

BLOOD BORN

THE
HALFBLOODS



MILLY
TAMMILLY
TAIDEN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLOOD BORN

THE HALF BLOODS

BOOK 1

MILLY TAIDEN



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About the Author

Also by Milly Taiden

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Blood Born

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Wolf alpha Reece Blackstone hates vampires. He was orphaned because of a bloodsucker. When Celestine Longborn prances into his life, Reece's hatred of vampires gets complicated. **Not only is she a Half Blood, the hot blonde is his mate. He can't believe his bad luck, especially not when Celestine offers to help him deal with the vampire threat.**

Celestine Longborn doesn't think of herself as a vampire. She's a Half Blood who has never drunk a drop of blood. Convincing Reece of that is hard. But if he wants to save his town, he'll have to lay aside his feelings and work with her. **The grumpy and sinful looking wolf is not her idea of the man for her, but fate seems to think so.**

Of course, some feelings are easier to ignore than others, and both are having a hard time fighting their attraction. With a deadly threat looming, love will have to save the day. **But will it be too late for the wolf and the Half Blood or can they do what's never been done before?**



BLOOD BORN

THE HALF BLOODS 1

*NEW YORK TIMES and USA TODAY BESTSELLING
AUTHOR*

MILLY TAIDEN

—For all my readers. This series is so sexy!
Enjoy!

ONE



CELESTINE

“That’s it!” Celestine slammed the door behind her. “I’ve had enough.” She stomped across the marble entryway, not bothering to remove her signature leather jacket as she kicked off her heels. She bent down to rub her pinched toes. “He was so *not* worth heels.”

Valentine popped her head out of the living room, grinning mischievously. “Told ya.”

Celestine glared at her sister. The scowl was a family trait, but as the eldest Longborn sister, Celestine rightfully believed that she’d perfected it. “Don’t you know it’s *rude* to say that? No one likes an *I-told-you-so*.”

Valentine shrugged and tossed her long auburn hair over her shoulder. “And? I wasn’t trying to be polite. I’m making a point. I told you it was a bad idea, and you didn’t listen. You never listen.”

Celestine’s scowl darkened. “I’m a great listener. Besides, there was no way to know it was gonna go badly. Not *that* badly.”

Her sister snorted before dissolving into a fit of giggles. “Ah, come on, sis. You knew it was going to go terrible because it always goes bad for you.”

“You shouldn’t date anymore,” Lilliane, the youngest of her sisters, added, coming down the curving staircase with a lollipop in her mouth. “You’re cursed.” She popped the candy out of her mouth to laugh.

“Stop that.” Celestine shuddered. “I am not cursed. I’m just... unlucky.”

“Means the same thing,” Lilliane sang.

“Agreed,” Valentine added.

“You’re impossible. The both of you. Sometimes, I wish I was an only child.”

“But then, who would be here to remind you that you’re cursed?” Lilliane asked with another chuckle.

“If I’m cursed, then so are you,” Celestine grumbled on her way to the kitchen. Her sisters followed. Of course, they would. They might tease her relentlessly, but they would be down to join in on the post-date snack Celestine would make to up her mood. She pulled out the tub of ice cream from the fridge and doled out three big scoops in three even bigger bowls.

“This is one of the reasons why I love being a Half Blood.” Lilliane sighed happily. “Can you imagine if all we could eat was *blood*? Life would be so much more depressing.”

“Of course, it would be. Who wants to survive on blood alone?” Val giggled.

“Umm, our *father*,” Celestine answered. The reason for her curse, she added quietly.

“Well, sure,” Val waved her off before taking a big mouthful from her tasty frozen snack. “Daddy dearest is a full-blown vampire lord with the terrible temper to match. Why do you think he’s angry about 99.9 percent of the time?”

“Blood-only diet,” Lilliane agreed with a nod. “It’s bad for the temper.”

“Whatever.” Celestine sighed before she walked out of the kitchen with her ice cream on the way to the living room. She sat in one of the perfectly plump leather couches and sighed again.

“Are you gonna tell us what was so bad about it?” Lilliane asked before she sat beside her.

“Nope.”

“Oh, just tell us,” Val said, taking a seat on the other couch. “You know you want to.”

“We’ll bug it out of you,” Lilliane continued.

“My life was so much simpler when you two weren’t around.”

“You would be lonely without us,” Lilliane said.

“Especially with your terrible luck with men,” Valentine added.

“We’re three intelligent women—” Celestine spoke around a mouthful of ice cream.

“Half Bloods,” Val corrected. “Not technically women, exactly.”

“Can’t forget that half-vampire thing,” Lilliane agreed as she dunked her lollipop into her ice cream, effectively using it as a spoon.

“You eat candy like an eight-year-old with no parental supervision,” Celestine chided.

“You complain like a thousand-year-old vampire,” her sister returned with a grin. “We all have our things.”

“Stop letting her distract you,” Val cried. “You know Ceecee will never tell us what happened unless we work together.”

“Right,” Lilliane nodded. “So. Tell us. What was bad?”

“Nothing. It was just boring.”

“The date or the man?” Lilliane asked.

“She said *it*. Gotta be the date.”

“It was both,” Celestine mumbled.

“Whoa!” Val cried. “It was so boring the guy stopped being *human*?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Celestine answered before stuffing her mouth with ice cream.

“Intense,” Lilliane nodded in sympathy. “You always had a thing for the boring ones, though. What you need is a bad boy.”

“No, thanks,” she grumbled. “The last thing I need is a male who can’t get his head out of his own ass. Bad boys are moody, and I don’t need a temperamental man-child dragging me down.”

“Oh! Lil is right,” Val cried. “You do need a bad boy. Someone who will keep you interested and on your toes.”

“A bad boy is just an asshole who treats you terribly,” Celestine argued.

“Not true,” Lilliane sang. “A bad boy can be a good boyfriend.”

“The line between bad boy and asshole is very fine,” Val said. “That’s true. You just have to know what you’re getting into before you start to catch feels.”

“Catch feels?” Celestine rolled her eyes. “I’ll just take a vow of celibacy and be done with the whole *men* thing.”

“That will work great for you,” Lilliane clicked her tongue. “Maybe you should let us pick your guys for you from now on.”

“This isn’t a sitcom.” Celestine laid her head back on the couch. “You can’t just pick who I date and hope you can pick better than me. In case you forgot, we are siblings. We’ve got to the same father and, by extension, the same emotional trauma.”

“Jeez, you’re a little black cloud sometimes.” Lilliane sighed. “Emotional trauma? Come on.”

Celestine put her bowl of ice cream on the coffee table, but before she could go on, Val interjected. “Umm, hello! Our father is a vampire, and we each have different mothers. We’re not the same. Besides, what kind of emotional trauma can we have?”

“Our father is a bloodsucking killer,” Celestine replied. “And that makes us half-bloodsucking killers.”

“But we haven’t killed anyone,” Lilliane argued.

“Only because we don’t need that much blood to survive.” In truth, Celestine was *happy* she didn’t have much luck in the love department. She was terrified of falling in love and accidentally killing her lover with her blood lust.

She never shared this fear with her sisters. As the oldest, she probably had more fears, and if they hadn’t thought of it, then she wouldn’t be putting things in their heads. Maybe her sisters didn’t feel the same way about their vampire heritage. Maybe they were stronger—better—women than her.

“I—”

A loud boom came from the entryway, and all three Longborn sisters stilled. Celestine’s response was completely cut off as her back straightened.

Only one person in the world would dare just barge into their home.

Their father.

“Girls,” he bellowed chillingly.

Celestine shivered, and Lilliane blew out a breath. “He sounds angry,” she mouthed. It was always safer to assume Father would hear whatever they said about him—unless they said things silently. The Longborn sisters had gotten pretty good at reading lips.

Sylvester Longborn, tall, pale, and sinewy, walked into the living room. “When I call for you, I expect an answer.”

“What’s wrong, Father?” Celestine asked without bothering to hide her annoyance.

“The vampire council will be meeting,” he replied, his tone dropping a few more degrees. “Right here.”

“Right... *here*?” Celestine’s entire body went numb with cold.

“In town?” Val’s hope was silly, of course. Celestine already knew the answer. It was written all over their father’s face.

“No. Here. In the house.”

“What? Why?” There was no reason the vampire council would choose to meet in the Longborn home. They never left the safety of their enormous palace in Europe. “What did you do?” Celestine pressed on.

“We are not discussing this,” Father snapped. “Get the house ready.” Without another word, he turned on his heel and left the house as quickly as he had entered.

The three sisters stared at each other in complete dismay.

Lilliane grabbed a lollipop from her back pocket and stuffed it into her mouth. “Well, now. That’s gonna cause some trouble,” she said around the bulbous candy.

“Does the vampire council ever meet away from the palace?” Val asked, frowning. “I don’t remember them ever leaving the palace grounds in my lifetime.”

Celestine sighed and shook her head. “I don’t think this is good. They never leave Italy. Not all together. Not all at once. This is bad.”

“This is about us, isn’t it?” Lilliane asked with a small voice.

“It has to be,” Celestine nodded gravely. “We better get the house ready for their arrival.”

“How long will they stay?”

“Do we need to get staff?”

“How about the windows? We need to get better blinds.”

Val and Lil threw questions at her faster than she could answer. “One thing at a time,” Celestine interrupted her sisters’ tailspin before they kickstarted her own. Already, her gut churned with tidal waves of acid. The back of her throat burned with the implications of a vampire council meeting. In. Their. Home.

“Right,” Val said. “But what is the first thing?”

“That,” Celestine replied, “is a very good question.”

TWO



REECE

Reece Blackstone stomped across the forest. His heavy boots hit the mulched leaves, and each crunch angered him. Maybe he should have shifted into his wolf to look around, but that wouldn't help him if he *did* find something.

How was he supposed to help anyone if he was nude? If he was a wolf? A kidnapped victim didn't want to be found by a naked man in the middle of the woods. Or a wolf. That would only make the whole rescuing thing harder.

Not that Reece believed he would find the missing woman in the woods.

Her scent was nowhere to be sniffed, and he was pretty sure he would find a body. Again. It would be the tenth, and he was getting really sick and tired of finding dead bodies. Dead bodies meant sad families, and sad families meant people crying in his office.

There was nothing worse than a sobbing person—except a dead person.

Reece never knew what to do when someone—one of his clients—cried. He didn't *do* comfort. He didn't do kind words. It simply wasn't part of his genetic makeup.

Maybe if he was a different kind of wolf with a different kind of history, he could pat a weeping spouse on the shoulder and offer some mundane comment of “They're in a better place.”

Reece *hated* that line.

How many times had he heard it when his parents were killed? If he had a nickel for each time, he would be a very rich man, and he wouldn't have to keep up with his PI business.

He liked his job just fine before, but in the last few weeks, there'd been an uptick in missing persons, and these missing persons had a knack for being found in the woods drained of all their blood.

These humans were clearly the victims of a killer, but there was nothing he could say to the very human families.

"Hey, listen, your wife was killed by a vampire." That wouldn't exactly go over well with most people who firmly believed that vampires were the stuff of myths and nightmares.

Reece didn't have that luxury. As a wolf shifter, he knew there were things in the world that were way worse than a man who could shift into an animal at will.

Vampires were such creatures.

Unlike shifters and other creatures that weren't supposed to exist, vampires killed without thinking of the consequences. They hunted to survive and feed, but they also hunted for the sport. Sure, Reece did the same, but his prey were deer, rabbits, and other woodland creatures that were part of the food chain.

Humans weren't meant to be food, and he was quickly running out of excuses to give.

"Did you find anything?" Sheriff Nero asked, coming through a thick patch of trees.

"No," Reece growled. "I'm guessing by your tone that you didn't find anything either."

"Big fat nada," Nero replied, stuffing his hands in his hair. "I don't get it. Her scent led us here. How can it just vanish?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"It doesn't feel like the other disappearances," the other wolf shifter commented.

“No, it sure doesn’t. Her scent should be here. She didn’t just grow wings and fly away.”

“Do vampires fly?” Nero shuddered in disgust. He hated vamps almost as much as Reece.

“We don’t know she was taken by a vampire,” Reece said. “Not until we find her body.”

“All the others were drained dry,” Nero argued.

“Right, but you said yourself this feels different.”

“Probably because this vamp can fly,” the sheriff crossed his arms. “Some can do that, can’t they?”

“I’ve got no clue. From my research, I haven’t found any real sources that agree on that.”

“Well, sure. Sources on vampires are all one hundred percent accurate.” Nero clicked his tongue. “Why does it have to be a creature steeped in mythology? It makes chasing ’em that much harder.”

“You’re telling me,” Reece grumbled.

Nero winced and clapped a hand on his friend’s back. “Sorry, man. I’m an insensitive ass sometimes.”

“It’s fine. I don’t expect everyone to know or remember that my parents were killed by a vampire.” Even after all these years, it hurt Reece to speak those words out loud.

Maybe it would hurt less if he had gotten revenge on the vamps who’d murdered his mother and father. Maybe if he had justice, it wouldn’t be so hard to think about chipper and sunny Wendy and stoic, but funny, Carter Blackstone.

His parents were good people who were taken from him much too soon. He had barely gotten to know his parents as a ten-year-old before his aunt told him they were gone.

Gone to a better place.

Even as a kid, Reece couldn’t understand why death was seen as a better place. His parents weren’t with him, and he thought that was the best place for them. For him too.

“I should get back to the office,” Nero sighed. “Maybe we need to regroup. Maybe she was taken to a different part of the forest.”

“What? Do you think the vamp is smart enough to create a false lead?”

Nero shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe they’re getting smarter.”

“Sure as shit hope you’re wrong. The last thing we need are smarter vamps.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Nero turned back, only to stop when he realized Reece wasn’t following behind him. “You good, man?”

Reece shook his head. “Something’s not right here.”

“I know. But standing in the middle of the forest trying to sniff every last branch won’t help.”

He heaved a heavy sigh. “You’re probably right.”

“She’s probably already—”

“I know,” he snapped.

“I guess this is another case that you won’t get paid for. One that’ll make it all that harder for me to keep my job.”

“No one likes to be told there is no hope,” Reece agreed. “I don’t mind not getting paid, though.”

“Well, sure. It’s not like you have bills to pay or anything.”

Reece raised a brow and followed behind Nero. “I might have bills to pay, but I can’t ask clients to pay me when all I can offer them is the certainty that their loved one has died.”

“At least you’re not a town official with an election to win,” Nero joked. His attempt to lighten the mood fell flat.

This was the tenth disappearance in as many weeks, but this was the first time the trace went cold. Reece was so frustrated, he wanted to punch a tree. He was a wolf, for fuck’s sake! He’d been on this woman’s trail since the day after she

vanished. He should've been able to find her with little to no problem.

Whoever this killer vamp was, they were good. Too good. He was going to have to think outside the box for this one.

Especially if he wanted to find Farrah Johnson alive.

THREE



CELESTINE

“I miss yesterday,” Celestine grumbled into her coffee cup. “Even with that terrible date, yesterday was good.”

“Of course, yesterday was good,” Val laughed tightly. “Yesterday, our biggest issue was your terrible love life. Today, we need to worry about the vampire council living in our home.”

“I knew we should’ve sold this place,” Celestine mumbled. “It would have been better for us if we had chosen to leave the Longborn estate to live in a small and crowded apartment far away from all of this.”

“Shit, can you imagine?” Lilliane shuddered. “Twelve vampires stuffed into a shoebox apartment with us?”

“I don’t want to imagine that,” Celestine snapped. “That sounds like a nightmare.”

“At least this house has a bedroom for every visiting vamp,” Valentine said. “Hopefully, they stay in their bedrooms and only come out for the council meeting.”

“Hopefully,” Celestine said, “this doesn’t last very long. We live in a small town. If people start dropping like flies because we’re playing host to twelve hungry and angry vampires, we won’t be able to explain it away. A few people going missing here and there is one thing, but if twelve people go missing every time these vamps feed, we’re going to be in serious trouble.”

“We can ask them to hunt away from the town,” Lil offered. “Father agreed to that.”

“Right,” Celestine snorted. “Because that went over so well with him. I don’t think the council members will be easily swayed.”

“Seriously,” Val shuddered. “We can’t let them feed around here. Don’t you remember the rumors running around when the council met last time?”

“But that was around the palace. Everyone knows it’s dangerous to live near a vampire castle,” Lilliane said.

“But humans don’t even know that vampires are real,” Celestine cut in. “How can they protect themselves from a threat they don’t even know about?”

“Are you saying someone should warn the humans in town?” Val gasped.

“How?” she replied. “How can we tell the humans to protect themselves from vampires? No one actually believes we’re real, and if we went around telling folks that we know vampires are real because we’re Half Bloods, I’m pretty sure we’d be locked up in nice padded rooms.”

“I wouldn’t mind the holiday,” Val joked.

“We would probably end up in Area 51 or something,” Lilliane said. “It’s hard to be half human and half imaginary creature.”

“It is,” Celestine agreed. “You two start installing those blackout blinds in the bedrooms, okay?”

“What are *you* gonna do?” Lilliane asked, crossing her arms. “You’re not gonna bail on us, are you?”

“There is no way in hell I’m leaving you two alone to deal with this. There’s just something I need to do.”

Celestine grabbed her wallet, phone, and keys on her way out the door. Each item had a specific place in her leather jacket.

Her trusty leather jacket.

It wasn’t exactly her armor, but she never took the thing off. Not even in the summer’s sweltering heat. Her skin was a

little sensitive to the sun, and she would rather be very warm than have a terrible sunburn. She slipped on a pair of sunglasses and hopped into her car.

She drove around Longville, thus named for the Longborn family. *Her* family. Well, her father's.

Of course, none of the humans knew that their beloved small town had once been a vampire stronghold. Maybe if they had known, their homes would be better protected against the vampire horde coming their way.

Celestine wondered if she could put strings of garlic at every doorstep and windowsill in town. The locals would probably think she was crazy. Maybe they *would* lock her up. Hell, maybe they *should* lock her up.

After all, it was her choice to encourage her sisters to live in the family home. She couldn't remember the reasons now, but she thought it was probably to keep an eye on them. Like her, they were Half Bloods, but they didn't seem to hate their vampire side as much as she did.

Sometimes, Celestine feared that her sisters would one day decide to go full vamp. Especially if they were given the chance.

Maybe it was an unfounded fear, but Celestine kept a close eye on them to make sure they didn't take a turn. A bad turn. One that would be an irrevocable step.

Celestine drove down Main Street until she arrived at the grocery store. A cursory peek in the produce section revealed there weren't enough garlic strings to protect a single home. The garlic powder in the spice aisle wouldn't work either. She'd need to buy the stuff in bulk, and then how would she guarantee that the powder wouldn't be cleaned or swept away by the wind?

Besides, protecting a home didn't mean the townsfolk were safe. Not if they were walking around the town, going about their business. What was she supposed to do? Tell every human they had to wear a string of garlic around their necks? Hello, padded room. Party of one.

More defeated by the second, Celestine roamed the grocery store for another solution.

Of course, the grocery store was busy. Mothers with their children. Men picking up odds and ends. A few teens buying junk food with their pocket money.

All of these innocent people were at risk because her father had been stupid and brought the vampire council to town for whatever fucking insane reason Sylvester Longborn did anything.

“I have to do *something*,” she muttered to herself.

“Are you okay, dear?” a little old lady asked.

“Huh?”

“Oh, I might be older than dirt, but I heard you. You sound upset. I don’t know what your troubles are, but I’m sure it’ll be all right.”

Celestine smiled at the woman as her heart broke a bit. How could she let these small-town folks remain defenseless against vampires? These humans weren’t just prey. They were *people*. People with loved ones and lives.

“Thanks,” Celestine replied, grabbing all of the garlic powder from the shelf.

It wasn’t much, but it would have to do.

“I hope that’s not all going in the same recipe.” The old woman laughed. “That’s a lot of garlic powder. You’re better off going next door and buying it by the case.” She laughed at the thought, no doubt finding it ludicrous.

“No, no,” Celestine responded. “Not the same recipe.”

Maybe once she had bought off the town’s garlic powder supply, she would have a genius idea. An idea that would protect the people of Longville from her father.

Maybe if she could pull this off, she wouldn’t have to go around living her life as if she was cursed.

FOUR



REECE

There was nothing Reece hated more than going back to the beginning of an investigation. That meant he had missed something. It meant his instincts had failed him, and for a wolf, there was no greater insult.

He was mad at himself for failing again. Ten disappearances. Nine bodies. Ten chances he had completely fucked up.

“You gotta give yourself a break,” Nero said from the passenger seat of the truck. “We’re up against vamps. They’re not the usual perv or psycho.”

“That just means I’m no good at hunting down someone my own size.”

Nero rolled his eyes. “You really think that’s it? Man, vamps have *powers*. Powers we don’t even know. Give yourself a break, will ya? At least you’re trying to help. It’s more than we can say for the human authorities, present company excluded, and we both know I don’t really count as a human authority.

“Human cops would have given up a long time ago. Yet, here you are, going back to the top to figure out what *we* missed. Though, for real, Reece. I don’t think we missed anything. I think this is the work of a powerful vamp, and there is little to no chance we’ll figure out what happened. Let alone find this latest victim before it’s too late.”

“Whatever. I gotta try. I’d rather try again, and maybe, if we catch this fucker, we can avoid another missing person.”

“Sure.”

Reece slowed the truck to a crawl as they turned onto Maple Drive, a narrow street off the main strip of Longville. The little white house at the end of the road was familiar to him now. He had sniffed and perused every inch of the place.

“I’ll drop you off here. Try to catch her scent again. See if it leads you somewhere different.”

“You got it. I’ll keep you posted.” Nero jumped out of the truck and began walking down the street with his hands stuffed in his pockets as if he were nothing but a sheriff going for a leisurely afternoon walk.

Reece parked near the Johnson family home and got out of the truck, scanning his surroundings to make sure there was nothing out of place. No one watching the home. No one scoping out the place.

That’s when he saw her.

A curvy blonde woman clad in the tightest—most alluring—pair of jeans he’d ever seen. Her leather jacket was molded perfectly to her curves. She was pure sex appeal. Attraction boiled in his blood. He’d never felt this way, and it surprised him. How was he supposed to focus on his work with such a beautiful woman—

He stopped walking, confused.

“What is she doing,” he whispered. Reece couldn’t look away. Was it fascination or shock? He didn’t have time to think it through. But there was no doubt the woman was pouring some kind of powder on each windowsill of the Johnson home. He turned his head toward the wind and took a few sniffs.

The sharp scent nearly made him sneeze.

Garlic.

The blonde woman was actually spreading garlic powder on each windowsill of the home.

“What the fuck is she doing?” he muttered to himself again.

Without taking a second to think about what he was doing, Reece made his way over to the house. He kept his footsteps slow and deliberate so as to avoid making a sound and spooking the woman.

As he got closer, his confusion only increased.

The attraction he felt a second earlier was replaced by a deep burn that sparked up his spine. Her scent was different. Not wrong, but there was something terribly familiar about it. Terrible because he recognized the undertones. She was a vampire.

This confirmed what he already knew. The missing people were the victims of a vampire on a rampage. He stalked forward, no longer caring if he made a noise. If he spooked the vamp, he could just chase her down and make her pay for the harm that she had done to those families.

As he got closer, he stumbled back as if someone had hit him in the solar plexus. He nearly doubled over in shock. His wolf howled loudly, the sound nearly tearing his mind in two.

