

TIME AFTER TIME
BOOK TWO



BEFORE I FALL

REESE RIVERS

Reese Rivers Presents

Time After Time

Book 2 – Before I Fall

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Time After Time, Book 2 – Before I Fall

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Fair Warning Dear Reader

In book one you were treated to an almost instant love. This book flips the coin on that and turns dark and tragic. There will be thoughts of suicide, self-harm, and an obsessive need that causes a character not to eat and become dangerously underweight. References to sexual assault and physical assault. Non consent will play a part in this tragedy but not in a sexual context. There will be no happy ever after in this book...BUT it will come by the end of the series. I'm not ashamed to say I had a few sobbing moments writing this book so if it kicks you hard in the feels, know you aren't alone.

Eden

I toss another painting on the floor and clench my fists in frustration at finding only a blank wall behind it. I've spent the last three weeks searching this house for some kind of safe or hidden panel that will contain the answers I need to get the mirror working again. Adera had to have left a clue of some kind, a journal, a user's manual or something to document her travels and how the damn thing works but so far, I've found nothing to help me get back to my men. I scrub at my face in exhaustion. I've barely slept since getting back and finding out that I was only gone for twenty-four hours in my time. I feel like I'm losing my mind and every part of me aches to get back to the men I love.

I look around the parlor in disgust. Other than the hot steamy showers I take twice a day, there's literally nothing in this house or this year that makes me want to stay. I trudge back up the stairs and climb over the piles of junk I toppled and left strewn about in my desperate search for answers until I'm standing in front of the mirror. There's a thick blanket covering it right now. I know in my bones I'll get back to my men once I figure out how to make it work but I want to be ready this time so I covered the mirror to prevent accidentally traveling like I did last time.

In between frantic sessions of searching the house I've been busy preparing for the moment I do go back. Once I'm reunited with them, I don't plan on coming back until I die of old age.

Sebastian's broken expression as I faded out in front of him fills my mind and squeezes my heart but I shove it ruthlessly aside. I can't think about what they must be going through or it will break the last part of me that's holding on to my will to live without them. Instead, I choose to believe that it's only a matter of time before I get the mirror working again. I reach for a corner of the blanket and carefully lift it so that only the

tinest sliver of glass is slowing. When I see it's still dark, I drop the blanket back in place and turn away in frustration.

I take a seat on the stool in front of the dressing table and gently spread the small pile of pictures I printed out and laminated across the surface. My phone was shoved into my bra when I came back and I sobbed for half a day on the floor when I realized that all the pictures I took while I was back in time were still in the gallery.

My fingertips brush against the images of Cade and Finn's grinning faces with mine in between them. I took the picture while I was showing them how to take a selfie the very first night the three of us came together in between bouts of love-making. We're lying on the bed with our heads pressed together on a pillow and the afterglow of multiple orgasms is all over my face.

I move on to the next photo of Luca holding me from behind. He's not looking into the camera but instead looking down at me and the love he has for me just shines from his eyes and expression. I had just tipped my head back to tell him to smile when I tapped the button. I bite my lip to stop the fresh tears that want to fall and move to the final picture. It's Sebastian and I right before we left for the Marquis' party. I'm wearing that insane red dress and we're turned towards each other with my hand on his chest and me looking up at him while he looks down at me. Memories of what came after that party has my core aching for his touch again.

I will be taking these pictures with me when I go as well as a select few other items that will fit in the large carpet bag I had made to look somewhat seventeenth-century appropriate. I hope if I loop the straps over my body it will make the trip with me just like my phone did. Just in case it won't go through with me, I had the same seamstress make me a dress and cloak with large lined pockets that I will fill with the most important things I want to have with me in the past. I'm going back as prepared as I can and hopefully will be able to take a few luxury items too.

Over the next few days, I have appointments booked to replace my birth control implant so it will be good for at least

three years and also get booster shots for all my vaccines plus a few new ones. I told my doctor that I'm moving to Africa for a few years so I could get all the shots for things that have been eradicated here. I'm trying to cover as many bases as I can so I don't end up dying of a treatable disease or infection. Another doctor I was friendly with when I worked as an EMT agreed to set me up with a bunch of courses of different antibiotics for a few hundred dollars. She didn't even need much persuasion as she had done a tour in Africa with Doctors Without Borders and knew how hard it is to get good meds there. The main thing will be to stay away from anyone who wants me dead and swords...no more fucking swords! The hardest thing to get my hands on was silver-coated bullets for my gun. If I have to go up against that bitch again I'll need an advantage and a silver bullet to the brain is the best I can do. Once again money talks and the bullets should be ready for pick up in a few days.

"Reminder! You have an appointment in two hours. Reminder!" Siri chimes out at me from my phone, causing me to scowl.

"Fuck," I say harshly as I push up from the table. I have to go to this one after blowing off the last lawyer appointment for my divorce. I thought I would be gone by now, back in the past where I'd never have to see Troy's smug face again. I don't have a choice though because if for some cursed reason I don't find a way to go back, I need to finally sever the last legal tie that holds me to the bastard. I want this done and over with so I can close that horrible chapter of my life.

I take an Uber downtown to my Aunt Adera's lawyer who now represents me and stare at the buildings as they go by. It's another dreary Seattle day and the gloom suits my mood. My driver hits a red light in front of a newly renovated building. It's all dark greys and blacks with a few red accents and has an old-world look that doesn't fit very well with all the modern steel and glass of the other buildings. As the light turns green and traffic starts to move again, a sign becomes clearer, 'Coming soon – Gothic – An Adult Playground and Night Club'.

I lean back, no longer interested but as we pass the sign it reveals a statue that has me leaning forward again. It's a naked woman with a strategically placed sheet to cover her breasts leaning back on her bottom with an arched back. Her face is pointed straight up so I can't make out her features but it's easy enough to make out that she's in the throes of pleasure. Her long rippling hair flows down to pool behind her. The woman's legs are bent at the knee and there's a man's chest between them as his face is buried against her stomach and she clutches at his long hair that hides his face.

The statue is beautiful, provocative, and screams sex but there's something about it tugging at the back of my mind that I can't quite grasp. The car drives past and I can't help but turn in my seat to watch it recede in the rear window until we turn a corner and it's gone from sight. I can't stop thinking about it until the elevator doors slide open and my lawyer appears to greet me.

"Eden! It's good to see you. I'm so glad you could make the meeting."

"Mr. Dunhurst, it's good to see you too," I say with a real smile. After Adera died, he had hounded me to take his calls and finally showed up at my door, forcing me with a kind and steady hand to deal with her estate and breaking me from the paralyzed state I was in after the attack. He's taken care of all the legal work and piles of forms that needed to be dealt with from an inheritance the size my aunt left me. He also took over all the nasty business of my divorce even though I refused to fight Troy for his outrageous demands. I was too broken to fight and I didn't care about the money, assets, and insurance my parents' death left me. I just wanted it to be over and never have to see him again. As far as I'm concerned, he could have it all if it finally ended things between us.

"Troy and his lawyer are waiting for us in the conference room." He tells me as he guides me down the hall to it. "If you are sure you don't want to fight this, then all that needs to be done today is to sign the final papers and it will be over."

I breathe out my relief. "Good. I know you wanted me to take a harder stand but I just want him gone."

“As much as I wish you would reconsider, I understand and will respect your wishes, Eden. Even with all that scoundrel is taking you for, you will never want for anything financially again with your aunt’s inheritance, so I’m sure Adera will rest easier knowing you will be taken care of.”

I squeeze his arm in appreciation and gratitude and then step past him into the conference room. My gaze lands on Troy briefly before sliding away to pull my chair out across from his lawyer. I don’t need to look at him to remind me of all the ways he worked to crush the broken pieces of me after my family died until there was nothing left but dust.

“Hey, babe! You’re looking a little tired there. Still not sleeping? Poor thing.” Troy taunts me from across the large table.

My eyes meet his for the first time since this all began. All our previous meetings had me in a high anxiety state that left me a wreck for days after. This time feels different. The tight panic in my chest at previous meetings is absent so I just stare back at him and really wonder how I let such a dirtbag narcissist fool me into marrying him. He hid his cruel side so well at first, playing the besotted, sweet man that couldn’t wait to spend his life with me. After the wedding, I caught small glimpses of the real him but it wasn’t until my family died that the real man came out in full force and started making my life a living hell.

I let my lips turn up in a faint smile. “Yeah, it’s tough but I can always take a nap to fix that. Unfortunately, you’ll always be a piece of shit. Just no fixing that...babe.”

A sense of satisfaction wells up in me when his mouth drops open in shock and he jerks back into his chair. Mr. Dunhurst masks his laugh by faking a cough as he takes the seat beside me.

“Well, shall we begin? With all parties in agreement, all that’s left is to sign the contracts and your marriage will be dissolved.” He states as he opens a file with the documents.

“Hmm, I’m not sure we’re ready to take that step yet,” Troy says smugly with hate in his eyes directed my way.

I narrow my eyes at him. This is payback for what I just said. I've never bit back at his taunts so now he's going to punish me for it. His lawyer puts a hand on Troy's arm to caution him but he swats it away never moving his hard eyes from mine.

"I think we should discuss the money my wife inherited from her aunt. It's a considerable amount that should be taken into consideration." An ugly smile forms on his face making my temper spark.

"That was long after we were separated, you asshole. You're not entitled to any of that!" I snap back as Mr. Dunhurst lays a calming hand on my arm and he clears his throat.

"Mr. Clark, is it your intention to attempt to include the estate my client has recently inherited from her Aunt Adera in these proceedings?" He asks with an eager tone, making me shoot a look his way. My lawyer has always tried to do what's best for me so I don't understand why this would make him happy.

"Isn't that what I just said? Yes, I want a cut of that estate too." Troy fires back, causing Mr. Dunhurst to practically bounce in his seat.

"Very well, then. I'll need a moment with my client." He tells them as he pops open his briefcase and pulls a thick file from it and sets it in front of me.

"Eden, I have detailed instructions from your aunt to present this file to you should ever that...person...attempt to interfere with your inheritance. Please take a few minutes to look it over before we proceed."

I give him a confused look but he just nudges the file my way. Troy is almost halfway out of his chair as he leans over the table to get a better look at the file. I don't miss the nervous look in his eyes as I pull the file closer so it angles down to my lap so that only I can see what's inside. I keep my expression blank as I sort through the eight by ten dated pictures but it's a challenge.

Troy at his bachelor party getting a blow job while his face is buried between another woman's large fake breasts. Troy nailing one of my bridesmaids to a wall in his wedding tux. Troy doing lines of cocaine at a party with a different woman draped up against him. My jaw clenches when I check the date of a picture of him partying on the boat he bought with my parents' money the day of theirs and Hope's memorial. It goes on with pictures of a massive mansion with flashy sports cars in front of it and more with him and lots of different women.

I eat my anger with a sigh and flip the photos to the side to scan the banking documents, invoices, and receipts of all the things he's spent my money on, finally coming to a last picture that has me frowning and then shooting a disbelieving look across to him even as the picture crumbles under my tightening fingers. My thoughts are speeding in a circle as they try to put the pieces together that I just can't accept so I smooth out the picture and close the file, setting it on the chair next to me, out of reach. I lean forward and snag the documents that we were supposed to sign today and rip them to shreds.

"What the fuck are you doing, bitch?" Troy yells as he leaps to his feet.

I ignore him completely and focus on his lawyer.

"Advise your client that all of his terms are rejected. My counsel's firm will be doing a forensic audit of your client's finances going back to the moment we got engaged. All findings will be presented before a judge for his ruling on the dissolution of this marriage."

Troy's lawyer drops his head in one of his hands as he nods tiredly. I'm kind of proud at how lawyer-like I managed to sound but it was basically what Mr. Dunhurst had been begging me to do from the start so it was easy enough to remember.

"Please, remove your client from my offices or I will be forced to call security." He says in a hard tone as Troy continues to hurl abuse my way that I ignore.

His lawyer manhandles him around the conference table but just as he's pushing him through the door, Troy grasps the frame and barks, "I'm going to make you pay for this, Eden. You're going to regret crossing me!"

I turn my chair slowly to face him and tilt my head.

"Like you made my parents and Hope pay?"

I see a flash of fear in his eyes before they harden back up with a gleam.

"Nah, that'd be too easy. Be seeing you...wife."

And then he's gone and a gasp of pain rushes out of me. I turn back to the table and clutch the edge.

"He...he...my family...Hope!" I gasp as Mr. Dunhurst pats at my back.

"It would seem so. I'm sorry, my dear. Unfortunately, that picture doesn't prove he tampered with their car, only that he was kneeling next to it on the night of Hope's party. We can take it to the police but it's circumstantial at best. I'm afraid we might never be able to prove he was responsible for their deaths."

I'm swamped with grief and guilt that I brought that monster into our lives. If Troy did have a hand in their deaths, it's my fault. They'd still be alive if I had better judgment in men. I feel the gaping black void of despair in front of me that will pull me under if I let it. I can't go there again. I know I will never find my way out if I do. I get my breathing under control as an ice-cold rage fills me, pushing me away from the void. This isn't over. There's no way I'll let him get away with this. I snatch up the torn agreement and find the half that has Troy's and my legal names and addresses and slip it into the file that I set in front of me again.

"Do you know how she got all this?" I ask him, tapping the file after clearing my throat that's thick with emotion.

"No, I do not. Your aunt was a sweet woman but she was cagey and had many secrets. She played things pretty close to her chest and only told me what she wanted me to know. I

swear there were many times that I thought she was a witch or some kind of psychic.” He laughs but I jerk at the words.

“What do you mean by that?”

He waves a hand like it’s nothing important. “It’s silly really, but she just seemed to know things before they happened. It was almost like she had the sight, like she could see the future.”

I suck in a breath and swallow hard as he taps the file again.

“I believe there is a personal note for you in there at the back of the file.”

I flip the file back open and search it until I find the small envelope that I recognize as being from her personal stationery set. It’s one single sheet of paper with only a few sentences.

My Dearest Eden,

I trust you will use this file wisely and crush that cockroach like the bug he is.

I am truly sorry to not be there with you.

I know how draining this must be for you.

I always found that the full moon would help to recharge my energies.

Safe travels,

Love,

Adera

Eden

I frown down at the note she left me. It doesn't explain how she managed to get all this evidence and it's doesn't even really sound like her. She was never into the mystical or moon worship that I know of so I don't know why she would tell me...wait...safe travels? Why would she say that? I can't remember the last time I traveled anywhere except...I bolt in my seat. Holy shit! Could she mean?

“Mr. Dunhurst, do you have a calendar I can look at?”

“Of course, my dear. I will be right back with one.”

I chew on my lip as I run my fingers over her note, picking it apart in my head. The words draining, full moon, and recharge stand out. And safe travels? I think this is code for the mirror and how it works but I just need a calendar to be sure. Mr. Dunhurst is back quickly and he slides a desk blotter-sized calendar in front of me. I track back the days to the one I went through the mirror on and sure enough, it was on a full moon. I count ahead to the next one and breathe out through pursed lips. Eight days. If Adera was really trying to tell me how to use the mirror, then I have eight more days until I can travel back to my men. I turn and beam a smile at my lawyer but then narrow my eyes in thought and tap the file with one finger.

“Mr. Dunhurst, are there any other files that my aunt left for you to give me?”

He ducks his head and that tells me there is.

“Your aunt set certain conditions and dates for items to be released to you. I am bound by her will to carry out the terms of that to the letter. She also said you would understand that the timing for some of these things would have to be right for them to be effective. I'm not sure what that means, do you?”

I consider that and wrack my brain trying to figure out why these things need to be timed in a certain way but come up

blank. Clearly my time traveling aunt knew about events that haven't happened to me yet and it makes me wonder if the mirror allows travel into the future as well as the past.

"I don't but it gives me comfort to know she's going to be looking out for me even if she's gone."

Eight days. I have eight days to get my affairs in order before I go back where I belong and hopefully, this time I won't be back.

"Sir, does your firm have a private investigator you can recommend?"

He gives me a measured look. "I take it you wish to have someone looking deeper into your ex-husband?" When I nod, he pushes to his feet. "Let me walk you out. I'll have my assistant forward you the details."

Time seems to slow right down over the next week as I finish my preparations. I've gone over the contents of my bag, again and again, discarding and adding things to it until I feel like I'm going to go crazy. I've been filling hours of my time since I returned with a French language app to try and cram as much of the language into my head as possible. The day of the full moon has me walking Seattle's streets, soaking up what I will miss once I'm gone, and picking up the last few items I want to take with me.

My cell phone rings as I step out of the jeweler's where I picked up the small velvet bag of loose cut stones that is now hidden in my bra. If it takes me a while to find my way back to the manor house, I'll need some form of currency to pay for transportation and the remaining stones can be given to pay for my upkeep. I know my men will be happy to cover my expenses but this way I won't ever feel like a burden to them. I juggle my shopping bags and the large latte I've been savoring as my last cup of good coffee until I can fish my phone out of my pocket.

"Hello?"

"Miss Kelly? Hi, it's Paul Travis."

“Mr. Travis, thanks for getting back to me. Have you had any luck tracking him down?”

“That’s why I’m calling. Your ex has left the country. He flew out the evening of your meeting to Switzerland, hopped a connecting flight to Prague and disappeared from there. I’m sorry I don’t have better news.”

I sigh in disappointment. “It’s fine. Thank you for looking into it for me. Please send your invoice to Mr. Dunhurst and he will see to paying it.”

I push my phone back into my pocket and turn for home. I must have scared Troy with my parting question about my family for him to skip town so quickly. I hate that he’ll never pay for everything he did but I’m out of time.

I order in all my favorite Thai dishes for my last modern meal and eat way too much as I scan over the items laid out on my bed that will be going into the carpetbag and the deep pockets of the outfit and cloak I will put on after my last shower. Everything modern has been repackaged or hidden to fit the time I expect to be traveling to. The medicine has all been put in small glass bottles with a cork stopper as well as the few beauty items I’m taking like hair serum, body and face lotion, and toothpaste. The bottles are secured in a thin, lightweight wooden box with linen stuffed around them to protect them from breakage. Hidden under the bottles and packing will be five toothbrushes, two mascara tubes, two eyeliners, and a razor with ten replacement blades. The tablet that is loaded with movies and TV shows, earbuds, and a paperback book-sized solar USB charger will go into an antique-looking book that’s been hollowed out and secured with leather ties to hold it closed. There’s a two-pound waxed canvas bag of freshly ground coffee that I will hoard like a madwoman and only allow myself one cup on special occasions and a small silver single cup mesh filter.

Most of the rest is clothing. I have two pairs of yoga pants and two sets of leggings rolled up tightly. Five bras, five sets of matching underwear, three pairs of fluffy socks as well as three tank tops that will be rolled into two oversized hoodies that have had all the tags and branding removed. Handfuls of

thick elastic bands and a few black scrunchies are in another small linen bag. The final two items are a spare pair of Toms shoes with the tag cut off to replace the ones I will be wearing and a pair of weatherproofed leather boots.

I've packed these items into the bag countless times until they will all fit with not an inch to spare. I hope the bag will make the journey with me but if it doesn't, I can live without any of it as long as I have the men I love.

My phone, pictures, the jewels, and spare bullets will go in my pockets and the gun and my switchblade will be strapped to my thighs under the long skirt I'll be wearing over another set of black leggings. With the bag packed and the night getting later I strip down and shower under the hot spray until the water runs cold. I take my time covering my skin with the body lotion that Finn and Bas couldn't stop smelling when we first met and defuse dry my hair until the mass of it ripples down my back in soft red and gold waves. I anchor the crown section of my hair back with bobby pins to keep it free from my eyes and swipe on the lightest touch of mascara to frame my green eyes. I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror as nerves battle with excitement. It's almost time.

I dress in black leggings and a white tank top over my matching bra and underwear, strap the gun holster to my right thigh and knife to my left before stepping into the full navy skirt of the dress I'll be wearing and zip the hidden bodice on the side, carefully smoothing over the fabric that covers it. I bounce a few times to make sure it's still tight enough to hold the girls in place, tuck the tank and bra straps in so they don't show, and stuff the small velvet bag of jewels down in between my breasts into the bra. All that's left is to slide on my shoes and add the full cloak that's waiting upstairs in the turret room. The phone, bullets, and pictures go into the deep pockets of the dress's skirt and then I'm heaving the heavy bag up over my shoulder and leaving my room, hopefully for the last time.

I go around the house, shutting off all the lights, check that all the locks are secured and then haul the bag up the stairs to the turret. As soon as I step into the room, I know the mirror is

awake. There's a soft glow coming around the edges of the heavy blanket draped over it and I suck in a gasp at the thought that this is really happening. It's been thirty long miserable days since I was snatched away from the men I love and tonight I take the first step to be reunited with them.

I stay back from the mirror even though it's covered and grab the cloak I had made, swishing it around my shoulders and buttoning it closed. The thick leather strap of the bag goes crosswise over my body and I position it in front of me so I can hold on to it with both hands once I uncover the mirror and step in front of it. God, I'm terrified and thrilled all at the same time. I don't know how this works. I don't know if I will be spit out at the same place as I was last time or in a different location. The only thing I can do as I yank the blanket off the mirror and step in front of it is to firmly fix Sebastian, Luca, Cade, and Finn's faces in my mind like a beacon and pray the magic takes me to them.

My hair lifts in a sudden wind and I'm locked into place as a harsh white light blinds me and a roar fills my ears, then I'm tumbling over and over again until I hit the ground and my breath leaves me with a dramatic sounding "Oomph."

I flinch at the crack that sounds all around me and then I'm heaving my guts out into the tall grass I've landed in. When I can finally breathe again, I spit the last of the foulness from my mouth and try to push to my feet as I stagger sideways from the heavy bag still over my shoulder. I blink my eyes a few times against the afternoon sun and spin around looking to see where I've landed. Forest and long grass in one direction and more grass in the other but no sign of any type of civilization.

I sigh and crouch back down in the grass so I can open the carpetbag and pull the wooden box from it. I uncork the bottle with toothpaste in it and using my finger run some over my teeth and then spit it out to get the awful tastes from my mouth and wish I had thought to bring some kind of water with me. With nothing else to do, I pack the box away, reposition the heavy bag on my shoulder and start walking away from the forest through the grass. Twenty minutes later I top a rise and

spot a dirt track with clear wagon wheel impressions on it. Bingo! I make my way carefully down the incline and reach the bottom just as a horse-drawn wagon comes into view. I swallow down my nerves and raise a hand once it gets close enough. There's a grizzled, rough-looking man holding the horse's reins and a middle-aged woman sitting next to him who looks me over from head to toe with a frown when they pull to a stop beside me.

“Bonjour, pouvez-vous me dire dans quelle direction le palais est, s'il vous plait?” I ask in my newly learned French.

The man grimaces and the woman's eyebrows shoot up.

“It's one of those Frenchies, I reckon but I haven't the faintest what she just said.” The man says to his wife, causing me to grin.

“English! You speak English, perfect! Would you be able to tell me which direction I would go to reach the palace, please?” It's my best bet to find someone who would know how to get me to the Duc de Gaul and his home but they both look at me blankly so I try,

“Versailles? The palace at Versailles?”

When they still look at me like I'm speaking a foreign language instead of English and my heartbeat picks up and my shoulders tense as I squeak out, “France?”

Surprise flashes across both their faces as the man harrumphs and shakes his head tossing a thumb over his shoulder.

“If it's France you're wanting, you'll have to go back that way to find a port and a ship to take you. You'll find that to be a challenge with the blockade but best of luck with you.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Where the hell am I? I try and keep a steady tone as I ask, “There's a city that way with ships?”

He nods slowly and says out of the side of his mouth to his wife, “I think she's daft.” And then tells me, “Aye, Portsmouth be ten miles back that way.”

I choke on my surprise and gasp out, “Virginia? Portsmouth, Virginia?”

The woman finally leans in my direction and asks in concern, “Mistress, are you alright, then? You seem addled.”

I huff out a laugh, “Yes, no, I mean, I...I fell and struck my head so I’m just trying to get my bearings but I’m fine. Please, this is Virginia and there’s a blockade?”

When they both nod, I swallow hard and ask, “Would you be so kind as to tell me what...what year this is?”

The man scoffs. “Yup, she’s daft alright!”

The woman swats him on the arm and looks down at me with pity.

“It’s the year of our Lord, 1775.”

I stumble back from them as tears fill my eyes. Not only am I half a world away from the men I love, I’m over a century too late.

Sebastian – 1747

I walk through the Manor, room by room, taking in the sheet-covered furniture as the servants load the last of the baggage onto the wagons. I've lived in many residences in my long life and never have I both loved and hated a place as much as this one. One brief month of happiness snatched away has left it a cold and soulless building that only holds despair and misery. It has been eighty-one years since she died in front of us and the pain of that moment is as fresh for all of us decades later as it was when it happened. It's time to leave this place and forge ahead to somewhere we won't see her ghost or hear her laugh around every corner. I owe it to my brothers to make this change so they might finally find some semblance of peace.

I throw open the double doors to Luca's studio and take in the destruction that fills it. Heaps of shattered statues lay forgotten and litter the floor in all areas of the room except for the small cleared circle he stands in. His latest work was completed three days ago and he's been sitting in front of it ever since with the heavy sledgehammer in his lap, waiting for the moment he can't bear to look at it any longer. It's a toxic cycle for him. He creates, stares, and then destroys only to start all over again. As much as I don't want to look, to see, my eyes go to her. Her head is thrown back in ecstasy as her glorious hair falls like a waterfall behind her. She's clutching at Luca's head as he buries his face against her while laying between her legs. It's soul-destroying to see her again and it brings back every moment we had her, loved her, and all the pain that came from losing her.

I'm so lost in the memories and feelings of Eden that I don't notice Luca getting to his feet and lifting the heavy hammer until he's poised to swing it forward to destroy that which torments him. My hand flashes out and latches onto the hammer's handle, preventing it from completing its arc. Luca whirls on me, red-eyed and snarling but I just pluck the hammer from his grasp and place my hand on his chest until the flames in his eyes cool from red to gray and his tense

muscles relax. I look past him again to her face and let the hammer slide from my fingers to fall to the marble.

“Not this one. This one stays, Luca,” I tell him and move my hand from his chest to grip his shoulder. “It has been eighty-one years. It’s time. Time to leave here, this place, this land, and her - behind. Leave her here, Luca and we will go and start again.”

His face crumples in agony at the prospect and he turns back to look at her for a few moments. I see his head drop in defeat so I take his arm and lead him from this studio, sparing one last longing look back at her face and then lock that brief moment of having her in our lives away forever. I lead Luca straight out of the house and into the carriage nodding to the driver that we are ready to depart and then climb up behind him and settle into the seat across from him.

Luca stares out the window for the first thirty minutes that we travel before finally squaring his shoulders and meeting my gaze. His voice is raspy from disuse.

“Where are the wolves?”

I tip my head. “Where indeed. I will need your help extracting them, I’m afraid.”

He sighs but nods and then goes back to looking out the window until we arrive at our first destination. Luca follows me into one of the more exclusive houses of ill repute and follows along as I wave off the proprietor and climb the elegant staircase to the second level. It’s not hard to find them as the door to the chamber they’ve been occupying for years is wide open with half-dressed women lined up along the hall waiting for their turn. It does not escape my notice that every single one of them has red hair.

We step into the large room that reeks of spilled spirits and sex and I wave Luca toward Finn while I move on Cade. The two naked women pressed against him are easily plucked off and with one hard look from me scurry from the room. I stare down at my brother as he stares back, eyes cloudy from being so lost in the madness of misery that they try to drown every day with alcohol and sex. If they were mere men instead of

supernatural beings, they would have been dead decades ago from the abuse they've put their bodies through since she died. I reach down and haul him up over my shoulder and carry him from the room with Luca bringing Cade in the same manner. When we reach the front doors, I toss a bag of gold coins to the Madame with a nod and carry my brother to the waiting carriage and dump him inside, naked as the day he was born.

Once we are all in again with the wolves passed out at our feet the carriage races to our final destination. By the time we reach it the wolves have come around and managed to pull some clothing on. Cade squints through the window and sees the forest of masts ahead. His only reaction is to raise one eyebrow before flopping back into his seat.

“Aye, and where would we be going, then?”

I eye all three of them until I have their full attention.

“It's been eighty-one years since Eden died. Today will be the last time we speak of her. We will leave her and our memories of her in France and sail on the tide to the new world where we will forge a new life. It's time for us to live again, brothers. It's time for us to forget and move on. Fix her face in your minds for the last time and then let her go - for once we set sail we will never speak of her again.”

I see defiance and sorrow in their expressions but slowly it turns to acceptance and I receive the nods of their agreements as the carriage comes to a stop. I throw open the door and stride toward the ship that will take us to the next chapter of our lives.

Sebastian – 1775

The distant sound of a thunder crack has me glancing toward the door just as the barmaid drops four mugs of ale to the dirty table in front of us, causing some of the brew to spill and adding to the sticky mess that already coats the well-used rough planks. It's the third round we've suffered through as we wait for our contact to show his face. We sit in silence, no words needed to be said as all the details of the transaction that's about to take place have been in the works for weeks.

A prostitute sashays over and brushes up against Luca, reaching to smooth his hair with dirty fingers and her mouth opening to offer her services when his hand flashes up to grip her wrist, stopping her from touching him.

His eyes are like ice as he bites out, "Leave off! You're not wanted here."

He shoves her hand away and angles away from her in dismissal as he picks up his mug and takes a deep drink. I shift my gaze away from his face as Finn slips the rejected woman a coin.

"Must you be a right bastard ta all that comes near you?" Cade snaps.

Luca's only response is to stare back at him with cold, lifeless eyes. Cade shakes his head and lifts a hand to rub at his chest as if to soothe a pain. He does it unconsciously, as does Finn. After all these years, one hundred and eight to be precise, they both still feel the ache from the missing bond with her. As far as I can tell, Luca feels nothing.

We crossed an ocean and when we reached the far shore, the broken hollow man that he was, was reshaped. All the broken pieces of him are now hard edges that cut anyone who dares come too near. He filled his emptiness with ice and indifference. In essence, he became the man I used to be before a certain witch melted all the edges from my soul in

one night of love. Try as I might, I can't seem to forge them again.

We wait and every time the door swings open our eyes track that way but the man we are waiting on does not step through. Two more rounds of ale are delivered and drunk and I finally see the wolves begin to lose patience. I'm concerned when I see both of them rubbing their chests again and the deep frowns that they wear on their faces. When the door opens once again both their heads shoot up and I see them sniff at the scent on the air. They share a confused look that has me leaning across the table.

“What? What is it?”

Both of their gazes meet mine and then shift cautiously Luca's way. Finn shakes his head like he's trying to dislodge something and then they both look away.

“For fuck's sake, spit it out!” Luca snaps at them causing Cade to glare at him and then turn to me.

“We can smell...her...scent.”

Luca slams his mug against the table sloshing the planks with even more ale and snarls.

“Shut your filthy mouth! You don't smell anything of hers. We had an agreement. I will say this one time and if you ever bring her up again, I will kill you. She's dead. We watched that sword slide through her chest. No one survives that so you don't smell her and you don't feel her bond and finally, you don't talk about her ever again! Do you understand me?”

“Luca! That's enough.” I warn when I see the red starting to ring his pupils.

He keeps Cade pinned with his glare for a few more moments before pushing back from the table and to his feet. “I need something stronger than this piss. I'll get a bottle and four glasses.”

We watch him shove through the crowd toward the bar until he's out of sight and then I sigh even as Finn's slamming back the rest of his ale and swiping at his mouth.

“Fuck if he’s not hard ta take some days. I understood why ya pulled us out of France, Bas but some days I think ya shoulda left that one lost in his fucking clay.”

I smirk at that and spin my mug. “Maybe so but he’s ours to deal with so give him another fifty years or so and if he’s still like this we’ll all knock some sense back into him.” I set my elbows on the table and rub my hands over my face before looking at them again. “You can’t...you just can’t. He’s right, she’s gone and you two bringing her up makes the whole thing start over again. Leave it be.”

Finn shakes his head. “Aye, I’d agree with you except right fucking here, right here I’m feeling a touch of fear and a whole lot of sadness and it’s just getting stronger so you tell me what that means because I dinnae have a clue,” he says while rubbing at his breastbone.

The door to the tavern opens again and within seconds Cade and Finn are on their feet as the air blows in. Cade’s eyes have the worst thing I’ve ever seen in them and when I switch to Finn I see the same damn thing. It’s hope. Their eyes are filled with hope and then they’re around the table and out the door. I squeeze my eyes shut and go back to rubbing my face as a deep weariness fills me. It will take me years to pull them back from this when they realize she’s not here.

Luca slams the bottle and glasses down on the table and drops into his chair.

“Where are they off to? Going to chase their tails to kill time?” He asks in a nasty tone.

I don’t even bother replying. I just lift a hand from my face, make a fist, and plow it into his jaw, sending him crashing to the floor.

Eden

I stand at the edge of the track, lost and not knowing what to do as the couple plods away in the wagon. How could this happen? How could the mirror not just send me so far away from my men but also so far in their future? They could be anywhere now. They might not even be in France. I told them what was coming in that country. What if they chose to move somewhere else? How will I ever find them and what do I do now? 1775! Why send me here, now? This is so bad...so bad! This is the year of the American Revolution. This is the true start of how my country was founded and it's an incredibly dangerous time. I need to get out of here but short of shooting myself so I can travel back to my own time, I have no idea what to do.

I turn in the direction the couple said Portsmouth was in and slowly start walking. What else am I going to do? Ten miles. I can walk ten miles. After twenty minutes the heavy bag and the strain of carrying it let me know it's going to be a painful ten miles. I'm considering switching my soft shoes for the heavier leather boots when the sound of horses galloping towards me from behind has me stumbling off the dirt track and into the high grass that grows beside it. My heart starts racing when I see at least twenty men and horses rushing towards me. Men all in red.

My eyes are huge as the first few ride past, barely sparing me a glance but then a rider pulls up to stop, causing my mouth to grow dry. He's young, maybe early twenties, with a smooth face and concerned blue eyes.

“Miss, are you in need of assistance? It very dangerous for a woman alone to travel these roads in these times.”

My brain spins through all the ways to try and play this and then I decide to just play to the era and channel Scarlett O'Hara even if she doesn't show up for another hundred years or so.

“Why, yes I do!” I gush. “My horse threw me and ran away leaving me all alone out here. I’ve been slowly making my way to Portsmouth ever since. I’m so afraid I will be caught out in this desolate area after dark and be at the mercy of wild animals and dastardly scoundrels. I was beginning to feel faint at the notion!”

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing and rolling my eyes when I see his chest puff up and hero status start to shine from his eyes.

“Never fear, Miss. It would be my honor to escort a lady such as yourself safely to Portsmouth. If you’d be so kind as to wait for a moment, I will have a mount brought forward for you.”

I bat my lashes and gush, “Sir! You are too kind.” I have to duck my head so he won’t see the amusement in my eyes as a deep red blush climbs to his cheeks at my silly, flirty tone. He wheels his mount around and calls out to one of the other men to bring a spare mount over and then slides down to stand before me.

“Alistair Lancaster, at your service, Miss.”

I offer my hand. “Miss Eden Kelly. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“May I take your bag? I will secure it to the mount for you.”

I pass it over to him and try not to groan as the weight is released from my shoulder and follow him over to the horse that’s being held by an even younger man in the red coat made famous by the British. Technically, these men are my enemy, multiple generations removed but right now I’m stranded in a time where being a woman alone is hazardous so I’ll happily flirt my way to some measure of safety. Once he’s secured my bag to the back of the horse he moves back to me and lowers himself to one knee.

“A leg up, miss.” He offers, patting his knee expectantly. I look from his knee to the saddle nervously while biting my lip. I have to ride this horse side-saddle and I can just picture myself making a complete fool of myself trying to get up on it

and then flying off the minute the horse picks up speed. Alistair gets back to his feet and gives me an understanding look.

“Forgive me, you must still be shaken from your horse throwing you. Would it be too forward of me to offer you a seat with me on my mount? For your safety, of course.”

Uh, hell yeah! This guy clearly knows his way around a horse so saddle me up.

“Oh, thank you so much! I would greatly appreciate that. I fear my nerves would affect this mount and I would end up thrown again. I have a strict rule about only being thrown from a horse once per day. It would be most kind of you to save me from breaking it.” I say with a hint of tease in my tone.

He takes my hand and brings it to his lips, brushing them across my knuckles, and says in the most serious tone, “It would be my greatest honor to have you ride tandem with me, Miss Kelly.”

Oh crap! That sounded almost like he was pledging his hand in marriage to me. Who knew a little flirting in the seventeen hundreds could make a guy fall over his feet for you? His youth disguises his strength as the next thing I know he’s lifting me around the waist to sit me up on his saddle and is launching up to settle in behind me before kicking the horse into motion. I try and stay sitting straight up but the horses’ movements have me falling back against his chest and his arm comes around my waist to anchor me in place. I hear him breathe in next to my hair and it reminds me way too much of how Finn and Sebastian did the same damn thing the first time I rode with them. Double crap!

“May I inquire where your people are from, Miss Kelly?”

I wrack my brain on what to tell him and then just go with a half-lie, half-truth.

“I’m alone in the world, I’m afraid. But I have distant relations in Portsmouth that I will be staying with for the duration.” I quickly change the subject so he can’t ask any more questions that I can’t answer. “And you? Have you been

in the colonies long? It must be hard to be so far from home and your family.”

He drones on about serving King and country and names places in England that I don't know. While he goes on about country seats, I stop listening and start thinking about my next move on how to find my men. The only thing I have to go on is Sebastian's title and that they lived an hour by horseback from the palace. This is such a mess. The only thing I can think to do is find a ship to take me to France and go from there but if the British are blockading the coast, the chances of me ending up on the bottom of the ocean are fairly high. I'm going to have to find some kind of lodging for the time being as I figure this out. I'm afraid of what might happen to me and I'm devastated that I might not be able to find Bas, Luca, Finn, and Cade.

As we ride into the town I realize that I will need local currency first and foremost so that means I will have to find somewhere that I can sell one of the jewels. I scan the businesses that we pass but wouldn't you know it, there are no big signs saying "Sell your jewels here". I spot a mercantile store and decide it might as well be a place to start.

"Mr. Lancaster, if you wouldn't mind, I believe that is where I would like to dismount," I say pointing to the store.

