answers.” Ev folded her arms, staring both of them down.

“I don’t know—” Dom started but Everleigh shot her hand up.

“The night you helped me escape. I know what you both did. Zaxton told me. You stripped me of my memories, of my past! A part of me is gone forever.” She hung her head. “While I understand why, I want you to know it was still not right of you to make that decision for me.”

Dominic looked at Winter, and for the first time in her life, her face mellowed and almost looked uncomfortable, worried.

“Everleigh, you know what we did was only to keep you safe,” Winter said. “If you had kept those memories, if you had known, it would have endangered not only you, but others, if you had tried to go back to him. It was for the good of the whole.”

“Be mad at me, Ev. Not Winter. I asked her to.” He looked to Winter before focusing back on Everleigh. “She initially didn’t want to go along with it.”

Winter tilted her head and a small smile crept over her lips as she gave a nod of almost respect toward him.

“Is that why there’s been such animosity between you guys for my whole life? It’s all starting to make sense now.” She looked between them and all the pieces of the puzzle somehow fit into place, painting the bigger picture, the missing holes.

Dom released a heavy sigh and nodded. “I deserve all the punishment. But hear me out, I sincerely thought I was doing what was best for everyone involved. If you had known about the bond, you know now, after having gone through the mating

bond with Tag, the intensity. Even broken, it's not something you can deny or resist. You would have tried to come back to Zaxton, to the clan and who knows what would have gone down. It was meant to keep you hidden, safe."

Everleigh stepped forward and placed a hand along his arm.

"I'm your brother, Ev. I would never do anything to intentionally cause pain. And I hope you know, I had to choose the lesser of two evils. Yes, it may have been wrong to take those memories from you, but I'd rather have you pissed at me than dead. I'm sorry."

Everleigh nodded, forcing back the tears welling in her eyes. "I know. I know."

He wrapped his arms around her, clutching her to his chest. "I'm so glad I have you back, though. I promise I will never do something like that again."

"Thank you," she whispered, releasing him from the embrace, turning toward Winter. "Thank you for always being a good friend, Winter. I'll miss you and the coven very much."

"We are never far, my dear. You know how to find us." She glanced toward the longhouse, eyeing Ember chasing after Denali with a stick. "I have a feeling there's more in store for us. Not everyone's stories have been written." She winked before reopening the portal behind her and stepping through.



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**SNEAK PEEK OF SOUTHWEST  
HEAT**

BY E.L. ADAMS

“I didn’t do it—I swear. You need to believe me.” Billy ‘Mick’ Powers smacked his head on the table, letting out a pathetic cry that didn’t crack the tough façade of Addyson Owings. Mick covered his face in his hands and mumbled his innocence repeatedly, the smell of his sweat clogging the room with body odor and garlic.

“Enough of the act, Mick,” Addyson lowered her face until she leveled her gaze with the suspect. Her voice remained even, straight to the point, and held a hint of amusement. Mick’s body shook, and he tightened his arms against his chest in a lame attempt of protection. “You did do it, and I’m going to tell you how.”

Mick’s face blanched just enough for her to feel the thrill of a win. It coursed through her veins like it always did, lighting her on fire. People told her that her hazel eyes glowed when she used her talents, but she’d never tested the theory. But when Mick’s gaze widened even more and he clutched the edge of the table in panic, she began.

“You wanted a hit, that was all. Your stash lowered, and that pissed off your boss. A quick hit would help the stress. Hey, it happens, right?” she said, moving from her spot directly across the table from him to lean against the further wall. She feigned understanding, carefully masking her face to look like sympathy. “You went to Jordy’s house, but he wasn’t home.”

Mick blinked too fast for anyone to believe he wasn’t worried. He swallowed hard, the sound almost causing Addyson to cringe. But she knew better than that. She didn’t give anything away. With a quick frown and tsk of her tongue, she continued with the story. “Jordy’s daughter was there. Cynthia Billingsworth. She told you nothing remained in the

house, correct? She tried shutting the door in your face, but you were stronger. Tell me, what did you do then, Mick?”

“I left. I told you, I left and bought food at the gas station.”

“We checked cameras at all the area gas stations, and there was no sight of you at the time you indicated. Try again. What did you do?”

“It ain’t my fault the cameras didn’t see me. I’m sure I can find a receipt or something to prove I went there. Listen, I didn’t kill Cyn. I wouldn’t!” he shouted and slammed his hand on the table. Something seemed to spark to life inside him. His eyes grew mean, more determined, and he sat straighter. He gave the detective a smug grin, one that stretched across his weathered and pot-marked face, and said, “Unless you have proof, I ain’t talking. I’m lawyering up.”