Maaaate!

The recognition of who—*what*—she was made his legs weak.

What. The. Fuck.

No.

Just no.

A big fat, loud, NO!

There had to be some kind of mistake. His mate couldn't be this woman. This *vampire*.

She was undoubtedly beautiful. Her long, wavy blonde hair didn't smell like other vamps. She actually smelled like flowers, and there was nothing vampiric about her gray eyes, but that didn't mean she wasn't a threat.

"I'm gonna say this only once. What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

She pursed her full lips at him and crossed her arms. Her leather jacket tightened across her chest, making his mouth water.

No. No. No. She is the enemy. We can't think of her like that.

“None of your business,” she snapped back.

“Oh, I think it is. The family hired me to find their daughter. I am here because I am *allowed* to be here.” He pointed toward the tub of garlic powder in her hands. “I’m not sure what *you’re* trying to do with that, though.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “None of your business, *wolf*.”

He was momentarily thrown, but it quickly faded into anger. A vampire—even a good-smelling one—could definitely tell he was a wolf.

“Well, forgive me for the confusion, but I don’t get why a vamp would be spreading garlic around town. Especially not around the home of a missing woman.”

“Half vamp,” she said through gritted teeth. “And what I do in my town is none of your concern, even if you *were* hired to find Farrah.”

He was shocked. His brows shot into his hairline. “You know Farrah?”

“No. It’s a small town, but not so small that I would know each resident personally.”

“Then why are you doing that?” he pointed to the garlic powder.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“Maybe the authorities would be interested in knowing why you’re here, then.”

“Oh? And what would you say to the cops? Help, please, this woman is putting garlic powder on windowsills. She’s a danger to the spaghetti bowls of the town.”

“Not quite. But I could make you a suspect in the disappearance. I’ve got an in with the sheriff. He’s an old pal.”

“Of course, you do,” she growled. But Reece didn’t miss the fact that she blanched. Color drained from her face, and she actually took a step back. “If you *must* know, I’m only here to make sure the Johnson family doesn’t have any more tragedies.”

“Tragedies?”

“Don’t you think that a missing family member is a tragedy?”

“Not as much as a dead family member,” he replied, his words strained under his own loss. His grief had the annoying knack of smacking him in the gut when he least needed it. “You know she’s dead.”

The woman looked away. It was all the confirmation he needed.

“Wow. Did you kill her?”

Her head snapped up, and Reece was sure the vamp would claw out his eyes. “How dare you ask me that. I would never harm a human.”

“Funny. You’re a vamp. That’s what your kind does.”

“I’m not a vampire. I’m a Half Blood, if you must know.”

Reece was shocked. “Excuse me?”

“Half Blood. Half vampire, half human. It’s really not that hard of a concept to wrap your mind around.”

He blinked at her, at a loss for words.

“Are you kidding me? You really don’t know Half Bloods exist?”

Reece shook his head.

The woman shook her blonde head. “Are you insane? You thought you were walking up to a full-blown vampire in the daylight? You thought it was a good idea to just strike up a conversation with a creature who could eat you for breakfast?”

“I didn’t think vampires could feed on shifters.”

“Seriously? Of course, they can.”

He didn’t miss the use of *they*. Whoever this woman was, she didn’t feel like a vampire. Reece was more confused than he had ever been in his life. What was he supposed to think? Not only was this lady his mate, but she was a Half Blood. A kind of vampire he had no clue even existed until a second ago.

“You look shocked again. Do you have *any* knowledge about vampires?”

“I thought I did.”

“You clearly don’t. Next time you come across any bloodsucking creature, you should run in the other direction. Not straight forward.”

“I can’t do that. Like I said, the Johnson family hired me to find their daughter. I am fully allowed to be here, which is more than I can say for you.”

“Whatever. I’m just doing the best I can.”

“Why?”

“Why what?” she uncrossed her arms, but her stance was no more relaxed than it was a second ago.

“Why are you trying to protect this house? It’s a little late, isn’t it? How do you know the powder will even work? I thought only fresh garlic strings protected against vamps.”

“Right, but a minute ago, you didn’t know Half Bloods even existed, so how about you accept that you have limited knowledge when it comes to vampires.”

“But garlic *powder*?”

Without hesitation, the woman rolled her sleeve and sprinkled garlic powder onto her soft forearm. The creamy skin immediately turned bright red, and she winced in pain. “If I react like that, just imagine what it would do to a full-blown vamp.”

“Do you know any full-blow vamps?” he replied as she covered her injured arm.

“I’m just here to make sure this family is left alone.”

“Left alone,” he repeated dully.

“Uh-huh.”

“There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“And why should I? I don’t know you.” She crossed her arms again and tapped her foot at him. “I’ve got shit to do, and you’re in my way.”

“Got more windows to powder?”

“Maybe,” she replied.

Reece took a few steps toward her. It was terrible. He wanted to grip her in his arms, but he also wanted to tear into her for being the worst kind of killer. It didn’t matter that she was Half Blood.

Shit. It didn’t even matter that she was his mate.

She was a killer.

That’s all that mattered.

FIVE



CELESTINE

Celestine tapped her foot impatiently at the wolf who stood in her way. His longish black hair gently curled around his brown eyes, giving his scruff cheeks an appealing look.

He was hot.

Crazy, stupid hot.

But he was also one pissed-off wolf with a seriously bad attitude.

Of course, his good looks weren't just undercut by his crappy temper. He stared at her like she was a piece of poop he'd stepped in.

More than that, he had actually approached a vampire without any consideration for his safety. He couldn't possibly know that Celestine was rather famous for her refusal to sip even the tiniest bit of blood from any living creature.

"You must have a death wish," she said, absentmindedly scratching at the garlic powder wound still simmering on her arm.

"Why? Because I stopped you from putting garlic powder on a couple of windows? What are you doing?"

She threw her head back with a laugh. "You've got guts. I'll give you that."

"I demand to know."

"You can't go around demanding things from people like that."

“Sure, I can,” he stood his ground, mimicking her stance and crossing his arms. “If you know the Johnson family, then by all means, let’s talk to them together.”

“No.”

He grinned. His lips curled up in a wolfish way that nearly made her shiver. Only because he was so good-looking. Not because his allure was actually making her nervous. Not in the least.

She was a Longborn Half Blood vampire, for fuck’s sake. A little wolf couldn’t turn her head. Not even one as hot as Mr. Attitude.

“Why would a vampire spread garlic? I want to know.”

“There you go again, demanding to know things that have nothing to do with you.”

“Seeing as I’ve been hired to find these people’s daughter, they would agree with me that it is definitely my business.”

“I’m just trying to help.”

“But why? If you’re spreading garlic, you know a vamp is behind the disappearance. I only *suspected* it. So that means you know she’s already dead, and you’re trying to...” He paused but only for dramatic effect. “Repel vamps from this home. Interesting. Your boyfriend’s handiwork? Trying to cover his tracks so you can live happily ever after sipping blood and destroying lives?”

Her jaw dropped. “Are you seriously fishing for my marital status in the same breath that you’re giving me shit for trying to help these humans?”

It was his turn to laugh. “Marital status? Nah. I’ve got no interest in *that*. Just trying to understand why you’re here. What, if not the protection of a loved one.”

She tried not to gulp, but it was difficult. She wouldn’t exactly call her father a loved one, but she sure didn’t want anyone to guess that her father could definitely be behind this disappearance and others too.

It was bad enough that the vampire council was coming to town.

Celestine had a moment of insanity. She opened her mouth and nearly told this strange wolf just that—that she was trying to protect the town from the incoming vampire council.

It wouldn't do.

There was no way she could tell a non-vamp there was a council. It would be sharing vampire secrets, and vampires had been killed for far lesser crimes against the vampire regime.

“I really don't have to explain my motivations to you.”

“You sure about that?”

She nodded. “You're not from here, so you can't understand how this small town works, but we look out for each other. No matter what breed we are.”

He laughed again. It was a dry sound devoid of any humor. “Looking out for each other?” He shook his head. “I'm pretty sure you're only protecting your food source from rival vamps.”

“I'm a Half Blood. I don't need to drink blood to survive.” The lie was an easy one. Besides, it wasn't *really* a lie. She didn't need blood. Not enough to drain a human dry, anyway. She couldn't even remember the last time she had actually drank blood straight from the source.

The wolf narrowed his eyes and watched her carefully. If he was trying to look into her soul to see if she was lying, he might see the fib.

Not that it mattered.

He was nothing. He meant nothing. He could not be a threat to her and her family—no matter how much she hated the vampire side of things. She still had sisters to protect.

“Now, if you excuse me...” She walked by him, abandoning the Johnson house without powdering every possible point of access. It hurt her to leave, but the wolf wasn't giving her much choice.

“I better not see you around here again,” he warned, grabbing her arm. He sniffed loudly, closing his eyes as if he were committing her smell to memory. It sent shivers up and down her spine, and Celestine hated herself for the attraction that simmered in her blood. “I know your scent now. I’ll know if you come within an inch of this place.”

“Whatever,” she growled as she pulled her arm free.

Celestine refused to look back at the wolf, but it was hard.

Very hard.

Later, once she had powdered most of Maple Drive, her stash of garlic powder was dangerously low. There was still half the town to protect. She had to find a better plan, but she wasn’t sure how to do it alone.

She couldn’t involve her sisters.

It was too dangerous.

If her father found out she was helping humans, he would probably kill her. Celestine didn’t want to put her sisters in that kind of danger. She was their big sister, and it was her job to protect them—even if it was from herself and her weird desire to help humans.

“Oh, my *god!*” Val cried as soon as Celestine walked through the front door. “You *reek!* What have you been doing? Rolling around with...” She sniffed the air. “Wet dogs?”

Celestine waved her off as she rushed up the stairs and straight to her bedroom. Valentine, stubborn as she was, ran behind her. “Seriously. Have you been rolling in a wet puppy pile?”

“Never mind what I’ve been doing. Just make sure the house is ready for the council.”

She slammed her bedroom door and took the longest shower of her life. She scrubbed herself down with so much vigor she nearly took off the first layer of her skin.

The garlic powder on her arm was a reminder that today, she had met a wolf. A wolf who was onto her. She tried to forget all about it.

She tried to forget all about him and his brown eyes and lush black hair. Her brain didn't get the memo because that night, she dreamed of him.

SIX



REECE

Reece watched the woman walk away in complete disbelief. Part of him wanted to run after her. At the very least, he wanted to have her name. He wanted to look her up, but all he had to go on was the fact she was a Half Blood.

That wasn't exactly a whole lot to go on if he wanted to find her again.

If he *had* to find her again.

Because she was a vampire. It didn't really matter that she *claimed* to be only half a vampire. It didn't even matter that she asserted that she didn't drink human blood.

It had been a lie.

His shifter senses had told him as much, and he wasn't about to let that go.

Reece didn't exactly follow her, but he craned his head just enough to see her license plate. She drove a vintage Chevy convertible. It was bright turquoise. Not exactly subtle. He typed up the license plate numbers on his phone as he watched her drive away. He was so engrossed in thoughts of his mate that he barely noticed Nero making his way toward him.

"Man, you look *pale*. Are you okay?" Nero asked.

Reece nodded tightly. "Fine."

"You don't look it. Who was that you were talking to?" He sniffed the air. "She smells..."

"Like a vamp?"

“Yeah, kinda. Not quite, though. She doesn’t smell foul like most vamps. What’s that about?”

“Apparently, she’s a Half Blood.”

Nero’s jaw flopped open. “What? *Half Blood*? That’s a thing?”

“Apparently,” he repeated, not sure he trusted himself to say anything else.

“Holy fuck,” Nero hissed. “So we don’t have to worry about vamps, but half-breeds too? Is there anything else we should know? Are fairies real? Ghosts?”

“I don’t know. We need to do more recon on these creatures. Half-bloods. Everything else can wait until it’s a problem. I doubt ghosts are draining people of blood. Vamps are our issues, and we need to learn everything we can about them.”

“Yeah? How? They’re the most secretive things out there. I thought shifters were bad until I found out vamps were real.”

Reece sighed. “I’ve been trying to gather intel on vamps since my parents. And I’ve basically got nothing.”

“Then you should follow that woman. See what she knows.”

He shook his head. “I can’t do that.”

Nero frowned. “Why not? Wouldn’t that be the best way to find out exactly what she’s doing? If she’s linked to this somehow? She *was* at the scene of a crime, and my training tells me that a lot of killers return to the scene of the crime.”

Reece considered telling Nero the truth. *The Half Blood is my mate.*

Nero would probably piss himself laughing. No. Reece couldn’t say anything, and he definitely couldn’t follow the woman. If he did, he might do something very dumb. It was enough that he’d already laid hands on her.

Sure, it had only been to commit her scent to memory, but he would always regret touching her. Her smell was now

permanently burned into his mind.

So was the feel of her arm in his hand. His palm still itched and twitched with the desire to explore the rest of her—and he didn't even know her fucking name.

All he knew about her was that she was his mate. His mate and a vampire. This was, without a doubt, the worst-case scenario. He was at a loss. What the fuck was he supposed to do with a vampire mate when his parents had been killed by those very creatures?

“Nothing,” he answered his own question out loud, confusing Nero. “Nothing,” he repeated before getting his truck.

REECE SAT AT HIS DESK, tapping a pen in annoyance. He had an address for the mystery woman.

In fact, Celestine Longborn lived right in Longville. Her family, it seemed, had founded the village a long time ago.

Celestine's home was none other than the lavish and impressive Longborn Estate. Reece had driven in front of it more times than he could count since he had been hired by the Johnson family.

Now that he knew that a Half Blood lived there, he wanted to kick himself for not scoping out the rich crowd in town.

Duh. Just *duh*.

Of course, the local rich family would be vampires.

He should have thought of that immediately. He wanted to drive down there right then and give Celestine a piece of his mind, but that would mean coming face-to-face with his mate again.

He wasn't ready for that. He would never be ready for that. Seeing her again would only prove that she *was* his mate, and she was the last woman—the last creature—he would ever

want to be with. It didn't matter that she was gorgeous and smelled like a meadow.

She was a vampire. A murderer.

For all he knew, she had killed his parents all those years ago. After all, vampires were famous for their inability to age. He didn't know what a Half Blood's skills and powers would be, and he didn't want to find out.

But he would have to find out, though.

The Johnson family was paying him a lot of money to find out.

With a sigh, Reece pushed back from his desk. He would have to do it. Confront Celestine and hope that fate had made a serious mistake matching them together. He was barely out of his office and down the hall to the exit when he spotted her.

Celestine Longborn stood in the lobby of his office.

His heart beat a little faster, and his wolf sure didn't help things. The beast began to howl impossibly loud, nearly drowning out Celestine's stern "We need to talk."

He growled low in the back of his throat. "Oh?"

"Yeah. I need your help," she squeezed out the words painfully.

Reece was stunned into silence, but only for a second. He threw his head back with a laugh and pretended to wipe tears from his eyes. "You're a hoot. I didn't know vamps had a sense of humor."

"There's nothing funny about this situation. I need your help, but no one can know I'm here. Take me to your office."

"I'm not in the habit of taking orders from people. Let alone *vamps*."

Celestine rolled her eyes. "How many times do I have to tell you? I'm a *Half Blood*."

"Yeah? And what is that even supposed to mean? I've been doing some research, and I haven't seen anything about Half Bloods anywhere."

She shrugged. “I can explain it to you, but only if you promise to keep the vampire secrets to yourself.”

Reece laughed again. “I don’t think that’s gonna happen.”

“You’re impossible. I did come here for help. What will it take for you to listen to me? Payment? I can pay you.”

“I don’t want your blood money.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I don’t have blood money. I earn my wages.”

“Yeah? And that big house you live in?”

Her cheeks turned crimson. “It’s a family estate. If I didn’t live there, it would fall into disrepair.”

“We couldn’t have that,” he replied sarcastically.

Celestine threw her hands into the air and turned to leave. “I knew this was a mistake. Forget it. I don’t need your help if you’re gonna be like this.”

“Celestine,” he called out and reached for her arm. Once again, he was struck by the sheer force of the contact—even through her leather jacket. He was really starting to hate the fucking thing. He wanted to see what she was hiding under there, even if it was molded perfectly to her body.

“What?” she snapped. Her eyes went wide. “You know my name.”

“Celestine Longborn. I know who you are now.”

“Did you follow me?”

“I’m not a vampire, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have skills.”

“Well, sure. Skills such as memorizing my license plate.” She rolled her eyes. “I really shouldn’t have come here.”

“So why *did* you come?”

“I told you. I need your help.” Her face softened. She meant it. She did want help. She needed it.

She needed *him*.

His chest puffed up with the realization, entirely without his permission. He didn't want to be needed by a vampire.

"You can let go of my arm now," she said.

He looked down, only to notice that he was still holding her. It was pure nonsense. Yet, he couldn't drop her arm. "Tell me why you need my help?"

"Because I don't like people getting hurt."

He nodded. "And your kind won't be angry that you're seeking a human's help?"

"You're hardly a human. I can smell the wolf on you."

He grinned. "Wolf. Yeah, that's right. I'm not quite human."

"That's why I need *your* help. You're not as vulnerable to vampires as the human authorities."

"Yeah? And what would I be vulnerable to?"

Celestine took a deep breath, closing her eyes to gather strength. Reece couldn't believe how beautiful she was, but soon, his mate's looks were the very last thing on his mind. "The vampire council is coming to Longville."

The confession fell like a death sentence on his lust for Celestine Longborn, the Half Blood.

SEVEN



CELESTINE

Celestine couldn't believe she was spilling vampire secrets—to a wolf, no less. “You should know that simply telling you this has put my life in great danger. I'm not exaggerating either. If other vamps found out about this conversation, they'd put a stake right through my heart, burn and salt my body, and then throw the ashes into a vat of holy water just for good measure.”

Reece stood like a fool with his mouth hanging open.

“I could be killed for betraying vampire secrets, but I can't let this happen without doing *something*.” Celestine took a deep breath and continued. “My father has done something. I'm not sure what, but because of him, the vampire council is on their way.”

“Maybe they found out he's been killing too many humans.”

She pursed her lips at him. “No. I can't see the council caring about *that*. Besides, I don't think he's responsible for the disappearances.”

“You claim you don't drink from humans. Is he the only vamp around here?”

She turned away from him. “Most likely, yes. This is Longborn land, and no one would dare hunt here without his permission.”

Reece raised a brow at this. “My, my. There sure are a lot of rules in your world. Especially since you're all killers.”

“I’m not a killer,” she spat. “And if someone is out there killing humans, it could be that someone is making it *look* like my father is behind it. Regardless, *twelve* ancient vampires are coming to town. The humans won’t know what hit them if these vamps all start feeding on the townsfolk.” She finally paused to take a deep breath. “Then, the Johnson disappearance will be the least of your problems.”

Reece still stood, looking at her like she was insane.

“Say something,” she growled.

“What do you *want* me to say? You just dropped a whole lot onto my lap. Give a man a second, will ya?”

“You don’t have that luxury. The council will be here by the end of the week.”

“Shit,” he hissed. “That’s why you were putting garlic powder near people’s homes. You’re trying to protect them.”

“You don’t have to be so shocked. Not every vampire is an evil bloodsucking creature.”

“In my experience...”

“Well, get ready for another experience. It’s not like I *want* to be a Half Blood. I didn’t get to pick my parents, just like you didn’t get to pick your parents who made you into a shifter.”

“I didn’t really get much time with my parents,” he said with a low growl. “Vampires killed them when I was ten.”

Celestine’s eyes went wide as she gasped. She covered her mouth with her hands and shook her head. “Oh, no. I am so sorry, Reece. I had no clue.”

“You couldn’t have known.”

“It sure explains your hatred of my kind.”

“I thought you were a Half Blood.”

“You know what I mean. I’m really sorry. I hate that vampires cause so much harm. That’s why—” She stopped short and took a step back. “This was a bad idea. Had I known

you have a history with vampires, I wouldn't have come. I'll ask someone else for help."

"You're not going anywhere." His tone was cold and hard.

"You might be an alpha, but you can't boss me around."

He chuckled dryly. "I'm not bossing you around. I'm telling you that no one else will help you with this. Given my history with vampires, I've been doing research on them since I was old enough to sign up for a library card. You won't find another PI with vampire knowledge like me."

"That means nothing," she replied. "There is so much misinformation about vampires out there. It might be easier to fill in someone else instead of working against your preconceived notions."

"If that were true, you would have gone elsewhere right from the start. But you didn't. You came to me. Now, you're gonna tell me what I can do to help the humans of Longville stay safe from the vampire council."

Celestine studied him carefully. She didn't know if she could trust him. Probably not.

What other choice did she have? Let the council destroy the whole town? No. That wasn't an option.

"Come on," he insisted. "I can't believe that garlic powder is enough to stop twelve ancient vampires from making Longville their own all-you-can-eat buffet."

"Obviously not, but it will give them pause."

"And that's enough for you?"

She glared at him. "Do you think it's enough if I'm standing in your office, asking you for help?" Reece considered her words, but Celestine wasn't exactly known for her patience. "You know, for a wolf so intent on helping and saving humans, you sure take your sweet ass time to help them."

"What do you suggest we do?"

“We need to figure out which vamp is hunting in Longville, and we need to figure out why the vampire council is coming to town.”

Reece crossed his arms. “Yeah? And what if we do this little investigation, and we discover that your father *is* behind the attacks?”

She stiffened. “Then I’ll deliver him to the council myself.”

“You would do that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Seems a little cold.”

“Really? Cold? It seems cold to arrest someone who is killing people?”

“You’re his daughter.”

“Only because he fathered me. He wasn’t exactly the cuddly kind of father. He took me from my mother when I was a toddler, and by the time I was old enough to find her, she had died.”

Reece huffed out a breath, his face contorting with sympathy. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Well. You understand now? I only agreed to stay in Longville and keep the estate if he promised never to hunt on town grounds. If he broke the one promise he ever made me, then I am done with him. This town in *mine*.”

“Actually, you’ll find this town is mine. Technically.”

“What?”

“The forest that surrounds the town is Blackstone pack land. That makes the town mine. Technically.”

She arched a brow. “Are we going to discuss geography, or will you help me?”

Reece nodded. “I’ll help you. But you should know I don’t trust you.”

“That’s fine. I don’t trust you either.”

“This is going to be a very odd partnership.” He laughed without humor. “If we don’t have trust, what do we have?”

“A common goal. The vampire council cannot come to town. There can be no more human deaths.”

“Agreed.”

“So. We need to start with the latest disappearance.”

Reece turned and walked back toward his office. “Let’s go. I’ll show you what I was able to find.”

“Weren’t you going somewhere?”

“Yeah, actually, I was on my way to your house to scope out the place. Until just now, you were my main suspect.”

Celestine stopped walking. “Oh.”

“I guess we were always going to end up working together.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Can you believe it? The wolf and the vampire.”

“Half Blood.”

He grinned. “Yeah, whatever you say.”

Celestine sighed but followed him into his office. The human lives in Longville were in a precarious position if she and Reece couldn’t learn to get along.

EIGHT



REECE

There is a vampire in my office.

Not just any vampire either.

My mate is in my office.

Everybody, be cool.

His wolf didn't take the warning to heart. The beast wasn't done losing his shit and howling a blue streak. It made it difficult to focus on the task at hand. "The vampire council is coming to Longville."