"Oh, are you sure? I would be happy to accompany you to your relations' residence to be sure of your safety." He glances around with a sniff of disdain. "This is a shipbuilding town and there are many rough characters about."

I pat the arm around my waist. "I will be perfectly fine but I do so appreciate your concern for my wellbeing as well as the assistance you gave me today. The store is fine, please."

"As you wish, Miss Kelly." He says with clear disappointment in his tone.

He helps me down from his horse and deposits my bag at my feet and then takes my hand.

"Miss Kelly, it was a pleasure making your acquaintance and it's my fondest wish that we might meet again."

I give him a dazzling smile and squeeze his fingers. “I hope so too. Good day, Mr. Lancaster.”

He hesitates another moment but finally nods and releases my hand and tips his head. “Miss Kelly.”

I watch him mount back up and I offer him a small wave and then pick up my bag and turn away hoping I won't ever see him again. I enter the small store that has every type of goods for sale, from fabric, dry foods, and even tools. I head to the counter where a tall man stands with an apron around his waist and greet him.

“Good day, sir. I'm hoping you can point me in the right direction. My family has just arrived in town and we are looking for reputable lodging.” I ask first, hoping he will be nice, and then I can ask about selling the jewels.

He looks me up and down, sniffs with a slight smirk, and shakes his head.

“I really wouldn't know. Try down at the docks. There's always work of a certain nature to be found there.”

I'm stunned for a beat at what he's implying but clench my teeth and place a fake little smile on my face.

“That would be relevant if I asked where to find work but I didn't, did I? I asked, where to find reputable lodgings.”

He gives me another sneering look. “As I said, I really wouldn't know.”

I breathe through my nose and nod keeping that fake little smile on my lips. “Thank you...you fucking piece of shit. Good day!”

I stomp out of the store leaving him slack-jawed, dodge a man pushing a cart full of barrels and stand looking in each direction. God, I'm so screwed. As I try and stay out of the way of people streaming by, I feel tears prick at my eyes. This isn't how it was supposed to be. It's not fair. I'm starting to think that I might not have a choice. That I might have to...to shoot myself so I can go home and learn to live without them for good. Why on earth did I think I could do this? I'm a woman alone in the seventeen hundreds in the middle of a war

that's just going to get more and more dangerous. My hand goes down to pat the gun strapped to my thigh under my skirt as the first tear falls. I'll need to find somewhere quiet. Somewhere private.

I turn my head to search and the crowd parts and I catch a quick glimpse of a face that stills my breath before the crowd shifts again and it's gone. Another tear falls as the ache intensifies. I want them so bad that I'm now imagining...there he is. Finn, it can't be but Cade steps up beside him and I'm choking out a sob as we stare at each other across the distance. The heavy bag thumps against me as I stumble that way and a shoulder bumps into me sending me sideways so I lose sight of them, causing me to cry out. I push away from the building I landed against and make it three more steps and then they are there in front of me. Oh God, they look exactly the same. My wolves, my loves. They stare at me like they're seeing a ghost and I lift a hand to reach for them and then they have me against them, in their arms.

"Lass, by all that's holy, how is this possible?" Finn breathes into my hair as I sob against his chest.

"I don't bloody care as long as you're real." Cade chokes out as his hands sweep up my arms as he presses against my back.

Home. This is home. This is where I belong. In any time, in any place, home is with them.

Eden

They pull me along, one on each side. They fire question after question at me but I can barely catch my breath to answer when my throat is so thick with emotions. They're here!

I finally manage to gasp out, "Sebastian? Luca?"

Finn shifts his grasp from my arm to my waist. "Aye, we're taking you to them, lass. Dinnae fret, they're just down the way, an' what a corker this will be for them, yeah? I canna believe you're alive!" He pulls me to a stop and grasps my face with both hands as Cade slides in behind me to press close to my back again. "I canna wait. Brace yourself, lass."

And then his lips are on mine in a deep kiss that has my toes curling and my heart exploding with all the love I've been missing over the last month. People move around us but it's just the three of us in our own little bubble of love. I feel heat blooming in the space between my neck and shoulder as the faint marks where he bit me throb in time with my heart. Cade spins me to face him and then his lips slide over mine softly as he looks deep into my eyes and I see his sea-blue eyes turn to gold before he deepens the kiss with so much intensity that I feel my knees go weak and I'm forced to clutch at the rough fabric of his woven shirt to stay upright. The matching bite mark blooms to life and my whole body lights up as the two marks sing with the bond between us.

When he pulls away it's to rest his forehead against mine and his gold eyes fade back to blue-green. "You canna leave us again, Eden. We barely survived losing you the last time."

The tears well up again. "I never want to let you go." I breathe and then he's wrapping his arms around me again with Finn completing the circle behind me. We stand like that, an island of love as the sea of people pass around us until someone jostles us as they go by and then they're back to pulling me along. We reach a tavern and they pull me through the door. Finn, who's in front of me, steps to the side and my

eyes search the dim crowded room until they land on my men. I feel a smile of joy spread across my face but it dies to a frown when I see Sebastian and Luca glaring at each other. They haven't seen us so I take the time to study them for a few moments.

Sebastian looks so different. He no longer has the elegant air of the Lord of the Manor. His clothes are rougher, more suited to a working man, and his hair is longer and tied at the back with a leather thong. He's still as beautiful as the last time I saw him but he looks tired even with the angry scowl on his face. But it's Luca that I hardly recognize. He has a hint of cruelty to his glare and a slight sneer to his lips. I've never seen him look this way before. All the softness and sadness that used to mark his features has been burned away and replaced by the ice that Sebastian used to wear like armor.

A group of men pushes us aside to get to the door and the spell is broken as Finn steps in front of me again and leads me with a hand behind his back. When he comes to an abrupt halt I bump into his back.

"Finally, are you both quite done chasing fairy tales?" I hear Luca say in a mocking tone.

Finn laughs. "Aye, we dinnae need to be chasing our happy ending anymore, Luca. We found it." And then he steps aside so they both can see me.

Bas chokes out a strangled sound but my eyes are on Luca. I see the blood drain from his face and a haunted look comes into his eyes as the wooden cup in his hand is reduced to splinters and then falls to the table with the sharp smell of spilled whiskey. After a shocked pause, they both rock to their feet and Sebastian is reaching a trembling hand my way. My hand finds his and I feel a spark and shudder go through both of us at the contact.

"H-how? How can you be here? My God, you really are a witch." Bas chokes out and my smile comes back as the tears well up.

"I told you not to call me that, Your Grace." I tease softly and then he's crushing me against his chest and pulling me

down into his lap as he drops back into his chair. His face is buried in my hair and I can feel each tremor rock through him as he breathes my scent in deeply. I pull back enough to get my hands on his face so I can look into his cinnamon-colored eyes.

“Hi, Bas.” I breathe out as my lips slide over his. His eyes squeeze tightly closed as if my kiss is painful but his lips return my kiss softly before pulling away again. As one we turn our heads to Luca who is still on his feet even as the wolves take their seats. I reach for him but he flinches back from me causing me to gasp.

“Oh, Luca. Luca...please?” His head shakes and he takes a step further back.

“I...I’m...glad you’re not...dead.” He manages to get out and then I see a veil of blankness drop over his eyes and expression and he drops back into his seat and reaches for the bottle of whiskey turning his eyes away from me. My heart aches to touch him, to say all the words that might fix this but Cade grabs my hand to claim my attention.

“Lass, I’m beggin’ you. Please tell me you brought your wee music maker. I’ve had that Pharrell lad’s song, Happy, stuck in my ear for near on twenty years. I’ve felt a lot of things in the last hundred and eight years since you...left but happy wasn’t one of them!”

He says it as a joke, causing me to choke out a laugh but it quickly turns into a sob.

“Oh God! I-I’m s-sorry! I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I, I don’t know how or why it brought me back so many years after I left! I can’t imagine how you all must feel. I’m s-so sorry!” I cry out.

Bas’s arms tighten around me and Finn adds his hand to Cade’s and mine but the flash of anger I see in Luca’s eyes has me crying even harder.

“Aw, lass, Eden, don’t cry, mo chridhe. We...”

Before he can finish, the door slams open and a man bellows, “Lobster backs heading this way!”

The four of them push to their feet with Bas bringing me to mine.

“Right, there will be time for answers later. We need to leave.”

I don't have time to ask what's happening as they drop coins on the table and usher me quickly deeper into the tavern and then out what I'm assuming is the back door. There's a line of horses tethered to a rail and they move to the last four in the line and mount up with Cade lifting me to sit in front of Sebastian. He hands my bag off to Finn who secures it to his saddle and then we're in motion riding through the town and into the countryside. I lean back against Sebastian and just luxuriate in the feel of his strong arms around me holding me safe against him even as my eyes stay locked onto Luca as he rides ahead of us.

The sadness, sorrow, and pain that filled Luca when we first met was so tragic. The love we found together helped ease those feelings and the man he used to be had started to re-emerge. The man from before he was tortured and turned into a vampire with the first few years full of bloodlust that destroyed his soul.

This is different. In the few moments we've been reunited, I've seen such anger and hints of cruelty that don't fit the man I knew. I frown sadly. For me, it was only a month-long separation but for all of them it was over a hundred years and they thought I died. He's changed and I'm so scared that it's all my fault and that I won't ever be able to fix it.

“He will need some time, Eden. Your death...he'll just need some time.” Bas tells me as his arm tightens around me.

I know if I try and speak right now I'll end up crying again so I just nod even as Luca glances back with a frown, meets my gaze, and quickly turns forward again. Please, Lord, don't let me lose him when I've just found him again.

I have hundreds of questions to ask them all on how they came to be here instead of France and what happened with that bitch, Keket, after I left, er, died. I keep them locked down for now as I'm sure it would be better for us all to have that and

other conversations once we can all participate. Instead, I relax back against Bas and smile softly as his arm tightens around my waist.

“Where are we going?”

His head dips down to breathe in against my hair and it reminds me of the young British soldier doing the same a few hours ago.

“Home. It’s another hour or so ride until we get there.” He tells me.

“We left the tavern pretty quickly. Are you fighting the British?”

He hums a non-answer in his throat so I tip my head back to the side to catch his eyes and raise an eyebrow in question. He takes advantage of the angle to reach my lips with his in a fast kiss that sends a spark through me but I still want to know.

“Are you?”

He looks ahead breaking our gaze. “Not fighting so much as undermining them. We were meant to meet a contact about moving guns and powder to the militia.”

I blink at him in surprise. “I thought you didn’t involve yourself in politics or intrigue?”

He chuffs a laugh. “We try not to but the bloody British have made that rather difficult. They have their noses in as many people’s business as possible with their quest to hold on to rule here. Being part of the French nobility has made a target of us. They forced our hand with their threats to pick a side.”

“Ah, you lead such an intriguing life, Your Grace.” I tease but he shakes his head.

“Not me, Luca. He’s assumed the title this time around and all the pomp and headaches it brings with it.”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Luca is the Duke du Gaul now?”

“The downside of immortality is that people start to notice when you don’t age or die. Luca and I have been passing that title back and forth for almost two centuries now. The wolves refuse to have any part of it so it leaves us to manage our affairs and fortune. Being a noble has paved the way to making our lives easier so far but things here are more complicated. Having a title breeds distrust from the colonists who settled this land and now that France and England are at odds...again, it’s brought trouble to our door with the redcoats. The small summary of what happens in the future you gave us has given us some insight on what will happen here so I believe the Duc de Gual will fall on the battlefield of this revolution and it will be the end of its line. Being a common citizen, wealthy, but not a noble will be our path forward after the dust settles on this fight for independence. Until then, we will work behind the scenes to support the colonists in any way we can.”

I think over everything he’s said and curse that I spent so much wasted time brushing up on French history and language when I should have been looking into this part of history. I had no way of knowing that I’d end up in this time or place but it still frustrates me that I don’t know more about this pivotal time of history in my country’s timeline. I’d kill for a Google search right now to give us the finer details of where and when the worst of the fighting will be. With a frustrated sigh, I pull my cloak tighter around me to ward off the chill from the deep shadows as we travel through thick forest on a small track only wide enough for a wagon. I love my independence but there are way too many dangers that could kill me and send me back to my own timeline in a war-ravaged country. I will have to resign myself to staying in the shadows and very close to their...our home. I sigh again, I’ll happily give up any freedom to spend the rest of my life with these men.

When we break out of the forest and into the sun, I have to blink my eyes to adjust to the brightness. When I can see again, a look of awe crosses my face. We’re on the top of a gently sloping hill covered in wildflowers that leads down to a shimmering lake. It’s breathtaking. As Bas gets our mount moving down the slope I smile at him over my shoulder.

“This is incredible! It’s so raw and unspoiled in its beauty.”

He hums his agreement. “Yes, it truly is a majestic land we’ve settled on.”

I perk up. “This is yours? You own this land?”

He laughs at the excitement in my tone. “Yes, it’s part of the lands we purchased when we first came here. The house we had built is still a bit of a ride away but yes, this is part of our land.”

I hum in pleasure as they lead our horses to the lakeshore to drink. Sebastian passes me down to Cade who twirls me around in his strong arms away from the horses and a laugh of pure happiness escapes me before he sets me down and captures my smiling lips with his. When he pulls back, the grin on his face is huge.

“Lass, I still canna believe you’re here! I’ve ached for you every moment that you were gone. I never stopped missing or loving you.”

Once again tears pick at my eyes but a derisive snort has my head turning to see Luca with a sneer on his lips.

“Yes, except for the first eighty years after you died. Those moments were filled by your wolves with copious amounts of spirits and fucking every red-headed whore they could find.”

My mouth drops open in shock at what he said but the cruel way Luca delivered it is what makes my chest feel as though someone has just plunged a knife blade into it.

I let out a harsh whisper choked in pain, “Luca.”

The sneer slips at what he sees on my face and I catch a flash of shame in his eyes as he turns away. Cade’s hands tighten on my waist and Finn moves to join us with a deep look of contrition on his face.

“Lass...” Cade begins as Finn says, “Eden...” But I hold both my hands up to stop them from speaking further.

My eyes squeeze tight for a beat and I take a deep breath to get my balance back. I want to howl from the pain and to be honest, rage that fills me at the quick and hot wash of betrayal

I feel that they had been with so many other women. My men, my mates, they thought I was dead. I left them and they thought I was dead. I have no right to feel betrayed. This is a disaster but I know it's not their fault, it's mine. I see the trembling in my hands before lowering them to grasp both of theirs and try and steady myself.

“That...that hurt...a lot.” I swallow hard and go on. “For me, I was gone for thirty days and it was agony but I always knew I'd find a way to get back to you all. You thought I was dead and you lived with that for over a hundred years. What you did, how you coped with that...” I dash away the stupid tears that keep falling. “You don't have to justify it to me. You don't have to apologize for any of it. I did that to you...to you all.” I say looking to Sebastian and Luca to include them. “That's on me. I'm just so grateful that you still want me in some small way after all the pain I caused you over those many years. I'm so fucking sorry.”

I see Luca's hands clench into a fist as a look of anguish crosses his expression but then he turns his back to me and looks out over the lake. Sebastian's expression hardens slightly as if he agrees but then he's blowing out a breath and shaking his head as he walks over to join us.

“You couldn't have known what would happen, Eden. And you didn't...die...on purpose. The time we had with you was a gift worth all the pain of losing you.”

Finn gently wipes my tears away. “It could have been two hundred years and we'd still love you just the same. Dinnae ever apologize for the love we share, pain or no, it's worth it.”

Cade pulls me against him. “There will nae be any more pain, aye? We will be keeping you safe so you never leave us again.” He tells me fiercely with his brogue deepening with emotion.

I nod and give them a trembling smile. They are saying all the right things but I can't help but think they aren't being completely honest. I pull away and walk slowly to Luca. I stand beside him without touching or looking at him and stare out at the lake.

“Do you hate me, then?” I ask in a small voice.

I see him flinch out of the corner of my eye but keep looking ahead. After a few minutes of him not responding, I drop my head.

“I understand,” I whisper and make to back away but his hand flashes out and grabs my wrist.

“Yes, but it’s only a fraction compared to the love I will always have for you.” He tells me in a conflicted tone full of anger and pain but then he drops my arm and moves away to his horse.

I look back out at the lake and suck back the next round of tears. I can work with that. I can fix this. I will fix this. Once I get my emotions back under control, I turn away from the lake and look over the beautiful landscape in front of me. From the thick forest to the sea of wildflowers and the lake at my back. I can imagine a life here and it tugs my lips into a smile at the possible future we could have here if I can fix things between us all.

“What do you see that makes you smile, lass?” Finn asks.

I wave my hand to encompass the area and paint them a picture of hope with words.

“I see a big, beautiful rock and wood house filled with windows to look out on all of this. A glass atrium on one end for Luca to sculpt in and bedrooms with big...big beds to share. Horses grazing in this field. A dock with a rowboat jutting out into the lake. I see picnics in the wildflowers. I see a home...for our family, for us...if you all still want that.”

Finn, Cade, and Sebastian stare back at me with bemused expressions as Luca launches up into his saddle and turns his horse away from the lake. He looks down at me with a blank expression but nods and simply says, “Yes.” And then kicks his mount into motion to climb the slope.

Luca

I don't know how to do this. She's dead. She died and it shattered me. It's been twenty-seven years since Sebastian pulled me from the wreckage of her loss and in that time I forged the pain and agony into a thick shield of anger, bitterness, and ice to function. I had over a century to manage the guilt and anguish of what I had done to so many innocents during the blood lust phase and I was coping. Badly, but I was coping, and then she blew into our lives and made me feel again, love again, she made me live again only to snatch it away after a brief time. I don't know how to do this knowing that if I let the love I've caged away inside of me free it will be taken away the next time she dies. It will only end in madness for me.

My fingers tighten on the reins as they itch to touch her again. She's just as beautiful as I remembered and the tears that fell from her gem-like green eyes had me wanting to snatch her away from my brothers' arms so that I could comfort her, reassure her that we will never stop wanting her but I can't. What I said was true. I do hate her a little bit for making me feel this way but fuck if I don't love her as much as the last moment I saw her too.

I keep my eyes ahead as I hear my brothers' mounts come up behind me. I can't deal with the contempt I know I deserve to see in their eyes. Telling Eden about the wolves coping method in such a cruel way was unforgivable. I just couldn't help myself from lashing out at her so she would feel a little of the misery I've felt since her death. I know it's not fair to her. I know it wasn't her choice to leave us and then come back so long after but there's a festering rage inside me that's slipped from my control now that she's cracked my armor by returning.

Eden Kelly will be the end of me whether I give in and love her again or not.

Eden

Finn claims me to ride with him the rest of the way to their house and he's spent most of the ride nuzzling my neck, kissing our bond mark, and drinking in my scent. In between, he murmurs apologies for what Luca revealed. I press back against him.

"Stop, baby. I can't imagine how hard that was for you. You don't have to apologize to me for that. It...it was hard to hear about it that way but I do understand."

His arms tighten around me as he sighs deeply. "We were fools, lass but I promise ta do everything I can to make it up ta you. I still canna believe you're here. It's like all my dreams came true the moment I saw you through the crowd. I promise with everything I am to keep you safe and with us for good this time."

I turn my head so I can find his lips for a brief kiss. "I love you, Finn. I'll love you forever."

For the rest of the ride, I study the landscape, marveling at how untamed and wild it all is. In my time this would be filled with houses, roads and towns, drive-thrus, and big box stores. To see it unsoiled like this is incredible. I work extra hard not to think about Cade and Finn with woman after woman. I can't let myself get hung up on that or let them know just how much it hurts. They thought I was dead. I keep telling myself that over and over again but a part of me still wants to scream and rage at how unfair this was to all of us. And now I'm terrified that it could happen again. There are so many dangers here that could kill me and take me back and without a way to control when or where the mirror sends me to, I might have to put aside my own wants to protect them. I can't do this again. If I die and get sent back. I will have to stay back in my own time. I can't put them through this again.

"Look there, lass." He tells me pointing ahead and I can make out a structure in the distance with smoke trails lifting

from the roof's chimneys. "It's not as grand as the Manor in France but it suits us fine."

"I'm sure it's lovely. All I care about is being with you all again. It could be a lean-to in the forest and I'd be happy!" I tell him with a smile.

He laughs. "Aye, well I'm glad it's not! I want you in a big bed with room for all of us when I feast upon your naked beauty again. My body aches for yours, Eden." His voice gets husky and thick at the last part and his arm pulls my hips snugger against him so I can feel the hard bulge of his cock. A bolt of heat pulses through me as memories of the last time we were together fill my mind.

Cade nudges his mount closer to ours and I see a look of promise in his eyes. "And that will be happening as soon as we can manage, lass. I have a powerful need ta feel your body against mine ta prove you're really here."

I reach across the space between our horses and squeeze his arm but he captures my hand and runs his mouth over my knuckles, sending a shiver through me.

"I'm definitely here, love, and I'm not going anywhere this time."

I see his eyes slide away from mine and meet Finn's but he nods quickly and smiles before nudging his horse to move ahead of us. Some of my happiness dims. They don't believe or trust I'm here to stay and I can't blame them for it.

Before I can dwell on that too deeply, we ride into the yard that's been cleared in front of their house. I would say the house is roughly half the size of the manor house in France. It's not quite a plantation house but still bigger than most homes in my own time. It has a wide porch with columns that runs along the front of it with small windows dotting the front and a set of double doors that swing open just as Finn is lowering me down to the hard-packed ground.

A woman comes out and rears back at the sight of me before a scowl fills her heavily lined and wrinkled face. The woman has to be the oldest person I've ever seen. She's very

short and stooped and her steel grey eyes match the color of her frizzy curls that explode around her head like she was just electrocuted. I feel stripped bare after her gaze rakes me from head to toe and just as quickly she dismisses me as she turns to Sebastian.

“What’s this then? You were meant ta bring Malcolm back, were ya not?” She barks his way.

A young stable lad with bright red hair comes running over and trips over his feet when he spots me. His face turns an alarming shade of red as he reaches for Luca’s horse’s reins and begins leading it away while glancing over his shoulder at me and almost tripping again.

“Keep the heid, boyo!” The ancient woman yells at him and then grumbles. “Like he’s never seen a bonny lass afore.”

“Flora, Malcolm didn’t show up. There were redcoats in town so they may have well scared him off.” Sebastian tells her and then gestures to me. “I’d like to present Miss Eden Kelly. She will be staying with us, indefinitely.”

Flora harrumphs as the corners of her mouth turn down and she pins me with a sour look. “And which one of you does the lass belong to, then?”

Finn runs a hand down my arm until he can thread his fingers through mine.

“All of us. Eden’s our mate, ya ken?”

Her eyes narrow at him. “Ya done told me yer mate was dead. How’s it that this one is her then?”

Cade says something to her in a language I don’t understand causing her to look back at me with a doubtful expression. “Deid is deid unless...are ya a witch, lass?”

This time I shake my head and answer. “No ma’am, I am most definitely not a witch. It seems I’m just harder to kill than we all thought. I’m pleased to meet you.”

She studies me for a few more moments and then nods. “Well, don’t be call me no ma’am like I’m some highfalutin lady. The name’s Flora and I do the cookin’ and upkeep for

your mates but I don't take special requests! Ya eat what I make ya or ya dinnae eat at all."

I smile at how crotchety she is and nod again just as Luca sweeps by.

"Then do your job and bring food and drink to the parlor. I'm sure Eden needs some refreshments after her travels," he tells her in a snide tone.

I glare at his back but Flora just snorts and raises an eyebrow at us.

"What bug crawled up himself's arse? He's more miserable than usual this day. You'd think a man would be happier ta have his mate returned, wouldn't ya?"

Sebastian shakes his head and pats her arm. "Please Flora, could you bring some refreshments to the parlor for us. We have much to discuss."

"Aye, git on with ya and I'll bring ya some." She tells him with another narrow-eyed look my way and then disappears back into the house.

Sebastian's gaze lands on me and I see a flash of uncertainty cross his face before he holds out a hand for me to take. I bite my lip and look away as I accept it. He leads me into the house but my mind is preoccupied with the idea that coming back to them this way after so long isn't the dreamy reunion I had imagined. My heart squeezes painfully in my chest as I realize that these are not the same men I left a month ago and they may not feel the same way about me anymore no matter what they say.

"Eden, may I take your cloak?"

I nod distractedly and slip it off as I take in what must be the parlor he's led me into. Luca is standing with his back to me in front of a fireplace but I can tell how tense he is by the tight fabric across his shoulders. Cade and Finn come into the room and take up a spot leaning against one of the walls with both of them crossing their arms over their chests with blank expressions. I feel tears prick at my eyes as Sebastian comes back into the room, glances at the others, and then lets out a

deep sigh before motioning me to a chair. I turn my back to all of them and take a shuddering breath trying to tamp down the emotions I'm feeling but sadness floods me.

I spin back and choke out, "I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have come back!"

Cade and Finn push off the wall and step toward me in unison both shaking their heads. Luca whirls around and glares at me and Bas's shoulders just slump like he's exhausted. I hold up my hands as they all step closer to me.

"No! I...I didn't know it would be like this. It's only been a month for me and I thought...It's been over a hundred years for you all and you thought I was dead. Of course, you don't feel the same about me. How could you? I never should have come back!" I end on a sob, dropping back into the chair and covering my face with my hands.

It's my wolves that come to me first. They kneel in front of me and pull my hands down so I can see their faces. Finn brushes the tears from my face.

"Hush now, lass. Of course, we feel the same for ya. You're our mate and no amount of time will change that. It's just a big adjustment to make, ya ken?" He tells me with love shining from his eyes.

Cade nods his agreement as he drops his hand onto my thigh but his brows shoot up when he feels the hard objects under his hand.

"What's this, then?" He asks as his hand roves over the hard bulge of my phone, the pictures, and the gun strapped to my leg. I sniff back the tears that want to keep falling and pull out the pictures I brought back with me for them handing the wolves theirs. As they stare down at them, I hold out the last two to Sebastian and Luca.

Sebastian takes his first and I see the surprise on his face and then his eyes go hazy as if he's remembering that night. Luca is the last to take the picture of us together and I see the first cracks in his hard demeanor. His fingers turn white against the edges of the laminated picture and it bends at his

tight grip. I see the scowl fade away to be replaced by a look of awe and longing and I swear a flash of shame but then Sebastian is pushing the wolves to the side so he can yank me from the chair and against his chest.

His fingers slide into my hair and fist and I catch the fury in his eyes before his mouth crushes against mine in a punishing kiss that has my knees giving out. There's nothing sweet or even sexy about the kiss. It's raw, powerful, and so filled with pain that I feel another piece of my heart cracking. His groan as he pushes away from me is painful to hear as well as the anger in his eyes that quickly slides away to show a deep weariness. Sebastian is tired like he's been worn down to the bone and again I feel the guilt fill me at the damage I have caused.

He turns away from me with a low sigh and moves back, leaving the wolves to settle me back into my chair. My eyes flash from each of theirs and I see the love but I also see the caution. I want to run away and hide. I want to scream and rage for all that we lost but I have to face up to this if I have any chance of mending what has been broken. I open my mouth to try again to apologize but before I can speak, Flora bustles into the room carrying a tray filled with drinks and plates of food. She drops it with a rattle on a small table next to the chair I'm in with a scowl but her eyes go to the picture Bas dropped to the floor when he kissed me. I see her eyes flare wide as she bends over and picks it up and brings it close to her face. Her fingers rub against the smooth surface of the laminate and she turns it over to see the blank white back of it. Turning it back to the image she glances back and forth between it and my face before she harrumphs and scowls again.

“Aye, not a witch? What magic is this, then?” She growls, thrusting the picture my way.

Sebastian snatches it from her fingers with a shake of his head.

“It's not magic, Flora. Eden is from a different time in the future where such things are common. She's a *taistealai ama*.”

The old woman scoffs and then snorts when she sees that the men are all nodding their heads. Her hands clamp onto her hips and she looks me up and down again with a sniff before shaking her head.

“Bah! Yer tryin’ ta tell me she’s a *siubhal*? No, that’s not ta be believed. Old tales and legends are mere stories, not truths, lads. Stop thinkin’ with yer cocks! She’s just a bonny lass that’s filled yer heids with nonsense!”

Finn chuckles. “Really, woman? This comin’ from a shifter, yerself? How’s it that you can believe that we are real and that vampires and witches are real but not a *suibhal*?” He turns to me with a grin. “Go on, show her your wee device, lass.”

I sit in shock that he’s just thrown out all our secrets to this woman like it’s common knowledge until I realize that he said that she’s a shifter herself. My mouth gapes open as I stutter out, “W-what’s that word you called me? And what did Bas say I was?”

Flora answers me in a suspicious tone. “*Suibhal*, that be Gaelic for wanderer. *Taistealai ama*...it means...time traveler.”

I blink a few times before I slowly nod my head and reach for the phone from my pocket. They obviously trust this woman so I guess I have no choice but to as well. I hold the phone up to her so she can get a good look at it and throw out my usual disclaimer.

“Not magic! It’s technology from my time and it won’t hurt you. It has pictures...images like paintings, from where I’m from.” I tell her as I swipe the gallery open and show her the Seattle skyline and other pictures that show modern life. Her eyes grow large with wonder and then she leans back as she shakes her head with disbelief so I forge on. “It also has music on it and...Oh! I brought a bigger device as well that has videos on it.”

I open a random playlist and tap on a song to show her. The Mummer’s Dance by Loreena McKennitt fills the room and causes Flora to suck in a gasp of surprise before a smile of

delight fills her wrinkled face. I let it play for half the song as I shoot nervous looks at the others and then shut it off.

“Well now, that sure be a lovely tune but back ta the matter at hand. If it’s true and you are a *Suibhal* that means you have knowledge of what’s ta come. That is a mighty dangerous weapon ta wield, ya ken? Best you mind the damage that knowledge could bring.”

She scans me up and down once more and with a curt nod turns away. “Feed and water the lass, supper will be a while yet and you’ll not want her fadin’ away!” She orders the men and then stomps from the room. Her words have all the men stiffening and frowning. I slump back into the chair at their reactions suddenly exhausted from the emotional toll the day has taken on me.

Eden

Silence fills the room until Luca pushes away from the wall and with a hard look I can't read and leaves the room as well. Sebastian watches him go before turning to face me. He opens his mouth to say something but then snaps it closed and turns and leaves as well. I drop my face into my hands as another flood of despair washes over me.

"Here now, lass, have some tea and settle," Finn tells me while handing me a cup of the steaming brew. "Everything will be well. It'll just take some time. It's a lot to process for all of us, ya ken."

I take the cup with a small, sad nod and let the drink warm my cold hands. "I don't know what to do to fix this. I...I swear I didn't know this would happen. I've hurt you all so much."

Cade kneels in front of me and rubs my thighs with a somber expression.

"Aye, we know you didn't. It was devastating to lose you as we did in such a violent way but it wasn't your fault. It took us all a very long time to come back from that but know this, I – we never stopped loving you, Eden, and no matter what happens going forward, we will never stop."

I set the tea back on the tray and clutch at his hands, needing to feel him, as Finn rubs my arm.

"What happened? When I...left...you were in chains and that woman, Keket was going to the palace to compel the King to do her bidding."

Cade growls. "That bitch was sorely surprised ta learn she had no power ta compel the King. The first thing Bas ever does is ensure no other of his kind can control a ruler we are aligned with. When we arrived at the palace, there was a brief battle with the men she had compelled but she managed ta escape in the end and we haven't seen or heard of her since. Bas tracked her movements across the continent for a time but

when it was clear she wouldn't be returning, he left off to tend to us. The poor bastard had his hands full with Finn, Luca, and me and the state we were in after losing you."

I drop my head at the reminder of the damage I've caused and whisper, "I'm so sorry."

Finn lifts me to my feet. "Enough of that, now. You have nothing to be sorry for. Come lass, let us get you settled in a bed chamber so you may rest before supper. All will be well. You just have to give it some time for all of us to adjust."

I let him and Finn lead me to a bedroom where they leave me with my bag and a brief kiss from them both that has me longing for so much more but I don't push. They're right, I can't expect us to magically fall back into what we once had. Like they said, it will take time no matter how much I want it to be the same. I stand in the room and stare at the bed, wanting nothing more than to crawl under the blankets and hide from all of this but I won't let myself. I hid from my problems for too many years and it got me nowhere so instead I unpack my heavy bag and strip off the layers I'm wearing under the dress before putting it back on to be more comfortable. I hide the gun and bullets in the back of a drawer in the armoire and take a seat at the dressing table and stare at my pale, drawn face in the cloudy mirror and try and come up with a way to fix this before sighing in defeat. I can't. I can't change what happened, I can only hope with time we will be able to overcome it and recapture what we had.

What I do know is that I can never let this happen again. If something happens, if I end up leaving them again, I can never come back. I can't put them through this again. A soft knock at my door interrupts my sad thoughts and when I open it, I find Sebastian on the other side holding a large wooden chest. I quickly back away so he can come in and chew nervously on my bottom lip as he sets the chest on the floor near the bed. He looks so different from the strong, confident man who used to drive me crazy with his arrogance. All the sharp edges are gone now and when he turns to look my way, I can't miss how tired he looks.

His eyes dart away from mine and he waves to the wooden chest as he clears his throat.

“I don’t know what condition they are in as it hasn’t been opened since you...left but the chest is made from cedar so hopefully it kept them safe.”

I look to the chest in confusion. “What-what’s in it?” I ask hesitantly, hating how nervous I feel around him now.

“The gowns that Luca had made for you as well as the accessories that go with them. I know they will be out of fashion now but I just thought some of them may still work for you until we can have more made in this period’s style.”

I suck in a sharp breath and feel the tears forming again. “You...you kept them? All this time? Oh, Bas...” I end on a whisper filled with emotion as the tears slip free to trail down my face.

His eyes soften and his hand lifts towards me but then he drops it back to his side and as much as it hurts, I can’t let this go on so I rush towards him and throw myself against his chest with my fingers cupping his strong jaw.

“Please, please Bas, forgive me? I will apologize every hour of every day for the rest of my life and do everything I can to make it up to you. Please just tell me that you’ll forgive me?”

His arms come around me and he buries his face in my hair breathing deep. We stand like that with my tears soaking through his linen shirt until he pulls back and stares down into my eyes. I hold my breath praying he will say the words I need to hear.

“Eden, I know you didn’t intend to hurt us and it was no fault of your own what happened - but your death broke them so badly and I’ve spent a century trying to put them back together. You coming back is a miracle but I’m terrified of what it will mean when you leave us again, because you will. Even if we protect you from every possible harm, one day you will die and I will be left to pick up the pieces once again, only this time, I don’t know if I will be able to do it.”

I try and pull away from him but his arms tighten around me holding me in place as his eyes harden. “No matter what happens, you will destroy us in the end but God help me because having you back in my arms? Not even the flames of Hell can stop me from loving you.”

His lips crash down on mine even as I whimper from the pain of his words. He kisses all of it away as his strong hands lift me up against his hard body. His lips and tongue are relentless as they sweep against mine and urgent moans of need escape me as I feel his thick hardness against my thigh. A hot, wet, ache blooms between my legs as I push even harder against him and my nails dig into his skin through his shirt. Sebastian growls into my mouth and it’s the only warning I get before he’s pushing me against the closest wall. He yanks up my skirt and holds it in place with one hand while his other pulls my panties to the side and two thick fingers are thrust inside of me. My head bangs back against the wall as I arch into him with a loud gasp of pleasure even as my own fingers reach for the laces of his pants to try and free him.

His thrusting fingers pump in and out of me with a brutal assault that has me moaning for more as the heel of his hand grinds against my clit, sending wave after wave of pleasure through me. I finally manage to free his thick, hard, cock and take it in my hand. It’s warm and heavy as he thrusts into my hand in time with his strong fingers still thrusting in my wet, aching pussy and in no time it has me coming in a shocking detonation that steals my breath and rocks my entire body. His mouth drops back onto mine to swallow my cries as he pulls his hand away from me and replaces it with his cock. I lift my leg up to wind around his hip and he drives into me, balls deep, with one hard stroke that only amps up the waves of pleasure rushing through me. He lifts me higher against the wall until both my legs are around his hips and he begins to pound into me hard and deep and with each thrust he growls.

“One hundred, eight years, four months, thirteen days. And every, fucking, day, I woke up, with your face, first thing in my mind, and the last thing I saw, before I slept. Every... god...damn...day.”

I sob out a mix of pleasure and pain at his words and the brutal thrusting of his cock as he fucks me against the wall. I dig my nails deeper into his back and jerk my hips forward to meet his every stroke, trying to take some of that pain from him. Anchoring me with only one arm, he uses the other to slip between our pounding bodies and strums my clit hard and fast. His eyes flare blood red as my walls clamp down on him and he barks out, "Come for me!" And then his head drops down to my neck and his teeth slide into my skin causing me to explode with a scream of intense pleasure that has my vision whiting out and my body spasming so hard around his cock that it sends him over the edge as well. As he roars against my neck I feel his hot seed fill me. A few more hard strokes and he stills inside of me as I suck in air to try and get my racing heart and breathing under control.

Sebastian slumps against me as all the tension leaves his body. He rests his forehead against mine and I can see the love in them but also a deep sadness and it kills me that I put that there.

I reach up and brush my fingers gently against his lips and whisper, "I won't apologize for loving you but I will for causing you such pain. I can't stop myself from aging and dying one day but I will make you a promise, a vow. If something happens, something that takes me back to my own time again before I die a natural death, I promise I won't come back. I won't put you all through this again."

His eyes close briefly before he tilts his head down enough to brush his lips against mine in the softest of kisses and then he whispers, "Thank you."

He helps ease my legs down so my feet hit the floor and steadies me before stepping back and turning away to close his pants but I just stand there and wait for what comes next. The words he said and the vow I made ricochet through my head and I can't help but wonder if the pain this love has caused is worth it for any of us.

When he turns back and sees me still in place against the wall, he lets out a deep sigh and reaches for me pulling me back into his arms.

“No matter what, I’m happy you are here Eden and I’m so glad that you didn’t die.” He brushes his knuckles across my cheek and drops a kiss on my forehead. “I will see you at supper?”

I manage a nod and a small trembling smile so he steps away and leaves the room closing the door quietly behind him. I manage to hold it in for a few moments before the emotions overwhelm me and I drop to the floor as the sobs trapped in my chest pour out of me.