“Fair enough.” She grabbed the folder from the table and snapped it shut. He wanted to play a game, so she’d let him. She curved her lips into that smile, the one that transformed her hard features into something more feminine, softer. She knew the affect it had on men, and she only used it right before she went in for the win. It had helped her solve countless cases, and this one was no different. “I’ll leave you to think about the way her glassy eyes stared at you after you choked her, how your name left her lips in desperation when you shook her hard enough to break her trachea. She loved you, Mick, and you killed her. And for what? For some blow? Word will get out to her father, and you know what that means. But you lawyered up, so we can’t work out a deal.”

She didn’t wait for a response before spinning around and reaching for the door. Her heart raced from the thrill of a win because she knew, in a few seconds, she’d get what she wanted—a confession. Her skin prickled with adrenaline, and she waited. *Three, two, one.* She’d barely touched the cold metal handle before he said, “How do you... Who told... Wait, don’t go!”

This time, she smiled for real. *Score.*

She turned back to face him, letting him see her winning smile. “Is that the start of a confession I hear?”

“I’ll talk. I’ll do it. You gotta protect me, though. It was an accident!”



Addyson propped her feet up onto her desk and enjoyed a steaming cup of coffee after getting Mick to confess everything. He gave her the missing piece of the puzzle they’d needed, and she heard the familiar thud of footsteps coming to her office. A combination of smugness and confidence filled the air around her, but it never crossed the line of egotistical. She knew she was the best in the Southwest Supernatural Society Phoenix office. She’d earned her right to be here and her title. She worked her ass off, sacrificing a hint of a personal life for it, but she rarely let herself think about that. Even though she didn’t have to prove herself over and over, it didn’t hurt to have her boss congratulate her again. With a quick glance at the mirror she kept in her bottom drawer, she wiped under her eyes and made sure to contain her crazy auburn hair with a ponytail. Appearances mattered, and as a woman, even more so. The door creaked opened, but two men stood there. Not just her boss. She could only see strong black shoes and pants. She frowned as her brows knitted together. *Well, that’s new.* She always could read a vibe, and this mysterious stranger gave nothing away. An excited, nervous energy flowed from her head to her fingertips as she sat up straighter.

“Addy, you did it again.” Patricio Flores looked at her with pride and warmth—something she never experienced growing up—and her chest tightened just a little. He had been her boss for two years and demonstrated time and again that sometimes, family was who you chose to surround yourself with. “Great job, kid.”

“Thanks,” she replied, removing her feet from the desk to the floor. Her small office allowed her to fit everything she needed: a small closet to hang extra clothes, her desk, two chairs for visitors, and her favorite old computer chair she’d owned since college. Cracks lined the material, and duct tape



covered some parts, but it fit to her curves and felt like home. A lone poster of Mission Beach rested on the wall from a trip she'd taken on her own, but that was the only artwork. She preferred plain walls most of the time as they were without distraction. Besides, artwork led to people asking her personal questions, and she didn't care for small talk. Patricio entered her office and plopped down onto one of the matching chairs across from her, giving her the perfect view of the second man. Her breath caught in her throat, words escaping her.

Cooper Braxton stood at the doorway, leaning against the wall with a casual expression on his face. His chiseled jawline and dark eyebrows sent a flicker of heat over her skin. A blast of familiarity and hurt coursed through her; she'd spent two years staring at his face, wondering why she couldn't *read* him. Two years of her life dedicated to him with the hope of something more. Two years, wasted, when he'd left her. *Crushed* her, more like. For the girl who always wanted a family, to have someone love her, he'd become the person she's trusted the most. But he left, and that part of her life ended. Well, so she'd thought. Seeing him in the flesh caused her stomach to plummet as her anxieties rose at a rate she didn't have a handle on. She surmised everyone in the room could hear her heart speed up, but Patricio sighed, drawing all their attention to him.

*Remain calm. Don't acknowledge him.* It took all her effort, but she dragged her gaze away from her ex and toward her boss. Patricio was safe, Cooper was *not*.

“Addy, this is Cooper Braxton. He works in Southern California. He's the equivalent of you from further out west.”

Her competitive streak gripped ahold of her filter, and she arched a brow to Cooper's shoulder. She wasn't quite ready to meet his gaze yet.

“We'll see about that,” she responded and did her best to look professional. She stood, reached out her hand, and waited for her ex to follow her lead. She did *not* want Patricio to know about their prior relationship. She'd worked too hard for too long to let some guy who'd broken her heart derail her

career path. She glanced at his face for just a second. “Nice to meet you, Cooper.”

He ran his teeth over his bottom lip, grinning ear to ear as he brought his massive hand to hers. His eyes had no business sparkling like that. “Likewise, Addy.”