"Yup."

"Any idea why?" he asked.

"No clue. My father didn't exactly go into details."

"Try and take a guess."

"Could be because of the mounting disappearances. Ten in ten weeks in such a small space could make people suspicious."

"And that would make them come here?"

"Maybe," she replied. "They *never* leave their stronghold." Celestine's voice tightened as she spoke. Reece was sure there was more. She was sharing vampire secrets, but not *all* of them.

He wanted to push, but he had to be careful. Working with a vampire wasn't exactly high on his to-do list, but if she was willing to spill some secrets, it was better than nothing. Hell, it

was more than he had learned from years of research. He tried a simple enough question, hoping he wouldn't push too hard, too fast. "Where does your father live if not at the Longborn Estate?"

"He has a few homes, but he prefers to be in big cities. It's easier to find victims there. People always leave or arrive, vanishing without a trace."

"There is an insane amount of missing people in the U.S." He shuddered.

"It's the perfect hunting ground for a vampire," she agreed.

"Home, sweet home," he said dryly. "So. We need to confirm that your father was nowhere near the town when these people went missing."

"Well, that's the thing. I don't know *where* he was, and I can't get that information without making him suspicious. I do think I have a plan. You can approach him and ask him. He arrived in town today. He came to warn us about the vampire council's visit. He's tasked us with getting the house ready."

"Technically, he could be responsible, then."

"Sure. He promised he wouldn't hunt in Longville, but he could have broken that promise. If you approach him, he won't suspect that I suspect him."

Reece frowned. "Are you saying you'll play the double agent?"

"Yes, exactly. If you approach him with questions, it'll make him nervous. He'll probably lie to you because he has zero respect for anyone who isn't a vampire, but he'll be annoyed, at the very least. That's when I'll swoop in suspicious of *him*. Hopefully, he'll tell us something useful."

"Which you will share with me."

"Obviously."

"I already told you that I don't trust you."

"Consider my position. I already told you way more than anyone outside the vampire world has ever known. I could be

killed for this conversation alone. You have me stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

Reece would much rather have her stuck under him on a soft bed, but he had to ignore that desire. No matter how painful it was. Did Celestine have to smell so good? Did she have to toss her hair over her shoulder every two seconds? His office would now forever smell like a flowery meadow. He’d probably have to burn the building down to get rid of the sweet aroma.

“Fine. I’ll go to your place and ask him questions.”

“I’ll call when he stops by. That way, you’re sure to catch him at the house.”

He nodded. “Even before that, we can try to find if he has a connection with any of the missing people.”

“There *is* a connection. Longville. But beyond that, there shouldn’t be. Not unless someone *is* framing him.”

“I don’t get it. If you hate him, why do you think he’s innocent of *this*? You know he’s a killer.”

“But not here. Not breaking a promise. There aren’t many boundaries in our father-daughter relationship, but this is a hard one. If he is behind this, I am done with him.”

“And you can’t come out and ask him?”

“No. He’s a good liar. Besides, I don’t want to put my sisters in harm’s way, and I’m scared he wouldn’t take too kindly to my questions. My father is a powerful man. A powerful vampire.”

“Fair enough. Go back home. Call me the second he’s at the estate, and I’ll be there in a second.”

“Fine.”

“Meanwhile, I’ll look for links between him and the missing people.”

“I could help you if you share your investigation with me.”

Reece shrugged. “If you want. Don’t you have a job? Somewhere to be?”

“I’m a graphic designer. I can work from anywhere, and I have a very flexible schedule. This is more important. There are lives on the line.”

Reece sighed and ran his hands through his hair. This was a terrible plan. He was aligning himself with a vampire. But what was he supposed to do now that he knew what the town was in for? He wasn’t from Longville, but Blackstone bordered the town, and who was to say the vampire council wouldn’t cross the forest to find their meal? Especially if Sylvester Longborn kept his promise to his daughter.

“I’ll send you what I can. Meanwhile, go back to your estate. I’ll be waiting for your call.”

She nodded. “Fine. I’ll be waiting for your investigation notes.”

Celestine walked out of his office, trailing her intoxicating scent behind her. Reece opened the window, but it was no help. As he did, he watched Celestine get into her convertible.

For the second time that day, he was watching her walk away, and he didn’t know why it made his heart ache. She couldn’t be his mate. He could not accept her.

REECE PACED HIS OFFICE, staring at his phone. He couldn’t remember the last time he waited by the phone for a woman to call.

Never.

That had never happened.

And now, he was waiting for a call from the woman he wouldn’t call his mate. Sure it had nothing to do with dating, but he still hated to wait.

All he could do was pace and wait for her to deign to call him.

What if she changed her mind? What if her father caught on and decided to kill his daughter? There was no accounting

for the vampire way of things. Truly, they were monsters.

Celestine Longborn was half monster.

A knock on the door nearly made him jump out of his skin. Nero stood there with a grin on his face. “Jeez, man. You’re more skittish than a deer during hunting season.”

“What do you want?”

“I found Farrah Johnson’s car. It was stashed in the southeast part of the Blackstone forest. Her scent is there, and it’s strong, but it vanishes again.”

“Someone knows that they have to hide her scent from shifters?”

“It’s funny you say that because I thought the same thing. But who would be that smart?”

“A vampire,” he replied. He quickly filled in Nero. It felt wrong to share vampire secrets because it put Celestine in danger, but Nero wasn’t just anyone. He was an alpha whose lands also bordered on Longville. He also happened to be sheriff. In many ways, the two alphas were partners when it came to defending their packs from big threats. Reece didn’t have a choice.

“Well, shit,” Nero shook his head. “If a vamp is trying to frame Sylvester Longborn, they’re doing a bang-up job if he’s the only bloodsucking vampire in the area.”

“Yeah. But why?”

“Power? The estate?” Nero guessed.

Reece thought about this. “I don’t know enough of the vampire world to know if that’s right or not.”

“You need to get the girl in here again. Really talk to her.”

“You think that’ll help?” Reece snorted. “It sure won’t help *me* any,” he added cryptically.

Nero frowned. “Yeah, it will help. We’re usually the top dog, the top of the food chain. Vamps are kind of our equals. I don’t want to say that they might have an edge on us, but they

might... We need an inside man—umm, an inside woman. She offered, so use her.”

“I’ll wait until she calls me. No use in contacting her just yet.”

“If you say so. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got my own pack to take care of.”

Reece nodded. “Let me know if there’s anything I can help you with.”

“Of course. It’s been a long time since the Blackstone and the Greenlee wolves have worked together, but I’m glad we can help each other out in this time of crisis.”

Reece sighed and stared down at his phone, willing it to ring. How had he come to this? How was he sitting around, waiting for a call from his mate—a vampire?

If his parents could see him now, they would disown him.

NINE



CELESTINE

Celestine rushed into the house with a plan to run up to her room and shower off the smell of wolf from her clothes before her father returned. It would blow up her plan with Reece if Sylvester even got a whiff of wolf.

Valentine put a wrench in her plans the second Celestine walked in. “Oh, Ceecee!” Val pinched her nose. “That is the second time today that you just *reek*. What are you *doing*?”

“Rolling in dog shit, apparently,” Lilliane laughed.

“Enough, you two. How are the preparations for the council coming along?”

Lilliane shrugged. “We bought out all of the blackout curtains from the hardware store. We ordered more, but there is no guarantee that they will arrive in time. Do you think the vampire elders will be okay sharing a room?” She threw her head back with a laugh.

The vampire council had never left the palace. For *any* reason. They were terrible snobs used to luxury. They were accustomed to being waited on hand and foot. They were also so old, most of them were completely uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the modern world. Not only did they hate humans, but they hated everything humans did.

Their choice to travel to small-town America was downright disturbing. Given the Longborn sisters’ history with the council, Celestine feared the outcome of this visit.

There was no doubt in any of the Longborn sisters’ minds that they would be the ones to serve the elders once they

arrived. As Half Bloods, they weren't exactly at the top of the pecking order, and the council liked to remind them of that.

"I remember when we met the council the first time." Lilliane shivered as if she could read her older sister's thoughts.

"You were barely six. There's no way you remember," Celestine argued.

"Umm! No. I might have been young, but it's not every day you get forced into the vampire council's palace to have your fate decided. It left an impression."

"Of course, it did," Val cut in. "I remember it too. It was terrible. I can't believe we have to share space with those freaky people all over again." She shuddered. "I've heard rumors that some elders' favorite meals are Half Bloods."

Celestine rolled her eyes. "That's nonsense. They were dead set against us existing. If they liked feeding on Half Bloods, they would have kept us under lock and key for their meals."

"I hate to think about that," Lilliane shuddered again.

"Maybe that's why they're coming. To drain us dry."

"You two!" Celestine gasped. "Stop with the dramatics. There are humans disappearing from the town, and that has to be the priority. We can't have our town under attack. We can't be food for the elders. I won't allow it."

Lilliane raised a brow. "And how would you stop them?"

Celestine couldn't tell them that she had betrayed vampire secrets to a wolf, no less. Would Reece even intervene if she and her sisters were up on the vampire council's chopping block again? She doubted it. "I'll find a way to stop them."

"How?" her sisters pressed in unison.

"It's a big sister thing. No one messes with you two but me."

"Girls!" Father bellowed.

“He really needs to learn manners,” Val muttered. “I hate the yelling.”

“Then yell back,” Celestine said. “We’re up here!” she shouted back.

“Down here. *NOW!*”

Lilliane made to go, but Celestine shook her head. “No. Don’t give him more power. Let him come.” She pulled her phone from her pocket and texted the wolf. With any luck, Reece wouldn’t take too long to arrive, and Father wouldn’t be leaving before the planned ambush.

“But he’ll be really pissed,” Val mouthed.

“Let him be,” Celestine said loudly enough that she was sure her father had heard her.

The sound of thumping footsteps up the stairs echoed through the library, and soon, Sylvester Longborn stood in the doorway, panting with anger. “What is the meaning of this disrespect?”

“Just making sure you know that we won’t be at your beck and call. We won’t do it for the elders either.”

“If they ask it of you, you will,” Sylvester snapped.

She raised a brow at him. “Oh? And here I thought that we weren’t beneath vampires. Isn’t that what we were promised? No diminished status for having mortal mothers?”

Father’s nostril flared again. “You’re an impossible, child. You always have been.”

“Yup,” she grinned.

“Why aren’t the windows downstairs covered? The curtains should be drawn.”

“We will keep them closed when they get here.”

“The sun is dangerous for me,” Father spat. “For you, too, if memory serves.”

“What’s a little burn?” she replied. “Isn’t that right, Val? Lil?”

“We can’t do more right now, anyway. We bought out the stock, and we need to wait for more blackout blinds to council-proof the house.”

“I don’t care what you need to do but cover those windows. Now.” Father opened his mouth to continue his diatribe, but he was cut off by the deep and dramatic sound of the front doorbell. “This isn’t over. One of you, get that.”

“I’ll get it,” Celestine said, earning herself a shocked look from her father. “I’m expecting a delivery,” she lied. “Could be those blinds.”

She ran down the stairs, hoping it would be Reece. She threw the door open, and her heart was immediately beating way too loudly. “Yes?” she asked, pretending she hadn’t set this up.

“I’m here to speak with Sylvester Longborn. It’s important.”

“Sure. Father!” she bellowed, much in the same way he had done. Unsurprisingly, Sylvester didn’t come when he was beckoned. “SYLVESTER! DOOR FOR YOU!” she shouted.

A very disgruntled Sylvester glided his way down the stairs. “What’s this all about?” he sniffed haughtily.

Reece gave a wolfish grin. “Mr. Longborn, I’m Reece Blackstone. I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“About?” Father sneered.

“Is there somewhere we can talk? I need to ask you a few questions about some missing people here in town.”

Father’s eyes went wide. “No. I don’t have time for this. I’ve only just returned to town to visit my daughters. Please see yourself out.” He waved Reece off with a flick of his wrist.

Celestine flattened herself against the wall, desperate to keep track of the conversation, even though it sounded like Reece wouldn’t make it through the door. She had to do something.

“Father?” she asked, rounding the corner. “Is everything okay?”

“Fine. This *wolf* is just leaving.”

Celestine gave a tight smile. “Oh, sure. Is there something I can help with?” She aimed the question at Reece. “My father is only visiting,” she said, hoping her father didn’t realize he was being played. “If you need to ask questions, maybe you and I should talk. I basically run this house. I’m the boss, I guess.”

“No,” Father snapped. Celestine knew she’d hit a nerve.

“It’s either me or the human authorities,” Reece said, his wolfish grin sliding a little too close to malicious for Celestine’s taste.

Father narrowed his eyes. “The library,” he hissed before turning his back.

Reece was quick to follow behind Sylvester with Celestine hot in his heels. She stood outside the library as both men disappeared behind the closing door. She pressed her ear to the wood panel to hear. She didn’t trust Reece to tell her everything—but she also didn’t trust her father.

And why should she after everything he had done?

TEN



REECE

Reece's wolf was howling up a storm in his mind, but for the first time since he walked into the Longborn Estate, it had nothing to do with the proximity of his mate.

It was the nearness of Sylvester Longborn that made his beast nervous. Reece wanted to shift and rip the vamp into bloody ribbons, but that wouldn't help the investigation.

It might also be dangerous to kill a vampire when their council was coming to town. He didn't need to bring their vengeful wrath on his pack. He had to play this right.

"Make this quick," Sylvester snapped. "I don't have all day."

"How long have you been in town?" Reece asked without missing a beat. He didn't exactly want to spend any more time than necessary in the vampire's presence.

"I only arrived this morning," the vampire replied, looking down at his long nails as if he were bored.

"Oh? And where were you before that?"

"I don't see how that is any of your business."

"Look, let's not beat around the bush. You know what I am, and I sure as hell know what you are. There's been a rash of disappearances in town, and you've got to know you'll be the first suspect, given your proclivity for blood. Human blood."

Sylvester narrowed his eyes and hissed, showing his fangs. "I could drain you dry before you had time to shift, wolf."

Reece shrugged. “Maybe. But that would only complicate your life. I’m not the only wolf who has put two and two together about you and your daughters.”

“My daughters have nothing to do with human disappearances. They don’t drink blood. And it just so happens all nine victims were bled dry.”

Reece wouldn’t admit just how relieved he was to hear Sylvester so adamantly insist that his daughters couldn’t be guilty.

Celestine had told him that she didn’t need blood to survive, but he didn’t exactly trust her kind, even if she was only half a vampire. It didn’t change *what* she was. “Well, how can you be sure your girls aren’t guilty if it’s not *you*?”

“How can *you* be sure that a vampire is behind this?”

“This is too many disappearances, and if it weren’t for our shifter noses, we wouldn’t have found a single body. Vamps hide their tracks, don’t they?” Reece almost mentioned that the last victim’s scent vanished into thin air. It didn’t feel right to bring it up just yet. It wasn’t exactly a smoking gun, but it was *something*.

“Of course, we cover our tracks.”

“Well? Where were you before you arrived?”

“I was at my home in New Orleans, and before that, I was at my home in Sicily.”

“Sicily?”

“In Italy. Maybe you’ve heard of it. A European country known for—”

“Don’t be patronizing, vamp,” Reece growled, his anger mounting.

Sylvester grinned maliciously, but Reece wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of getting the upper hand. He took a deep breath and nodded. “Look, Sylvester, if you want to play games, I’ve got no issues taking my questions to the local authorities. I’m sure they would be interested to know why you own so many properties. Maybe I’d even tell them to look

into the number of disappearances there are around your other homes.”

This shut the vampire right up. It took all of his self-control not to smirk in victory.

“Well?” Reece pressed.

“I’ve never met the Johnson girl.”

“Never?”

“I don’t feed around here. My daughters will tell you as much.”

“I guess I just wonder why you would listen to them. It doesn’t seem like you care for your daughters much.”

“Don’t. Don’t pretend you know anything about my family.”

Reece shrugged. “Explain this.” He pulled out his phone and showed a picture of Farrah Johnson standing by a silver Mercedes. “Isn’t that *your* car?”

Sylvester ripped the phone out of Reece’s hands and gaped down at the picture. “But... But that’s my car.”

“I’m aware. Was it stolen?”

“No. I drove it just this morning.”

“Your story isn’t lining up.”

“I don’t have time for this, and I don’t know why you think it’s amusing to play a trick on me like this. What is your alpha’s name? He needs to know his wolves are disrupting important members of the vampire council.”

“You’re not on the council, so don’t try to play that card with me. And the alpha?” Reece gave Sylvester his best and brightest smile. “I am the alpha of the Blackstone pack. If you want to complain about how I conduct my business, go right ahead. I’m all ears.”

“There is no proof that I’m the man in the picture. It could be anyone.”

“But your car wasn’t stolen, and you claim this isn’t you.”

“Someone could have taken my car on a joy ride.”

“And returned it?”

“It’s not impossible. Now, if you will please excuse me, I have things to attend to. As you’ve pointed out, there seems to be a breach in my security if someone was just able to take my car out of my garage.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Reece continued to smile.

“Don’t bother,” Sylvester growled before leaving the library and slamming the door behind him.

Reece shook his head. The conversation hadn’t exactly gone the way he expected. The soft click of a door made him turn. Celestine came into the library on the tips of her toes, looking behind her to make sure she wasn’t followed.

His breath caught as her scent reached his nostrils. It wasn’t just alluring, but it was a breath of fresh air after the acrid scent that trailed around Sylvester. How a Half Blood could smell so good, he didn’t know. He also didn’t want to think too much about it.

Surely, the only reason why Celestine smelled so good to him was because his wolf was confused. It was a mate thing. A mistake, but a mate thing, nonetheless.

“And?” Reece whispered. “Did he lie? I could tell he wasn’t being truthful, but I didn’t realize a vampire would be so hard to read.”

“I’m not telling you anything until you explain yourself. You didn’t tell me you had a picture of Farrah Johnson with my father.”

“Strictly speaking, it’s with your father’s car,” Reece replied.

“You kept something this big from me! So much for working together.”

“I told you. I don’t trust you.”

“I don’t care. We agreed to work together. How is that gonna work if you keep evidence from me?”

“I needed to make sure your father wasn’t the man in the picture before I told you about it. I didn’t know if you would warn him and help him skip town.”

“You’re impossible.”

“But you would have done the same thing in my position. Admit it.”

Her nostrils flared. “You don’t know that.”

“Sure I do. You don’t trust me, either, and that means you would have done the same as me. Now. Was your father really in New Orleans and Sicily when the disappearances were happening?”

Reece was sure she wouldn’t reply. He had kept something big from her, and now, there was a chance she would revolt.

Much to his surprise, Celestine’s shoulders sagged in defeat. “He lied. Obviously. He hasn’t been to the New Orleans house in a decade. He finds the climate too hot.”

“Huh. So why lie?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t fair to assume he was behind it just because the council is on its way. I guess we’ll know what they want from him when they arrive.”

“I thought the plan was to keep the council from coming to town.”

“Do you know how to stop twelve vampires from coming? Because I sure don’t, and I’ve been in this world a lot longer than you.”

“Well, sure. But we need to figure out if he *is* the man in the picture.”

“Let me see it.” She held out his hand for his phone, and he reluctantly let her take control of his device. She zoomed in on the hooded figure and clicked her tongue. “I really don’t see my father wearing a hoodie like that. He thinks it’s beneath him.”

“So it’s the perfect disguise.”

“I’ll be the first to admit that my father is a bad person who does a lot of bad things, but... I am not convinced this is him.”

“And you really don’t know why the council is coming?”

“No. I don’t keep things from you like you’ve just done.”

“I deserve that.”

“You deserve a swift kick to the ass. Now, if you’ll excuse me, this is the perfect time to go talk to my dad. He will be all turned around after your visit. See yourself out?” she asked. She blinked up at him, and he nearly leaned forward to kiss her.

Why did she have to be so fucking beautiful? Why did the curve of her cheek beg to be kissed?

And then there was that damn leather jacket. It was molded to her curves, and he wanted to peel it off her to see if the black shirt she wore was a tee or a tank. How easy would it be to take it off her?

“Reece?” she asked, annoyed. “You need to leave before he suspects that we’re in here talking.” Without waiting for his reply, she turned on her heel and left. He had the insane urge to follow her.

If he did, he would be in more trouble than he could handle—because following those hips, that ass, it would be the death of him.

ELEVEN



CELESTINE

“Father!” Celestine called out as she rushed through the house. She found him in the garage. Unsurprisingly, he was sniffing the inside of the car. “Who uses this car when I’m not in town?” he barked.

“No one. We don’t like to flaunt expensive cars in a small town,” she replied.

“Then who did you let into the house?”

“Again, no one. Why would we let anyone into the house? Besides, I’m the one who should be asking the questions. First, you return without *any* warning, only to tell us that the vampire council is on its way here. You don’t tell us why. You just dump it on us and order us to get the house ready. And then, just when things can’t get any weirder, a PI shows up at the door asking questions about missing girls. What have you done? Is that why the council is coming? Have you exposed yourself?”

Celestine could have kept shooting questions at her father, but she paused. If she pressed anymore, she might reveal something. Her father was nearly a thousand years old, and it would be hard to fool him.

“Stop shouting at me, girl. I brought you into this world, and I can take you out of it. You’re an ungrateful little runt, and you’ve always been one. You don’t get to question me.”

“When you come here and do things like make locals disappear, I can. We had a deal! No feeding on the locals and

putting the girls and me in a compromising situation again. Why is the vampire council coming?"

"I don't answer to you."

"Tell me. Right now. Why?"

"Because one of the elders has died," he roared. "There is an available seat, and I've asked to be considered for the role."

Celestine's mind blanked.

If Sylvester were responsible for killing locals, things would be bad.

But Sylvester sitting on the vampire council was infinitely worse.

So. Much. Worse.

A shiver ran up her spine, and Celestine saw her whole life flash before her eyes. "You cannot be serious."

"Of course, I'm serious. Why shouldn't I be considered? I've been alive long enough. I have the wealth and the connections. I would be a good council member."

She blinked at him, her jaw agape. "Yes, because the entire council are murderous freaks!"

"Watch yourself," he said coolly. "Once I'm on the council, I could easily order your death."

"Nice one. Threatening your daughter." She rolled her eyes, yet fear gripped her heart. There were worse fates than death when your father—your *maker*—sat on the vampire council.

"It might be easier on me if I could get rid of the three of you, but I can't, now, can I? I want to see the security footage for the house while I was away."

"No. You can't see it because we turned off the cameras months ago. We only have them on when you're in town."

"Idiot girl. If you hadn't done that, I could prove my innocence to this pesky wolf."

“Did you kill any local? Tell me. Right now. Or I swear I will tell the council everything I know about you.”

“I’d like to see you try.” He began to walk away, basically dismissing her. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get the house ready for the council’s arrival.”

Celestine hopped into the car and drove away before she said something she truly regretted. She floored the pedal to the floor, desperate to feel something—anything—that wasn’t fear or anger. She didn’t really pay attention to where she was going.

It wasn’t until she saw the front of Reece’s building that she slammed on the brakes.

“What the fuck am I doing here?” she muttered.

At least it made some sense. She had some information she could share with Reece. If her father was going to sit on the vampire council, Celestine and her sisters would need allies to protect themselves. But before she told Reece, she had to make sure she could trust him. He’d yet to prove himself, especially since he kept the picture secret. Was there more he was keeping from her?