Sebastian

I stand frozen in the hall as I listen to her heartbreaking sobs filter through the door and clutch my fingers into fists. Guilt wracks me at the brutally honest words I said to her. I know it's not her fault. She's blameless in both the death that took her from us and the cursed mirror that sent her back over a hundred years later but it doesn't change the bitterness coursing through me for all the years I was forced to manage my brothers' grief while pushing my own to the side. Having and losing Eden has changed each of us from the men we once were and I don't know how she will fit into our new dynamic now that we all know what will come the next time she dies. I force myself to relax my hands and then scrub at my face before leaving her door and heading in search of the others. I find all three of them waiting for me in the study where we plan our business dealings. Luca sneers at me the moment I step into the room but I ignore him as well as the wolves and their grim expressions as I head straight for the Brandy decanter and pour myself a double dose that I quickly throw back.

When I set the tumbler carefully down Finn asks, "Is she alright?"

I shake my head as I turn to face them. "Are any of us alright? Having her return has been shocking and I'll confess to not knowing what the right course is going forward."

Luca barks out a harsh laugh. "Now that you have sunk your cock into her, you mean!"

I flash across the room in a blink and lift his body into the air with a hand wrapped around his throat. Both of our eyes flare red as I bite out through clenched teeth.

"Mind your tone with me, boy! I've allowed you much latitude over the years due to your grief for her but you begin to test my patience with your constant surliness. Remind

yourself that you weren't the only one who suffered at her loss."

I toss him away from me with barely a flicker of my strength and he crashes into the wall with a snarl.

I turn my back on him and catch the approving looks on the wolves' faces. We will always stand with Luca but we have also all felt the lash of his ugly demeanor these last few decades. Perhaps we have done him a disservice by allowing it to continue for so long. I blow out a breath and address the question Finn asked properly.

"Of course she is not alright. She came back expecting the men she fell in love with and found us instead. Over a century later. She is wracked with guilt and doubt for what we went through and where we will go from here."

Finn and Cade share a look between them before Cade steps forward with a determined look.

"No matter how or why, Eden is back. She is our mate and we will care for her and protect her, this time more carefully until she dies a natural death...or longer...if possible."

Luca sucks in a breath at what Cade is implying and steps closer with a desperate look in my direction. "Sebastian...?"

I swipe my hand through the air like a knife. "NO! Do not even suggest it! She will remain human. No matter how it pains us, we will not selfishly force that horror on her."

Luca scowls and snaps back, "We could..." I cut him off again but this time I pull him close and look deep into his eyes and compel him.

"You will NEVER change Eden into a vampire!"

I shove him away from me again, disgusted that he would even consider doing that to her and relieved that he will not be able to do it behind my back now that I have compelled him against it.

Cade shoves both his hands into his hair in frustration as Finn curses me under his breath and I spear them all with a dark look.

“If you truly love her as you say, then you will never force such a monstrous existence on her. No, we will find a way to move past this and be grateful that we have another chance to have her in our lives for as long as we can. Eden is not to blame for any of this and we all knew she would leave us one day back when we allowed ourselves to love her. Understand that she will leave again and prepare yourselves for it now or...” I turn and glare at Luca, “Stay the hell away from her if you can’t. I won’t have you punishing her for something she has no control over. Don’t test me on this Luca or I will bury you deep underground and not unearth you until she has passed!”

The look I see in his eyes is almost feral and reminds me of when he was under the bloodlust but it quickly shifts away and he gives me a curt nod before looking away and changing the subject.

“What of Malcolm?”

I see the wolves relax slightly at his seeming to accept my decree and I let some of the tension ease from my shoulders.

“Malcolm will make contact through the network when he’s able. Have no fear, the militia needs the weapons we have. They will contact us when it is safe to do so.”

Cade nods in agreement but Finn begins to shake his head with a conflicted look on his face.

“Perhaps we should pass the entire affair off to another group in the network. There is an element of danger to what we have been doing and now with Eden to protect we shouldn’t take the risk that it could blow back on us and put her in jeopardy.”

I pour myself another drink as I consider his words. While my brothers were lost in their grief over losing Eden, I was hit with the double-edged knife of grief and guilt. Keket is my maker and I knew she would surface one day to wreak havoc in my life so I have always felt that I was partly to blame for her getting her claws into Eden and ultimately responsible for her death. He is right. I can’t have such weight added to my shoulders once again should anything happen.

“It is too late to change things for this shipment but it will be our last. Eden being here changes everything. We must ensure her safety so I will make the arrangements for all future shipments to go through others in the network.” I rub my chin in thought. “We may want to consider moving further west where the British have less of a presence. War will come sooner rather than later to this land and we may not be able to protect her here.”

Finn blows out a deep breath. “War here or untamed wilderness teeming with native savages? Neither is a good choice, brother. At least here we have people who will warn us of the danger to come as it moves closer and who will stand and fight with us. We should stay but prepare a location at the furthest reaches of our property in the depths of the forest that we can spirit her away to if the fighting gets too close.”

I look to Cade and Luca and receive their nods of agreement so agree as well. We will stay and prepare for the worst this world can send our way.

“Speak to Aiden about it. He knows every inch of our land from his evening runs. Tell him what we need and what for and have him begin to prepare the best spot so we may build a shelter there. Be sure to tell him to keep it quiet. I don’t want the young pup blaring it to all the other lads. Only his Gran is to know as she will go with us if we have to move Eden to safety.”

Before I can say more the sound of the dinner bell rings out, ending the conversation. Finn and Cade leave to collect Eden and I turn to face Luca - delivering a last warning look before I also leave to head to the dining room. I mean to protect her, even if it means protecting her from him.

Eden

By the time Finn and Cade come to collect me for supper, I've managed to clean myself up with the basin of water in the room and tamp down on the rampaging emotions that leave me shaky and exhausted. All I really want to do is go to bed and forget for a while but I've already decided not to hide anymore so I straighten my gown and let them lead me through the house to a room that is much less formal than the last one we dined in across an ocean and a century ago.

I take the seat Finn holds out for me and stare down at the plate, too tired to look at the others and wade through the tension that fills the room. Sebastian sits at my right, Cade to my left. Luca and Finn are across from me. I know they're staring at me but I keep my head down and feel my eyelids start to droop but I jump in my seat with a flinch when Flora drops a huge tray with a clatter in the center of the table. I blink a few times at the frowning small elderly woman and try to smile my thanks at the meal she's prepared for us but nausea churns in my stomach from the stress even though the roasted meat and vegetables on the platter smells amazing.

She harrumphs and tosses her head in my direction even as she snatches a basket of soft-looking buns from the red-haired teen I saw earlier and drops it next to my plate.

“Eat, lass! Yer not but skin and bone.”

I reach for a bun and breathe in the scent with a slightly bigger smile. “Thank you for cooking this, Flora. It smells amazing.”

Her eyes soften and I catch a hint of concern in her gaze before she snorts and spears the men with a stern look. “Aye, hopefully your sweet manners are catching. You lot could take note, ya ken?”

Finn, Cade, and Sebastian all thank her for the meal but Luca only waves her away with an annoyed look. I nibble on the still warm bun as Bas slices the roast and transfers some to

all our plates and Cade adds a scoop of the roasted vegetables to mine. The silence in the room is oppressive and even though the food is delicious I barely manage to choke down a few bites and spend most of the meal pushing the food around on my plate.

“Eden, would you like some wine?” Finn asks from across the table.

I shake my head and reach for the goblet filled with water instead. Cade sighs and reaches for my hand giving it a small squeeze.

“Will you tell us what happened to you when you...went back to your own time?” He asks softly.

My eyes flash to each of them and I see that they all really want to know, even Luca, so I take another sip of water and tell them.

“I...um, when the sword...when I left, well - it’s like a loud roar of wind and everything goes white and then I was on the floor in front of the mirror back in my own time. There was no...blood or...or wound from the sword. It was like it never even happened. The mirror was completely black. I couldn’t... couldn’t get it to work again. I figured out that I had only been gone for a day in my own time, even though I was with you in France for over a month. I tried for weeks and searched the entire house for clues to how my aunt made the mirror work to travel through it but I couldn’t find anything. The lawyer that is handling my divorce was also my aunt’s lawyer for years. About a week ago he gave me a note from her that told me what I needed to know. Anyway, the note said something about a full moon would recharge things. It was very cryptic but I checked the calendar and I had traveled the first time on a full moon so I hoped that’s when it would work again. I was ready this time with a bag of things I wanted to bring with me and I had this dress and my cape made to travel in so when the mirror lit up again, I just let it take me thinking it would bring me back to where you found me last time.”

I reach for my water and gulp the rest of it down and try not to choke when Luca scoffs.

“Obviously, it did not!”

He jerks in his chair and glares at Finn so I know he must have kicked him under the table. I drop my eyes to the cold food on my plate and give a tiny shake of my head.

“No, it didn’t. It was shocking to find out that I was not only on the wrong continent but over a hundred years too late. I didn’t know what to do or where to go.” I heave out a breath. “I had just decided to travel back to my own time when Cade and Finn found me.”

Sebastian leans toward me with a frown. “You know how to travel back?”

I bite my lip hard to keep the tears that want to well up again back and then swallow hard and whisper, “Only how I went back last time. I...I was going to...”

Cade and Finn growl at that and Luca flinches in his chair but Bas takes my free hand and tugs me from my chair and onto his lap where he wraps his strong arms around me and rests his lips on my hair.

“No, that will never be the way. Never do that Eden. Never.” He tells me in a voice thick with emotion. I close my eyes and relax into him for a moment before pulling away and sliding back into my seat.

Finn clears his throat. “Where did you appear, lass? Did anyone see you?”

I shake my head. “No, it was in a field and I was alone. I found the road and then a man and a woman traveling on it told me the date and that I was ten miles from the town.”

“You walked ten miles? Alone?” Cade asks in concern and I feel my cheeks heat up in embarrassment at how I did manage to get to town.

“Well, no actually. Um, there was a group of um, British soldiers that rode past and, well, I uh, kind of played up the damsel in distress act so their leader offered me a ride into town. I told him my horse had bolted and I was trying to get to town to stay with distant relatives. He was...charmed by me. After that, I tried to find lodgings but a nasty man at a store

where I asked told me to go check down at the docks for work as a prostitute and I just started to unravel at how hopeless it would be to find you all. I was going to start looking for a quiet place to...end things...when you found me.”

Cade leans into me and kisses my temple. “And we are overjoyed that we did, lass. Everything will be fine, love. You are safe with us and we will be together from here on out. We will take care of you, Eden. I promise.”

I squeeze his hand back and look to the others. Bas and Finn both nod but Luca is staring down at his plate with a hard frown on his face. Another wave of weariness washes over me and I slump in my chair just as Flora stomps into the room carrying a cake that she places on the table. Her gaze hits me, looks down to my barely touched plate, and then scans the men.

A disapproving hum has us all looking toward her and she snaps out, “Aye! If you lot of men aren’t oblivious! Canna ya not see that the lass is completely knackered? Look at her eyes and her color, ya wee fools. She’s deid on her feet!” She stomps around the table and hauls me out of my chair by my arm with surprising strength for such a small, old woman. “Come with me and I’ll see ya to yer bed. I’ll have Aiden fetch you a basin of heated water and then it’s off ta sleep for ya!”

I manage one last glance over my shoulder at them before she pulls me from the room and see the concern on their faces. Flora’s right. I haven’t slept in over twenty-four hours and I know that’s part of why my emotions are so extreme. I’ll have a better handle on things after I get some sleep. I thank her again for supper and promise to help her with the chores tomorrow but she waves my words away and points a stern finger at the bed before leaving me once Aiden brings a basin of steaming water. I strip the dress off and wash my body, brush my teeth and pull on a fresh tank top and underwear before climbing into the soft bed. Sleep claims me almost instantly. I surface briefly when two hard, warm bodies slide in on either side of me but then I am lost to the darkness.

When I wake again the sun shines through a window and hands are caressing and stroking my body. Lips and tongues kiss and lick at my skin sending an ache of need to my core. It flares hotter when a mouth trails up my leg and nudges my thighs apart.

“Open for me, lass. I have a fierce need ta have your taste on my tongue.” Finn murmurs against the inside of my thigh and then places a hot kiss over my lace-covered mound.

I can't stop my legs from spreading as he licks me through the lace and Cade's mouth nuzzles against my neck and he starts whispering heated words near my ear.

“So many years, we've dreamed of touching, tasting you again. Your sweet, tight pussy squeezing our cocks and your moans of pleasure singing in our ears. The bond is forever, lass but we mean ta claim you for ours again to strengthen it. Will you give yourself over to us? Will you let us pleasure you again and again until you are screaming our names?”

His hand moves under my tank top and cups one of my breasts as his fingers roll my nipple between them. Finn pulls the thin lace to the side and blows gently on my hot, wet pussy causing me to gasp out, “Yes!” That's all he needs to dive in and his tongue swipes between my slit and licks me hard from top to bottom. The tip of his tongue circles my clit and my hips lift for more as Cade's mouth comes down on mine in a deep kiss. His tongue lashes against mine almost in tandem with Finn's assault on my clit and I moan into his mouth begging for more. When Cade pulls back his eyes are intense and filled with need. He reaches down and nudges Finn's mouth from my body causing me to whine.

“Together, cousin.” He growls at Finn and they quickly move us to the side of the bed. Cade pulls my shirt over my head and Finn drags my panties off and then Cade settles on the side of the bed and pulls me between his thighs so my back is against his chest and I can feel the hard bare length of his cock between my ass cheeks. Finn drops to his knees in front of us and runs a thick finger through my slit until it reaches my opening and then he slides it in and pumps it a few times before pulling back out and reaches further back to guide

Cade's cock to my opening. Cade grunts in pleasure as Finn drags his cock back and forth through my wetness and then leans us forward enough to angle inside of me in one fast, hard thrust. "Mine!" he barks out as I cry out the pleasure of his thick cock filling me.

"Ours!" Finn growls and bends to my glistening pussy to torment it in the best possible way with his tongue. Cade's hands leave my hips even as he pulls back and lifts my hands with his to the sides of Finn's face so we are both holding his head against my mound and then thrusts forwards again pushing my pussy against Finn's mouth and lips. He fucks me hard from behind causing me to grind against Finn's mouth with every stroke and the wave crashes hard and fast over me as I come in an explosion of pleasure that has me clamping down on Cade's cock again and again.

"Fuckin' hell! You're everything, Eden." He groans into my neck as his strokes slow. I'm boneless as he slips from my body and drags his wet cock up between my ass spreading my arousal between my cheeks. Finn replaces his tongue with his thick fingers and spreads more of my cream to the area until he can slide a finger partway into my tight hole. I moan at how good it feels as he pushes deeper and gently strokes in and out of me a few times. He pulls out and again drags Cade's cock through my wetness and then I feel Cade's engorged head pushing against the tight ring of my opening.

"Ya need ta relax, love, ta let me in." He breaths against my neck and swipes his tongue against the faded bite mark causing my whole body to light up with a pleasure-filled glow. Finn's tongue gently slips between my folds again and the soft, easy licks against my clit have me relaxing enough for Cade to push further into me. There's a slight burn as he stretches me but the tongue circling my clit speeds up causing bolts of pleasure to overtake the burn until Cade is fully inside me. He stays still even as he groans letting my body get used to his size and I can't help but wiggle against him as Finn lashes my clit with harder strokes of his tongue and the next orgasm starts to build.

"She's close, cousin. Come and join me now."

Finn climbs to his feet and moistens his rigid cock by sliding it through my folds twice before lifting my legs up around his waist and sliding deep inside me. I thrash my head against Cade's chest at the overwhelming fullness of having both of them inside me at the same time. It's too much and I don't think I can take it but then Cade reaches around and finds my yes button while Finn pulls back and strokes deep again. I can't contain the cries and moans as the pleasure builds and builds as Cade moves next. They find a rhythm that has them thrusting into me at the same time and it's so fucking intense, so fucking full, and so fucking good that when the orgasm hits me I scream as bright sparks of light flash before my eyes and I barely feel their teeth biting down on the marks they left on my shoulders before. The tiny flare of pain and then the glow of love that fills me just adds to the pleasure rocking through me. The last thrusts fill me as they both find their own release and we stay pressed together with me in between them until Finn lifts my chin to stare down into my eyes.

"It could have been a thousand years and it wouldn't have changed how we feel for you. Eden, you are ours and we are yours, forever."

"Forever." Cade echoes from behind me, kissing my neck as Finn slides his lips across mine.

For the first time since I got here, I feel steady and sure of what's to come. These are my men and we will have a life together full of love and happiness no matter what it takes. No more tears, no more doubts. It's time to stand up and take back what's mine.

"I love you. I love you both so much and I'm going to spend the rest of my life showing you that." I slide my hand down Cade's thigh that's still pressed against the back of my legs and place a quick kiss on Finn's sweaty chest before laughing. "But first, a bath!"

Eden

My wolves are happy to haul in a wooden tub and hot water for a bath and we slosh around in it, making a mess with teasing touches and slippery, sliding skin as we reconnect and strengthen our bond. They tell me of coming to America and building the house we are in and how they've been helping the militia with weapons over the last year. I'm leaning back against Finn's chest between his legs as Cade swipes a soap-covered cloth up and down my leg from the other end of the tub.

"Is Flora a relative of yours? She obviously knows what the four of you are."

Cade smirks and shakes his head. "No, but it doesn't stop her from burning our ears with her sharp tongue like our Gran would have when the mood takes her. She and Aiden, her great-grandson, were being sold down at the docks when we happened ta be there for business. We scented that they were one of our kind. We bought their contracts ta set them free but the wee demon insisted on badgering us the whole way home so she and Aiden stuck and we hired them on ta tend the house and stables."

I giggle when he nips at my bare soapy toes and I pull my foot away to rest it on his chest. "It must make you happy to have other shifters here. To not be the only ones I mean."

Finn sweeps his hands up my stomach to cup my bare breasts and rubs softly against my nipples.

"Aye, it's a comfort ta be sure. Flora is a font of knowledge of the old ways and Aiden is fun ta roll around with when we run, for all the pup he still is. We've learned that there are a scattering of packs that have settled in further west in the wilderness but we've yet ta meet any other shifters besides Flora and Aiden."

His teeth catch on my earlobe and I push back against him when I feel his cock hardening, causing him to chuckle. One

hand leaves my breast to slide down between my legs. He slips two fingers inside me and drags them against my walls causing me to push my foot harder against Cade's chest as I lift my hips to reach for more with a gasp. Cade's smile grows and his eyes turn intense as he gets to his knees and moves closer while fisting his hard cock and stroking it.

"Will you take us both again, lass?" He practically dares me with a raised eyebrow.

My mouth waters and I lick my lips wanting nothing more than to have him in my mouth and feel the smooth skin of his cock on my tongue.

"Aye, she will, cousin. Fill her channel with your cock so she has something to squeeze as we make her come for us again."

Finn whispers, "Gladly." And then he's lifting me up enough to slide deep inside me with a groan. I roll my hips to grind on him, sending a small wave through the water and tilt my head back and open my mouth so Cade can feed me what I want. Finn hisses at the movement, letting me control the ride as my tongue darts out and swipes the slit of Cade's cock and then swirls around it with a moan escaping me. I keep rolling my hips to ride the throbbing cock filling me from behind and I take Cade's deeper into my mouth and suck as I slide back and forth, going deeper each time until he hits the back of my throat. When I swallow against him he growls and clenches a handful of my hair to anchor my head so he can start pumping in and out of my mouth. Finn's fingers slide down and slip between my folds quickly locating my clit and rubs to match Cade's strokes into my mouth.

I rock and suck and fall into a dazed state of pleasure as my body tightens around them both and sparks begin to fire off inside me as the pleasure builds higher and higher. I open my eyes when Cade groans my name to see his eyes glowing gold and a fierce expression on his face. When he roars out the word, "Forever!" and spills into my mouth it takes me over the edge and I crash into my own orgasm. My walls milk Finn's cock as he latches onto my hips and surges up into me with three hard, deep thrusts before he also empties his seed inside

me. All three of us collapse back into the tub, sending another wave of water over the lip and onto the floor. I look down and see maybe three inches of water left in the tub and can't help but start laughing at the complete mess we've made. Finn's arms tighten around me and his voice is thick with emotions.

“My love, my mate. I've spent decades yearning ta hear the sound of your laugh again and your smile haunted me even as I dreamed of it every night. I'm so thankful ta have you here again.”

My breath catches at his words and I go from silly laughter to joyful tears in a blink as Cade moves back to us and holds both of us in his strong arms.

We eventually wash again with the little water that remains and they help me clean up the small flood we made, stripping the bed to use the blankets to mop it up. Cade grumbles about Flora stabbing them for the blankets that will now need to be washed but Finn proclaims that it was worth it and he will do the job himself to save them from her wrath. I laugh at the image of him wringing out laundry.

With my stomach grumbling for breakfast and my head demanding coffee, I set to work taming my hair and laying out the items I brought with me, catching the wolves' interest. Finn picks up the hollowed-out book that I flipped open and blinks in surprise.

“What's all this, then?”

I smile. “Well, I'd like to say all I need is love to survive but I couldn't help but bring a few non-essential items with me.” I take the book from his hands and pull out the tablet and power it on and then hand it back to him with a grin as Cade crowds in to see. “I know how much you both liked my phone so I brought this for you. It's a bigger version of my phone that has music and movies loaded on it and it can take pictures too.” I grab the earbuds and hold them out. “You put these into your ears so that you can hear it without everyone else being able to hear it.” I give them a quick demonstration and laugh at the looks of delight on their faces as they listen to the song I turn

on with one earbud each. “You can share using one each or use them both at the same time if you are alone.”

They hand the buds back to me and start poking through the bottles I brought, demanding to know what each one contains as I pull on a fresh set of underwear and the matching bra. That gets their attention as it’s an emerald green set with sexy crisscrossed straps. They both move toward me with a look on their faces that I know well so I throw up my hands and try not to laugh.

“NO! Back! Stay back you beasts! Food, coffee, and then maybe we can come back.” I tease and snatch the hoodie I set out and hold it in front of me to block their view of the sexy set. Cade pouts and Finn shakes his head sadly at being denied.

“Those undergarments are dangerous, lass. They make a man lose his heid and want ta commit any manner of sins against your body. You can’t expect us ta resist such a temptation.”

I laugh at that as I pull the hoodie over my head and reach for my leggings. “You sampled this temptation twice already and it’s not even breakfast! I’m sure you can resist for long enough to feed me.”

Now they’re both pouting so I roll my eyes at them and go back to the dressing table to grab a scrunchie to put my wet hair up in and swipe a quick coating of mascara on my lashes. I slide my bare feet into the clean Tom’s I brought and snag the bag of coffee and filter then point at the door.

“Feed me!”

We’re laughing when we enter the dining room until I hear a gasp of shock and see Flora gaping at me as she takes in my clothes.

“What manner of dress is that? It’s positively scandalous! I can see every bit of the shape of your legs!”

Cade pulls me against his chest and looks down at me with a smirk. “Aye, it’s bloody fantastic, innit?”

“Good morning, Eden. I trust you slept well?” Sebastian asks as he rises to his feet.

Flora’s wide eyes track to him and she squawks in outrage. “And you approve of such an outfit as well? I thought you had a firmer heid on your shoulders than the rest of them.”

He laughs, making her eyes go even wider and that tells me it’s something he rarely does so I go to him and tilt my head up for a morning kiss. His lips brush against mine lightly before he answers her.

“Flora, Eden is like no other woman you will ever meet. She dresses as she wants, curses like a drunken sailor, and fights like a warrior...and we love every bit of her just the way she is.” He looks down at me and kisses me again. “I missed every bit of you.”

I can’t resist going up on my toes to kiss him again before letting him pull out my chair and settling me in it. I turn my eyes to Flora and smile in understanding.

“I hope that when I dress casual this way it won’t offend you. I am completely covered after all and this style is very common where I’m from. Besides, I’d like to help you with any chores that need to be done and the dresses I have would not be appropriate for that kind of work.”

She purses her lips and gives me a considering look but it shifts to a scowl when Luca snaps out, “You will not! There is no need for you to be doing such menial work.”

I glare at him. “Oh? Do you have a large staff of servants still that’s at your every beck and call, Your Grace? I’ve only seen Flora and Aiden so if that’s the only help to care and keep the four of you and now me as well then I WILL be helping them with what needs to be done. I’m not a pampered princess, Luca. You should know that!”

He glares back at me and then shoves his chair back and surges to his feet. “Do what you will for however long you manage to stay here then.”

The pain is a sharp dagger that instantly pierces my heart and just as quickly comes the anger that he would say such a

shitty thing to me.

“Go to Hell, Luca!”

His glare morphs into a grim smile and he delivers a mocking half bow to me. “You already sent me there, Eden.”

I sink down into my chair as he strides from the room and feel all the happiness of earlier fall away. I close my eyes and pictures of Luca and me from before flash through my mind. The gentle loving man that I fell in love with is so far from the person he has become and I don't know if I will ever get him back.

I open my eyes when I feel someone take my hand and see the concerned expression in Bas's eyes.

“Is he gone? Have I lost him for good?”

He sighs deeply and looks away, telling me more than any words he could say.

“Luca...he...he broke when we thought you died, Eden. He was so lost for so long after and when I forced us to leave France he became what you see today. There is so much pain and bitterness in him and I do not know if any of us can reach the man he used to be but...if anyone can, it will be you.”

“HA! The lad don't need to be reached, he needs a solid kick in the arse! If ya be the warrior they claim ya are then go pound his heid until sense takes hold.” Flora stomps her foot and then crosses her arms. “As for what ya wear or how ya speak, it makes no never mind ta me and if it means some help for me an me aching back I will say thanks for it. Now, break yer fast as I know ya hardly touched yer plate last evenin'.” With that, she stomps from the room leaving Cade and Finn grinning at her cranky tirade.

I try and push Luca from my mind for now and scan the table for anything that resembles a pot of coffee. Cade must read my mind because he winces and shakes his head.

“I'm sorry, lass. If you're looking for your morning brew, we don't have any but we will be sure ta get some for you next we are in the town for supplies.”

I send him a smile. “It’s fine. I brought a small amount with me. All I need is some hot water if possible.”

He jumps to his feet with a nod and leaves to get me some as Finn starts piling food onto my plate and nudging it closer to me trying to get me to eat. I manage a few bites before Cade comes back with my hot water and the men watch in interest as I make myself a cup of much-needed coffee. By the time it’s ready the glorious smell of it has me not bothering with cream or any sugar and just sipping it black. I finish all the food on my plate and sit back to savor what’s left in my cup. Sebastian eyes me cautiously before speaking.

“We know you are fully capable of doing whatever you set your mind to, Eden, but it isn’t necessary for you to do all the household chores. Flora has her grandson to help and she’s managed just fine so far.”

I sigh and shrug as I look around the table at all of them. “I plan on being here for the rest of my life. I don’t want to be a guest, I want this to be my home so I feel like I need to contribute my fair share. What else will I do with my time?” I catch the smug, leering look on Cade’s face and laugh. “Besides entertaining you!”

Bas chuckles at that. “We want you to feel like this is your home as well but I’m sure daily life in this time is much more strenuous than what you are accustomed too and we would hate to see you worn down by it. I would much rather retain more servants to handle such things. We certainly have the funds to do that.”

I chew on my lip trying to find the words to explain to them that I want to build a real life here with them and not just be their pampered pet. It’s not like I have many options to have a career so helping around the house is all that’s really left for me. That reminds me of the jewels I brought with me.

“I know you’re wealthy but I want to contribute to my upkeep, both with work that needs to be done and financially. I brought some jewels back with me that I want to give to you to go towards that.” When he starts to shake his head I forge on.

“Please, let me do this! I want to be partners with you all, not feel like a kept woman.”

He reaches out and takes my hand lifting it to his mouth to kiss my knuckles softly. “You are an amazing woman, Eden and if it makes you happy, I will accept that.”

Luca

I pull the reins of my heaving mount to bring it to a walk to cool down as the end of the treeline before our stable yard comes into view. The three-hour ride has done nothing to cool the hot anger simmering in my blood since she came back. Just looking at her slices through me with daggers of pain for all she made me feel and then took away. I can't help but lash out at her to share some of it. The ease in how my brothers have just accepted her back into their arms and beds based on her cries of pleasure that rang through the house has me wanting to rage, fight and destroy everything around me. I desperately want to feel her in my arms as well but how can I allow her in again only to have it snatched away like last time? I groan through clenched teeth. Those big, green eyes of hers so filled with love and pain when they turn my way makes me want to steal her away and rage at her, fuck her, and hold her in my arms all at once. It's infuriating that I can't control the emotions I had locked down for so long.

My mount comes to the edge of the trees and right away I spot the gleaming red and golds of her hair as she works to hang blankets from a line to dry and my fingers tighten on the reins as another wash of fury crashes through me. She's not meant for such work! Eden is no common scullery maid to roughen her hands and stoop her back from the weight of menial chores. Her life will be short and it should be filled with pleasure and joyous pursuits that will have her laughter ringing through our home. That I can't bring myself to be the one to give her these things doesn't change what I want for her. It's madness.

My jaw tightens when she turns to reach for another item to hang from the heaping basket and she spots me. I see the way she stiffens and the deep breath she takes that has her breasts heaving against the fabric of the strange sleeveless shirt and then she starts walking my way with a nervous look on her face. I watch her every step and try hard to commit every inch of her to memory for the day she leaves once again. Her

beauty staggers me and when I make no move to ride past her I see the hope bloom in her eyes. I harden my heart against the pain I know is coming as my horse comes to a stop when she reaches a hand out to it. Even the damn beast isn't immune to her as it leans into her fingers as she rubs its head.

“Luca, we...we should talk. I...I know you're angry with me but...”

I cut her off with a dismissive wave of my hand toward the washing on the line. “Your time would be better served completing the task you wanted to do so badly.”

I wrench the reins with a jerk to get my mount moving past her and catch the hurt in her eyes before fire replaces them and she steps back.

“Goddammit, Luca! You are being such an asshole!” She yells after me but I don't look back as I head to the stable. Better for me to be an asshole as she says than a broken madman when she destroys me again.

Aiden rushes out to take care of my horse so I toss him the reins and stride to the house, not allowing myself to look Eden's way again. I make it three steps into the house when a fist connects with my face and I go flying into the wall. Fury surges up and my fangs slide out as I find my feet to face Cade who delivered the blow. His eyes are glowing gold and the snarl on his lips shows hints of his canines lengthening as he takes a firm step towards me.

“Have we not suffered enough that you feel the need to add more to it by punishing her? Eden's only crime was loving us. Loving you! Does it really lessen your own pain to inflict it upon her?” He rages at me.

I feel the shame creep up on me. She was theirs first. Their mate and they loved me enough to include me and share her with me. I know how they suffered when she died and I saw the first true happiness on their faces this morning since then. I turn my eyes away from him and slump against the wall.

“I can't. I can't let myself...it broke me, brother.” I tell him in a defeated voice.

He steps closer and rests a hand on my shoulder. “Aye, it broke us all but don’t you see that Eden and all she would give us is the way ta mend it? Ta make us whole again?”

I brush his hand away and straighten. “For how long? And what of the next time she leaves us for good? Then what will mend us? No, I can’t, I won’t. Better she should hate me and keep her distance than suffer that again!”

“You are a fool ta think she will ever let that happen. You belong ta her, Luca, just like the rest of us, and knowing Eden, she will do whatever it takes ta get you back.”

Eden

I groan from the pain in my hands, arms, and back. Washing, wringing out, and then hanging the house's bedding all by hand was a job I was nowhere near prepared for. I have no idea how one small old lady has been managing it all. I'm sore, dirty and sweaty, and dying for a shower but make do with a basin wash. After helping with the laundry, Flora showed me to the linen closet and sent me on my way to remake all the beds with fresh sheets and blankets. I roll my head on my neck to try and loosen the muscles and decide that being a pampered princess and a kept woman has its merits. Fuck, that was brutal work having to twist and squeeze the water out of the blankets by hand.

As I rub a small bit of the body lotion I brought back with me into my sore, red hands, I start thinking about the future and ways to make life easier here. Just because certain things haven't been invented yet doesn't mean I couldn't have them made myself with the right materials. Top of the list would be some kind of large tank that could be turned into a type of shower and plumbing and a roller system to squeeze out water and...

"You look deep in thought. Are you alright?" Sebastian interrupts my musings as he leans against the door frame to my room.

I narrow my eyes at him. "I've decided we DO need more help around here, please and also, I need to speak with a blacksmith!"

He barks out a laugh of surprise. "A blacksmith? What on earth would you need to speak to a blacksmith for?"

I shrug my shoulders causing me to groan and reach up my hands to rub them. Bas pushes off the doorjamb and moves into the room, plucks me from the side of the bed, and takes my spot, settling me between his legs. His strong hands and

fingers go to work on my knotted muscles and a moan of pure pleasure comes out of me that almost sounds sexual.

He makes a noise of amusement and teases, “It would seem domestic duties may not be your forte.”

I make a sound of annoyance. “I can do it just fine but after today I’m reconsidering your offer of hiring on others to help with it. Do you know, in my time, I can do as much laundry as I did today in as little as a few hours with just a touch of a button? I already miss my washing machine!”

“Hmm, and does that bring us to the blacksmith?” He asks.

“Err, well, I’m not sure who would be the right person to talk to about what I want to build. I may have chosen to leave my modern life but I see no reason why we can’t have a few modern conveniences created to make life here more comfortable.” I arch my back and groan as his thumb digs into a particularly tender knot. “I have a list started in my head. Would you mind if I made a few changes around here?”

His lips find my neck causing me to moan with a different type of pleasure. “You, my love, can change everything you want to, as long as it makes you happy.”

I can’t help but smile at how different Sebastian is from the hard, icy man I first met. He’s so much softer and loving now. Out of all the men I love, Bas was the one I got to spend the least amount of time with before that fucking bitch, Keket, ruined everything. I was worried that the connection we had made wouldn’t be strong enough to withstand the amount of time I was gone. We had only that one amazing night together before I left so having him be so accepting and loving towards me being back is such a gift. I turn in his arms and kiss him with all the love I feel. His hands sweep up and down my back and into my hair as he pulls the elastic from it so it falls in waves over my shoulders and his fingers massage my scalp. I sigh in contentment against his lips and pull back enough to look into his eyes.

“Do you know what I want right now? I want to crawl into this big, soft bed with you, have your arms wrapped around me and...take a nap.”

His eyebrows shoot up and I can see the amusement in his eyes but then they soften and he pulls me close again.

“I would love that, Eden. I want to spend as much time with you as I can. I regret deeply that it took me so long to see that when you first came to us. I promise that I won’t make that mistake again.”

He reaches for the hem of my hoodie and lifts it over my head and then does the same with the tank top I’m wearing underneath it. I wiggle out of my leggings so I’m standing in front of him in only the emerald green bra and panty set and watch as his eyes heat up and his fingers trail over the tops of my breasts.

“So damn beautiful.” He breathes out with a touch of wonder in his tone. His hands run smoothly down my sides and come to rest on the crisscrossed bands at my hips that hold in place the small scrap of fabric that covers my mound.

I reach for his shirt and murmur, “If you don’t stop looking at me like that, I won’t be getting that nap.”

His lips quirk up and then he’s sweeping his shirt over his head and tossing it to the side before standing and dragging the blankets back on the bed for me to climb in.

“I promise you will get your nap but I think you are still far too stiff and sore from all the hard work of the day. Will you allow me to relax you a bit more?”

His hands drag down my back and over my ass as I climb up past him causing heat to spread between my legs. I lay down on my back and reach my arms out for him to join me, wanting to be back in his arms. He nods and quickly moves to shut the door and then climbs up into the bed with me laying on his side beside me. His lips come down on mine softly and his kiss is sweet and soft as his free hand rubs down my arm and across to my belly. The rushed, desperate passion from the day before when he took me against the wall is gone and in its place is a gentle kind of loving.

I thread my fingers into his hair and deepen the kiss so our tongues can slide against each other in a dance, even as his

fingers sweep gently over my curves, touching everywhere my skin is exposed. When the back of his hand brushes over the dampening satin covering my pussy my hips lift for more. His mouth leaves mine and finds my ear to whisper, "Not yet. Have patience." And then he's kissing down my neck and across the swell of my breasts still with soft, sweet movements. It's a slow seduction that will drive me crazy with need. He slips the straps of my bra off of my shoulders and peels down the cups covering me, exposing my nipples. They pebble as the cool air washes over them and his lips find first one and then the other as his tongue circles each one in soft licks that turn into gentle sucking.

The slow gentle pace is driving me mad and my panties are soaked as I throb for contact, friction, or anything that will soothe the ache that's growing by the second. Every time I've been with Sebastian this way, he's been confident and commanding, sexy and passionate - but this, this is a different side of him. My vampire is a master of seduction and the sweet care he's showing my body has me falling even more in love with him but I can't take much more.

"Please, please." I gasp out even as my hips lift from the bed, searching.

He finally leaves my breasts and moves down my body licking his way down to where I want him the most. He buries his mouth and nose between my thighs against the soaked satin and breathes me in with a groan of his own. I press up against his face, needing so much more, and he quickly strips the satin barrier away so that his hot tongue can sweep into me in one long lick that has me coming off the bed with a gasp. He explores and tastes every inch of my folds, leaving me panting and begging for him to give me the release my body is desperate for. When he finally circles my clit and then sucks gently on it, I come so hard my whole body shakes and I trap his head between my thighs as they squeeze together from the intensity of it. Once the pulse waves slow my legs fall apart and I'm left panting and trembling with weakness from it. He kisses the inside of my thigh and moves back up my body to take me in his arms. He brushes the hair from my face and kisses my forehead.

“I love you, Eden.”

I think I say it back but my eyes slide closed and sleep takes me, safe in his arms.

When I wake next, the sun is going down and shadows fill the room. I burrow deeper under the blankets and pout that Bas has left me at some point but then I remember the toe-curling orgasm he sent me to sleep with and forgive him. I'm not feeling quite as sore as I was and with the sun going down I should get ready for supper so I force myself out of the bed to find something to wear and spot the large wooden chest Sebastian brought me in the corner. I toss on my underwear and hoodie and then kneel in front of it to unlatch the clasp and lift the lid. The smell of cedar and lavender wafts out to me and the lavender triggers memories of Claudette and I know she was the one to pack my dresses away. Sadness fills me knowing she is long dead.