Did her imagination play a trick on her, or had he said her name like a dirty secret? Why did he have to wear the same subtle cologne that tickled her nose and brought back a million memories? Them kissing, them making love while they camped, them planning a life together—just for him to abandon her. She pressed her lips together in a tight line, shoving down the emotions threatening to overrule her.

She cleared her throat, ran a hand over her ponytail, and faced her boss. “Now that the introductions are over, what’s he doing here?” she asked her boss, earning a chuckle from Cooper. That sound flooded her with even more painful memories. He laughed with his whole body and, for one second, hearing it reminded her of how happy she used to be back then. She’d looked forward to so much with him—a family, a partner, *love*. Now she obsessed over her career and besides that...not much else. Along with the nostalgia, anger rooted her to the floor. He *left* her, so why the *fuck* did he stand in her office smirking?

She’d worked a couple cases with Patricio in years past, and he functioned the same as she did. *Work hard, don’t waste time on small talk*. She cocked a hip out and remained standing. They were in her office after she’d broken a huge case, and this was her way of whipping her dick out. Maybe a part of her wanted to rub how well she’d done for herself in Cooper’s face. Better than great. *Yeah, look at me and weep, asshole*.

Patricio pulled a thick manila folder from under his arm. Her curiosity got the best of her. Was it a new case? Something bigger than the drug lead she’d just gotten? Dragging in someone from another location meant one thing—a big fucking deal. “Two families have gone missing between Phoenix and San Diego in the past two weeks. Each story is the same: They were all from here, heading to California on

holiday. They checked in with family members during the drive, but none of them made it to their destinations. The local police want to bring in consultants. That means us.”

“Are they connected in any way, the families?” she asked, all thoughts of her past with Cooper disappearing at Patricio’s words. A new case excited her and caused her blood to pump in a different way. She was anxious to help get answers, to find the truth for concerned family members. She wanted to be the person she’d never experienced growing up—someone to fill in the gaps. The main reason she’d become an investigator was to help others, and this case *needed* her. On top of that, she loved the challenge, the excitement, the newness of a crime to figure out.

“No. The first family to disappear, the Fitzgeralds, showed up a mile past the Arizona state line. No wounds, no evidence of what happened, both parents and two teenagers were dead.”

Addy pinched the bridge of her nose and let the normal wave of grief come and go, as it always did. She focused her energy on the details. “How long were they missing before they were found? What is known about their disappearance?”

“From the locals, it seems like nothing.” Patricio stood, his slightly overweight belly protruding from his starched, blue, button-down shirt, and he gestured to Cooper. “We want two of our finest to tag team this case, see if you can’t get to the bottom of it or help point the locals in the right direction. They are worried. They haven’t found a damn clue and don’t want this to be a trend.”

Her gaze flicked to Cooper’s, his painfully gorgeous brown eyes framed with dark lashes long enough to make her envious staring right back at her. The sparkle from earlier had disappeared, and instead, an intensity she hadn’t seen before radiated from him. It seemed he took this as seriously as she did. Good. She could work with that. She nodded. “When do we leave?”

“You got your ready-to-roll bag here?”

“Of course, I do.” She nodded to the small suitcase leaning against the corner near her closet. If Addyson could be

described in three words, they would be prepared, efficient, and determined. She'd graduated with honors in criminal justice and been recruited right out of college—it was easy to give up any hint of a normal life when she had no family, few friends, and the guy she'd thought she'd marry had left her. She rose in ranks and worked in one of the most prestigious departments where a paranormal could work at twenty-six. To ask if she was prepared was an insult. "I'm ready to go as soon as you need."

"The SUV is stocked and equipped to leave within the hour. You and Braxton will meet up with Detective Hansen near the state border around noon. I'll need a report in thirty-six hours."

"You'll have it." She refused to look at Cooper as she acknowledged her boss.

"Great." He smiled. "Nice work on Powers. Knew we hired you for a reason," Patricio said, tapping his fist on the desk at his departure. "Cooper and you need to debrief on the case. I'm meeting with the mayor and hopefully won't be kissing too much ass, but holler if you have any questions."

"Always do." She gave her boss and mentor a tight smile, dreading the moment she and Cooper would be left alone in her small office. She loved her area in the building—it wasn't massive, but she had her desk, two chairs, her favorite lamp she'd found on a trip to Santa Fe, and a picture from college of her with her closest friend Shivani. It felt too personal to share with him after all this time. He didn't deserve to know who she was now. He'd lost that privilege.

Cooper studied the space like it held all the answers, and the thought unsettled her. Three years had passed since she'd lain her eyes on him, and the man had aged almost unfairly. His dark hair hung from his forehead in a way that made him appear like a movie star rather than a detective. The playful tilt of his lips only looked more appealing with laugh lines around his mouth. And the worst part...his eyes were wiser. When Patricio walked out, she took another long sip of the coffee and waited ten seconds before glancing at her former lover.