She had to find out.

Resolved, Celestine made her way into the PI office. Reece was surprised to see her again. “Are you stalking me or something? We were just together.”

“I spoke to my father after you left.”

“Don’t tell me you already know what he’s up to,” he replied with way too much hope. It nearly made her sad that she had to shake her head in denial.

“I know why the vampire council is in town, and it has *nothing* to do with the missing people. Sylvester has asked to be part of the vampire council, and they’re coming here to evaluate him.”

“That sounds ominous as fuck.”

“It is. It’s not a good thing for my sisters and me.”

“Oh? It won’t give you more riches and power? Don’t you want to be a vampire princess?”

“You don’t know what happens to vampire princesses, and it shows.”

His brows flew into his hairline. “Now I’m curious. What happens to vampire princesses?”

Celestine winced. The question was totally normal, but she didn’t trust him enough yet. She erred on the side of less is more. “We get married off to make alliances with other councils. As Half Bloods, we’re not exactly ranked high in the vamp hierarchy.”

“And?”

“Never mind. All you need to know is that it’s *bad*. Bad and definitely none of your business.”

He grinned, amused. “Fine. Don’t tell me.”

“Let’s move on before I smack you,” she mumbled. Reece’s grin turned into a chuckle, only angering her. “Were you able to find any connections between Sylvester and any of the missing people?”

“You do know I was just at your place, right? When would I have had time to do that work?”

“Don’t you have wolves at your beck and call?”

“You let me worry about what my wolves are doing,” he snapped back, annoyed. “That’s not of your business.”

“Just like what happens to vampire princesses is none of *your* business,” she replied.

Reece grinned at her. “We make a terrible team. We can’t agree on anything.”

“We agree that the vampire council cannot come here, but now that we know why, there is no way to stop it.”

Reece’s mouth dropped down in shock. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly that. My father *wants* the vampire council to come to Longborn.”

“That can’t be right. There must be something we can do to stop it.”

“I am fresh out of ideas.”

“Not even if we prove that your dad is responsible for all these disappearances?”

“The council would only care if it exposes vampire secrets,” she responded. “I think our best shot at protecting the humans is prevention.”

“And now we’re back to your garlic powder plan.”

“Short of framing my father...”

Reece stilled. “Now *that* is a good idea.”

“Are you insane? We can’t do that!”

“Why not? I thought you don’t care what happens to your dad.”

“Stop calling him that. He’s my father, not my dad.”

“There is no difference.”

“Oh, there is a difference.”

Reece shook his head. “You’ve got to be the most infuriatingly contradictory creature I have ever met.”

“Right back at you.”

“Fine. If we can’t frame him, we’re left with very few options. I’ll find out who is behind those disappearances, and you use all of your vamp knowledge to save the humans from twelve angry vampires coming to town.”

“There are eleven. My father wants to be twelfth, but that’s beside the point. If you think I’m going to trust you with investigating these disappearances now that you’ve threatened to frame my father, you’re insane.”

“And just what do you think you can do to stop me?”

“I am not going to let you out of my sight.”

“If you want to spend time with me, love, all you gotta do is ask. Though, I’ll be *real* honest, I am not a fan of your kind.”

“I don’t care. I don’t trust you.”

“I don’t trust you either. I don’t need a babysitter. I have a bunch of wolves at my beck and call, like you said.”

Celestine sat in one of the chairs and crossed her arms. “Let’s start.”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m helping you with the investigation. Tell me what you’ve got so far.”

“No.” He pointed toward the door. “Leave. I’ll let you know what I find if it has anything to do with your father, and in that spirit of cooperation, you’ll let me know what you plan on doing to protect the humans.”

“I am not going anywhere.”

Reece threw his hands up in exasperation and tried to pull her out of her chair, but she didn’t budge. She wasn’t a weak little human. Not exactly. She had some vamp strength, and she used it to stay right in her seat. “You cannot be serious with this bullshit,” he growled. “Get out.”

“Nope.”

“Fine. Be that way.” Reece grabbed the back of the chair and dragged it toward the door.

“You really think that’s gonna work?”

“Of course, it will. Don’t I have to invite a vampire in? I didn’t invite you in.”

She snorted. “That’s not how that works.”

“I don’t care. You’re in my way, and you are making it very hard to do my job. I have families counting on me to find their missing relatives.”

“Excellent. I’m here to help you with that.”

The sound of a cough made Celestine jump. She turned her head to see a handsome man—though not as handsome as Reece—standing by the door. There was a mischievous smile on the newcomer’s face.

“Oh, look,” she taunted. “One of your wolves is here to report back to you.”

“What is going on here?” the man asked with a chuckle.

“He isn’t one of my wolves. He’s the alpha from the next town over.”

“Goody,” she cooed. She aimed her sweetest smile at the man and batted her lashes. “Can you please tell this stubborn ass that he needs my help?”

“Sure. Stubborn ass, you need her help.”

Reece flipped off the wolf. “Stay out of this, Nero.”

“You’ve got a vamp in your office. I don’t think I can let this go.”

“I hate you,” he hissed at Celestine before letting go of the chair. He stalked toward Nero. “And? Have you found anything?”

Nero’s features sobered. “I did. I found a body.”

“Shit,” Reece snapped. “Farrah Johnson?”

“Yeah. She was drained of blood. Obvious signs of a vamp attack on her neck,” Nero replied.

“Where did you find her?” Celestine asked, not daring to stand from her chair. With her luck, Reece would throw her over his shoulder and walk her out of his office. She didn’t want to touch the wolf ever again because it played tricks with her mind. With her body.

“We found her on the border between the two towns of Longville and Blackstone. She wasn’t there when we did the rounds a few hours ago, so that means that she was just dumped there.”

“Any scent?” she asked.

“Don’t ask questions,” Reece growled at her. “And you,” he pointed a warning finger to Nero. “You don’t answer her question. Did you smell anything? Follow any scent?”

Nero chuckled. “As fun as this exchange has been, you two need to decide how to work together. And no. There was no obvious scent.”

“Take me to the site,” Celestine said, coming to her feet.

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Cool yourself, wolf,” Celestine rolled her eyes. She tapped his cheek like he was a temperamental child. “My mind is just fine. But if you can take me to the location, I might be able to get something you couldn’t. Oh, and I’ll need to see the body.”

“Not. A. Chance!” Reece stalked toward her and grabbed her arm.

It made no sense to Celestine. How could she feel his touch so keenly, even through the defense of her leather jacket? What was Reece made of? Wolf hair and sex appeal? She shook off his hand. “You don’t have to like me to let me see the body. I can tell you if it was a new vamp or an older one.”

Nero shrugged. “I am not getting in the middle of this. But I will tell you that the body was taken to the Longborn morgue.”

Before Reece could stop her, Celestine was out of the door. She wasn’t exactly running toward the body, but she sure was running from Reece.

TWELVE



REECE

The Half Blood was going to bed the death of him. He could feel it in his bones. She was going to argue him to death, and he would be powerless to stop her because she was his mate.

Never—not once in his life—had Reece ever felt so damn powerless. He wasn't a fan of the free-falling sensation plaguing his stomach. It left him too breathless for his comfort.

“Thanks for that,” he grumbled to Nero on his way out of the door, hot on Celestine's heels. She was already in her car and peeling out of the parking lot by the time he reached her. He got into his car and broke about ten different traffic rules to try to keep up with her as she drove into Longville and straight to the morgue.

He parked his truck beside her car, but she was already on the way into the morgue. Always one step ahead of him.

Damn her and her perfect ass.

It would be so much better if she was one step *behind* him. Then he couldn't notice how beautiful she was. How her hair had this great bounce to it. The way her jeans were the perfect kind of tight.

“Hi, I'm here to see Farrah Johnson.”

“Are you a family member?” the clerk behind the desk asked.

“She's with me,” Reece replied, pulling out a small badge.

“You’ve got a badge?” Celestine snorted. “You’re just a PI.”

“Fine. She can’t come in with me,” he drawled to the clerk, leaning on the desk.

“Yes, I am,” Celestine argued.

The clerk looked between the two of them and shook her head. “Umm?”

Celestine rolled her eyes. “Oh, for fuck’s sake. I need to see the body and confirm something. Let me in.”

“Whatever,” the clerk shrugged. “I don’t get paid enough for this. Reece, you know what to do.” She pointed toward a set of doors and returned to her phone, scrolling through her social media.

Reece moved quickly, hoping that Celestine wouldn’t follow. She did. “Do you have pull everywhere? Does *everyone* know you’re a wolf?”

“That clerk is a pack member,” he replied.

“Well, sure she is. Because that isn’t convenient at all.”

“It’s always been pack policy to make sure there is someone working in the important offices in town.”

“Makes sense,” she grumbled begrudgingly.

Reece walked into the morgue and right up to a cold room. The walls were lined with little doors, each identifying who lay in the cold slabs. Much to his chagrin, Celestine read out the names, looking for the Johnson girl.

“Got her right here,” she said softly. Her shoulders sagged as he turned to face her.

“I thought a Half Blood wouldn’t have any trouble seeing a dead body.”

She glared at him. “Why would I be okay with a life being cut short? This is really sad. Show some respect.” She took a deep breath, closing her eyes. Her lips moved silently as if she were saying a prayer. Then, with a trembling hand, she pulled at the handle, and slowly, the slab moved forward.

Farrah Johnson was barely in her twenties. A pretty girl who had once been so full of life now lay there gray and cold.

“I’m really sorry about this,” Celestine murmured into the corpse’s ear. She turned the girl’s head to the side and huffed out an annoyed breath. “Vampire bite.”

Reece walked forward. “Did you have your doubts?”

She nodded. “I was hoping to be wrong about this. I’m not. This is a vampire bite. Not exactly as clean as I’ve seen, but vampire, nonetheless.”

“What do you mean, *clean*?”

“This is the work of an older vampire. The newer ones can be pretty sloppy. They chew a bit, still used to the human way of...” She shuddered.

“Eating. Got it,” Reece shuddered along with her. He wanted to make fun of Celestine for being so squeamish, but it felt disrespectful. More than that, he didn’t think it was right to mock Celestine for being human if she was truly saddened by a young girl’s death. Her grief seemed genuine enough, and it messed with his already confused mind.

Celestine slid the slab back in and leaned against the wall. “It could be my father.”

“I’m sorry,” Reece whispered before he could stop himself.

She gave him a sad smile. “Thanks. Does the family know yet?”

“I’m sure Nero would have made sure to warn them. He *is* a sheriff, after all. It comes with the job.”

“Right. And what do we do now? Hope that somebody else disappears so we can follow that trail?”

“I don’t know that I’m ready to give up hope.”

Celestine turned away from him. He had the distinct impression that she was wiping tears from her eyes. She wasn’t the cold killer he would have expected from a vampire. Or a Half Blood.

Celestine was nearly human.

Of course, knowing this didn't make hating her any easier. Why did his mate have to be vampire? Worse than that, why did she have to be a bit sweet? So hell-bent on protecting the humans of Longville?

Celestine was not what he expected, and he didn't know what to do with that.

He rubbed a hand across his mouth to keep from saying anything that would betray how he felt.

Not that he felt anything for her.

"I don't want to give up hope, either, but we also need to be realistic. She was the last one to disappear. The chances that no one else goes missing..." She winced and shook her head.

"Right," he croaked. "I didn't want to think that."

"Neither did I, but there's no point in hiding from the truth, no matter how ugly it is."

"You're right. I need a drink."

"Ditto."

He raised a brow at her, and she rolled her eyes. "I'm definitely talking about alcohol. Not blood. How many times do I have to tell you that I don't need to drink blood to survive?"

"A couple more times," he admitted.

"Are you going to let me help you now?" she asked.

He considered this for a few seconds. "I will take you to where she was found. If you think it will help."

"It might."

"That's good enough for me, I guess."

He was running out of time. He was running out of options. That was the only reason why he was agreeing to—momentarily—work with the vamp.

It had nothing to do with the tears still shimmering in her eyes.

THIRTEEN



REECE

The woods were quiet. Too quiet.

“Do you hear that?” he asked Celestine in a whisper.

“No. I don’t hear a thing.”

“That’s my point. Usually, these woods are really alive with little creatures. Rabbits, squirrels. Birds. There’s not even *that*.”

“It could mean that a predator is in the woods.”

“You mean *you*?” he asked pointedly.

“I was actually talking about *you*. You’re the wolf. Don’t your kind eat squirrels?”

“Are you nuts? Why would I kill such a small creature? You eat a squirrel, and you’re hungry twenty minutes later.”

“You’ve had to try it to know that.”

Reece clicked his tongue. “And here I thought we had a bit of a truce going.”

“Truce? Yes. Doesn’t mean I’m gonna stop teasing you.”

He stumbled on a tree branch, not exactly the smooth and confident woodsman he usually was. “Teasing me?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No. I don’t know what you mean,” he grumbled.

Celestine laughed and continued to walk ahead of him, stopping every now and again to sniff the air. It was a bit of a

shifter thing to do, and it made him uncomfortable. Sniffing the air was supposed to be *his* job. “What are you doing?”

“Vampires have a distinctive smell. I’m just trying to spot anything that feels out of place in the woods.”

“I know vampires have a distinctive smell,” he bit out. “I smell you, don’t I?”

“Half Blood,” she sang. “I don’t smell like other vampires. At all. I smell more like a human.”

“Disagree,” he grumbled.

“What do I smell like, then?”

“Flowers,” he replied before thinking better of it.

At least he managed to make *her* stumble. He beamed at her in victory.

“Flowers?” she asked.

“Flowers,” he repeated. “You know, when they’re starting to decay.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re a jackass.”

He was a liar, actually. Celestine was a fresh meadow full of flowers. It was an aroma he would never forget. It was burned in his nostrils.

It also made him horny.

That was a mate thing he was choosing to ignore. Fate had made a mistake, and as soon as this whole vampire council business was put to bed, he would call fate and give it a piece of his mind.

“Stop,” Celestine held out a hand to steady him. She closed her eyes and turned her face toward the sunshine peeking through the trees. It made her look like a fairy princess, not a vampire. Fuck, she was beautiful. Her delicate nostrils flared as she took deep breaths. “Yup. There was a vampire here, but I don’t know who.”

“Was it your dad?”

“I don’t know. I don’t *think* so. Most vamps smell the same. Sort of...”

“Bitter,” he finished for her.

“Yeah.”

He sniffed. “I’m not getting anything.”

“Here.” She took his hand and tugged him toward her. The touch of her hand on his was too much. His entire body sparked to life, and he wanted to run out of the woods, far from the woman he refused to acknowledge as his mate. He wanted to pull his hand away from her touch, but he was immobile. “Are you getting it now?” she whispered as if any volume of voice could make the scent vanish.

Reece sniffed the air again, but he couldn’t latch onto anything. Celestine was all there was. “No,” he admitted.

“Oh. Well. Here.” She tugged him closer and touched his cheek to turn his head toward the wind. His face was on fire where she left her fingers. “Now?”

He couldn’t breathe. It didn’t matter that he was trying to save people. All of his senses shut down because his mate—a vampire—was touching him.

“No,” he said. “Take a step back, will ya?”

She frowned at him.

“I can’t smell anything but flowers right now.”

“Oh.” She understood and took a few steps back. “Keep your face right there and wait for the wind to settle.” She waited a few seconds. “Do you get it now?”

He tried again. This time, there was definitely a bitter twinge to the wind. “Shit. Yeah. It’s super subtle.”

“It would be. Vampires aren’t exactly supposed to exist, and I think that their scent vanishes when they feed.”

“Huh. You know you do that a lot. Distance yourself from the vampires. You say *they*. Not *we*.”

“Because I am not a vampire. I am a Half Blood.”

He shrugged. “You get that it’s hard to accept that, right?”

“Yeah,” she snorted. “I get it. That’s basically my whole life. I’m too much of a vampire to be human and too human to be a vampire. It’s made my life a bit hard.”

“I can see that,” he replied.

Wait! Am I actually feeling sympathy for this woman? Something is seriously wrong with me!

“Is there anything else you can get out here? Usually, I’m the one with the super nose.”

Celestine shook her head. “No. That’s it. We can follow it, though.”

“Lead the way,” he said, in complete shock that he was actually conceding to Celestine. The world had to be ending.

Her eyes went wide. “Whoa. Did you seriously just relinquish some of your power to a *vampire*?”

“Half Blood,” he grumbled.

“I’ll take it. Follow me, please.”

Reece didn’t like it. Not only because it meant he was still trailing behind Celestine with a clear shot of her luscious ass but also because he had to admit that without her, he wouldn’t have found the vampire’s scent.

He was powerless or as close as he could come to it. He was a neutered wolf because his mate was a Half Blood.

What kind of kids could they have?

He shook his head as soon as the thought popped into his mind. There was no way he was having kids with this woman. There was no precedent, and he didn’t care for her like that. At all.

They continued to walk through the woods for over an hour. Soon, the sun began to set, making the thick forest that much darker. The branches and undergrowth got thicker and thicker, which did nothing to help with visibility, even with his shifter eyes.

Finally, Celestine stopped walking.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I don’t know...” she sniffed the air and turned in a circle.

“Did the scent just drop? Because that’s what happened to us...”

“Yeah. It does vanish, and I don’t think we’ll be able to follow it.”

“Vamp nose letting you down too, huh?”

She rolled her eyes and pointed to the ground. “No. I don’t think any creature out here can track a car.”

He looked down, following the line of her finger. There were undeniable tire tracks. His gut clenched. “Those aren’t car tires. That’s a four-wheeler.”

Her frown pulled her face into a terrified mask. “A four-wheeler?”

“Big machine. Four wheels. Good to drive in this kind of terrain.”

“I know what they are. I just don’t know if a vampire would drive one. They’re loud and bulky.”

“And?”

“Vampires are known for their stealth.”

“Right,” he agreed. “Well, what does that mean? A new vampire?”

“I don’t know. This is starting to look like the vampire used the utility vehicle to bring his victim out here, but that is really weird. Why not just drain her where he found her?”

“That is a good question. Do you have an answer?”

“Why would I?” she asked.

“Because you’re a vampire,” he replied. Seeing her major eye roll, he quickly added, “Half vampire. Whatever.”

“This is beyond unusual. Something doesn’t add up.”

“Why should it?” he grumbled. “Why would any of this be simple?” He meant that on more levels than Celestine could possibly understand, but she only shrugged.

“If a vamp was on a utility vehicle, we should still be able to follow the scent,” she said absentmindedly as she continued to sniff the air. “I think we need to keep this in mind for the other missing people. This vampire isn’t just taking people out of their homes, but he—or she—is taking them into the woods in a very loud way.”

“I can try to find who owns or rented a four-wheeler since Farrah Johnson vanished.”

“It’s as good a plan as any,” Celestine sighed. “At least this removes my father from the list of suspects.”

“Why?”

“Because he would never drive a utility vehicle. Too human for his tastes.”

Reece clicked his tongue. “I’m sure that would hold up in a court of law.”

“Sure. Because these cases are going to end up in front of a group of disgruntled citizens drafted for jury duty,” she clapped back, turning without a backward glance at him.

FOURTEEN



CELESTINE

Celestine refused to go back home. She followed Reece back to his office, knowing full well he was going to fight her as soon as she got out of her car.

She wasn't about to let Reece shut her out of the investigation. She might only be a graphic designer, but she had a heart. It beat, too, no matter what Reece believed. She wanted to make the disappearances stop, and she wanted the guilty person to face justice.

She also wanted to make sure it wasn't her father.

If it was, there was going to be a serious reckoning in the Longborn family. She didn't care if the vampire council was making her father their final member. If he dared to break the only promise he had ever made to her, she would make sure he never got to live in the prestigious vampire palace.

"I don't see why you have to be here," Reece growled at her as she followed him into his office.

"How many times do we need to have this conversation? We are working together."

"It's not like having you around has helped me," Reece replied, crossing his arms.

"Umm, excuse me. Did you or did you *not* find those tracks, thanks to me? That's the first real clue you've had. You're just angry because I'm better at this than you."

"You're a vampire and nothing but a graphic designer. I'm an alpha, a wolf, and a PI with years of experience in

investigations. You can't be better at this than me. This is my land, and I'm the one who needs to defend it no matter how much garlic powder you spread around town."

"I hate you," she hissed, taking a step closer to him.

His wolfish grin was annoyingly handsome. She wanted to slap him or kiss him. Anything to wipe that smile off his face.

"Right back at you, babe," he chuckled dangerously low as he took a step toward her.

"Don't call me *babe*," she hissed again. Reece was so close that she could feel the heat from his body on hers. It shouldn't have been erotic, but it was.

"What would you rather I call you? Vamp?"

"Fuck you," she growled. "Don't call me that."

"Yeah, yeah. You hate your vampire side. I do too. Just so we're clear." Reece took another step toward her. She could see the flecks of gold and green in his brown eyes. She could feel his breath on her face as his breathing became more labored. "Explain something to me," his voice was rough and low. "How can a Half Blood smell like flowers?"

She arched a brow at him. "How the hell should I know?" Her heart thundered in her throat. *Flowers? She smelled like flowers to him? How weird was he?*

"Are you doing something to me?" He reached out and ran his thumb along her lower lip. "Some vampire bullshit attraction?"

Her breath stuttered, making her legs weak. But maybe it was the feel of his thumb on her skin. She nipped at the finger, hoping to cut through the hazy cloud of lust pulsing inside her. "What?"

Reece placed his hand on her neck and lowered down to look deep into her eyes. "You know what I mean. Are you making me do this?"

"Do what?" she whispered.

He didn't answer.

Nope.

Reece Blackstone didn't reply. Instead, he pressed his mouth to hers in a searing kiss.

Celestine's entire body came to life. Even the vampire half was completely alive. His tongue parted her lips, and she moaned, gripping his shirt with such force her nails tore through the material.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" she asked against his mouth. She didn't give him any time to reply. She kissed him as deeply as he had, even going so far as to try to outdo him.

"You tell me what's going on. I don't want to do this." Reece gripped her ass in his palms and picked her up off the floor.

Celestine wrapped her legs around his waist and closed her arms around his neck. "I don't want this either, so I *really* don't know what you're doing right now." Her words meant nothing. Not when she pressed her mouth to his. He groaned into her mouth, massaging her ass roughly. He kneaded the globes as he walked them to his desk.

He placed her on the surface and shoved his laptop and stacks of files, sending most of it toppling to the floor. "Your vampire powers. That's what you're using on me," he growled, sniffing her hair.

"I don't have any," she laughed, ripping his shirt open.

"You're a bad liar," he growled, doing the same to her.

Celestine dragged her nails down his bare chest. His muscles rippled under her touch, making her laugh again. "Not a lie." She cupped a hand on his erection. The girth pressed against his jeans in obvious arousal. "I am not responsible for this," she gave it a good squeeze, grinning up at him. He was hot. Hot and full of lust. For her. "I'm not doing anything."

"I don't believe you," he growled, kissing the column of her neck. "I wouldn't fuck a vampire."

"Half," she corrected while unzipping his pants.

“Whatever,” he breathed as she reached into his boxers. The flesh of his cock was hot steel against her palm. He was big. Crazy big. Big enough that her core clenched in anticipation. “I don’t want you,” he said, moving his hips to give her more access to his erection.

“Ditto.”

“I’ll just stop, then,” he groaned against her neck.