I lift the yellowed linen that covers the top and find even more underneath. Each dress has been folded inside of its own sheet with a small bag of dried lavender and a larger bag that contains the matching slippers and jewelry. I lay each gown out on the bed and gasp a happy laugh when I uncover the fancy black bathrobe that I had traveled to France in the first time. Age has dulled the shine of it but its synthetic fibers have held up and it's still soft and plush against my fingers. A good airing out and it should be perfect to wear again. The last two gowns are the dark green one I first wore to dine with my men and the sexy red number that Sebastian had made for the Marquis' dinner party. The bag with it has the matching shoes but I'm relieved to see all the priceless ruby jewelry is gone. Hopefully in a safe somewhere.

A knock on the door has me turning away from the bed full of gowns and opening it to a scowling Flora whose hands are full with a basin of steaming water. Her eyes dart down to my bare legs and then back up with an annoyed look.

“Land sakes, lass! I know I said yer difference wouldna bother me none but do ya haf ta be so blatant about it? I have low expectations for the future if all the lassies behave like ya!”

I can't help but laugh at that. If she only knew half of what is acceptable in my time she'd die on the spot in shock. I take the basin from her and set it on the dresser as she steps further into the room and eyes the mounds of silk, satin, and lace piled up. She rubs the green one's hem between her fingers and shakes her head.

"Well aren't these lovely, then. Don't see you beating the rugs in any of them, though!" She cackles.

"Right? Or wringing out the washing!" I laugh. "No, these gowns were from when we lived in France over a hundred years ago. They're so beautiful but I doubt I will get much use from them here." I smooth my hand over the green gown and chew on my lip before deciding, fuck it. I'm skipping the corset but I'm wearing this dress to supper!

"Flora, would you mind buttoning me into this one, please? I think I'm going to dress up for supper tonight." I frown down at the dress. "Luca had this made for me. Maybe he needs a reminder of what we used to share."

"Aye, that and a punch in his maw. The lad has a wicked tone ta him. If not for the other lads, I would have taken my Aiden off a while ago rather than put up with him."

"He wasn't always like this. I'm sorry for the way he speaks to you. It's my fault he's the way he is." I tell her sadly.

"Hogwash! It be his own choice ta be so surly ta others. Don't take the blame on yerself. Now, supper will need ta be served shortly so if yer wantin' my help with all the wee buttons on that gown, let's get on with it."

I have another quick wash with the fresh steamy water she brought while she folds away the rest of the gowns back into the chest and then stand with my back to her as she buttons up the back for the dress. I turn around and swish the skirt and wait for her opinion and she cracks me up again.

"'Tis a fine gown and works well with yer coloring, ya ken, but are you going to tame the wild beast on yer heid? A body could get lost in that lot of curls!"

I shake my head with a laugh, causing the wild beast of waves to dance and thank her for her help. She leaves me to my taming and I go to work on it anchoring half of it up in five different ponytails, inverting them, and then threading the tails through all the others in both directions making a lovely loose looking weave design. The bottom half waves down my back neatly with a tiny amount of serum and I finish it off with the black ivy combs with the tiny leaf emeralds. I break out one of the eyeliners I brought with me and go dark and thick, smudging it to create shadow, and two coats of mascara. The delicate necklace and matching shoes complete the look and I step back from the mirror to get a better look at the total package and smile at the effect. I hope it will jar something in Luca to get him thinking about how good we used to be together. As Claudette once told me, my looks can be a weapon and I hope to fucking wield them against him tonight.

I have no perfume so I rub in some of the vanilla body lotion on the tops of my lifted breasts and down in my cleavage. I bite my lips a few times to redden them up a bit and I'm ready for the next battle to win him back.

Luca

When the bell rings to announce supper, I wish to ignore it. I certainly don't need the sustenance from it but almost against my will, I find myself walking that way. Seeing her, being so near her and not being able to touch her is a torture I can't stop myself from incurring. Perhaps I should leave. I could go west into the wilds until the day she ages and dies. Would that not be preferable to this agonizing need for her that she's brought back into me?

I'm so lost in thought that I turn the corner blindly and collide with...sweet vanilla fills my senses and my arms automatically go around her when she staggers. Those big, beautiful green eyes look up at me in surprise but then soften and turn dreamy and soft with love as her hand comes up and cups my cheek. She breathes out my name like a wish and I'm unable to stop myself from pulling her even closer so our bodies are pressed tightly together. My whole body comes alive at having her in my arms after so long as I stare down into her perfect face. A face I sculpted hundreds of times over decades...and then destroyed, as she had destroyed me.

I drop my arms away from her and harden my will and expression as I step back and take in the gown she's wearing. I flinch back further as memories of her in that very gown assault me. Her laughter and smile when we first played a card game together in the library. The easy way she included me and made me begin to feel for the first time in a century. Every moment we spent together after that flashes through my mind and I shake my head as if I can dislodge them from it but they are etched into my soul. She is etched into my soul and I will never be free of her.

Her expression is one of pleading as she reaches for me again and I almost take her hand but Finn and Cade come up behind me breaking the spell and I turn away but not before I see the flash of disappointment cross her face.

“Eden! I never thought I would see such a sight again. You wore that gown for our first supper together in France. It is amazing to me that you look exactly the same after so many years have passed.” Finn enthuses while Cade reaches for her hand even as she looks my way.

“You look stunning. Your beauty is magical so please forgive Sebastian if he accuses you of being a witch again. Please, allow us to escort you to the dining room?”

She nods with a dimmed smile and takes his hand and Finn’s elbow to continue on but when they reach the door, she glances back at me with sad, haunted eyes.

I force myself to wait in the hall until I’m sure they all have been seated and then straighten my shoulders, clear my expression and then follow after and take my seat. My fingers tighten into fists as they discuss Eden’s day as a domestic servant and how hard everything is compared to her timeframe. They relax when I hear we will be hiring more staff to help with the upkeep and I nod in agreement when Sebastian looks my way. I may be the current Duc de Gaul but we all know it is in name only. Sebastian is and will always be our Alpha.

“Eden, please share with us what you mentioned earlier today about the blacksmith.” Bas prompts her and she laughs with a nervous look my way.

“I was just thinking, if you are all open to it, that is, that we could update a few things to give us some of the more modern conveniences that have yet to be made common in this time. I’m just not sure how to go about it.”

“Give us a few examples, lass.” Fin tells her.

She plays with her wine glass for a moment before sighing. “Well, plumbing for one thing. It’s a crazy amount of work just to haul water from the well, heat it a pot at a time, and then haul it again to where it’s wanted, bucket by bucket. So the first thing would be a way to pump the water from the well to the house. I’m pretty sure windmills have been invented already so I would start with that. If we could have some type of large tank made that can be installed inside the house that

could be heated by a fire, it would give us a continuous amount of hot water. Running pipes from it to different parts of the house would again mean less hauling and also help to heat the house during the winter.”

Sebastian is nodding his head. “Yes, we used that method to move water in France for the Manor house but didn’t bother with it when we had this house built. As for the hot water, there were multiple fires in the kitchen there that always had water heating - but we also had a very large staff to manage that. I like the idea of one large tank being heated to cut down on all of that. I do not know how pipes would work, though. What would they be made of? Wood? Clay? Iron?”

The wolves jump in and debate the merits of different materials and I watch how lively her expression is as they make suggestions on her ideas. When they launch into the possible ways to remove waste from inside the house to outside I realize why she seems so happy. They are planning a future, a life with her, and I need to decide if it will include me. Even with us extending her life through our blood, we will have at best eighty years with her before she dies a natural death. I think back on the last eighty years of misery without her and ask myself if I want to put myself through that again when I don’t have to. I could have happiness again with her. I rub my forehead in frustration. It’s all the years after she dies that will be a never-ending hell that I have to consider.

“We would have to cut holes in the flooring and outer walls for such to work, lass. Not to mention, a third level to the house to put the tank of heated water above for the shower you want so desperately.” Finn tells her.

The table goes silent and all eyes turn toward me when I comment. “It would be best to construct a new home completely and have such things installed during the process.”

A trembling smile forms on Eden’s face and she bites her bottom lip before quietly asking, “Would you want that, Luca? Would you want to build a new...home...with us? With me?”

I swallow the affirmative I want to gush at her and instead shrug one shoulder and keep my expression carefully blank as

I reply.

“We certainly have the funds to do so and it would be less disruptive than the mess it would make should you go ahead with your projects in this house.”

I remember her words at the lake. How she described a house there for all of us to live in and I frown. I had said yes in the moment, so shocked with disbelief that she was here but now I have no answer for her so instead I push out of my chair to my feet.

“I care not. Do as you will.” I tell her dismissively and leave her once again with a hurt, disappointed expression as I flee the room.

Eden

I viciously yank the weed out of the ground between the squash plants growing in Flora's kitchen garden and swipe the sweat from my forehead with a dirty hand. I'm moody and frustrated that I still haven't been able to break through to Luca after a week of trying. Every time we're in the same room, it's all dark looks and snippy rudeness and I've had about all I'm going to take of that. Whether he wants it or not, we will be having it out pretty fucking quick and resolving this one way or another. I know how much I hurt him but I won't be his verbal punching bag anymore.

Luca and Sebastian have been gone for the last two days on some delivery thing they've got going on with the local militia. I'm happy to have a bit of a break from him but what they're doing is something that worries me, knowing the war that's about to happen here. My men might be supernatural creatures but that doesn't stop me from worrying about their safety.

I sigh and lean back on my heels and look to the west where Finn, Cade, and Aiden are cutting down trees to haul back to the yard to chop up for firewood. It's astounding just how much wood we go through every day but I do like watching my wolves as they chop wood shirtless. They put those TikTok lumberjack thirst trap videos to shame even without any ink on their ripped chests. I would sit and watch them chop wood all damn day if there wasn't so much to do around here. They're too far into the forest for me to see them right now but maybe if I get the rest of the garden weeded to Flora's satisfaction I can reward myself with watching them later when they get back with the felled trees. I groan as I get to my feet to move over to the next row in the garden. Pioneer life is really fucking hard. I honestly don't mind doing the work, it's just a lot to get used to for a girl who spent her life in a city and the work uses many muscles in a different way than training does.

I scan the row as I move along, looking for another offender to pull and smile at the memory of watching a movie with Cade and Finn last night on the tablet. I let them choose which one to watch and for some reason, they both decided Titanic would be the perfect choice. They enjoyed it right up until the end and then argued nonstop about there being enough room on the damn door and Rose must not have truly loved him to not share it with Jack so he could live. I finally had to strip naked and distract them to get them to let it go. I feel a hot throb between my legs as I remember exactly what the three of us did to create our own happy ending.

Movement from my left catches my eye and I turn, hoping it's Bas and Luca returning. My breath sucks in when men in redcoats come from around the barn and head my way with guns pointed in my direction. I want to run for the house but I don't know how they'll react if I do so I stand still and wait instead. Maybe I can charm them the way I did with Captain Lancaster. The closer they get the more that idea dims. These men look rough and angry, their uniforms are dirty and bloody in places. I slowly start moving backwards as fear begins to take hold. One of the soldiers narrows his eyes at me and I swallow hard at the sheer hatred and contempt I see in them when he jabs a finger my way.

"You there! Who is the owner of this property?" He demands and I take a few more steps backward out of the garden. My mouth is dry as dust when I reply.

"The Duc de Gaul owns this property. He...he is away right now but should be back shortly."

His lip lifts in a sneer at that and huffs, "French? Just as bad as these damn treasonous colonists! In the King's name, we will be taking all slaves from this property to fight in his army as well as provisions for our use."

I frown at him and shake my head. "We have no slaves here, sir."

The soldier scoffs at that. "Do not waste your lies on me! A member of the French nobility not owning slaves? Pfft!" He looks me up and down and his eyes latch onto my tight yoga

pants and then travel up to the revealing tank top I'm wearing and a gleam that scares me even more enters his eyes. "Are you his wife or his whore? Dressed as you are, I will assume the latter." He chuckles darkly and waves his men closer.

"You four, search the outbuildings! The rest of you may take whatever relief you wish from this one while I search the house."

My mouth drops open in shock that he just basically told his men to rape me and that's all I need to spin away and run. His dirty fingers reach out and latch onto my wrist, squeezing it painfully enough that I know I'll have a ring of bruises there and yanks me back around. His other hand flashes at me and connects with the side of my face, rocking my head back and blood starts to fill my mouth. His ugly laugh breaks through my stunned mind and turns my fear into rage. I whip my free arm around and slam the heel of my hand up into his nose, baring my teeth in satisfaction at the crack of a breaking bone. He drops my wrist to clutch at his face, freeing me, and then I'm in motion kicking, punching, and spinning as I fight off the other three soldiers who lunge for me. I manage to take two down when my hair is wrenched back causing me to scream in pain and then a gun cocks next to my ear causing me to freeze in place. I hear wolves howling in the distance and relief floods me that they're on their way but I'm terrified they won't make it back here in time.

"I do like a woman with spirit but I'm afraid I like breaking one with it even more. You colonists WILL learn your place! Consider this the King's tax." He snarls in my ear and pulls my head back even harder by my hair. "Strip her!" He barks out to his recovering men and angry hands reach for my top and tear it down the middle as others fumble to yank down my pants. Flashes of what they are doing to me and the gang of men that attacked me in my own time blur together. They held me like this back then and hurt me so badly with their grabbing hands and vicious hits. A raging terror takes over and I go wild with it, screaming and cursing, clawing at the arm holding me in place.

I kick out and catch one of them in the balls before their leader hits me hard in the head with his gun barrel and I feel hot blood pour down over my ear and neck even as my eyes go hazy. The soldier holds me up on my feet by my hair as I start to sag from the blow and I cry out desperately again.

“Use your knife and cut them off of her!” He growls at the man trying to get a hold of the slippery lycra of my pants. The soldier steps back with an awful grin and pulls his knife from its sheath just as a silver blur tackles him from the side and takes him to the ground with snarls and flashing teeth.

I blink a few times to clear my eyes and get a better look at the wolf who is ripping out the downed soldier’s throat even as he stabs the knife into its flank. The small silver beast releases the dying man as it lets out a sharp female-sounding yip of pain and I realize that it must be Flora. The gun moves from where it had been pressing against my head and I see the barrel move past the side of my face to point at Flora. I scream out a desperate “NO!” and shove into his arm, throwing the aim off to the side as he pulls the trigger. The noise of the shot so close to my ear is deafening but I keep pushing and turning until I can bring my foot up and strike a sharp blow to his knee causing him to fall to the ground and taking me with him. I see fur flying past but all my attention is on this bastard who needs to fucking die even as my vision blurs again. I’m running on pure instinct now.

I roll onto him, straddling his waist, and wrench the heavy musket from his hand even as his fingers curl around my throat and start to squeeze. I bring it down to hit him in the face over and over screaming my rage with every blow until his face is a caved-in bloody mess and his hands drop away from me and still. It doesn’t matter that he’s done, I hit him again causing even more of his blood to splatter up and add to the mess coating me. My hearing starts to come back and I hear someone bellowing my name, men screaming in terror, and horse hooves galloping towards me but I can’t stop hitting this evil motherfucker beneath me.

Strong arms wrap around me and yank me away and I go into a defensive move that has the person who grabbed me

flipped to the side. My fists and feet fly. It's too much, I can't let them do this to me again. The familiar red haze takes over and all I want to do is hit, claw, bite and tear at the motherfuckers who dared put their hands on me.

“STOP!”

As much as I want to keep hitting, the powerful voice freezes my body in place and as the red haze begins to clear and I realize it is Luca holding me in place. My bare chest heaves with my tank top hanging in bloody tatters from my shoulders and a keening noise comes from my hoarse throat as I stare at him, pushing against his command – trying to move, to fight - but I can't. The only thing I can move is my eyes and they dart around to see a limping Flora, blood running down from her hip, and a naked Aiden wrapping a blanket around her bare body. Two huge grey wolves with gold eyes that I know are Finn and Cade prowl between the dead, bloody soldiers and Sebastian is striding our way with a panic-filled expression. Seeing them all here has the last of the fight draining out of me.

When I can finally speak properly I grit out, “Release me!”

He nods and I feel my muscles unlock causing me to stagger to one side. Luca moves toward me but I flinch back, stopping him in his reach for me.

“Eden, Eden - please? Are you hurt? Did they hurt you? I... I need to see. I need to make sure you are alright! Please, please let me...” He pleads but I cut him off.

I shake my head violently. “N-no...you...you don't get to do that! You don't get to treat me like shit, make it clear over and over again you don't want me here and then...and then... NO! You...you leave me alone!”

I finally see everything Luca has been hiding from me when his expression cracks wide open but I can't deal with it right now as blood drips down my face, chest, and arms and the adrenalin dumps from my system. Shakes and shudders wrack my body as I sink to my knees. Sebastian shoves Luca to the side and scoops me up into his arms. I curl against him and let the sobs break free on how close I just came to losing them all

again. I have no doubt that those soldiers would have used me repeatedly and then killed me. I would have gone back to my time and I had made a vow not to return.

He carries me toward the house but changes direction when Flora calls out, “Take the lass ta the well and rinse the blood from her first so we can see ta tend ta her wounds.”

He gently lowers me to sit on the stone wall that surrounds the well and pauses to press his forehead against mine as I continue to cry at how close we came to being over. The physical pain of my injuries is just starting to register as my wolves rush over, now in their human forms and completely naked. The four of us end up in a messy group hug with the blood covering my face, chest, and hair smearing on to them making me cry even more. Sebastian pulls away and rips his shirt off, tearing it into strips, and then hauls a bucket of clean well water up. Between the three of them they manage to wash most of the soldier’s blood from me but every time I wince from the contact against my cuts and quickly forming bruises the wolves’ growl. I manage to get my crying down to a few hiccups when Bas scoops me up again and carries me toward the house.

“There...there was more of them. He sent them to check the outbuildings while he...”

His arms tighten around me and his lips tighten. “Dead. They are all dead and you are safe. I promise.”

Some of the tension flows out of me but not all of it and I sigh deeply as I lay my head against his chest.

“I’m not, though. This is just getting started, this revolution, this war, it will last for seven years and it will just get uglier and uglier.”

A low growl of frustration escapes him as he kicks the door open, unwilling to let me go.

“Then we will leave! We will pack up and take you as far away as we can to keep you safe. None of us care about this war as much as we care about you. We will keep you safe, Eden!”

He carries me to my room as I try and will the throbbing in my head and cheek away. I give up as he gently lowers me to the bed and I close my eyes while taking deep breaths as nausea rolls in my stomach. That motherfucker probably gave me a concussion when he hit me in the head with that heavy musket gun. For the first time, I'm thankful for the red haze of rage that I thought I had gotten over. Without it I probably wouldn't have been able to fight him with my head in this state.

I come off the bed with a sound that is half scream, half wail of pain when Sebastian presses a damp cloth against the split skin and throbbing knot on my head.

"I'm sorry! I know it hurts but I need to see how bad it is." He tries to soothe me but his probing fingers take over from the cloth making the pain so much worse.

Finn and Cade rush into the room, dressed now and with worried faces. Taking spots on either side of me on the bed and reaching for my hands. I catch Luca hovering in the doorway but look away, still so pissed at him even as I wish he would come in and try to comfort me again.

"Just bloody heal her, man! Don't make her suffer in pain." Cade barks at Sebastian.

My fingers squeeze his to let him know I'm ok even as my eyes roll up to meet Sebastian's.

"Can you do that? How?" I ask with a little bit of whine in my tone. I'm not a wuss about pain and I've taken quite a few hits in the ring as well as the horrible beating by the gang. It's not the pain of my wounds so much as the days of nausea and dizziness I know I have ahead of me if I do have a concussion. If he can heal that even a little bit then I'm down for any possible side effects. He frowns and shakes his head.

"It is not a good idea. My blood is not the same as Luca's. I do not know how it will affect you."

Luca steps into the room and pushes him to the side with an angry look while pulling a knife from behind his back. After slicing across all four of his fingers he hands the knife off to

Cade. I can't help but stare at the dark red blood that wells up across his cupped fingers, mesmerized by the burgundy thickness of it as a few drops spill over and drop to the rug. His eyes slide away from mine to the wolves and he nods for them to hold me before lifting his bloody hand and letting the pooling blood pour over the gash on the side of my head. I gasp at the searing heat but it quickly turns to a moan of relief and pleasure as the throbbing pain dims and my whole body lights up in a soft glow of pleasure.

My eyes flutter closed as Finn lifts my chin and gently pulls my mouth open so Luca's slick fingers can swipe in against the cut on the inside of my cheek. The taste of his blood in my mouth should disgust me but instead a sharp need for more has my lips closing around them. I suck hard on them and my tongue licks against the quickly healing slices he made on his fingers. A whine of need escapes me as his wounds heal over depriving me of more of the rich coppery taste my body now craves. When he pulls them from my mouth, my hand snaps up to hold his hand in front of my face so I can lap at the smears of blood in the palm of his hand and he groans even as the wolves growl and press closer to me. There's a throbbing need between my legs that's hard to ignore and I realize that it's his blood mixing with mine that's causing me to feel this way.

Memories of the days of sexual madness I experienced the last time Luca fed me his blood fill me and cause me to drop his hand and pull back. Now is not the time to go into a sex-craved mania. Thankfully, the little bit of blood that he has used on me only leaves me feeling unsettled in a buzzy sort of way but even better, most of the pain I was feeling begins to ease off. I lift my eyes back to his to thank him and see a red ring around his grey eyes and his jaw tight with want and need. It clears as fast as it takes for me to blink twice and his expression is back to one of anger. He pulls away from me and quickly leaves the room, making me clench my fingers in frustration. Sebastian lifts my chin so I'll look at him.

"We will make sure this never happens again, Eden. I promise. We *will* keep you safe and protected."

After reassuring themselves that I'm going to be okay, they leave me alone to get cleaned up and changed as they deal with the bodies scattered around the property. Sebastian had to snap at the wolves to get them to leave me even after I reassured them multiple times that I was okay. As much as I want to wallow in their care after what happened, Bas is right that they need to get all evidence of the dead soldiers ever being here cleared away. I reach up and gently probe the gash on the side of my head and close my eyes in relief to find the skin still sticky with drying blood but closed and a much smaller bump. The inside of my cheek is still tender but the cut there is also closed. It still amazes me that Sebastian and Luca's blood can heal the way it does.

I strip off my leggings and blood-soaked bra and wash my skin and hair as best as I can with the cold water in the basin before stepping in front of the mirror to see any that I might have missed. My eyes looked haunted and my skin is pale. I can't see any more blood but what I do see is the bruises starting to form around my neck and along on side of my ribs. When I lift my hand to touch, I spot the ring of bruises around my wrist and the haunted look turns to something else. It's a combination of frustrated hurt and hopelessness.

Why? Why do these things keep happening to me? My horrible marriage, losing my entire family, the attack by the gang, a sword through the chest just when I finally found happiness, and now all of this. What did I do that caused the fates to keep kicking me - over and over again? Don't I deserve just a little bit of happiness? Am I such a horrible person that I don't get to find peace, happiness, and love? I turn away from the mirror with a shake of my head to try and dislodge the pity party that's taking form in my brain and go to the armoire to find fresh clothing. My hand reaches for a fresh pair of leggings but then starts to shake at the image of the soldier looking me up and down in my modern clothing and assuming I was a whore. I snatch my hand back and pull out the blue dress I had made to put on instead.

I drag the zipper up and fold the fabric covering over it and then tug and pull until the dress is sitting as comfortably on my body as I can make it. My mind goes to war with the idea

that I was partially responsible for what happened because of what I was wearing and the ‘fuck that’ of a modern woman’s mindset. By the time I get my hair up into a messy bun, my body is so unsettled and my skin feels too tight over my bones while my emotions are all over the place. I need to move and scream, curl up and cry, fight or fuck, just do something to settle myself the fuck down. In the back of my head, I know it’s a combination of what happened today, the extreme ups and downs since I traveled back here, and the vampire blood mixing with mine. Knowing that doesn’t help at all so I yank my door open and start moving through the house in search of...something.

I prowl from room to room as the itch under my skin gets worse and worse. The guys are outside cleaning up and disposing of the bodies somewhere and I have no idea where Flora and Aiden are. With every empty room I come to my fingers tighten into fists as the urge to just fucking do something gets stronger and stronger. I need a gym of some kind like the weapons and training room they had in France to beat this feeling out. My jaw is clenched tightly and with every swish of my skirt I want to rip this stupid fucking dress from my body. I pass an open door and catch movement from the corner of my eye causing me to jerk back to stand in the open doorway. I want to snarl as I see Luca with his back to me, his shirt off as he washes his arms and chest. Here it is. This is what I need. He’s been a total dick to me since I got here even if he did just heal me and now’s the time to let him have a piece of my mind.

“YOU!” I snarl out, baring my teeth as he whirls around to face me in surprise. I take a few hard steps in his direction with my chest heaving. I see him scan me from head to toe and his eyes clock the bruises on my wrist and neck as they go from surprised to furious and that is all the reaction I need to let the beast straining in my chest free.

Luca

After hauling the bodies to the forest and dumping them into a pile for the others to dispose of I walk back to the house to get cleaned up. My mood is beyond sour at what transpired today. I hate the redcoats and all that they stand for and look forward to the day that they are defeated and driven from this emerging nation. The fact that they put their hands on and hurt Eden infuriates me but it also just hardens my will to stay away from her and keep my love for her locked away indefinitely. I can't watch her die again. I cannot let myself feel that overwhelming joy and love for her again only to have it snatched away. She is so damn fragile as a human that anything could kill her easily and we might not always be in time to heal her if she is injured. I won't go through that again. I can't survive it. I will need to make plans to leave here, leave my brothers, and leave her.

When I get to my chambers, I strip the bloody shirt from my body and toss it aside in disgust to clean myself, wishing I could have killed those men again and again for what they almost did to her. They could have done unspeakable things to her that would have crushed her beautiful spirit and body. That we were there in time to stop it gives me no comfort. What of the next time? We will not be able to be with her every second of every day. We cannot protect her from every threat no matter how vigilant we are. I sigh as I finish my washing. I have to leave. I almost gave in when I saw the state she was in as all I wanted to do was wrap her in my arms and promise to protect and love her forever. The sharp pain from her rejection only helped to remind me that Eden Kelly would be my downfall if I don't put space and distance between us.

“YOU!”

I turn quickly to face her, surprised that she would seek me out after telling me to leave her alone. My eyes scan her for injury and spot the blooming bruises on her delicate skin, causing a flush of rage to overcome me. She stomps toward

me with a furious expression and bared teeth and jabs a finger in my direction. I am taken aback by this until I spot the red tinge around her eyes and understanding dawns. It is the blood I used to heal the worst of her injuries causing this. She's riding the extremes that come with it for a human. Too much blood and you get sexual intoxication or a mad rage depending on the person. But a small amount will have every emotion heightened and a need for some type of action to quell it.

“You fucking COWARD!” She rages at me as she stomps closer to stab me with her pointed finger. “Too fucking scared to have your heart broken again so you treat me like shit to take the coward's way out. Well, fuck you, Luca! You don't think I know what that feels like? To have everything taken from you again and again until you just want to die to stop the pain? All I've had for the last three years is pain but here I am still fucking fighting for one goddam minute of peace and love. NO! I'm not going to let you do that!”

She places both hands on my chest and shoves, catching me off guard and causing me to step back but she follows just as close as she can.

“The ONLY thing I have is you and the others and I'm NOT going to let you go!”

Her small hands stop pushing and instead slide over my chest and down to my waist causing me to suck in a breath at the glorious feel of her hands on my skin again but she's not done with her tirade.

“This is fucking MINE! You are MINE and the only way I will stop fighting for you is if I die!”

I latch on to her wrists to stop her torturous movements but can't bring myself to remove them completely from my skin as I snap back at her.

“Exactly my point! Until you die. You die and leave me... AGAIN!” I lean down closer to her so our mouths are almost touching and growl, “You ask too much of me!”

She huffs out a sardonic laugh with angry eyes. “I offer you everything I have, my heart, my body, my soul and I can't ask

for the same in return? People die, Luca, all the time. There will never BE enough time for all we want to do, give, and experience but if you close yourself off like this, you already ARE dead. It's not a life if you don't LIVE and let yourself have all that comes with living."

She doesn't give me a chance to respond as she surges forward with a frustrated sound of need and slams her lips to mine. I try, I try to will myself to push her away but her tongue licks against the seam of my closed mouth begging me to open to her, and a century of longing shreds the last of my resistance. Eden doesn't kiss my mouth, she attacks it. Her lips and sweet tongue sweep hard against mine like she's fighting a war that she plans to win. I can't stop myself from releasing her wrists and burying my hands in her hair, pulling it free from its bun to flow down her back like a rippling waterfall of fire. I fist handfuls of it to anchor her head as I join the battle we are waging with our mouths. A groan of pure pleasure escapes me at the taste and feel of her after so long but it turns into a growl when her hands slide into my low-slung breeches and cup my throbbing cock.

She makes a noise of triumph at the shudder that wracks my body at her touch and rears back to stare commandingly into my eyes.

"On the floor, NOW!" she orders and then pulls me to the floor and pushes me back so I'm lying flat. There's a desperation to her movements as she pulls my breaches open and yanks on her skirts to try and get them out of the way. I catch a glimpse of red lace before she pulls it to one side exposing her bare mound and then sinks straight down on my engorged member. A hiss escapes my throat at the wet silken heat that surrounds me and clamps down to squeeze me as she throws her head back with a loud cry of pleasure. My hips surge up to get as deep as possible and I clamp my fingers on the slippery fabric covering her hips, wanting to rip the dress from her body. All thoughts of denying her flee my mind as she rides me hard and fast, chasing the release she needs to satisfy the burn in her mixed blood.

When Eden drops her head forward again and meets my eyes, they are just as fierce and angry as when she came into the room. She plants a hand on my chest for leverage and rolls her hips with a bounce causing her to gasp as she tries to speak.

“M-mine! You...are...mine!”

The pleasure coursing through me has me echoing her in a guttural snarl. “MINE!” I feel the first flutters as she begins to tighten around my cock and I can’t not rip her skirt up the middle so my fingers can find her hot, slick center. I thrum hard and fast against her and feel the release take her as she thrashes against me and cries out over and over as her walls squeeze and milk me to my own release. She collapses onto me, her chest heaving as she tries to catch her breath. The haze of pleasure starts to clear and I curse myself for the weakness inside me that allowed this to happen and let my arms fall to the side even as I wish to gather her up and hold her.

With a groan, she lifts herself off my chest and blinks down at me. I expect soft love to shine from her eyes but what I see instead in those beautiful green eyes is a hard, challenging look. She tosses her hair back and pats me on the chest in a condescending way.

“It’s a simple choice. Spend however long I have to live being loved and full of happiness and then cherish it after I’m gone - or live a dead life full of misery and pain. Choose, Luca, but either way, you are done treating me like shit.” She pulls herself off of me and lets the skirt of her dress fall down to cover her legs and then winks at me. “Thanks for the sex, it really scratched the itch.” And then she turns and without looking back leaves the room.

I let my head fall back to thump on the floor and groan into the empty room. How the fuck can I not choose that?

Finn

I kick the last body into the deep hole with a vicious kick, wishing he was still alive so I could tear him apart with my teeth. The fact that the bastard has no face left thanks to Eden is no comfort to me at all. She shouldn't have had to do that. She should be safe. We just got finished talking about making sure she stays protected at all times a few days ago and this happens. Our lass has only been here for a week and already we almost lost her again. I run my fingers through my hair and pull until I feel the sharp pain of it. The frustration and fear coursing through me has me feeling wild and out of control. I spin away from the hole as Bas and Cade start dumping dirt over the remains of the bloody menace that came onto our lands and almost took what we love the most. It has memories of the last time soldiers of the crown came on our lands and slaughtered our entire village flashing through my mind. I...we can't let that happen again. Eden has told us that this war for independence is just getting started and it will be a long, bloody seven years before it's over. Somehow we need to find a way to protect her from all of it and keep her safe.

“What were they doing here in the first place?” Cade growls out as he shovels more dirt into the hole. “No horses that we could find and short in numbers for a full patrol. Why here?”

Sebastian doesn't bother looking up from the work as he answers. “The two I questioned claimed they had a brush with the militia and took heavy losses. They were looking for horses and supplies to get back to their command post.” He sighs and pushes back the hair that has fallen into his face. “They were never meant to be here. It was just bad luck.”

I grit my teeth in frustration. “Fuck luck and fuck the British! We could have lost her!”

Cade jabs his shovel into the pile of dirt. “Aye, and it won't bloody happen again! Someone must always be with her going forward. Not even here is safe for her to be alone.” He tosses the dirt into the hole and then throws the shovel down with a

snarl and turns to Bas. “It’s too fucking dangerous. Everything is too fucking dangerous for her! You need ta consider turning her so she can protect herself! I...we can’t wait another hundred years ta get her back if something happens and she dies again.”

Sebastian drops his shovel as well and squares up to us with a tired sigh. “Alright, let’s say I turn her into one of my kind. Who will you sacrifice to sate her bloodlust? Our neighbors? The citizens of the nearest towns? It will not be enough. You do not understand the scope of what the first two years under that curse would mean. She could drain five people a day and it wouldn’t be enough. She will be crazed by it. Eden will turn mean and vicious to get one more drop of blood. Man, woman...children, she will kill them all, smile, and ask for more. Even you two would not be safe from her thirst. Is that what you want? Is that what you want her to become? And after the bloodlust clears and she realizes what she has done, what she has become, she will either hate herself and us or she will be so completely altered that she will revel in the evil of it. So tell me wolves, will it be worth it in the end?”

I turn away from him and roar my rage at the fates, sending birds flying away in fear from the trees. The one solution ta keeping her forever would destroy all of us worse than having her die and losing her again. We need ta leave this place. We need ta take her somewhere that this war won’t touch her, won’t put her in jeopardy. I calm my breathing and turn back to my brothers.

“We need ta leave! Go west ta the untamed lands where the British have no presence. We can build a new life there, make peace with the Indians or find the rumored shifter packs and keep her safe.” I send a desperate look Bas’ way. “Please, I canna see her die again and know it will be a century before we get her back.”

He sends a cautious look to both of us and his shoulders sag. “Longer, it will be longer than that. Eden has made a promise, a vow that if something should happen and she...leaves again...she won’t come back.”

Both Cade and I immediately start yelling denials at that.

“BE QUIET!”

The command has us both slamming our mouths closed and glaring furiously at him. He swipes his hair back again and then rubs at his eyes tiredly.

“Think for a moment, both of you. Think of what the last century of grieving has done to all of us. Do you wish to go through that again and again? Do you think she wants us to? Eden does not know how to control that mirror. What if she doesn’t come back to us again? What if it sends her far away from us in location and time? Do you want her to have to kill herself just to try again? No, it is her choice should something happen again and I found myself...relieved...at her promise to not come back. Resign yourselves to this, brothers. If she dies again, she will not be coming back.”

He stares at us for a few moments before waving his hand to release us and reaching for his discarded shovel to continue filling the grave.

“Two hundred and fifty-three years until we next meet if we lose her again? I dinnae know if I can survive that.” Cade says in a low, broken voice.

I step closer to him and brace a hand on his shoulder. “Aye, we can and we will. She is our mate and we told her we would wait forever for her, cousin. It willna be like the last time when we thought her dead and gone. If it happens again, we will take comfort in knowing we will have her again one day.”

He leans into my hand and drops his head in sadness. “Aye we will but Finn, a lot can happen in such a space of time. We willna be the same men when we find her again.”

I squeeze his shoulder and then reach for his discarded shovel ready to be done with this chore and meet Bas’ gaze. “Truly. So best we do all we can to keep her safe and with us in the here and now.” We work in silence until the hole is half-filled before I speak again. “We will need wagons filled with supplies as well as more servants to help on the trail and with the building of a new home far from here.”

Sebastian grunts his agreement. “I will speak to Luca about it and we will come up with a plan on how to go forward. He may not wish to join us and you both should be prepared for that. No matter what he decides, we will prepare to leave here as soon as we can arrange everything we will need and take Eden somewhere safer.” He pauses for a moment to look our way. “It may be best if we did not tell Eden of our plans until they are closer to completion.”

Cade and I silently nod in agreement before turning back to finish burying the evidence of the day’s events.

Eden

I return to my room, still feeling edgy but more settled than before. I want to change out of the ripped dress and I put on one of the split skirts and a blouse that Luca had made for me so long ago. Being with him again felt so right, even if I did practically force him to have sex with me. Today showed me just how fragile my circumstances are and I refuse to waste one more moment waiting for him to come back to me. I do understand what he's struggling with. After all, I also locked myself away from life after the horrible things that happened in my time. It was these men that showed me how to love again, how to live, and now it's my turn to return the favor by dragging Luca back into happiness with me.

I grab the ripped dress and head to the kitchen in search of a needle and thread to mend it. I find Flora there, bustling around preparing dinner. Flashes of her wolf form tearing out one of the soldier's throats jerk me to a halt and then the memory of the knife stabbing into her crashes into me. I can't help but walk up to her and pull the small cranky woman into a hug. She sputters at first but then relaxes and leans into me before giving me a quick pat on the back and pulls away to scan me from top to bottom with narrowed eyes.

"I can't thank you enough for what you did for me today, Flora. I saw that soldier stab you with his knife. Are you sure you should be on your feet already? I can make us all dinner."

"Bash! It was merely a wee nick, already healed. As for me intervening, I might not agree with some of yer ways but yer me pack now, ya ken? We protect our own!" I see her lips twitch and a gleam come into her eyes. " 'Sides, I've had powerful dreams of sinkin' me teeth into a Sassenach for most of me life. It was a small satisfaction for all the damage they've done to me and mine over the years." She wrinkles up her face so her eyes practically disappear in the folds and shudders. "Blood tasted like tainted piss, though!"

I gasp out a choked laugh and then groan when she forces me down into a chair so she can inspect the healed gash on the side of my head. When she pronounces me fit and shoves a small knife into my hand and nudges a basket of vegetables closer, I take the hint and get to work. An hour later, the work is done and she waves me out of the room, insisting that I leave the dress for her to mend.