When their gazes met, her heart pounded painfully against her ribcage. How dare he look at her with heat after what he did? She worked her jaw left to right, trying to find the right words when he broke the silence first.

“Addy.”

She closed her eyes and let the sound of her name from his lips wash over her. The sudden desire to touch him—run her tongue over a body she knew was chiseled from long hours of dedication at the gym—shocked her. She shouldn’t have uncontrolled lust for him. *It’s been three years.* She’d moved on. Sure, no one had come close to touching her heart and soul, but she’d been with other men. She rubbed her lips together, dug deep to find inner strength, and met his gaze head-on.

“Cooper,” she said, setting the bright purple mug down and leaning forward onto her elbows. He still stood against the wall, about two feet in front of her, and grinned the same crooked smile she’d fallen in love with all those years ago. *Keep it professional. Business first. Talk about the job.* “Seems you’ve done well for yourself.”

“Right back at ya, babe.” He sauntered to her desk, propping himself up on the side of it like he owned the place, and took his time eyeing her. His signature scent of coffee and soap washed over her, confusing her paper-thin hold on her emotions.

“You look great. Real nice.”

She didn’t respond. She raised a brow, pursed her bright red lips, and opened the folder Patricio had left them. It did no good to acknowledge the electric attraction between them. She knew better now, to confuse lust with trust or love, and she needed to ensure he understood she would *not* be going down that route again.

She felt his stare all over her body as she flipped through the pages. Her skin burned with awareness and desire, her mind unable to focus on the details. Her lingering attraction to him numbed her thoughts, stifled her emotions, and confused her. She’d built walls around her heart to prevent anyone from

getting close, and the *one guy* who was the catalyst for said walls threw her off balance. She'd survived heartbreak, lived through it, and wasn't stupid enough to do it again. Work needed her attention. *Only work.*

The case file contained pictures of the latest family, the ones they'd found dead without any marks on them. She loved the initial part of an investigation, where anything became possible, and she wanted to connect the dots. Running her tongue on the corner of her mouth, she glanced up and found Cooper's gaze zeroing in on her lips. Her skin flushed. "What do you know about the Fitzgeralds?"

"Is that's how it's going to be between us? Not acknowledging our past for a second?" he asked, lowering his voice to that dangerously sexy tone that sent shivers down her spine. He chuckled and moved from one side of the desk to the other, invading her personal space like he used to, and cupped her chin with his calloused hands. "I've licked every part of your body, been inside you for hours, and you're hoping to look at me like a stranger you just met?"

*God*, the sex between them had defied expectations. Explosive. Hot. Feral. Always selfless, intuitive, and communicative; Cooper dominated the bedroom. They'd gone away to Cabo for a weekend and never left their hotel room. Her face warmed at the memory, and she curled her toes in her shoes. Heat and chemistry didn't equate to more than that—a nice lay. She dug her nails into her palms, willing her pull to him to settle down, and kept her face neutral.

"You might as well be a stranger, Cooper. We haven't spoken in years. I'm not the same woman you used to know," she said, hating how her voice rose just enough to give away her feelings. She channeled her inner badass and stood, shooing his hand away from her face and shoving him lightly in his chest. Her temper flared. Only he could ever ignite this type of fire beneath her skin. "If you think things will be anything but professional, then you need to request a different assignment. I don't know anything about who you are now, how you're partnering with our department, or what games you might try and play with me. But know this..." She moved

closer to him, their mouths no more than six inches apart. She could smell his minty breath and subtle cologne. *God, he smells the same.*

“I am *the best* at what I do, and *nobody* is going to mess that up for me.” She smacked his cheek twice and gave him her best smile. “I’ll see you in the SUV.”

\*\*\*

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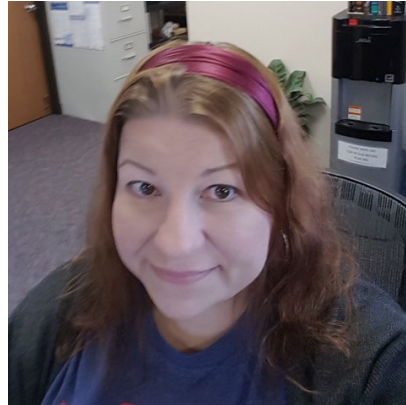
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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WREN MICHAELS hails from the frozen tundra of Wisconsin where beer and cheese are their own food groups. But a cowboy swept her off her feet and carried her to Texas, where she promptly lost all tolerance for cold and snow. Fueled by coffee, dreams, and men in kilts, Wren promises to bring you laughter, heart-fluttering romance, and action that keeps you on the edge of your seat. The easiest way to her heart is anything to do with the Green Bay Packers, Doctor Who, or Joss Whedon.



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