She moved her hand up and down but suddenly stopped and arched a brow at him. “Fine. It’s not like I want you to touch me here...” She pulled down the cups of her bra, baring her breasts to him. His eyes sparked with desire. He was immobile for a second, and Celestine hated him for not immediately reaching out for her.

She would never—ever—say out loud that she wanted him.

She had never wanted a man more than she wanted Reece in that moment, but she wouldn’t admit it to him. She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction. She sure as shit wouldn’t beg either.

This meant nothing. This was nothing but a desperate need to expel the pure hatred out of their bodies.

That was it.

There was no love. No lust. Just a burning that needed to run its course so they could work together without tearing each other apart.

It was nothing but a necessity.

“You don’t want me to touch you, huh?” he whispered. He flicked his thumbs over her peaked nipples, pulling a moan from her lips. Her core moistened as he continued to knead the sensitive globes. “I’ll stop.”

“I’ll maul you if you stop,” she warned.

He chuckled and kissed her again. He reached back and unclipped her bra. Her freed breasts heaved as she breathed erratically. He leaned down and took one pebbled nipple into his mouth. His moist, hot tongue twirled around it before he

sucked hard. Celestine arched into his touch, desperate for more.

“Reece,” she moaned. “Is that all you got?”

“Give a man a second, will ya?”

“You’re too slow.” Her rough tone was meant to hide the heady desperation she felt for Reece.

“I hate you,” he growled, looking down at her.

“Right back at you, babe,” she echoed his earlier words as she reached between them to wrap her hand around his erection. She moved her hand up and down and laughed when Reece’s eyes closed in bliss.

“One of us should probably point out that this is a terrible idea,” he murmured.

“It’s this or a fight,” she shrugged. “I’d much rather do this.”

He grinned at her with a panty-melting grin. Seconds later, both of them were nude and kissing like it was the only thing keeping them alive.

“You better want this,” he growled.

“I want this,” she replied, positioning his erection at her entrance.

He sank into her moistened heat with a powerful thrust. He groaned and held still for a moment.

“Don’t tell me that’s all you’re good for,” she said breathlessly. Reece was a big man. Everywhere. It was a delicious kind of full that overcame her.

“Don’t you ever shut up?” he laughed before kissing her.

As he began a slow and torturous rhythm, he continued to devour her mouth. Celestine’s entire body lit with pleasure. Every thrust and every movement made her shiver with delight. She might not like Reece as a person, but the man knew how to move.

He knew how to pleasure a woman.

She held onto his shoulders, giving as good as she got. Celestine would always remember this, and she wanted to make sure Reece could never forget her. She wanted to bite him, mark him, make sure every woman who came after her knew she had been there first.

It was a possessive side of being a Half Blood, and for once, Celestine didn't hate who she was at all.

She was too busy hating Reece Blackstone who was giving her the best sex of her life.

Reece reached between them, and as he continued to thrust into her, he parted her folds to roll his thumb across her sensitive nub. Celestine clenched her core around his erection, lost in a torrent of passion. He groaned in her ear, "That's right, Celestine. Come for me," he chuckled when she gasped. "God, it's beautiful to hear you so damn quiet. I love it." He kissed her deeply as he increased his pace.

Celestine's body sang. Reece could touch her in ways that should be impossible. He reached deep inside her and pulled out the most intense orgasm of her life.

She cried out as wave after wave of pleasure overtook her.

Soon, Reece reached his own climax and stilled inside her. Both panted as they came down from their momentary insanity. Reece placed his forehead against hers, eyes closed and chest heaving. "Fuck, Celestine. What the hell just happened?" He pulled away, and she thought he would leave her alone to compose himself.

He didn't.

He pushed her hair over her shoulder and looked deeply into her eyes. His face was soft for once, and his brown gaze melted into hers.

There was something beyond hatred there—and it *terrified* her.

"Celestine," he began.

She pushed against his chest until he had no choice but to slide out of her. He stood there, naked and glorious. She

committed every hard line of muscle to memory before she said, “We just had hate sex. Nothing more.”

Reece huffed out a breath. “Hate sex.”

“Yup.”

“Good to know it’s not the first time you’ve done that.”

She glared at him. “I don’t sleep with men I barely know. This was insanity, and don’t think it’ll ever happen again.”

Reece threw his head back. “You weren’t that good, love. If I never touch you again, it’ll be fine by me.”

A sharp and uncomfortable pressure crushed her heart, and Celestine refused to admit his words made her sad.

She couldn’t—ever—have feelings for Reece Blackstone.

FIFTEEN



REECE

Reece was a goddamn liar.

If he never touched Celestine Longborn again, he would probably die.

Scratch that. He wouldn't *probably* die. He *would* die.

She wasn't just the best he ever had.

Celestine was the only woman he would ever want.

And she was a fucking vampire. It didn't matter that she was a Half Blood who would age and die like another human. It didn't matter that he barely knew her.

She was his mate. He'd had her, and he would never be the same again. As the seconds ticked by, he tried to find something to say. Something that would convince Celestine that they should talk. Get to know each other.

He came up empty.

Reece knew himself. He wasn't the flowers and romantic gestures kind of guy. He wasn't a relationship guy. He was an alpha and a PI. The only feelings he had to contend with were making sure his pack was happy.

This was different.

This was beyond the realm of what he knew, and he was out on a limb without any clue of what to do. But, shit, did he know exactly what he wanted to do.

Following his whim, Reece gripped Celestine's face in his palms and kissed her. She pushed against him. "What do you

think you're doing?"

"I hate you," he said against her mouth, hoping that these were somehow the magic words that would make Celestine desperate for him again.

"We're not fucking again," she said.

"A wolf can try," he laughed.

"I thought we agreed never to do *that* again."

"Uh-huh," he said. He smelled her desire. The scent of it flooded his nostrils. His entire body was alive with need for her. How could he want Celestine so much when she was everything he hated? It didn't matter that she was his mate. He shouldn't want someone as badly as this.

Celestine wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek before whispering in his ear, "We've got work to do." She pushed against his chest and slid off his desk. As she began to dress, Reece looked around his office. He would really need to burn the building down now.

It wasn't just Celestine's scent that would haunt this place now. It would be the memories too.

He would never forget what it was like to see his mate losing herself to the pleasure he gave her. He would have to carry those moments somewhere deep in his heart because there was no way to reconcile the woman who was his mate with the terrible fact she was a bloodsucker like the one who destroyed his life.

Celestine vanished into the bathroom, and he took this time to slide on his jeans. His shirt was ripped to shit, but he was used to that. He kept a pile of clean tees in one of his desk drawers for shifting purposes.

"Now that we've done *that*, we can get to work," Celestine said, coming back into the office.

"Right," he coughed. "Work. Where would you like to start?"

Celestine stilled and gaped at him. "Did you really just ask me that? Don't go soft on me now, wolf."

He sighed. So they weren't done fighting. *Great*. Because that wasn't the best aphrodisiac for him. "I just thought you'd want to catch up on what I know since I've been investigating this for a lot longer than you." He clicked his fingers. "Oh, and don't forget all the additional experience I have."

She rolled her eyes. "Walk me through the first ten disappearances. We should make a list of the commonalities between all the victims."

He grinned at her and pulled out a notepad. "I've already done that. The only thing the ten victims have in common is that they're from Longville *and* they have blood."

She punched his arm, but not hard enough to hurt.

It was *almost* flirty. "Don't be dumb. There have to be other similarities. You must've missed something."

"I'm a shifter. I don't miss things."

She arched a brow at him. "You missed the smell in the woods."

"Maybe if vamps weren't so secretive, I'd have more to go on."

"Ha! So you agree that I'm the perfect person to help you with this." She held out her hands. "Your files on the other victims, please."

Reece groaned in complete defeat. There was no way he was going to win this one. With a resigned sigh, he pulled out the files and laid them on his desk.

Right where they had made love.

Fucked.

Celestine waved him away. "Go, go. You've got a pack to lead. I'll catch up on this stuff and let you know where you're needed."

"You don't seriously think I'm going to leave you alone in my office with my client files?"

"Yes."

“But some of those documents are from Nero’s sheriff office. No one is supposed to see those. Not even me. They’re confidential.”

She continued to flip through one of the files. “And? I’m a Half Blood. Who am I gonna tell?” She looked up to meet his eyes. “I could spot something. Just like the smell in the woods.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “But if any of this leaks into the general population, I am holding you personally responsible.”

“You got it.”

Reece stood there for a few minutes, watching Celestine read the files. He considered staying, simply to make sure she didn’t leave, but she aimed a withering glare his way.

“If you’re going to just stand there, leering, I can think of something better for you to do.”

“Oh?”

“Get me some food, will ya? I’m famished.”

“What does a Half Blood eat?”

“I’d kill for a steak.”

He chuckled. “Kill?”

She rolled her eyes. “Poor choice of words. Anything that’s got a fair amount of red meat would be good. My thinking brain needs protein right now.”

He grinned. She needed protein because he had worn her out. “Burger?” he offered.

“Only if it comes with fries and a milkshake.”

Reece didn’t want to become her errand boy, but he was curious. Could Celestine really eat human food? He had to see it for himself. “Fine. I’ll get us some food.”

“If you can get some donuts or something sweet, you’ll gain extra points.”

He laughed again. “Something sweet? A milkshake isn’t sweet enough for you?”

Celestine didn't look up when she answered, "Milkshakes are for hydration."

He shook his head in disbelief, and he managed to kill his smile before Celestine caught him. There was nothing worse than letting your Half Blood mate know she was getting to you.

SIXTEEN



CELESTINE

Celestine eyed the clock in annoyance when her stomach grumbled loud enough to be heard across town. Reece had left over an hour ago to get food, and he hadn't come back yet.

If she hadn't been sitting in his office, she would suspect he had completely ditched her.

With a sigh, she pushed against the desk and stood. As she did, she spotted some picture frames on the wall. One photograph captured her attention.

In the frame, a man and woman stood on either side of a young boy. All three were smiling big wide smiles. There was no mistaking Reece, even as a small boy. He had the same brown eyes, and though his toothy grin was in an awkward stage of losing baby teeth and growing adult ones, it was clearly him.

He was adorable.

He was also very much loved by his parents.

They held him like a precious jewel, clearly proud of their son. With a trembling finger, she reached out to run her fingers along the cool glass of the frame.

What would it be like, she wondered, to have parents who loved you? To have a family? To have a child to be proud of? To have a life partner to raise kids with?

These were things she had never had. Things she wouldn't have.

That didn't mean she didn't long for them.

An ugly envy bloomed in her heart, making her ache. Reece had known the purest form of family love, and he had lost it.

Now, *that* was something she was familiar with. She knew how desperate and angry loss could make a person. She might not really remember her mother, but she remembered the crushing sadness when she realized her mother wasn't coming for her. The desperate drowning feeling that came with losing everything.

"That was the last picture we took together," a soft and rumbling voice said behind her.

She turned to see Reece standing at the door, holding a few paper bags. There was an indescribable sadness in his eyes, and she quickly returned her attention to the picture in the frame.

"They were killed a few days after that. For a long time, I couldn't even look at that picture. I hated it. Hated them for dying. Hated the vampire who killed them. My Nan kept that picture in the house, though. Every now and again, it would appear in my bedroom. I'd take it out and hide it, but Nan always snuck it back in.

"One day, I left it up. Slowly, *very* slowly, it became easier to look at it. And then, just like that, I could look at the picture and remember how happy we were. How kind they were. When I look at it, I can hear my mom's laughter. Hear my dad crack some lame joke."

Celestine's eyes prickled with tears. "It's so nice that you have memories of them. Some people don't have that." She wiped at a tear, hoping Reece wouldn't notice.

"You don't have memories of your mother?"

She shook her head. "No. I don't remember her at all. I don't even know what she looked like. It's not like my father was in love with her or anything. I've got no pictures, no memories. I've never been able to talk about her with anyone."

"Not even your sisters?"

“No. We have three different moms. All we can do is bond on how Sylvester took us from our mothers and raised us as...” She sighed. “I’m not sure what he raised us as. Sometimes, I think he took us from our families because he resented that we had something he didn’t have.”

Reece placed his hand on her shoulder and gave her a squeeze.

It surprised her.

It was full of tenderness and compassion.

It was weird.

Sure, they’d fucked, but there had been nothing sweet or loving in their naked time together. Why would Reece turn soft now? Celestine wanted to be mad, but she couldn’t think of a biting retort. She rarely got comfort, so she did what she longed to do.

She sank into it.

She laid her head on his hand and sighed.

“I’m really sorry, Celestine.”

“Don’t pity me,” she said. “I couldn’t take it if you pitied me.”

“It’s not pity. I’m not sure what it is, but I do feel bad that you didn’t get the chance to know your mother. If you’re anything like her, she must’ve been a pretty amazing woman.”

“That almost sounded like a compliment.”

He laughed softly. “Never.”

“Good,” she sniffled. She blinked fast and looked away from Reece and the picture, back toward the desk. “So, you were right. There are no links between the victims beyond the fact they are humans who live in Longville.”

Reece placed their dinner on the desk and nodded. “I told you.”

“I had to check for myself.”

“Sure. Let’s eat before this shit gets even colder.” He pulled fries and burgers from the bags. He settled in one chair, and Celestine joined him.

She reached for one of the burgers and bit into it. Her eyes rolled back as she moaned. “You got medium rare.”

Reece shrugged. “I figured that would be the best thing to get for a Half Blood.”

“Hey! You said that without any hatred. Good for you.”

“You’re growing on me.”

She arched a brow at him as she popped a fry into her mouth. “Sex will do that, I guess.” But Celestine had a feeling it wasn’t so much the sex as her little meltdown in front of the family picture.

“I guess,” he agreed. “Do your sisters miss their mothers?” he asked.

“I don’t know. We don’t really talk about it. We mostly just bitch and complain about our father.”

“Yet, you all live here. In his estate.”

“We don’t really have a choice,” she tried to be evasive, going so far as to take half her burger into her mouth. Reece wouldn’t be deterred.

“You don’t have a choice?”

“More vampire secrets.”

“But you’re a halfling,” he pointed out with that mischievous grin she was quickly starting to like. “You can keep half the secrets and share the other half.”

“That’s not really how it works.”

“Fine. I can try to guess. You and your sisters have to stay on a vampire estate, probably your father’s, because you are dangerous. Half Bloods must not be very common, and so they want to know where you are at all times.”

Celestine narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re smarter than I gave you credit for.”

He slurped his milkshake with a smile. “Gee, thanks. Does that mean I guessed right?”

“You did,” she admitted. “The vampire council wasn’t exactly thrilled that we exist. Half Bloods are a bit unusual, and somehow, my father has three of them. When we were all pretty young, we were summoned to the vampire council.”

“That sounds ominous as fuck.”

“It was. We flew to Italy, drove to the secluded and secret palace, and we were basically put on trial for existing.”

His jaw fell. “You’re joking.”

She shook her head. “Do you *think* I’d joke about something like that?”

“Your dad really let you go down there to face death?”

“I told you. He isn’t my dad. He’s a father. There’s a difference.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to get that. Obviously you didn’t die.”

Celestine absentmindedly munched on a fry. “No. We didn’t die. Sylvester didn’t exactly fight for us, but he told the council he would keep a close eye on us. We were given the permission to live if we made certain promises.”

“Such as...”

“We were to live on one of the Longborn estates, and though they were okay with us interacting with humans to make sure we ate properly, we have to abide by the same rules as vampires. We can’t share vampire secrets under pain of death.”

“Anything else?”

“We aren’t allowed to have relationships with humans,” she added. “No human families, no long-lasting human connections. My sisters are all I have, and they will always be all I have.”

“Shit. That sounds lonely.”

“Yeah.”

“And what happens if you break one of those promises?”

“Death,” she replied simply.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am, though. My father has strict orders to kill us if we disobey the council. If he can’t do it, he has to call them and they’ll send one of their assassins.”

Reece shook his head. “No wonder you didn’t want to tell me anything.”

“Yeah. Honestly, I’m half expecting an assassin to walk through that door and drag me out of here.”

“I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

Her head snapped up in shock. She expected to see a grin on his face, but Reece was looking at her with resolve. He meant it.

It was her turn to be shocked.

“Reece?” her voice cracked on his name.

“What?” he laughed, but the sound was devoid of any humor. “Do you think I can let my only link to the vampire world die?” He shook his head. “Nah. I need you here to catch the vamp behind these killings.”

“Oh. Right. I know. I mean, I thought that’s what you meant.”

“You said something...” He paused and nudged a box of donuts toward her. Celestine took one of the massive sugary treats and tore it into tiny pieces to keep her hands busy. “Something about fates worse than death for vampire princesses. What did you mean?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she shrugged.

“Yeah, I don’t believe you. Not even for one second. The council doesn’t consider you real vampires, so I can’t imagine that a half-vampire princess will be a good thing.”

“I told you. They’re married off to make alliances with other councils.”

“But that’s *real* vampires,” he argued.

She laughed softly. “Hey, listen to you. Finally admitting that I’m not a real vampire.”

“Celestine,” he warned.

“What?” she sighed. “I don’t think you want to know.”

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t want to know.”

She studied his face for a few seconds too long. She considered lying. She even thought about saying something mean to push away. In the end, she chose the truth. It was fucked up enough to stun even a wolf shifter. “If me and my sisters are married off for an alliance, we won’t be married by choice. We won’t have a single thing to say about who we are sent to marry. And because we aren’t full vampires, we’ll be...” Her breath caught.

“Not a real wife?” he tried.

“Yeah. Something like that. Just used for the alliance and tossed off. No family. No chance at...” She stopped herself just before she said the word that would break her.

No chance at love.

Reece was the very last man she would admit that to, and Celestine didn’t want to know why.

SEVENTEEN



REECE

Not for the first time, Celestine made Reece's blood boil.

This time, it had nothing to do with the fact that she was a Half Blood. It had nothing to do with the hatred he felt for the creatures who had killed his parents.

It was the injustice of her life that made him angry.

His nostrils flared with fury as he pushed away from the desk. "Are you kidding me? And your *father* would be okay with that? With sending you to some shitty man who would treat you poorly?"

"He doesn't exactly treat us right to begin with. He took us from our mothers. With force. He never let us see them again. We aren't his daughters. We are a commodity. Burdens."

"Well, I don't care if Sylvester ends up on the vampire council, you're not going anywhere."

She gave him a sad smile. "And you think you could stop a vampire council?"

"I could try."

"You'd die trying, and then what would happen to your pack? I'm not worth the hassle."

Her words were worse than any gut punch could have been. He didn't believe it for a second. Celestine didn't deserve to have her already limited life further ground down until she faded from existence.

He wouldn't allow it.

He wouldn't mate her, but that didn't mean he would leave her to a terrible life.

"Your father might not make it onto the council," he offered with hope.

Celestine only shrugged. "The council never leaves their palace. If they're here, it's because they are seriously considering my father for the twelfth seat."

"And that's it? As soon as he's on the council, you're officially a vampire princess and to be married off? That's bullshit."

"Well, they would have to find a vampire council member willing to marry us. There wouldn't be many, but the ones that would be willing wouldn't exactly be the cream of the crop."

"I fucking hate vampires," he snapped.

"Yeah. Same," she said with just as much anger. "They have terrible traditions. Please tell me that shifters also have terrible traditions. It might help me feel less sad."

Reece chuckled. "I don't know about *terrible*. I happen to like most of our traditions, but I *am* the alpha. Maybe I have a different view of everything."

"Then tell me the worst thing about being a shifter."

He considered this for a few seconds, and before he could stop himself, he said, "Mates."

"Mates?" she repeated.

"Shifters have mates. When we meet the person we're destined to be with, our instincts just tell us. We know. Immediately."

"That doesn't sound bad at all. It actually sounds kinda wonderful. Relationships are fucking hard, but if you're guaranteed to find your soul mate, that's good. Isn't it?"

"It depends. Not every shifter actually meets their mate. Some people go their whole lives looking for that special person without finding them. It doesn't mean they don't fall in love and have kids with someone else. But even if you *do* meet

your mate, life can be hard. It can be someone you don't like or someone who is already married. Finding your mate doesn't remove all of life's obstacles. It doesn't mean an easier life is guaranteed." He paused before choosing to go on. "And then there's the mate mark."

"The *what* now?"

He chuckled as Celestine leaned closer to him across the desk, completely intrigued by his words. He wanted to close the distance between them and kiss her. "The mate mark. When you've met your mate, and you agree to be mated for life, you..." He cleared his throat. "During sex, just at the time of orgasm, you mark her. A bite, a scratch. Something that will bond you for life. Something that will let every other shifter know who she is."

"You do know you're talking to a vampire, right? We're not exactly known for being kind to necks."

Reece grinned at this. "Are you saying that you'd bite your mate right back?"

"Should I be so lucky as to be a shifter's mate," she replied with a shrug.

His breath caught. Had she *really* just said that? Had his mate really just said she would be lucky to be a mate? Reece picked at his dinner as his mind spun out. "Why would you like to be a shifter's mate," he asked, not daring to look at her as she considered his question.

"I think that a shifter mate would be just the kind of obstacle that would make it impossible for the vampire council to force me into a marriage I don't want."

"Fuck," he growled.

Reece hadn't even considered that. There wasn't just his fight with himself and his hatred for vampires to contend with.

There was the vampire council.

They might cause quite the stink if he ever dared try to mate Celestine. Not that he was even considering it. Not. At. All. Not even a little bit.

It was only his wolf who begged him to take Celestine right then and there and put an end to his torture.

“Yeah,” she sighed, not understanding his conflict. “But that is very unlikely. I’ll probably have to go on the run, but I can’t exactly leave my sisters to that fate. And I don’t know if they’ll want to run away with me.”

“Do you think they would want to be married off?”

She shrugged. “I don’t think so, but I’m not in their head. They’re their own people. Maybe I should bring them to your pack and see if any of your wolves are their mates.” She laughed as if the idea was ludicrous.

Reece didn’t think it was such a bad idea, though. Maybe it would be the perfect way to keep Celestine safe and unmarried.

Mated, yes. But unmarried.

There was also a very easy way to protect her from the fate of a vampire princess, but he wasn’t ready for that. He would probably never be ready for that.

How could he give his heart, his life, his future to the kind of creature who had destroyed him? How could he continue to fight with vampires for the rest of his days?

“We should probably get back to work,” he said gruffly. “This has been enlightening, but it hasn’t helped us solve this case at all.”

Celestine nodded and stood. As she cleared away the remnants of their meal, Reece let his mind go on a loop. What was he supposed to do now?

Not only did he have to find which vampire was killing Longville citizens, but he also had to find a way to defend the town from the vampire council.

Now, he also had to find a way to save the mate he was starting to want for himself.

EIGHTEEN



CELESTINE

Celestine couldn't believe that she had shared so many vampire secrets with a man she hated. It was all kinds of bad, and one day soon, the council would learn of her betrayal, and she would die.

But really, Celestine had to ask herself a very serious question.

Did she actually *hate* Reece Blackstone?

Where did the hatred come from? It was only a reaction to the way he hated her, and now that she knew more about him, she understood why he hated vampires.

He had a wonderful family, and it had all been ripped away from him because some vamp couldn't keep his fangs in his mouth. She hated whoever had killed Reece's parents too. Probably as much as she hated Sylvester for taking her away from her mother.

Maybe Celestine was a bit more confused than she needed to be because they had slept together. But no matter how hard she tried, Celestine couldn't bring herself to regret that.