Dinner is a subdued affair with very little talk. All of us are lost in thought about what happened and worse, what a different outcome would have meant. No one speaks of the attack or what the possible ramifications from us killing them all might be. I don't ask what they did with the bodies either. Luca avoids looking at me but the wolves spend most of the meal reaching to touch me as if to reassure themselves that I'm still here and safe. Sebastian just watches me with a tired expression so as soon as the last bite is eaten, I excuse myself from the table and get Aiden to help me bring buckets of hot water to my room so I can have a proper bath. By the time I'm done and the water is cool, the effects of Luca's blood mixing with mine are gone and a wave of exhaustion sweeps over me. I'm more than ready for this fucked up day to end so I slide my naked, clean body between the sheets and let sleep take me.

"Look at this sweet little pretty, boys. I bet her pussy's nice and tight. At least until we're done with it!"

The leader of the men who attacked me jokes and they roar with ugly laughter as they shove me back and forth between them while I cry and beg them to let me go. Sam's broken body lays not far away and I know that mine will soon join his. I catch the hard glint in the leader's eyes as I'm shoved his way again but am still not ready for the hard punch to the face that has my head rocking back and my vision going white from the pain. Other arms catch me and hot breath washes over my ear and neck.

"I do like a woman with spirit but I'm afraid I like breaking one with it even more. You WILL learn your place!"

I scream as he yanks my head back by my hair and the ugly men, a mix of redcoats and gang members taunt me with all

they are planning to do to me and move in closer to drag me down to the cold hard floor of the dim parking garage. I scream and scream as they rip the paramedic uniform from my body and rough hands grope at my...

“Eden! Eden, wake up! Lass, please, Eden!”

Hands, so many hands on me as I struggle and fight. I manage to catch one of my assailants in the face with a flailing hand and I'm punished by boots kicking me in my ribs and legs. I turn my head to the side to escape a leering face trying to kiss me and see the heavy boot rearing back for a kick to my head. It flies toward my face and just as it's about to make contact...

“WAKE UP!”

The scream rips out of me, tearing at my throat as my eyes fly open and latch onto Sebastian's concerned face. Hands are grabbing me still, on my arms, trying to hold me still and it makes me fight even harder until I realize that the hands belong to my wolves. All the tension and fight flow out of me, leaving me panting and weak, and they gently lower me back to the bed and the grabbing turns into soft petting to try and soothe me. I let my eyes flutter closed as I realize that I'm safe here with my men. It's been so long since I've had this kind of nightmare and I forgot how much of a toll they take on me. With the gang and redcoats merging in the attack, I know that what happened today triggered it. As I get my breathing back under control I open my eyes again and see the wolves and Sebastian exchanging loaded, angry looks. My voice comes out raspy from all the screaming I must have done.

“I'm okay. I'm fine now, I promise. I'm sorry if I scared you.”

All of their eyes snap back to my face and soften but it's Cade that leans down and kisses me softly on the lips and then pulls back enough to wipe the wetness from my cheeks and gaze into my eyes with a determined look.

“Nay, lass. Dinnae be sorry. You can't help your night terrors and it's ta be expected after what happened today. Just rest assured that nothing like that will ever happen again. We

have a plan ta take ya far from here and the dangers of the British. We will keep ya safe, *mo chridhe*.”

My brow furrows at his words and I scoot further up in the bed pulling the blankets with me so I can sit up and see the others and that’s when I spot Luca hovering halfway into the room. I swallow down the rawness in my throat.

“Leave here? But...but this is your home.”

Sebastian sends Cade an annoyed look but reaches to take my hands. “It’s just a house, Eden. We don’t care about such things. All that matters is that you are safe and with what you have told us about the war and what happened today, we all feel that it would be best to leave this area until it is over.”

I shoot a look at each one of them and see that they all agree and my shoulders slump in sadness. I’ve caused such problems for all of them coming back and this just adds to it. I shove my hair back away from my face and sigh.

“W-where would we go?”

Sebastian settles onto the bed beside me and holds my hand. “West, we will go to the west. There are great swaths of land that have not been settled yet. We will buy wagons loaded with supplies, hire on any who wish to travel with us, and find a remote location to build our new home. It will be hard work but there have been many that have already gone that way to escape colonial rule and the overreaching hand of the British. This continent is a brave new world and we will find our place in it and prosper.”

I chew on my bottom lip as I consider the huge undertaking he’s talking about. Far from any type of civilization, there would be no safety net to fall back on if things went wrong. I try and picture myself as an adventurous homesteader and come up blank. Finn takes my free hand and squeezes it with an excited look in his eyes.

“Think of what a grand adventure it will be, lass! Exploring new untouched lands? No prying eyes in our life. We can do and be anything we want to. We will not have to hide our true selves!”

I smile a sad smile at him but shake my head and glance at the others. “It’s not fair. None of this is fair. I had no idea that coming back would cause you all so much trouble and pain. I hate that because of me you all will have to leave your home and the life you built here. It’s just not fucking fair.”

Luca steps further into the room and frowns at me. “There is nothing fair, as you say, about this world. As for you being the reason we are leaving, you may be the catalyst of it happening now but most likely we would have gone west at some point in the future. We are all weary of the conflicts of men and having to hide our natures from them. It will be refreshing to go far from them and have a measure of peace for as long as it will last.” He takes a step closer and his frown deepens. “You have told us a great deal about what is to come. How expansion and populations will explode over the next few centuries. This may be our only chance to live free before that happens.”

They all nod their agreement at his words but I can’t help but worry still. I’ve never asked about what Sebastian and Luca...eat but if pop culture has taught me anything about vampires it’s that they need blood. Luca told me about when he was first turned into a vampire and that he killed so many people in his bloodlust so if we move far away from people then how will they...feed? I swallow my nervousness at asking such a delicate question and just put it out there.

“If there are no people...how...how will you...eat?”

An amused smile forms on Bas’ face at the hesitation in my tone. “Sweetheart, the sheer amount of wildlife on this continent has easily sustained Luca and me for decades. Today - those soldiers - That was the first time I have fed off a human in years. I imagine the unsettled lands will be teeming with all the wildlife we will need.”

I settle deeper under the covers with another sigh but nod my head. I guess it doesn’t really matter where we go as long as we’re together. A small smirk lifts my lips. Eden Kelly... pioneer woman.

Eden

The next week is a flurry of lists, maps, and plans as we plot our trip west. Flora and Aiden are fully on board and their excitement to leave here and settle new lands is contagious. Sebastian and Cade have gone to town to begin purchasing the wagons and interviewing people who are looking for work and might wish to leave the area. There's so much to do and buy and I would seriously give my left tit to be able to Google some of this shit. I mean, we will essentially be camping for the foreseeable future, living out of covered wagons and cooking on open fires. My parents used to take Hope and me camping when we were growing up near the Cascade Mountains, so it's not like I've never done it before but there's a fuck load of difference between living in a tent trailer with a mini-fridge and a propane stove for a weekend and long term living on the trail. It's the start of August now so that means fall and winter will hit us long before we will have any house built. I'm excited until I have images of us huddling around a campfire in a snowstorm with hypothermia. It makes me run back to the maps and search out routes going southwest where the weather won't get so cold.

I try and remember my geography as I study the map that only shows the current colonies in this time. If we go straight west that will take us into what will become Kentucky, Missouri, and further into Kansas. Those states aren't exactly known for their tropical winters. Going southwest, we could travel through what will be Tennessee, Alabama, and into Mississippi where winters will be much warmer. I have zero idea about what is happening in those places in history but I do know that a lot of land west of the Mississippi will be sold in the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and that it's currently owned by the French. With the Duc de Gaul title still in play, going to that side of the river might be the best place for us.

I straighten up, away from the map I've been leaning over with a sigh of longing for my long-lost friend, Google, who would make this so much easier, and spot Luca standing in the

doorway watching me. We haven't talked since I threw him down and had my way with him. I still have no idea where he's at as far as us but at least he's stopped with the nasty remarks and cold tone and he seems to be on board with this whole great pioneer adventure. I'm still a little pissed at him for the way he's treated me, though. He's staring at my chest with a thoughtful expression and it makes me look down to check if my girls have spilled out of the dress while I was leaned over. Finding them exactly where they should be I look up at him with a raised eyebrow and put all the sarcasm I can muster into my voice.

“Something I can help you with, Your Grace?”

His eyes meet mine as he pushes off the door frame and steps into the room.

“You stopped wearing your clothes. The clothing you brought with you, I mean. Why?”

Shame rises up but I push it down just as fast and jerk my head to get those thoughts from it.

“I thought it best to wear what's suitable to this timeframe from now on.”

He steps even closer and frowns. “Why? You have said that your clothing is more comfortable to wear. Why would you choose these dresses instead? What changed?”

I clench my jaw and make to move around him to leave but he stops me with a hand on my arm.

“Eden, what happened? Tell me.”

I yank my arm away but can't quite meet his eyes as I grit out, “That soldier...he said...he assumed I was your whore to be used because of how I was dressed.” I smooth down the fabric of the long skirt. “It's just better that I wear this style so no one else will think that way of me because of what I'm wearing.”

He tips my chin up, forcing me to meet his eyes. “If I could, I would resurrect that bastard and kill him all over again for you. No man should do what he tried to do to you, no matter

what clothing you are wearing. Do not let what happened affect you so.”

I bite my lip to keep it from trembling and give him a jerky nod before quickly changing the subject. “This trip...are you sure you want to go with us?”

His hand drops from my chin and he angles his body away from me not giving me the answer I so desperately want. Tears well up in my eyes but I blink them back and let the anger surge instead.

“Damn it, Luca! I’m not supposed to let what happened to me affect me but you get to wrap your misery around yourself like a blanket and wallow in it?” I pull him back to face me and grasp his face between my two hands. “I’m here now. Let it go and choose happiness. Choose love. Luca, choose me!”

When he leans forward and rests his forehead against mine I think for half a heartbeat that I’ve finally gotten through to him but then I see the pain shimmer across his eyes. He pulls away, turns, and walks from the room leaving me alone once again.

No longer interested in the maps, I slowly walk back to my room. I snag my phone from the dresser and turn on my sappiest love song playlist and then curl up in the chair by the window and do some wallowing of my own. I lose myself in the music and memories of Luca and me in France and all the love we shared there. I don’t know how to break through to him. I don’t even know if he’s planning on coming with us when we leave. I waste a good portion of the day sitting there being sad and miserable - so lost in my own thoughts that I don’t even see Bas and Cade return until a hand on my shoulder has me flinching back into the present. Sebastian’s looking down at me with a concerned expression so I push aside the sadness and smile up at him.

“You’re home! How did it go? Were you able to find people to come with us?”

He scoops me up and switches places with me so that I’m sitting on his lap. “We did. So far we have four indentured families as well as six suitable male and female slaves

purchased. I would like at least double that number before we set out but there is time yet to find them.”

I shudder at the idea of buying people but I know that they will be all free once we are away from here. “You explained to them all where we are going and that they will be free of ownership if they come with us? That we will help them set up their own homes wherever we settle?”

He runs his thumb over my bottom lip with a smile. “Of course. The indentured families are eager to join us and to have the chance for a fresh start. The slaves are not quite as trusting of our word. Cade and Finn are getting them settled in one of the outbuildings and will speak with them more in-depth about it. A few of them have family that are also being sold so we will try and buy them as well so they won’t be separated by such a great distance.”

I lean back against his chest and sigh. “I hate that they may feel like they have no choice but to come with us because you bought them.”

He kisses the top of my head and makes a sound of agreement. “Let’s give them all a few days to settle in and for the wolves to keep reassuring them. Unfortunately, they have no reason to trust us.” His hand slides my skirt up my leg and traces circles against the skin on the inside of my knee. “How was your day? You looked...lost when I came in.”

“Hmm, I’ll give you one guess,” I tell him as his fingers trail higher to the inside of my thigh.

He tips my head to the side so his lips can brush against my neck sending shivers of pleasure through me. “I do not need to guess. I know Luca is still struggling with his fears and I know how sad that makes you. I cannot fix Luca’s fears but I can take your mind off of them. ”

The backs of his fingers brush against the damp fabric covering my center as his tongue sweeps against my neck in soft licks causing my breathing to stutter and gasp, “O-Oh, how?”

“I’m going to pull this covering to the side and use my tongue to lick all thoughts of sadness from you. My fingers will slide in and out of you slowly as my lips suck on your swollen, aching bud, and only when my face is all that you see and my name is the only name on your lips begging for more will I let you come. But it won’t be enough, will it? I’ll bend you over that bed and slide my big, hard cock through your hot juices and then deep inside you. Hard, deep strokes to fill you up and when you are screaming my name in pleasure, I will give you even more. I will slide my teeth into your skin to taste your sweet, sweet blood and you will come so hard it will feel like a vise on my cock as you milk me dry. I will give you all the love and pleasure you need to smile your sweet smile for the rest of the day.”

The ache between my thighs is hot and heavy as he rubs and toys against the now saturated fabric. My hips lift trying for more, for harder contact as I pant in his lap. With a growl, he launches us from the chair and lays me out on the side of the bed shoving my skirts up and yanking my panties to the side before he spears me deep with his hot tongue. I buck against his mouth and try to grind my pussy against his face - chasing that sweet spot even as I moan his name. Bas throws my thighs up over his shoulders and my hands find his head so I can clutch at his hair to pull him even harder against me. The shallow thrusts of his tongue in my channel are driving me mad with need and when I pull his hair hard to redirect him to my clit he spans my raised ass in retaliation. The sting of pain only adds to the pleasure he’s giving me but I’m not prepared for when he rolls us over so I’m sitting on his face.

He pulls back just enough to speak and growls at me, “Ride my tongue, witch!”

I freeze in shocked surprise until his tongue goes exactly where I want it to and circles my clit before he flicks it a few times. His hands slide up my thighs to push the skirt back up and then clamp down to pull me hard against his face. It feels so fucking good that my head falls back and I moan as my body starts rocking and grinding against his tongue and lips. One of his hands releases me now that I’m moving and slides between my legs. Two hard fingers thrust into me and when he

curls them to drag against my walls I almost scream his name as shock waves start building higher and higher. A third finger goes in stretching me even more and his lips suck my clit mercilessly sending me right over the edge with a jolt that has color bursts stealing my vision and my body arching like a bow.

I barely have any breath left when he's flipping me again so that I'm bent over the side of the bed. He covers my back with his chest and murmurs into my hair, "Good girl. Now take my big cock and scream my name." He kicks my feet apart, rubs one side of my ass, digs in with his fingers and then thrusts into me hard and deep. My back arches against him and he wraps my hair in one fist - pulling me back even further as he spreads his free hand against my lower back to brace himself as he plows into me as deep as he can with every thrust. He's so fucking big that the stretch of him inside of me burns in such a beautiful way and the pleasure waves start rolling again. A sharp tug on my hair and he's growling again.

"My name, say my name, Eden. YOU...ARE...MINE!"

I cry out his name and it's barely left my lips before his teeth sink into the back of my shoulder, triggering the orgasm that comes with it. Now I do scream his name as jolt after jolt of intense spasms of pleasure rock through me and my walls clamp down on his cock again and again until he finally finishes drinking from me. He roars, "MINE!" at the same time as spilling his release deep inside of me. When the euphoria starts to lessen and my vision returns, my body is slack and the only thing keeping me up is Bas's hand in my hair. I feel him lick at the bite mark on my back to seal it and then he gently lowers me back to the bed where I struggle to catch my breath.

Long sweeping strokes down my back and sides fill me with warmth and love for this man that is mine just as much as I'm his. His love doesn't lessen how sad I am about Luca but he is right that I will spend the rest of the day with a smile on my face.

Cade

“You need ta eat more than that, lass. ‘Tis a big day and you’ll need your strength.” I tell her, nudging more food her way but she just laughs that beautiful laugh that still sends a kick of happiness straight to my heart. I went so long despairing that I’d never get to hear it again that I treasure each laugh she gives me now.

“If you think a few hours of shopping is a big day for a woman from the future, you’ll be in for a huge shock when you get to my time! Seriously, I can do a few hours of shopping in my sleep.” She laughs again.

I return her smile but my stomach still rolls with the nerves I’m feeling about today. If Finn and I had our way, Eden would not leave this house again until we roll out with the wagons two days from now. Everything has been bought and planned for. The wagons are lined up and packed with more supplies than we will ever need. All that’s waiting is to hook up the oxen. Twelve freed slaves and seven indentured men and women and their families have agreed to join and work for us in exchange for help to set up their own homesteads when we reach our destination. We are so close to getting Eden away from here and to safety that it seems like an unnecessary risk to allow her to go into town for the final shopping trip.

Eden very forcefully pointed out that this may very well be her last chance to visit civilization once we leave the established colonies. She insisted that she would be safe with Flora, who also wished to go, and Sebastian as her escorts. It should be fine, she should be safe but I can’t help the sick feeling in my gut that letting her go to town is a mistake that could cost us everything.

“Mae and Alice helped me put together a list of things that their people will need. Do you know that most of them don’t have any belongings except the clothes on their backs? We can’t let them leave here with nothing! So we will be buying as much clothing and shoes as we can to outfit them with at

least a few changes of clothing as well as extra blankets. We'll also buy fabric and sewing supplies to make more as we go. The children will need school supplies of some kind so we can teach them how to read and do basic math. Mae told me that most of the freed slaves don't even know how to read!" She leans back into her chair and drinks the rest of her coffee with a frown. "These people aren't just coming to help us on the way. They will be our neighbors, our community once we settle and start building. We have to help them in any way we can."

I drink in her determined expression and marvel at the huge heart my mate has. She's unlike any woman I have ever known and I'm so thankful that we have a second chance to have her in our lives again. The love I have for her is an overwhelming ache in my chest and I once again wish she would just give us the list and let us go buy the things she wants so she can remain here and safe.

I look across at Finn and see from the look in his eyes that he feels the same. Two days. Two days and we will leave this place and all the dangers that the war poses for her. Traveling through the wilderness will be much safer as we will be able to roam and scout in our wolf forms to keep the wagons and all the occupants safe. Happiness fills me at the thought of being free to run through the endless forests and wild lands we will travel through, free of men's politics and conflicts.

"Oh! I just had a thought! What would happen if any of the new people found out what you all are? We could have a riot on our hands of terrified people!"

Luca answers her. "No, we would not. All servants that we employ are compelled to accept and keep secret anything they see. They also will not be able to harm any of us in any way."

He will not look at her for more than a few glances and he still resists the love we know he has for her. He is a fool to deny himself the happiness and love she offers us so freely but at least he no longer treats her cruelly. I sigh and turn to her.

"Lass, it has always been so with any human that is near us for a prolonged period of time. We would not chance your

safety by not ensuring that the people joining us were unable to cause any of us harm.” I tell her.

She has a conflicted look in her eyes but nods slowly in understanding before looking to Luca again.

“So that means you’re coming with us, right?” She asks him and I hear the hope in her tone that makes me want to reach out and punch my brother for being such an ijit. He keeps his eyes down as he sighs.

“I will be joining you all for the journey. I have yet to decide if I will be remaining wherever you all choose to settle.”

I see her fingers tighten around her cup but she only gives a curt nod. I want to sweep her up into my arms and take all the sadness he has caused her away. Show her how much the rest of us love her and that Finn, Sebastian, and I will more than make up for Luca’s refusal to open his heart to her.

“Are ya not done yet? The day’s a-wastin’! We need to be off ta town so as I can get back and oversee the new uns to be sure they be doin’ the chores correctly!” Flora grouches at us as she comes in to start clearing the breakfast dishes and Eden sends her a smile filled with fondness that makes me want to ravish her mouth.

“Yes, Eden, we should be off soon so that we are home well before the light fades. I fear your shopping list has grown to the point that we will have to visit multiple merchants to fill it all.” Bas tells her with an amused smile.

She jumps to her feet, grinning. “Give me ten minutes and we can go!” She leans over and brushes her sweet lips over mine and murmurs, “Love you.” And then repeats the gesture and words to Sebastian and Finn.

I see her hesitate as she moves past Luca’s chair and her hand lifts hesitantly to reach for him but then drops back to her side before she rushes from the room.

I watch him follow her out with his eyes and shake my head. “As Eden would say, yer a fucking dumbass, Luca!”

Luca

I believe Cade is correct in his insult to me. I have tried to keep my distance from her and shield my heart but have failed spectacularly. Every laugh, every smile flays me open and causes the love I have locked away for her to surge forward. I cannot resist her any longer. I had decided not to join them on this journey but the agonizing thoughts of seeing her and my brothers ride away from me destroyed my will to keep the distance between us. My hands ache to touch her constantly and my arms feel empty without her in them. Hearing her tell my brothers that she loved them and the soft sweet kisses she bestowed on them has my heart throbbing painfully for her words and kisses to be mine as well. I am lost to her completely no matter how hard I fight against it. I push to my feet and scan the faces of my brothers and then nod. I see the understanding and relief cross Bas' face and the grins that start to form on the wolves'.

"I will tell her," is all I say before leaving the room to go and find her. A shout from the front of the house has my feet changing directions to stride to the main doors to see what the commotion is about. When I throw open the doors my jaw clenches as I grind my teeth and my fingers fist at my sides at what I see. A full patrol of British redcoats, at least thirty men, are riding into our yard. I hear my brothers follow me out as I stride down the stairs of the porch to meet them as they begin to dismount. One man turns to face me and I spot his rank and watch as he squares his shoulders and smooths down his jacket. He is young but by his bearing, I assume he is a peer of the realm.

"Sir! Are you the Duc de Gaul?" He calls out as I move toward him.

"I am. Who might you be and what is your business on my land?"

I see him swallow nervously but then lift his chin arrogantly. "Captain Alistair Lancaster at your service. My

men and I are in search of a missing patrol that was reported to be seen in the area. Have you any information or sightings of them?”

“Your Grace.” I snap at him, annoyed that he would presume to come on my lands and question me without the proper respect. I see the narrowing of his eyes as he tips his head in acknowledgment.

“My apologies...Your Grace.”

The contempt is clear in his tone and the soldiers behind him pick up on the tension that now fills the air, causing them to tighten their holds on their weapons. The wolves and Sebastian have spread out to either side of me at the perceived threat so I wave a dismissive hand his way.

“Your wayward sheep are not here. Perhaps they are off terrorizing my good neighbors. Make leave of my lands for you and your men are not welcome here.”

His hand moves to the pistol he wears at his hip and I see a single drop of sweat course down from his hairline but before he has a chance to speak next a gasp of surprise from behind me has my shoulders tensing even more and his eyes widening as he looks past me. I do a quarter turn and see Eden rushing down the stairs and bark out at her.

“Return to the house this instant!”

Of course, she ignores me. She’s shaking her head and lifting her hands in a stop motion.

“No, no, this gentleman helped me when I first arrived! Luca...”

“Miss Kelly? Although I had hoped to see you again, I dare say I was not expecting to find you in the company of such notorious men! Do you have any notion of what they are reputed to be?”

His words have her stumbling to a stop as an angry frown crosses her face. She cannot be out here if things turn ugly so I step towards her to take her arm and pull her back into the house just as the Captain speaks again with disdain dripping from each word.

“Such a shame someone with your grace and beauty has lowered themselves to keep such distasteful company. What a sheer waste of good breeding stock!”

I turn with a snarl of fury that he dare speak in such a way to her and feel my monster surge forward. I hear Sebastian curse and the wolves growl but I only have eyes for the dead man in front of me. He stumbles back a step with his eyes flaring wide and manages to pull and cock his pistol before I’m lunging at him. As my clawed fingers wrap around his throat and rip, his finger pulls the trigger, sending the single shot harmlessly past me. I rip his throat out and move to step over his falling body to the next man in line when the sweet smell of her blood reaches my senses. I turn with a roar of denial and see her shocked face and the blood blooming on her chest before she topples backward to the ground.

“NO!”

I have her in my arms in a blink of supernatural speed even as more shots ring out and men scream in terror as my brothers tear them apart. Her eyes are huge as they blink up at me and one trembling hand lifts to cup my cheek. Her voice is weak and thready as I hear her heart begin to slow.

“M-my monster, my l-love. S-so sor-ry.”

No, no, no, no, NO! This cannot be happening again. I cannot lose her again! I see her arm begin to flicker out of existence and lean closer to her and push the power into my voice as I stare into her dimming eyes.

“YOU WILL RETURN TO ME!”

And then she disappears, leaving my arms empty once again.

Eden

I roll onto all fours and heave out the vomit as my stomach rolls with the cost of traveling and then crawl away from the puddle and collapse in tears and clutch at my chest where the pain has disappeared. Why does it always have to be in the fucking chest? I roll onto my back and slam my fists against the carpeted floor and scream my anger, loss, and frustration out at the ceiling. Why, why, why? Why does this keep happening? We were so close! So close to leaving and getting away and starting our adventurous new life. I bang the back of my head against the floor and then sit up. I need to get back. I need to get back to Luca!

I shove to my feet and cross the room to the mirror and just glare at it, willing it to come back to life but I know it will stay dark until the next full moon. It doesn't matter, I have to go back. I have to return to Luca...and the others. They need me. I can go back. I will go back, no matter how many times I have to, I'll keep going back to him.

I force myself to spin away from the dead mirror and stomp out of the turret and down the stairs to my room. Every part of my being wants to sit in front of the damn thing until it comes to life so I can get back to Luca. I struggle to get the tight dress off my body that Finn buttoned me into this morning for our trip to buy supplies. With a screech of frustration I go into my bathroom and find a pair of scissors and just cut the fucking thing off of me and toss it into a corner. It feels like there's an itch under my skin that I can't scratch and angry, frustrated tears fill my eyes as I strip off my underwear and bra. I ignore my cell phone as it drops to the ground from where I had slid it into my bra band even as the screen cracks from hitting the hardwood floor. It doesn't matter. All that matters is getting back to them. Getting back to Luca!

I turn the water in the shower on as hot as I can stand it and step under the spray hoping the heat will help ease the itch I can't seem to shake. I let the water pour over me and go over

every memory I have of being with Sebastian, Finn, Cade, and Luca. I need them so badly I can barely breathe. I need to get back. I need to go back. It's a constant loop that fills my head over and over again until I'm ready to scream it out loud.

The water goes cold and I stagger out of the bath after shutting it off and fall into bed soaking wet not caring about getting the sheets and duvet wet. All I care about is going back. Back to Luca. That's all that matters now.

Part Two

Sebastian – 1853

I push my way to the edge of the forest and break through into the clearing, relieved to be back home but disappointed that I have failed to locate the wolves once again. Eden has been gone for seventy-eight years this time and the wolves for almost seventy. They tried to stay with us after she left but the toll of losing her and their mate bond wore them down day after day until they couldn't take it anymore. Knowing that she wouldn't return again and that it would be two hundred and fifty-three years before they would see her again drove them to choose their wolf forms to ride out their misery in. I've been searching for them ever since in the hopes that I can convince them to come back and wait it out with Luca and me.

I cross the overgrown field toward the house she spent two weeks with us in and look forward to resting after being gone for the last eight years searching the forests of this huge continent. The lack of smoke coming from the chimneys and the broken windows tells me that rest will not be coming any time soon. I climb the steps up to the porch that is covered in decaying leaves and push open one of the doors that is hanging by only one hinge. The wood flooring is softening under my feet from rot where the elements have blown in and all the rooms have been emptied of furniture. My shoulders slump as I take in the shell that was once our home and know Luca is in some way responsible for its current condition.

His manic behavior since she left has chased me away to search for the wolves for longer and longer periods. No matter how many times I tell him that Eden vowed not to come back, he refuses to believe it. He makes obsessive plans for when she returns only to descend into dark bouts of despair and depression. The swings of his moods are more than I can stand when I am struggling with my own grief and anger at what we have become. There are many days that I find my love for Eden turning to bitterness and resentment that she has

fractured our family, our pack, in such a devastating way. No love should hurt this much.

I leave the abandoned house and continue the long walk that will take me to Portsmouth and vaguely wonder at what changes I will find after so many years away. War will be coming back to the country within a decade if what Eden told us is true. Another century, another war. It makes no difference to me. I crest the rise of a hill and come to a stop as I look down at a large house next to the lake that has been built in my absence. There is a long dock running out into the water with a rowboat tied to it. When I spot the glass atrium built on one end of the house, I know I have found Luca. He has built the house Eden dreamed would one day be our home. I shake my head as I start down the hill. This house will be rubble by the time Eden ever sees it.

Eden

A whine of frustration escapes my lips as the sound of the reminder alarm on my phone penetrates the fog of desperate need filling my brain. I try to rise to my feet from where I'm kneeling in front of the dark mirror but fall to the side as a wave of dizziness and my unresponsive legs conspire against me. I push my legs straight and pins and needles wash through them causing me to cry out from the pain that floods in. After a few minutes, I'm able to shift enough so that I'm sitting on my bottom with my legs straight out for the first time in what must be days and reach for the cracked phone on the dressing table to silence the alarm. My eyes are dry and blurry from staring at the mirror for so long as I blink them to try and see what the alarm was for. When my vision finally clears enough that I can make out the notification a gasp of hope shoots through me. I have a meeting with my lawyer. He might have something from my aunt just like last time that could help me get back to Luca faster.

I shove my oily hair back from my face and leverage myself to my feet with the help of the dressing table. I sway alarmingly enough that it breaks through my thoughts of needing to go back enough that I realize that I need food and water or I will not be going anywhere. I make my way carefully down the stairs, clutching at the banister so I don't fall, and make it to the kitchen. I drink a full cup of water from the faucet and then search for food. The fridge is empty except for condiments and I realize that I haven't gotten groceries since I came back. I rub my forehead and try to think but the urge to go back up to the mirror so I can go back to Luca is overwhelming so I pull my phone out and check the date. I shake my head in confusion. It's been twenty-two days since I got back. How is that possible? What is wrong with me that I've lost so much time, so many days?

The water sloshes painfully in my empty stomach so I drop my phone on the counter and open cupboards until I find some stale crackers. They're tasteless and dry in my mouth but I

keep eating, hoping that the food will help me clear my mind so I can think. I yank open the freezer above the fridge and find old Tupperware containers of frozen leftovers so I grab one and put it in the microwave to defrost and heat as I make myself drink more water. Slowly the fog in my brain starts to clear and it lets me remember the appointment with Mr. Dunhurst. Yes, yes, that's good! The last time I saw him he gave me the note from Adera about the mirror. There has to be more than he's keeping from me. There has to be a way to control the damn thing so I can go back to closer to when I left. Luca needs me to come back to him. I can't make him wait a hundred years again.

The microwave dings so I pull the half-cooked lasagna from it and eat half of it, spilling some of it down on my sweatshirt until my stomach rolls from too much, too fast, and leave the partially eaten dish in the sink. I need to go. I need to get everything Adera left for me so I can get the mirror working and get back. I can't waste any more time. Luca needs me to come back.

I grab my phone and wallet and fight with the door locks before finally getting the door open so I can leave. I'm halfway to the street when a sharp pain in my foot has me crying out and hopping onto the overgrown grass. I look down and stare at my bare feet in surprise and then slowly turn and look back to the house and see that I've left the front door wide open. The pain in my foot from stepping on a sharp rock brings me a brief moment of clarity. What is wrong with me? How could I leave my house like this? I rush back inside and shut the door behind me and lean against it. I don't understand what's happening to me. My eyes go to the stairs and follow them up and every cell in my body itches to go, go to the mirror so I can go back as soon as it comes to life. I shake my head to try and clear it again and force my eyes down and away from the stairs. I spot my phone clutched in my fingers and bring it up so I can see the cracked screen. I can still see the reminder notification for my appointment and it gets me back on track.

I swipe it open and order an Uber to drive me downtown and then search for my shoes and keys. Mr. Dunhurst will help

me. He will have what I need to make this right, to help me get back to Luca. I wait impatiently with my back to the stairs, facing the front door and take deep breaths to stop myself from going back up to wait in front of the mirror. Eight days. There are eight days until the full moon. I can't just sit there and wait. I have to try and find a way to go back sooner. Mr. Dunhurst will have the answer. When the car pulls up I force myself not to run out but to close and lock the door behind me first. The driver turns to look at me but an expression of disgust crosses his face and he's quick to turn back around and start driving. I don't care. He doesn't have the answers I need, he just needs to take me to the person who will.

The farther we drive from the house...the mirror...the more my skin itches to go back to the only thing that will take me to Luca but I push through and stay focused on the buildings that we pass. We are almost there when the car stops for a red light in front of the same building as last time. The new nightclub, Gothic. That incredible statue catches my eye again but the two people walking past it has the air in my lungs freezing and I shove the door open and almost fall out of the car until I catch my balance and start running their way. My Uber driver is yelling from behind but all I can do is race after the man walking with a woman with long black, almost blue hair.

"B-Bas? Sebastian?" I call out desperately. It can't be him. If he was here he would have come to me. I suck in a gasp when he stops and turns to face me. Oh God! He's here, my beautiful, sexy man is here! He will help me. He will take me to Luca. Tears form and start trickling down my face as I take in his strong handsome face but...but he...he's mad, angry, not happy to see me. I freeze in place as he strides toward me and flinch back when his hand comes up to wrap tightly around my neck. He leans in so close that I can see the hate he has for me in his eyes and feel the spittle from his mouth as he snarls at me.

"I told you if I saw you again, I would kill you! You're just lucky there are so many people on the street to witness it or I'd snap your neck right here."

My mouth o's in complete shock and I try and shake my head but his grip is too tight around my neck. What has happened? How can he hate me so much?

"Who's this, then?" A woman asks and I tear my eyes away from Bas' hate-filled ones to see who she is just as he lets me go. I start shaking my head in a daze of shock and confusion. It's her! The bitch who started all of this...wrongness that's happened. How can he be with her? She leans closer to me for a better look and then rears back with a look of distaste.

"Oh my, the smell of this one." She fakes a shudder. "Is she homeless? One of your pet projects? Really, Bas, you should train them to not approach us in public."

I finally find my voice and swing my eyes back to Sebastian. "How could you? How could you be with this... this...fucking bitch! After everything she did? She's the reason I died! Sebastian...where is Luca? I need to find him!"

He shoves me away just as my Uber driver catches up to me and grabs my arm.

"Hey! You can't just bail on the middle of a fare like that!" He yells. "I'm closing the ride and docking your rating. Find some other way to get to your destination. I'm out!"

I ignore him with all my focus on Sebastian even as Keket's eyes narrow as she tries to place me. "Luca! Where is Luca? I need to get back to him!"

Sebastian starts to back away from me, pulling Keket with him and shaking his head. "You've done enough to Luca as it is. Leave him to his madness. I swear, if you approach me again, witnesses or not, I will kill you!"

I stand there with people walking around me and stare at his back until he disappears into the building. I don't...he can't... what the fuck is happening? I grab handfuls of my hair and pull as I squeeze my eyes shut at the pain and confusion wracking my body and mind until my feet start moving. I need to go back. I need to go to the mirror so I can get back to Luca and...fix this somehow. I need to go back.

Sebastian – 1868

I leave the store with my package tucked under one arm so I can scan the newspaper headlines as I walk. The war has been over for three years now and the practice of slavery has been abolished. More states are joining the Union and rebuilding has begun. None of it matters to me in the least other than where to direct my fortune so it will continue to grow. I stand on the wooden sidewalk and scan the nearby storefronts in search of a reason to stay in town and not return to the monument that Luca has built for a woman that will never be coming back.

I step out of the way of other shoppers and sigh. I miss my brothers deeply. Finn and Cade have still not returned and it's been a few years since I last went in search of them. I have begun to resign myself to the fact that I may never see them again. I miss Luca as well. At least, the man he once was. Eden has been gone for ninety-three years now and I hate that I still keep track. I will love her forever but the damage that love has done to all of us is catastrophic. Luca insists she will return at any time no matter what I say so I now humor him to avoid the argument. It doesn't help that for years he would watch the video of her and the wolves that they took on the device she left behind. Over and over again, he would play it - causing her laughter to ring through the house, haunting me at every turn until the cursed device finally stopped working altogether.

With no other reason to delay returning home, I turn away from the stores and make my way to where I have left my horse. A distant crack of thunder has me scanning the sky for storm clouds but when I only find the pleasant blue of a summer's day my steps falter. I feel a shiver race down my spine as doubts creep into my mind. She wouldn't. She made a promise, a vow that she wouldn't come back and do this to us again. Eden wouldn't hurt us that way. She knew how much pain we all went through the last time. She made a vow not to do it again. My steps quicken as I rush to my horse and

quickly flip a coin to the stable lad as I accept the reins. I have to be sure. If she has come back, I need to intercept her. I can't let her do this to Luca. He is one thread away from slipping into complete madness. Seeing her die again will take him from me forever.

I kick my mount in the side as soon as I clear town to gain speed. She said it was ten miles the last time. In a field, ten miles from town. I ride hard scanning in every direction and push out fifteen miles at least to be sure but find nothing. The relief of not finding her settles like a cold weight in my stomach as I turn my horse back in the direction of town. I have a perfect picture of her in my mind. The mass of her fire-red hair rippling down her back as she lifts that perfect face up to me with a smile so sweet and laughter in her emerald green eyes. I clench my fingers tighter on the reins as a sharp spear of longing pierces my chest. The damage she caused does nothing to lessen how badly I want her back in my arms.

I slow my mount as we enter the busy town once again and ride to the other end and in the direction of the house Luca built. I cannot call it home. Men's rough laughter and a woman's cry have my head turning and catching a glimpse of dull red hair. The crowd shifts enough that I'm cursing and launching from my horse. I toss the men aside that have crowded around her and one fierce look has the rest scattering like the wild dogs they are. My jaw aches from clenching my teeth so hard as I reach down and haul her to her feet. Her tear-filled eyes meet mine and fill with relief. I do not give her a chance to speak as I pull her with me to my horse and swing her up onto it, quickly vaulting up behind her. She lied to me. She broke her vow and now I need to do what I have to, to protect my brother and myself.

"Bas! Bas, thank god you found me! I didn't know where to go or how to get to you. I need to find Luca. Please, will you take me home?" She begs as she tries to turn and look at me.

I hold her tighter in place and frown at the greasy matted hair and the smell coming from her. Something is wrong, something has happened for her to be in such a state. She's also wearing those tight form fitting pants and a strange jacket

with a hood that has words on it. Why would she come back in her modern clothing? I need to get her out of sight and somewhere Luca will not stumble upon her by accident on his infrequent trips to town. I take her to a poorer section of town and secure a room above a tavern. I ignore her pleading to go home to Luca and pull her to the stairs after ordering a bath to be brought up. Once we are finally alone in the room with the door closed, I turn and face her, taking all of her in.