Reece might dislike her—hatred felt too serious now—but he had been sweet with her.

Her sister's words chose that moment to ring out in her head. *A bad boy makes the best boyfriend.* It was laughable. She didn't think of Reece as a bad boy, exactly. He was too responsible for that. There were a lot of people who counted on him, and he took those responsibilities very seriously.

That wasn't a bad boy.

That was the mark of a good man.

Shit.

It would be so much easier to keep her heart away from Reece if he *was* a bad boy. Or an asshole. How was she supposed to keep away from him if he was actually a good person who was there for his people? She would bet anything he would be a good mate. A good husband. A good father.

He would be protective, if not a bit too over the top.

But for someone who had always been the one to do the protecting, the prospect of someone sharing that burden with her was nice.

She shook her head and tried to banish the thought.

She couldn't think of Reece that way. She couldn't let herself imagine that he would mate her. He was probably waiting for his instincts to actually find his destined mate, and if she was that woman, he would have told her.

He would have hated her for it too. Not only because she was part vampire but because she would complicate his life to no end with Sylvester as her father. With the vampire council hanging over her head like a guillotine.

"Are you okay?" Reece asked, cutting into her thoughts.

"Huh?"

"You're quiet. I haven't known you long, but I know you enough to be scared of your silences. What is going on in that mind of yours?"

"I'm just trying to figure out if there is something I can do to stop the council from coming to town. I'm at a loss."

"Any chance we can intercept them and kill them all?"

She arched a brow at him. "Do you really want to have that kind of fight on your hands?"

He shook his head. "I guess not. We can't warn the humans, and we can't stop them from coming. I could always

get some of my wolves to stand guard outside your estate. If any one of them tries to leave, they would have a wolf trailing behind them.”

Celestine nodded. “That might actually be a decent enough idea. Do you have twelve wolves to spare? Would they be okay fighting off a nearly invincible creature? I don’t think it’s a good idea to come between a vampire and its meal, but…”

“I don’t know if any of my wolves would volunteer.”

“But you wouldn’t force them,” she guessed.

“No. I wouldn’t force them. Like you said, a vampire is pretty close to invincible, and I don’t want any of my wolves to go off to their deaths on my command. Not unless the town is under an imminent threat.”

“I could make a list of good weapons against vamps. But any dead council member might bring the council’s wrath on your head. We might have to think *way* outside the box.”

“Oh? And what do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know. What if we claim to be mates, and because of our connection, the wolves of the pack are sworn to protect me, and that’s why they’re posted at the gates? We—you and me—could lie and say that we have a mate’s agreement that no human on pack land can be fed on. That might give the council pause, especially if you can get Nero to agree. That way, it wouldn’t just be one pack but two.”

“Shit, if we go to the next town over and get Atlas Silvers to agree, too, that would be three wolf packs against a vampire council.”

“Fuck me,” she laughed. “Is this place wolf pack central?”

He chuckled. “Something like that, yeah.”

“If only that plan would work.”

“Why wouldn’t it?” he asked.

Celestine’s mouth fell open. “You can’t be serious.”

“Wouldn’t it be worth a try? It’s a crazy enough idea that it could work.”

“But you hate me.”

“And?”

“You would have to pretend to be super in love with me for this to work. Besides, I thought you said that a shifter has to do the whole mate mark to make it real. I’m pretty sure the vampire council will know that.”

Reece stood and paced the room. He rubbed a hand across his mouth, mumbling to himself. Even with her keen Half Blood hearing, she couldn’t quite hear what he was saying. Then he stopped, sat at his desk, and stuffed his hands in his hair.

“Reece?”

As if he hadn’t heard her at all, he stood and paced some more.

“Reece!” she said louder this time.

Without responding, he left the office. Celestine went after him, but when she reached him in the hall, he started to run like his tail was on fire.

And there, right before her eyes, Reece Blackstone turned into a big black wolf.

NINETEEN



REECE

Reece had to get the fuck out of the office before he did something even more insane than tell his mate that she was just that.

His mate.

If it wasn't for Celestine's idea, he never would've considered it.

He had met the woman that very morning. He had spent the better part of the day *hating* her. Yes, he had fucked her like his life depended on it.

But now, she needed his help, and there was nothing he could do but mate her.

It was the solution to all their problems, but a complication he didn't know how to take. If he could meet fate, he would give it a piece of his mind—a mind he was pretty close to losing.

“Reece?” she called out after him as he ran down the hall.

The only thing he could think to do at that moment was shift into his wolf. At least in that form, he couldn't speak, and it would give him the chance to think about everything. About his mate, about her future, about what he wanted.

“Whoa. You really do shift into a wolf,” he heard Celestine say before he burst through the doors of the office.

Reece didn't stop running until he was in the woods, and then he kept running until his lungs were on fire and his paws were nearly raw from the effort.

He only stopped running when he left Blackstone lands and entered Greenlee pack land. He bowed his head to one of the enforcers doing his rounds of the woods. The enforcer, a large brown wolf, immediately recognized him. He took his human form. "Alpha Blackstone. Is everything okay? Has there been another murder?"

Reece shook his head. "No, but there has been a development. I need to speak with Nero. *Now*. I would also really appreciate it if someone got in touch with Atlas of the Silvers pack. This will also affect him."

The other man's eyes went wide. "Shit. That sounds serious."

"It is."

"If you tell Nero you sent me off to warn Atlas, I can leave right now."

"Then go. I'll tell your alpha you were very gracious in your offer to help."

The brown wolf nodded before taking off into the woods. Reece continued his walk until he came across a large log home. Nero's place was a castle made of wood, and there were lights everywhere, giving the whole place a welcoming look. It was freakishly similar to his own home. Wolves liked their places to be all-natural and in the middle of the woods where they could shift at a moment's notice.

It was good to see a reminder that Nero wasn't so different from him. Reece needed that reminder.

As if Nero had been waiting for Reece, the other alpha sat on the front porch in a rocker with a glass of scotch in his hands and a half-full decanter next to him. He poured a second one and handed it to Reece. "What brings you here?"

"I've got some really bad news," he said.

"Not another disappearance, I hope. This is the first night off I've had in months. I need some rest. I need to get laid, but I'm too scared of getting attached to anyone in case some vampire decides to make chow out of her."

Reece sighed and sat next to Nero. He downed his scotch before filling it again. Once he was on his fourth glass, Reece finally had the strength to tell Nero *everything*.

Everything about the council. About Celestine. About what would happen to her and her sisters if her father was selected. He even told Nero about Celestine's idea to protect the town and its humans.

"That's an insane idea," Nero whistled. "Clever, but insane."

"Oh, I haven't even told you the most insane part of the story yet," he growled.

Nero was shocked. "How is that even possible? If you're about to tell me mermaids and unicorns are real, I'm gonna shit my pants."

"Celestine is my mate."

Nero dropped his glass on the ground. "Shut the fuck up, she is not."

Reece laid his head back against his rocking chair and sighed. "She is. I have known since I laid eyes on her, but I didn't know what to do about it. She's a Half Blood. She is linked to the creatures who killed my parents. I thought fate made a mistake."

Nero laughed. "You know as well as I do that fate doesn't make mistakes."

"Then why in the fuck did fate send me a mate that is everything I hate?"

"But she's not, though," Nero pointed out. "She is only half, and I think it's a really good way to put your vamp issues to rest. You've been angry long enough."

"I can't mate her."

"Why not? You smell like her. Actually, you don't just smell like her..." Nero jumped to his feet. "Holy shit. You fucked her!"

“I didn’t mean to. She was there, yelling at me, and next thing I know, we’re going at it on my desk.”

His friend laughed. “Well. How was it?”

“You don’t really expect me to answer that, you asshole. I am not gonna kiss and tell.”

“That good, huh?” Nero clapped a hand on his back. “Look, I know it’s hard for you to accept this, but I want you to take a breath here. Think about this. What would it feel like to let the vampire council come to town and take her away? What would you feel if Celestine was married off to some vampire who will never love her and will treat her like a means to an end?”

“Shut up,” he said, downing another glass of scotch.

“No matter how many of those you drink, it won’t change shit. She will still be your mate, and you will still be conflicted.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“So. Answer me, then. What would it feel like to lose her to vamps?”

Reece didn’t want to answer, but he had known Nero a long time. The wolf was stubborn. He wouldn’t let this go. That was probably exactly why Reece had come to him. He knew Nero would give it to him straight and not let him run from this.

After all, that’s what friends were for. Especially friends who understood the crushing weight of being an alpha.

“If I lost her to vamps, it would be like losing my parents all over again. I can’t let it happen.”

“Then you have your answer. You know what to do. Mate her. Make it really hard for the vamps to take her away.”

“That might mean we’ll have a war on our hands.”

“And?” Nero shrugged. “If it were my mate in this, I would do everything possible to keep her.”

“Celestine is gonna hate me.”

Nero laughed. “Yeah, well, from what you’ve said, it sounds like your girl likes hate sex.”

“She’s not my girl.”

“Not yet,” Nero chuckled, lifting his glass in cheers. “And you know what is even better than hate sex?”

“Don’t say it.”

“Mate sex,” Nero said. “There. I said it. Neither one of us have had mate sex, but we know what it means. You’ve got your answer. Now, get off my land and get the girl before I get mad at you. I *wish* I’d found my mate.”

“You don’t. Not if she was a Half Blood.”

“Does it matter? Really?”

It didn’t. Celestine was smart, beautiful, and she was protective of her family. She was sweet, and she understood grief. He couldn’t have picked a better mate for himself.

“Go,” Nero said. “Stop drinking my scotch.”

Reece didn’t know what else he could do but run back to his office.

With any luck, Celestine wouldn’t be there anymore. But fate, that fickle bitch, would probably make sure Celestine was waiting for him.

TWENTY



CELESTINE

Celestine slurped her milkshake with her face turned up toward the moon. Her phone was pressed between her shoulder and her cheek. “Has there been any sign of the council?” she asked Lil.

“Not one,” Lilliane answered.

“Has Sylvester given you any clue as to when they will arrive?”

“None,” Valentine said. Celestine blessed the magic of three-way calls. At least it let her check in on her two sisters at the same time. “But he is getting angrier by the second. He’s super pissed that you’re not here. He wants you here the second they arrive. Apparently, the fact that you’re the eldest is important. He wants you here to greet the council.”

“Of course, he does,” Celestine sighed. “And we all know why.”

“You need to be a good Half Blood vampire daughter. Docile and pretty, ready to be married off for an alliance,” Val said with so much anger that Celestine could *feel* it even through the phone.

“Just that,” Celestine slurped her milkshake again.

“Maybe it’s best if you stay away,” Val offered. “If you’re not here, then they can’t marry you off.”

“Well, no. But that only means that it’ll be Valentine next on the list.”

“Oh,” Val snorted dryly. “They can just try to marry me off to some creepy vamp. I will not allow it.”

“You and me both,” Celestine promised.

“It might not be so bad,” Lilliane added in a small voice.

The sound of a smack came over the phone. “Have you lost your mind?” Val screamed.

“No. Stop hitting me! Maybe it would be okay. It would mean a life of freedom,” Lil’s suggestion was pure madness.

“I don’t think you know what freedom means,” Celestine snapped.

“Well, it would mean no love and no kids. Perfect. There would be nothing more to lose,” Lil said.

“The way you see life makes me very sad,” Val growled. “You should want more for yourself.”

“Whatever. Maybe I can protect you two,” the youngest Longborn sister said. “If *I* agree to it.”

“It’s not your job to protect *us*,” Celestine said. “Besides, as soon as Reece comes back and gets his head out of his ass, he’ll see that my plan is a good idea, and then no one will have to get married.”

“Unless they want to,” Val added.

“Exactly,” Celestine agreed. “We shouldn’t be beholden to the vampire council. Not when they tried to kill us when we were kids.”

The sound of ruffling leaves caught Celestine’s ears. She looked up to see a very naked Reece come through the trees.

Even after she had sex with him, she was stunned by how attractive he was. His body was full of rippling muscles and thatched with just the right amount of hair. He wasn’t as hairy as a wolf, but he was all man. He was, in a word, perfect.

Her mouth was dry with desire, even though only a few hours had passed since their tryst on his desk.

“Girls, I gotta go.” She didn’t wait for their response but quickly ended the call. “Why did you take off like that? We were in the middle of making a plan.”

“An insane plan,” Reece argued, crossing his arms. The naked stance only heightened the desire she had for him.

“Think you could cover yourself up,” she said. “You’re making it really hard to focus right now.”

Reece looked down at his cock and shrugged. “If you’re going to be a wolf’s mate, you need to get used to the nudity. Wolves don’t always keep clothes around to cover up after we shift.”

“Right,” she squeaked, forcing herself to look away. “Where did you go?”

“I needed some time to think about what you said.”

“And? Did you think enough about it to make a decision? You know it’s the right thing to do.”

“Before I agree to anything, there are things you need to know.”

She grinned at him. “Ah, shit. Are you gonna share a bunch of shifter secrets with me? More than you already have? Anything similar to the whole nudity thing?”

Reece sighed and opened the passenger door of her convertible. “Get in,” he said.

Her jaw dropped down. “Did you just really tell me to take the passenger seat in my own car? While *nude*?”

“Don’t argue, love. We need to talk, and we can’t do it out here. I’m gonna take you back to my place.”

Celestine got into the car, but she didn’t say a word as he drove them out of Longville and into the neighboring town of Blackstone. Reece’s house was nothing like she expected. It was a massive log home with a wraparound porch. There were rocking chairs and all kinds of comfy-looking cushions that just called out to her.

“This isn’t what I thought you would have.”

“Did you expect a bachelor pad?” She nodded as he explained. “This was my parents’ house. It’s the alpha’s home. They tend to be big because we have a lot of kids and even more family. People stay here sometimes. Wolves are also partial to log homes.”

“Sure. Makes sense. Reminds you of the woods.”

He grinned at her. “Yeah. Hang tight and make yourself at home. I’m gonna put on some clothes before my dick falls off.” He went into the house while Celestine sat on one of the rocking chairs. She took one of the big throws and threw it over her knees.

As a vampire, she didn’t really feel the cold, but she had no problem with being cozy. She loved cozy. But there was just something downright *naughty* about Reece’s pair of sweatpants when he joined her.

They might have been designed for comfort, but they were hot. Insanely hot. They hung low on his waist, and he looked way too good for comfort.

He sat beside her with a sigh. “So.”

“So.”

“Are you gonna tell me why you majorly freaked out and ran?”

“Yeah. I am trying to work up to that right now.”

“Okay.”

“Look, I know you said that we could pretend to be mates, and because we have slept together, it might fool some people. But...” He cleared his throat.

“But? What? It won’t be enough.”

“No. It won’t be enough.”

“Oh. Well, it was worth a try.”

“No. You don’t get it, love. It won’t be enough for me.”

Celestine nodded. “I know. You couldn’t actually be my mate. I wouldn’t ask you to do that after everything you’ve

lost. It would just be pretend while the council is in town.”

“You don’t understand.” He turned to face her. His features were tight and serious. There was not a single hint of the hatred he used to aim at her.

There was something else in his eyes.

Something new and thrilling and terrifying.

“I don’t understand, no,” she agreed. “But tell me. I already spilled all my secrets. You might as well reciprocate.”

“I hated you when I saw you.”

She giggled. “Yeah. I know. You hated me when you fucked me too. You said as much.”

“I didn’t hate *you*. I hate vampires, and then you show up, beautiful and full of attitude and vampire blood. And my wolf was screaming at me that you’re my mate. What was I supposed to do?”

Her jaw dropped down, and she couldn’t breathe. “What? *What* did you just say?”

“I didn’t hate you. I *don’t* hate you.”

“Not what I was asking you to repeat. What did you wolf scream?”

“Oh. Right. That you’re my mate.”

“I’m... your...No.” Celestine stood with so much speed that it upturned her rocking chair.

Reece stood and went to her. “Look, I am not asking you to be my mate, but I couldn’t agree to the whole pretending charade without telling you that you’re the real thing to me.”

Celestine couldn’t move. She couldn’t think. “Too bad I can’t take off for a jaunt in a wolf’s body like you did,” she grumbled.

He sighed. “That wasn’t the right thing for me to do, but you caught me by surprise. In more ways than one.”

“We barely know each other, and what? We’re going to mate just to save the town? The humans who live here?”

“We would have our lives to get to know each other, but we don’t need to do anything. Not yet. Not ever. I am not going to force you into this. I’m not like the vampire council. But it would definitely make everything else easier, wouldn’t it? The vampires couldn’t go against shifter rules.”

“But they could. They would. They hate anything that isn’t a vampire, and then there’s my father. I don’t see him being too happy that he is losing me as his chess piece. And what does it mean for my sisters? They’re gonna be the ones to pay the price for me.”

“Then we hide them. We don’t let the council find them.”

“I can’t actually be your mate,” she whispered. “I thought it was just pretend. I didn’t know it was going to be...real. And you *hated* me two seconds ago.”

“Celestine,” he said softly. He touched her shoulder until she could face him. “At worse, we tell the council what we are to each other and hope it’s enough.”

“You’ve known about this for a while now, and you got the time and space to make your peace with it. Could I have the same grace?”

He nodded, but the muscle in his neck jumped as he swallowed. “Of course. Your car is here. You can go back home. I won’t stop you, love.”

“No,” she shook her head. “If I go home, surrounded by preparations for the council, I won’t be able to think. I need —” She stopped short. “I don’t know what I need.”

“I’ve got to meet with some of my wolves in the woods,” he said. “I won’t be in the house for a few hours. You go on inside and make yourself at home. Take a bath, cook some food, watch TV. Do whatever.” He licked his lips and looked away. “This would be your home if you were my mate, so might as well test it out.”

Before she could come up with the right response to that, he tipped her head up to look into her eyes. “Hey, love, you were wrong, by the way.”

“Wrong? What about?”

“What happens to vampire princesses is *definitely* my business. At least *this* vampire princess.” Reece kissed her softly. “I’m sorry I’m a dick. I’ll work on it.”

Without another word, he walked down the steps and toward the forest. He stopped and turned to face her before shifting into his wolf and vanishing in the woods.

Celestine watched him go, wondering what a wolf’s mate would be like.

TWENTY-ONE



REECE

It only took a couple of hours to meet with his wolves to give them as many details as he could about the impending arrival of the vampire council. The only consolation at this time was the lack of new disappearances.

If someone else went missing, Reece didn't know how he would handle it.

He had a town to watch over, a mate to protect, and a killer to catch.

He also had a mate to mate, but that felt like the hardest thing of all. In under twenty-four hours, he had gone from absolute vampire hater to a wolf desperate to mate his Half Blood Celestine.

At least she was a Half Blood. She didn't count as a full vampire, and that was a small mercy. She was still very much embroiled in the vampire world, and her life was making his all the more complicated.

The Blackstone pack took the discovery of his mate in stride. They wouldn't go against this most sacred bond.

Neither could he.

Reece went back to his place, but instead of finding Celestine on the front porch, he found his place completely dark. All the lights were out, and if it weren't for her convertible parked in his laneway, he would have assumed she had gone back to her place.

“Celestine?” he softly said as he walked through the front door.

She didn’t respond.

He listened carefully for any sign of life, and he grinned. By the sounds of it, she was fast asleep.

On the tips of his toes, he made his way to the living room where Celestine was sleeping on the couch, wrapped up in one of the throws his Nan had knit. Her mouth was slightly open, and she looked peaceful. Beautiful. With her long waves all around her and her lashes curled away from the curve of her cheek, she looked like an angel. She looked like a woman he would be happy to share his life with. As his heart thundered in his chest, he leaned down and ran his hand down the soft skin.

“Celestine, love, that can’t be comfortable. I’m gonna move you, okay?”

She didn’t budge.

He smiled to himself as he took her into his arms. He considered taking her to one of the many guest rooms, but really, there was only one room where he wanted her.

His room.

Reece gently put her on his bed before flipping the comforter over her. Maybe if he was a better man, he would have gone to one of the guest rooms, or he would have gone to the living room to doze on the couch.

He wasn’t a better man. Shit, he wasn’t even a good man.

He lay beside his mate and watched her sleep until his eyes grew heavy.

“WHA— WHERE— UGH!”

Something hard collided with him, and Reece cracked an eye open. “Are you always this graceful when you wake up?”

he asked, his voice raspy with sleep.

“Where am I?” Celestine asked, rubbing at her eyes.

“You’re in my home.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “In your bed?”

“Yup. Nothing happened again if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Given that I am fully clothed, I guessed that. Why am I in your bed? I remember falling asleep on the couch.”

“You didn’t look comfortable,” he said, longing to reach out to her.

Their quick fuck in his office had been great, but without a soft surface, they hadn’t been able to really enjoy each other’s bodies. He hadn’t been given the chance to hold her.

Now, he could have that chance if he only took it. He was a wolf, for fuck’s sake. He had bravery coming out the ass. He should be able to reach out to her and hold his mate if he wanted to. And, boy, did he want to!

“Are you going to maul me if I approach you?” he asked, keeping his tone teasing.

“What do you mean?” she asked, edging away from him.

He clicked his tongue. “I came deep inside you, kissed you, toyed with your clit, but you’re scared of a snuggle?”

She blushed. “Whoa. That’s something to say to a girl first thing in the morning.”

“Too much?” He laughed without waiting for an answer. He lunged for her and wrapped her up in his arms with a happy sigh. He closed his eyes and settled his breathing.

This.

This was all he wanted. All he longed for. He would probably never let her go now.

“Umm, Reece, what the hell are you doing?”

“Cuddling. It’s this thing people do after they’ve been intimate.”

“Yeah. When they’re dating.”

“Which we are,” he said.

“When did we decide that?”

“You decided that last night when you suggested we tell the vampire council we’re mates.”

“I don’t think that’s what I said.”

“It’s what I heard.”

“Is selective hearing a wolf thing?”

“Sure is,” he laughed. “Now, stop struggling. I’m giving you my best stuff, and you’re wiggling like a worm on a hook.”

“Of course, I am! I am super fucking confused. I need time to think.”

“Didn’t you think enough last night?”

She sighed. “No. I fell asleep because that couch is evil. I don’t think we should actually be mates, Reece. Hasn’t fate ever made a mistake?”

“No. Fate doesn’t make mistakes.” He wouldn’t admit to her that he had the same thought at first. “Fate sent you to me for two reasons. The first was to resolve my past, and the second? That’s to save you.”

“I don’t need saving.”

“My bad. The second is to help you have the life you want.”

“I didn’t exactly want a life with a wolf,” she argued.

He nodded and sat up. He wasn’t convinced that she hadn’t imagined this, but he could tip the scales in his favor. “You know what? You’re right.” He jumped out of bed and walked to his bathroom. “Let’s get ready. I’m taking you to breakfast.”

She gaped at him. “The vampires!”

“It’s seven a.m. The sun is up for another twelve hours, and seeing as how vampires don’t do so well in the sun, I think you have time for breakfast.”

“We need to figure out what to do.”

“Waffles,” he said from the bathroom, throwing on the shower. “Bacon.”

“You had me at waffles,” he heard her grumbling.

An hour later, Reece held the door of Tails and Syrup open for Celestine.

“Tails and syrup?” she pointed to the menu as they sat in his favorite booth.

“Yup. Tails because they serve wolves things that have tails, and syrup because it’s a breakfast joint. What’s a waffle without syrup?”

A young woman came by to take their order, but she made herself scarce. The word was out. The alpha was on the town with his mate. Everyone was curious and gawking at him. The wolves seemed to have some kind of agreement that everyone would get a chance to meet the Half Blood that was to be their alpha mate. Maybe. One day. If things lined up. If fate hadn’t made a terrible mistake.

“Alpha, good morning,” Trisha said as she stood at his table. She held a twin in each arm. The two little girls were rambunctiously tugging at their mother’s hair, making incomprehensible baby noises. “Miss Celestine, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Celestine, this is Trisha. She teaches the first grade at our school here in town,” Reece said by way of introduction.

“I do, usually, yeah. But I’m on maternity leave right now.” She smiled down at her girls just as a little boy peeked around her legs. “Brennan here is having a bit of a hard time adjusting to sharing me with his new sisters.”

The little boy glanced at Celestine. “You’re pretty,” he whispered before hiding again.

“Oh!” Celestine gasped. “Well, thank you, Brennan. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hold June, will ya?” Trisha nudged one of the babies into Celestine’s arms while giving baby May to Reece.

Celestine held the newborn like it was a bomb about to go off for a second before she settled back into the booth, smiling down at the baby. “She is adorable,” she whispered, rubbing the baby’s chubby cheek.

“Thanks,” Trisha said, pulling out her wallet. “Go give this to the waitress, Brennan. There’s a good boy.” The three adults watched the little boy shyly give the cash to the waitress before rushing back and hiding behind his mother’s leg again. “We’re trying to help him break through his shyness, but it’s a work in progress. You’re the first person he’s spoken to that doesn’t share DNA with,” she said to Celestine.

His mate’s head snapped up. “Oh! Well, I’m honored.”

Trisha stretched her arms and smiled at them. “I am gonna have the best arms in the pack before the girls can walk. You’ll have to hire me as an enforcer, Reece.”

“I’ll make sure Jace isn’t on duty tonight. Give you a bit of a break.”

“Ah, bless you, Alpha.” Trisha took her daughter before leaving the restaurant.

After that, nearly every member of the pack came by to chat with them. It was a common thing. Reece didn’t mind the interruptions. Especially not since this was exactly *why* he had brought Celestine to the busiest breakfast spot in the town.

The pack was a big family.

It was the one thing she wanted, and when she was his mate, it would all be hers.

TWENTY-TWO



CELESTINE

“That was a dirty trick, Reece Blackstone,” Celestine said as they left Tails and Syrup. “Making me hold babies. Putting me smack down in the middle of the town. Don’t think I haven’t figured out what you’re doing.”

He shrugged innocently. “I’ve got no clue what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh. I’m sure. Dirty, dirty trick.”

It was only dirty because Celestine had absolutely zero defenses against a town like Blackstone. She could keep the asshole version of Reece away from her heart, even when he was buried deep inside her.

What she couldn’t defend against was this version of Reece.

The version of him that smiled at children and pack members. The version of him that opened the car door. The version of him that slowed down to let a family bike by, even if the toddler had a hard time with his training wheels.

But that was nothing to the version of Reece who turned his face toward the sun to smile at it with his eyes closed.

“You’re different out here than you are at the office,” she heard herself say before she could think better of it.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a jerk at the office.”

“I’m not a jerk. I’ve just got a lot on my mind. I have this whole town to protect. Every single soul in Blackstone is mine to guard, and...”

“And my family is making it hard to do your job,” she finished for him.

“Not your family. I didn’t have any issues until your father came to town with the vampire council in tow. I don’t have any issues with you or your sisters.”

“My sisters are nothing but trouble,” she warned with a laugh. “If you don’t have issues with them, you are seriously underestimating them.”

Reece chuckled. “Maybe I should meet them.”

“They’d love that. Actually, they’re probably wondering where the hell I am. I’ve never spent a night away from them before.”

He shook his head. “You never stayed over at a boyfriend’s place?”

She raised a brow at him. “Do you really think I’ve had boyfriends?”

“You must’ve, though. I’m not gonna lie. I hate the thought of anyone touching you besides me.”

“So possessive. Is that a shifter thing?”

“Absolutely. I don’t like thinking of you in another man’s arms. You should probably just tell me right now that you’ll be my mate.”

“So romantic,” she mumbled. It was a dare, but it was also fucking dangerous. If Reece got into this head that being romantic would lower her defenses, Celestine would be in serious trouble.

“Meeting babies not enough for you, huh?” he laughed. “Okay. Good to know.”

“Your priorities are way out of whack. The council is going to be here soon, and there is still a killer vamp on the

loose. We should be trying to find them before they strike again.”

“I’ve got wolves roaming Longville and Blackstone. Nero has Greenlee covered, and Atlas has been warned, and by this time, I’m sure he has his enforcers roaming Silverton too.”

“And that’s good enough for you?”

“You saw my files. Do you think I’m missing something?”

Celestine blew out a breath. “No. I don’t think so.”

“Unfortunately, until someone else goes missing, the killer’s trail is cold.”

“You know, I read somewhere that it’s harder to solve a murder when it’s done by a stranger. It’s actually really rare for a murderous attack to be completely random. Usually, it’s someone the person knows. It doesn’t have to be someone they’re close to, but there is typically some kind of link that makes the investigation come apart.”

“And when the killer is a hunter feeding, choosing victims at random in the moment, it makes our job that much harder,” Reece agreed. “That means until the sun goes down, you are my priority.”

She rolled her eyes in annoyance, but she could do nothing to stop the smile curling at her lips. “What? You think you can convince me to be your mate before the sun goes down?”

Reece reached over and took her hand in his. He continued to drive with only one hand on the wheel. It was a small and simple gesture, but it was also the only answer he gave her.

“You know,” he started once he parked the car in front of his house. “You’re a graphic designer, which means you can work from anywhere. If you *were* my mate, you would live here. Super close to your sisters and with no shortage of work. As soon as the town learns what you do for a living, you’ll have more work that you know what to do with.”

“What do you mean?”

“We wolves like to keep our people in business. Especially the alpha mate. A happy alpha mate means a happy alpha. And

a happy alpha is—”

“A happy town,” she finished for him. “I get it. You’re all linked. One big happy family.”

He hopped out of the car and ran to open her door. He held out a hand for her to take. “It’s very different from how you vamps do things.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“But if you want to just pretend to be mates and hope that the council will buy it, then we can do that. I won’t force you into a lifelong decision.”

“Thanks, I guess,” she said.

“But you should know that we will probably just end up mated anyway. Whether it’s now or in a few years, it’ll just happen.”

“How can you be so sure you’ll get me to agree?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Just a feeling, I guess.”

Celestine sighed. “A feeling? Is that feeling in your pants, by any chance?”

Reece threw his head back with a laugh. He was so handsome when he laughed. She couldn’t believe the change in him.

All in a day.

“You’re certifiable, you know,” she said as they made their way into his house.

“Ha. How do you figure?”

“You hated me. Just yesterday.”

Reece sighed and tugged her toward him. He placed his hands on her hips and looked deep into her eyes. “How many times do I have to tell you? I didn’t hate you. I was just surprised that fate would send me a Half Blood mate. I held every vamp, half and full-blooded, responsible for my parents’ death. But you were just a baby when they died. You can’t be responsible for it. Fate is cruel, but not to that extent.”

“So just like that, you can go from hate – *disliking and distrusting* – to willing to spend the rest of your life with me? Certifiable!”

“I’m a wolf. We do things differently than humans.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to catch on to that,” she said. Celestine wanted to keep poking and needling at Reece’s defenses, but she was rudely interrupted by her ringing phone. “Hello?” she said into it.

“CELESTINE! COME HOME! NOW!”

“Val?” she asked as her heart jumped into her throat. “What’s wrong?”

“The council. They just pulled into the driveway.”

Celestine’s heart fell to the bottom of her stomach, leaving her breathless. “What? In the bright sunshine morning?”

“They’ve got these big SUVs with tinted windows. They’re here, Celestine. They’re here, and Father is in a mood. We need you.”

Celestine looked up to see Reece’s entire body rigid and ready for a fight. “I’ll be right there,” she gulped. “Just go to your bedroom, and no matter what, don’t go out. I don’t want the council to see you or Lilliane. Do you understand me?”

“Why?” Val gasped. “We’re not in danger, are we?”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Celestine’s words were rough with fear. “I’ll be right there.” She hung up and shivered. “Well, I guess the vampire council just made my decision for me.”

“I am not letting you go,” Reece roared.

“You don’t have a choice. My sisters are there, and I can’t leave them alone to deal with the council. You might have a whole town to worry about, but I have two sisters.” Tears lined her eyes, and a sob ripped out of her. “They’re all I have, and I cannot lose them. I just can’t. I won’t survive that.”

Reece pulled her into his arms and held her as she cried.

Celestine let herself take the comfort for a few minutes. She had a glimpse of what life might look like if she was given the chance to choose her future, but that was all gone now.

She had one hell of a fight ahead of her.

She would be lucky to walk away with any breath left in her lungs.

TWENTY-THREE



REECE

Reece was dizzy. Just listening to Celestine. With his shifter ears, he could hear both sides of the conversation. Each word made his gut clench.

This was too soon.

It wasn't sundown.

He thought he had all kinds of time ahead of him, but he had been wrong. He wanted to kick himself for wasting a full twenty-four hours hating Celestine. He had fought the mate sense, and for what? What had his hatred gotten him? A big fat *nothing!*

Celestine hung up the call just as she began trembling. He hated seeing her scared more than he had ever hated vampires. The force of the emotion terrified him, at least until his wolf reminded him that it was entirely normal to feel such powerful things for Celestine. For his mate.

"I need to go," she whispered. "I... The council is here. I've gotta go."

"If you think for one second that I am going to let you go all by yourself, you're the one who is certifiable."

"You don't have a choice," Celestine argued, wiping tears from her face.

Reece thought that hating Celestine was the hardest thing he had ever done, but watching her cry and being so powerless to make it better was even worse.

"You're mine to worry about," he growled low.

“No. Not yet. Not officially.”

“I am going with you, and we are doing your plan. We will tell the council that you are my mate, and that there is no way to separate us. We will deal with whatever they throw your way *together*.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking. I’m doing it. That’s final.” He took her hand in his and towed her to her car.

Celestine didn’t exactly go willingly. She kept arguing with him, but it fell on deaf ears. Reece was too busy making plans and backup plans for those plans.

He was too busy freaking the fuck out.

He had already lost his parents to vampires, and he wasn’t about to lose Celestine before he had a chance to really have her.

As it turns out, fate really was cruel.

It was also one wily son of a bitch.

This was literally the only way Reece would have ever let someone—anyone—into his heart. That was it. That was the truth.

He was so caught up in his grief and his anger that only a supposed enemy and a threat to his entire world would shake him out of it.

Celestine was perfect for him.

Not just because she was his mate. It was so much more than that.

She was the exact opposite of what he wanted, and now, he couldn’t imagine wanting anything else. Hell, he couldn’t even imagine *needing* anything—anyone—else.

Reece didn’t exactly drive fast, but he was also not going slow. He needed time to get his thoughts in order and make sure they were doing the right thing. Using the car’s Bluetooth system, he put in a call to Nero.

“Shit. This is insane. You good, man?”

“No,” Reece said, his eyes cutting to Celestine.

“You didn’t do the thing, did you,” Nero guessed.

“We didn’t exactly get the chance,” he replied tightly.

“Okay, well, go with your girl’s plan. Pretend it’s a done deal, and hopefully, that will buy you time. In the meantime, I’ll call Atlas. We’ll cover as much ground as we can. We’re wolves, for fuck’s sake. We won’t be undone by a handful of bloodsucking vamps. No offense, Celestine.”

“None taken,” she replied, hollow and terrified.

Reece ended the call and turned to her for a second. “Here is the plan,” he said. “You are my mate. There is no denying that. We haven’t done the official step yet, but that is just a technicality. We are going to be mated the second we get the chance.”

“Right, because in all of this, we will find time to fuck.”

He growled. “No. It’s not like that.”

She shook her head. “I hate this. I wanted more time to get used to what the future would be. I didn’t get to talk to my sisters. I didn’t get the chance to know you without hatred. I didn’t get the chance to find the killer. I’ve done *nothing*.”

“You did plenty, love,” he argued. “But if you think you can ever be ready for the future, you’re deluded. There is no way to know for sure what it has in store for you. All we can do is take this one moment at a time. We will meet with the council and tell them that you are taken. We will also tell them about the disappearances, and we will tell all those vamps that they have been exposed. We’ve got a sheriff who knows that a vampire is behind those attacks. If anything, that should keep them busy enough.”

She sighed, not entirely convinced.

“Look, I know this is less than ideal, but whatever happens, I won’t let anything happen to you or your sisters.”

“We’re walking in blind. We don’t know what is waiting for us.”

“Sure we do,” he argued with a tense smile. “Twelve vampires and three Half Bloods. That’s all we need to focus on.”

“That’s not exactly a plan.”

“Plans never work, anyway,” he argued. “Something always goes wrong.” He took her hand in his. “I will protect you, Celestine. I will.”

“And who will protect you?” she responded sadly.

“Don’t you remember? I’ve got wolves at my beck and call. Not to mention my Half Blood mate.”

Celestine sighed and looked up at the Longborn estate coming into view. “We are seriously outnumbered.”

“It only looks that way,” he said, pointing to the surrounding woods. “Look.” He pointed toward flashes of white, brown, and black through the woods. “See that? Those are my wolves. We are not in there alone. There is a whole pack of people who want you safe.”

Reece noticed her shoulders sag in relief. Celestine didn’t need to know he was freaking the fuck out.

TWENTY-FOUR



CELESTINE

Three massive black SUVs were parked in front of the house. Their windows were so dark that Celestine was sure it was illegal. It was just the kind of car a full-blooded vampire would need to get around in the daylight.

“The council never leaves their palace, and they got here way too fast. Something is happening.”

“Yeah. A new council member is joining their ranks,” Reece said. “Do you think they’ve ever only been eleven members?”

“No. There are *never* new council members. The ones that are ruling have been in power for hundreds and hundreds of years.”

“Well, there you go. Maybe this is an emergency for them. If it is, we need to use that to our advantage and make sure they are shaking in their boots.”

“Overwhelm them with more problems?”

“Exactly,” he smiled at her. “We got this,” he repeated. “The wolves are gonna surround the house, and if they sense any trouble, they will help us. We also have an advantage right now. It’s daylight. If we need to get rid of a few members, all we need to do is open the blinds.”

She pursed her lips at him. “That’s a bit childish.”

“But you’re fighting a smile, so that means something. I can make you smile even when we’re in danger.”

Celestine got out of the car with Reece hot on her heels. He placed his hand on her back as she went up the steps, and it gave her the courage she needed to open the front door.

The house was deceptively quiet. Maybe the council members were in the living room with its new blackout blinds. Maybe they were taking a nap because they were up in the middle of their rest time.

Celestine placed a finger to her lips, begging Reece to be quiet. Soon enough, every vamp in the house would smell the wolf in their midst, but hopefully, by that time, Celestine would have the time to warn her sisters Reece was on their side.

Quietly, she went up the curling staircase and down the hall to Val's bedroom. She slowly opened the door before shoving Reece inside.

"What the fuck!" Val gasped, leaping off her bed.

"What is happening?" Lilliane asked, her face going pale. "Why is there..." she wrinkled her nose, "a *wolf* here?"

"I'm guessing this is the reason why you've been so stinky lately," Val said. She held out a hand to Reece. "I'm Valentine, Celestine's favorite sister."

"Reece," he said with a smile.

"I'm her favorite," Lilliane snapped, reaching out for Reece's hand. "The youngest is always the favorite. It's a fact."

"Call her Lil," Val cut in. "As in *little. Lil*. Get it?" She laughed, but the sound wasn't quite genuine. There was little to be happy about when the house was full of vampires.

"As much as I love the tension-releasing humor, we don't have time for that right now. This is Reece Blackstone. He is the alpha of the Blackstone wolves, and he is here to help us with our council problem."

"Why would you help us?" Lilliane asked, narrowing her eyes in suspicion.

“You know, I can really spot the family resemblance now,” Reece joked. “You have the same suspicious face as your sister. I’m here because your sister is my mate, and I am not letting her get hitched to some vamp who won’t know or understand how lucky he is to be with her.”

Her sisters’ brows rose on their foreheads.

“What the hell?” Val gasped. “A wolf mate?”

“Lucky,” Lilliane added.

“But that means I’m the eldest, now!” Panicked tears lined Val’s eyes. “Shit!”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let any Longborn sisters be taken away by the vampires. That is a promise.”

Valentine looked at Celestine, and the sisters hugged. “If you don’t trust him, you can trust me. I won’t let them take you away. We can do this together.”

“How?” Val asked.

“We’re not sure,” Celestine admitted. “But we will find a way, okay?”

“That’s right,” Reece said. “Now, first things first, the house is surrounded by wolves. They are your friends, not foes. They will help you if you need to leave the house quickly. You might end up in another town with the Greenlee wolves led by Nero or the Silverton with Atlas. No matter, they’re good people. They’ll have your back until we can get to you.”

“So, what? We’re just supposed to leap out of the window if things go sideways?” Lilliane asked.

“Yup,” Celestine said. “The sun is shining, and we all know the vamps would be turned to old dust if they even set a single foot outside to chase after you.”

“This isn’t the greatest strategy,” Val said.

“No, but all we need right now is to make sure no one takes you *if* your father is picked as the newest council member,” Reece said.

“Because if he isn’t picked, then we aren’t in as much danger,” Celestine reminded her sisters.

“He’ll be picked,” Val said.

“Or they wouldn’t be here,” Lil agreed.

“That’s exactly what I said,” Celestine nodded.

“So. Let’s gather the vamps while daylight is burning,” Reece said. “Get ready.”

“What for?” Celestine asked.

“For the plan to start,” he replied.

“But you said plans never work,” she argued.

He gave her a mischievous grin. “And that is why I’m gonna improvise the shit out of this.” He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her softly. “No matter what happens today, remember I love you.”

She rolled her eyes. “You hated me a second ago.”

“Only because I’m an idiot,” he laughed. “You know what they say about the line between love and hate.” He kissed her again.

“Wow,” Val said, shaking her head. “Where can I get one of those?”

“So not the time,” Lil grumbled.

“Get ready, love,” Reece said before walking toward the door. He threw it open and bellowed, “Sylvester Longborn, I want a word for you.”

“He is insane,” Lilliane gasped.

“He is insanely *hot*,” Val said.

“He is going to get us killed,” Celestine hissed, rushing out of the bedroom and down the stairs, hot on Reece’s trail.

Right there, at the bottom of the stairs, Father was waiting for them, surrounded by eleven pissed-off vampires. Celestine shivered at the sight of them.

This was truly the beginning of the end.

TWENTY-FIVE



REECE

Sylvester Longborn was definitely a vampire. He was tall, lanky, and so pale that he looked sick. The sneer twisting his too-wide mouth displayed a pair of sharp fangs that might have been threatening to a mere human, but Reece wasn't a human.

With the skill of the alpha he was, Reece smiled down at the vamp, letting his mouth shift ever subtly into his wolf to show his own canine fangs. "Hi, again."

"You're trespassing for the last time," Sylvester growled.

The eleven vampires behind him also sneered and showed their fangs, but a few of them looked so old that they might crumble with the effort of it.

"Actually, Father, I invited Reece here. I want you to meet him. Officially." Celestine smiled. "Or not officially. You *have* met him as the PI investigating all the disappearances in town lately, but you need to meet him as my guy."

"What disappearances is the Half Blood talking about?" one of the council members asked with a slithering voice.

"It's nothing, Nikolas," Sylvester said.

"It's *not* nothing," Reece said.

"Unless you think ten bodies drained of blood in as many weeks is nothing," Celestine added.

This got the council's attention.

“How can you expect to lead on the council if your own town is plagued by a wayward vampire?” the same vampire, Nikolas, spat. “Unless you are responsible for this?”

Reece tutted reprovingly. “Well, if Sylvester here is responsible for the deaths, he is in serious trouble with the sheriff up in Greenlee. Nero Silver is a good pal of mine, and he has figured out that these disappearances are the work of a vampire, and he’s been tracking the vamp for a while now. He’s getting close too. I bet the next body leads us right to the guilty party.”

“Sylvester,” Nikolas snapped. “We need to talk about this. This is not how a council member conducts his business. You are at risk of exposure.”

“I am not behind those attacks,” Sylvester said with the nasal voice of someone who is annoyed at being blamed for something he didn’t do. It was the voice of a child.

“Be that as it may, you should have investigated this and put a rest to it before our visit began. This is not a good sign.”

“If I may,” another vampire cut through the chatter. He was younger and not quite as pale.

Nikolas rolled his eyes, and Reece was glad to note it. This meant the council was not of one mind. They didn’t agree on everything, and Reece could use this to his advantage. In-fighting always made an external attack more efficient.

“What is it, Richard?” Nikolas asked, annoyed.

“Perhaps we should leave. It’s clear that Sylvester is not the kind of vampire we want on the council.”

Nikolas shook his head. “No. There is no proof this was his doing. We will see this through. Sylvester, you have until the end of the day to find the vampire responsible for those deaths. Bring them to justice, right here in front of us, and you will be able to sit on the council.”

“You’ve got a fucked-up way of picking your friends,” Reece cut in with a low whistle.

“These vampires are not my friends,” Nikolas replied. “They are the council. My personal feelings about them have nothing to do with how we run our affairs, wolf.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. Seems to me that if you were all pals, it would be easier for you all to choose who sits on the council with you. Why don’t you take a vote right now? Is Sylvester the vamp you want to close out your twelve?”

Nikolas blanched. “How do you know so much about our ways?” His eyes cut to Celestine. “You, Half Blood! Is this your doing? Are you sharing vampire secrets with an outsider? A wolf, no less?”

“I don’t share vampire secrets with just anyone,” she argued. “Only with my mate.”

Nikolas’s fanged jaw dropped down. “Mate?”

“Mate,” Reece repeated with a grin that was all predatory. “Are you familiar with the concept of mates in the shifter world?” He put his arms around Celestine’s shoulders. “Celestine is my mate. An alpha mate, *no less*. We have no secrets between us.”

“I won’t allow it!” Sylvester roared as he lunged for his daughter.

Reece pulled her out of her father’s reach. “It’s a little too late for that. Fate has spoken, and she is mine, just like I am hers. We are not to be separated. Isn’t that nice? Though, I will say, this isn’t exactly the welcome I was expecting. I thought you vamps were warmer and cuddlier than this.”

“A Half Blood cannot mate a vampire,” Nikolas snapped.

“Why not?”

“It has never happened before,” the vamp answered with a sneer. “These girls aren’t even supposed to exist. We only let them live to—” He stopped short, realizing he was about to spill some secrets of his own.

“You were saying?” Reece taunted.

“This will not happen,” Nikolas roared. “That girl belongs to *me!*”

“Fuck you very much, sir,” Celestine roared right back. “I don’t belong to anyone. I am my own woman. I might be Reece’s mate, but I don’t belong to him.”

Reece wanted to argue with her on that point, but if she was going to defend herself, he wouldn’t stop her. She might not belong to him in the *possession* sense of things, but she did belong *with* him. Semantics that mattered to him, especially when this pasty-ass vampire was trying to claim her as his own.