Her green eyes are dull and have a desperate look in them. There are dark bruising shadows around them that scream exhaustion. Her features are sharper too. Her cheekbones are more pronounced and her chin seems more pointed. I reach for the zipper and undo it spreading the dirty stained jacket apart and find her naked underneath. My fingers can't help but skim over her sharp collar bones and down over her pronounced ribs. She has lost an unhealthy amount of weight since I last saw her causing worry and concern to soften my tone when I ask,

“Why, why did you come back? You promised you wouldn't come back, Eden.”

Her hands shake as she lifts them to my face and her expression crumples as she cries, “Please, please don't hate me! I'll fix it. I promise I'll fix whatever happened to make you hate me. Please, Bas, please I need you, I need Luca and my wolves. Please help me.”

I don't know why she would think that I hate her but before I can ask further there's a knock on the door. I settle Eden on the bed and wrap a blanket around her before letting the servants in with a wooden tub and steaming buckets of water. I follow the two men and two women out into the hall and compel them.

“After you bring more water, no one is allowed on this level unless I command it. Clear all the rooms of any guests and leave them empty until I say so. No one is to enter this room unless I am here or have given you orders.” All four of them bob their heads as the compulsion settles into their brains so I shove a handful of notes their way to cover the cost of renting the entire floor and stand guard until they come back with the

next round of hot water. One of the women hands me a small sliver of soap and a thin, stained towel as I dismiss them. I toss the soap and towel to one side of the door. I will not use such dredges to clean her.

Eden is still sitting on the bed but she's rocking back and forth like she's in pain and twisting her fingers like she can't bear to be still. I watch her with a frown. I have never seen Eden like this before. Something is very wrong with her but I don't know what. I need to get her cleaned up and settled before I do anything else so I cross the room and kneel before her, taking her fidgeting hands in mine.

"Eden, I need you to stay here and not open the door to anyone but me. I will only be gone a short while. I just need to go to the nearest merchant to buy you some clothing and soap. I promise to be back before the water in the bath has grown cold."

Her grasping fingers squeeze my own even as she shakes her head.

"No, no, no, please, take me home to the others. I need to get back to Luca, Bas. Please!"

The desperate look in her eyes scares me. I don't know what's wrong with her but I know I have to keep her away from Luca to protect him. He will not survive seeing her die again so I push my power into my voice and compel her to stay put and to lock the door behind me. The frustrated, desperate whine that escapes her has me pulling back and rushing from the room to purchase the supplies I will need to make her more comfortable. She starts crying again as she follows me to the door and I hear her pleading for me to take her home even as I run down the stairs.

It takes me next to no time to locate a nearby mercantile and purchase ready-to-wear clothing, soap, and some bread and cheese. I rush back to the room and breathe a sigh of relief when she opens the door for me. Her face is wet with tears as I push her back into the room and drop the supplies on the small table. The bath has cooled but is still warm so I strip the filthy clothing from her body and suck in a breath of dismay at just

how much weight Eden has lost. My hands have mapped every inch of her beautiful, curvy body and all I see now is a sick body with sharp contours of bones where soft curves use to be. I guide her down into the bath and wash her body and hair even as she continues to beg me to take her home. I ignore her pleas and once she is clean, wrap her up in a sheet from the bed and settle her on my lap. It is time for some answers. I tilt her head back so she is forced to look me in the eyes.

“Eden, tell me what happened? Why did you come back when you promised you wouldn’t?”

“I died again! I don’t know why I keep dying! I tried to come back as soon as I could but the mirror wouldn’t work no matter how long I stared at it. Please, take me home, Bas! Please, help me.”

“But why, Eden? You promised not to come back! Why are you here?”

Her crying turns to sobs and I can barely understand her.

“Need to come...need to...be with...feels like...dying...”

I pull her close and press her head against my chest letting her cry and mumble into my shirt the same words of needing to come back over and over again as I glare at the wall across from us. I do not think she has a physical illness. I believe she has neglected her health in her desperation to return to us. Eden is a strong woman. She faced many tragic hardships in her life and managed to overcome them. It would seem that the cursed love we all share has finally broken her as well. I hold her in my arms until exhaustion overtakes her and she slips into sleep. I hold her long after as I try to decide how to go forward and fix the mess we are in.

Eden

I wake slowly and snuggle into the warmth of the body wrapped around me. It's so comforting and feels like home. It feels like it's been so long since I had a proper sleep that I feel like a new woman. I force my swollen, gritty eyes open when he kisses the top of my head and tilt back to see Sebastian's cinnamon-colored eyes looking back at me. I must be dreaming and if I am, I never want to wake up. I blink at him as memories slowly start to form in my head of sitting in front of the mirror waiting for it to come back to life so I could get back to him, the wolves and...Luca! I need to get back to Luca.

"Bas? Are the others here? Luca?" I croak out from my incredibly dry throat.

I see the frown cross his face before he sits us up and reaches for a cup on the table nearby. He pushes it towards my lips and the cool wash of water that slides down my throat is like heaven. I dip my fingers in the last bit of water and use the wetness to rub into my eyes to try and cool the burning gritty feel of them and then hand the cup back to him. I lick my dry cracked lips and try and remember why I feel so weak but there's still a fog in my brain that makes it hard to think straight. I shake my head in frustration and take a look around the room with a frown of confusion.

"Where are we? How did I get here?"

Sebastian sets me to one side of the bed and rises to pull a chair over and sits facing me. I already miss his strong arms around me and wish he would come back to bed with me. I know he will help make everything better but he just sighs deeply and leans toward me.

"Eden, do you remember traveling back through the mirror?"

I push at the fog in my brain but all I can remember is kneeling in front of the mirror waiting to come back, not

actually traveling through it - so I shake my head and ask, "Where are the others? Can you take me to them?"

He sighs again. "They aren't here. You've been gone for a long time, Eden."

I jerk my head in denial. "H-how long?"

"Ninety-three years. It's been ninety-three years since you left and a lot has changed since then."

My lips start trembling and I feel my body start shaking hearing that. "W-where are they? How...how can we find them? Please, Bas, I need to get back to them."

His face hardens. "I am sorry, Eden, but that cannot happen. You made a promise not to come back and put us all through this again. It is too hard, it does too much damage to all of us. We already lost the wolves, I will not lose Luca as well."

I cry out as the painful itch of need floods through me. "No! You don't understand, he needs me to come back! Don't do this, please, don't do this Bas!"

He scrubs at his face and then drops his hands. "The very last thing any of us need is to watch you die and leave us once again. Luca is barely holding on to his sanity. You coming here again...no. I will not let this happen again."

The tears are flowing freely from my aching eyes as I reach out and grab his hands. "Is this why you hate me? Why you chose that woman to be with again? I can fix it, I promise, I'll fix it! You just have to take me to Luca and everything will be all right again."

He pulls his hands from mine. "I don't hate you, Eden. What woman are you talking about? There has never been another woman since you!"

I nod rapidly. "Yes! I s-saw you with her. In my own time. You, you said you would kill me if I came near you again. Y-you were with Keket! Why? Why would you be with her? S-she's the reason I died the first time. She did this to us. How could you be with her?"

Hot anger starts forming, pushing aside the desperate need to find Luca. Sebastian betrayed me, he's keeping me from Luca and the others.

“Fuck you, Bas! I didn't do anything wrong. It's not my fault that I died. You were supposed to protect me. You promised to keep me safe but you failed! All I ever did was love you. I gave you every part of me, all of it - but you chose her in the end over me. I hate you! You have no right to keep me from them. Luca needs me to come back to him. I need him!”

He shoves himself out of his chair, sending it toppling back to the floor. I see the pain on his face as he turns his back on me and moves to the door. He's going to leave me here. No! I jump to my feet and press my naked body to his back, wrapping my arms around his waist.

“No, don't go! Please, Bas, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it! I could never hate you. I don't know why I said that! Please, please don't leave me. I love you. I'll love you forever!”

He turns slowly in my arms and looks down at me with so much pain in his eyes. Pain I know I put there. I can't bear it so I lift up onto my toes and brush my lips against his. The soft touch of our lips is like a key in a lock that opens the door he's been using to hold all his feelings back. With a tortured groan his lips crash against mine and his arms pull me up higher against his chest. His tongue forces mine apart to delve in and tangle with mine. A different type of need fills my body as his fingers slide under my ass and press me tight against the swelling rod in his pants. The need to get back to Luca dims from my mind as my core clenches with the need to have Sebastian fill me deeply. He's mine and I have to show him that so he never forgets and chooses another over me.

I pull at his clothes trying to find skin to touch, to feel, as he walks us back to the bed. His lips finally leave mine as he lays me out on it and looks his fill. The heat is quickly replaced by a frown causing me to glance down my naked body and the changes to it I was unaware of. My hands sweep over my ribs and I could count them if I wanted and then down over the sharp hip bones. My eyes lift to Sebastian's even as I'm

shaking my head in confusion at how this happened. Anger fills his expression and he lifts his wrist to his mouth and bites before bringing it to my mouth.

“Drink! You’ve made yourself sick. You need to drink so my blood can heal you.”

I shake my head knowing what drinking his blood will do to me. It might give me my strength back but it will also turn me into a sex-starved nymphomaniac for days. I can’t stay here getting my brains fucked out when I have to get back to Luca...Luca! I jerk my head away from his wrist but his other hand clamps on my jaw and forces my face back and my mouth open. The first few drops that hit my tongue are like pure lightning that jolts my body straight and I feel a bright glow take over that energizes my entire being. I need more. My lips create a suction on his wrist as my hands pull it closer and I suck hard on the coppery ambrosia filling my mouth. It’s nothing like the feeling that overtook me when I drank Luca’s blood. This is pure raging power filling every cell in my body. I don’t know if it’s because Sebastian is older and more powerful than Luca but the difference is like a cup of plain brew coffee and a quad shot of espresso. The fog that’s been filling my mind for so long begins to lift and clear.

My eyes blink up at Sebastian as he pulls his wrist from my mouth and hands. Everything that happened over the last month comes into sharp focus and my eyes go wide at the realization of what I’ve done. Ninety-three years. Oh my God! How could I have done this again? I promised I wouldn’t. No matter how much I want to be with them, I would never want to hurt them this way. What the fuck is the matter with me? Why did I do this?

Sebastian

For the first time since I found her, I see clarity come into her eyes. They sharpen and shine with health and a slight red tinge even as the dark hollows under them clear away and the soft pink of health blooms on her pale skin. She's so damn beautiful and I have missed her so much that when I see sad regret cross her features I can't help but try and erase it. I lift her against me again and devour her mouth, slicking my tongue against hers until she's whimpering with the need to have me. I might be furious that she's come back and all the damage that will cause but in this moment I'm helpless not to take what I need from the woman I will always love and need. She is here now and I will not, cannot deny myself of her.

The more my blood mixes with hers the stronger she gets and the more aggressive. Her fingers shred the shirt from my back and rip it away so she can touch my skin all over my back. She's lifting and pushing against me needing more - more contact, more pleasure. When she bites down on my lip hard enough to draw blood and then laps it up my cock throbs for more. With my blood mixing with hers, she's no longer a delicate human but a beast like me, and a primal thrill rushes through me to dominate, push her to her limits and fuck her the way my body craves. I pull back with a dark laugh at the thrill of it and toss aside the remains of my shirt and then remove my breaches. She rushes back up to meet me with a growl of desire but I wrap my hand around her throat and pin her down so that I can dip down to her perfect breasts and lick, suck and bite at them. Every time my teeth nip at her skin she bucks against my body and snarls.

“Harder! I want every part of you inside my body, Bas. Give me your teeth!”

So I do. I bite into the smooth globe of flesh and sip her sweetness as she goes wild beneath me from the orgasm wracking her body. Her legs wrap around my waist so she can rub her dripping wet, hot cunt against my cock until it slides

between her folds and drags across her clit. Her nails dig into my back as she claws from the pleasure consuming her body. It's more than I can take. I need to be inside of her. I reach down and line my throbbing head to her entrance and plow forward making her scream my name. Her hips rise to meet every brutal thrust and she begs me for more. When I release her throat so I can pull back for a better angle she follows me up and sinks her teeth into my shoulder, breaking the skin and then licking and sucking the blood from the wound. I wrench her head back by her hair and her eyes roll back in ecstasy even as I thrust up harder into her perfect, tight cunt that wraps around and squeezes my cock and pulses with the next orgasm plowing through her. The feeling is so fucking exquisite that I pulse my own release deep inside of her with a roar of satisfaction.

Eden's head drops forward when I release her hair and a low chuckle comes from her throat as she shoves me. I fall onto my back still inside of her as she balances on her knees and starts to roll her hips. There's a greedy look in her narrowed eyes as she plants a splayed hand on my chest and begins to move faster, harder on my still rock-hard cock.

"We're not even close to done, vampire. You'll give me so much more before we are." She tells me in a commanding tone, riding the power of my blood in her system and it gives me a glimpse of what she would become if I made her one of my kind. Though I've sworn never to do that to her, the idea of having her by my side forever as an equal sends a sharp blade of desire through me that brings my monster surging forward. My eyes go red and my fangs descend as I thrust my hips up harder. Eden bares her own teeth at me.

"Yes! Give it to me. Give all that you are to me, Bas. I want all of you!"

Her riding my cock isn't hard enough or deep enough. I need more so I roll us off the bed and we crash to the hard, wooden floor - still joined as one. The hard surface gives me the leverage I need to punish her slick cunt over and over again with deep, filling thrusts. We growl, snarl, and bite each other. Pull hair and claw skin until we are covered in rapidly

healing wounds and smears of blood and it's still not enough to satisfy the craving we have for one another. I have lost track of the number of times we both found release when we roll off of each other and lay panting on the cold rough floor. Our heads tilt toward each other and I stare into her red-ringed green eyes as a grin spreads across her face. She lets out a laugh.

“Is this what it feels like to be a vampire? I swear, Bas, I could fuck you until your cock falls off and then lay back and use it to fuck myself some more.” She turns her face away and laughs even more at the ceiling. “I feel like I could fuck the whole world right now.”

I can't take my eyes off of her. She's glorious. I don't know how I'm going to let her go again. I push that thought to the side for now and roll to my knees pulling her legs toward me so that I'm in between them and push her knees further apart so her slick, pink cunt is opened to me.

“Now that I know what you'd do to my cock, why don't I show you what I can do with my tongue?” Her smile grows wider and her hands reach up to pull my head down to her hot center. When she squeezes my head between her thighs and my tongue laps at her sweetness, I know in every part of my soul I will never be able to let her go.

We lose ourselves in each other for a full two days when the urgency of her need begins to wane. I knew it wouldn't be as long as before with Luca sharing his blood to save her. That time, she had nearly bled out and he gave her much more than I did this time so the intoxication lasted longer. My blood is much stronger than Luca's, being only once removed from an Original so the effect was different for her. She was stronger and fiercer than she had been last time. Where before she was a silly, playful blood drunk, with my blood she was more of a savage animal that was driven by a primal need. It was the most satisfying two days of my long existence. Not even Keket fulfilled me the way Eden has in the last two days but then again, I never loved my maker the way I love Eden.

She splashes water at me from her end of the tub that I had emptied and refilled to get my attention. The red is gone from

her eyes and I know it won't be long until my blood is gone from her system. Reality will need to be faced soon and decisions will have to be made. I sigh and wish we could just stay hidden here and ignore the world. Thinking of my maker reminds me of what Eden said when she first got here.

“Is it because you saw me with her that you came back?”

“What? Uh...no or at least I don't think so. I'm sorry. I-I honestly don't know what happened, Bas. I never planned on coming back again. I promised you and I meant it. I know how hard this has been on all of you. I can't even explain why I did it. I mean, of course I want to be with you all but I hate the pain and suffering my coming and going causes. It's not fair to any of you to keep putting you through this. Something just... came over me. I couldn't even function after I got home. It's like I lost my fucking mind. I spent days kneeling in front of that damn mirror waiting for it to wake up so I could get back.” Her forehead creases and she rubs at her temple as she tries to order her thoughts.

“My phone alarm went off. It...woke me up? Brought me out of the fog? I don't know but it was a reminder that I had an appointment with my lawyer. I thought he might have more information from my aunt about working the mirror so I went out but I saw you on the street. I saw you and...her. I called your name and begged you to help me but you were so angry.” She slides a hand around the front of her throat as her eyes flash up to meet mine. “You choked me and there was so much hate in your eyes. You told me you would kill me if I ever came near you again! You said I needed to leave Luca to his madness.” I see a shudder ripple over her skin when she says his name and her frown deepens. “Where are the others, Bas? What has happened to them?”

I look away from her knowing that what I'm about to tell her will hurt her deeply and fill her with so much guilt but she needs to know.

“I haven't seen the wolves since a few years after you left. They...they couldn't stand the pain of your missing bond so they chose to shift to their wolf forms...permanently.” I flinch

slightly at her gasp of pain and go on. “I have been searching for them for decades but I have not been able to find them.”

She covers her face with her wet hands and cries, “Oh my God, oh my God, what have I done?” Her hands drop and she stares at me with a horrified look. “Oh, Bas! I’ve destroyed everything haven’t I?”

When I don’t respond her face crumples and she stands and leaves the bath, wrapping up with one of the fresh sheets I paid to be delivered to the room. I rise as well and dry off before pulling on my breaches and stand studying her shaking form. When she spins to face me I see the sheen of desperation in her eyes.

“What happened to Luca, Bas? Where is he?”

I know she’s not to blame for what came before but I still feel resentment building up at the cost of her being here again and again.

“He’s struggling with his sanity since you left. He refuses to believe that you promised not to come back. He ranges from mania to deep despair. If what I said to you in the future is true, then it is even more imperative that you stay away from him.” She starts shaking her head in denial so I reach out and shake her. “Eden! If you go to him, he will lose his mind when you die again. If you truly love him then you need to stay away from him. He can never know that you came back again!”

She struggles to pull away from me and I know that my blood is nearly gone from her system by how weak her struggle is.

“You don’t understand! I can fix him. He needs me to come back to him, Bas.”

I push her away, frustrated that she is not understanding me.

“At best it will be a temporary fix! How can you do this to him, Eden? You will drive him completely insane when you leave again. Even if somehow we manage to keep you safe and alive for years, you will still die one day and it will destroy him. Leave him be and let him heal. It may take

decades or even another century - but he will one day deal with your loss and move on!”

She backs further away from me and I can see by the look in her eyes that she’s not hearing me. I am not getting through to her. She starts scratching at her arms and then pulling at her hair and I don’t understand how she’s changing right before my eyes. She just keeps crying that he needs her to go back to him. I curse and turn away, raking my fingers through my own hair. Her mind is broken. Luca isn’t the only one who is slipping into madness. Perhaps it’s the mirror that is doing this to her. She has traveled through it three times now. Maybe the price of time traveling is insanity and the more she does it the worse it will get. My blood must have helped restore her mental state but it has worn off. I don’t know what to do. I can’t let her anywhere near Luca. I need to think. I need time to decide what to do.

“Please, please, he needs me. Please take me to Luca? Please, Bas?”

I can’t, I can’t THINK here! I turn back to her and feel a sharp jab of agony seeing her this way. I need to go and think - somewhere away from her.

“There is fresh food and water on the table and clothing for you to wear on the chair. YOU WILL STAY IN THIS ROOM AND SPEAK TO NO ONE BUT ME. LOCK THE DOOR BEHIND ME.”

“Please, Bas, don’t do this!”

“I’m sorry, Eden, it is for the best. I will be back as soon as I can.”

With one last look at her heartbroken face, I rush out the door, pausing to hear her lock it behind me and then practically run from the building to escape the sounds of her cries. I collect my horse and stop to purchase a fresh shirt after many shocked looks at my bare chest on display. I’ve hardly mounted my horse when the skies open up and drench me with rain, soaking my new shirt and the rest of me to the skin. It is pointless to rush back to the house Luca has built and I let my mount walk at an easy pace once we are out of town. I lose

myself on the ride with thoughts of Eden and my brothers. There is no solution to this mess that I can come to. Even if I could bring myself to...kill her to send her back, there is no stopping her from traveling back here again and again. If I could cry to relieve the misery inside of me I would.

So lost am I in my dark thoughts that when my horse rears back suddenly I almost lose my seat and fall to the muddy ground. I pull hard on the reins to get him settled and when I look up and squint through the pouring rain, everything inside of me surges with joy as two very large wolves step onto the track and look my way with glowing gold eyes. The shout of greeting dies on my lips as it hits me that they will know she's here. They will feel the bond and insist we bring her to Luca. Somehow, I will have to find a way to keep them from her as well.

Luca

I walk through each room doing my daily checks to ensure that everything will be perfect should Eden come home today. It is day thirty-three thousand, nine hundred and sixty-seven since she died in my arms. None of them believe she will return, but I do. I know she will. I am sure that she will come back. I ensured she will come back. I wasted so much time fighting to keep her away and keeping my heart safe. I know better now what a mistake that was. I will not make that mistake again. Everything must be perfect for her here in the home I had built for her. All the dreams she had of us all together in this house will come true. My brothers will return when she does and we can finally have the happiness we all deserve. It will be different this time. It will be perfect.

I once again check the bathing chamber of the room I designed for her and turn the lever to let the hot water flow from the tank above that is kept hot at all times by the firebox connected to it. I reach out and let the water flow over my hand and nod at the perfect temperature. She will love this so much. I close the lever to stop the flow and glance at the ceramic seat set in a wooden chair and connected to a pipe in the wall in the corner and the basin of water beside it ready to be used to flush the waste away. Her armoire has all the clothing she left behind hanging and folded in it as well as a few new gowns that reflect the current style. Some will need to be replaced as the style has gone out of fashion. I will go and place an order with the dressmaker soon. I close the door to her room with a nod. Perfect. Everything will be perfect if she arrives today.

I move from room to room and picture her face when she sees what I have built for her, for us - until I come to the glass-enclosed atrium. I water the many blooming flowers and plants that I know will make her happy to see. When I reach the end, my eyes travel over the sacks filled with clay and the table with all the tools laid out that I will need to sculpt again. My fingers itch to feel the smooth, cool clay between them

once again but I push my hands behind my back to lessen the temptation. No, I will not create anything until Eden is back where she belongs. She is, after all, my muse. I lose myself in thoughts of her as the rain beats down on the glass above me. What if I'm wrong? What if she was already too far gone when I compelled her to come back to me? How will I manage if she does not ever come back to me? This house was a mistake! A farce! I have lost her to time and I will not survive another century and a half without her. The weight of despair has my shoulders and head drooping on my neck. I am a fool. I didn't protect her when she needed me the most. I don't deserve to have her back! I let my temper at that soldier's pathetic insult distract me from what I should have done as soon as they rode into the yard. I could have...

"Sir?"

The sound has me spinning with a snarl to see young Aiden hovering nearby.

"Yes, what is it?"

He shifts his gaze away but not before I see the pity in his eyes.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Sir, but you asked to be informed when our wood supply was down to half. We have reached that point...again."

I frown and shake my head. "No, that will not do! We must keep the supply topped up so the fires can keep the water hot at all times. We will go now and fell more trees."

"Sir? It will keep until the rain lets up. There is still a large supply that will last for weeks before we deplete it."

I glance up at the rain-covered glass and nod absently. "Yes, I suppose it can wait for the rain to stop but please, ask Flora to bake that cake that Eden loves so much. If she arrives today it will be a nice surprise for her at supper."

Aiden's face pales and he turns away from me.

"What? What is it? Do we not have the supplies to make that cake?" I ask, confused that such a simple request would upset him in such a way.

He clears his throat but keeps his back to me when he answers. “My grandmother passed from this life over twenty years ago, Sir. You helped dig her grave.”

He strides away before I can reply and I’m left to stare at where he was standing in confusion. Flora died? How did I forget that? Eden will be so sad. She had a fondness for the cranky woman.

Shaking my head at myself for forgetting such a thing, I leave the atrium and head to the kitchen to instruct the staff on baking that cake for Eden. I’m passing through the main hall when the double front doors are thrown open and all three of my brothers walk in. Finn and Cade are completely naked and covered in mud. They nod cautiously my way and I can’t help the bark of delighted laughter that shoots out of me.

“Ha! I told you she would be back! None of you believed me but I was right. That’s why you’re back, right? The bond, the mate bond is back, isn’t it?”

I see them exchange frowns with Sebastian and it just makes me laugh even more. She’s back, no matter what they think. I know it in my soul.

“Come! She will be here soon so you can try out the hot shower in her bathing chamber and get cleaned up for her arrival. Bas, show them the way! I need to speak to the cook about a cake. Ha!”

Sebastian

My brothers have changed. They look older, harder than they did when they left and the spark of playful cheeriness that they always seemed to carry with them is gone. In its place is a quiet, serious watchfulness that makes me nervous. I need to proceed very carefully or I could lose them when I just got them back. They made use of the showers Luca had installed when this house was built and found their outdated clothing where he had stored it in their rooms.

Cade rubs at his chest as he looks around the room and then shares a silent look with Finn that I can't read. When he turns those aquamarine eyes my way there is no warmth in them.

"You've had no word of her? No sightings? The bond returned almost three days ago, now."

I swallow down my nerves and shake my head. "No, nothing. Where have you been? I have been searching for you for decades."

Finn sniffs. "Aye, we know. We scented you in every forest we ran through. Ya ken we dinnae want ta be found? We were trying to forget and your scent everywhere was a constant reminder."

The anger in his eyes has me looking away as hurt fills me. My own anger has me turning back and snapping.

"Forgive me for imposing and wanting my brothers back! You weren't the only ones who were suffering but while you were out in the world rolling around like dogs, I was here alone trying to keep Luca from fracturing into pieces. That was the second time you all left me alone to pick up the pieces while you went and grieved. Did any of you consider me when you broke up our family, our pack by leaving...again?"

Finn is the first to look away but Cade steps forward. "Aye and I'm sorry for the pain you felt at losing her as well but no one asked you ta pick up any pieces. We're not your children,

Bas that you have ta care and tend to. After hundreds of years, I like ta think we qualify as grown men able ta make our own choices. You could have left as well.”

I push to my feet and pour myself a glass of brandy and toss it back to try and cool the anger and hurt coursing through me at his easy dismissal of what we once meant to each other. When I turn back they are both facing me so I nod.

“No, you are not my children but I thought you were my brothers and my family. It is good to know where you stand on that. As for me leaving, I still consider Luca my family so I couldn’t leave him when he started to lose his mind to madness.”

They both look away but I catch the shame that crosses their expression as they do. Finn sighs.

“He has always believed she would come back but you told us she vowed not to.” He rubs his chest absently with a frown. “Why do you think she came again after promising not to?”

“I do not know. She was adamant that she wouldn’t put us through this a second time. I don’t believe she would want to hurt us this way again.” I can’t help but ask, “What...what do you feel? Can you sense anything through the bond?”

Cade curses and throws his hands up. “Who bloody knows! One minute it’s sadness and despair then panic. The next it’s happiness and orgasmic and then back to sadness, despair, and panic again. It makes no fucking sense at all.”

“We thought she was here with you because of the happiness and the...pleasure she was feeling for two days. We tried ta pick up her scent around the outskirts of the town but the rain has washed everything away. So if she’s not here with you and Luca then I’d like ta fucking know who is pleasuring our mate so we can kill him!”

I turn to reach for the brandy and squeeze my eyes shut at the news that they are so attuned to what she is feeling through the bond. The rain washing her scent from me was a lucky chance but this will not end well for any of us if I can’t think

of a solution and soon. When I turn back to them my expression is a composed, blank mask.

“Luca is barely holding on to his sanity. If we find her and bring her back here...we all know how it will end at some point. Losing her again...it will finish him.”

Cade narrows his eyes at me. “What are you suggesting then? We don’t look for her? We just leave her out there somewhere all alone, unprotected? That’s our mate you’re talking about! You may be ready to wash your hands of her but we never will!”

“No! Of course, that is not what I’m saying. I...I just don’t know what to do anymore.” I scrub at my face, suddenly so tired of it all and drop down into a chair. “She comes and we love her and then she dies and leaves us. We fracture and spend decades in misery and then she returns and we do it all over again. I love Eden and I wish things could be different but they are not. All I can see is a vicious circle in this pattern over and over again and...I am...tired. I no longer know what to do to protect all of us from this love that hurts us so very much.”

“You need to turn her or release me so I can do it. She should be with us forever. That is how you make the pain stop.” Luca says from the doorway.

I stare at him in defeat and slowly shake my head. “That is one thing I will never do. As much as this hurts, I love her too much to ever do that to her.”

Fury crosses his face and just as quickly turns into an empty smile. “Then we will ride this circle around and around and around because Eden will always come back. Just like us, she cannot live without our love.” He glances at Cade and Finn. “Supper is served. I had the cook prepare your meat as rare as possible as I am sure you are not used to having your food cooked after so many years in the wild.” And then with another empty smile, he’s gone.

Cade and Finn exchange another silent, loaded look before Cade spits out, “Fuck!”

I completely agree.

The wolves disappear from the house for long stretches over the next two days as they search for Eden's scent. Every time they return without her Luca's mania increases. I can't wait any longer to get back to her. I have left her alone for almost three full days and her food and water must be gone by now. With Finn and Cade being able to detect her scent I must be very careful on how I accomplish this. I go to her room and gather some of her modern clothing that she left the last time she was here and when my fingers brush over the soft plush fabric of the bathrobe she first came to us in, I consider just ending all of this and bringing her back here. The sounds of Luca raging from deeper in the house has my resolve hardening so I pull the robe and the other clothing out and stuff it all in a sack with my own change of clothes before quickly leaving.

I keep a close watch for the wolves but do not see them as I ride into town and straight to the tavern where I left her in the room above it. I throw a stack of notes at the barkeep and order food, clean water, and a bath to be brought up and then race up the stairs to her door.

"Eden! Unlock the door!" I call out through it and lean back in surprise when I immediately hear her scratching at the door on the other side. The latch clicks but when I push the door to open it she cries out in pain. "Move back away from the door, Eden so I can come in."

I hear movement so I ease the door slowly open and what I find has me choking in shock. She's laying on the floor a few feet from the door reaching for me with bloody hands. Her eyes are glazed and she can barely lift her head. Her voice is a rough rasp.

"B-Bas...pl-please...need...to go...back..." Her head thumps to the floor and rolls loosely to the side as she blinks slowly up to me.

"Eden! Oh, Eden what have you done?" I kick the door closed behind me and scoop her off the floor and lay her on the bed before examining her hands to see where all the blood

is coming from. I frown in confusion when I find her fingertips shredded and some of her nails missing and others half ripped off. I turn and look at the door where she was scratching and see the deep grooves stained with blood. I turn back to her in disbelief. She's gone mad to do this to herself. There's an abrupt knock on the door so I toss a blanket over her to cover her damaged hands and rush to let the servants in with all that I ordered. I stand between them and Eden until the bath is filled and the food and water have been placed on the table and then dismiss them once the foul chamber pot has been emptied I dismiss them and lock the door once again.

I just stand and stare at her laying so lifeless on the bed and consider if it would be a mercy to end her life to send her back to her own time. Whether I do or don't, I cannot let her suffer in such a state. I pour her a cup of water and lift her hands gently to bring the cup to her lips so she can drink. She turns her head away once she drinks half the cup so I set it aside and pull the knife I have in my boot and slice across my palm and then cup my hand so my blood pools in it. I dip each of her damaged fingers in it and clamp my free hand around her wrist harder when she hisses at the pain and tries to pull away. Once all of her fingers are starting to heal, I tip her head back and pour what's left of my blood into her mouth and then reopen the wound and do it again twice more until I'm satisfied it is enough to clear her mind but not enough to send her into a frenzy like before. I hold her in my arms until she struggles to pull away.

“Ah! My hands! Fuck, what the hell?...Jesus! What did I do?” She stares down at her healing fingers with horror and then looks at me in shock. “Am I crazy? Bas! I think I'm losing my mind! What the fuck is going on?”

I pull her back against me and bury my face in her hair. I have no answers for her and I am at a loss on what to do. She struggles once again for me to release her and when I pull back her hand comes up and slaps me across the face and then she's jumping to her feet.

“You fucking bastard! You LEFT me here, trapped me here! I couldn't open the door. I couldn't call out to anyone for help.

How could you do that to me?"

I reach for her but she pulls away with a flinch and glances over her shoulder at the door and then back at me with a betrayed look.

"Take it back! Release me, Bas. You can't keep me a fucking prisoner here!"

"Eden, I...I can't. I need to...protect my brothers."

She rears back in outrage. "From me? You have to protect them from me? What? Fuck! Tell me what's going on right now!"

I reach for her again, slowly this time and she lets me pull her down next to me on the bed.

"Something is...wrong...with you. You don't remember how you got here or some of the things you are doing. You seem...obsessed. I don't know if the mirror has done something to you to make you this way but it is only when I give you my blood that you become clearheaded and rational. As soon as it wears off you become manic again. Look what you did to your hands! You promised you wouldn't come back again and hurt us this way but you did it anyway and you can't give me a reason why. So yes, I have to protect the others from you. I am sorry. I do not know what else to do."

She clutches at her head and moans before pushing back to her feet and turning toward me.

"Then kill me. Send me back to my own time but you can't leave me here trapped in this room!"

I shake my head. "Don't you think I've considered doing that? I could easily snap your neck and have you fade away again but what is to stop you from coming back again and again and then whatever is making you this way could get worse and worse every time you travel. Eden, I love you. I never want to let you go and I hate seeing you this way, in so much pain. I am doing this to protect my brothers but also to protect you. I can't help you if you are descending into madness a hundred and fifty years in the future!" I shove myself up to my feet and grab her by both arms. "What if you

travel again and I don't find you? Do you remember how I found you this time? You were surrounded by rough men who would have hurt you if I hadn't intervened. You came back dressed in your modern clothing. You had no one and nothing to protect yourself, not even your sanity. Eden, I'm trying to protect all of us by keeping you here!"

Tears fall from her eyes and she looks so broken, lost, and small as the fight drains out of her.

Her voice is flat and lifeless when she tells me, "This won't work. Keeping me trapped here? Hiding me from the others? None of it will work. I can feel them, Bas. I can feel my wolves searching for me, right here." She rubs the middle of her chest with a shaking hand. "I can hear Luca yelling for me to come back, here." Her hand lifts to the side of her head. "You need to take me to them. Whatever is happening to me, I think it's because we aren't together. Please, help me."

I pull her against me, needing to feel her closer. She could be right. Maybe putting all of us together again would...cure whatever is happening to her. Luca's mental state would stabilize with her back and the wolves would stay with us again. I would have my family back in one piece...for a time. But I know what would happen when she leaves again. Luca said it is a circle that we will go around and around on until every single one of us is destroyed completely. It has been ninety-three years since the others have seen her. They've had time to grieve and maybe with even more time they will fully accept her loss and we can get back what we once had before she came into our lives. Do I want to bring her back to them and start this damaging cycle all over again? What if she is wrong and the madness taking her just continues to worsen. What will it do to all of us to watch her destruction? Giving her my blood is only a stop gap unless I fully turn her into one of my kind and that would bring a whole other set of tragedies. I still do not know the right thing to do so I kiss her instead, trying to convey how much I love her but she pulls away and my arms drop from her. I turn away and pick up the sack of clothing I brought with me and begin pulling them out.

“You should bathe before the water cools and then eat while your mind is still clear. I have brought you some of the clothing you left the last time so you will be more comfortable. When I lay her robe out on the bed her trembling fingers brush the fabric. Her voice is hopeless and filled with despair, matching the look in her eyes.

“You will destroy what you are trying to protect, Sebastian. They will find me and when they do, they will hate you for what you have done.” Her voice drops to a whisper and what she says next almost breaks me. “As I do.”

The last of the clothing falls from my hands to the bed and I force myself to turn my back on her. I strip my clothes off and toss them to the side and then scrub her scent from my skin before dressing in the clothing I brought. I need to leave. I need space from her and the madness that will soon be on her again when the small amount of blood I gave her wears off but I must be sure that the wolves will not scent her on me. When I reach for the door, I can't stop myself from turning back for one more look. She's curled up in the mess of sheets on the bed with her robe clutched against her chest, staring blankly at the wall.

“Eden, I promise I will figure this out. I just need more time. I know you said you hate me but I love you.” She doesn't even blink at my words and I sigh. “Lock the door behind me.”

I leave the tavern a defeated man and slowly make my way home. Her words ricochet around my head. *They will hate you, as do I.* Is she right? In my quest to protect them all, have I destroyed us? I can no longer make these decisions alone. I will explain everything to the wolves and ask them to take her far away from here without them telling Luca. I will lose them and Eden forever but I will stand steady in my will to protect Luca. Time will heal him. I am sure of it.

I do not see the two wolves with watchful eyes crouched in the trees as I ride past them nor do I see when they rise and split apart. One running back the way I came from with his nose to the ground and the other trailing me all the way back to the house.

Finn

I circle around to the back of the house unseen and shift to my human form before slipping in through the back door that is closest to the rooms Luca designed for Cade and me, quickly wash and pull on some clothes. Sebastian is lying to us. At first, we thought it was Luca hiding her away somewhere but after talking to him and watching him closely we know it is not him. His mind is fractured, just as Bas told us it was.

Our brother's mind plays tricks on him and he often does not even know what era we are currently living in. One moment he believes she is here with us and the next he is ranting and raving at her for leaving. In between bouts of rambling he berates himself for not being the man she deserves. I do not think Luca is even capable of hiding her and lying to us about it.

The bond we feel for our mate came back to life in a jolt of panic and urgency and despair that knocked us off our feet it was so unexpected. Sebastian assured us she wasn't coming back so when we shifted to run the wilds and escape the loss of her we never thought we would feel it again until the years took us to her time. We traveled back as quickly as we could but when we felt her happiness and sexual pleasure we knew our brothers had found her and would keep her safe until we arrived. Two days we felt the pleasure through the bond only to have it change again to the deepest despair and then just a few hours ago to anger and confusion. Sebastian is lying.

Eden, our mate, would not lay with another man outside our pack. If not with Luca then she was with Bas and we will find out why he is hiding her from us and what he has done to cause her such pain. Cade has gone to track his back trail in hopes of finding where he is keeping her and I go to confront him. I search the house to find him but cannot locate him. I spot Luca through one of the many windows. He seems to have a fixation on chopping wood to ensure that the many fireboxes stay roaring to heat the water tanks he installed for

Eden. Since Cade and I have been back, we have seen him out there with the ax for hours at a time.

I turn away from the window and continue my search for my lying brother. I finally locate him in the room that Luca made for her. He's sitting in a chair with the red dress she once wore long ago in his lap as his fingers run over the material. It's faint but I catch her scent in the air. I do not know if it is from the gown or if it comes from him being with her. Bas lifts his head slowly to look at me in the doorway and I see the pain and suffering written clearly on his face.

“What will you do when you find her?” He asks me in a tired, strained voice. “Will you bring her back here and stay... until...?”

As angry as I am at him I see the toll the years of suffering and the weight of responsibility have taken on him. Gone is the strong Alpha that held our mismatched pack together and always strived to protect us from the world. For the first time, I truly realize what the cost was to him to let Eden through his icy demeanor and control when she first came to us. He resisted her up until the night she wore the dress he clutches in his hands and I now see that it was to avoid this very outcome. Sympathy and understanding for him push aside some of the anger I feel until another pang of panic and desperation washes through me through the bond.

“What would you have us do, then? Should we abandon her ta this time unprotected and allow her ta be abused and then killed again?” I ask him coldly.

His eyes drop to the dress and he slowly shakes his head. “No, I want her safe as much as you do but I also want... need...to protect Luca from any more damage. Will you take her away? When you find her, take her far from here. I will tell Luca that the bond you feel is gone and that you have returned to the wild. Eventually, he will accept that she is not coming back and hopefully his mind will begin to heal.” He looks back up at me with a glimmer of hope in his eyes. “I will provide you will all the finances you need if you will do this for him...for us.”

I consider his words for a moment but before I can respond, movement outside through the window behind him catches my attention. Cade is back and I watch him shift to his human form and approach Luca. Whatever he says to my brother has him tossing the ax aside and racing for the stables. I can only assume Cade has found her. I have to go so I turn my attention back to Sebastian.

“I will speak to Cade about it.”

I leave the room quickly and race back to our own to gather clothing for my cousin. If he has found her we cannot go in our wolf forms to collect her. We will need horses. I meet him as he is striding toward the house and toss the bundle of clothes at him. He tells me as he dresses.

“It’s a tavern in the poorer area of the town. From what I could see there are rooms above it ta rent. I dinnae scent her anywhere near it but if he has her locked away in a room, I wouldn’t. Finn, the bond feels stronger there and she is in so much pain I almost lost control of my beast and tore the place apart ta get to her. She’s there, I know it.”

I clasp his arm and turn him towards the stables where Luca is leading three mounts out into the yard. “Aye, I believe it. He’s been trying ta keep her away from Luca and from what I’ve seen, it wasn’t the worst decision. He’s just gone about it the wrong way, ya ken.”

He sends me a sharp look. “He thinks Luca will be a danger ta her?”

I sigh and slow down so Luca won’t overhear us. “No, he thinks she’s the danger ta him. You’ve seen him, talked ta him, aye? Bas thinks Luca will crack completely if she comes back and then leaves again. He may not be wrong.”

Cade curses. “Too late for that, then. I already told him I found her.” We both stop and look Luca’s way for a moment where he’s checking the tack on the horses. “I’ve been thinking about what Bas said. It wasn’t right that we left him alone ta deal with the aftermath of Eden leaving. We did it both times, Finn. If we lose her again...we need ta stick around and help him with Luca. They’re our brothers and they

took us in and cared for us after we lost our families and pack. We owe them both.”

I nod my agreement. “Aye, ‘tis true. We will stay, no matter how this time ends.”

When we reach Luca, all three of us mount up. Cade and Luca get their horses moving but I pause for a moment and look back at the house. I spot him watching us through one of the windows and I shake my head. His shoulders and head drop and I know he knows that we are going to get her. I nudge my mount in the side and catch up to my brothers. There’s no choice to be made. The love we have for her demands it.

Eden

I lay on the floor pressed against the door in my bathrobe that Bas brought me. It's as close as I can get to leaving and getting back to Luca. The fog in my brain has come back and Luca is all I can think about. He needs me. He needs me to come back to him. I hate Bas for keeping me trapped here. He's ruining everything...everything! All that matters is getting back to Luca and I can't do that stuck in this room with no way out. My glazed eyes scan the room, looking for some kind of weapon or way that I can kill myself. If I can go back to my time, then I can travel back again and I will make sure Bas doesn't find me first before I get to Luca.

Raised voices and the sounds of fighting come from the tavern underneath me and I paw at the door listlessly, wishing someone would come up. Sebastian compelled me so I can't speak to anyone but him and I can't leave the room but if someone was to come and open this door I could find a way to get a message out to Luca so he can find me. I can't speak but I can write a note if I had paper. I cry out as a spike of pain lances through my head. I need to get back to Luca! It hurts, it hurts so bad!

"Eden! Eden, are you here?"

I push up off the floor and claw at the door. I know that voice! Cade, it's Cade. He will take me to Luca. He will take me back to him! I bang and kick at the door wanting to call out so bad but I can't.

"Eden, are you in there?" Is yelled from the other side of the door as I continue to bang at it.

"Just break the damn thing down!"

That voice has me freezing in place. That...that was Luca. Luca is here! I made it, I made it back to him! My bloody hands fall to my sides as all the urgency and need to get to him that I've been weighed down by lifts and the fog in my brain clears. I spin away from the door and stare around the room.

What happened? Why am I here? I stare down at my hands as memories of how I've behaved since I was shot by that soldier flash through my mind and a choked sound gushes out of me. How...why...why would I do all of that?

“Eden! Move away from the door. We are going to break it down so move back!”

I quickly move to the other side of the room even as my mind races to put the pieces together. Luca...I've been obsessed with getting back to Luca. Why? Why just him and not the others too? Something must have happened to make me that way. The door crashes open and my wolves come flying in with a shout. I open my mouth to say their names but nothing comes out. They pull me into their arms and tell me that I'm safe and that they'll get me out of here but I know they can't. I can't leave this room until Sebastian lets me. He compel...Oh my God! I know what happened to me. I pull free from their arms and push them aside and there he is. Luca is standing in the middle of the room, his mouth stretched with a wide smile filled with insane glee.

“You came back to me.”

I try and yell, scream at him for what he's done but nothing comes out. I know he must have compelled me to come back somehow even if I don't remember him doing it. It's the only thing that explains my behavior and the desperate need I've had to get back to him. I can't scream what I want at him so I lunge at him instead but Cade captures me around the waist and pulls me to him.

“There will be plenty of time for hugs and reuniting when we get you back to the house. We need to go before the regulators get here, yeah? We might have caused a wee bit of damage to the owners and the property when they tried to stop us from coming up here.”

He drags me toward the door while Finn gathers my clothing up but my furious eyes never leave Luca. I can't fucking believe he would do this to me. I had no way to fight it. It took over my entire brain. All my will was focused on

doing what he compelled me to. First Luca and then Sebastian did it by forcing me to...

“Argggg!!!!”

The pain whites out my vision and has the meager contents of my stomach coming up all over. My fingers claw into Cade’s arm leaving deep bloody grooves until he lets me go and I drop to the floor and drag myself back over the threshold of the room to make the pain stop. I lay there gasping as tears flow down my face and wait for the dark spots to leave my vision.

“What just happened?” Cade yells out but I still can’t speak to him or anyone but Sebastian so I just lay there in pain.

“He must have compelled her so she can’t leave the room.” Luca spits out angrily and I roll my eyes his way and glare at the fucking hypocrite. Finn’s concerned face comes into view as he leans down and helps me to a seated position. My fingers stroke over his jaw. It’s so good to see him. I missed him and Cade so much. He looks different, harder somehow and I try and tell him how sorry I am for coming back with just my eyes.

“Is that true, Eden? Did Bas compel you to stay in the room?” He asks so I nod my head tiredly. He looks deeper in eyes and cups my face using his thumb to brush away some of my tears. “There’s more, isn’t there? What else did he make you do?”

I sigh and lean against him even as Cade drops to my other side and takes my hand. “Tell us, lass.” I make a face at him and mime speaking while shaking my head that I can’t. It’s such a fucking relief to be able to think clearly now. They pull me to my feet and make sure I’m steady before letting go and turning to Luca.

“She can’t speak either? Can you not fix it? Override it somehow? Compel her to leave? We need to get her the fuck out of here!” Cade growls at him.

I shake my head violently from side to side. No more fucking compelling! That’s what got me into this mess to start

with. Luca's eyes narrow slightly at me and then he shakes his head angrily.

“No, I cannot. Sebastian is more powerful than me. He can override my orders but I can't change his.”

I make a muffled groan and stab my finger his way. When Bas gets back here I'm going to make sure he fucking does exactly that. I move toward Luca with a furious expression, jabbing my finger at him over and over again and forcing him to step back. I think I see a flash of shame cross his expression but then he's knocking me to the side with an angry roar.

“She is released.”

Everything slows right down as my body twists from the shove and I step back. My feet catch in the clothing Finn dropped and my arms windmill to try and find my balance. I catch sight of Luca slamming into Sebastian who is standing in the doorway as I go down and my feet fly up. I hear the snap when the back of my neck connects with the edge of the tub filled with cold water but strangely feel no pain from the hit as my body jackknives in half and I hear the thump of it hitting the floor but I still don't feel it. That familiar rushing of wind fills my ears and the last thing I see is Cade trying to pull Luca off of a horrified Sebastian and Finn reaching out for me with the saddest look on his face and then I'm tumbling over and over and hitting the floor of the turret in front of the mirror again.

When the heaving stops I start to scream and scream and scream. I need to go back. I need to go back to Luca!

Eden

There's a ringing that won't stop. It goes on and on and finally breaks me from my stare down with the mirror, waiting for it to come to life so I can go back. I try and swat it away but it just rings again, causing me to snarl and spin on my knees to find it. The pain knocks me onto my face and it only gets worse when I try and straighten my legs. I grunt and moan and wail from it until I can focus enough to send my hands to the source, my knees. I manage to sit up and my bathrobe falls open showing me the swollen purple and angry red knobs my knees have become. The ringing noise sounds again and the pain from my legs clears my head enough that I finally recognize it as the doorbell. I try to yell that I'm coming but my mouth is so dry that my throat almost closes up on me and I gag. I don't know how long I've been in front of that mirror but I do know if I don't find a way to stop myself from doing it again, I will die before it ever recharges and that will stop me from getting back to Luca.

It takes a while for me to massage my legs back into working order enough that I can pull myself up onto my feet. When I sway from dizziness I have a flash of a memory of this happening before. My need for food and water, and judging by the smell coming off of me, a shower needs to be addressed if I want to be well enough to go back to Luca. I make my way down the stairs and into the kitchen desperate for a drink of water. I drink too much too fast and end up throwing most of it back up in the sink so I fill the cup back up and force myself to take smaller sips with time in between each one. I catch sight of my phone on the window sill with the back cover off exposing the small solar panel to charge in the sun. I have no memory of putting it there at all. I reach for it and see way too many notifications to deal with in my current state. The date means nothing to me. I have no idea how long I've been home this time.

Once my water is finished, I refill the cup and open the fridge to address the next pressing need but find it empty. I

brace myself on the counter and spot an open cracker box on its side. There's only a handful left but food is food right now so I stuff them into my mouth one by one and try not to gag on the stale taste of them. It won't be enough calories to see me very far so I swipe open my phone, open the delivery app and place an order for like half the menu. I can reheat what I don't eat over the next few days before the mirror is ready to take me back to Luca. Luca! I have to go back to him. He needs me to go back! I turn to race back to the mirror and slam one of my damaged knees into the cupboard, sending a shocking jolt of pain through me. It hurts so much I almost throw up the crackers I managed to force down but it also knocks me out of my need to go back to the mirror.

Fuck! What was I doing? Right, right, food. I need food. Takeout is coming but I should get more so I place another order at the local market and just add my entire favorites list to the order and send it. I need to keep it together if I want to go back healthy and whole. I pull out the junk drawer and find some elastics and wrap them around my wrist. I swallow down my trepidation and see if it will work.

Luca...Luca...I need to get back to Luca! As soon as my feet turn to go to the mirror I snap the elastics...hard. Ouch! Fuck, okay maybe I don't need to snap them that hard but it works so there's that. Alright, what's next? Water, check. Foods on the way so...shower, right! I stink...badly. I limp to my bedroom and manage to stand in the hot water without falling and breaking anything so I scrub my skin and hair clean and only have to snap my wrist three times to stay on task. I search for my favorite comfortable clothing but most of it is missing so end up in an old pair of sweat pants and a black slouchy sweater. I don't know where all my yoga pants and leggings have gone to and most of my hoodies are gone too.

The doorbell rings just as I'm done combing out my wet hair and I pray it's my take-out because my stomach has woken up and it's growling like a beast. I head to the front door but when I pass the stairs I have to snap my wrist twice to keep myself from running up them to the mirror. When I pull the door open a box tumbles down to my feet and the delivery driver is waiting with his hands full of bags to hand me. I

practically snatch them from his hands as the glorious smells hit me. I have already pre-paid his tip on the app so I nudge the box further into the house and with a half-smile close the door on him.

I carry everything into the living room using my feet to push the box ahead of me, limping the whole way. I dump the food bags on the coffee table and ease my sore body down onto the couch and then my butt down to the floor so I can straighten my legs out underneath the table. I spread the food out and open every carton after finding the plastic utensils that came with the order and dig in. Spaghetti and meatballs, fettuccini alfredo with chicken, chicken parmesan, cheesy garlic bread, and a few other dishes all get sampled. I moan and groan at how good everything tastes. All too soon my shrunken stomach protests even one more bite so I close all the covers and stack them to one side to make room for the box that had been left against my door.

When I flip it over and spot that the return address label belongs to my lawyer's firm, my heart speeds up. This could be from my aunt. It could be something that will help me get back to Luca sooner. Luca! I need to get back to him. Oh god, he needs me to come back. SNAP! Fuck! I need to change those elastics to my other wrist or I will have some major welts by the time the mirror has recharged. Speaking of that, how much longer do I have to wait?

“Siri, when is the next full moon?”

Somewhere underneath the discarded plastic bags, my phone answers me.

“The next full moon is on September third, twenty twenty-eight.”

Panic and an overwhelming feeling of urgency start to bubble up in my mind when I figure out that's still three weeks away. I can't wait that long. Luca needs me. Luca! I have to snap my wrist twice when I push the table away and leverage myself up to go to the mirror. I sink back down on the couch when the pain knocks it back and then switch the elastics to my other arm for the next go-round. I have to keep it together

if I want to make it for three whole weeks without slipping into the fog. My body can't take going that long without food or water.

I pull the box back over to me and rip the tape off and open the flaps. It's filled with Styrofoam peanuts that I have to dig through to get to a shiny square wooden box about six inches by six inches. Tied to it with a ribbon is an envelope that I recognize from my aunt's stationery set and it has my name on it. I pull it off and set the box in my lap and slowly open the envelope and pull out the folded note inside.

My dearest Eden,

I hope this finds you well. I do wish I could be with you to guide you on your journeys.

As I am not, I hope this gift will be the compass you need in finding your way.

A caution and a warning.

Love can be an epic tale or a dark tragedy.

Our choices will shape the outcome.

Sometimes, in order to fix what has been broken,

one must make the greatest sacrifice and shatter it all.

Safe travels.

Love,

Adera

I read the words over and over again trying to understand the meaning behind them. How could my Aunt possibly know that I found love in the first place? She died before I even traveled the first time and found Sebastian, Cade, Finn, and Luca. Luca! SNAP, SNAP...SNAP. It's kind of creepy how she seems to be speaking to me beyond the grave and I wonder if she visited the future and saw all that would happen to me. Shaking my head, I set the note aside and lift the box from my lap, nervously chewing on my bottom lip. Flicking the small metal latch, I open the lid and my eyebrows shoot up in awe. Sitting inside on a bed of royal blue velvet is what looks like a blinged-out compass. Just like the frame surrounding the mirror, the device has an assortment of small jewels that create a pattern of runes around the outside edge of it. At the top is what I think is a diamond, in the shape of a triangle that points down. The inside has three different rings with numbers and a small nudge shows me that they all will spin. The very center has a moonstone that clicks when I push it. I lift the compass from its bed and pull up the velvet hoping to find a fucking user manual but find nothing.

I set the compass back into the box and put the box on the table and then lean back. This is how I can control the mirror but I'll need to figure it out. I rub my head and wish that I could think clearly. My brain is so foggy and it's hard to think past the urgent need I have to get back to them, to Luca. I make it halfway up the stairs to the mirror, stumbling on the steps before I realize what I'm doing and snap the hell out of my wrist to stop myself from going any further. I turn and sit on the step and drop my face into my hands. Why? Why is this happening to me? I feel like I'm losing my mind and I'm terrified that it might be a side effect of using the mirror or time traveling. Maybe this is the cost of it. Maybe Adera died from going insane and I will too. I push to my feet and slowly walk back down the stairs to put the food away. If madness is the cost of going back to my loves, to Luca (SNAP) then it's a price I'm willing to pay.

Sebastian

Luca's mind is gone. I lean against the door of the room I compelled him to stay in and listen to his ranting and raving for her. He screams her name over and over and begs her to come back and forgive him. In his anger at me for keeping Eden away from him, he pushed her to get at me and unwittingly caused her death. He begs for her forgiveness in his madness when I'm the one to blame. I did this in my quest to protect him.

"Come away and leave him be. We need to hear from you on how this transpired, Sebastian." Finn tells me in a cold voice.

I turn and meet his gaze and then Cades and see nothing but cold contempt and it makes me wish for the heated rage they showed me the night before just after she left us again. I took every hit they all threw at me as we fought and destroyed much of the upper level where I had been keeping Eden. I only compelled them all to stop when Luca lost control of his monster and went for their throats. We managed to get him out and back here so he would not be a danger to the innocents in the town in his madness and thirst to destroy and consume. The coldness I now see in their expressions tells me that no amount of explaining or justifying I do will ever be able to repair our relationship. I have lost them all. I follow them down the hall to the study and reach for the brandy but Cade swipes it from my hand and tips the bottle back, drinking half of it before passing it to Finn. His eyes glow briefly as he looks at me but when he clenches his hands his eyes settle back to the blue-green of his human form.

"Tell us...from the start."

I scrub at my face and then nod. "I found her surrounded by rough men taunting her. She came back in her modern clothing and it was clear that she was sick. She was gaunt, unkempt - I knew right away something was wrong. You know how much Eden values being clean. She clearly had not washed or eaten

in days, maybe longer. I got her into the room but she was inconsolable, manic to get to you and Luca. I have never seen her in such a state. When I removed her clothing to bathe her I saw just how much her health had suffered. I could count her ribs and her hip bones jutted out. All her curves were gone and I feared that she was wasting away from some disease so I gave her my blood to try and heal her.”

“That’s when you decided ta fuck her for two days instead of bringing her home?” Cade asks harshly. “Do not deny it! We felt her pleasure through the bond.”

I glare right back at him. “You know firsthand what effect my blood has! You have both experienced it yourselves as you took from me to prolong your existence. You also enjoyed the pleasures of her body when Luca fed her his blood to save her in France!”

Finn steps between us with a jerk of his head for Cade to back off. “Enough! Aye, we know what it does ta her but after she was healed, why did you not bring her back then?”

My shoulders slump and I back into a chair and settle heavily on it. “Luca. I have already outlined my concerns about what would happen to his state of mind if we continued this circle of love and death with her. Judging by his current condition, I was correct but it is not just him. There is something wrong with Eden. As soon as my blood began to wear off her mind began to fracture into madness again. When I returned to her next, she had destroyed her fingers scratching at the door! Her sanity was gone. I suspect that the time-traveling she has done has broken her mind. It would have destroyed Luca even more to see her that way.” I sigh heavily. “I had hoped you both would take her away from here. Keep Luca from ever seeing that she had returned in the hopes that he would heal over more time. You left to get her before I could tell you where she was.”

Cade snarls at me, “I want your word that you will never compel her again. Under no circumstances will you ever put her through that...control again.”

I nod my agreement. “I give you my word. I will never compel her again.”

They share a look of silent communication and Finn turns to speak to me but before the words can leave him they are both gasping, making choking noises, and clutching at their chests in shock. I surge to my feet and reach for them.

“What is it? What has happened?”

Finn turns wide eyes my way. “It’s back. The bond is back! Eden is back!”

Cade clutches his head. “How the bloody hell is this possible? It’s always been decades between her coming back! How has the lass managed to come back the day after she left?”

Luca’s screaming gets louder and echoes through the house causing us all to flinch. It is as if he knows she is back somehow. I shove a hand through my hair and pull until I feel the pain in my scalp.

“What...what do you want to do?” I ask them hesitantly.

Finn snarls and throws the empty bottle of brandy at the wall, shattering it, and then spears me with a look. “We go and fucking get her! What else can we do? She’s our mate!”

My eyes dart from one to the other. “And Luca? What of him?”

Cade throws up his hands in frustration. “Fuck! Maybe he needs ta see her ta settle down? Just...just let us go and find her and we will speak ta her about what’s happening with all of this first.” He gives me another dark look. “She can fucking talk ta us, right? She couldn’t speak when we saw her yesterday!”

I wave his words away. “Yes, of course, I released her from the command. I only did that so in her madness, she didn’t attract attention in that place. Can you imagine what might have happened if any of those men had found her in that state? I was trying to protect her!”

He grabs a handful of my shirt and gets in my face with a snarl. “The lass would not have needed protection from them if you had brought her home!”

Finn pulls him off of me. “Come, cousin! We must find her before others do.”

They turn their backs to me and head for the door but I need to tell them the rest.

“Wait! There is...something else.” When they look back, I move over to a cabinet and open the safe inside and pull out fabric wrapped bundle. I stare down at it for a moment before lifting my eyes back to them. “You both need to be...cautious with her. I...I believe whatever is causing her mind to fracture started before this last visit of hers. After she was shot by that soldier, Flora was cleaning up Eden’s things and found something in her room.”

I slowly unwrap the bundle as they move closer for a better look.

“What is that? Is that a gun?” Finn asks with a frown.

“Yes. It’s what guns will look like in her time. She must have brought this back with her for protection but there’s something even more troubling to me and should concern you both as well.”

I press the button to release the ammunition and hold it out to them. Finn makes to take it from my hand but jerks back when his fingers get too close.

“Is that...are those made of silver?” He breathes out the question in disbelief and I nod slowly.

“Yes, Eden returned to us with a weapon loaded with ammunition made of the one thing that will weaken us.”

Cade is shaking his head like he can’t believe I would imply that she would be a threat to us and then he’s pulling Finn away from me and towards the door so I call out,

“Be careful brothers. Eden is no longer the same woman you made your mate two centuries ago.”

Cade

“Tell me you don’t believe that nonsense, cousin!” I growl at Finn as we ride towards the area Eden has arrived near the last two times she came back. “The lass would never want ta harm us. There’s not an evil bone in her body!”

He glances my way with a conflicted look causing me to growl low in my throat that he could ever believe our lass could want to harm us.

“No, I dinnae think she would want that...but why would Bas lie about such a thing? He loves her just as we do. You can see the toll this has taken on him as well as I can. Until we speak ta her ourselves, we willna know for sure what is happening, ya ken?”

“Bah! The bloody vampire dinnae want her in our lives ta start with or have you forgotten that?”

I remember well how he treated her when she first came to us. I know he has never loved her the way we do.

Finn shoots me an annoyed look.

“Just because he saw how hard this would be for us and wanted ta protect us from the pain of her human death doesn’t mean he’s not hurting as well. I have no doubt that he loves her as he also loves us. My current anger towards him is about how he handled this last return of her’s and doesn’t change that knowledge. Make haste, cousin. We willna have the answers we seek until we find our mate.”

He spurs his horse faster, the discussion over.

The population of this area has increased greatly since we left for the wilds and there are many riders and wagons on the roads that make me worried for Eden. If she came back in her modern clothing as Bas said she did last time, it would draw attention to her by the wrong type of man. If the vampire was telling the truth about her state of mind she could be in much danger. We searched the fields and roads as best we could on

horseback until I grow too impatient and worried to continue this way. I ride off the road into the trees and toss my reins and clothing to Finn and quickly shift into my wolf form so I can better smell the air for signs of her scent.

I find her weeping under a tree an hour later, clutching something to her chest with one hand while the other is wrapped around her ankle that is beginning to swell. Finn is right behind me with our horses but a whine escapes my beast when I see the condition that she is in. I shift back to human form and drop to my knees in front of and reach for her but my hands stop and hover as I take in just how badly off she is.

Both of her forearms are covered in red, bloody welts and a choked sob sticks in my throat when I see her snap a strange band covered in blood against her skin. Her eyes are huge and glazed over with tears streaming from them as she looks past me at something far in the distance. They've sunken into her too-thin face and have dark circles underneath them. Her dry, cracked lips mumble words I can't quite make out.

"Eden! Sweetheart, look at me, look at me!" Finn begs her when he drops down beside me.

He reaches out to cup her face, forcing her to look at him, and I see the minute she comes back when her eyes widen and a gasp of relief gushes out of her.

"F-Finn? Oh, oh, oh, Finn! Please, please take me back. I need to go back! You'll help me, right? You'll take me back to Luca?"

"Jesus wept, lass. What has happened ta you?" I cry, causing her eyes to slide my way.

"Cade...I...I need you...to take me...back. Back to Luca." She whispers desperately.

I gather her up against me and cry as I feel how delicate she is now. She's dying. Our mate is dying. I plead with my eyes over her shoulder to Finn, begging him to fix this, fix her and see his jaw clench.

"Give her to me, cousin, and dress yourself. We will take her back to Sebastian to heal her."

I peel her body from mine as gently as I can even as she grasps at me and begs.

“And Luca! Take me back to Luca. I need him!”

I nod woodenly at her, ready to give her anything she needs to save her from the broken creature she’s become as I pass her to Finn and pull on my clothes.

“No, lass. You have ta stop doing that. You’ve shredded your arms!” Finn tells her when she keeps snapping the band against the bloody skin on her arm.

“C-can’t...need to...think! Need...the pain...to think.” She tells him and tries to pull away.

He pulls her closer and rips the band from her arm, dropping it to the ground.

“No, sweetheart, we have you now. You dinnae need it any longer. I promise we will take care of you and give you all you need.”

Fingers of one hand curl into claws, bunching the fabric of his shirt but she’s still holding something in the other with a white-knuckled grip.

“I need to go back, back to him. He needs me to go back!”

As soon as I’m dressed I move to them and try and pry her fingers from the object she’s holding without hurting her. She shrieks at me and struggles to pull away.

“NO! No, you can’t have it! It’s mine. She gave it to me so I can come back on the right day! It’s mine!”

Finn shoves me away with one arm, keeping Eden secured in the other.

“Of course it’s yours. We willna take it from you, lass. Cade only meant ta look at it.”

He soothes her in a calm voice that has some of the mania dimming from her eyes. He looks down at her clutched hand with a frown.

“Does it help you work the mirror? Is that why you managed to return so soon?”

A wide smile filled with madness crosses her face. “Yes! Yes, I can control the time now. I can come back to any day I want. I can come back to Luca.”

He nods at her encouragingly with a tight smile. “That’s so good, lass. And who was the one who gave it ta you, then?”

Her laugh rings of insanity, causing shivers to run down my spine.

“My aunt! She sent it to me to find my way.” Her mad smile dims and a look of confusion crosses her face and her voice lowers to a whisper. “She...she said...something, something about a sacrifice...to fix...to fix...”

Finn’s worried eyes clash with mine. We need to get her back to Sebastian so he can heal her but the way she seems fixated on getting to Luca and now hearing about a sacrifice, I’m starting to believe she may be a danger to us after all.

Eden

I'm going back to him. My wolves are taking me back to Luca. I'll be okay, everything will be better as soon as I'm back with him. My tense body slowly relaxes back against Finn who holds me tightly against his chest with one arm as we ride. His other arm holds my hand to keep me from scratching at my welts but I don't feel the same urge to snap my wrists now that they are taking me back to Luca. My other hand holds tightly to the compass that I can't seem to let go of. When the road we are traveling on leaves the trees and crests a hill, I recognize the field of flowers and the lake they brought me to when I came here on my second trip except it now has a huge house built next to it. A house I dreamed of where we could spend our lives together and I know they built it for me. Finn brings our horse to a stop and jerks his head forward at Cade. When he rides down the hill without us I surge forward in the saddle to try and get us moving. Luca is down in that house, I know it. I need to go there. I need to get back to him!

"Easy, lass. We're going ta them, I promise. Cade's just riding ahead to let them know so they'll be ready ta greet you." He tells me in a soothing tone.

My head nods with a wobble. "K, need, need to go back to him," I whine in a tired voice and let my head fall back against him as he nudges the horse forward. I'm so tired and I feel so weak. I just know everything will be better when I get back to Luca.

We ride into the cleared yard and Finn helps me down from the horse but still keeps a tight hold on me. My head swims with dizziness and my ankle throbs so I know without his support I would topple to the ground. A tall man with shockingly bright red hair accepts the horse's reins to lead it away but pauses in surprise when he catches sight of my face. Something about him triggers a memory and I realize that the man is young Aiden all grown up.

“Aiden! It’s so nice to see you. Please tell Flora I’ll be there soon to help with the chores. I just need to get back to Luca first.”

His eyes widen a fraction in surprise and then fill with sadness. I catch Finn shaking his head quickly at him with a look I don’t understand but Aiden just nods at me and leads the horse away. I mean to question Finn to see what that was all about but then my feet turn to the house. I need to get back to Luca. I manage two steps when my knees give out on me but Finn is there scooping me up into his arms and carrying me the rest of the way to the door. Cade holds it open for us and right away I hear Luca screaming my name deeper in the house. My body stiffens and I cry out in need to go to him but Finn and Cade go in a different direction than where his voice is coming from. I fight against Finn’s hold as best I can but my body has no strength to get away.

“Quickly! Bring her here.”

They take me to a room and I see Sebastian waiting for us.

“NO, no, no-o-o-o-o! You can’t keep me from him! Let me go! I need to get back to Luca!”

I can’t let Sebastian near me. He will trap me, keep me from going back but the strong arms band around my squirming body and holds me still while he brings a bloody hand to my mouth. I try and turn my head, yelling that I hate them. Hate, hate, hate them all for doing this to me, for keeping me from Luca - but fingers pry my mouth open and the hot coppery blood pours down my throat.

My back bows as his blood enters my system and then I drop limp against the arms holding me as the glow overtakes me.

“Lay her on the chaise. She should be clear-headed shortly and begin to heal.” Sebastian tells them as I lay gasping at the changes coursing through my body as his blood begins to heal it and the fog slowly starts to clear from my head.

“You were bloody right, Bas. I’m sorry I doubted you. We need ta tell you what she said. I think her aunt may be a witch

that's hexed her ta try and get revenge on us for something. She said something about a sacrifice and she's got a wee device that lets her control..."

I feel a surge of strength flow through me at the same time I hear Luca's faint voice yelling my name. That's all I need to jump up and fly from the room while they're distracted. I hear them call after me but my feet fly faster than I've ever run before thanks to Bas's blood in my system. I need to get to... Luca? Why do I need to see him so badly? My head is clearing even as my feet run down a hallway with a door at the end that I can hear his voice coming from. My thinking is becoming sharper and memories start to come back. I'm gasping in disbelief as I throw open the door and step into the room. He's standing there, waiting for me and it's like a switch goes off in my head. I'm back, I'm back with him and the fog disappears. I start walking toward him even as a wide grin splits his face and he lifts his arms for me to walk into. I hear the others run into the room but I only have eyes for Luca. Furious fucking eyes.

"YOU FUCKING BASTARD! I'LL KILL YOU!"

The last few steps between us disappear as I lunge for him. I see his face crumple and crack at my screamed words but before I can reach him, strong arms catch me around the waist and start hauling me back. I bare my teeth and swing out to slap him across the face but the hand I use is clutching the compass so it hits flush against his cheekbone and I hear the click of the moonstone being depressed. The familiar roaring of wind fills my ears and I try and yell out to them to tell them what he's done but nothing comes out as my vision goes white.

When I land on the carpeted floor in front of the mirror, for the first time I don't throw up so I shove to my feet and roar out the rage coursing through me. My mind is as clear as it can be with Sebastian's blood in my system and I throw the compass at the wall in fury. It bounces back at me and lands in front of my feet. Hopelessness crashes over me and I sink to my knees and stare at my arms as the damage I have done to my own flesh starts knitting back together. He did this to me.

That fucking bastard turned me into a psychopath. I'll never forgive him for this. I cry out at the pain I know I've caused Bas and my wolves from the way I've been acting. They have no idea why I have done all these terrible things. Damn you, Luca! Damn you to hell!

I sit there for hours going over and over everything I have done to myself and them and trying to figure out a way to make it stop short of killing myself to end it all. I finally accept that killing myself here in my own time would end the whole cycle and that it's the only choice I have. I push slowly to my feet to go run a bath and find my switchblade when a beam of sunlight flashes off the compass at my feet. I reach down and pick it up and hold it in front of me running my fingers over the numbered dials. If only I had this from the start. I could have gone back to France right away. Gone back to...Luca! This will take me back to him. I need to go back, back to Luca. As the last of Sebastian's blood leaves my system the fog descends over my mind and only one thing consumes all of my thinking...I need to go back.

Sebastian

I sit on my horse in the field waiting for her to return, staring blankly at the trees on the other side. She's come every day for the last seven and there's no reason to believe she won't return again today. Eden is getting sicker and sicker every time she arrives and the wolves begged me yesterday not to heal her again, to let her return and die in her own time. Seeing her body wither away and her mind locked into this madness is destroying them right alongside what it does to Luca. We tried to keep her away from him but she hides from us now and always manages to get to the house on her own somehow. If she can't get in through the doors that we keep locked, she'll press her body against the window of the room he's in and when we approach her to pull her away, she presses that damn compass and fades away to try again.

The crack of thunder rings out above me and I don't even flinch. My eyes are heavy with sorrow and exhaustion as I watch her blink into this world. She rolls over and retches but her starved body produces nothing but dry heaves. I watch her try and push to her feet but her body is so weak and neglected that she falls back to the ground. I slide from my horse and walk slowly toward her until I'm standing over her. Her arms are splayed out to either side and I see that cursed compass in her hand so I move my boot to step on her tiny, boney wrist with just enough force to make her fingers fall open. She blinks her eyes at the bright sky and they slowly and sluggishly turn my way. Two more blinks and they fill with so much hate that I drop to one knee beside her.

She is so close to death now, it won't be long. This will end. She will end and then so will I. The pain is so great and all-consuming that my eyes fill with a red tinge as a drop of blood falls from my eye and rolls down my cheek.

Vampires don't cry, that is a fact. This woman though, this love, has so destroyed me and my family that here they are, something that shouldn't be possible. I brush the tears away

and stare down at the blood smeared on my hand and then back to emerald eyes that took everything from me and I can't do it. I can't let her die right here in front of me. I use my teeth to tear the skin at my wrist open and force the blood into her mouth. It won't be enough to save her but it will be enough to see her home so I don't have to watch the light dim from her eyes forever.

She hisses weakly at me with bloody teeth and rasps, "I hate you."

I nod and brush the dull brittle hair from her forehead. The fire of it has dimmed with the disease consuming her. I wait for the moment, the moment her eyes change and fill with clarity. I need this chance to tell her when she's herself and not filled with insanity. I need her to hear me.

"I love you, Eden...forever."

Her eyes turn soft and I see the love return and it's the perfect way to say goodbye to her so I press the moonstone on the compass and send her back.

"Know this, if I ever see you again...I will kill you myself."

Her eyes widen at what I've done and said but I spin away, wanting that look of love to be the last memory I have of her. When I turn back moments later she is gone.

Eden

What...what just happened? Why would Bas send me back like that? Why would he threaten to kill me? I feel the glow of his blood in me and sit up as memories hit. My eyes flash around the room for a clue as to why I would do the things I've done and spot large writing all over the walls. NO, no, oh my god, how did this happen? I jump to my feet and race to the nearest wall and reach out to touch the words that are in my handwriting but gasp when I catch sight of my bare arm. It's no bigger than a twig! My eyes go back to the words.

YOU ARE DYING OF STARVATION

EAT AND DRINK!

LUCA COMPELLED YOU TO GO BACK

KILL YOURSELF!!!

It all comes flooding back at once and I have to brace myself against the wall so I don't fall from the shock of it all. Fuck! Sebastian gave me his blood. Blood that's more powerful than what Luca did to me but it won't last. I don't have long before it will leave my system and I will forget again in the madness of getting back to Luca. I need to get out of here while I have the strength to. I need to go to the hospital so they can put me on a psych hold. That way when I start losing my mind again they will tube feed me and keep me on an IV. Fuck, maybe I should kill myself. NO! I can't do that. I'll get myself committed and wait for Bas or my wolves to find me in this time. We can still be together, I just need to stay alive long enough for them to find me.

I turn and search for my phone to call an ambulance or an Uber, someone to get me to the hospital fast before Bas's blood can wear off. I toss the room but can't find it so I race out and down the stairs and search everywhere. There's a ticking of a clock in my head now as I know time's running

out so I just throw on a jacket and shoes and bolt from the house, right into a snowstorm. My teeth begin to chatter as I slip and slide through the fresh powder and somewhere in the back of my mind I ask when the fuck winter happened. I clutch at fences and buildings to stay on my feet as I travel through the freezing streets to get to the closest hospital which is located in the downtown core.

I start to wonder what I'm doing, where I'm going as I pass an open alley and almost fall on a slick patch of ice with nothing to hold onto. I manage to stay upright but a chilling laugh filled with madness rings out and freezes me to the spot.

“Time after time. Time after time. Time after time!”

I slowly turn to face the alley and blink the snow from my lashes. I need to go back. I need to go back to...Luca! That voice. That voice is Luca's! I shuffle down the dark alley until I see someone sitting on the ground, leaning against the wall and wrapped in dirty tattered blankets. I drop to my knees, not even feeling the icy pain that shoots through them.

“Time after time. Time after time...” He mumbles and I reach out and pull him closer so I can see the madness in his eyes. The fog that was starting to fill my head clears and I just stare at the man whose love almost killed me.