“Things were decided long ago,” Nikolas went on. “When we allowed the girls to live, you agreed, Sylvester.”

Sylvester looked up at Celestine and her sisters. All three girls were on the stairs, glaring down at their father.

“What is he talking about?” Celestine asked with a deadly cold voice.

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with,” Nikolas said.

“I did what I had to do,” Sylvester answered.

“What. Did. You. Do?” Celestine pronounced every word very carefully.

“Your father promised you and your sisters to certain members of the council,” Richard replied with a sly grin on his face. “Most of us were not agreeable to this, but we only found out years later when it was too late.”

“You promised us to vampires when we were *children*?” she gasped. The disgust in her voice was palpable, making Reece shiver. He reached out protectively to Celestine, scared that the vamps would jump them and take his mate away before he could react.

“That is despicable,” he told Sylvester with a growl. “What kind of father are you?”

“Not a father at all,” Richard said. “Only a vampire desperate to be on the council. Isn’t that right, Sylvester? You only raised those girls because you wanted to be on the council.”

“This is really messed up,” Val said. “I always knew you were terrible, but this takes the bloody cake.”

“It totally does,” Lilliane asked. “Especially if we would have done it if you only asked.”

Celestine and Valentine turned to glare at their sister in shock. “No, we wouldn’t have,” Val shouted.

“What is the matter with you, Lil?” Celestine asked. “Are you feeling okay?”

Lil shrugged. “This is our world. You can’t really be surprised this is how it works?”

“You were taken from your mother when you were way too old,” Celestine sighed. “Just... don’t say things like that. We do not consent to arranged marriages,” she went on. “Nikolas, I am with Reece. For better or worse. Forever.” She took Reece’s hand in hers. “We are mates, and even a council member is powerless against it.”

Nikolas grinned. “I’m sorry, but you are not mates. Oh, you might be mates in the broader sense of the word. Maybe his little wolf told him you are his, but you have not gone through the change.”

“How could you possibly know that?” Celestine spat.

“For real,” Reece asked, growling. “My *little wolf* can kick your ass every day of the week and twice on Sundays just for fun. Just try and take Celestine away from me.”

“I won’t need to. A deal was struck. She is mine.” Nikolas turned toward Sylvester with an evil grin. “If you want to sit on the council, you will make your daughter comply.”

“No,” Richard said. “The condition of his joining the council is finding the vampire responsible for the murders.”

“Maybe you all need to agree on what the conditions are,” Reece said. “In the meantime, we’re gonna go.” He started to tug Celestine down the steps, but Nikolas stepped in front of them.

“You are not taking my intended anywhere.”

“Sure I am,” Reece said. “What will you do to stop me?” He nudged his chin toward the blackout blinds, and as if she had read his mind, Celestine bolted down the steps and threw open all the blinds she could reach.

The vampires scampered back into the shadows, and just like that, they were powerless. All the twelve vamps could do was watch Celestine and her sisters walk out with a wolf.

“Fuck you all,” Celestine said over her shoulder.

Reece really did love her then.

TWENTY-SIX



CELESTINE

“You!” Celestine shouted to Lilliane once they were settled in the car. “Have you lost your damn mind? You can’t tell a room full of vampires you would be okay with marrying them. You just can’t speak for us like that.”

Lilliane rolled her eyes. “Sylvester made a deal. We can’t exactly go against it.”

“Something is wrong with you,” Valentine gasped. “I don’t recognize you. Are you feeling okay?”

Lilliane shrugged. “I’m fine. I just think that this is being blown out of proportion. Whether we live here, trapped in one vampire estate or in Italy, trapped on a whole other vampire estate, what is the difference?”

“Hmm, *FREEDOM!*” Celestine cried. “Drive as fast as you can, babe, before my insane little sister jumps out of the car to go back to the vamps.”

Val hugged Lil close. “I’ve got her. She ain’t going anywhere.”

“What if Sylvester is killed by the council because of us.”

This gave Celestine pause. She glanced at Reece, who winced at the question. She reached over to take his hand. Knowing what she needed, he gave her a good squeeze. “If he is killed because he made a deal with *us* as the prize, then that is on him.”

“But he is our only parent left,” Lil argued.

“I don’t think we can count him as a parent,” Valentine argued. “I seriously consider Celestine the only parent we ever had, and you saw the vamp she would be forced to marry. Nikolas is horrible. You really want your sister to be shackled to that creep for all eternity? Because let’s be real. That council member wouldn’t let us just be Half Bloods. We would be forced to complete our transition.”

Celestine felt Reece jolt with shock before he asked, “What do you mean?”

“We’re Half Bloods, but there are things we can do to be full-blooded vamps,” Valentine replied.

He cut Celestine a cold look. “Is that right?”

“Only in theory,” she replied. “We could die if the transition doesn’t go well. I’ve never felt inclined to take that chance.”

“These vamps would be okay taking that chance?” he growled.

“Better a dead Half Blood than a living Half Blood,” Celestine said. “We don’t really know what the transition would entail.”

“Could be drinking blood from a human. Draining them dry,” Lilliane said.

“You are just not allowed to talk anymore,” Val gasped. “You are full of nasty surprises today, and I really don’t know what the fuck your problem is anymore.”

They fell silent for the rest of the drive into Blackstone. Reece drove them to his place, and as soon as they were parked, Celestine noticed a few wolves leaving the woods. One by one, the wolves shifted into their human forms.

It meant a whole lot of naked guys surrounding their car.

“Have I died and gone to hot guy heaven?” Valentine whispered.

Of course, the shifters had exceptional hearing, and they heard her. A few chuckles made Val blush, but not one to be

ashamed, she waved at them. “Hi, boys. Sorry! Just not used to all these wangs.”

“Jesus,” Celestine grumbled. “Do you think that the pack will be okay with these two psychos I call sisters?”

Reece grinned. “I’m sure they’ll be fine. They’re related to the alpha mate, and that means they get a psycho pass.”

“Good to know.”

“Well, well,” one of the wolves said. “Not one but *three* vamps!”

“Watch it, Evan. They are Half Bloods, and they will correct you so often, you will be tired of poking fun at them. Now, all of you get dressed. We need to have a meeting.”

“No kidding. We thought we would be free of the council today, but now, we lost our edge. We left, and we all know they will find a way to attack us during the night,” Celestine said.

“We don’t know that at all,” Reece replied.

“You really think the council will let their three brides walk away without any retaliation?” she asked. “Because Nikolas looked like he was seriously considering taking his chances with the sun when I walked by him. He was *this* close to grabbing me and making me his vampire bride.”

“We’ll make it work. Twelve vampires are no match for three wolf packs,” he assured her. “We are not in this alone. There is no way Nero and Atlas will allow vamps to roam freely around their towns. This is going to be resolved. Soon.”

“Maybe we should go upstairs and do the thing. Make sure I can never be taken from you.”

Reece shook his head. “Not a chance. When I mate you, it won’t be because there is a threat. I am gonna take my sweet time with that. You deserve that. It’s too important to be done when there is a threat looming over us.”

Celestine nodded. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have even suggested it. It’s a sacred thing. Not a solution.”

His smile was wan. “Yeah. Exactly. Though, I wish I had just taken a bite out of you when we were in my office.”

“I would have been pissed.”

He chuckled. “Pissed but mine without a doubt.”

Reece opened his front door, and the wolves trailed in behind Celestine and her sisters. She was concerned about the strange look in Lil’s eyes. Was she ready to bolt back to the Longborn estate? Something was definitely going on with her little sister, but she couldn’t figure it out, and every time she asked her if she was okay, Lilliane would only wave her off.

One problem at a time, Celestine told herself again as Reece gave his pack their instructions.

“There has to be a constant guard around Blackstone’s perimeter. I don’t want anyone to go missing. We also need to send wolves over to Longville. Nero and Atlas have also sent wolves there to protect the human town. We are three packs with four villages to protect, and we will not lose a single soul, is that understood?”

There was a chorus of “Yes, Alpha.”

It was pretty incredible to watch him in action—at least when he was in the safety of his home. Once the fighting started, there was no way to know if he would actually be safe. If he would come back to her.

Celestine held her breath as she continued to listen to Reece plan out their night. She couldn’t believe how quickly he had come to mean everything to her.

And how quickly she could lose him.

TWENTY-SEVEN



REECE

Reece was a shifter. He was an alpha. A private investigator.

He was a wolf. The very definition of a predator.

There was no reason for him to feel like he was caught and trapped. There was absolutely zero reason why he should feel like the end of the world had come to his beloved small town.

Yet as he stood in his house, giving his wolves their orders for the incoming vampire threat, he could feel the walls close in on him. They seemed to shimmy tighter with every breath he took. With every order he gave, the log walls pressed in a foot.

All he could do was hope that no one noticed.

“You know what to do,” he said to his pack before dismissing them to their positions.

“Hey,” Celestine whispered to him. She took his hand in hers and tugged him up the stairs to his bedroom. “Are you okay?” she asked.

He turned away from her. He didn’t want her to see that he was shaken. That he was afraid. “Fine.”

“I’d be terrified if I were in your shoes,” she said softly. “You’re sending your pack to fight the very creatures that took your parents. Anyone would be less than thrilled about that. Most people would be paralyzed by fear, but you didn’t even blink. You gave everyone their role and position without even taking a beat.”

He snorted dryly. “Right.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “But,” she added, “if you think you’re sending them to their deaths, if you feel responsible, don’t.”

“How could I not?” he asked, facing her. “I swore I wouldn’t send my wolves out to fight these fuckers who are basically indestructible. I swore I wouldn’t make any orphans.”

“But you didn’t ask. The wolves showed up for you. Because they care about you. Because you’re a good alpha. I might’ve only met a small portion of the pack, but they’re loyal to you, and not because you ask the impossible of them.

“They show up because you do the impossible for them and ask very little in return. Whatever happens today, the only people responsible will be the attackers. The vampires who choose to come here to take women against their will.”

He gulped. “Were you always this wise?”

She grinned at him. “Yeah, of course. You were too busy hating me to notice.”

“I never hated you,” he said, holding her to him.

“I know,” she replied, laying her head against his chest. “Vampires aren’t indestructible. The wolves know how to fight them now. Thanks to you.”

“Thanks to *you*,” he returned.

“Okay. Now, the sun will go down soon, and there will be a threat out there. But it doesn’t mean you will lose everything again. You’re not a little boy anymore.”

He nodded. “A man isn’t supposed to be this fucking emotional. Not in front of his girl.”

She rolled her eyes. “I am exactly who you’re supposed to be emotional with. We’re partners, Reece. One day, we’ll be mates, and you’ll have years of showing me a side of you no one else sees. You’re my big, tough wolf, but you’re also a person with a heart that’s been through some stuff. You won’t lose me,” she said with so much conviction he believed her.

“If they take you away from me, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“You won’t have to find out. I’m not going anywhere. You and your wolves won’t let it happen, and I sure as shit won’t let it happen either.”

He laid his forehead against hers and sighed. “Okay. I’m ready for the fight of a lifetime.”

THE BLACKSTONE PACK was ready for the vampires to attack way before the sun began to set. As the darkness rolled in, so did the itchy anticipation of a fight. By the time the moon was up, Reece was ready.

The vampires could come onto his land and try to take his mate, but he wouldn’t let her go without the biggest fight the vamps ever had.

If he exercised his demons of being orphaned at the same time, then that would be good too. It might even make more room for his future with Celestine—because he wanted a future with her. He wanted little Half Blood wolves with her, no matter how insane it would be to raise kids who had vampire blood *and* wolf blood running through their veins.

It would be one hell of an adventure, and he couldn’t wait to start it.

Reece was thinking of all the stuff he would teach his kids—things his parents had taught him—when the first glimpse of a vampire caught his attention. From the paleness of the attacker, he could tell that it was Nikolas. Reece shifted into his wolf and howled at the moon.

It was the signal.

All around his house, his wolves would be ready for the attack. Celestine was safe in one of the bedrooms, ready to defend her sisters if the vampires were able to breach the home.

If it hadn't been for Lilliane's ambivalence, Celestine would've joined the fight, but along with Valentine, they had decided it was best to keep an eye on their sister. Lilliane insisted that she was fine, but even Reece, who didn't know her, wasn't convinced.

With the knowledge that his mate was safe, Reece crashed into the vampire. They tumbled into a heap on the hard ground, but even as they slid, claws and fists were delivered in equal measure. Nikolas managed to bite Reece's flank, but the wolf kicked hard and launched himself away from the vampire.

As Reece lunged for the vamp, he noticed that some of his wolves were also fighting. Sylvester and Richard were being tag-teamed by a handful of wolves. The sounds of grunts and blows, the smell of blood and sweat, all of it permeated the cool night air.

The vamps had attacked at the height of the night, and unless the fight lasted hours, the sun would be no help to the wolves.

It didn't matter.

Celestine had given the wolves a list of the vampires' weak spots.

That's what he aimed for when he went for Nikolas with his claws. He sliced through the vampire's neck, but his claws weren't long enough to sever the head completely.

The arterial spray was still gruesome. Nikolas lost most of the stolen blood that pumped through his dead veins. The vamp scampered backward, covering the wound with a sputter.

"You've got fight, wolf," a chilling voice said from behind him.

Reece turned just in time to see Richard pouncing on him. He was too quick for the vamp and narrowly missed the blow. He growled low in response.

"You can keep the Half Bloods," Richard whispered as he edged closer. "I'm not here for them. Who would want to ally themselves with such base creatures?" His chuckle was

terrible. The stuff of nightmares. “If you kill Sylvester, I’ll call off the rest of the council. He isn’t one of us anyway. Not one of us would care if he were to die.”

In his wolf form, Reece couldn’t reply, but that didn’t decrease his shock.

“You know you want to kill him. Get rid of the vamp who has been munching on all those humans. You can keep the girl. Keep all three for all I care.”

Reece hit Richard with his paws, sending the vamp sprawling backward. They landed hard on the ground, with Richard on his back and Reece firmly pinning him to the ground. With his sharp wolf teeth, he bit at the vamp’s neck.

Richard sputtered through a chuckle. “You can’t kill me, wolf. Not even if you wanted to. Maybe getting the girl isn’t enough motivation for you. What if I told you that I am the one who killed those humans?”

This got Reece’s attention. Richard noticed and smiled a bloody smile. “That’s right. I knew Sylvester was trying to get the last seat on the council. I couldn’t let that happen, and it was nothing to sneak away from the others. Come here, kill a few humans. If you don’t want to kill your girl’s daddy, all you have to do is set him up. I’ve already started the work for you.”

Reece lunged for the vamp again. He wanted to look around and make sure that someone else was hearing this. That he wasn’t the only one stunned by Richard’s confession.

“I’d owe you one. Do you know how useful it is to have a vampire council member owe you a favor? I can give you money beyond your wildest dream. Maybe a whole new village. One that doesn’t share borders with other wolf packs. If you want to lead those other packs, I can arrange that. Just name your price.”

Reece growled low and shook his head. Richard shrugged. “Then I don’t mind killing you.”

I’d like to see you try.

He couldn't speak the words, but he hoped the vamp could sense Reece's determination.

"It would actually be fun for me," Richard went on, his grin turning more malicious. "It would be closing out my collection." He threw his head back with terrifying laughter. "And to think that all these years later, I could kill the son. Two alpha wolves killed." He rubbed his hands together, relishing the idea.

Reece was frozen on the spot.

Richard's words quickly dawned on Reece.

"You're a slow creature. Do you get it now? I killed your parents. I tried to kill those girls when Sylvester brought them here, but your parents got in my way. They wouldn't let three innocent children be killed." He laughed. "But they were no match for me. Sad, isn't it? They died to protect kids that weren't even theirs. There is something poetic about the fact they saved your mate for you. But it's even more poetic that I'll be the one to kill you. Full circle."

Reece had heard enough.

He pounced onto the vamp with his claws poised. He landed on the vamp's shoulder and bit through the neck with all his might. He didn't stop chomping. His mouth filled with blood, and he kept on chewing and chewing. He barely felt the blows Richard delivered in defense. He just kept biting until finally, the vamp's head rolled away, completely severed from his body.

Reece shifted back into his human form, grabbed the head, and as he held it high above his head, he shouted loud enough for the fighting to stop.

"I've killed one of your members. He was the one killing humans here. He orchestrated all of this to keep Sylvester from the council."

Nikolas stepped forward with a few wolves snapping at his heels. "You've made a serious mistake. But I will disregard this death if you give me the girls."

"No," Reece said. "They're not going anywhere."

“I’ll go,” Lilliane shouted from the window.

Celestine and Valentine cried out and tried to stop her, but it was no use. The young woman was out the door and surrounded by vampires before the shock wore off.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Val screamed. “Get back here!”

“I’m okay,” Lil said. “This is what I want.”

Nikolas smiled like the predator he was. “I believe our business is done here.”

The vampires were quick to leave, but Reece called out to them, “Not even close.”

The fight had been won by the wolves. But it wasn’t a victorious night. Not when Lilliane had chosen to leave with their attackers.

That was a loss no one would understand.

TWENTY-EIGHT



CELESTINE

A week had passed since the night of the fight. Celestine had barely left Reece's bed, where she spent her days and nights crying and raging against her little sister.

At first, Valentine had joined her, but after a few days, Val had left. "If she wants to be a vampire bride, then that's her business. She made her choice. It was obviously the wrong one, but what can we do?"

"We should go save her," Celestine insisted.

"We can't. Why should we? She left of her own volition. She won't come with us."

"But I miss her," Celestine wiped a few tears.

"I miss her too. But she isn't my sister anymore." With that, Val had left the house and settled in a cute little bungalow Reece offered her on the border of Blackstone and Greenlee.

Celestine kept meaning to visit Val, but she couldn't picture seeing Val without seeing Lil too.

"Love," Reece said softly, coming into the bedroom. "Good morning. I got you some waffles from Tails and Syrup." He placed the breakfast tray on the bed and sat beside her. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Better. Still sad, but better. Lilliane finally texted me back while I was sleeping. She is in Italy somewhere. She says she's happy. That she's fine."

"You don't believe her."

“Do you?”

“I don’t know her enough to answer that, love. But Val seems to be fine with it.”

“Yeah. For now.”

“Maybe *for now* is good enough. If Lilliane ever wants out, if you and Val ever want to visit Lilliane, we’ll find a way.”

Celestine nodded. “This isn’t exactly how you imagine your life going, is it? Not only do you have a Half Blood mate, but just as she moves in, she becomes a weepy version of herself.”

“I don’t mind weepy so long as you’re here, and I get to make you feel better.”

She gave him a sad smile. “You do make me feel better.” She tugged him into the bed and laid her head on his chest. Listening to his heartbeat made it easier to breathe. Being in his big, strong arms was just what she needed. “Have I told you I love you today?”

“Not yet.”

“Oh, well. I love you, Reece Blackstone.”

“I love you too.”

“We should do the mate thing. Now. Like, right now.”

He stilled. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” She nodded, but he wasn’t convinced. “You’re still sad about Lil.”

“Yeah, but I’ll always be sad about that. But I don’t want to be sad right now. What I want is to be happy. I’ve got a real chance at a family with you, and I’m done lying around and moping. I want to start the future. With you. I want hope and happiness, and that’s what you are for me.”

He smiled at her and kissed her softly. “I’m not strong enough to say no to you, love. Even if I think you need more time.”

“I can keep being sad and mad at Lil while we build our life together. But I want to live now.”

Reece lay on top of her after removing the tray from the bed. He looked deep into her eyes and kissed every inch of her face. “If you’re sure...”

“So sure. I want you, Reece. I want to be *yours* forever.”

His smile widened before he kissed her. “How’s a man supposed to resist when their beautiful mate says something like that?”

“You’re not supposed to resist it at all,” she replied, quickly removing her sleep shirt. It took little time to remove Reece’s clothes.

Their naked bodies slid together, hot and soft. Hard and ready. Reece kissed his way down her body until he could pin her legs to the mattress. His hot breath fanned across her core, and she moved her hips up to meet his eager mouth.

He took long, slow licks of her heat, twirling his agile tongue around her clit with skill and precision. Her body shook as her release overtook her. Flutters and shivers of passion ran through her limbs as Reece licked and laved her until her orgasm crested.

Her fingers tangled in his hair to keep him close to her as the aftershocks ebbed. But Reece wasn’t done pleasuring her. “I want you to remember this day forever.”

“Don’t see how I could ever forget the day I become yours.”

He smiled at her with hooded eyes. His desire for her was clear, but he took his time kneeling between her splayed legs. He positioned his erection against her core and eased in only an inch. He leaned down to kiss her through the delicious tease. She arched her hips to take more of him, but he held off. “I love you, Celestine Longborn. I’m gonna make you my mate, and then my wife, and then the mother of my children.”

“You’d need to be fully inside of me for that last one to happen.”

“Like this?” he asked as he slid home. She gasped and arched her hips to meet the thrust. She was filled with him, so perfectly full. He reared back, only to grind down as he surged

forward again. Her sensitive core fluttered around his girth, and her walls clenched down on him to keep him seated deep inside.

“Fuck, Celestine. You feel so good. Damn good. I never want this to end.”

“It never has to. We have forever.”

He kissed her as he increased the rhythm of his hips. He was everywhere. Inside her, drawing out her pleasure. Licking and nipping at her sensitive nipples. Kissing her neck. Rubbing the pad of his thumb against her clit.

He was building her pleasure with everything he could. Her entire body sang under his touch, and her limbs were drunk on passion as she found her release again. She cried his name, begging him for more, and pleaded for him to join her.

And he did.

His hips surged forward again, and as he emptied himself inside her, his mouth found the crook of her neck. He nipped the gentle skin, sending the waves of her orgasm into a new torrent of pleasure. She moved beneath him, holding fast to the man she would never stop loving.

“Reece,” she cried. “Oh, Reece.” A wild desire overtook her, and she nipped his neck. Not enough to pull blood, just enough to make him chuckle.

“You don’t have to bite me to leave your mark, love.” He placed their joined hands over his heart. “You’re already burned right here. In my heart. Mate. The woman of my dreams.”

“Woman of your nightmares, you mean.”

He chuckled and nipped at her breast. “Am I ever gonna live that down?”

“Maybe one day,” she said. “If you keep bringing me breakfast waffles.”

“Done.”

“And if the sex keeps being *this* good.”

“Now, *that* I can promise. Anything else I can do?”

“Love me forever. Never leave me. Never stop giving me a hard time.”

“Always,” he vowed.

“How about me? Anything I can do to keep you loving me?”

He kissed her deeply. “You just keep being yourself, love. You be yourself, and I’ll love you. But if you wanna bring me breakfast waffles every now and again, I wouldn’t be opposed to that.”

“I can do that.”

“Oh, and you better never stop giving me a hard time either.”

Celestine laid her head on Reece’s chest, and he hugged her close. “We’re gonna be happy,” she said.

“The happiest,” he agreed. “The wolf and the Half Blood.”

“Howling at the moon happily ever after.”

The End



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author

Hi! I'm Milly Taiden. I love to write sexy stories featuring fun, sassy heroines with curves and growly alpha males with fur. My books are a great way to satisfy your craving for paranormal romance with action, humor, suspense and happily ever afters.

I live in Florida with my hubby, our son, and our fur babies: Speedy, Stormy and Teddy. I have a serious addiction to chocolate and cake.

I love to meet new readers, so come sign up for my newsletter and check out my Facebook page. We always have lots of fun stuff going on there.

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