“Luca! Luca, can you hear me? It's Eden. Luca, look at me!”

I shake him until he focuses on me and then involuntarily rear back when he starts to howl with mad laughter. Fuck! He's almost skeletal and his skin is the same color as the snow falling. I need him to be sane to release me from the compulsion he put on me. I look around the dirty alley and spot a broken bottle near by. If Bas's blood can clear my mind then maybe mine can clear Luca's. I reach for the bottle and slash the heel of my hand and then shove it against his mouth. He tries to pull away at first but then I feel his fangs slide into me and have to brace against the wall with my other hand as an orgasm roars through me and steals my breath. If I wasn't already on my knees I would be on my back as the pleasure shakes me.

Luca pushes my hand from his face and gasps as he stares up at me. His red eyes are filled with confusion.

“You came back again. Time after time you come back and then...you fade away.”

I cup his cheeks tightly. “Because you made me! Why? Why did you do this to me, to us, Luca?”

His laugh rings out once again but some of the madness has left it.

“Because I simply couldn’t exist without your love.” He tells me.

I lean forward and press my forehead against his.

“Oh, Luca...you destroyed us. Baby, you have to let me go. I’m...I’m dying because of what you did. Please, Luca...don’t kill our love.”

He blinks at me a few times and then presses his cold lips against mine and then pulls back.

“I release you but I will never stop loving you, Eden.”

I sit with him for a while as the tears flowing down my face at all we have lost freeze on my cheeks. When I feel strong enough to leave him, I kiss him one more time.

“I’m going to fix this, Luca. I promise. I will take all the pain away.”

I leave him there mumbling about time and walk slowly back to my home. When I close the door behind me the first thing I do is walk to the living room and pick up the note my aunt sent me with the compass. I read the words over and over and then let the paper flutter down to the floor. I know what to do now. I know how to fix it all.

I gather food and water and my aunt’s stationery set and settle under a blanket on the couch. I eat slowly and take small sips of water as I start writing a long letter. I need to regain my strength to accomplish what needs to be done. In two months this will all be fixed and all the damage will be reversed...for all of us.

Eden

It's a dreary spring day when I heave my guts out in the park across the street from my Aunt's house. I know she isn't home because it's the day of my parents' and Hope's memorial. She sat beside me and held my hand as my family's friends got up and gave moving speeches in their honor. She held me together that day and got me through it when my asshole husband was nowhere to be found.

I get to my feet and brush the dirt from my clothes. Clothes that are starting to fit again as my body fills out and my health slowly comes back. It will take a long time to fully recover from the months of starvation I suffered under the obsessive compulsion Luca had me under. None of that will matter when I travel for the last time once the mirror recharges on the next full moon.

I leave the park, cross the street and climb the steps to the front door, one hand clutching an envelope with the long letter I wrote, telling her my story and asking for her help. My other hand holds the compass. I stare down at the mail slot in the door and lift the letter to push it through but pause for one moment. Once I give this to her, the chain of events that caused so much happiness and tragedy will be set in motion. For the last time, I wrack my brain to find a different solution but come up empty. Any changes I make from this timeline could send us all down a different path but there are so many paths that it's impossible to predict whether they will be good outcomes or even worse than what has happened in this one.

I shake my head and steel my resolve. No, this is the only way to fix what has been broken so I slide the envelope through the slot and turn my back to the house. I glance to both sides to be sure no one is nearby and then click the moonstone to take me home.

I spend most of my time over the next month sitting in the turret's window seat while I wait for the mirror to recharge for my final trip. I never did find my phone but their pictures were

on the cloud so I was able to download them and print them out again. I look at them a lot as I hold them in my lap. I smile often and cry even more as I relive every moment of the time we shared together...good and bad.

When the mirror lights up again, the rain runs down against the window like tears. My tears are gone. I'm ready to make the sacrifice. I'm ready to shatter it all to fix what was broken so badly.

Sebastian

It's raining but I don't feel the wetness or cold as I stand in front of the house he built for her. He's out there chopping wood obsessively, still convinced that she will return and needing everything to be perfect for her. When Cade and Finn step from the house to stand beside me I don't turn their way. I know what is coming next.

"It's been a week and she still hasn't returned. Do you think she's dead?" Finn asks me.

I can't answer him, say the words, so I just nod. If she was still alive, her obsession, her madness would drive her to keep coming back.

"It is done, then. We are agreed? None of us will approach her if we live long enough to reach her time?"

This time I choke out the words. "It is agreed. We will not interfere in the future."

I see them nod from the corner of my eye as Luca brings the ax down to split another log, his mad rambling faint from the distance between us. A distance that we will never be able to cross due to his shattered mind.

With no last words, the wolves walk away. I watch them go and when they reach the treeline see them shift to their wolf forms and disappear into the shadows. As if he knows our pack is no more, Luca bellows in rage, throws the ax as far as he can, and drops to his knees clutching his head. As the rain pours down the sorrow I feel is replaced by a hard, icy coldness. Everything I let myself love is dead and gone. She gave us a reason to live and then destroyed us all. I will not search her out and interfere as agreed but should I cross paths with Eden Kelly at some point in the future...I will kill her myself for what she has done to us.

Eden

I didn't eat today so there would be nothing in my stomach to throw up. I choke back the dry heaves and push to my feet in the dim room. I don't need the light to know every inch of the space that has been my world for so long. I give the mirror a wide berth as it glows softly and start pulling boxes down from the wall that Adera created to hide this space. Once books and papers are scattered everywhere, I pick up the lamp from the dressing table and unplug it, holding it in my hands as I take one last look at the mirror from the side. It gave me everything and then destroyed it all.

I flinch when I hear the doors on the other side of the box wall open and when the lights come on, I hear the characteristic popping sound of a bulb burning out. I know I'm out of time, out of hope so I raise the lamp in my hand back and throw it as hard as I can at the glass of the mirror.

As it shatters and pieces of glass fall to the carpet, I look down at my hands and watch dry-eyed as they start to fade away. There's no rush of wind this time. I'm not traveling anywhere...I'm being erased and with it all the love and pain. This is how I fix it all. I will never go back and they will never meet me. There will be no love and because of that, there will be no pain. I fix their faces in my mind as I close my eyes and then darkness takes me.

Eden

At the top of the stairs, I dump the packing supplies and pull open the double doors to the turret before waving my hand inside to find the light switch. When I finally locate it, the lights come on with a pop of noise as two burn out, leaving the large circular room half in shadows. Great, I'll just add that to the shit sandwich my day has become. A crashing sound from deeper in the room has me flinching back and making my heart race. My stomach rolls with nausea from it and I sigh, so fucking tired of being afraid of everything.

I blow out a breath at the stacks of junk in front of me. Aunt Adera was so kind to me when I desperately needed it but I didn't know her very well. She was that weird aunt that flit into our lives randomly between long absences as she traveled the world. Cleaning out a lifetime's worth of belongings has been eye-opening.

The woman was obsessed with history. I've sorted through stacks of old - like hundreds of years old - newspapers, research books, thick historical tomes, and documents all wedged in between the most beautiful antique furniture. There was so much crammed into the house that I had to rent two storage units, one for the papers and books and one for the furniture. Once I finish clearing out the turret, I plan on having a few different assessors go through the storage units to see what should be donated to historical societies and museums and to evaluate the antique furniture for auction. Before that can be done though, I need to clean out this final room.

I pause just inside the doorway and imagine the stacks toppling over me, trapping me under the piles of history until I smother. Shaking my head at the dreary image, I slide sideways between stacks and work my way deeper into the room to see just how bad it is before I start sorting. I suck in my stomach as I squeeze through another passage and find a pleasant surprise on the other side. I judge I'm halfway through the room when it opens up into a cleared space.

Turning to look back I can see the boxes and stacks of books and papers creates a sort of wall that hid the second half of the room. Shaking my head at Adera's eccentricities I turn back and take in the space.

The first thing I notice is a beautiful cushioned window seat with bright throw pillows dulled by dust. Beside it sits a small table with a china teacup on a matching saucer. I can just imagine my aunt sitting there while reading one of her history books. Turning away from the view I spot a dressing table with old pots of dried makeup and a hairbrush scattered across it. On one side of the table there's a clothing rack filled with what can only be described as period piece costumes and on the other, the most gorgeous full-length mirror leaning against the wall. The floor in front of it has books, boxes, and papers scattered everywhere. I feel goosebumps flash across my skin as I take in its stunning beauty. What looks like ancient runes twine around the frame, made up of crystals in every imaginable color. If I didn't know better, I'd swear they were real diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires but that would make the mirror worth millions of dollars. That is, if the glass inside the frame wasn't completely shattered. The simple act of me opening the doors must have shifted the air in here enough to topple one of the stacks and break the mirror. That must have been the crashing noise I heard.

I kick some of the fallen junk out of the way, snag an empty box, and carefully start picking up the pieces of broken glass and dropping it inside. I wonder if I can have new glass installed in it. It's such a shame that something so beautiful got shattered. I wish my broken life was as easy to fix. Once all the glass shards are picked up and in the box, I push it over to sit under the frame of the mirror and get to my feet to start cleaning the fallen junk. My mind goes to everything that happened today at the gym and my reactions. I think about what first, Diesel said and then how Kevin basically echoed it. I take a deep breath and let the pity party I've been having for myself go. This has to end. I either need to take the coward's way out and kill myself or get help to start living again but something has to change.

I pull my phone from the deep pocket of my bathrobe and swipe to my email and tap out a quick message to the therapist my aunt's lawyer recommended. I hit send before I can change my mind and then pocket my phone again and get to work cleaning this place out. I'm tired of being sad, lonely, and afraid. It's time to live again.

Gothic

Miles away from a broken mirror and a woman determined to get her life on track, Seattle's newest, hottest nightclub is jam-packed with people dancing and drinking. The loud music throbs through the speakers as bodies writhe to the beat and arms and hands wave in the air. The theme of the nightclub is dark pleasure and the style leans heavily to blacks and reds with statues of a man and woman in the throes of passion in different positions scattered on every level that rings the vaulted dance floor. The club is dark and erotic with dimly lit, tucked-away nooks and crannies that are extremely popular with the more adventurous club-goers and their chosen partner for the night to explore the pleasures the club welcomes.

High above the dance floor, above even the VIP level, is a glass balcony where the owners can look down on what they've created. Four tall, exceptionally good-looking and powerful men lean on the railing as their eyes take in the revelers of the night. They have spent centuries together traveling the world and sampling all its many pleasures in search of that one thing that will fill the empty void they all feel but can't explain. Seattle and this club is just the latest venture to try and find a meaning to their long existence.

As one, they all stand straight, stiffening as something washes through them. The first two men's eyes turn red and one of them speaks.

"Something is coming."

The last two men lift their faces to the air and inhale the scents filling the club as their eyes glow gold. One of them shakes his head.

"No, not something...someone."

To be continued...

Check out the preview for my post apocalyptic standalone RH novel – **Dying To Love**, following the Afterword.

Book 3 in Time After Time – **And Shatter** can be found here!

[And Shatter on Amazon](#)



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Afterword

Still with me? Hating me right now? Yeah, I get that. Sorry! Just know that the next book will be hot and soothe away a lot of the damage this book caused in all the best sexy ways. Thanks for sticking with Eden and her men!

HUGE thank you to the sweetest girl, my niece, Mariah for letting me ramble on about these stories and helping me climb out of plot holes. I wouldn't be able to find the magic without you. Also, thank you for loving my books so much that you walked into a beam because you couldn't put it down. So glad you didn't need stitches!

My ride or die, Rachele, who listens to me panic when I just know I won't get the book done by deadline and just rolls her eyes and says, "Shut up and write, bitch. You know you can do it." She never stops believing in me and it is... everything.

Another huge thank you to Tiffany for coming to my rescue with a last minute beta read. You have no idea how much I appreciate it and all the wonderful suggestions that only made this book better!

As always, my amazing husband and kids who let me disappear for weeks at a time to live in my stories and all the Bingham's who let me squat on their land to binge write in my camper. So much love to you all!

Reese

Dying To Love – Preview

Kelsey

I snuggle deeper under the comforter, trying to find the will to get up and face another day but sometimes the emptiness of my existence makes me want to just not bother. Waking up to this emptiness, this desire to just quit, is becoming more and more frequent as the days go by. As I stare up at the ceiling, I wonder if today is the day that I'll finally find the courage to end it all. Even though I've just woken up I'm exhausted and it takes everything I have to throw back the covers and swing my legs over the side of the bed to the floor. There's a wall of mirrors that hides the closet that I'm facing and I take stock of my ragged appearance. Limp, greasy hair the color of mahogany falls tangled and dull just below my breasts in length. Dark purple smudges look like shadows below my lifeless gray eyes. Eyes that are practically hidden under brows that haven't seen a tweezer in months. My skin is dull, even with the light tan I've gotten from all the work I put in on the crops. I make a face as my gaze goes lower and shift slightly to the side so that I can see the outline of my ribs through the tight tank I wore to bed. I'm at least twenty pounds under a healthy weight and it's not even because of a lack of food.

Cooking and sitting down to a meal for one just emphasizes how alone I am and has stolen most of my appetite so now I just nibble quick bites here and there throughout the day, never sitting down to a full meal. My lips tug up in a smirk as I look at the forest of hair that's grown out on my pale legs and I wonder briefly if I could braid that shit. I could start a new style if there was anyone left alive to follow it. Apocalypse body braids, yeah, it could totally be a trend.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I've been here before. This state of mind. This is the start of a steep slide that ends with a gun barrel pressed against my forehead and my finger hovering over the trigger.

Tara settles onto the bed beside me and looks at my reflection in the mirror with an amused smirk.

“Damn, girl! When you let yourself go, you fully commit and go all the way. Look at that leg hair. You bringing bush back in style too?”

Her laughter rings out as I glare at her in the mirror and spit out, “I didn’t let go all the way or I’d be with you instead of stuck here alone!” Turning away from her I mutter under my breath, “bitch.”

She rolls her eyes and bumps me with her shoulder. “Whatevs, we’ve already covered that. You know I wanted to be with Ryan. Besties trump a lot of things, but not true love. Sorry.” She pins me with her signature “You’re an idiot” look and shakes her head.

“Come on, you got to move past that. You’re the last one standing so make it fucking count.” She wrinkles her nose and waves a finger back and forth and up and down my body. “Fix this shit cause that’s just sad and an affront to all women. You know what you need to do. Round up the girls and make a plan to kick-start your vibe again.”

I close my eyes and breathe out so I don’t blast her with all the angry words that I have bottled up inside, but when I open them again, she’s gone. The ache in my chest flares to life, making me want to join her so badly but her pep talk and the small stubborn spark that still exists in my heart forces me to my feet in defiance. Time to pack that shit away and change the channel. Tara’s right. I need a jump start.

It’s time for a hen party. As Taylor used to sing, I need to shake it off - and the best way to do that is to dance. First thing’s first, if I’m going to go and have a girls’ night, I need to clean up the hot mess my appearance has become and that means it’s going to be a high-maintenance, full works, spa day.

I lean over and sort through the pile of dirty laundry on the floor and my nose wrinkles at the rancid smell that wafts up. Oh-kay. So laundry and a full camper cleanup will have to go on today’s list too. I finally locate a semi-clean hoodie with only a few questionable stains and throw it over my sleep tank

top, not bothering with pants to go over the booty shorts I am wearing. It's not like there's anyone around to see anyway. Three carpeted steps take me down out of the bedroom to the main level of the 5th wheel trailer I call home.

The clean slate state of mind I'm trying to overwrite my depression with has me looking critically at the mess that I've let my small kitchen become. Dirty plates, glasses, and cups litter the counters and fill the sink. I shake my head at how lost I have been for the past few weeks to let it get so bad. So, a full day of physical and mental maintenance it is, body and living space - before I end the night with a few cocktails and some dancing with my girls. It won't magically fix everything that's wrong with me but it's a good first step.

My gaze lands on the hand-drawn calendar I've tacked to the wall and I mentally add another day to my tally. It's been 662 days since the dead rose up to destroy the world as I knew it and 413 days since I last spoke to another living person. If I want to quit my slow descent into darkness, I have to believe there are others out there and one day I won't be alone anymore. I find a travel mug to pour coffee into before jamming my feet into a pair of rubber boots and open the camper door to a beautifully sunny, late June day. I stand stock-still for a few moments, listening closely. I can hear leaves rustling in the light breeze but no sounds of the moaning dead. Maybe it will be a good day.

My eyes scan the small apocalypse empire I am the Queen of, all ten acres of it. Seven of the acres are dedicated to crops and gardens that I only actually need a fraction of to survive. The extra I just keep canning, dehydrating, and storing away for that mythical day when there will hopefully be more mouths to feed. Besides, what else do I really have to do to fill the long hours of each day?

Two acres are stacked end to end with solar panels that make life after civilization a little more bearable. The power they produce means that I'm two steps up from a pioneer woman and I don't have to hand scrub my laundry ... yay me. The last acre has the three RV campers we brought here to live in. Only mine is used to live in. The other two are crammed

full of scavenged supplies that I will never use up by myself, but again - one day.

The campers back onto a wall of rock that goes up at least fifty feet and bolted into it halfway up is a massive, heavy tarp that juts out at an angle to cover all three campers. It's supported by wooden frames at both ends and two more frames between the campers and gives me a large protected outdoor living space. There are three sets of patio furniture, fireplace tables, grilling stations, and patio heaters in front of each of the campers that were all used in the beginning but now sit covered in dust and blown leaves. Sitting around a fire and making s'mores for one lost its appeal pretty fucking quick.

If I squint, I can make out the ivy-covered inner fence that surrounds my empire and keeps me safe, or a prisoner depending on my outlook for the day. Today, I'm choosing to feel safe.

I take a big slug of coffee and get on with it, starting with turning back inside and gathering up all the gross clothing littering my bedroom floor and dresser and carrying it over to the middle camper that has a small washer and dryer in it. I have to wait for the water heater to heat up but once it's ready I get the first load going and search for the beauty supplies Tara insisted we scavenge and haul back when we were first getting this place set up.

After the fences, security, food, and basics were stocked up, Tara and Lisa convinced the guys we needed to do a luxury run. By that point, we had leveled up so high in this zombie apocalypse game that it was an easy run to do, as were the next two. That's how we ended up living the high life with every want we could think of scavenged and stored away.

I lay the beauty tools and products out on the dining table and dive in. I choose a cherry-colored tint for my hair and while it processes, start ripping hair from all over my body with wax strips. Legs, pits, and lady bits are attacked with much cursing and screeching but by the time the color rinse in my hair is ready to be washed out I'm as smooth as an egg and really fucking pink in places from the abuse. I jump in the

camper shower and scrub from head to toe while my hair gets a deep condition. By the time I get out, the water is cold and I feel a little more like my old self. Fat rollers go up and will stay for the rest of the day until my hair dries while I go to work plucking and shaping my brows back into two distinct shapes rather than the unibrow they have been growing into. Just to ramp up the fun, I add a few falsies to bulk up my lashes and get to work on my makeup. A girl's night of drinks and dancing calls for a bit of extra so I wing my eyes with liner and brush on a smoky eyeshadow look. When I finally lean back from the mirror and get the overall look at my face, I'm smacked hard by memories of me, Tara and Lisa crowded into Tara's bathroom as we did our faces for a night of clubbing. When tears well up I force myself to blink them away. Tara would kick my ass if I ruined the smoky eye look I had nailed.

The first load of laundry goes into the dryer and I attack my nails and toes. Trimming, shaping, and painting them a pretty peach color for the season. Other than my hair and dress that I will do later, I'm done with the beauty maintenance portion of getting my shit together. Next up, decontaminate my camper.

When the guys first told us we would be getting RVs to live in for their master plan, I cringed and imagined the ugly orange upholstery and tacky wooden trim of my parents' camper from childhood. Turned out that RVs had seriously upped their game since then. With the majority of the population dead or in hiding and no one minding the store we picked out the best of the best in high-end campers. The one I live in has six slide-outs to double the space.

The large living room at the back has a full couch, two recliners, an electric fireplace, a flat-screen TV, and is slightly bigger than my old condo's living room. There's a freestanding dining table that can expand to seat six comfortably and a kitchen with a house-sized fridge, four-burner gas stove and oven, double sinks, and an island for even more counter space.

Next to the kitchen is a bunk room in its own slide-out. It has a jackknife sofa that converts to a bed, a bunk over top of

that, and a small desk and cupboard. Turning right from the entrance are three steps that go up to a landing with a small ladder leading up to a loft bed area. After that is the bathroom and then the master bedroom that has two slide-outs and a king-sized bed with the very front wall covered in mirrored closet doors. It's fucking epic as far as campers go. The camper beside mine used to be Tara and Ryan's and has a similar layout except it doesn't have the bunk room or loft. The final one had been Lisa and Tommy's and it's a huge ass motorhome. At the time, I chose this one because I was the only single in our group and had hopes that other survivors would join us in time and there would be room for them. I was a fucking fool.

Kelsey's camper:



I take a couple of deep breaths and remind myself about the whole new outlook thing and snap on a pair of rubber gloves because - fresh nails and all. It takes me a few hours to get everything shipshape and sparkling again with all the laundry, dishes, sheets, and bathroom cleaned up. After a snack of cheese and slightly stale crackers I head out to check on the girls and let them know they need to put their party hats on for tonight. I walk past the other two campers and follow the rock wall for thirty feet with my eyes tracking up the rock. I scan the strong mesh rock fall nets that the guys bolted into the rock ten feet above the tarp, looking for any fallen rocks or random zombies. It had only happened once and none of us could figure out how one of the dead had gotten up there in the first place but it had freaked us all out in a big way. I had nightmares for weeks afterwards about zombies dive-bombing our camp from above. The nets started out bright orange but we spray painted them a flat grey before putting them up to help them blend into the scenery.

Seeing that the nets are clear, I take another look over the gardens, noting that the corn was getting to be a nice height, and step into the cavern. Right away I'm greeted by my girls with squawks and balks. Feathers start flying as they rush to the gate in welcome or more likely for feed. I grab a scoop of chicken feed and my egg bucket and wade into the flock.

"Ladies! Big news ... Huge news!" I call out to the flapping hens as I toss feed in an arc to spread it out. "We are lighting this shit UP! Put your best feathers on because tonight is GIRLS NIGHT! Whoop-whoop!"

With the last of the feed spread out I move over to the nesting cubbies and start gathering eggs while I chatter away at them.

"Yes, ma'am we are going to rock the cavern tonight. I expect all of you to put your best effort in but watch your drunk levels. Don't think I'm going to be holding back your feathers if you start puking."

I turn and point. "Yes, I'm looking at you Snookie! You're always the first one who takes it too far, you lightweight." The chicken in question flaps her wings and balks at me in outrage. I cock a hip and glare back at her.

"Well, flock you too! You and J-Wow are always stirring up shit around here. Girl, push me and see if you don't end up in the pot. I ain't playing!" When Snookie settles her feathers and goes back to pecking at the ground I nod. "Uh-huh, that's what I thought."

With one last scowl to show I mean business, I turn away and open the gate between the inside and outside pen so the girls can go get some sun after they're done eating.

I leave them to it and carry the egg bucket to the cavern kitchen, setting it beside two other buckets that are already brimming with eggs on a long stainless steel table that we appropriated from a high school cafeteria. I sigh at just how much work I've let pile up in my funk and pull my phone from my back pocket to check the time. I still have a few hours before I have to do my hair and get dressed for the party so I get cracking ... literally.

I crack eggs into a ginormous steel bowl, tossing the shells into the compost box. I keep careful count until I hit fifty and then whisk them up until they get frothy. Each one of the five dehydrators can process fifty eggs at a time and when I'm done, I have three filled and cooking for the next ten hours before I will grind them up for storage. I need to get this out of my way because the early tomatoes, peppers, and onions will need to be picked and processed into sauces and salsa in the next few days. I wash everything up and clean the mess away, flick off the lights and head out of the cavern and back into the sun.

I spend the next hour walking my gardens, pulling the occasional weed, and checking for any bugs or rot before finally heading to Lisa's motorhome to find something to wear tonight. Where Tara loved her makeup and beauty products, Lisa was a total fashionista. She threw herself into scavenging as many apocalypse inappropriate outfits as she could, like a kid in a candy store with an unlimited allowance. I miss my best bitches so hard right now and try not to hate them too much for leaving me. It takes me a while to go through the many stacked storage totes she had filled with men's and women's clothes and finally strike gold in the master closet. The space is crammed with high-end women's fashions and I can't help but laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of Lisa hoarding such clothing when she would never get to wear it, even if she had lived. I run my hands over silk, satin, and lace knowing for a fact she'd have even more if there had been space.

I finally settle on a short, silver, strapless number that flares out - stopping mid-thigh with layers of silver ribbon hemmed black crinoline under the skirt. It's completely over the top for my hen party but why the hell not? My girls don't judge me ... most of the time. There's a bag looped over the hanger with silver strappy stilettos to match the dress and a slim case with jewelry but I leave the shoes because - still a zombie apocalypse - and you never really know when you might need to run. Instead, I find a pair of thigh-high black boots with silver buckles and sturdier block heels. They don't really match the dress, but close enough for the hens.

I carry everything over to my sparkling clean camper and prepare the most important item to get the night started, a strawberry margarita. Thank god for the bottles of mix that only need ice and tequila to make a club-worthy drink. As I sip my first cocktail for the night I throw on a dance playlist to set the mood and start pulling rollers from my hair. The color rinse was a success and I tilt my head back and forth, loving the cherry overlay on my dark curls. The second cocktail I make goes down even smoother than the first as I touch up my makeup and shimmy into the silver dress.

It takes some comical wrangling to get it zipped up but I'm feeling giddy from the booze so I just laugh as I play clothing twister to get it in place. I twist my hips to make the skirt sway and bounce a few times to make sure my tits will stay inside the strapless bodice but it's tight with built-in push-up support so they bulge out perfectly and there is no need to worry about flashing the girls some nip, no matter how hard I dance. Boots, a choker, hoops, and lipstick complete the outfit and I stand back from the closet mirrors and take in the whole effect.

"Fuck me, what a goddamn waste. Any other night, any other place, and I wouldn't be going home from the club alone looking like this," I tell my reflection with a frown.

I toss my hair back and reach for my drink only to find it empty again, time to go. I'm going to knock my hen's feathers off with this look. I stop on my way out and refill my drink for the road, grab my phone and earbuds, hit the exterior lights so I don't kill myself later trying to get home drunk, and finally head to the party.

It's early yet, the sun is just dipping towards the treetops, but this is the most popular club around so it should be getting busy. The closer I get to it the more I construct my fantasy and by the time I reach the cavern entrance, Tara and Lisa have appeared on either side of me laughing and giggling. I smile coquettishly at the bouncer and he unhooks the red velvet rope with a nod for us to go through. Hot girls don't wait in line after all. I slip my earbuds into my ears and hit play. I love the DJ at this place so much.

The hot beats of Calvin Harris have my hips swaying as we make our way onto the dance floor. John Newman blames it on the night as the three of us bump, grind and spin to the beat while laughing. Song after song, I move my body to the music and lose myself to the fantasy. When I drain my third cocktail of the night I make eyes at the cock across the way who's checking me out but when he caws at me I turn my back. I know a player when I see one. It does make me think about ending the night with a random hook up though. It's been ... fuck ... over a year since my last orgasm and I know just the dusty, purple bad boy vibrator to get the job done. If I can find it.

When the DJ goes retro with some C & C Music Factory, I throw my hands over my head and close my eyes as I dance. I can feel the hot bodies crowding me and smell the mix of sweat, perfume, and cologne overtop of stale beer as I rock out. Fuck, this is exactly what I needed.

I'm feeling nicely buzzed from the drinks and even the slightly sore feet from my heels add to the picture of a time when all was well in my life and the world. I can feel the smile stretched across my face as I spin but when the music cuts out and is replaced by an annoying foghorn alarm in my ears, I stumble on my feet and my eyes fly open.

The light in the cavern is flashing red like a strobe and for a few beats, I consider just ignoring it. Letting it all end here and now while I look hot and my head is filled with good memories. I glance at my hens though and the image of the dead tearing them apart has me squeezing my fists so tight that my nails bite into my palms.

“ARGGGG, MOTHERFUCKER!” I scream out. “Can't you leave me in peace for just one fucking night?”

My chest heaves in rage as I look around the cavern - now empty of my two best friends and all the other club dancers. My perfect moment, my perfect night is gone and I know the party's over and there's only one thing left to do. Kill the fuckers who ruined this for me and this time, they'll stay dead.

Kelsey

I stomp over to a row of metal spikes in the wall and snatch my favorite double holster already filled with two silenced handguns. I add a few extra magazines to the loops, throw the holster on, and check the app on my phone to see which area of the fence is being hit before tucking it back into my tall boot top and start running. Rage coupled with the alcohol I've consumed is making me stupid as I fly through the gardens toward the first fence but I just don't fucking care anymore. If tonight's the night I die, so be it. My hen party was starting to bring me back a little bit but this just shoved me ten steps back into the darkness.

The sun has set but there's still enough light for me to navigate. I should go to one of the guard platforms to get a look at what I'm facing while it's still light out but I'm just so fucking furious that I head straight to the gate closest to the area that's being attacked. The secondary alarm hasn't gone off yet so I know the outer fence hasn't been breached. So far it is just the pressure sensors that have gone off and I should be fine to pick off the zombies that are threatening the outer fence and redirect the rest.

I'm so mad right now that I don't even feel the pain in my feet from running in heels and as I reach the gate on the inner fence I'm prepared to fuck some zombies up. I yank the gate open, tearing apart the ivy that's grown across it and I am definitely not prepared for what's waiting on the other side.

Everything slows down as my eyes take in a man, standing sideways right in front of me, holding out a gun. His head turns my way and I catch a glimpse of shocked green eyes before that gun starts turning my way. I don't even have to think as my next move is one that Ryan drilled us on so many times.

Right-hand goes to the gun barrel, left hooks under and around the shooter's arm, yanks toward me. Duck under the arm, step forward with the gun now in my hand. Another step,

pivot while shifting the gun into my grip. Keep pivoting until I'm behind him and bam, Bob's your uncle! I am now behind the intruder, his own gun jammed into his neck. Then I freeze and assess.

The guy I just disarmed has frozen like a statue and thanks to my heels I can just see over his shoulder to the four other men that are staring our way with dropped jaws and shocked faces. A quick scan shows me three of the four are armed with handguns and the fourth is clutching his side like he's in pain. The dead are pushing against the outer fence, attracted in part by a moaner making a racket a few feet past where the others stand, so I pull the silenced weapon from my left-hand holster and bring it up in one smooth move beside the guy's arm in front of me and take the shot. The moans are silenced instantly from that spot but the fence still shakes as more and more dead push against it. The dead know we're here so there's no point being quiet at the moment. A silenced gunshot isn't actually silenced like in the movies, it's just not the loud bang it would normally be. I swing the barrel towards the group of four keeping buddy's gun pressed firmly to his neck.

"Weapons down. Now," I order in a low but firm tone.

As one, they all look to the guy I'm using as a shield. That's interesting, looks like I hit the leader of this group. His head moves slowly in a nod and his outstretched hands make a lowering gesture for them to comply. Two of them do it right away and toss the guns where I indicate - a few feet in front of them. The third guy hits me with a fierce glare from ice-blue eyes and I take a minute to get a better look at him. Holy hot cakes, he is smoking hot in an angry bad boy kind of way. Thick black hair hangs to his shoulders, surrounding a jawline that could slice bread. Long dormant parts of me start to sit up and take notice but, hello? Not the time or fucking place so I repeat myself.

"Last chance, weapon down." My tone is even, not even a hint of anger in it as he tries to stare me down. I'm thinking I'll have to shoot him in the leg or something when their leader guy speaks up.

"Dev! Put it fucking down, man!"

Dev curses but finally lowers and then tosses it toward the rest of the guns in the grass.

I go up on my toes so I can get closer to their leader's ear and murmur, "Thank you."

He turns his head towards my face not even worried about the gun in his neck and opens his mouth to say something but stops and takes a deep breath, inhaling through his nose. His eyes track over every feature of my face in the fading light and a small grin pulls at his lips.

"First, you smell fucking amazing. Second, you could put your guns down too. We mean you no harm."

I'm sure it's the booze in my veins talking or maybe it's the sexy green eyes framed by thick dark lashes that are filled with interest but my reply comes out waaay flirtier than the situation warrants.

"Hmm, I like to use protection on the first date. Maybe next time."

The tiny grin on his lips grows, making me shake my head to get the thought of kissing them out of it.

"Zombies, Kelsey. Strange men with guns! Focus!" I reprimand myself internally.

"How many dead followed you to my fence?" I say out loud, all traces of flirtation gone from my voice.

He winces and looks apologetic. "It's a horde. Hundreds, maybe even more. We've been running for days trying to stay out in front of them. I'm sorry."

A few feet behind me another moaner hits the fence and starts calling for his friends so I step back and pivot enough to take another shot through the fence at head height, silencing him.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I turn back to leader guy and catch him looking through the gate on the inner fence but thankfully the corn growing there should block most of his view of the jackpot treasure they just stumbled upon. I place my hand on

his back and feel way too many muscles ripple under my touch and push him towards his friends.

“Ok, go to your friends and all of you take a seat. I’m going to need you all to be quiet while I take care of this before they breach the fence. Once they’re gone, we can talk.”

I see him nod and when he moves toward the others I quickly close the gate to keep any more eyes off my home. Once he moves out of the way and sits down, the others have a clear view of me in the dying light and the expressions on every one of their faces shift to disbelief. Not sure if they haven’t seen a woman for as long as it’s been since I’ve seen a man but their reaction to me is a little over the top. I reach for my phone and that’s when it hits me that I’m standing here strapped with weapons in a fucking sparkly, strapless party gown and high heeled boots. The first living people I’ve seen or spoken to in four hundred and thirteen days and they’re going to think I’m a goddamn lunatic. Ok, I kind of am at this point but we could have worked up to that fact. Fuck my life.

“I-I was at a ... a hen party so ...” I wave vaguely at my outfit and then just shrug. Fuck it, it is what it is. After that I mostly ignore them, too embarrassed to see the judgment on their faces as I get to work opening apps and making the first call.

I hear Dev, the icy blue-eyed hottie mutter. “Who the fuck is she calling and how ...” But I hit him with a glare and hold up a ‘wait for it’ finger, cutting him off. Two beats later, the song “Who Let The Dogs Out?” comes blaring out from further in the forest on the other side of the fence. It only takes seconds for the dead to unhook their bony claws from the fence and start to move away. I peek up and see grins on three of the five faces staring at me as I make a few more rapid taps on my phone. I switch apps to security and see all green on the fence line map so I tap back to the next level and send the call.

“Somebody call 911, shorty fire burning on the dance floor.” Can be heard but from further away than the first song. I keep at it until the next song is barely a whisper in the air and finally hit the last measure to ensure the dead will keep streaming that way. I tap the button and drop my phone to my

side, look up and just wait until the first firework soars into the sky and bursts into life. I space the next two shots five minutes apart for the best coverage and as soon as the last one goes off, I wave the men to their feet, putting a finger to my lips in warning so they'll stay silent and motion for them to move down the path between the fences away from where their guns are piled and in the opposite direction than the horde came from. I frown when I see two of them help a third to his feet and almost carry him between them. I keep a safe distance from the others with my gun carefully trained on leader guy's head as we follow from behind. We move along until we reach a corner. I wave them on but place a hand on leader guy's broad back causing him to freeze in place as the others keep walking. I move up close and rise up on my toes again so I can whisper.

“Your friend is injured. Was he bit?”

Once again, he turns his head so our faces are close together and takes the opportunity to look me over again, causing me to bite my bottom lip. When his eyes go straight to my mouth, shit starts fluttering down south.

“No, a jagged piece of metal sliced him on his side as we were dodging the dead. It's why we climbed your fence. He can't run anymore.”

I pat his back twice and nod to let him know he can keep going and also – muscles to feel. When we've made it halfway down the path and I see the huge tree on my home side of the fence I whisper for them to stop. I step back a few feet as they all turn to look at me and chew on my lip while I think of the best way to play this. On the one hand, people! On the other, strange people – men, who could kill me and take over my home. The light of the day is gone, leaving them barely outlined, so I activate the flashlight on my phone and angle it towards the inside fence just in case there's still any dead nearby. The ivy is a thick barrier covering both fences making it hard for anyone to see in but best to not take any extra chances. Now that we can see each other again, I wave them back down to the grass and crouch down, keeping a tight grip on my gun in case one of them makes a move.

Inspiration hits me with a half-ass plan but it's all I've got so I run with it. I tap out a text message on my phone to Tara's old cell and send it in full view of them and then turn my best hard-ass look their way.

“Ok, first up. There are other guns on you right now so any funny business and they'll take you out. Second, stay off the fences. They're alarmed so you have no chance of sneaking anywhere. Third, I'm going to need to see that injury to prove it's not a bite. If it is, you all go right now and take your chances out there. If it's not, then you're welcome to stay here for the night to give your friend a chance to rest and recover. You will be perfectly safe as long as you stay off the fences and someone will come to talk to you in the morning.”

Four of them turn their heads and have one of those silent conversations only long-time friends or family can have without saying a single word out loud. Tara and I could do that. We could pack an entire bitch session into one loaded look. I get a hard suspicious look from Dev but the other three nod at me and two of them help the injured guy pull his shirt up enough that when I shine my light on it I can see a long angry-looking slash in his side that's still bleeding a little bit.

I make a pained face. “That needs to be cleaned out and stitched up or it'll get infected.”

Dev rolls his eyes at me. He. Rolls. His. Eyes. At. Me!

“No shit. Kinda been busy running for our lives to play doctor but hey, so sorry to have disrupted your party, Princess.” He shoots at me bitterly.

I huff out an excuse-me-laugh and push to my feet. “Right, then. Have a nice night!”

I turn with a swish of my skirt, toss my hair, and start walking back the way we came when leader guy calls out softly.

“Wait!”

I stop but don't turn around, waiting.

“What's your name?”

I actually have to think about that for a few seconds. Do I want to tell them? I haven't heard my name on another's lips since Tara left me. I close my eyes, my voice barely more than a whisper on the wind but it's loud enough for him to hear. I tense up as I wait for another snarky comment.

“Thank you, Kelsey. Thank you for letting us stay here tonight.”

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City Escape – A Stranded Novel, Book Four

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